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Persistence of Memory: Revision, Nostalgia, and Resistance in Contemporary American Drama

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Persistence of Memory: Revision, Nostalgia, and Resistance in Contemporary American Drama

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

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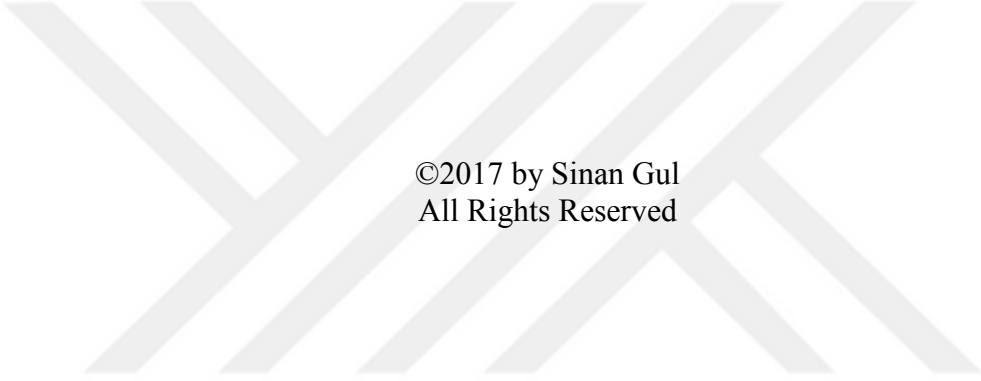
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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the usages of memory in contemporary American drama. Analyzing selected mainstream and alternative dramatic texts, *The Persistence of Memory* is a study of personal and communal reflections of the past within contemporary plays. The introduction provides examples from modern plays, major terms, and vital concepts for memory studies and locates their merits in dramatic texts. The first chapter makes a critique of family plays, which uses historical elements to indicate a revisionist yearning for the past as well as the American Dream. Similarly, the second chapter contains business plays, which implement a heavy feeling of nostalgia towards the past, and offer the past as a comforting refuge from the troubles of the present. Third chapter makes an account of documentary plays and illustrates how their approach to history has been different, in order to create a resistance and alternative stand against mainstream formulations. In contrast to other plays, documentary plays employ an opposing tone to conventional usages of history to point at its flaws, strengths, and fallacies. The fourth chapter involves historical plays, which have historical events and characters at their cores. Historical plays like documentary plays have a protesting tone, and the material they handle reveals the playwrights' ideological tendencies. Given the abundance of memory and history in contemporary dramatic texts, the significance of these components on creating meanings in the present is the main center of interest in this study.



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Acknowledgments

I started this project believing I had the answers, but the more I researched the less confident I felt about my preconceived ideas. I came to conquer the United States and to tell my story. Now, I am returning to Turkey with a newfound knowledge of other people's stories and a belief in life-long learning.

I would like to thank Les Wade who has been a great teacher, listener, and adviser throughout my entire experience at the University of Arkansas. As a member of the drama department, he has always been a helpful guide from the very beginning of this project. He has shown great patience for my rough drafts and given them an academic shape.

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Introduction

Rachel Corrie was an American activist and student killed by an Israeli bulldozer while protesting the demolitions of the Palestinians' houses in the Gaza Strip in March 2003. Having assembled most of its content from Corrie's diaries and emails, Katharine Viner and Alan Rickman wrote a play called *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. It was staged in April 2005 at the Royal Court Theatre, London, and won the Theatregoers' Choice Awards for Best Director and Best New Play. Everything seemed normal for the play until it was scheduled to be transferred to the New York Theatre Workshop in March 2006. The play was "postponed immediately" as several Jewish groups raised their discontent for the play. Although the play was staged in different cities in the USA and all over the world, it had to wait longer than usual for the aegis of James Hammerstein Productions to access Broadway.

What was the reason for this clear censorship in twenty-first century America? Was it anti-Semitic propaganda? Probably not. Was it the flaws of dramatic construction in the play? Many critics refrained from calling this text a play, and they pointed at flaws such as Corrie's "curiously weightless observations," "misguided politics," (McCarter) and "eerie patterns of recurring images" (Brantley 2006) in it, but this was not the reason. What drove the Jewish community to stop this play was Rachel Corrie's memories. Of all communities on earth, the Jews are the ones who know the importance of memory better than anyone else. That's why there are Holocaust museums all over the world. They know if people forget, their existence and sufferings will be devaluated. They are the ones who diligently memorize their scriptural texts to maintain their identity. The biggest conflict in the Middle East region still originates from historical claims to certain parts of land, especially Israel.

Rachel Corrie is not a part of *Persistence of Memory* as it focuses on mainstream dramatic works, but *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is a testament to memory's power in dramatic texts because when the present is established through fictional past, which is based on personal observations and records, its authority is amplified. Besides, the ruckus this play has caused generated a dialogue on the variations of memory in dramatic texts. This dissertation analyzes dramatic constructions of memory, whether they are from a specific person or from a communal history, irrespective of sources.

Exploring issues closely associated with time has become an important component of contemporary dramatic structures for a long while and its potential to create dramatic conflicts has been immense. The way playwrights have integrated branches of memory into their plots has been diverse. Memory and history have brought a wide array of meanings into plays which have gone, to a certain extent, unnoticed in academia. This study is an attempt to shed some light on this trend. For example, domestic plays analyzed in this study demonstrate a revisionist method that attempts to review and reminisce about the miseries of the past. The demise of a family member in each play functions as a catalyst to encounter the tragic events in the past. This can be the death of a child as seen in *Rabbit Hole* and *Clybourne Park*, or the suicide of the father in *August: Osage County*. These losses unveil forgotten familial memories and the disappearance of these characters revive the suppressed history within the family. As other playwrights (Jon Rabin Baitz' *Other Desert Cities*, Christopher Shinn's *Where Do We Live*, and Lisa D'Amour's *Detroit*) have also shown, revision of the past is an unnegotiable part of inner peace for these characters. Assessing personal memories and voicing the uncomfortable parts to each other's face has been a strong method of modern drama and contemporary American drama follows suit.

This revisionist strategy has been substituted by a nostalgic version in plays where characters have financial difficulties. In a way, the plays analyzed have created a web of history which was definitely a better place for many people. Historically, 1950s and 1960s have been significant thresholds for American prosperity, but the way history is handled in business plays propagate a past as the absolute solution. Without touching the real damages of neoliberal policies on the characters' lives, taking shelter in a fictional past can be seen as an accurate understanding of contemporary American society. In contrast, documentary and history plays have objected to such revisionist and nostalgic comprehension of history, and have advocated a more objective and resistant method of using historical materials despite their shortcomings. As a major difference between mainstream plays, documentary and history plays tend to avoid romantic portrayals of the past and history has been a jumping point for them to question the conventions of official history. Bringing in their own methodology of reading the present through the past, they have shown the capabilities of recorded materials to shed light on current issues.

Theatre has always been a construction site for remembering and forgetting. We pay money for tickets to forget and remember. We forget our daily life struggles and we love the poetic way playwrights tell our forgotten stories to us. We remember the (imaginary) murders we have committed or always wanted to, the hearts we have broken, and the ones we have lost.

Helene Cixous defines theatre through its relationship with the past:

For me the Theatre is by definition the stage where the living meet and confront the dead, the forgotten and the forgetters, the buried and the ghosts, the present, the passing, the present past and the passed past. There is nothing more Theatre than a great City of the Dead. It is a stage through which all the characters of a story make their appearance, from the most ancient, the most distant in the centuries down to most contemporary, from the imaginary, the invented, the lost found again down to the real familiars. The dead are not always as dead as we think nor the living as living as they think. (Prenowitz 26)

The family on stage, as Cixous points out, is remarkable as long as it reminds ours or it is familiar. We are reminded of how lucky we are today for being in those seats instead of those characters. We are reminded of the hardship, the sweat, and the sacrifices of those who made it possible for each one of us to be an audience to the tragedies of others which are either a recalling or reminder for most audience members.

As the plays in this study demonstrate, memory and history play a major role in the construction of dramatic structures. Despite different formations and functions, contemporary plays employ mnemonic elements to talk about the present. However, there has been a scholarly neglect to analyze the components and impact of history/memory in contemporary plays. This study aims to unearth the hidden influence of mnemonic elements used to shape dramatic discourses within plays as there has been similar patterns while portraying certain themes. Plays dealing with problems in families tend to express a revisionist memory/history approach. Despite nostalgic feelings for the family past, a bitter criticism by new generations towards the past has been commonly uttered by playwrights. Business plays which have hardship of work life at their core have a clear nostalgic approach towards the past.

Each chapter examines the usages of history and memory from a different perspective, asking an independent primary research question. I have organized chapters thematically as most playwrights use different methods and strategies for their plays, but my aim in bringing them together is to be able to unfold identical patterns and similar concerns rather than lumping them in one group. Although the focus is on the concept of history, I have included other important themes and plotlines. This project offers an investigation of issues and connections, and a review, not a comprehensive one, of contemporary American drama. I cannot claim to do full justice to the richness of current scholarship on memory and history, and there are parts where I

had to reduce it to merely certain interpretations of them. The plays in each chapter have their own unique set of dramatic structures to explore the aspect of the past as well as particular concerns, merits, and opportunities.

Chapter 1 tracks philosophical concepts of memory in domestic settings. Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* demonstrates a family who has been stuck in their past and the suicide of the father in the family brings all those memories to the surface. David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* is about a couple who is fighting against their late child's memory. Memory, despite its subversive impact on their relationship, helps the couple go through their hardship. Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* is a metaphorical museum of memory because the first act of the play addresses the family in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). *Clybourne Park* makes a comparison of two different generations through the changes in a neighborhood in Chicago. The past in *Clybourne Park* has a racist façade and minorities particularly the African-American characters face unfair treatment. However, Norris illustrates how the present is reminiscent of that era despite all the progress society has accomplished. There is a fifty-year difference between the first and second act, so what is left from the first one is a sign of selective and subjective memory in the second act. Family plays create a web of pleasing memories despite dysfunctional reflections of families. Although the past has a secretive component designed to expand its influence, it is also used to extend the power of the past in the present. The vitality of memory is an important repeated concept in most plays and these images and moments in plays recall traumatic memories.

Domestic dramas in the first chapter handle the issue of memory with caution because the past is the source of problems for those families. Older generations in domestic dramas address the past with yearning, but a clear difference between younger and older generations is visible as

the former is aware of the prejudices of old times. Thus, political correctness is an important contemporary reality that new generations are more aware. Despite the alienation that modern times have caused, contemporary ethical and moral judgment triumphs over old domestic and social values. For example, the matriarch, Violet, in *August: Osage County* praises the way she was brought up and criticizes her children and grandchild's attitudes. However, as the play unfolds, her racist and narcissist character reveals old habits of degrading other people including her own children.

Chapter 2 engages contemporary business plays in which remembering leads to extreme nostalgic components about the protagonists' past. Most of these plays take place in offices or stores where the protagonists work. Being outside domestic settings has enabled the playwrights to roam through a different vein of memory fueled with bitter feelings for the harsh conditions of neoliberal markets. Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts*, David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People*, and Samuel Hunter's *A Bright New Boise* dramatize the history/memory binary through the catastrophes of their characters. In addition to memory lane these plays exemplify, success and class differences are other important themes that characters scrutinize.

The proliferation of documentary plays is a sign for the interest in memory because the mnemonic and dramatic background of the plays depends on documented materials. Moises Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen's *The Exonerated*, and Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* are the foci of chapter 3. These plays are based on interviews or other recorded materials, and their approach to memory is reformative. Each in its own way attempts to show (1) how memory is unreliable despite documentation; (2) how to treat memory so that it can be useful at all.

This exploration continues in a different way in chapter 4, which scrutinizes history plays. Emily Mann's *Mrs. Packard*, Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room or The Vibrator Play*, and Moises Kaufman's *33 Variations* use historical characters or events as a backbone of their narration. Memory becomes a means of questioning the present in historical plays and a way of showing how history can still enlighten the present. Chapter 3 and 4 have significant similarities because they both use historical materials to the extent that their authenticity has been questioned at times. The amount of historical material, however, is not determinative in their genres.

Documentary drama, in last three decades, have evolved into a completely different genre all over the world. In the US, it has taken the role of political drama which has not historically been a strong vein in American drama since the 1950s. Documentary drama aims to enlighten people and, to a certain extent, educate them in certain topics. The examples in this study show that recorded material by playwrights (or troupes) provides a major difference between historical and documentary plays. The latter is about today, talking about current or very recent people or events. For example, *The Laramie Project* focuses on the murder of Mathew Shepard who became an important icon for the LGBT communities in the US, or *I Am My Own Wife* tells the story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf who was a symbol of survival and mystery for the German transvestites. Characters in documentary drama are usually familiar to contemporary society or their stories appeal to contemporary issues. Historical drama has a similar strategy to find points for the audiences to identify themselves with characters. As a major difference, historical playwrights dig into the dusted treasures of history and pick a certain event or character to include within their texts. For example, Moises Kaufman questions Beethoven's reason(s) to write 33 variations for Diabelli's insignificant melody. Kaufman uses a music professor to bridge

the time gap and link it to contemporary characters' lives. On the other side, Emily Mann and Sarah Ruhl uses historical events to explore the difficulties women experienced.

My primary methodology involves close readings of the texts with particular attention to history and temporal shape within each play. How are the past and history differentiated in the plays? What is the playwright's attitude about time zones? What is the general feeling in the play toward the past, the present, and the future? More significantly, what are the political implications of the use of time in the play? This project attempts to answer these questions and investigate how individual and collective memories have conditioned theatrical composition.

The plays in this study are all contemporary. They are all millennial products as the term is getting popular everywhere. My intention when I started writing this dissertation was to write about the millennial identity in contemporary American drama and find the impact of 9/11 on characters. However, the scarcity of materials and the sensitivity of the subject made it more difficult to concentrate most topics about identity under one united project. American society more than any other nation on earth is prone to think deeply over social incidents, and I think it will take its writers and philosophers longer to face 9/11 and evaluate its long-term effects. While conducting my preliminary research for writing, variations of memory in contemporary American drama became a clear topic that repeated itself in different forms. The fact that the major playwrights of the last 40 years such as Sam Shepard, Tony Kushner, August Wilson, and John Guare have all challenged America's past in different forms encouraged this study. These playwrights' works, as well as contemporary ones, clearly indicate the need and desire to face memory and history in dramatic constructions.

Contemporary is a tricky concept, and it is hard to define its borders, but the common feature of these texts can easily be their concern with contemporary problems. The way history

and memory are integrated into these plays expresses playwrights' intention to interpret the shining rays of the present through the clouds of the past. Contemporary American drama hails the past as an inescapable part of the present and uses it as a source of conflicts, which repeatedly interacts with the present in several ways. The past opens up an inquiry of the present and triggers changes in both times. It is clear now that the past is recognized as an important component of the present, and therefore a refined version of the past is integrated into most texts of contemporary stages. That being said, each playwright has a distinctive usage and perception of what the past is and developed his/her unique techniques to present it on the stage.

Memory, since the times of Ancient Greek plays, has been a source for different purposes. It has evolved into different forms over time and its definitions are historically and culturally specific. Maurice Halbwachs points out that "the frameworks of social memory" (182) such as family, religion, and social class determine what to remember and these frameworks are shaped through "the predominant thoughts of the society" (40). In other words, individual memory is not an independent entity produced by idiosyncratic recollection, but rather social interaction. Hence, collective memory is a product of a society that seeks for specific meanings and shared values for the social cohesion of the whole nation at a specific time and space. Thus, different places and different people have adhered various meanings to the concept of memory. For example, memorizing a text in medieval times was seen "as a creative and intellectual ability" (Landsberg 4). As part of scriptural study, memory, on which rituals depended, was instrumental in understanding and spreading religious texts. Memory gained its public role in modern times, which aimed to create a collective repertoire for the whole nation-state. As an enforcer of nationalism, memory became a means of dissemination to construct the "imagined communities." Michael Kammen points out that the United States fostered the "use of

monuments, architecture, and other works of art as a means of demonstrating a sense of continuity or allegiance to the past” (33). It has been a medium that determines a relationship to the past. For example, new group identities in the United States in the nineteenth century were conveyed through the depictions of memory, which enabled several groups to observe their cultural and identical traits.

Memory in this study refers to representations of what appears to have occurred. It “is located in the minds of individuals, and through which those individuals have knowledge of things that fall within their personal experience” (Cubitt 14). These can be personal, familial, or social recalling with an impact on characters and these aspects of memory will principally be the focus of Chapter 2. The way these memories are reflected in the plays is the major concern of this study because they represent these characters’ approaches to the past as well as the present. As a concept, the past embodies all the events that happened prior to plays. However, the way people interpret whatever happened in the past becomes history. Pierre Nora explains how memory and history differ:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds—which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet, specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. History on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one,

whence its claim to universal authority. Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (Nora 8-9)

History is a selected version of the past, as Nora points out above, a collective memory, “a unitary mnemonic capacity” (Cubitt 14) which functions for a certain unit the way individual memory does for the individual. Thus, it might consist of “a host of interlocking practices, many of them continuous or repetitive, some of them subtly transformative of people’s sense of identity” (Cubitt 19). For example, in the American Civil War there were many events and characters, but if Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is chosen among all the other past speeches and addresses to represent the Civil War, the emphasis will naturally be different. The South will eventually be silenced or its opposition will not matter because history is written by the triumphant. The philosopher George Santayana describes history as “nothing but assisted and recorded memory,” (394) whereas Ludmilla Jordanova points out that “the writing of history is about the transmission of memories” and “the practice of history is, after all, a highly specialized form of commemoration” (138). History, as these writers state, is a different form of memory, “a codification or arrangement of memory,” (Cubitt 31) and a collectively-remembered version.

The past is a repertoire for writers, and they create history out of that storage. The past is rich and offers many different topics in varied forms, but history is selective. As Cubitt points out, “the past is everything that precedes the present, and that is deemed, through an infinitely complex set of connections and interactions, to have contributed to making the present what it is – making it this present rather than another” (27). Memory is an individual part of history. History can be applied to address the remembering of events or individuals by bigger groups, neighborhoods, communities, and nations, but memory belongs to individuals. Memory has potential to “capture a sense of fluidity that the conventional research-focused discourse of

professional history tends to exclude, but that a broader appreciation of the production of historical knowledge seems to require” (Cubitt 30). It contains intimate moments, secret feelings, little joys, and personal problems. For example, what Arthur in *Superior Donuts* by Tracy Letts explains in his monologues are examples of such memory. They are filtered through the national history of the sixties and seventies. However, those memories belong to Arthur’s childhood and his family, despite the Vietnam War in the background. In this play, the past is the general turmoil in the US, but what Arthur picks from that chaos represents his view of those decades. Thus, Arthur’s personal memories “haunt and shadow the discourse of history, now offering to complete it and reinforce it, to expose its inadequacies and fragile pretensions” (Cubitt 30).

Attilio Favorini’s *Memory in Play: From Aeschylus to Sam Shepard* (2008) has been a significant contributor to my project. Favorini’s book is about those “memographers,” his coinage for thinkers and writers about memory, and it focuses on how playwrights represent memory and how they dramatize the memory/history binary. Favorini argues the significance of history and memory in drama and explains the bridge between creating fictional past and representing the present. He also considers the Middle Ages as the starter of the “history/memory problem,” and associates historical plays with myth-creating and philosophical investigations. For Favorini, industrialization opened a new path for dramatic representations of historical events such as the French Revolution in the nineteenth century. His work is very inclusive, as his title suggests, and my project seeks to extend his insightful analysis to contemporary American drama.

Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2001) and Jeannette R. Malkin’s *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1999) are two other significant resources that I have used while analyzing the plays. Although they are thematically different

from each other, both books are great sources to understand how memory functions in dramatic texts and performances. Carlson argues that memory operates in a distinct manner within the theatre because it is a quintessential feature of drama. He calls this phenomenon *ghoustering*, which “presents the identical thing they [audiences] have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context” (7). “All theatre,” argues Marvin Carlson, “is as a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition” (11). In most cultures recycling and ghoustering, as Carlson calls it, influence the reception of dramatic texts and performances significantly. The examples I have chosen to demonstrate this influence have a wide range in contemporary American drama.

My project aims to fill the lack of scholarly analysis on most contemporary plays because canonical works of modern American drama receive most of the scholarly attention. Although most plays in this dissertation are mainstream plays, which are often popular in academia, I believe the critical understanding I provide will reveal the complexity of the American attitude toward the past and help other scholars to assess textual and performative merits of these plays more comprehensively.

Having only dramatic texts may seem like a disadvantage for a dissertation, but I think the bulk of memory studies in American drama is often dismissed and it requires more specialization to understand its impact. Donald Trump’s presidential campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” also proved that the Americans are yearning for a past in which America was great. However, the way most people remember “those good old days” is remarkably inconsistent with what most historians report. The trick our memories play on us comes from their manipulative nature because there is no certain way of understanding how selective our memories are. What an individual stores in his or her mind can be completely different from the

national or familial memories. Subjective characteristics of mnemonics have been the catalyst for memory studies in several disciplines.

Everything on stage is production of a mnemonic action. Actors memorize their lines and repeat their actions, which they learn at their rehearsals. The sentences they utter on stage belong to someone else. They are as good as their mnemonic skills because if they forget their lines, the play might fail. Therefore, memory is a quintessential element of drama. Memory in performance provides a backbone for the presentation of dramatic material by actors. Time is an important part of utopian potential in a text. Its simultaneity adds force and effect to performances. Frederic Jameson argues that utopian discourse can best be apprehended as a neutralization of now. He points out that “The force of the utopian text ... is not to bring into focus the future that is coming to be, but rather to make us conscious precisely of the horizons or outer limits of what can be thought and imagined in our present” (Wegner 65). Alternative structures of time have a liberating effect from linear narration because time in theatre has several dimensions. Audience, text, and performance function on a different time zone. According to Aristotelian philosophy, effective plays captivate their audiences in but one of these time zones. In contrast, Brechtian Theater strives to enable its audiences to be aware of all.

In terms of exploring the past in American drama, expressionism had a lingering effect to reveal interior reality and alternative visions of the past since the early twentieth century. Expressionism, as a means to display the past concurrently with the present, “provided alternative means for portraying the past and devices that permitted the past to permeate the present as well as precede it” (Schroeder 26). In addition to expressionism, the American actor training system has also been based on the conceptualization of Stanislavsky’s ideas on acting which reinforce memory as the main source. Other major approaches to acting such as the

Method, the Adler, or the Meisner technique advertise themselves as successors of Stanislavsky's teachings. All of these three schools train their actors to use their own life as a source to bring back the right experience. A foundational component of realist drama, method acting focuses on "the inner life of the character, the importance of subtext, psychological action, motivation, and emotion" (Watson 37). Memory does not only shape dramatic texts, but also forms performers' prepping and staging processes. In other parts of the world, memory often plays a more important role for practitioners. For example, in India and Japan, Kathakali and Noh performers also function as the bearers of their cultural memory. Their performances rely heavily on the memorization of certain narratives, images, characters, and gestures. In a way, every performance is a reminder of a shared culture.

Each play is principally a memory play and each performance reinforces various representations of memory. In the second half of the twentieth century, literary theorists argued that the texts are products of an intercultural and intertextual process, and the omnipotent attribution to a single author to create texts cannot explain reception processes adequately. Literary theorist Roland Barthes explains how every text is made of other cultural remnants: "We now know that the text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the 'message' of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture" (146). Dramatic texts have historically been suitable to recycle other elements to create meanings, as Barthes suggests, and it now requires a combination of crafts to be able to display a harmonious blend of all the elements in a play. Although this dissertation focuses on dramatic textual aspects of memory, performative qualities influence the perception process as well.

In addition to actors' memory, there is text memory, which refers to the mnemonic action within a play. Playwrights employ several memory sources in their texts, trying to bridge connections between the past and the present. Drama, as its nature requires, is a combination of mystery and suspense. Mystery comes from the invisible and the unknown. The past hosts these two within its borders, and therefore, most openings in dramatic forms start with references to a previous incident of which the audiences are not aware. Despite the evolution in methods of integrating history into a play, memory establishes a dramatic foundational framework, which carries the burden of other layers often invisible to characters, but visible to the audience from Ancient Greek to postmodernist drama. Thus, memory becomes the secret in a dramatic text, which playwrights often reveal during a cathartic transformation or a climax. Disclosure of mnemonic secrets amplifies the emotional and performative nature of a play. For example, Hamlet, despite the variety of its images and themes, is remembered with a skull, which belongs to the court's jester Yorick. Hamlet's soliloquy on how he used to spend time with him in the palace enhances the meaning of the skull. What makes it significant is the memory embodied around it. Memory, in that sense, is an autonomous meaning-maker. Even trivial materials touched by the charm of memory turn into inseparable talismans of dramatic structures.

The past has become an integral part of the present, which seemed an independent entity for a long while. Memory has become a strong force of dramatic progress, and despite its side effects, "this retrospective aspect of American dramatic form [...] has had the most widely influential repercussions" (Schroeder 128). As Patricia R. Schroeder illustrates in her book *The Presence of the Past in Modern American Drama*, the past in the plays of O'Neill, Wilder, Miller, and Williams "becomes a matter of inquiry and debate; it directs characters' choices, becomes a source of their conflicts, remains alive in their memories, and even changes through

time” (125). This legacy of mnemonic forms in American drama has made a significant impact on contemporary playwriting, which has internalized reflections of memory as an inseparable unit of the present. The inclusion of memory into dramatic texts has been, and remains, a seminal mode of political and ideological engagement in American drama due to its capacity to present diverse points of view.

In terms of memory studies in the twentieth century, many scientists and theorists have made important contributions to this field. Memory studies can never be complete without mentioning the influence of Sigmund Freud who discovered the role of memory in an individual psyche. Explained through the concepts of ego, id, and superego, the unconscious is considered a product of memories from childhood. Although Freud deserves major credit for developing a new understanding of memory, Josef Breuer, Carl Jung, and Pierre Janet have also extended the hermeneutics of memory with their studies. In addition, psychologists like William James, Jean Piaget, and Frederic Bartlett; philosopher Henri Bergson; sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, and dramatists Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O’Neill, Thornton Wilder, and Robert Sherwood have also interpreted forms of memory in their writings. Each in his own way attempted to understand the function of memory between the individual and the society, and how memory was shaped, dismantled, and restructured (Favorini 6). Undoubtedly, there is a rising interest for social and cultural memory among researchers in a wide variety of fields in the last thirty years. This project is also a result of this interest in including mnemonic pieces in dramatic texts. One important aspect between memory and history is that neither the personal view of memory nor the official view can claim a natural or literary superiority over the other. Such a discussion might have different purposes for this study. My aim is to explore the tension

between history and memory and to illustrate the differences between them to create a challenge for broader thinking on how we perceive the past.

J.H. Plumb argues that a society centered on technological advances rather than conservation finds “no sanction in the past and no roots in it” (14). In *The Death of the Past*, he discusses the possibility of a future without a sense of the past, which is not a source center for verifiable anterior action, but rather an inspiration of inquiry and debate. In a similar vein, playwrights of historical plays, for Michael Bennett, are modern historical translators “who fuse the past with the future and, like a translation, say something about their moment in time, bringing past, present, and future together in the tense of always: discussing each play’s synchronic limitation to a strict time and place [...] as well as its diachronic timelessness (1). Playwrights transform the past into recognizable dramatic forms for their audiences in order to express their anguishes. Thus, history departs from being a commemoration, but functions like a critique and guide for the future.

It is my contention that the hardships of business – corporate ethics – have been one of the major reasons for people and artists to explore the past to understand the present. When former president George W. Bush “encouraged” people to go out and shop more after 9/11 attacks, it was a sign of neoliberalism’s despair which does not have a lot to offer other than consuming. Thus, seeking a refuge in the past became a comforting concept for many. It would, however, be misleading to oversimplify the impact of the past by claiming a general imposing culture over everyone, but it is totally useful at least to establish the relevance of business ethics to the task in hand indicatively. America, since its foundation, has blessed the significance of business and individual entrepreneurship as Max Weber explained the association of business with Protestant ethics. The fact that business has taken such an important place in the culture is

the result of the process after the end of Cold War. As an intensification of this process, neoliberal policies initiated a new era where business became a glorified trait of identity reigning over other defining elements of nations. The priority of the business as main social determiner has clear traces in David Lindsay Abair's *Good People*, which tells the story of two ex-lovers meeting years later in totally different economic and social conditions. The play turns into an investigation of identities through social classes, and relates the despair of its characters with their backgrounds and professions. It asserts that Americans are primarily defined by their professions and the main reason for such a perception might be the lack of social welfare in America. Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts* (2008) is another play that handles the fabric of multicultural America and questions business values as the binding power of American society. Both playwrights, however, conclude their plays with concern about the materialistic sides of identity creation and take shelter in nostalgic memories of their protagonists.

The victory against communism is another factor that fortified the propaganda for a wealthier present. Considering the boom after WWII, this expectancy is not historically wrong. Working for an economically stable country with the possibility of being wealthy is the new attraction of America although they are criticized rather than being promoted in contemporary drama. Memory often serves as a profound anti-political element in contemporary American drama because focusing on history and memory emphasizes the bright side, which overshadows the issues of income inequality, child poverty, teenage pregnancy, imprisoned population, gun homicides, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste production, which are rising problems. In the middle of the turmoil, history keeps the American dream alive and connects contemporary generations to a higher meaning, which actually does not exist under the norms of neoliberal values. After all, it is a battle of survival without the code of chivalry.

Documentary drama appropriates historical materials for socially productive ends as the examples of this genre slowly takes over the mission of political theatre in the US. Documentary performances express in attenuated fashion a genuine concern to emphasize “its own discursive limitations, with interrogating the reification of material evidence in performance, as it is with the real-life story or event it is exploring” (Forsyth, Megson 3). Jonathan Kalb in his article “Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self”, mentions the political vein of documentary compared to other dramatic sources: “Effective political art in boom-time American must be cunning—much more so than in previous ages, when institutional targets had less complex cosmetics and were less proficient at seeming nebulous—and the documentary impulse is a form of cunning, even if its practitioners don’t always see it that way” (16). Avoiding theatrical illusion, documentary drama contains a deeply affecting language in addition to recorded materials to rouse the audience’s emotion and empathy. The recordings provide extraordinary testimony and authority, so the past in documentary drama provides an authoritative antagonism to official history.

Another important aspect of the millennium’s American identity is the liberal atmosphere provided for sexual explorations and themes. Spearheaded by Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* (1996), there have been several plays undermining the norms of sexual codes approved by society through personal memories. In that respect, American plays have helped to raise awareness as studies on collective identity construction suggest that the boundaries of groups are changeable and open to such influences. Feminist playwrights have reversed historical difficulties to explain the legacy of women rights’ movements and criticize the variations of old problems in different forms today. Emily Mann’s *Mrs. Packard* is a 2007 play that takes its plot from Elizabeth Parsons Ware’s biographical story. Packard had to prove her sanity against

accusations she received simply because she disobeyed her husband's dogmatic theology.

Similarly, Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room or Vibrator Play* is a comedy which criticizes the way female orgasm and femininity were handled in 1880s New York. A science man, Dr. Giving, introduces an electric vibrator to his female patients diagnosed with hysteria to induce orgasm whereas he doesn't realize that his wife, often left alone, needs the same assistance. While the play unfolds the subject of orgasm in a funny tone, it also exposes the emotional and physical neglect women endured, and sets a bridge between history and present to provide an alternative view to the frustration and solitude modern women often experience.

Both Mann and Ruhl expose and protest against cruel and inhumane methods women suffered from part of their identity. Placing women out of their domestic context, these playwrights offer an alternative model for modern women's identity. Contrary to many domestic dramas, Mann and Ruhl portray a different world than the cornered walls in which patriarchal system expects to see women. Furthermore, Ruth protests against this vision of a female, "I will write a play with a living room, as long as the walls dissolve. I'll write a play with a kitchen but only if a horse walks through it" (Marlowe). American drama has been an important conveyer of the history of the oppressed in American culture: Mann and Ruhl's contemporary plays serve to reveal subjugated women due to the misconception of female rights by the whole society. While reconstructing the historical meaning of social institutions, they offer alternative readings for problems of contemporary gender equality, and identity. Their plays reveal characteristic trails of the society they live in, and also they serve to convey their resistance and objection to the mainstream identity lines.

History contains a surprising element for audience members in each play. Its mystic role in the plays enrich dramatic layers by connecting the narration to a grand time and purpose. At

the same time, it equips playwrights with an extra craft to express their concerns. The great repertoire for eccentric characters and events build a bridge between the past and the present while giving the opportunity to provide a unique and individual insight.

Persistence of Memory addresses theater practitioners as well as academic scholars. The close readings it offers are about contemporary dramatic texts which have been popular in terms of public reception. Therefore, they are widely accepted and recognized as representatives of contemporary American playwriting. They all depend on millennial concerns of the American society. They question the present with the aid of the past and use memory in different forms to shape their characters. The nostalgic understanding of contemporary playwrights has revealed itself in political venues as politicians also use the past to comment on the present. Thus, decoding the frameworks and patterns of contemporary American drama will not only engage in an academic dialogue, but will help people to understand the dynamics of society. Although there are other works on memory and history binary, *Persistence of Memory* aims to combine contemporary texts from different genres and forms to be able to identify and analyze dramatic texts' usage of memory as these forms and genres have varied purposes and contents. This work focuses on one of the fundamental conflicts of twenty-first century America. Today's "newly emerging culture of abundance" yearns for a "loosely-labeled Puritan-republican, producer-capitalist culture" (Susman XX). The battle between rival perceptions of the world repeats itself on different levels as capitalism has taken a new form called neoliberalism. The frustration it has brought has significantly increased mnemonic effects on people and literary representations. This work shows the dissatisfaction with the present in dramatic texts, analyzes the revision of the past, and questions the forms of resistance by using memory.

1. Remembering Dysfunctional Family

Although at times American dramatic creativity seems as diverse and contradictory as the society itself, plays devoted to domestic life have been long-time favorites with American audiences and critics. This chapter provides an analysis of family structure and its relation to history/memory as revealed in domestic settings through David Lindsay-Abaire's *Rabbit Hole* (2007 Tony winner), Tracy Letts' *August: Osage Country* (2008 Tony winner), and Bruce Norris' *Clybourne Park* (2012 Tony winner). These commercially and critically successful pieces of mainstream American theater share several features which constitute significant breakthrough in stage portrayals of the American family.

First, the end of patriarchy and the emergence of dominating female protagonists are clearly visible; after decades of women's struggle for equal representation, the American stage hosts well-established and independent female characters who are not necessarily bound to their houses by domestic roles. Household chores are often equally divided or women have willingly taken the responsibility. Second, when disruptive events in each play reveal the need for familial unity, comfort is offered by someone outside the family due to the impotence of family members. Third, transformations in American society are reflected through a comparison between the older and younger generations. Younger people are more cognizant of multiculturalism and pluralism, more tolerant of others, and more willing to learn about others. Although their pasts are problematic, there is a latent yearning for a temporary escape from the present. Although these plays by white American male playwrights are mostly about middle-class, white families, their approaches social and cultural topics include constructive and progressive features.

Lindsay-Abaire describes *Rabbit Hole* (2006) as “a play about a bereaved family, but that does not mean they go through the day glazed over, on the verge of tears, morose or inconsolable” (64). Becca and Howie’s four-years-old son, Danny, dies eight months before the first scene. He follows their family dog into the street through the door that Howie has left unlatched while Becca goes to answer a call from her sister. Therefore, everybody shares a feeling of guilt for Danny’s death. Lindsay-Abaire illustrates the structure of a family circle and signals the difficulty of loosening it when a traumatic event occurs. Despite differences and misunderstandings among most family members, family eventually becomes the main factor reuniting members after all the difficulties they endure.

Another family play less concerned with the sacredness of domestic space but more interested in family dynamics is Tracy Letts’ *August: Osage County* (2007). The disappearance and subsequent death of the family’s patriarch, Beverly Weston, become a catalyst for the family to have a reunion. The chaotic situation after the father’s death drives the rest of the family to discover repressed truths and unpleasant secrets. Reminiscent of Sam Shepard’s family plays *True West* (1980) and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *August* is Letts’ first family play, but it has already joined the canon of domestic plays on the American stage. It became a theatrical sensation, and it was reviewed as “a harrowing and hilarious portrait of the American family as our greatest blessing and our greatest curse” (Witchel 105).

Bruce Norris’ *Clybourne Park* (2011) has several similarities with *Rabbit Hole* and *August*, but the main reason for its inclusion in this study is its exploration of domestic space. It is also praised for “ripping the Band-Aid off the American epidermis, the one covering the oozing sore of race relations in the U.S.A.” (Simakis) Written as a sequel to Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), *Clybourne Park*’s first act turns to a white couple who

decide to sell their house to the Youngers—the African-American family in Hansberry’s *Raisin*. It ends before the Youngers arrive in Clybourne, a white-dominated neighborhood. There is no black population there, and other white property owners are concerned that their presence might trigger a “contamination” leading to a decrease in real estate prices. Act II unfolds the process of gentrification in Clybourne, and the uncomfortable zone of racial and financial discussion among the Americans from different backgrounds.

Domestic realism has been criticized for being a “structurally unambitious, homogenous, tunnel—visioned form, churning out the same fundamental message and denying creation of a more open, pluralistic theatre” (Demastes, ix), but contemporary American domestic realism has actually pulled away dramatically from attitudes of traditional patriarchy and misogyny. The main determinant of this change has been in content rather than form. I believe this is the answer of the millennial American drama to June Schlueter’s question in 1999 about “whether domestic realism remains an accommodating theatrical form” as there has been a growing interest in analyzing domesticity and domestic spaces, particularly after 9/11. Shortly afterwards this interest developed into conflicting binaries of us vs. the others. Increasing reports of violence, domestic tensions, and abuse by and towards teenagers and other family members have been vital signs that made domestic representations more appealing to the society. As the house and home are frequently perceived as “symbols of the self, the psyche, and the body,” (Briganti 8) a thorough investigation of residential spaces can explore the relation between society and the individual. Characters in their domestic settings embody traits of millennial American identity as twentieth century domestic realism has paved the way to an enriched and revitalized American theatre conceptually challenging and culturally pluralist. Thus, this chapter evaluates portrayals of American characters in their residential spaces and identifies major changes in terms of

shifting representations of femininity, familial and individual reactions towards a disruptive event, the decline of patriarchy, and the generation gap. Advancing the argument of American identity from a domestic point of view, this chapter focuses on the reflection of American identity in private spaces. The portrayals of American houses and protective family circles in contemporary plays go through a significant evolution, and thus the American family on stage requires a new assessment.

Domestic values and domestic space do not impose restrictions on women in these plays written by white male playwrights. The embodiment of feminine and domestic virtues in Johnna, and Becca (and Bev in *Clybourne Park*) increases the importance of these women. Playwrights with similar backgrounds and nature, such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, were criticized by feminists for maintaining patriarchal suppression in their plays. Domestic spaces were heavily denounced for victimizing women in plays starting from *Trifles* (1912) to *How I Learned to Drive* (1999), but the perception of domesticity in contemporary texts through a less phallocentric language by male playwrights recognizes the equality of sexes within domestic spaces. Desire, defined by Judith Butler as “the feeling of absence or lack” (7), is not central to the recognition of female characters, and contemporary American domestic drama, as its modern antecedents, relies upon the suppression of any sexual reference.

Although the lack of women in the production process (as producers, directors, and writers) is often criticized, modern American domestic drama has always hosted strong female characters. However, the rise of women's awareness and consciousness against patriarchal institutions, such as family and marriage institutions and female artists' contribution to the production process of plays, have enabled female characters more than ever to raise their voice against stereotypical perceptions and classifications. Social struggles and theoretical debates for

equal rights have forced recognition of diverse and fluid identities; theatrical texts have also reflected a similar response to find ways of representing varied characters who go beyond stereotypical and simplistic representations.

Alternative visions from contemporary plays contest long-held archetypes and bring recognition to diversity on the conception of female characters. For example, all female characters in *Rabbit Hole* would meet the expectations of women's right activists of the nineties, but Becca, in particular, shines as an independent woman and a contemporary housewife. Indicating her difference through her independence, she is not religious at all, unlike the other parents at her therapy group, who describe their kids' death as God's act. She compares God to her father because both were prayed to and both "treated" people "like shit" (51). Her defiance of religion as well as her defiance of her late father as a representation of patriarchal systems echoes radical feminist manifestations. She is also critical of other women who attend therapy groups, "These ladies don't even talk about their kids or their husbands or any of it. I think they are just so happy to be away from all that. It's probably the last thing they wanna talk about. Because I'm sure most of them are bored housewives, right?" (47) Unlike the other women in the therapy group, Becca is a voluntary housewife who is vividly contrasted to other female characters in the play. Aware of the domestic space's limitations, she is a millennial character—she has maintained her creativity and dignity while being in charge of her domestic responsibilities—different than the modern female portrayals in twentieth century American drama who are either not as independent as her or are imprisoned within their domesticity. Becca as a character embodies the new domestic women of the twenty-first century, created by women's resistance to submission as well as economic forces which transformed every individual, regardless of age, sex, ideology or other personal traits, into participants in the labor market. Becca's situation

embodies the modernization of life-styles and the reduction of authoritarian structures within family and society.

Becca's constantly clean and well-organized house is proof of her motherly skills and personal maturity. Conversely, her family doubts whether her sister Izzy, who often hangs around pubs and has a messy house, is capable of raising a child. In addition, Becca demonstrates a great deal of expertise in baking. Although appreciation for domestic skills might seem the appraisal of a patriarchal value system, the way these skills are portrayed in the play is not intended to degrade the position of women in society. The reconciliation Becca and Izzy experience before the latter gives birth signals the eroding patriarchal values, as Izzy does not fit into the description of a virtuous mother. Although the quality of domestic service by women functions as an agent and product of cultural and social perception, Becca as a role model, a conscientious housewife and mother celebrates her clumsy sister's pregnancy. Apart from Becca's personal level of integrity and familial background, this might be why it is so difficult for her to accept her child's death.

Becca's potential for self-invention and rehabilitation becomes a key factor in her portrayal whereas her mother is the opposite. Her mother's irrelevant and ill-informed commentary on politics, including her politically incorrect admiration for the Kennedy family demonstrates her superficiality which is also reflected in her incapability of coping with her son's loss. Becca's struggle with memories isolates her from the outer world, and the only way out of this chaos becomes her reconciliation with the fifteen-year-old Jason, who has accidentally killed her only child. Her relatively positive approach to reconciliation with her son's accidental killer and her encouragement to her mother to act sensibly point to Becca's capacity for personal

maturation. Her mother, on the other hand, either ignores her son's absence or does not feel remorseful for his death.

The biggest difference between Becca and her mother stems from the former's self-realization after her meeting with Jason. Without her husband, she meets Jason and reads his published short story dedicated to Danny. They talk about parallel universes and where theirs might be. Becca says, "... so this is just the sad version of us" (55). The tone of the play here becomes more optimistic as they reveal their true feelings in their short conversation. In addition, Howie's early arrival indicates his symbolic return to Becca and the end of his brief romance with another woman from the therapy group. Becca has called their friends Rick and Debbie, and they will have a cookout with their children, whom Becca has been avoiding for a while. The following conversation indicates the return to normal for them:

HOWIE: [. . .] And then we'll wait for Rick and/or Debbie to bring up Danny while the kids are playing in the rec-room. And maybe that'll go on for a little while. And after that we'll come home.

BECCA: And then what?

HOWIE: I don't know. Something though. We'll figure it out.

BECCA: Will we?

HOWIE: I think so. I think we will. (61)

Becca's action has enabled them to eliminate the gloomy atmosphere. Although she struggles to find her place between past and present, her action triumphs over Howie's inaction or avoidance of the topic. The fact that their life will go back to its routine does not necessarily imply that they will be happy, but it removes the clouds of sorrow and that transitional loop in their life.

In Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* Johnna, like Becca, utilizes her domestic skills to maintain the liberal feminist framework although she is employed as a maid and caregiver.

Contrary to the Native American advocacy Letts undertakes, Johnna's virtue does not necessarily

come from her being a Native American, but from her talent at housekeeping and cooking. Although Johnna is “the Indian who lives in [her] attic,” (75) at the end after everybody else leaves, Violet takes refuge in her arms; the abhorred Native American becomes the last resort for the proud American matriarch. The reunion of these two opposite characters upholds harmony and hope for the future, but it also raises similar questions as *Rabbit Hole*: are women expected to maintain a skillful balance between work and domestic services? Is it a historical justification that Johnna stays with Violet to take care of her? Is it a coincidence that characters like Becca in *Rabbit’s Hole*, Bev Stoller in *Clybourne Park* and Johnna in *August* are more virtuous or respected because of their domestic skills? Sympathy for these characters definitely rises as the former two lose their children and the latter has indirectly been a victim of a historic genocide.

This transformation of domestic virtues from estrangement to an element of reconciliation is seen in contemporary American domestic realism, which is often at the forefront of progressive movements. It has been a harbinger for changes taking place or bells for reformation. An advocate of fresh ideas, drama holds a liberal attitude towards women’s independence. American theater might be commercially oriented, but in certain aspects, it has manifested liberal and subversive elements by advocating for women and minority rights. Women’s freedom of choice, including being a voluntary housewife, has manifested a liberating effect rather than an isolating one on women. As in the case of Becca and Johnna, *August* and *Rabbit Hole* offer an alternative vision for domestic service and reject the female conceptions of the twentieth century. As these texts do not romanticize domestic space or portray female figures imprisoned within the politics of residential areas, houses in these plays are depicted neither as sanctuaries or prisons, and women are not seen as victims of domesticity due to their familial labor. Male characters in these plays also share the tasks and duties at home. In some cases, such

as the relationships between Becky and Howie in *Rabbit Hole* or Violet and Beverly in *August*, power and class divisions between couples weigh in favor of the women.

Act II in *Clybourne Park* is also a testimony of younger generations' partial superiority in terms of egalitarianism and level of tolerance towards each other compared to what it was like fifty years ago in Act I, where the stress on domestic space highlights the representations of the patriarchal family construction. When Karl insists that Jim, another guest in Russ' house, stay, he tells Russ that he does not mean to usurp his authority since it is Russ' "castle" and he is "the king" (56). Although this statement sounds overtly Victorian, it accurately reflects the spirit of the 1950s and 1960s, whose oppressive atmosphere is partially responsible for the sexual revolution and counterculture movements as a reaction. When Albert tries to calm Russ down, the latter reminds him that this is his space, "Putting your hands on me? No, sir. Not in my house you don't" (97). The house Russ is selling is his warranty contract with society; in this context it is a guarantor for the freedom and control of the landlord. This is exactly the reason that the Youngers also want to reside in Clybourne Park. This move will elevate their social status to complete independence and freedom.

At the end of Act I, as everyone leaves, Bev and Russ are finally alone in their house. At this point, Norris depicts the solitude of women in the 1950s. While they keep packing, Russ talks about how it is going to be great for him to have a short commute. On the other hand, his wife, Bev, does not have any choices in how to spend her time. While Russ consoles her that he will be at home as soon as his work is over, she responds ironically, "What'll I do in between?" (99) This question indicates the repressive characteristic of domestic space that has been harshly criticized in modern American drama, especially by feminist playwrights. The impact of feminist

criticism and the advance of women's rights are represented in the second act as an answer to Bev's question.

Although *Clybourne Park* is strongly associated with independence and freedom, it is still a domain of males, not females. There is, however, a big difference in the representation of women in Act II. Female characters are not as submissive as Bev and Betsy. *Clybourne Park*'s second act, like *August* and *Rabbit Hole*, reflects the demise of patriarchy. Although the private sphere has been traditionally seen as the realm of females, and the public sphere has been dominated by males (Gallagher 277), the absence of bullying fathers and husbands, or demanding partners on the contemporary American stage is a reflection of cultural and socioeconomic progress. The prominence of politically correct characters is a significant result of workshops, readings, and artistic influences. The process of multiple edits inhibits "a writer from thinking outside the box," (Hosking) as Lindsay-Abaire points out, but the outcome is usually appropriate plays which conform to middle-class values. Playwrights, however, have a clear progressive response to the tyranny of patriarchy which domestic realism usurped for a long while. Family politics are no longer necessarily carried out between father and son or father and wife. The new dialectic of families requires more participation as well as more dispersed, equalized, and reversed power dynamics.

Letts, Lindsay-Abaire, and Norris, like most contemporary male American playwrights, are capable of forming non-submissive and strong female characters. Although there is no clear assertion of a subversive approach to the patriarchal system, as a feminist text would demand, the situation and presence of these characters are highly positive in terms of female representation. These playwrights have their varied reasons for creating well-developed female characters. For Lindsay-Abaire using female characters is a method to "distance [himself] from

the protagonist” (Hosking) so that he is not writing about himself. For Letts and Norris, an equal division of roles between male and female actors might stem from the tradition of the Steppenwolf Theatre, where both playwrights have been working as actors for years. Regardless of the practical necessities, the egalitarian intention they apply in their texts is a fruit of advances in women rights.¹ The reduction of hierarchical and authoritarian structures within the families depicted in their plays can change the literary and social conservative rhetoric into a more pluralist, open, and ongoing discussion.

Like twentieth century American domestic plays, *Rabbit Hole*, *August: Osage County* and *Clybourne Park* all center around a traumatic event within different family structures and investigate these families’ ability to cope with its stresses.² The variety of families portrayed is promising but contemporary American domestic realism requires more participation from other ethnic and gender minorities to display a fair spectrum of shifts in cultural and social life. The three families analyzed here are white, heterosexual, and of a relatively affluent background. Despite the racial, sexual and economic normativity in these plays, they, nevertheless, reflect changes in the power dynamics in contemporary American society. Since definitions of family are socially constructed and as, compared to the rest of the world, the United States represents a

¹ This egalitarian and advanced situation in dramatic representation, however, should not obscure the fact that there are still many cases of domestic violence and abuse in real life. These plays convey middle-class values so comfortably that nobody feels the absence of troubles which may be subconsciously attributed to lower classes.

² It would be, however, anachronistic to reduce the pivotal aspect of these plays to the point that they take place in a domestic area. Contemporary American domestic realism, as the most fertile and flexible mode of American theatre, keeps audiences in their seats while providing opportunities for playwrights to survive. These plays are often capable of successfully exploring the inner depths of human experience, offering psychological insights, political criticism and spiritual counsel not because they take place in private zones, but because they reveal conflicts and contradictions inherent in the society.

model of rapid transition and change due to its technological, cultural, economic, and social advances, American families are more prone to be affected than other nations. A house—or its conspicuous absence—can reflect all of these changes, and domestic realism might be considered to be better equipped to do this than other dramatic approaches.

Bearing in mind theatre's tendency to make frequent use of domestic settings as well as familial issues, it is noticeable how frequently they have been used in contemporary plays. *August: Osage County*, which takes place in August 2007, in a large country home outside Pawhuska, Oklahoma, is often praised for reflecting these changes under one roof. The dark atmosphere in the beginning, marked by taped windows, undergirds the pessimism surrounding the house and suggests a voluntary exile from the outside world. As family members talk and reveal their secrets, their house brightens and clears as well. The Westons' internal struggle for power and domination after the death of their patriarch becomes a catalyst for them to reveal their unhealed wounds. *August's* call for a more transparent and tolerant habitat endorses the common message of contemporary domestic realism, prioritizing clear communication among characters.

Clybourne Park, which tells the story of the Youngers moving out of their neighborhood while selling their house to an African-American family, also acknowledges the importance of communication within a society. This planned move, which is the source of conflict, originated from the Youngers' son's suicide after his return from the Korean War. As expressed in all plays, the lack of assistance and the hopelessness within the family hinders the reconciliation process, and leads people to seek condolence outside family circle. Moving out of the natural domestic space is usually the first thing to do, as mobility in American families is very frequent. Home is

often associated with the absent character, and memory is expected to reset with a change in domestic space.

In her book, *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture* (2013) Rachel Hurdley points out that “since home – of whatever sort – is the first institution we all encounter, scrutiny of how its places of visibility and invisibility, remembering and forgetting are ordered ... modes of ordering in/of other institutions.” (11) Relating memories of war and trauma to home and its materials (such as mantelpiece) she describes different patterns in the use of domestic space to indicate physical and psychological boundaries. In accordance with her description, the Westons’ house characterizes a self-contained ordeal that negates the heeding process within the family and functions as a catalyst to ignite confrontations.

Becca and Howie in *Rabbit Hole* also decide to sell their house which is associated with past they wish to leave behind. The house serves as a repository of memory for all these plays, and, therefore becomes an item either to get rid of or hold on to. This is a legacy of a modern American drama, famous for portrayals of dysfunctional families; and much the same narrative survives in contemporary domestic realism.³ The house in *Rabbit Hole* encapsulates leftovers from the dead son’s life. The family’s reaction causes the whole event to turn into a psychosis with no escape at the end of the tunnel. As the play’s name implies, a psychological and chaotic experience awaits at the end of this journey, a self-validation the people involved will explore.

³ There are several modern masterpieces of American drama which champion the house as an indispensable part of the play rather than a simple notion of setting. Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) portrays a house that needs to be abandoned for Williams’ redemption. On the other hand, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) considers a house in a “better” neighborhood as a status definer. Stressing the advanced property ownership of African-American community, August Wilson’s *Fences* (1983) studies the issue of securing what belongs to a family as the title also suggests.

The trauma in these plays is initiated through the loss of a beloved person. Reminiscence or repression of an absent character on stage, like Becca's brother and child, or the Youngers' son, is a frequently used element in playwriting techniques. Different from a flashback, in reminiscence, the dialectic between memory and forgetting plays an important role in self-representation. For example, Becca intentionally records another TV show on one of "Danny's tapes" which her husband, Howie, secretly watches when she is not around. She removes Danny's pictures and his memorabilia. Losing a brother to drug addiction, Becca uses emotional shutdown to reduce her pain. Previous experience of such a loss has an impact on her to escape reality rather than face the agony of it.

BECCA: He's everywhere, Howie. Everywhere I look, I still see Danny. [. . .] I can't move without—I mean, Jesus, look at this. (Grabs a spiky toy dinosaur from nearby.) Everywhere. Do you even know? (Grabs a kid's book from a stack of magazines.) Here: Runaway Bunny for godsake. The puzzles. The smudgy fingerprints on the door-jamb.

HOWIE: I like seeing his fingerprints. (28)

Grief for the death of a beloved one, as illustrated above, in all three plays brings family and community members closer to understanding their incapability to assist each other. In each of these separate cases, characters without family sources of consolation—Becca in *Rabbit Hole*, Barbara and Violet in *August*, Bev in *Clybourne*—receive assistance from figures outside the family circle. This situation opposes, to a certain level, the subliminal message embedded in American political discourse since 2001. Being a wary and dutiful citizen was defined as keeping an open eye for strangers and people out of one's circles. Playwrights, however, have indirectly responded through an alternative path where outsiders became friends or saviors. This might be considered as a therapeutic and optimistic contribution of the American drama to overcoming domestic troubles. This overtone, endorsing social integration in domestic realism, is a novel

response of the American commercial stage often criticized for being “conscientiously devoted to manufacturing escapism and obscurantism” (Brustein xiii).

Despite the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the plays due to the losses these families have experienced, it is significant that none of them emotionally exploits the concept of death; it is mostly used to signify the elimination of emptiness and agony rather than bring the audience to tears for a melodramatic effect. Lindsay-Abaire explains this matter in one of his interviews, “We go [to theatre] because we want to feel less alone. We want to feel that we’re in communion with the story and with other people in the room. It’s about connection. It’s not necessarily about wanting to see how awful the characters’ lives are.” (Harren 14) Although it is a major part of the plots, death in these works destabilizes the comfort zone and triggers action. A more liberal approach to death, the effort shown by characters does not aim to reduce or relieve the pain of death. The aestheticized—slice of life—version in contemporary domestic plays juxtaposes death with life and the living whereas a naturalist representation is mostly based on grief and agony. This reminder prevents these plays from serving merely consoling and therapeutic purposes as the real purpose is primarily to question family structure and significance of death and then provide some relief and guidance. For example, Violet remarks when Ivy asks her if she is scared of death, “Course, I’m scared. And you are a comfort, sweetheart. Thank God one of my girls stayed close to home. My generation, families stayed together” (24). Family is seen as a “comfort” in the presence of death. Ironically, what Violet says does not reflect the real situation, since Ivy has been fed up with being stuck in their small town and is about to flee the nest. This situation, well-known to the audience, becomes an ironic investigation of death. Although the emotional setup of *Clybourne Park*’s finale, where Bev catches her son, Kenneth, in full uniform writing his last letter to his family before his suicide, leaves a bitter tone, the depiction of

arguments radically undermines this tragic vision. Rather than lessen the agony, family serves to fill the void of the deceased. Instead, the absence of authority in these families becomes the primary thing to be filled immediately.⁴

The way characters present themselves within their private spaces shapes their personal identity and the balance of power in the house. Their actions offer an insight into continuity and change in cultural patterns, shifts that determine national policies. For example, the lack of family members' commitment to the production of collective good in the family accentuates their eagerness to promote their individual concerns. The concept of miscommunication within the family is at the center of *Clybourne Park* whose first act is marked by the Youngers' verbal subterfuge, and the second act by the disorder caused by each character's enthusiasm to be heard and reluctance to listen. Rather than reach a consensual and harmonious settlement, the individuals take the initiative and claim that he/she is the one to lead the others just like Howie in *Rabbit Hole* and Violet in *August*. This action is a reminder of a competitive culture in which individuals aspire to take control of their own and others' lives.⁵ These plays narrate individual aspirations within families in times of crisis from the perspectives of different characters, allowing readers/audiences to better appreciate the human dimension of the events. The inclusion of an outsider into family politics opposes the politically embedded xenophobic atmosphere of millennial America and functions as a healing factor for family solidarity.

⁴ Tom Scanlan, in his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*, points to Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1935) as the beginning of this search for new power dynamics within the domestic spaces.

⁵ Tracy Letts states in a softer tone the process his family went through after his father's death in his interview with Alex Witchel: "Family gets remade with the loss of anybody, and my father was a strong force in the family. He was the patriarch, and so when he died, the family had to recalibrate, remake itself."

Revolt against the “parental archetype,” which underlines the differences between the younger and older generations, has been a commonly repeated theme of drama since *Antigone*. Used commonly by playwrights from ethnic minority backgrounds to highlight problems between immigrant parents and second-generation children (Lee 90), the generation gap has been a fertile field for mainstream American drama to bring up a wide range of conflicts such as tyranny versus freedom, rules against personal philosophies, conservatism against liberalism, the abuse of power and other weighty issues.

Clybourne Park portrays a generation gap in two societies separated by fifty years. There is no direct criticism or reference to a generational gap through characters in the play, but both acts engage the issue. Word games, confusions, politically in/correct jokes, and prejudices changing thorough time are some elements Norris employs in his play. Although Norris, in essence, illustrates that humanity has not been advanced as much as we assume, the egalitarian and tolerant nature of millennial America, compared to the sixties, constitutes a major difference. Needless to say, the depiction of contemporary America is superior to America fifty years ago despite its flaws.

August also sides with the younger generations against their parents despite the negative portrayal of the only teenager character as disrespectful, drug-using, and flirtatious with older men. Jean, who is only fourteen years old, gets high with her aunt Karen’s fiancé, Steve, who is fifty years old, and she is rescued from Steve’s sexual advances with the help of Johnna the maid and her pan. This incident and the ruckus it causes initiates a separation of family members: Karen, who justifies her fiancé’s indecent activity with Jean’s inappropriate behavior, leaves with Steve; Bill leaves with his daughter, Jean.

Dysfunctionality extends to millennial families in various situations and issues, such as the independence of teenagers, parents' diminished authority, and the unending discord on family matters. However, it is clear that middle-aged characters acknowledge the needs of their children, and are more informed and concerned about their world than their parents. Their sympathy for their children's independence and freedom echoes Robert Epstein's theories on capability of teenagers, which he claims underestimated by the society.⁶ Bill and Barbara are modern parents who discipline their only daughter through dialogue, but they are unable to intervene and stop her drug addiction.

Representative of the older generation together with her sister, Mattie Fae, and her sister's husband, Charles, Violet Weston, whose drug-addiction resembles the mother character in Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, loses her superiority and authority to her daughter Barbara, whose life choices, failed marriage and evaporated beauty are all under harsh scrutiny by her mother. Their confrontation endorses the idea that privacy in American drama as well as American society is powerful enough to contest anything that threatens its borders, particularly parental authority. Violet's sister, Mattie Fae, has similar problems with her son, Little Charles, who has difficulty in expressing his ideas to others and misses Bev's funeral because he oversleeps. Unlike Barbara and Bill, Little Charles' parents do not give him space to engage in his freedom. This oppressive attitude is the major difference between elderly and younger generations. While trying not to repeat their parents' mistakes, these middle-aged characters, particularly the daughters of the Westons, also cope with the modern sense of living through depression, miscommunication, and neglect.

⁶ In his book *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence*, Epstein discusses how teens are isolated from adults and society harms their development by not offering them the credibility and the authority to exhibit readiness for real life.

The discrepancies between the parents and the children's upbringing exemplifies the paradigm shift in families in *August*. As the play unfolds, we learn that Violet, her husband Beverly, and her sister Mattie, unlike their children, have had a rough childhood. They come from a different generation where raising children was not the top priority in a house. This is the reason Violet expresses her frustration with her granddaughter, "Y' know ... if I ever called my mum a liar? She would've knocked my goddamn head off my shoulders" (69). Dialogues between Violet and her daughters reveal a childhood of poverty, neglect, and abuse. Violet believes that she and her husband provided a nice childhood for their children because it was better than theirs, and therefore, she demands more respect and gratitude from them. Contrary to her expectations, no one tolerates her bitter personality, and she is left alone with the native-American maid at the end of the play.

Rabbit Hole also highlights the identity of a millennial mother and points out the differences between Becca and her mother. More liberal and educated, Becca confronts her mother's coping with stress:

Did Izzy tell you I was taking a continuing ed. class? We're reading *Bleak House*. Isn't that hilarious? He handed out the syllabus and I just laughed. Bleak House. Of course no one knew what I was laughing at, which was great. It's in Bronxville so no one knows about me. I'm normal there. That's what I like best about it. I don't get "the face" every time someone looks at me... Anyway, I like it. I like that I'm just a lady taking a class. (118-20)

Nat resorts to the comfort of religion after her son's suicide whereas Becca takes refuge at a continuing education class. Reading literature becomes a shelter against dialogue with her husband or other people. The savior position that written word is assigned to serves as a testimony to the twenty-first century's adoption for new kinds of literacies. Communicating or seeking therapy in written forms of language reigns over the spoken word in Becca's case. Exhausted with the assumptions of people surrounding her, Becca struggles with the identity

attributed to her by others. Unlike her mother, she prefers to fight against it and literary arts help her reshape her identity. Thus, the impact of literature on Becca's rehabilitation is an important difference between her and her mother. Younger generations in *Rabbit Hole* and *August* feel better as long as they escape the domination of the family circle. This voluntary exile introduces these female characters to self-realization and the amelioration of grief despite their inability to restore their familial order.

Parallel to *Rabbit Hole* and *Clybourne Park*, the generation gap has been a significant medium to illustrate the advance and decadence of families in American society.⁷ In all plays, older characters are portrayed, to a certain level, out of context. Violet is a pill-addict who has lost touch with her family and society for a long while. Nat's ways are often questioned and her daughters do not recognize her authority or wisdom. These characters' reluctance to admit their detachment from reality is often the primary catalyst to spark controversy between them and their families. They are not part of the millennium, their opinions look outdated, and they are not aware of the new boundaries of American society.

In addition to siding with the younger generations while maintaining the line of respect, contemporary drama envisages an enlightened and rational perception which is too prone to categorize, classify, identify and analyze. Despite being commercial theater products, these plays do not disregard the importance of spreading new thoughts and experiences within culture. This

⁷ This situation undermines a common perception in American history that the 1950s formed the best generation and family. Stephanie Coontz argues this myth in her book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992) that as long as nostalgia for a fictional and mythologized past is accepted, there is no way to see forward. In this respect, domestic realism can help society to break the nostalgic bonds of past.

rational approach is utilized by younger characters in *Rabbit Hole*, *Clybourne Park*, and *August: Osage County*. First of all, Violet, who has no sense of respect for the Native American Johnna's background and identity, often gets criticized for her politically incorrect attitude and corrected by her daughters. Violet represents the old America which is not cognizant of multiculturalism, pluralism or identity matters. In the process of conveying new multicultural America, Violet experiences the most significant enlightenment. *August's* final image, Johnna embracing the destitute Violet, illustrates the reconciliation of the old America with the new one. In *Clybourne Park*, the characters in Act II know more about the world due to their travels. Although characters are also aware of several world cities in Act I, they have never been there. Contemporary American characters are more global and they are more considerate about borders. Norris converts this travel experiences into a humorous anecdote where the capital of Morocco becomes a big issue just like Act I where Ulan Bator creates a similar comic effect all thorough the scene.

The point that American society has reached in terms of racial, social, and cultural terms is not compatible with the older generations' identity and their upbringing. Therefore, contemporary playwrights use middle-aged or younger characters to oppose their discourse and offer a more multicultural and egalitarian vision of sociocultural issues.

Together with other major theatrical productions in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is clear that realistic domestic drama is attached to the American heart. At the center of American drama and, to a certain extent, of American literature, lies the American family: dysfunctional family conflicts and drama go hand-in-hand. Domestic realism's success on the American stage, however, has partially impeded social criticism. This is one of the reasons American drama was criticized for resembling a "diaper drama" in the 1980s and 1990s by

Martin Esslin and Benedict Nightingale, who condemned the fact that problems with parents caused playwrights to ignore the urgencies of the political and social world. Contrary to the European theatre, a strong tradition of social commentary, excluding certain social upheaval periods like the 1940s and 1960s, has not flourished. As Marvin Carlson points out, “theatre in this culture has long been a socially marginal form, generally and not inaccurately regarded as a primarily commercial enterprise oriented toward the entertainment of upper middle-class audiences” (4). Either because of the public willingness to trespass on the private haven of family or a nostalgic wish to preserve a static, idealized and traditional family on stage, the best setting for appealing to upper middle-class taste has been the home.

The abundance and significance of houses as the main setting in American literature is not a new factor. A house has been a strong symbol of acceptance and a promised part of the American dream for a wider range of opportunities. Owning a house, as Dianne Harris notes, “was the surest way to cement one’s (and one’s own family’s) inclusion in the nation” (15), and not surprisingly, most masterpieces of modern and contemporary American drama take place within domestic spaces whether the characters are the property owners or not. As a possible indication of this house-based philosophy, there has been an abundance of plays whose main setting or theme has been around domestic settings. Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Arthur Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman* (1949), Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956), Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Marsha Norman’s *‘night, Mother* (1983), and August Wilson’s *Fences* (1983) are examples of realist domestic dramas which carefully investigate individuals’ tragedies through a family lens while exhibiting social and national disturbances in the background. The permanence of dysfunctional families resulted in producing more domestic realism as writers realized that “it could address large social and

historical issues in theatrical terms” (Berkowitz 3). There is a clear transformation of domestic perceptions not only in the content, but also in form. For example, in the 1960s, private property for minorities meant a means of integration as Lorraine Hansberry uses private property in her play *A Raisin in the Sun* as one of the most efficient ways to reconcile separate racial groups of American society. In a similar vein, August Wilson advances this idea by focusing on fencing family property. Thus, the evolution of these domestic plays’ setting can be illuminating not only in terms of theatrical artistry but also in terms of the social forces controlling them.

In *Rabbit Hole*, as in the other two plays discussed in this chapter, private property is a special concern for the playwrights. In *August*, the house becomes a symbol for America, and it is a decisive element separating social classes in *Clybourne Park*. A similar type of elaboration is applied in *Rabbit Hole*: Howie cannot express his anger at Jason, who accidentally crashes his car into Danny, at least not until Jason’s unexpected arrival at the open house session months later the accident. Howie asks him to leave because of the “family visiting” (37). This request suggests that there is a circle of which Jason is not a part. Although Howie is simply making up an excuse to get rid of Jason, his primary protective shelter is family. Jason’s violation of physical boundaries –though polite and kind—releases Howie’s submerged anger. The moment their place is “occupied” literally and metaphorically, dramatic conflict takes place. Interestingly, the place where Howie seeks solace does not offer a refuge from the outside or from his own problems. Rather than being forgiven or cleared for his involvement in the boy’s tragic death, Jason is blamed for his unannounced arrival at the family’s home. His entry justifies Howie’s anger. 9/11 has been a significant event in American history to reinvigorate the concern for

boundaries and identity.⁸ Physical boundaries are notably significant for the Americans since private property and its protection have been an indispensable part of the American ideology as opposed to socialist ideologies and European welfare theories. Staged five years after 9/11, *Rabbit Hole* conveys similar concerns through an American family's experience of loss and instability.

American social and economic culture, which fuels a culture of competition affect families as micro representatives of society more than any other institutions. Letts takes a step further in *August* and, to a certain extent, uses the family house as a metaphor for the whole country. In other words, the fate of things in the Westons' house mirrors the reality of the entire country. There are clear references to the family house to tie it to the national establishment. To start with, the house was built almost a hundred years ago by "Germans and the Dutch and the Irish" (24). In addition, there is the Native American element that also provides room for ethical discussion. These two references elicit issues of American-ness and the nation-building process. Letts also points out the representative quality of *August* in an interview, "I thought it was important thematically to *August: Osage County* that they were representative not only of Oklahoma and the plains, but even the larger picture than that. That they were representative of the country on some level" (Rich). Although references are mainly relevant to Oklahoma, some aim beyond the country's historical roots. As Barbara mentions, "Who was the asshole who saw this flat hot nothing and planted his flag? I mean, we fucked the Indians for *this*?" (25, Emphasis

⁸ This attitude, in general, exemplifies the preventative methods after 9/11. A family-centered shield, watchdog dads at schools and neighborhood report programs promote the message to be cautious against those who do not belong to local neighborhoods. It has become imperative to keep all in the family, and anything suspicious outside local circles must be prevented to avoid a moment of danger. Although it does not seem directly affiliated, the incident of Trayvon Martin who was killed due to his suspicious attire and actions around a Florida neighborhood has echoes of this policy.

playwright's). Letts, who grew up in Durant, Oklahoma, expresses his content about telling his story with all other members of the community: "Not only is it a true story of my family and the place I come from and the people I come from, but it is also an embodiment of pretty much everything I believe about the theater and ensemble work." (Witchel)

By the same token, *Clybourne Park* portrays two different periods of America. If Act I can be divided into two parts, the first one portrays a regular family getting ready to move. This part can be called the private domain. On the other hand, the coming of neighbors inverts the whole play into an investigation of racial and social politics through family norms. The Stollers are content without outsiders. For them, outsiders mean disruption, bad memories and an unwanted violation of their domestic space, especially for Russ. Like Howie in *Rabbit Hole*, Russ does not welcome investigations concerning his son's death. The untold part of this plot is about Russ and Bev's son, Kenneth, who returns home from the Korean War, and his transition to civil society becomes more challenging than anyone expects. In addition, he is accused of killing innocents in the Korean War. Kenneth cannot stand the pressure and isolation any longer and commits suicide by hanging himself in his room. Russ feels extremely angry and disappointed with his neighborhood. He believes that they are the main reason for Kenneth's suicide, due to their hostile attitude. *Clybourne Park*'s first half portrays an America dealing with racial prejudices and Norris shows us in the second act that despite all the civil and social advancements, our society still breeds a lot of prejudice due to the lack of communication among layers of it.

* * *

Family norms and values have always been at the core of the American nation as presidents have described it as the "cornerstone of society" (Lyndon B. Johnson) or as being "at

the center of our society” (Ronald Reagan). The term “modern isolated nuclear family” was coined in 1955 by Talcott Parsons to highlight this simple family unit stripped of kinship ties and strong family networks. (Heinemann 12) Tom Scanlon acknowledges the importance of family in the American drama in his book *Family, Drama, and American Dreams* (1978):

American playwrights inherited their expectations from a changing family structure and a complex of ethical and emotional attitudes toward the family. From the outset the strains on the nuclear family system were felt in terms of intensity and isolation. But those very qualities also proved appealing in other ways because of their conjunction with deeply held attitudes. Our concern with the family was related to our expectations of what made up the good life, our desire to abandon social forms, and our assumptions about the democratic system. ... Yet, in our drama we do not give up the realistic family war. This conservative reluctance wars with the radicalism implicit in our desire to break out of inherited forms. (213)

Although Scanlon is right about the “conservative reluctance” to resist this realistic form, it is clear that children, as a sign of evolution and change, have been moved to the center of this nuclear family as well as the contemporary domestic American realism. They have become one of the most powerful sensual devices to create an emotional attachment to a dramatic text. *Rabbit Hole* focuses on the absence of a child, and *August* is centered on the absence of childhood and its reverberations. Although *Clybourne Park* deals with more social problems on the surface, the main plot takes its exigency from the Stollers’ son’s suicide. In these plays, the death of a child or absence of a happy childhood leaves such a devastating impact that memory becomes a burden for the family, and the house is a prominent factor for the quest of acquiring a new identity. This parallels other contemporary plays (*The Pain and the Itch* [2006] by Bruce Norris, *The Whale* [2011] by Samuel D. Hunter, *Other Desert Cities* [2011] by Jon Rabin Baitz) where children are always at the core of family and also cause conflicts of memory and identity.⁹

⁹ The prevalence of children occupying the central spot of the American families on stage can be seen as a result of socioeconomic projects inspired by the baby boomer generation. The

Another social resemblance that these three plays contain, in terms of the social and political timeline, is the proximity of these plays' psychological environments to the national mindset. It was a time of grief and agony for a long while after 9/11 which have been mirrored by other contemporary shows. For example, Neil Labute wrote a play, *Mercy Seat* (2003), about an employee at the World Trade Center who wants to disappear after 9/11 with his mistress to avoid all the scuffle of divorce. Similarly, Anne Nelson's play *The Guys* is also about 9/11, in which Joan, an editor, helps Nick, an FDNY captain, to write the eulogies for the firefighters who die under his command at the World Trade Center. Both *Mercy Seat* and *The Guys*, however, are less interested in the political background or social dimensions of 9/11 and "focus instead upon its psychological effect on two individual New Yorkers, a man and a woman, seeking to come to psychic and personal terms with what has happened." (Carlson 11) Despite the lack of any direct references to 9/11 or its conclusions, the psychology of those years correlates more with Becca's agony over losing her only child and Howie's feeling about his personal space being invaded by outsider(s). The solution Lindsay-Abaire suggests is to embrace someone outside of their routine circle of friends, namely the person who inadvertently kills their son, sounds more constructive and less xenophobic. Things off the stage, however, did not happen as the playwright proposed. Instead, the American government wanted to take revenge; a war broke out and more than a million people died.

Around the time *August: Osage County* was staged, war and the financial crisis of 2007-2008 deteriorated the conditions in the US. George W. Bush's second presidential term received

transformation of American society in the 1960s created the social appeal of suburbs: they became a desirable place to raise children so that parents would be less worried about their neighborhood and other factors. Besides, owning a house in the suburbs has been "a sign of belonging to the middle class." (Harris, 17)

harsh criticism since the information about weapons of mass destruction has never been fully proven and the way the 2007 mortgage crisis was handled by the administration seemed unfair to tax-paying citizens as the perpetrators of the crisis were all bailed out. It was a time of fierce debates for the whole world and America much like the characters debated in *August: Osage County*. The general despair of living in the U.S. in 2007 which was reflected in the play was eliminated in the film adaptation, which in an interview Letts insists that it wasn't important to highlight (quoted in Katey). It was a time of red states and blue states, and partisanship divided the whole country into two camps, just like members of the Weston family who couldn't reach a consensus about anything. On stage, this time the savior became another oppressed minority; one of the real owners of this land, a Native American, assumed the consoler's position. The multicultural and pluralist discourse has reigned over the discriminatory tone. Likewise, in real life for the first time in American history a black politician took the presidency. Tracy Letts' anticipation or metaphorical strategy for a way out seemed to match with national preferences. The need to embrace each other and enlarge our circles of trust at all layers of the society seemed more urgent than ever as it was projected at the finale of *August: Osage County*. The dialectical relationship between drama and reality became more profoundly visible.

Ten years after 9/11 and two years after the ascension of an African-American to presidency, *Clybourne Park* focuses on the lack of dialogue and miscommunication which can easily be a short summary of the decade. In general it provides a civil discussion but also portrays how most of our discussions have been fruitless and doomed to fail from the start. Norris' dramatic vision also brainstorms on the remnants of history and undergirds how we are stuck in them unless they are permanently and willingly solved for everyone in this country.

What is promising in these literary texts is that recognition or reconciliation comes with the acknowledgement of others. American drama, albeit not universally praised for this tendency, boosts a multicultural vision of American society. In response to the concern that Samuel Huntington raises in his book *Who We Are* (2004), American drama reassuringly responds that white, Christian, middle-class, legally married families struggling with their problems are still the conventional pillar of this society at least for now. Recognition of others and their values, however, of which Huntington is skeptical, strengthens the unity rather than damages it at least on the fictional world.

Consequently, in all three of these plays, families have a dysfunctional side which disables family members from offering atonement within the residential zone. Characters outside the family play a key role for the protagonists to find an exit out of her/his misery. Contrary to the discriminative tone of the post-9/11 era, theatrical texts subliminally suggest expanding people's borders for welcoming others. Although that is a progressive approach to social matters, the fixity of white, middle-class, affluent, and nuclear families limits our understanding of the twenty-first century American family phenomenon. Despite family's "centrality within the self-conceptions of the American nation and people" (Heinemann 8), the modern notion of the isolated nuclear family is heavily oriented around "the values of the white-middle class, embodied by its socially and ethnically exclusive hegemonic family ideal" (10). A nuclear and patriarchal family which is "based on the stable exercise of authority/ domination over the whole family by the adult male head of the family" (Castells 196) is the prototype of the American society. However, due to the "rise of an informational, global economy, technology change in the reproduction of the human species, and the powerful surge of women's struggles, and of a multifaceted feminist movement ... since the late 1960s" (Castells, 197) a new understanding of

family where power dynamics are dispersed, equalized, reversed, or ignored has become mainstream. These families have become a common place of sociological advances to announce the melting of patriarchy. This trend has a slow but steady transformation which is more insightful about the processes of family values and gender roles and depicts a vivid picture of the continuous change in the family.

Old elements in a new generation of playwrights continue to exist. The reappearance of similar images and patterns of action involves interesting sophistications. On the face of it, Lindsay-Abaire and Norris are in touch with new modes of perception and Letts uses traditional texts and themes more. All of the playwrights try to put some new wine in this old bottle. For example, the decline of patriarchal figures and the prominence of dominant female characters signal a more egalitarian dramatic style. The shift of American feminism from familial oppression to campus rapes and equal pay is also a signal for a better family perception within the women rights groups. This liberal attitude has also changed the concept of domestic space, which is a significant factor in analyzing the generation gap. Positively, the transformation between generations highlights more rational and pluralist identity traits compared to parents and ancestors. Despite the lack of representation of economically and ethnic minor groups, American domestic drama remains the dominant technique for the articulation and production of American values as well as the reflection of cultural identities in the twenty-first century.

2. Nostalgia in Business Plays

“In the coming months, let’s see where else we can make progress together. Let’s make this a year of action. That’s what most Americans want – for all of us in this chamber to focus on their lives, their hopes, their aspirations. *And what I believe unites the people of this nation, regardless of race or region or party, young or old, rich or poor, is the simple, profound belief in opportunity for all – the notion that if you work hard and take responsibility, you can get ahead.*”

President Barack Obama’s State of the Union Address, January 28, 2014

If family, which represents privacy and isolation, is one of the primary constituents of the American way of life, next comes business, which, as Obama refers to, unites this nation and encapsulates the “profound belief in opportunity” inherited from the times of the European settlers on the continent. In an attempt to understand characteristics of the millennial American identity on stage, this chapter analyzes the subversive impact of neoliberalism on characters’ identity in contemporary mainstream American plays. Neoliberalist policies, since the 1970s, have been grounded in the assumption that governments should be restricted while giving an unrelenting freedom to free markets, and privatization as well as corporatization of small businesses. However, the evanescence of the American Dream, as well as the reduced future prospects of characters under neoliberalism, have invited a nihilism which has deprived them of their moral and political values and turned them into drifters whose nostalgic feelings have disconnected them from reality. Tracy Letts’ *Superior Donuts*, David Lindsay-Abaire’s *Good People*, and Samuel D. Hunter’s *A Bright New Boise* will be contrasted here with such modern masterpieces of American drama as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, among other significant plays, to compare the shifting perception of the American Dream as a consequence of neoliberal policies in twentieth and twenty-first century plays.

Contemporary mainstream plays illustrate the decreased faith in the American Dream by pointing out that fortune has been more central than merit in many cases in contrast to what President Obama mentions as the myth of hard work. The dominance of neoliberal values has also been critiqued despite the opportunities and the wealth they have provided in the twentieth century. Major characters in contemporary plays have been portrayed as pursuers of illusions, which prevent them from comprehending their real situations.

Two prominent twentieth century plays are usually regarded as theatrical embodiments of the American Dream and critiques of capitalism.¹⁰ Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) refers to "its early idealistic signification and to what is often described as its later deterioration into a mere materialistic craving for financial and social upward mobility" (Benziman 21), and displays a deeply compromised but morally and spiritually stalwart American dream. Miller places a salesman in his play's center; the profession implies a certain element of fraud, which Harold Clurman criticizes for replacing the ideals of hard work with the ability to sell to provide "the accumulation of profit being an unquestioned end in itself" (213). Willy Loman, an aging travelling salesperson, who is at the edge of a nervous breakdown due to his failure at his career, faces the difficulty of being no longer able to fulfill his social and familial expectations. He commits suicide for the thing—money—that has caused his downfall. Miller's play has been praised as an eminent portrayal of the failure of American Dream.

David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), which tells the story of four real estate salesmen and their hopeless endeavor to keep up with the expectations of their profession, points to the process of self-destruction for career goals. The real estate sales team in the play, who

¹⁰ Benedict Nightingale points out the similarities in detail and explains succinctly how these plays express similar concerns in different periods in his article "Glengarry Glen Ross" in Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet* (2004).

compete to reach their quotas to maintain their positions and win the ultimate prize—the Cadillac—are under high pressure, and this desperation leads Shelley Levine and his accomplice Dave Moss to rob their own office to get the sales leads. The greed and the moral corruption as a consequent result of the neoliberal social and economic system in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which is thematically similar to Mamet's other plays *American Buffalo* (1975) and *Oleanna* (1992), give "social edge to an American drama then so preoccupied with private matters that it barely acknowledged the existence of a world beyond the back porch" (Nightingale 91). Both plays have been loud critics of the American way of capitalism and focused on the financial and cultural meltdown of middle-class. In a similar vein, Hunter, Lindsay-Abaire, and Letts also voice their concern for the American Dream to a society which suffers from the problems Mamet and Miller addressed.

Known for his competent usage of characters' psychology rather than theoretical problems in his "absurdist farces" (writer's own description in his interview with Balfour) and scripts, David Lindsay-Abaire visits his blue-collar working-class roots in a tragi-comic tone in *Good People*. He tells the story of Margie (Margaret) Walsh, an Irish-American single mother with a disabled daughter, living in Boston's tough Southie neighborhood where it is difficult to find a job since she does not possess the professional training or qualifications. Margie finds out that Mike, with whom she had a summer fling when she was a teenager, is an affluent doctor now, and she believes that he can help her find a job. Margie's visit to his office without an appointment raises issues of class, race, gender, and social mobility. All of these issues become more complicated when she decides to go to Mike's daughter's cancelled birthday party suspecting that she has been deliberately misinformed.

Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts* (2008) is the story of a Polish-American, "child of the 60s" (3), Arthur, dealing with a personal crisis in the middle of financial difficulties while trying to help his newly hired African-American assistant, Franco. As the title suggests, it reflects an American daily-life material in an old-fashioned way. Characters and plots are drawn from reservoir types including the old pal learning from the young. Franco's ambition and struggles motivate Arthur to take important decisions in his lonely and unsatisfactory life.

Samuel D. Hunter's *A Bright New Boise* (2010) unfolds the story of Will, in search of his son, Alex, who was given to a foster-family as a baby. Set mainly in the break room of a Hobby Lobby store in Boise, Idaho, this dark comedy portrays the power relationships between manager and employee, father and son, and men and women. Will's estrangement from his church and his self-contained character illustrate the difficulties of communication in contemporary society. Although Will has his own reasons not to trust others, the cultural structure of a small town has dictated the formation of such an estranged community which is less cooperative and joyful compared to *Good People* and *Superior Donuts*.

Three significant points in contemporary plays mainly differ from the perception of the American Dream in modern drama. First, protagonists in *Superior*, *Good People* and *Boise* are outcomes of several failures, where protagonists in modern drama are portrayed on their way to destruction and its subsequent results. One of the common points of all the protagonists in contemporary plays is that they either work for minimum wage or their income is not sufficient to maintain a decent life. As the American Dream is a very real presence when economics play a significant role in a play, these protagonists are portrayed to have been stripped of this particular quality of Americanness. Different from twentieth century business plays, the focus is on psychological damages rather than the implications of a consumerist culture. For example,

Loman in *Salesman* and Levine in *Glengarry* are victims of their greed and ideals whereas Margie in *Good People*, Will in *Boise*, and Arthur and Franco in *Superior* are hard workers who can't make ends meet despite their efforts. What they need to accomplish their goals does not solely depend on their personal merits but involves other elements such as establishing a bond with people, or finding ways to cope with alienation.

Loman and Levine are honorable characters who don't accept defeat or seek a way out of their miseries without admitting their failure. They are losers because their dreams have died. Loman's rejection of his brother Charley's job offer or Levine's effort to get good cards to make sales show their dignity and self-confidence to preserve their dreams. Where both plays show the path to failure, contemporary dramas analyze post-failure. Both Levine and Loman are out of their context and a surreal psychology leads them to their destruction. On the other hand, contemporary protagonists have fallen into reality's trap and do not have the power to get out. However, while accepting the presence of an experienced catastrophe of a financial meltdown, these plays seek for some moments of relief. These mainstream plays—successful in terms of box-office and being restaged—tend to restore or repair the plight of those characters by offering bits of optimism. For example, at the end of *Good People*, the protagonist receives some money from a benefactor to be able to pay her next rent so that she will not be on the street with her disabled daughter. In *Superior Donuts*, the belief in the American dream is revived through the novel draft, *America will be*, that the protagonist has sent to an editor to be reviewed and published for his African-American employee. *Boise*, however, has a plot reluctant to reflect a major change in its protagonist Will, but his relationships with people include revelations for everyone. More than a reconciliation, there is a clear implication that he will keep living with his illusions and misconceptions. However, his son's unsuccessful suicide attempt values the

importance of life despite all the hardship. This situation is reminiscent of Allan Bloom's words on The American way of transferring European forms: "We have here the peculiarly American way of digesting Continental despair. It is nihilism with a happy ending" (147).

Second, the belief in the American way of living as well as the American dream has significantly eroded, and compared to contemporary pieces, modern versions contain more promise and integration for protagonists or people around them. It does not mean that contemporary plays do not offer hopeful resolutions at the end, but they rather highlight the pessimistic surroundings in which they take place. Loss of belief in the American dream and awareness of the plight, which have equipped these plays with a nihilistic message, have caused characters to fail at turning critical light back upon themselves. The main settings described by the playwrights also echo this loss of faith in the American dream. For example, *Good People* starts behind a Dollar Store, which is known for selling second-rate products for cheap prices, and the presence of a big trash container in the first scene is not coincidental. The stunning house in the second act does not convey a promise, but conversely increases the conflict between these two settings. The last scene, where characters play bingo at a church's basement, does not offer a consolation at all. The symbolic erosion of the American setting is also visible in *Superior Donuts*, which takes place in a vandalized old-fashioned donut shop. *Boise* mostly takes place in an employee break room of a Hobby Lobby store, another dull setting that underlines financial predicaments.

The third point is the general mistrust of corporations and the despair characters feel because the future on the horizon is not bright. Despite the historical contribution that corporations have made to the growth of the US, each time a corporation is mentioned in these plays, there is a complaint or cynicism about the way it conducts its business. Whether it is

Starbucks in *Superior Donuts*, Hobby Lobby in *Boise* or Dollar Store in *Good People*, characters are negatively affected by these companies' labor practices although the plays do not directly criticize or hold them responsible for the tragic events. On the contrary, they are often mentioned as a significant corollary of the American dream and a direct accusation, which would be un-American per se, is often avoided.

These three modes (lack of hope and faith in the American Dream and the general mistrust of corporations) rest on the fundamentally malleable premises of these plays' narratives in general—namely the erasure of the middle-class and appearance of vigilant characters. A key aspect of these protagonists linking them with twentieth-century drama is the prevailing concept of illusion.¹¹ The desperate financial situation the protagonists live and the lack of a permanent or sustainable social solution to their atrocities are results of neoliberalism, which is a particular reorganization of capitalism that have evolved to favor corporatism and the privatization of public enterprises. Because neoliberalism is not a mode of production, its influence on society can be observed better in literary texts. Thus, dramatic texts play an important role to show how American neoliberal rationality ramifies from the economic realm to the cultural realm. It is “not merely an ideology, not merely an economic perspective, not merely a rationality, but it is the concatenation of them” (Ventura 2). Contemporary scholars (Cal Jillson, David Harvey, Alfredo Saad-Filo, Naom Chomsky, Jean and John Comaroff) acknowledge that politicians since the 1980s have not succeeded in restoring confidence and opportunity broadly throughout the society and economy as well as the reestablishment of the American Dream. The American Dream has been converted by neoliberal policies into a defense mechanism to defer the harms of financial

¹¹ Family plays are another significant source to portray the American Dream as reflected in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Edward Albee's *American Dream* (1961), and August Wilson's *Fences* (1983).

and social system. However, the loss of promise has compelled the characters to take refuge in the past. This nostalgic desire to a fictional past has resulted in a nihilistic attitude, which in turn has disabled the characters to make decisions for their lives or take action.

The key for success is a frequently scrutinized topic in American society. Malcolm Gladwell, in his books, *Outliers: The Story of Success* and *The Tipping Point*, analyzes several success stories from Bill Gates to famous hockey players and succinctly concludes that there are several factors governing personal achievement: date of birth, familial support, demands of the market, and timeliness. Playwrights also seek answers from a fictional point of view to the question of what makes a person successful. In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman's older and wealthy brother, Ben, is a successful businessman, and in *Glengarry Glen Ross* everybody envies Tony Roma, who has better sales records than everyone else in the office. The concept of financial success in its American context is embodied by way of characters presented as acceptable and admirable in opposition to others presented as unacceptable. Bequeathed by twentieth century dramatists to their contemporary successors, this contrast between winners and losers shifts the focus from social forces to personal attainments and competitive skills. While family plays champion several generations—baby boomers, generation X, millennials—in order to compare the value shifts between them, plays about the American Dream prefer forming a trajectory between successful and unsuccessful characters because philosophical contrasts between them highlight the uncompromising dialectic of capital and labor.

Good People, *Superior Donuts*, and *Boise* contain winners and losers: losers who are at the bottom of their lives and fully aware of the fact. Their efforts to get out of this vicious cycle seems, if not impossible, mostly futile. The vitriolic tone of speakers describing the difficulty of upward mobility in social and financial levels in American drama suggests a cynical and

contentious approach to winners and wealth. It would not be correct to think, however, that American drama has a consistent anti-business stance, despite the reformist impulse. If we look back at *Death of a Salesman*, winners, in contrast to Loman, are happy and seem to have a better life. The managers in *Glengarry Glen Ross* are die-hard capitalists, but no critique other than calling them “stupid” is directed toward these characters. At least they are the ones who give orders and have the privilege of looking down on everyone else. However, there is a clear decrease in the life quality of winners in contemporary American drama.

Lindsay-Abaire’s main point of character comparison highlights Margie and Mike. Margie gets pregnant at an early age, drops out of high school to take care of her disabled baby, and pays a high price for the choices she has made. On the other hand, Mike, who might be her daughter’s father, leaves Southie, and goes to college under his father’s wings. Margie marries another friend from the neighborhood and gets stuck in Southie with no prospect for the future. In contrast to *Salesman* and *Glengarry*, *Good People* gives the sense that luck or coincidental order of things determine the condition of their lives as underscored by Mike and Margie’s conversation about luck:

MIKE: You make too much out of everything. It never got close to that.

MARGARET: Yes it did. You know it did. You could be sitting up in Walpole right now, bunkin’ with Marty McDermott.

MIKE: That wouldn’t have happened.

MARGARET: If your father wasn’t watching from the kitchen window it would’ve.

MIKE: But he was.

MARGARET: Which is lucky, that’s all I’m saying. I never had anyone watching from a window for me. You got lucky. One hiccup, and it could’ve been you looking for work instead of me. Or you dying up on that sidewalk instead of Cookie. That could just as easily have been you, Mikey.

MIKE: I don’t think so. (190-191)

Margie's statement about being lucky and the possibility of Mike's sharing the same fate with other characters from their teenage years undergirds the coincidental element stressed throughout the play. Although "one hiccup" seems to overestimate the situation, it shows how social imbalance and influence could be effective forces within their lives.

In addition, the scenes where Margie and her friends as well as almost everyone in the neighborhood play bingo highlight the significance of luck in this plot. The fact that it takes place in the basement of a church signals that the fortune and other social institutions have been historically linked to each other. Considering the fact that Las Vegas is considered to be the unofficial capital of entertainment, the neoliberal America has invested heavily to embed this concept of sudden success/wealth into the psyche of the whole nation. It is not a coincidence that in *Superior Donuts* Franco's gambling history has caused his problems with the betting gang. The possibility of having an enormous success in the form of a jackpot seems to be the only hope most characters have which is not very intriguing for the financial and social conditions that neoliberalism has created.

Lindsay-Abaire acknowledges the significance of luck while showing a continual awareness of other elements which are parts of his identity discussion. His definition is provisional and subject to new questions as his vision of the American Dream undermines the myth of hardworking success. Contemporary playwrights' qualified optimism on the roots of self-creation, success, and achievement may seem incompatible with the politics of the contemporary neoliberal world, but it serves as a platform to disseminate their vision. However, Lindsay-Abaire's imagined environment of possibility is restricted to those who have the means to be a part of this world. In other words, people, no matter how good or bad they are, must be members of either high middle-class or above to possess this element of luck. Therefore, good

people are not always winners and this perspective offers a vision reminiscent of twentieth century American drama. This traditionalist position, despite the implied positive results of hard work and education, asserts the persistence of unfair and unequal construction of the American climate for lower classes. This in turn recognizes of the plight defined by Thomas Picketty. In his *Capital* (2014), Picketty claims that the majority of wealth is inherited all over the world from generation to generation or accumulated by those with access to large sums of capital, which blocks the lower classes' chance to move within the social hierarchy. The story of the protagonists of *Good People* testifies to Picketty's thesis which points at neoliberalism as the source of most conflicts in a modern society.

In contemporary American drama, winners correspondingly own more, as the concept of American Dream designs. However, Mike in *Good People*, Max in *Superior*, and Pauline in *Boise* are not pleased with what they have. In accord with the general observance about the families on stage in chapter one, these characters who are not successful in their careers have also failed to maintain a good relationship with their siblings or children. There is no family stability, as their lives are prone to frequent crises. Mike, as the wealthiest among these "winners", has family problems; he cheated on his wife, and there have been trust issues within the family as his marriage is also questionable. Mike's father-in-law, who is at the same time his former boss and academic adviser, has facilitated his son-in-law's career goals. Another winner character, Max, owns three stores at the end of *Good People*, but he is not appreciated by the community because of his aggressive character. In addition to public aversion, Max is clearly homesick, lonely, and estranged from American daily norms and society despite his success in business life. The authority figure, Pauline, as the manager in *Boise*, faces several challenges because she has to control an understaffed store with limited funds. She portrays a successful and

dedicated manager, but there is no hint about her personal life. She has dedicated her life to being able to get her manager position, suggesting that her workaholic nature has harmed her personal life.

The insignificance of these characters' lives suggest that success in the business world neither depends upon personal merits nor guarantees happiness. Playwrights question and, to a certain extent, ridicule the wealth concept of the American Dream as none of these "successful" characters is portrayed as free of major problems. Success in business life might be an important tool for social acceptance and upward mobility, but the way it has been crowned by neoliberalism is clearly undermined on stage. It would, however, be misleading to think that these characters are depicted as malicious or patronizing, but the playwrights' treatment of them is an outgrowth of the view I ascribe to illusion. These characters, maybe more than the protagonists, have more reasons to believe that they are the winners of this society without seeing how their connection with others has been lost. Mike's disillusion with his past, Max's disconnection from people around him and probably his motherland, and the emptiness of Pauline's personal life point at the conflict caused by the perception of wealth as a sign of better living conditions. This might be a dual characteristic of mainstream American drama, which on one side undermines the aspect of affluence, but on the other sells an average ticket for one hundred dollars.

Some critics believe that literati and merchants have many reasons to hate each other. Algis Valiunas defines business as an "obsessive scramble for lucre and status" and points out that "American literature hates American business for what it has done to the soul of the rich, the poor, and the middling alike" (163). Explaining his argument through negative portrayals of business in texts by Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Arthur Miller, David Mamet, Saul Bellow,

Tom Wolfe, and Ayn Rand, Valiunas concludes that their “grossly oversimplified caricature of that world” has to be changed, because, after all, “to be a businessman is not to lose one’s soul” (Valiunas 179). Although it is not possible to disagree with Valiunas’ analysis of these playwrights and novelists’ texts, I think he neglects to include in his conclusion the social conditions that cause(d) these writers to take a strong stance against the business world. For instance, distrust of American corporations had a significant climax during the 2011 *Occupy Wall Street* protests when many people voiced their discomfort with the level of influence corporations have on American economy and politics. Although public enthusiasm to fight against this influence has not been strong so far (with the exception of the passionate reception Bernie Sanders had), a succession of scandals (Enron, dot.com, and Bernie Madoff), as well as the 2007 mortgage crisis has resulted in a more skeptical relation between the nation and corporations. However, contrary to what Valiunas states, contemporary American drama has not been a loud critic of corporations because these companies are often significant fundraisers for major production companies. Furthermore, American drama has not often been a vessel to cultivate critical approaches to American life-style and institutions because theatre has often been considered a refuge from daily realities and distress. Moreover, the centrality of character, as opposed to theme, message, or plot in American drama has hindered the involvement of social topics within dramatic plots.

These elements are conspicuously present in *Good People*, *Superior Donuts*, and *Boise*. For example, in *Superior Donuts*, the lack of control over corporations is an integral frustration emphasized by Arthur’s Russian neighbor, Max, in his offer to buy Arthur’s store, “I give you the same price I offer before Wall Street douchebags fuck everyone in the ass” (38). Through his broken English and politically incorrect Russian spirit for communication, Max, a fiery émigré,

contemplates the American identity entirely through business, and presents a character, born outside the US, but still well aware of social dynamics. His frustration with the Wall Street crisis, however, does not harm his enthusiasm for business. Indeed, he has added American resilience to his Russian dynamism.

Max has recently brought his nephew Kiril to the US to assist in the store, but he has been a source of frustration as he insists on speaking Russian with his uncle. Max tells Kiril that speaking English is the key to being accepted as American. Kiril's love for a bartender has made it more troublesome for Max's goal of turning Kiril into an American businessman. All these problems and projects reveal that Max, like Mike in *Good People* and Pauline in *Boise*, does not have time for his personal life. Their lives are dominated by their professional ambitions and they are not aware of the things that they have compromised in order to accomplish their material goals. Max is not aware of this situation, but people around him always question his motives. For example, Max calls the police after he finds out that Arthur's store has been raided, but he is questioned about his intentions: "Because I'm a good citizen," he says. "I am guilty of nothing other than working hard. I am guilty only of living American Dream" (11). Although his real intention is to convince Arthur to sell his donut store, he would like everyone to respect him because he is a winner. Max is an ideal prototype of the winner figure in American society, but does that mean real success for him?

Max and his crew have a minor role in *Superior Donuts*, but at the end, Max becomes the owner of three adjacent stores, so he potentially embodies the future. However, the opening of a Best-Buy store in the neighborhood is very likely to end Max's business dreams, just as Starbucks closed down Arthur's donut store. In general, compared to Arthur's bohemian and disheartened character, Max's entrepreneurial spirit combined with his pragmatist methods

seems triumphant. Nevertheless, it is clear that his victory is only acceptable until another corporate store opens somewhere nearby and takes over his business. Max and his crew, however, demonstrate that contemporary American identity is closely related to business success. Max's presence and success as an immigrant highlight the multicultural and pluralist fabric of the global business world as well as Tracy Letts' authorial tendency to employ varied characters from different backgrounds.

David Lindsay-Abaire refrains from integrating such details in his characters' background, and does not highlight the dominance of corporations, but Margie's absolute submission to her manager to keep her position hints at her impoverishment and the total subjugation of her psyche to the Dollar Store where she works. She tries to convince her manager to withdraw all the raises and promotions she has received when she says, "I never asked for those raises. I only got them because you were required by law to give them to me. It wasn't much, god knows—a nickel here, fifteen cents one time—but I knew when I went over nine dollars, you were gonna start looking for an excuse to get rid of me" (15). Margie's lack of appreciation and respect for her own labor stems from the internal psychological and personal pressure to keep her position in addition to other hardship in her life. In other words, she feels estranged and does not value her contribution to the business. According to her character-based and socially decontextualized perception of her position, she feels that she is the main culprit in her situation, and she cannot have those raises.

By the same token, Will in *A Bright New Boise* cannot find the energy and diligence to focus on his working conditions because of his struggle to establish a relationship with his son. Thus, this situation pits personal conflict against collective reality as Will's millennial expectation of rapture also derails his focus. His interview for a position at Hobby Lobby, where

he wants to work to be close to his son, is like a parody of the fear about unionization that has been pumped through the nation since the 1950s. The medium of language and conversation in particular suspend an epistemological inquiry that will be helpful to understand how corporations function internally as decentralized networks:

PAULINE: ... Yeah, it's like—I don't know, something about unions. Do you know anything about unions?

WILL: They're not good.

PAULINE: Yeah, exactly. That's the gist of the pie chart, anyway, so you get it. Sorry you couldn't just watch it, the damn VCR's broken. Everything here is falling apart, including me. Heh, you know.

WILL: Oh. Yeah, yeah.

PAULINE: So anyway, *don't try to unionize*.

WILL: Oh, no, of course not.

PAULINE: They shut down a Hobby Lobby in Kansas City when they tried to unionize, so don't try to unionize.

WILL: I really won't.

PAULINE: Too bad you couldn't see the video, it's actually—it has a funny segment, like a cartoon?

WILL: Oh, okay.

PAULINE: Yeah, it's actually a pretty great company when it comes down to it. And they know how to run a business, everything is hooked up to the corporate office. We can't even turn the air-conditioning without calling Oklahoma. I mean—I know that sounds annoying but it's actually really great. Really, it's just—a well-oiled machine. (109-110)

Although the interview scene where Pauline talks to Will about the working place conditions and unionization seems like a moment of relief from darker themes, it brings a major problem in American society to light, a problem that does not allow workers the right to ask for better conditions from their employers through an organization. The broken DVR is Pauline's only excuse for not providing some evidence to prove that unions are evil and Hobby Lobby is a great workplace. The fact that the video is "like a cartoon" increases the parodic impact of this scene. Pauline describes the corporation as "a well-oiled machine," but contradicts herself when she

states, “everything here is falling apart” (10). It is clear that she is not informed about unions, but strongly believes the corporate propaganda. This conversation exemplifies the corporate anxiety over unions and illustrates how such anti-union traits in favor of corporations are still in effect.

The television in the break room, set to show only Hobby Lobby commercials, is on all the time, but it is mute. Towards the end, Alex turns up the volume and for the first time in the play “the voices [on TV] are heard clearly” (72). Praising Hobby Lobby’s contribution to children’s art education, the conversation between two men upsets Alex and triggers his panic attack. Later, we find out that Alex commits suicide after this event. The pervasive banality of the commercials initiates a crisis for Alex, who would like to be an artist. The time he has to spend at work threatens his creativity.

Despite the veiled criticism of corporate culture, realist drama in its American form does not purport to explore social dynamics like its European counterparts, but rather focuses on personal conflicts. This perception might be one of the major differences with British theatre, whose plays are imported whenever Broadway needs a strong statement about a social conflict.¹² I do not intend to criticize playwrights for their artistic choices, as no writer has any kind of obligation to include any kind of social criticism. What I find difficult to grasp is the lack of a broader social analysis while showing these characters in dire conditions. Although some scholars believe that the age of American exceptionalism is long gone, fascination with the American system can be observed in this situation. David Harvey links this situation to a conceptual apparatus which has become so embedded in common sense as to be taken and not

¹² It would be clarifying to see that how important problems of the American society have been reflected through the European playwrights. *Enron* (2009) by Lucy Prebble, *Stuff Happens* (2004) and *The Power of Yes* (2009) by David Hare are some major examples of the British plays that have brought direct criticism to American politics and life-style.

open to question (5). Can it be that overconfidence in the American way of life that establishes an invisible wall for the playwrights to shy away from national politics or is it so embedded that nobody tries to act against it?

Unsuccessful characters' miserable lives are justified without an objective reasoning. A partially-functional social mechanism has undermined the protagonists' ability to identify their positions within a historical context. As Patricia Ventura points out that the reason for holding individuals accountable for their own actions, but not seeing the responsibility that network of system and structures have is a result of neoliberal rhetoric and policy (4). The vulnerability that Will, Margie, Franco, and, to a certain extent, Arthur experience comes from the neoliberal assumption which regards the poor are lazy, given to criminality, and generally without morals. In other words, "they deserve their misery even though the system is at least partly responsible for creating it" (Ventura 4).

The inability of suggesting an attainable solution to the protagonists' failures has nourished a nihilist philosophy which has undermined the ability of characters to confront their challenges or question the foundation of unfair treatments. As the prospect of the American Dream fades, the diminish of these protagonists' personal traits dominate contemporary plays. Allen Bloom relates this situation to nihilism:

Nihilism as a state of soul is revealed not so much in the lack of firm beliefs but in a chaos of the instincts or passions. People no longer believe in a natural hierarchy of the soul's varied and conflicting inclinations, and the traditions that provided a substitute for nature have crumbled. The soul becomes a stage for a repertory company that changes plays regularly—sometimes a tragedy, sometimes a comedy; one day love, another day politics, and finally religion; now cosmopolitanism, and again rooted loyalty; the city or the country; individualism or community; sentimentality or brutality. And there is neither principle nor will to impose a rank order on all of these. All ages and places, all races and all cultures can play on this stage. (155-156)

Lack of confidence, quiet nature, and passive life-styles are dominant traits for these protagonists. For example, Arthur is questioned by Franco about his nihilist character when Arthur advises him not to dream because dreaming is “dangerous” and he is “going to get crushed” (68). Franco opposes Arthur’s inactive demeanor: “You don’t talk, you don’t vote, you don’t listen to music. Why do you bother to get outta bed in the morning?” (68). Arthur, the most progressive protagonist, later breaks this cycle by fighting Luther, who cuts Franco’s fingers for his unpaid debt. Although Arthur later pays Franco’s debt later with the money he gets from selling his store, saving Franco’s life, the finale does not provide a vision of the future. Despite Arthur’s individual advance, the fact is his future, at least the financial one, is as unpredictable as Margie’s and Will’s. Indicative of his determination to change his life, Arthur’s transformation is a momentary triumph, but also reflects his impulsive character and chaotic state on stage.

A transformational turn like Arthur’s cannot be observed in other plays because Margie and Will do not have such a climactic reversal in their stories. Margie in *Good People* suffers within a social system, which refuses to help her to take better care of her daughter or give her a chance for an improved life. Even a simple mention of such solutions might increase the utopian character of American drama and enrich the philosophical soil for playwrights. However, it seems that the only remaining option for her survival is working for corporations like Dollar Store or Gillette, which pay minimum wage and provide little or no benefits. Although the act of discharging her from her position is justified because she has been late several times, had she been a member of a union, she could probably receive more assistance to keep her position. Her manager, Stevie, is concerned as his superior pressures him about Margie’s tardiness. He seems to be considerate of Margie’s situation as he is one of the “good people” who helps her at the end of the play, but corporate policies require him to fire her due to her inefficiency.

Unlike the situation where Arthur sells his own store to help Franco, along with other reasons, corporations have eliminated personal connection between employees because ultimately corporate profit maximization is more important than anything else. Despite the dominant role of corporations on plot, there are no figures of authority in terms of representation. No characters take the role of bosses or employers. The characters such as Pauline in *Boise* are not the stereotypical capitalists that has been portrayed to describe this privileged class. The ultimate decline of such superiors in a workplace is a sign for the meltdown of business under neoliberal policies. Although management is an essential feature of a legally authorized entity owned by shareholders, the lack of a corporate authority on stage has caused an underestimation of their impact. Those who represent the corporations are again one of those people. There is no evil or malicious face of uncontrolled capitalism as it is represented through every one which makes the situation more tolerable.

Pauline, who is the manager and the highest level corporate representative in *Boise*, describes the challenge of her position to coordinate several different individuals in harmony without any authority. The new psychological training of business administration and problem solving has supposedly equipped her with conflict resolution skills. She admits that these trainings are results of corporate policies to avoid further conflicts when she says, “Last year when that guy ... CARL—when Carl made Mandy cry and Mandy went to corporate and I had to do a fucking weekend workshop” (147). Pauline’s performance and her approach to other employees have been shaped by corporate policies and she clearly does not have any faith in them. She represents the corporation, and it seems that she has turned her career into a personal struggle against failure, which has pleased the corporation. She points out the difficulties and compromises she has made for this position:

I took over this store four years ago. The first day I was here, four out of six cashiers called in sick, there were rats in the stockroom, and a good quarter of all items on the floor were mis-stocked or mislabeled. ... It was *chaos*, you understand? Corporate told me I was taking over as a temporary measure, to oversee the branch for six months before, they said, they would most likely close it completely. And what did I do? I cleaned it up. I stayed here during nights by myself restocking and organizing, cleaning the air ducts, firing and hiring, and basically reshaping this entire store from the ground up. I took out ads in the paper announcing new management and grand-reopening sales. Six months later, our profits were up sixty-two percent, and they've been climbing ever since. I, Will, *I* brought order to chaos. (Playwright's emphasis 149)

Pauline's emphasis on bringing "order to chaos" might signify corporate work's unifying impact on society. After all, there is a certain perception of democracy that enables neoliberalism to foster social improvement at the same time. Compared to what it offers to the global elite and its appendages, although the majority of people do not get what they need for a wealthy life, the changes in gender equality, communication, and technology have made life easier in developed countries. As Pauline believes that the society should look up to corporations to be able to work properly, she acts like an owner or a shareholder of the store even though she is there "as a temporary measure." This position has demanded much of her personal time and since she spends her days and nights by herself to improve the store, she does not have a personal life, or at least, there are no clues for it in the play. However, she is proud of being a diligent but lonely manager similar to *Good People's* Stevie. The self-esteem that their positions have equipped them with has shaped their characters and, consequently, produced an illusory position that has set a barrier between them and other employees. Although Pauline includes her contribution and dedication in her assessment, she contradicts herself when she expresses her and the corporation's priorities in another speech:

What people believe doesn't fucking matter. What matters are real things. Real things like money, the economy and a country so beautiful that it can support a chain of big-box retail stores that makes all its money off of selling people

quilting supplies and construction paper. *This is what matters.* (Playwright's emphasis, 172)

Her faith is the kind of commitment any business can ask for, but her prioritization of money, economy, and business over people is a common problem of neoliberal policies explained indirectly in contemporary American drama. In a similar manner, Pauline takes the contribution of workers for granted when she praises the "country" for "support[ing] a chain of big-box retail stores," while ignoring her own and other employees' contributions.

Another reason these playwrights are criticized lies in their failure to comment on the lack of political and social programs despite ideally suited situations. For example, Margie's hard times with her daughter's disability might not be a problem in England, Franco's problem with his college tuition would not be as challenging in Scandinavian countries, and Will's problems with his son could be handled more professionally in another Western country. The lack of a comparative analysis or a hint of a socially-motivated resolution weakens the utopian character of these plays. Patricia Ventura links the denial of a social inquiry into the characters' problems to neoliberal culture:

That denial enables neoliberal subjects to avoid operating in an antagonistic relation to any other ideologies or to formal structures of power, and allows those individuals and groups who have assumed a friendly relationship with the powers-that-be to blame victims of social, economic, and political ills for their own problems—as when the supposed laziness of the poor is said to be the cause of poverty. As a result everyday life is depoliticized. (12)

Far from providing a futuristic vision for the problems discussed in the plays, the depoliticized atmosphere playwrights create does not direct audiences' attention into these problems. For example, in *Good People* when Margie visits Mike's house, she is told that their vase is really expensive and insured. This instance is used to enhance the comic side of the play. The absence of artistic intervention to highlight these moments of inequality and social injustice lessens the

impact of theatre on society because it does not challenge idealistic notions of neoliberal culture at the base of many problems.

It is not fair to connect every problem to economic systems, but the perception of success cannot be fully explained without exposing the market's demands of individuals:

That is to say, from the perspective of neoliberalism's market orientation there is nothing inherently keeping us all from achieving our desires because supposedly we all have a chance to acquire the resources to fulfill those desires and wants. Of course, we are told we have to choose to be "successful," choose to work hard to acquire what we want, but that too is represented as part of promise of neoliberalism: if we work hard, we will get what we want; if we don't get what we want, we haven't worked hard enough. Buried deep within this promise is the fact of structural inequality, but that too often is ignored or represented as a benefit because it is governed by bedrock principles which, we are repeatedly assured, are elemental to the system and keep it fair: rule of law, privatization and emphasis on property rights, the privileging of the individual over the collective, and most fundamentally, limits on state and sovereign power. (Ventura 10)

If we look at Ventura's statement from a Marxist perspective, it is clear that the neoliberal infrastructure of the American system has heavily influenced the superstructure. The forces and relations of production have shaped a competitive and individualistic culture which has nourished a nihilist attitude that does not strive for a broader understanding of individual problems. It would be illuminating here to mention a minor character in *Superior Donuts* to illustrate the issue of social injustice. Arthur allows a homeless woman, Lady (Boyle), to come inside and have a free donut with coffee any time. A recovering alcoholic, Lady summarizes what it looks like to be unfortunate and how addictions can take a person to the bottom of the social order: "You never see the bad stuff coming. Just always comes up behind you and pow! Socks you behind the ear with a glove fulla marbles. Sets you back a few steps" (85). She takes refuge in several places on a regular day, but her statement at the end summarizes her problem: "I guess I gotta find someplace else to go" (87). This is not her place and she is not wanted anymore. Her situation is unknown as the play ends and nobody questions where she might go

instead of Arthur's store. The misery of losers is an accepted concept in neoliberal societies though the need to further investigate it is often ignored.

Although Mamet and Miller depict the consequences of two different crises in American history, the times they wrote their plays can be considered more wealthy, union-friendly, and responsible in terms of providing a decent life standard for every citizen. The emergence of the Bretton Woods Institutions (which would later turn into the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO), the melting of Keynesian principles which suggested that the state should get involved in regulating markets and capitalism, the stagflation caused by the high cost of the Vietnam War and oil crisis in 1973, and the elimination of taxes on the wealthy are considered to be some of the major reasons for the neoliberalism to get more aggressive. (Hickel) This aggravated situation on average citizen constitutes the extra burden on the protagonists in contemporary plays. The criticism of the transition from being a "salesman" in twentieth century plays to a corporate employee working for minimum wage in contemporary drama embodies the very spirit of neoliberal policies.

The physical disappearance of corporations on stage, at least at the level of top managers, tones down the criticism of consumerist culture, as there is no actual person or place to be critiqued. Although this seems to be a subtopic of these three plays, the demanding nature of these corporations has influenced all their characters adversely. They have lost connection with each other and in response, they have created psychological shields to maintain their dignity. However, these shields are based on illusions, which lead to nostalgia and nihilist outcomes in each play.

Before the term was even coined to describe the situation of Swiss soldiers living abroad in the seventeenth century, nostalgia has been a central feature since the times of Homer. Often dismissed as a sentimental reaction to modernity, nostalgia refers to a growing fondness for the past, which is becoming a strong trend in America. Some miss the days of FDR, some Reagan, some the days of Woodstock, and some lament incapable politicians for not being able to bring the prosperity of those good old days, which might help explain Donald Trump's presidential campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." Clearly, many people believe that America was a great country in the past and they want it back.

There have been several incidents in the twenty-first century that might have triggered such nostalgias; 9/11, Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Hurricane Katrina, and the financial crisis were some of the most significant. Although these events initiated a difficult term for many people, the strong sense of nostalgia in contemporary American drama has been independent of these crises. The longing for a fictional past has long been a common theme in literature. This tendency can be a trait of postmodern phenomena, which Frederick Jameson defines as picking certain images to create a certain memory instead of reminding of the historical realities of the desired era (Postmodernism 281). For example, South Boston (Southie) embodies this kind of a nostalgic appeal for Margie in *Good People*. She recalls Southie as a much better community, where people used to support each other, although her stories clearly contradict other people's perception. For example, the story Margie tells to prevent her manager, Steve, from firing her illustrates the inaccuracy of her assessment:

MARGARET: We grew up together, me and your mother. If she knew what you were doing right now ...

STEVIE: You know what, Margaret? I *do* actually remember that story about her stealing the turkey. But you know what you forgot? The part where you called the

cops. You forgot that she spent Christmas Day down at Station Six. That was always how *I* heard it. You should ask my sisters how funny that story was. (17)

Margie's feeling of guilt and embarrassment filters her memories to suit her illusion which can summarize the condition of all protagonists in these plays. The shift from realities of her youth to imagined or inaccurate portrayals of the past is part of the overarching grand illusion of the play. The lost society or past for which she nostalgically longs, is deeply flawed in ways she omits or never even existed. The loss/absence of a dream(s) in this text is a main reason for an illusion, but the difficulty of accepting current situation, which would make it necessary for Margie to surrender the dream, exacerbates her condition. Although it is misleading, this habit of manipulating personal history helps Margie survive. The problem and danger of nostalgic narratives, as John Su points out, are "that they offer readers the illusion of utopian idealism without providing knowledge of legitimate alternatives to present circumstances" (8).

The same characteristic can be found in modern American drama, which has created several well-known protagonists with illusions or pipedreams. Like Theodore Hickman in *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar named Desire* (1947), Joe Keller in *All My Sons* (1947), Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), and Paul in *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990), Margie has distorted her past and started to believe the illusion with which she has replaced her bitter memories. Moreover, this illusory and nihilist attitude in response to real problems is heavily associated in these plays with neoliberalism.

Arthur's situation in *Superior Donuts* is more complex than Margie's, as his memories embody a different tone of bitterness, stemming from the Vietnam War draft and his relationship with his father. However, his retrospection clearly portrays a better country:

The city was true working class, and the bars were clean and well lit, and immigrant factory workers would sit and have a beer after a day's work. And sleeping outside with my family, with all the families, on the lawn at Jefferson

Park on sticky summer nights. Every Sunday hanging out in someone else's basement, food all day. Or a trip to a forest preserve, all free back then. Polish the only language I'd hear, twenty pigs spinning in fire, and every friend I made became my parents' friend, just because they were my friend. Coming back from a family trip, driving along the Eisenhower, I'd see the giant neon lips of Magikist and I knew I was home. (28)

Arthur's escape to Canada to avoid the draft destroys his relationship with his father, who takes a central role in his monologues. Compared to his father, Arthur, a failure at business and family affairs, has been overwhelmed with the burden of business and family. This pervasive sense of defeatism, which explains the protagonists' significance in their work places, has undermined confidence and resilience while establishing a fragmented identity, centered in nostalgic illusions.

Indicating mostly homesickness and pain, Arthur's monologues, in which he recalls his earlier years with his family, construct a nostalgic narrative between now and then. However, his engagement with the past, unlike Margie's, leads to a positive personal transformation toward self-respect, action, and an approach to overcoming his difficulties. Although his nostalgia has a somewhat transformative impact on his character, Arthur's monologues can easily be considered as instances of his illusory tendencies and his drug addiction. Arthur is unquestionably delusional. His business is about to go bankrupt, his wife and daughter have abandoned him, and he ignores everyone else around him, including the female police officer who has been courting him for months. Franco becomes a catalyst for Arthur to see the outer world again, and help others while restoring himself. Arthur's selling his store and getting out of business is the emancipating solution in the play, though it might also be considered as a capitulation to the corporations and neoliberal policies.

A closer look at Will in *A Bright New Boise* shows a similarity between him and other protagonists regarding the concept of illusion. From the beginning, one of the most distinctive

features of Will is his lack of self-awareness and satirical engagement with the concept of apocalypse, often in ways that are filled with humor and references that meant for comedy rather than serious drama. The first scene starts with him counting backwards and closing his eyes as if he wants the apocalypse to take place and end everything. Of course, when nothing happens, this brings a comic relief to the plot, which in essence revolves around his attempt to reconnect with his son and the larger society. Will's apocalyptic expectations can also be taken as a gentle mockery of the fundamental religious fabric of the American society. Amy Hungerford explains this concept of religion as "belief without meaning" which "maintain[s] religious belief rather than critique its institutions" and "buttress the authority of the literature that seeks to imagine such belief" (xiii). Will's commitment to religion demonstrates the deeply embedded fundamental religious practice in American society.

His religious tendencies dominate Will's character although his former pastor killed one of their congregation, Daniel, who shared doubts with Will. When Will told Daniel's doubts to his pastor, this information caused the pastor to push Daniel to an extreme physical punishment that caused his death. Will's fundamentalist beliefs differentiate him substantially from Arthur and Margie. Will is still a victim of his illusions, but they are not rooted not in his character or family, but his religious choices. When confronted about what happened back in his hometown or what he really believes in, he still expresses his belief. For example, Anna, who secretly spends her evenings just like Will at the store to enjoy the free internet and solitude, asks him if he still believes in God. Will affirms that his belief is the only remaining anchor in his life: "You work at a Hobby Lobby, Anna. Your life is meaningless, my life is meaningless, and the only thing that gives any meaning, that brings any hope to this life is the fact that God will come again in glory to replace this disgusting life with something new, and pure, and eternal" (183). Will's

hatred for a society governed by a neoliberal materialist system and his attempt to take a refuge in his faith can be felt in this conversation. Interested in restoring cultural unity on the basis of his Christian orthodoxy, Will writes a novel about the apocalypse and tries to convince others about the upcoming danger. However, when Anna questions his ideas in private, Will bursts out: “AND THESE PEOPLE WILL BURN IN HELL, YOU WILL BURN IN HELL BECAUSE INSTEAD OF SEEKING TRUTH YOU MOCK IT, YOU INSULT IT, AND SOON GOD WILL COME” (183). His response stems from his religious understanding, which expects God to judge people for their deeds. However, this expectation has nourished a cultural nihilism that has overpowered an activist spirit seeking justice in this world. The language derived from this sort of nihilism, which Amy Hungerford defines as “belief without meaning,” has become a part of Will’s life and he pursues happiness within the whole arsenal of terms such as burning in hell, seeking truth, self-fulfillment, and so on. Although, if used efficiently, these words can be progressive and therapeutic, it is clear that they don’t have a transformational impact on Will.

Despite his repentant attitude in public, Will does not have the courage to admit delusional commitment to his denomination. Similarly, Margie cannot see how her life has failed and wants to believe that it still can be saved by taking refuge at her disillusion about people. It is clear that Will, like Margie and Arthur, made significant mistakes in familial and financial choices, but none of them questions the basic source of their problems. This lack of investigation recurs as a leitmotiv in each of these plays. Thus, their misery seems fortuitous, as the playwrights omit a general contemplation in favor of personal flaws. This weakens the realist vein in these plays. Cultural critics like bell hooks insist on a significant distinction between memory and nostalgia for a “politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to

illuminate and transform the present” (147). A purely nostalgic dissatisfaction with the present cannot help envision genuine solutions to crises because it assumes solutions are found in past societies. John J. Su, in his book, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, points out that nostalgia, which he links with “the economic, social and political forces associated with late modernity” (3), signifies “inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests” (2). The longing to restore an imagined past, or future in Will’s case, inhibits the protagonists from gaining greater knowledge and engaging in activist practices about their situations, questioning institutions of authority or status quo, and maintaining a progressive dialogue with the audience.

Svetlana Boym, in her ground-breaking study, *Future of Nostalgia* (2001), defines nostalgia as the “ache of temporal distance and displacement” and divides it into two zones as restorative and reflective (39). While restorative nostalgia embodies the memory of home (nostos), reflective nostalgia aims to embody the processes of longing (algos), rather than the memory of home. Thus, evoking “national past and future” becomes a mission of restorative nostalgia whereas “individual and cultural memory” is about reflective nostalgia (49). The problem of nostalgia in these plays comes from its reflective nature, which avoids the restorative, nurturing potential of memory for the individual who feels threatened with the hardship of present. It impedes an inclusive perception of social matters rather than provide a fuller understanding on the negotiation between the present and the past and how it has shaped the self and the society. Milan Kundera defines nostalgia as “the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return,” but if it is a non-existent paradise only good for remembering, what is the point of returning there?

Al Campbell points out the destructive impact of neoliberalism on the lower-classes: “Beginning with the 1970s, capital, backed by government policies, especially after the consolidation of neoliberalism, introduced a plethora of policies and practices aimed at reducing the growth of, or even absolutely reducing, workers’ real wages and benefits” (Alfredo 196). Because of the policies employed by government in the late seventies and early eighties, the ability of labor to fight back against capital’s assault was weakened, the minimum wage’s real value was dropped, and the welfare safety net was crippled. Unemployment insurance benefits, trade adjustment assistance, aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) and other benefits were dropped. If we go back to the issues the protagonists experience, these changes are the real reasons for their suffering. The impact of these changes, however, is not explored in the plays themselves.

Despite their reluctance to highlight neoliberalism as the main culprit of the protagonists, contemporary playwrights should be acknowledged for dramatizing current conditions. Documenting the hardship of these characters experience can be helpful for identifying the problems first and seeking for causes and solutions later. Boym attributes a utopian quality to the nostalgic desire that has been on the rise since the 1960s. “The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia,” she states. “Nostalgia itself has a futuristic utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future” (74). Susan Stewart, who defines nostalgia as a “social disease,” joins Boym to associate nostalgia with an idealized world. Stewart argues that “Nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality” (122). Therefore, despite nostalgia’s subversive impact on their characters, playwrights managed to express their characters’ individual disappointments which, in turn, could initiate a search for articulating an alternative narrative

that calls others and audience members to question what they witness. As Su points out, “The alternatives provided by nostalgic narratives are valuable less for their potential to provide a blueprint for a better or more utopian world than for their potential to offer hope that alternatives continue to exist” (176). It is nostalgic longing that enables the characters to at least articulate the frustration that haunts them all the time.

As a comparison point between the twentieth and the twenty-first century, the shifting optimism in plays should be noted. *Salesman* and *Glengarry* are intrinsically about their protagonists’ delusions, and they portray the moment of truth in which the protagonists recognize *hamartia*—their own flaws after a long struggle of survival. They initiate a reaction which shortens the path to their ends. On the other hand, contemporary plays highlight the aftermath of struggle as playwrights show a strong awareness of the deteriorating conditions of lower middle classes. *Good People*, *Superior Donuts*, and *A Bright New Boise* depict characters who have already lost their dreams while trying to survive, and cannot pursue an American Dream which does not seem applicable to their lives. In other words, they have reached the end of their cul-de-sac and have nothing left to find a way out. Although Miller’s and Mamet’s characters have a self-deception which merges economic success with social and emotional validation, contemporary writers are more cognizant of their characters’ plight. Arthur sells his donut store and gets some money, but Letts does not endorse this as a final relief from his problems. For Will and Margie, the future is unpredictable, as the plays are open-ended without a final promise. Miller and Mamet point at a twilight and a threshold, but contemporary plays highlight the wounded state of the American Dream. The change is designed to reflect the illusory situation as well as the real problems of neoliberalism’s significance. The American Dream constitutes a filter for these protagonists’ self-discovery and dignity, which alerts the audience to how these

plays situate themselves around the absence of hope. What has caused the shrinking end of the American Dream and the vulnerability of the characters is the neoliberal culture that became dominant after the Cold War and advocated “the aggressive reassertion of liberalism’s negative liberty and individualist orientation” (Ventura 11).

The protagonists in these plays have high esteem for their stories which they have turned into personal mythologies. The stories they tell on stage sound far from the truth, but they are stuck at the time and the place those stories took place. Margie’s recalling of the past in *Southie* is not accurate. What she believes is a distorted version. Arthur’s Chicago does not exist anymore and the place he describes has caused him to run away. Will’s expectation of a rapture is a shield to obscure the malicious acts that have been performed in his belief’s name. These narratives are all products of these characters’ ways of coping with the difficulties they have endured. The commitment to these personal stories keeps the characters sane and focused on their missions, just like the American Dream is another socially-constructed narrative that keeps the society on a specific path. While one serves a whole nation, personal mythologies, as an extension of the concept of the American Dream nourished by nostalgia, engage individuals.

The problem with a nostalgic and illusory aspect of the past is that it makes all these protagonists yearn to relive it through a romantic vision. Nostalgia has taken over the American Dream and turned it into an illusory force that playwrights use as a fuel for their protagonists. The poverty of the present is so overpowering that their dream is more comforting than anything else. However, the transformation of characters under the influence of their illusion does not promise any hope or conceptual relief for them. Still, none of these protagonists should be understood as suffering from a psychotic disorder. Their stories are not about rags-to-riches, or winner-takes-all-stakes. Their stories are about survival. Illusion is what dragged O’Neill, Miller,

and William's characters to their end, but in these three contemporary plays it is the fuel for characters. They dream, therefore they are. In a world where they are not financially, psychologically, and socially capable of producing change, they prefer to live in their dreams, which keep them alive but at the same time bring on a slow destruction. The illusions that they have bred to flex their psyches will eventually become their masters. After all, illusions are a combination of consumerist culture, unemployment, lack of social services, and all the other difficulties a neoliberal age has left on our threshold. Is it a coincidence that playwrights prefer to bring characters with illusory disorders to the spotlight? Is that why every politician, just like Obama, tries hard to make people believe in a dream which has been clearly in a decline for decades?

3. Resistance in Documentary Plays

“Writing history is not rediscovering the past; it is creating it from our own present.”

Walter Benjamin

This chapter analyzes examples of contemporary documentary drama and the reasons for the recent abundance of documentary plays in America. While family and business plays often serve to justify, explain, or reinforce the status quo despite their skeptical components (as illustrated in chapter one and two), documentary theatre has provided room for playwrights’ critiques of current social and cultural practices/arrangements by means of historical comparisons. The second chapter in this study examines how playwrights deploy memory as nostalgic yearning but the way memory and history are utilized in documentary plays is profoundly different and aims to foster in audiences a new understanding of the situations dramatized while challenging mainstream accounts and giving voice to the point of view of the dispossessed. Thus, this chapter examines *The Exonerated* (2002) by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, *I am My Own Wife* (2003) by Doug Wright, and *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufmann and other members of the Tectonic Theater Project that have documented, neglected, or marginalized history at their center. These plays, in Jeannette Malkin’s words, “recall the past from repression or from its canonized ‘shape’ in order to renegotiate the traumas, oppressions, and exclusions of the past” (1). Although there is little overlap among the plays’ content and messages, penetrating commentary on current issues through a variety of memory forms is a key point in all. Accordingly, dramatic pieces in this study “champion the hitherto suppressed stories of those excluded from mainstream theatre by dint of class, gender, or ethnicity” (Forysth, Megson 4) and challenge the epistemologies underlying institutionally endorsed histories.

I will describe contemporary memory plays under three headings. Coined by Derek Paget in 1987 during his research on documentary plays, which used tape-recorded material, “verbatim

theatre” is often constructed largely or exclusively from words actually spoken or recorded. For example, trial plays tend to have similar lines taken directly from court records. *The Exonerated*, for example, tells the story of six wrongfully convicted death row inmates through testimonies of the freed convicts, court recordings, and other documents.

The Laramie Project belongs to a second category, where edited interviews and testimonies still stand at the center of the text. However, *The Laramie Project* differs from other verbatim plays by its elimination of a protagonist. It aims to reconstruct and rewrite Matthew Shepard’s story in order to raise his voice in the name of all oppressed homosexuals and illustrate the reasons for his murder, but Shepard is not represented as a character on stage. *The Laramie Project* is similar to *The Exonerated*, but their methodology and construction have fundamentally different incentives and elements.

Third group consists of autobiographies. Although monologue is a common technique used in such plays, it is clear that with the help of stage devices the style and content of autobiographies have an extended reach. *I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright examines the life of a German transvestite, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who had a tumultuous life during the second half of twentieth century in East Berlin. The play is based on Wright’s meetings with Charlotte and other documents he has collected about her.

I do not want to imply that these plays and playwrights are members of a coherent grouping in any way. Although all merge historical materials with fictional elements, their genres, styles, rhetorical strategies, politics, and concerns cannot be melted in one pot. However, their emphasis on identity politics and insistence upon a more extended public discussion of politics and social issues separates them from other genres and trends. Ultimately, in illustrating the documentary theatre’s close relationship with social activism, this chapter supports a

broadened perspective on what documentary theatre is politically capable of and how it interrogates the present by examination of the past.

Despite the scholarly interest¹³ in documentary plays in recent years, there is still a confusion about defining its borders and establishing a precise definition. However, I believe this is the consequence of richness in this genre rather than ambiguity. One of the most recent works on documentary drama, Carol Martin's *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010) contains several articles and informs readers about how documentary theatre has been globally influential all over the world. It is clear from the articles, however, that there is a problem with naming this genre. Archive, documentary, verbatim theatre, testimony, paradocumentary, documentary performance, reality theatre, and nonfiction plays are some of the names deployed to define this genre.¹⁴

One of the major challenges of finding an appropriate concept or definition for this genre comes from its vitality and continuously dynamic, hybrid form. Derek Paget mentions how documentary forms have been widely used in hybrid forms, bringing documentary closer to drama:

¹³ *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1999) by Jeanette Malkin, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (2000) by Freddie Rokem, *The Theatre of Real* (2006) by Carol Martin, *Reminiscence Theatre: Making Theatre from Memories* (2007) by Pam Schweitzer, *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009) by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, *Performing the Past* (2010) by Karin Tilmans, et al, and *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater* (2013) by Jacqueline O'Connor are major scholarly works which have analyzed the function, definition, and other significances of documentary drama.

¹⁴ Carol Martin names it theatre of the real, which has different methods that "recycle reality" into the dramatic element. Her book also includes subtopics such as "documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war, and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre" (*The Theatre of Real* 5).

This hybridization is a response to changed political and social circumstances at home and abroad, ratcheted up by growing distrust of politicians, disaffection with political process, and an associated lack of trust in agencies formerly supposed to honour social duties of care ... The proliferation of documentary modes in a variety of media can be regarded as part of a cultural response to changed circumstances nationally and globally. (139)

Like Paget, Thomas M. Croak also highlights the combination of political and theatrical matters in documentary drama when he defines the documentary drama to be “responsive to urgent social and political issues and can serve as a valuable tool for the historian studying the times, places, and people which the genre portrays” (vi). In a way, when the real platforms fail to create a progressive interrogation of social and political issues, arts in general and more specifically theatre takes over the job. Thus, contesting or rewriting the past means “to pose questions about the present, and what the past means in the present” (Hodgkin and Radstone 1). These questions are the results of a capitalist modernity whose selective remembrances have promulgated a conservative approach to history because, as Walter Benjamin states, “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of now” (252-3). Documentary theatre acts like a rebel against this conservative atmosphere that permeates the present with a conventional understanding of history.¹⁵

¹⁵ Brecht’s mentor, Erwin Piscator, is usually accepted to be the founder of documentary theatre as he coined the term after his production *Trotz alledem!* (1925) which exemplified “for the first time a production where the political document is the sole base for text and scenic work” (Reported in Irmer 18). He was the first professional theorist and practitioner to frame real events within the aesthetic space of the proscenium stage. Gerhard F. Brobst, in his book *Erwin Piscator and the American Theatre* acknowledges Piscator as the originator of documentary theatre. Brobst also describes *Trotz Alledem* as “an early example of documentary theatre since it was a montage of authentic speeches, essays, newspaper clips, proclamation, and handbill: photographs and films of the war, the revolution’s other historical events and of historical personalities ...” (30). His impact was broad as he instructed several acknowledged theatre artists such as Bertolt Brecht, Judith Malina, Tennessee Williams, and Harry Belafonte, among many others while he worked as the head of the New School’s Dramatic Workshop. After WWII, Piscator returned to his country and played a major role in post-war documentary theatre in Germany.

I associate documentary theatre with the concept of memory theatre to loosen the definition to a point where it can apply to other performers whose work may not be an exact product of field research, but is valuable in terms of firsthand witnessing. All plays in this chapter engage with the dramatic construction of memory. I prefer to call these plays “memory plays” in order to highlight the contrast between documentary memory and nostalgic memory. The second chapter in this dissertation analyzes plays in which memory turns into a nostalgic yearning, but the way playwrights dramatize the memory/history binary in documentary plays is profoundly different and invites audience/readers to a critical thinking. On the other hand, nostalgic memory serves the status quo, and offers a vantage point for conformism despite its subversive side effects. This conformism is a result of the dissatisfaction with the established system, but it looks for temporary refuges and optimistic resolutions rather than question the system for answers. However, documentary memory posits itself against the status quo and challenges the embedded versions of official or acknowledged history. Personal or collective memory in this context interrogates the given norms of the society. It does not necessarily seek a happy resolution, but it aims to prove its point through the “real documentary” feature of its construction without forgetting its mission and sometimes by compromising the entertaining side if necessary. In contrast to nostalgia, documentary memory is driven by an impulse for authenticity, accuracy, and historical legitimacy.

Nostalgic memory, explored by European Romantics, particularly Rousseau, Goethe, and Wordsworth, has a restorative, nurturing potential, but documentary memory questions its conformism and exposes the artificiality and the real discomfort beneath. A close look at the emergence of American documentary theatre can sketch an inherently political vein running

through the genre. Although there are some earlier precedents to the history of American documentary theatre, the 1930s can be considered to be the starting point through the Living Newspapers created by the Federal Theatre Project, which were actually inspired by the Soviet Propaganda Bureau.¹⁶

Documentary memory is a voluntary recall of the past, which appeals to logic. It purports to be transformative and highly critical of its subject matters including their own methodologies. On the other side, nostalgic memory is an involuntary recall that is seductive and appeals to emotions. Nostalgic memory is mostly psychological, as opposed to cerebral, in its interest in how memory creates images in the brain to maintain selfhood. Full of incomplete and inaccurate psychological images of the past, it is highly conservative and yearns to go back to a fictional past. In contrast to nostalgic views of the past as a way to protect America, memorial plays use the flaws of the past to reconstruct America. John Su, for example, defines memory as signifying “intimate personal experience,” countering institutional histories and nostalgia to signify “inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests” (2). Blended with nationalism and rightist politics, nostalgia aims to reduce current neoliberal policies’ impact by offering a fictional and selective refuge in the past. However, memory theatre points at the problematic components of the past to view the present under the light of a progressive culture. After all, nostalgia is the legitimate, appropriated, and the most naïve response of millennials to the shock and disillusionment of neoliberalism, which has neutralized

¹⁶ These performances, mostly sketches, aimed to inform people about the Great Depression, agriculture (*Triple-A Plowed Under*, 1935), and housing (*One-Third of a Nation*, 1938) and the steps taken to recover from the crisis. Theatre historian Sidney F. Parham explains this period through the impact of technology: “The next active period of documentary drama was in America during the 1930s. In this decade, films were very well established, and the radio brought the day’s events into every home. This dominance of radio can be seen in the talkiness of the first Living Newspapers before they exploded their theatrical possibilities” (31).

most reactions against it and has established a culture of protest that does not aim for futuristic gains, but yearns for what is lost.

Documentary drama has played an important role in memory studies. The increase in memory studies¹⁷ has brought several disciplines together to understand the impulses behind memorialization and commemoration. As Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2006) and their contributors suggest in *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, memory has dictated the distance between history as the real past and history being written in the present, which enables society to experience the unexperienced. When objections to constructed identities, national narratives, and cultural certainties are raised through the rewriting of history, a different understanding of the past makes silenced or marginal histories and memories more visible (Anderson, 2006; Boym, 2001; Edkins 2003; Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983; Portelli, 1991, Dacid Dean and Meerzon Yana, et al, 2014). This feature, which can be observed in all plays, enables those silenced or marginalized to be represented.

Modern societies tend to share a linear view of time with an expectation of an unprecedented future. A linear view of time supports the idea of an evolving and changing universe whereas the cyclical one accepts the concept of an eternal universe. Nostalgia curves this line into a cycle pointing to an erosion in confidence in the present and suggesting an elegiac turn to the past. Documentary memory, on the other hand, stresses a coherent timeline, which allows dynamic comparisons between decades or even centuries where the present analyzes the

¹⁷ On one side, Jan Assman has initiated a distinction between cultural and collective memory pointing out that communicative memory is shared by and conveyed through a social group over a few generations, and cultural memory is shared by a community and often institutionalized. Paul Ricoeur (2000), on the other hand, focuses on collective memories of trauma, amnesia, nostalgia, and empathy.

past through a critical reading unlike the understanding of time in a religiously interpreted cosmos, which begins and ends with the Absolute God. In the theater of memory, a linear timeline does not reflect an advanced society destined to advance through time. Derek Paget explains how the methods of documentary drama are capable of acting as a brake on naturalistic performance and she adds that “Naturalism, with its emphasis on ‘through line’ for the performer, is unforgiving of interruption, and documentary theatre is a theatre of interruption” (‘The Broken Tradition’ 229). This break with the past enables actors with freedom rather than a restraint on the performance. The problems of the past can recur, and exposing these flaws through the lens of historical documents can help societies identify former problems and offer guidance to the future.¹⁸

Documentary theatre provides space for experiments in both form and content. It does not have historical frameworks (such as the well-made play codified by French dramatist Eugene

¹⁸ The usage of documents (in the modern sense) has a relatively short history going back to the eighteenth century where almost everything such as tombstones, coins, ruins, and other social and legal documents started to be accepted as historical artifacts in addition to manuscripts or treaties. Documentary, as a sign of faith in facts, was forged in the twentieth century to enlighten the audience through approved information and new technological possibilities in staging. The relationship between the real and the fictional for theatre practitioners and scholars has a long history starting from Aristotle’s mimesis to Leibniz’s dramaturgie. Playwrights have utilized the real events of the past through verbatim, documentary, and biography to enrich the dramatic fabric of plays. We see a lengthy lineage of historical representations through political struggles in Greek tragedy, Shakespeare’s historical dynasties, Restoration heroic drama, and the Victorians’ obsession with historical accuracy. Although these examples contain characteristics of documentary drama, the European origins of documentary drama are often associated with George Buchner’s *Danton’s Death* (1835), which is a forerunner to modern developments in drama.¹⁸ Scholars consider *Danton’s Death* as the precursor to documentary theatre due to its use of numerous historical resources and extensive quotations from the French revolution. John Reed’s *The Paterson Pageant* (1913), which opened in Madison Square Garden and showed the alliance between modern art and labor unions, is the earliest known example of American documentary theatre (Dawson 14).

Scribe) or exemplary predecessors that might influence the way a performance or text should be. There is no certain form or style for them to comply with in order to be successful or acceptable and freedom of style opens up new venues, topics, and opportunities for these plays to reach more people. For example, modern realist family plays constitute the skeleton of American drama, and there are certain norms such as heterosexual depictions of family structure devoid of certain sexually references which need to be implicitly observed by a playwright if s/he wants to be staged in mainstream theatres. However, documentary theatre's concern is more on the task of turning conventional theatre into a venue that would create an opportunity for audience and performers to reconsider points that have been hitherto hidden, neglected, underestimated, or disrespected. These can be examples of identity matters, gender problems, institutional oppression, majority vs. minority conflicts, or other social issues. This vision of independent plays and performance can create a liberating effect on audience and readers. American drama is in need of new dramatic styles, and the emergence of memory plays can encourage the advance of plays that promote both social justice and artistic innovation.

New American documentary theatre is based on community projects and focuses on identity problems of the present rather than the past. Through an elaborate investigation of media culture, new forms of narration and representation, and authentic documents, it explores the present. Contemporary practitioners' treatment of materials as secondary sources to understand the present is a point of significant difference between their 1960s predecessors, who were more scrupulous about using records, files, and other historical documents as the main source for their plays. Derek Paget points out, "In diverging from previous forms, the New Documentarism on stage responds to changed social and political contexts in which modes of communication themselves have acquired new significances" (129).

Contemporary forms of documentary drama differ in many aspects from the old ones.¹⁹ First of all, the political climate today is completely different from the 1930s and 1960s, as are the modes of production, laws, and the arrangements of social life. However, subsequent examples of documentary drama had an important impact on the reception of truth and its staging. Documentary plays in the 1970s attempted to generate a new understanding of the real in theater: “It was no longer enough to narrate the truth (or what people thought was the truth); it had to be theatrically staged with transparent methods” (Martin 58). Transparent methods enabled the union of the real and dramatic and presented audiences a new historically and politically informed perspective. Second, there is the problem of access to a myriad of documents everywhere, and documentary plays aim to champion “a distinctively new kind of privatized politics” (Paget 138). Radio, film, and especially television developed documentary forms of drama dealing with contemporary issues. NPR’s documentaries, other radio stations’ interest in sharing the pie of educational podcasts, Michael Moore’s and other prominent

¹⁹ Martin Duberman’s *In White America* (1963), Daniel Berrigan’s *Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1970), and Donald Freed’s *Inquest* (1971) are examples which pioneered the exploration of different issues such as racial injustice and protests against the Vietnam War. Offering new historical insights, these documentary plays brought in an analytical interpretation of documents and aimed to expose hidden or manipulated sides of the events.¹⁹ Carol Martin explains the tentative network of these plays: “None of these productions was strictly documentary or verbatim. They are important because they show how theatre artists who were incorporating the real in their work brought about a sea change in the use of mise-en-scene, media, historical sources, autobiography and biography, interviews, documents, and agit-prop techniques. Although all the works are American, the techniques of these works have also been developed elsewhere, in different ways and in different social and political contexts (31).” *Still Life* (1981) and *Execution of Justice* (1986) by Emily Mann, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights and Other Identities* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith, and *The Laramie Project* (2001) by the Tectonic Theater Project are examples that strived for transferring oral history to the stage while foregrounding silenced and invisible members of society. Since the 1990s, contemporary documentary drama based on collective works has explored new methods of telling stories and exploring history.

directors' inspiring documentaries followed by instant success and accolades, and the proliferation of documentary channels on cable TV exposed and developed a hunger for narrations supported by authentic documents and testimonies. After all, documents are what an establishment uses to legitimize itself and empower its institutions. The United States' Constitution, which holds the center of the American system, might be a good example for such a usage and resource for authority. Amendments are the pillars of arguments for the Americans when they need strong evidence for changing public policies. Using documented history as a source for dramatic constructions is similar to questioning the power that has belonged to the governing class.

Documentary theatre can also be called a product of technology as well as an indicator of dissent. It is not a coincidence that documentary theatre flourished in the 1990s when technological advances such as the tape recorder, photographic slide projector, computers, and filming devices were becoming more and more popular. Carol Martin defines technology "as an integral part of the means to embodied memory and as necessary for the verification of the factual accuracy of both the text and the performance," and adds that "Performance knowledge becomes reproducible, even embodied, via an archive at least partly created from film, video, audio recordings, and digital manipulations" (*Bodies of Evidence* 10). The advance of hand-held camera and cell phones with multiple ways of recording also changed the perception of the truth. In our times, it is very common to demand an image or video as a proof of an event's reality. If this is lacking, the claim will not be accepted as real. After all, one of the best examples of documentary drama, Anna Deaveare Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* takes its plot from the riots which started from a video showing police officers beating an African-American citizen, Rodney King. I assume the vital point that Wikileaks have made stems from the documents they

released, because they have shown the public that there are many hidden documents with critical information. If documents are so important for people to understand issues in depth or to be convinced, it would not be surprising to see a rising trend of documentary plays in the USA and all over the world. As technology advances, its possibilities, forms, languages, and other means grow and change. For example, verbatim theatre used to refer only to trial plays where most of the text belonged to court records. However, several recent plays have used a variety of documents from different sources so that their characters can repeat whatever is recorded although it did not take place in a court. Fictional text added by the playwrights has also extended the contemporary borders of this genre.

British and American dramatic literatures differ in that the stage is not the place to voice outbursts or protests on this side of the Atlantic. However, as fewer political issues have found space on stage, playwrights have merged more real-world events and documents into their fictional constructions. *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* associates the concept of documentary with the legacy of nineteenth century positivism, as “documents came to be regarded as unproblematic sources of facts and information, and information itself became a component in government’s control and organization of industrial nations” (173). In *The Real Thing* (1989), Miles Orvell highlights the shift from imitation and illusion to showing ‘the real thing’ (xv) in the twentieth century and explains the social hunger for it. However, the twenty-first century interpretation of authenticity has shifted artistic concentration from single-perspective notions of truth toward commencing open conversations and exposing silenced viewpoints. In response to the scandals of “deliberate misrepresentation and indifference to truth in the mass media” (Kalb 20), “documentary theatre has complicated notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the ‘real’” (Forysth and Megson 2). Although

social venues have given people opportunities to share their concerns, a formal occasion such as a play with a prepared message for masses, seems to bring more attention to its topic.²⁰ The Tectonic Theater Projects' *The Laramie Project* (2000), *The Exonerated* (2002), and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) were all signs of yearning for more veracity on stage. Peter Marks, *The Washington Post*'s chief theater critic, acknowledges this appetite for documentary theatre: "There's always been theater looking at current events in a very direct way, in an almost nonfictional way, but I think it's really taken off in the last 20 years" (10).

One outstanding feature of docudrama that comes to surface as an expression of its main purpose is the non-realistic quality of staging. Actors are expected to represent more than one character, and they are not supposed to get into a "classic" understanding of role. Other non-realistic devices including the décor, gestures, and minimalist clothing also support this anti-Aristotelian component and highlight the artifice of the performance.

Classic realist drama depends mostly on powerful characters living behind the fourth wall. Although memory plays also contain strong characters, their interrelation with documents and true events prevents them from being completely character-based plays. The dominance of characters over plot, theme, and the message has reduced the impact of realism in American drama over time. The relative insignificance of characters within documentary drama attempts to address this situation. Thus, the awareness of real events combined with artistic contribution without focusing on the flaws or extraordinary strengths of characters creates a more objective perception, which Brecht advocated, opposing the Aristotelian concept of catharsis. Although

²⁰ The success of Anna Deavere Smith's landmark *Fires in the Mirror* shows the eagerness for an alternative view and a warm welcome to politically motivated works on stage. An interview-based solo piece about Los Angeles riots, *Fires in the Mirror* reminds the audience of the power of documentary theatre, which lost its vitality during the Cold War.

these plays are promising in terms of producing political activism and public engagement, this is not a guaranteed outcome. The multifaceted positioning of reality does not necessarily mean spectators will absorb the message.

The proliferation of machine-made replicas of almost everything created “the culture of an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more ‘authentic’ works that were themselves real things” (Orvell xv). Despite the variety, writers will select according to their own nature. Echoing Derrida’s ideas about writing and the ownership, documentary drama conveys a subjective message through objective means. Therefore, it would be a mislabeling to call memory plays Brechtian because their homogenous structures do not fit into such generalizations. The Brechtian vein in these plays might be a result of their social criticism, but would not suffice to define them in a certain genre.

Local and national narratives became the subject of late-20th-century documentary drama, but 9/11 and subsequent steps taken to retaliate opened the path for many writers to address global crises across national borders. Many ideas have proliferated in documentary drama and this has enriched the political fabric. Although most non-naturalistic forms including documentary drama have been criticized for being “the staples of the left” (“The Broken Tradition” 224), we cannot associate one single ideology with documentary drama. In general, the aversion to status quo/establishment constitutes a common pattern for most plays in this genre. Despite their flaws and shortcomings, documentary plays can contain a reformist spirit that American drama needs.

I Am My Own Wife

Doug Wright’s one-person play *I am My Own Wife* (2003), written to be “a one-woman show performed by a man,” (ix) recounts the playwright’s encounter with Charlotte von

Mahlsdorf (1928-2002), a well-known transvestite and celebrated antique collector in East Berlin. Born in Berlin as a male named, Charlotte had an intriguing life of various experiences—murder, spying, and stories of survival under a communist regime. However, Wright’s focus in this play focuses more on Charlotte’s character than the struggles she experienced. As Michael R. Schiavi points out, “*Wife* prompts investigation of the boundaries between history and biography, and between biography and fiction, overlapping genres that collapse further into each other when transposed from page to stage” (196). It is a self-conscious play where Wright portrays the difficulty of fitting Charlotte’s story into a dramatic structure. As a solution, Wright includes himself in the play as a character (Doug) and explains what he encountered while he worked on his play. He states that the play enabled him to create “a wonderful vehicle for some rather hefty themes: self-invention, the unreliability of historical narrative, and the subjectivity of authorship” (Reported in Schiavi 197). Inclusion of the playwright is a strong manifestation of staging personal experience and identity matters together, and it definitely highlights the caution with which Wright approached his play’s rhetorical strategies.

In 1992, Charlotte published her own autobiography, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau (I am My Own Woman)* which was turned into a movie the same year by director, Rosa von Praunheim. Charlotte was awarded the prestigious Medal of Honor in 1993 for establishing and preserving the Grunderzeit (Pioneer Times) Museum, which came to be recognized as a bastion of gay culture during the Cold War. Despite being targeted by the neo-Nazi groups, Charlotte enjoyed her fame and toured the country until her Stasi file engulfed her in a storm of controversy and brought her negative publicity as well as financial problems. Although the German intelligence service, Stasi, had a folder about almost every politician, and their reports were not considered to be trustworthy, Charlotte had to move to Sweden in 1995 due to social pressure. “While visiting

her beloved Grunderzeit Museum, she suffered a heart attack,” says Wright in his play: “Alone in a garden of gramophone horns, she died [in 2002]” (45).

Charlotte’s birth name was Lothar. It was difficult for Lothar’s mother to accept her small son’s desire to attend his first communion in drag. Although Lothar had a good relationship and an understanding with his mother, his father was a violent and abusive figure. Charlotte claimed that she had killed her father as a young child, but her statement and the historical records do not necessarily agree each other. Her aunt had a great influence on her adolescence as she approached Lothar’s early sexual choices gently and gave space for Lothar to express his feelings openly. Female members of her family were supportive of her decisions although Charlotte was an outsider since the day she discovered her sexual orientation.

Doug Wright has written about the extraordinary lives of outsiders since the beginning of his writing career. “Mostly, I’m compelled by outsiders; people who are marginalized in their own cultural moment, people who felt obligated to tell the truth when it wasn’t convenient,” says Wright in his interview with Julie Krug. Marcel Duchamp in *Interrogating the Nude*, Marquis de Sade in *Quills*, and Big Edie and Little Edie Bouvier Beale in *Grey Gardens* are some of his eccentric and unconventional characters through whom Wright expressed his humor and sympathy for them. While explaining how writing about Sade and Charlotte is different, Wright points out the essential principle for a documentary play:

I felt I had to adopt a different standard with *I Am My Own Wife*. Charlotte von Mahlsdorf was not a well-known international figure; there aren’t any reliable, third-party biographies about her. She doesn’t have the iconic stature of Sade. I knew I would be introducing most audiences to her for the very first time. As a result, I felt I needed to show greater fidelity to the basic facts. As a result, I chose not to invent outright events in her life. (Reported in Soloski 31)

Wright’s “greater fidelity to the basic facts” exemplifies the explorative spirit of contemporary documentary drama. In contrast to Sade’s character and life portrayed in *Quills*, Charlotte is a

more down-to-earth character. Her mission is to inform and enlighten, where Wright's account of Sade depends on sensational stories about sexual matters.²¹ Wright reiterates his intention in his introduction to *Wife* saying that "*I Am My Own Wife* is not intended as definitive biography; hopefully someday my play will be out-distanced by scholars and critics far more expert than I" (v). "Growing up gay in the Bible Belt," (Wright 12) Wright was also the target of teasing and bullying because of his gender orientation. *Wife* is a literary appraisal of a publicly transvestite character who did not yield to the bullying of others and the system. Although there are literary components and incentives for Wright to pick Charlotte as the central character for his play, a personal dimension has also motivated Wright to pursue this subject. His skeptical approach to the matter of biography and personal history, however, complicates the situation as critic Don Shewey noted, "[*Wife*] is a theatrical essay about the importance of recording history that ends up challenging the reliability of all historical narratives, including its own" (32). As Shewey mentions, Wright's reluctance to use history as a guarantee of truth is reminiscent of Arthur Schlesinger's ideas on the American Civil War:

History is not a redeemer, promising to solve all human problems in time; nor is man capable of transcending the limitation of his being. Man generally is entangled in insoluble problems; history is a constant tragedy in which we are all involved, whose keynote is anxiety and frustration, not progress and fulfillment. (Rozwenc 189-190)

Memory theatre exposes the "anxiety and frustration" in history, but nostalgic drama yearns for a fictional "progress and fulfillment." In harmony with sanctified versions of the past, nostalgia replaces a mythic approach instead of a realist evaluation. Although documentary drama has all

²¹ Elvis Mitchell points out in his review of *Quills* that "It invents elements to make its rather obvious point about the price exacted by art and the state that liberals trying to do what's right can be whipped into."

the means to serve the purpose of following the truth, its capability to question its own merits as Wright does in his play can qualify it as superior to nostalgic texts in this search.

Wright feels an obligation to go after outsiders with whom he feels associated because learning another aspect of history depends on digging up those stories and bringing them to sunlight. As Su points out in *Postcolonial Nostalgias*, “Institutions to store and diffuse such memories tend to be bureaucratic and soulless; networks of peoples carrying out the division of mnemonic labor are not always coherently connected; and there is the problem of biased salience” (18). Although there have been recent significant studies on how the Holocaust damaged the population of socialists, homosexuals, and gypsies, it always belongs to the tragedy of the Jews. I am not trying to measure people’s or specific groups’ sufferings, but more needs to be explored about other groups’ pain who suffered because of their ideological or sexual identity. Charlotte invites her audiences to witness another aspect of the period prior to and after the WWII. The Holocaust is a symbol identified with the Jews as well as much of postmodern ethical theory, but Charlotte’s insertion of her identity struggles steers the attention toward another aspect of history. David Bisaha calls *Wife* a “third-generation response to Holocaust testimony,” (25) but this play’s function cannot be reduced to reminding people the tragedy of Holocaust. Although he is right to state that this play illuminates “the processes by which non-witnesses bring themselves closer to understanding the traumatic narratives of the past” (187), the structure of the play is centered on the survival of Charlotte and her identity rather than the traumas she experienced under totalitarian regimes. That’s why narratives can provide an opportunity to identify with potentially unfamiliar descriptions of the world that readers can “empathize with the values and needs of others” by “challeng[ing] the truth claims of existing histories and beliefs by redescribing reality from alternative perspectives” (Su 19).

Throughout the first one-third of the play, Wright explains how he got involved with Charlotte. John Marks, Wright's high-school friend, who works as the *U.S. News & World Report* bureau chief in Berlin informs Wright about this larger-than-life character and suggests Wright consider her for a play or another project. Marks admits the sterility of official reporting when he says that Charlotte's gender-bending story may be "too extreme" for his *U.S. News & World Report* readers. Marks' commentary conveys the spirit of mainstream family plays which usually refrain from including unconventional characters or indecent activities on stage. However, as this play's success demonstrates²², concealing such unacceptable figures and action within the concept of documentary drama can commence a reformatory movement in contemporary American drama. The reformatory character of documentary drama has been important for Wright to express Charlotte's and his own sexual choices, which would be an intolerable element for a mainstream fictional production.

Although Wright pursues the truth in Charlotte's story, the principal subject of the play is clearly the construction and reception of the relationship he had with her. This relationship, in terms of dramatic concepts, oversteps several boundaries between biography and history, solo-performance and storytelling, and memory and fiction. This situation enables the play to overlap genres as Wright also points out that the play provides, "a wonderful vehicle for some rather

²² In return, *Wife* had surprising success in terms of the accolades it accumulated. It was staged in several countries including Greece and Germany and received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, a GLAAD Media award, an Outer Critics award, a Drama League award, and the Tony award for best play and best lead actor in a play. Charlotte, as a transvestite, who has survived not only the Nazi era but also the communists in East Germany, is potentially a perfect match for drama. Even the character Doug Wright in the play calls Charlotte "a slam dunk" due to the potential material Wright could surface.

hefty themes: self-invention, the unreliability of historical narrative, and the subjectivity of authorship” (Schiavi 197).

By establishing his play around a transvestite from East Germany, Wright creates a resemblance between the private worlds of two different economic systems. How societies, despite being different in fundamental principles, could be consonant with suppressing their citizens in terms of personal gender construction is a key element to the essential subject of *Wife*. “When I first met Charlotte I wanted to write a real hymn to her,” Wright explains in an interview. He adds, “I thought that all the negative conditioning I had endured as a young gay man growing up in Texas was countered by her own extraordinary stories of survival” (gltbq.com 4). Wright, who grew up in conservative environment, explains how he can feel the personal suffering and social bullying that Charlotte has experienced because they were both warned to hide their identities: “I grew up gay in the Bible Belt. I can only begin to imagine what it must have been like during the Third Reich. The Nazis, and the Communists? It seems to me you’re an impossibility. You shouldn’t even exist” (20). Powerful and defiant Charlotte, however, does not yield and protects her own space and identity. Despite the flaws in her story, Wright does not forget his encounter with Charlotte and unfolds this extraordinary life to North American audiences for whom such characters and their stories are usually undesirable.

Katrin Sieg in an article on sexual identity during the Cold War explains how communist regimes used homophobia to defame political dissidents. Sieg points out how the Soviet Union refrained from any deviant sexual explorations that could challenge the heterosexual family concept (24). However, Wright does not convert this play into a battlefield with totalitarian regimes, but he prefers to focus on the mysteries of Charlotte’s life and her character’s intricacies. For example, the way Charlotte was treated during the Nazi regime and the Soviet

invasion after 1945 are not scrutinized the way her personal life was. Furthermore, the fact that her life has been under investigation by the German intelligence service even after the fall of the Berlin Wall illustrates the homophobic and anti-LGBT character of modern society. Although she was always under surveillance during the Cold War, the unfolding of her Stasi files held to reveal her position causes a bigger scandal despite her denial of those documents' content. Accused of spying on her friends, Charlotte shifts her identity at an early age and imposes her own gender on everyone including her own family. She becomes a part of a mechanism that places everyone under surveillance. However, according to her, she never betrays her people, but only uses this to her and her friends' advantage.

Charlotte's museum where she creates a false domesticity is a significant reflection of her deviant life. This can be seen as a challenge to conventional bourgeois life and theater because at the center of both stands family and domestic props redolent of home. Her museum, formed by souvenirs and furniture collected from others, looks like a house, but none of those items is meant to support a patriarchal conservative domestic setting. Furthermore, each time they are represented on stage as part of a play, they lose their meaning for the second time. This artificial situation removes the domestic value of those objects and neutralizes their meaning. In a way, they become revalidated: their meaning is first devaluated and a new quest for each object and normative definition is open on stage. A similar strategy is applied in terms of gender construction because Wright opens the sexual perceptions to redefinitions through Charlotte. Her house and gender enable Wright to challenge patriarchal structures. Similarly, Wright expresses his enthusiasm in his introduction to *Wife* to work on an alternative perspective of history and shed light on opposing views to mainstream perceptions of gender:

I'd long held a casual interest in gay history, and Charlotte seemed like a veritable treasure trove. There are only a handful of books about gay life in Germany

during the Second World War, and even fewer about the plight of the homosexual under Communism. Charlotte's story, I reasoned, might help to fill in the considerable blanks. Furthermore, her quiet heroism – maintaining an unwavering sense of herself during such repressive times – could be a boon to gay women and women everywhere. (xi)

Wright's interest in writing a play solely based on Charlotte's testimony, however, fades when her Stasi file provides evidence that conflicts with her words. Documents suggest that she has been a voluntary informant and has shared information with Stasi in order to protect herself and her museum. After abandoning the project for six years, Wright eventually decides to depict the whole process of meeting Charlotte and contemplating what has taken place between him and her rather than a conventional play. This method of questioning instead of a formal play, to an extent, fits Wright's purpose because the truth about Charlotte is still unknown. Thus, the second act starts with a letter from Alfred Kirschner who was imprisoned because of the information Charlotte has delivered to Stasi. Kirschner involves Charlotte into his business and they sell wall clocks to the American soldiers, and when Stasi finds clocks in Charlotte's house, they accuse her of "engaging in illegal sales, with foreign military personnel" (33). She blames Kirschner as he instructs her to do, and Kirschner goes to prison. Stasi seizes his collections, and Charlotte helps him when he gets out of prison. When the news spread years later, people wanted Charlotte to relinquish her Medal of Honor. Wright's skeptical tone evaluates antagonistic testimonies against Charlotte, but at the same time destroys this simplistic scaffolding. The unreliable nature of Stasi files, the authenticity of documents, and Charlotte's playful and protective nature complicate the dramatization of her life. Thus, as a format that seeks the truth, documentary drama questions the real motivation and purposes behind her actions.

Charlotte starts the play by introducing a phonograph and its inventor, Thomas Alva Edison. Praising the ability of recordings, Charlotte later compares Doug with Edison as they both record history with their devices. This signifies the importance of technological devices and

advances for documentary drama and explains how it has developed independent means of expressions as contributors to staging. Highlighting Charlotte's penchant for antiques, the inclusion of such equipment into the dramatic plot has enriched the narration as well as amplifying the authenticity of biography. Although it might have different outcomes depending on the usage, the function of recorders in this context facilitates the witnessing and approval of the recorded material by audience.

Another defying characteristic of *Wife* stems from its search for historical accuracy to test Charlotte's character. Wright turns this play into a shifting understanding or questioning of Charlotte as he learns more about her. Charles Isherwood criticizes Wright for "providing neat interpretations the audience might better be left to discover for itself" (64) by including himself, which, according to Isherwood, are the "weakest moments" in the play. I think what Isherwood misses in his contemplation of *Wife*, is that Wright turns this play into an odyssey to explore the process of creation while introducing Charlotte to the audience. On the other hand, Schiavi thinks Wright's self-inclusion "steadies Charlotte's shifting story" and "reassures audiences that their own search for truth is reasonable" (209). It is also clear that Wright is consonant with Holly Hughes who associates solo performances with the "American tradition of testifying, of witnessing history in the first person."

The increasing interest in one-person shows since the 1990s (*Fires in the Mirror*, *Vagina Monologues*, *Dame Edna: The Royal Tour*, *The Syringa Tree*, *Elaine Stritch at Liberty*, *700 Sundays*, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and *Buyer & Cellar*) is a sign for widespread thirst for real stories. Holly Hughes associates solo staged autobiography with the "American tradition of testifying, of witnessing history in the first person," and she adds, "It's a tradition that's entwined with this country's social change movements" (2). Biographical dramatizations defines a

significant kind of taste in the mutual connection of personal with political in our age. “We lean toward the personal paradigm perhaps in part out of journalistic laziness (it requires less homework) and in part out of a deeper-seated postmodern preference for micro-over macro- and metanarratives,” (23) says Jonathan Kalb to indicate the significance of the self-analytical monologue. He adds:

But more significantly, I think, we choose the personal because of our culture’s more and more overpowering ethic of self-actualization. The more we fetishize independence and nurture the narcissism that supports and girds it, the more self-conscious we begin to be about mirrors. Solo artists turn the mirror into a political tool (recall Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror*). They provide the audience with opportunities to identify with the other through a transformed single individual and thus bring the power of the mirror to the representation of otherness. (23)

Transforming a single individual into the representation of otherness has been a strong feature of solo performance, and the real in this context can be equated with authenticity, personal liberation, autonomy, and representation. Furthermore, David Roman considers “queer solo work” to be more powerful and “usually pedagogical” (26) as it confronts audiences with an unusual environment and actions that blur the boundary between acceptable norms and deviances. Charlotte’s transformation in German society and her survival under two different autocratic systems clearly highlight how such performances “teach us about what it means to be queer and how that aspect of ... identity intersects with various other identity factors, such as race—including whiteness—ethnicity, class, gender, and region” (Roman 5). This educational aspect of documentary dramas serves to inform audiences of all backgrounds even as it entertains or mobilizes them politically. Wright also mentions this feature in the play through his character, Doug, when he says that “You are teaching me a history I never knew I had. Thank you” (28). His gratitude for this pedagogical outcome is actually a thank you note for documentary drama because “What Charlotte testifies before Doug, and what Doug captures in his tape recorder, would seem a millennial spectator’s invaluable link to the buried queer past” (Schiavi 204).

Wright comments that the transformation of Charlotte also had a pedagogical effect on spectators during *Wife*'s 2005 debut in Krakow and it evoked "a kind of stunned reverence ; the dawning awareness that a new kind of truth is being told, one contrary to John Paul II's dehumanizing rhetoric" (2005, 53). Wright's emphasis on identity politics and constructive influence of Charlotte's story are repeated through another character, Mark Finley, who is described as a gay activist from San Francisco in *Wife*. Finley says, "We—as homosexuals—have been systematically denied our own history. Our own past. Perhaps that's why we're so eager to embrace a martyr, even when she's made of glass?" (43). Wright's reaction to mainstream history and his pluralist structure of characters are indicative of a search for new revelations in terms of sexual identity and dramatization.

Despite being "decidedly un-Broadway" (McKinley), *Wife* investigates a trending issue of the twenty-first century America. Sexual identity and gender rights seem to be an appealing topic for Broadway because of the emergence of feminist plays and subsequent the LGBT community plays. Charlotte's transformation embodies an identity-shifting story that defies all the impositions by the two most totalitarian regimes the Western world has experienced. Not only did Charlotte preserve and publicly illustrate her real identity, she also helped other homosexuals living under the yoke of Stasi in East Germany.

This play in general challenges everything that the American drama represents. First, it dismisses the drag dramaturgical choices of American staging. This transvestite on stage is not a subject of desire. Her anatomical maleness is not hidden, and her transformation is visibly explained through the characters. The performative cross-dressed body language that has enabled Charlotte to overcome the restrictions of daily socialist codes permits Wright to evade the

disciplining framework of realist drama. Defying the prevailing stage methods, a Shakespearean-like reversal of gender norms embodies the disparate components of Charlotte's sexual identity.

The episodic structure of *Wife* disturbs audiences' cathartic identification with the characters. The transition among scenes is not designed to create a psychological unity, but it gives selected scenes coming out of Doug Wright's memory wardrobe. The design of several characters performed by one actor also interrupts the flow of emotions towards audience and invites a session of questioning or investigation rather than a cathartic embrace of a conventional dramatic text. The mnemonic techniques used by Wright actually represent the question marks he had before *Wife* was shaped. Thus, memory does not function as a source of knowledge or nostalgia, but as the pivotal center of *Wife*; memory triggers the unveiling of the truths because it is capable of showing audience that what they consider as the truth depends on the type of memory employed.

The Exonerated

Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen wrote their documentary play, *The Exonerated* (2002), which was first performed by the Actor's Gang in Los Angeles, after interviewing sixty people who "had been sentenced to die, spent anywhere from two to twenty-two years on death row, and had subsequently been found innocent and freed by the state" (xi). They added police interrogation, personal correspondence, and six of those interviews to create a play focusing on the problems of the criminal justice system and capital punishment. The play was very successful and the playwrights relate it to "people's hunger for real stories that start real conversations that challenge them and move them outside their comfort zones" (The Uses of Empathy 15). It ran for six hundred performances off-Broadway in New York with a rotating cast of celebrities, toured the country and Europe afterwards, and became a Court TV movie featuring Susan

Sarandon and Danny Glover among many other celebrities. Its political reach was also wide: it has been staged at the United Nations, and in front of high legislative members, such as Janet Reno, Supreme Court Justice David Souter, Senator Patrick Leahy, as well as other prominent staff members of the Justice Department.

In their memoir, *Living Justice*, Blank and Jensen mention the “emotional immediacy” they felt at a conference on the death penalty at Columbia University where they listened to the voice of a man on death row over speakerphone. They decided to write a play, which covers the arrest, imprisonment and eventual exoneration of five men and a woman whose cases have been mismanaged due to several reasons especially misleading statements, disinterested public attorneys, and inconclusive criminal evidence programs. The play does not only criticize the police system, but also puts a spotlight on the harsh life conditions in prisons. Usually performed as a staged reading, *The Exonerated* focuses on the problems these convicts have experienced before, during, and after imprisonment.

The United States accounts for only 5% of the world’s population, but contains nearly 22% of the world’s imprisoned population. An average of 5 million American people are under supervision in the form of probation or parole. In addition to these high numbers, there is racial discrimination because 1 in 3 black men will go to prison if current trends do not change, according to Amnesty international reports. I think these statistics tell us the secret behind the success of *The Exonerated*. Incarceration discrimination is an underestimated problem of American lower classes whose voice cannot be heard on stages or at other cultural venues unless they are sponsored by the federal government or produced by private individuals like Blank and Jensen. Uncovering the problems of people for whom being represented is in front of the rest of

the nation is almost impossible, but the emergence of such plays provides space for reflecting these memories through elaborate aesthetic devices.

In 2015, 160 people were exonerated: 149 of those prisoners spent an average of 15 years in prison before they were released. More than two-thirds were members of minority groups, and half were African-American. Twenty-seven convicts falsely confessed to their crimes due to their young age or mental handicaps (Melber). Blank and Jensen also interviewed a prisoner with mental disabilities, but decided to omit his interview because his words “weren’t cohesive enough for an audience to understand” (Living Justice 115). The convicts’ lives are full of stories of misery and destruction, and once indicted, they have to spend around 15 years in order to reverse the verdict. There is a massive discrepancy in resource distribution for a capital case. Often a state gets around \$500,000 for a case, but most of it is spent on building the case and a public defender only gets around \$15,000 (Bussel). This situation creates an imbalance for the defendant. Jensen explains the dilemmas of the criminal justice system in an interview:

Our criminal justice system is fraught with error. There are many systemic causes of wrongful conviction, many of which have potential solutions. Many of these causes and potentials have been identified, and with the right legislation, the risk of wrongful conviction could be significantly lessened. (Bussel)

This play is a strong testimony to a history of individual struggle against institutional violence and racism. The stories of people are more important than political components in this play as the didactic tone is reduced to highlight the conditions of imprisonment. Does that make *The Exonerated* a political play? Showing politically oppressed people on stage, as Hans-Thies Lehmann points out, does not make a play political. The real component of political theatre is “through the implicit substance and critical value of its *mode of representation*” rather than “the direct thematization of the political” (Lehmann 178). *The Exonerated* succeeds in terms of

spreading its political message through the representation of silenced and oppressed characters, but praising only its political repercussions would underestimate its narrative merits.

When the curtain goes up, Delbert welcomes the audience as the narrator of the play and fills the gap between stories with his poetic wit and humor. Centered as an African-American choral figure, Delbert recites a poem which explains the hardships and dangers of being convicted. Delbert says, “How do we, the people, get outta this hole, what’s the way to fight,/ might I do what Richard and Ralph and Langston’n them did?” (E 8) He positions himself in a line of African-American poets fighting against injustice and highlights the lingering lineage of violence and discrimination in American history. After this poetic introduction, Gary, who is white, forty-five, a Midwestern hippie, and an organic farmer, starts to tell his story. His wife Sue accompanies him telling how Gary was arrested after finding the dead bodies of his mother and father who were brutally murdered. He says that he was pressured in the police station to volunteer to give a “vision statement” which is a hypothetical account of what could have taken place if he were the real murderer. The vision statement was used for a confession later in the court. Then comes Robert, who is African-American, in his thirties, and worked as a horse groomer, and his wife Georgia. Robert was accused of raping and killing a white girl with whom he had a sexual intercourse before. He says, “In my first trial, I knew I was going to prison—I had eleven whites and one black on that jury” (E 12).

Representation in documentary drama is an important concept because the history incorporated within the play is in dire need of narration and recognition. These people Blank and Jensen write about were wrongfully imprisoned and their stories could not find venue to be told to other people through artistic expressions prior to this play. Even if their stories have been mentioned somewhere else, the impact *The Exonerated* made has not been matched. Having

these ex-convicts' stories in the center of its plot, *The Exonerated* provides a forum for thinking through these characters whose years have been stolen from them because of the flaws in local administrations or the incompetence of people in the judicial system. To what extent, can *The Exonerated* initiate a change or reformation? Lehmann explains how theatre can act as a moral institution:

[T]here is one thing theatre can do: artistically deconstruct the space of political discourse as such – in as much as the latter erects the thesis, opinion, order, law and organically conceived wholeness of the political body – and to show its latently authoritarian constitution. This happens through the dismantling of discursive certainties of the political, the unmasking of rhetoric, the opening of the field of a non-thetical presentation. (178)

As Lehmann suggests, a theatre with a moral mission deconstructs the normative systems that privilege and rewards certain identities and lifestyles and *The Exonerated* analyzes the judicial system under the control of neoliberal system, which ignores or detriments those who cannot afford to hire a proper representation in defense of themselves. Clearly, some of these people were convicted because they were not aware of the jargon, discourse, and complicated concepts of the judicial system. If they had had the means to be properly represented at the court, they would not have to spend time in jail. Revealing the capitalist character of the American justice system, *The Exonerated* calls for a more accurate assessment of imprisonment and judicial murder.

Kerry, “a nineteen-year-old trapped in a forty-five-year-old’s body,” (E 5) was arrested for the murder of a girl whom he met a couple of months before the incident. Kerry, who had criminal record, became the main suspect in the case after his fingerprint was found in the victim’s apartment. The only witness of the incident pointed at Kerry as the person whom she saw in the apartment on the night of murder. Although her description fit the victim’s former lover rather than Kerry, his lawyer did not object to her testimony. In attempting to explain how

the neoliberal dynamics of the judicial system mediates the acceptance of such a statement, Kerry suggests that the structure of the court system has been depended on his financial condition: “My court-appointed attorney was the former DA who jailed me twice before. He was paid five hundred dollars by the state, and in Texas you get what you pay for” (16). Kerry’s words sum up the neoliberal structure of justice as well as any other public service expected from the government. Money is a key concept for understanding the relationship within any kind of system including the judicial one. The stories in *The Exonerated* are interwoven and there are dynamic bounces in the text. For example, Robert also reminds the audience of Orenthal James Simpson’ case and claims that everybody knows that O.J. was guilty, but his wealth protected him from going to prison. David, who is another exonerated character falsely accused of having robbed his grandmother’s house, also illustrates how local politics play a key role in solving such cases: “The sheriff was running for reelection at the time, and this was a big unsolved crime, so he had to bring somebody in for it” (18).

The Exonerated successfully dismantles the courts’ discourse and unmask their rhetoric by avoiding law phrases and complicated terms. It shows that it is our stories at the core once all of those embroidered language is removed. What the play focuses on is people and their stories. The playwrights do not aim to outsmart other people through the complicated construction of judicial system. There is no miracle or *deus ex machina* in their play. There is not one of the solidly old-fashioned courtroom dramas where the lonely lawyer Paul Newman walks in to save the day for everybody. On the contrary, what permeates through the stories is the sentiment of being defeated. Although it is difficult to avoid sentimental messages, the play focuses on a subversive questioning of the justice system. For example, when prisoners articulate the

vulnerability and destitution they felt because of being sentenced to death, bewilderment embraces them. One of the characters, Sunny Jacobs, expresses his surprise:

They tell you exactly how they're gonna do it. They're gonna send twenty-two hundred volts of electricity through your body until you're dead. And then they ask you if you have anything to say to that, and really it's kind of dumb-founding. So after the judge read the sentence, I just said, "Are you finished?" I didn't have anything to say. What do you say? How can you say anything to that? (45)

Jacobs is not alone at expressing his bewilderment with the inhumane intricacies of the system, but the play moves away from this emotional mood to highlight how the same mistakes have been repeated similarly in each case. Blank and Jensen particularly warn actors against over-emotionalizing in their memoir: "Whenever emotion runs the show, whether it's in the form of a desire for vengeance, a deeply felt need for a quick resolution or 'closure,' a real fear of further violence, or a prosecutor's personal desire to get ahead at all costs, it inevitably obscures the truth and leads to wrong decisions—often with tragic consequences" (reported in Ryan 134). What the playwrights emphasize is beyond the emotional and personal consequences of these imprisonments as the main point eventually becomes the U.S. prison and incarceration system. Thus, the proper emotional response to this performance should evoke a feeling for characters and perhaps elicit civil action. They describe their target audience in an interview:

And we especially want to reach people who are yes, on the fence about the death penalty (or in favor of it); who may think that the criminal justice system doesn't affect them because they haven't violated the law; who believe that it's safe to trust the authorities just to do their job; who think that if they vote, that's sufficient civic engagement; who think that things like this only happen to "other people," out there in some other place, and who don't realize how intertwined our fates all are in this country and this world. (Reported in Bussel)

In addition to the latent institutional discrimination such as having such a small group of non-white district attorneys throughout the whole country, the playwrights reiterate the fact that this system is shaped by individuals who might have biased or racist ideas about certain groups.

Thus, *The Exonerated* functions as a reminder to everyone about how the system can be

corrupted through people even though it purports to be different. Blank and Jensen believe that, “in this cultural moment, theater may be one of the last remaining places where true social self-criticism can take place” (The Uses of Empathy 15).

Sunny Jacobs was the only woman in the country who was sentenced to death. At the age of fifty, she is described as “a bright, pixieish yoga teacher from California” whose “lightness and positivity contrast with moments of great depth and clarity” (E 4). She and her husband Jesse met Walter Rhodes in Florida. While Rhodes was giving Sunny, her husband, and her kids a ride, two police officers pulled over his car. Rhodes shots both, and told Sunny and her family to run away with him in the police car. They were all captured soon and Rhodes confessed that it was Sunny and Jesse who shot the officers as part of his deal with authorities. Rhodes regretfully reversed his testimony years later and Sunny was released in 1992 after spending 18 years away from her family.

Delbert Tibbs, “a child of the sixties and the seventies,” (22) was convicted of the murder of a white man and the rape of a sixteen-year-old white girl in Florida in the early 1970s. The only evidence against him was the eyewitness account of the rape victim. Tibbs points out, “Now, initially, the girl who survived the thing described the murderer as a black man about five six, very dark complexion, with pockmarked skin and a bush Afro. Now that don’t fit me no matter how you draw it-except racially. ... We’re both black men” (E 23). Tibbs was released in 1977.

Robert Hayes was convicted of rape and murder of a white woman. His conviction was overturned in 1995 by The Florida Supreme Court and he was acquitted in a retrial in 1997. David Keaton confessed to the murder of a white police officer in 1972 under torture. As a black teenager, Keaton expresses how ignorant he was about the laws and rules when he says that “I

didn't know the rules and they were threatening me, and all that. And I was afraid. I mean they could go in there and beat you up, mess you up, hang you up, nobody'd ever hear nothin' else about you. And so I say, okay, to prevent that, I'm gonna go ahead and confess to the crime" (E 20). His reliance on the testimony of witnesses did not turn out to be a solution and he was sentenced to death in Florida. In 1972, the conviction was reversed by the state supreme court and Keaton was released only after another man was tried and convicted for the crime of which he was accused.

The Exonerated is not a conventional play. It is intended to be read by actors and mimetic characterization is minimal. Blank and Jensen also approve the minimization of theatrical atmosphere as long as "the focus [is] on the stories and on the actors who were telling them" (E xv). The sparse minimalism of the presentation reminds the audience that this is "not the reproduction of real life, but a theatrical demonstration of a political process, which all too obviously pushed an ideological message" (Innes 437). However, they also warn performers to balance pushing an ideological message and being too didactic in their presentation of the play. Calling for wariness about over-emotionalizing, the playwrights recommend a simple staging. Their warning is mostly about the subject matter, as "things can get overly dark rather quickly" (E xvi).

Despite the emotional tone, playwrights want all performers "to find the humor in their characters" as "too much gravity and depression" (E xvi) can destroy the real intention and turn it into a tearful melodrama. After all, this is a call for action, not tears. As a final warning, the playwrights ask for caution and respect for the people whose stories are told in the play, because they do not desire to see replicas of these people; "It's all in the words, and in the stories" (E xvii). They are pleased with having celebrities such as Danny Glover, Susan Sarandon, Vanessa

Redgrave, Robin Williams, Brooke Shields, and Mia Farrow among many others to take part in their play because “the audience is made aware that the actors are not playing characters but reading actual people’s words” (Ryan 137). This strategy of creating a significant distance between the actors and characters keeps the audience aware that what is narrated in this text gives voice to the testimony of real people. This distinction highlights the capacity of documentary drama to enable the representations of historically marginalized characters as a reminder of this society’s problems.

Despite its convincing plea for humanity and restitution, *The Exonerated* consists of personal and political contradictions that bring further questions forward. It is clear that the play aims treat all races or criminals equally. However, the fact that the majority of convicts on death row is guilty of killing a white person is an ignored and understated element. Katy Ryan explains in detail and criticizes that *The Exonerated* does not mention victims’ race in these cases. The fact that all victims in these cases were white (130) can change the atmosphere. This common point signals at the urgency in finding the guilty party in white murders and it is another common feature among those wrongfully convicted people. Ryan emphasizes the problem of representing three black and three white convicts:

Unless contextualized by the racial makeup of the United States, this “balanced” presentation suggests an equivalency and risks obscuring the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration, wrongful convictions, and capital sentencing on African American, American Indian, and Latina/o individuals, families, and communities. (130)

Similarly, the focus on how a few local sheriffs²³ have insistently pursued conviction for the minority members reduces the significance of racial supremacy permeated through the body of

²³ The playwrights express the psychology of small towns’ sheriffs and explain how the pressure in such places can be against innocent suspects: “Wrongful conviction is a problem all over America—from small towns to suburbs to exurbs to cities. However, the phenomenon seems to

the judicial system and the conditions of imprisonment. Gary explains how prisons are far from being rehabilitative and adds the risks and dangers of being incarcerated: “The whole place was run by gangs, you know, there was ongoing warfare between the different factions. And the only gang open to white guys was the Northsiders—which is basically made up of the Aryan Nation and the Skinheads. So I had no gang protection. So I kept to myself a lot. Killed a lot of time on my own” (E 48). Gary learns to do embroidery in the prison and goes through a positive transformation despite the adversity he has experienced. However, what Kerry encounters is an atrocious account of how the privately-run prisons were inadequate to provide a safe and reintegrating atmosphere. He was accused of being a homosexual in the court, and when it was heard by other inmates, he was raped and sodomized.

Historical investigation in *The Exonerated* is possible through silent moments as a reminder of the time spent in a prison for audience members. That time is a sign of loss just like the way people look at the stage and see nothing. That silence is threatening because lack of action changes the whole tone. Close to end of the play, Jacob asks audience members perhaps a rhetorical but provoking question: “1976 to 1992, just remove that entire chunk from your life, and that’s what happened” (E 66). This question is reminiscent of what documentary drama aims to accomplish. It does not glorify the past, because it does not exist within the repertoire of collective memory. It is surpassed in a prison, in a secluded place; it is forbidden to be witnessed.

play out in distinct and specific ways in smaller communities. In close-knit towns, when a horrific crime is committed, the emotional effect on the public can be quite dramatic—people often feel more vulnerable because of the small size of their community, and consequently there is more pressure on prosecutors to identify and detain a suspect immediately. While this is certainly understandable, pressure on police to work fast often increases the risk of wrongful conviction. Sometimes there can be so much pressure on the cops to “get the guy” that getting the *right* guy gets lost in the shuffle” (Reported in Bussel).

Thus, documentary drama brings in new testimonies and other materials to fill that gap. History is not written by *victors* in documentary drama. On the contrary, it is the story of the forgotten, abhorred, and the innocent. In their memories, Blank and Jensen summarize the essence of *The Exonerated*: “[T]he exonerated people had something to teach us about facing darkness—even death—and coming out the other side... [T]he exonerated people had something to teach us about survival, endurance, and hope. That was the heart of the play” (L 254).

The Exonerated has triggered a structural and political response to the problems mentioned in the play. Former Illinois Governor George Ryan announced that he decided to commute the sentences of all the prisoners on state’s death row after watching *The Exonerated* organized by a coalition of groups. This situation, to a certain extent, reasserts theatre’s power to arouse empathy in such situations, as Ryan is well known for being a longtime supporter of the death penalty. In addition to the affirmative influence the play has created on the judicial system’s members, it has raised more than half a million dollars for the people whose stories it tells. Many panels, discussions, conferences, talkbacks, and other social activities before and after the play have enabled more people to be involved. *The Exonerated* has shown that despite the emotional and private structure of the stories, it started a conversation to improve the criminal and judicial system.

Christine Simonian Bean worked as a dramaturg for a 2013 production of *The Exonerated* and found out that the cast and directors totally ignored the fact that one of the characters, Bill Hayes, whose story was told in the play was incarcerated again for a murder that predated the crime referenced in the play. Bean asserts that Hayes’ recent conviction creates ethical problems for the play which fights against the issue of wrongful conviction. However, as Hayes’ case illustrates, the notion of truth in the play is damaged and a further editing of the text

might be prerequisite for other theatre practitioners before they stage the play. Although Bean is right to criticize “aesthetically conservative characteristics which shout out loud the leftist political messages rather than addressing troubled epistemologies about truth, authenticity and reality” (193), I think keeping Hayes’ testimony also invites a philosophical investigation of the crime and the guilty. Hayes’ situation complicates the normative notions of the judicial system and exposes the dilemmas of individual testimonies at the core of this issue. However, Bean is right to call out the playwrights about informing their audience on Hayes’ situation. On the other hand, the update on his situation would include evidence for the slippery nature of individual testimony of which the play is critical. Thus, *The Exonerated*’s objective assessment of both sides of the judicial system can be complete. This situation echoes the last words of Tibbs who says, “For thoughts that do not end in concreteness” (76). The stories that *The Exonerated* tells do not fade within the walls of the theatre.

The other cases explained in the play consist of white defendants. Gary Gauger, who was convicted of murdering his parents in 1993, was encouraged to give the police a “vision statement,” describing how he might hypothetically have killed his parents. Gauger was convicted because of the flaws in his statement. Gauger received a full pardon from former Illinois governor George Ryan when the FBI found the real perpetrators.

The way documentary drama is promoted and understood by its audiences assumes that the material is factual, is treated objectively, and is represented accurately. Yet the whole concept of the genre is highly political, and almost without exception, the work produced is propagandistic: factual form serves an embedded message. In addition, the whole idea of “fact” is deceptive, since verbal testimony forms the primary data for verbatim theatre, its accuracy ultimately depends on the honesty of the speaker. Authenticity, therefore, becomes limited to the

means of collecting the “facts” —such as unedited recordings—and to the medium of transmission requires making audiences aware that the performers are reproducing the words of others.

The Laramie Project

The Laramie Project (TLP), as the name aptly suggests, is a group work and attempts to explore an issue rather than stage a finite image within the context of Western dramatic tradition. Its quality of being a project moves the discussion from staging an incident to inciting a sophisticated investigation of a deeper phenomenon. Similarly, *I Am My Own Wife* opens the path for a discussion of gender identities whereas *The Exonerated* challenges the assumptions of incarceration and the judicial system through the stories of exonerated people. *TLP* constructs a public interview around the murder of Matthew Shepard, who was picked from a pub by two local thugs, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, on October 6, 1998, robbed, and pistol-whipped nearly to death. His body tied to a fence was found the next day by a cyclist, and Shepard died in a hospital five days later. His death commenced protests and demonstrations all over the country and members of The Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP) travelled to Laramie to collect material about this incident. Like *Fires in the Mirror* and *The Exonerated*, *TLP*'s dramatic construction is based on conversations taken from interviews which scrutinize the events before and after the death of Shepard. *TLP* addresses the phenomenon of violence in American society through the interviews of people in a small town and observations of actors/playwrights. It brings in a new perspective to understand why this murder took place and provides an opportunity for Laramie residents to be heard and represented. The encounter with others in a major role on stage operates as an ethical prologue that questions the nature of theatrical dynamics as well as social problems.

Emmanuel Levinas describes the Other as anterior to the self and prior to discourse. For him, the relation to the Other helps the self come into being. Therefore, violence to the Other brings an interrogation and harms the Self because they are inseparable parts of a whole. (Levinas 19) Derrida also resembles otherness to a sort of circumcision, a wound that opens the self to the Other. (Derrida 12) Les Wade sees a significant similarity between Levinas' and Derrida's theories of otherness and *TLP*'s purpose. He points out that "The intentions and attitudes of Kaufman and his Tectonic company certainly appear in keeping with a Levinasian regard for otherness, as the violence that permeates the play is countered by appeals to an acceptance of and obligation for the Other" (12). Kaufman's and his friends' effort reminds of Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* which Levinas is fond of quoting: "We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others" (Hand 2). The warm welcome that people in Laramie show to TTC is a sign of the trust and responsibility. The portrayal of the Other provides space for everyone to understand primarily each other's identities through the mirror turned outside.

The play consists of three acts and the first one portrays a happy and safe Laramie for most of its inhabitants. Testimonies from different age groups verify that the "live and let live" attitude of the state provides a sense of safety and freedom. However, this image is shattered with the brutal beating of Shepard. Kaufman skillfully stacks up layers in the first part, and out of this peaceful land, he and his crew find a crack in the soil. From the beginning, Kaufman²⁴ uses contrast in testimonies so that different ideas on the same issue can be heard. For example, Rebecca Hiliker, who is the head of theatre department at the University of Wyoming, points out,

²⁴ Although Leigh Fondakowski (Head Writer), Stephen Belber, Greg Pierotti, and Stephen Wang are also writers of *TLP*, Kaufman will only be mentioned for practical reasons.

“You have an opportunity to be happy in your life here” (13). Kaufman portrays a quiet small town setting before he dives into further discussion and enables people’s expression of their town’s safety and security. Kaufman’s strategy is to portray a regular place in America and then expose how a hidden danger is embedded within that place as well as anywhere else in the country. Jill Dolan believes in the utopian power of *TLP* despite being skeptical: “While I believe *The Laramie Project* is flawed as a political project, I support the work it tries to do and appreciate it as an example of the complexity of using theater to comment on and participate in national dialogues” (125).

The display of underestimated facts and dangers to start a national dialogue is a strong side of documentary drama. The efficacy of *TLP* as a representative of this genre stems from its deprivation of authorial power. All plays in this study demonstrate an anxiety over the idea of an omnipotent articulation of the issues they have addressed. In *TLP*, Kaufman continually emphasizes that this project aims to provide “an opportunity for the community to talk” (Quoted in Shewey 15). This hesitation in documentary drama for creating conventional narratives has been fueled by the mistrust towards the Western civilization and enlightenment after the WWII. Docudrama expresses the elimination of Cartesian self whose existence is entirely self-evident and purports to give the other space to articulate its self as anterior to understanding the society and its own self.

The scope and usage of collected materials through interviews can be brought up to question the motives and self-censorship in *TLP*. The amount of the data collected for documentary drama is often abundant and the process of selection requires a significant elimination. However, the TTP share the selection process during the performance and every hint about selection process is given to the audience. Putting the concept of community forward, *TLP*

reminds its audience that the editorial process of highlighting some of the interviews more than others does not hinder the ethical engagement of the group to question the nature of this murder. For example, Dolan believes that “Implicitly, the play blames Shepard by giving Laramie’s homophobes so many chances to express their disdain for him and by giving their speech so much credence” (125). However, providing room for Laramie’s homophobes to express their disdain is the way to start a conversation and find a mutual point of negotiation.

Whenever there is death or injustice, it is inevitable to have an emotional structure which might be threatening to dramatic cohesiveness of a docudrama. To avoid emotional encounters, for example, Kaufman does not include the victim, Matthew Shepard into the play. As Leslie A. Wade points out, “One could argue that the play is more about Kaufman (and the authorial self) than Shepard, more about inserting a politics than opening a space of investigation” (21). Although Wade’s point makes sense as the group’s voice sometimes dominates the rest of the issues, Kaufman uses these moments to include everybody’s, including his own troupe’s, feelings within the emotional repertoire of the play. The interviewers stay self-reflexive about their positions to reflect on their personal experiences with political resonance. Dolan notes that “The Tectonic performers, oscillating between playing themselves and playing others, conveyed most clearly their own mystification with the culture of Laramie, rather than a considered deconstruction of their own powerful perspectives as the ones shaping the telling of this story in this forum” (127).

In his introduction to the play, Kaufman describes his project as focusing on “moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus” (iv). *Wife* and *The Exonerated* are also implicitly connected to his project as all question a certain aspect of dominant ideology. Kaufman explains his intentions in an interview:

“The hypothesis was that if my company listened to the people of the town at this moment in their history, we would be able to create a document that would serve as a portrait of that town – and, by extension, the country – at the end of the millennium” (Svich 70). All of these plays use performance to investigate personal experience with political resonance. They act as mediums between the layers of society to trigger a conversation about historical events.

Documentary plays are capable of transforming this conversation into a project. Like an archetypal hero’s journey, the TTP members go through several missions and the sense of journey is highly visible not only in *TLP*, but also in *The Exonerated* and *I Am My Own Wife*. This feeling facilitates the discussion to reflect implicitly from a distance on the events that the protagonist(s) have suffered. Suggested to sound like “cacophony” or “invasion” (46), *TLP* positions the townspeople as part of a national discussion in which they were mostly excluded. The mentioning of back and forth travels from New York to Laramie creates the there/here divide to illustrate that there are many things both parties need to learn from each other. Just like a hero’s journey in archetypal stories, they need to listen to each other, and find out the virtuous and vicious aspects. Although Jill Dolan criticizes the play because it “inadvertently exoticize[s] Laramie—sometimes belittling it and sometimes romanticizing it,” she admits that *TLP* leads a sophisticated audience to think that such a crime “couldn’t happen here,” a wrongheaded and false understanding of hate crimes as a practice of only rural communities” because “Gay bashing happens in New York and other large cities every day” (118). Their journey has unfolded the disillusionment of local people with the press as Leigh Fondakowski, assistant director and head writer in The Tectonic Theater, points out, “The people didn’t feel like they [the media] had had any closure. They were very upset with how they had gotten represented in the press” (Kuchawara).

As a result of this distrust between local people and press, The Tectonic Theatre Company bridges in between through testimonies. As Rebecca Hilliker points out in the play, “When this happened they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all dialogue stopped” (11). *The Laramie Project*, like other documentary dramas, purports to bring that dialogue back between the audience and the event. It transforms history into a platform where everyone can learn something from rather than simply lamenting the incident. Its dramaturgy underlines the struggle to balance the opposing views and propagates tolerance instead of violent reactions from both sides of the argument.

Multiple characterizations by actors and the subsequent presentation of different voices on stage entangle significant questions about the ethics of performance and participatory democracy which has been damaged by the notion of truth and journalism in mainstream media. In general, the public is skeptical of these institutions’ objectivity as a medium between news sources and people. Father Roger Schmit, the local Catholic priest, echoes this concern when he was interviewed: “I will trust you people that if you write a play of this that you ... say it right, say it correct. I think you have a responsibility to do that” (32). *TLP* cannot claim to be purely objective, but adding this skepticism into the text enables audience members to consider this point while watching the play. This is a powerful method that documentary drama often employs to highlight the climate of doubt fostered by postmodern tendencies and the exposition of scandals between mass media companies and political entities.

In the second act more detail is given through the testimonies of a local sheriff and the bicyclist who found and gave first aid to Shepard. One question that is repeated in this part is why Shepard’s death has been so important for the nation. Amy L. Tigner lists 17 people who were murdered because of their sexual orientations between 1998 and 2000, and asks the same

question: “Why did Shepard, in particular, become the focus of enormous mainstream media and popular attention, including that of the White House?” (138). Tyler mentions Matthew’s race, class, age, and the location of the crime to explain the attractiveness of this tragedy for the rest of nation and adds that “Such a sensational death perpetuates the image of Laramie as the Wild West and Matt as the Western heroic yet tragic figure” (3). However, Kaufman strips Laramie of this exotic Western town image and illustrates how citizens of this place live in daily American norms and lead a similar life just like they do anywhere else. Thus, this play is called *The Laramie Project*, not the tragedy of M. Shepard as a mainstream version would have been named.

The fence which Shepard was tied to becomes an icon which represents suffering and pain. The way people started to visit this fence as part of a pilgrimage recalls how Shepard’s experience has been assessed through a religious perspective. A local pastor, Stephen Mead Johnson quotes from the Bible, “God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (24) to describe the emotional frustration and highlight the victim imagery in this situation. A fence, as a signifier of Laramie’s mountainous and agricultural geography, becomes one of the first images to describe Shepard as he is not represented on stage. Therefore, Kaufman inserts images instead of a character. This method, first of all, respects Shepard’s memory, and reduces his personal involvement without adding emotional points. Amy Tigner relates Shepard’s missing figure to the play’s resemblance to a pastoral elegy whose “central figure is always present in the minds of others but absent himself” as the tragic death of the hero in pastoral “is what calls the community together” (4).

Kaufman makes his audience feel the first trepidation of his company members when they arrive at Laramie as most have not been to such a small town built on the stereotypes of the

redneck attitude. Statistically New York is more dangerous than Laramie, but these people show extreme caution by never being alone and having a cell phone. Kaufman inserts his precautionary tone between the lines of safe and peaceful Laramie rhetoric. He shows that as most places when you scratch the surface, then emerges the threatening face of phobias and hatred.

Although it is a project on Laramie, the interaction between town people and troupe members constitutes an enlightening process for the visitors as well. The intricacies of language in this part of the world need to be explained to actors coming from New York. When actor Greg Pierotti interviews Marge Murray, she says, “I could run around the house in my all togethers, do the housework while the kids were in school. And nobody else could see me.” Greg does not understand the phrase “in my all togethers” and Marge explains, “Well, yeah, honey, why wear clothes?” (15).

Amy Tigner argues that Kaufman and his troupe censored certain interviews in order to create the effect sought. For example, Aaron Kreifels is the bicyclist who finds Shepard tied to the fence and calls 911. Tigner describes that Kreifels’ characterization is based on a typical romance structure in which a young man leaves society, encounters a conflict, overcomes some obstacles, goes through a positive transformation and then returns as a changed man. One of the company members, Mercedes Herrero explained that they removed anti-gay sentiments from Kreifels’ interviews because it would make him sound “out of line” or “out of character” as that would not be a good portrayal of the hero that TTP tries to create (Tigner 147).

TLP’s positioning of memory as a transformative force appears to be their activist method because such a change on its audiences is one of its primary objectives. Two characters, Jedediah Schultz and Romaine Patterson, express the impact of the whole incident on their daily

and social lives. Patterson, a friend of Matthew Shepard, became an activist after witnessing the homophobic sentiment surrounding Shepard's murder. She and her friends organized a protest against the ultra-right-wing Reverend Phelps who visited the University of Wyoming campus. Patterson decides to work as an activist and lead a career in political activism after being honored for her contributions by the Anti-Defamation League in Washington D.C. Her transformation from an obedient small town girl to an activist cosmopolitan woman represents the rebellion against the conservative climate behind Shepard's murder. Although living in a metropolis does not necessarily indicate a civilized or advanced life, Patterson's new life sustains relations of more understanding and tolerance. This transformation, on the contrary, is a signal at the productive capabilities of urban settings.

Schultz is another Wyomite character who always had a desire for acting. He prepared an excerpt from *Angels in America* to apply for auditions, but his conservative Christian parents did not come to watch him because they were averse to his playing a homosexual character. Schultz had mixed feelings about homosexuals and homosexuality because of his family's attitude. However, Shepard's death and his encounter with the TTC has completely changed his opinion about homosexuality. He later takes part in his department's production of *Angels in America* and this time his family embraces his professional and sexual identities. Kaufman shows the healing aspect of performance through Schultz's journey. Tigner calls this "a conversion narrative, not from sin to Christianity, but from narrow Christianity to tolerance, from small town conservatism to urban liberalism" (145). However, associating this change with religious concepts would be out of the TTC's purposes. The journey of a hero as a literary pattern fits better to describe Schultz's transformation rather than a conversion because conversion sounds against the egalitarian principles which implies that people need to be converted to respect the

other party. *TLP* aims to prove the opposite and show everyone that listening to each other despite their shortcomings is what we need in the first place. Changing your side from one to another is not an act of conversion, but it is a part of human nature. We fear what we do not know. The more we know each other, the more we listen to each other, the less we will have to fear.

Conclusion

The documentary plays analyzed in this study have autobiographical elements that chronicle playwrights' reactions and their eventual transformation from outsider to insider within the convention of storytelling and role playing. Narrators open the play with an introduction and function as a guide throughout the play. In *The Exonerated*, one of the characters takes the part to narrate the whole story, but in *The Laramie Project*, an actor is in charge of introducing the play and other actors as well as main plotlines. *I Am My Own Wife* does not contain a narrator, but the characters take turns to describe the events and thus functioning like a regular narrator. The inclusion of a narrator strengthens autobiographical elements of the productions and validates the play's authority and claims. However, we cannot take everything to be accurate because it is part of an autobiography. All of these works are constructed texts as much as any other fictional work. One advantage that documentary drama has over other literary works is that it does not turn its plot into a make and believe play in the sense of classical drama. From the acting methods to character creation, documentary drama prefers a non-Aristotelian way to explain its subject matter because it does not aim to create a cathartic presence for audience members per se; it brings in more questions not answers. Despite its well-established structure of plotline, it does not require a resolution at the end because there is no storyline consonant with

classic Western structure that comprises a climax, resolution, and strong characters to submit messages.

These plays approach history as a form of resistance in contemporary drama. Thus, the past, the present, and the future are embodied in these plays to represent and revise a transition between a failed yesterday and a potential tomorrow. They aim to alter our understanding of the past to generate an inquisitive space especially about divisive topics.

Carol Martin lists six functions of contemporary documentary theatre: ‘1. To reopen trials in order to critique justice’; ‘2. To create additional historical accounts’; ‘3. To reconstruct an event’; ‘4. To intermingle autobiography with history’; ‘5. To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction’; ‘6. To elaborate the oral culture of theatre’ (2006, pp. 12–13). In addition to Martin’s list, I would like to add that American political theatre in general has taken refuge in documentary theatre. This study illustrates the reluctance in contemporary American drama to engage in social issues even though the neoliberal system is the culprit for most of the problems mentioned in the plays. Although this reluctance has caused a voyeuristic attitude towards solving these problems, neoliberalism has created its own mechanical systems of criticism. Hence, documentary drama has been a strong movement all over the world to respond to the disguised and genuine problems of masses.

These plays constitute a public sphere where audience members are invited to consider the presupposed meaning of the events and be part of a temporary sociality to witness and attend. Under the guidance of critical reasoning, most of the time what these plays evoke can be defined as “a noninstitutional forum for public debate based upon a wide variety of expressive concerns” (Roberts and Crossley 20). These texts allow for collective experiences of social solidarity, grief,

oppression, as well as ‘political mimesis’ which Jane Gaines defines as having a capacity to respond to and to engage in sensuous struggle (10).

The concept of truth has changed significantly in the twenty-first century as there has been a common skepticism about the news on mainstream media. 9/11 and its aftermath should be the zenith of conspiracy theories, and the emergence of personal blogs, opinion columns for public in local newspapers, and the popularity of social media have diversified interpretation all around the world. Although drama is a fictional product and has no obligation to present realist works, the intellectual capacity of theatre combined with authentic documents harbors a persuasive rhetoric against fabricated or falsified news. David Hare associates this interest with a return to realism:

All revolutions in art, said someone, are a return to realism. Given the most art forms, in the hands of metropolitan elites, tend to drift away from reality, what could be more bracing or healthy than occasionally to offer authentic news of overlooked thought and feeling? [...] What a welcome corrective to the cozy art-for-art’s-sake racket which theatre all too easily becomes! ... [T]heater using real people has become a fabulously rich and varied strand which, for many years, has been pumping red cells into the dramatic bloodstream. (112-13)

As a signifier of the shift in philosophical and scientific thinking, documentary drama in the twenty-first century “pumps red cells” that opposes the perception of realism despite its precedents in the twentieth century. In a way, documentary drama has inherited the legacy of Off-Off Broadway, a rebellious form that has re-emerged in local theatres funded by commissions and sponsors. At the same time, these plays have been “the product of a more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before” (Watts 9). Ian Watts’ account is useful to identify similar traits of the rise of the novel and documentary theatre. The pioneering position that the novel had in the 18th century resembles the resistance of documentary theatre to amplify a realist vein in drama. Documentary theatre practitioners draw

attention to the issue of correspondence between dramatic works and the reality they imitate. Inviting an epistemological inquiry, documentary drama is reminiscent of the realist novel that arose in the modern period as a detachment from its classical and medieval heritage. Similarly, the heritage of dramatic forms and content was not left behind in documentary theatre practices, but the restrictions and impositions stemming from traditions have been, to a significant extent, ignored. This change has enabled documentary plays to be free from the body of past assumptions and conventional methods. One important aspect of this change has been that partial subordination of the plot to the pattern of mnemonic recording is defiant of the character-based drama model. Jeannette Malkin associates the changed view of memory with postmodernism:

In postmodern theater, voice and image are privileged over narrative and character, the collective over the individual, the interactive over the self-sufficient, intact text. In this reformed reality, the question of who is doing the remembering is problematic. Unlike memory in modernist plays ..., where a protagonist, or group, is the explicit source of remembrance, postmodern drama has no psychologically endowed characters who can act as the locus of recall. For postmodernism, individual recall is no longer the relevant paradigm, since the rooted, autonomous self, the subject-as-consciousness, is no longer available. (7)

Malkin associates memory plays with postmodern aesthetics and looks for the roots of these plays in the second half of the twentieth century starting from Beckett's late plays. Memory blended with different national and ethnic backgrounds is her focal point in her book *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* in which she analyzes Samuel Beckett, Heiner Muller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Thomas Bernhard.

However, this new understanding in which "the rooted, autonomous self, the subject-as-consciousness is no longer available" challenges the instinctive models implanted by educators such as Konstantin Stanislavsky, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg because an instinctive acting and playwriting model involves an individual memory which indicates a Cartesian idea of that "I think, therefore I am." Ironically, Stanislavsky's *ecole*, which can be

considered a forerunner to most American practitioners, is also based on memory. His affective memory technique, which requires actors to call on the memory of details from a similar situation to import appropriate feelings onto the stage, was evolved into emotional (Meisner) and sense (Adler) memory later by other instructors. However, documents-based plot indicates that “I can prove, therefore I am.” Such an ontological revelation can expose the flaws of the realism in a system where the truth or authenticity of social findings have been questionable. Documentary drama relies on a documented memory not one that is recalled by an actor. Similar to Malkin’s account, individual recall is erased in both genres, but what is reinserted as memory shows the contradiction between postmodernist and documentary drama.

Although I agree with Malkin’s idea that “the fragmentation of experience and the dissolution of a unified self-banished memory the security of individual control,” (8) documentary theatre has different incentives besides postmodernist tendencies to avoid traditional dramatic structures and methods. As most of the documents used in plays have a political context, they oppose the status quo rather than a postmodernist crisis in individuals. As noted in chapter 2, neoliberalism is the elephant in the room in American drama. Malkin acknowledges the impact of neoliberalism when she points out, “American postmodernism is the effect of an advanced capitalistic society whose ubiquitous technology and mediated forms of communication gave new meaning to notions of simultaneity and the interactive” (14). Malkin’s examples of Beckett, Bernhard, Muller, and Shepard can express such marks and traces of cultural discourses, but the same concern cannot be observed in documentary theatre because as Andreas Huyysen has argued, “The turn to the memory in postmodernism is a reaction to the modernist structure of temporality that celebrated the new as utopian” (Reported in Malkin 10). I disagree with the idea of memory’s return as a reaction to the modernist structure. On the

contrary, contemporary interest in memory can be called a reaction to postmodern erasure of social history and its ambiguity.

A document's significance imposes the unbearable weight of truth, which has been challenged by postmodern culture and its myriad communication channels. Nietzsche, who does not accept the existence of absolute truths, reminds how everything we devoutly believe in is actually a commentary on things and people. Following the artefacts of a Nietzschean philosophy, the culture of the late twentieth century has impaired the relation between the artist and spectator because it has been implied that nothing can substitute the truth in artistic recreations. In that case, can we ask if using a document is an attempt to substitute the truth? After all, it certifies a particular account of the past or it is authorized to represent the memory. It does not denote a hard ontological category.

Political theorists or pundits might have more to say on the matters in these plays, but the way these playwrights have bent the winds of social and cultural change through their characters have been informative. The past they have uncovered is connected with the present and it has ratified modes of making sense of the world. *The Laramie Project*, *The Exonerated*, and *I Am My Own Wife* are outcomes of collective labor. In contrast to mainstream theatre, their writers have combined forces with others to produce the text, rehearse, and stage it. If nation is an 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson suggests, this is a dynamic process where a synchronic reading of this community is produced by artists and theatre practitioners.

"Theater is the art of repetition, of memorized and reiterated texts and gestures. A temporal art, an art-through-time, theater also depends on the memorized attentiveness of its audience with whose memory ... it is always in dialogue," says Jeanette Malkin to describe the significance of repetition in drama. Marvin Carlson also defines theatre as an institution "haunted

by repetition as he points out that the “ghostly reappearance of historical and legendary figures on the stage has been throughout history an essential part of the theatre experience” (7). We learn through repetition. That is how we recognize or apprehend things as it bends souls over time. The past narrated and repeated in *The Exonerated*, *I Am My Own Wife*, and *The Laramie Project* has a disturbing tone unlike postmodernist models. Their accent on harsh realities of history is especially pronounced when audience members are invited to witness the flaws of our society. It might be a wrongfully convicted person, a screened and scrutinized life of a transvestite, or a brutally murdered homosexual, but in the end, documentary drama shows us the urgent need to look back to understand the present. Our mistakes are all buried in the magical box of the past. Without glorifying those, they can be our guides for tomorrow.

4. Dramatic Revision of Forgotten History

This chapter analyzes the usages of memory and history in historical plays. The methods playwrights employ to integrate history into their fictive constructions are observed in Emily Mann's *Mrs. Packard* (2007), Sarah Ruhl's *The Next Room or the Vibrator Play* (2009), and Moises Kaufman's *33 Variations* (2009). These three plays contain performative and textual moments that transmit memory as they reconstruct historical moments. In contrast to other plays in this study, history plays deliberately perform or represent memory and, as Keith Peacock notes, there is "historical factuality in either or both character and event" (5) in these plays. Chapter 3 and 4 have significant similarities because they both use historical materials to the extent that their authenticity has been questioned at times. The amount of historical material, however, is not determinative in their genres. Documentary drama, in last three decades, have evolved into a completely different genre all over the world. In the US, it has taken the role of political drama which has not been a strong vein in American drama since the 1950s. Documentary drama aims to enlighten people and, to a certain extent, educate them in certain topics. The examples in this study show plays based recorded material by their playwrights or their troupes. This exemplifies a major difference between historical and documentary plays. The latter is about today, talking about current or very recent people or events. For example, *The Laramie Project* focuses on the murder of Mathew Shepard who became an important icon for the LGBT communities in the US, or *I Am My Own Wife* tells the story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf who was a symbol of survival and mystery for the German transvestites. Characters in documentary drama are usually familiar or their stories appeal to contemporary issues. Historical drama has a similar strategy to find points for the audiences to identify themselves with characters. As a major difference, historical playwrights dig into the dusted treasuries of history

and pick a certain event or character to include within their texts. For example, Moises Kaufman questions Beethoven's reason(s) to write 33 variations for Diabelli's insignificant melody. Kaufman uses a music professor to bridge the time gap and link it to contemporary characters' lives. Emily Mann unfolds the unknown story of Elizabeth Packard to raise awareness about the difficulties women experience in their daily lives.

History plays, by definition, represent historical events, which is not a new literary genre in the US. However, the term is usually identified with Shakespeare who is known as the forefather of English history play. Although Shakespeare's history plays have always been popular on this side of the Atlantic, American drama has also created successful dramatic replicas of historical events and characters especially in the twentieth century. As an example of this genre in the twentieth century, Maxwell Anderson, in his plays *Elizabeth the Queen* and *Anne of the Thousand Days*, attempted to recreate Elizabethan verse drama. Robert E. Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1938), James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter* (1966), and Arthur Miller's *The American Clock* (1980) are some of the major works that deal with particular periods in American history. As Patricia R. Schroeder points out, "The nature of the past and its influence on the present have been obsessive concerns of American writers since the Pilgrims arrived" (21).

Despite its golden years, over time the tragedies of kings and princes, the era of verse drama, the heroism of knights, and the stories of the royalty have lost their allure. If these plays do not contain superstars in their casts now, they will not last long on stages. Contemporary history plays tell the stories of regular people or comprise a combined set of characters from different backgrounds. They seldom depict historical figures as the interest in political overtones

of the past has faded. Brian Walsh notes how the audience members' expectations can change a play's temporal shape:

To perform history produces an experience of pastness that highlights a sense of loss and distance, provoked by the knowledge that historical people and events, like the theatrical people and events representing them onstage, are fleeting. [...] The evanescence of the theatrical event, its status as taking place in time, helps spectators to understand the idea of historical knowledge as being similarly transient. (62)

Herbert Lindenberger speaks less assuredly about the definition of history plays when he says that, "I might as well admit that by a strict definition one cannot categorize historical drama as a genre at all, though one can speak of specific forms of historical plays which prevailed at certain moments in history" (ix). A theater play, as Walsh argues, can give its audiences a different experience of time through the magic of theater. Similarly, Niloufer Harben states that a historical play "evinces a serious concern for historical truth or historical issues, though the expression of that concern and the treatment of those issues may take protean forms" (18).

Analyzing the emergence of the literary genres of the historical novel and the historical drama, Erika Fischer-Lichte points out that "The preoccupation with the past was an attempt to solve a double need that had arisen in all sectors of society through the process of industrialization" (231). In other words, when the present is not sufficient to fulfill society's expectations, it becomes widely accepted to look back due to "an increasingly complex and depressing reality ... to find orientation and identity in a changing world" (231). Traditionally, historical dramas have social origins. They have to present history to new generations and people about certain characters from the national repertoire. However, modern historical plays have "dramatic characters in a dramatic present, rather than 'real figures' in an historical past" (Menhennet 1). Writing a historical play is difficult because it needs to appeal to the present through the past. The balance between those two requires delicacy. On the other side, writing a

historical play might be more advantageous than conventional plays because it offers a scaffolding for the playwright. Often, eccentric characters or twisted plotlines are ready for playwrights to embroider their craft upon them.

A distinction needs to be stated between the past and history to clarify how these terms have been used in this study. In general, the past refers to things that actually took place. However, history is the effort of interpretation on the past. Thus, it might be forged, subjective, or misleading. Although there are other meanings of both terms, the way they are employed in this study attributes a superior position to history because that is the past embroidered with fictional elements. The past is inclusive as it contains everything since the beginning of time. By contrast, history is a process of assessing the past from different angles. The past is encyclopedic knowledge, but history gives that knowledge a meaning and adds an informative contribution to the past in the present. If the past is a museum, a playwright is a curator who designs certain exhibitions of materials taken from the museum. What is going to be highlighted and displayed depends on the subjective criteria of that person, but it does not mean that the museum will have less. On the contrary, the richness of the museum will attract more people to use its materials in accordance with their agendas. For example, the task of medieval European historians was to keep chronicles listing major events mostly for religious purposes. However, subsequent movements, which were fond of historical figures such as the Romantic Movement, approached the past with an appreciation. Therefore, they created a narration that praised its qualities and highlighted certain moments in the past. History, like theater, puts emphasis on certain images and figures. This is one of the reasons that history has been a profound resource center for drama whenever it needed new aspirations. Carl Becker calls history “a continuous process of

interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (35).

History plays manifest a protest against positivism which advocates one accurate response to a fixed, recoverable past because every history play proposes an alternative reading. There are several variations of historical responses to the past whose linearity and continuity are defied by each new play. Since history is a fictional product of a certain ideology in the final analysis, other constructions from different viewpoints such as feminism, Marxism, conservatism, and imperialism have created their own myths out of the past. Classical and modern perceptions have in large measure fueled the desire for new articulations of addressing these ideologies’ needs.

The power of history to harbor conflicts enhances its desirability for literary arts. It creates heroes, legends, dogmas, and taboos for societies. Once all ideological apparatuses of a state assert a historical point, its authenticity remains invincible and undisputable. This attraction between drama and history has been recognized since the times of Ancient Greece:

Aristotle recognized that history and drama share many mimetic attributes and aims because they represent the possible and probable structures of action ... Both the playwright and historian construct coherent, unified narratives based upon the actions of the agent. (Canning and Postlewait 32).

However, drama, like other arts, can undermine or unsettle the safety of historical so called facts. Shakespeare’s depiction of Richard III is an example of this kind of invalidation because Shakespeare’s villain “bears little resemblance to the portrait which Paul Murry Kendall gives in his modern biography of the king” (Lindenberger 3). Shakespeare explicitly uses the comic devil of the Morality plays to create Richard’s character which traditional New Critics judge as “a piece of Tudor propaganda” (Peacock 12). In response to Shakespeare’s portrayal, the Richard III Society was founded in 1924 and on their website it says that “The purpose—and indeed the

strength—of the Richard III Society derives from the belief that the truth is more powerful than lies; a faith that even after all these centuries the truth is important. It is proof of our sense of civilized values that something as esoteric and as fragile as reputation is worth campaigning for." Their manifesto is another testimony that history is a constructed entity that might not be consonant with an accurate portrayal of the past. Alexander Feldman explains how different groups perceive history as a main pillar of their ideological differences with others:

The Whig interpretation views the history of the Western World as a march from an originary state of barbarity to an ideal state of civilization, defined in terms of constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy, and industrialized capitalism, where the directorial agency is transferred from Providence to Progress. According to a Marxist perspective, on the other hand, history is the story of class struggle, leading from feudalism, to capitalism, to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and ultimately to a classless society, with dialectical materialism as its organizing intelligence. In this case, as in the Judeo-Christian worldview, the telos of the process is yet to be achieved. (8-9)

Dramatists, since the times of Aeschylus, have taken advantage of the power of narrative and reenactment to reverse and modify the flow of history according to their understanding. Feldman describes these works as historiographic rather than historical to indicate how playwrights are interested in not only the events of the past, but also the discourse of history, its philosophical and ideological perception, and the process of writing as well. Taken from Linda Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction," his "historiographic metatheatre" refers to "self-reflexive engagements with the traditions and forms of dramatic art" which "illuminate historical themes and aid in the representation of historical events" (3).

Eugene O'Neill states that man's struggle with his own fate is the subject in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), and adds that "The struggle used to be with the gods, but it is now with himself, his own past ..." (quoted in Cargill 111). Following O'Neill footsteps, there have been a significant number of plays which mingle history with contemporary temporal forms. It is not strictly a

historical drama but, for example, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993) uses actual historical figures like Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn along with antirealist elements to comment on issues of gay rights and tolerance. Moreover, Suzan Lori Parks' *The America Play* (1993) attempts to create an African-American understanding of American history, especially the founding fathers. Usually what distinguishes a historical drama is its writer's intention to "revivify past (or present) contemporary persons and events in order to project a dramatic experience," (Parks 5) because after all, "The warp and woof of historical drama are factual events in the life of an actual person or group of persons, a town, a nation, a social institution, a religious movement, or even humanity at large" (Moe et al 3). Then what is the difference between documentary and historical drama? They come from the same origins; they have based a historical instant, person, phenomenon, or event within their center.

First, historical plays offer a narrative presentation of history depending on sources. However, it does not teach history. The communication between the audience and the text is primarily based on narrative. Thus, historical play does not engage its audience with any social or cultural responsibilities for conveying historical points. Contemporary historical plays do not chronicle the past as it used to be. Dramatic elements are incorporated more, to the extent of changing historical facts, to create an entertaining and morally informative dramatic piece for the audiences. In a way, they interpret how history operates in relation to space and time. As Walter Benjamin points out, "History is a subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time but time filled with the presence of the now" (261). The three plays analyzed in this chapter offer different usages of history "filled with the presence of the now." Historical plays place the past into their center, but their spiritual life belongs overwhelmingly to the present.

Stage is the ideal venue to reflect history “because the provisionality of stage and ephemeral nature of its representations complement postmodernism’s sense of plurality of historical truths” (Feldman 25). Although there is a clear balance between dramatic and historical aspects of the plays, history is usually internalized. Thus history plays create a natural bond between time and politics by exposing the operation of time and history. The audience can observe how the present dictates the conditions we perceive of the past because “Through the performance process, the past, both in its limitation to a strict time and place and in its timelessness, repeats for its current and its future (not-yet-existent) audiences” (Bennett 9). Time in a play repeats itself in different temporal forms. As a result, manipulation of the past unfolds the political vein of history. Rejecting history and putting forward an alternative version, playwrights alter the past and disturb historiographical methods and specific historical myths. English playwright Edward Bond notes that “Our age, like every age, needs to reinterpret the past as part of learning to understand itself, so that we can know that we are and what we should do” (8). Emphasizing the informative feature of history, Bond’s statement is a reminder of historical plays’ impact on masses.

The influence of history on society comes from its parallel form to the perceptions of temporal forms in daily life. A linear model of time operates “through our understanding of motion in space” (Lakoff and Johnson 151). Here refers to the present, in front of us is the future, and the past is behind us. Going forward means progress, but time is not just a line in our lives. That’s why we look back to see the footsteps of those before us. Michael Bennett, in a similar vein, considers history play to be simultaneously an act of narration and an act of translation. He notes that “While ‘narration’ implies a forward moving arc, ‘translation’ implies a telling ‘again’, containing both the ideas of ‘back’ and ‘anew’” (4). Assessing historical stories from a

different timeline enables us to obtain new understandings or insights. However, if the look back turns into a form of nostalgia, it might be detrimental to the present leading to negative consequences because the past is gone. There is no way back, but evaluating it from a new angle can heal the scars and show people what to learn from the past. Isn't this why humanity had the epics in the first place? The shaman around the fire or the chorus on stage narrated all the magical stories to educate people while entertaining them. History is where the key to identity is locked. It shapes the future. The state and its ideological devices use it to create generations which will fight for the same causes and will live together without feeling apart. Drama uses history to bring in a new understanding to the past that the state advocates per se. Official history is mostly black and white; drama, as well as other arts, gives it colors and moments.

After all, a person's approach to history acquires significance as it reflects a worldview. In recent years, for example, it is commonly accepted to deny Columbus Day as America's foundation day because of the treatment minority groups on the continent had to experience. However, if you come from a white, Protestant, and conservative family, it would be no surprise to wander off the streets with a confederate flag. If you see Columbus' move as a colonial attack on the lives and cultures of Native Americans, you will be protesting the celebrations just like millions around the country. In addition to historical celebrations and cultural landmarks, the philosophy of a society also determines the understanding of time. For example, time in Christianity has a direction and purpose: "It develops irreversibly from the Creation to the end, and has a central point of reference in the incarnation of Christ, which shapes its development as a progression from the initial fall to the final redemption" (Agamben 94). Consequently, anthropologists divide nations according to their temporal models. For example, Warren TenHouten defines Aborigines' time model as *Patterned-Cyclical* which is "dualistic,

discontinuous, event-oriented, synchronic and qualitative,” (58) whereas the Western *Ordinary-Linear* time culture is “linear, continuous, clock-oriented, diachronic and quantitative” (58).

Temporal assumptions will reveal our conceptions of the world at large. Drama invigorates such interpretations. Seeing a moment of history intensifies emotional value. Therefore, we have people reenacting the Civil War in national parks or veterans giving victory speeches on July 4 because history is created through these reenactments. It is constructed and needs to be refreshed and repeated to make an impact. Drama is a reminder of our culture, memory, and history. Culture refers to what and how we do; memory retains how we feel, and history reminds us who we are.

Although there are many plays that dramatize the continuity of history on a single line, drama makes us aware of moments of interruptions, contingencies, and lacunae. American drama has naturalized the linear, irreversible model of time, but contemporary perception of history on stage has evolved into a genre that employs a critical tone while aiming to portray a realistic narrative. In terms of its forms, there has not been a separation from the traditional way, but history is more often clearly integrated into texts with subversive intentions. *Mrs. Packard* and *Next Room* are plays with feminist messages that protest what women had to suffer while portraying the past.

Despite its prolific political and theatrical outcomes, history plays raise questions in terms of inclusion and discrimination. The problem with constructing or reevaluating history on stage comes from the exclusion of America’s growing diversity and non-Western, non-Christian cultures with different worldviews. Alternative theatres originated from the sociopolitical unrest and changes of the 1960s and 1970s used history as an option to deviate from the dominant political discourses. For example, Luis Valdez’s El Teatro Campasino staged *La Conquista de*

Mexico to give an alternative portrayal of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Similarly, Amiri Baraka's Black Revolutionary Theatre produced *Slave Ship* to reflect an account of slavery and injustice African-Americans experienced. As these pioneering plays as well as contemporary ones demonstrate, "history plays depart from, especially, early modern history plays in that these modern reincarnations of the form do not focus on commemoration [...] but use history as a means of critique and a way to look at and act in the future" (Bennett 4). New voices and new faces with different backgrounds can change the phenomenology – the study of the perception of objects—in American drama and enrich the American fabric. Juno Diaz and Ayad Akhtar might be the next playwrights who contribute to the history writing on American stages from different angles and cultures. Theater is an attempt to bridge the past with the present, "constantly 'quoting' from the past, but erasing the exact traces in order to gain full meaning in the present" (Rokem xi).

After all, plays are make-believe texts and they offer a piece of probability regardless of their genres. What is represented on stage might be a piece of reality and this is one of the strengths of theatre to lure the audience to buying a ticket. Historical play is no different than other plays, but rather than representing a possibility, it claims to comprise a certainty. Historical play says that this indeed happened in opposition to this might have happened.

Mrs. Packard

Emily Mann recounts the story of Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard, born December 28, 1816 in her historical drama *Mrs. Packard* (2007). Packard's husband was a conservative Calvinist minister of the Old School and they had six children. After 22 years of their union, reverend Theophilus (Theo) Packard confined his wife to an insane asylum in Jacksonville, Illinois, due to her opposing religious and cultural ideas. Elizabeth's liberal thinking and joining a Methodist church became the main ground for her incarceration after her husband's declaration of her insanity, rather than a public hearing at that time. The play takes place mostly in the asylum in Illinois between 1861 and 1864. Elizabeth's three year detention was an unfair treatment which reflects the inequality in marriages in the 19th century. The play starts in 1861 and criticizes the chauvinistic legal system and 19th century mental health care.

Mann talks about the torturing of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, when she is asked how this play speaks to the present. She criticizes religious fanaticism and absolute power which corrupts those who hold authority in their hands. (Langworthy) By the same token, theatre critic Peter Marks compares *Mrs. Packard* to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and argues how both plays are "about the martyrdom of those who dare to tell the truth when powerful, hidebound institutions demand they tow the line." Moreover, Emily Mann defines her plays to be "about giving voice to the voiceless," and she adds that "Elizabeth's voice was not only almost silenced in her own day, but like many women, her story has nearly disappeared from history" (Reported in Langworthy). She cites Emily Dickinson's poem in her dedication to the play: "'Tis the majority/In this, as all, prevails./ Assent, and you are sane;/ 'Demur,--you're straightaway dangerous,/ And handled with a chain." Majority is an important concept for Mann because that is what she questions between the past and the present. Any sensible person would abhor Mrs.

Packard's story in the 21st century, but Mann aims to show the audience how individuals are still persecuted because of their beliefs, ideas, identities, or tendencies. There are no Mrs. Packards in contemporary times, but there are variations of her in subdued forms that Mann puts under spotlight throughout her story.

Most of the unfair treatment that Elizabeth experiences stems from the law passed in 1851 in the state of Illinois, which allowed that "married women ..., who, in the judgment of the medical superintendent are evidently insane or distracted, may be entered or detained in the hospital on the request of the husband of the woman ... without the evidence of insanity required in other cases" (Rendell). In the beginning of the play, Dr. Andrew McFarland talks to Theo and his wife, and he promises special privileges while Elizabeth is in the institution. This situation indicates that Dr. McFarland is aware of the situation and he can tell that Elizabeth is sane, but her husband's testimony is more powerful, as the law indicates, than the reality. Elizabeth is aware of her husband's flaws and this is one of the reasons that she cannot accept the superiority of his ideas or personality. Her husband Theo had a vision after his brother died in his arms and after that he quit drinking and entered seminary. This situation demonstrates how Theo actually acts pragmatically in his relation with God and his congregation as a minister. However, as everyone is aware of his personal fallacies, they all counsel Elizabeth to ignore and respect her husband the way he is.

Writing becomes a special method of therapy for Elizabeth. Dr. McFarland also encourages her to express her feelings and use writing as a means of relief. Mann refers to the idea of writing as a way to record history in the play because this play is a testimony to Elizabeth's writings. Her notes and letters constitute the backbone of Mann's dramatic structure. While Elizabeth writes her memoirs on stage, she actually writes the core of the play and this

creates a feeling of a play within a play. This self-cognitive move creates a lineage of writing among women particularly between Mrs. Packard and Mann. At the same time, it recognizes the creative abilities of female writers as well as establishing a solidarity because Packard's story was not well-known until the production of Mann's play. On one hand, Mann pays tribute to Mrs. Packard's struggles and substantiates her memoirs by converting them into a different format.

Recording becomes Elizabeth's way of resistance against everyone who wants to silence her. Mann exemplifies a way of refusing institutional oppression gracefully by linking Elizabeth's habit of writing to resistance. The asylum's norms surround her life and seize her private life. As Foucault points out, "Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere" (*The History of Sexuality* 77). In response to Foucault's idea of power, Mann illustrates through Elizabeth's story that resistance is as prevalent as the power. Elizabeth's determination to express her opinions in some way shows how individuals can maintain their dignity even under pressure or torture. Elizabeth's writing enables her to protect her sanity and at the same time makes it possible for other generations to learn about her story. Ironically, Elizabeth's liberation from the asylum also depends on a piece of writing, an affidavit that she needs to sign, so that she will "honor and obey [her] husband in all things—that [she] will be his unconditional help-mate and support in his church, in his home, and in his bed" (39). As Dr. McFarland knows her penchant for writing, he wants her to sign an affidavit that states her unconditional obedience to her husband's wishes and opinions.

In addition to unfair marriage dynamics, Elizabeth's story also uncovers the brutal treatment the patients in the asylum encounter daily. They are subjected to abusive treatment, although some of the patients have no indication of any mental disorder just like Elizabeth. She

is placed in with other rational women whose stories are, to a certain extent, similar. Elizabeth explains why she is in the asylum: “Doctor ... my husband is jealous. His congregation is dwindling. I—I encouraged ... healthy discussion! ... The Christ I worship and love would not have an innocent baby damned at birth, Theophilus! It is woman who will crush the serpent’s head!” (12) Her refusal of the Calvinist values about the original sin float to the surface and she cannot hide her anger. The asylum superintendent, Dr. McFarland, treats Elizabeth well and shows fondness for her. He urges Elizabeth to admit that she has been acting irrationally and to apologize to her husband. This is his condition to release her. However, Elizabeth is too proud to accept such a deal. When her rebellious nature raises her voice against the inhumane treatment and conditions, McFarland sends her to the 8th Ward where they keep “the maniacs.”

It takes some time for Elizabeth to understand that Dr. McFarland is a crucial part of this oppressive system since he is a kind gentleman. However, when Elizabeth asks for his help to be released with all other sane patients, the doctor is surprised. Although he tries to calm down Elizabeth, when she calls the asylum a prison, McFarland bursts out: “Prison? This is not a prison, Mrs. Packard! The women who are patients here must be kept here for their own health and protection and for the protection of their children” (53). McFarland reverses the family appeal Elizabeth uses to convince him. Family, which this institution protects or damages, is an excuse that the oppressor and the oppressed use. This confrontation brings Elizabeth’s happy days to an end, and she is sent to the 8th ward where she is deprived of all her privileges.

The second act starts in the 8th Ward as Elizabeth tries to restore and clean the place with the help of a kind, but ineffectual attendant. Meanwhile, McFarland prevents Elizabeth from gaining access to pen and paper which she might use to report the conditions in the asylum. When he finds out that Elizabeth has been keeping record of her experiences, he tortures her. She

is forced to wear a straight-jacket and left in solitary confinement. However, Elizabeth finally gets a second chance to go to court when visiting asylum overseers talk to her. Once her sanity is realized by others, she is released, but her problems do not end there. Her husband locks her up and keeps abusing her.

Scene transitions between the court and the asylum provide a colorful account of the events through reenactment and narration. This shift between the court and Elizabeth's days in the asylum also portrays the inconsistencies between testimonies and the reality. Elizabeth meets other women who have been confined by their husbands for their different ideas and beliefs such as supporting abolition or studying with a Swedenborgianist, a name given to a new religious movement informed by the writings of Swedish scientists and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. All of these examples illustrate that Elizabeth's presence in the prison is not sporadic and other women just like her have also been sent to be corrected. Correction in this play refers to any act of oppression by the majority upon those who hold different opinions and defend them publicly.

Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard wrote two books to describe her suffering during her confinement and after that. Although there were many autobiographical elements in them, the first one, *Modern Persecution or Married Woman's Liabilities as Demonstrated by the Action of the Illinois Legislature* (1874) keeps an account of Mrs. Packard's difficulties after being kidnapped from her own home by the authorities. The second book is called *The Prisoners' Hidden Life, Insane Asylums Unveiled* (1868) and it gives a detailed description of the brutal treatment Elizabeth and other patients experienced. Mann used these books extensively to detail Elizabeth's and others' daily life behind locked doors.

One important concept that Mann scrutinizes through Elizabeth's character is her strong will against total submission. This revolt against institutional oppression shows that her refusal to

recant her liberal views of religion is not a whimsical stubbornness or personal vendetta between her husband and Elizabeth. Her struggle, after a while, becomes a bigger issue and it transforms into a debate between the society and her. Elizabeth realizes that this is not about her husband or doctor as she recognizes the traces and patterns of the same work everywhere in her life. What she rejects is the life and character that was imposed on her, and she is willing to fight to get what she really deserves and desires.

Mann illustrates that a revolutionary way opens up several paths for the enlightened persona, and the reversal of such a journey is almost impossible despite the hardships. Elizabeth risks her well-being by opposing her doctor's opinions and treatment of other patients. At the end, her unbending character causes her to end up in a worse surrounding with more mentally unstable patients. After the long confinement and retrials, Elizabeth remained married, but she and her husband were estranged for the rest of their lives. She became an activist who lobbied for the rights of women, and she was influential in changing the commitment laws in four different states.

Mental illness was considered a sign of witchcraft or demonic possession for a long while and the mentally ill were confined in prisons, monasteries, or homes. In time, vigilantes like Mrs. Packard improved the appalling conditions for the mentally ill after witnessing the outrageous situations in prisons. For example, Dorothea Dix called on the Illinois legislature to provide "appropriate care and support for the curable and incurable indigent insane" (12). Jacksonville Insane Asylum opened in 1851 after such efforts to create a better place to treat the patients.

Earlier treatments of the same topic employ more challenging approaches to the problems of sanity and institutional oppression on individuals. *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917) by Susan Glaspell, and *Marat/Sade* (1964) by Peter

Weiss also question institutional oppression on individuals' both physical and mental health. Depictions of different individuals in varied time zones also prove that although the pressure has changed forms and intensity, it has always existed and pushed individuals to a more problematic expression of their 'illness' rather than a treatment. Although he finds it "informative, lively and engrossing," Bob Rendell criticizes *Mrs. Packard* for having "neither the depth, complexity of character, sufficient theatrical invention, nor brilliance of language to transcend her standard issue melodramatic story." Toby Zinman also considers Mrs. Packard to be "more a theological soap opera with a feminist ax to grind than an engaging play drama." Despite its shortcomings, *Mrs. Packard* informs the society about an important historical character and builds a bridge between the past and the present. Such interruptions in the lineage of American history, which is full of male chauvinistic figures, can be enriched with others who have contributed to the emergence of a modern life on this continent.

Michel Foucault's famous book, *Madness and Civilization* takes a central place in the historiography of institutional oppression over individuals. Foucault analyzes social and individual mechanisms behind the Western penal systems through empirical evidences, and points out that unreasoning has been used to condemn sexual offenders, those guilty of religious profanation, and free-thinkers (les libertins) as well as the mad (Gutting 55). He emphasizes that the internment did not have any medical purposes, but it was rather to isolate 'the mad' from social environments with which they differed. His emphasis on correctional administrative internment tells how it restricts the liberating and humane characteristics of the individuals through a strict regime of moral management. Foucault explains the genealogy of the abnormal and the asylum to show how "the Enlightenment incriminates modern urban luxury and idle affluence, the nineteenth century denounces proletarian degeneracy and idle poverty" (Gordon

97). People who are confined for the good of society appear as residues of evolution. Madness, as Foucault states, is used by socially superior classes to maintain their privileges. In this case, Theo and Dr. McFarland are the protectors of the status quo. In addition to madness, family becomes one of their blackmailing points as the nineteenth century value system honors the family over the individual. In a way, a woman's existence is dependent on her family and by separating Mrs. Packard from her children, she is figuratively detached from her reasons for living. When she realizes that family is a significant part of women's contract with society, she expresses her bitter feelings:

“I could never, ever regret having my six children, don't misunderstand me, but ... the price to pay is quite high, don't you think? I now better understand those women who choose not to marry. I could never understand them before! Or women who want to vote? I'm thinking very hard about them at the moment ...”
(26 emphasis in original)

The hard choice between her family and independence restricts Elizabeth's power over her decisions and actions. Used against her, Elizabeth's children become a symbol of her husband's power over her. Her kids are taken from her for the same reasons that her sanity is desired to be taken away by her husband. She is indirectly reminded that everything she has can be taken through legal and illegal methods. The reason that she fights as an activist when she is out of the prison comes from the fact that she has realized how desperate women are compared to men under the provisions of this system.

Unlike Emily Mann's other plays, this is not a documentary, but despite its creative structure and composite characters, Mann adheres well to historical facts. For example, the court recordings and testimonies show how implausible Elizabeth's confinement has been because the accusations against her are illogical and subjective. Mann creates an image of how using the majority to oppress an individual can ruin one's life through the court scenes depicted. Mann

distinguishes *Mrs. Packard* from her documentary plays and defines it as liberating. She points out:

“It took a combination of all the skills used in writing a documentary—research, editing—because in fact this is inspired by a true story. But it gave me complete freedom to know what the bones of the story were and then fill in from there and create characters and make scenes and tell a story from my imagination. That’s been the great fun of it. If I needed a scene, I could write it. I didn’t somehow have to construct it out of spoken word or found text” (Reported in Langworthy).

Although Mann illustrates the oppressive methods of a patriarchal system over women, it is still a man who helps Elizabeth to get out of the asylum. When Elizabeth meets the board of trustees touring the institution, she succeeds to make a ten-minute appointment with them. At the end of that conversation in which she justifies her religious deviancies, Mr. Blackman, who is the head of the board of trustees, appeals to Theo: “Could you not, Reverend, find a way to make peace with your wife—agree to let her think her own thoughts—these ... liberal thoughts, as wrong-headed as you may find them—but confine her speaking about them to the privacy of your own home?” (96) He also adds a condition to remind her what she needs to do in order to deserve this release: “We could make it a condition of her release that she must agree not to speak out publicly” (96).

Imprisonment became a popular punishment method in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The United States also opened several prisons and mental institutions to confine those who committed crimes. These institutions “intended not to efface crime but transform the criminal (through obligatory labor); they offered the possibility of constantly supervising the prisoner; they provided an efficient institutional apparatus for altering ‘minds’; and finally, insofar as these new models were motivated by the same set of beliefs that were giving rise to the human sciences, they provided for the establishment of procedures for acquiring knowledge about the individual prisoner – his past, his thoughts, his progress” (Schrift 144). The purpose of

Elizabeth's detainment is to manipulate her thoughts and her future as her ideas are found threatening to current norms of the society. As Mrs. Chapman in the play points out, "They call it 'subduing the patient'" (35). The potential danger manifested through her objection of Calvinist teachings harms the image of obedient subject and, therefore, she needs to be reformed. However, at the end, what goes through a reformation is the oppressive system, not her.



In The Next Room Or The Vibrator Play: Hysteria In Action

Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room Or The Vibrator Play* (2009) unfolds the issues of marriage, breastfeeding, the invention of the vibrator, and hysteria through the relationship between a doctor and his patients as well as a husband and a wife. Historical facts in Ruhl's text become a springboard to start a conversation on the problems of intimacy, marriage, and sex. Ruhl started to write the play after reading a book, Rachel P. Maines' *The Technology of Orgasm* (1999), which accounts the history of a new electrical device used to cure women diagnosed with hysteria. Ruhl also expresses her debt to *AC/DC: The Savage Tale of the First Standards War* (2006) by Tom McNichol, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (2001) by Janet Golden, and *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (1984) by Phyllis Rose. *Next Room* is clearly a product of an extensive study, and Ruhl warns her readers about the authenticity of the events in the play: "Things that seem impossibly strange in the following play are all true—such as the Chattanooga vibrator—and the vagaries of wet nursing. Things that seem commonplace are all my own invention" (6). *Next Room*, as Ruhl claims, is loyal to historical characters and events, combining several different topics under one dramatic structure. There is also a personal aspect of the play; Ruhl wrote while nursing her own newborn baby.

The play takes place in a prosperous spa town outside New York City after the Civil War circa 1880s around the dawn of the age of electricity. Overall, *Next Room* tells the story of six lonely people seeking relief from a doctor. Critical of alienation among people, the play takes place under the heavy mannerism of the Victorian age embraced by the approaching era of electricity, technology, and sexuality.

The name of the play refers to the operating theater where Dr. Givings accepts his patients. Since the name is intimidating, his midwife, Annie, prefers to address it as the next

room. Dr. Givings' position is equal to a modern day psychologist who suggests solutions to patients with psychological problems. Psychology, as a separate branch of treatment, was not known in the nineteenth century, although there were scientific steps which would eventually assist Sigmund Freud and his colleagues to interpret mental difficulties their patients experienced. Herb specialist, medicine makers, medical and religious scholars, have used hysteria for centuries. Pieter van Foreest suggested a peculiar method as a cure for hysteria in a medical compendium published in 1653:

When these symptoms indicate, we think it necessary to ask a midwife to assist, so that she can massage the genitalia with one finger inside, using oil of lilies, musk root, crocus, or [something] similar. And in this way the afflicted woman can be aroused to the paroxysm. This kind of stimulation with the finger is recommended by Galen and Avicenna, among others, most especially for widows, those who live chaste lives, and female religious, as Gradus [Ferrari da Gradi] proposes; it is less often recommended for very young women, public women, or married women, for whom it is a better remedy to engage in intercourse with their spouses.

Historically, as *Next Room* and *Mrs. Packard* exemplify, women's problems were considered to be either in their head or womb. Throughout time, men claimed authority over those. In the last 100 years, women have obtained some independence from a patriarchal dominance over their bodies. Dr. Givings' patient Mrs. Daldry, whose hysterical attacks have been cured by the vibrator, has a housekeeper who has recently lost her baby. The Givings are looking for a wet nurse to feed their baby because Mrs. Givings' milk is not adequate to breastfeed their baby Letitia. The first scene ends as Mr. and Mrs. Daldry leave to come back the next day with their housekeeper Elizabeth. In the second scene, Elizabeth, whom Dr. Givings examines for diseases, starts breastfeeding Letitia. The first act ends with the solidarity of Mrs. Givings and Mrs. Daldry, who shows the doctor's wife how to use the vibrator because Mr. Givings does not allow his wife to use the vibrator.

The focus of the play in the second act shifts to Mrs. Daldry, who cannot have orgasm in the next scene the following day, despite the same application of the machine. Although it usually takes three minutes for a patient to reach a paroxysm, this unsuccessful session reveals her sexual tendencies. When Dr. Givings' female assistant Annie starts a manual treatment, Mrs. Daldry reaches her sexual climax. Mrs. Daldry's obvious attraction to Annie is a sign of her repressed (lesbian or bisexual) identity which prevents her from enjoying her marriage with her husband.

Ruhl provides a close look into the masculine world of the nineteenth century and exemplifies the challenges of living under a patriarchal system through her characters. Although it is difficult for women to survive, Ruhl also portrays male characters that experience hardship because of what is expected from them. For example, Leo is an artist who has been diagnosed with hysteria. It is clear that he has homosexual tendencies.

Next Room turns into a criticism of modern inventions starting from Thomas Edison's electricity and light when Leo, one of Dr. Givings' patients, indicates their soulless form: "When Edison's light came out, they were all saying, my God! –light like the sunset of an Italian autumn . . . no smoke, no odor, a light without flame, without danger! But to me, Mrs. Givings, a light without flame isn't divine—a light without flame—..." (77). Leo, who is an embodiment of artistic and homosexual sensitivities about art and love, provides a clear example of a character that has peculiar problems compared to the rest of society. His obsession with Italian art and his fondness for Italy serves as a model for the European character who trusts feelings more than reason. Dr. Givings is the opposite character who believes in science and thinks that his machine can solve people's problems. However, his wife's unhappiness illustrates that technology can be

relieving as long as humans are involved in it. Otherwise, it will just be soulless technology, as Leo states.

Dr. Givings' reaction when he catches his wife's hand on Leo's cheek upsets his wife more because he is strictly logical about it, whereas Mrs. Givings would rather have him throw tantrums about it. When she asks why he is not pale with rage, Dr. Givings talks as an anger management instructor: "Pale with rage, exactly, in a sentimental novel. My point is: this is not the end of the book. You made a mistake, that is all. The treatment I gave you made you excitable. It is my fault. A hand on the cheek, these are muscles, skin, facts. It needn't mean that one is preferred absolutely, or that one isn't loved. So why then jealousy? My darling, I don't mind" (103). His indifference to shocking situations or bewilderments is also confirmed by Mrs. Givings when Dr. Givings catches Leo painting Elizabeth nursing their baby in their living room without his prior knowledge. When Dr. Givings pretends that nothing serious has happened, Mrs. Givings complains that he has no reactions or feelings: "As you see, he is a man of science. Nothing upsets or shocks him" (109). Leo, on the other hand, compliments Dr. Givings for being rational: "What a capital husband you have. Completely beyond the dictates of modern society. I love your husband" (109).

Ruhl establishes an indirect criticism of rationalism through Dr. Givings' character. For example, for Dr. Givings, to produce a paroxysm "was much like a child's game—trying to pat the head and rub the stomach at the same time," (16) and the invention of the vibrator has made things easier when he says that "thanks to this new electrical instrument we shall be done in a matter of minutes" (16). He is the embodiment of practicality, briefness, and logical methodology. He is trained to understand other people's problems, but he cannot see the problems his wife suffers from because his scientific attitude prevents him from being sincere

and close. As John Lahr points out, “There is no place for Catherine in the house, or in her husband’s imagination. He literally and figuratively can’t take her in.” Even in the final scene where he gets together with his wife, he considers it as an experiment in which he is concerned about the outcomes of it. This sounds pragmatic which rationalist philosophy has historically rejected. In addition, as Foucault argues, this rationalism has been used to silence the Others of society by dominant groups. Ruhl quietly questions her audiences through the laughter over entertaining images of vibrators, breastfeeding, and stereotypical characters. She asks if this was what rationalist policies have structured in our society in the past, how we can trust the present’s rationalist society. The past becomes a model which projects light on today through its repetitive patterns despite completely different surroundings.

The character of Dr. Givings portrayal is as a male physician with uninformed prejudices on the subject of women’s sexuality. Thus, Ruhl cuts “across the grain of traditional history, which, by default, assumes the experiences of men to be normative” (Kelly 660). Despite all problems, Dr. Givings proves that he can effectively express his sincerity through his science logic if he tries:

Dr. Givings: (*kissing tenderly each place as he names it—they are all on the face*)
 I bless thee: temoporamandibular joint
 I bless thee: buccal artery and nerve
 I bless thee: depressor anguli oris
 I bless thee: zygomatic arch
 I bless thee: temporalis fascia
 I bless thee, Catherine.
Mrs. Givings cries, it is so intimate. (84)

This scene brings the couple together and their domestic setting suddenly disappears. They find themselves in a sweet small winter garden where they end up making love. Mrs. Givings reaches orgasm on her husband at the finale and their sexual life and marriage are restored through this surrealist transcendence. Katherine E. Kelly finds a biblical commentary at the end:

Throughout the play, the milk-poor Mrs. Givings is linked with gardens and fertility, and at the play's close, she breaks out of the two-room set, leading her husband to the Edenic garden where they undress each other, lie down, and make angels in the snow. Thus Ruhl recasts the middle-class white woman as a sexualized being unintimidated by technology and undeterred by scientific objectivity. (659)

Although Kelly's analysis offers an insightful reading, such a comparison reduces the significance of female awakening and resistance to oppression within the play. More than a biblical reference, the final scene increases the romantic element that has been attributed to female sensitivity. Ruhl questions this stereotypical attribution through an ironical portrayal of the Givings' comical situation.

Michael Farmer uses the German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger's works "The Question Concerning Technology" and "The Origin of the Work of Art" to describe Ruhl, who "presents modern electric technology as a force destructive of nature and humanity but resists the temptation to posit any simple dismissal of the modern world as the key to human survival; instead she presents art as a countervailing force to modern technology, a tool to orient humans toward a proper perspective on Being itself" (353). Ruhl has used technology as a means of criticizing its present functions as her play hints at alienation between couples. The automation of close relations, particularly sexual encounters, have eliminated the charm of sincerity. Although contemporary society is far more advanced than the one Ruhl portrays, technology and modernity have caused more problems which could not be solved through any means they have created.

What makes Ruhl write such a play comes from the methods nineteenth century doctors used to treat women diagnosed with "hysteria." There is a great similarity between Mann's *Mrs. Packard* and Ruhl's *In The Next Room*. They both explore and condemn the conventions of the 19th century life-style. Medical boundaries on defining women's problems have been used to

ignore, hide, and maintain the unfair treatment of females despite their illogical and unethical approaches. Mann explores the concept of madness in her play whereas Ruhl unfolds how hysteria has been exclusively reserved as an umbrella term to cover and dismiss feminine problems stemming from the pressure of a patriarchal society.

Diagnosis and treatment of hysteria, like madness, was subjective and unscientific. No longer used to describe patients' symptoms, hysteria was a commonly used phenomenon to send women to an asylum or to undergo surgical hysterectomy. In other words, everything that bothered people about these women was a result of hysteria. This might sound funny or preposterous to contemporary audiences, but the American Psychiatric Association kept using the term until the early 1950s. Although its meaning has evolved into different implications, it has not been easy for women to remove the labels of crazy and hysterical.

At the end of the 19th century, great advances were made in the diagnosis and treatment of hysteria "by the recognition of its psychogenic nature and by the use of hypnotism to influence the hysteric patient" (The Columbia). Sigmund Freud, who was a pioneer with other scientists such as Joseph Breuer, J.M. Charcot, and Pierre Janet, concluded that "hysterical symptoms were symbolic representations of a repressed unconscious event, accompanied by strong emotions that could not be adequately expressed or discharged at the time" (The Columbia encyclopedia). Before Freud's studies, "it was believed that hysteria was the consequence of the lack of conception and motherhood" (28). Freud advanced his studies and focused on psychology and the unknown of the human mind. His conversationalist approach rather than an imposing method changed the treatment for mental illnesses.

While explaining how stereotypes and idealized figures manipulate women's decisions in the advertising industry, Mady Schutzman gives a brief but insightful account of hysteria in *The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, and Advertising*:

Hysteria was in large part a silent scream of distress. The late nineteenth century was a time of radical change: industrial capitalism was expanding at a rapid pace, men were losing a sense of mastery in the workplace due to mechanization, women were entering the public sphere, a middle-class women's movement was flourishing, medical science was typologizing madness, and the advent of the ad agency standardized representations of gender. While opportunities for women increased, inequities of gender severely limited women's actual power within the public realm. Women protested through their corporeal bodies, expressing on a localized site that which was inexpressible on a public site. Hysterical symptoms were endless; they invented themselves as rapidly as the social body invented ways to displace societal power conflicts onto the female body as if they belonged to her. Hysteria in women was, and still is, a reflection of the male hysteria of dominant culture. (2)

While being critical of romantic deprivations in a relationship, Ruhl addresses the male hysteria of dominant culture. Her character Mr. Daldry exemplifies such an expectation when he drops his wife at the doctor's office. For him, his wife is ill and needs to be treated. He does not show any affection for his wife and he seeks love from other women like Mrs. Givings.

Next Room contains similarities with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). Although the story of Mrs. Givings is not as revolutionary and enlightening as Gilman's protagonist, Mrs. Givings feels the same restrictions in her life. However, rather than a rebellious way to change things completely, she finds little holes in her life to make it more durable. For example, she likes walking and taking naps which is a clear defiance of her husband's wishes. She loves going out and getting wet under the rain which implies her seeking for a more passionate story in her life. Leo calls her "a fallen angel," when he finds her making snow angels and she responds to that compliment by saying that "Did I? Oh! I am cold, but the cold feels marvelous, I feel awake, my skin is tingling" (61). Her feelings

outside the conventions of her domestic setting release her and “awakens” her. She, like Mrs. Daldry, might be called hysteric or feeble, but once they are out of the circles they have been imprisoned, they can express their desires and identities better.

What Ruhl illustrates through a comic portrayal of the nineteenth century men and women relationships is a disguised political structure that restricts women from expressing their desires and wishes. The service that Dr. Givings sells is a temporary illusion of relief, sympathy, and intimacy. These needs are considered to be signs of illness and the women in question require medical treatment. The understanding and cure for hysteria is actually a violation of women’s physical bodies which are performative objects for authorities. Hysteric women were considered to be asking for attention. Their call for help was considered to be overreactions or irrational tantrums. Ruhl and Mann reflect the subjugation of women to patriarchal power through the repressive policies of the nineteenth century.

Mrs. Daldry exemplifies a silenced and oppressed woman in her marriage. The way she is defined, “fragile and ethereal,” leaning “heavily on her husband’s arm, and “her face is covered by a veil attached to a hat” (10), in the text points to unfair power relationship in her marriage. The vibrator, a phallic symbol, substitutes sexual passion, but its existence takes the control from men and gives a feeling of enlightenment to women. The vibrator enables female characters realize what is missing in their marriages.

33 *Variations*: Obsessed with history's intricate details

33 Variations alternates between two time frames, one in the present and one in 1819.

The main plot involves two protagonists whose stories get connected at certain points. Time is an important concept for both of these people and the feeling of running out of time creates a unique suspense for audience members. It attempts to reconstruct the events of nearly 200 years prior and present it in a modern-day investigation style. As a difference between *33 Variations* and other historical plays in this study, it rejects a continuous, linear time of stage realism in favor of deliberate anachronisms. Although the play has been criticized for its clumsy scenes, poorly drawn characters (Lahr), being “a banal soap opera” (Sheward), oddly tone-deaf (Brantley), not mentioning any specific concepts pertaining to ALS patients and disease (Rowland), the play earned Tony nominations for Kaufman and Jane Fonda who played Katherine in 2009.

As a center of conflict, the play takes its plot from a similar situation. The best 50 composers in Vienna were invited to compose one variation of Anton Diabelli's waltz. Beethoven first refused to compose one but he eventually became obsessed with it and ended up writing 33 pieces despite his busy schedule of composing his 9th *Symphony* among other major works. Diabelli's melody is around 45 seconds, but it takes 45 minutes or longer to play Beethoven's variations. Kaufman's play places Ludwig van Beethoven's 'Diabelli Variations' into its center and questions the reasons for Beethoven to complete that particular piece. It examines the creative process of Beethoven and the journey of a musicologist, Katherine Brandt. Katherine is an academician who tries to find why Beethoven was obsessed with a simple waltz written by Diabelli. Brandt asks, “What was it about this insignificant waltz that so captures his imagination?” (3). This question becomes the spine of Kaufman's play as it took Beethoven four years to produce 33 variations which are known as the Diabelli Variations. Kaufman explains his

obsession with this question in an interview: “It’s really a question about inspiration ... what is it that Beethoven sees in this 32 bars of nothing? I always say it would be like if Philip Glass found a song by Britney Spears and decided to spend the next four years of his life studying and making variations on it” (Reported in Freymann-Weyr).

When the play starts, Katherine asks her nurse’s opinion about a trip to Bonn, Germany, which she plans to have in a week. This idea in the beginning also sets the tone for the rest of the play as the whole play turns into a journey discovering the untold stories of Beethoven and Katherine. Katherine finds important messages in Beethoven’s endeavor to enrich Diabelli’s melody. She thinks that Beethoven is instructing people not only in musical ways, but also in a grand philosophy about the world. She says, “When beginning a great voyage, one must set aside trepidation, even if we may not yet know where the journey will take us, we must nevertheless embark on it with courage and determination: as if it were a majestic march” (26-27). She is also the narrator for the play as she is an expert on Beethoven. However, Katherine informs the audience about the limits of history writing when she narrates the conversation between Beethoven’s friend Schindler and him. She says that “History doesn’t record what he said” (16). This line in the play shows how subjective history is and how dependence on it can be manipulating because it is not a box where everything is recorded. Thus, Kaufman warns his audience that what they are about to see is his selection of what has been recorded. This recording might be incomplete or inaccurate, but he implies that is what history actually is.

The interpretive contribution of a playwright or any other history narrator is decisive on the quantity and quality of the historical material that is blended with contemporary politics of theatre. However, Kaufman employs a transparent method of rewriting history to show its interpretive quality. For example, Katherine reads from Schindler’s biography where he says,

“Diabelli’s waltz had taken his fancy in a curious way,” (28) and then she adds, “What was curious about it? How had it taken his fancy?” (28). Katherine indicates that even her best opinion will not reflect the truth behind Beethoven’s obsession with the variations, but the outcome would be what historians or literati who write about historical figures and events actually produce. In a way, Kaufman reminds his audiences that historical background in a play does not necessarily provide an authentic structure for the plot and characters. On the contrary, it is vital to keep in mind that everything in this play and others is a fictional product of authorial selection because as Katherine reminds, “Schindler’s biography doesn’t elaborate on that” (28). Later when Katherine meets with another Beethoven scholar, Gertie Ladenburger, Kaufman reiterates the impossibility of reading history comprehensively through documents: “You are trying to find out why Beethoven became obsessed with Diabelli’s waltz. It’s really a question of inspiration. I do not think our sketches will help you with that” (30). Historical recordings are helpful for providing an historical insight, but what they do not contain is more than what they have to offer.

Kaufman does not attempt to create an accurate historical portrayal of Beethoven’s times, but instead emphasizes the unity of the past and the present in his text. He concludes the scene in which Katherine reads from Schindler’s biography on a plane through a reminder about the borders of temporal forms: “If you have been reading a book about Beethoven, we ask that you put it aside, return to the present and snap out of it” (28). His call to come back to the present signifies temporal possibilities within the play where everything is a memory. The present mentioned in the play is a textual time which will be re-lived each time it is presented to an audience. This timeline is not real but it has references to our contemporary timeline. For Kaufman exposing the past is not the purpose, but rather showing the present as characters

perceive it and recording the past as his vision of history dictates it. This overlapping of temporal forms is reminiscent of Thornton Wilder who “gave rise to a number of similarly self-conscious theatrical devices” (Schroeder 27).

Historical plays often contain a historical moment or knowledge to surprise the audience. This can be something unknown, less popular, intriguing, or shocking for people if they are not experts of that historical era or person. Kaufman uses one of Beethoven’s compositions which is not recorded anywhere other than his sketchbooks. This can easily be a moment of surprise for many people who do not know how to read musical notes or pay special attention to Beethoven’s sketchbooks. Kaufman illustrates how history, despite its shortcomings and flaws, can still be full of surprises and provide insightful contributions to the present. The never-ending surprises of the past in historical plays provide fresh perspectives on matters which have been accepted in certain forms. It is clear that Kaufman put a lot of effort into writing *33 Variations* because the musical background and pieces for the play require a great amount of studying. Kaufman has added musical notes into the dramatic text, and the play has been blended with not only history, but also musicology. Decoding this play means providing historical background and a good pianist to understand the historical harmony beneath. This informative feature of historical plays makes it a less attractive genre for playwrights, but in the end they are designed to inform as well as entertain audiences through a combination of contemporary elements with history.

Like the name of the play, each scene is a variation of how Kaufman interprets Beethoven’s compositions and Katherine’s struggles. Beethoven improvises on Diabelli’s melody, and writing about history is a similar task. Kaufman notes that he has “chosen to explore this story from a fictional perspective” despite the fact that it is based on a historical event. He defines his plays as “a series of variations on a moment in a life” rather than “a reconstruction of

a historical event” (6). Kaufman’s choice to turn this event into an interpretation rather than a journalistic report of historical events is a modern trend that blends history and fiction to enhance their impact. When a writer is dealing with a historical matter, what readers witness is that writer’s variation. By comparing Beethoven’s compositions with historical writing, Kaufman highlights the objective vein in those works.

Kaufman’s choice of a European composer at the center of the other half of his plot reveals his diverse roots as he tries to expand his authorial borders with international characters out of his circle. One of his former plays, *Gross Indecency* (1998), was also about the trials of another European figure, Oscar Wilde. By his choices of historical figures, Kaufman states that history for him is not limited to North or South America, but a universal Western history constitutes his repertoire. Kaufman’s passion for the music can also be the reason behind this play as it is “more about time and rhythm than about characterization, in which narrative motifs are orchestrated to mimic the trajectory of Beethoven’s music from the apparently trivial to the transfigured” (Lahr). Music also functions as a means of transition between scenes, which portray different time zones, and places. As an example, playing parts of the variation by a pianist also signal to the complete form Beethoven has established.

The simultaneous timeline in the play depicts Beethoven and Katherine’s life at the same time and creates a similarity as both characters experience serious health issues. Katherine’s Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS a.k.a. Lou Gehrig’s disease) gets worse every day and Beethoven’s growing deafness makes composing excruciatingly difficult for him. Katherine’s obsession to know the origin of things takes her to the site of his official music library containing the scores of Beethoven’s compositions in Bonn, Germany. She wants to prove her theory that Beethoven wanted to show everyone that he can create something magnificent out of something

trivial. She cannot find the answers, but the scores she finds opens the path for Beethoven's appearance in his own time. The dualistic approach to time portrays different eras with varied concerns as Katherine's relationship with her daughter, a costume designer, needs to be repaired before her terminal illness incapacitates her, and Beethoven's need to finish his variations while wrestling with his failing health, deafness, and poverty. Both characters' physical decline depict their struggle and companionship through their respective journeys as they compete against time to finish their endeavors.

In the scene called "Variation: 'The Exam'" Katherine is in an examination room where X-ray images are taken. She feels uncomfortable in complete darkness and the lights of X-ray machine enlightens the scene. This is "the first time we see the depth of her sadness" (53). Stage directions tell that Beethoven enters the room and sits behind her. Katherine who is upset with the whole medical situation gets relief when she finds Beethoven's "back and leans on him, her head resting on his back ..." (53). Kaufman blends Beethoven's presence with tranquility in which Katherine "finds a modicum of peace and comfort in the subject of her obsession" (53). The past becomes a refuge for Katherine who forgets the difficulties of the present. The therapeutic impact of Beethoven and his products on her is reminiscent of nostalgic effect that I argued in the second chapter. Although Katherine is fond of a recorded history and she does not have a romantic yearning for that piece of historical timeline, the present does not relieve her problems. Therefore, she spends probably her last days before her illness cripples her, in a museum to track the creative processes of Beethoven.

As Katherine gets closer to understanding what Beethoven went through while composing the variations, her relationship with her daughter also flourishes. Katherine's nurse, Mike, starts dating her daughter, Clara, and he becomes a bridge between them. In one scene,

Mike massages Katherine while teaching Clara how to do it properly if he is not there. First hesitant to have a physical contact with her mother, Clara then takes her mother's arm and imitates what Mike does. This action creates their worn bond figuratively as the roles in their lives are about to change. Touching is what connects Katherine with Beethoven and Clara with her. Physical contact in Kaufman's text is a primary method to reconnect and understand each other. Katherine goes through Beethoven's manuscripts, which have remnants of food and other items that symbolize physical contact between them. The fact Katherine has access to the documents that Beethoven personally created and lived with implies that their physical connection happens on those pages. Similarly, when Clara takes Katherine's arm, this functions as a moment of unity for them because "Touching is not something these two women do often" (62). Later, Mike makes fun of Clara by saying that is a benefit of ALS because "it forces intimacy" (87). Clara becomes the caregiver and her mother who has been concerned about her life choices and other issues will have to listen to her daughter. As a result, "This simple act of physiotherapy has created a momentary truce," between them. The juxtaposition of familial and social roles between mother and daughter reimagines archetypal constructions through an illness and shows the power dynamics as Katherine becomes more feeble and dependent every day. Katherine's deteriorating health parallels Beethoven's condition, but Kaufman prepares his audience as both Katherine and Beethoven have a climactic reversal despite their conditions.

Katherine is followed by her daughter Clara and her boyfriend Mike who is an experienced nurse with ALS patients. Clara wants to repair her relationship with her mother before it's too late. The past that Katherine tries to salvage is not only Beethoven's but also hers. The fact that soon she will forget everything because of her illness makes the past more crucial. Far from his documentary style, Kaufman's technique in *33 Variations* is to create a character

who is involved in internal struggles with the past. Kaufman creates a parallel timeline which indicates the unity of Katherine's health conditions and studies with Beethoven's composition of variations. This unity enables the audiences to follow the timeline and see how their stories are similar and different.

Structurally different from *In the Next Room* and *Mrs. Packard*, *33 Variations* integrates history to create a second dimension where the plotline proceeds similar to the present story. A well-known musical celebrity, Ludwig van Beethoven, is portrayed through his flaws and moments of genius. His obsession with making variations to a certain melody is paralleled with Katherine's obsession to understand his interest in it. While questioning individuals' obsessions, Kaufman illustrates how people around those individuals are neglected. Usage of history in *33 Variations* can be described as an extension of magical realism which brings Katherine and Beethoven together for a conversation at the end. Reminiscent of Kaufman's South American roots, magical realism appreciate the past while avoiding a nostalgic yearning. Although the scene where Katherine meets Beethoven is implied to take place under the influence of heavy medication, in the end this enables Kaufman to merge two different visions, which defamiliarizes the scene for the audience. The implied situation of transcendence due to the drugs eliminate an element of supernatural within the story.

As Eva Aldea points out, "Magical realism is characterized by the use of 'two voices': one rational and realist, and the other indicating a belief in magic" (3). Katherine's belief in magic brings her all the way to Germany. She believes in the magic of Beethoven's sketchbooks, but her faith in her research is contradicted by her "rational and realist" daughter. Beethoven has a similar conflict with Diabelli who is more pragmatic about music unlike Beethoven. However, Kaufman shows how Katherine and Beethoven have made a significant impact by pursuing the

magical realism in their lives. There is nothing supernatural in their lives, but what they have produced is a magical consciousness of reality. Katherine emphasizes the magical aspect of Beethoven's variations at the end: "Variation form allows Beethoven to do the miraculous and slow down time, to pierce the waltz and enter the minutiae that life, in its haste, robs us of. ... So that for Beethoven, variation form is not only a musical structure, it is a way to reclaim all that is fleeting. Allowing us to see it with new eyes" (102).

Consistent with magical realism's anti-colonial perspective, *33 Variations* criticizes the dominance of an aristocratic system, and uses the example of the imprisonment of composer Robert Schumann for expressing his political views. Kaufman's insertion of Beethoven's political critics into the play reminds Wen-chin Ouyang's statement in the 2005 *Companion to Magical Realism*: "Magical realism is inherently political concerned [sic] not only with the continuing influence of empire in the postcolonial world..." (14). Kaufman does not show any interest in contemporary politics, but rather focuses on Beethoven's time to criticize the political system in Europe. Beethoven and Katherine become the 'Other' whose relationship with surrounding people has been damaged because of their irrational obsessions with seemingly futile projects. "The important thing in an archeological dig is not only the objects that are found, but looking at the dig itself, and seeing where every shovel came onto the earth," Kaufman says. "All of the marks are part of the thing that was rescued." (Freymann-Weyr)

"Soulful, nostalgic, tender, Beethoven's final variation moves from a fugue to a minuet, marked *grazioso e dolce*, a spectral ending to a journey that begins as "a beerhall waltz" and concludes as an immanence of the sacred. In a startling and strangely moving stage image, the present and the past are brought together as the actors dance until Beethoven and Brandt finally stand alone before us, "as if they were about to begin their discussions in earnest," the stage

direction reads. The show is inconsequential, but the feeling into which it taps is not. Both Brandt and Beethoven have undergone a paradigm shift. As the sublime music plays them out, these poorly drawn characters nonetheless become emblems of hopefulness to an audience in the midst of its own paradigm shift, the outcome of which is far from certain.” (Lahr)

* * *

Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel* (2001) is another historical play that expresses similar concerns by a female playwright. It explains the story of Esther who marries a young Barbadian worker on the Panama Canal after having a passionate letter exchanging process. Their marriage ends in separation as Esther’s husband, George, tells her lies and runs away with all the money she has saved. *Intimate Apparel* is another testimony to the difficulties of women in the twentieth-century America refusing nostalgic feelings for a time defined as the gilded age. Explaining feminist history plays, Katherine E. Kelly points out, “A history play does not replicate the work of history writing, which records events for the purpose of answering “truthfully” the basic questions of who, what, where, and when in relation to those events; it invites the audience to know again—to undo and redo—the past in the present performance and in the absence of scientific truth claims made by official history” (660). *Intimate Apparel* as well as *Mrs. Packard* and *In the Next Room* challenges the environment imposed by official history and highlights personal sufferings of women to undo and redo the past in the present performance.

Mrs. Packard and *In the Next Room* are representatives of feminist history plays which “provoked a rethinking of historical periodization, categories of social analysis, and theories of social change” (Kelly 646). Both Mann and Ruhl focus on female characters as they have distinct problems from the society because determinant sexual division of authority and sexual order

exclude those characters' involvement within sexual and social recreation. Kelly explains how the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became an appealing inspiration center for feminist history plays as they were both "a period of possibilities—sometimes short-lived or even false, but clearly imagined and inspiring—for many groups of women" (653). In addition, it was a time of awakening for many women like Mrs. Packard who did not consent to the dogmas of time and resisted them in favor of a change and reformation.

Both plays display examples of physical repression of the nineteenth century which Foucault critiques in his *The History of Sexuality and Madness and Civilization*. Foucault states that madness has evolved in time to become a weapon in the hands of rulers to shut away dissident ideas as well as mentally ill. Thus, ruling classes adapted madness in order to justify confinement for other deviants. Mrs. Packard is a victim of that repression and she is confined for her ideas. Her story becomes an alternative for his/story which celebrates the nineteenth century as the pinnacle of Western achievement and the expansion of American mind as well as culture. Mann forges a link to the national past which was characterized by silence and absent for major female characters. *Mrs. Packard* exposes lies and gaps in recorded history, which is not taught at schools because it was written in unwelcome locations of society. When her significance in gaining civil rights for women is revealed at the end of the play, that commemoration becomes a tribute to her deeds and memory. This moment of enlightenment shows, "In a general way, then, madness is not linked to the world and its subterranean forms, but rather to man, to his weaknesses, dreams, and illusions" (*Madness and Civilization* 26).

On the other side, Ruhl's uses of parody and irony signal her characters' resistance to the determining forces of power. Consistent with Mann's handling of madness, Ruhl focuses on a single key theme within the classical conception of madness: hysteria. Melancholia, mania and

hypochondria are other themes that Foucault relates with the classical definition of madness. Mrs. Daldry and Mrs. Givings elude power through their search for orgasm and their solidarity challenge patriarchal conceptions of traditionally male-focused historiography found expression in the books Ruhl read prior to writing her play. Ruhl's text unfolds through a vigorous blend of comedy and concealed pressure, resulting in an idiosyncratic combination of laughter, shock, and bewilderment that has a discomforting effect on audiences. The performative-quality of writing history reveals "a gigantic moral imprisonment," as Foucault defines it, while showing how performative expectations of society still determine the norms over individuals.

The third play of this analysis involves a completely different strategy and usage of history. *33 Variations* creates a double time which sets the past in conversation with the present as it takes place in contemporary times, but linked to early nineteenth century. Music, used as an interruption, as well as transition, between the scenes, separates Kaufman's variations from each other. His innovation in blending history stems from his rejection of a linear history in favor of a thematically driven historiography inspecting certain moments in Beethoven's life enriched by his furious encounters with people around him. This approach enables Kaufman to time-jump between scenes and creates different time zones in one space regardless of chronological proceeding.

Kaufman, however, does not use history to provide a critical insight for the present. The past he creates is an essential element to tell the stories of contemporary characters. His method is close to magical realism which uses the charm of historical or mythical figures to explain non-realistic moments in our lives. In *33 Variations*, Katherine's illness becomes a window to invite such a convention into the realist fabric of the play.

Unlike Kaufman's documentary plays, *33 Variations* in general frames factual content in highly theatrical or explicitly fictive performance. Although it is in many ways comparable to *The Gross Indecency* and *The Laramie Project* which I analyzed in chapter three, the way *33 Variations* is structured shows fundamental nuances since it is closer to mainstream theatre tradition in terms of plot, character, themes, and messages. The significant departure from the informative approach in documentary drama surfaces in historical plays. Documentary plays generally deny or undermine the psychological integrity on which naturalistic characterization is built and it leads to a particular type of alienation effect on the audience. On the other side, history plays parallel the real case with an imaginary or to some extent cliché image. Taking a classical play or historical event as the scaffold is another option for them to employ a realistic tone.

Despite the colorful background and training of these three writers, it is clear that the history that is scrutinized belongs to a certain class and race as the protagonists in each play are white, middle class and well-educated. Such a categorization reveals a negligence towards other components of society. My selection is also determinant at creating such a restricted view, but I believe it represents common patterns and popular themes in contemporary American drama which needs more inclusion of black, Asian, and Hispanic writers to tell forgotten stories of their past and present onstage how they have led to their present situation. Actress/playwright Anna Deavere Smith's plays provided a more comprehensive record of American conflicts in the present. Perhaps what millennium needs for a dynamic representation of various layers of the society is new opportunities for different voices of history to be heard.

Dramatic texts demonstrate that the cultural conditions and oppression methods of the past can influence the psychology of people. In a way, history plays aim at a process of cultural

healing through past scars. However, keeping a linear time reduces the strength of historical plays. As Michael Bennett points out, history plays “are able to discuss the past, the present, and the future simultaneously giving the reader a new angle and theory for think [sic] about modern drama and theatre’s power and methods” (3). Disorienting temporal shape and showing a distorted sense of time can reach more people in our age of alienation because technological devices have disturbed our perception of narrative with commercial breaks and surfing through channels. It would be naïve to ignore all of these changes in our theatres. Theater can be strong if it is revolting. The attempt to show the alternative or opposite can explore more of human nature and the experience from a play can benefit many people in various ways.

Conclusion

It did not take long Broadway producers to realize the rising star of blending packed and sanitized history with commodified entertainment into their next project after the remarkable successes of *The History Boys* (2006) by Alan Bennett and *War Horse* (2007) adapted for stage by Nick Stafford from Michael Morpurgo's book of the same name on both sides of the Atlantic. Thus, was born *Hamilton* (2014), the musical, which combined rap, hip-hop, and R&B ballads with historical figures from America's founding fathers in an emotional form. After receiving 11 Tony awards, including best musical, the Pulitzer Prize, a Grammy award, and 16 Tony nominations, the most nominations in Broadway history, *Hamilton*, in a unique way, had redefined what an American musical can look and sound like as it challenges the nickname of Broadway, the Great White Way, by its cast led by mostly black and Latino actors. Recently, they were on the news again by their post-play talk with the new vice-president elect, Mike Pence, about their concerns for Donald Trump's term as the president. In addition to all the fun, music, and entertainment *Hamilton* contains, it brings up the issue of immigrants who "get the job done" and will probably suffer more during the next four years. Lin Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* has accomplished to bring history to the present through contemporary forms and it has used the history of founding fathers to understand contemporary America which is actually far from what is used to be in Hamilton's times.

American Revolutions program, "a 10-year commissioning project to create a new American 'history-cycle' of plays from the likes of Culture Clash, Paula Vogel, Tanya Barfield, and Robert Schenkkan," (Weinert-Kendt) has commissioned 23 of its slated 37 history plays, and staged seven of them. Among those, Robert Schenkkan's LBJ plays, *All the Way* and *The Great Society* have been over-night success stories. AmRev has commissioned writers to write plays

about guns in American history, about the environment, and about the African-American relationship to Civil War history. Manuel Lin-Miranda's *Hamilton* is also part of this project that promotes American history's certain seemingly insignificant moments which turn into glorious pieces as playwrights put their magical hands on them.

Hamlet traps his uncle Claudius through a play which he calls 'The Mousetrap' because in an Aristotelian way, when audience members can identify with the event or character on stage, they can purify their feelings. In Hamlet's case, his uncle's guilt hits the surface and he cannot hide his vehement reaction to seeing what has taken place. The return of memory through actors enable the audience to experience that moment again, but this time in company of others. The communal aspect of remembering enhances its impact and creates a common memory for that particular audience. The restorative energy of drama recreates a past which has been lost for many and provide additional opportunities for people to access a common imagination.

Historical dramas' prevalence has been lost, but the new formulations such as *Hamilton* and *The War Horse* have shown how historical figures and events can win the audiences' heart through their rhetorical innovations (using hip-hop and other music genres to make historical records more appealing) or visual impressions (a walking horse conducted by actors) on stage. Both plays have attributed new features to staging methods, and perhaps that will be the way to attract contemporary audiences to grand shows. Theater is capable of reviving and reinventing itself as long as these new additions are centered around its indispensable humanistic values. In the coming post-Trump years, American drama can be a salient witness of a renewed interest in memory.

The past has become an inseparable part of the present in contemporary American drama. As demonstrated in several plays, the past has enriched the fabric of contemporary American

drama by creating a bond with traditional forms, plots, and characters. Marvin Carlson explains dramatic texts' relationship to previous literary and nonliterary texts:

Among all literary forms it is the drama preeminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public. This process naturally involves but goes far beyond the recycling of references, tropes, even structural elements and pattern that intertextuality considers. It haunted in almost every aspect—its names, its character relationships, the structure of its action, even small physical or linguistic details—by a specific previous narrative. (17)

The unique creativity by each playwright has shown how the past interacts with the present in complex and surprising ways. Family and business plays consider the past to be a refuge from the daily-life difficulties and seek for temporary reliefs in the backrooms of memory. Both personal and collective memories in these plays have shown a nostalgic yearning for a mostly fictional past which is inconsistent with the way other characters recall it.

Documentary drama presents a less-confident relationship with the past and opens its historical materials to question. While appropriating historical materials for socially productive ends, it enables public to process information on specialized problems. As documents became a sign of truth and politics, there have been several forms of movie, writing, and performance that centered documentaries in their cores. A wide range of documentary practices have shown that the fading political façade of American drama can utilize them to provide testimony and rouse the audiences' emotions.

History/memory in contemporary American drama has drawn a profusion of primary source material rather than depend on academic recordings. The significance of secondary historical sources, such as personal memoirs, interviews, and non-official documents, exhibit the tendency of dramatists to reflect an affinity between their ideological positions and inspirational

sources. Whether this is a significant woman's struggle or a mistreated ex-convict, sources are accorded with the perception of history according to the playwright(s).

The way people respond to the past is always through the touch of the present. Theater reminds the audiences those past events and then adjusts both the audiences and the performance according to the demands of the present. It also has a galvanizing effect to bind groups together and create extra memory traces. In general, theater fights against erasure or oblivion. The history/memory experiences I have discussed reflect how these concepts have been used rather than how they should be, and admittedly, my selection depends on a limited access to contemporary texts and performances. However, most of these dramatic texts have signs to last longer than most of its contemporary peers and leave a lingering effect in literature and theatre.

In all of these plays we see how this reciprocal relationship between memory and dramatic constructions create attitudes that embody both submission and resistance. This process is neither inclusive nor widely culturally acceptable for the whole contemporary American drama, but these playwrights' works offer a conceptual framework on the significance of memory in our lives and texts that reflect certain moments of them. These hyper-historians, as Freddie Rokem defines them as "the connecting link between the historical past and the 'fictional' performed *here* and *now* of the theatrical event" (13) in *Performing History* (2000), rewrite the past stories focusing on their restorative capabilities and contributions to the public sphere. Thus, memory representations in contemporary plays offer a substantial opportunity to explore social problems with implications to generate conversations among people.

The shift from history to personal memories is a sign of technological advances which have enabled individuals to record anything easily. Cameras capture our daily lives everywhere all the time. Official history, whose details were usually a misnomer for most people, is

challenged more than ever, and new technological advances such as DNA analysis have disputed the authenticity of historical events and documents. Local and personal memory recordings are more popular than ever. However, these memories are not treated the way historical documents used to be canonized. Writers and readers appreciate their contribution to understanding the society and history, but a cautionary attitude towards the use of memories is always necessitated. This awareness in memory studies indicates a superior position which enables writers and readers to question the history.



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