Neoliberal Dystopias: Postmodern Aesthetics and a Modern Ethic in Four Pairs of Plays by Argentine and Irish Playwrights (1990-2003)

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Neoliberal Dystopias:
Postmodern Aesthetics and a Modern Ethic in Four Pairs of Plays
by Argentine and Irish Playwrights (1990-2003)

by

Noelia Diaz

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ABSTRACT

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Noelia Diaz

Advisor: Jean Graham-Jones

This project is an exploration of eight plays, four from Argentina, four from Ireland, comprehending the period between 1990 and 2003. Both countries share a strong tradition of national theatre that, from its beginnings, was closely intertwined with the development of the nation state. Theatre functions in Argentina and Ireland as a medium through which representations of what it means to be Irish or Argentine have been explored, questioned, and contested. It is the aim of this project to examine how the apparently non-political and ahistorical theater of the playwrights I will examine is indeed a response to a contextualized sense of political, social, and economic uncertainty, fueled by globalization. The postmodern aesthetics of the plays go beyond the playful to question how community, identity, and meaning are articulated in a world where national frameworks are being replaced by transnational movements (both economic and cultural). The impact of neoliberal economic policies implemented on Argentina and Ireland in the 90s and the severe displacement and rise of inequality of large sections of the population in both countries is contested, critiqued, and examined in all the plays of my study. In both the Argentine and Irish cases, lingering repressive practices responsible for human rights violations coexisted with an economic neoliberal agenda that generated its own particular set of discriminations, abuses, and diminish citizenships. This project analyzes how the chosen plays establish links between present and former instances of repression, violence, and abuse—underscoring for audiences unaddressed haunting human rights concerns in late twentieth-century Argentina and Ireland.
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Introduction

This project commenced, almost twenty years ago, with my viewing of Martin McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) at the Atlantic Theater in New York City. At that point, writing my dissertation was still several years away, but McDonagh’s work introduced me to Irish Theatre—and while *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is not included in this study, that production was the seminal impulse for the work at hand. Argentine Theatre joined the panoply of this work both before McDonagh and after. I had the privilege of studying acting in Madrid with Zulema Katz, a renowned Argentine actress who exiled herself first to Paris, and then to Madrid, after her second husband, poet, and political militant Francisco Urondo was executed by the Junta Government. Zulema’s life story was my first introduction to the horrific violence perpetrated by the Junta regime. Her mastery and talent, both as a performer and a teacher, marked the beginning of my lasting passion for theatre.

This project is an exploration of eight plays, four from Argentina, four from Ireland, encompassing the period between 1990 and 2003. Four texts are by playwrights self-identified as Irish: *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) and *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000) by Marina Carr, *The Pillowman* (2003) by Martin McDonagh, and finally the *Holy Ground* (1990) by Dermot Bolger. Four texts are by Argentinean playwrights: *Martha Stutz* (1997) by Javier Daulte, *La escuálida familia* (2001) by Lola Arias, *Cocinando con Elisa* (1994) by Lucía Laragione, and *Socavón* (1999) by Luis Cano. My study limits itself to the theatre created in the Republic of Ireland, not in Northern Ireland, and while acknowledging that contact between both areas has taken place, all of the Irish writers of this study come from the Republic, not from Northern Ireland. Argentina and Ireland share a strong tradition of national theatre that, from its beginnings, was closely intertwined with the development of the nation state. Theatre functions in both Argentina
and Ireland as a medium through which representations of national identity—what it means to be Irish or Argentine—has been explored, questioned, and contested.

It is not the aim of this investigation to provide an exhaustive history of either the theatrical landscape or the political circumstances in Ireland and Argentina when the plays were written. Such a study would be gargantuan and perhaps unproductive, by virtue of its size. Within the smaller scope of this project, it is easier to highlight the key similarities embedded in the two sets of plays I analyze. However, an understanding of the crucial local and national debates at the time the plays were written is indispensable to interpret their creation.

In his seminal work on Irish theatre *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era*, Patrick Lonergan notes that Irish theatre’s international success, with plays like *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) by Brian Friel, reinforced for audiences abroad what an Irish play was, rather than leading to intercultural exchange (54). Lonergan is critical of how an emphasis on globalization theory runs the risk of a subsequent failure to investigate the particulars of how a play is made and received. Local knowledge, he asserts, must be part of the conversation (223). I concur with Lonergan’s stance, and the aim of this project is to facilitate intercultural exchange between seemingly unrelated plays that nevertheless ponder similar questions on either side of the Atlantic. By remaining attendant to local histories and to crucial social changes in Ireland and Argentina, this project seeks to engage in a truthful “intercultural exchange,” one which understands national particularities while underscoring how globalizing forces, and their neoliberal agenda, generate diminished citizenships across the world.

I will argue that in spite of vague or absent historical signifiers (*Martha Stutz* being the exception here), all the plays are critical of the profound political and social changes unfolding in the 1990s in their respective countries. The period examined coincides with the implementation
in Argentina and Ireland of aggressive neoliberal economic and social policies that undermined, in both cases, their previous welfare states. Under the governments of Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1995) in Argentina and Bertie Ahern (1997-2008) in Ireland, economic growth masked the steady and severe rise of inequality, as well as the progressive impoverishment of the most disenfranchised sections of their populations.

David Harvey, investigating the rise of neoliberalism from the 1980s onward, has noted the discrepancy between the theory and the practice of a neoliberal state. As he discusses: “There are presumed to be no asymmetries of power or of information that interfere with the capacity of individuals to make rational economic decisions in their own interests. This condition is rarely, if ever, approximated in practice, and there are significant consequences” (68). Harvey highlights how as the state withdraws from areas such as health care, education, and social services inequality increases and personal failure is attributed to the victims of such system, not to the system itself (76). While Harvey notes that the implementation of a neoliberal system varies across countries he defines how in essence neoliberalism is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skill within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). In Argentina and Ireland neoliberal guidelines were introduced that weaken their respective welfare states and had disastrous consequences for large sections of the population.

Carolina Rocha identifies the way in which, under Menem’s government, the state retreated from its role as an arbiter among the different social classes: “First, political power sided with the upper classes that have traditionally favored economic liberalism and have benefitted the most during the years of military rule. […] Second, the interests of the middle and
lower classes ceased to be the axis around which domestic policies where planned and carried out” (xiv). The impact of these policies was sharply felt. By 1995 a third of Argentine households were living in poverty, and by 1996 the unemployment rate had reached 18.8 percent (Rocha, xiv). While Ireland’s economy did not hit a recession until 2008, signs of the uneven distribution of wealth and its ensuing consequences for the middle and lower classes were a subject of concern throughout the Celtic Tiger era. Kieran Allen’s study, conducted in 1999, already identified issues of increasing concern in Irish society: “While productivity has risen quite dramatically and even though the corporate elite have not significantly increased their investment, the gains are not being shared. Quite the opposite. Despite the ideology of social partnership the increase in labour productivity is associated with a declining share of wages in the national economy, while the share going of profits has risen substantially” (45).

In both Argentina and Ireland a two-tier society emerges through the 1990s with dire consequences for the vast majority of the population. The sense of insecurity and marginalization of large sections of the citizenry in both countries underscores the costly price of unfettered economic practices—practices that fail to remain vigilant to the equitable distribution of wealth. In both of these countries too theatre served as a voice critiquing and resisting the changes afflicting their respective societies; and theatre provided an opportunity for its audience to imagine alternatives.

In both Argentina and Ireland, there were crucial debates regarding human rights issues at the end of the twentieth century. These provide the backdrop to the critique of patriarchy and authoritarian discourses embedded in most of the plays in this study. In Argentina, President Menem issued two sets of pardons, in 1989 and 1990, to thirty-nine military members responsible for crimes committed under the 1976-83 Junta regime, which defined and created a
culture of impunity. The impact of these pardons on the civil society has been long-lasting and damaging, even after their reversal fifteen years later, since they allowed criminals of the military regime to remain free. As Carlos S. Nino reflects: “The pardons of those most responsible did nothing to promote the goal of preserving human rights for the future. They were granted instead to reconcile different sectors of the ‘Argentine family,’ blurring the moral condemnation of the atrocities committed and treating the crimes as if they were the result of a mere feud between two contending groups” (2630). Of particular interest for this project is Menem’s rhetorical construction of Argentine society, which Nino perceptively highlights, as a family in need of reconciliation. In the theatre of mid-1970s–early 1980s Argentina, the family unit functioned as the metaphor through which power struggles and the violence experienced by the Argentine citizens were explored. As Jean Graham-Jones reflects: “Theatre reacted by closing in on itself, creating hermetic worlds in which family politics and sadomasochistic games stood in for larger social violence. The preferred trope was the metaphor, and expressive means were employed to avoid censorial repercussions” (9). In most of the plays of this study, the family functions as the preferred metaphor used to address unresolved human rights issues under democracy, providing a link between former and present abuses afflicting Argentine society.

In the case of Ireland, the sexual scandals of the 1990s, which involved both the Government and the Catholic Church, cannot be ignored. Diarmaid Ferriter, in his thorough study of sexual practices in modern Ireland, concludes: “But what the 1980s and 1990s made clear was that illegitimacy, abortion, rape, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation were emphatically already a part of the ‘Irish heritage’ and the more events that received publicity, the more people were prepared to unburden themselves in relation to their own experiences” (Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland, 524). The floodgate of disclosures of
sexual abuse, across all sections of the Irish population, revealed an endemic, unresolved, and poorly (if at all) addressed civil and human right concern under the Celtic Tiger period.

In both the Argentine and Irish cases, lingering repressive practices responsible for human rights violations coexisted with an economic neoliberal agenda that generated its own particular set of discriminations, abuses, and diminish citizenships. This project analyzes how the chosen plays establish links between present and former instances of repression, violence, and abuse—underscoring for audiences unaddressed haunting human rights concerns in late twentieth-century Argentina and Ireland. All of the plays chosen for this study unmask the narratives that enable and perpetuate inequality among social classes, ethnic groups, and genders, while refusing to provide their audiences with specific modes of political and social action to overcome such inequalities.

In both the Argentine and the Irish plays of this project, there is a deliberate distancing from the explicitly political theatre prevalent in the 1980s in both countries, and yet, I will argue, all of the plays of this study are political. Lola Proaño Gómez, in considering Latin American theatre and globalization, defines four categories of what is political: the emergence of people indispensable to the system that nevertheless remain ignored and invisible to it; the encounter between two different logics, one belonging to the established system and one that opposes it; the fissure between the two logics, the moment of intersection and breakage that remains unaccommodated; and finally, the episodic eruption of violence that disrupts the established order (9-10). In each one of the plays, both Irish and Argentine, the political is revealed through one, or several of the above mentioned categories—through, in short, a postmodern aesthetic.

In spite of their postmodern aesthetics, the writers chosen for this project share ethical, philosophical, and moral concerns more closely associated with modernity. Some of the pairings
venture further into postmodern aesthetics (*The Pillowman, Martha Stutz*), while others (*Socavón, The Holy Ground*) are more grounded within a modern paradigm. However, in their hybridity, all of the plays of my study are examples of how resistance to a neoliberal praxis, and its ensuing dire consequences, can be articulated. Following the definition of postmodernism postulated by philosopher Richard Kearney in his book *The Wake of Imagination*, a postmodern imagination must become both ethical and poetical. According to Kearney, the collapse of the ethical via deconstruction has resulted in a dilemma for postmodernism, one in which the other has become just an image without substance. However, Kearney reflects how postmodernism can be reconsidered to reclaim the sense of ethics of the modern period:

> Narrative identity is a task of imagination, not a fait accompli. And here the poetical and the ethical aspects of this narrative task point to a political project. In telling its story to the other the imaginative self comes to recognize is unlimited responsibility to others. This responsibility extends beyond my personal history to include a collective history. […] This is why we feel bound to continue the search for a postmodern imagination, one willing to accept that whatever particular narrative it chooses or whatever image it constructs, there is always some dimension of otherness which transcends it. And, needless to say, this narrative quest for something always other entails radical possibilities of political praxis. (396, emphasis in the original)

Kearney’s postmodern imagination underscores the self’s awareness of its responsibility toward the other and its ensuing implications for a collective political history. By highlighting that the quest, the search itself is always unfinished, the postmodern artist’s refusal to impart lessons on how to act is reclaimed as an opening towards multiple paths. As Sarah Bailles proposes in her definition of a poetics of failure: “Whilst an intended outcome imagines only one result, the ways in which it might not achieve that outcome are indeterminate. […] In this sense, strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces, and does so in a roguish manner” (3). The dystopic, harrowing worlds of the plays of this study can be reconfigured, under Bailles’ and Kearney’s considerations, not as foreclosed
modernist endings, but, quite the opposite, as points of departure for new imaginings, and, perhaps, more hopeful futures. In a similar vein, Proaño Gómez reflects how the intersection of a postmodern aesthetic with a modern ethic in Latin American theatre leads to a refusal on the part of playwrights to answer the questions the plays raise:

"...por detrás de estas poéticas cuyos rasgos se han descrito como pertenecientes al postmodernismo, subyace una ética moderna. Sus procedimientos enfrentan -¿nuevas?- diversas formas de dominio; ellas no niegan ni la historia, ni la posibilidad de acción ni la de denuncia. Pero a diferencia del teatro político tradicional, los planteos que estas poéticas realizan tienen la forma de preguntas abiertas que marcan la ausencia de afirmaciones o proyectos definitivos; se caracterizan por una estética de la incertidumbre.” (13)

An “aesthetic of uncertainty” which Proaño Gómez examines is at the core of all these plays, Argentine as well as Irish. All of the plays attempt to elucidate how their characters relate to their own communities—what power, or lack of it, they have to define who they are, and to what extent violence and forces beyond their control shape both their choices and their destinies.

Taken in the context of a globalized world in which it has become increasingly difficult to name the forces, both political and economic, or how much autonomy is left to any of us, the ethical thrust all plays exhibit, in spite of their postmodern aesthetic, lies—as Proaño Gómez discusses—within the modern.

Each of the pairings in this project examines the ways in which, under a postmodern aesthetic, lies an ethical reflection regarding the nature of communities. *By the Bog of Cats*... and *Cocinando con Elisa* highlight the lingering discriminations towards minority populations in their respective countries—Travellers in Ireland and *cabecitas negras* in Argentina. *On Raftery’s Hill* and *La escuálida familia* question the patriarchal and authoritarian discourses that contribute to unresolved human rights abuses leading to a culture of impunity. *The Pillowman* and *Martha Stutz* investigate the fictional nature of historical narratives, as well as the elusive quality of
“truth” through its investigation of violence perpetrated against children. *Socavón* and *The Holy Ground* explore the devastating effects of a masculinity in crisis trying to reassert itself through gender violence.

**Chapter Summaries**

**Chapter 1. Reclaiming the Liminal Space: Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats…*(1998) and Lucía Laragione’s *Cocinando con Elisa* (1993)**

In this chapter I argue that Irish playwright Marina Carr and Argentine Lucía Laragione, through the rewriting of previous literary models--Greek tragedy in the case of the former, and fairy tales in the case of the latter--unmask discriminatory narratives towards minority groups in their respective countries. At the core of this engagement with mythology and fairy tales is violence. Violence takes a central role as the locus from which the relationships between the characters get drawn or disrupted. Even though the two plays differ greatly in setting and structure, they echo each other in a shared project of rewriting an older model. A comparative study of both plays unveils how in spite of their initial differences, Laragione and Carr find new meanings and possibilities in the simultaneous subversion and embrace of classical models. This chapter argues that the collapse of the rites of passage within these communities functions as a critique of socioeconomic displacements within Argentine and Irish societies. It will elucidate how, through highlighting liminal identities, Laragione’s play reconsiders the unresolved civic and human rights issues still lingering in democratic Argentina. Similarly, Carr’s play, through the figure of Hester, underscores the severe displacement of the Traveller population in the Republic, and the failure of the Irish State to accommodate, accept, and recognize Ireland’s largest minority.¹

¹As with the rest of this project the policies and references I discuss pertain only to The Republic, not to Northern Ireland.

In this chapter I compare two plays, On Raftery’s Hill by Marina Carr and La escuálida familia by Lola Arias. Both Carr and Arias write contemporary tragedies in which incest becomes the source of civilization’s demise and both playwrights critique patriarchal narratives that perpetuate discrimination and abuse. On Raftery’s Hill and La escuálida familia recreate dystopic worlds in which what remains is a single family invested in self destruction, violence, and the violation of one of the primordial taboos present in most societies: incest. Both writers examine closely the extent to which these two families have lost all sense of civilization and are slowly reverting to a state of animalization. By this, I mean a slow but nevertheless unstoppable path towards a complete loss of humanity through the progressive escalation of brutal acts.

In Ireland, the 1990s revealed the pervasive culture of sexual abuse across all sections of the Irish population and the failure of the Government to intervene and protect the victims. Given that context, Raftery’s abuse of his daughters becomes a painful reminder to Irish audiences of the many unresolved human rights violations under the Celtic Tiger period. In Argentina, the pardons issued by Menem to high-ranking officers responsible for crimes against humanity under the military dictatorship created a culture of impunity that haunted, like the many desaparecidos, democratic Argentina. Additionally, Menem’s rhetoric of economic progress masked the rise of inequality under his presidency. In that light, the hunger described in La escuálida familia underscores the rise of a different set of desaparecidos, those abandoned by a government pursuing a neoliberal economic agenda. Carr and Arias write tragedies which nevertheless deny the audience the pleasure of catharsis, and, in so doing, each questions both the form and place of
tragedy in the theatre as well as in the political context in which the play is written. The isolation, displacement, and marginality of the communities of both of these plays speak to the difficulty of creating, establishing, and sustaining meaningful relationships in the current world.

From a generic point of view, both plays use Greek tragedy as a blueprint. As Arias acknowledges in one of her interviews: “En el caso de La escuálida familia el desafío fue escribir una tragedia. Y en ese experimento también hay restos de otros generos: un poema, fragmentos de un diario, una carta. Sin embargo, el procedimiento tiene que ver básicamente con la apropiación de los tópicos de la tragedia y la exhibición del mecanismo” (231). Both Carr and Arias write contemporary tragedies in which incest becomes the source of civilization’s demise and critique patriarchal narratives that perpetuate discrimination and abuse.


In this chapter I compare two plays, The Pillowman by Martin McDonagh and Martha Stutz by Javier Daulte. Both plays concern the investigation of a brutal crime. In Daulte’s case, the play is based on a real historical event dating from 1938 in the province of Córdoba. Marta Stutz, a nine year-old girl disappeared and was never seen again. The play parodies the documentary theatre in the style of Peter Weiss’s The Investigation by deconstructing the different characters, bringing in overt themes from Alice in Wonderland, and having “doubles” which disintegrate any possibility of certainty or resolution. In a similar vein, The Pillowman, although fictional, parodies the police drama, engaging with The Trial by Kafka and The Grimms Brother’s fairy tales. The play also uses the story “The Sandman” by E.T. A. Hoffman as the model for the short story the protagonist of the play, Katurian, writes and which gives the title to the play: The Pillowman. The Pillowman is set in an unknown undemocratic state, one which
vaguely resembles communist Russia. As one of the characters sums up for Katurian: “Katurian. I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?” (23). Indeed, this sentence summarizes not just the political state in which the play is set, but also the overall sense of uncertainty and frailty of the citizens of this unnamed country. These two plays deliberately seek to undermine a genre (documentary theatre in one case, police procedural in the other) which is deeply invested in the establishment of “truth.” As critic Amalia Gladhart reflects in her analysis of several Latin American history plays: “In plays in which historical material is reenacted, the performance becomes an acted-out narration for the audience, while ‘history itself,’ the recorded events that form the basis of the presentation, is revealed or constructed as a series of provisional, partial, and highly problematic live representations which later become ‘fact’” (29). Both plays present children as the victims of crimes, but nevertheless move beyond the pain of the act, to question any possibility of justice or resolution. In addition, both plays deeply engage with previous literary works as departures for newer readings and rewritings through which to examine the impossibility to achieve stable knowledge. The pain of the crimes becomes undermined through the brutal dark humor present in *The Pillowman* and by the parody and intertextual references in *Martha Stutz*. Pain, emotional distress, and resolution give rise to ridicule, distancing, and uncertainty. Children become the preferred mode of both these states to create national mythologies of victimization in which a strong government must intervene to protect its citizens. The irony lies in the fact that the mythologies are deconstructed and ridiculed by both playwrights. The victims become agents, and the aggressors are disempowered through the closer examination of their weaknesses. In a postmodern world, the certainty provided by nationhood is no longer feasible, and as the master narratives crumble, both Daulte and McDonagh examine what it looks like to exist in the
uncertain. What ultimately appears to survive, and to provide meaning, in both cases, is storytelling and fiction.


In this chapter, I examine two monologues in which a spouse confesses to having killed a partner. Their confessions are suspect. Although the voices of both characters, a man in the first, a woman in the second, are very different (he appears to be schizophrenic; she is consumed with loneliness and isolation), both plays offer a bleak vision of marriage. The characters both use the monologue as a confessional mode, one in which after acknowledging the crime some sort of absolution could be granted—but in neither case is there final solace or forgiveness. In *Socavón* consolation cannot be attained because the unnamed male protagonist is only dimly aware of his own responsibility in the committed act. His own mental illness precludes him from obtaining a coherent narrative that might pave the way for remorse or absolution. In *The Holy Ground* Monica is fully able to unravel all the pieces of her broken life, up to the moment in which she tried to kill her husband with rat poison, but her confession once again is deemed useless since the husband died of unrelated natural causes. Ironically, the rat poison Monica used may have prolonged her husband’s life, according to the doctor to whom she confesses her crime, so Monica’s attempt at rebelling against her fate is deprived of significance. Both plays explore the ways in which a masculinity in crisis attempts to reassert itself through gender violence, only to fail, and lead to further isolation.

Through the narration of their marital alienation and despair, both Monica and the unknown male unravel not just their own pain, but also the failure to achieve human bonding in a world in which archaic gender roles inhibit truthful relationships. The political inability to seek
divorce in Ireland at the time *The Holy Ground* was written ensures that Monica and her husband are locked in a relationship which has become stale and poisonous to both of them, and yet there is no way out of it, not even when one of them dies. In *Socavón* the collapse of communication is taken a bit farther as the audience cannot even be sure that the murder was perpetrated. Indeed the speaker is so incoherent and mentally ill that all the conflicting narrations he channels are equally unreliable. Language, the primordial human tool in the establishment of bonding, is in both of these plays deeply questioned and deconstructed: Monica never spoke what she felt in a façade of a marriage filled with lies, and the unknown man can only deliver broken pieces of his life. Masculine hegemonic roles are called into question and, in doing so, both plays unveil the dire consequences of sexism and a masculinity in crisis in Ireland and Argentina.

In conclusion, the aim of this project is to closely analyze how the plays chosen here, in spite of their apparent ahistorical settings and vacuum of national consciousness, indeed respond to the contextual influences, both historical and literary, surrounding their creation. The impact of the neoliberal economic policies implemented in both countries and the ensuing fragmentation, disenfranchisement, and rise of inequality of large sections of the population, while not explicitly stated, is the backdrop for all the plays. Lastly, in spite of their postmodern aesthetic, the plays share ethical and philosophical concerns which place them, in spite of their dates, closer to a modern sensibility. The striking similarities between the pairs also exhibit the ways in which, in a globalized world where cultural and artistic movements are not bound by national borders, it is possible to be simultaneously local and global.
Chapter 1. Reclaiming the Liminal Space: Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*… (1998) and Lucía Laragione’s *Cocinando con Elisa* (1993)

In *Cocinando con Elisa* the audience learns how Elisa, a peasant cook, almost at the point of giving birth, has been killed by Funes, a servant, so that her baby can be removed from her uterus and given to the Madame of the house as a surrogate son. At the end of *Bog of Cats*…, Hester, a Traveller, kills first her daughter, and then herself, in an attempt to rebel against her fate. These two unspeakable examples of extreme violence highlight the presence of disenfranchised minorities in Ireland and Argentina to their audiences and in doing so underscore the catastrophic consequences of marginalization. Through the use of Greek myth in the case of Marina Carr and fairy tales in Lucía Laragione’s case, both writers deploy a classic literary genre to subvert expected notions of each. As Bruno Bettelheim contemplates in *The Uses of Enchantment*, a marked difference between myth and fairy tales lies in the pessimistic outlook of the former versus the optimistic outcome of the latter (10). While in fairy tales the struggles and tribulations depicted do usually end with a sense of accomplishment and justice that favor the hero/heroine, in myth the audience or reader may experience a sense of catharsis, but the protagonists, like Medea or Oedipus, encounter cruel fates that lead to death or terrible despair. In Laragione’s and Carr’s plays the pessimistic/optimistic dichotomy laid out by Bettelheim is reversed; thus while in *Cocinando* the end grants victory to Nicole, who is essentially the witch, in *Bog* Hester triumphs, even in spite of her death, because she possesses complete foresight into and understanding of both her fate and the choices she makes.

Even though the two plays differ greatly in setting and structure, they echo each other in a

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2Throughout the rest of the chapter I will use the abbreviated forms *Cocinando* and *Bog* to discuss the plays.
shared project of rewriting an older model. A comparative study of both will show how, in spite of their initial differences, Laragione and Carr find new meanings and possibilities in the simultaneous subversion and embrace of classical models. This chapter will argue that the collapse of the rites of passage within these communities function as a critique of socioeconomic displacements within Argentine and Irish societies. It will elucidate how, through highlighting liminal identities, Laragione’s play reconsiders the unresolved civic and human rights issues still lingering in democratic Argentina. Similarly, Carr’s play, through the figure of Hester, underscores the severe displacement of the Traveller population in the Republic, and the failure of the Irish State to accommodate, accept, and recognize Ireland’s largest minority.³

*Bog* and *Cocinando* underscore liminal spaces and subjects as the locus from which to contest repressive power structures that silence, abuse, oppress, and disenfranchise marginal subjects. As defined by Victor Turner, a liminal individual is marked by the following characteristics:

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualizes social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon. (90)

For Turner liminal customs function as a rite of passage into society. As such, while the individual temporarily inhabits a threshold area or state, the successful completion of the ritual will lead to his/her incorporation into society. Turner’s later elaboration of the liminal in *From Ritual to Theatre* seeks to demonstrate how liminality, while generating critique and the

³As with the rest of this project the policies and references I discuss pertain only to The Republic, not to Northern Ireland.
suspension of rules, is a temporary state, and once transcended by the participant individuals, further strengthens society’s rules: “Thus symbols found in rites of passage in these societies, though subject to permutations and transformations of their relationships, are only involved in these within relatively stable, cyclical, and repetitive systems” (29).

Examples of the liminal can be, among others, a wedding ceremony or the passage from puberty into adulthood. In the plays Elisa’s pregnancy and Hester’s Traveller status mark them as liminal individuals within their communities. Farida Tilbury, Yan Toussaint, and Annette Davis, further elaborating on the liminal, conclude that “cultural performances are opportunities for group reflection about the moral and legal rules, social, structures, roles etc. Such performances help people to understand themselves and the group by reflecting and challenging the group’s assumptions about itself” (10). Since in Laragione’s and Carr’s plays liminal subjects fail to move from their indeterminate placement into their communities, the liminal becomes, not a transient stage, but a permanent locus of violence, displacement, and marginalization. The plays challenge audiences in Argentina and Ireland to reflect upon marginalized citizenships in both countries and unmask the narratives enabling such discriminations.

The liminal space is both a physical location--like the bog in Bog or the subterranean kitchen in Cocinando--as well as a social displacement--like Hester’s marginalized existence as a Traveller or Elisa’s servant role in Nicole’s kitchen. I will argue that liminality is evidenced in the uses and revisions of existing generic categories, such as Greek myth and tragedy in Bog and fairy tales in Cocinando. Both Greek myth and fairy tales function in the plays as haunting

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4Turner makes a distinction in the passage between agrarian and modern societies. In this discussion, his use of liminal is exclusive to agrarian, pre-industrial societies. Since the plays, while written in the 90s, hark back to, classical, pre-modern period, Turner’s use of liminal, rather than liminoid, is apt when describing Elisa’s and Hester’s status.
presences that imbue the plays with earlier, familiar blueprints that the playwrights deconstruct and reconsider. As acts of postmodern rewritings the liminal is construed, in both plays, by the uneasy stance between the modern and the postmodern aesthetics the plays inhabit. While Greek tragedy, in its Aristotelian conception, provided catharsis to the audience, allowing order to be restored, in Carr’s version, Hester’s self-sacrifice and Josie’s filicide become acts of contestation against the displacement experienced by Hester as a Traveller. Hester rises against the pressure to succumb to a social order that denies her a physical and spiritual space. Her wrath, anger, and destruction eradicate not just herself and her daughter, but sharply critique the bourgeois society that elides her. In Laragione’s play, Elisa’s failed attempt to escape the repressive order of the household she inhabits, and her gruesome murder, with her unburied body left to rot in the open, speak to the impossibility of finding a place of belonging, even after death. Hester, Josie, Elisa, and Nicole reside in the threshold, contesting, sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently, their borderland existence. In Ireland, the troubled and long history of discrimination against Travellers is crucial to exploring how the liminal in the play comments on the larger society. In Argentina, the invisibility, displacement, and marginalization of the indigenous and Afro-Argentine populations raise profound questions regarding human rights and the full development of a civic democracy in post-dictatorship Argentina. The inability, or failure at the moment the play was staged, to adequately address the crimes of the military dictatorship, with all its brutality and lingering scars in the democracy of the 1990s, must also be considered. In spite of the bleakness present in Bog and Cocinando, though, I will argue that Carr and Laragione seek to reclaim the liminal space as fruitful area from which to resist oppressive orders and violent repressions. The sometimes fragile, threshold positioning of Hester and Elisa ensure the marginalization of the characters within their communities but also, however tenuously, the
opportunity to envision an alternate place or order from which to resist oppression.

Before proceeding to a closer analysis of both plays, a succinct summary is in order. As noted by many scholars (Doyle, Harris, Sihra, and others), Bog is a loosely adapted version of the myth of Medea, and, to a certain extent, Euripides’ tragedy. Hester, the protagonist of the play, is a member of the nomadic and itinerant people known in Ireland as Travellers. She has always lived on the periphery of her community, closely linked to land and nature. At the beginning of the play the audience learns that Hester has been abandoned by her lover, Carthage Killbride, who is about to marry a new bride, Caroline Cassidy, the night in which the play commences. Although never married to each other, Hester and Carthage have a daughter, Josie, of whom Carthage is trying to gain custody. Hester had originally agreed to depart from the bog she inhabits but, after taking the money and agreeing to relocate, refuses to leave her home. Obstinate, determined, and fierce, Hester refuses to abandon the land where she grew up, in spite of the attempts of almost all the characters in the play to persuade her to leave. As it becomes apparent, Hester’s love for, or obsession with, both Carthage and her mother (Big Josie) preclude her leaving the bog where she hopes both will return. Hester and Carthage also share a darker secret involving the death of Hester’s brother. Jealous of the attention Hester’s stepbrother had received from their mother, Hester killed him, and with the money she stole from him, Carthage managed to improve his social standing. At the end of the play, Hester will kill her daughter, Josie, and then herself, in front of her horrified friends and neighbors.

This brief summary makes it apparent that, even with some variations, Bog is greatly inspired by Medea. Hester is the barbarian lover (Hester’s Traveller status makes her the other) whom Jason/Carthage Killbride is happy to relinquish once the opportunity to marry Creusa/Caroline Cassidy presents itself. Caroline might not be the princess of Corinth, but she is
the future heir to her father’s land, the largest piece of property in this small community. Medea’s two sons are replaced in *Bog* by one daughter, Josie, and the chorus is played by several characters, although Catwoman is the primary carrier of this role. This sustaining tragic framework is further complicated in Carr’s play by Hester’s turbulent past: her involvement in the murder of her brother and her difficult relationship with her absent mother. Hester has blood on her hands before she kills herself and her daughter, and this problematizes her character who is not just a victim suffering the abandonment of Carthage, but also a murderer, even if she does have a guilty conscience about her deeds.

In *Cocinando*, Nicole, the head chef of a wealthy household, is provided with a new apprentice, Elisa, whom she must instruct in the complex and sophisticated art of French cuisine. Entirely set in the mansion’s subterranean kitchen, Nicole functions as the evil witch imparting her knowledge to the new apprentice. However, things are not as they appear. Unable to decipher the world that she has entered, Elisa fails to learn the necessary skills to survive in this country estate and is trapped in a web of deceit, abuse, and violence. Finding herself pregnant, by a suitor whose identity is never disclosed to the audience, Elisa decides to leave the house and seek a better future. In a truly chilling and horrifying tale of Elisa’s last moments, Nicole recounts to Elisa’s infant, how Funes, a male house servant, killed the child’s mother and removed him from her uterus.

Using as a sustaining framework fairy tales, in particular *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, the play unMASKS the dangers of accepting and perpetuating romance narratives that normalize violence and its consequences. *Cocinando*, as noted by Ariel Strichtarz, also evokes Esteban Echeverría’s “El Matadero,” intersecting an Argentine canonical short story with Western archetypal figures. By evoking “El Matadero,” racial issues and the barbarism/civilizing
tensions present in the construction of Argentine national identity are intersected with fairy tales. Gauchos, criollos, and blacks are portrayed in “El Matadero” as barbarous and violent in contrast to the progressive, civilized Unitarian persecuted by the mob. The civilizing forces praised by Echeverría in his tale are European in origin, just like the fairy tales Laragione uses as a blueprint, but rather than praising European values, Laragione adeptly unveils the repressive, discriminatory, and brutal power structures embedded in the tales. The following analysis will elucidate the intersection of fairy tales and the Gaucho narrative in Cocinando and in the process, offer a critique of lingering discriminations under Carlos Menem’s presidency.

The incorporation by Laragione of a fairy tale structure in Cocinando seeks to reconsider the narratives used to indoctrinate children into compliance. As noted by Jack Zipes:

My concern is largely with the fairy-tale discourse as a dynamic part of the historical civilizing process, with each symbolic act viewed as an intervention in socialization in the public sphere. […] The fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves, and they are not the best therapy in the world for children. They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them. (10-11)

Zipes’ remarks underscore the power of fairy tales to serve, under an aura of agelessness and universality, as agents of historical prescription at any given moment. What sort of historical prescription/s does Laragione evoke by implicitly alluding to fairy tales in her play? What modifications, if any, has Laragione made to the ageless version of the persecuted heroine genre? Her play, much like the fairy tales she takes as her inspiration, is, as Zipes points out, an intervention in socializing in the public sphere. Laragione forcefully contests, deconstructs, and ultimately refuses to remain complacent in the face of violent abuses of power. Furthermore, her play excels at showing the insidiousness with which, once put into place, power structures are sustained, perpetuated, and further solidified by those who are most repressed and marginalized.
by them. Laragione’s heroines, Nicole and Elisa, become pawns of a system which they have little power to resist, since they have internalized and thus, accepted their roles as liminal subjects within it.

In order to elucidate how Laragione uses fairy tales to contest the “historical prescriptions” at the time the play was staged, some brief contextual information is required. *Cocinando* was written in 1993, and, following an initial opening in 1995 in Madrid, staged in 1997 in Buenos Aires. The military dictatorship ended in Argentina in 1983, so it could be argued that by 1997, more than ten years into a democratic period, Argentina was no longer in a moment of “transition.” However, President Carlos Saúl Menem (1989-1999) issued two sets of pardons, the first in 1989 and the second in 1990, the latter to Jorge Videla, Emilio Massera, Leopoldo Galtieri, and other men who had been responsible for the political repression and disappearance of so-called “subversivos” under the Junta dictatorship. The opposition to the pardons came swiftly, from both the international and the national communities. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial published on January 6, 1991, states:

> Only in the last few years have civilian leaders tried to assert authority over the generals, so it's disappointing that President Carlos Saúl Menem began the 1990s with a step backwards. [...] Menem said the pardons were necessary to bring about a reconciliation in Argentina, and balanced his pardon for the officers by ordering the release of the jailed leader of the Montoneros, the terrorist group the government suppressed in the late 1970s. But it will take more than that to persuade the vast majority of Argentines that Menem has made the right decision--or for the right reason. Public opinion polls indicate that up to 80% of Argentines disapprove of the pardons.

Anticipating resistance and unrest to his pardons, Menem’s explanation for his actions drew on a language of unity and forgiveness. Menem’s rhetoric assumed two opposing groups, the “subversivos” versus “the milicos” rather than a military regime, embodied by “the milicos,” that had set to terrorize the Argentine population. In her analysis of Menem’s discourse regarding the
pardons, Ana Ros notes that:

Before granting the first round of pardons, he established the framework from within which they should be interpreted. He talked about humbly accepting one’s own mistakenness and the adversary’s rightness to contribute with a truthful disposition to reconciliation and unity. He stressed that he “was willing to do his best so Argentines could leave behind resentment and distrust to enter a new era of authentic peace” (Lvovich and Bisquert, 53). Thereby, he shifted the focus away from the existence of opposing interests regarding justice and explained the conflict in terms of feelings of hate and revenge between two groups, both of which had been equally “wrong” and harmed the adversary. (5)

As Ros underlines, Menem attempted, through a rhetoric of reconciliation, to underscore the uneven nature of the conflict. By referring to two opposing parties, with different ideas of justice, Menem failed to acknowledge the horrific reality of a government that had set to terrorize large segments of its citizenship. Menem’s “historical prescription” regarding the dictatorship denied victims the right to prosecute those who had harmed them, and opened the door to a culture of impunity.

In that light Cocinando is one more voice resisting forgiveness of the crimes committed under the dictatorship. Given that Cocinando does not deal explicitly with the historical circumstances of the regime, it can be argued that the play does not have a political purpose. However, as defined by Lola Proaño Gómez, “Lo político aparece solamente cuando se da el encuentro entre dos lógicas – que a la vez responden a dos racionalidades diferentes –, la del orden instituido y la de un nuevo orden con la propuesta de una nueva lógica con fines y valores radicalmente opuestos a la lógica del sistema” (9). Laragione’s play rejects an order that masks brutal violence and condones discriminatory treatment, under a guise of civilization. In contrast, Elisa’s fate in the household reveals the brutal consequences of power structures that remain unquestioned and uncontested. Laragione’s play is, in this light, a sharp critique and reminder of the consequences of remaining passive and silent when atrocities strike. Reflecting on her play in
2011, upon winning the Proyecto 34°S’s contest, Laragione states:

*Cooking with Elisa* was written in 1993. Given the time that has passed since it was written and the play’s track record, I can speak of it almost as if it were someone else’s. It is a post-dictatorship text. From 1976 to 1982, the year of the Malvinas (Falklands) war, Argentina suffered the bloodiest dictatorship in memory. Although I did not set to write a text that alluded to that unfortunate period, it is true that I lived in the same dark circumstances as all Argentines that stayed in the country. When the military dictatorship fell, the horror –masked behind the name of the ‘the disappeared’– came to light. And we began to know the truth: tortures, deaths, children taken away from their parents. It was inevitable therefore, in that context, that the critics would read *Cocinando* – loaded with cruelty and violence as a metaphor from the dark past from which we are only just emerging. (Author’s note to *Cooking with Elisa*. Trans. Clara Tilve, 36)

As noted by Laragione, the horrors of the dictatorship were very present in the Argentine audiences’ minds when the play was originally staged in 1997, and so were the pardons (1989-90) that Menem had issued to those responsible for the crimes. Additionally, beginning in 1995, with the public confession of Captain Adolfo Francisco Scilingo, a number of military leaders acknowledged the systematic abduction, torture, and dumping of hundreds of people into the ocean. By 1998, eight military members had confessed their involvement in the killings and disappearances (Skaar, 56). As such, when *Cocinando* premiered in Argentina, the crimes of the dictatorship were at the forefront of public discussion. In fact, Mabel Itzcovich’s *Clarín* newspaper review of the original staging in Buenos Aires stated: “Pero la trama no se detiene en las recetas y avanza por caminos cada vez más tortuosos que convierten a *Cocinando* en una metáfora sobre la represión que remite a la dictadura militar de la que los argentinos – aunque no todos – aún guardan memoria” (Mabel Itzcovich). Itzcovich’s review underscores the link

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5Proyecto 34°S site states that: “Proyecto 34°S is an independent artistic exchange with a focus on contemporary African and Latin American theatre and the performing arts. Founded by Nikki Froneman (South Africa), it takes its name from the 34°S line of latitude which links Cape Town and Buenos Aires, the first two cities to actively participate in the exchange. From its base in Cape Town, South Africa, Proyecto 34°S works with a number of volunteers as well as partner organizations and advisors, from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds who collaborate in a variety of ways in the realization of its artistic exchange projects.”
between the military dictatorship and the violence present in *Cocinando*, as well as the ironic acknowledgement that many don’t remember it, or perhaps have chosen to forget the brutality of the Junta. She thus highlights the play’s value to its Argentine audiences.

In the context of Argentine politics, then, *Cocinando* can be considered a refusal to participate in a mode of transitional justice that normalizes acts of state violence through a narrative of truth and reconciliation. Siphiwe Ignatius Dube argues that, in light of mass atrocities and genocide, the process of truth and reconciliation overemphasizes the positive aspects of forgiveness over retributive justice (181). Drawing from Brudholm’s critique of the normalizing and positive emphasis on unity, hope, and compassion, rather than anger, Dube advocates for a reconsideration of narratives of transitional justice,

> It has meant a simple equation of transition with positive outcomes, while in reality, political transitions are fraught with havoc, to say the least. Further, for those of us engaged in the study of literary fiction that deals with periods of political transition, such privileging has meant that texts we study do not match expectations regarding positive outcomes. However, the impact of this positive oversignification goes beyond insular textual literary analysis; it also has a direct impact on the ethical dimensions of our responses to particular repressive situations around the world. (184)

As Dube incisively analyzes, a rhetoric centered on the positive outcomes of reconciliation, rather than retributive justice, has ethical dimensions that go beyond the literary. An emphasis on positive outcomes denies not just the voice, but also the past, present, and future of the victims and their families. It superimposes a narrative, similar to a fairy tale structure, in which all bad things get resolved and order is restored. In that light and context, Laragione’s play subverts the expected outcomes, alerting the audience to the dangers of accepting, without critical judgment, a fairy tale ending. The following analysis will disclose how the innocent persecuted heroine genre, a classical western fairy tale form, is deconstructed by Laragione. Additionally, as pointed out by Strichartz, *Cocinando* on the surface resembles the *costumbrista*
rural dramas characteristic of early twentieth-century Argentine theatre (105). Laragione combines a classical, “ageless” genre with a very well-known Argentine form and in doing so, the play simultaneously combines the mythic (fairy tales) with the historical (rural drama), denying the audience the possibility of remaining complacent in this realm of the archetypal.

Fairy tales fall into just a handful of subgenres, and what Steven Swann Jones has called “the innocent persecuted heroine genre” is one of the most widely known, if often unnamed. Jones describes this genre as falling into a three-act structure. In each act, the heroine attempts to overcome her fate. The first act finds the heroine at home, but she is victimized by other family members: such is the case, for example, of Cinderella, who suffers the envy of both her stepsisters and her stepmother. In the second act the heroine manages to escape the grip of her abusers and after several trials and tribulations finds a mate she can marry. Once again Cinderella’s tale falls within this category, since against all the obstacles put in place by her evil family the heroine manages to attend the dance given by the handsome prince who falls in love with her. Lastly, in a typology less known to readers who tend to be most familiar with fairy tales that end in the heroine’s happy marriage, in act three, the heroine will suffer in her husband’s home either from his abuse, or from other family members, usually after having borne his children. Examples of this category put forward by Jones include The Maiden without Hands, The Three Golden Sons, and Born from a Fish (16). The persecuted heroine need not face each one of these trials in order for the definition to apply. For example, the harassment could take place just in act one or two. In Laragione’s play though, Elisa, the persecuted heroine, will be victimized in all three acts, with increasing violence until the play culminates with her murder.

At the beginning of Cocinando, Elisa has just arrived at the house where she will be working as a cook’s apprentice under the head chef, Nicole. Even though this is not Elisa’s
house, it will function as such, given that no previous information on her lineage is put forward, nor any family attachments described. In this first act, according to Jones’ discussion of the genre, the heroine usually suffers under the jealousy of her siblings or stepmother, who resent her beauty, goodness, or both. In Cocinando, Nicole, fulfills the role of evil stepmother. As head chef Nicole is in charge of introducing Elisa into the house, more particularly into the kitchen, and showing her how to behave in it. She functions as the guiding parental figure, albeit not a kind one, who is in charge of educating her. Nicole nevertheless is not interested in teaching Elisa. On the contrary, she takes pleasure in abusing her power, however limited. And she tricks Elisa into mistakes, or demands unreasonable tasks from her pupil, as in the following example:

ELISA: ¡¿720?! ¿Para cuándo los quiere?
ELISA: ¡720! (40)

This scene evokes the Brothers Grimm version of the Cinderella tale, in which Cinderella can only attend the dance if she picks up a bowlful of lentils that her stepmother has scattered in the ashes. In that version, birds help her collect the lentils, and here, Elisa dutifully fulfills her task with the aid of Funes, a male servant of the house, whom Nicole warns her not to trust. However, since Nicole is so cruel to Elisa, neither she nor the audience pay attention to the warning. The audience naively sides with Elisa’s plight at the hands of Nicole, so her successive hints and warnings against the other characters are attributed to Nicole’s jealous and evil nature and not to real dangers.

The first scene, in addition to alluding to the Brothers Grimm classical tale, sets the
parameters for how the relationship between Elisa and Nicole will unfold. As noted by Strichartz, Nicole’s teaching technique closely resembles an interrogation (99). By attempting to confuse Elisa, deliberately being obscure in her references and using French, rather than Spanish, to name the recipes, Nicole repeatedly reminds Elisa of her subservient status. The use of French is particularly relevant, since it introduces, very early on, the racist overtones of the play. French is more than just a language in the play; rather, it signals Nicole’s yearning to distance herself from her peasant roots and align herself with her employers. The fact that Monsieur and Madame are the terms used to refer to her superiors further suggests that all things Francophone are a source of identity and pride in the household. France, along with its cuisine, stands in for an idealized, European model just like the fairy tale structure of the play, used to distance itself from the indigenous inhabitants of this land. The construction and perception of race in Argentina at the time the play was written must be considered, since Nicole’s anxieties regarding her own background underline how those that have been elided internalize oppression.

As previously noted, Menem was the president at the time Cocinando was produced, and his identity, in terms of his own race, religion, and provincial status, was very present in the public and private discussions by Argentine citizens while he was president. The racial and ethnic overtones in the play cannot be divorced from the racial and social discriminations experienced by the non-European population in Argentina. More poignantly, given Menem’s own status as a non-European, the discourse/s surrounding his persona exemplified the anxieties,

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6The script of the play does not specify Nicole’s or Elisa’s race, but both are assumed to be rural peasants. In the original staging of the play in Buenos Aires, Norma Pons, who portrayed Nicole, is white, but her hair was bleached blond, not her natural color, highlighting her desire to be European. Subsequent productions of the play have varied their emphasis on social class versus race when casting the roles of Nicole and Elisa. In the staging of the play in Mexico in 2011 the actress portraying Elisa was black, underscoring racial issues, rather than a peasant/European divide. Moreno, Jaime. “Teatro/Mexico. Cocinando con Elisa comenzará temporada en la sala Villaurrutia.” Rancho las voces. Revista de Arte y Cultura/ Ciudad Juárez. Chihuahua 15, July 2011. Web. 19 Oct. 2014.
notions, and complexities regarding race in Argentina that *Cocinando* explores. Menem came from a family of Middle Eastern descent, from Syria, and prior to becoming president, he had been the governor of the province of La Rioja, in the north of Argentina. Although Muslim, Menem converted to Catholicism in order to become president of Argentina, and he subsequently proceeded to modify the law that made Catholicism a requirement for the presidency.

Throughout his time as governor of La Rioja, Menem was fond of Gaucho outfits and long sideburns, which many considered an *Indian* aesthetic (Joseph, 350). Menem embodies the several discourses regarding race, provincialism, and the role of the Argentine nation in the world as viewed by porteños (residents of Buenos Aires). Galen Joseph conducted fieldwork in 1994 and 1995 in Buenos Aires and concluded that:

> It is the perceived disjuncture between the ideals and hopes for the Argentine nation and the state of decline and disappointment in the failure to meet them, that Menem slips and slides among the categories of Argentine President, *indio*, *caudillo*, and *turco*. For middle class porteños, each of these terms correlates with a particular aspect of past, the capital-provincial divide, and immigration. (351)

Joseph’s findings highlight how the citizens (or citizenry) of Argentina in the 1990s, in particular those residing in Buenos Aires, struggled to form an identity that would be inclusive of the Indian minorities and the rural population. In *Cocinando* the pervasive references to both race and ethnic categorizations exemplified the extent to which, in spite of the democracy, discrimination and a hierarchy of racist values prevailed. Nicole and Elisa, provincial workers on a country estate, isolated and removed from the city, embody one of the disenfranchised groups of citizens at the time the play was staged. Their existence itself is liminal and expendable. They dwell in a kitchen, where they are often unseen; only their labor, the complex and sophisticated French dishes, signals their existence. Ironically, the cuisine they create represents the values used to suppress and discriminate against them.
Joseph’s research focuses on the perceptions about race espoused by Argentines of European descent, but in *Cocinando*, given that the audience never sees the presumably white Monsieur or Madame, the views regarding ethnicity and race are put forward by Elisa and Nicole. Nicole exhibits all the markings of a subordinate employee fully indoctrinated in the values of the ruling class. She is, unquestionably, suffering from internalized oppression and is heavily invested in preserving the status quo that serves to disenfranchise her. In the following excerpt the anger and profound distress that Nicole experiences highlight her own liminal state within the household:

NICOLE: Me llamo Nicole. Nicole.
ELISA: ¡Deje de hacerse la fina conmigo, quiere! Si acá todos se le ríen por detrás. Si hasta Monsieur y Madame se burlan de sus aires…
NICOLE: ¡Basura! ¡Eso es basura!
ELISA: Vamos, Nicolasa. Hija de una cocinera de estancia y de un peón golondrina que la llenó y voló. ¿O acaso me va a decir que usted conoce a su padre?
NICOLE: Cállese, vaca sucia! Está hablando la mism basura que toda la manga de negros brutos que se mueren de envidia porque Madame y Monsieur
ELISA: La mandan a dormir al sótano. (58)

The fury that Elisa is able to elicit from Nicole speaks to the instability and fragility of Nicole’s position in the household and illuminates her fierce determination to brutally uphold her power within the small territory of her kitchen. The slippage from Nicole to Nicolasa unveils the chef’s yearning to become French, to embody the identity of the oppressor and to escape the provincial roots. Nicole explicitly accuses Elisa of being like the “manga de negros” who, although she does not get to finish her sentence, presumably speak ill of the Monsieur and the Madame.

Categories of race in Argentina rarely dwell on those of African descent, a poignant example of the denial of the Afro-Argentine population is captured in the following statement by Menem: “In Argentina blacks do not exist, that is a Brazilian problem.”\(^7\) However, the term *negros* as

\(^7\)This statement is captured in the film *Afroargentinos* an exploration of contemporary Afro-Argentine life in Buenos Aires. *Afroargentinos*. Dir. Diego H.Ceballos et al. 2005
used by Nicole can have at least two separate meanings. It can refer to the Indian, native population or to the rarely acknowledged Afro-Argentine population. Under the military dictatorship both groups were lumped together into one, under the labeled “cabecitas negras,” and as Diana Taylor notes, the military dictatorship underscored their marginalization (94). The term “cabecitas negras” predates the military dictatorship⁸, and it has been in use in Argentina since the 1940s. According to Barbara Sutton, with the industrialization of Argentina in the 1930s, large numbers of people from the interior moved to urban areas, particularly to Buenos Aires. The reception by the urban classes was not welcoming. Sutton states that:

> The swelling presence of poor and working-class people from the “interior” horrified the privileged of Buenos Aires, who described these internal migrants in racialized and pejorative terms such as cabecitas negras (little black heads) and referred to their migration as aluvión zoológico (zoological flood). Ever since, the term cabecita negra has invoked images of poor dark or brown-skinned people. (“Con testing Racism” 108)

In the hands of Nicole the term “negros” could refer to Afro-Argentines, rather than to the Indians, since at other moments in the play Nicole uses the term “indio.” Yet it might also be the case that Nicole’s “negros” is a looser category of both Indian and Afro-Argentines, the above-mentioned “cabecitas negras.” If so, Cocinando highlights how the racial categories used to discriminate under the dictatorship were still prevalent in recently democratized Argentina. In his study of the Afro-Argentine community in Argentina in the second half of the twentieth century, Alejandro Frigerio analyzes the community’s fragmentation and limited visibility within the public sphere (8). However, Frigerio also goes on to explain that in the 1990s several key events led to a resurgence in visibility by the black community in Argentina. As Frigerio notes, the

⁸Evita Perón (1919-1952) used the term “descamisados” and “cabecitas negras” as a form of endearment for the popular classes supporting her husband, Argentine President Juan Perón.
publication of the essay, “Stories and Passions of Afro-Argentines” in the newspaper *Clarin* is an important intervention because it acknowledged a fact previously unrecognized: the existence of a prominent Afro-Argentine community (17). To gain a tentative public sphere, however limited, is nevertheless not the end of marginalization for this community. As recently as 2005, according to Sutton, racial discriminatory attitudes towards minorities were still prevalent in Argentina. Although some gains have been made under democracy to recognize and grant equal rights to all Argentine citizens, Sutton found that structural racism still posed a serious challenge to an effective democratic citizenship (“Contesting Racism”107). Nicole’s profound racism, and her alliance with the values of Madame and Monsieur, speaks to the difficulty of overcoming deep-set categories of race and discrimination. Given that Nicole/Nicolasa perceives herself as non-Indian, but is made fun of by everyone else in the house for her futile attempts to transcend her “cabecita negra” background, she is in a fragile position. In his review of the original staging of the play, Pablo Zuzino referred to Nicole as a “criolla ladina,” underscoring Nicole’s mestiza status, even though Norma Pons, a white actress, performed the role. Zuzino’s statement exemplifies how racial categories in Argentina are not directly correlated with skin color, but rather with social status. As Sarah D. Warren notes:

> Because of the verbal obscuring of race in Argentina, racial differences are not openly discussed. Skin color is recognized in conversation and nicknames, but differences in skin color do not necessarily translate into perceived racial differences. Many people who have darker brown skin in Argentina do not identify as indigenous (Briones 2005, 31), nor is it necessary to have dark brown skin (or even brown hair and brown eyes) to be...

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indigenous. In fact, Claudia Briones argues that in Argentina “whitening has been possible—and many times forced—for indigenous and afro-descent peoples” by “the possibility of an improved class position” (Briones 2005, 32). (777)

In spite of Pons’ race, Zuzino can label Nicole a “criolla ladina” based on her social status and placement within the manor, just as Elisa’s insult and unmasking of her true name, Nicolasa, marks her as a criolla, and distances her from her Francophone aspirations (to travel to Paris, to be addressed as Nicole). Unable to be whom she yearns to be, and trapped in an identity she rejects, Nicole becomes a vicious enforcer of the system used to oppress her.

The second act, according to Jones’ “innocent persecuted heroine” scheme, delivers a mate to the heroine after she has overcome several trials and obstacles. In the scene following the collection of the snails, and once again borrowing from Cinderella, Elisa receives a beautiful dress from the Madame so she can attend a dance. Elisa is delighted with both her dress and the generosity of her employer. In fact, the Madame functions for quite an extended period of the play as a fairy godmother, in sharp contrast with Nicole. If Nicole is the evil stepmother, the Madame is the benevolent mother figure absent from Elisa’s life. The dress is poignantly white, like a wedding dress, a symbol of Elisa’s innocence and virginity. Nicole is furious at Elisa for having received this present, and pretending to search for a rat in the kitchen spills a container of rabbit’s blood on Elisa’s dress. The blood stain on the white dress functions as a premonitory sign of Elisa’s imminent loss of her virginity to an undisclosed mate, as well as her death. That Elisa’s sexual relationship has been consummated is in fact soon made apparent by her

10Norma Pons had a long and successful career on the revue scene of the 60’s and 70’s, as well as in multiple soap operas, however, in her later years she achieved critical success, receiving both the Best Drama Actress and the Golden Award at the Estrella de Mar Awards. She died in 2014, at the age of 71, from a stroke. Ekdesman, Luciana. “Actress Norma Pons dies at 71.” Buenos Aires Herald 30 April, 2014. Web.12 Jan. 2014. Most Argentine audiences when Cocinando was staged were familiar with her career and as such, Nicole’s desire to transcend her peasant background is mirrored by Pons’ distancing from popular genres (comedy, soap operas) and towards “serious” theatre.
pregnancy. Elisa’s white dress and her subsequent pregnancy mark two liminal instances that are complicated in the play as transitional moments, since Elisa doesn’t marry, and she dies still pregnant, failing, in both cases, to overcome her liminal placements. The white dress, as a symbol of marriage, calls attention to the rite of passage that Elisa should fulfill to become part of the community. However, rather than leaving her marginal state, Elisa becomes further excluded by her pregnancy. In her analysis of Cocinando, Strichartz explains that under the dictatorship women’s bodies were targeted: “In the military’s discourse, the metaphorical and actual destruction of the feminine body served as the necessary sacrifice for the creation of a new breed of citizen and the recuperation of the nation’s health” (98). As Strichartz notes, Elisa’s role is, through her pregnancy, to allow a barren kingdom to survive, even at the expense of her own life.

The intersection of the innocent persecuted heroine genre with the history of women’s bodies under the dictatorship yields an additional, possibly more positive, reading of the play. One must first consider that the fairy tale structure Laragione subverts demands that the heroine attain the prince’s favor and become a part of his kingdom. However, by truncating the expected outcome, Laragione’s play questions the kingdom itself. Elisa’s inability to leave her liminal stage can be interpreted as a form of resistance. By subverting the fairy tale’s expected outcome, Laragione critiques how uncontested, universal narratives can be rejected and reconsidered. In her study of the role of narratives and ritual, Carolyn Walker Bynum critiques Turner’s definition of liminality. For Bynum, Turner’s “liminal” is problematic from a feminist point of view, and while Bynum’s essay focuses on Medieval women, her critique can be expanded to more contemporary circumstances as well. Bynum argues that the liminal stage suspends rules, status symbols, and roles for males placing them temporarily outside the system and its conflicts. For
women, or oppressed groups, however, the liminal stage is envisioned not as a reversal of roles, but as a struggle towards equality, where all hierarchies are abolished (34). In *Cocinando*, Elisa’s pregnancy and out-of-wedlock status function as rejections, however unintended on her part, of the domestication of women’s roles through the rites of passage that solidify their subservient status. Elisa in fact is very vocal about exposing the trappings of a system that serves to disempower and oppress those at the bottom. Elisa’s revelation of Nicole’s background simultaneously unveils Nicole’s folly and victimization and bring Elisa and Nicole to the same level. One could argue that Nicole and Elisa occupied from the beginning the same social status, since both are mestiza servants working in a white household. However, Nicole voices, exercises, and represents through her actions the status-quo of a violent and highly hierarchical system of oppression, Elisa’s revelations highlight Nicole’s liminality and displacement. In spite of the fact that Elisa is blind to her fate, and will not have a foreboding sense of her murder, she is able to unmask Nicole, illuminating with her sharp comments Nicole’s fractured identity and fragile status. Also, although Elisa will die, her decision to leave the household speaks to both her strength and her desire to remake life on her own terms. As Bynum suggests, Elisa’s will to remain in the liminal signals an awareness of new possibilities where hierarchical categories are obliterated.

When Nicole finds out that Elisa is pregnant, she accuses her of being dishonest, since she did not reveal her pregnancy when she was hired. However, Elisa denies having lied. This is a significant acknowledgment on Elisa’s part, since she will never reveal the identity of her baby’s father. If indeed Elisa is not lying, and her baby was conceived while working in this household, the Monsieur seems to be the most likely father. Nicole had warned Elisa to stay clear of him since he preys on young servants, but, as expected, Elisa pays no attention to this
warning. It is shortly after the Monsieur is killed in a hunting accident that Elisa expresses her desire to immediately leave the house, according to her, “to search for the father of her child,” although it is more plausible that she can no longer remain in the house once her lover is dead. While Elisa tells Nicole that her baby’s father is a migrant worker it seems rather doubtful. Instead, it’s more probable that given Elisa’s subservient position within the household she cannot acknowledge, to Nicole least of all, that the Monsieur is responsible for her pregnancy. In fact, the scene in which Nicole recriminates Elisa for leaving the household implies as much:

ELISA: Necesito irme.
NICOLE: “Necesito irme, necesito irme”. ¿No sabe decir otra cosa? ¡Desagradecida y egoísta! Sólo piensa en usted. ¡Pobre Madame! ¡Hacerla sufrir como una perra solo porque a usted se le ocurre arrancarle esa criatura!
ELISA: Usted no entiende, no entiende… Yo, yo,… necesito irme.… (Sale intempestivamente.) (63)

Nicole’s categorization of Elisa’s decision to depart as “stealing the baby” from Madame suggests that Elisa is nothing more than a surrogate mother. Additionally, Elisa’s abrupt departure and sentence “you don’t understand,” underscores Nicole’s inability to comprehend Elisa’s plight, since Elisa assumes, erroneously I will argue, that Nicole ignores that the Monsieur is Elisa’s lover.

The disturbing death of Monsieur, who is gored in the testicles by the wild boar he is trying to kill\textsuperscript{11}, can have at least two possible readings. The Monsieur is punished for his lascivious behavior; Nicole after all is the one who warns Elisa against his taste for “fresh meat,” and his humiliating death underscores his lust. Or quite the opposite, his death is a symbol of his impotence, since it is Medina de Olivares, the presumed lover of his wife, who will remain alive

\textsuperscript{11}The Monsieur’s death might be a parodic treatment of Actaeon’s Greek myth. In the myth, Actaeon, after seeing Venus naked, is transformed by her into a stag that is subsequently hunted by his hounds.
after the hunt to replace him in his bed. Either reading underlines the anxiety intertwined with the future of the house, since this is after all a “barren” kingdom with no successors in sight. No children have been brought into this house by the relationship between Madame and Monsieur, so there is no heir to continue their lineage. It will be through Elisa that the future of the house is ensured. Nicole’s comment at the very beginning “Mire, no puedo imaginarme qué le vio Madame” becomes, in retrospect, an ugly acknowledgment of the motives behind Madame’s decision to hire Elisa (38). Maybe Elisa was never meant to learn how to cook, but rather to become the vessel through which Monsieur would finally produce an heir. Genealogy is a significant feature of fairy tales, and Laragione’s play problematizes the origins and future of the household in order to illustrate how marginalized populations are erased from history. Nicole tells Elisa, offhandedly, how the Monsieur’s father conquered the land from the Indians. The fact that Nicole refers to the Indians as others, ethnically unrelated to her, speaks again to Nicole’s historical self-displacement. Although she has a father, described as a transient worker, Nicole ultimately lacks a fatherland, a patria, since her ancestors were those conquered by Monsieur’s grandfather. According to Joseph, “While the genocide of the Native Americans in Argentine territory began before 1870s ‘Conquest of the Desert,’ this campaign was the final broad military assault to ‘clear the pampas’ and make room for the immigrants who were to help ‘civilize’ Argentina” (343). It is of course ironic to designate this military campaign as the conquering of an empty space, a desert, while simultaneously advocating to “clear the pampas.” The incongruity of both statements speaks to the liminal stage, historically, of the Indian population within the Argentine imaginary. Simultaneously non-existent, and yet at the root of military conquest, the Indians recede from the public imagination and become ghost figures in a “deserted” landscape. Elisa, whose existence is hidden in a subterranean kitchen, serves a similar
function within the household. Her body, the site of new life, is conquered by the Monsieur, only to be discarded and dispensed with.

The fate of Elisa’s body, a metaphor for the fate of the conquered Indians, also recalls Jones’ discussion of the third act of the innocent persecuted heroine genre. However, Laragione subverts the expected ending, allowing a brutal last scene to forfeit a happy ending. According to Jones, in the third act, the heroine, after giving birth to one or more children, will be persecuted in her husband’s household. Elisa has suffered violent abuse throughout the play, but the violence intensifies after the Monsieur’s death. Heavily pregnant, distraught by his death, and increasingly isolated, Elisa resorts to escaping from the prison this kitchen and house have become. Nicole is outraged at Elisa’s will to depart and accuses her of being selfish, since Madame would be very upset at the prospect of not seeing Elisa’s baby. In an apparent last act of kindness, Madame provides Elisa with handmade outfits for her future baby and asks Funes to drive her part of the way. In a sly wink to another fairy tale, in this case Red Riding Hood, Nicole advises Elisa not to deviate from the path, to no avail. If the audience thought Elisa’s trials were finally over, nothing could be further from the truth: in an eerie monologue, Nicole recounts how Funes, under the Madame’s orders, has killed Elisa and taken her son out of her womb. The play ends with the baby placed under a rabbit that is being exsanguinated. By having blood drip onto the infant, Laragione alludes to the continuation of evil into the next generation. The sins of the forefathers permeate the younger generation and the cycle of violence continues. Laragione does not allow Elisa to be reunited with the father of her child, neither does she grant her the opportunity to survive her abuse. Rather she reminds the audience to remain alert to the fallacies of histories that deny voice and space to historically marginalized populations in the new democratic Argentina. It is not a coincidence that Elisa is compared to a cow by Nicole, since
Argentina’s beef and cattle industry is one of the most iconic symbols of the country.\textsuperscript{12} To have Elisa killed in such brutal manner, sliced open, highlights the unhealed and unresolved aspects of Argentine history that Menem attempted to push aside. As Dube remarks, the emphasis on truth and reconciliation, rather than retributive justice, denies, ignores, and hides narratives that oppose/contest forgiveness as the ultimate goal (184). While the bodies of those abducted and executed by the military regime were thrown out of moving planes over the River Plate or buried in mass unmarked graves, forever condemning them to a state of “disappearance,” Elisa’s body is, according to Nicole, left in an open space. Elisa’s mutilated body, eerily present through Nicole’s retelling in the last scene in spite of her physical absence, is a haunting reminder of the recent and past violence afflicting the Argentine state. Unlike the Indians of the nineteenth century, who were eradicated from public discourse by a deceptive language that hid the brutal genocide of native populations, Elisa’s body, however maimed and abused, remains present.\textsuperscript{13}

By remaining unburied, Elisa is forever subjected to a liminal state, but therein lies her strength. Her burial would have ensured closure and allowed the social order to resume, negating the crime and brutality of which Elisa was the victim. The circular structure of the play emphasizes how history will repeat itself, if left unattended and uncontested. When Elisa enters Nicole’s kitchen for the first time, she inadvertently stands under the rabbit being exsanguinated, which marks her, as Strichartz has noted, as a future victim. By the end, it is Elisa’s son who is marked by the dripping blood falling upon him; nevertheless, Nicole reveals Elisa’s fate to the infant, and

\textsuperscript{12} This symbol has been used in Argentine theatre in plays like La cortina de abalorios (1981) by Ricardo Monti, as well as in El niño argentino (2006) by Mauricio Kartun.

\textsuperscript{13} Sarah Warren underscores how a racial discourse “justified the Conquest of the Desert in the late 1880’s, which had as its central goals the eradication of indigenous people and the expansion of Argentina’s national borders. Through what amounted to military warfare, the Argentine military drastically reduced the number of indigenous people in Southern Argentina” (777).
however minimal, to orally acknowledge the past, in all its brutality, is the first step towards progress. Nonetheless, it is not the last. For the Argentine audiences Menem’s pardons remained eerily vivid, and Nicole’s oral acknowledgment, just like the confessions of the military leaders, falls short of justice. As Skaar underscores:

Although thousands of claims were filed during the dictatorship period, judges had been reluctant to look into these matters. There was a burst of judicial activity right after the transition, but the amnesty laws and Menem’s pardons effectively halted all the investigation into the cases of the disappeared. After Scilingo’s riveting declarations, the Center for Legal and Social Studies, a non governmental organization, launched the first of a new wave of cases. (60)

To know the past is not to overcome it, and, given Nicole’s brutal behavior, the audience is keenly aware that Elisa’s son will be absorbed into the existing power structure if more drastic measures and changes are not implemented. Opening at a moment in Argentine’s history of transitional justice, Cocinando encourages audiences to consider the pitfalls of a justice that does not seek retribution for the crimes committed under the dictatorship and establishes links between the past and present abuses embedded in the construction of the Argentine nation. By highlighting how violence repeats itself, Laragione invites audiences to reject Menem’s pardons as failures to overcome injustice, and to remain alert to fairy tale endings that mask the brutal oppression and discrimination of many, under a rhetoric of truth and reconciliation.

If Laragione chooses fairy tales as the underlying structure of her play, Marina Carr draws heavily from Euripides’ Medea in Bog. This borrowing has been made apparent by critics, among them Doyle, Harris, and Wallace, and by the author herself, who has described her attempt and interest: “to write a classical tragedy as opposed to an absurdist view. […] the Greek idea of destiny and fate and little escape” (23). In her excellent essay about the use of tragedy in Marina Carr’s plays, Clare Wallace summarizes very effectively the varied responses Carr’s
works have received among critics: “As yet discussions tend to have fallen into a number of areas; those which examine the plays in terms of Irish theatre and its preoccupations with memory and storytelling (shaping the past into a narrative), those which focus upon Carr’s earlier work and its absurdist, feminist tendencies, and those which approach her work in a social context as an expression of post-colonial anxieties in contemporary Ireland” (78). In addition to these readings Wallace provides a thorough study of how tragedy structures many of Carr’s plays, particularly in *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *Bog*. While acknowledging the impact of Greek tragedy on *Bog*, the focus of the remaining portion of this chapter will elucidate the purpose of liminal spaces and identities in the play. In particular, Hester, as a Traveller, will be closely examined, since her character contests bourgeois society and the displacements she experiences within it. Published at the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period (1995-2008), *Bog* offers a sharp critique of how traditionally disenfranchised populations within traditional Irish history (the Travellers) resist being absorbed into a social and economic system that obliterates their identities. Additionally, the bog itself, a site of marshes and non-urban landscape, stands in sharp contrast with economic policies that strongly foster aggressive real estate development at the cost of natural spaces. Since Hester will both commit suicide and kill her daughter, my analysis of the play must also take into account how Hester’s own obliteration, and that of her progeny, are acts of resistance, not of defeat.

The historical origins of the Traveller population in Ireland are contested. In her study of the representation of Travellers in Irish literature, José Lanters lays out a comprehensive overview of the current theories on the still-debated historical origins and characteristics of what is commonly denominated the tinker population. Although Irish people continue to use the term tinker, it must be noted that in legal procedures and academic circles, a more favored term,
Travellers, has replaced tinkers. Some argue that Travellers go back as far as the twelfth century (Donahue), but Sinéad Ní Shuinséar notices that most Irish people believe that Travellers “are descended from Irish peasants forced onto the road, most significantly as a result of the Great Famine of the 1840s” (70). Ní Shuinséar is prompt to identify that such an assumption leads to a political agenda invested in reincorporating Travellers into Irish society, rather than in recognition toward acceptance of, and respect for the ethnic and linguistic differences of the Travellers. According to the Irish Traveller movement website, an estimated 25,000 Travellers live in Ireland presently and comprise about five percent of the Irish population. The most significant characteristic of the Travellers, as the newly designated name indicates, is their itinerant and nomadic existence. Although in previous centuries, as Kamaria A. Kruckenberg notes, the Travellers used to make a living from “horse and donkey training, entertaining, and tinsmithing. Today, many Travellers continue their life on the road, but mobile homes and trailers have replaced the horse and wagons. There are fewer stopping grounds now, and society’s changing needs have eliminated many of the jobs that supported a culture on wheels” (2). The emphasis on the Traveller’s nomadism, as the most distinct quality of their ethnicity, has posed some serious challenges in current Ireland to their ability to access social resources, and it is a major contributing factor to the discrimination they experience. Kruckenberg points out that the Travellers “are at the bottom of Irish society in regard to rates of poverty, unemployment, life expectancy, infant mortality, health, education levels, political representation and access, and living conditions, among others” (3). In spite of the tremendous wealth generated throughout the Celtic Tiger period, the Travellers’ conditions did not improve; if anything, they grew worse. In

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14 Since in the Bog Hester refers to herself as a tinker, rather than a Traveller, I will use the term tinker while discussing the play, but in laying some of the historical and social context of the tinkers within Irish society I will switch to the newest term Traveller.
2002 the Irish Government enacted legislation criminalizing the use of public spaces by caravans or any other vehicle (Housing, Miscellaneous Provisions, [Act No 2002]), effectively attempting to limit their nomadism.\textsuperscript{15} Many within the Travellers community and their advocates perceived this policy to be directly aimed towards the Travellers. Further complications between the Irish State and the Travellers involved the dispute over designating the Travellers as a discreet, differentiated ethnic minority within Irish society. The recognition of the Travellers as a separate ethnicity would allow them to seek, in the court of Law, the same provisions and rights allocated to other ethnic minorities experiencing discrimination. As highlighted by Robbie McVeigh:

\begin{quote}
It is important to force the logic of this ethnicity denial (McVeigh, 2007). First it bears emphasis that there are no grounds for Travellers experiencing racism if ethnicity is denied. The Irish Government has said that much: “Travellers do not appear to fall within the definition of racial discrimination.” Although the Irish Government has not done this yet in terms of its domestic policy, ethnicity denial inevitably leads to racism denial. (96)
\end{quote}

In this context, Carr’s choice to make Hester a tinker, and the heroine of \textit{Bog}, cannot be separated from the increasingly dire, real-life circumstances of the Traveller population in Ireland.

The focus of many of Carr’s critics (Harris, Wallace, and Sihra) on the play’s tragic elements shifts the emphasis from the social and political commentary embedded in \textit{Bog} towards the mythical and the literary. Wallace acknowledges the examination of Carr’s works through a postcolonial lens by some critics, particularly Vic Merriman, but the overwhelming response to Carr’s plays gravitates towards the mythical and psychological. Among Carr’s critics Merriman offers the sharpest political critique of her work. Merriman equates the figure of Hester with the

\textsuperscript{15} According to the Una Crowley and Rob Kitchin: “While on the surface this criminal trespass legislation (Appendix II) prohibits everyone from illegal camping or trespass, in reality it targets a minority, Irish Travellers.[…] The new legislation further extended a number of Acts ratified in the second half of the twentieth century designed to regulate Travellers’ lives and delimit their spatial mobility with respect to housing, trespass, use of roads, ownership and control of animals, destruction of property, anti social behavior and trading” (129).
old state now being banished from society in order to make room for the New Ireland. He forcefully argues that the position of the Traveller that Hester embodies is in fact at the heart of her violent behavior. According to Merriman, just as the 1980s yuppies stepped over the homeless on their way to the stock change, thereby ignoring their circumstances in the new upwardly neoliberal economy, Hester becomes “the other” bourgeois audiences in Ireland take pleasure in deriding, since she provides them with a figure against which they can imagine themselves. From Merriman’s point of view, the audience can feel comfortable with Hester, because she represents both the past they have successfully left behind and the present they can ignore. Like the homeless she is “beyond the pale” (306). However, when Merriman argues that Carr’s Bog specifically grounds Hester’s predilections for violence, deceit, and unnatural urges in her identity as a Traveller, his claim becomes slippery, since although Hester might be a tinker, she is no Traveller. Not only does she not travel at all throughout the play, but she conceives of herself so deeply enmeshed with the Bog that she anticipates roaming around it after death,

HESTER: Ya won’t forget me know, Carthage, and when all this is over or half remembered and you think you’ve almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin’ wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or rustle behind ya. That’ll be me and Josie ghostin’ ya. (340)

In fact, the knot of the play, the tension at the heart of all her encounters, is Hester’s absolute refusal to move from her land. Hester, unlike the homeless to whom Merriman refers, can neither be stepped over nor ignored. Her strength is so commanding, however at the margins she may be positioned, that all the characters come to her; and except for one brief occasion Hester remains in the same spot throughout the whole play. It might be that bourgeois audiences, if one is to agree with Merriman, might be content to position themselves against the “other” that Hester embodies, but the picture she paints of the community, is less than reassuring. Carthage is complicit in the murder of Hester’s brother; his future father-in-law, Xavier Cassidy, appears to
have incestuous thoughts towards his daughter, Caroline Cassidy, Carthage’s fiancée; and Carthage’s mother, Mrs. Killbride, implies having incestuous thoughts, and possibly past actions, towards Carthage. Mrs. Killbride attends Carthage’s wedding ceremony wearing her own wedding dress and remembers fondly how they used to sleep together. Finally, Father Willow, whom one might assume to be the moral center of the community, appears to have lost his mind. He has decided to shoot the parishioners who arrive late to Mass, and his inside-out pajamas show under his vestments while he performs the marriage between Carthage and Caroline Cassidy. While I agree with Merriman that Hester is indeed “other,” I profoundly contest the notion that Irish audiences witnessing the play could leave the theatre reassured in their bourgeois values. In fact, I argue that Hester’s liminal placement allows her to offer a sharp criticism of a community imploding into itself. The community’s values focus on monetary and social climbing, while ignoring moral and social issues, and Hester reminds them of their duties. Ironically, the fact that Hester is a strange tinker, one that never leaves her land, might account for her demise. By forfeiting a nomadic existence, Hester is placed in an unsustainable predicament, since she becomes a doubly marked outsider. Hester no longer has any tinker relatives (they are either dead or gone) and she will never be able to become a part of the village community. However, I believe that Hester’s double liminality positions her in a place of unique strength from which she can effectively reject the illusions of a fixed social and political identity and, in doing so, question the regressive policies towards Travellers in Ireland.

*Bog* is a play in which liminalities upon liminalities saturate the text, rendering unsustainable any notion that transitional stages are brief, isolated moments, to be transcended on the road towards social inclusion. The play commences at dawn, in itself a transient state from night to day that is further complicated by the inability of the Ghost Fancier (the Ghost in charge
of collecting Hester’s soul) to establish, if it is indeed dusk or dawn. As Hester tells him: “It’s that hour when it could be either dawn or dusk, the light bein’ so similar. But it’s dawn, se there’s the sun comin’ up” (266). His mistake alerts the audience to Hester’s impending death and forebodes the tragic ending. By highlighting the possibility of her imminent death, less than twenty-four hours remaining till dusk (and also evoking Aristotle’s unity of time), Carr distances the audience from the emotional havoc that will unfold shortly. In case the Ghost’s message has eluded us, the Catwoman will also predict Hester’s death, shortly after, by reminding Hester that Big Josie (Hester’s mother) predicted that Hester would not live one day longer than a particular black swan. We first see Hester carrying the dead swan, which leaves a bloody trial behind, when the play begins. Having found it frozen, she pulls the swan away from the ice, hard, ripping part of its belly out, to be able to bury it. The end of the play will indeed confirm Big Josie’s prediction, and, in that light, Hester’s burial of the bird becomes, metaphorically, an impossible act. We cannot bury our own selves; that task is left to others, who will fulfill our last liminal stage for us, in which we move from the living to the dead. However, Hester will remain on the threshold, even after she has plunged a knife into her chest, since the last words she yells at Carthage predict her ghostly permanence and that of Josie, in the bog.

At the end of the play, Hester is lying on the floor, unburied, her heart out and lying on top of her “like some dark feathered bird” (341). Just as in the case of Elisa in Laragione’s play, here the audience is left with the eerie presence of an unburied, mutilated female body, one that haunts the future and disturbs the present. Unlike Elisa, though, Hester decides her own fate, and that of her progeny, and sharply delineates the boundaries of her existence. While Elisa’s sense of self, as a disenfranchised Indian minority, is tentative, or often obscured by her daily struggles with Nicole, Hester remains fiercely adamant and proud of her marginalized status. In sharp
contrast to Elisa’s death, retold by a third party, Hester’s suicide takes place in front of the audience. Given that the status of Travellers in Ireland, both in legal and social terms, has not been adequately resolved, Hester’s death reminds the public of the lingering issues regarding the social welfare of the most prominent minority within Irish society. Displaced by a bourgeois society that would neither accept her nor allow her to exist within her own terms, Hester’s self-sacrifice becomes the only viable option for remaining true to her identity as a tinker. Hester’s burial of the black swan, her natural twin, signals the protagonist’s mastery of her own fate to the last moments and identifies her with the natural world and nature.

Hester’s life choices—to remain unmarried, to refuse to relocate, to remain at the margins of her community—must be drawn against the real-life conditions of Travellers within Irish society. According to McVeigh, the Travellers in Ireland, as opposed to those living in England or the U.S., have received a very different approach from the Irish State:

The state in Ireland, north and south, has routinely insisted that the existence of Irish Travellers (or ‘tinkers’ or ‘itinerants’)—rather than anti Traveller racism—is the ‘problem.’ The state has also been gradually implementing a ‘satisfactory solution of the problem’—settlement and absorption. Moreover, the state of Ireland, north and south, has long suggested that getting rid of the Travellers is in the interest of Travellers—as well as everyone else. (93)

In Bog both of the governmental policies McVeigh has identified towards Travellers are present. Neither succeeds, since as McVeigh incisively points out, the Travellers are a problem to get rid of, and, under a language of protection and respect, oppressive policies are laid out that effectively harm and diminish the ability of the Travellers to exist within Irish communities (93). In Carr’s play Hester’s attempts to settle are jeopardized again and again by a constant reminder that she is, and forever will remain, an outsider. Hester has been living in the bog since she was a baby. It is unclear when her mother, Big Josie, settled in this area, but although the accounts are vague and incomplete, there seems to be evidence that, prior to her disappearance and
abandonment of both of her children (Hester and Joseph), Big Josie had been living in the bog for at least seven years. Neither Hester nor Joseph will ever depart from the bog, and, in fact, their ghosts will continue to haunt the space after their deaths. Unable to overcome her mother’s abandonment, or due to her love for Carthage, Hester decides to remain in the community. She nevertheless compromises, by moving into a home with Carthage, rather than living in her caravan (which remains parked in the bog, the play predating the law that penalized the use of public spaces), and by staying put, rather than being a nomad, as her tinker status would demand. However, her commitment to Carthage falls short of societal norms, since they never marry. Caught in the liminal, Hester’s existence becomes an act of resistance, defiance, and critique of the social norms used to marginalize her and her progeny.

Marriage is a fundamental rite of passage within most societies, Ireland’s included. And although the institution has lately been falling apart, for most of Ireland’s history it has remained a strong pillar of moral, political, religious, and social relationships in the Republic. In Carr’s play the marriage scene between Caroline and Carthage becomes a grotesque and irreverent parody of the act, highlighting the society’s vacuum of honest feelings and meaningful rites of passage. When the time for the wedding comes, Carthage finds himself with not one but four brides. In addition to Caroline Cassidy, his fiancée, Josie arrives wearing her communion dress; Carthage’s mother, Mrs. Killbride, wears her own wedding dress; and lastly, in the only instance in the play in which Hester leaves the bog, Hester shows up in a wedding dress that Carthage had given her at some unspecified, earlier point. As Róisín O’Gorman notes, “This supposed symbol of purity and security leaves no room for the wearer to live, to grow, or breathe.[…] The dress represents a literal and ideological space which the women of the play cannot escape. To refuse this icon and its trapping brings about a violent rupture, as the illusion of stability and order is
shattered” (115). O’Gorman further points out that Hester’s attempt to scorn the official institution comes at a high price, since both she and her daughter die wearing the “wedding” garments. Hester’s success becomes a bitter triumph, in light of the ending. While acknowledging O’Gorman’s interpretation, I focus on the contrast between Hester’s out-of-wedlock relationship with Carthage and Carthage’s official wedding to Caroline. There is no doubt that the proliferation of wedding dresses, the sorry state of the clearly senile officiating priest, and the overall disarray at the wedding serve to question the institution of marriage as a death trap for women. What I find more interesting is how the relationship between Carthage and Hester offers an alternate model to marriage. According to the bits and pieces that slowly surface as the action unfolds, Carthage and Hester have been in a consensual, sexually active relationship for fourteen years, of which Josie, aged seven, is a product. Hester is at this point forty years old and ten years Carthage’s senior. However sour their current state of affairs, there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that Hester and Carthage’s relationship was strong and passionate. On her own wedding day, Caroline feels unsettled and disturbed by the weight of Carthage and Hester’s relationship on her present. As Caroline tells Carthage, “You and Hester has a whole history together, stretchin’ back years that connects yees and that seems more important and real than anythin’ we have. And I wonder have we done the wrong thing” (303). Carthage’s attempts to ease her fears and worries seem half-hearted, and the audience gets a sense that, in spite of Carthage’s words, Caroline might be right. In fact, while pleading with Hester to leave his land, Carthage addresses her as “Hettie,” signaling an intimacy and perhaps lingering feelings that seem absent between him and Caroline.

However, Hester and Carthage’s relationship is not only highly unusual within the boundaries of the settled community, but also when compared to traditional Traveller social
arrangements. According to research collected by Niall McEllwee and others, Travellers tend to marry, heavily, within their communities. McEllwee references two studies: in the first, conducted in 1982 by Flynn, thirty-nine percent of marriages among Travellers were among first cousins. The second study, conducted ten years later by Mary Forde, reached the same conclusions. This second study found that sixty-one percent of the couples interviewed were the product of consanguineous marriages. Additionally, the marriage age among Travellers has remained young, most marry in their late teens, in contrast with non-Travellers, for whom marriage age for women has increased since the 1960s (McElwee, 110-11). Given these figures, Hester’s relationship with Carthage presents a sharp contrast to the actual Traveller population. Not only does she not marry at all, but her relationship with Carthage does not begin at an early age. Hester was twenty-six and Carthage sixteen when they commenced their relationship. A large birth rate among Travellers is also the norm, with, according to McEllwee, the average family size of the Travellers being 4.9, compared to 3.1 among the rest of the population (106). Again, these figures do not correspond to Hester, since she only has one child, Josie. In spite of the vast differences between the real Travellers and Hester’s life-style, all the characters, repeatedly refer to Hester as a tinker. Yet Hester has failed both at becoming part of the settled community and at having a life within her own community of Travellers. Hester is, in fact, deeply embedded not just with the bog and Carthage, but with the village community that now seeks to push her aside. In a litany of recriminations and reshuffling of the past, all the characters in the play provide versions of their relationship with Hester: Catwoman took care of her as a child, when Big Josie abandoned Hester; Hester was a babysitter to Caroline Cassidy when she lost her own mother; Xavier Cassidy claims to have provided care to Hester, when she was a young child and Big Josie left town on a drinking binge; and Monica and Hester have been
friends for many years. And yet, and in spite of these deeply meaningful moments of shared
history and bonding, all of those characters will ask Hester to leave and will banish her
altogether from both their lives and their common land. Some will claim this is for her own good
(Monica, Catwoman), while others will use money and veiled threats (Xavier, Caroline,
Carthage), but not a single one will advocate for Hester’s right to remain where she feels she
belongs. In spite of the years Hester has spent in the community and her willingness to make
some concessions, the policies mentioned by McVeigh --settlement and absorption-- have failed
to provide Hester with belonging. As she tells Carthage near the play’s end:

HESTER: No, Carthage, ya done nothin’ right, your bull-headed pride and economy and
painful advancement never moved me. What I wanted was somewan to look me in the
eye and know I was understood and not judged. You thought I had no right to ax for that.
Maybe I hadn’t, but the way ya used judge me – didn’t it ever occur to ya, that however
harshly ya judged me, I judged meself harsher. Couldn’t ya ever see that. (334-35)

Hester plainly states the psychological price paid by her inability to become part of the
community and to find intimacy, even with her lover. Hester carries the judgment of the outside
world within her, and it is apparent that it has taken a toll on her psyche and on her ability to
make a fruitful life for herself and her daughter. Hester’s statement plainly indicates as well her
utter disregard for the values espoused by the community and exemplified by Carthage, namely,
economic and social advancement. While Nicole and Elisa’s displacement within the household
is made apparent, as is Elisa’s critique of Nicole’s airs of grandeur, no outright rejection of the
structuring order itself is voiced by either of the characters. In contrast, Hester is very vocal
about her pride in being and willingness to remain an outsider, and her disregard for the
community’s values and hypocrisy highlights her resistance to be absorbed into a system that
does not accommodate her difference.

In spite of Hester’s emotional upheavals and dark past, there is a constant, unremitting
love and sense of belonging that supersedes all other affections. It is not Carthage, nor it is Josie, or her absent mother, but the bog itself, nature. In fact, the play’s title, *By the Bog of Cats*..., grounds the landscape as a crucial and indispensable feature of the play. It could be argued that Hester’s obsession with her mother’s abandonment accounts for her fierce determination to remain rooted to this piece of land, in the hopes that Big Josie will return, but at least one other explanation is also viable. The bog itself, as a site of marshlands, wilderness, and underdeveloped land, can be construed as the natural equivalent of the Travellers versus the domesticated, cattle breeding land of the village community. In other words, the bog itself functions as an allegorical figure of Hester’s and other Travellers’ demise in the face of “civilizing” forces. In his analysis of the play’s bog, Derek Gladwin identifies how this landscape functions as a form of resistance:

*Although the bog could stand as a synecdoche for all of Ireland, I would contend that *By the Bog of Cats*... challenges a kind of new Ireland, one that allows itself to quickly sponge some of its traumatic past. If one looks at the bog as a fitting symbol of one aspect of Ireland’s past that is quickly being forgotten in EU-era Ireland, then *By the Bog of Cats*... can be seen a resisting this gleeful forgetting. The bog, then, naturally forms the ties to the land and its status as a solid, transhistorical space by representing a ubiquitous Irish landscape.* (390)

Two aspects of Gladwin’s considerations resonate with my reading of the bog as an allegorical figure for Hester. The first is the equating of the bog as a site from which to contest the Celtic Tiger’s (in Gladwin’s words, the new Ireland’s) push towards a voluntary amnesia of sorts that does not account for Ireland’s traumatic past. The second is the ubiquitous and transhistorical presence within Ireland’s landscape of bogs, which makes them hard to ignore. Hester, as a tinker, embodies both notions. On one hand, the new Ireland was moving fast and furiously towards the future under the Celtic Tiger period, but, as noted previously, the Travellers’ needs and living conditions continued to worsen. Forgotten under the new economic agenda, the
Travellers were nevertheless deeply ubiquitous in the Irish landscape. Hester is constructed in transhistorical terms in the play, since, as demonstrated earlier, she is a very strange Traveller, and yet, all of the characters continue to refer to her as a tinker and ground her perceived vices (drinking, violence) not in relation to a personal biography of hardship, social exclusion, and marginalization, but in relation to an essentialist perception of tinkerhood. Carthage’s social climbing, just like the new Ireland, allows him to reject Hester and to forget her traumatic circumstances, without a second thought. His emphasis on economic betterment at any cost (complicity in a murder, marriage to a person whom he does not love) represents not only his personal qualities, but also those of the community, since Hester is perceived by everyone in the community as the offending party. More poignantly, all the characteristics attached to her Traveller’s status are constructed in negative terms.

Genealogy is an essential feature both in fairy tales and Greek mythology, and, in Bog, the significance of legitimacy and origins within the village community is questioned by Hester as well. The intersection between the historical, and conflicting, views regarding the origins of Irish Travellers, and its implications regarding social and political policy in Ireland, can be examined through Josie’s liminal status within the community. Born out of wedlock, Josie, Hester and Carthage’s daughter, must endure repeatedly the derisive comments of her paternal grandmother, both towards herself and Hester. While playing cards with Josie, Mrs. Killbride states: “Ya got some of it right. Ya got the ‘Josie’ part right, but ya got the ‘Killbride’ part wrong, because you’re not a Killbride. You’re a Swane. Can you spell Swane? Of course ya can’t. You’re Hester Swane’s little bastard. You’re not a Killbride and never will be” (279). As Lanters discusses, the commonly held view that Travellers are “drop outs” of settled communities in Ireland following the potato famine forces a logic of reinstatement into the community. Rather
than valuing their nomadic experience, the Irish State attempts to preclude their mobility, as the law prohibiting caravans in parks previously discussed demonstrated, in order to absorb and integrate the Travellers. However, as the case of Hester indicated, to remain in one place, and even to have a child with someone from the settled community, is not enough. As the fruit of a consensual relationship with a member of the village, Josie should be able to be fully integrated; however, that is not the case. Hester’s life choices radically differ from the actual Travellers, and, as a consequence, it is not surprising that Josie’s life does not correspond either with the settled peoples or with the actual living conditions of Travellers’ children in Ireland. Josie is an only child, which already sets her apart from the commonly large Traveller families. As a result the labor incurred, particularly by young girls, within the Travellers’ communities is absent from Josie’s life. According to the research conducted by Jane Helleiner:

Traveller author Nan Joyce described how older girls were ‘never really free’ because of their child care responsibilities, adding that: “Since you were nine or ten you were holding the youngest child in your arms” (Joyce and Farmar, 1985:6). Bridget Murphy (born in the early 1930s) described in a published oral narrative how from the age of 10 she was washing, baking, and keeping the caravan clean while her mother was off peddling (Court, 1985: 72-3; see also Pavee Point, 1192.44-5). Traveller children were then involved in a range of activities, which supported their respective household enterprises. (“For the Protection of the Children,” 55)

In a sharp contrast with this reality, Josie appears naïve and far from self-sufficient. The audience first sees Josie dancing barefoot in the snow, still wearing her pajamas, when her grandmother arrives. While there is no doubt that Ms. Killbride is a vicious and mean-spirited individual who confronts Josie in her inability to get properly dressed, the fact is that Josie is not capable of doing so properly. In a reversal of the roles of Travellers’ children and the settled community, Ms. Killbride derides Josie and her childishness by bragging about how much she had to do herself as a young child, as seen in the following statement: “Seven auld years. When I was
seven I was cookin’ dinners for a houseful of men, I was thinnin’ turnips twelve hour a day, I was
birthin’ calves, sowin’ cor, stookin’ hay, ladin’ a bull be his nose, and you can’t even win a game
of snap” (278). While the generational gap does account for some of the discrepancy in child
labor expectations, particularly in a rural community, Josie’s inability to prepare a simple
breakfast or get dressed sets her apart from actual Travellers. Travellers’ children, and their
rights, became highly visible during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and resulted in new policies
criminalizing child begging. Helleiner summarizes the intervention of the group Pavee Point,
which advocates for Travellers’ rights, in response to the Children’s Act 2001, which purported
to function under the auspices of child protection and welfare. The Act, Pavee Point argued, was
too broad and did not draw a distinction between “call backs” and “child begging.” As described
by Helleiner:

The former it suggested was: “a traditional form of begging carried out by Travellers for
centuries” wherein “a child accompanies a mother out or a grandmother” in activities of
“trading, bartering, offering services and begging” with particular families with whom the
Travellers have a relationship. In this activity the children were safe with their parents,
were building relationships with the settled community and “engaged in legitimate trade”. By
including this activity under the definition of “child begging”, Pavee Point submitted,
the legislative reform was not protecting children but rather criminalizing. (“For the
Protection of the Children,” 28)

The progressive stigmatization of Travellers’ activities, including those previously considered
accepted labor, targeted not just Traveller adults, but children as well. By precluding Travellers’
children from joining with the parents on the house calls, the Irish state attempted to further limit
the ability of Travellers to survive on their own terms. The rhetoric of the State framed the issue
as a protective gesture ensuring school attendance for Traveller’s children, but taken in
conjunction with other restrictive measures (limiting the use of caravans in public spaces), it was
one more attempt “to re-absorb” Travellers into the mainstream population. The audience never
sees Josie begging, and it is implied that she attends school; however, she is marked as an outsider, just like Hester, even by her own family members, like her paternal grandmother. Josie occupies a fragile space within this community. Even though Carthage does love her, she is the product of a relationship that did not materialize in a marriage, so she is an illegitimate child living on the edges of the society. Josie is nevertheless the only child present in the play, so it is through her, heir to this bog land, that the future will be forged. She represents the opportunity, however weak, to move beyond what seems to be a very corrupt and incestuous community.

There are constant references to incestuous behavior that plague many of the characters, making this land not just barren but spiritually polluted. Mrs. Killbride openly indulges in remembering fondly how she used to sleep with her son when he was younger. Hester accuses Xavier, Carthage’s future father-in-law, of having more than fatherly love for his daughter Caroline, and Hester goes as far as to tell Carthage: “Bringin’ a child on a honeymoon, what are you at Carthage? Well, I won’t let ya use Josie to fill in the silences between yourself and Caroline Cassidy” (331). Whereas, in Cocinando, Elisa was simply a vessel through which to produce a new heir, a body to be discarded once its purpose was served, and largely unaware of the intentions of those around her, Hester is keenly perceptive of everybody’s sins. Nicole tells Elisa’s infant that her mother would have not made a good cook, because she did not have a good nose, implying not just that she could not decipher kitchen recipes, but more acutely that she could not interpret the social underpinnings of her world. In contrast, Hester is fully aware that it is both her insight into the community and having Josie that provide her with the power to resist being pushed aside. The future rests on her, and she knows it. The future has the potential to be better precisely because she is an outsider to this corrupt community. As she plainly states: “[…] And as for my Traveller blood, I’m proud of it. It gives me an edge over all of yees around here,
allows me see yees for the inbred, underbred, bog-brained shower yees are. I’m warnin’ ya now, Carthage, you go through with this sham weddin’ and you’ll never see Josie again” (289). While Elisa’s child will eventually become the tainted heir of a vicious household, Hester will make sure that her daughter is rescued from joining a community that is unable, or unwilling, to accept Josie within it. Cornered into a life of both spiritual and economic disenfranchising, Hester chooses the only viable option that still endows her with agency and strength, in spite of her death.

Lastly, I would like to address how the fulfillment of Hester’s fate, that is, her death at the end of the play, however tragic, is not in any way a defeat of Hester’s uncompromising spirit. Throughout the play, the past is constantly rewritten according to the different points of view of the characters, so that it remains elusive and unstable. Any attempt to establish an all-encompassing narrative is undermined by the different voices interrupting and rearranging the facts. Storytelling is both a fiction and the compelling force behind some of the characters’ desire to take hold of a permanent narrative. By killing her daughter, Hester halts the cycle of deceit, death, and longing that haunts her family. Hester effectively takes hold of the narrative and ends it. As she tells Carthage shortly after killing Josie: “Yees all thought I was just goin’ to walk away and lave her at yeer mercy. I almost did. But she’s mine, and I wouldn’t have her waste her life dreamin’ about me and yees thwartin’ her with black stories against me” (340). By killing Josie and herself, Hester ensures that her history will be the one to engulf all others. She also makes it clear that no attempt to obliterate her or her memory will be successful; in the absence of her physical body, her ghost and that of her daughter will prevail. In sharp contrast with the ending of Cocinando, in which the baby becomes heir to the house run by those responsible for his mother’s death and is blinded to the sins preceding him, Hester kills her daughter as act of
cleansing and renewal. The terrible longing for her own mother, which drove her to kill her brother and has marked her life with pain, deceit, and remorse, is finally over. Keenly aware of the vacuum her absence would leave in Josie’s life and very aware of the corrupt society she has inhabited for so long, Hester frees herself and Josie from this warped community and returns to the natural world of the bog.

Hester will give Josie what she values the most, more even than Carthage or her mother: the Bog of Cats. If Hester is able to find peace and solace at all throughout her tormented and difficult life, it is in the landscape she inhabits. Hester is so akin to the bog that she firmly believes her ghost and that of her daughter will roam around it long after she is gone from this earth. Hester is inextricably tied to nature, a swan indebted to its natural habitat, content and fulfilled only in this meager piece of land she claims as rightfully hers. When she also decides to burn all of Carthage’s cattle, Hester engages in more than just one act of revenge; she eradicates civilization, domesticated animals, and the social forms of organization cattle herding entails. Then, it is not an accident that she never married: if she had she would have embraced a form of social ritual unheard of in the natural world, which is where she and her spirit belong. In sharp contrast to Hester’s close links to the natural world, Elisa is fully alienated from both her natural landscape and the highly codified world of French cuisine that Nicole’s kitchen constitutes. Nicole’s kitchen represents the opposite of what Hester stands for. In Nicole’s kitchen the animals are pulled apart, gorged, exsanguinated, macerated, and, in the case of the little calf, extracted from the cow’s uterus before it is even born, just like Elisa’s baby. All these acts of cruelty are codified as acts of civilization, since French cuisine in the context of the play stands for more than just cooking. France represents the unattainable paradise of civilization that this kitchen, lost somewhere in the middle of the Americas, can only dream of. Elisa fails at both
finding her place within the natural world and at mastering this so-called civilization into which she is being indoctrinated. As such Elisa is left vulnerable, a victim in a world of predators, alienated from any form of tentative empowerment. Hester in contrast, manages to find strength and to capitalize on it by surrendering herself to the bog, transcending her personal biography and becoming forever an encompassing force larger than any of the petty lives she leaves behind.

As this chapter has demonstrated, both Marina Carr and Lucía Laragione invest their plays with classical genres (Greek Tragedy and Fairy Tales) that function as mediums through which the plays address the present social and political disenfranchisement of minority populations in their respective countries. Both Laragione and Carr reconsider how liminality can function as a locus of strength, resistance, and, ultimately, new visions for a truly equal democracy for all. The failure in the Argentine case of Menem’s government to properly address the crimes of the military dictatorship, and its intersection with discriminatory behaviors towards both the Indian, Latin American immigrants, and Afro-Argentine populations, highlights the failure of the recent democracy to create equality and justice for all. Laragione’s play sharply links the most recent brutality of the military dictatorship to previous acts of genocide and violence against sections of the Argentine population, as in the nineteenth-century “clearing the pampas” invasion. By weaving both strands of violence into Cocinando, Laragione is able to unmask how a history of violence will not be halted unless aggressive and active measures are taken by a citizenship truly committed to change. Elisa will remain within the liminal, exposed and mutilated, as a reminder of the many desaparecidos that are still missing and only recently recognized. Similarly, Bog places at the forefront of the play the largest, oldest, and among the most severely disenfranchised minority populations within the Irish Republic, the Travellers. By having Hester as the heroine of the play, Irish audiences can no longer ignore the terrible life
conditions of Travellers. Since Hester, as discussed in this chapter, embodies a semi-settled Traveller, her failure to find intimacy, belonging, and community becomes even more jarring, given how much Hester has been willing to change. However, Hester’s community still rejects her and constructs her identity in essentialist rather than historically based terms, proving that attempts to transcend pre-conceived notions of the tinkers are hard to overcome. Written at the beginning of the Celtic Tiger period, _Bog_ reminds audiences how economic betterment that ignores those at the bottom of the ladder will eventually lead to disastrous consequences. Since the most aggressive anti-Traveller policies were still to come, Hester’s predicament forebodes, like her haunting ghost in the play, a society still unable to accommodate difference and equal rights to all its citizens. While Laragione dwells on the terrible outcome that arises from lack of both self-knowledge and social understanding, Carr’s play exemplifies how agency is possible even within the narrow constraints of fate. Hester manages both to fulfill her fate and to deny it by embracing her death, while Elisa fails terribly at overcoming her lot. In spite of the marked differences in structure and theme, both plays echo each other in unexpected ways; Hester is linked to a swan while Elisa is associated with a cow. Both protagonists will die, one willingly, the other unaware and innocent. Both of their children are the potential future for collapsing communities, but they will have very different fates. Both Laragione and Carr pose the same questions, and though they arrive at very different answers, they nevertheless ponder the same terrain. It is in their shared investigation of the limits of humanity, violence, and the capacity to subvert one’s destiny that the two plays come together and mirror each other, however warped those reflections might be.

In the final statement of Lola Arias’ play *La escuálida familia*, Luba enunciates: “Dicen que el amor entre hermanos engendra idiotas. Fundaremos entonces una familia de idiotas y viviremos felices en el fin de la nieve. Tendremos uno, dos, mil niños idiotas y los dejaremos correr, amar, morir. Se juntaran entre sí, engendrarán otros idiotas y así sucesivamente…” (44). In Marina Carr’s play *On Raftery’s Hill*, Dinah tells her father: “Granny was talkin about gorillas earlier. Thah’s whah we are, gorillas in clothes pretending to be human” (21). These two statements indicate how humanity has all but vanished from the communities presented in these plays, largely, but not entirely, due to incest and the savage behavior of the families. In one case the “idiotas” will take over the future; in the other humans have regressed into gorillas, walking backwards from civilization into the wilderness. The plays examine how, in the absence of moral behavior, violence leads to havoc, rendering individuals powerless to own their destinies since their lives are marked by physical, spiritual, and emotional depravation. Both plays are largely preoccupied with how to create communities that are moral and satisfying to all their members. Thus, in spite of an exhibited postmodern aesthetic, there is also deep ethical concern for both writers to question, and reflect on, the conditions that lead to the bleak scenarios portrayed in *La escuálida familia* and *On Raftery’s Hill*.

This chapter will argue that, in the face of both economic and social drastic change taking place in Argentina and Ireland at the time of these plays’ staging, Arias and Carr seek to offer a path to re/consider, resist, and examine how patriarchal social structures contribute to the disenfranchising of many. Carr’s and Arias’ plays offer, in concordance with postmodern
aesthetics, not solutions but openings from which to rethink the present failures of their respective nation states to provide fundamental human rights (the right to safety, work, adequate food, health, housing provisions) to many and to emphasize their audiences’ present disenfranchisement in light of patriarchal mores. The patriarchal narratives reconsidered in these plays are divided in two categories: public and private. The public narratives encompass Greek mythology and Bible teachings primarily, but they also include the stories generated outside the plays’ households. The private narratives scrutinize the origins and pasts of the members of the household in an attempt to understand the present. The fragmented private narratives often contradict each other, exhibiting the impossibility of creating a transparent, communal history of the households. In his definition of narrative, Michael Bamberg problematizes the dichotomy of master narratives and counter narratives by taking into account the speaker who can be both complicit with and resistant to master narratives. In his rethinking of the interaction between both narratives, and the role of the speaker, Bamberg suggests the following line of inquiry:

…how speakers employ narratives to juggle claims as to who they are that are hearable both as complicit and as countering. In other words, the question has shifted to how they create a sense of identity that maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one’s actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one’s agency. (363)

When applied to both La escuálida familia and On Raftery’s Hill, Bamberg’s definition of narrative permits a close examination of how master narratives, in this case patriarchal master narratives, are contested by even apparently complicit characters. The contradicting number of private narratives regarding the families’ past highlights the difficulty of establishing narratives not aligned with the public/master narratives. Nevertheless, by offering paths of resistance and agency to their characters, Carr and Arias make prominent to their audiences how modes of opposition to patriarchal and neoliberal economic policies can be negotiated and contested.
This chapter will seek to explore three aspects of the plays: First, it will investigate the purpose and function of tragedy within both plays. Secondly, it will contextualize the plays within the economic moment in which they were created, to elucidate how in spite of a purportedly apolitical postmodern aesthetics they are nevertheless very much embedded in the historical moment in which they were created. Lastly, the ethical concern the plays share will be linked in the Irish case to the sexual scandals, and in the case of Argentine case to the outrage over the pardons issued by president Menem to those who had perpetrated crimes under the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. The contextual aspect is therefore divided into two separate explorations: one dealing with the economic crisis and the other with moral/ethical issues being raised regarding both the welfare of the victims, and also with the narratives, public or private, used to understand, justify, or deny the crimes committed in Ireland and Argentina.

It is my contention that Carr and Arias write tragedies in response to the catastrophic consequences, both economic and social, of the 1990s neoliberal policies implemented in Argentina and Ireland. Why tragedy? As noted by Mark Houlahan, the postmodern and tragedy sit uneasily against each other. In his analysis Houlahan examines how the rise of postmodernism conflicts with the key premises of classical Greek tragedy. Aristotle’s theory requires characters to be “knowable and coherent” and the focus on the downfall of the hero/ine privileges the individual. As Houlahan reflects, massive tragic events that have affected millions and are considered tragic render the emphasis on the individual character of tragedy potentially incongruous (249-50). Furthermore, according to Richard Kearney, postmodernism’s stress on play and deconstruction has deemed suspect ethical concerns, a key component of tragedy. In his redefinition of postmodernity, Kearney advocates for a postmodern aesthetic not divested of morality and ethical questioning. It is this definition of a postmodern aesthetic, one infused with
ethics, that Carr and Arias pursue in *On Raftery’s Hill* and *La escuálida familia*. Carr and Arias choose tragedy precisely because of the social and political associations this genre implies. Tragedy is the preferred classical form used to question and examine national identity within the Western canon. In Sarah Annes Brown’s words:

> The persistence of tragedy may in part be ascribed to its capacity to be adapted and transformed across periods and cultures, indeed to be enriched by such displacement. This robustness perhaps signals a particular bond between the workings of tragedy and the dynamic of transition. Tragedy seems to have been most potent at moments of cultural or political upheaval, reflecting and anticipating change. (1)

In the midst of severe and dramatic changes to Argentine and Irish society, tragedy, in Carr’s and Arias’ hands, serves to underline, critique, and examine the consequences of the political and economic changes engulfing their respective societies. These two postmodern tragedies deconstruct the classical Aristotelian form through several techniques that will be examined, but a concern with ethics remains fundamental to the plays. The plays constitute acts of intervention seeking to foster a dialogue, an opening, that allows audiences to re/consider and resist the new economic/social policies.

In spite of the vast cultural and geographical distance between Argentina and Ireland, as a result of globalization, very similar neoliberal economic models were implemented in both countries in the 1990s. This model, as summarized by Peter J. Clinch, et al., transferred power from the nation state and its politicians to international institutions, like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Washington. Clinch et al. also note how strong critics of the model, among them Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz, have openly voiced “that a free-market economic model was being uncritically applied in situations around the world where the preconditions for its successful operation simply did not exist” (63). Their analysis is particularly pertinent since at the time of the publication of their book, 2002, the Irish economy
had not collapsed yet, unlike Argentina’s. In an overview of the dangers in allowing international agencies to be responsible for Argentina’s economy, the authors state the following:

The phenomenon we are describing has been labeled the ‘Argentinisation’ of economic policy because the country prior to January 2002 was a prime example of one that had virtually handed over all economic policy making to outside agencies; the Argentine currency board made the Federal Reserve (the US Central Bank) the real Central Bank of Argentina, and the need to reassure international financial markets obliged the government to comply with a long list of conditions from the IMF. Meanwhile, interest rates have soared, the economy stagnated and political and social unrest mounts. […] The Irish economy is in a much stronger situation than Argentina’s, of course. We have clearly gained enormously through the move from protectionism to free trade. (63)

Particularly relevant for my study is the comparison drawn by Clinch et al. between Argentina and Ireland, even if at the time of their study the authors held a promising and optimistic view of Ireland’s economy that proved to be short sighted and inaccurate.

Even though On Raftery’s Hill was staged in 2000, my historical study begins a decade earlier in order to trace the impact on Irish society of the neoliberal economic model being implemented, as well as the disclosure of the previous decade’s endemic and outrageous sexual abuse cases. As R.F. Foster examines in his book Luck and the Irish, in the 1990s Ireland became an incredibly wealthy, multicultural country, where the economy grew far beyond expectations. A brief summary of this decade as captured by Foster indicates that “output in the decade from 1995 increased 350 per cent, outpacing the per capita averages in the UK and the USA, personal disposable income doubled, exports increased fivefold, trade surpluses accumulated into billions, employment boomed, immigrants poured into the country” (7). Under the economic policies of Bertie Ahern’s Government, Ireland became a fiscal paradise for foreign investors, particularly American companies, which promptly took advantage of both the low taxes and the educated, English speaking workforce Ireland had to offer. Ireland moved from being a nation with a long history of migration to becoming host to large communities of immigrant populations, and by
2001 it had become one of the most globalized countries in the world.

In Argentina the 1990s were also a time in which aggressive neoliberal policies were pursued under Menem's government. According to David Rock, under these policies Argentina’s economy expanded, the peso became pegged to the dollar, and the once powerful trade unions came under attack. As in the case of Ireland, massive outside investment created a mirage of wealth and growth that led to higher consumption rather than increased production. Investment was targeted towards the large-scale, capital-intensive industries that featured in Menem’s privatization programme. The so called PYMES, the small medium size firms, failed to surge; still lacking access to credit, technology, markets and skills, they could do little to mop up the raising surplus of labor. Productivity gains lagged behind international standards. (71)

Although Arias does not write on the Menemist period, the changes implemented by Menem during his presidency shaped both the economy and by extension the social landscape of those who became adults in the 1990s. As Brenda Werth summarizes: “Menem's particularly authoritarian brand of neoliberalism generated unprecedented social exclusion, reflected in the emergence of the newly poor, the disenfranchised middle-class, and growing popular opposition during the nineties” (8). Werth’s conclusion sounds very similar to Foster’s findings during the Celtic Tiger period when Ireland held the unfortunate lead in Europe with both the greatest number of people living in relative poverty and one of the highest rates of “persistent risk of poverty.” Foster also elaborates how “the Tiger does not devote much care to its more puny cubs: even some Boosters admit the recent decline in social services. The picture here may suggest a two-tier society, of a kind recognizable to analysts of boom countries elsewhere in the world but new to Ireland” (15). Thus, in spite of the vast geographical and cultural distance between Argentina and Ireland, the period studied in this project exhibits similar social and economic patterns, no doubt fruit of the shrinking of the world under globalization.
However, the changes, albeit drastic, did not materialize overnight, and at the time the plays were written the mirage of increased wealth was still present in Ireland, if less so in Argentina. Why do the playwrights Lola Arias and Marina Carr then write two very similar plays about poverty, incest, violence, and isolated communities? *La escuálida familia* was staged in Buenos Aires’ Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas in September 2001, and *On Raftery's Hill* premiered in 2000 at Galway’s Town Hall Theatre, before moving to the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Carr’s play precedes Arias' by one year, but it was indeed a crucial year. The economic booms of Ireland and Argentina came to a halt around the same time, not coincidentally, due to the slow-down of the US economy after the September 2001 attacks. While Ireland’s economy did not collapse, “In 2001 Maurice O’Connell, governor of the central bank of Ireland, pronounced: ‘The era of the Celtic Tiger is over’” (R.E. Foster, 8). Given how much Ireland and Argentina depended on the strength of the US economy to push forward their own economies, a decline of the international investments that had led to growth held disastrous consequences for Argentina. As Barbara Sutton recounts, “In December 2001, the world’s attention turned to Argentina. The Argentine economy collapsed, food riots spread across the country, and the president declared a state of emergency that would limit freedom of movement and assembly. Masses of people openly defied the presidential decision, flooding the streets in protest” (1). This is the context in which Arias’ play opened, on the eve of unrest and social mobilization.

Given that both works were written under a postmodern rubric, any further discussion must face the dilemma of how much context is relevant, if at all, to the creation of *La escuálida familia* and *On Raftery’s Hill*. In his analysis of Irish theatre Eamonn Jordan pointedly reflects on how, in the era of globalization, postmodernism, and post-nation, the contextual has become
more and more difficult to identify. Jordan argues that, in fact, there is very little relation between the reality of the Celtic Tiger period and the theatre produced at that time, save noted exceptions. In his opinion the plays cannot be restricted to a national interpretation since other forces, like international reception, and varied influences, ranging from the local to the global, come into place (10). While I agree that national boundaries can prove limiting in the interpretation of *La escuálida familia* and *On Raftery’s Hill*, I disagree that the context in which the plays were created is of no consequence to their interpretation. The context is not only national, since globalization allows playwrights to consider, participate in and be influenced by factors beyond their national identities, but, however challenged, nationhood still remains. In the case of Ireland the sexual scandals of the 1990s, which involved both the government and the Catholic Church, cannot be ignored. In Argentina, President Menem issued two set of pardons in 1989 and 1990 to people responsible for crimes under the Junta Regime that defined and created a culture of impunity. The impact of the pardons on the civil society has been long lasting and damaging, even after their reversal fifteen years later, since they allowed criminals of the Junta regime to remain free. As documented by Francesca Lessa drawing from a study conducted by Humphrey and Valverde:

*Impunidad* describes the sense of vulnerability and fragility of citizenship in contemporary democratic Argentina, which results from the failures of the state to protect rights, provide access to justice, ensure legal accountability of public officials, tackle police corruption, reverse rising incidence of violent crime, and make businesses and individuals accountable for criminal negligence. (14)

Both Irish and Argentine citizens of the 1990s questioned the capacity of their official institutions (be it the Government, state agencies, or the Church) to protect the country’s citizens from harm in light of past and present abuses. Carr and Arias propose in their works new visions and alternate routes to regain and create committed citizenships in spite of the apparent lack of
political statements. Given that neither La escuálida familia nor On Raftery’s Hill possesses a single overt reference to a national, political, social, or historical moment, the claim that the plays are indeed political and concerned with their immediate national communities might seem far-fetched. In formulating what the political constitutes in these plays, I concur with Proaño’s definition, which states the following: “Propongo entender la política como la lucha o el enfrentamiento de intereses, el accionar de los individuos en la polis, dentro de un sistema de normas instituidas. […] es la lucha por el poder interno de la polis o la lucha entre dos órdenes diversos y contrapuestos” (8, my emphasis). This definition views conflict and the struggle between individuals/communities with opposing logics or formulations of how the world is or should function as political, while it distances itself from the explicitly political theatre of the 70s, which had, for the most part, a radically different aesthetic from the plays of both my study and Proaño’s. Lola Arias herself, in an interview with Jorge Dubatti appearing in a second appendix included in the published text of La escuálida familia, has stated:

Político en el sentido en que todo arte habla sobre las relaciones de poder y es conservador, revulsivo u oficialista en el uso de la forma. No creo que para producir una incisión en la realidad haya que ser “referencial”, simbólico o pretenciosamente subversivo. Una obra sobre los conflictos obreros no es necesariamente más política que una pieza de desencantos amorosos. Es obvio, pero no está de más repetirlo: la política, la revolución-oh, que palabrilla tan manoseada-, no están en los temas sino en las formas. (59)

Proaño Gómez and Arias distance themselves from a realist tradition of explicitly political theatre and reconsider the means for a political action. There is no doubt that La escuálida familia and On Raftery’s Hill are political, in spite of their lack of historical and social references, if one recognizes that analyses of power struggles and a postmodern aesthetic are modalities of political action. The plays focus on the most primordial form of community, the family, and exhibit what happens when primordial mores of conduct, namely incest, are violated.
The fragmentation within the families is the result of the clash of two different orders contending for the power to re/define the moral core of both communities. The dismantling of tragedy by Carr and Arias also locates both plays within a postmodern aesthetic, and as such, both the form and the content become politically invested. Additionally, the plays explore the gruesome effects of extreme poverty in one instance, and of near isolation and extreme violence in the other. Lastly both *La escuálida familia* and *On Raftery’s Hill* raise questions about language and the role narratives, both private and public, have in creating/shaping the communities the characters inhabit.

The political stance of both plays is delivered, then, through a postmodern aesthetic. This postmodern aesthetic, which Proaño defines as “an aesthetic of uncertainty” and which others like Dubatti, and Osvaldo Pelletieri, have respectively described as “el canón de la multiplicidad” or “teatro de la desintegración,” takes into account the fragmentation of master narratives in the postmodern era. Nevertheless, Proaño finds in the postmodern plays of her study a “modern ethic.” This modern ethic is implicated in questions of human solidarity, the difficulty of creating community under the pressures of globalization, and the role history and language play in creating individuals’ perceptions of themselves within a given time. The same structure of “modern” ethical content and postmodern form infuse the plays of my study. Both *La escuálida familia* and *On Raftery’s Hill* fall under what Kearney has postulated as a postmodern imagination that is both ethical and poetical. According to Kearney, the collapse of the ethical via deconstruction has resulted in a dilemma for postmodernism, one in which the other has become just an image without substance. His solution is to allow the postmodern imagination to play and deconstruct, to critique, but not to become nihilistic in the process. The postmodern imagination must remain ethical to allow the reinvention of a new social project that overcomes the
postmodern paralysis. Carr and Arias choose to formulate _La escuálida familia_ and _On Raftery’s Hill_ without specific contextual coordinates, but their focus on morality, isolation, violence, and humanity speaks to their ethical and social concerns. As concisely expressed by Dubatti regarding the theatre of the post-dictatorship, and more precisely of the 1990s:

_Dentro de uno u otro modo semiótico de la univocidad o de la multiplicidad, lo cierto es que el nuevo teatro (y en general todo el teatro argentino actual) se ha convertido en un espacio de resistencia. Contra el olvido y la insignificancia frente a la unificación del mundo por la hegemonía del neoliberalismo autoritario y la desarticulación y redefinición todavía no concretada de la izquierda, el teatro sigue enarbolando la bandera de la lucha por los valores humanistas fundamentales (derechos humanos, calidad de vida, justicia, igualdad social, identidad y conocimiento del pasado, democratización del saber, trabajo, etc.). (“El teatro en la post-dictadura (1983-2004),” 24)_

Dubatti’s reflections pertain to the theatre of Argentina in particular, but their fundamental tenets are sympathetic to not just the theatre of Marina Carr, but to the British theatre movement commonly labeled in-yr-face-theatre. As analyzed by Aleks Sierz, the movement’s main theorist and the one responsible for coining the defining term, in-yr-face- theatre seeks to unsettle the audience through shock tactics, be it by showing explicit sexual content and violence, or smashing social taboos. It attempts to create discomfort and uneasiness in the audience in order to “tell us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yr-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative” (4). Both Dubatti and Sierz reflect on a contemporary theatre movement which is deeply concerned with spiritual and moral issues in the face of the alienation resulting from, among other things, the processes/es of globalization and the failure of the left to provide a space for resistance and the reestablishment of human rights. Neither Arias nor Carr reach the “experiential” level of writers like Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill, but the core foundations are there. Carr’s character Sorell is
raped in front of the audience, and although Arias' use of a very poetic register in *La escuálida familia* deflects some of the horrific circumstances of this family, murder, incest, starvation, alcoholism, fratricide, parricide, suicide, and isolation are all present in the play. Both Arias and Carr push the audience to reconsider how contemporary society has failed many of its citizens and through their theatre, seek to raise the questions that must be pondered to create a different present and future, in order to overcome the present stagnation and spiritual vacuum.

A brief summary of the plays will exhibit the striking structural similarities. In *On Raftery's Hill*, the family is composed of a father, his deranged elderly mother, two daughters, and a retarded son; in *La escuálida familia* the family is made up of a father and a mother (who will commit suicide half way through the play), two daughters, and also a handicapped son. In Carr’s play, Red Raftery, the patriarch of the family, rapes both of his daughters, Dinah and Sorrel. Dinah is the mother and sister of Sorrel. The whole family structure is distorted by Red’s brutal acts. The only other male in the family, Raftery’s son, Ded, is an emotionally disturbed man unable to care for himself and more at ease with the stable animals than with any of his family members. As in *On Raftery’s Hill*, the father in *La escuálida familia* has an incestuous relationship with one of his daughters, Lisa. The other daughter, Luba, engages in a sexual relationship with her brother, Reo, who was abandoned at birth. Due to his unusual upbringing, Reo is socially awkward and uneasy around people. Reo will accidentally kill Lisa, who is pregnant with her father’s baby, and subsequently the father himself, this time intentionally. At the end of the play Luba and Reo are the only surviving characters in the deserted, snowy landscape. Their unborn child will be the seed of the future, product of an incestuous relationship that nevertheless carries the hope of a new order.

Additionally, the landscape envisioned in both plays is barren, cold, and virtually isolated
from any social interaction outside the close knit family. In La escuálida familia the lack of sufficient food is a source of constant worry, along with the cold weather, brought on by a fading sun that no longer provides warmth or light. Luba and Lisa hunt, but their only prey is Reo, found nearly frozen when the play commences. In On Raftery’s Hill there is still food, in fact, the Rafterys are quite wealthy, but Red Raftery is engaged in what appears to be animal mayhem, hunting and slaughtering prey on his property just to leave it rot outside, not bothering to use it for any purpose except to fulfill his desire to kill. The abundant carcasses populate the hill on which the family lives, creating a foul smell and further isolating the family. The savage behavior Red exhibits towards the animals is indicative of his abusive nature, and categorizes him, and his family, as socially crippled.

La escuálida familia and On Raftery’s Hill reconsider classical tragedies, rejecting some of the elements and preserving others. The unity of place and action remain, but time is abandoned. There are marked downfalls in the plays, but it is hard to establish the hero/ine. The plays present hybrid reconsiderations of the tragic, drawing inspiration from similar sources, Shakespeare and Greek myths. In an interview for the New York Times Marina Carr acknowledges that she is interested in “the Greek idea of destiny and fate and little escape” (Clarity C23). Similarly, in the interview conducted by Dubatti Arias reflects: “Los tópicos trágicos se repiten siempre: la venganza del excluido, el huerfanito (Hamlet, Segismundo, Orestes y el tan vapuleado Edipo), el duelo entre hermanos (Cain y Abel), la violación de la virgen (el sacrificio de Ismena, Ofelia), los cádaveres despedazados o devorados como fruto de una política atroz (Tito Andrónico)” (54). However, and in spite of the many similarities between the two works, there also marked departures. Although both plays break the three-act classical form, they do so differently. Arias’ play begins with a preface and proceeds with fifteen scenes
and an epilogue. *On Raftery's Hill* has two acts; the second act takes place three weeks after the first, inside Red's house, where the whole play unfolds. Nevertheless, these departures from classical Greek tragedy, albeit in different directions, signal the hybrid forms both plays pursue and their uneasy stance between the modern and the postmodern. Arias deconstructs the tragic form further than Carr does, and yet, her preface attempts to situate *La escuálida familia* within a long and familiar history of the key elements of a tragedy, as can be seen in the following lines:

LUBA: La Historia es siempre familiar  
Un reino, país o baldío, en la nieve  
Un trono de liebres y hueso  
La Historia es el regreso del huérfano  
Un duelo de hermanos en la frontera  
Un cadáver que separa al país del extranjero  
La Historia es la violación de la virgen  
Un mapa trazado con partes de cuerpos (13)

In Spanish the words for history and story are the same: *historia*. In order to mark the difference history is capitalized to indicate the collective past and kept in lower case when it refers to a personal, individual narrative. In Arias' preface, however, “historia” is capitalized, even though it describes the narrative of a single family, underlining the confluence of the public and the private, the collective and the individual, and the impossibility to separate one realm from the other. By linking the public to the private both plays become politically invested, even if the isolating settings might indicate otherwise. Carr has adamantly denied any relationship between her theatre and the political context in which it was created, stating: “I know nothing about politics, I have no interest in politics. I am not commenting on the state of politics in Ireland” (Kilroy 14). However, the author has also acknowledged that the interpretation of her plays is the critic’s work, not hers (Ibid.14). Whether it is Carr’s intent or not, it is hard to consider *On Raftery's Hill* divorced from the national context where it was created and performed.

As mentioned in Chapter One of this study, tragedy is not an alien form to Carr; it plays
an important role in *By the Bog of Cats*..., and it is a genre which she has explored extensively in her Midlands plays. As critics have noted (Doyle, Harris, Wallace et al.), it is in tragedy that Carr finds her voice; tragedy is the medium which has solidified her reputation as a notable Irish playwright. According to Wallace, who has examined in depth the playwright’s use of tragedy, Carr informs her plays with a tragic form that is a mixture of both classical and highly contemporary elements. Wallace identifies the following defining features in her Midland plays:

…strong character development in particular in terms of the figure of the tragic heroine in each play; a thematics driven by heightened emotion and extreme situations; narratives reinforced through repetition; a persistent emphasis on heredity as destiny; fables and stories which serve to provide a meta-commentary on the theme of destiny on each play; and finally heightened significance achieved through a mythologised sense of place and stigmatic naming characters. (255)

These characteristics are present in the three Midland plays, but, in the case of *On Raftery’s Hill*, it is more difficult to identify the play as tragedy despite the presence of a significant number of the elements. In contrast to the Midland plays, *On Raftery’s Hill* lacks a strong heroine, no one dies, the male protagonist is a brutal presence rather than an idealized absence, and myth becomes unviable. As a result, and in spite of sharing some of the characteristics of the Midland plays, *On Raftery’s Hill* is more grotesque than tragic and without a doubt more closely related to the contextual circumstances in which it was conceived, namely the horrific sexual scandals of the 1980s and 1990s in Ireland, than any of Carr’s previous plays.

As incisively analyzed by Wallace, in each of the Midland Plays (*The Mai, Portia Coughlan* and *By The Bog of Cats*...) a female heroine, the tragic figure, is bound by the following characteristics: “Each is a mother and yet for each their offspring are not focal points of their desires or identities. Each is driven by an obsessional hunger which can, it seems, neither be controlled nor sated. Each struggles with a man in her life who is either absent or
uncommitted. Each is bound by a legacy of the past” (438). However, in *On Raftery's Hill*, this is not the case, since it is hard to establish who in fact is the hero or heroine of the play. Although Sorrel is the latest victim of Red's brutality, she is by no means the heroine of the play. Sorrel has less time on stage than Dinah or Red; her love for Dara seems conventional and unremarkable, and she is not a mother and lacks any obsession, or in classical terms, hubris, that might cause her downfall. Similar objections could be raised to Dinah as the heroine. The relationship between her and Red, although incestuous, lacks the poignancy and obsessive quality Portia has for her deceased twin brother in *Portia Coughlan*. Nor is Red absent from her life as the men are in the Midland Plays. Red and Dinah behave like an old married couple, alternating between bickering, resignation, and at times, caring for each other. Their sexual relationship, at this point consensual, is driven by habit rather than passion. When Dinah tries to provide an explanation for it to Sorrel, she describes it in the following terms:

DINAH: So we do ud from time to time, allas in pitch dark, never a word, ud's nowan bloody business. Who's ud interferin wud? Nowan only us. And we want ud to stop. You don't believe thah. You don't believe thah. You don't believe anythin good abouh me and Daddy. We don't aither, but we want ud to stop. Ud's just like children playin in a field some awful game, before rules was made, […] (41)

Carr keeps the structural apparatus of tragedy but divests it of its mythological resonance. The pieces are there, but when they are brought in together they do not fit, and as a result *On Raftery's Hill* becomes a tragedy manqué. To what end? Carr’s deconstruction of the elements of her own personal tragic form denotes a further exploration of postmodern aesthetics, in which the pieces stand up by themselves, leaving the audience the task to rethink how wholeness can once again be achieved, or reconsidered. In her analysis of the Midland plays Margaret Maxwell establishes the following Greek/Shakespearean reconsiderations in Carr's plays: *The Mai* draws on Penelope and Odysseus' myth, *Portia Coughlan* on *The Merchant of Venice* and in the most
transparent of the correlations, *By the Bog of Cats*... retells Medea’s myth. In comparing *By the Bog of Cats*... to *On Raftery's Hill*, however, Eammon Carr notes how the pain of incest cannot be elided through a mythological dimension. If Carr succeeded in the Midland plays to reconsider and provide through ritual and other techniques a mythological resonance, in *On Raftery's Hill*, according to Eammon Carr:

Because there are so few dramatic mythic/precedent, Carr’s attempts to draw on the Greek myth of incest, between Zeus and Hera, fails. There is a difference between a Greek myth of origins and of populating the world and the reality of the pain of incest, so that the play never has the comfort of a mythological dimension.[…] Carr re-invigorates the Medea myth in *By the Bog of Cats* as murder is ritualized through distancing and dancing, whereas in *On Raftery’s Hill* myth becomes unsanctioned and unviable. (144)

Carr’s failure to make myth “viable” in *On Raftery's Hill* speaks to her commitment to embrace a postmodern aesthetic, one of pieces, which nevertheless carries a deeply ethical commitment.

While in the Midland's Plays the characters are unaware of their mythological precedents, in the case of *On Raftery's Hill* Isaac himself (the Rafterys neighbor) attempts to understand his community, and incest, through the lens of Greek mythology:

ISAAC: […] Zeus and Hera, sure they were brother and sister and they goh married and had chaps and young wans, and the chaps and young wans done the job wud the mother and father and wud one another, and sure the whole lo a them was ah ud morning, noon and nigh. I suppose they had to populate the word someway. Is ud any wonder the stahe a the country and them for ancestry. (31)

Isaac's metatheatrical musings lead him to the same conclusion Eammon Carr reaches when considering Greek mythology in *On Raftery's Hill*: myth becomes “unsanctionable and unviable” in the light of incest (143).

The 1990s in Ireland proved to be a decade of sexual child abuse revelations that undermined both the Catholic Church and the Irish State. In a thoroughly documented sexual history of Ireland, Diarmaid Ferriter discusses many of the most publicized cases (*The Killkeny
incest, Father Brendan Smyth, the anonymous X girl, and Anne Lovett, among others) and examines the conditions that facilitated the abuse. Ferriter identifies how sexual and physical abuse affected children placed in public and Catholic institutions, but it extended likewise to individual families. The endemic nature of the problem was reflected in the sheer number of cases, as Ferriter remarks:

*The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland Report (SAVI)*, initiated by the Dublin Rape Crisis Center, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies with additional funding from the Irish government and published in March 2002, revealed a huge volume of child abuse in Ireland. Over 1 in 20 women (5.6 per cent, representing nearly 80,000 women) reported being raped in childhood; over 1 in 50 men (2.7 per cent, representing nearly 47,000 thousand men) reported being raped in childhood, while 30.4 per cent of women reported some form of sexual abuse in childhood, as did 23.6 per cent of the men. *(Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland, 459)*

The SAVI report also noted that women remain as vulnerable to abuse as adults as they had been as children (281). The results of the report, taken in conjunction with notions of patriarchy and the status of women in Ireland, play a role when considering the persistent abuse of women under the Celtic Tiger period. Harry Ferguson is careful to point out how the media attention given to the abuses conducted by priests clouded the fact that most of the cases did not happen at the hand of priests but in the private sphere of the home. In his analysis he notes how in fact the most common occupation for child abusers is farming, yet as sharply noted by Ferguson, “the paedophile farmer” label had not drawn any attention. Carr’s choice to examine sexual abuse in the context of a family, rather than at the hand of priests, appears to be a deliberate act to acknowledge the endemic problem within Irish society. By placing the abuse within the private sphere, the audience has to further examine and consider how power is established in a family, and also how abuse is sustained by public narratives of gender roles in Irish society. The master/public narrative of a good family man, hard-working and heterosexual, who nevertheless
commits sexual abuse, is harder to accept, even in profoundly Catholic Ireland, than the narratives of abuse committed by members of the clergy. In a disturbing analysis by Ferguson of the language employed by Justice O’Flaherty in the reduced sentencing from 14 to 4 years of the rapist responsible for the pregnancy of a fourteen year-old girl commonly known as X, he notes that:

Part of the Judges’s rationale for reducing the sentence in the X case was that the abuse was not “out and out” rape. This clouds issues of consent and implicitly draws attention to the behavior of the child as somehow complicit with in her victimisation. At its worst, responsibility for the problem of sex crimes is shifted to the victims: the idea that somehow the desexualized man was ‘led on’ by the sexualized child. (250)

The judge had previously referred to the accused as a “hard working, good family man” as if those qualities served to ameliorate his crime. His employment, as a businessman, also contradicted the commonly held view that sexual abuse is more prevalent in lower economic classes. In fact, as Susan Janko remarks, “Although child abuse and neglect are present in all ethnic groups and across socioeconomic levels, reports of abuse and neglect occur predominantly in families of low socio-economic status” (34). Child protection programs were established in response to the findings of the 1990s; however, in order for the programs to run effectively, continued support and investment were indispensable. Niall McElwee points out that “the government admitted in January 1998 that the Irish childcare system requires £100 million spread out over three years to be truly effective in implementing childcare services” (81). Nevertheless, the investment failed to materialize and the resources were allocated to other areas. As McElwee incisively underlines, “Despite the constant rhetoric accorded to children in this country, when it actually comes to putting significant cash in prevention focused services, politicians cannot seem to deliver the goods” (81). The new neoliberal economic model diminished services for individuals and families, weakening the welfare system that could
prevent further abuses. Under the Celtic Tiger period the overall wealth of the country increased but so did social inequalities. As Carmen Kuhling remarks:

Although social policy analysts have pointed out that the Irish welfare state was never particularly strong, it would appear that the opportunities produced by the Celtic Tiger economic boom could have been used to develop aspects of public services [...] and to begin the process of developing a strong version of the welfare state. [...] However, it (Ireland) exhibited an extraordinarily low level of state spending on basic social programmes. O’Hearn demonstrates that Ireland had the lowest levels in the EU of government expenditure,… (18)

Within this context Carr’s play is an urgent reminder that measures must be taken to prevent further child abuse, and that the Rafterys are one of many, not just an exception.

The location where the play unfolds further contributes to the estrangement and isolation the characters experience. The Hill, with the 300 acres Red owns, is a source of wealth, but also a physical demarcation of his power. As Rhona Trench elaborates, the position of his house, high above the valley, allows Red to keep a watchful eye on his family and to keep the community at bay from the sexual abuse he engages in and the brutal cruelty he exhibits towards animals (171). The Rafterys isolated location, on the Hill, serves to deepen the play’s atmosphere of entrapment and moral disease. None of the Rafterys manages to leave the property. The most poignant example is given by Shalome, the senile grandmother. Shalome tries to escape, first towards Killnery and later to India, in search of past (imagined) lovers. Her attempted trips and delusions provide a comic note in an otherwise very bleak play, but Shalome’s repeated failures at escaping underline the inability of the characters to physically, or emotionally, abandon Red’s Hill.

The house becomes a timeless space in which circular time overrides the linear development of events. Even though the play’s stage directions state that the story unfolds in the present, the year 2000, the complete absence of any technology blurs this fact. There is no TV, phone, radio, or even a newspaper around. Nor is there a mention of a car, although a suggestion
to visit town is briefly mentioned. The diversions Red lists for Dinah, with whom he is trying to make peace, are getting her hair done or buying a dress, and when she refuses, he offers to buy her books, which she seems to enjoy although the audience never sees her reading. If this is indeed the year 2000 the suggestion to attend a movie would have been more appropriate. This is the period in Irish history of increased wealth, and for a wealthy household like the Raftery’s not to own even a radio encourages the question of what significance the lack of technology has for the play. Eammon Carr's interpretation of the original setting for the play, directed by Garry Hynes and with a stage design by Tony Walton, considers the following:

The play's setting shared more in common with the marginalized settings found within the underprivilged, saturated realities in the work of American playwright Maria Irene Fornes, than it does with the average contemporary Irish farmer with such size holding (three hundred acres), where computers, technology and European Union documentation in all probability play some part in everyday living. Likewise, while Red has some wealth, as demonstrated by his capacity to hand over a sizable cheque, the setting reflects the squalid and dysfunctional psychological conditions of the household. (142)

The play’s feeling of being outside history is strengthened by the fact that within the play hunting and cow herding are the main sources of subsistence. Carr’s choice to historically isolate these characters from the period they inhabit might at first glance contradict the claim of this analysis that there is a link between the play and the sexual scandals of the 1990s. However, as noted by Carr, the setting reflects the dire psychological state of the characters.

There is a profound lack of communication in the play between those who reside outside the house, namely Isaac (the Raftery’s neighbor) and Dara (Sorrel’s suitor), and those who are inside. Dara and Isaac can pointedly comment with disgust and shame on the incestuous case of a neighbor. Their views exhibit the view commonly held by society that the actions of the abusive father are both despicable and inexcusable. Their sentiments are aligned with the victim, in this case a daughter. In contrast Red’s view of Brophy’s abuse is to label the news as “gossip”
and to explicitly claim: “Sarah Brophy goh whah was comin to her” (15). Given Red’s own brutal abuse of all his children, his promptness to blame the victim is not surprising, but when both victims of his sexual abuse, Dinah and Sorrel, hold Red’s point of view, the insidiousness, isolation, and pervasive effects of incest are glaringly exhibited. In one of the cases, when Sorrel blames Dinah for failing to protect her from her father’s assault, Dinah replies: “Ud’s noh the end a the world just because hands was laid on ya thah shouldn’t a. Why couldn’t ya a just been more careful?” (40). After her rape Sorrel will turn against Dara, whom she cared for and was very loving towards previously: “No! Go way from me! There’s natin wrong a Daddy. Ud’s you! Think ya know everything abouh everywan! Well ya know natin, Dara Mood” (38). As these two examples have indicated, both of his victims internalize Red’s point of view, which ensures their silence and their complicity with their abuser. The inability of either Dara or Isaac to perceive the abuse taking place in this house is equally disturbing given how clear the signs are. Both Dara and Isaac see how Red mistreats Dinah and the terrible fear Ded has of him, to such a point that Ded has secluded himself in the cowshed rather than live under the same roof. Furthermore, Red’s extreme violence towards the animals on his hill reaches gruesome proportions. Isaac witnesses Red killing a hare, which he intends to eat, but subsequently, and for no apparent reason, Red strangles the leverets. More disturbingly, Dara tells Sorrel how he saw Red cutting the udders of one of his cows to subsequently pull her into the river and drown her. These actions, particularly the second, highlight the extreme, gratuitous violence Red is capable of perpetrating, and yet neither Isaac nor Dara see the incest taking place right under their noses. Just as the Rafterys live in a vacuum, unaware of what takes place in the valley, except for what they are told, Isaac and Dara fail to comprehend the true nature of the Rafterys’ home.

It is as if these two universes, the valley and the hill, occurred in separate parallel planes,
with no chance of ever meeting, or having a significant impact on the other. In the context of the 1990s sexual scandals, Carr’s choice to drop historical specifics universalizes the terrible isolation the victims endure, while simultaneously calling attention to the failure of the local communities to perceive the abuse. In the most publicized cases of sexual abuse in Ireland, in the time preceding the publication of the play, the extent of the problem, both in number and length of years, along with the failure of public institutions, both governmental and religious, to protect the victims, enraged the public. Carr’s examination of the sexual abuse taking place in the Rafterys’ house, as well as in the more tragic case of the Brophys, underlines the prevalence and extent of incest in this community, pointing to an endemic problem rather than an isolated case. Additionally, the community’s ignorance, deliberate or not, highlights an institutional failure to protect the victims. As noted by Trench:

That the Brophy story did not reach the community until after the tragic deaths of the mother and child were discovered is significant. The silence of the community in the play acts as a metaphor for Ireland’s tendency to resist and conceal distasteful issues. It is only in the last fifteen years that Ireland’s hidden histories of abuse in many families and state institutions are being exposed. (173)

Even if reports of abuse have come to light and much public discussion of them has engulfed Ireland, the SAVI report in 2002 found that many would not disclose abuse:

When asked to judge whether they would tell others if they themselves were sexually abused, over a quarter of study participants said that they would be unlikely to tell family members. More (41 per cent) felt they probably would not tell friends. Regarding professionals, over a quarter (27 per cent) felt they would be unlikely to tell the Gardaí and almost a quarter were uncertain or thought they would not go to a counsellor. However, most (85 per cent) felt they would disclose to a doctor, with the added qualification that they would only do so if medically necessary. Men were more likely to think they would not disclose to all groups except doctors. (7)

Additionally the report recommended further training of counselors and support for abuse victims. More distressing is the fact that only a tiny fraction of those accused of sexual abuse were prosecuted and received sentencing. As the authors of the report concluded: “Legal redress
for sexual crimes, as reported in this study, was the exception rather than the rule” (39). *On Raftery’s Hill* underlines the complicated cycles stemming from a culture of silencing, violence, and incest, but no easy answers are provided. The fact that Red himself appears to be a victim of sexual abuse precludes the audience from easily allocating blame without considering the role of the community in perpetuating sexual abuse. In an interview with Karen Fricker, Carr explicitly states her views regarding Red: “I like Red Raftery” she said. “I know people might find that difficult, but I do. He may not have much humanity, but it is there. His humanity is that he realizes he is bad. He realizes he has fallen. He realizes he has got it all wrong. The inhuman impulses are struggling alongside the impulse to be humane” (9). Since Red’s entanglement in incest is three fold, the possibility to judge him is obscured. Shalome, Red’s mother, romanticizes her relationship to her father and will not, much to Red’s anger, answer who his father was. The notion that Red might have also been involved with Shalome is slyly raised in an exchange between Isaac and Red, in which Red accuses him of being part of the group of people behind this story as the following lines indicate: “Like hell ya forgeh, and you wud the biggest lugs in the parish. Ud was all over something thah was said abouh me mother and abouh me. That’s whah thah was” (30). In the production of the play by Garry Hynes, Red pushed Shalome up the stairs by placing his hands on her buttocks, further emphasizing this possibility. The incest upon incest within the family is profoundly disturbing and the image of the hill on which the Rafterys reside, populated by carcasses filled with maggots, underlines their moral, emotional, and social deterioration. As Shalome in one of her rare moments of lucidity expresses to Dara: “You’ll make someone very happy, young man, but it won’t be Sorrel Raftery. Because, you see, we’re strange creatures up here on the Hill. And strange creatures, aberrations like us, don’t make for lifetime companions” (36). Except, one might add, to each other, since the Rafterys’
lives are forever intertwined by everything they have silenced and denied. Red’s impunity to his brutal violation and repression of his children is ensured by his children’s inability to voice publicly the horrors to which they have been submitted by their father.

As Wallace has shown, both narrative and fable are strong components of Carr’s tragedy, and *On Raftery’s Hill* is no exception. There are two types of narrative present in the play, and each serves different functions, at times colliding with the other and exacerbating the tension between the private and the public. On one hand, there are a number of narratives and stories related to the Raftery's private mythology: where they came from, who their ancestors were, and how much property they may own. These narratives are largely the result of the private memories of different characters, and often they are contradictory, which highlights their dubiousness and the imaginative nature of memory. On the other hand, there are a number of narratives that might be designated as public, describing the outside community and the social order. Within the public narratives, Greek mythology and the Bible are counterpoised, each offering a different type of society and moral order. To these two forms of narrative one might add the “gossip” coming from the valley, which as the negative label used to categorize it implies, is viewed as a source of unreliable narration. Following Bamberg’s definitions of master and counter narratives, the public narratives previously described in *On Raftery’s Hill* function as master narratives within the text. Bamberg divides master narratives into two categories: “One claiming (in a more narrow sense) the existence of master narratives that delineate how narrators position themselves within their story; the other arguing in a much broader sense that speakers are principally subjected to grand récits and metanarratives from which there seems to be no escape” (359). The second, broader category corresponds to the use of the Bible and Greek mythology in the play, since the characters consider their actions in light of both narratives. The
second public narrative, the “gossip” functions as a master and as a counter narrative, depending on which character considers the news. The private narratives, such as the memories of the children, are, in their vast majority, counter narratives that seek to redefine the characters’ sense of self. Within the Rafterys’ household Red holds the master narrative of his family, and his progeny attempts, with little success, to alter, counter, and resist Red’s version of events. Bamberg elaborates how even in the act of countering a master narrative the narrator juggles both the master and the counter narrative, and agency is located in the moment of interaction. As he states, “I am proposing considering counter narratives as brought off and carefully managed in the social realm of interaction rather than as stories that have a previous existence in the mind or the life of speakers” (368). Within Carr’s play, the dual focus of being both complicit and subversive is indeed pertinent, since the characters are unable to configure themselves outside the master narrative that Red controls, or attempts to control. The reconsidering as well of the master narratives that go beyond Red’s household master narratives (Bible/Greek mythology) serves to highlight how patriarchal public narratives impact the microcosm of the Rafterys’ household and the acts of resistance and complicity the characters engage in when attempting to make sense of their lives.

While the private narratives provide the family with a mythology of origin and belonging, the multiple, opposing versions given by different family members of the same event underscore the fractured and violent form of their bonding. In order for one narrative to override the others, brutal force and methods are used. The most poignant example of this type of collision of the different Raftery narratives is Ded's retellings of the conditions of Sorrel's birth:

"I was the wan had to do ud all! Daddy came to me and he says, you’re to go down to the cowshed wud Dinah. And I says Daddy I won’t, I want to stay wud Mother, and he says, go now and do what you’re told. And there’s blood and every fuckin thing coming ouh a Dinah. And I says Daddy I don’t know what to do and Daddy say’s she is only calvin and"
Ded is brutalized by Red, who physically forces him to deliver Sorrel, but he is also psychologically destroyed by the burden of his own involvement in this act. Ded’s outburst prompts a swift repression by Dinah and Red, who together fetch a rope to tie him down and then sedate him with medication. At one point during the physical fight that arises, Red overpowers Ded by placing his foot on Ded’s throat, a clear physical sign of attempting to repress speech by brutal force. Ultimately, Red’s narrative is superimposed on the others, since at the end of the play his violence has engulfed all members of his family and rendered them incapable of abandoning him. Their paralysis binds them to the house, where incest has become the structuring social order. In light of Bamberg’s thoughts, the complicity each of Red’s children exhibits with the master narrative Red espouses underlines the difficulty of overcoming not just him, as an oppressive violent father, but the master narrative that serves to delineate who he is. In Red’s circumstances, the master narrative is the traditional view that a father is the head of the household, the one responsible for his children and wife, and the unqualified source of power from which the rest of the familial relationships are drawn. This master narrative allocates not just the economic power to the father, but also, and more relevantly for the play, the emotional control of his relatives. The master narrative regarding paternal power present in the play echoes the statements issued by the judge in the X case, in which the status of the rapist as a hard-working male was used to ameliorate his sentence. Thus, in spite of assertions to the contrary by the author, Carr’s play is indeed a political intervention seeking to reconsider patriarchal narratives that lead to abuse and perpetuate inequality, both between women and men, but also, between fathers and their children.
The public narratives exist outside Red’s control, but he nevertheless attempts to belittle them, by labeling them “gossip” or by making futile attempts to deconstruct their meaning to his advantage. Brophy had committed incest with his daughter, Sarah Brophy, who became pregnant and had his baby who died shortly after being born. Distressed by the death of her baby, Sarah Brophy goes to his grave and spends the night there, which likely leads to her own death, as she contracts pneumonia while mourning him. Maxwell notes how Brophy’s story echoes that of Ann Lovett, one of the most publicized cases of the 1980s. Furthermore, as Maxwell examines: “Deprived of characterisation, and therefore, denied voice, Sarah’s story becomes subject to bias narration: thus effectively elided, she is rendered society disreputable” (472). Red is quick to blame Sarah for her tragedy, in an attempt to suppress any narrative that might undermine his own position regarding incest. Sarah is effectively silenced by her own death, but although alive neither Dinah nor Sorrel can voice their own suffering publicly. The news of Sarah’s death is delivered by Isaac, who has come to visit the Rafterys, along with Dara. In reflecting on Brophy’s suicide, Isaac volunteers that maybe the bit of Christianity left in him led him to kill himself. Isaac implies that Brophy’s conscience could not bear the weight of his crime, even though Christian scripture does not allow for suicide. Red promptly points out how Christ forgives the sinners, and to Isaac’s retort that Christ forgives everyone except “the devils,” Red quickly answers: “And doesn’t your God make monsters too, for all the righteous to look down on. Didn’t he create Lucifer for the sole pleasure of flingin him outh a Heaven?” Isaac replies:

16 Anne Lovett was a fifteen year-old schoolgirl from Granard who died giving birth beside a cave on January 31, 1984. Her baby son died at the same time. An investigation determined that she had died due to irreversible shock caused by hemorrhage and exposure during childbirth. Her case prompted public discussion in Ireland regarding women and childbirth outside of marriage.
“Monsters make themselves. They were hopped into the world clan as the next” (30). Red seeks a way out for his conduct, a rationale to reconcile his own private mythology of right and wrong with the Bible’s canonical, public text. The impossibility of aligning the private and the public, to gain transparency and a perfect fit between the two forms of narration, exhibits the unbridgeable moral distance between the Rafterys and the Bible’s teachings. Isaac offers Greek mythology as an alternative form of social order, one in which incest is acceptable, but he concludes: “Is ud any wonder the stahe a the country and them for ancestry” (31). Isaac thus reflects that the values of Greek mythology, namely incest, are unviable. His disgust at Brophy’s act, and his implication in “the stahe a the country,” that foul behavior is rampant and linked to flawed narrations of origin, opens a fissure through which new narratives can be created. Carr’s questioning of both forms of narration, public and private, positions On Raftery’s Hill within a postmodern aesthetic. Carr shows how the process of finding the truth is fraught with violence and elusive conclusions.

Did it matter to the community that Brophy’s abuse of his daughter had been revealed? Unless steps are taken to prevent the further molestation of children, truth does not provide safety, although it is without a doubt the first step towards significant change. Carr’s play is invested in undoing the narratives, both public and private, which allow the events occurring in the Rafterys’ house to repeat themselves. There are no easy answers, since even Red, who by Isaac’s account is a monster, is himself a victim of sexual molestation.

Claudia Harris writes that when Carr’s play opened in 2000 in Washington D.C, as part of an Irish celebratory festival at the Kennedy Center, both audiences and critics judged it harshly and found it to be the weakest of the three Irish productions (the other two plays were Pentecost and Catalpa by Stewart Parker and Donald O’Kelly respectively). As Harris noted, part of the poor reception the play encountered had to do with the somber nature of the play, which clashed
with the celebratory mood of the festival. Nevertheless, Harris also comments that even some of the actors, male and female, were worried that this violent, grotesque family would come to represent how rural Ireland was perceived by Americans. However, the discomfort and uneasiness with *On Raftery’s Hill* might also be related to the difficulty, on the audience’s part, to accept the role communities play in silencing, ignoring, and disregarding the victims of abuse, be it sexual molestation or any other form of violent behavior. The American audiences witnessing *On Raftery’s Hill* were not like the Irish audiences, who had been bombarded by the media with the terrible, endemic sexual scandals of the previous thirty years, but their uneasiness with the play speaks to the uncomfortable place Carr’s work forces them to consider. Harris does not make any connections in her essay to the sexual scandals which had been uncovered in Ireland and labels the play both “absurdist” and “primarily non-representational” (220) without taking into account the context in which it was conceived and originally performed. Although she evaluates the difficulty of exporting Irish drama, and the risk of having it misunderstood by a foreign audience, she makes no reference to how the Irish audiences’ connection with Carr’s earlier material went beyond the aesthetic familiarity they had with Carrs’ work to encompass the moral core of the play, incest. The uneasiness of the Kennedy Center actors with this particularly negative image of rural Ireland, which clashes with the mythical, peaceful land of green pastures with which it is commonly associated, stresses the power of theatre to function as a space for social commentary and questioning. The Rafterys might be grotesque and the violence too extreme, but they only served to highlight the profound, endemic and systemic problem of sexual molestation within Irish communities. The patriarchal economic and social narratives sustained in Ireland at the time the play was written helped shaped a culture of silencing and disenfranchising for women that cannot be divorced from the sexual scandals under the Celtic
Tiger era. By exposing how patriarchal structures are conducive to abuses of power and violence, Carr undermines, questions, and opens the door to alternative orders.

Lastly, and as a transition to the section of this chapter regarding *La escuálida familia*, a closer look at the titles of both of these plays signals the different emphasis Carr and Arias pursue. Whereas Carr’s universe becomes bleaker at the end of the play than it originally was, Arias’ play, in spite of the deeply tragic outcome of many of the family members, ends on a marginally more hopeful note. The title of Carr’s play, *On Raftery’s Hill*, emphasizes her focus on both the physical isolation the Rafterys experience and the patriarchal reaffirmation of Red’s power over his family members. The title emphasizes to the audience the landscape in which the play unfolds, a hill, high above the valley, but no closer to heaven than the valley, since incest corrupts both locations. The hill further ensures the physical isolation the characters experience, since they live apart from the rest of the community, and attempts to escape Red’s house, both emotionally and literally, remain unfulfilled. Even though the title is not *On Red Raftery’s Hill*, no one seeing the play could infer anything else, since Red’s last name will be carried over by each one of his children. Neither Dinah nor Sorrel will marry and take a husband’s name, and Red’s patriarchal power, brutally imposed, will remain uncontested and strengthen at the end of the play. The play was given two different endings, one in the performance and the other in the textual version published two years after the staging of the play. Eammon Carr has considered both endings and their relevance in interpreting the play. In the staged version Sorrel has the last word. Red asks her if she has resolved her disagreements with Dara, to which Sorrel replies: “Oh I souted him ouh, Daddy, don’t you worry. I sorted him ouh for evermore” (42). As Eammon Carr reflects, however ambivalent the performance ending might be, the focus and the last words belong to Sorrel. The textual ending is far bleaker. In it Red begins to clean his gun with a strip
of material from Sorrel’s wedding dress, now soiled, after Shalome wandered away wearing it.

As Eammon Carr notes:

This is a more harrowing, if negatively symbolic ending with the patriarchal figure, wiping the gun (phallic object) with a strip of material from a wedding dress that has been put beyond use (decommissioned), by being soiled beyond any dry-cleaning intervention, and by being torn by him. With this gesture, Red is allowed to consolidate his power, but also he is given the last words of the play. (147)

Carr’s decision to modify the ending, two years after the performance, places the emphasis on the lingering power of patriarchal mores. Red’s brutality has managed to engulf each member of his family and forfeit any chance of an alternative order. At the time of publication and as McElwee’s research indicates, children’s services, in spite of the public awareness of abuse in the recent years, had failed to come through. Perhaps Carr’s new, darker ending, is an attempt to call attention to the cost being paid by those left unprotected, uncared for and ignored by the State.

If Carr’s title for her play highlights Raftery’s name, and by extension patriarchy, as it has been previously discussed, Arias’ title, *La escuálida familia*, draws attention to the communal sense of deprivation the whole family experiences. A perfect English language translation of this title is difficult, and in fact, in Jean Graham-Jones’ translation of the play, the title was modified to *A Kingdom, a Country or a Wasteland, in the Snow* since the English term squalid does not overlap with the Spanish term.\(^17\) A closer literal translation would be “emaciated” and the most famous animal in Spanish literature, Don Quixote’s horse, Rocinante, is described as

\(^17\) Anne Lovett was a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl from Granard who died giving birth beside a cave on January 31, 1984. Her baby son died at the same time. An investigation determined that she had died due to irreversible shock caused by hemorrhage and exposure during childbirth. Her case prompted public discussion in Ireland regarding women and childbirth outside of marriage.
“escuálido,” but the term emaciated in English draws closer attention to physical deprivation than the Spanish term does. These questions aside, Arias’ title calls attention to how the bleak conditions the family experiences extend to all members, decentralizing the power from the father and providing a more horizontal structure to this kingdom. Additionally, the parents are not given proper names, just the functional titles of Father and Mother, overemphasizing their parental roles at the cost of their individuality. The children though do have names (Lisa, Luba, and Reo), an indication on Arias’ part that it is through the young, who are more than just a daughter or a son, that the power structure of this kingdom will be trampled and replaced. As a closer analysis of the contextual circumstances surrounding *La escuálida familia* in Argentina will show, a very public, communal response from different social classes to the catastrophic social and economic policies implemented by Menem, and maintained by de la Rúa’s government, was part of the social landscape in which *La escuálida familia* was written and premiered.

Argentina did not experience the extent of the sexual scandals that took place in Ireland, but the process of democratization entailed recognizing the horrors of the 1976-83 military dictatorship. *La escuálida familia* was published and produced in 2001, almost twenty years after Argentina’s return to democracy, but the process of coming to terms with a political past that was gruesome, hidden, violent, and had left tens of thousands “disappeared” is without a doubt part of the legacy inherited by those like Arias coming of age in the 1990s. The military dictatorship operated with secrecy in abducting citizens not complicit with the regime, and it united itself with the conservative Catholic authorities, advocating a patriarchal, traditional family structure quite similar to the one sustained for many decades in Ireland. Once the crimes of the regime were confronted, some citizens had to negotiate their own roles in the horrors which took place,
either by consenting to, participating in, or ignoring the signs of something gone terribly wrong. The role the national community had played in allowing the military regime came under scrutiny, and in that regard both Irish and Argentine playwrights served as voices allowing their audiences to reflect on its past, but also to consider what sort of present was now available, and what future to envision. The victims of sexual abuse in Ireland, which finally managed to come forward, demand legislation, and open a public discussion of the institutional failures that betrayed them, is not dissimilar to the process of those who were victimized by the Junta regime experienced. I am not arguing that the military regime’s brutality is comparable to the sexual scandals in Ireland. Rather, I am proposing that the process-- from the point of view of the victims as well as from the local and national communities-- of acknowledging, confronting, examining, and finally demanding measures that would ensure a community in which institutions would protect its citizens, rather than fail them, was part of the public discussion in the 1990s. And the playwrights examined here participated in that discussion and political context. Menem’s pardons of the military leaders who facilitated the abductions and his desire “to move forward” without taking account of the past brought outraged opposition from many groups. Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo were among the best known of these groups. As Diana Taylor has reflected, “As Menem’s term as president proceeded, it became increasingly apparent that Argentina was embarked on what James Petras and Steve Vieux call electoral neoauthoritarianism. The ‘democracy’ functioned within the same authoritarian institutional framework set up by the military and pursued many of the same political policies” (15). Like Marina Carr’s *On Raftery’s Hill*, Lola Arias’ *La escuálida familia* reduces the community to its bare bones: a single family. Arias states in the interview with Dubatti, “En el Prefacio hay una hipótesis: ‘La historia es siempre familiar’. En toda la tragedia-de la Biblia a Grecia y Shakespeare-la familia funciona
como la metonimia del reino. Si el teatro es pura condensación y economía, en los roles de parentesco se exhiben todos los vericuetos del poder” (54). Following Arias’ reflection Argentina becomes the kingdom under analysis and the members of the family a reduced, minimal representation of civil society in democratic Argentina. The question becomes: What sort of community does Arias evoke in La escuálida familia? How is the power within this kingdom established or demolished? As my earlier summary of the play indicated, the similarities between Arias' and Carr’s plays are indeed striking. However, this is not surprising since, according to Arias, “los tópicos trágicos se repiten siempre” (54). Arias’ setting is even more desolate, brutal, and isolated than Carr’s. In La escuálida familia, no one except the family members appear although a past suitor is mentioned briefly and Reo speaks, however cryptically, about an older woman he once lived with. The world the family inhabits is barren, cold, and meager in food and light, a deserted snowy landscape filled with savage passions and hatred. As analyzed in Graham-Jones’s foreword to the English version of the play: “Despite its mythical roots and isolated location, the play resonates strongly with our current plagues of hunger, war, and globalized consumerism. Indeed, the original Buenos Aires production, directed by the author herself, upset and discomfited its audience members.” (58). At the time the play was written the imminent economic crisis that would collapse de la Rúa’s government was palpable, and the fragile situation of Argentina’s middle class, not to mention those at the lower levels, was visibly present. Rock summarizes these results of Menem’s neoliberal policies:

Promises of a new economy funded by foreign capital clearly proved a mirage. Unemployment soared, and high value export sectors failed to materialize. Privatization, thanks in part to the oligopoly of the domestic conglomerates, has not even brought efficiency—as the Financial Times has noted, Argentina has been one of the most expensive places to do business.[…] If the central planks of the Washington Consensus produced unemployment, regional blight and rising inequality, it was the fixed exchange rate that, with the rising dollar, provided the extra turn of the screw, the extreme severity of Argentina’s millennial crisis. (85)
The conclusions drawn by Rock are post-crisis, but, even as early as 1994 in an entire issue of *The Economist* dedicated to Argentina and its then upcoming elections, the troubling effects of Menem’s policies on the middle and lower classes were raised:

However, the most unsettling social change in Argentina has not taken place amongst the poor, but rather within Argentina’s middle class, still the largest and more prosperous in Latin America. Although their living standards have been falling compared with other countries for decades, Argentina’s middle class had until 1989 a certain bourgeois solidarity. It was a world of jobs for life, of charitable works for schools and churches. Mr. Menem’s reforms have rent all this asunder. Middle managers have been privatised out of their jobs; shop owners pushed aside by hyperstores; college lecturers man news-stands; psychoanalysts drive taxis; respectable housewives sell pension plans. (13)

The collapse of Argentina’s middle class, and the reduction of social services for all, resulted in a community of increased fragmentation and disempowerment. All sectors were affected and theatre makers were no exception. In an interview with Patricia V. Fischer, Arias speaks openly about the inability to earn a living from her theatrical career and the minimal resources she had to produce the play. The artifacts that populate her staging of *La escuálida familia* were retrieved from flea markets since there were no available funds for anything else (257). The play was staged in October 2001 in El Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas, an official institution, and the scant budget it was allocated is an example of the dire circumstances Argentina experienced. In a vivid example of the deterioration of public spaces and institutions, including El Centro Cultural Rojas, Arias recounts to Fischer what took place one of the nights the play was staged:

*A nosotros nos pasó una cosa muy rara en el Rojas: en medio de una función empezó a llover dentro del escenario. […] La gente no se levantó y se fue, simplemente se hizo un círculo alrededor de la gotera y siguió mirando la obra, y los actores siguieron actuando. Los técnicos, cuando terminó la función, me dijeron que debía haber suspendido porque una gota que cae sobre la luz puede prender fuego a un telón cerrado y volverlo una trampa mortal. Es decir, podíamos haber muerto todos. […] Resistir, es quedarse mirando la obra con gotera, o irse y poner faja de clausura? (258)
At this point Argentina was only a couple of months away from the complete collapse of its economy, and all sectors, including theatre, were suffering the consequences of the failure of the new economic policies. Nevertheless, the fact that Arias did not stop the play, even when it was raining inside the theatre, and that the audience did not leave, speaks powerfully to the commitment of both the author and the public to theatre as a form of social and political contestation and questioning.

The world inhabited by this family in Arias’ play is reduced, minimal, a microcosmos of an imploding society. The family barely survives; frozen potatoes and two hares are the only food they can scrape together, far from enough for a family of four, and soon five, with Reo's arrival. Hunger is always present, from the very first lines, in which the mother describes how while butchering a hare she found a fetus inside. In spite of her hunger, the thought of eating the fetus makes her nauseous and she has to throw it away. In the context of 2001 Argentina, where the “cacerolazos” (the middle-class practice of protest consisting of banging pots and pans loudly in opposition to government measures) (Humphrey M. and Valverde E., 183) had achieved unprecedented popularity, the constant reference to empty pots and lack of food in La escuálida familia offers a commentary on the dire circumstances of many Argentines during the crisis. As poignantly analyzed by sociologists Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler, the dismantling of an economy which they labeled as the “import-substitution” model in favor of a neoliberal economic model led to a dramatic impoverishment of the middle class. According to their research, between 1980 and 1990 “the average income of salaried personnel and wage earners dropped 40 percent,” and if in the beginning of the decade the working poor represented only 3.2 percent of the population, by the end of the decade it had climbed to 26.7 percent (87). In that context the constant struggle of the mother to find new survival schemes centered around the
pawning of her daughters to wealthier, older men willing to support them in exchange, one imagines, for sexual favors and free labor, was sadly closer to the everyday reality of many Argentines than it might appear as first glance. From an aesthetic and political point of view, *La escuálida familia*, as critic Silvina Diaz has discussed, functions in the following manner:

A nivel semántico, las obras de […] Arias presentan una visión pesimista, basada en la evidenciacián del deterioro de las relaciones afectivas y solidarias y en el cuestionamiento de la idea tradicional de familia aludiendo, por extensión, a la crisis de valores por la que debió atravesar el país. Los textos de los nuevos dramaturgos tienen como característica común el hecho de ser fuertemente combativos: no hay en ellos nostalgia por el pasado, sino que-por medio del procedimiento del final abierto y de la creación de amplias zonas de indeterminación-exhiben las fisuras del discurso hegemónico (tanto teatral como político) y dejan entrever la idea de un cambio posible. (362)

*La escuálida familia* does not provide audiences with a mode of action to overcome their circumstances, but rather it exposes how fragile communities are and stresses the discourses which serve to sustain them. Arias portrays the complete fragmentation of a social order under the pressures of both hunger and incest but leaves the text open for new imaginings that can lead to change.

Like Marina Carr, Lola Arias examines the roles public and private narratives play in shaping the world inhabited by this family. Unlike Carr’s play, though, in which the neighbors provide a glimpse of the outside world, the members of *La escuálida familia* exist in nearly complete isolation. Reo is the one exception, since he is positioned at the border, between the outside and the inside world, between the past and the future, and only awkwardly placed in the present. Like Ded in Carr’s play, Reo is socially crippled, his speech poor and at times bordering on the absurd, while his memory is also punctuated by half-remembered images and a patchwork of pieces lacking a linear structure. Nevertheless, small glimpses into his previous life slowly surface, providing a tiny vision of a landscape other than the one the family dwells on. As such
the public narratives are mainly composed of the Bible stories the father tells Lisa at night, right before he attempts to have sexual intercourse with her. They function as the canonical text of moral behavior, and while Carr’s play is more ambivalent about Christian theology, leaving undetermined how the Bible might or might not serve to perpetuate oppression, Arias’ play forcefully links the Biblical teachings to a patriarchal structure that serves to perpetuate power inequalities. The private narratives are a mixture of hidden secrets that are slowly revealed and a handful of memories about the past that are mainly concerned with parenting: recriminations to the mother for her lack of feeling towards her children, jealousy and feelings of inadequacy from Luba in regard to her sister Lisa, guilt and remorse towards the abandonment of Reo. All of these reflect on failures of one kind of another: the failure to love one’s children, the failure to protect them from harm, and the failure, ultimately, to raise a family, due both to individual and collective collapse. The cumulative effect of both the public and private narratives is one of despair, even more severe isolation, and moral vacuum. At the end of the day, only “el reino de los idiotas” prevails.

As mentioned, the public narratives in La escuálida familia are centered around the Bible, and in particular two parables are questioned and reconsidered by Arias: Lot’s story and Abraham’s aborted sacrifice of Isaac. Both parables are told to Lisa by her father so they function as a distorted book-before-bedtime scenario. This bedtime, during which parents usually create intimacy, bonding, and nurturing with their children, turns, in the hands of Arias, into perverted fore-play. The stories chosen by the father from the Bible encourage filial submission and perpetuate patriarchal mores of behavior. The recounted Lot parable is not the commonly known one about his wife turning into salt, but a less known story, in which Lot’s daughters, in order to repopulate the earth, rape Lot while he lies unconscious. The following excerpt exhibits
how Lisa attempts to rebel against her father:

LISA: No entiendo, una mujer no puede obligar a un hombre.
PADRE: Lo dice la Biblia, ellas abusaron de él que estaba borracho.
LISA: Pero si no tenía conciencia, no hubiera podido… estar con ellas.
PADRE: Es así, lo dicen las escrituras.
LISA: Mienten. Lot también era un pecador y Dios lo salvó, le mató la mujer, le entregó a las hijas… Dios también es un padre… (20)

Lisa quickly perceives the illogical underpinnings of the parable and the warped gender and intergenerational politics embedded in it. She explicitly accuses God of siding with Lot because they are both fathers. The parable itself has generated extensive scholarship, since even among religious believers it has been difficult to explain how God could sanction incest. Some early theologians cast doubt on Lot’s unconsciousness, as collected by Robert Polhemus:

Jerome (347), using Jewish sources, casts doubt on Lot’s ignorance of what was happening: ‘the Hebrews represent it as practically incredible, because in the nature of things it is not possible for anyone to have intercourse without knowing it.’ He goes on to speculate, ‘When Lot went to bed with his daughters, it was not that this was a freeing from Sodom, but rather the forming of another.’ (Kind, 73)

As Polhemus comments, this line of thought is the origin of an extensive revisionist quest of family life in the twentieth century. In Arias’ reinterpretation of the parable for La escuálida familia, it is significant to note what changes she has made in order to elucidate her focus. The original parable has Lot, along with his two daughters, having just escaped from Sodom and seeking refuge in a cave. God’s wrath at the depravity of the Sodomites leads him to set the city on fire and to exterminate this most unfaithful group. From Lot’s daughters’ point of view, they and their father are the only surviving human beings on earth and, as such, compelled to reproduce in order to perpetuate not just their species but the world of God. In La escuálida familia it is unclear why the world is collapsing, but the lack of food, isolation, and a fading sun suggest a bleak and uncertain future. However, in the scene between Lisa and her father, it is
made clear that Lisa could have married another man, a fat suitor supported by Lisa’s mother but rejected by her father. This act is far from a protective, unselfish paternal gesture, but rather it is an attempt, on the part of the father, to keep Lisa for his own sexual gratification. When their sexual intercourse, which the audience can only hear, since the lights have been turned off, ends or is halted by Lisa (it is unclear in the text whether it is actually consummated or not), the father recounts Lot’s parable to Lisa. This post-coital tale can be interpreted as either the way to re-initiate their sexual encounter, or as a justification for its having taken place to begin with. The father in La escuálida familia is far from being unconscious; in fact, he is so lucid he chooses a parable fitting to his present circumstances to justify his heinous act. From a feminist point of view the act committed by Lot’s daughters, in spite of the incest, is a powerful moment of agency in women’s history, since they take paternal power into their own hands. In Arias’ version though, Lisa’s agency lies in her ability to deconstruct the father’s attempt to manipulate the Bible for his own purposes. By allowing both the father and Lisa to remain conscious and capable of having an argument, Arias seeks to highlight how foundational myths, in this case the Bible, must be rethought to achieve liberation from patriarchal oppression.

The second parable Arias explores is when Abraham (Lot’s brother) takes Isaac to the mountain to be sacrificed, following God’s command. God tests Abraham’s faith, by requesting that he execute his most beloved son, but just before Abraham is about to kill Isaac, God intervenes to save him. Once again the father uses this parable to initiate sexual intercourse with Lisa, except that Lisa is not in her bed, and Reo has occupied her space. Once the father realizes his mistake, he becomes angry, accusing Reo of attempting to seduce both of his daughters and creating distress in his family. When the father calms down he proceeds to share his collection of liquors with his son Reo and gets him drunk, with the intention of killing him. A fight between
Reo and the father ensues, but Luba breaks them apart by using a rifle. The parable chosen by the father induces filial submission, since Isaac complies with Abraham, even after Isaac learns that he is going to become the sacrificial lamb. In Arias’ variation, however, the father must get Reo drunk in order to overcome him, and even then he fails. Luba, arguably the future God/dess of this kingdom (since she will be the creator of new life through her relationship with Reo) is the hand that intervenes, at least this time, to prevent Reo from killing their father. Arias’ scene reinscribes the original parable from the Bible on new ground, giving the children, not the fathers (God or Abraham), the power to reconceive the future of the community.

The return of Reo to the family must also be analyzed within Argentina’s history. Reo was abandoned at birth by his mother and thrown into a lake by his father. He was mysteriously rescued by an older woman, who raised him and possibly sexually abused him. It is unclear in the play how Reo’s relationship with this unknown woman was severed. Under the military dictatorship 30,000 thousand people disappeared and among them were children born to mothers who had been labeled terrorists. The children were born in jail, taken away from the birth mothers (who were executed shortly after giving birth), and placed with families complicit with the regime. It is estimated that 500 children were abducted in this manner and given a new identity (Lessa, 8). The circumstances of Reo’s abandonment and reappearance in Arias’ play haunt the repressive, patriarchal kingdom of the father and, in time, will lead to its destruction, giving rise to a new order. When Reo is found by Lisa and Luba, he is nearly frozen and speechless. That Reo is frozen can be interpreted as the impossibility of Argentine society to move forward into the future until a full account of the past has been achieved. The present remains “frozen,” held hostage, by a past that has been eluded. Menem’s pardons effectively denied the victims the opportunity to hold accountable the military responsible for the
disappearances and the crimes committed under the military dictatorship. Reo becomes the material body representing all “the disappeared” that haunt the play. He has returned from the lake where he was thrown to reclaim his space in a society that erased him. Under the military dictatorship many were disposed of by being thrown into the River Plate from planes, drawing a further link between Reo and the many, still missing, bodies. In 1994 a group called HIJOS was created to put the children of the disappeared in contact with each other. Initially, the group counted 350 members; by 1996, 600 children had joined, organizing public demonstrations against the pardons and seeking to reunite the abducted children with their biological relatives. The organization, still active, continues to advocate for a re-writing of both the collective and individual history of the country that acknowledges the abuses and crimes committed under the military regime (HIJOS). The return of Reo, el “huérfano,” initiates the possibility of a new history, both private and personal, that reconsiders and acknowledges past abuses. Against all odds, Reo’s survival and return, marks a fresh beginning for the kingdom. The Mother’s last words, in her suicide letter, state that she does not regret attempting to drown Reo. This solidifies the sense that, in spite of the recent deaths (the Mother, the Father, and Lisa), the future is the place of hope and new birthings (Arias, 44).

Arias exposes the narratives, in this case Biblical narratives, which allow for a patriarchal societal structure that ensures the oppression of women and the eventual collapse of the community onto itself. In the context of Argentine politics, and as incisively analyzed by Taylor, the military regime operated in similar terms, by allocating to itself the role of the father, in charge of the patria. As Taylor explains: “According to this discourse (or incest narrative), the military man (who embodies the state) engenders and copulates with the feminine Patria, given birth to civilization. In this scenario the military male embodies masculine subjectivity while the
feminine is reduced to the material territory, the body to be penetrated and defended” (78). The body politic became the feminized, oppressed and silent recipient of the discourse and actions of the Junta government. Since Menem’s government, as pointed out earlier, behaved as a “neoauthoritarian democracy” (Taylor, 15), attempting to move into the future without considering the past, the voice of Lisa, raised against her father, is a political act of subversion. In the Argentine context it signals an opening towards an alternative structuring of power, one in which women and children can regain autonomy and voice. Although the economic crisis affected all sectors, women and children encountered particular challenges directly linked to the remaining patriarchal structuring of society even under the democracy.

Under Argentina’s economic crisis women and children became the most disenfranchised by the neoliberal social and economic policies in place. Women experienced the double burden of having to work outside the home, since one salary was not enough, and inside their homes, since traditional structures of women as mothers and home makers remained in place. As Sutton states, “The economic troubles that low wages and unemployment brought to families, combined with the national government withdrawal from responsibilities in health, education, and other services, was often translated into heavier work loads for women” (Bodies in Crisis 46). In La escuálida familia this double burden is expressed openly. The mother is responsible for cooking the potatoes that provide the family’s sustenance, while the daughters are the hunters. In contrast, the father does not engage in any activity that provides any food or help to his family, even though he is the head of the household and decides important matters, like who his daughters should marry or not. While in the past the family owned a business trading pelts, their present situation has become so dire (like that of many Argentines) that the father appears not to hold any employment. However, he is not responsible for bringing or preparing food since traditionally
that labor, invisible and unpaid, falls under what is considered a woman’s responsibility. Sutton indicates that, like Argentina, “in a society plagued by gender inequities—similar to others with respect to the assumption that women are not supposed to experience appetites (Bordo 1993a)—the economic crisis reinforced cultural expectations that women can or should go without adequate nutrition but still focused on sustaining their families’ nourishment” (53). In the play this notion is made clear by the father’s anger towards the mother regarding their welfare. When she complains that their businesses have disappeared and little is left he yells at her, “No quiero escucharte más. Tenés una boca enorme para tragar y hablar sin sentido” (24). The father wants to silence both her hunger and her anger while he does little to help with either. At this point he has returned home, visibly drunk, and the mother is in the process of preparing the food. The potatoes were being thrown away from a truck and the mother took them. In the absence of any income the mother has resorted to alternative practices that can, if not ensure, at least help with the feeding of the family. In Argentina during the crisis the number of people searching for food in garbage containers dramatically increased and became a daily appearance (Bodies in Crisis, Sutton 60). In that context the audience witnessing the play could not easily disregard food deprivation as an alien occurrence removed from their daily affairs, and Arias’ play acquired particular resonance with the Buenos Aires audience, as Graham-Jones noted (58). In contrast with On Raftery’s Hill, in which Red is the hunter, Lisa and Luba embody a traditionally male role: hunting. Arias’ decision to give the daughters agency regarding their own survival, in contrast with Carr’s play, demonstrates the possibility of change in gender and intergenerational roles and deconstructs patriarchy even further.

Given, however, that at the end of the play Lisa will be accidentally killed by Luba and that Luba and Reo will engage in an incestuous relationship, what has changed? What does the
future hold for this community? Arias does not provide the audience with an answer. In accordance with the play’s postmodern aesthetics, how the future will be made is left indeterminate and unresolved. Reflecting on the alternative discourses possible to the patriarchal within La escuálida familia, David William Foster identifies Reo as the oppositional force. According to Foster:

Tal vez el espectador tenga que quedar meditando respecto a que es lo que el patriarcado expulsa, de que engranajes tiene que prescindir para que funcione su “máquina de matar”, que principios del ser, del pensar y el hacer tienen que quedar excluidos para que promueva el propio programa social: ya sabemos cuáles son las escualidades del patriarcado, ahora hay que configurar las contrapuestas lingüísticas y discursivas. Es decir, abandonemos el proyecto de darle nosotros el lenguaje al reo, y metámonos a aprender el suyo. (“El lenguaje patriarcal, el lenguaje de los idiotas: La escuálida familia de Lola Arias.” 11)

Foster’s reflection highlights the role Reo plays as the outsider/insider dismantling the existing structure. He replaces the father, in his role as procreator of the future generation and as carrier of an alternative language/discourse. As noted by Graham-Jones in her translation of the play, Reo in Spanish means culprit, accused, fugitive, and bum (Graham-Jones, 113). However, she also proposes that Reo is a variation of Remus, as in the myth of Romulus and Remus, since Luba claims that her name means she-wolf (Ibid, 113). Following this line of thought, Lisa’s death would restore the mythical order, since Reo and Luba, the original twins, are reunited in the end. In his vague remembrances Reo also mentions having been raised by an older woman who had wolves, further contributing to the notion that Reo might indeed refer to Remus. Reo’s cryptic speech, as noted by Foster, is the voice of a reborn generation that seeks to teach a fallen patriarchy how to give birth to a new order. In Carr’s play, Ded, who also functions as the idiot, is the only member capable of voicing the truth about the Rafterys. However, his voice is brutally silenced, and at the end Red’s patriarchal rule has been strengthened, rather than weakened, by the addition of Sorrel to the list of his victims.
It is apparent from this analysis that both Carr and Arias are invested in deconstructing the power of narratives to shape communities and to establish and maintain social orders which are repressive and damaging to its members. However, at the end of both plays more questions have been raised than answered, and the future might appear even bleaker than the past. Nevertheless, if, by the time the curtain falls, the audience finds itself bewildered, as those attending Carr’s play in Washington did, the end is just the beginning of the process of reimagining new alternatives. A similarly hopeful view could be elicited from Arias’ play, as a place for a new departures in spite of its bleakness. As Javier Daulte has stated regarding the role of the artist in contemporary Argentina, “El mundo, y en particular Argentina, amenaza con desaparecer pronto. Las crisis se suceden sin cesar, los problemas son abrumadores. Aun así, cualquier presentación del horror cotidiano en el que nos encontramos sumergidos no deja de ser una afirmación. Y toda afirmación tiene un aspecto optimista” (“Producción artística y crisis” 47, my emphasis). In doing so, the notion of a poetics of failure in performance, as proposed by Sarah Bailes, seems fitting to the both Arias’ and Carr’s projects, even if their techniques are radically different. I am particularly interested in Bailes’ claim that failure can function as a place from which to generate new meanings and visions. According to her analysis:

Failure works. Which is to say that although ostensibly it signals the breakdown of an aspiration or an agreed demand, breakdown indexes an alternative route or way of doing or making. In its status of ‘wrongdoing,’ a failed objective establishes an aperture, an opening onto several (and often many) other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or ‘correct outcome’. Whilst an intended outcome imagines only one result, the ways in which it might not achieve that outcome are indeterminate. […] In this sense, strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces, and does so in a roguish manner. (3)

Applying Bailes’ theory to La escualida familia and On Raftery's Hill, the unresolved, bleak endings can be interpreted as new points of departure for alternative discourses,
communities, and social orders. Carr’s and Arias’ deconstruction of tragedy and patriarchal master narratives illuminates to their audiences how the alienation, impoverishment, both spiritual and economical, of many in both countries can be reevaluated. In a very similar gesture to the potentially liberating quality of failure, Sutton, analyzing the Argentine crisis reflects that, “this was also a time in which inequality was rendered more visible; when social relations that might have seemed opaque or hard to grasp became more exposed, potentially intelligible, and susceptible to social change efforts. Crises can create openings, cracks through which we can see the structures of society more clearly” (3, my emphasis). In this hopeful light, On Raftery’s Hill and La escuálida familia prompt their audiences to see what is hidden and to act upon the new acquired knowledge, in spite of the darkness and suffering the plays portray. “El reino de los idiotas” becomes a landscape of renewal and openings, the aperture to a different model in which morality can be once again be reclaimed and liberated from its history/ies. As Arias states, “He aquí la mayor ironía: el reino de los idiotas es la única utopía posible, el lugar vacante para la libertad” (55).

The preceding plays analyzed in this study were heavily grounded in the history, both economic and political, of their respective countries. By contrast, the featured pair in this chapter, *Martha Stutz* and *The Pillowman*, traverse a less tangible terrain, traveling well into postmodern aesthetics. Even when historically inspired, as is the case with *Martha Stutz*, they are not primarily concerned with history *qua* history, that is, history that can be discovered and revealed, but rather with the idea that history is always constructed. Hayden White succinctly states the postmodern stance towards history and to factual, “objective” knowledge:

> If postmodernist notions of history are informed by a critique of the ideology of objectivism, this does not necessarily mean that they are opposed to the truth and committed to lie, delusion, fantasy or fiction. It means rather that postmodernism recognizes that “reality” is always as much constructed in discourse as it is discovered in the historical record. Which means postmodernist “objectivity” is aware of its own constructed nature and makes this work of construction the subject of its discourse. (312)

Deeply embedded in postmodern aesthetics, both plays deconstruct “factual” discourses by inserting fictional tales (*Alice in Wonderland*, *The Pied Piper*) into the police procedurals that are the apparent focus of *Martha Stutz* and *The Pillowman*. In structure, both plays are highly self-reflexive and meta-theatrical; and in subject, too, both plays are subversive—critical of hierarchical forms of power and downright mocking of the tendency of such powers to claim a monopoly on truth. Javier Daulte and Martin McDonagh defy authority by resisting not only the concept of the party line, but the genres and discourse which seek to convey so-called “fact.” Both playwrights adamantly reject as a possibility the acquisition of any permanent notion of truth, or authenticity. For each of them, revolution is sought not through a politically explicit
theatre but rather through the disarticulation of genres of fact: documentary theatre in the case of Daulte, and police drama in the case of McDonagh.

According to Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, the genealogy of documentaries has its roots in the Enlightenment and is thereby bound up with a positivistic view of the world. As they summarize:

Documentary is a product of the Enlightenment in which discourses of Science were married with liberal-humanist view of the world and were propelled by a desire for social change and progress. Science soon replaced religion as the new paradigm and developed a variety of scientific methods and procedures to chart, map, and ultimately uncover the truth of the social world. (9)

Roscoe and Hight emphasize how faith, both in fact and science, becomes inextricably linked to the photographic image—tangible proof of an external reality that is beyond subjectivity. Roscoe and Hight’s interpretation of the relationship between factual discourse and the rise of documentary addresses film, not theatre. The many areas of overlap between the two media—documentary film and drama—make it possible to extend their interpretation to include theatre. As Peter Weiss, both a practitioner and a theorist of documentary theatre, puts it:

Documentary Theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements of well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films and other contemporary documents are the basis of the performance. Documentary Theatre refrains from all invention; it takes authentic material and puts it on stage, unaltered in content, edited in form. (41)

Weiss’ definition highlights a key feature of documentary drama: its reliance on archival records to establish its claim of authenticity. While acknowledging that the content will be edited, the emphasis on lack of invention binds the work to the realm of non-fiction, rather than fiction, and presupposes that reality can in fact be accessed, charted, and explained. The Pillowman and Martha Stutz present their audiences with hybrid genres that seek to refute the possibility of
attaining such authenticity. In the process of so doing, both plays reclaim the mythical, and
fiction, as the place from which meaningful truths might best be accessed.

According to Stephen Bottoms, documentary theatre is on the rise, and has come to
replace, at least in British theatre, the in-yer-face theatre of, among others, Sarah Kane and Mark
Ravenhill. Since Martin McDonagh, although of Irish descent, has been included in that
movement, his play The Pillowman can be viewed as a transition between the new brutalist
tendencies of the 1990s and the claimed resurgence of documentary theatre in the 2000s—not just in England, but in stages across Latin America and the United States. McDonagh’s play is
not a documentary, and yet it takes aim at another fact-checking, truth-invested genre: the police
drama. The Pillowman parodies the police genre and becomes the equivalent of what
mockumentaries, like Christopher Guest’s Best in Show (2000), do for documentary film.

While recent years have seen an explosion of mockumentaries in film, the same cannot
be said for theatre. Martha Stutz, by Javier Daulte, is one of the exceptions. In it, under the guise
of a documentary play, a mockumentary filled with humor and nonsensical scenes unfolds.
Given that mockumentaries have been limited, almost exclusively, to film, the following
definition, by Roscoe and Hight, although not intended for theatre, can be applied to the work of
both McDonagh and Daulte: “Mock-documentaries are fictional texts which in some form ‘look’
like documentaries. These texts appropriate certain documentary modes, as well as the full range
of documentary codes and conventions” (49). To what purpose? According to Roscoe and Hight,
“the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions is used not so much to anchor the
argument in the real world or to bolster claims to truth, but rather to offer critical commentary”
(50). If we contrast this purpose of the mockumentary with the original definition by Peter Weiss
of documentary theatre itself, we can begin to see how Daulte and McDonagh seek to
deconstruct the reporting genres in order to critique and question factual discourse itself.

This chapter will argue that both *Martha Stutz* and *The Pillowman* seek to deconstruct, critique, and reconsider notions of truth and authenticity, both historical and personal. By drawing parallels between fiction and non-fiction, Daulte and McDonagh reject any possibility of attaining certainty and, in doing so, encourage audiences to re-examine political, historical, and personal biographies in the light of contesting narratives. Daulte and McDonagh uncover in their respective plays the ways in which media and scientific knowledge are fraught with biased and deceptive methods, leading to questionable truths and doubtful results. *The Pillowman* and *Martha Stutz* are both purposefully hybrid in nature; and both plays seek to reconsider genre distinctions and to use postmodern aesthetics to illuminate the process of uncovering truth. In each we see how horizontal socio-historical narratives can be created to traverse the vertical, fact-driven accounts of reality.

Both plays concern the investigation of a brutal crime. Daulte takes as his starting point a real historical event dating from 1938 in the Argentine province of Córdoba. Marta Stutz, a nine year-old girl, disappeared and was never seen again. The play parodies the documentary theatre in the style of Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* by deconstructing the different characters, bringing in overt themes, and even scenes, from *Alice in Wonderland*, and having “doubles” which disintegrate any possibility of certainty or resolution. In a similar vein, *The Pillowman*, although fictional, parodies the police drama, engaging with *The Trial* by Kafka and the Brothers Grimm tales. The play also incorporates a variation of the short story by E.T.A. Hoffman, *The

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18The name of the disappeared girl was Marta Ofelia Stutz. However, in the play, Daulte includes a silent h, to spell her name. The relevance of this letter will be explored later in the chapter. I will spell her name without the h when describing the historical Marta, and with the h when describing the fictional character in Daulte’s play.
Sandman, although the version in The Pillowman is far more sinister. Katurian, the main protagonist, is a writer of children’s stories living in what appears to be a totalitarian state. When children start being murdered in the very fashion his stories narrate, Katurian—along with his mentally handicapped brother—are brought in for questioning. The play stages the unfolding of that investigation, although, as it soon becomes clear, justice is not the main concern for either of the policemen conducting the proceedings.

Martha Stutz also follows the investigation of the disappearance of the “real” Marta Stutz, making use of historical records (police reports and contemporaneous newspaper articles), but it soon becomes evident that Daulte has no interest in documenting any facts. The proceedings are interrupted by external theatrical elements that call attention to the nature of the play as “spectacle.” Some of the characters get confused at times and forget their scripts, and external unrealistic elements, like Alice in Wonderland’s rabbit, are incorporated. All of these factors contribute to the perception of the play as artifice, and by extension reflect on the fictional aspect of any historical narrative. Both plays engage with previous literary works as departures for newer readings and rewritings through which to examine the impossibility of achieving stable knowledge. Each play begins with crime, but in each the pain of those crimes is undermined. The brutal dark humor of The Pillowman and the use of parody in Martha Stutz overtake the crime drama itself. In each play, the pain, emotional distress, and resolution we expect in a whodunit give way instead to ridicule, distancing, and uncertainty.

Within the landscape of Argentine theatre of the 1990s, critic Osvaldo Pelletieri has identified the work of Daulte as belonging to “el teatro de la desintegración.” This theatre is characterized by “… un pesimismo intenso, ‘muestran la desintegración textual y social, la incomunicación familiar, la violencia gratuita, la ausencia de amor en la convivencia...’
posmoderna” (“La producción dramática de Javier Daulte”15). Theatre practitioners under this rubric also exhibit, as identified by Pelletieri, six common aesthetic and theoretical characteristics. Among these characteristics, and evident in Martha Stutz, were firstly, an emphasis that a play is a theatrical event, or “simulacro”; and secondly, a thematic focus on the deconstruction of truth. Additionally, the use of intertextuality with other genres marks Martha Stutz as firmly grounded within the postmodern aesthetics described by Pelletieri (15).19

The play Martha Stutz was created by Daulte as part of the informal collective of playwrights called El CarajaJi. This theatre group was originally organized by the Teatro San Martín.20 According to a historical account about the group compiled by Celia Dosio, the Teatro San Martín, in an attempt to elicit new plays for its theatre for and from younger generations, selected a group of eight dramatists (Carmen Arrieta, Alejandro Tantanian, Rafael Spregelburd, Alejandro Robino, Javier Daulte, Alejandro Zingman, Jorge Leyes, and Ignacio Polo) and asked them to write a play each. The group was to meet once a week under the guidance of older playwrights Roberto Cossa and Bernardo Carey, and, after a period of six months, a draft of the play in progress was to be submitted to Cossa and Carey. However, after only two months, the organizers requested to see what had been written thus far and, after reviewing it, decided to dismantle the group.

According to Dosio, from the very beginning there was a generational divide between the

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19Pelletieri’s additional characteristics are: a deconstruction in the dramatic texts of language and reason, and as such, certitude; postmodern plays open in their exploration of questions that remained unanswered; and the recycling of old genres (melodramas, vaudevill) approached from a new vantage point (15).

20The Teatro San Martín is an important municipally supported theatre in Buenos Aires and the largest theatre complex in Argentina. It was inaugurated in 1960 and underwent substantial renovations in 2011. It holds three performing spaces, and in its entirety occupies 320,000 square feet in 13 floors.
organizers and the group of recruited younger artists. There had been multiple conflicts. While the eight members themselves managed to work together quite productively, their collaboration with the organizers proved to be difficult and ultimately unsustainable. However, the eight members decided to continue working together, officially named themselves as a group, and after a year of collaboration, produced a play each. The plays were published by the Centro Cultural Rojas.21 *Martha Stutz*, by Javier Daulte, is the result of this communal collaboration with Caraji-ji (Dosio, 11-41).

These contextual dynamics, the backstory as it were to the creation of *Martha Stutz*, greatly shaped not just the play itself, but indeed Daulte’s very conceptualization of the role of theatre in society. In particular, the generation gap between the organizers under the Teatro San Martín and the younger playwrights, along with its tensions and subsequent re-grouping, marks a move toward an horizontal structuring of the creative process—and toward a complete abandonment of the directives given by the heretofore consecrated authority figures of Cossa and Carey. The newly configured group, once freed from the San Martín, evolved into a very productive enterprise, one which rejected the very notion that knowledge and guidance must follow a top-down structure. The same could be said both of *Martha Stutz* and Daulte’s theoretical reflections on the role of theatre.

Given that Daulte is both a practitioner and a theorist of theatre, his perceptions on the purpose and function of theatre are also relevant when evaluating *Martha Stutz*. Daulte reflects that the “important” theatre, a theatre motivated by truth-seeking and “despertador de

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21El Centro Cultural "Rector Ricardo Rojas", known as El Rojas, was inaugurated in 1984 and is associated with the UBA (the public University of Buenos Aires). It hosts performances, classes, exhibits, and public talks, has a publishing house, and in its origins functioned as a place for counter culture movements.
conciencias” has disappeared, mostly. He also argues that, in the past, a theatre that neglected a serious agenda was considered frivolous. However, and here lies what I consider his most significant claim, “Lo importante en el teatro se ha desdibujado y antes que lamentar tal cosa, habría que festejarla. La determinación a priori de lo importante conlleva naturalmente una actitud didáctica, verticalista y, como decía más arriba, dictatorial” (“Juego y compromiso”13). This statement is crucial to understanding how Martha Stutz uses postmodern aesthetics and intertextuality to dismember positivist beliefs, factual knowledge, and indeed any notion of truth at all.

Daulte reveals his subversive intentions when he claims that the role of theatre is not to pretend to teach, or impart any knowledge to the audiences, since in so doing the author becomes a dictator in possession of the truth. Martha Stutz’s form and structure highlight how any attempt to construct a vertical sense of knowledge is a fallacy, and how by opening, rather than closing, possible scenarios of Marta’s disappearance, audiences can arrive at new conclusions, not determined, a priori, by a godlike author in possession of the truth. In Daulte’s world there is not one truth, but multiple truths, and it is up to the public to determine and create, through the theatrical experience, what those truths might be.

The apparent purpose of the play Martha Stutz is the reconstruction of the events leading to the 1938 disappearance of Marta Stutz, a nine year-old girl living in the province of Córdoba. The play is set up with a courtroom ambience. At rise, a Conductor faces the audience from a desk piled with folders of reports on the crime. With his two helpers, he relates the

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22 In this essay Daulte categorizes Teatro Abierto, and its mission, as the paradigm of a politically invested theatre in contrast with his own reflections on the purpose of theatre.
details of Marta’s disappearance. The Conductor is in charge of detailing the investigation for
the audience, and of directing the other characters to reenact the events pertaining to the case.
The Conductor is aided by two assistants, Ayudante 1 and Ayudante 2, who remain nameless
and mostly compliant with the directions given by the Conductor. The rest of the characters are:
González, a journalist involved, at the time, with the investigation; Suárez Zabala, the prime
suspect, who is split into Suárez Zabala 1 and 2; his wife, Pascuita, who provided him with an
alibi for the crime; and two suspected accomplices, Risler, a local prostitute presumed to be
involved in the abduction of Marta, and Carmen, a midwife accused of providing services to the
dying child. Lastly, Marta Stutz is embodied by a character named Mujer/Niña.

In spite of the courtroom atmosphere, one of the first sentences in the play already
signals the futility of its representation: “La desaparición de la menor dio lugar a uno de los
mas sensacionales procesos que hubo en la Argentina. (Pausa) Por supuesto, el caso nunca
fue dilucidado” (73). Given this premise, it is obvious that the following play will not be able
to resolve the particular mystery of Marta’s disappearance either, but the audience might still
expect, following the format of documentary theatre, some form of clarity or understanding
about the past. The play, at the very least, can pose an additional narrative on the
disappearance of Marta, an illumination of the public record, and, perhaps even open new
lines of inquiry into the crime. As a play based on historical events, Martha Stutz can also be
considered a history play. According to Amalia Gladhart, “In plays in which historical
material is reenacted, the performance becomes an acted-out narration for the audience, while
‘history itself,’ the recorded events that form the basis of the presentation, is revealed or
constructed as a series of provisional, partial, and highly problematic live representations
which later become ‘fact’” (29). Is Martha Stutz a documentary play? A history play? Both?
Caught in a deliberate liminal genre space, *Martha Stutz* is a mock-documentary drama, which, as suggested by Roscoe and Hight, uses the conventions of documentary, partially, to attack what they have labeled the factual discourse (49). As Gladhart also suggests, history plays illuminate, through their representation, a particular narrative of the past events, one more text and performance to be added to the record. Gladhart’s definition underscores how a history play, rather than contributing to a factual discourse, can serve to undermine such notion, by highlighting the “partial” and “provisional” aspects of any re-telling/re-enacting of past events.

The following analysis will unveil how Daulte undermines factual discourse by:

1. Questioning the integrity of the investigation into Marta Stutz’s disappearance, an investigation apparently fraught with irregularities and coercive techniques by the police. Any knowledge obtained by force is deemed suspect;

2. Critiquing the media as a powerful and utterly biased tool used to shape narratives, under a guise of authenticity and objectivity;

3. Disarticulating those theatre genres—police drama, documentary, and history play—that claim there is a single truth that can be established via their representation; and

4. Using intertextuality, particularly with *Alice in Wonderland*, to create alternate explanations for the disappearance of Marta Stutz.

By incorporating all of the above strands into *Martha Stutz*, Daulte forcefully undermines any possibility of attaining the truth and in the process creates a theatre that prods the hybrid, liminal, and anti-dogmatic.

In order to conduct an investigation into a crime, that crime must first have been committed. As obvious as this maxim might seem, it is the initial crucial difficulty faced by any investigator of the disappearance of Marta Stutz—a body was never found. As González tells the
Conductor, the investigation is a path into a vacuum, nothingness, since there was no “cuerpo del delito.” From the very beginning of the play, the audience is faced with three contesting forces trying to assert control of the narrative of Marta’s disappearance. The first narrative is delivered via the Conductor and his acolytes who are in charge, apparently, of presenting the audience with the facts of the case. The second is presented by González, who embodies the media, a force of interference both with the original investigation and with the play’s own presentation of its facts. As it will be shown, again and again, González positions himself as the only voice that can claim real knowledge into Marta Stutz’s disappearance, in opposition to the corrupted and fraudulent facts obtained by the police through coercion and violence. Nevertheless, there is a third force vying for control of the narrative, and it subverts both tales of the Conductor and González. This force is comprised of fictive projections that offer alternative versions of what might have happened to Marta. These alternative imaginings start creeping into the representation, first slowly, but ultimately forcefully, and finally gaining control of the representation.

The confluence between scientific discourse and police work invests the last with a halo of unbiased, rational, and truth-establishing aura. In fact, much criminal investigation falls in the realm the sciences and relies heavily on factual discourses to convey its findings. According to Richard V. Ericson and Clifford D. Shearing, “As has been well documented and argued regarding other professions—for example medicine, and specially its specialism of psychiatry the construction of police as mere technical and instrumental agents of legal and scientific rationality fosters the ignoring of, and even ignorance about, the moral and political nature of their activities” (134). This disregard for the moral or political is, as Ericson and Shearing reflect, made possible by the very nature of police work and by the association between scientific discourse and the law.
From the start, Daulte mocks police methodologies and results. The play commences with establishing “los hechos” of the case. After detailing the time and date of Marta’s disappearance, the first facts established by the Ayudantes are a description of Marta’s garments the last time she was seen. Pointing to a silent character, labeled the Mujer/Niña, the Ayudantes proceed to point out what Marta was wearing. The scene becomes both silly and uncomfortable. On one hand, the Ayudantes demonstrate the obvious, since the Mujer/Niña is in fact dressed exactly as the Ayudantes describe. On the other hand, when the Conductor proceeds with the description of Marta’s underwear, both Ayudantes hesitate to comply by showing the audience the Mujer/Niña’s panties. All along the Mujer/Niña remains quiet and docile as the Ayudantes proceed with their findings. The underwear, as described in the play, is white with a pink flower that matches Marta’s hair ornament. The humiliating display on the Mujer/Niña of the clothing the missing girl was wearing becomes a commentary, on the way in which bodies become objects in service to science. A silent and compliant body receiving the discourse of scientific police work via the Ayudantes, Marta Stutz falls apart into fragments, pieces of clothing that ignore her actual presence. The white underwear with the pink flower becomes suspect, and the public must consider how apparent facts are instrumental in creating narratives that are far from objective and unbiased.

By this point in the play, the audience is starting to surmise that the proof offered by the Conductor is either inaccurate or deliberately fake. When one of the Ayudantes shows the audience the school report card from Marta, in which the last trimester is incomplete, it has

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23 In fact, according to leading daily newspaper La Nación’s brief summary of the facts published in 2006, Marta was not wearing a white outfit, but rather dark navy blue. She did have a white ornament on her hair, but no mention of matching underwear is disclosed in the article. Daulte’s narrative tampers with the facts in order to parody and highlight how there isn’t a single truth that can be established.
become obvious to the public that the piece of paper being used as evidence is a stage prop. Daulte creates a narrative that elides some facts of the case, invents others, and juxtaposes reality and fiction. Daulte changes Marta’s outfit to white, which, as will be discussed later, allows him to evoke *Alice in Wonderland*. But even more significantly, Daulte silences in his play the brutal abuse of one of the suspects of the crime. According to journalist Alvaro Abos, a neighbor, Vidoni, was accused of being complicit in the crime and of disposing of Marta’s body in one of the industrial ovens in his property. Ashes recovered from the oven were deemed to be Marta’s, and Vidoni was beaten severely by the police. By the time his body was transferred to the nearest hospital not much could be done, and Vidoni died shortly after his arrival. The ashes were later determined to have belonged to an adult, not a child (Abos, 2006).

The case of Marta Stutz is well known in Argentina, and it has haunted the national imagination for decades.\(^{24}\) Therefore, Daulte’s decision not to include Vidoni’s death in the play underscores his authorial voice. Why omit it? To what purpose? In his own words, the artist should not attempt to represent victims, *any* victims, since in that case theatre runs the risk of becoming “*la ilustración voluntarista de nuestras frustraciones como hombres, como generación, como país, como género humano. Algo parecido a un catálogo del resentimiento romántico. El teatro, y el arte, se vuelven solemne e ideológicamente conformistas.*” In order to resist becoming compliant, Daulte proposes that: “*el teatro debe proponerse innecesario*” (emphasis in the original “Contra el teatro de tesis” 17). Daulte’s claim to refuse to represent any victims is explicitly made evident in *Martha Stutz*, as the following dialogue between the Conductor and

\(^{24}\)The latest article on Marta Stutz was published on February, 2014, upon the eightieth anniversary of her disappearance in Diarioveloz.com (“Marta Ofelia, una búsqueda de ochenta años”), underscoring her haunting presence in the Argentine imaginary.
González indicates:

GONZÁLEZ: Antonio estaba desesperado. ¿Sabe lo que significa ser noticia de todos los diarios durante meses? ¿Que se hagan correr los rumores más horribles sobre usted y los suyos? ¿Que para tachar a alguno de depravado se le diga “Sos un Suárez Zabala”? ¿Quién puede vivir con eso?


GONZÁLEZ: Porque es la víctima.

CONDUCTOR: ¡No! ¡Martha Stutz es la víctima!

GONZÁLEZ: ¿Y Suárez no?

CONDUCTOR: Está bien. Como usted quiera. Sigo su razonamiento: si un Suárez Zabala ocupa el lugar de la víctima, faltaría entonces ver quién está dispuesto a ponerse en el lugar del criminal. (94)

At this point in the play, Suárez Zabala has been established as the most likely suspect in Marta’s disappearance. He has been implicated by a local prostitute, Risler, who claims that Zabala favored young girls as his preferred sexual partners, and by his own wife, Pascuita, who although giving him an alibi makes it evident that she believes him to be guilty. Suárez Zabala is also undone by Suárez Zabala himself, since Daulte splits the character into two, Suárez Zabala 1 and 2. Suárez Zabala 1 claims his innocence and appeals to our pity, while Suárez Zabala 2 seems guilty. He attempts to tell Pascuita what he has done, but she prevents him, in order to safeguard herself and by extension his innocence. In this context, the decision of the Conductor, in charge of creating and transmitting the facts of the case to the audience, to acquiesce to González and let Zabala supplant Marta as the real victim in the case, further marks the play as spectacle. By agreeing to supplant one victim with another, following the logic proposed by González, being a victim becomes both irrelevant and random. A victim as sympathetic as Marta Stutz, a young innocent girl, becomes a parody and a subversive voice in Daulte’s hands. To explore how and why requires further elaboration on the role of parody as a form of critique of public discourse.

As we have seen, Daulte mocks the discovery of fact, and its re/presentations in scientific discourse and in the media. Then, too, Daulte rejects a theory of theatre that takes itself too
seriously, a theatre which is invested in establishing, or attempting to know, any sort of truth.

However, to negate and distance oneself from a theatre advocating for any cause cannot be equated to a rejection of the value of theatre as a place from within which to offer critique. I will argue that, in fact, Daulte’s use of parody in the play contributes to an expansion and reconsideration of the pitfalls of public discourse, through a cacophony of voices that are, through his authorial voice, undone one after the other by contradictory and suspect testimonies.

In his elaboration of the role of parody and public discourse, Robert Hariman expands on Bakhtin’s theory of polyglosia to argue that:

[...], genres such as parody play a particular crucial role in keeping democratic speech a multiplicity of discourses. Since the city can only speak through a plethora of voices, all are necessary; since no one can speak the voice of the city, all are fallible. Thus, everyone is fair game for the comic’s mimicry. Like the novel, public culture is defined not by the creation of new, distinctively modern discourse of representation, but rather by the historical struggles that Bakhtin describes as the constant tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, that is, those forces that would “unify and centralize the verbal ideological world,” and those, such as parody, that would disrupt the process. (260)

Indeed, everyone is fair game in Martha Stutz. One after another, all the characters are derided and mimicked, and the facets of discourse they embody too are pilloried. The police procedural, with its reliance on scientific discourse, is discredited both by the facts Daulte chooses to silence (Vidoni’s death) and those he deliberately invents (a fake report card, the wrong outfit), but his parody of the police investigation does not stop there. The brutal treatment Vidoni received at the hands of the police might not be present in Daulte’s play, but the abuse suffered by the main suspect, Zabala, is well represented.

The historical Zabala became the target of public outrage and the center of the investigation into Marta’s disappearance and was accused, sentenced, and nearly mobbed to death outside the court house for the kidnapping, homicide, and disposal of Marta’s body. The case had been widely publicized, both in and outside of Córdoba, and the pressure to find a
guilty party was relentless and brutal. Zabala was tortured by the police, and yet, he never confessed to any role into Marta Stutz’s death. In 1939 he was sentenced to seventeen years in prison, but in 1943 the case was won on appeal, and he was freed (Abos). 25

Daulte’s parody of the police investigation is twofold. On one hand, the mocking of the facts serves to undermine factual knowledge itself. On the other hand, the treatment received by Zabala, at the hands of the police, highlights the political and moral nature of the investigation, and serves to cloud and ultimately to discredit their work. The character in charge of voicing and deriding the irregularities and brutal treatment of Zabala is González, the journalist. From the beginning of the play, González takes the role of dissenter against the official story: Zabala-as-the-main-suspect-in-Marta’s-disapearance.

It is of course ironic that González becomes Zabala’s most ardent advocate, given that the yellow journalism fiercely present at the time of the crime contributed to the brutal treatment of both suspects, Zabala and Vidoni, and of course to public perceptions of these men. Some of the headlines of the period leave no room to doubt that the public, via journalism, had already judged, condemned, and sentenced the presumed perpetrators. Here are some of the headlines, from the leading daily *La Nación*: “Vieron quemar a Marta Stutz. Un peluquero y varios ex-peones de Vidoni han hechos grandes revelaciones. La culpabilidad de Suárez Zabala estaría comprobada.” “Confesó la Barrientos. Marta estuvo varios días en su casa. También confesó la rubia cara cortada.” All of these headlines were on the front page of the newspapers, competing with the developments of the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Hitler in Germany. The headlines no doubt captured the imaginations of their readers.

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25 Archival records for the daily newspapers *La Orden* and *El Litoral* corroborating Abos’ information can be found in the virtual library for the provincial government of Santa Fe. Web 15 Apr. 2014.
It is a surprise, given the historical context, that González, in Daulte’s hands, becomes the most prominent advocate for Zabala’s innocence. As opposed to the real-life media coverage at the time of Marta’s disappearance, González presents himself as exclusively interested in achieving real justice, in contrast to what the character calls “justicia victimaria” responsible both for Vidoni’s death and Zabala’s abuse at the hands of the police and the public.

Journalism, along with science and police work, is another discourse closely linked to positivist ideas about knowledge. According to Roscoe and Hight:

Documentary practice, and the cultural assumptions and expectations we have of it, has been informed by the discourses of journalism. Journalism, like the broader discourse of education, is linked with documentary through its adherence to the project of the Enlightenment and its modernist tendencies. As Hartley (1996) notes, journalism has a huge investment in modernist technologies of truth. Like documentary, journalism’s status relies on the cultural acceptance that it has, as a genre, a certain ‘truth value’ (Meadows, 1999:45). (13)

González indeed attaches himself to that “truth value,” pitting it against other factual discourses he finds tainted, biased, and imprecise. However, Daulte ultimately discredits González as well and, in the process, the factual discourse attached to journalism which the character embodies. González’s downfall as a speaker of truth is created through several disclosures, all of them personal, that portray him as potentially sexually deviant. In the first instance, Risler, the prostitute testifying to Zabala’s interest in young girls, acknowledges González to be both one of her clients and a personal friend of Zabala, as can be seen in the following lines:

RISLER: Una mujer rubia, claro. Una apreciación de lo más detallada. ¿Me acusás porque nombré a … tu amiguito?
GONZÁLEZ: ¿Qué amiguito?
RISLER: Tu juego es asqueroso, querido. Te prefiero jugando al “salchicha-salchichón”.
GONZÁLEZ: ¿Qué?
RISLER: ¿Quieren que les cuente cómo es? Él lo inventó; hay que ver lo creativo que es para algunas cosas…
CONDUCTOR: Risler…
RISLER: ¿No quieren un testimonio? Este es bastante divertido. Oigan…: Se empieza con este dedo…
GONZÁLEZ: ¡No le permito! ¡No voy a permitir que una…!
RISLER: Momentito, González. Una cosa es dejar que me insultes cuando pagás, y otra es aguantarte gratis. (81)

The exchange between González y Risler damages the journalist’s reputation, both personally, and professionally, and he becomes an unreliable source. Risler discloses to the audience the friendship between González and Zabala, and implies that Gonzalez’s anger at her testimony is a direct result of this disclosure. She also refers to Zabala as “amiguito,” rather than “amigo,” suggesting a relationship that perhaps goes beyond friendship between the two male characters. Her revelation of a sexual game between her and González further compromises the journalist’s integrity, since it servers to discredit his testimony. Finally, the last two lines between Risler and González, and in particular the anger he exhibits towards her, almost at the verge of calling her a whore, discredit him severely. Risler’s refusal to put up with his treatment of her at that moment, when, unlike in their previous encounters, he is not paying for her services, obscures González’s professional conduct and damages his defense of Zabala.

However, in Daulte’s crucible, Risler too is a blemished witness. While Risler maintains that without monetary compensation she will not put up with Zabala’s treatment Risler also will not cooperate with the “investigation” initiated by the Conductor unless she is paid. After the exchange with González, Risler becomes so incensed that she threatens to leave altogether without having first volunteered her version of the events. She is persuaded to remain on stage only after one of the Ayudantes gives her pretend money.

The monetary exchange has, at least, a twofold ramification for the play. On one hand, it serves to highlight how social interactions and the quest for truth are tainted by economic interests. Previous chapters have already addressed the economic situation in Argentina and the impact of the neoliberal economic policies under Menem, which I will not explore further here.
However, suffice it to note that the characters’ susceptibility to manipulation when monetary compensation is offered suggests a corrupt system, one in which one will find characters seeking individual betterment out of sheer economic necessity and at the cost of the common good. On the other hand, since the money is evidently a prop, Daulte highlights and reminds the audience that what they are witnessing is a spectacle. As damaging as Risler’s acceptance of the money is to her testimony, her account is problematic on several fronts, regardless of the counterfeit reward. She is, after all, herself a possible accomplice in Marta’s disappearance, and her job as prostitute demands that in exchange for money she must be compliant and pretend pleasure for her clients. This is clear enough, but what happens when little Marta herself won’t participate in the show unless given money as well? The answer to this question leads into the last areas of the analysis regarding Martha Stutz: the use of Alice in Wonderland to complicate both gender performance and the agency, or lack thereof, of children as well as the ultimate triumph of fiction over factual discourse.

When we first see the Mujer/Niña on stage, a proxy for Marta, one of the Ayudantes gives her pretend money in order for her to acquiesce with the display on her body of the garments she was wearing when she disappeared. Since the money is forged the audience can presume that Marta, as a child, agrees to play along in a world of fantasy and make-believe, a world in which currency need not be real. However, the fact that a monetary transaction is alluded to in a parodic form underscores, from the very beginning of the play, the weight of economic concerns upon all the characters, including the victim. Additionally, the fact that the character of Marta is happy to comply when given pretend money suggests a child who is either unaware of or uninterested in real money. The child requests and is content to accept the illusion of money in lieu of real pesos. As such, Marta’s theatrical character initially appears naïve and sympathetic. (Ironically, the real
Marta, on the last evening she was seen alive, was on her way to a newspaper stand, with actual money, to purchase some magazines.)

It is at this point in the play that a peculiar unfolding of the character occurs. Two Martas emerge, a doubling of sorts. Two contesting and contradicting pictures of who Marta might have been start creeping into the narrative of the play. It is when one of these Martas ultimately triumphs, by closing the play, that the audience is forced to consider an unexpected ending of Marta’s last moments, an ending which redefines the accepted mythology of her disappearance.

The first aspect to consider is Daulte’s decision to label the character embodying Marta in the play Mujer/Niña. Except for one monologue, in which the performer embodying Marta also reenacts another character, throughout most of the play the character Mujer/Niña is referred to as Marta. Why not call the character then Marta Stutz, Marta, or Martha? Why, even though Marta Stutz was only nine, does Daulte choose to categorize her as both a woman and a child? In her analysis Sharon Magnarelli argues that the play refuses to answer whether Marta was/is a woman or a child: “The play suggests that any answer to that question would depend upon the role that she was playing at a given moment–that of innocent child or young seductress. And, clearly, her role at any given moment is contingent on the demands or projections (desires in either case) of her audience–another elided factor” (12). By refusing to categorize Marta as a child Daulte effectively complicates her status as a victim and shifts the construction of her identity to the multiple subjectivities and desires of her audience. As the play progresses, the innocent child of the first moments, silent and compliant while her underwear is shown to the audience, is slowly eroded by an alternate version of Marta as an agent regarding her fate.

When the Mujer/Niña is asked to lie on a gurney, during the representation of Marta’s last moments, the Mujer/Niña hollers: “¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! ¡No deje que pase esto! ¡Hágalo seguir!”
¡Hágalo seguir!” (98). Marta forcefully resists the narrative that recreates her death and demands that Carmen avoid both her death and the end of the representation. By yelling: “¡Hágalo seguir!” Marta forces her survival as a character in the play and suggests the possibility of an alternate ending that allocates her with more autonomy regarding her fate. However, Marta’s will to survive keeps slipping from her. In one of the play’s most distressing moments the Mujer/Niña becomes invisible to the other actors, in spite of her increasingly distressed screams and attempts to be seen. Following the recreation of the moment in which Marta was supposedly brought to Carmen the following sequence unfolds:

CARMEN: […] ¿Marthita?
MUJER/NIÑA: Acá.
CARMEN: Marthita.
MUJER/ NIÑA: Acá está.
MUJER/ NIÑA (Verdaderamente asustada): ¡Acá! ¡Acá está!

La Mujer/Nina empieza a chillar producto de un acceso de angustia. En ese momento suena una fuerte campanada y con ella se produce un brusco silencio y apagón. A esa campana le siguen otras cuatro. El velador del Conductor se enciende. (100-1)

Right after this scene the Conductor issues an intermission to the proceedings. Marta’s invisibility marks the moment in the play in which fiction starts asserting control of the ultimate narrative in the play. Prior to the intercession, albeit with some minor interruptions and disagreements between the characters, the play has unfolded as a hybrid between a police procedural and a documentary play; however, once Alice in Wonderland becomes part of the production, a new narrative opens within the play into the realm of fiction and fairy tales.

Martita’s anguish and terrifying screams bring to an end the section of the play that investigates the historical version of events leading to Marta’s disappearance. In fact, her invisibility on stage forcefully evokes the vacuum and impossibility of establishing her absence
as a crime, since her body was never found. Up to the intermission Marta is written as a victim: compliant, defenseless, and ultimately reduced to nothing more than an anguished scream that remains unheard. However, through the introduction of Alice in Wonderland into the play’s second half, Daulte will provide Marta with a new identity—an identity in which the submissive child, victim of a terrible crime, becomes an assertive, coy, and sharp interlocutor who determines her own future.

Daulte’s choice of Alice in Wonderland is not without context. In order to better understand the use of Carroll’s text in Martha Stutz, it is valuable to take a more general look at the role of Victorian’s children literature, so as to elucidate Daulte’s motives in using Alice as the vehicle through which to forge a new mythology of Marta Stutz. According to Jennifer Geer:

In mid-Victorian discourse, fairy tales often exert a recognizably domestic influence on their readers or listeners. Contemporary periodical articles and reviews commonly portray the tales’ virtues as analogous to an ideal home’s: readers young and old will find their sympathies awakened and the corrosive effects of an amoral, competitive, and violent worlds lessened. Wonderland and Looking-Glass, like many Victorian texts, thus characterize the values inscribed in idealized childhood and its tales as domestic and feminine. (2)

Geer’s interpretation aligns with that of critics who find Carroll’s books to be reassuring assertions of Victorian morals for little children. Other critics, however, view the books differently. Gerald. P. Mulderig for example, considers Carroll’s novels subversive and profoundly different from other contemporary Victorian texts. A young heroine is not unusual in children’s literature of the time, and Muldering cites many examples of the genre (e.g.,The Fairy Bower, Sandford and Merton, and The Children of Blentarn Ghyll); however, while other texts seek to reinforce Victorian norms of propriety and feminine behavior, Alice’s tales can be viewed as a critique and rejection of those norms. As Mulderig states:

The world of Victorian children’s fiction, then, is one of immediate and inescapable
justice, a world in which the good are consistently rewarded and the evil are inevitably exposed to physical suffering or psychological torment. In contrast with such a “view of life in which everything matters,” Wonderland seems a world of striking moral laxity. For just as Alice’s attempts at politeness go unreciprocated, her bursts of rudeness go unpunished. Indeed, though Alice’s wrongdoings range, as we have noted, from thoughtlessness impetuousness to premeditated malice, Wonderland never inflicts on her the psychological or physical punishment she seems to have earned. (325)

In considering the role of Alice within Marsha Stutz, I concur with Mulderig that the books are, primarily, a site from which to critique and subvert Victorian manners. I believe Daulte’s own interpretation of Alice’s adventures is closer to Mulderig than to Geer’s critique, since, in Martha Stutz, Marta’s transformation into a would-be Alice allocates the character with renewed strength, duplicity, and autonomy.

Daulte’s choice to incorporate Carroll’s work in particular also coincides with the Argentine playwright’s generic subversion of pre-established theatre genre conventions. Literature provides no shortage of young girls to intertextualize, after all, but Daulte has chosen Carroll’s heroine—the heroine of a writer whose intentions seem to mirror Daulte’s own intentions—the heroine of an author who altered the genre of fairy tales from within that genre. As will be shown, the Mujer/Niña’s transformation into a willful, strong, and bright woman is brought about by her embodiment of Alice’s spirit.

In her analysis of Marsha Stutz, Beatriz Trastoy opens with a commentary on the presence of Alice in the play, both in the written text and in the production. In the first staging of the play, in 1997, under the direction of Diego Kogan, the playbill featured on its cover a

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26 It is also worth noting that Carroll’s interest on photographing young girls is widely known, which adds one more layer to Marsha Stutz and its sexual implications. In 1995 Alice, by Robert Wilson, Tom Waits, and Paul Schmidt, opened at BAM. The play, in Schmidt’s words, explores: ”the tension between the childish charm of the story-teller and the repressed sexuality of the photographer” (Robert Vorlicky, 366). Another play addressing Carroll’s problematic relationship with Alice Liddell is Dennis Potter’s Alice (1965).
photograph of what appears to be a homeless girl with her hand stretched out. As Trastoy notes however, the girl in the picture is not a homeless urchin, but rather is in fact Alice Pleasance Lidell, the child that the reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) used as the inspiration for his books (283). The confluence of the two figures, Alice and Marta Stutz, becomes increasingly present, and, by the end of the play, Marta has fully transformed herself into an assertive child in charge of her fate.

As Mulderig notes, Wonderland does not punish Alice for her behavior—behavior that is rude at times, often impervious to the wishes of others, very non-compliant and thereby un-Victorian. In addition to her outspokenness and her willingness to command others, Alice is fiercely in charge of both her own body and her travels. Although her changes in size are frightening, it should be noted that it is Alice herself who chooses to drink the different potions, to follow the rabbit into his hole, and to further pursue him into the garden. Alice’s curiosity is matched by her ability to find the means to satisfy it, resulting in a strong and stubborn temperament in the face of obstacles. The Mujer/Niña’s embodiment of Alice’s spirit is initiated in the play’s recreation of the Tea Party chapter, and Daulte’s modifications of Carroll’s version further complicate Marta’s mythology.

For his play Daulte chooses the Tea Party to introduce Alice, but, unlike Carroll’s version, in which the party is attended by the Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse, in Martha Stutz all the characters of the play are present at the tea party, except the Conductor and González, who remain on the sidelines. The rest of the characters pretend to drink tea and to eat a large amount of pastries and cookies. The most crucial modification is the presence at the tea party of Risler, as the Queen of Hearts. In Carroll’s version Alice and the Queen of Hearts are each other’s antagonists, and yet, as Geer analyzes, they behave in a similar fashion and with equal
temperament. In Geer’s words:

Alice often resembles older female characters such as the Duchess or the Queen of Hearts. In a neat comic reversal of Victorian conventions, however, the characteristics Alice shares with the Duchess and Queen are not self-denying love and service, but individualism and will to power. She does emulate these figures, but the result is conflict rather than harmony, since each party attempts to satisfy her own interests at the expense of the other. (8)

In Martha Stutz, Marta also emulates Risler, but the result is one of harmony and complicity, rather than conflict. Whereas Alice fights the Queen of Hearts, screaming at her and kicking the chessboard, in an attempt to defeat her, the Mujer/Niña accepts Risler’s advice and guidance.

In a monologue addressed to the Tea Party participants, Risler imagines an exchange between the Queen of Hearts and Marta, namely, between herself, since she has been given the surname of The Queen of Hearts and Marta. Although the story is apparently told to all present at the Tea Party, by the end of it, only the Mujer/Niña will remain awake and actively listening. The rest of the party falls suddenly asleep.

In Risler’s story, the Queen of Hearts instructs Marta to avoid becoming nine years and seven months old, since that age “is not convenient.” Instead, Marta should remain nine. The following excerpt illustrates how the Queen of Hearts resolves the conundrum of Marta’s age: “‘Yo nunca pido consejo para crecer’ dijo Martha indignada. ‘¿Demasiado orgullosa?,’ pregunta la Reina. ‘Quiero decir que una no puede evitar hacerse mayor,’ le aclara Martha. ‘Una quizá no,’ dice la Reina, ‘pero dos sí. Con la ayuda necesaria podrías quedarte en los nueve’ ”(102). While the rest of Daulte’s tea party falls asleep en masse, the Mujer/Niña laughs at Risler’s tale, and as the stage directions indicate, her laughter is one of both shock and excitement. Marta’s laughter signals the first step toward her new, fictional identity and a progressive embrace of a future no longer tragic, but rather deliberate and of her own making.

After a brief dialogue, González joins the tea party and a further alignment of identity
unfolds between the Mujer/ Niña and Carroll’s Alice. Marked by absurd misunderstandings and teasing remarks, the conversation between González and the Mujer/ Niña becomes both flirtatious and highly allusive to *Alice in Wonderland*. The dialogue between González and the Mujer/ Niña resembles the exchange between the Hatter and Alice. In Carroll’s version, Alice is deeply confounded by the Hatter’s literal understanding of language and his inability to engage in abstract thinking. In one instance, the Hatter becomes very offended by Alice’s attempt to define Time. He angrily tells her: “He won’t stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked with the clock[…].” (30). A similar confusion ensues between the Mujer/ Niña and González, but in Daulte’s case, it is the Mujer/ Niña who deliberately teases González and blames him for failing to know the meaning of his name. This can be seen in the following lines: “Ovátsug. (*González ríe*) ¿De qué se ríe? Es su nombre. Gustavo-Ovátsug. Es tan tonto, que da risa. Si usted supiera qué quiere decir, no sería tan tonto. Pero usted no sabe qué quiere decir y le hace gracia, se ríe. Pero tampoco sabe de qué se ríe, y eso no es nada educado (*Pausa.*) Tonto y maleducado”(105). In a sense, the Mujer/ Niña becomes a hybrid of the Mad Hatter, the Queen of Hearts, and Alice. The Mujer/ Niña retains Alice’s willful spirit and the Hatter’s non-figurative understanding of language, and she acts upon the advice of Risler—as Queen of Hearts—to view Marta’s age as not appropriate. The Mujer/ Niña uses her “inappropriate” age to flirt with González by remaining coy about it, while it also foreshadows the ending of the play and an additional collapse of the identities of two other characters, González and Suárez Zabala 2. Interpolating the tea party into his work allows Daulte to underscore both the collapse of language as a means of communication and the fluid, elusive, and ultimately futile attempt to fix an identity. The Mujer/ Niña is either a woman or a child; Alice or the Queen of Hearts; a victim or a willing participant into her disappearance. By
indexing one option after another, Daulte forcefully critiques how factual knowledge is neither a
tenable nor an interesting avenue to pursue. Rather, fiction, with its endless supply of
possibilities and scenarios, becomes in *Martha Stutz* the only remaining path forward.

The ending of the play establishes Marta as complicit with her adventure, a willing Alice
happy to go down the rabbit hole and not to return. The encounter between Zabala and Marta is
recreated as filled with tenderness, laughter, and deep complicity. It also, by the addition of a
silent letter, h, to Marta’s name, solidifies her persona as fictional and, yet, deeply enduring. The
little girl who disappeared in Córdoba was named Marta Ofelia Stutz, *not* Martha Ofelia Stutz.
Therefore even the title of the play is fraudulent, since, by introducing the h, the investigation
that unfolds is a fallacy. And yet, however fictional she may be, by the end of the play the
Mujer/Niña has become deeply endearing and complex, no longer a statue-like figure onto which
to display the “proofs.”

By the end of the play too, the fictional Marta has taken hold of the narrative and remains
present and compelling, while the original Marta has receded from the audience, lost in a
cacophony of inconclusive and futile factual clues. Ironically, a Google search, even using the
correct spelling, minus the h, will yield many more results for Daulte’s play, than for the “real”
Marta Stutz. In the end, the path towards the real is through the fictional, and perhaps, in the end,
the only Marta that will survive, just like in the play, is the imagined one—commanding and
captivating to audiences, and endlessly renewable—created by Daulte.

While *Martha Stutz* is inspired by a historical account, Martin McDonagh’s *The
Pillowman* is an entirely fictional work. However, as mentioned earlier, both works question and
ultimately reject genres predicated on factual knowledge in favor of fiction as the path towards
meaningful truths—truth, as a concept, for both these writers, being best represented as plural.
Daulte dissolves documentaries and historical and police dramas, by undoing the discourses upon which those genres are predicated. With *The Pillowman*, McDonagh does something quite similar. The play seeks to disarticulate the police procedural and, in so doing, questions factual knowledge itself. Also, like Daulte, McDonagh keeps the emphasis on narrative and fairy tales, rather than on the factual clues to the crimes, as the preferred medium for arriving at truth/s.

While *Martha Stutz* incorporated only one intertextual fairy tale, *Alice in Wonderland*, in *The Pillowman* the literary references and echoes abound. Florentina Anghel has identified, among others, the following references: *The Third Policeman* by Flann O’Brien, *One for The Road* by Harold Pinter, and Beckett (101-5). A grotesque and sinister modified version of the Brothers Grimm’s *The Pied Piper* is in the play, but less obvious echoes from Tom Stoppard, the Bible, Kafka, and *The Sandman* by E.T. Hoffman are obliquely referenced as well.

In addition, seven of the main character’s own stories are fully included in the text and are either read, or retold by their author, Katurian. The titles of the seven stories are as follows: “The Little Apple Men,” “The Three Gibbet Crossroads,” “The Tale of the Town on the River,” “The Pillowman,” “The Little Green Pig”, “The Little Jesus,” and “The Writer and the Writer's Brother.” Two additional short stories (“The Shakespeare Room” and “The Face Basement”) are briefly mentioned and synopses provided, although, in these cases, no extensive reading ensues. If the *The Pillowman* originally appears to be a police investigation, it soon becomes a labyrinth of narratives that, much like in *Martha Stutz*, obscure the bare facts of the murdered children who are the ostensible focus of the investigation, while illuminating less tangible truths.

Any further discussion of McDonagh’s work must acknowledge, however briefly, the intense response his plays, in particular his Irish plays, have received. As noted by Patrick Lonergan, McDonagh’s work and his persona have received wide popular and critical attention,
not always positive. Although of Irish descent, McDonagh was raised in London, and in discussions of his plays, he has been located within both the British in-yer-face movement and the Irish canon, alongside such luminaries as Marina Carr. Lonergan explores in depth the polarizing effect of McDonagh’s plays. They seem to engender deep, virulent comments from literary and theatre critics, while remaining, for the most part, extremely successful with audiences, not just at a local and national level, but globally. McDonagh’s plays have travelled around the world, and The Pillowman has been staged thus far in, among other places, in London, New York, Paris, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Buenos Aires. As Lonergan points out, some critics are deeply angered by McDonagh’s work (this extreme response sometimes extends to the writer himself) and by what they perceive is the exploitation of negative Irish stereotypes for the sake of making money. Disagreeing with those critics, and in particular with Mary Luckhurst, Lonergan underscores how:

The major feature of [Luckhurst’s] argument—and this is true of many of the people who attack McDonagh—is that it makes a link between the audience response and authorial intention: she suggests that if McDonagh’s plays promote anti-Irish prejudice in the theatre, he must himself be to blame. The question of whether an author is responsible for the many different responses his or her plays provoke is one of the key preoccupations of this book, as is indeed it is the major feature of McDonagh’s work from The Pillowman (2003) onward. […] it is notable that the most hostile responses to McDonagh tend to use audience response rather than textual analysis as evidence in support of their condemnation. (The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh, xviii)

I agree with Lonergan that while there may be some value in judging a writer’s work by examining audience response to it, such a judgment can be limiting and problematic, particularly since McDonagh is a global artist, and his work is experienced and subjected to interpretation by a wide range of audiences.

The focus of my own analysis will reveal McDonagh’s use of intertextuality to undermine expected genre conventions (police drama) and to underscore how factual knowledge is an end game neither worth pursuing, nor particularly interesting. Instead, McDonagh
constructs a play that, like a Russian nesting doll, keeps unlocking layer upon layer of tentative scenarios and answers to the same question.

On the surface, the question itself appears simple: Who killed two children and abducted a third? But it soon becomes apparent that the focus of *The Pillowman* is far more ambiguous and self-reflexive. Instead of finding a killer, audiences must grapple with questions like: What is the role of the artist in society? How does (or doesn’t) violence impact who we become, and the narratives we create, in order to understand both our lives and our place in society? Who is a victim? What remains of us when our bodies are no longer present?

Daulte asks his audiences very similar questions through the figure of Martha Stutz and, just like McDonagh, uses postmodern aesthetics to require of his audience active participation in piecing together the multiple meanings and contradictions of the portrayed lives. Addressing the ethical stance embodied in McDonagh’s work, José Lanters elaborates on the value of raising questions, rather than answering them:

> Postmodernism rejects certainty and closure; its ‘refusal to cling to a particular point of view for the sake of consistency means that there can be no “genuinely true” answers to “serious questions” of…morality’ (Kilian:17). McDonagh’s refusal in his work of closure, consistency and absolutism, in favour of ambiguity, multiplicity and contradiction is in itself a postmodern ethical stance in which ‘nothing can be affirmed aside the importance of the question one cannot (and must not) answer’ (Kilian: 139). Merit can be found in vacillation, doubt, confusion and continual searching. (178)

The ultimate futility of acquiring factual knowledge, at the end of both plays, functions as a rejection by Daulte and McDonagh of the discourses and activities that sustain such endeavors (police investigations, media coverage, evidence, and material proofs.) Instead, *Martha Stutz* and *The Pillowman* allocate fiction/s, and fairy tales in particular, with the enduring power and meaningfulness that facts lack. It is through an exploration of the many fairy tales embedded in *The Pillowman* that my analysis will elucidate how fictional tales triumph over material
The Pillowman unfolds in an unnamed totalitarian state, in two cells, and although no time directions are provided, the span elapsed among the three acts could very well be one single day—a couple at most. Two policemen, Tupolski and Ariel, are investigating the gruesome deaths of two children and the disappearance of a third. Two suspects are brought in for questioning: they are the brothers Katurian and Michal. Katurian is emotionally and financially responsible for his younger mentally disabled brother, and while he works as a butcher, Katurian considers himself a writer. He claims to have written four hundred short stories, and, almost without exception, his tales are morbid, violent, and often involve the cruel and brutal abuse of children at the hands of elders. The two murdered children were each brutally tortured in the manner described in two of Katurian’s stories. It was this congruence that led Tupolski and Ariel to detain both Katurian and his brother. A third child, a girl, is still missing, and the investigators are eager to determine her whereabouts.

During the course of the investigation, further incriminating proofs are found at Katurian’s apartment (such as the chopped off toes of one of the victims), and, eventually, Michal confesses to Katurian that he is the perpetrator of the crimes. At that point, Katurian, possibly to save Michal from torture or a more painful death, suffocates him with a pillow. Katurian confesses to all the crimes, including the abduction, and is shot to death at the end of the play. Those are the bare facts of the plot, but far more is indeed uncovered.

Katurian tells how when he was a child his parents, in order to conduct an experiment, encouraged him to write, and write he did, beautiful, sweet, and tender stories. He was filled with love, and his writing reflected the privilege and caring environment in which he was being raised. However, soon, he started hearing at night the terrible noises of what sounded like
someone being tortured, next to his room, and his writing became dark and violent, a product of the disturbing sounds he heard every night. One night Katurian broke into the room adjacent to his and found his theretofore unknown brother, Michal, nearly dead. Their parents had tortured Michal, repeatedly, for years, in order to establish if Katurian’s stories would evolve into a more creative, albeit sinister, writing. Upon discovering his parents’ horrible experiment, Katurian proceeded to kill and bury both of them. Since then Katurian has taken care of Michal and, while working in a butcher shop, continued to write short stories. However, most have not been published and remain unknown, except to his brother, who is a captive and eager audience of Katurian’s tales. Unfortunately, Michal interprets the stories literally, rather than figuratively, and his murderous acts, constructed in order to prove the feasibility of the crimes of his brother’s imagination, become both brothers’ doom.

Given that *The Pillowman* is not based on an historical incident, the notion that factual discourse is undermined in the play can prove problematic to establish. However, while albeit vaguely, *The Pillowman* refers to sufficient reality-based coordinates that it is possible to detect embedded cultural critiques very similar to those found in Daulte’s play:

1. Police conduct is suspect, due to the coercive techniques use and the lack of due process. Any knowledge obtained by force is therefore deemed untrustworthy and biased;

2. The media is a powerful and biased tool used to shape narrative;

3. Police drama, and its attachment to physical evidence, is a problematic basis for truth; and

4. Fairy tales and myth provide a more philosophically sound basis for the pursuit of truth, even when subverted.

The conduct of the police during the investigation into the disappearance of the historic
Marta Stutz was deeply problematic when the case erupted. The brutal treatment of several of the suspects at the hand of the investigators raised troubling questions of the abuses of power conducted by state-sanctioned agencies. However, in *The Pillowman*, audiences are led to believe that the play is set in a totalitarian state in which human rights issues are not honored. The names of the characters (e.g., Katurian, Tupolski) suggest a country from the Eastern block, and one of the victims is called Andrea Jacovic, a common surname both in Croatia and Serbia. Katurian’s place of employment, the Kamenice abattoir, also signals an Eastern location. There are Kamenice locations both in the Czech Republic and in Albania. Although the play was first staged in 2003, according to McDonagh, its creation precedes some of his Irish plays (Cliff, 132). The Milošević Era, and the subsequent Kosovo war years, must have been very present in the minds of audiences, at least in *The Pillowman’s* original representations.

In the case of American audiences, which first had the opportunity to see the play in New York in 2005, the Iraq war and the Abu Ghraib scandal were certainly in the front of audience members’ minds. As *New York Times* critic Caryn James reflected at the New York premiere: “When Katurian stands onstage with a black hood over his head, the image fleetingly brings to mind the photos from Abu Ghraib prison—one more bit of evidence that this play is as timeless, as topical and as resonant as a fairy tale.” As James so rightly identifies, the vagueness of the time and location allows McDonagh to offer a critique of violence that transcends particulars and remains unbound to national or time frameworks.

While *The Pillowman* is set in an unnamed, possibly Eastern European location, it also

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refers to American police dramas, blurring the lines between democratic and undemocratic practices in police conduct. At the very beginning of the play Katurian seeks reassurance from Tupolski, the head officer, that Michal would not be harmed. Shortly after, Katurian starts hearing the terrible screams of his brother, who is in the adjacent cell and apparently being tortured by Ariel. Katurian becomes incensed and the following exchange ensues:

    KATURIAN: That’s my brother.
    TUPOLSKI: Yes, I believe it is.
    KATURIAN: What’s he doing to him?
    TUPOLSKI: Well, something fucking horrible. I don’t know, do I?
    KATURIAN: You said you wouldn’t touch him.
    TUPOLSKI: I haven’t touched him.
    KATURIAN: But you said he would be fine. You gave me your word.

    The screaming stops.
    TUPOLSKI: Katurian. I am high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything? (23)

Tupolski’s statement underscores how police brutality is in fact perfectly permissible within a totalitarian dictatorship. However, McDonagh, simultaneously evokes the vocabulary and practices of the police under a democratic state. For example, at the very beginning of the interrogation, preceding the above encounter, Tupolski mentions casually, “Oh, I almost forgot to mention… I am the good cop; he’s the bad cop” (12). Any viewer of mainstream American police TV dramas is familiar with this expression, and, as such, the clear line dividing a totalitarian from a democratic state becomes increasingly blurry as the play progresses. Returning to the stage, presumably from torturing Michal, Ariel states that he will soon be proceeding to torture Katurian as well:

    ARIEL: I’m taking a breather now, but the next time I go in there, I think I am going to put something sharp up inside him and then turn it.
    TUPOLSKI: Oh, Ariel, that’d definitely be classed as ‘police brutality’. (25)
Again, while Tupolski’s tone is ironic, the pervasive mirroring by McDonagh of police practices and the vocabulary associated with them serve to disorient not just the audiences, but the characters themselves. When, for example, the chopped toes of one of the victims are found in the brothers’ house, Tupolski instructs Ariel in the following manner:

TUPOLSKI: Make him swallow them.
_Ariel wrenches Katurian off the chair._
ARIEL: Where’s the mute girl?! Where’s the mute girl?!
_Ariel tries to force the toes into Katurian’s mouth._
TUPOLSKI: Don’t make him swallow them, Ariel. What are you doing?
ARIEL: You said make him swallow them.
TUPOLSKI: Only to scare him! They are evidence! Have some sense. (29)

The labeling of Ariel’s behavior as police brutality refers not to a totalitarian state, where brutality would simply be a part of police work, but rather to a democratic one. This indeterminate state of the state in which the action takes place—the ambiguous nature of police conduct in the play’s location—is further highlighted by Ariel’s own difficulty in elucidating Tupolski’s command. Ariel interprets Tupolski’s order erroneously, but his misunderstanding is the product of the unstable delineation by McDonagh of the boundaries between a democratic and a totalitarian state. In a totalitarian dictatorship preserving, or even requiring evidence for condemnation is unnecessary, since a dictatorship is predicated on the limitation and negation of personal rights. Since Tupolski enjoys belittling Ariel, maybe the intent to preserve evidence is simply an excuse on Tupolski’s part to further humiliate his subordinate; however, it also serves to ridicule and discredit the practices and vocabulary of routine police work.

The porous boundaries of police conduct in this drama are further complicated by
Ariel’s decision to preserve evidence when he is told not to. Among the most damaging evidence used in the investigation to implicate the brothers in the killing of the children are Katurian’s unpublished tales, and yet, at the end of the play, after Katurian is executed, Tupolski instructs Ariel to clean up the mess and burn the stories. The preservation of evidence is rendered, ultimately, unnecessary; and yet, here again McDonagh seeks to keep the audience from making facile assumptions by having Ariel disregard Tupolski’s command.

Katurian’s ghost, or soul, states to the audience: “…Because for reasons known only to himself, the bulldog of a policeman chose not to put the stories in the burning trash, but placed them carefully with Katurian’s case file, which he then sealed away to remain unopened for fifty-odd years” (104). The audience, as such, is left to wonder exactly which police procedures McDonagh’s play is critiquing, since so much ambiguity is raised, and so little clearly established. In the absence of transparent answers, the pervasive mirroring, however ironic, of police dramas serves to undermine police work and, by extension, the factual discourses that inform its practices.

The critique of the media as unreliable and subject to government intervention is revealed in the dialogue of both Katurian and Tupolski. In fact, unsure why he has been brought in for questioning, Katurian’s first conjecture is that his one published tale has irritated the authorities. Katurian promptly distances himself from his story:

KATURIAN:…I can’t remember, but anyway, that’s what I do, I tell stories. No axe to grind, no anything to grind. No social anything, whatsoever. And that’s why, I can’t see, if that’s why you brought me in here, I can’t see what the reason would be, unless something political came in by accident, or something that seemed political came in, in which case show me where it is. Show me where the bastard is. I’ll take it straight out. Fucking burn it. You know? (8)

Further discussion between the two characters highlights Katurian’s fear that the police might
have interpreted anything political in his texts, and he is prompt to reject the notion that any part of his writings is meant to denounce or oppose the current regime. Ironically, his one published story, “The Tale of the Town of the River,” is printed in a magazine called *La Libertad*, which indeed points to a potentially subversive agenda on the editor’s part. “The Tale of the Town of the River” is a reinterpretation of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.” In the classic version, collected by the Brothers Grimm, the Pied Piper retaliates against the townspeople who fail to pay him for his services in eradicating the rats from the village. In response to the people’s greediness, the Pied Piper proceeds to lure the children out of the town with his music, punishing their parents for breaking their agreement with him. “The Pied Piper,” even in its original version, is a subversive and joyless tale. At the end of the story, the townspeople are besieged by a calamity more severe than the rats’ invasion; their children are abducted by a stranger never to be seen again. It is hard to imagine a more disturbing story for parents or children to consider, and the moral of the story (to pay our debts? to honor our word?) can’t compensate for the horrific ending. In McDonagh’s version, a little child, victim of domestic abuse at the hands of his drunken parents, still remains kind and generously shares his sandwich with a stranger (the Pied Piper). To repay him the stranger takes a meat cleaver and cuts the child’s toes, telling him: “I would like to give you something now, the worth of which you might not realise” (22). When the stranger proceeds to carry all the children away from the town, the child without toes is not able to follow him and, as such, his life is spared. Katurian’s tale implies that the children were from the beginning the intended target, and the stranger, anticipating the town’s greed, uses the rats as an excuse for his actions. In interpreting the function of the tale within *The Pillowman*, Anthony Ellis, borrowing from Julie Sander’s reflection of the meaning of the “Pied Piper,” reflects:
Sanders reminds us that at its core, the Pied Piper narrative is about the powers-that-be refusing to relinquish the town’s wealth, to redistribute it to someone who performs the most vital work of the city. As a result, the Piper absconds with ‘the symbolic economic future of the community’ (84). Presumably, the editors of the Libertad perceived the radical dimension of Katurian’s adaptation, the subtext that a lack of charity and heavy-handedness by a central government can result in a society’s degeneration. (153)

As Ellis points out, while Katurian might not be aware of the subversive qualities of his story, a sharp reader could be, and its publication indicates the tentative attempts at obliquely critiquing a political regime that denies its citizens full rights. The fact that neither Tupolski nor Ariel perceive the political aspects of the tale reminds us that, even in the most repressive regimes, there is room for resistance and opposition. While Tupolski is dimly aware of how executing writers is perceived differently, he can only elaborate the following: “We like executing writers. Dimwits we can execute any day. And we do. But, you execute a writer, it sends out a signal, y’know? (Pause.) I don’t know what signal it sends out, that’s not really my area, but it sends out a signal” (30). However, La Libertad appears to be a small voice within a conglomerate of state-sponsored media. Further proof of the media’s lack of transparency is volunteered by Katurian’s discussion with Michal:

KATURIAN: […] A man comes into a room, says, ‘Your mother’s dead.’ What do we know? Do we know that the second’s man’s mother is dead?
MICHAL: Yes.
KATURIAN: No, we don’t.
MICHAL: No, we don’t.
KATURIAN: All we know is that a man has come into a room and said to another man, ‘Your mother is dead.’ That is all we know. First rule of storytelling. ‘Don’t believe everything you read in the papers.’[…]
KATURIAN: We don’t even know that there were any children killed at all.
MICHAL: It was in the papers.
KATURIAN: Who runs the papers?
MICHAL: The police. Ohh, You’re quite clever. (39-41)

The above excerpt illustrates how the media is subject to the control of the authorities and therefore cannot be relied upon for information. However, while Katurian’s logic is accurate, the
outcome of his reasoning is not. Children were indeed murdered, by his brother no less, and McDonagh’s use of irony manages to simultaneously undermine the factual authority of newspapers and to call into question the logic of his own agent provocateur.

McDonagh continues to blur these lines, and to confound thereby the expectations of his audience. While in the above-quoted dialogue Katurian plainly appears convinced that newspapers cannot be trusted, a few hours later he will recant his stance and draw conclusions regarding the appearance of one of the victims based on the information disclosed in the newspapers. In exchange for saving his short stories, Tupolski requires Katurian to write a second confession of the murders. Since Katurian is not in fact responsible for the crimes, he is forced to infer the appearance of the boy, based on what has been reported on the news. Katurian is well aware that living in a totalitarian state implies that any news item is likely manipulated, and yet he is unable to resist drawing (erroneous) conclusions based on the fragmentary clues disclosed in the newspapers. The paper stated that the boy was of Jewish descent, and as such, when questioned on his hair coloring, Katurian replies the following:

KATURIAN: Browny-black. It was a browny-black sort of colour.
ARIEL: ‘It was a browny-black sort of colour.’ Pretty good. Considering he was a little Jew boy, ‘It was a browny-black sort of colour.’ Pretty good. It’s a shame his mum was fucking Irish, and her son closely resembled a red fucking setter. (97)

Katurian, it seems, cannot resist falling into the trap of drawing faulty logical conclusions based on the limited information he has about the disappeared boy. Ironically, while Katurian’s logic proves incorrect and Jewish boy does not equal brown hair, Ariel’s equally faulty logic yields accurate results: Irish mom does equal red-haired boy. McDonagh successfully disarticulates one stereotype only to replace it with another, and, in the process, logical reasoning is rendered useless, since it yields right or wrong answers indiscriminately.

As Lanters states, McDonagh’s choice to remain comfortably settled in a realm of doubt
and permanent searching is indeed an ethical stand. We cannot, and should not, assume any knowledge about anything or anybody since, as *The Pillowman* illustrates, truth itself is elusive and hard to establish, and our most commonly trusted means to achieve it (journalism, science, police investigations) are fraught with pitfalls.

In *Martha Stutz*, Daulte uses the figure of Alice to wring from Martita’s disappearance an alternate scenario and, through fiction, to implode the victim mythology of Marta Stutz. The historical figure is replaced by an assertive fictional child, on the cusp of womanhood, who rejects a fate that circumscribes her to failure and submission. In *The Pillowman*, the fairy tales included serve a similar function, since they negate their traditional utopian narrative and encourage audiences to reject the worldview embedded within them. In his historical analysis of the purposes and functions of fairy tales across different periods, Jack Zipes argues that “the fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal and beautiful in and of themselves, and they are not the best therapy in the world for children. They are historical prescriptions, internalized, potent, explosive, and we acknowledge the power they hold over our lives by mystifying them” (11). For those of us growing up in the twentieth century, the most prevalent vision of a fairy tale becomes embodied by Disney and the popularized versions of Grimms’ classics the company created and distributed widely, beginning with *Snow White* (1937). According to Zipes, Disneyland, and the world it spouses, is dangerously simplistic and hides within it the hierarchical vision of American culture, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

The message in this “black and white” film is simplistic: evil is represented by the dark forces of discord, impropriety, and overreaching. There is no complexity in a Disney fairy tale film, no exploration of character or the causes that create obstacles for the protagonists in the narratives. The emphasis is on purification, preparing oneself to become chosen, a member of the elite, and this American cleansing process based on meritocracy replaces the old schemata of European fairy tale while at the same time it
restores notions of hierarchy and elitism, reinforces a kind of redundant behavior controlled by a master builder such as Disney, and leads to a static dystopian vision of the world, that is, a degeneration of utopia. (209)

McDonagh’s tales seek to subvert the status quo and to anchor themselves into an anti-tale tradition that is as old as the fairy tales themselves. McDonagh’s tales are written against the Disneyfied version of classical tales and inscribe themselves in a genealogy of authors that includes, among others, E. T. A. Hoffman, whose short story “The Sandman” is remarkably similar to “The Pillowman” tale that gives title to the play. In the introduction to an edited collection of essays of “anti-fairy-tales,” Catriona McAra and David Calvin propose the following definition of the genre:

Rarely an outward opposition to the traditional form itself, the anti-tale takes aspects of the fairy tale genre, and its equivalent genres, and re-imagines, subverts, inverts, deconstructs or satirizes elements of them to present an alternate narrative interpretation, outcome or morality. (3)

Particularly useful in understanding how McDonagh’s tales fit into a genealogy of the anti-fairy-tale is a taxonomy proposed by Calvin of the main distinctions between fairy tales and anti-fairy-tales. I include it below, since I will refer to many of them as I briefly analyze the impetus and purpose behind McDonagh’s own tales (see chart on following page).
(McAra and Calvin 3). Of the sixteen anti-tale distinctions identified by the authors, McDonagh’s tales easily include about thirteen, firmly grounding the tales in the realm of subversion and disenchantment. However, I argue that the poetics of disenchantment McDonagh’s tales create is by no means a place of failure, but rather a ledge from which to envision a future that remains critical and alert to the shortcomings of factual knowledge. The tales, and by extension *The Pillowman*, encourage audiences to question our assumptions about truth and the bodies of knowledge upon which truth is predicated. Reflecting on some of the critiques that McDonagh’s work has elicited, Lanters elaborates:

This means that postmodern theory tends to avoid addressing the issue of morality, ‘not because it tacitly supports non morality or amorality, but because it is not possible to talk about morality without resorting to metanarratives’ (Kilian: 38). What is sometimes seen as Martin McDonagh’s ‘defective’ moral vision should be reconsidered in the light of this conundrum, and can instead be seen as his way of expressing a morality of contingent truth embedded in the textual play rather than one based in the idea of universal, absolute Truth. (169)
I concur with Lanters that McDonagh’s work is not amoral nor deprived of truth, but that indeed it is through the deciphering of the textual play that his, always contingent, truths are revealed. An analysis of three of the most significant tales in McDonagh’s play (“The Pillowman,” “The Green Pig,” and “The Little Jesus”) will highlight how the utopian worldview embedded in fairy tales is supplanted by a subversive, disenchanted poetics. Such a poetics becomes a generative space that reaffirms the value of fiction as the most meaningful road to truth and knowledge.

“The Pillowman” tale tells the story of a very sad figure: a fluffy, nine-foot tall Pillowman who visits people when they are considering suicide. The Pillowman brings them back to their childhood, before their suffering started, and convinces them to kill themselves to avoid a life of pain. The Pillowman makes sure to stage the death as an accident to spare the unfortunate children’s parents additional pain. Given the framework of the narrative, the Pillowman, despite his murderous deeds, is constructed as a merciful figure. The tale’s performance precedes the moment in which Katurian learns that Michal is responsible for the murdered of the two disappeared children, and the disappearance of a third. After hearing the news, Katurian, right before Michal is about to fall asleep, suffocates him with a pillow to prevent him from experiencing torture or a crueler death delivered by the authorities. Katurian becomes, through his actions, the Pillowman and saves Michal from further pain. As we might expect from Calvin’s taxonomy, “The Pillowman” tale exists in a gray moral area, one that defies easy answers and precludes the reader, or listener, from finding comfort and reassurance in an orderly world.

28In the Broadway’s staging of The Pillowman, a mid-raised half floor, situated above the two adjacent cells, functioned as the tableaux on which the tales were enacted. Four silent actors mimed some of the tales while Katurian narrated them from below, aiding the audience in following the extensive retellings of Katurian’s short stories.
The world of the Pillowman is filled with pain, pessimism, and disenchantment, and yet, it is Michal’s favorite tale. He even tells Katurian that he thinks the Pillowman goes to heaven, in spite of the vivid and disturbing suicides described in the story. Since Katurian will execute his brother shortly after Michal makes this statement, the play implicitly, via Michal’s words, absolves Katurian. As Katurian’s alter ego, the Pillowman demonstrates the writer’s guilt at his brother’s suffering. Katurian has generated a fictional figure that could have saved his brother from the brutal treatment he received at the hands of his parents and spared Katurian himself from the responsibility, however indirect, of being the cause of so much pain.

However, “The Pillowman” tale’s ending takes an even sadder turn, complicating further the notion of The Pillowman as Katurian’s alter ego. Burdened by the terrible weight of his job, the Pillowman decides to visit his former, childhood self, and convince the young Pillowboy to commit suicide. Upon hearing about his future employment, the Pillowboy ignites himself, and as he is dissolving into flames, the terrible screams of all the children no longer saved are the last sounds he hears. It is a disenchanting ending, a dystopic last moment that must fill, one imagines, the Pillowman with terrible sadness—a sadness presumably experienced by readers or listeners of the tale, so why does Michal enjoy it so much? In spite of his limited intelligence, Michal can grasp, probably, Katurian’s mixture of love and guilt in the creation of the tale. Michal is a perceptive listener who understands how the Pillowman is Katurian’s alter ego and his enjoyment of the tale underscores for viewers their brotherly love, in spite of Katurian’s murder of Michal. However, the Pillowboy’s suicide allows children who will have a terrible life, filled with pain, to continue on living rather than committing suicide, a cruel fate indeed, but perfectly fitting in McDonagh’s universe. Fiction, in the end, is the only truth worth living and dying for, and the audiences are reminded of it by the play’s ending.
McDonagh’s choice to have Michal accept his suffering and to find value in his existence is further ratified by the end note to *The Pillowman* that Katurian’s soul, in lieu of a prayer for his brother, delivers to the audience after getting shot by Tupolski. The Pillowman visits Michal and encourages him to commit suicide in order to avoid the years of torture at the hands of his parents that will begin that night. Michal replies as follows:

MICHAL: But if my brother never gets to hear me being tortured, he may never write the stories he’s going to write, might he?
KATURIAN: ‘That’s true,’ said the Pillowman. And Michal thought about a while and said…
MICHAL: Well, I think we should probably just keep things the way they are, then, with me being tortured and him hearing and all of that stories, ‘cos I think I’m going to really like my brother’s stories. I think I am going to really like them. (103)

Ironically, this unusually upbeat ending is not what Katurian intended, but since Tupolski does not honor his word and shoots him earlier than agreed upon, Michal’s words become the final ending for *The Pillowman*’s tale. Nevertheless, Ariel’s decision to save Katurian’s stories, against his superior’s orders, further underlines Michal’s choice. Against all odds, the stories will survive.

Ultimately, *The Pillowman* rejects the mythological and orderly world of conventional fairy tales and reaffirms an individual, dissenting view that forever questions. It is, as Lanters states, an ethics of doubt that McDonagh investigates. This ethical and aesthetic position, vacillant, and endlessly probing, is further exemplified by the juxtaposition of the following tales: “The Green Pig” and “The Little Jesus.”

Michal claims that with his third victim, the missing girl, he reenacted “The Little Jesus” tale. Of all Katurian’s tales, “The Little Jesus” is possibly the most savage. In it, a little girl, devotedly religious, is tortured by her foster parents. The torture is a reenactment of Jesus’s crucifixion, but when she does not die, they bury her alive—which she is content to accept.
since she strongly believes she will rise in three days, just like Jesus did. Unfortunately, three days later, although alive, or resurrected, her scratching in the coffin is not heard, and the reader must presume that she dies an agonizing death. When Katurian hears that Michal has chosen this story to reenact on the missing girl, he is profoundly horrified. Why, he wonders in despair, out of everything he has written, would Michal would choose the cruelest tale; why not “The Green Pig?” Indeed, as the play unfolds, when the girl is found, alive, covered in green paint, it becomes clear that the story Michal reenacted was in fact “The Green Pig.”

The juxtaposition of the two tales illustrates the triumph of individuality against all odds. In “The Green Pig” tale an unusual green pig prays to keep his unusual coloring, but the farmer in charge of him is determined to erase his difference and sprays him with permanent pink paint. Shortly thereafter, though, a bizarre green rain pours down, dyeing all the pigs green, except, of course, the original pig, who, rendered permanently pink by the farmer, is therefore, once again, unique.

Read against each other, “The Green Pig” and “The Little Jesus” offer opposing views on subjugation by our elders. As a reenactment of Jesus’s life, and in particular his last moments, “The Little Jesus” tale espouses a worldview of abnegation and submission to an elder figure, God. While the little girl in the story opposes her step-parents and her faith remains firm, her horrific ending chastises the folly of abnegating one’s life. The story illustrates the cruelty of God in allowing—commanding—his only son to die in such a fashion for the benefit of others. It is a tale about becoming one with the many, and in the process neglecting one’s individuality. “The Little Green Pig” tale advocates the contrary, to resist becoming one more in a litter and to value one’s own differences. One could argue that the little Green pig’s fate, first to be green, and then pink, in both cases without his intervention, underscores not independence, but the contrary,
since the pig is not choosing his color. However, the pig’s wish is not to be either pink or green, but to be different, and is happily so at the end of the tale as the following lines indicate: “And as he looked at the strange sea of green pigs that lay around him, most of which were crying like babies, he smiled, and he thanked goodness, and he thanked God, because he knew that he was still, and he always would be, just a little bit peculiar” (67). Since in the play the missing girl is found alive, covered in green pain, it can be surmised that *The Pillowman*, at last, advocates for singularity.

Given the contextual circumstances (a military dictatorship), the act of writing is constructed as subversive, even when, as Katurian claims, that is not the author’s intention. Katurian’s own intentions and his apparent lack of political agenda are irrelevant. His tales are insurrectionary. They portray, consistently, the abuse of children by authority figures and, too often, the triumph of those figures over the children. In the political circumstances of this unnamed state, they represent allegories of abuses of power and name resistance, in spite of the personal price paid for it, as the only ethical choice possible. Facing death, Katurian’s stubborn choice to safeguard his stories should not be interpreted as a narcissistic foible, but rather as an act of courage against oblivion and oppression.

Ultimately, both Daulte and McDonagh propose fiction’s ability to generate new subjectivities vested with agency and independence, in spite of limiting historical constraints. Daulte’s Martha is freer and stronger than the real Marta Stutz. Her life, and absence, is imagined not as a fateful demise but rather as a willing leap into a rabbit hole of possibilities. In *The Pillowman*, Katurian’s tales can be constructed as psychotherapeutic, a way to expurgate some of the pain he and his brother experience, but, more poignantly, the stories highlight agency and survival. Each in his own way, but with several crucially overlapping techniques, both
Daulte and McDonagh reclaim the power of fiction to render individuality inalienable, impervious to context, to societal norms, to conventions of genre, to brutalism—impervious even to the ever-present and equally inviolate singleness of all the other players.

If individuality can be said to be inalienable, it is valuable, in this final chapter, to consider a pair of monologues, each from precisely such an individual perspective. Luis Cano’s *Socavón* and Dermot Bolger’s *The Holy Ground* are both monologues in which a spouse confesses to having killed a partner. In each, we are treated to a profoundly bleak portrait of marital relations. In each, too, the confession itself appears to be suspect—that is, the monologues’ speakers are unreliable reporters of the events they describe. Although their voices are quite different—Argentine Cano’s Ulisito appears to be schizophrenic whereas Irish Bolger’s Monica, putatively in touch with consensual reality, is consumed by her own loneliness and isolation—they have much in common. Both characters describe their own pain, and in so doing they tell a tale of the failure to achieve human bonding in a world in which archaic gender roles can too often inhibit truthful relationships.

Dermot Bolger and Luis Cano chose to frame their plays referencing a previous literary work: *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner in the case of *Socavón*; and the traditional Irish Folk song that provides the title for *The Holy Ground*. Each frame serves to call into question the role narratives and fiction play in delineating gender roles. Both frames serve as a departure point from which to examine gender construction and the nature of romantic love. Using his frame, each playwright is able to open the door to rethinking the tensions between the ideal and the real; and then, through murder, they each drive this tension to its most dramatic consequences.

In *Socavón* and in *The Holy Ground*, Cano and Bolger present the audience with traumatized bodies, of both the perpetrators and the victims of gendered violence, that suggest collapsed masculinities. In their consideration of hegemonic masculinity, R. W. Connell and James W.
Messerschmidt state that:

[…] the hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, not a pattern of simple domination based on force. Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities. Also well supported is the original idea that hegemonic masculinity need not be the commonest pattern in the everyday lives of boys and men. Rather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g. professional sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them. (846)

In both plays the male protagonists, Ulisito and the murdered Myles, are marginal individuals unable to embody a hegemonic masculinity, an incapacity that ultimately destroys their own lives and the lives of their partners. Gay McAuley, in her definition of the concept of vanishment, describes how rejected or abjected individuals can disappear from public discourse, and as a result from public consciousness (154-55). In the context of Argentine and Irish politics, both monologues offer a critique of the emasculation process experienced by many males during the 1990s in those two countries. Reflecting on the impact of Menem’s policies, Caroline Rocha and Elizabeth Montes Garcés describe how “[t]his process of emasculation experienced by male victims not only challenges the concept of Argentina as a civilized society but also, more importantly, alludes to the impact of socioeconomic variables on the roles that men perform in Argentine society” (xxvi). In a similar fashion, Brian Singleton, exploring the rise of male-centered monologues in the Celtic Tiger period (1995-2007), underscores how:

[…] these monologues do not feature hegemonic males performing authority. If anything, they are replete with socially subordinated individuals who are performing their own abjection in a society in which they have lost their place. Further, the men represented form very much a muted group in themselves, confined to a non-discursive and inverted self-loathing, whose alcohol dependence both permits them to cope with their subordinated position, but ultimately causes their social self-destruction. (71)

While in The Holy Ground, it is Monica, and not her deceased husband (Myles), who details the couple’s self-destruction, the collapse of a hegemonic patriarchal vision of Ireland lies at the
play’s core. The violence which ensues in that monologue and in Socavón is a form of civil resistance, a reaction against the dehumanizing effects of the neoliberal economic policies of Argentina and Ireland in the late 1990s. As Rocha and Montes Garcés have noted, the deterioration in the standard of living for many Argentine citizens under Menem’s second term (1995-2000) meant that, “the concept of citizenship was devalued as citizens were abandoned by the state, deprived of social benefits, and exposed to its excesses and abuses, many started questioning the advantages of abiding by the law” (xv). Marginalized by these policies, and trapped in a menial existence, Monica and Ulisito commit a barbarous act in an attempt to alter their ordinary lives—and to gain significance.

Socavón is the more complex of the two plays. It is written in what appears to be a stream-of-consciousness fashion, and as the monologue unfolds, it becomes difficult for the viewer to follow not just the events of the narrative, but also which voice is speaking, who is being addressed, and to what purpose. Written for a solo male performer,29 there are at least four distinct voices delivered by the actor: Ulisito (the presumed killer); his wife Marita, the victim; a policeman (Domingo); and Ulisito’s mother. Ulisito is further splintered into two separate consciousnesses—he is both the man purchasing the murder weapon, and the employee of the hardware store where that knife was sold. Ulisito is questioned by Domingo regarding his whereabouts at the time of Marita’s murder and the nature of their relationship. Did he love her? Was she unfaithful to him? Why did he fail to attend her funeral? Ulisito, delivering a cacophony of voices, appears to be schizophrenic—mixing the past (conversations with his mother, where he used to live) with the present (description of his hands, his rambling thoughts) in an

29The original staging, at the Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas in October of 1999, was directed by Luis Cano himself and featured one single actor, Osmar Núñez.
increasingly frantic tone, one that ends with the description of Marita’s dead body covered in blood. While glimpses of the crime and its surrounding circumstances punctuate the monologue, the play does not provide the audience with a coherent plot or storyline, but rather it draws its meaning/s from the circular repetition of images and tropes.

In *The Holy Ground*, Monica recounts for the audience the progressive demise of what began as a happy marriage. At a moment shortly after Myles’ funeral, Monica describes for the spectators how she met her husband, his naïve understanding of sexual matters, and the discovery that he was sterile, a terrible blow to his sense of manhood. Angry, disappointed, and unable to communicate his feelings to his wife, Myles becomes heavily involved with conservative Catholic politics, and coerces his wife to follow his path. Monica is incapable of finding contentment in the Church Myles has turned to for comfort, and she grows increasingly lonely and isolated. She describes her attempts to kill Myles by adding rat poison to his meals. When Myles dies, Monica, consumed with guilt, confesses her actions to the doctors, only to find out that her husband’s death from a blood clot was completely unrelated to the warfarin Monica had been administering. In fact, warfarin, as a blood thinner, might have prolonged his life rather than shortened it; and the doctors tell Monica to go home and keep her mouth shut.

Just as in *Socavón*, in which the male performer delivers four voices, Monica, albeit consciously, allows the other characters to speak through her. The text underscores how at different moments Monica becomes Myles, one of the church elders, the doctors, and Deirdre, a friend from Monica’s youth, among others. In the last, bleak moments of the play Monica, addressing Myles, blames him above all for depriving her of Christ as a form of solace, since when she attempts to pray, Myles, stern and righteous, stands in her mind beside God.

These summaries make it apparent that while the plays are performed by only one actor,
the characters embody fragmented subjectivities that are polyvocal and to some extent dialogical. What, then, constitutes a monologue? And what sorts of monologues are Socavón and The Holy Ground? Clare Wallace, elaborating on Deborah Geis’s work, states that “the form (postmodern monologue) is less engaged with character development or narrative progress than with theatricality, parody and ambivalence” (9). Of perhaps even greater significance for this chapter, though, is Wallace’s claim that “the use of persona as a means of social critique, the undermining of gender stereotypes through role-play, blurring the outlines of the autobiographical, ‘authentic’ subject, are recurrent features of, in particular, a genre of solo performance that has developed in the United States (and beyond) since the 1980’s” (13).

Both Ulisito and Monica present the audience with fragmented selves. These presentations underscore an inability to establish a coherent narrative of the self, while simultaneously highlighting the constricting, violent gender roles that the monologues call into question—and ultimately reject. Their tormented bodies, displaced from society and silenced by ruthless patriarchal discourse, illuminate for the audience their atomized lives: they are characters alienated both from themselves and from others. In their summary of the core definition of trauma theory, Mick Wallis and Patrick Duggan note:

So trauma theory suggests a performative bent in the traumatic suffering itself—the trauma symptom is a rehearsal, re-presentation, re-performance of the experience of the trauma event, which irrupts unbidden into the sufferer’s daily life. The normative assumption of trauma theory is that the sufferer needs to re-establish their life narrative-incorporating the event as past-in order to gain closure. (2)

Each unable to take hold of the narrative of his or her life, Monica and Ulisito remain subject to trauma, while concurrently their selves are displaced from society. Ulisito’s inability to communicate to the interrogating officer, Domingo, whether he was implicated in his wife’s murder underscores the fact that Ulisitio remains subject to a trauma he can’t narrate, and
therefore can’t transcend. In contrast, Monica can tell her audience how she was emotionally abused by her husband, and yet, her ultimate failure to generate a new vision for her life, informs us that she remains stuck in an unending circle of abuse, in spite of Myles’ death.

In their discussion of contemporary Canadian monologues, Jennifer Harvie and Richard Knowles argue that monologues can be dialogical by incorporating multiple voices into a single performance in which “a variety of voices, styles, languages, or ‘speech genres’ contest with one another on equal terms, with no single voice dominating. No voice gains authority by being more articulate, more intelligent, more erudite” (2). Relevant to this chapter is Harvie and Knowles’ investigation of how dialogical monologues, with their conflicting voices, are “key to the deprivilenging of absolute, authoritarian discourse” (1). What discourses are Monica and Ulisito contesting? What subjectivities do the monologues give rise to? How do they call into question past and present forms of violence in their respective countries? By examining the conflation of voices represented in Socavón and The Holy Ground, this chapter’s analysis will illuminate the link between former and contemporary gender constructions in Argentina and Ireland, and its effects on the marginalized subjects recreated in the monologues. Written before the collapse of both economies, the monologues nevertheless foreground the social ailments that will afflict citizens in Argentina and Ireland in the early 2000s. As with the rest of the preceding plays in this study, Cano and Bolger critique and unravel the narratives that drive Monica and Ulisito to their demise, and in the process, encourage audiences to envision an alternate present, and future, other than the one portrayed in Socavón and The Holy Ground.

Within the landscape of Argentine theatre of the 1990s, Luis Cano is among the most prolific writers of his generation.\(^{30}\) The heading for one of his interviews with Carlos Pacheco,\(^ {30} \)

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\(^{30}\)As a playwright, theatre director, and poet Cano has written more than twenty plays and received, among others, the following awards: the Fundación El Libro award (1997 y 2000), the New Plays of Mercosur’s authors award, the
published in the Argentine daily *La Nación*, was titled “The Hyperactive Luis Cano,” and his long list of published works underscores his many accomplishments. Ian Herber and Nicole Ledereg have also considered his work:

The written and dramatic text is undergoing changes similar to those to be seen in staged works. Reading, one is confronted with characters who have lost their identity and wholeness, who have no personal history, who are dominated by ambiguity and the absence of definition, who exist more as stock figures than as the characters expected of traditional theatre. These are the characteristics which appear clearly in a play by Luis Cano which has just won first prize in a city playwriting contest. Its title is *La Bufera* (the Swamp). Cano is also the author of *Socavón* (the Great Void). (3)

Indeed, Ulisito functions as an absence more than a presence, a void into which reverberating echoes of other characters continually deny him wholeness. While Ulisito’s body is evident to the audience, his mind and the interconflating speeches he delivers seem to highlight the absence of a coherent subjectivity. Just as Ulisito’s conscience is inhabited by several voices, the text of *Socavón*, preceded by an epigraph from *Woyzeck*, harkens back to an earlier literary text, similarly concerned with gender violence and emasculated male figures. The quote reads as follows: “¿Y este cuchillo? Está muy afilado. ¿Quiere cortarse el cuello? Se lo dejo a buen precio. Pero si quiere hacerlo, que no sea en vano. Tendrá una muerte económica” (88).

The opening line of *Socavón* is: “Do you recognize this knife?” (89), a choice which seamlessly blends one text into the other. In fact, *Woyzeck* seems to act as a blueprint for *Socavón*, both structurally and thematically. *Woyzeck* was written between 1866 and 1867 but not staged until 1913. The text was left unfinished, since Büchner died before its completion, and its collection of scenes, without acts, left in no particular order. However, the play became very popular and has been widely staged. As Waltraud Mitgutsch states, “Woyzeck is an archetype:

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Adai Argentores award, the international "Jorge Luis Borges" Prize (1999), and the National Prize of the Culture and Communication Secretary (2001).
the archetype of late 19th century and early 20th century everyman on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, the archetypal underdog, passive and bewildered, almost featureless, more defined by what happens to him than by his own actions” (152). As a low-ranking soldier Woyzeck is abused by his superiors and further dehumanized by the doctors he submits to for experimental treatment in exchange for money. He is an everyman, speaking for the many. While it becomes apparent, as the play progresses, that Woyzeck’s descent into madness is a progressively unremitting path, in Socavón Ulisito is already mentally ill at rise. What brings Ulisito to his actions? Is he an agent or a victim of his circumstances? Ulisito is, like the everyman Woyzeck who prefigures him, an obscure man, isolated and lonely, who commits a terrifying crime—that crime his only action, in an attempt to transcend his invisible life.

Since Socavón does not have any characters, just one speaker through whom we hear a polyphony of voices, the act of deciphering who Ulisito might be, among all the other utterances, is an endeavor fraught with pitfalls and uncertainty. However, the opaque, almost elusive quality of the text underscores how marginal and vanished Ulisito has become—even from his own life. Let us begin with his name, Ulisito. During the first three scenes of the play, the audience does not know who the speaker is. It is only by the fourth scene, in the following utterance, that we learn the name of our protagonist:

No estaba más mi casa. Se la habían llevado. A ella, a mi casa. Todos los vecinos estaban mirando pero nadie vio nada cuando se la llevaron. Ahora no sé donde vivo. Mamá me dijo aquella vez en voz baja, pegándome la boca en la oreja. / Cuando quieras volver, ulisito, acá está tu pieza esperándote igual que siempre. No tengas vergüenza de volver. No es por mí ni por tu padre que te lo digo, nene. Es por el bien tuyo. / Era una mujer hermosa. / Mi madre…/ Su esposa. (95)

Readers and spectators might experience the conflating speeches differently. The bodily presence of a single actor encourages audiences to consider Ulisito as schizophrenic while for readers it becomes harder to decipher the separate voices embodied in Ulisito’s discourse. However, both experiences underscore a fragmented subjectivity.

The dashes on the quotation are mine to signal the additional space left on the page between, what appear to be, different voices.
The name Ulisito is used by his mother to refer to the character, who must be called Ulises. In this diminutive form, it can be interpreted as form of endearment, of course, but more centrally as an act of emasculation of an otherwise adult male on the part of his mother. In fact, in the text, the first letter of the name is not capitalized, as it should be, given that it is a proper name, but rather it appears in lower case. All the other names mentioned in the play (Marita, Domingo, Marcelino) do have the corresponding uppercase letter. So Ulises, in Cano’s contemporary version, becomes an antihero who cannot even lay claim to his own name. In a reversal of the eponymous myth, Ulisito is not returning home after having fought his enemies; rather his house itself, as if by magic, vanishes, and no neighbors can account for its disappearance. Ulisito is homeless, disoriented, and lost in an urban landscape that has transformed itself from familiar into alien—and is not Penelope who awaits him, but his mother. Furthermore, his mother notes that his childhood room always awaits him and that he should not be ashamed to return to it. In fact, she only beckons him to return for his own good, nene (kid/child). Again here, the term nene infantilizes the male character and reverts him to a prepubescent stage; just as the mother’s urging him to return—speaking directly into his ear, an oddly intimate gesture between an adult mother and her son—calls attention to Ulisito’s emasculated self.

It is unclear why the mother advises her adult son to return home: is it because his wife has been unfaithful to him, or because he is unable to make a living for himself and requires parental financial support? The answer to both questions is intertwined with the shifting gender expectations which were unfolding in Argentina in the 1990s. According to Rocha (“Masculinities in Contemporary Argentine”11), the transition from a welfare state model to a neoliberal globalized economic system has meant that:
If men are classified according to their economic accomplishments, the failure to attain financial success drastically erodes a man’s gender identity and diminishes his sociodomestic importance. Thus, it has become de rigueur to refer to masculinities as experiencing a crisis resulting from the expansion of global capitalism, which undermines patriarchy and men’s status in society. (11)

CoRocha’s reflection serves to illuminate Ulisito’s plight under global capitalism. It is unclear if Ulisito is the owner of a hardware store, or an employee in it; however, the mother’s urging to return home and her acknowledgment that a room is always ready for his return, whenever that might be, suggest that Ulisito’s economic status might be precarious. The link between unemployment, or diminished economic standing, and violent behavior from men towards their partners is supported by the research conducted in Argentina and Mexico by psychologist María L. Jiménez-Guzmán in 2013. Jiménez-Guzmán’s study concluded that “[t]he tragedy of violent-unemployed-men is that they are doomed to recycle their discomfort, composed of frustration, anger, blame, resentment, which will led to illness, loneliness, and isolation. Victims of the economic system unconsciously become victimizers of themselves and the persons close to them” (97). In Socavón Ulisito experiences all the symptoms described by Jiménez-Guzmán. Although the study was conducted in 2013, the conditions under which violent behavior by unemployed men towards their partners arises were present in the Argentina of the 1990s. In fact, according to the research conducted by Ana C. Dinerstein, under Menem’s economic policies: “In August 1995, official statistics highlighted that since the beginning of the convertibility plan, unemployment had risen from 6% in 1991 to 18.5% in 1995. Namely unemployment doubled in two years, reaching around 2,4000,000 people. In the capital city of Buenos Aires (where half the unemployed are concentrated) the rate of unemployment went up to 20.2% in May 1995” (2). Unequal income distribution, another consequence of Menem’s economic policies, was also found to be determinant of domestic violence. A report capturing the findings of a regional
seminar concerned with domestic violence in Latin America and the Caribbean published in 1998 stated that: “Increasingly unequal income distribution is one of the chief factors fueling the rise in domestic violence in Latin America and the Caribbean. […] Studies in the region show that one out of every four Latin American and Caribbean women have been the victims of physical abuse at home, while 60 to 85 percent have been subjected to some degree of psychological violence over the past year” (Gatti, 1). Ulisito, just as Jiménez-Guzmán’s research suggests, becomes a victim and an agent of violence in light of his diminish socioeconomic standing in the Buenos Aires of the 1990’s.

By the time the play commences, Ulisito is profoundly mentally ill, but in his monologue there are clues to indicate an even earlier mental disintegration. He describes to Domingo his relationship with his neighbors and patrons in the following terms: “Mucha gente pasa que ni mira. Algunos que viven de años acá y hacen como que no lo conocen a uno. Pasan de largo. Algunos que espian por la mirilla de la puerta pero no quieren saludar” (96). All his attempts to overcome a lack of social interaction with people only lead to additional awkwardness and loneliness: “A veces trato de ser amable. De disimular, digamos. Para no asustar. Busco un aspecto. Lo que pasa es que hace falta poner la voz, hacer el gesto, saludar a todos. Pero me miran con miedo. Ser agradable asusta. No saludo más” (101). Ulisito’s awareness that his attempts at normalcy generate fear serves to further confirm that his behavior is perceived with uneasiness by his peers. His inability to relate to people in the public sphere is compounded with an increasing lack of communication with his wife. While earlier in the monologue, Ulisito comments on her wife’s beauty, as the police questioning continues details about his unhappy marriage start creeping in, as in the following excerpt: “También me preparaba hígado. Hígado saltado. A mí no me gusta el hígado, me cae mal. Le dije que no me gustaba pero siguió

The above lines capture one of the few moments in which Ulisitio appears lucid and able to describe his failed marriage. Ulisito’s attempts to communicate his desires to his wife are met with her disregard, leading to further resentment and isolation on his part. In his relationship with the neighbors, Ulisito describes his deliberate efforts to replicate “normal” behavior, unsuccessfully. By contrast, Marita, after their three-year marriage, has become the consummate actress. A more striking example of what Ulisito considers a blissful moment in his marriage is his description of Marita’s cooking: “Lo único que me acuerdo es de ella pelando zanahorias. No le gustaba pelar zanahorias. Yo la miraba pelar mientras hablábamos de cualquier otra cosa. No podía dejar de mirarle las manos, el cuchillo, las zanahorias. Veía las zanahorias todas peladas, como muertas. Alienaditas sobre la mesada. Como dedos. Y pensaba: son cuatro, ¡falta una! ¡Falta una!” (93). Even in what in the surface appears as a moment of domestic peace, Ulisito’s rendition of his thoughts is highly disturbing and filled with violence. The carrots, lined up on the table, like fingers, are mutilated by his wife under Ulisito’s panicked gaze. Perhaps aware of his own murderous inclinations, Ulisito is unconsciously wishing and fearing to have his hands, responsible for Marita’s death, maimed.

Indeed, Ulisito’s obsession with his hands is a recurring image in the monologue. At the beginning of the play, he takes pride in his dexterity and details how his hands have a mind of their own (“Las manos piensan.” 89), but as the play progresses, a new, darker set of images emerges. Blending echoes from *Macbeth*, with obsessive, pejorative, and demeaning comments regarding his clumsiness, his hands become a constant source of neurotic remarks. Perhaps
displacing his guilt to a body part serves to disassociate Ulisito from the horrible crime he has committed. It could also be the case that his hands, originally portrayed as dexterous, strong, and similar to his grandfather’s, become a burden once Ulisito is no longer employed or able to provide appropriately for his wife. His idle hands, at that point, become the painful manifestation of wasted opportunities—and in time, responsible for Marita’s murder. The conflation of mental illness, unemployment, and violent behavior towards women or children has been documented in the research conducted by Jiménez-Guzmán. In fact, describing her initial interest on the link between gender equity and precarization and unemployment Jiménez-Guzmán states that:

…this research project came about only as a personal concern derived from the articles that began to appear approximately about four years ago, reporting several cases of males with violent behavior that murdered their families and later committed suicide (or at least tried). The media attributed these cases to mental health problems. No one referred to the conditions of “life demands” on these subjects. After further research, it was discovered that these men had lost their jobs. (97)

The progressive sense of inadequacy that Ulisito experiences, particularly evident in the transition from a positive towards a very negative description of his hands, illuminates the increasing deterioration of his sense of self-esteem. Jiménez-Guzmán’s research establishes a link as well between the loss of economic security and the sense of self-esteem of the men in her study (97). Rocha, examining the economic changes that afflicted Argentina in the 1990s, reaches a similar conclusion: “…as men were laid off and their sources of income disappeared, their incontestable role as breadwinners began to disintegrate. Their loss of social status and privilege translated into a diminished sense of authority in both the private and public spheres” (12). The play never establishes clearly whether Ulisito is unemployed or not, but in spite of the

33 The article was published in 2013, so the cases Jiménez-Guzmán refers to took place years after Cano’s play was written. However, the results of the study can be applied to the 1990s as well since as documented earlier a high rate unemployment and income inequality were found to be determinant of domestic violence in the region around the time Socavón was published.
lack of conclusive evidence of his diminished status, there are clues that suggest he is without work: his mother’s urging him to return home, his wife disregarding his food preferences, and lastly the freedom he has to wander Buenos Aires.

Uncomfortable in his own home, Ulisito, true to his name, takes to roaming the city, in aimless walks that lead nowhere. In his analysis of urban spaces in Argentine theatre David William Foster considers how: “… se inscribe la cultura en el estudio de la geografía, en primera instancia cómo la cultura acontece (se crea, se consume, se interpreta y, en una palabra, se vive) en espacios que son descriptos en términos geográficos (literal o metafóricamente) y, en una segunda instancia, en el sentido en que lo geográfico (otra vez en un sentido literal o metafórico) se inscribe en la cultura” (“Teatro argentino y espacio urbano: postulaciones para una teorización” 69). Foster also reflects on which spaces are considered feminine (the home) and which are considered masculine (the bar) and the extent to which different Argentine plays underscore, or question, their presence within the private and public sphere of men and women.

In Socavón, Cano evokes a labyrinthine city, one that is menacing and alien, and rejects Ulisito. The urban landscape described by Ulisito is filled with awkward social interactions and disorienting features, and none of the iconic urban signifiers (the café, the bar, the movie theatre) are present. As such, the city Ulisito roams appears vacant, with only ghostly appearances of spying neighbors, visions of a potential double, and remembrances of his childhood home. Among the items Ulisito carries with him, there is an odd photograph of a city corner, in Sáenz Peña, with no one in it. When questioned about the nature of this strange picture, Ulisito can only offer a descriptive reply of the image:

¿Que tiene ahí?/ ¿Una foto?/ ¿Qué? ¿Una foto de quién? ¿De Marita?/Bueno…es una de… es de Saénz Peña./ ¿Sáenz Peña?/ De una esquina de Sáenz Peña./ ¿Me la muestra?
¿Esto es Sáenz Peña?/ Una parte nada más./ ¿Por qué tiene una foto de Sáenz Peña?/ Yo viví ahí./ ¿En qué calle?/ No sé. La esquina no tenía cartel./ Pero no hay nada en esta esquina. / No. Está vacía./ ¿Para que lleva esta foto en el bolsillo?/ Me olvidé. (99)

The photograph portrays his childhood neighborhood, not his present home. There is no mention in the text of the location within Buenos Aires of the house he shared with Marita. Has Ulisito become so lost in this large metropolis that he must carry a picture to find his way home? The fact that it is his mother’s (never his father’s) home that he seeks to return to further underscores his emasculated nature. And yet, his mother’s home, signaled by the empty corner, emerges in the text as both a site of comfort, and perhaps love, but also as the originating point of Ulisito’s peculiar nature, and maybe mental illness. Eventually, Ulisito remembers why he is carrying the picture with him, but his reasoning is so vague and opaque that its meaning remains unclear, except to acknowledge that his mother’s home is both the point of origin and the point of return: “Ya me acordé por qué tengo esa foto. La de Sáenz Peña. Porque en esa esquina anduve de chico. Como que ahí fue que empezó todo para mí.[…] A veces vuelvo a mirar esa esquina” (105).

Perhaps, the viewer cannot help but ponder, by the beginning of everything, Ulisito refers not just to the physical location of his childhood home, but more poignantly, to the unfolding of his violent nature. The fact that Ulisito is trying to return to his childhood home, a private, socially constructed feminine space, highlights the character’s inability to embody an assertive masculine public persona, and in doing so, offers a critique of a masculinity in crisis.

The location of Ulisito’s former home is also relevant in examining the decline of social services and the wellfare state under Menem. The neighborhood, known as Presidente Roque Saénz Peña, is one of three unrecognized sections encompassed within the Saavedra neighborhood. Originally called Barrio 1° de Marzo it was the first public housing endeavor implemented by Juan Perón’s government (1946-1955 and 1973-74) in fulfillment of his
campaign promise to provide adequate housing to all (Eduardo Criscuolo). While the neighborhood has undergone many changes since its earlier construction, it nevertheless represents a form of socially conscious investment on the part of the government absent from the neoliberal model of the 1990s. Ulisito’s return to his mother’s house can also be construed as a critique by Cano of the vacuum of fair housing policies and the brutal displacement of many to marginal living conditions during this period. According to Emanuela Gano:

Even though squatting was a frequent occurrence in Buenos Aires throughout the twentieth century, its incidence increased in the late 1990’s, progressing hand in hand with the growth of poverty and unmet demand for affordable housing. Despite the large number of vacant properties, apartment rents often exceeded the means of many. […] By 2000, it was estimated that about 200,000 families lived in casas tomadas (houses occupied by squatters) scattered all over Buenos Aires. (84)

Ulisito’s attachment to the photograph of the empty corner of Saénz Peña highlights to the audience the diminish citizenships embodied in a neoliberal economy where fair housing is no longer part of Menem’s political agenda.

In his incoherent and fragmented utterances, Ulisito volunteers a few glimpses of his youth. It is marked by a violence that suggests a lack of empathy and a disregard for human suffering. When walking around the neighborhood with some of his friends, one of them, Miguelito, falls into a ditch.34 Rather than helping him out, Ulisito abandons him there, which causes Miguelito to contract pneumonia, since he is not found until the following Monday. Ulisito does not appear perturbed by his past actions, nor does he see a connection between his present circumstances and prior acts of violence. However, his parents, just like the spying neighbors Ulisito resents, appear aware of his strange nature, as the following excerpts indicate:

34The literal translation of Socavón is ditch, not the Great Void. The French translation for the play is Effondrement. I will address the significance of the title, and its different translations, later in the chapter.
“Me miró un rato y me dijo: en el fondo sos bueno. Yo sacudí la cabeza. […] Entonces ella le dijo a mi padre que yo no estaba normal. Está triste. Le dijo a papá que tenía miedo de que yo me enfermara. Que le parecía que estaba escondiendo algo. […] Sí, el pobre está muy callado viejo. Entonces decidieron vigilarme más” (106). The accuracy of the conversation between Ulisito’s parents is irrelevant, however; what the passage illuminates is the perception, in Ulisito’s mind, that he has been the subject of spying for many years, at the hands of both strangers, and family members. Perhaps it is in an attempt to escape this constant sense of surveillance that Ulisito is increasingly drawn to endless walks around Buenos Aires.

Ulisito’s preferred walks lead him to the square where he disregards the “Don’t Step on the Grass” signs. Domingo, the policeman, reminds him that he is breaking the law by venturing onto the lawn, but Ulisito is more troubled by the recent change in the square’s infrastructure, as it can be seen in the following lines: “Bueno, es que antes había esas piedritas de ladrillo molido. Ahora pusieron piso con baldosa. No me gustan las baldosas, me hacen pensar. […] Lo que me gustan son las hojas que se pudren. Es rico el olor. Seguro viene el cuidador y se las lleva, después. […] Es un buen trabajo el ‘cuidador de plaza’. El hombre se encarga del pasto y de las cosas que se tiran a la basura” (100-1).

Ulisito’s discomfiture with the recent tiling of the park’s paths gives us a sense of his obsessive-compulsive nature, but also of his preference for the green areas within the city. Foster’s analysis of urban spaces examines how the square becomes the preferred site for romantic love, but the plaza created by Cano lies in stark contrast to the common images associated with it. The plaza described by Ulisito is a place of rotten leaves and garbage that need to be cleaned up. Rather than an oasis within the urban landscape, the plaza becomes a place where regulations and the implementation of order hinder the possibility to walk on a lawn
and experience freedom. Paradoxically, Ulisito, in spite of his yearnings to walk on gravel, rather than paths, and as such, to reject the urban landscape, considers being a park ranger a good job. Perhaps Ulisito’s desire to become the man in charge of managing the plaza—to collect the garbage and properly dispose of the rotten leaves—is his feeble attempt to embody a masculinity that gives him, however petty, a minimal sense of empowerment.

The vacant spaces evoked by Ulisito, a city of rotten garbage and spectral figures on the brink of emotional collapse, illuminate the ravaging effects of Menem’s economic policies. The empty city, where no one can provide help, is configured as a maze—one much like Ulisito’s mind—where constant searching yields no clear answers; only further confusion and loss. In one of the most disturbing utterances of the play, Ulisito describes his encounter with an unknown male, disheveled and exhausted, who begs him for money. It is unclear if this man is in fact a stranger, or perhaps a doubling of Ulisito, but as reflected in this excerpt, the imaginary or real encounter leaves Ulisito shaken:

Levanto la vista y en la puerta de casa veo un fulano. Era como un paquete de ropa con un poco de pelo arriba. Esa es toda la descripción del tipo. No sé si era que había escupido sangre o qué le había pasado. Yo no sabía qué hacer. Me arrimé. Estaba temblando. Él tiembla. ¿Quiere que lo lleve al hospital? No. Está agarrado a la pared con un hilo de saliva que colgándole un rincón de la boca. ¿Quiere que vaya a buscar a alguien? El desconocido derrama más sangre. Se ve que tiene una herida en alguna parte.[…] En la calle no hay nadie a esa hora. Entonces se me ocurre una idea completamente estúpida. Saco del bolsillo una moneda de cincuenta centavos. […] Se la guardo enseguida. Empiezo a correr. Trato de no darme la vuelta. ¡Yo no hice nada malo! Voy por la calle. Me pierdo. (102)

Whether or not the figure was Ulisito’s doppelgänger, the text captures the angst and distress caused by an aggressive neoliberal agenda that left many subject to economic and social vulnerability. The public display of suffering in this description contrasts with the rhetoric of financial wealth, consumerism, and progress portrayed in the media under Menem’s presidency.
Eradicated from public discourse, the unknown male’s ravaged body rises in stark contrast to the government’s narrative of successful restructuring of the economy—and here, the ravaged body reclaims the public space from which he has been rejected.

Ulisito’s commission of murder raises questions regarding gender equity and domestic abuse in the face of collapsing masculinities: is Marita’s death a consequence of Ulisito’s slipping power? Or is the inverse true—that her murder represents a successful reclaiming of the masculine hegemony? Barbara Sutton’s research suggests that, in spite of some improvements in the treatment of women in the post-Junta years, gender inequity and domestic violence still remain a subject of concern in Argentina. According to her research, the arrival of democracy did not alter the preferred, westernized ideal of femininity (white and middle-class). To the contrary, in fact, she asserts that “in the latter part of the twentieth century, the legacies of state terrorism and its bodily discipline regime, the increasing commercial display of sexualized female bodies in the media during the democratic transition, and the cult of consumerism and bodily appearance during the neoliberal 1990s all have bearing on constructions of femininity” (65). In Socavón, Marita appears only in fragments, a disembodied presence that Ulisito sometimes channels, but in these few glimpses the audience can grasp the struggles of a lower-class woman enmeshed in a troubled marriage. While Ulisito’s mother appears as figure of solace, and in some ways an enabler of Ulisito’s violence (or at the very least in denial of his bizarre behavior), Marita’s only sentence in the play is a rejection of Ulisito’s sexual advances: “Me acuerdo que se apoyaba delante de la estufa. Una estufita vieja. Yo pasaba y la acariciaba. Nos quedábamos así. Al rato me decía soltame que me voy a quemar el culo. Soltame que me voy a quemar el culo” (98).

The domestic space described by Ulisito is humble (“una estufita vieja”) and dominated
by his wife, who can, in no uncertain terms, push him away from her body and reject his futile attempts at intimacy. Marita is also described in the text as a fragmented, commodified body, subject to Ulisito’s male gaze, and to the damaging gossip of neighbors, as captured in the following lines: “¿Tenía el vestido lila? ¿Se acuerda que color era el vestido de Marita? / Mire no la veía tan seguido…/ Se pintaba. Linda. Se empolvaba la cara. Llevaba medias rosas” (98). 35 Marita is reduced to highly gendered practices, applying make-up and wearing pink stockings, and only her physical attributes are mentioned. Sutton’s research emphasizes the fact that, under democracy, Argentina remains a highly gendered society, one with heteronormative expectations of its women. During Menem’s presidency, the cult of the body (particularly but by no means exclusively for women) became prevalent. This cult served to hide some of the social ailments that had been fueled by the implementation of neoliberal economic policies (70). However:

Poor and working-class women were already struggling to pick up the pieces left by the economic changes. As Moncarz (1997, 55) observed, at the same time that more and more women were impoverished, marginalized, and excluded by the neoliberal economic project, the model of a woman ‘free from conflict’ and intensely focused on her bodily appearance was being advanced: enter the ‘light woman.’ Itkin (1996) called this idealized model of womanhood the light woman to underscore the untroubled nature of her existence—- that is, and individualistic, politically uncommitted, socially unaware woman mostly concerned about her looks and personal well being. Moncarz suggest that while this model did not fit all women, it nonetheless exerted a widespread pressure towards compliance and homogenization. (Bodies in Crisis Sutton, 72)

Ulisito’s description of Marita recreates a woman attempting to comply with the bodily expectations placed on her by her culture, despite the limited resources of their marriage.

An indication of their socio-economic status is provided not just by Ulisito’s humble employment—if indeed he has any employment left at all at this moment—but also by the

35In this excerpt I identify Ulisito’s voice as the one wondering what color dress Marita was wearing as well as the one describing her stockings and make-up.
glimpses Cano affords us into their household and their properties. Ulisito mentions to Domingo that his car kept breaking down, and he was forced to sell it because he could not afford the repairs. He also mentions their old heating system, and how he and Marita needed to stand close to the heater, suggesting that their apartment is not properly insulated against the cold. Lastly, the food he despises, liver, is a cheap cut of meat, and Marita’s insistence on serving it, in spite of his dislike, might not be an act of disdain on her part for his wishes, but the only cut of meat they can afford. As stated in article by Peter Hudson published in 1999, the year that Socavón premiered, “According to Government statistics, a third of the residents of the greater Buenos Aires (the wealthiest area of the country) do not receive enough income to cover their basic food bill, and almost two-thirds receive less than the $1000 the experts estimate a family needs to cover its broader needs. The widening of the breach between the rich and the poor has been one of the decade’s constants” (177). In spite of their circumstances, Marita’s attention to her physical appearance underscores the pressure of working-class women to fulfill the expectations of Argentine society, even when this poses a financial hardship. Ulisito’s gaze and words reconstruct for us a female body very much invested in demarcating conventional gender differences; and yet, Marita’s refusal to fulfill Ulisito’s sexual desire, not allowing him to touch her buttocks, signals a disruption of the usual feminine assumptions: she is unwilling or unable to be submissive and compliant to her husband’s needs.

Marita’s potential promiscuity is suggested by Ulisito himself: “No tengo nada que reprocharle a ella, salvo una que otra cosita que no viene al caso. Andaba con otros. Uno que otro. Ella no me lo contaba. Yo se lo contaba a ella. No hablábamos de esas cosas. No es que anduviera con otros hombres. Ella era muy comprensiva conmigo” (104). Given that Ulisito is an unreliable narrator, it cannot be established with certainty that Marita was unfaithful, but what
can be ascertained is that Ulisito believes this to be the case. The eeriest remark is Ulisito’s confession that she did not reveal her affairs to him; rather, he informed her of them. Here again, we are given to understand that Ulisito spends his time wandering the city and, just like his neighbors, spying on Marita. In fact, later in the text, Ulisito retells how he witnessed an altercation between Marita and an unknown male, who addressed Marita as “vaca” (104). In this episode, it also appears as if Marita has been crying. Marita’s being is commodified not just by Ulisito, who evokes her only in pieces (make-up, stockings), but also by the unnamed lover, who addresses her as cow. The term cow, within Argentine culture, is highly symbolic, since it represents the country’s famous cattle industry while it also, in this instance, reduces the female body to an animal valued, primarily for its slaughtered flesh, and secondarily, for its milk, a maternal image. The metaphor reduces Marita to an object of consumption, while simultaneously evoking the conditions under which domestic abuse is more likely to occur. In Socavón, however, Marita refuses to comply with her husband’s sexual advances, and might be cheating on him with other men—which in turn further exacerbates Ulisito’s emasculated status, and contributes, at least in his mind, to her murder.

Ulisito’s progressive mental decline is further reflected in a subsequent description of Marita, in which he divests her of all individuality and agency, stating:

Se me mezcla Marita con otras imágenes. Una ensalada de Marita con otras mujeres. Algunas amigas, mujeres que vi en la calle, estatuas. Marita. ¿Vio? Se me confunde con … Marita. Se me junta la Marita de ayer con la de hace tres años, ¿sabe? La que conocí una vez con todas las demás Maritas que nunca conocí. De noche es una cosa terrible. Mejor me voy a caminar. (99)

Ulisito’s inability to codify his own wife here—is she a statue? A Frankenstein-salad of mixed female parts?—might be a subconscious displacement of his crime, an attempt to eradicate the murder from his memory. It is certainly a state which further propels him on his endless walks in
search of home forever receding from his grasp. The vacant spaces evoked by Ulisito, a city of rotten garbage and spectral figures on the brink of physical collapse, depicts the social disintegration of Buenos Aires, of which Marita seems to be one more victim. In the last sentence uttered by Ulisito, Marita’s physical presence is forever eradicated since he states: “¿Donde la dejé?” (113). Not even a statue, Marita becomes one more spectral figure, lost in a ghostly urban landscape.

Against the collapsing masculinity embodied by Ulisito, a contrasting ultra-masculine image emerges in the utterances of the questioning policeman, Domingo. As noted earlier, the staging of Socavón alternates between one and two performers, and when staged with two performers, both of them are male, one representing Ulisito, the other Domingo. In one of the most recent stagings of the play, in 2012 at El fino espacio escénico, directed by Carolina Ramos, the monologue was split between Mauricio Herrando and Franco Maraco,36 who were both dressed in a fashion evoking the Junta period. As explored by Diana Taylor, the Junta government operated in highly gendered ways, condoning appropriate forms of masculinity while feminizing and stigmatizing what it considered deviant forms of gender performance associated with politically subversive individuals. The Junta’s supporting men (los milicos), among them the military and police forces, wore western suits and short cropped hair, in contrast with the beards and longer hair of los subversivos. In the Ramos staging, the actors’ costumes conformed to the Junta stereotypes of appropriate and deviant masculinity; but both text and context of Cano’s play call into question Domingo’s masculinity as well as Ulisito’s.

36The information about this particular production can be found in the theatre blog: http://condesapizarnik.blogspot.com/2012/10/obra-de-teatro-socavon-de-luis-cano.html
In spite of the democracy, both military and police abuses, as well as corrupt practices, are a continuing subject of concern in Argentina. According to Kent Eaton, “Two decades after the end of a military regime that murdered upward of thirty thousand citizens, police criminality has emerged as one of the most pressing and intractable political problems in Argentina’s post authoritarian period” (6). The police were involved in some of the most disturbing cases of the 1990s, among them the beating of Walter Bulacio in a police station, the death of photojournalist José Luis Cabezas, and the torture in 2003 of Leyla Nazaar and Patricia Villalba (Eaton, 6). As these cases make clear, the authoritarian practices prevalent under the Junta years still pose a serious threat to an effective democracy. As such, Domingo’s aggressive questioning of Ulisito, a mentally unstable and confused character, can be construed as abusive, and more poignantly, as a haunting reminder of the lingering scars of the Junta years on the democratic present.37 While Ulisito’s murder of his wife makes him an agent of violence, the play also makes it clear that Ulisito himself is a victim of his dire socioeconomic circumstances, and of his inability to transcend discriminatory gender practices. Domingo, however, fails to gain the knowledge he seeks. He is unable to arrive at a clear understanding of Marita’s death, nor even to determine whether or not Ulisito is implicated in the crime. In the original production, Domingo’s authoritarian grip was further undermined by the choice to have just a single actor deliver the monologue. When staged as a monologue, Domingo’s voice is competing with other voices/discourses and ultimately failing to obtain control of the narrative. As such, Cano manages to critique, through the cacophony embedded in the text, the intersection of gender discrimination with previous forms of political repression. Additionally, by using Woyzeck as a

37The Argentine film El bonaerense (2000) directed by Pablo Trapero examines the Buenos Aires police corruption as well.
blueprint for *Socavón*, the plight of a contemporary everyday man, a victim of the catastrophic socio-economic measures taken under Menem, becomes, in time, a brutal agent of violence himself, just like his literary predecessor. Literary history borrows from the past, but so does political history, and *Socavón* seems to suggest that unless a more equitable society is created, many, but in this case, women in particular, will be the victims of a collapsed masculinity trying to reassert itself through gender violence.

The title of Cano’s play, *Socavón*, and its two translations—in French (“Effondrement”) and in English (“The Great Void”)—itself illuminates the decay of social interaction and crisis embodied by Ulisito. The literal translation of socavón into English is ditch, which signals the collapse of a public space, generally a road or sidewalk. Miguelito’s fall into a ditch is the only mention in the text of the word, and, in the context of the play, the word primarily serves to signal to the audience a moment of cruelty on Ulisito’s part. However, Miguelito’s unexpected fall also indicates how the ditch is seamlessly embedded into the public infrastructure and remains invisible until tragedy strikes.

Jimenez-Guzman’s initial decision to research gender violence was prompted by the news media’s failure to acknowledge, or even consider, that shifting economic conditions played a role in the commission of crimes. The decreasing self-esteem of the men she interviewed, as well as their acknowledgement that they turned their anger on their families, was invisible in public discourse. As we saw with McCauley’s research, these men and their stories were narratively “desaparecidos” (disappeared), made to vanish from the public discourse and the social fabric, seemingly just blending into a city that rejects them, since they have no economic value—just like Ulisito. The physical collapse of the city’s infrastructure, illustrated by the ditch, depicts collapse and decay as hidden in plain sight, and Ulisito’s indifference to his friend telegraphs the
dire consequences of a failure to act.

While Luis Cano belongs to a younger generation of playwrights, Dermot Bolger is a longstanding figure of the Irish literary canon. Bolger, born in 1959, is the oldest of all the playwrights of this study, and it could be argued that his work belongs to an earlier period of Irish literary history. However, his exploration of a shifting national Irish identity resonates with the themes explore by both Carr and McDonagh. As Christina Wald succinctly notes:

Bolger’s plays depict both the soothing, strengthening impact of experiencing a sense of home and the tormenting, deadening effect of a clinging vision of home that cannot be achieved. Related thematic concerns are the fear of change and the simultaneous need to feel being on a journey, the crisis of masculinity in the face of unemployment and women’s emancipation, the pain of (social) stigma and the loss of trust in the Catholic Church but, at the same time, the persistent need for faith and spirituality. (32)

His monologue, *The Holy Ground*, precedes the Celtic Tiger Period, and yet it prefigures the unfolding of the hegemonic patriarchal masculinity that subsequent playwrights, like Connor McPherson, will explore in depth. As such, *The Holy Ground* can be interpreted as a play where the seeds of subsequent collapsed masculinities are embedded, and a close reading of the monologue will unmask how Monica and Myles’ disastrous marriage is, sadly, not an exception but rather the result of discriminatory gender practices very common in Irish culture at the time the play was written. Further links between Monica’s marriage and the marriages of women in the Celtic Tiger period will highlight the fact that, in spite of some gains toward gender equity in recent years, much work is left to be done. Additionally, the increase in male-centered monologues, like those of McPherson, focused on troubled and displaced masculinities, suggests

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38Bolger has published novels and poetry, in addition to his plays. He has, just like Cano, received multiple awards for his work, among them the A.E. Memorial Prize, the Samuel Beckett Prize, Edinburgh Fringe First Awards in 1990 & 1995, the BC Stewart Parker BBC Prize, and the O.Z. Whitehead Award for Best New Irish Play. *The Holy Ground* won in 1992 the Edinburgh Fringe Award.
that contemporary Ireland is still adjusting itself to a neoliberal model and to the new masculine subjectivities it generates.

*The Holy Ground* was originally staged in 1990, at the Gate Theatre, and directed by David Byrne. The monologue was presented in conjunction with Bolger’s debut play, *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989), a two-act play concerned with the impact of the Irish diaspora on its two main characters, Arthur and his lover, Kathy. Arthur returns home, only to find an Ireland alien to him, and Kathy looks forward to immigrating and leaving Dublin behind. Taken in conjunction, the two plays highlight the impact of shifting economic and gender expectations for Irish people, and the subsequent crisis experienced by Irish men. In each play, it is the surviving partner, Monica and Kathy, who narrates for the audience the tragic results of their relationships.

Just as *Socavón* was preceded by a quote from *Woyzeck*, *The Holy Ground* too refers to an earlier work. It borrows its title from a traditional Irish folk song, one that has been covered by multiple singers (The Clancy Brothers, The Dubliners, Mary Black, and Pete Seeger, among others). I include the lyrics below since it is against the archaic gender roles evoked in the song that Bolger’s monologue is conceived. The lyrics are as follows:

Fare thee well, my lovely Dinah, a thousand times adieu.  
We are bound away from the Holy Ground and the girls we love so true.  
We'll sail the salt seas over and we'll return once more,  
And still I live in hope to see the Holy Ground once more.  
Fine girl you are!  
You're the girl that I adore. And still I live in hope to see the Holy Ground once more.  
Fine girl you are!  
Now when we're out a-sailing and you are far behind  
Fine letters will I write to you with the secrets of my mind,  
The secrets of my mind, my girl, you're the girl that I adore,  
And still I live in hope to see the Holy Ground once more.  
Oh now the storm is raging and we are far from shore;
The poor old ship she's sinking fast and the riggings they are tore.
The night is dark and dreary, we can scarcely see the moon,
But still I live in hope to see the Holy Ground once more.
It's now the storm is over and we are safe on shore
We'll drink a toast to the Holy Ground and the girls that we adore.
We'll drink strong ale and porter and we'll make the taproom roar,
And when our money is all spent we'll go to sea once more.

The song draws on imagery of male comradeship, and alternates between the pronouns “I” and “we,” merging the single male voice into a community of sailors facing the elements. The song’s female pronoun coalesces into four distinct entities: Dinah, The Holy Ground (referring to Ireland), the ship, and the girls to which the sailors hope to return alive. In Bolger’s play, Myles will attempt to find a similar type of camaraderie among two distinct groups; a football team and the church, but his search will only lead him to progressive isolation and anger. He will also fail to communicate his secrets to his girl (Monica), and his heavily conservative politics, obsolete and derided by the media, will erode his self-esteem. Progressively isolated, Myles, just like Ulisito, resorts to oppression of his spouse in order to establish a sense of agency and to reclaim his collapsed masculinity. He is psychologically abusive to Monica, who remains powerless to resist his increasing cruelty and violence. In contrast to Socavón’s uxoricide, in The Holy Ground, it is Monica, and not Myles, who attempts the murder of her spouse—and while she fails at being the cause of his death, he does die, thus freeing her. This play, like Socavón, asks if gender violence can indeed become a tool in the reclamation of autonomy.

While in Socavón Ulisito’s mother becomes a haunting presence who underscores Ulisito’s inability to embody an hegemonic masculinity, in The Holy Ground it is Monica who becomes, against her own wishes, a mother to her husband. The monologue commences with Monica’s account of the first time she met Myles, and it is filled with tenderness: “I just reached up to stroke your hair and like a little boy you grinned. And that’s what you were to me, a little
boy in a big jersey clutching your shin-pads like trophies. So sweet after the rough mauling of hands I’d always known at the Metropole” (105). Monica’s description, while nostalgic, reveals a contrast between an aggressive masculinity (mauling of hands) and Myles’ prepubescent stage, a little boy that Monica, at least initially, finds comforting. However, it soon becomes apparent that Myles’ behavior, while polite and courteous, fails to satisfy Monica’s needs for affection and sexual fulfillment. While Monica is relieved not to be sexually assaulted—as in a previous date with another man who left scratches on her legs—Myles’ hesitancy to kiss her unsettles her. “That was it. For months. Lifting my head, waiting, wondering was anything wrong with me? Was there anybody else or did he just not know how to break it off? It felt so nice at first, like I was a piece of porcelain. But I wasn’t. I was a woman of twenty-three and I wanted a man” (109).

Reflecting on sexual practices among the Irish, Tom Inglis describes a prudery and denial of sexual desires, particularly for women, that was embedded in Irish culture during the period of Monica’s youth, the 1960s. As Inglis states, “The stereotypical image of the shy Irish colleen, silent about herself and her emotional needs, reflects a historical reality in which there were strict silence imposed on sex and sexuality in general and on female sexuality in particular” (26). Monica is caught in an unsustainable position. The Constitution and the Catholic Church stance towards women in Irish society preclude her from asserting her sexual needs while positing motherhood as her only gender-appropriate choice. Myles’ inability to fulfill his own role as an aggressive male, at least initially, leads Monica to embody a misplaced mothering instinct towards him: “You were my child, under that big frame, and I swore I’d look after you and keep you from harm” (111). Monica’s wish to protect Myles positions him as an object, not an agent, within their relationship, but it does not last. Once Myles discovers that he is sterile, the sweet
boy with whom Monica fell in love transforms into an aggressive, domineering, and cruel man.

The Irish Constitution’s enshrinement of the family unit as the foundational model for the Irish State, as well as its ban of abortion,\(^{39}\) presupposes the birth of children in Ireland as not only the social norm but indeed the only socially acceptable choice to pursue. Although Ireland’s rate of marriage has been quite low in contrast with other Western societies for most of the twentieth century, the marriages themselves have been dramatically productive. Ireland, with its low rate of marriage, nonetheless has the highest rate of marital fertility (Inglis, 10).

Myles is profoundly ignorant of women’s physiology (when Monica first gets her period, he thinks she is hurt), but in accordance with Irish expectations, his desire to have children becomes the initial focus of his marriage. However, his failure to impregnate Monica soon unsettles his sense of self and leads him to become increasingly sexually violent with her: “Those few days Myles, you were someone else. Then, when it was time, you were rougher, I wasn’t ready. It was… more like a challenge. It hurt. (Pause) And every time it hurt more” (113). The excerpt reflects how Myles’ sexual relationship with Monica is driven not by pleasure or gratification of either one of them, but rather out of pursuit of an unattainable goal. In the process, Myles and Monica’s rift increases; and while Myles was originally reluctant or unable to embody a hegemonic masculinity, his sterility leads him to embrace it furiously, to disastrous consequences for himself and for his wife.

Having failed to create a family, and as such to fulfill his Irish role as a male, Myles seeks to regain his sense of autonomy and masculinity by immersing himself in football. In their

\(^{39}\) Under President Higgins a law allowing abortion, under certain circumstances, was passed in 2013.
research into male sports, Adi Adams, Eric Anderson, and Mark McCormark examine how male sports are an avenue through which men learn “toxic practices” among them sexism and fem-phobia, homophobia, and physical violence against each other. These practices serve the purpose of raising their capital among their masculine peers. As the authors state, “Boys and men are thought to employ processes of hegemonic oppression to construct socially esteemed identities (predicated on being heterosexual and masculine), in an effort to maintain or improve their position within the social stratification” (280). As in Myles’ violent sexual life, his immersion in football correlates with neither sportsmanship nor pleasure, but rather with the eager pursuit of virility and the reclaiming of his damaged masculinity. In her description of his pursuits in this arena, Monica portrays the muscular, exposed body of her husband, a body that reflects the psychological pain he remains unable to communicate to her:

Oh, if you could only have screamed Myles, I could have run to you. But you just ate your dinner in silence and were gone. Meetings, committees, training. You were like a savage on the football field then somebody told me once. Blind courage they called it. It was blind rage I knew. You’d come home, cuts on your forehead, bruised eyes. You’d strip to the waist in the kitchen – I never saw you naked. Once… your face streaked with blood… I tried to help you. You flinched when I touched your forehead, stared at me. Oh Good Jesus, Myles, I never forget that look. (115)

Distraught by his sterility, Myles, who in the past had been content to follow the team around and not play, throws himself into a frantic punishment of his body. Unable to be comforted by Monica, his anger and pain are displayed not just in his body, but too in his rejection of his wife. Monica’s remark that she never saw him naked functions as a metaphor for the lack of open communication in their marriage.

Myles’ embrace of football is an assertion of his Irish national identity, achieved through the embrace of Gaelic Football rather than soccer, which was associated with the English and as such with colonial exploitation. As Brian Singleton notes, “Thus the male warrior on the sports
field in GAA terms (Gaelic Athletic Association) was, and to some extent still is, symbolic of an armed struggle” (11). As the play progresses, Myles’ pursuit of Irish nationalism becomes increasingly aggressive, with dire consequences for Monica and for himself. Myles’ embrace of football and its attendant all-male companionship ultimately fails as a strategy for the reassertion of masculinity when the other players question him on his lack of progeny. “What did they say to him down at training night? It was just a joke I’m sure, some tiny slight. (Joking male voice.) ‘No young centre forwards yet, Swifty? You’d better get the lead out of your pencil!’” (116). Unable to handle these remarks, Myles, just as easily as he had embraced football, abandons it, abandoning too his nickname, Swifty. From that moment on, he insists on being called Myles Ó Muirthile.

The re-acquisition of his given name marks a further reclamation of Myles’ Irish national identity. When Monica first meets him he is neither Swifty, nor Ó Muirthile, but Myles Hurley. Football fails to endow Myles with a hegemonic masculinity, but his subsequent embrace of his national Irish identity is more effective. He rejects the colonial, feminized Irish subject and replaces it instead with Irish Catholic conservative politics. The intersection of a postcolonial identity with repressive gender politics towards women has been documented by the research of MaryAnn Gialanella Valiulis. This work describes how the birth of the Irish Free State failed to provide Irish women with equal inclusion and treatment. In fact, in colonial terms Ireland had been configured as the feminine, subjugated state, and while the Free State meant political independence in practice, “[t]here was, moreover, very little that the Free State could control – they were constrained by the restrictions of dominion status, by the international monetary

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40Hurley is the English version of at least three distinct Irish surnames: Ó hUirthile, Ó Muirthile and Ó hIarlatha.
forces, by the reality of their own lack of resources and natural advantages” (126). In what Gialanella Valiulis considers typical of post-revolutionary societies, the Free State consolidated its power “by enacting measures against women, such as forbidding women’s political participation, outlawing abortion, prohibiting wage earning by mothers, imposing female dress codes” (127). By the 1960s, only 29 percent of the workforce was comprised of women, and discriminatory tax laws dictated that a woman’s income was her husband’s for tax purposes. Married women paid higher taxes than married men or single people, and it was not until 1980 that this discrimination was challenged constitutionally (Ferriter, The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000 569-70). The Holy Ground, covering a span of time from the 1950s to the late 80s, enacts the impact of these practices in Monica and Myles’ marriage.

When Myles, after rejecting football, immerses himself in the Church and in its politics, he makes it clear that Monica might be present on the meetings, but only to provide refreshment. She is silenced from participating in the meetings held in her own home, and brutally subjected to Myles’ control:

Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to. Just take their coats and stay out of the way.’ (Her own voice, as she moves around demented.) I scrubbed the lino in the hall, I washed the step, I ran to the mirror like a woman demented. So long since anyone had been to the house, I had almost forgotten how to hold a conversation. At nine o’clock I served tea to the men and women here, who peered at me like an unclean animal. (119)

Myles’ regained sense of manhood is predicated on his brutal control of Monica, who, by this point, has lost all sense of self. While prior to their marriage, Monica had some friends—among them Deirdre—and employment, her marriage to Myles puts an end to her life outside the marriage. In fact, as she sadly recounts, she has lost her voice, both public and private, and can’t even hold a conversation, unless it is with herself. (She has described talking to herself, and to the imagined children she never had, earlier in the play.) While wage-earning by mothers was no
longer outlawed, the fight against reproductive rights, among them abortion, was very much present in the Irish social landscape of the 1980s. In fact, in 1982 the constitution was amended to include the right-to-life of the unborn, an amendment which further strengthened the already conservative treatment of women’s bodies on the original De Valera constitution. As Ferriter notes, “The backlash of the 1980s, including abortion and divorce referenda, was an indication of the ability of small groups of Catholic activists to divide women, leading to what Connolly called ‘a highly unsuccessful and deferential campaign’ to oppose the pro-life amendment campaign of 1983, which in the sort and long term was a disaster” (*The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* 667).

Myles is in fact deeply involved in advocating for such policies: “*The 70s will be red!* Over my dead body. It’s no wonder the country’s destroyed with the like of them plays. We’ll have picket on that.’ (A snort) ‘A doctor on the censorship board? Encourage every class of pornography so they can legalise the pill and make money on the prescriptions for it!” (119). Not only does Myles reject those policies which advocate for a woman’s right to reproductive autonomy, he forces Monica to write letters, dictated by him, to local newspapers from fictitious mothers opposing the pill. Silenced in her own house, Monica is coerced into embodying a public voice that further contributes to her own oppression and disenfranchisement.

However, the tide is turning, and Myles’ anger and beliefs become increasingly outmoded in a society on the cusp of dramatic social and economic changes. While a 1986 referendum did not pass the amendment that would have made divorce legal in Ireland (it would pass in 1995), Myles’ demagogic stance towards women is finding less and less support in the social mores. And yet he remains undeterred and unwilling to concede that a New Ireland is emerging, one that will no longer accommodate his politics. As Monica recounts it, his phone
calls to newspapers and to political leaders go unreturned and: “They left you alone to struggle with your own Calvary. Wandering the streets with nobody heeding you, having rows with young people sniggering on the bus home” (123). Myles, just like Ulisito, wanders into an urban landscape that is alien and from which he is rejected and rendered an obscure figure. His attempts to embody a hegemonic patriarchal masculinity ultimately fail to provide him with a sense of coherence and strength, and in the process, his marriage falls apart.

Myles, also like Ulisito, holds a humble employment. As Monica states. “You know the Yanks you see in O’Connell Street on Patrick’s Day, always wanting to meet the ‘Little People’. If they only knew, they wouldn’t have far to go. In the door of the GPO. second hatch on the right after the Statue of Cuchulainn. Myles and the thousands like him, little people in the little jobs, lives bounded by foolscap paper and elastic bands” (116-7). The glorious Ireland evoked by the Statue of Cuchulainn, one of the foundational mythological figures of Irish culture, is belittled by its juxtaposition with the post office quarters. Myles’ vision for Ireland, present in the song *The Holy Ground*, which he sang about in bars with his lads prior to marrying Monica, is nowhere to be found. Instead, it has been replaced by the image of men working in menial jobs, invisible and meaningless, where Myles is just one of many toiling away. Stubbornly seeking to reclaim a proud Irish nationalism, Myles has sought to find it by renaming himself, by pursuing football, and finally by embracing Catholic politics—all to no avail. As Monica reminisces, Myles’ life is ultimately a path towards isolation: “Even Clark and his friends spuc-ed off on you these last months Myles, new offices down town, computers and spokesmen in smart suits” (123). The Celtic Tiger period is about to unfold, and there is no place within the New Ireland

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41General Post Office.
for people like Myles, remnants of a bygone era.

Myles’ failure to occupy a public space is mirrored in Monica’s as well. Silenced in her own home, Monica’s interactions with the outside world are equally disempowering and humiliating. Ostracized by the church members, and having lost all communication with her own friends, Monica has become socially awkward and, as her attempted murder of Myles suggests, mentally unstable. In one of her trips to the supermarket she describes her encounter with a mother and her little daughter, who has a sticker that reads, SPUC OFF. Monica details her reaction to the sticker in the following manner:

When she saw me reading it and I smiled she smiled a little defiant smile back, as if to say we’ll beat them, we’ll live our own lives yet. ‘S.P.U.C. Off.’ I started laughing, the cashiers looking with startled eyes. “Spuc off! Spuc Off!” Oh God, I laughed, the tears down my face. A space cleared around me and the young woman touched my elbow. (A concerned female voice.) ‘My husband is dead,’ I said, ‘thirty years dead. Swifty Hurley, he was a good, simple man, a footballer.’ I left the shop and almost ran home. I felt the whole street was looking at me. I took the poison from the shed, put it above the cooker and made his favorite stew. (122)

The concern expressed by the young woman, who worries that Monica is ill, highlights how after years of seclusion, emotional abuse and rejection, Monica’s mental state has severely deteriorated. Myles is incapable and unwilling to accommodate any changes in his conception of what Irish society should be, but Monica is equally at a loss when faced with the imminent future: a young woman and her daughter advocating, openly, for women’s reproductive rights. For Monica, it is too little too late, and her laughter masks the severe pain endured in her marriage. While Ulisito is unwilling, or unable, to remember his murder of Marita, Monica can explicitly detail what led her to add rat poison to Myles’ food. It is ironic that, after a life of

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abuse and neglect, Monica decides to kill her husband at the point in which he has become a victim of his regressive politics and is experiencing himself the very fate he inflicted on his wife. Perhaps Monica, in the end, pities him, and her attempted murder is not an act of cruelty but of mercy. It could also be argued that her encounter with the woman and child in the supermarket prompts her to take, finally, some action, to claim some agency regarding her own life. However, Myles’ death, rather than bringing closure and the opportunity for a new beginning, leaves Monica distressed, angry, and lonelier than she has ever been.

Monica’s description of Dublin, and her fear of being watched, resembles Ulisito’s Buenos Aires of spying neighbors. Just as Ulisito was lost, Monica too is confused by an urban landscape that rejects her and denies her experience and her voice. After finding Myles dead, Monica ventures into the city in her gown and slippers and confesses her murder to the hospital officials, only to be told: “(A strong male voice) ‘Your husband died from a clot to the brain. The man had a history of thrombosis, he’d take treatment from nobody. Rat poison contains Warfarin that prevents clotting and thins out the blood. If you did give it to him you probably lengthened his life. Go home now Mrs Ó Muirthile and keep your mouth shut’” (124). Neither her voice nor her actions are acknowledged, and the strong command by the doctor, sounding just like Myles, depicts a patriarchal repressive culture which extends well beyond the boundaries of Monica’s household. Swifty Hurley might be dead, by Ó Muirthile lives on, not just in his wife’s last name, but through the authoritarian grip, extending beyond the grave, that hijacks Monica’s imagination:

I closed my eyes and thought of God. I saw him there kindly… like my own father beckoning, but suddenly you were there beside him, Myles, righteous and stern. I tried to pray but nothing would come. You’ve stolen my youth and left me barren, you’ve stolen my gaiety and gave me shame, and when I die I will die unmourned. But I could forgive you Swifty, everything except that… seated there at the right hand of God, you had stolen
my Christ away from me. (125)
The above excerpt are the last lines of the monologue, and Monica’s voice, unrepentant and angry, leaves audiences to ponder the sad fate of an ordinary Irish woman, who commits, or attempts to commit, a barbarous act in order to gain autonomy, only to fail, yet again. Staged at the cusp of the Celtic Tiger period, *The Holy Ground* is an urgent reminder of the discriminatory gender inequity practices afflicting Ireland, and the dire consequences of ignoring those individuals who have been made to vanish.

While Bolger’s *The Holy Ground* precedes the Celtic Tiger Period, his examination of Irish nationalism and its intersection with a masculinity in crisis foretells the experiences that many Irish men will undergo as the result of those changes in Irish society. McPherson’s monologues of violent, alcoholic men, soul-searching for meaning in their lives are Myles’ never conceived children, still lost and angry. Ulisito is, likewise, very much a man of his time and place. He is the anti-hero that neoliberal Argentina can generate—a hero transformed from Ulysses into the Invisible Man, with a brief stop-off as Büchner’s Woyzeck. Shunted aside in a Buenos Aires crowded with ravaged bodies, and shamed by its legions of Desaparecidos, he desperately seeks to regain his masculinity—indeed his personhood, his visibility—through gender violence.

Both plays end on a bleak note: *Socavón* with the description of Marita’s dead body, bloody and mutilated, and *The Holy Ground* with Monica’s futile anger toward a deceased Myles. However, in their shared investigation of gender inequity—and in their shared use of the monologue form to evoke multiple voices, all of them silenced—both plays can be seen as opening an avenue to a fruitful dialogue from which new considerations of equality can emerge. In Ireland, in Argentina, in any country on the brink of dramatic social upheaval, we can hear...
those who have been silenced, if we’re listening.
Conclusion

In the years since the most recent play of discussed in this study, *The Pillowman* (2003), the catastrophic collapse of the national neoliberal projects in both Argentina and Ireland underscores how what the playwrights of this study envisioned came to unfold, perhaps much more dramatically than anyone anticipated. Lola Arias’ play *La escudilida familia* (2001) premiered shortly before *el corralito*, and the world of starvation and bleakness depicted in her play fell short of capturing the ravaging consequences of a financial experiment gone awry. However, in the succeeding decade Argentina managed to pull itself out of the worst economic crisis of its history. Under the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), Argentina’s debt with the IMF was cancelled with a single payment in 2005, the same in year in which, finally, Captain Scilingo was sentenced to 1000 years in prison for crimes committed against humanity (Werth, 15).

Nevertheless, and in spite of significant gains made towards a more equal and just society, Dubatti still categorizes the current period as the post-dictatorship, acknowledging the legacy of the Junta on current Argentina. As the chapter of *Socavón* noted, current police abuses pose a serious threat to an effective democracy and Sutton’s study of post-crisis gender practices underscores the prevalence of sexism in Argentina. As Dubatti notes: “Una vasta zona del teatro actual trabaja sin pausa, y de diferentes maneras, en la asunción del horror históric, la construcción de memorias del pasado, la denuncia y el alerta de lo que sigue vivo de la dictadura en el presente” (“El teatro de Buenos Aires en el siglo XXI” 45). The present is, for the avid theatre goer, a moment of incredible fertility and wide diversity on the Argentine stages. Dubatti

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43 The term used to describe the freeze placed on Argentine bank accounts by Minister of Economy Domingo Cavallo (1991-1996 and March 2001 to December 2001) to avoid a flight of capital from the country.
originally used the term “canón de la multiplicidad” to describe the theatre of the late twentieth century, but in the face of almost a thousand yearly new shows, he has defined Argentine theatre in the twenty-first century as, “el canón imposible,” since in his words:

En el campo teatral actual, hay investigador especialista pero no experto, en tanto la totalidad del campo es imposible de abarcar. En el auge de las micropoéticas y las micropolíticas (espacios de subjetividad alternativa, al margen de los grandes discursos de representación), la multiplicidad de estilos y cosmovisiones teatrales se ha reafirmado como uno de los signos positivos de la época. (48)

In light of so much production and diversity, any attempt on my part to illuminate the state of current Argentine stages must bear in mind Dubatti’s claim that such vast field cannot be encompassed by any single theatre critic. Before moving on to some of the highlights of theatre production in Buenos Aires after my project I will briefly provide some glimpses into the post-crisis works by Lucía Laragione, Lola Arias, Javier Daulte, and Luis Cano.

Laragione continues to explore the intersection of violence and ethnic discrimination. In her play *Criaturas de aire* (2004), the legacies of Nazism, genetic experimentation, and the treatment of Jewish and Gypsy populations are explored in the post-war period in an Argentine context, while *El ganso del Djurgarden* (2004) examines exile through the eyes of three men: a Chilean, an Argentine, and an Uruguayan residing in Stockholm. Daulte divides his time between Barcelona and Buenos Aires, and in the first decade of the twenty first-century published seven new plays and another seven between 2010 and 2012. In addition to his work as a playwright he continues directing commercial theatre in Buenos Aires and has received prestigious awards, including the Platinum Premio Kónex as the best director of the decade (2001-2010). Cano, as prolific as ever, has written more than thirty plays to date and participated in many others as a director and dramaturge. Violence, its causes and effects, its legacies, its agents and victims, still inform many of his plays.
Lastly, Arias’ work, while still concerned with violence and the legacies of dictatorships (both in and out of Argentina), has evolved into multimedia spectacles that transcend borders and nationalities. Many of Arias’ new projects are multimedia performance pieces that distance themselves from her formerly textual based work and explore non Argentine identities. Beginning with her collaboration with the Berlin-based Swiss artist Stefan Kaegi, Arias’ most recent work is deeply interested in the liminal interactions created by globalization and its displacements. Her second collaborations with Kaegi, Airport Kids (2008), is a meditation on the lives of children labeled “global nomads.”\textsuperscript{44} The piece highlights the disappearance of national identities and its replacement with a “third culture” created in the marginal spaces generated by globalization. I am particularly interested in how the aesthetics of Airport Kids, and Arias’ subsequent pieces, reflect the disjointed, fragmentary, and invisible spaces and people unacknowledged in a world of commerce.

Arias’ most recent work explores the porous boundaries of identities in a permanent state of transition. Through her disarticulation of the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, and her expansion into non-traditional theatre spaces such as hotel rooms, Arias’ work illuminates how twenty-first-century identities are constructed and performed when national frameworks are either absent, or elided. Since Arias’ subjects are displaced, often, by transnational economic systems beyond their control, the pieces highlight to audiences the consequences of previously unconsidered acts. Given Arias’ current interests and use of technology in her most recent productions, La escuálida familia appears as an anomaly within her trajectory as a playwright, and yet, I argue, many of the themes introduced in La escuálida familia still pervade her work.

\textsuperscript{44}Stefan Kaegi is one of the founding members of Rimini Protokoll and his first collaboration with Lola Arias was Chácara Paraíso (2007).
The legacies of the past in the present, whether in the form of political or personal histories, and its intersection with generational conflicts between parents and children keep resurfacing in different contexts, even if the aesthetics employed have changed.

Before moving onto the Irish stages I would like to briefly note a new form of Argentine documentary theatre, *biodrama*, created by Argentine director Vivi Tellas in 2002. While working as the director of the Teatro Sarmiento, Tellas created the project *biodrama*, giving a single directive to the participant playwrights, to create a piece about the life of a person. Between 2002 and 2009, El Teatro Sarmiento staged fifteen plays categorized as *biodramas*, among them, *Mi vida después* (2009) by Lola Arias and *Nunca estuviste tan adorable* (2004) by Javier Daulte. Pamela Brownell, reflecting on the significance of *biodrama* writes:

> Despite the simplicity of the assignment, Biodrama's aesthetic, ethic, and political quest was—and is still today—profound and complex. Conceived in a global context of spectacularization and mediatization of experience and in a local context impacted by Argentina's social, economic, and cultural crisis of 2001, Biodrama sought to use theatre and its power to bring people together as the means for an inquiry into the lives of human beings: into their stories, their ways of existing, and their arts de faire—in the words of Michel de Certau (1980). (1)

Tellas’ project has generated a prolific number of plays and continues to grow and inspire playwrights in and outside of Argentina. In 2010 and 2011 Tellas was one of the facilitators of the artists’ residency MAKE, a Cork Midsummer Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival, Project Arts Centre and Theatre Forum endeavour connecting Irish artists with international mentors and theatre makers. The connection between Tellas’ work and Ireland leads me into a brief description of recent productions and works on the Irish stage.

Post-Celtic-Tiger theatre has not experienced the massive growth present on the Argentine stage. While inequality and social services, overall, diminished through the Celtic Tiger period, the funding towards the arts, and theatre in particular, increased. As Lonergan
examines Irish theatre was one of the cultural artifacts used to brand the new Irish State as evidence of the creative Irish mind: “This proposed rebranding of Ireland as a creative economy provides us with an example of the contemporary relationship between economic and cultural networks, and of how the global and the national interact in both fields” (59). However, by its centenary the Abbey had an operating deficit of 800,000 euros and by 2004 that figured was 2 million euros (Lonergan, 81). By 2010, funding for smaller companies, such as Blue Raincoat, Barabbas, and Corcadora, among others, diminished, and yet, as of today, all of them are still operating in spite of financial constraints, a testament to the commitment of Irish audiences to their theatre. Before moving on to new voices within Irish theatre I will provide a brief glimpse of some of the subsequent works created after 2003 by Marina Carr, Dermot Bolger, and Martin McDonagh.

Marina Carr continues writing plays that reimagine classical pieces for contemporary audiences, investigating the present by gazing towards classical literary history. Carr’s *Ariel* (2002) is a retelling of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, while her latest play, *16 Possible Glimpses* (2011) imagines different moments in the life of Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Dermot Bolger continues to productively write across multiple genres (poetry, novel, theatre), investigating, from different perspectives, the shifting, always in-flux conceptualizations of what an Irish identity might look like in the twenty-first century. Of particular note for my project is his publication of *The Ballymun Trilogy* (2010), an exploration of the lives of two immigrants-- one Polish, the other one Moldavian--residing in Dublin. With the Ballymun towers as a backdrop, the trilogy charts the changing landscape, both physical and spiritual, of contemporary Irish

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45The original towers where built in the 1960s as public housing. After a long period of decay the original towers were demolished, and a new Balymun was erected between 2008 and 2013.
identities. Lastly, Martin McDonagh’s latest play to date, *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010), a black comedy set in the United States, did not have the critical or audience success of his previous works.\(^{46}\) Conversely his films *Six Shooter* (2004) and *In Bruges* (2008) were very popular. Perhaps film, in McDonagh’s own words, his preferred medium, is where his future endeavors will continue.\(^{47}\)

Among the new voices emerging in Irish theatre, Connor McPherson is, perhaps, the most successfully acclaimed. His angry, emasculated male characters that drink too much and are prompt to violence resemble Ulisito, drop-outs of an economic system where one’s failure is construed not as flaw within the system, but as an individual’s responsibility. McPherson’s use of the monologue form, in contrast with Bolger’s, becomes not an act of dialogism, but rather the unique avenue for agency and performance of otherwise disenfranchised males. I narrate, ergo I exist seems to be their motto.

For the first time in Irish theatre history two Travellers, Rosaleen McDonagh and Michael Collins, have written and performed about their experiences as Travellers.\(^{48}\) In examining their works Maurya Wickstrom ponders two conflicting aspects of Traveller theatre:

> On the one hand, housed itself, theatre becomes a housing operation. It rehabilitates the Traveller toward assimilation with Irish neoliberalism and the ongoing absolute non-recognition of nomadism. On the other hand, theatre creates a world in which many different elements are put into relation with one another, a world that, perhaps, tests and experiments with intensities of appearance, being-there, and the appearance of self-

\(^{46}\)Ben Bratley, in his review for the *New York Times* stated: “But the disappointment that shadows the face of Mr. Walken’s character — a one-handed man who has been searching for years for his severed appendage — comes to seem like a prophecy of the audience’s. The rest of the erratically enjoyable “Behanding” — directed by John Crowley and featuring Sam Rockwell, Anthony Mackie and Zoe Kazan — never matches the strange genius of its star.” “Packing Heat and a Grudge.” *New York Times* 5 Mar. 2010. Web. 26 Jan. 2015.

\(^{47}\) From an interview with Fintan O’Toole preceding his films: “I would be unhappy if I wrote 90 good plays and didn’t make a good film. But if I made one good film. If I made one brilliant film, one really, really good film, I’d be happy. One would be enough” (BOMB, 1998).

\(^{48}\) Michael Collins has written two plays thus far *It’s a Cultural Thing, or Is It?* (2005) and *Same Difference Worlds Apart*. Rosaleen McDonagh has written two plays as well *The Baby Doll Project* (2003) and *Stuck* (2007). Neither Collin’s nor McDonagh’s plays have been published as of yet.
difference, being as being. (170)

While the tensions highlighted by Wickstrom unveil the difficulty of minority populations to remain true to their identities (in this case nomadism) and to resist being engulfed by a neoliberal project, theatre is indeed a tool for resistance.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to two new plays that highlight some of the tensions generated by the influx of recent immigrants into Ireland. Throughout the Celtic Tiger period, the arrival of large amounts of people from myriad places around the world meant that the “2006 census showed that out of the Republic’s four million residents, 400,000 were born outside Ireland—about three quarters of them in the EU or the USA” (R.E. Foster, 34). The shift from a predominantly white and Catholic majority towards an ethnically and racially diverse population has not always been smooth. Two plays by new young playwrights explore the difficulties experienced in attempting to accommodate “others” into the New Ireland.

Charlotte McIvor explores multicultural tensions in the post Celtic-Tiger period by examining Gianina Cărbunariu’s Kebab (2007) and Ursula Rani Sarma’s The Magic Tree (2008). Cărbunariu is not an Irish playwright, but a Romanian one, nevertheless her play Kebab, while developed for the Royal Court Theatre, premiered at the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. (McIvor, 323). The play follows the fate of three young Romanians in Dublin and while McIvor acknowledges that it is “shaky” to categorize Kebab as Irish she concludes: “This play makes a strong case for inclusion within the discussions of Irish drama for being the only major work to take on the subject of immigrants’ exploitation by the sex trade within Ireland” (324). While Kebab has received mixed reviews, some of them profoundly critical, the play draws attention, as McIvor perceptively notices, to an elided and unacknowledged section of the Irish population.
absent from public discourse. While a discussion of *Kebab*'s value as a theatrical piece will require a more extensive analysis, suffice is to say that, as a testament to the harsh experiences of subjects existing in a liminal state within Irish society, the play is relevant to contemporary discussions of Irish theatre. It is also noteworthy that a Rumanian playwright’s decision to choose Dublin as the setting for the play underscores how globalization dislocates national identities and prompts discussions about what actually makes, in this particular instance, an Irish play Irish.

The next play discussed by McIvor, *The Magic Tree*, is written by an Indian-Irish female playwright who is uncomfortable with all the labels used to categorize her and her work. In an interview with Sarah Keating for the daily *Irish Times* Sarma states:

> I guess it comes from the question I sometimes ask myself: whether or not I can ever be fully Irish, or perceived as Irish, with a name like Rani Sarma. But it also has to do with how people are always pigeon-holed: they look at you as woman, then as a playwright. Then you become “an Irish female playwright” instead of just an artist. (Keating)

Sarma’s reflections regarding both her identity and the pitfalls of categorization illuminates how the New Ireland is struggling to accommodate difference at a time when nationalities are not neatly aligned with one ethnicity, language, and/or race. The four characters of *The Magic Tree* are white, and a large section of the play unfolds in Cambodia, highlighting, one more time, how contemporary Irish theatre investigates identities in a permanent state of flux that defy classifying.

Perhaps the most interesting questions to pursue, given the state of Irish and Argentine theatre, are not what makes an Irish play Irish or an Argentine Argentine, but rather to illuminate, however fragmentarily, how theatre’s resurgence and sustained presence in our highly mediated,

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49 Charles Spencer’s review for *The Telegraph* was titled: *Kebab*, a pile of rancid clichés (2007).
technology-driven world underscore theatre’s capacity to inspire, critique, and create communities, in spite of our perceived or real differences. Dubatti’s description of “el canón imposible” beautifully captures the critic’s act of surrender and joy in the midst of so much richness, diversity, and, one hopes, many more plays to attend on either side of the Atlantic.
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