



Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente (2010). Photo: Alejandra Aranda

An Enormous Yearning for the Past: Movement/Archive in Two Contemporary Dance Works

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Artistic production in Argentina has a rich tradition of exploring the state violence and political turmoil that marked 20th century Argentine history, in particular the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). The contributions of contemporary dance, however, have not figured prominently in discussions around how performance and embodied practice transmit traumatic cultural memory. Within the past decade, a number of works have employed movement as a method for negotiating histories of violence. Vivian Luz's *Serán otros los ruidos* (The Noises Will Be Different, 2010) and Daniel Payero's *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (Small Pieces of Our Recent History, 2010) juxtapose archival materials with the live dancing body to chart an evolutionary history of political violence from 20th century Argentine—and global—history. Occasionally citing the same photographic and political documents, these evening length works question how movement can remember and critique the disciplinary management of bodies by (military) violence. To quote Luz's performance, they critically explore a moment marked by "an enormous yearning for the past."¹

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These works premiered in the wake of the highly spectacular May 2010 bicentennial celebration that manifested Argentine history for a national audience. The *Desfile artístico histórico* (Artistic Historic Parade) was the most notable of these; sponsored by the federal government, it transformed downtown Buenos Aires into a historical pageant of mass proportions with an estimated 2,000 people lining the streets and thousands more watching on television or via the internet. Artistically directed by the physical theater troupe Fuerzabruta, the parade featured more than 2,000 performers and represented historical “highlights” from Argentina’s 200 years of independence, including a representation of the last military dictatorship that set fire to a enormous replica of the Argentine constitution.² The parade not only re-enacted this past but also staged a technologically and scientifically slick future. On a stunningly grand scale, the parade set the archive in motion.

Serán otros los ruidos and *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* choreograph history on a much smaller scale and propose more cautious projections of the future. In a moment focused on celebrating Argentina’s grand historical narratives, these works do not attempt to dance the archive, nor do they present an especially cohesive or comprehensive account of historical events. Instead, gesture and choreographed movement literalize cultural memory as always already embodied and in excess of its documentation.³ Central to the meaning-making framework of each piece, archival materials function as dialogic components in an exploration of what it was like for the body to be moved by—and to move against—social choreographies of terror.⁴ In delicate and subtle ways, these works explore how gesture might enact an ethics of mourning for bodies “disappeared” by military violence. They also stage possibilities for connection and intimacy between bodies in pasts (and presents and futures) otherwise foreclosed by normative corporealities.

Por el amor, por el horror (By love, by horror)

A thrice-repeated heterosexual love story structures *Serán otros los ruidos* as it moves through three defined historical moments—World War II, Argentina’s last military dictatorship, and the contemporary global preoccupation with contagion—to invoke an embodied genealogy of violence and social exclusion. Conceived and directed by well-established independent choreographer Vivian Luz and performed by dancer-actors Laura Wigutow and Carlo Argento, it weaves choreography with an original script by Laura Ferrari and a musical score composed of recorded songs and original sound arrangement by Cristóbal Barcesat. The movement style of this piece does not activate any one particular technique, but instead blends social dance citation, quotidian gesture, and rhythmic movement through space.

A central device in the piece, performers manipulate white fabric sheets that are continually re-arranged on lines diagonally strung across the stage, functioning as transformative objects as well as projection surfaces for the archival images featured throughout the work.⁵ Luz credits the inspiration for the sheets to an iconic scene from the Italian film *A Special Day* (1977)

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in which Sofia Loren removes white sheets from a laundry line (Luz 2010). Set on 8 May 1938, the day Hitler visited Mussolini in Rome, the film explores Loren's character's ill-fated attempt to seduce her queer male neighbor who is on the brink of deportation. This film's role in the artistic conception of the work provides a notable counterpoint to its otherwise transcendentalized heterosexual narrative.

In each performed historical episode, the performers reiterate specific movements and fragments of text to underscore the ways in which histories of political violence draw upon what Diana Taylor identifies as repeating "scenarios" or "meaning making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes" (2005, 28). While scenarios include textual elements such as narrative and plot, they also involve "attention to milieus and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language" (2005, 28). The piece negotiates such repeated scenarios of political violence by juxtaposing corporeal behaviors with archival documents, in particular video documentation of war and mass public gatherings and text of political speeches. Literalizing the notion of the personal as political, private experience in this piece is transmittable only through collective memory.



Laura Wigutow and Carlo Argento in *Serán otros los ruidos* (2010), by Vivian Luz. El Portón de Sanchez, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Photo: Alejandro Barbosa

The work opens to the sounds of "Shake That Thing," a big band swing song written by Charlie "Papa" Jackson to aurally locate the spectator in the 1930s and 40s. The performers' dress also suggests this era—Argento wears khakis, a white tank top, suspenders, and army boots and Wigutow a patterned cotton dress and sandals. They dart between the haphazardly hung sheets and only their legs are visible as they perform jitterbug steps. The sounds of bombs and military drills abruptly interrupt their lighthearted movement.

The dancers slowly crawl toward the front of the stage, as if moving through trenches, alternately speaking the lines, "Outside there are roars, dying blue hands, mouths in which beat defeat/The heavy noise of bombs falling on streets wet with blood [...] Soon the sun will come out/They will be different, the noises/Those of war/Those of love."⁶ As one performer speaks, the other stands facing the audience, palms and fingers outstretched framing a mouth open in a silent scream. Archival footage of bombs falling over Europe projects onto the white sheets. Word and gesture tell the story of their courtship, marriage, and his departure for the war. They were "attracted by love" she states. "By the horror," he replies.⁷

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The male character moves frantically about the stage reading letters written to his wife during the war. Wigutow's character tears through the space, always just missing Argento behind a sheet, until he passes her a black piece of paper. Presumably containing news of his death, he collapses into her arms with a cry of desperation. He disappears behind the sheets as images of post-war Europe flash across the curtains, displaying cities reduced to rubble. She slowly begins to remove the sheets from the lines. For a brief moment, the images of rubble are projected only onto her body and she walks upstage.

The performers re-emerge to the sounds of the Argentine rock song "Hoy todo anda bien" (Everything is Going Well Today, 1971) by the group Manal. Argento wears a polo shirt and khakis and Wigutow a peasant-style shirt and slacks as they cite movements of 1960s and 1970s, including the twist and disco. As in the first scenario, sounds of military marching halts the euphoria of their dance.



Laura Wigutow and Carlo Argento in *Serán otros los ruidos* (2010).

Photo: Alejandro Barbosa

As police sirens ring, "iconic" images of the 60s and 70s—including Woodstock—show masses of young bodies gathered together in the name of hope. The couple performs an updated love story as new projections appear featuring Argentine student and union manifestations of these decades. The images repeat in rapid succession as the couple engages in a hyperbolic (clothed) sexual encounter. The projection cuts to the words "*Viva la libertad!* (Freedom lives!) scrawled in bright red. Wigutow wraps her legs around Argento's neck as he stands with her inverted face toward the audience. He removes a sheet from the line and begins to stuff it into her shirt to symbolize a pregnancy that metaphorizes the dreams of revolution gestated by 1970s youth.

The moment turns violent when Argento's character restrains his partner. He begins to recite *Comunicado No. 1* (Communication Number 1), the first message to the public following the coup that began the last military dictatorship in 1976. Synonymous with the estimated 30,000 forcibly disappeared, tortured, and murdered citizens during this time, the military government coupled economic liberalization with a brutal campaign against the civilian population on the Cold War pretext of fighting "subversion."

As he recites, "Effective immediately, the country is declared under the operational control

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of the General Commanders of the Armed Forces,” Argento’s body twitches as if experiencing a mechanical malfunction.⁸ His fingers point in haphazard accusatory gestures. This parodic embodiment of disciplinary authority critiques the performative control over bodies enacted by the declaration. As she shouts revolutionary phrases, he recites consecutive military announcements as he gathers sheets and throws them roughly over the lines to represent the accruing number of disappeared persons by military violence. He then grabs Wigutow’s character and pulls the sheet from her stomach with a shout, enacting the birth and death of their dream/child. Pausing after this aggression, the performers then ceremoniously begin to remove the sheets from the line, folding each with care and placing the bundles gingerly on the ground in a circle in a quiet act of mourning.



Laura Wigutow and Carlo Argento in *Serán otros los ruidos* (2010).

Photo: Alejandro Barbosa

The final episode of the piece reflects on contemporary preoccupation with disease, contagion, and amassed bodies. Inspired by global panics over HIV/AIDS, H1N1, and the stigmatization of migrant bodies, the scripted portion of this final encounter questions the pathologization of love as their movement explores the (im)possibilities of bodily connection (Luz 2010). The performers wear white shirts and pants and the audio score includes children’s screams, cluttered voices, and a heavy techno-electronic beat. The female performer expresses that, “there is an enormous yearning for the past,” the nostalgia of which the historical trajectory of the piece interrupts and renders ironic.

The performers roll themselves in the sheets, echoing images of biohazard suits; they are left with no physical possibility for movement or contact. Over the duration of the piece, these sheets have assumed a palimpsestic quality. The previous meanings with which they were imbued (trench lines, disappeared bodies, canvases for archival footage, etc.) are always only just concealed under their surface. As the performers struggle to free themselves from the sheets, they negotiate not only the restrictive bodily regimes of this contemporary moment but also the weight of the violent exclusions represented before.

The piece ends with the re-citation of the movements and sounds associated with each episode in quick succession. Arm in arm, the couple inches upstage into fading lights as projected images of white flower petals flicker across their bodies. This final gesture toward an idyllic if undetermined future locates hope in the ability of bodies to connect and to move together

despite the ways in they are continually separated and produced by genealogies of political violence.

Memory Moves

In contrast to the chronological narrative that frames Luz's piece, *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* relies on a fragmentary movement landscape that traffics in the affective intensities of state terror. A young choreographer, Payero is member of the Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea (National Contemporary Dance Company), a group founded in 2007 that gained official support from and affiliation with the federal Ministry of Culture in 2009.⁹

Retazos is a ten-dancer ensemble piece (five men and five woman, including Payero). The movement style is based on a contemporary dance derived vocabulary that maintains clear markings of technical training and virtuosity.¹⁰ The musical score is arranged by Gastón García, and in addition to archival audio recordings, includes a medley of recorded songs that draw heavily on Chango Spasiuk's *chamamé*, a folkloric music genre from northern Argentina. Like Luz's work, the scenography centers on the manipulation of one central element, in this case, wooden chairs in equal number to the dancers.¹¹

Primarily concerned with the disciplinary action taken against citizen bodies during the last military dictatorship, Payero's work also makes reference to Germany's Third Reich. The work employs archival audio recordings and projection; however, unlike Luz's piece the dancers do not perform a script. Instead, Payero's piece relies on aestheticized movement's ability to evoke and denaturalize the quotidian corporeal behaviors of disciplinary violence. This is to say that the piece does not attempt to represent authoritarianism through dance, but rather physicalizes how authoritarianism *moved*.

The piece begins as a solo female dancer carefully steps over a series of overturned chairs scattered about the stage. As the baroque curtain of the Teatro Nacional Cervantes begins to lower, she moves onto the thin strip of stage space remaining in front of it to execute an off balance movement sequence. In stillness, she calls out names. A glance at the program reveals that these are the names of her co-performers. The ritual of speaking names aloud invokes the practice of naming as an act of presenting those no longer physically here—activist groups frequently recite the names of the disappeared during gatherings. Within the representational framework of the piece, this inaugural spoken gesture signals an act of solidarity with those bodies whose conditions of disappearance the piece explores. It also marks an effort to inscribe their names, and by extension personal histories, into a broader legacy of memory.

The curtain rises to reveal female dancers costumed in simple dresses and men in black shirts and slacks. Following a series of duets and unison ensembles, the dancers arrange the chairs in a line upstage as the lights darken and the stage

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empties. The complete text of *Comunicado No. 1* appears in white letters, projected against a black background. In addition to the lines cited in Luz's piece, the projection reads "It is recommended that all residents strictly obey the regulations and directives of military authority, both security and police, and maximize caution to avoid individual or group actions that may demand drastic intervention by active duty personnel."¹²



Daniel Payero in *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (2010), by Daniel Payero. Performed by the Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea. Teatro Nacional Cervantes, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Photo: Alejandra Aranda

A solo male dancer takes the stage, clothed in black pants, shirt, and coattails. Straight lines, deep pliés, and rigid control of the upper body mark his movement. His rhythm punctuates the aural score, which is the text of *Comunicado No. 1* with its ordering words disorganized. Payero maintained the sequence of words in the text, but re-arranged the letters of each word to render them incomprehensible save the visual register of the projected text. Taking advantage of the unfamiliar sounds produced by the twisted Spanish language, the recording exploits the clash of consonants to produce parodically German tones. This aural reference to German authoritarianism, created out of the archive of Argentine political violence, plays on the long history of comparisons between Nazi and Argentine military violence (left un-interrogated by Luz's piece) at the same time that it emphasizes that one is not fully reducible to the other. It calls into question what sounds disciplinary at the same time that the disorganization of the words deflates their performative disciplinary authority.

Now all costumed in black (women in black shorts and sports bras), the dancers take the stage and echo the solo dancer's *Comunicado No. 1* choreography, but with a difference. Movement stutters in a mechanized way, much like the male performer's *Comunicado No. 1* choreography in *Serán otros los ruidos*. The parallels between the two scenes continue as the dancers, arms robotically extended, point haphazardly at each other. The choice to embody *Comunicado No. 1* in this manner, in both works, functions as a parodic embodiment of authoritarianism and suggests the auto-vigilance instilled in Argentines during the dictatorship.¹³

A single female dancer is left onstage as the theatre goes dark. The lights come up partially, revealing several figures crouched on the chairs arranged in a line across the back of the

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stage. The five dancers—three women and two men—are naked and blindfolded, hands covering genitalia. The subtle reveal of this stark image powerfully comments on torture’s strategic invisibility within clandestine torture centers during the last military dictatorship.¹⁴ The image remains for only an instant before the lights fade again and the scene shifts. Surrounded by a circle of witnesses, a male soloist re-cites the pointed finger movement motif coupled with vertical leaps and frantic rotations on a fixed axis. Set to the sounds of clanking metal, stomping feet, and helicopters, his movement activates the terror of detainment. Following his solo, several of the dancers embrace him.

Following these movement-based engagements with the detained body, an audio recording plays and repeats fragments of military government leader Jorge Videla’s statements on human rights and disappeared persons in response to a journalist’s question during a 1979 press conference:

With a Christian vision of human rights, life is fundamental, freedom is important, as is work, family, home, etc. etc. Argentina attends to human rights in this comprehensive manner. I speak concretely because I know that your question refers not to this comprehensive vision of human rights but specifically to the man who is detained without process, that is one case, or the disappeared person, which is another. In the case of a disappeared person, it is an unknown. If the person appears, ok, he or she will have X treatment, and if the disappearance becomes proof of the person’s death then the person will have Z treatment. But while the person is disappeared no, no, no he or she cannot have any special treatment, the person is an unknown, disappeared, without entity, not here, not alive nor dead, disappeared.¹⁵



Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente (2010).

Photo: Alejandra Aranda

As the recording plays, the full cast takes the stage. Forming couples (both hetero and not), they gently embrace. One dancer in each couple initiates a movement series as his or her partner repeats the movement with a brief delay. The movements are rounded and soft, characterized by sweeping limbs and spinal curves. The initial shadowing gives way to weight sharing and partnered lifts. The audio recording repeats and overlaps the phrase “the person is an unknown, disappeared, without entity, not here, not dead nor alive, disappeared.” The repetition of the movements counters the repetition of Videla’s phrase, offering bodies where he insists there are none, presence where words semiotically negate the actuality of state

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violence. As an act of memory and continued protest, movement signifies on the archive.

The female dancers and one male dancer remain on stage. The female dancers recite fragments of the transcript from interviews recorded during the first demonstration of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo)¹⁶ in 1977:

My daughter was five months pregnant when they took her. My grandson must have been born in August of last year. I still don't know anything about him/They won't tell us if they are alive, if they are dead. Why don't they tell us? We are looking for this, nothing more. That they answer us, nothing more/We only want to know where our children are, dead or alive. Anguished, because we don't know if they are sick, cold, hungry, we don't know anything. And we are desperate, Mister, because we don't know who to appeal to.¹⁷

The women sit down on the chairs (still arranged in a line at the back of the stage) as the solo male dancer is bathed in a spotlight. Instrumental violin music plays as he slowly raises his arms until outstretched at his sides, horizontal with the floor. He executes lower body based choreography, maintaining this arm position as the audio score shifts to the sound of lapping waves and a humming engine. Referencing the military practice of tossing drugged but alive bodies from planes into the Rio de la Plata, the dancer's outstretched arms become the plane's wings. Following the male soloist's exit, the female dancers reappear onstage and arrange the chairs in a semicircle. Moving to the original recording of the Madres' work, they stomp feet, raise fists, fall to the ground and recover to their chairs, honoring the group's decades long dedication to the slow process of juridical reclamation.



Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente (2010). Photo: Alejandra Aranda

Payero's work concludes, like Luz's, by staging intimacy and connection in the face of violently disjunctive social choreographies. Five couples (two female/female, two male/male, and one male/female) embrace, tenderly kissing as the lights fade to darkness. Payero shares that this final gesture emerged from an improvisation exploring how to give *cariño* (affection), an ending that offers a queer counterpart to the naturalized heteronormativity of Luz's work (2011). Startlingly poignant, the kiss offers a simple ethics of care toward (all) bodies.

Serán otros los ruidos and *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* yearn for an intimacy with the past in a moment saturated by the spectacularly grand scale of official

bicentennial celebrations. As a bicentennial spectator, I was both exhilarated by the clear acknowledgement of histories of political violence taking place under official auspices *and* wary of an increasingly normativized discourse around memory in Argentina. While these festivities—above all the aforementioned Desfile artístico histórico—indeed emphasize the importance of embodied practice and participation in the commemoration of history and performance of national identity, Luz and Payero’s works offer an alternate engagement with the archive. Where the parade emphasized the loss of legality during the dictatorship—in the form of an enormous Argentine constitution in flames—Luz’s representation of 1970s militant bodies and Payero’s gentle exploration of the physicality of terror facilitate an ongoing historical conversation between the corporeal experiences of bodies then and now. The works offer a kinesthetic ethics of hope located in the situated and affective labor the dancing body can do in relationship to the social choreographies that establish the conditions of possibility for the body’s movements across time.

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Notes

¹ “Hay una enorme añoranza del pasado”.

² Fuerzabruta artistic director Diqui James, in conjunction with the government, selected the historical episodes enacted. Composed of 19 “scenes,” the parade depicts gaucho culture, the early 20th century immigration boom, the growth of national industry, and the last military dictatorship, to name only a few highlights.

³ Here I draw on Diana Taylor’s insight that cultural memory is “a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection” that is “embodied and sensual” (2003, 82). She argues that while in the Western epistemological tradition the written archive is the privileged source of knowledge about the past, embodied practices passed down over time – the “repertoire” – function as repositories of collective cultural memory that, when enacted, produce knowledge about the past in the present (2003, 20).

⁴ Here I borrow Andrew Hewitt’s term for the social conditioning of the body’s movement in everyday life (2005).

⁵ *Serán* premiered at El Portón de Sanchez, a small prominent independent black box-style performance space.

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⁶ “Afuera hay rugidos, manos azules que se mueren, bocas en las que late la derrota/Hay ese ruido pesado de las bombas sobre las calles húmedas de sangre/Dentro de poco saldrá el sol/Serán otros los ruidos/Los de la guerra/Los del amor”.

⁷ “Atraídos por el amor/por el horror”.

⁸ “Se comunica a la población que, a partir de la fecha, el país se encuentra bajo el control operacional de la Junta de Comandantes Generales de las Fuerzas Armadas”.

⁹ Payero was trained through the conservatory of the Teatro Municipal General San Martín, home to the only municipally supported contemporary dance repertory company. The Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea’s origins lay in a labor dispute between longstanding members of the Ballet Contemporáneo of the Teatro San Martín and management that resulted in their dismissal. Politicized by this experience, the dancers created a new group that sought to model a horizontal power structure and engaged contemporary and historical social justice issues.

¹⁰ I use “contemporary” here to encompass choreography that fuses classical modern dance technical elements (from Graham and Limón technique in particular) with unstructured and weighted release style movement.

¹¹ *Retazos* premiered at the Teatro Nacional Cervantes, a large nationally supported proscenium-style theater.

¹² “Se comunica a la población que, a partir de la fecha, el país se encuentra bajo el control operacional de la Junta de Comandantes Generales de las Fuerzas Armadas. Se recomienda a todos los habitantes el estricto acatamiento de las disposiciones y directivas que emanen de la autoridad militar, de seguridad o policial, así como extremar el cuidado en evitar acciones y actitudes individuales o de grupo que puedan exigir la intervención drástica del personal en operaciones”.

¹³ As Diana Taylor notes in her text on the last military dictatorship, the constant state vigilance and possibility of abduction during the this period created a sense of diffuse surveillance and foreclosed the possibility of mobilization among Argentines, as any person standing nearby could be a member of the military (1997, 119).

¹⁴ This image also resonates strongly with the photographs leaked from the US Abu Ghraib detention center in Iraq in 2006.

¹⁵ “Con una visión así cristiana de los derechos humanos, el de la vida es fundamental, el de la libertad es importante, también los del trabajo, de la familia, de la vivienda, etc. etc etc. La argentina atiende a los derechos humanos es esa omnicomprensión que el termino de los derechos humanos significa. Pero yo hablo concretamente porque yo sé que usted hace su pregunta no a esa visión omnicomprensiva de los derechos humanos sino concretamente al

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hombre que está detenido sin proceso, que es uno, o al desaparecido, que es otro. Frente al desaparecido, es una incógnita el desaparecido, si apareciera, bueno, tendrá un tratamiento X, y si la desaparición se convirtiera en certeza de su fallecimiento, tendrá un tratamiento Z. Pero mientras sea un desaparecido no, no, no puede tener ningún tratamiento especial, es una incógnita, es un desaparecido, no tiene entidad, no está, ni muerto ni vivo, está desaparecido”.

¹⁶ Arguably the most visible human right groups to emerge from the last military dictatorship, the Madres famously circled the main Buenos Aires plaza (Plaza de Mayo) in front of the government palace to protest the disappearance of their children and call for justice.

¹⁷ “Mi hija estaba embarazada de cinco meses cuando se la llevaron. Mi nieto tiene que haber nacido en agosto del año pasado. Hasta ahora, no he podido saber nada de él/No nos dicen a nosotros si están vivos, si están muertos. ¿Por qué no nos dicen? Sí, busquemos eso nada más. Que nos respondan, nada más/Nosotros solamente queremos saber dónde están nuestros hijos, vivos o muertos. Angustias porque no sabemos si están enfermos, si tienen frío, si tienen hambre, no sabemos nada. Y desesperación, señor, porque no sabemos a quién recurrir”.

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