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Wandering and Sleeplessness

Performance as Research in Memories of the 1970 Peruvian Earthquake

Introduction

An image in my mind floats before me as I write. The light is pale and spectral. There is a one-storey house that is bordered with cream roses. A cluster of timber beehives huddles in the darkest corner. In the backdrop, copper cornfields stretch into a horizon of sloping grassland, flanked by a thicket of eucalyptus. A steep, cobbled lane named Jirón Bolognesi runs past this house, stained in sepia by a row of electric lampposts. It is framed by two narrow lines of whitewashed buildings, topped with terracotta roofs and protruding wooden balconies. Most are built in colonial style, boasting doors and shutters of cedar and pine, set around a central patio. At the end of the street towers Mount Huascarán, the tallest mountain in Perú; a life-source in this lush valley, the Callejón de Huaylas. Its twin peaks are crowned with ice that glistens in the moonlight. A black sea of sky ripples with stars. This is the home of Luis Ramírez, known to his friends as Lucho.

Aged sixteen, Lucho lives with his parents, two older sisters, a brother, and his uncle. He studies at Santa Inés, a prestigious school for boys two blocks downhill, which attracts boarders for hundreds of kilometres. Among its recent graduates is Aníbal Quijano. Would-be surgeons can practise with a model human skeleton, newly acquired by the board of governors. Aspiring artists can watch films on a projector (Huamán Huerta, 2004: 442). There, Lucho's spare time has been occupied by amateur dramatics. He has auditioned for a role in a modernist Spanish play called *The Kind Mermaid*. One Sunday, he is due to meet for casting with his teacher and his classmates, but a fractured arm has forced his absence.

Consequently, on the last weekend of May, Lucho does not go to Santa Inés. Instead, he leaves his hometown of Yungay and travels to Lima, on a visit to his relatives. [Figure One]

Lucho has been invited for a special occasion. On Sunday, Mexico will play the USSR in the inaugural game of the football World Cup, hosted by the Mexica nation. Lucho's uncle is fortunate enough to own a television – that little black box of magic that has not yet arrived in the Callejón, where the rest of his family will listen on the radio. The whistle blows on Sunday May 31st at 1pm and fans around the world pull up their chairs. Twenty-two men chase the ball around the pitch for ninety minutes. No goal is scored. Spectators filter out the Azteca stadium (*El Expreso,* 1970). Before the stalls empty, some 3800km to the south near another viceregal city, an earthquake strikes off the coast of the Pacific. Measuring 7.8-7.9 on the Richter scale, it devastates the department of Ancash. Some 80,000 people are killed and 800,000 left homeless. The seismic movement causes giant boulders of rock and ice to break away from the Huascarán, descending through Llanganuco valley at speeds of over 300km/hour (Evans et al, 2009: 96). The thick, brown mass buries Yungay in its entirety [Figure Two].

On Monday morning, Lucho awakes to headlines that his home has been devoured. There is no way to establish contact with his parents: roads are blocked and scant phonelines are broken (see Bode, 1990; Oliver-Smith, 1986). After a fortnight of sleepless nights, on the day that Lucho's plaster cast is taken off his broken arm, his uncle finds a small box of precious text in the classified section of *El Ojo*. It is a message from Lucho's father. The family has survived. They are coming to Lima. There Lucho stays, where eventually his parents arrive – at first, he does not recognize his father with his long beard – and the family permanently resettles. Lucho has lost his home, his town, his school, his friends, his cousins, and his

childhood. His young life is reoriented around death and disappearance. In the months that follow, he seeks respite from the trauma of this loss in his passion for performance. He will go on to have a long and successful career as a stage actor, founding several experimental theatre groups and travelling the world's major fringe festivals. Over a decade after the disaster, in 1981, he will create a solo performance about the burial of his hometown. He will call it *Wandering and Sleeplessness*.

Performance as Research

This article analyses the collaborative reproduction of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* that I began with Lucho almost four decades later, as part of a larger research project on the legacies of the Yungay landslide. This research seeks to establish how landslide survivors live with the enduring effects of disaster, and how their memories of disaster are entangled with the geophysical environment. I am interested in the creative strategies deployed by survivors to process trauma and its affects. In the contexts of conflict, violence, and abuse, trauma studies have spotlighted the role of performance in working through memories of harm as part of healing processes (Cvetkovich, 2003; Hart, 2025; Milton, 2014). Research in disaster studies, meanwhile, has largely focussed on performance after disaster as a political critique of colonialist recovery policies (González, 2022; Jarman, 2017) or as a vehicle for transferring knowledge about risk and resilience among exposed populations (Davidson et al, 2024). Building on this work, I explore how performance can move us closer to experiences of trauma, by giving access to the affective dimensions that, as scholarship has noted, are often repressed or overlooked in analyses that focus on the discursive content of oral testimonies (Allan, 2018; Slowikowski and Motion, 2021).

Much has been written on the stuff of trauma that evades facile narrative representation (Caruth, 1991; Das, 2020; Taussig, 1987). When interviewing dozens of survivors from Yungay and reading many other written testimonies, I have found that language often falters. There are ellipses and glazed gazes, reported, too, in the work of others (Bode, 1990; Oliver-Smith, 1986; Usón, forthcoming). Survivors often refer to May 31st as the end of the world. Many believed that they were living through the apocalypse. Confronted with absolute unknown, where horror simply does not fit in language, I want to think about Veena Das's question: "Could it then be that a different register of anthropological creativity opens up when we can find ways of acknowledging that we would have to beg, borrow, and steal words for no ready-made standing languages are available?" (Das, 2020). As survivors recount their stories, they face moments of uncertainty (Stevenson, 2014): uncertainty as to what they saw; the reliability of their memories. How might performance help us find a mode of being-with survivors in these silences?

I bring these questions to my work with Lucho. My role is not to use my research to influence the contents of *Wandering and Sleeplessness.* Instead, I observe its resurrection as a privileged spectator. By this, I mean a spectator who has access not only to multiple performances of the play but, also, over an extensive period of time, to the actor's processes of re-assembling and adapting the production in intimate rehearsal spaces; to archival material relating to its public performances; to audience responses at the polar ends of a four-decade period; and, perhaps most significantly, to Lucho's life as his friend and his collaborator.

Using these methods, I followed remotely as Lucho began rehearsing for *Wandering and Sleeplessness* in January 2020 for a short run of performances in Lima, to coincide with the

May half-centenary of the disaster. Through spring, we spoke regularly as Lucho sourced his props. My plan was to travel to Peru from my base in the UK to watch these performances in person. But COVID restrictions lay waste to this idea and, instead, in 2021, Lucho produced an abridged, six-minute video of the play and then a 25-minute version. In 2022, he produced a full, 38-minute recording and hosted live performances in his Lima studio. We organized several online streaming events for the play, for which I wrote subtitles in English. These processes were supplemented by research that I undertook into the afterlives of the Yungay disaster on two extended periods of fieldwork in Peru, between May 2023 and June 2025, when I often visited Lucho in his Lima studio, hearing of the most recent changes he had made to *Wandering and Sleeplessness* when touring in Cuzco, Cajamarca, and Sao Paolo.

Theatre as Death-Space

My learning from this process — from five years of being-with Lucho as a privileged spectator — holds valuable findings for trauma studies, disaster studies, and visual anthropology. As Lucho would often take pains to remind me, *Wandering and Sleeplessness* is not only a play about the earthquake. Rather, it is an archive of traumas, some personal and some collective; some extreme and some insidious (Cvetkovich, 2003). It visits the terrors of the Spanish Conquest, Lucho's fears for his missing parents, his identity as a performer, and the anxieties that arose during the pandemic. To mediate these traumas, Lucho would draw on a catalogue of fears and losses that find no explicit depiction in the performance. Instead, they take the form of diffuse images that evoke what Taussig calls a "death-space," whereby "the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problem of representation [is] keenly figured and thrust into consciousness" (Taussig, 1987: 121). In places that are constituted by the horrors of colonial violence, the space of death is an otherworldly realm

that exists across dreams, fantasies, faith, visions, and memories that seep into the social fabric as images.

By images, I do not necessarily mean pictorial depictions but, instead, a register of icons, symbols, signs, and artefacts that might be visual, sonic, or linguistic. Images portend from transcendental sites and moments to hover around referents without ever being fixed or fully replicable. They have porous boundaries. They are imbricated with corporeal sensations. This refusal of hermeticism means that images contain many implicit meanings that are bundled together – that bleed into one another – and are infused with emotions that can be contradictory. Our imaginations and imaginaries are populated by images that disappear, transform, morph, and multiply. Unlike facts, Stevenson argues, images create a language that "resist[s] formulation" (Stevenson, 2014: 12). Disobeying the rules of syntax, they take the direction of affects instead of analysis. Thus an image "has a hold on us *even after* its informational and symbolic meaning has been decoded" (Stevenson, 2014: 36, emphasis in original). Correspondingly, images are often associated with traumatic memories and memories of trauma that are difficult to process, as per Taussig's connection between the space of death and a realm of images. The image-realm speaks to the fragmentary nature of trauma, which "demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral" (Cvetkovich, 2003: 7).

When I first met Lucho, *Wandering and Sleeplessness* existed as a series of images in his mind. The play was unscripted. It had never been recorded. Old reviews were often vague on details, though Lucho was meticulous in keeping a scrapbook of press clippings about his early performances, to which I was given access. Over the course of our initial encounters, Lucho gave the play to me in fragments. There is a bed. A young man. A nightmare. A

mirror. From these descriptions, I gathered that there was no single, linear narrative thrust to *Wandering and Sleeplessness*. Instead, it is composed of theatrical "episodes" (Giordano and Pierotti, 2024) that summon a collection of images. Much of its text comes from verse by well-known poets that Lucho collated in his youth. Affects are created by placing these words in conversation with physical expressions, gestures, sounds, tones, props, and postures. These movements elaborate "a way of thinking – at once remembered, and reinvented – the otherwise unthinkable" (Roach, 1996: 27). Like memory itself, *Wandering and Sleeplessness* is visual, corporeal, and kinetic.

By outlining four episodes, or images, from the filmic version of the play, I would like to suggest that it conjures a theatrical death-space which is unleashed by Pachacuti. This is "the suspension or overhaul of space-time that inaugurates long cycles of catastrophe or renewal in the cosmos" (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 22).[1] In Andean cosmology, time is divided into cycles. Between every five hundred and two thousand years, one cycle ends to begin another. To indicate a change in animating regimes, Pachacuti – meaning "world reversal" – overturns the ruling order in a revolutionary motion. So, Kay Pacha – the earth's present moment, the here and now – is supplanted by Ukhu Pacha – the Andean underworld, the earth's dark and humid interior that harbours death, like a burial chamber, but that also germinates life, like the mother's womb or the soil that nurtures seedlings (Estermann 2006; Urton, 1981). Ukhu Pacha is a capsule of the past, which is the underside of the future; "otherwise stated, the past contains the future and can become it" (Howard, 2006: 242). In *Wandering and Sleeplessness* – as promised by its title – Lucho beckons us to the realm of Ukhu Pacha, guiding us through this post-disaster world that is summoned in his insomnia.

[1] This and subsequent translations from Spanish and Italian are mine.

This experience of wandering with Lucho through an apocalyptic landscape has helped me better understand my interactions with disaster survivors. Almost a year before I first met Lucho in 2019, I had spent a month in Yungay with my husband, Daniel Ceballos, a Venezuelan anthropologist. We had interviewed about ten survivors, seeking to piece together the course of the landslide from witnesses who experienced the disaster at different locations. I recall how, at first, their accounts had seemed so unreal. We could not visualize the images they were describing. Many likened their memories to scenes from a film, using metaphor as a technique to sift through a "jumble of images" (Slowikowski and Motion, 2021: 89). Others compared the event to a nightmare or a hallucination. As the number of our interviews increased over the next five years, the tsunami of mud began to take shape in my mind. Still, I could not imagine the moments that came after its impact.

In collating testimonies from Yungay, Tomás Usón also notices this discrepancy. The minutes before the landslide are narrated photographically, creating a sense of "time overflowed with actions, emotions, and objects." Meanwhile, "oral stories about the aftermath of the earthquake commonly turn somehow vague and diffuse" (Usón, forthcoming). Time loses its form. Space becomes abstract. Usón accounts for this by explaining that people had to wait days for help. The usual markers of routine had disappeared. Survivors were in shock. The future was desperately uncertain. To this, I would add that both place and people were rendered entirely unrecognizable. Most contemporary interlocutors were unthinkably young when the disaster happened. They often doubt the veracity of their recollections. These memories are hard to convey not only because of their emotional charge. They may be repressed or erased from the psyche. Again and again, we heard survivors use the same refrain. "Fue el fin del mundo". What remains after the world has ended? How can this be rendered comprehensible?

What I have found, when exploring these questions, are spectres, shards, relics, and feelings. The disaster zone has been transformed into a memorial park that is called Sacred Ground, or Campo Santo. The mud consumed practically everything in its path; the ruins that survive are regarded with special reverence. Mass is held at the rubble of the town's main church. Before it stand four palm trees that miraculously withstood the force of the landslide, later becoming symbolic of the *yungaínos*' resilience. Rituals on commemorative occasions transport survivors to the depths of the mass grave and to the arms of the people who are lost there. Here, in this realm, the dead wander underground in the company of saints, virgins, mythical creatures, and revered ancestors. The living zealously protect the handful of old photographs that survive of their missing town. They speak nostalgically of the old Yungay, portrayed romantically in paintings, poems, songs, and memoirs, and express a proud affinity to their schools, their clubs, and their neighbourhoods.

In my viewing of *Wandering and Sleeplessness*, the play collates these ephemera — held together by the affects that are roused between actor and spectator — to offer a glimpse of the "psychic life" (Stevenson, 2014: 4) of a disaster. Through my involvement in the reassembly of the play, I have learnt that memories of survival are often suspended in this image-realm where reality cannot be taken for granted. Such knowledge is largely unavailable in a discursive analysis of oral testimony, which is predicated on explicit speech acts, finite narrative, and linear logic. As such, it often falters in grappling with cyclical events that defy the rational mind, such as the return to cosmic chaos or the pervasive legacies of psychological trauma. Being a disaster survivor is fundamental to many *yungaínos;* their loss sits at the centre of their identity, as is often the case with trauma victims (Jelin, 2022). But survivors also emphasize that this is not their only defining lived experience. They are more

than just a witness of the landslide. So, too, does *Wandering and Sleeplessness* refuse to be condensed into one interpretative line. To understand this, it is important to give broader context to the production.

A Record of Trauma and Transformation

In the tumultuous months after the disappearance of Yungay, Lucho joined Peru's National School of Theatre, thus pursuing his lost opportunity to star in *The Kind Mermaid*. Founded in 1946 by Spaniard Edmundo Barbero, the School's programme favoured polished, canonical productions for urbanite, ticket-buying audiences. One of its most prolific graduates, Luis Álvarez Torres, would go on to find fame starring in Enrique Solari Swayne's *Collacocha* (1956). Solari Swayne wrote his play after witnessing the 1941 landslide in Huaraz, a town some 50km south of Yungay. The catastrophe was depicted largely in similes ("It was *as though* the earth cracked open! It was *as though* the mountains crushed the tunnel!" (Solari Swayne, 2005: 49, emphasis added)). For critics, Lucho among them, Solari Swayne's inability to render the disaster an actual, felt event was symptomatic of the bigger problems that plagued Peruvian theatre. It was colonial. It was stagnant. It lacked empathy and imagination.

After two years, Lucho left the School and, in 1975, under the mentorship of Mario Delgado, joined a new fringe group that become known as Cuatrotablas. This group of five twenty-somethings hailed from the provinces and included another *yungaíno* in their number who went by the name of Malco Oliveiros (Balta Campbell, 2001: 234). Alongside other experimental collectives such as Peru Negro (Barrós Alcantara, 2016) and Yuyachkani (Garza, 2014), Cuatrotablas would redefine the parameters of Peruvian theatre. Inspired by

Eugenio Barba and Jerzy Grotowski, they conceived of performance not as spectacle but, instead, as a laboratory. Their practice was underpinned by a set of interrogations: How can theatre expand creatively into the emotive space that is created between actor and audience, using limited material resources? How can acting transgress the limitations of our immediate material, physical environments? How can performance grant access to knowledge that exists at the extremes of empirical experience?

These questions surfaced for Cuatrotablas at a time when Peruvian society was being restructured by the military regime that came to power in 1969 with General Juan Velasco, who, at the height of the Cold War, promised policies that were neither capitalist nor communist. Under the auspices of agrarian reform, Velasco sought to dismantle the legacies of a feudal system and redistribute wealth across the country, tackling the concentration of capital in Lima. As part of this, his government rolled out an ambitious programme of cultural interventions that would reach out to remote, Quechua-speaking areas. Encompassing radio, theatre, film, music, and the print press, such initiatives were designed to publicise the work undertaken by the central government that proclaimed democratization of public life in the provinces. Participants were to become politicised in the process of creative collaboration (even as this was overseen by technocrats operating from the capital) (Cant, 2022: 55-58).

In promoting decolonial identities, this programme also sought to recover a collective pre-Hispanic past that had been all but obliterated by the Spanish Conquest. The dormant signs and symbols associated with colonial resistance – Inca rulers, highland rebels – were excavated and suddenly became ubiquitous (Mitrovic et al, 2022; Barrós Alcantara, 2016; Barrow, 2018). Colonization was reconceptualized and viewed, not has it had been, as a

marker of progress, but, instead, as ‘a record of trauma and transformation’ (Urton, 1990: 15). From the ruins of the old, a new order would be born; one that celebrated equality, justice, and freedom, extolling the splendours of history that would resurface in this revolution.

These ideas were crucial to Cuatrotablas, who – like many independent theatre movements of their time – favoured decolonial productions, written by Latin Americans, that reimagined the history of Empire from the perspective of the colonized. Drawing on the ideals of Poor Theatre, they deployed performance to “reveal and revitalize many unconscious aspects of the [colonial] social world” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010: 19) that persisted in Peruvian contemporaneity. They took their school to towns and cities all over Peru, where institutional cultural offerings were negligent, and brought major international players like Barba to the hills of Ayacucho. Together, they organized national festivals and workshops, recruiting participants in the highlands for their avant-garde performances. Shunning ornate sets and elaborate costumes, they believed that the body was the actor’s most powerful “tool of expression” (Giordano and Pierotti, 2024: 13) in connecting with other elements and creating transformative encounters with an intimate spectatorship.

This was important in a conservative, postcolonial, and neofeudal society where Brown bodies were dehumanized, stigmatized, silenced, and conceived as property. Conversely, in Cuatrotablas’ workshops, the body meant autonomy, strength, power, and liberty. They adopted Barba’s practice of collating and adapting fragments of literary texts, with few concerns about being faithful to the source. Students were encouraged to read anti-imperial poetry, stories, philosophy, and history, and to bring their reading to their practice. They revisited the Tahuantinsuyo, or the expanses of the Incan Empire, in books and

conversations. They prized regional oral histories and *campesino* folklore. They revalorized Andean textiles and learnt to play highland music. Against the deeply conservative leanings of the classical performing arts in Peru, Cuatrotablas began to establish a decolonial theatre [Figure 3].

The group was eager to transport their productions to the wider world of experimental performance. In 1980, they embarked on a twelve-month global tour, appearing at fringe festivals in Mexico, Venezuela, Germany, Spain, Denmark, France, and Sweden. By the end of the year, Lucho was exhausted. "Sorry for the delay," began one of his letters from Gothenburg, "I'm working a lot and in my free time I sleep, sleep, sleep" (LIFT1981FW). He had also exhausted his time with Cuatrotablas. Delgado had mentored the cohort for five full years. It was time for them to graduate. Once again, as he pursued his own direction, Lucho had arrived at an important personal juncture. Where did he belong in the world, and where did he belong in the world of theatre? How could he act alone, and still embody the ethos of a collective? Where was home, if it wasn't Cuatrotablas?

These worries began to filter into his artistic work and are evident in the archives at Goldsmiths, which holds the collection for the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT). Lucho had been spotted by Lucy Neal, the director of LIFT, at Avignon Festival; she later approached him to perform in London with Cuatrotablas (De Wend Fenton and Neal, 2005). Writing from Tarragona, Lucho explained to Lucy in Italian, their common tongue, that – after speaking with Delgado – he would formally represent Cuatrotablas at LIFT, but that, in reality, he would be acting in his own capacity until forming a new group of his own (LIFT1981FW). In this endeavour, he would bring a solo show to London's Institute of

Contemporary Arts which had been born in workshops with Cuatrotablas. *Wandering and Sleeplessness* ran for ten matinees before sold-out audiences (Chaillet, 1981).

The play was the creative outcome of an accumulation of losses: the destruction of Yungay; the end of Cuatrotablas; the catastrophe that was the Conquest. To this list, in its reproduction, we might add the losses that were generated by COVID: the loss of freedom, of personal interactions, of physical contact. It seems strangely, painfully fitting that our restaging of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* coincided with the outbreak of a pandemic. When Lima suddenly went into lockdown in April 2020, Lucho found himself in Casa Bagre, a basement studio in the city's historic centre. Confronted with the impossibility of staging live performances, he began to work with long-term collaborator Beto Benites to produce a recording of *Wandering and Sleeplessness*. As a subscriber to Grotowski's belief that theatre is fundamentally "what takes place between spectator and actor" (Grotowski, 1975: 32), Lucho was sceptical of performing without an audience. Later, he would see the camera as a vehicle for asynchronous connections with other spectators, myself included.

For two years, Lucho and Beto kept me updated with these proceedings, sharing media of rehearsals and performances on WhatsApp. From the other side of the lens, I watched the play build up and up in an accumulation of disparate images. Viewing short clips and photographs, along with hand-drawn posters and audience responses, I came to regard *Wandering and Sleeplessness* as I might a dream or a distant memory. It lingered, pervasive and incomplete, in my peripheral vision. Scene by scene, we visited Lucho's childhood bedroom; his old school; the valley of death; the heights of a vengeful mountain. Slowly, I came to understand that this was not simply the retelling of a single nightmare or one night of terrors. Instead, it summoned a lifetime of dreaming as "a privileged form of experience and

knowledge" (Kohn, 2013: 116) that offers glimpses into unknown dimensions. As Kohn explains, "[d]reams too are part of the empirical, and they are a kind of real. They grow out of and work on the world, and learning to be attuned to their special logics […] helps reveal something about the world beyond the human" (Kohn, 2013: 13). What I realised as a dream-spectator was that Lucho had brought me to Ukhu Pacha. It was the world turned upside-down by the apocalypse.

Four Images

The essence of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* has an ephemeral, haunting quality. With each performance, its episodes change in length, composition, and content. An episode may be replaced, added, or excluded; one might morph into another. Delineations between them are always shifting. For the purposes of this article, I choose to work with the film recording because it is freely available to view online, thus making it accessible to readers.[2] The result of Lucho's basement performances with Beto is a shadowy piece of video art featuring dimly lit scenes that are captured by a shaky hand-held camera. Silences are infiltrated by the echoey sounds of water pipes and disembodied voices that come from the higher floors of the building. Lucho acts alone with recourse to a handful of props: a mirror, a bed frame, two chairs, a table, a box of matches, a candle, a newspaper, a blanket, a die, a cane, some panpipes [Figure Four]. Changes in costume and posture are used to indicate Lucho's performance as different characters. This rendition of the play consists loosely of eight episodes that each revolve around an image. We might summarize these as follows:

[2] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdMhbAvvhCI

1. Lucho's arrival on stage and his acclimatization to this otherworldly space, in which he sets the scene for an imaginary journey to his childhood in the mountains
2. A direct address to the audience that offers some information about the creation of the play
3. A sleepless night which is punctured by reflections on death, fate, and chance
4. The death of an Inca and his transformation into a condor
5. A sequence of colonial funerary rites that terminates in prayer and self-flagellation
6. Lucho's encounter with Death and an exodus on horseback
7. The earthquake and Lucho's return to his school that is buried by the landslide
8. Lucho's second and final direct address to the audience.

This composite nature of the play resembles what Giordano and Pierotti term "affect theatre," referring to Barba, which begins with the construction of short, theatrical events that are assembled into a larger work of associative arrangements. They argue that this process resembles the Freudian concept of dream work. "What matters in dreams is not their literality," Giordano and Pierotti explain, "but the net of evocations and loose connections that are set in motion by the dream's images and sounds. […] What is generative in the dream content is the allusiveness of its visual and sonic components, and their fragmented manifestation" (Giordano and Pierotti, 2024: 135). Such is also the case in affect theatre. The ephemeral form of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* – of affect theatre in general – permits Lucho to conjure the world of ruins that lingers in the aftermath of Pachacuti and that haunts the memories of survivors. It is a world that that is tormentingly just out of reach. Yet, like trauma, it is also all-consuming.

As such, the actor-director does not tread the tightrope of chronological time. Rather, he traverses the realms of the past, present, and future; these run together concurrently in "inter-cyclic synchronicity" (Estermann, 2006: 203). This is spiralling Andean time, where the underworld has supplemented the here-and-now. It is a dreamscape of visions and visuals; the realm of trauma and traumatic memory. It is the space of death, "a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction" (Taussig, 1987: 4), where the human and non-human wander among the debris of history. This space is manifested by "points of rupture" whereby shock is absorbed into images that later "enter into the vibrant and contradictory texture of social life" (Taussig, 1987: 169). It is a horizon of images that live through disaster. Let me elaborate with my responses to four images from the performance.

A Mountain

The rhythm of the first episode unfolds as if in slow motion. Lucho makes a disquieting, high-pitched whining sound as he enters on the stage. He looks confused, disconcerted. Neither actor nor spectator knows where they have landed. From Lucho's actions, we gather that it is an eerie, dark, cold place. He whistles like the wind. I wonder if we are in the mountains. Lucho is dressed in purple Adidas shorts, long orange socks, a red clown's nose, and a khaki waterproof jacket. There is an old metal bedframe that stands on its head. He walks tentatively around it. Before it, there is a mirror that perches on a chair. Below that is a pair of walking boots. The structure is illuminated by a spotlight. Absorbed by the light, Lucho removes his coat to reveal a tight, bright yellow vest that clings to his chest and outlines the circles of his nipples. The outfit is what remains of that football match of May 31st which saved Lucho's life, and the circus that was in town that day, where many children escaped the disaster; it is survivors' guilt rendered costume. The sight of a sports kit designed

for the young on an aging, adult frame creates a jarring effect as it summons the "ghostly, unreachable fantasy" of Lucho's long-lost childhood (Bond Stockton, 2009: 5) while, simultaneously, giving presence to the child that once occupied this body; the child who survived these experiences. [Figure Five]

Standing before the mirror, Lucho turns his back and looks over his shoulder. He turns around again and walks towards the altar. We see now that the mirror is covered in a thin layer of white dust. With his right finger, Lucho traces the silhouette of a mountain, a house, and a crescent moon. The picture is a skeletal rendition of the ekphrastic image that opened this article: it is the outline of his vanished childhood home. With this gesture, Lucho signals that the present, or Kay Pacha, has been replaced by Ukhu Pacha, or the underworld, as its inverted mirror image (Howard, 2006: 242; Urton, 1981: 63). This is a sign from the future.

In the year before the earthquake, Lucho became obsessed with drawing the Huascarán, using the peaks as his signature in textbooks. These doodles are one of many premonitions that have been reported by *yungaínos*. Some y pwere presented with an apparition of the Virgin who foretold the landslide (Bode, 1990). Others tell me that they saw death in their dreams and watched helplessly as Yungay disappeared in their subconscious. The image is a harbinger of the disaster that is yet to come in *Wandering and Sleeplessness*. It is also a reminder that the disaster has always already happened. Using the image of the mountain to create space between these recurrent events – the space of collective trauma – the actor invokes fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and discomfort.

Once the drawing is complete, Lucho takes a sharp inhale of breath and shakes a small box of matches that he removes from his jacket pocket. He lights a single candle and warms his

hands on its flame. There is a table covered by a cloth. Lucho looks underneath to find a newspaper sheet. The headline "¡INFIERNO!" is blazed in red across it. The contemporary date of the newspaper reminds us of our current moment; we are not in a hermetic version of the past but in a place where multiple temporalities are interfused. Lucho rolls the paper into cylinder and lights it with the candle, before unrolling it and placing it before the altar. Compressing the air with his hands, he makes the red embers dance and then puts them in the boots, pulling them to him one by one towards him as if the ashes were the remnants of their former owner. The movement of disembodied shoes point towards the ghosts that we spectators cannot see, but that are called upon by the actor and released into the image-realm of the theatre. This is an enactment of "mournful life," or a conscious embodiment of grief, "that takes very seriously the way we bear the dead along" (Stevenson, 2014: 124).

The Inca

Halfway through this iteration of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* there is an episode that features an Inca in his death throes. Lucho has lost his red clown's nose and is dressed now in a plaid shirt and brown trousers. He has moved from the world of acting to the space of ritual. The pace and intensity of this image is accelerated. Lucho tosses and turns on the table – which we presume to be his bed – before slumping in the chair beside it. He falls to the floor, writhing in pain, and shivers with a fever. He speaks between convulsions, citing text from *The Sun Beneath the Horses' Feet* by Ecuadorian playwright Jorge Enrique Adoum, first performed in 1970:

> All the signs are here.
> The cold that I feel inside,
> and sixteen restless concubines,
> mean that the day is ending.
>
> I am the fall of the Tahuantinsuyo empire

And nobody, nothing can stop the night
That drags the stones in the brutal anguish of twilight.
The signs mean death.

These signs are an index of the apocalypse, which cannot be condensed in narrative but, rather, linger at the outer edges of our imagination. As Estermann explains, each five-hundred-year cycle ends in "a *pachakuti*, which is to say, a cosmic cataclysm (*kutiy*/*kutiña* means: 'return', 'revolve'). The universe (*pacha*) 'returns' to its chaotic, messy state, to then become restructured and create another cosmos" (Estermann, 2006: 202). Each Inca embodied the centre of the universe, which grew from the city of Cuzco. The demise of the Incan dynasty, wrought by the Spanish conquest, signified Pachacuti, which, in turn, is unleashed by the death of the Inca.

In the world created by *Wandering and Sleeplessness*, then, we might surmise that the catastrophe that consumes Yungay is intricately linked to these cosmic cycles, occurring, as it does, almost exactly five hundred years after the Conquest. Using script stuck in his mind from the time of the 1970 earthquake, Lucho channels the demise of Huayna Capac, the eleventh Inca of the Tahuantinsuyo, whose reign was interrupted by the Spanish occupation, using images to create this cyclical timeline. Afraid of death, the desperate Inca falls to his knees and, arms stretched, appeals to the gods, before climbing again on the table and rocking in a diminutive foetal position. Struggling to sit upright, he continues in strained, hushed, tones as if speaking to a bedside listener:

Like a plant I was born.
Like a plant I grew.
Then time passed, and age arrived.
I shrivelled up.
Now it's my time to die.

As Lucho curls his body, Huayna Capac turns into a seed, awaiting resurrection in Ukhu Pacha. In a later sequence, the Inca exclaims that he wants to be buried with his dead, "in the

cool, dark belly of a vessel made from clay". In his internment, Huayna Capac will return to the dark and humid underworld where he will re-encounter his ancestry. There, too, he will find his descendants. Ukhu Pacha not only houses death, but it also nurtures life: it is the subsoil that germinates plants and contains water. Our journey to this afterlife thus beckons rebirth; the space of death is "a privileged domain of metamorphosis" (Taussig, 1987: 374).

This becomes important in the climatic sequence of this episode. The Inca arrives in a cross-legged position on the table, his voice clear and commanding. His hands cup his face, his body shakes, his mouth turns downwards, and his eyes roll back into their sockets. He pulls his cheeks so that his skin is drawn tightly around his skull and his pupils are barely visible. He has visually transformed into a cadaver.

> They must take my body to Cuzco,
> where my dead call to me,
> nestled in their mummies and their urns.
>
> I will go with my cadaver.
> The entire empire must attend the funeral that marks
> The passing of the Inca.
> With me must die one thousand virgins, servants and concubines.
> The Inca is not accustomed to being alone.

At the end of this parting monologue, Huayna Capac falls back onto his bed before Lucho jumps up again and plays a breathy, frenzied anthem on two panpipes. The Inca's death is not final. A wooden flute becomes his beak and the pipes become his wings as he soars into the sky as a condor. With this, the Inca is reborn as a powerful, immortal creature that travels to the heavens, or Qhepa Pacha; the realm of the celestial and the sacred (Estermann, 2006: 203). This is the future, but it is also the manifestation of a divine past; it is the mythical site of cosmic origin. In this episode, deep in the Andean underworld, Lucho takes the spectator to transformation from pain, death, and suffering.

The School

The penultimate episode in this iteration of *Wandering and Sleeplessness* takes us back to where we started. We return to the school of Santa Inés, on Jirón Bolognesi. Lucho drags himself across the stage, which has become a swampy wasteland, while singing the first verse of the school's anthem. He climbs atop the table, using a cane for support, as if summitting the peak of a mountain. There, he yells a series of patriotic mottos: Viva Peru! Viva la patria! Viva Yungay! His feet begin to stomp, making the table quake. He looks around in confusion, gripping a die in his right hand. He emits a low groan and swings from side to side. He is the mountain; with this earthquake, he is "a performing landscape" (Pitches, 2020: 9). Jumping from the table, Lucho spins faster now. He throws the dice. The mirror smashes. Still spinning, he shouts desperately for water. The image shifts from the visual to the sonic, staging all sensory dimensions of this traumatic memory. Working with the acoustics of the basement space, Lucho's cries are multi-tonal. His identity is multiplied like the screams of children in a classroom.

This is Santa Inés, then, as it exists, but underground; as it plays out so forcefully in Lucho's psyche. As David MacDougall points out, "a school aims at a steady state. As older students leave, younger ones come to take their place. […] In this they serve a utopia dream: they create a regulated world, insulated from aging and historical change" (MacDougall, 2005: 105). Turned upside down, this subterranean school is, instead, a dystopian nightmare. Crouched beneath the table, which represents the upper surface of the subsoil, Lucho sings the Yungay anthem, now almost in a whisper, and pulls a cloth before his face, drawing a curtain on his childhood. As he reaches the line that commends the "beauty of the Huascarán," particles of dirt and dust fall from above, obstructing our view of the speaker.

“Cousin!” Lucho calls. “Cousin!”. Now he begins to walk with the table on his head. He calls a roster of lost souls with the names of his friends and relatives. “Present”, each one responds, in their absence. Lucho crawls from under the table to the broken mirror that is piled on the chair. From his hat, he tips a handful of soil with each name uttered. The social world of the school still exists, but as debris. Moved by grief, Lucho acts out the performance that he could not stage with his classmates, recalling how, in this regional context, “the disappeared are kept ‘alive’ by anyone who speaks their names” (Stevenson, 2014: 113).

Writing of this episode, one spectator at an online showing commented on Lucho’s use of his body to conjure these abstract topologies: “What struck me profoundly was to witness how his corporeality, his gestures, the quality of his presence, his voice, rhythms, and movement are so deeply rooted in *place*, in the territories he conjures up so beautifully. He moves because we sense the mountains and the earth underneath his feet start shaking” (Mary Ann Vargas, email to author, June 25, 2021, emphasis in original). We might expand on this with a comment on the transformation of materialities, whereby the mountain is rendered synecdochally as an icon, as dust, as soil, as seismic movement; it shifts from the opening image of the play into its final moments. These proliferous forms indicate that there is no single, graspable referent; the mountain is everywhere (Howard, 2006). Pervasive, too, is the nature of trauma. So much is captured in a review of Lucho’s performances in the 1980s. “The landslide descends before the spectator, she can sense it, just as she can sense the dead, the need for water and the desire to be someone […]. Lucho as an actor does not seek to transmit a message but rather to *share an experience*” (*Diario el Norte*, 1981, emphasis added).

Light

For me, this experience is at its most absorbing in the web of affects that Lucho weaves around the images that envelop the spectator. In the parting image of the filmed recording, Lucho walks behind the bedframe. Peering directly at the viewer from an opening in the mesh, he utters lines from León Felipe's "Navigate": "Light…/When my/tears reach you/My eyes will serve/No longer to cry/But to see." A spotlight illuminates his face, framed tightly in a close-up. We sense that the night of terrors is almost over. Lucho is transformed by his wanderings. Performing these episodes – or producing these images – has delivered him to dawn. So, too, are we absolved of our suffering as an audience. The anxiety, the fear, the grief, and the tension that has built in the composition of the play now dissipate in this closing encounter.

This is, perhaps, the most moving lesson I have learnt from Lucho: a way of being with the survivors in their bereavement, by holding their emotions with them; by accompanying them in their memories. That these lessons are imparted by a film acquires special significance. Per MacDougall, film takes the viewer "closer to the world of the subject" by becoming "part of a larger three-dimensional imaginative conception, instead of objects to be inspected or windows to be looked through" (MacDougall, 2005: 239). The same might be said about recollections of trauma; of working through grief in theatre. For Lucho to climb through a portal into Ukhu Pacha, and to come back to the light, he must be accompanied by the spectator. In keeping with the principles of Poor Theatre – that theatre is, in essence, an encounter between actor and audience – it is the spectator who makes this work possible.
[Figure Six]

Conclusion

In conducting research for this article, I have watched *Wandering and Sleeplessness* many times. In this process, I have also been transformed with Lucho. The images from the film now form part of my own memories, filed alongside more images of Yungay; thousands of images that I have collated from texts, photographs, archives, observations, and interviews. Over time, as I have learnt from my role as privileged spectator, I have let my imagination summon situations, sensations, and characters that were but sounds and gestures, if they appeared at all, in spoken testimonies of survival. In using these materials to imagine the place that Yungay once was, and the place that it became after its destruction, I have forged a deep connection with its people and its landscapes. Doing so has meant that I am imbricated in the affective qualities of the town. I, too, feel the feelings that are felt by survivors, though in wildly different textures and intensities. This emotive bond is strengthened and renewed each time I revisit an image, and especially in rendering these images in my writing. Like Lucho, I trade in redrafting, rehearsing and repetition. Such is the call of "knowledge that overwhelms us" (Das, 2020).

In this vein, I would like to add a final image; one that, like the opening scene, I have rewritten many times and could rewrite forever as I crave the reassuring sounds of the words that resonate silently as I read. It is August 2023, and I am working in Yungay when, unexpectedly, I run into Lucho. It is a joyful, affectionate encounter. We go for lunch in a local restaurant with some of his old classmates. They reminisce about old friends and teachers, using nicknames and speaking in caricature. Later that afternoon, Lucho suggests that the two of us visit the site of his childhood home, now buried beneath eight meters of detritus. Under a cloudless sky, I follow my guide on winding paths, stepping past giant

boulders and makeshift graves, in the direction of Mount Huascarán that shimmers before us like an altar. Using the surviving palm trees as co-ordinates, Lucho murmurs the names of streets that have disappeared. “It’s here,” he says after we have walked for a while, and stops at an empty patch of scrubland. I wonder how he can know; if there’s something in the ground that I cannot sense. We stand awhile in silence. I close my eyes and listen to the wind. In the absence of infrastructure – once the material is long gone – all that we have are these: the whispers between words, the rustle of the grass, that, in our memories, have such power to move us. Perhaps this is revelatory of the nature of place beyond the buried city of Yungay, as others have found after genocide (Allan, 2018), war (Hart, 2025), and displacement (Giordano and Pierotti, 2024): that place exists most vividly in companionship; in hesitation; in darkness.

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