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JOSÉPHINE ORIO (POTSDAM)

# Letting the Archive Talk: Ethical Reflections on Strategies of Transmission in Amaranta Osorio Cepeda's *Regresar es irse* (2024)

## Introduction

> Ser exiliada es estar en lucha continua con los recuerdos.
> Es sentir que no encajas en ningún sitio.
> Es vivir con miedo a perderlo todo.
> Es verte obligada a escribir una nueva historia.[1]

This definition of the condition of exile[2] reminds us of its numerous challenges: the traumas of the past, the impossibility to feel at ›home‹, the fear that the unstable ground on which you stand once again gives way beneath your feet, and despite it all, the necessity to start writing a new story for yourself. These difficulties faced today by millions of people throughout the world find representation in the character of María Luisa in the play *Regresar es irse* (2024) by Amaranta Osorio-Cepeda. It is the first play in a triptych trilogy entitled *Trilogía del recuerdo* (2024) and composed of three plays dealing with the memory of

[1] Amaranta Osorio: »Regresar es irse«. In: *Trilogía del recuerdo.* Vigo 2024 (cited below as REI), pp. 71f. My translation: »Being in exile means constantly battling with memories. / It means feeling like you don't belong anywhere. / It means living in fear of losing everything. / It means being forced to write a new story.«

[2] The term exile is the one commonly used by historians and academics to designate the forced migration of those who had to flee Spain to escape the Franco regime. In her book *La voz de los vencidos. El exilio republicano de 1939*, Alicia Alted explains the use of this term as such: »El exiliado se expatria para escapar de una persecución por quien ejerce el poder, debido a sus opiniones o actividades políticas o religiosas, o bien por formar parte de un grupo amenazado, como, por ejemplo, en el caso de los judíos bajo el Gobierno de Hitler. Además, el retorno al país de origen implica graves riesgos personales o simplemente no puede volver porque está en juego su propia vida.« My translation: »An exile leaves their country to escape persecution by those in power, either because of their political or religious views or activities, or because they belong to a threatened group – as, for example, in the case of the Jews under Hitler's regime. Furthermore, returning to their country of origin involves serious personal risks, or they simply cannot return because their very life is at stake.« In other words, the term ›exile‹ is used in this context as a synonym for forced migration due to political reasons.

violence. The play under study, *Regresar es irse*, was inspired by the life of María Luisa Elío[3], a writer, actress, and screenwriter of Spanish origin.

As she was just a young girl, at the end of the Spanish Civil War, she had to [4]flee to Mexico with her family to escape the purges carried out by Franco's forces against Republicans. Osorio's play reconstitutes a part of her life as she goes back to Spain with her son decades after the escape. It draws heavily on María Luisa Elío's original works, some of which are directly incorporated into the text of the play. These include the collection of autobiographical narratives *Tiempo de llorar y otros relatos* (1961) and the film *En el balcón vacío* (1961), for which María Luisa Elío co-wrote the screenplay and in which she appeared as herself. These documents can be regarded as ›archives‹ in the sense developed by Aleida Assmann in *Erinnerungsräume*: »Das Archiv ist nicht nur ein Ort, wo Dokumente aus der Vergangenheit aufbewahrt werden, sondern auch ein Ort, wo Vergangenheit konstruiert, produziert wird.«[5] According to Assmann's definition, the archive is not just a material to be stored and preserved, but also a space of creation in that it allows for the constitution of a narrative of the past – often one elected by the political power. Therefore, it is because Osorio Cepeda draws inspiration from Elío's work that the play can be described as an archive. But this new perspective on Elío's work is deeply rooted in a social and political context. For Derrida, precisely, the influence of political power is crucial to understanding the notion of the archive:

> On ne déterminera jamais cette question comme une question politique parmi d'autres. Elle traverse la totalité du champ et en vérité détermine de part en part le politique comme *res publica*. Nul pouvoir politique sans contrôle de l'archive, sinon de la mémoire.[6]

According to Derrida, the political power always has control over the archive. That implies that when a political regime changes – and with it, the national narrative it has chosen – new aspects of the past are brought to light or are accorded greater importance, whereas others are devalued. When an authoritarian regime falls, as in the case of Franco's regime, what was once kept

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[3] The list of characters at the beginning of the play describes the character of María Luisa as such: »Basado libremente en María Luisa Elío, quien nació en Pamplona en 1926 y murió en México en 2009. Sus padres se exiliaron en México al final de la Guerra Civil, cuando ella era adolescente. Fue actriz y escritora. Entre sus obras destacan *Voz de nadie*, *Tiempo de llorar* y *En el balcón vacío*. Estuvo casada con el escritor y cineasta Jomí García Ascot, con quien creó la película *En el balcón vacío* en 1961.« My translation: »Loosely based on María Luisa Elío, who was born in Pamplona in 1926 and died in Mexico in 2009. Her parents went into exile in Mexico at the end of the Civil War, when she was a teenager. She was an actress and a writer. Her works include *Voz de nadie*, *Tiempo de llorar* and *En el balcón vacío*. She was married to the writer and filmmaker Jomí García Ascot with whom she made the film *En el balcón vacío* in 1961.«

[4] The film, which she co-wrote with her husband, Jomí García Ascot, himself a Spanish exile, interweaves memories of her childhood in Spain with an imagined return to the apartment where she grew up. At the time, she had not yet been able to return to Spain.

[5] Aleida Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. 1. Aufl. München 2018. DOI: 10.17104/9783406729911-2, p. 21. My translation: »The archive is not only a place where documents from the past are stored, but also a place where the past is constructed and produced.«

[6] Jacques Derrida: *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*. Paris 1995, p. 15. My translation: »This question can never be determined as one political question among others. It cuts across the field in its entirety and, in truth, determines the political as *res publica* through and through. There is no political power without control over the archive, without control over memory.«

secret suddenly becomes public. *Regresar es irse* is the result of this new interest in the silences of the dictatorship. The play was indeed written within the project of the »Club Benjamin group«[7], linked to the *Nuevo Teatro Fronterizo* in Madrid, and sought to investigate the theme: »Resistencias: La defensa en la sombra de las libertades y derechos democráticos (1936–1975)[8]«. This project inscribes itself in a time of growing interest for the Spanish Republican exile, 85 years after the events and 50 years after the fall of the Franco regime. After so many years of imposed silence, two questions naturally arise: Whose stories now remain to be told, and how can they best be transmitted?

I therefore undertake the study of this play, bearing in mind this broader societal enterprise to break the silences of the dictatorship and transmit the stories of those it attempted to erase. To this end, I examine *Regresar es irse* through the lens of ›transmission‹ as both a gesture of mediation and an act of remembrance. I approach transmission on two distinct levels. The first level of transmission is a social one; it refers to the transmission of the memory of the Spanish Republican exiles which was, under Franco's regime and until recently, absent of the Spanish narrative. The rewriting of the social narrative that takes place in *Regresar es irse* through the integration of new protagonists and a change of perspective is a perfect example of the changing character of what is sometimes considered as ›archive‹ and sometimes as ›waste‹, as theorized by Assmann:

> Der wachsende Abfall als nicht gesammelter und sich dennoch ansammelnder Überrest der Zivilisation ist unschwer als ein inverses Bild des Archivs zu entziffern. Der Abfall als ein ›negativer Speicher‹ ist aber nicht nur ein Emblem für Entsorgung und Vergessen, er ist auch ein neues Bild für das Latenzgedächtnis, das zwischen Funktions- und Speichergedächtnis angesiedelt ist und von Generation zu Generation in einem Niemandsland zwischen Präsenz und Absenz fortbesteht. Die Grenze zwischen Archiv und Müll erscheint dabei als durchaus beweglich.[9]

The memory of the Spanish exiles and of Elío was, until 1975, relegated to ›waste‹: forgotten material that had become a ›latent memory‹. This memory has now turned into a valuable archive for rewriting the social narrative of contemporary Spain and can therefore be unveiled and transmitted. The second level of transmission that deserves our attention is that of the personal, meaning the intergenerational transmission of memories and experiences in a family. Indeed, transmission is not only a metatextual stake of the play but also appears as a crucial theme throughout *Regresar es irse*. Osorio chooses to portray three generations, María Luisa, her mother and her son, at a crucial moment in their

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[7] »Theatre against oblivion. Club Benjamin« is a project of *Matadero Madrid, center for contempory creation*. It aims to save from oblivion various events and characters of Spain's recent history (1930–1975) through theatrical productions and academic publications. Methodologically, it oscillates between the objectivity of history and the subjectivity of art and especially of theater.

[8] My translation: »Resistance: Defense in the shadow of freedoms and democratic rights (1936–1975)«.

[9] Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume* (ref. 5), p. 22. My translation: »The growing volume of waste – the uncollected yet ever-accumulating residue of civilization – can easily be interpreted as an inverse image of the archive. But waste, as a ›negative repository‹, is not only an emblem of disposal and forgetting; it is also a new image for latent memory, which lies between working memory and long-term memory and persists from generation to generation in a no-man's-land between presence and absence. The boundary between the archive and waste thus appears to be quite fluid.«

relationship. María Luisa's mother – called *La Madre* in the text and inspired by Carmen Bernal López de Lago, the real mother of María Luisa Elío – approaches the end of her life and asks her daughter to bring her grandson to Spain to show him the history of his family. As the son gains a growing interest in the war and the exile his family went through, his grandmother progressively allows herself to die, thus portraying an intergenerational handover.

The play therefore allows a reflection on the ethics of transmission both on a metatheatrical level but also within the text itself. In a context where forced migration has become a painful reality for many throughout the world, the questions raised by the play and its way of approaching the Spanish Republican exile appear highly relevant. How does one pass on a story of violence and pain? Can all of it be passed on? What are the conditions of transmission, the forms and devices that it can take? Where lies the boundary between reality and fiction, between the archive and its reconstitution? In order to guide my reflection on this play, I therefore try to answer the following question: What makes the transmission of the experience of the Spanish Republican exile both a necessary and, at the same time, highly challenging endeavor?

To answer this question, I first analyze how the encounter with oblivion and the fear of erasure trigger the need for transmission both inside the play and on a metatheatrical level. Secondly, I investigate the limits and difficulties of transmission when it comes to telling a traumatic story and have a look at the several devices deployed to overcome them. Finally, I conclude my inquiry with a reflection on the ethics of representation, thus bringing it to a more contemporary and social debate.

## From Confrontation with Oblivion Emerges the Necessity of Transmission

### *From One Generation to the Next*

When reading *Regresar es irse*, a play about the Republican exile, one realizes that the central matter of the play – the experience of exile and therefore the relationship to what was lost – is closely intertwined with the protagonists' relationship to the mother figure. As she stares at the empty balcony of the apartment she once lived in with her family in Pamplona, María Luisa notes »El balcón y mi madre parecen ahora una misma cosa«.[10] Saying this, María Luisa implies that her mother will soon become like the balcony of their old apartment, out of her reach. She knows that her mother will disappear, taking with her many memories, which she will experience like a second experience of loss, a second exile. In the film *En el balcón vacío*, Gabriela, the character played by María Luisa Elío, asks herself, wandering through the streets of Mexico: »¿A quién voy a poderle preguntar tantas cosas?«[11] With her mother it is a part of

[10] REI, p. 60. My translation: »the balcony and my mother now seem to be one and the same«. Here the author quotes Elío, María Luisa: *Tiempo de llorar y otros relatos*. Ciudad de México 2022 (cited below as TDL).
[11] *En el balcón vacío*. Dir. Jomí García Ascot. México 1961.

her past that she loses, as well as the opportunity to ask all of the things that she could not understand as a child. However, in the play under study, Osorio grants the mother of María Luisa a longer life, so that she is still alive when María Luisa and her son return to Spain for the first time. But even so, the threat of oblivion remains throughout the play, which makes the act of transmission all the more urgent.

Already at the start of the play, the mother of María Luisa knows that she will not be able to live much longer and therefore tries to initiate an intergenerational *relevo*.[12] She wants her grandson to know the story of his family and urges her daughter to bring him to Spain on the traces of their past. Taking advantage of a visit of her daughter at the retirement home, the mother makes her wishes known: »Prométeme que lo llevarás«.[13] She wants her daughter to function as a bridge between all three generations at a moment when she feels herself slowly losing her memory: »los recuerdos son lo único que me queda y cada día me quedan menos«.[14] This intergenerational passage is symbolically contained in the mirroring of the journey that María Luisa and her son undertake with the last journey of the mother who is approaching her death.

However, this enterprise of transmission proves to be challenging as the son does not feel himself concerned at all with the family history. At first, he even shows himself reluctant to the idea of a trip to Spain. In the third scene, entitled »Preparar el viaje«, he keeps confronting his mother: »¿Por qué tenemos que ir a España?«,[15] »Qué hueva hacer un viaje tan largo«.[16] She, on the other hand, tries to instill in him the acknowledgment of the necessity of this trip. To the question »¿Por qué estás haciendo la maleta?«,[17] María Luisa replies: »No quiero olvidar nada.«,[18] thus putting words on the whole point of the trip: not letting the memory of her family fade away. The fundamental misalignment between mother and son is reflected in the way they communicate. Rather than engaging in a dialogue, each character pursues their own monologue, interrupting the other's. To recreate dialogue and continuity is a stake of that enterprise of transmission, and this also implies speaking the same language, using the same vocabulary.

During this ineffective dialogue, the son suddenly pronounces a word that awakes a memory in his mother:

| | |
|---|---|
| HIJO | Ya sé que mi abuelo era rojo. |
| MARÍA LUISA | ¡El rojo! |
| HIJO | ¿Qué pasa? |
| MARÍA LUISA | Me ha venido un recuerdo de un señor al qué le decían así: »El rojo«. La primera vez que lo vi estaba fumando, sentado en una piedra. Tenía una barba muy larga y ojos almendrados. |

[12] Amo Sánchez, Antonia: »Introducción«. In: Amaranta Osorio: *Trilogía del recuerdo*. Ediciones Invasoras, Madrid 2024, p. 7.
[13] REI, p. 18. My translation: »Promise me you'll take him there.«
[14] REI, p. 25. My translation: »Memories are all I have left, and every day there are fewer of them.«
[15] REI, p. 22. My translation: »Why do we have to go to Spain?«
[16] REI, p. 23. My translation: »It sucks to make such a long trip.«
[17] REI, p. 22. My translation: »Why are you packing your suitcase?«
[18] REI, p. 22. My translation: »I don't want to forget anything.«

> Durante la guerra, encerraron a algunos republicanos en el sótano del colegio. Los sacaban una vez al día.
>
> Esa mañana, los niños empezaron a gritarle »Rojo-rojo« y a tirarle piedras.[19]

The mere evocation of the word *rojo* brings back the memory she had of that man and the pity she felt for him. She perceives it as an incarnation of the stigmatization of Republicans, which was what led her family to flee. For her son, however, the term *rojo* is deprived of meaning. He knows that his grandfather was for some reason called *rojo*, but it does not mean anything to him. In that sense, transmission for María Luisa also means endowing words with meaning. It is the point of their journey, a journey towards more comprehension and dialogue. Indeed, after María Lusia tells this story, her son starts asking her questions, bringing them into the same reality, into a space of dialogue, for a brief instant. Other than failed dialogues, the text of the play is also filled with ineffective phone calls – María Luisa and her ex-husband fight over the trip to Spain, the son and his girlfriend were cut in their conversation and the mother hangs up on María Luisa – another symptom of miscommunication. These communication difficulties, which trauma studies identify as typical forms of traumatic behavior, in turn hinder transmission.

Additionally, the masculine characters in the play often act as obstacles to transmission. The initial reticence of the son to learn about the history of his family is one example, but it is also worth mentioning the role of two rather marginal characters: María Luisa's ex-husband and her father. The ex-husband makes an appearance in the play on a phone call with María Luisa on which he proves himself uncooperative as to their trip to Spain. And as for María Luisa's father, he only appears as a ghost. This spectral appearance resonates with the memories of the mother to whom the ghost appears. In a conversation with *el fantasma del padre* – of which we only have access to what the mother says – she remembers his return after his escape from prison: »Tú te fuiste vivo y volviste sombra.«[20] In the same way, María Luisa Elío remembers the return of her father in *Tiempo de llorar*: »su delgadez era extrema y no hablaba, ¡no decía nada! […] el anterior papá ya había muerto«.[21] About his time imprisoned by the Francoists and later in a concentration camp, the father does not say a word. His silence, however, says a lot as to the traumatizing effect of what he had to endure.

Both the silence and the distance of the masculine figures of the play are counterbalanced by the transmission work operated by the feminine characters, María Lusia and her mother. As Antonia Amo Sánchez observes:

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[19] REI, p. 23. My translation: »I already know that my grandfather was a Red. /*The* Red! / What's wrong? / A memory just came back to me of a man they used to call that: ›The Red.‹ The first time I saw him, he was smoking, sitting on a rock. He had a very long beard and almond-shaped eyes. // During the war, they locked some Republicans in the school basement. They let them out once a day. // That morning, the children started shouting ›Red! Red!‹ at him and throwing stones at him.«

[20] REI, p. 26. My translation: »You left alive and returned as a shadow.«

[21] TDL, p. 64. My translation: »he was extremely thin and did not speak, he did not say anything! […] our ›daddy‹ from before was already gone.«

> Las mujeres sufren los recuerdos, pero también sobreviven gracias a ellos. Son las guardianas del fuego, las que tejen y destejen una memoria afiliativa, a veces neta, a veces falible. La memoria se escribe en femenino. Y no importa tanto su valor en sí como lo que el acto de memoria produce: el trenzado de los lazos intergeneracionales.[22]

To Osorio's female characters' ability to keep the memory alive and to create a bridge between generations, one may therefore also add that they also enable a transmission of the memory duty from the feminine to the masculine. They want the son to be receptive to his family history, a witness, someone through whom the experience of persecution and exile will live on as a warning for future generations.

### *Memory of the Spanish Exiles*

The play begins with a picture of an identity card from the exhibition *LAS SINSOMBRERO*[23] that took place in the Teatro Fernán Gómez in Madrid in 2022. It contains information about a woman and her daughter collected by the immigration office of the Mexican Consulate. It can be assumed that they fled the civil war and sought exile in Latin America, as María Luisa Elío and her family had done. Although María Luisa Elío was too young at the time to be considered a member of the Generation of '27,[24] her work as a writer and as a filmmaker was also mostly forgotten in Spain until very recently. Although the Civil War and the ultimate victory of the Francoists largely contributed to it, the forced exile of many Republicans also explains why they remain, to this day, foreigners to the Spanish artistic landscape. In writing this play, Osorio therefore brings the story of María Luisa Elío back to Spain, in an act of memory echoing the efforts of the characters within the play.

In this context, we cannot but think of the already mentioned character of *el rojo*, who comes back like an obsession in *Regresar es irse*, like it does in *Tiempo de llorar* and *En el balcón vacío*. This man, of whom neither the reader nor María Luisa Elío and her characters know anything, except that he was ›the Red‹, a Republican, becomes a symbol of the thousands of people whose memory was swallowed by the Civil War. In the play, like in *Tiempo de llorar*, María Luisa goes in search of the tomb of this man but is faced with the painful realization that he was probably thrown in a mass grave like many others. Like him, many were indeed denied the right to a grave, the right to be mourned and remembered,

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[22] Amo Sánchez: »Introducción« (ref. 12), p. 5f. My translation: »Women suffer from memories, but they also survive thanks to them. They are the guardians of the fire, the ones who weave and unweave a shared memory, sometimes clear, sometimes fallible. Memory is written in the feminine. And what matters is not so much its value in itself as what the act of remembering produces: the weaving of intergenerational bonds.«

[23] This exhibition delves into the forgotten history of the women artists part of the Generation of '27. The artists of that generation were all witness to the great social and political changes that Spain endured in the 20th Century, however the women of that group were mostly forgotten in the aftermath of the civil war. This exhibition therefore sought to bring to light the work of these women. LAS SINSOMBRERO | Teatro Fernán Gómez. For more information on the subject, see the documentary produced by RTVE Las Sinsombrero - Documental sobre igualdad en RTVE Play.

[24] Cf. ref. 3.

which makes the work of memory all the more difficult but nonetheless necessary.

## From Silence to Dialogue: The Obstacles to Transmission and the Strategies to Overcome Them

### *Trauma, Silence, and the Limits of Transmission*

As noted above, certain experiences resist transmission. This is particularly true of the Spanish Civil War, during which countless individuals were buried anonymously and remain to this day unidentified, making the work of memory especially challenging. Additionally, the trauma triggered by such a violent period makes it difficult for the survivors to tell their story. This is what Cathy Caruth studies in her foundational work *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History*. She argues that in a situation of trauma »to be reasonable« means »to step out into the freedom of forgetting«.[25] In other words, the reasonable option that traumatized people have, in order to go on with their lives and free themselves from the pain, is to forget. Still, one might wonder if this is a realistic one. In *Regresar es irse*, the mother has not been able to let go and this is why she is stuck in her memories, unable to communicate with her family and holding on to her late husband – symbolized by the skull she won't let go of. The only real conversations she is able to lead throughout the play – and that somehow always revolve around the unresolved past – are with the ghost of her late husband. In the scene when María Luisa comes to say goodbye before leaving for Spain, all that her mother is able to say to her as she asks: »Hola, mamá. ¿Con quién hablas?« is »Con tu padre«, »Su fantasma«, »Hablo con mis recuerdos.«[26] Additionally, in the play she is constantly represented locked in the room of her retirement home, a metaphor for a life trapped in the confined space of memories.

For María Luisa, the most painful is having been robbed of her childhood by the war or how Nuria de Orduña Fernández puts it: »esa imposibilidad de regresar también al paraíso perdido de la infancia.«[27] It is all contained in the story of the day María Luisa had to leave her home in Spain: »solo me dejaron llevar un juguete«,[28] echoing the memory told in *Tiempo de llorar*: »Me advirtieron que no podía llevarme nada, ningún muñeco ni el abrigo siquiera, debía parecer que íbamos de día de campo.«[29] For a child, the tragedy of not being able to take anything with her, not even a toy, not only symbolizes the rupture from

[25] Caruth, Cathy: *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore / London 1996, p. 32.
[26] REI, p. 27. My translation: »Hello, mom, who are you talking to?«, »With your father«, »With his ghost«, »I am talking with my memories.«
[27] de Orduña Fernández, Nuria: »Prólogo«. In: Osorio: *Trilogía del recuerdo* (ref. 1), p. 12. My translation: »also the impossibility to return to childhood's paradise lost.«
[28] REI, p. 12. My translation: »They only let me take one toy.«
[29] TDL, p. 44. My translation: »They warned me I could not take anything with me, no dolls, not even my coat, it had to look like we were going on an excursion in the country.«

childhood to sudden maturity but also the impossibility to keep any material trace of the past, and therefore the impossibility to pass any physical realia of memory on.

However, despite the obstacles and trauma, memory sometimes finds ways to live on. Reading the words on the tombstone – »En este lugar, Antigua fosa común, reposan los restos de cientos de hombres y mujeres valedores de la legalidad republicana […].«[30] – triggers a sense of duty in the son who then decides to dedicate his life to the memory of the victims of the Spanish Civil War: »Creo que me voy a dedicar a eso. // A estudiar los huesos para ponerlos sus nombres. Quiero ayudar a las familias a encontrar a sus muertos.«[31] This decision of the son, late in the play, is prompted by a national remembrance practice in the form of a memorial. It connects state memory with family memory, what Assmann respectively calls cultural and communicative memory.[32] Cultural memory is not disembodied, it talks about and to human beings, intersecting and interacting with communicative memory. Although communicative memory may appear more fragile and less tangible than a memorial, it remains essential to transmission. Without the efforts of his mother and grandmother who decided to take him to the point of origin of their exile, the son would not have experienced this revelation.

### *In Spite of Everything, Pass On: Opening Spaces for Dialogue*

The particularity of the story of María Luisa Elío is that, unlike many other displaced persons, she had the opportunity to go back to the country of her childhood. However, whether it be in *Tiempo de llorar*, in *En el balcon vacío,* or in Osorio's play, the character of María Luisa experiences the return to Spain as a failure. The title of the play, *Regresar es irse* – a quotation from María Luisa Elío's text *Tiempo de llorar* – already hints at this impossibility of return:

> Y ahora me doy cuenta que regresar es irse. Es decir, que volver a Pamplona es irse de Pamplona. Al fin voy a volver donde las cosas no están ya. He vivido en el mundo de mi propia cabeza, el verdadero mundo quizá, y contando poco con el mundo exterior. Ahora al fin me atrevo a regresar donde la gente ha muerto. Por eso sé que regresar es irse, irme. Irme de una vida, casi de toda una vida (y sigo hablando en el orden del pensamiento), porque sé que ahora la mirada tan sólo va a servir para borrar. Lo sé, lo sabía, y en ese saber tiene una importancia total el verificar. Pamplona, tan sólo un lugar.[33]

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[30] REI, p. 56. My translation: »Here, in this former mass grave, lie the remains of hundreds of men and women who stood up for the republican cause […].«

[31] REI, p. 57. My translation: »I think I am going to devote myself to this. To study bones to be able to give them their names back. I want to help families to find their dead.«

[32] Cf. Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume* (ref. 5), p. 13.

[33] TDL, p. 15. My translation: »And now I realize that returning is leaving. In other words, going back to Pamplona is leaving Pamplona. At last, I am going back to where things are no longer there. I have lived in the world inside my own head, the real world, perhaps, and paid little attention to the outside world. Now, at last, I dare return to where people have died. That is why I know that returning means leaving, for me to leave. Leaving a life, almost a whole life (and I am still following the train of thought), because I know that now the gaze will only serve to erase. I know it, I knew it, and in that knowing, verification is of the utmost importance. Pamplona, just a place.«

With those words María Luisa confirms what the title already suggested: coming back is to go away or, in other words, there is no coming back and what she remembered and imagined of Pamplona will never again be reality. Although she knew she would not find any trace of her past – only an empty balcony – by going to Madrid, she still needs to go there to verify it. In a way she announces from the beginning the impossibility of her return to Spain – the country of childhood and memories.

If there is no return possible for María Luisa, the journey to Spain nevertheless creates the conditions for her son to listen to his family's story. Even though they could not see the apartment she lived in and could not find the grave of *rojo* nor anything that would bring back her memories, this trip opened the space of dialogue. In scene 31, after their return to Mexico, María Luisa and her son are able to hold a very normal conversation in which the son asks questions about exile which his mother answers. As opposed to the third scene that displayed a fragmented dialogue, this scene offers the image of listening, respect and continuity.

For María Luisa and her mother, who were not able to make the journey together, the play finds another way to open communication, namely through songs. The radio plays a mediating role between the two who otherwise are not able to communicate with one another. In scene 6, the song »Solo le pido a Dios« by Leon Gieco is playing on the radio for the mother and daughter to hear. They do not comment on the song, they just let it play between them and listen to lyrics that resonate strongly with their experience: »Desahuciado esta el que tiene que marchar / a vivir una cultura diferente.«[34] In scene 29, as María Luisa comes back from Spain and deplores everything the war has deprived her of, her mother starts to sing »Anda Jaleo«[35] – a traditional Andalusian song that became famous through Federico García Lorca who recorded it. The figure of García Lorca became a Republican symbol after the Civil War so the mother of María Luisa singing this song is a strong gesture of her persistent resistance to the Francoists who led her to flee her own country. In scene 32, the mother starts to sing to the skull of her husband the song: »Serenata para la tierra de uno«:

[34] REI, p. 28. This song is about the military dictatorship in Argentina that forced Mercedes Sosa, famous interpreter of the song, into exile. My translation: »Pitiful is the person who has to leave home to live in a different culture.«

[35] Anda Jaleo was recorded by Federico García Lorca, who did the musical arrangements and played the piano in the recording. At the start of the Civil War, he was assassinated in 1936 by nationalists part of the Falange.

Porque el idioma de infancia
Es un secreto entre los dos.
Porque le diste reparo
Al desarraigo de mi corazón.
Porque me duele si me quedo,
Pero me muero si me voy.
Por todo y a pesar de todo, mi amor
Yo quiero vivir en vos.[36]

In choosing this song for the mother to sing, Osorio plays on the ambiguity of the address. She could be both talking to her dead husband whom she wants to join, as well as to her lost country. At play here is what María Isabel Corbí Sáez calls a »dialogue de mémoires«,[37] a necessary intercultural exchange of memories. The song sung by Mercedes de Sosa, forced to exile in Europe by the military dictatorship in Argentina, mirrors the Republican exile from Spain to Latin America. This »dialogue des mémoires« allows the creation of a community, and the songs through which it happens have a gathering role – between the readers or the audience who probably know these songs, and within the play. Indeed, these songs constitute a form of musical interlude allowing mother and daughter to unite and symbolically tell each other everything they are otherwise not able to express. With the song »Solo le pido a dios« they even join to sing it together. Even though, after the experience of war and exile, communication and transmission can prove difficult and sometimes seem impossible, the mother still finds a way to express her love for her country and the Republican values.

Osorio herself uses different strategies to familiarize her readers or audience with the life of María Luisa Elío. As previously noted, she inserts a plurality of resources in the play such as excerpts from *Tiempo de llorar* which she stages so that María Luisa appears to be writing them. She adds »Su escritura puede ser proyectada o enunciada«,[38] thereby leaving the stage director free to choose between embodying María Luisa Elío's text and projecting it. Osorio also inserts an excerpt of the film *En el balcón vacío*[39] – with the voiceover of María Luisa Elío – that her mother watches and comments on in the company of the ghost of her late husband. This results in an embedded gaze, the spectator watching the mother watching the film, in which her daughter contemplates her childhood memories. But the most obvious example is Osorio's transformation of Elío's monologues and personal thoughts from *Tiempo de llorar* and *En el balcón vacío* into dialogues performed on stage. Through dialogue and theatrical performance, the play brings Elío's words to life, making them more immediate and accessible to a contemporary audience.

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[36] Song by María Elena Walsh, sung by Mercedes Sosa: María Elena Walsh a. Mercedes Sosa: »Serenata para la tierra de uno« [1980]. Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvd-8DRur-A (accessed June 22, 2026). This song was composed in a context of military dictatorship in Argentina and Mercedes Sosa herself was forced to exile in Europe to escape censorship in her country.
[37] María Isabel Corbí Sáez: »Littérature et Éthique de la mémoire: Le cas de Lydie Salvayre avec *Pas pleurer* (2014) et *Rêver debout* (2021). Du « vivre-avec » au « vivre-ensemble » «. In: María Isabel Corbí Sáez a. Gabriel Sansano (eds.): *Literaturas migrantes. Preservación de las memorias e identidades colectivas y cohesión social. Retos para la Europa del siglo XXI*. Madrid 2024, pp. 63–78, here: p. 75.
[38] REI, p. 17. My translation: »The text can be projected or spoken aloud.«
[39] REI, pp. 33–34.

To these literal mediations of the life of María Luisa Elío, Osorio adds methods that are less faithful to reality. For example, she freely modifies the temporality of Elío's biography. In the play, María Luisas mother is still alive when she takes her son on their journey to Spain, which was not the case in real life. This slight distortion of reality however enables a focus on the intergenerational bonds and an emphasis on the act of transmission.

## Considering the Ethics of Representation on the Contemporary Stage

### *Beyond Literalness: Distancing the Archive to Enable Transmission*

One might naturally wonder whether such biographical distortions are not obstacles to transmission. Is the mention »La obra está inspirada libremente en la vida de María Luisa Elío (actriz y escritora) y de su MADRE Carmen Bernal López de Lago[40]« enough to dispel this concern? The ethical question of appropriating an original voice – here, that of María Luisa Elío – is a highly contemporary concern, one that has received considerable attention in recent years, particularly in the field of migration studies. How does one tell a story without erasing the voice that first told it? How does one remain faithful to the original? It is also a concern addressed by Julie Salverson in »Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre, and the Lie of the Literal«. In this article, she argues that »if the overly symbolic or abstract is evasive, the overly literal is a lie«. By this, she means that if a representation steps too far away from the reality it tells, it is not accurate enough, but if, on the contrary, it remains too close, it becomes a lie. Assuming one can reach a point of proximity to the original that will grant accuracy is a lie – and a dangerous one I might add – because it does not allow for »complexity, nuance and multiple points of entry«.[41] In that regard, *Regresar es irse* makes no claim to literalness.

Moreover, the phrase »the literal is a lie« is relevant for stakes of transmission within the play. Even though María Luisa cannot show her son anything of what life was like in Spain before she left – and give him what she would have hoped to be a ›literal‹ understanding of her own experience – the journey to Spain still got him interested in his family history. This example not only demonstrates that the transmission of the literal experience is impossible and therefore »a lie« but also that it is not necessary. Indeed, I would argue that this successful transmission is the conjunction of two forms of memory. First, family memory passed on through the grandmother and mother in the form of what Assmann calls ›kommunikativen Gedächtnis‹ (communicative memory) in that it is passed on from one generation to the next trough orality, as shown above.

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[40] REI, p. 16. My translation: »This work was freely inspired by the lives of María Luisa Elío (actress and playwright) and her mother, Carmen Bernal López de Lago.«
[41] Julie Salverson: »Performing Emergency: Witnessing, Popular Theatre, and the Lie of the Literal«. In: *Theatre Topics* 6.2 (1996), pp. 181–191, here: p. 184. DOI: 10.1353/tt.1997.0012.

And secondly, ›kulturellen‹[42] memory (cultural memory), to use once again the words of Assmann, in the form of the memorial in the cemetery. This second form of memory offers a new perspective on the Civil War and thus allows a distance from family memory and the stories that the son has heard his entire life. Thanks to this distancing, this step aside from the literalness of the family stories, the son has enough space to take ownership of his own story.

Salverson further develops on the risks of literalness: »Such a story may remain either outside the experience of the listener, as the exotic and impenetrable but vicariously viewed ›other‹; or, will be collapsed and assimilated by the listener as ›just like me.‹«[43] She argues that a play that comforts the audience in its comprehension of the concepts of ›self‹ and ›other‹ is a play that leaves insufficient room for interpretation and, I would add, for the public to get involved with the story and make it their own and thereby enable transmission. In that regard, the son's evolution throughout the play can also be interpreted as the result of a successful act of transmission, one that allows for a renewal of the perspective on the ›self‹ and ›other‹. This is well illustrated by his proclamation of a complex identity at the end of the play:

> Soy nieto de republicanos.
> Hijo de exiliados.
> Soy mexicano, de familia española.
> Estoy vivo porque mis abuelos lograron escapar.
> Porque ellos empezaron una historia sin historia.
> Soy el hijo de una historia que nadie quiere oír,
> una historia que quisieron borrar.
> A mis abuelos nadie les ha pedido perdón.
> Soy mexicano. Nieto de republicanos. Exiliado de tercera generación.[44]

In this quote, the anaphora of »Soy« expresses the affirmation of a multiple identity, reinforced by the juxtaposition of short sentences drawing our attention to the numerous facets of the son's identity. These facets – although they seem to stand in opposition, *like mexicano and exiliado* – however stand on the same line, illustrating their possible coexistence within a same identity.

Therefore, I would argue that the thesis that the literal is an illusion and a lie which endangers transmission, in fact, acts as a sort of morality of the play. The following quotation sums it up:

> En realidad, el recuerdo de uno es lo verdadero. El recuerdo no es algo que uno inventa o cambia, es algo mucho más exacto que la realidad, dispuesta siempre a ser cambiada. En cuanto al recuerdo, es como una fotografía, como una tarjeta postal: fijo, incambiable.[45]

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[42] Cf. Assmann: *Erinnerungsräume* (ref. 5), p. 13
[43] Cf. Salverson: »Performing Emergency«, p 184.
[44] REI, p. 64. My translation: »I am the grandson of Republicans. / The son of exiles. / I am Mexican, from a Spanish family. / I am alive because my grandparents managed to escape. / Because they began a story without a history. / I am the son of a story that nobody wants to hear, / a story they wanted to erase. / Nobody has ever apologized to my grandparents. / I am Mexican. Grandson of Republicans. A third-generation exile.«
[45] TDL, p.16. REI, p. 68. This quotation is taken from Elío's work and reproduced in Osorio's play. My translation: »Actually, one's memory is the reality. A memory is not something that one makes up or changes, it is something much more accurate than reality, always liable to change. As for the memory, it is like a photograph, like a postcard: fixed, unchangeable.«

In this quote, María Luisa Elío opposes the fixity and exactitude of the memory that she compares to a photograph, to the unreliability of reality that constantly transforms itself. In other words, reality is opposed to immobility, an image of death, what cannot live on or be passed on. I believe that this could also function as a metaphor for the ethics of transmission, whether it be within the play as we just saw, or on a metatheatrical level. The world around us keeps on changing and thus our understanding and reception of the archive – or of reality – changes as well. It cannot stay unaffected by the passing of time, like memories do. Therefore, one has to embrace the posture of distancing from reality – which Salverson calls »the gap«[46] – if one is to transmit anything.

Applied to theatre productions and specifically those dealing with tales of migration, one could formulate it as such: traumatizing experiences cannot be delivered as they were lived – literally – to the readers or the audience, therefore there has to be some sort of mediation allowing distancing from the original experience. On a metatheatrical level, I would thus argue that Osorio's play follows this principle in modifying certain biographical elements of the life of María Luisa Elío. Of course, the 60 years distance from the release of the film, the 40 years from the publication of *Tiempo de llorar* and almost 90 years from the events they tell, make a distance inevitable, but as shown above, Osorio plays further with the frontier between reality and fiction. I would thus argue that this is not a betrayal of the archive – of the material we have of the life of María Luisa Elío – but rather a device allowing this story to be heard by the contemporary audience.

### *Passing On: An Ethical Responsibility*

In her analysis of the work of Lydie Salvayre – a second-generation Spanish exile – María Isabel Corbí Sáez reminds us of the »ethical responsibility«[47] we have to commemorate the tragic episodes of history in order to prevent their repetition. But more than that, according to her, telling the story of the Spanish exile is also a way to complete a fragmentary story that was deliberately truncated, cut short:

> Si l'acte de témoignage s'avère déjà en lui-même un exutoire et une réparation morale pour les avatars existentiels subis, la transcription qui s'opère dans le roman les inscrit dans cette histoire longuement tronquée. Une histoire tronquée qui est reconstruite, redressée et complétée, de façon subjective et fragmentaire, à l'aide de toute l'information puisée de différentes sources que la narratrice enchevêtre dans son récit.[48]

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[46] Salverson: »Performing Emergency«, p. 184.
[47] Corbí Sáez: »Littérature et Éthique de la mémoire«, p. 64.
[48] Corbí Sáez: »Littérature et Éthique de la mémoire«, p. 68. My translation: »While the act of bearing witness is in itself a form of catharsis and moral reparation for the existential ordeals endured, the process of transcription at work in the novel inscribes them within a history that has long remained incomplete. This incomplete history is reconstructed, corrected, and supplemented – subjectively and fragmentarily – through information drawn from a variety of sources, which the narrator interweaves into her narrative.«

Corbí Sáez interprets the memorial ›patchwork‹ of the narrator of *Pas pleurer*[49] as a »reparation«. Indeed, in her novel – which was awarded the prestigious Prix Goncourt – Lydie Salvayre tries to reconstitute the beginning of the Spanish Civil War by interlacing conversations with her mother, who was a young woman at that time, the narrative published by Georges Bernanos in *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* and the archives she found on the period. Doing so, she fills out the blanks left by more than 35 years of Franco regime that diligently and violently erased any counter narrative. Similarly, María Luisa Elío, like many other Spanish exiles of that time, was erased by the regime, which explains why her story is to this day largely unknown in her own country.[50] 60 years later, Osorio's play constitutes a form of »reparation«. For Reyes Mate in his famous work *La Herencia del olvido* – an essay about the memory of the Holocaust but also of the Spanish Civil War and of the Latin American dictatorships – to commemorate is a necessity in our societies: »No se trata de impartir justicia, sino de reconocer que sin memoria de la injusticia no hay manera de hablar de justicia.«[51] For Reyes Mate, the purpose of transmission and commemoration is not to condemn, but rather to preserve the very concept of justice.

To close this reflection on memory, the following section examines the quotations of Gabriel García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* (2003)[52] in the play. It is María Lusia that brings it to her mother and starts reading it to her in an inverted gesture of transmission. The choice of this book is relevant in this play because it constitutes itself a reflection on oblivion, memory and the necessity of transmission as synthetized in the famous last lines:

> Sin embargo, antes de llegar al verso final ya había comprendido que no saldría jamás de ese cuarto, pues estaba previsto que la ciudad de los espejos (o los espejismos) sería arrasada por el viento y desterrada de la memoria de los hombres en el instante en que Aureliano Babilonia acabara de descifrar los pergaminos, y que todo lo escrito en ellos era irrepetible desde siempre y para siempre porque las estirpes condenadas a cien años de soledad no tenían una segunda oportunidad sobre la tierra.[53]

In his novel, Gabriel García Márquez intended to criticize the erasing of the political and collective memory in Latin America through the tale of the family condemned to annihilation and eternal oblivion because it did not pay attention to

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[49] Lydie Salvayre: *Pas pleurer*. Paris 2022.

[50] It is worth noting that María Luisa Elío's centenary, celebrated on August 17, 2026, prompted numerous tributes. Among them, the Instituto Navarro de la Memoria created an online exhibition devoted to her, available through the Oroibidea portal [https://oroibidea.es/maria-luisa-elio/es (accessed October 31, 2026)], along with a podcast series.

[51] Reyes Mate: *La herencia del olvido*. Madrid 2008, p. 169. My translation: »It is not a question of administering justice, but of recognizing that without a memory of injustice, there is no way to talk about justice.«

[52] Gabriel García Márquez dedicated his book to María Luísa Elío and her husband Jomi García Ascot.

[53] Gabriel García Márquez: *Cien años de soledad*. Barcelona 2003, p. 495. Translated by Gregory Rabassa for the 1970 Harper Edition: »Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.« p. 422.

its history. After reading the last lines of the book, the mother ominously asks »¿Cuantos años estaremos condenados al olvido?«.[54]

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown to what extent Amaranta Osorio Cepeda's rewriting of the life of María Luisa Elío sheds light on very contemporary concerns. Through *Regresar es irse*, the playwright questions how we are to tell stories of the Spanish Civil War 50 years after the end of the Franco regime and nearly 90 years after the events themselves. More broadly, the play raises the question of how traumatic stories of migration and exile can be transmitted today, and why such transmission is necessary, by placing this issue at the very core of the story. Indeed, through the relationship between María Luisa, her mother and her son, Osorio explores how memories circulate from one generation to the next despite silence and trauma. Moreover, the progressive evolution of the son throughout the play demonstrates that, even if exile cannot be fully understood by those who did not experience it directly, transmission nevertheless remains possible.

This study therefore leads to the conclusion that telling these stories is not only possible but also essential, both for a society and for future generations, however difficult it may seem. Ultimately, as *Regresar es irse* suggests, transmission relies on a fragile balance between forgetting and commemorating, literalness and distance, archive and re-creation.

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