Chapter 2

The Cultural Laborer

The figure of the narrator alone on a bare stage commands the audience’s focus. This person is first a talented raconteur who enraptures the public with well-honed acting and skill of delivery. Narrators are also public intellectuals. They shade their tales in varying degrees of political intent, while they synthesize intellectual concepts in their productions. Marco Baliani’s *Tracce* (1996; *Traces*), for example, is entirely a reflection on Ernst Bloch’s eponymous collection and is among the most cerebral of productions. Unlike many works of the avant-garde, however, Baliani steers away from a complex formalism, and instead sits casually on a chair to address the audience directly. Finally, narrators have a sense of civic duty, which they demonstrate by guiding their audiences toward new perspectives about someone (an entrepreneur, a midwife) or something (the assassination of the prime minister, the industrial peripheral cities of the North). Taken altogether, they position themselves to construct dialectically a persona that converges the skills of the creative performer, the public intellectual, and the civil servant. While each narrator has a different performance style, they all nonetheless demonstrate a unique balance between these three identities. The resulting figure is a cultural laborer, a term I adapt from the animazione teatrale practices of the mid-1970s.

At the heart of the theater of narration is a sense of responsibility to converse in a productive way. Narrators produce knowledge, new histories, and the experiences of others. They create projects from this impulse, which leads them to engage diverse communities, social issues, and historical events. In founding a new dramaturgical language, the first generation of narrators devised a practice of listening and moved away from the visual stimulus of the physical theater that was so much a part of Teatro Settimo’s oeuvre. Hinting at the oratorical dimension of a soloist speaking directly to the audience, the term “cultural laborer” underlines both public service and pedagogy in the narrators’ practice. This concept acknowledges the work, the labor of their jobs, and the urgency and necessity of reconciling the past in terms of individual experience.

Ethnography is an important component of cultural labor, in part because narrators adjust the practice to contain more overt didactic implications, and
in part because of its basis in empathy. When narrators perform, they hold
a mirror in front of their publics not just to beg their gaze, but to beg their
critical, self-aware gaze: Where is your reflection? Where are you in this his-
tory? As cultural laborers, they first conduct an ethnography of themselves as
a way of centering their personal stakes against larger sociocultural events,
communities, or individuals. Their second use for ethnography is a more
traditional investigation of individuals from within their communities. Per-
formance scholars Suzanne MacAulay and Kevin Landis define the practice
of ethnography as simply the practice of getting to know other human beings
intimately and well, especially through their everyday experiences. For nar-
rators, this process leads to a historical praxis in which they put their own
critically examined private histories in conversation with other microhistories,
and then reassemble the greater historical narrative to include those two parts.

Taking inspiration from the animazione movement’s collaborative spirit,
while also acknowledging the inherent power structures between themselves
and their publics, narrators cultivate a rapport with the audience in which
they are several steps ahead—Virgilian guides—as the audience follows
along a journey that is often intensely personal and eminently public. As
they reconsider the past through a people-empowered lens, they work in a
reflexive, methodologically transparent, Brechtian pattern so that audiences
can embrace these tools for their own purposes. A better understanding of
narrators’ personas reveals not only the practice’s revolutionary potential,
but also its dependence on this single individual and their ability to convey
the relationship between ordinary people and extraordinary events.

The long 1970s in Italy were also influential in shaping the concept of
the cultural laborer as intellectual discussions from the period confronted
the prospects of an artistic and politically engaged life. An investigation of
the contextual influences uncovers some of the cultural sparks that inspired
the founding narrators’ self-conceptions. As narrators begin to understand
their relationships to surrounding environments through a practice and
eventually performance of autoethnography, they reveal the influence of cul-
tural anthropology on the theater of narration. The oft-referenced writings
of Victor Turner and others concerning the “anthropology of experience”
in conversation with D. Soyini Madison’s notions of critical ethnography
and the positionality of the researcher illuminate the delicate balance of
self-awareness and full immersion that narrators negotiate. In examining
themselves and their environments, albeit retrospectively, they also perform
for the audience a method of examination. They suggest that an attentive-
ness to one’s surroundings and one’s relationship to their surroundings will
inform and influence the ability to read historical events more generously,
more compassionately, and with greater depth.

Finally, the last major characteristic of the cultural laborer is the desire
to obtain a dynamic understanding of others. The ways in which narrators
turn the mirror of an autoethnography outward to conduct a traditional
ethnography composed of oral histories completes their tapestries of ordinary people, which ultimately depict a large-scale, widely recognizable moment in the national history. Studies by the oral historians Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini, along with performance studies scholar Della Pollock, help to articulate the potentials of oral history, particularly in the theater. Together, these three components—an intellectual breadth, an ethnography of oneself, and an oral history–driven classical ethnography—articulate the core of the narrator as a cultural laborer: someone whose trade is art but who works from the perspective of a public servant.

The early work of Teatro Settimo beginning in 1974 that was heavily influenced by the popularity of animazione exhibits the most conscious intentions toward creating a theater in the vein of cultural labor that the narrators refined in their practices. Laura Curino first demonstrates the dialectic of self-awareness and activism in her 1987 Passione. Similarly, Marco Baliani’s involvement in student-led activism in Rome during the 1970s inspired an ethnography of himself, which he so pointedly shares in Corpo di stato (Body of State). Debuting in 1998, this production demonstrates how the autoethnographic technique became a hallmark of the narrator’s work, even for someone who did not study directly with Teatro Settimo. More than ten years later, when the second-generation narrator Giuliana Musso premiered Nati in casa (2001; Born at Home), she demonstrated an energetic engagement with cultural labor, also proving how this concept continues to follow narrators who came of age during different periods and in different parts of the country. This particular piece focuses on issues of modern obstetrics practices, basing her play on ethnographic research of midwives and obstetricians near her home region in the Northeast.

Baliani, Curino, and Musso continue to perform all of these plays at theaters and festivals all around Italy and occasionally abroad into the 2020s indicating their continued relevance and popularity even thirty-plus years after the debuts of some. Passione and Corpo di stato exhibit in especially clear terms the ways in which narrators engage an ethnography of oneself, but they are also two very different pieces offering distinct ways in which the narrators interpret public memories through private experiences. Nati in casa, meanwhile, is exemplary in its dexterous melding of oral history and creative imagination to build an argument. While these artists have worked with various degrees of intention toward a concept of cultural labor, they open up the work of other artists—and not just theater artists—to reconsider their product in economic terms with a specific value for the well-being of societies.

Impegno and the Intellectual

The animazione movement popular during the 1960s and 1970s demonstrates how members of Teatro Settimo understood its practice of pedagogical
theater in relation to their responsibilities as theater artists invested in their community. A closer investigation of its main principles in communion with the theater of narration reveals its profound influence in the concept of the narrator and in how narrators crafted the persona of the cultural laborer. The movement created a path that led students on a journey to create lives as artists, intellectuals, and active members of society. Particularly insightful is Curino’s copy of Morteo’s manual for animazione from her private archives, which she first read around 1978 during the dawn of Teatro Settimo. In its introduction she underlined a paragraph in which Morteo explains that the animator is not someone who executes a project, but a laborer or worker (operatore) who, in consultation with collaborators, produces interventions suitable to particular situations. With the choice of “laborer” instead of “artist,” Morteo implies that the animator provides a service to the public, offering a utilitarian conception of the theater artist.

Returning to the opening of her most successful solo show, Camillo Olivetti, which debuted in 1996 almost twenty years after she studied Morteo’s book, Curino shares a similar thought: “This work is dedicated to Adriano Olivetti. I say work and not play in the memory of an expression that my parents used. . . . They would talk about going to the theater to see this or that particular artist because . . . the actor works well. Works, they said, not performs.” Her show, about one of the most famous entrepreneurs in modern Italy, is for ordinary people like her parents who recognized work when they saw it. Referring to herself, she makes it clear every night to a new audience that the performance they are about to witness is an act of labor. Rather than Morteo, she credits her parents, a seamstress and a Fiat worker, with this notion that art and work had something in common, but such an idea was also all around her, in her coming of age during the 1970s with ubiquitous discourses about the concept of labor, and in her own introduction to animazione, where she had underlined Morteo’s use of operatore to describe performers.

Returning to Morteo’s manual, a little farther down the page from where he first introduces the concept of the laborer, Curino had starred a paragraph in the margins and underlined specific phrases. Morteo explains that one goal of animazione teatrale is “to design a way to live the cultural experience, or perhaps more precisely, if limiting, to make one live, to help one live the cultural experience, someone who has not or has not yet gained familiarity with such an experience”—a passage Curino underlined. Morteo clarifies the term “cultural experience” as the “incorporation of an indeterminate plurality of attitudes and operations,” which Curino underlined in squiggles, and goes on to emphasize that “it is a functional imprecision that relates to a plurality of attitudes and operations.” Culture, then, is something messy for Morteo, something imprecise because it encompasses many voices. To experience this plurality, especially for those who never have, is also the main objective of animazione, and struck Curino as a key point. The
implications in this work for theater as an act and spectatorship as a mode of witnessing constitute an ethos of service. Morteo implores the artist to practice sharing a multitude, and invites the public to live this new experience. As explored below, the idea of many voices resurfaces in the theater of narration, as does a similar appeal for the audience to embrace these many perspectives.

For the next several pages, Morteo stresses the importance of group work, and he concludes that “collective behavior is a hallmark of animazione, one of the main elements that juxtaposes it to how one generally understands what it means to participate in an artistic (and in a broad sense cultural) event that is prevalent today.” At the time she was studying this text, Curino was in the midst of founding Teatro Settimo, with whom she devised and performed dozens of plays for the next decade before creating *Passione*. She took Morteo’s advice literally by collaboratively creating theater with a company of artists whose plays were frenetic and physical, often involving large casts who could follow their impulses and improvise movements and gestures in the direction of a collective goal. A decade later, as Curino tells the story of her youth in *Passione*, reflecting on what it meant to grow up in the industrial North and more specifically in the town of Settimo Torinese, she operates as a soloist, developing these concepts of plurality into a more sophisticated dramaturgy that functions less literally.

For narrators, the use of autobiography—which they push into the realm of an autoethnography, as the following section explores—becomes a way to dialogue with others in imaginative interactions and explore the spirit of the plural. It also combines the civic responsibility of the intellectual with the dramatic imperatives of a storyteller. The narrators use their own subjectivity to balance a delicate neutrality in their work with the implicit decision to disseminate new perspectives, but they refrain from condoning any outright political position. Such restraint defines the terms of their cultural labor, putting the service back into civic responsibility. They do not proselytize. If the cultural experience is one that is meant to incorporate a cacophonous symphony of perspectives, as Morteo described it, then it is also one in which there is no single better experience.

On some occasions, narrators blur the boundaries of the genre by performing works by other authors, but in a style of solo performance that is suggestive of the theater of narration. Lella Costa fascinatingly draws attention to constructions of gender in her performance of the great Italian comic actor Franca Valeri’s play *La vedova Socrate* (*Socrates’s Widow*), first written and performed by Valeri in 2003, in her early eighties, and debuting with Costa in July 2020, just before Valeri’s hundredth birthday; fig. 4). Costa, this time through Valeri, portrays the infamously cantankerous wife of Socrates, Xanthippe, with compassion and intelligence, suggesting that such a reputation was unfounded and unfair, and inherently questioning the way women are judged, especially in relation to their husbands.
Narrators are not completely impartial because they are aware of the ways in which their stories are relevant today. They are not simply recounting facts but also relaying their persistent significance through a critical perspective. As they highlight events that official history has repressed, helping to contextualize their importance for the audience, there is an implicit judgment that society would be bettered by listening to these other voices. Some critics have explicitly referred to several productions that have more of an investigative journalist tone as civic theater, such as Paolini’s *Vajont*, but all theater of narration is civic theater because it asks its spectators to actively engage with society by forming its composition from as many perspectives as possible, and not just an elite few.

This notion of civic theater surfaces in other theaters of the real and performances that wrestle with the past. In his preface to the English edition of *Corpo di stato*, theater scholar Ron Jenkins compares Baliani’s work to that of Spalding Gray, particularly Gray’s *Swimming to Cambodia*, about his experiences filming *The Killing Fields* (1984). Especially resonant for Jenkins is when Gray refers to himself as a “poetic reporter,” meaning that he places the emphasis not on facts but rather on how to process them once they have settled with time. Similarly, Rokem conceives of actors who perform historical figures or events as “hyper-historians” who physically embody both the past and the creative process of the present. These descriptions also suit the work of narrators who similarly negotiate tensions between documented
historical events, memory, and invention, but the work of the cultural laborer is more far-reaching.

One important task for a cultural laborer is to serve as a liaison to some of the leading arguments with which societies grapple. Intellectual concepts that were in conversation with protesting populations are present in the theater of narration, both formally and thematically. Decentralization and redistribution of authority, for example, became central tenants of worker revolts that took shape as early as 1962 with violent protests in one of Turin’s main squares, Piazza Statuto. Curino’s *Olivetti* plays might be the most apparent example, since the two plays discuss factory labor and industrialists, interrogating the possibility of a factory that was largely in the hands of its workers. While she does not critique the Olivetti family, she subversively narrates their story largely through the two matriarchs, Elvira Sacerdoti, the mother of engineer Camillo Olivetti, who founded the company, and Luisa Revel, his wife and the mother of Adriano Olivetti, who further developed the company. Sacerdoti and Revel were so unknown that Curino herself conducted the research that finally settled the correct spelling of Sacerdoti (and not Sacerdote).

Embodying these two women and hearing the fabled Olivetti history from them is an example of the ways in which narrators incorporate the positions of ordinary people in their productions. It is also a formal choice that performs the ideas of decentering (in this case Camillo and Adriano Olivetti) and redistributing authority (to Sacerdoti and Revel). The *Olivetti* plays exemplify the sophisticated and subtly crafted methods with which the theater of narration engages themes that were vital in the long 1970s, but in earlier works there are more overt demonstrations of activism. In Curino’s first years with Teatro Settimo, the group occupied public spaces turning them into performance spaces and engaged in acts that mirrored the violence they witnessed, such as smashing and setting fire to a car, as in their show *Esercizi sulla tavola di Mendeleev* (1984).

This broad conception of the narrator who engages in acts of social justice not only pursues the areas of overlap between theater and activism from the stage, but also conveys the theatricality of protests, ubiquitous in 1970s Italian society. One of the main oppositional forces during the 1970s was the development of countercultures, such as radical groups that decentralized power. Activists employed theatrical behaviors in complex ways, as the relationship between students and workers demonstrates: rather than staging forms of protest that would signal theatricality (e.g., with costumes, props, and scripts), students and factory workers were attracted to the characters that each represented, beyond the social issues. Both groups began to transfer their identities onto the other, attempting to alter some of the ways in which society viewed them. Generalizing, students held utopian ideas of community environments in factories with Maoist Chinese models in mind, which, for some, led to Marxist fantasies of revolt.
this Maoist ideal, where students live out a fantasy of worker revolt, point to theatricality as a practice of existence during these years.

Jean Baudrillard suggests a separate angle when he considers the exhibitionist temptations of terrorists surrounding the Moro capture as not so unlike those of establishment politicians.\textsuperscript{13} For him, those elected officials and those extraparliamentary revolutionaries were all involved in a practice of performance in order to influence the general public. The literary scholar Jennifer Burns has argued that several major writers and intellectuals in the twentieth century responded to the terrorism of the 1970s as a fantastical larger-than-life occurrence, as though it were fiction.\textsuperscript{14} These years, which were so fraught with struggle for social progress, curiously blurred the creative with the political as a way not only to interpret social movements but also to practice and exist in them.

Returning to students and workers, from his personal involvement with Marxist-oriented collectives, Portelli observed that while the radical youth movements of that decade helped in changing the perception of working-class culture, most educated youth still rejected identification with working classes. Many university students preferred to identify with and meet in groups of “young people” rather than with groups of workers.\textsuperscript{15} On the one hand, the students and workers were united, but on the other, they were oppositional. These two very different observations about the behaviors of these groups speak to the intensely variegated directions of the 1970s. These extremes demonstrate the need for a dialectic result to harmonize the polarities and create something out of their mutual attraction, which is precisely what the narrators found in their conception of a cultural laborer.

The concept of political engagement, or impegno, is fundamental to the definition of an Italian intellectual, particularly from the 1960s through the 1980s. Certainly many Italian theorists, philosophers, and artists have considered what it means to be an intellectual, as is easily visible from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Norberto Bobbio to Italo Calvino and Pier Paolo Pasolini. As literary scholar Vincenzo Binetti notes, after fascism and the war, it seemed likely that leftist intellectuals would emerge to publicly reevaluate society via culture. Being an intellectual in the postwar climate meant being a cultural ambassador or interpreter rather than an ideologue.\textsuperscript{16} Yet the role of the intellectual became more fraught in the latter half of the century. Binetti argues that the mass-mediated system and the continued growth of technology imposed an irreversible process of alienation that problematizes the role of the intellectual in society. Gone are the postwar intellectuals who served as the moral conscience of a nation, supreme judges of historical developments, and passionate guardians of civil rights.\textsuperscript{17} Binetti’s tone is elegiac, yet this might be a positive development insofar as it suggests a democratic dispersing of intellectual potential. Many people invested in social movements reflected on them, commented on them, and ultimately shaped the role of the intellectual in Italian society.
The rapport between students and noted intellectuals, which was often contradictory and conflicted, also reflects the shift that Binetti elucidates. There was tension, since the students viewed intellectuals as living complacently within the bourgeois system. Many intellectuals, however, aimed to support students, persuaded by their calls to alter aspects of the university experience, and joined their causes through various facets of artistic production and propaganda. One of the main tenets of the 1970s-era student revolts was based on the desire for a system that was more responsive to their social needs and experiences instead of an institution in which they attended school and “received” knowledge through grandiose lecturing. Students, and eventually narrators, wanted to change a system that presumed mere compliance with authority. They wanted more control over the practice of acquiring knowledge, which would have distributed power more equitably within the educational system.

Though it was a score and some years later since the height of student uprisings and occupied universities, Baliani’s 1996 Tracce is a provocative undertaking that offers an example of both the expansive creativity with which the theater of narration can operate, and how narrators can repurpose complex intellectual concepts, or in this case a philosophical text itself, and render it accessible on a large scale. Taking inspiration from the passage in Traces in which Ernst Bloch suggests that “in short, it’s good to think in stories too” Baliani devised an entire production that mimics Bloch’s associative style, which is its own performance of thinking rendered textual and performative. In Baliani’s three-dimensional free-form narrative, which changes dramatically between performances, he works to privilege the mere idea of narration, of speaking and listening, by musing in a Joycean train of thought about the power of stories. At times he recites poetry, as if to perform the beauty that a vocalized poem can transmit. In a Brechtian fashion, but also in a way that involves the spectators, he opens his show not just narrating content but describing what is occurring onstage. In the first lines he offers, “I like to begin allowing my voice to resonate in the darkness as I recite a poem.” He ends the play the same way, with both a description of his actions and a poem. “Now I leave you . . . and as I recite the poem, the lights dim little by little until it is only darkness around us.” And so begins his excerpt from Rilke. (He opens with Dylan Thomas.) This play represents the theater of narration in one of its most experimental forms and demonstrates how narrators are attracted to intellectual material and rendering it accessible on a large scale.

An Ethnography of Oneself: The Personal Terrain of Public Events

The political and intellectual environment that surrounded first-generation narrators in their early years stimulated community-creating and the
exchange of ideas, but the theatrical framework to which they were drawn, which offered an embodied experience for both the performer and the audience, required the narrator to find a method with a physical-awareness that could complement the intellectual and argumentative aspect of their practice. From this need for a physical center-point emerges a practice of autoethnography. The origin for this term as it relates to the theater of narration lies in some of the last writings of anthropologist Victor Turner, regarding notions of experience. In a volume coedited with Turner, Edward M. Bruner credits late nineteenth-century sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of experience (*Erlebnis*, or what has been lived through) as having inspired Turner’s notion of an anthropology of experience.22 Clarifying the relationship between anthropology and experience, Bruner asserts that anthropologists attempt to understand the world through the “experiencing subject,” striving for an inner perspective.23 For many narrators, the effort to share the world of those subjects, to tell their stories, first begins with themselves as they reflect on what they have lived through, and how they use their own experiences to navigate a shared journey with their subjects.

Narrators promote the idea that historical recuperation is ultimately an interactive process. As such, one of the closest ways in which they can experience the world of their subjects is through a method of immersion, like an ethnographer. They adjust the focus of their investigation to first examine themselves, rather than others, in a specific environment. When Paolini, for example, begins his tale of the dam construction and landslide in *Vajont*, he opens with an analysis of what the dam meant to him as a young boy in the Northeast. When Curino tells her story of Camillo Olivetti, the first section recalls what the Olivetti factory meant to her growing up in the industrial North. When Davide Enia recounts the murder of two Sicilian judges trying to stop the Mafia, he sets the scene at the kitchen table with his parents in his home in Palermo having just heard the news.

Related to autobiography, an autoethnography signals a deeper critical rigor and contextualization of cultural surroundings. Autoethnographic texts include “cultural reflection” as opposed to the “merely personal.”24 The practice offers a broad sociocultural analysis through personal narrative.25 In the theater of narration, the autoethnographic aspect also motions toward the ways in which narrators perform a pedagogy. This technique concerns a process of thinking. The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff explains how self-reflection is useful for people to have a better understanding of themselves:

One of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves, through multiple forms: by telling themselves stories; by dramatizing claims in rituals and other collective enactments; by rendering visible actual and desired truths about themselves and the significance of their existence in imaginative and performative productions.26
The narrator takes these same techniques and uses them as a way not just to know themselves but also to know intimately a public event in terms of others. Through their stories, and the retelling of them, they guide their publics to search for better understandings of themselves in relation to each other and their shared histories.

Baliani’s Corpo di stato and Curino’s Passione demonstrate two distinct ways to perform autoethnographies. Baliani negotiates his role as a student during a time with violent student protests and presents a way of thinking that the audience members themselves can mimic. He revisits his late teens and early twenties in the 1970s, when he was an active protestor in the many movements that challenged the status quo, showing how he, as a left-leaning student, emotionally processed two climatic events of the decade: the kidnapping and assassination of Prime Minister Aldo Moro and the Mafia-led murder of Peppino Impastato.27 Baliani stands downstage for most of the performance addressing the audience directly, occasionally sitting on a bench during moments of silence when he screens black-and-white photographs depicting several protests and clashes with the police. Baliani’s text is a visual arrangement reminiscent of cinematic montage in that he weaves together different memories from his more revolutionary past in a charged and emotional register.

Passione is Curino’s great homage to her hometown of Settimo Torinese, which she introduces through her eyes as a young child having just moved there from Turin on account of her father’s work as a Fiat employee. Largely in first person—though also portraying many characters, including the curious women in her town who both intimidated and intrigued her as a young girl, and other women she had invented in plays she wrote with Teatro Settimo—she recalls her own personal history as a conduit through which to explore and better make sense of a national identity in a quickly industrializing society and amid a growingly diverse constellation of regional cultures. Passione embodies the complex layering of many influences as Curino compresses time through her memory in a long-view examination of her past. She offers a varied performance haunted with many people of her life, real and imagined, and with references to the literature of Pasolini, Goethe, and Allende, setting the tone for a complex interweaving of not only a private past, but also a cultural past shared by many.

Victor Turner’s conception of culture as an uncontrollable plurality incapable of containing meaning mirrors Morteo’s explanation, yet Turner also added that people were active agents in the historical process.28 One of the benefits of the narrators’ ethnographies of themselves is how the method requires them to acknowledge the inherent tensions in their attempts to provide a more authentic people’s account of particular moments or places. Baliani confesses that one of his many initial reactions to Moro’s kidnapping was not anger or sadness but exhilaration. Curino laughs at the squalid environments that characterize parts of her childhood as she also looks back with
remorse. The fact that they incorporate personal experiences underscores the reflexivity in being subject and object, interviewee and interviewer, in dialogue with themselves as much as with others.

**Baliani’s Corpo di stato**

Baliani’s play frames the deaths of Impastato and Moro as well as the social and political unrest of the later 1970s from the perspective of the student movements that occupied Italian universities, particularly La Sapienza in Rome. He depicts the main events that defined his early adult life, as they defined many at that time. Amid the myriad of conspiracy theories and mysteries surrounding Moro’s death, Baliani admits plainly that he is not concerned with discovering what actually happened. Rather, he wants to confront what was happening to him emotionally during these times. Once he understands his interior state, he will be able to more deeply understand the exterior events. He quickly switches registers to a private, even confessional tone in which he shares with the audience the inner conflicts these traumatic events brought forth. He cues the audience that he is about to reveal something very delicate:

I know, I could tell you something completely different, it wouldn’t take much, with the wisdom of hindsight I could tell you I got angry when I heard the announcement on the radio [that Moro had been kidnapped and five of his guards murdered], that I immediately condemned the action of the Red Brigades. No, that’s not true, it didn’t go like that.

Baliani is showing his audience that he has a choice in what to say, in how to construct that narrative of his innermost feelings. He could pretend to the audience, and maybe even to himself, that he felt a certain way, a way the audience would readily consider honorable, but instead he chooses to acknowledge something closer to the truth, however unglamorous it might be. He admits plainly that when news reached him of the kidnapping he “felt a sense of exhilaration.” Although he defends himself by saying that he had never endorsed the extreme measures of the Red Brigades, he still bravely acknowledges this initial reaction, wondering how and why he felt a sense of euphoria over the kidnapping as though he belonged to the cause.

In a way, he did belong to the cause, and the piece is largely about figuring out what that “belonging” means. This act of self-locating demonstrates how the narrator works with the audience to provoke questions about where they and their stories belong within other stories and the stories of others. Baliani wondered how he could participate in the energized protests of those days, while also opposing this act against Moro, a symbol of negotiation and compromise. How can he participate in violence without acknowledging
his complicity when that violence escalates? Baliani cannot answer these questions, but by asking them he shows how one person, in their lonely singularity, can confront events that affected many.

In performing an ethnography of himself, Baliani (fig. 5) slowly unfurls his story into a sequence of broad reflections in which he asks a series of questions that then inspire him to make connections with more public names. This is his transition from the questions in his own mind and how they lead to the more familiar situations of the time.

How had it come to this? How did it happen that friends, comrades from my own political group, from the marches, had suddenly started talking about weapons . . . ? But what could you do, if the police went around dressed as students during the protests, holding pistols in their hands to provoke the crowds? What could you do if they shot tear gas canisters at your head during the marches? Isn’t that how they killed Francesco Lorusso in Bologna? And Giorgiana Masi in Rome, on the Garibaldi bridge. . . . What were we supposed to do? When did the clash turn so harsh, when did it get out of control, when?31
The naming of Lorusso and Masi calls forth the memory of two protestors who were killed during demonstrations. In a bold suggestion, Baliani references the “strategy of tension” when he recalls undercover police provoking crowds so that they could use force in suppressing them. Amid this confusion, chaos, and ultimately tension in the atmosphere, he insinuates that the police themselves created a situation in which they would be pardoned for the deaths of protesters. The stories of Lorusso and Masi evolve from two protesters who were killed to two protesters who were lured into a dangerous atmosphere by police, who then killed them.

Such an important shift in perspective is possible only because of the ethnographic techniques that Baliani employs. This moment shares methodological similarities with what cultural anthropologists and ethnographers call “participant observation,” in which they take part in the experience they are studying at the same time that they are observing it. Here Baliani’s entryway into a reflection on Lorusso and Masi is through his own experiences of being in the middle of a protest. As Bruner explains, “The anthropology of experience deals with how individuals actually experience their culture, that is, how events are received by consciousness,” including one’s feelings and expectations toward these events. For narrators, their method is reflective, while the anthropologist takes notes in the present. Though the reliance on memory might seem problematic, as it could signal inaccuracies and fictions, Turner notes that “it is structurally unimportant whether the past is ‘real’ or ‘mythical,’ ‘moral’ or ‘amoral.’ The point is whether meaningful guidelines emerge from the existential encounter within a subjectivity of what we have derived from previous structures or units of experience in living relation with the new experience.” These ideas are in communion with Certeau, White, Jenkins, and other historians who have theorized the vitality that occurs between history and fiction. Bruner also endorses this perspective, noting that “there is no fixed meaning in the past, for with each new telling the context varies, the audience differs, the story is modified.” This is ever more true in the theater of narration, in which narrators are constantly retelling stories from one night to the next with different audiences, yet their personal histories, even if they might differ slightly between performances, serve to ground them.

The method of allowing an ethnography of oneself to lead to an ethnography of others is problematized not only by memory but also by the fact that representing the experiences of others is a complicated and even controversial undertaking that has consequences. In her work on performance ethnography, D. Soyini Madison stresses the need to discuss the positionality of those who represent others and to be attentive to slippage with subjectivity:

Ethnographic positionality is not identical to subjectivity. Subjectivity is certainly within the domain of positionality, but positionality requires that we direct our attention beyond our individual or subjective selves. Instead, we attend to how our subjectivity in relation to
others informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of others. We are not simply subjects, we are subjects in dialogue with others.\textsuperscript{36}

In the spirit of the cultural laborer, narrators ultimately want to shift the story from their own to that of others, but by starting with their own, they position themselves as insiders. They are not researchers from faraway universities coming in to study small populations and then leaving. Narrators work from home.

In \textit{Corpo di stato}, Baliani spends more than a third of the entire show speaking about three characters inspired by people he knew to varying degrees of closeness. In many ways they were just average citizens, but they had strong beliefs and suffered consequences for their political commitments and decisive actions during the late 1970s. Their actions were not extraordinary, yet they paid dearly for them. The three men, each given their own sequences in the show, were named Giorgio, Riccardo, and Armando. Giorgio was a few years younger than Baliani and many of the other seasoned protestors, who were in their twenties. As some of these groups began to steer toward more hostile and violent action, the younger ones, Baliani says, often felt that they needed to prove something. In 1977, Giorgio and some others were caught by the police after an attempted bank robbery. Though he was unarmed, he reached into his pocket for an ID card, and one of the cops—probably as young as Giorgio, Baliani offers—shot and killed him. While Baliani explains what happened to Giorgio, he also shares more intimate moments, such as looking at a photograph of Giorgio where someone snuck his hand behind his head, giving him bunny ears. His aim is always to humanize the people in his memories, including himself, into ordinary individuals to whom many can relate.

Armando’s situation is particularly provocative for Baliani, and he uses it to construct a reflexive world of what-ifs: What would he have done if he had been in a similar situation? After giving up much of his political affiliations with groups who had grown more and more violent, Armando had a wife and young daughter by 1978 and spent much of his time working in the hospital. One evening an old friend rang his doorbell and begged him to hide a package that he was carrying. Armando’s wife was not home, and eventually he conceded to his friend’s pleas, never telling his wife what occurred. After two days passed during which the friend was supposed to return for the package, finally, on the third, the building was surrounded by police who found it: a gun. Armando ended up with a three-year prison sentence. His wife, who Baliani says has never forgiven him, also spent three months in jail trying to prove that she knew nothing about it.

These memories of visiting Armando in jail, of his unfortunate story, stir in Baliani many mixed emotions from guilt to gratefulness and even paranoia. He wonders what he would do if an old beauty from his youth who
was prominent in the revolutionary groups, and whom he always tried (and failed) to impress, showed up at his home one day asking for the same favor. Baliani depicts Armando as a good person, fighting “the good fight,” who turned his back on it when it grew too violent, became a family man and then, maybe out of nostalgia, or maybe without any real reason, made a bad decision for which he suffered the consequences. In part Baliani is asking the audience, How do you step back and realize things have gone too far when you are in the middle of something? The use of his own emotional conflicts in connection with stories about his friends reduces the distance between the audience and himself, since reflexive questioning and role-playing are familiar acts.

By performing those behaviors as part of his show, Baliani nudges the spectator to do the same and, in doing so, share the experiences of Armando. As Richard Schechner has specified, “Everything imaginable has been, or can be, experienced as actual by means of performance. And that, as Turner said, it is by imagining—by playing and performing—that new actualities are brought into existence. Which is to say, there is no fiction, only unrealized actuality.”

This hypothetical realm of the imagination affects not just the way in which Baliani or audience members tell stories of events that they lived through, but also the way they tell those stories that then become histories. The ability to intimately connect with the experience of others, to see those experiences from one’s own perspective and wonder what one would do, demonstrates a rich empathy that guides the historiography of the specific events that these plays discuss.

Curino’s Passione

In her critique of small towns in the industrial North, Curino offers a multidimensional example of the participant observer in which one must have a particularly heightened awareness of positionality. Toward the end of her play, Curino recalls the evening when a neighbor brought her to see Dario Fo and Franca Rame’s Mistero buffo (1968). The penultimate scene of Passione is of a young Curino as a spectator in the audience just before this particular performance begins. It is a virtuoso moment including southern dialects, colloquial expressions, and touches of Spanish. Curino reminisces about the local people of Settimo Torinese completely filling the piazza, full of joyous energy, where husbands, wives, and lovers alike merrily awaited the event. “And you laugh, laugh so hard that your heart takes off, it flies, until you don’t know where your heart is anymore,” she recounts. With her own memory as the base, she portrays the small-town local production as a liberating moment for many in Settimo.

Looking out into her audience as she performs Passione (fig. 6), she reconstructs a moment when she was looking at another audience, that time as an audience member herself, when she was a young woman attending Fo and
Rame’s show. Of all the details that she could have gathered, she assembles the joyous laughter that she shares both with that earlier audience and with the audience presently before her in a layered participant observation. Straddling time, she addresses both these groups directly with you (“you laugh,” tu ridi), purposefully confounding them; one as she remembers them, the other as they are before her. Then she breaks away from her memory to address the audience in front of her to say that she wishes they could have been there. In that hope, there is the reminder that the audience will never know for themselves, only through her guidance, what being a part of that play in that audience of locals from Settimo Torinese in the early 1970s was like, yet the present audience is also a part of her play in the present moment as its members listen to her.

Curino further complicates her positionality when she follows her recollection of Fo and Rame’s visit with an actual portrayal of Rame’s monologue from Mistero buffo of the Passion of Mary before the Cross. Curino’s play articulates an ability to be fractured across time and place in the same way that sociologist Erving Goffman theorizes frames as boundaries that orient people to a collective understanding of behavioral norms. Goffman points toward a self that adjusts according to the framework in which one exists, but Curino demonstrates how the dynamics of the self can exist in a single framework in these last scenes. There are several subversive strands among the dexterous shifting of frames that Curino creates, from layering the
performance space of postwar suburban Turin over the one she is currently in, to challenging not only the traditional practice of theater but also that of storytelling in her vacillation between her characters and herself. Further, the very subject material of the Mary scene dramatically shifts attention from Jesus to his mother. Curino’s practice plays with constructions of memory (what she remembered of Rame’s performance) and challenges what in history should be remembered (what she, Curino, decided was worth relating to the audience). In the case of Rame, Curino rewrites a performance history that includes a diverse working-class audience but also, and finally, one that allows Rame to share a spotlight that is almost always aimed at Fo.

Curino credits Rame’s monologue from *Mistero buffo*, which offers a feminist perspective of the Catholic ritual of the Passion that borders on the sacrilegious (and was most certainly according to the Church), with making her want to pursue theater. As Mary watches Jesus slowly die, she viciously curses and swears at the Roman guards, eventually trying to bribe them to let her dab her son’s bleeding skin. A nod to the groundbreaking feminist theory of the 1970s that considers language and *écriture féminine*, Rame’s monologue is notably in an archaic tongue somewhere between Latin and a southern dialect, requiring her to rely on an experiential language of communication. After the guards refuse, she condemns the archangel Gabriel for having visited her in the first place. In the horrific suffering of witnessing her son’s grisly death, she wishes that he had never been born. This portrayal of Mary is hardly the patient and understanding saint who accepted her fate and recognized the honor of her role in Jesus’s life. She is a weeping human, a helpless parent, a fighter with agency to protest until the bitter end.

Both Rame’s and Curino’s very presence as female artists alone onstage introduces an implicit story of resistance in this version of Mary. As the scholar-performers Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor have written, women’s autobiography in performance must confront the disembodied, traditionally masculine, “universal subject” that constrains so many as “others” bereft of voices or physicality. Layered over the public performance of Rame’s Maria, Curino’s private recollections show both the importance of her own memory and the continuing political relevance of giving Mary the powerful voice that Rame did. Ryan Claycomb argues for the inherent reciprocity in feminist theater, in which performing real life demonstrates the extent to which real life is performative. He adds that this autobiographical action then challenges cultural structures that define and continue to enforce gender norms. Curino honors Rame’s Mary as a representative figure of women’s courage and resistance under extreme duress and physical threat (here by the Roman soldiers). At the same time, she also embodies the intellectual and creative passions of a female artist whose project is largely independent, presenting her work in a traditionally unwelcoming space to such individuals.

Curino and Baliani embrace a positionality of vulnerability in presenting different aspects of themselves. What Miller and Taylor, Claycomb, and
Heddon have flagged as techniques for a feminist theater are applicable to the whole of theater of narration, which adheres to their definition of a feminist methodology. To borrow again from Miller and Taylor, autobiography “reclaims, celebrates, and complicates the construction of the female self.”

In the case of Curino, she revises the past by creating a space for female stage artists when she recalls Rame’s performance and offers her own rendition of it. Meanwhile, Baliani creates a space of remembrance for ordinary people, in which he “reclaims, celebrates, and complicates” those individuals who sacrificed their lives to effect societal change. As Curino and Baliani dance between storytelling, acting, private remembrance, and shared histories, they reinvent the Goffmanian frame into a space that can hold many selves. For Curino, this choice is gendered, but this technique also suggests a rebellious positionality, which points to how the theater of narration can be a vehicle for ideological dispute.

The risk in being the solitary voice onstage, tasked with the responsibility of offering a more dynamic historical record through specific viewpoints, is that a power dynamic develops in concert with the more magnanimous gesture of giving voice to others. The ability to shift perspectives that emerges from an impulse of contextualized self-reflection along with the pluralistic spirit of the theater of narration is at odds with the authoritative associations of a single individual onstage. Narrators might strive to promote ordinary people and the value of a critical narrative, but they are in a position of power as the author and actor. This is a fact of their genre and relates to similar conundrums that ethnographers confront.

One way that narrators correct or at least check their authority is simply with this self-awareness in the spirit of Ginzburg, who acknowledged his subjectivity as he conducted research. Practicing an autoethnography in concert with ethnographic research is another way to work through this dynamic. Madison contends that “the critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control.” Craig Gingrich-Philbrook agrees, reframing autoethnography from a method to an orientation. He understands autoethnography as having developed from the need “to signal when ethnographers questioned their participation in the domination of the other through their own cultural regime of truth.”

The idea to include oneself as a way to check one’s authority acknowledges an unequal dynamic, helping narrators to call attention to that reality rather than pretending it does not exist.

In Corpo di stato, the smaller everyday events that Baliani recounts, such as driving in the car with his partner and their baby or enjoying a day at the beach with friends, signal an epistemological shift in perspective because they address material which hitherto had no pertinence for bourgeois-made history and which would not have been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, political, or historical value. Paying attention to the micro level of
the everyday enacts a process of rediscovery not only of the previously overlooked histories, but also of the ruptured outcomes of conflict and struggle. Local or regional knowledges are not only about the events that have been overlooked. *Corpo di stato* works to broaden knowledge of experiences in the process of uncovering these struggles, while at the same time demonstrating the broad value and greater historical implications that private colloquial instances can hold.

Narrators also exercise a specific performative agency to rectify the inherent power structures in their work. As narrators encourage spectators to think about their own memories and private struggles, they are rearranging the audience’s “structures of knowledge.” Guccini and Marelli have written that after every narration the story dissolves into a residue of signs made newly available for one to interpret, encouraging the individual memory to exert its own obscure power of creation. In performing the process of pairing the personal with the public, and in the inherent suggestion that everyone listening to them can do the same, they point out the inherent agency of those in the audience. Here again is the face of the cultural laborer as someone who creates the potential for activism as well as its continued discourse through art and critique.

**Looking Outward: Giuliana Musso’s *Nati in casa***

The imbricate voices in the theater of narration originate with the narrator, but they quickly move to consider the experiences of others through interviews and documented histories, frequently engaging methods in oral history to construct pluralistic accounts of the past. The lens of postmodern theory, in which the self can be both stable and linear as well as multiple and fragmented, provides a metaphor for the narrator: in the theater of narration the self is a steady and centrifugal force from which the story strays to intermingle with the experiences of others and to which the story returns. Plays establish connections between events, people, ideas, and struggles, and they operate in several registers in order to distill a perspective that is difficult to approach through more conventional forms of reflection. If narrators begin with themselves, they eventually shift their ethnographic strategy to understand the world through the lens of their neighbors, and often this focus is the main content of a performance. Beyond the fact that these shifts move the narrative into its main sequence, they also signal essential moments in the production by performing the interconnectedness between one’s private history and another’s, and how together these histories form the tapestry of a public history.

This negotiation between plural histories, which are fundamentally a collection of singular ones, encourages the audience to consider the ways in which personal experience fans outward, and how reflecting on the
connections in one’s own experience and that of others constitutes history making. History, then, is always a multiauthored living collection of voices. As Pollock notes, “No one person ‘owns’ a story. Any one story is embedded with layers of remembering and storying. Remembering is necessarily a public act whose politics are bound up with the refusal to be isolated.” Narrators demonstrate this joint ownership when they incorporate other voices into their works, aided by practices of oral history. As narrators engage other perspectives in an effort to create a multidimensional history, it becomes clear that many stories are not only about clarifying aspects of the past from those hitherto unheard perspectives but also, importantly, about how to interpret those events in both personal and collective ways.

Giuliana Musso’s *Nati in casa* (*Born at Home*, performed in repertory since 2001) exemplifies both the shaping of history through multiple voices and the act of interpreting that history and its implications in the present with the help of oral testimony from ordinary people. The piece, which is part of Musso’s “investigative theater” trilogy (*teatro d’inchiesta*—how she describes her theater), weaves together stories of midwives from the early twentieth century in northeastern Italy, Musso’s home region. The other two pieces include *Sexmachine* (2005), for which she researched and conducted interviews on prostitution, and *Tanti saluti* (2008; *Best Wishes*), on how society handles death and dying people. The themes of these productions travel from meditations on birth to sex to death (the fundamental processes of life, in other words), but they are often thought of as a trilogy, largely because of Musso’s research methods, which rely heavily on collecting oral histories. She went on to translate poetry and prose into dramaturgical texts for her next shows, but later returned to similar research methods, in the mid-2010s with *Mio eroe* (2016; *My Hero*) based on the testimony from mothers of fallen Italian soldiers in the NATO-led war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaida (2001–14). By 2017, when she won the prestigious Hystrio playwriting prize for over seven different plays, even while she has explored other writing methods, her rigorous research of oral histories is the area in which she receives most recognition. As the critic Roberto Canziani declared, if she were not such a talented actress, then she would have been a formidable journalist for her ability to merge rigorous investigation with pathos in everyday issues that society often overlooks. This could be a mantra for all narrators.

Born in 1970 in the northeastern province of Vincenza and later relocating farther east to Udine, only thirty kilometers from the border of Slovenia, Musso’s artistic style is influenced by long-standing regional traditions of physical actor-based Italian theater, similar to the traveling troupes in the commedia dell’arte style. She is a master of improvisation and technically brilliant in her precise physical gestures, which can be both big and elastic, like Dario Fo’s, and subtle and small. That physical command extends to her vocal range in both tone and accent, which she uses to create many characters in her productions. Though some critics associate her with fellow northeasterner
Marco Paolini, and while she studied in guest workshops with Teatro Settimo members including Laura Curino, Mariella Fabbris, and Gabriele Vacis, her artistic lineage is grounded with those itinerant troupes that often interacted with the audience following their own sketches of scripts. *Nati in casa* debuted in 2001, but it was not until the early 2010s that critics began to celebrate Musso as a major narrator.

She takes the practice in different directions, most notably with more monologue-heavy sequences in addition to the typical one-on-one conversational style of narration that she employs in *Nati in casa* (fig. 7). In later works the presence of the narrator becomes more and more subtle, taking on different forms. The opening choreopoem set to music in *Sexmachine*, and the sunglass-wearing clowns that both represent death and are themselves a commentary on death from *Tanti saluti*, are experimental incarnations of a narrator in productions that comprehensively favor characters or representations of characters (as with the clowns). *Nati in casa* is the production most

Fig. 7. Giuliana Musso in her opening monologue of *Nati in casa* (San Daniele del Friuli, Udine, ca. 2001). Photograph by and courtesy of Elena Bazzolo.
convincingly grounded in the theater of narration traditions, yet Musso still opens the show with a grand monologue, to jarring effect. Wearing a pregnant suit that she later sheds, she portrays a woman going into labor. In a comedic sequence of high-pitched fast-paced banter, this woman describes her anxieties and how she is relieved to be delivering in a hospital given all of the complications that might ensue. Picking up the pace, she describes her initial conversations as she checks in and settles in; then she slows down as the nurse that she liked leaves when her shift finishes, the doctor breaks her water, the medical staff calculatingly wrestles control from her. There are a team of people observing her, they administer an epidural (“like in America!” she exclaims with nervous laughter), and suddenly she does not know when to push, what to do, and has lost much sensation in her body.

At this point, fifteen minutes into this opening, the audience hears a calm and collected voice, somewhere between that character and Musso herself, that asks several times, “Come facevano le donne prima . . . ?” (How did women do this before . . . ?). This is the first key moment of transition between an invented contemporary character, Musso herself, and the next sequence, which answers her question. Stemming from research and interviews with midwives, she tells their stories and the stories of women in whose labors they helped. Originally the director, Massimo Somaglino, was commissioned by the Pro Loco (a regionally sponsored association to promote local culture) in the small town of San Leonardo Valcellina, outside Pordenone in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region of northeastern Italy, to devise a theatrical text that would celebrate their local obstetrician, Maria, who had helped in the births of generations of the town’s children. He passed the project to Musso, who did most of the research, interviews, and writing. These practices of historical inquiry themselves constitute much of the larger meaning in this production specifically, and broadly in the theater of narration as they demonstrate the richness that microstories hold. They put the human—and in this case not the science and technology of birth—center stage, quoting actual individuals and shaping a narrative that is heavily mediated by oral histories.

The very idea of positioning the human front and center shares philosophical underpinnings with the process of oral history, which replaces documented accounts with those that are brought to fruition only through the voice of another human being. Rising in popularity during the 1960s and 1970s, oral history is a method mainly associated with social historians as they conduct “history from below,” with marginalized people like working-class individuals, racial minorities, and women. While it does offer glimpses of experiences that are generally hard to locate, with the work of Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli, and others the focus shifted from the actual narratives to subjectivities and cultural processes. For Passerini, the inaccuracies, such as misremembering an event, read like Freudian slips that nonetheless provide key meanings. The historian Joan W. Scott describes Passerini’s model:
She uses interviews not to collect facts, not to clarify what did and did not happen in the past, but to explore the ways in which the relationship between private and public, personal and political is negotiated. It is this negotiation that produces identity, the sense of membership in a collective. . . . Memory, Passerini suggests, sustains identity through its invocation of a common history.50

Scott continues to explain how for Passerini, one of the most valuable aspects of oral history is what goes unsaid. She reads the pauses, hesitations, and discrepancies of her interviewees analytically, providing insight into the complexity of their subjectivity. This notion of the unsaid shares theoretical ground with the detective work of microhistorians and the paradigma indiziaro, or method of clues, which engages with the gaps in historical records. Rather than leading the historian to new discoveries, however, in oral history the caesuras are the discoveries.

Musso uses interviews in the same way: not to collect facts but to create a collective memory based on an individual’s personal history. How did women give birth before? Before hospitals, before paved roads, before telephones, and before an onslaught of medical intervention that removed all agency from the birth mother? From her quiet thoughtful questioning, Musso begins to shift her body gently from side to side, describing the middle of the night in a rural town, as she transforms herself into a midwife who is riding her bicycle—with the bell on the right of the handlebar and a leather bag on the left—up a steep hill before arriving at the house of Rosina, a woman in labor. As she arrives, Musso portrays both Rosina’s little sister, an exuberant fourteen-year-old Rosetta (Musso asks her audience to “try not to confuse them. Once upon a time that’s how it went”) who will help in her sister’s labor, and the midwife. She colors their exchange with Friulian dialect, which gives her story both an older and a regional flavor. Then she slips back into a narrator closer to herself, referencing the interview process in preparation for the production. Looking directly into the audience, she announces,

One of the first things that all of the municipal’s midwives from back then want to tell you when you meet them is about how they traveled to the women in labor, at all hours of the day and night, by any means necessary, but usually by foot or by bicycle, or sometimes with the bicycle on their shoulders if it was a steep climb, or maybe on their backs with their legs knee-deep in mud.51

Throughout the play, she conveys the physical strength of the midwives, and their physical and emotional dedication as they support other women through their own moments of intense physical and emotional strength. It is not merely an empowering piece. It rewrites both the history and the current story of childbirth by juxtaposing the opening scene of nervousness and
ultimately impotence of today’s birth mother in a hospital with several anecdotes of women-centered spaces, based on memories of women, in which they had fuller participation in the births of their children.

These dexterous shifts between characters and the narrator as researcher conducting interviews demonstrate the way in which ordinary people, herself included, have the potential to create large-scale historical narratives. The key is in the listening. First she needed to do the listening, and then it was the audience’s turn. Though Musso does not acknowledge the inherent hierarchy as the beholder of these stories, choosing which ones to tell and how to share them, adding and detracting, inventing as she might, she does demonstrate how one can construct a larger historical narrative by interweaving individual ones. Pollock underscores the characteristic dramatic value in these research methods:

That insofar as oral history is a process of making history in dialogue, it is performative. It is co-creative, co-embodied, specially framed, contextually and intersubjectively contingent, sensuous, vital, artful in its achievement of narrative form, meaning, and ethics, and insistent on doing through saying, on investing the present and future with the past, re-marking history with previously excluded subjectivities, and challenging the conventional frameworks of historical knowledge with other ways of knowing.52

Beyond empowering the actual subjects of Nati in casa (the new mothers, the midwives, and Musso herself), the presence of oral history in the theater of narration leads to an epistemology with stakes in historiography itself. Oral history may create history through dialogue, but the theater of narration demonstrates how it and the other elements that go into making it (from creative interpretation to documentary evidence) are inherently performative.

The audience, and their accountability in the history-making experience through narrative, is a vital component to the theater of narration. Pollock states that when oral histories appear onstage, they both reveal “the magnitude and inherent responsibility in beholding the story of someone else” and demonstrate how stories are embodied, lived experiences that provide “a space for the complexities of indigenous or vernacular conceptualizations of experience.”53 Musso holds what she has learned from others with an unmistakable reverence that is dramatized largely by the lighting in the piece, when she is brightly centered by a spotlight or awash in blue, associated with Mary and the miracle that birthed Catholicism. She also frequently references the Northeast as she shares these stories, in particular with accent and dialect, but also with mentions of regional landscape. Above all, Musso demonstrates that the act of performing these stories in front of an audience is part of what makes a whole story, a single narrative, a history that consists of individual histories.
If Musso’s choice not to reflect on or at least acknowledge the problematic of subjectivity might seem positivist, other narrators have spoken more candidly on the matter and openly worked through their hesitations. Considering the features that can alter perspective, when Celestini has reflected on the mechanisms at play in storytelling, he has commented that oral memory occurs in a certain moment of the present, even if always linked to the past. For him, memory is so much a part of the present that recalling specific events will change or efface parts of the past. This idea recognizes that the inherent problem in memory recollection is that while interviewees may be willing to share their experiences, they haphazardly censor or repress different aspects of an event because they are not fully aware of or able to articulate a vision beyond their own subjectivity.

This framework is also clear in Baliani’s efforts to consider perspectives other than his own in Corpo di stato, including that of the kidnappers. He imagines them at the moment in which they shot and killed Moro: “Did the first one to fire squeeze hard on the trigger? Could he have stopped himself in that moment, not gone through with it? Or not, or is it always the same, that by that point in the game the hands move on their own, like machines?” He reconstructs a psychological drama of an action that had huge consequences for a nation, narrowing that focus to one person, wondering if, by the time the gun was raised, Moro was as good as dead, or if there was still a glimmer of hope. What is particularly revealing about the practice of the theater of narration is what Baliani says next: “But they [the hands] tremble, they tremble! So you have to make them stronger, harder, you have to steel yourself, until you see before you not a man, but a mere figure, a function of something, a thing.” Baliani has shifted the point of view to the actual kidnappers as they confess what one needs to do in order to carry out this task. Even though Baliani is only imagining the scenario and not quoting from one of the kidnapper’s memoirs, he is still offering some type of insight into unsympathetic people, making them weaker, trembling. He humanizes them by depicting them as ordinary people who attempt to grapple with a moral choice, rather than affectless ideologues. Baliani goes well beyond his autoethnography, yet his own witnessing of the militancy in those years when he too was a part of a struggle allows him to access an empathy that provides a window into the experiences of another.

Similar to Celestini’s recognition of the present, Baliani makes the case that both subjectivity and the ability to recognize it have useful benefits in the construction of history. Celestini’s argument is about the relationship between the present and one’s point of view from the present. What influences memories of the past is not just the present, but the perspective that the present affords. Portelli shares this idea, taking it in a slightly different direction by introducing the possibilities of misremembering and fantasy when recalling the past; narrators engage with the latter as they construct the specifics of their scenes. Maybe the kidnappers’ hands did tremble. Maybe
there was a moment of hesitation, maybe not. What Baliani shows, indeed performs, is the actual mechanism that confronts these public events: empathy. Emerging from his own experiences, his empathy allows him to reflect on and understand the experience of others in a personal way. By tinkering with his subjectivity and flirting with that of another, Baliani demonstrates the proximity of the relationship between the private and the public. In this example, he is saying that perhaps, for the kidnappers to be able to kill Moro, they had to strip him of his status as a leader of the nation, even as a human being, and think of him as some worthless entity. In fact, they had to block their empathy.

Several intellectual trends from the 1970s also resurface in these multitudes composed of oral histories. Passerini intuits these associations as well. In one of her early works, she explicitly makes the connection between subjectivity, autobiography, orality, and history and then links this four-part grouping to the effect of events that occurred from 1968 through the early 1980s—the long 1970s. She credits the women’s movement for making personal narratives relevant in public and on political platforms. She also acknowledges the post-1968 student movements for attempting to create a historical subject based on everyday conditions that affirmed a double right: to be in history and to have a history. As she describes the process of recognizing one’s own subjectivity through autobiographical narrative, she speaks to the necessity of alternating between subjective and objective positions, adding that, through these exchanges, a different type of discovery of self takes place.

Passerini’s thoughts share striking parallels with the theater of narration as the same elements of subjectivity, autobiography, orality, and history collide. The theater of narration, however, is concerned less with the different selves that intersubjectivity can reveal than with the actual performance of how these multiple selves are mutually reshaped through their juxtaposition and interaction. By presenting different perspectives, one of the narrator’s functions is to dramatize the connection between who is remembering and what is being remembered. In Nati in casa, it is the layering of Musso’s ethnographic experience as interviewer and as fellow northeasterner who knows the landscape well and can intimately imagine trekking up hills and around muddy spring towns with the stories of the midwives who recalled their journeys, their memories of specific birth experiences, this back-and-forth, that allows her to realize a broad vision. Musso destabilizes her account as she switches between many characters, yet it is in the accumulation of these stories, interweaving them by returning to characters, that she locates a shared history. Here she exhibits a resounding characteristic across the theater of narration: that by incorporating their experiences, narrators demonstrate how they have a right to historical existence, and this right extends to everyone in the audience, and all of those interviewed. This joint valorization of individual experiences forms the possibility of continually revised collective memories.
Narrators are playing with a system that constructs a relationship between performer and audience that either mimics the narrators’ relationships to themselves or extends from their ethnographic self-awareness. In one of Erving Goffman’s most celebrated theatrical metaphors, he explains the private and public self by describing one’s behavior as either backstage or frontstage. The frontstage behavior concerns the various affects that one acquires in the presence of others in order to come across in a particular way, while the backstage self does not behave according to perceptions, but informally acts on its own volition. His metaphor here anticipates an awareness in which one decides for oneself how to behave based on audience, but when there is no audience, one does as one pleases. Goffman never considers the self an audience. In the theater of narration, when narrators share their personal histories, when they discuss their research processes, when they invoke the stories of others, they construct pasts and their own behaviors in those pasts for themselves as much as for their audiences. Agency is a backstage performance with frontstage behavior.

Toward the end of Nati in casa, Musso seems to conclude by bookending the piece when Rosina gives birth in her home on top of the hill. The first midwife, whom the audience meets in the beginning of the performance on her bicycle traveling to Rosina, has labored throughout the night with her, and now the baby is ready to arrive. After the birth scene, Musso turns her back to the audience and takes a few steps upstage, prompting the audience to applaud as they expect her to turn around and take her bow. But when she does turn around, she walks downstage half-laughing and, out of character, says, “I’m sorry to disappoint you. The creature was born, but the show is not over. There are still a lot of important things to do and we have to do them together.” In this instance, which is staged and scripted and entirely intentional, Musso is working with a variety of relationships, including between herself and the people about whom she is talking, as well as to whom she is speaking, and especially with whom; as she specifies, this is work that they must do together. In one instance she reminisces on a common detail that the midwives shared in her interviews—those long treks through the mountainous countryside just to arrive at the woman in labor—and at another she is telling the audience that they too are a part of this narrative, that there is still much that they need to do with her. Her laughter might seem like a flash of backstage behavior, but it is an intentional performance of this behavior, which serves to demonstrate agency—an agency that is both her own and one that she is hoping to share with the audience.

In a final scene with her characters, she returns to the birth of Rosina’s child, where the starry-eyed Rosetta (the young sister) follows the midwife around and asks about her profession with great admiration. Somewhat sassily, she provokes the midwife, taunting, “But if the baby had trouble coming out, then we would have had to call a doctor.” To which the midwife responds coolly, “Yes, of course, but as you see, we didn’t need one.”
Rosetta: No, but how many babies have trouble coming out?

The Midwife: Rosetta, so many questions! I don’t know. A few.

Very few.

Rosetta: But exactly how many few?

As the midwife, Musso contorts her face for a long pause as if to say, “I really have no idea because there are so few,” but instead of responding as the midwife, she suddenly shifts nearer to herself and deadpans, “Thirty-seven point six percent. Today, in our Italian hospitals, thirty-seven point six percent of babies have trouble coming out and are born through caesarian section.” Here is the work left that Musso needs the audience to do with her: think about this. Compare the stories that they just heard to today’s reality, recalling that first character who opened the show. Then they can decide for themselves how this story should continue.

While the entire production celebrates a woman-capable-centric world, this is the moment that rings as the most activist or openly political. Musso continues to share Rosetta’s story, how she grew up to become an obstetrician and works at one of the largest hospitals in the Northeast. The character of Rosetta and her experiences is based on several midwives who shared with Musso birth stories from both home births and hospitals. In the production, Musso also uses the invention of Rosetta to shore up her arguments with statistical facts, stating that according to “Rosetta,” in 1985 the World Health Organization declared that there was no valid reason in any part of the world for there to be a rate of caesarian section higher than 15 percent. In this sequence—the most naked moment in the production, the most theatrically stripped-down moment with the simplest lighting—Musso does not portray any characters, but instead looks at audience members as if in conversation, leaving them with questions to take up on their own. Yet it is very precisely rendered to look as though it offers a backstage intimacy that her frontstage monologues could never offer. Musso also speaks of Rosetta as though she were one of her interviewees, when in fact Musso created her based on a number of her interviews. This penultimate section is also paced with a quick tempo. Musso does not dwell on these soundbites of information. She credits Rosetta as having shared them with her and leaves them for the audience to mull over and decide for themselves how to deal with them.

The audience has one more task left that relates to interpreting what they have witnessed in terms of their own lives as well as broadly. Eugenio Barba complicates Goffman’s ideas when he articulates how the struggle to remember can develop minor tensions into the audience members’ experiences of a production. Influenced by the psychological exercises in Stanislavsky’s acting technique known as “method acting,” Barba notes that there is a continual conversation between the actor’s outer presentation of self and the inner life and that this exchange, this anxiety, can transfer to the spectator. The audience witnesses and experiences a dialogic mechanism, an inner debate, that
works to move the story onstage narratively forward. Guccini has noted this feature when he distinguishes between the overt presentation as the story that in this case the narrator delivers, and an inner story that takes place simultaneously where the narrator has a particular relationship by way of autobiography.\(^6\) This autobiographical element—which is more of an ethnography of oneself—adds to the underlying tensions as the narrator dances between private and public recollections. Mimicking this duality, audience members can both identify with the narrator’s experiences and recall their own. What Musso refers to as the work that is left for her and her audience to do together is the untangling of these tensions, or at least the ability to clearly see through them.

The narrator is ultimately a dynamic figure, one that adheres to certain codes while also operating originally and independently. Narrators have enough freedom to make individual unique choices, yet they share influences in their thinking and behaviors. The role of the narrator is fundamentally to guide the audience through a journey that contemplates a variety of perspectives. Working through their own stories, and often with oral histories from interviews that they conducted, narrators perform the fragmentary ways in which the past breaks down and is imperfectly reconstructed. For narrators, remembering does not pair with forgetting; rather, it suggests that there was first an act of dismembering, disjoining, or breaking apart. A strong somatic presence by way of performance lends weight to that which is intangible, such as experience or memory. As moments decompose in the past, as time and space disrupt them, they are left there, scattered separately until someone (anyone, which is part of the point) re-members them through re-collecting and re-calling them. This is ultimately what constitutes the narrator’s work as a cultural laborer. In order to remember an experience, to put it back together again, narrators must recollect it. They must also recall it, or name it, in a way that resonates with the present. Naming the memory gives it a form again, and so the past begins to resurface, though with some parts missing, and others exaggerated. Building on the idea of a cultural civic servant, these reconstructions have political implications as they find relevance in the present.

Through an intellectual breadth, an ethnography of themselves, and finally from multiple perspectives, narrators reach beyond personal experience to locate the greater stage of Italy’s recent history. They enact a process of layered identification with the audience as well as a dialogic practice as though there were more people onstage than just the narrator. This dialogic dimension assumes a civic responsibility as Curino, Baliani, and Musso evoke the subaltern history of postwar Turin, 1970s Rome, and the recent history of childbirth. They hold themselves and the audience members accountable for their roles in maintaining an inclusive history by encouraging them to interweave their own personal memories and experiences within a common historical framework. They embrace the spirit of what anthropologist
Edward M. Bruner offers when he acknowledges, “Stories may have endings, but stories are never over.” Rather, they are told and retold, and reconfigured and rethought. When private identities surface within a context of public sharing, they can shed new light on events that had become distorted in hegemonic histories. The cultural labor of the narrator is to show audiences how to rewrite more inclusive histories that are at once wide-ranging and intensely personal.