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Contemporary Drama in English

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Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann, Birgit Däwes (eds.)

Global Challenges and Regional Responses in Contemporary Drama in English
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Papers given on the occasion
of the eleventh annual conference
of the
German Society for
Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English

Edited for the society
by Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann and Birgit Däwes

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Inquiries should be addressed to the general editor,
Prof. Dr. Martin Middeke, Englische Literaturwissenschaft,
Universität Augsburg, Universitätsstr. 10, D-86159 Augsburg

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Jochen Achilles
Ina Bergmann
Birgit Däwes
Global Challenges and Regional Responses in Contemporary Drama in English: An Introduction

I

This volume collects the papers presented at the eleventh annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Drama and Theatre in English (CDE) on “Global Challenges and Regional Responses in Contemporary Drama in English.” It was organized by Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann, and Birgit Däwes, the faculty of the American Studies Division at Würzburg University, and was held at Burg Rothenfels, Germany, May 9-12, 2002. The conference was part of the Julius-Maximilians-University’s sexcentenary celebrations. It addressed the tensions and interrelations between globalizing and localizing tendencies in contemporary drama, between the economic and political drive towards uni(formi)ty and standardization on the one hand and, on the other, the resistance to such homogenization by specific regional, ethnic, gender or social groups. In his 1996 critical introduction to performance studies, Marvin Carlson describes performance as a substantially and inherently contested concept. Carlson cites W. B. Gallie’s philosophical discussion of the “essentially contested concept.” Such concepts are marked by a defining and indispensable, inbuilt, as it were, “disagreement about their essence” (1). Such disagreement also inheres in the debates of globalization and regionalization. Globalization and regionalization may, therefore, be considered essentially contested concepts, too — not only when contrasted with each other but also in, for, and by themselves. Globalization and regionalization are often used as synonyms for the conflict between the one and the many, unification and
diversification. But they can also mean a host of other things. Globalization has overtones of both cosmopolitan world citizenship and of a particular form of regionalization, also known as Americanization. Regionalization can smack of parochialism but can also refer to substantial rootedness in a world of fleeting cybernetic and other interrelations.

Well-known developments such as the almost unchallenged political and military dominance of the United States of America as the only remaining superpower after the dissolution of both the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact; the concomitant expansion of capitalist economy in what Frederick Buell calls a new global system; the mass migrations and resultant necessity of the increasing multicultural coexistence of different ethnic groups in many parts of the world; and the impact of an, again, United States-dominated and -oriented media and movie industry contribute to the prominence of American society as a highly controversial social and political model for the rest of the world. In a seminal sociological study of 1944, influential to this day, Gunnar Myrdal gives the social and political model at stake here a name which has stuck. He calls it the "American Creed." Myrdal, himself a Swede, considers this American Creed — informed by "ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity" (5) — as the common bond of Americans from all walks of life and as exemplary for other nations:

Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors have something in common: a social ethos, a political creed. It is difficult to avoid the judgment that this 'American Creed' is the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation. When the American Creed is once detected, the cacophony becomes melody. The further observation then becomes apparent: that America, compared to every other country in Western civilization, large or small, has the most explicitly expressed system of general ideals in reference to human interrelations. (3)

This American model for the reconciliation of interethnic, economic, and gender conflicts is, of course, not without inner tensions and contradictions. The theme and title of the monumental two-volume study in which Myrdal develops it, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (1944), exposes one of its fundamental problems: the dispute over racial equality. In The Contrapuntal Civilization:
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*Essays Toward a New Understanding of the American Experience*, his 1971 essay collection on the subject of unity and diversity in American civilization, historian Michael Kammen argues that the contestational nature of American society is ineradicable. In Kammen's view, America is unavoidably based on contrapuntal structures, as "racial discrimination, civic corruption, and violence are just as much American traditions as equality, morality, and the rule of law" (22).

In recent years, the question of American ethnic diversity and the irreconcilable answers given to it — the unitarian, but potentially oppressive, melting-pot ideology on the one hand and the egalitarian, but potentially divisive, cultural pluralism, which developed out of Horace Kallen's theories, on the other — have dominated the theoretical debate of the American cultural model. In his book *The Disuniting of America* (1992), the historian and former political adviser Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., expresses fear of the replacement of the melting pot with an American Tower of Babel, i.e., the disintegration of America in the attempt to satisfy a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands. Echoing William Butler Yeats, Schlesinger asks "Will the center hold?" in view of the uncompromising ethnocentrism preached in higher education and in the political arena. The bone of contention in this debate is the question what precisely a central and universally acceptable set of values, or Creed, consists in, which would be acceptable across race, gender, and class boundaries and which would guarantee the nation's cohesion. While Schlesinger suggests a return to fundamental values derived from the European tradition, which multiculturalists consider as inappropriately eurocentric, his colleague David Hollinger argues for the reinstitution of an American Creed which is based on civic, as opposed to ethnically specific, values such as equal opportunity, fair treatment, and equality. In his study *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (1995) Hollinger writes:

A postethnic perspective on American nationality emphasizes the civic character of the American nation-state, in contrast to the ethnic character of most of the nationalism we read about today. A civic nation can mediate between the species and the ethnos in ways that an ethnic nation cannot. In the context of the worldwide resurgence of ethno-racial particularism, the transethnic solidarity of the American civic nation has much to recommend it. The United States, as a
civic nation with an ethno-racially diverse population, mediates more directly than most nations do between the species and the varieties of humankind. (14)

Hollinger’s postethnic perspective thus consists in a re-emphasis of the basic ingredients of Myrdal’s American Creed. Like Myrdal, Hollinger considers the American Creed based on civic values as an exportable commodity that can serve as a yardstick for the social balance of many other nations that have to cope with a multiplicity of cultural identities in a postethnic world.

The contestations of ethnocentrism on the one hand and a postethnic cosmopolitan perspective on the other reappear on the economic plane in the conflicts between, for instance, Fredric Jameson’s trajectory of a hegemonic reinforcement of capitalism and Daniel Bell’s belief in a postindustrial society based on the organization of knowledge rather than the production of material goods. In his essay “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue” (1998), Jameson discusses the economic ramifications of the American Creed’s potential globalization. Jameson argues that there are two major aspects of globalization which tend to collapse into each other and yet form dialectic contradictions, namely, the economic and the cultural aspect. Depending upon which aspect is foregrounded, the consequences of globalization may appear to be diametrically opposed. The cultural contents of globalization may be described as “a celebration of the emergence of a whole immense range of groups, races, genders, ethnicities, into the speech of the public sphere” (Jameson 57). From this angle, globalization may be considered to breed diversification and decentering. From an economic angle, however, the consequences of globalization consist of “the rapid assimilation of hitherto autonomous national markets and productive zones into a single sphere, the disappearance of national subsistence (in food, for example), [and] the forced integration of countries all over the globe” (Jameson 57). These consequences of globalization are obviously far less celebratory than the cultural ones of ethnic diversification. The promise of “the dawning celebration of cultural difference” (Jameson 57) is counteracted by the threat of “the worldwide Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences, the massification of all the peoples on the planet” (Jameson 57) — the latter a less than desirable form of adherence to the American Creed.
Jameson emphasizes that globalization is first and foremost “a communicational concept, which alternately masks and transmits cultural or economic meanings” (Jameson 55). The contradictions between economic and cultural trends towards either diversification or standardization are primarily negotiated in the communicational sector, as globalization is tantamount to the export and import of culture: “It is enough to think of all the people around the world who watch exported Northamerican [sic] television programs to realize that this cultural intervention is deeper than anything known in earlier forms of colonization or imperialism” (Jameson 58). And: “American mass culture, associated as it is with money and commodities, enjoys a prestige that is perilous for most forms of domestic cultural production, which either find themselves wiped out — as with local film and television production — or co-opted and transformed beyond recognition, as with local music” (Jameson 59). The American film and television industries are economic factors of the highest order from which enormous profits can be reaped. Therefore, the logic of economic expansion propels the expansion of these communicational industries. American films and television programs are at the same time cultural factors of enormously homogenizing influence as they propagate American lifestyles, attitudes, and mores all over the globe (see Jameson 60). The dominance of Hollywood films and American television programs in global mass culture is powered by economic advantages of the United States over smaller countries and, in Jameson’s view, also amounts to “an allegory of the end of the possibility of imagining radically different social alternatives to this one we now live under” (Jameson 62):

The point is therefore that, alongside the free market as an ideology, the consumption of the Hollywood film form is the apprenticeship to a specific culture, to an everyday life as a cultural practice: a practice of which commodified narratives are the aesthetic expression, so that the populations in question learn both at the same time. (Jameson 63)

Jameson is not optimistic as to measures which might balance this homogenizing trend of American mass culture by a proliferation of cultural differences because neither the Japanese nor the European entertainment industries are a match for the American one (see Jameson 67). Contrary to the modernist period, when non-commercial aesthetic im-
pulses could find sanctuary in the cathedrals of high art, in postmodernity “no enclaves – aesthetic or other – are left in which the commodity form does not reign supreme” (Jameson 70).

The work of influential European, African, and Asian theorists demonstrates the internationalization of this discussion. American society may not function as a model for these theorists, as Myrdal and Hollinger recommend, but the obvious parallels between the debates of nationhood and transnational identities in the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia bespeak the global expansion of the problems of societal coherence vis-à-vis increasing diversity. From an Anglo-German angle, Sir Ralf Dahrendorf and Jürgen Habermas concern themselves with questions which are very similar to those addressed by Schlesinger, Hollinger, and Jameson. In his essay collection *The Postnational Constellation* (1998/2001), Habermas diagnoses the multiculturalism of the European nation-states and their need for a politics of recognition, a demand first voiced by Canadian social philosopher Charles Taylor: “Multicultural societies require a ‘politics of recognition’ because the identity of each individual citizen is woven together with collective identities, and must be stabilized in a network of mutual recognition” (74). In a similar vein, the Indian social scientist Arjun Appadurai speaks of “global ethno-scapes,” shifting interethnic configurations changing with the tides of global migrations, which tend to replace the traditional nation-states not only in Europe but worldwide and to generate a new cosmopolitan consciousness.

Like Jameson, both Habermas and Appadurai emphasize the decisive impact of the mass media, especially film and television, on these globalizing developments. Habermas critically analyzes the development of a world consumer culture which is as commodified as it is superficially unified:

Global markets, mass consumption, mass communication, and mass tourism disseminate the standardized products of a mass culture (overwhelmingly shaped by the United States). The same consumer goods and fashions, the same films, television programs, and bestselling music and books spread across the globe; the same fashions in pop, techno, or jeans seize and shape the mentalities of young people in even the most far-flung places; the same language, English assimilated in a variety of ways, serves as a medium for understanding between the most radically different dialects. The clocks of Western civilization keep the
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tempo for the compulsory simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous. This commodified, homogenous culture doesn’t just impose itself on distant lands, of course; in the West too, it levels out even the strongest national differences, and weakens even the strongest local traditions. (74–75)

On a more positive note, Appadurai, thinking of Bollywood as well as Hollywood, considers the empowerment of the human imagination through the mass media and the culture industry as one of the most far-reaching transformations of the global cultural order and as the agency which facilitates the interaction of the global and the local in the modern world:

The imagination – expressed in dreams, songs, fantasies, myths, and stories – has always been part of the repertoire, in some culturally organized way, of every society. But there is a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of ‘possible’ lives than they ever did before. One important source of this change is the mass media, which present a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives, some of which enter the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others. (197)

One of the implications of Jameson’s, Habermas’s and Appadurai’s emphasis on the importance of media culture for the debate of the relationship between the local and the global is the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, the signifier and the signified. Jean Baudrillard famously claims that the reality status of Disneyland is not an anomaly but rather emblematic of the fact that the real in its entirety has developed into a simulation or simulacrum: “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (154).

The relationship between the local and the global is, of course, not only discussed on the lofty heights of culture theory. It is obviously a staple diet of contemporary political debates whose theatrical stagedness and performative virtuosity in the context of media representations decidedly partakes of Baudrillardian simulation. The March 2002 article entitled “Gipfel der Heuchler” / “Summit of Hypocrites” and, espe-
cially, the accompanying cartoon from the renowned German weekly *Die Zeit* on a summit meeting of leading politicians from member states of the European Union in Barcelona highlights and satirizes this.

This cartoon by Beck deals with European unification, the fledgling European offshoot of globalization, but it nevertheless pinpoints some essential problems common to both interrelated processes. The viewers of the cartoon become witness to the building of what, in somewhat clichéd political parlance, is often called the European House, the growing together of a diversified Europe pictured as an architectural endeavor. The building site of this European House demonstrates that it is, indeed, contested ground. A large number of walls is being erected so that the finished edifice will most probably resemble an apartment house with many cubicles for single lodgers rather than an open space such as a stage, a conference-hall or, for that matter, an elegant ballroom for free and gracious European exchanges of the most diverse kinds. In addition, most of the building operations are being boycotted in various interesting and effective ways while they are underway — some builders have literally been rooted in concrete, for instance. One may have one’s doubts whether a European House, whose foundations are thus undermined, will not collapse before the opening ceremony. On the cartoon’s left side, one of the house builders is euphemistically telling the masses of European consumers assembled outside that (as the subscription reads) their unified market will open shortly when a little more wall-
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building has been completed inside. Meanwhile, one of the orator’s not so cosmopolitan friends is sending a brick in the direction of the back of his head. The rhetoric of European unification, which can stand in for a globalized melting-pot-rhetoric of many descriptions, is evaporating into so much window-dressing, while nationalists, regionalists, and ethnocentrists are happily at work, hedging in their respective little terrains. As a matter of course, the building will not be able to stand without any walls whatsoever, but how many we need and where they are to be located is the problem.

The builders of the European house are obviously portrayed as actors in the worst sense of the word; they appear as the hypocrites which the article’s caption suggests they are. And the European citizens outside become spectators to a nightmarish performance of an essentially hopeful play. This cartoon is thus, in its own way, decidedly theatrical and performative. The roles which the cartoon assigns — the cosmopolitan as empty rhetorician, the regionalists as both myopic and malicious masons, and the rest as either gullible or skeptical crowd, are, of course, replaced by less stereotyped and more finely chiseled ones in contemporary plays which deal with aspects of globalization and regionalization. The political allegory of the cartoon is definitely not the only dramatic genre in which contemporary plays express themselves. There are many other, different, and more complex pictures of the conflicting tendencies towards the local or the global to be found in the pages of contemporary plays and the essays about them collected in this volume.

II

If the interrelations between the local and the global in the spheres of ethnic, gender, and class identities are inextricably connected with questions of media representation, the discussion of these interrelations in contemporary drama may be considered to be of particular importance. The contributions to this volume, which came out of the conference, cover American, as well as Canadian, English, Irish, and South African drama. Several thematic foci are discernible. Seven articles address American plays and six English-speaking dramas from England, Ireland, Canada, and South Africa. The essays which are grouped together under the heading “The Individual and the Politics of Gender, Race, and Class
in the United States of America” deal with the challenges to which the American Creed is exposed by disruptions of both the family and national values in the works of Sam Shepard; ethnic and sexual stereotyping in plays by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, David Hwang, José Rivera, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Tony Kushner; the politics of feminism in Wendy Wasserstein’s *An American Daughter*, and simulacral postmodern aesthetics in Don De Lillo’s *Valparaiso*.

More specifically, Matthew Roudane’s contribution, “Global Challenges, Regional Responses: The Theatre of Sam Shepard,” expertly assesses Shepard’s oeuvre and the both specifically American and international influences on it. Among the former are Beat poetry, jazz music, and the drama of Edward Albee; among the latter Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Peter Handke, Luigi Pirandello, Antonin Artaud, and the fiction of Anton Chekhov, Juan Rulfo, and Frank O’Connor. O’Connor may sound like a far cry, but his obsession with oedipal conflicts links him to Shepard’s central interest, “the exploration of the primal family unit.” This concern is at the heart of a number of Shepard’s earlier plays and also informs his latest play to date, *The Late Henry Moss* (2002). This work’s autobiographical aspects connect it with Shepard’s own traumatic family experience. But *The Late Henry Moss* is also a criticism of the current state of family structures as such: “Shepard’s play, while regionally specific and very much about the Henry Jamison Moss family, is also informed by a larger global critique of the primal family unit.” Highlighting the fabrication of family history by making use of family photos, *The Late Henry Moss* also addresses the constructivist and simulacral qualities of contemporary identity conceptions — a topic which interrelates a large number of otherwise diverse plays under discussion during the conference. Hans-Ulrich Mohr’s essay on “The Significance of ‘Horseplay’: Global and Regional Dimensions in Sam Shepard’s *True West* and *Far North*” discusses the regional promise of the West as opposed to the disillusionment with the globalizing consumer culture of the United States at large. In Sam Shepard’s plays *True West* (1980) and *Far North* (1988), the West reveals itself as a hybrid construct, a projection screen filled with manifold re-interpretations. Whereas the real West “corresponds with a protean sense of self and of reality,” the traditional West can be defined by “a deep emotional appeal, resulting in the
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conviction of rootedness.” The constructedness of both the postmodern and the traditional West is a quality which it shares with a process of globalization that, in Mohr’s view, appears as a “contest of desires conjointing into the social construction of reality.” Whereas Hans-Ulrich Mohr emphasizes Shepard’s contribution to the assessment of a global media culture, Katharina Erhard’s article “Enacting the Farm Crisis of the 1970s: Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* as a Socially Symbolic Act” discusses the historical and geographical rootedness of Shepard’s drama. Erhard reconstructs the significance which the agrarian ideal of America, manifesting itself in an emphatic definition of the American farmer, still had in seventies political rhetoric. The farm crisis emerges as a major element in a national identity crisis which is caused by Cold War competition, the Vietnam War, and economic stagflation. Erhard convincingly analyzes the ways in which Shepard captures this political climate of the seventies in his family play; how, for instance, military deficits on a national scale translate into metaphors of emasculation and impotence on a personal one:

In the 1970s, the farm crisis as well as the frequent recurrence to the image of the yeoman captured American anxieties about postmodernity. By piling the doubts about America’s capitalism on the back of a farming family, Shepard found a powerful way of conveying doubts and fears that ran through the whole society.

Wilfried Raussert explores the impact of gender, race, and class differences in the development of intercultural identities in his essay “Gender and the Performance of Local and Global Conflicts in Postmodern and Contemporary American Drama: LeRoi Jones, José Rivera, David H. Hwang.” The article discusses Jones’s *Dutchman* (1964), Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* (1988), and Rivera’s *Marisol* (1992) and concerns itself with the African American, Asian, and Puerto Rican experience as it is shaped by gender and class definitions. The genre of drama lays emphasis on performativity rather than essentialist givens and thus supports the fluidity of the identity formations which develop in intersections of the local and the global. In “Revising America, Revisioning the Past: American Drama in a Global(izing) World,” Carmen Birkle addresses related issues. She discusses the racing, engendering, and queering of American history in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* (1994) and *Topdog/Un-
derdog (2001), Wendy Wasserstein’s *An American Daughter* (1997), and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1990/91), respectively. All three playwrights use the theatre as a platform for the revision of “the History of America and American identity and thus the myth of the American Dream as limited monocultural constructs and the American community as imagined and thus imaginable in other ways.” Kerstin Schmidt’s essay “A Blueprint of an Event: History, Spectacle, and the Creation of an African American Perspective” discusses more specifically the way in which Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* redefines American history and, more concretely, Abraham Lincoln’s death. History and Lincoln’s role in it reveal themselves as theatrical, transformable, and reproducible — in short, as “disneyfications” — within the framework of a global media culture. Parks’s play demonstrates that such mutability is not tantamount to meaninglessness but, on the contrary, can be considered as a chance for ethnic appropriation and acceptance: “Via the detour of spectacularizing and globalizing history American history is made available for African Americans. They can thus claim history for a specifically African American historical interrogation and adapt it according to their ideological agenda.” Klaus Benesch’s article on “Myth, Media, and the Obsolescence of Postmodern Drama: Don DeLillo’s Tragicomedy *Valparaiso*” concentrates on the interrelation between postmodern simulacral realities and drama as represented by DeLillo’s tragicomedy. *Valparaiso* (1999) transforms the postmodern aesthetics, in which media fabrications and empirical reality blur, into a theatre aesthetics which at the same time precedes and epitomizes postmodern performative realities and redeems them by a cathartic regeneration through violence: “it seems as if the ‘reality’ of the stage is not only always one step ahead of the postmodern play with simulacra and representations but, simultaneously, transforms it into something that is at once more authentic and more convincing than our flimsy, media-guided notions of the real.”

The second group of essays, collected under the caption “Global Paradigms and Local Identities in England, Ireland, Canada, and South Africa,” deals with the American presence in British and Irish plays, the representation of the Jamesonian postmodern sublime of global capitalism in the drama of Caryl Churchill and David Edgar, the equally loving and satirical treatment of Northern British provincialism in the work of
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Alan Bennett, Irish-American relations in the drama of Sebastian Barry, Native Canadian identities in Drew Hayden Taylor’s plays Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock and AlterNatives, and, finally, political betrayal and ongoing oppression in post-apartheid South Africa as shown in the plays of Zakes Mda.

Marvin Carlson’s truly comprehensive contribution “The Mother Tongue and the Other Tongue: The American Challenge in Recent Drama” provides an overview of the role played by America and American characters in British and Irish plays since John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger (1956), in which America is mentioned as the counterpoint to a romanticized British tradition. The essay pursues the challenge of America in English plays such as Harold Pinter’s The Homecoming (1965) and Caryl Churchill’s Icecream (1989). In Irish drama, “the American has replaced the Englishman as the dominant Other.” Brian Friel’s Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964) is perhaps the most famous Irish play rehearsing this international theme. Thomas Murphy’s Conversations on a Homecoming (1985) harks back to the Kennedy era. It is a homecoming play like Pinter’s, Tom Murphy’s own more recent The Wake (1998), and Anne McGravie’s The Cairn Stones (2001). Both Martin McDonagh’s The Cripple of Inishmaan (1996) and Marie Jones’s Stones in his Pockets (1999) deal with the ironies and distortions to which the image of Ireland is exposed when it is mediated by Hollywood film productions. These last two plays demonstrate the power of fabricated and illusionary imagery which, in a global context, tends to replace stark regional realities. Cordula Quint’s article “Terror of the Contemporary Sublime: Regional Responses to the Challenges of Internationalism and Globalization in the Drama of Caryl Churchill and David Edgar” discusses Caryl Churchill’s Serious Money (1987) and Far Away (2000) as well as David Edgar’s Pentecost (1994) against the backdrop of Fredric Jameson’s postmodern reinterpretation of the sublime. Its incommensurability to both the individual mind and its capacity for artistic creation qualifies contemporary multinational capitalism in Jameson’s eyes as a cultural version of Edmund Burke’s and Immanuel Kant’s natural sublime. Quint develops this notion further, arguing “that these contemporary transformations engender an intensified apprehension of an ungraspable totality of interlinked relations and challenge all
illusionary boundedness. This experience then is the *intercultural sublime*.
Churchill’s and Edgar’s plays portray the cognitive and emotive consequences of this intercultural sublime, i.e., displacement, disorientation, and decentering, in a variety of contexts and dramatic modes. They also open up a perspective of renewed cognitive mapping as a strategy which may lead out of the contemporary impasse. Kara McKechnie focuses on a specifically British form of theatrical regionalization in “Homely Northern Women in Sensible Shoes: Alan Bennett and the Pleasures of Provincialism.” Alan Bennett’s dramatic portrayal of Northern provincialism as well as his own public persona come across as deceptively endearing phenomena whose deep-reaching ambivalences are unearthed in this sagacious interpretation. Both Bennett and his North of England are “an unlikely example of the postmodern thesis of the image’s dominance over the concept it represents.” While they appear harmless to the superficial gaze, Bennett’s constructions of Northernness reveal their sadness, anger, and subversiveness only to patient scrutiny.

In “Revising the Nation: Globalisation and Fragmentation of Irish History in Sebastian Barry’s Plays,” Jürgen Wehrmann demonstrates the continuing trend towards deconstructions of Irish national identity in contemporary Irish drama. In Sebastian Barry’s plays *White Woman Street* (1992) and *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* (1995), this development reaches new dimensions. In both plays, Barry conflates aspects of Irish and American national identities which develop into amalgamations, or hybrids, of a near-universal or global description and thus erode their respective specificity. In *White Woman Street*, the conflation of the movement for Irish national liberation on the one hand and Indian Removal on the other “questions the essentialist idea of national homogeneity and exposes the imaginary character of the nation.” In *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn*, Irish music hall artiste Lizzie Finn and Buffalo Bill are thrown together in the British coastal town of Weston-super-Mare in an early attempt at globalization that ironically subverts the national unity of experience. In “Local or Global? Negotiations of Identity in Drew Hayden Taylor’s Plays,” Birgit Däwes analyzes both the fluidity attributed to identity formation in the theories of David Hollinger and Julia Kristeva and the resistance to essentialist concepts of
authenticity in Native American and Native Canadian Studies. The interpretation of Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock (1989) and AlterNatives (1999), two plays by Native Canadian playwright Drew Hayden Taylor, confirms the performative nature of identities for which the stage is a playing field and laboratory. Dawes concludes: “The question thus does not seem to be whether we define ourselves as regional or global agents, but whether, in a world of open and negotiable borderlines, this distinction makes any difference at all.” In “The Theme of Political Betrayal in the Plays of Zakes Mda,” South African critic Chijioke Uwah addresses the problems of post-apartheid South Africa with postcolonial independence. This is a problematic which, with regard to other African regions, has been discussed by a number of African writers, among them Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Chinua Achebe, and J. P. Clark. South African playwright Zakes Mda anticipates the political betrayal of the masses by a new black ruling class in South Africa in plays such as We Shall Sing for the Fatherland, first produced in 1978, and And the Girls in Their Sunday Dresses at a time when liberation and independence were still things of the future. In these plays, “Mda had suggested that the common man might end up a victim of a second round of oppression in an independent South Africa.” Mda’s misgivings proved prophetic, and he continues his criticism of corrupt post-apartheid governmental practices in plays such as Mother of All Eating and You Fool How Can the Sky Fall, both first produced in 1995.

The third focus of the conference was on both the teaching and the experience of contemporary drama in English. Annette Pankratz’s, Alyce von Rothkirch’s, Kathleen Starck’s, and Merle Tönnies’s contribution “Making Play-Texts Live: Teaching Drama as Experience” describes and analyzes the complex results of a teaching workshop during the conference. This workshop presented and discussed methods such as “in-yer-face theatre,” as well as the holistic, surface, atomistic, strategic, and deep approaches to teaching drama. This workshop also suggested a number of seminar organization patterns such as the pre-show talk, the student-as-expert, student-as-tutor, student-as-director, or student-as-theatre critic approach as well as forms of interaction such as performance, discussion, improvisation, playing with props, casting, set design, rewriting the text, and others. This workshop on teaching drama was
supplemented by Fulbright Senior Specialist Janice Perry's group work on "Constructing Self: Autobiographically Based Performance From Page to Stage." Drama and theatre as concrete and immediate experience was also provided by a highly entertaining reading from his plays by Ojibway dramatist Drew Hayden Taylor and by Janice Perry's hilarious "Holy Sh** — Stories from Heaven and Hell," a one-woman show on the pitfalls of sainthood in locations as diverse as a parochial Bavarian tavern and a truly cosmopolitan, but less than liberal, gay and lesbian hangout in London's Shepherd's Bush. Two student theatre groups contributed excellent productions, too. The Anglophone Collaborative Theatre Stuttgart, directed by Stuart Marlow, performed Pricing Freedom, Stuart Marlow's original and topical play about globalization and the conflict in the Middle East; and The Würzburg University English Drama Group, directed by Bertram Richter, produced Tennessee Williams's one-act The Lady of Larkspur Lotion. Professional theatre was also included in the conference activities. Conference attendants watched the Würzburg Mainfranken Theatre's experimental production of Michael Frayn's Copenhagen. Director Gabriele Wiesmüller as well as stage and costume designer Bodo Demelius joined the conference on the following day for an intriguing discussion and analysis of their interpretation of Michael Frayn's play.

This summary of the conference contributions in this volume hopefully gives an impression of the rich and complex discussion of global challenges and regional responses in contemporary drama in English that was achieved by these papers when they were read at Burg Rothenfels in May 2002. This overview certainly also demonstrates that this debate may address the conference topic from a variety of angles but is in many ways not entirely systematic and well-balanced, far from being complete, marked by contingencies and other human imperfections, and thus not the comprehensive treatment of its topic which the reader might expect. This much being said, one more repetition of a particular quip that often graces reviews of volumes such as this should, nevertheless, be discouraged. The claim usually is that, on account of all the omissions and imbalances of such volumes, they are held together by little more than the glue which the bookbinder uses on the spine. This, I think, is not true in this case and in most such cases. Such books are also
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held together by the expertise and fresh insights, not to speak of the enthusiasm and friendship, of their contributors. Conference proceedings rarely attain the closure and coherence of a well-planned monograph, since they are subject to all sorts of eventualities which inevitably befall the organization of such ventures. Nevertheless, I am fairly convinced that this volume is held together by more than glue. The simulated and mediated character of our postmodern global realities and identities, highlighted by Baudrillard, seems to be one overarching theme, for instance, which connects Hollinger’s, Jameson’s, Habermas’s, and Appadurai’s debate of social, political, and economic coherence with the arguments by many contributors in this volume. It also links American drama with drama from other English-speaking regions and provides a common concern for plays otherwise as diverse as Sam Shepard’s *The Late Henry Moss*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*, David Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, Drew Hayden Taylor’s *AlterNatives*, Sebastian Barry’s *The Steward of Christendom*, Martin McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, and Marie Jones’s *Stones in His Pockets*. The disconcerting realities of advanced multinational capitalism, which are incommensurate to human emotions and defy aesthetic closure, are yet another topic which pervades the American drama of Suzan-Lori Parks or Sam Shepard as well as British plays by Caryl Churchill or David Edgar. Contemporary drama in English can thus on the whole be understood as a host of regional responses to global challenges.

Works Cited


I.

The Individual and the Politics of Gender, Race, and Class in the United States of America
Sam Shepard interjected a youthful, exuberant, and experimental voice that extended our appreciation of an alternative theatre aesthetic in the 1960s. In the 2000s, Shepard continues experimenting with dramatic form and structure. He traverses the borders of faith, logic, and social coherence to reconnoiter a mythic and cultural terrain filled with uncertainty and the near-absence of love. His is a Zolaesque world, a malevolent universe in which a sense of bafflement and loss pervade. As Baylor says in *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), “We’re all gonna get clobbered when we least expect it” (Shepard, *Lie* 100). Contextualized within a narrative history of the American theatre, seeing characters “clobbered” on stage is hardly unique. From Eugene O’Neill to Edward Albee and Adrienne Kennedy, American playwrights have presented a rich, if disturbing, series of physical, psychological, and moral assaults. Still, within the works of many twentieth-century American playwrights — O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956), Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953), Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out* (1977), and Margaret Edson’s *Wit* (1999) — there is more often than not an implied sense of recovery, or some epiphanic coming to terms with one’s self and culture. Li’l Bit, in Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), learns much more than how to drive; she learns how to take control of her life. Or if it is too late for a John Proctor, perhaps the spark of recognition transpires within the audience. For many American dramatists, confrontation triggers catharsis, cathar-

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osis insight, and that insight becomes a still point whose defining moment, itself, is the mechanism for a transcendent awareness, signaling the first step toward a spiritual recovery of the self.

Locating such affirmative textures within Shepard’s theatre is difficult. Perhaps impossible. To be sure, there emerge momentary glimpses of hope, and Shepard’s works in text and performance can be wildly funny. *True West* (1980) sparkles during its absurdist, Vaudevillian moments: when a baffled Lee discovers that there are 10 Melly Fergusons living in Bakersfield; when Lee finally finds the pen in the trashed-out kitchen; and when their mother returns from Alaska and urges her sons to go see Picasso, who she thinks will make a personal appearance at a museum in Los Angeles. On the other hand, a sadness pervades *True West* and most of Shepard’s other plays, a sadness that dissolves into a sense of menace, then uncertainty. This decline finds its expression in the deeply problematic nature of loving relationships between men and women, as seen in *Fool for Love* (1983) and *Eyes for Consuela* (1998), or between parents and their children, as seen in *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) and *Buried Child* (1979). In Sam Shepard’s entropic world, the primal family unit — whose members seem to be on some grand cosmic disconnect — are trapped within their own lies of the mind. Perhaps this explains why, when I asked if there were hints of hope and positive re-connection in such recent work as *When the World Was Green: A Chef’s Fable* (1996) and in selected tales from *Cruising Paradise* (1996), Shepard told me, “I think hope and hopelessness are intimately connected, and I don’t believe in one or the other. In a way I prefer hopelessness to hope. I think there’s more hope in hopelessness” (Roudané 75). Indeed, Shepard’s heroes find themselves caught within a terrible binary of hope and hopelessness, struggling with their own distorted versions of objective reality, and trying to survive in an American landscape warped by its own deflected myths, generational schisms, and wayward sense of Manifest Destiny.

However one wishes to view his plays, though, Shepard’s characters seem less concerned with social change and more fixed, at best, on discovering some genuine force in a world filled with shattered families. They are figures propelled by an inchoate inertia and preoccupied with merely surviving. Movie stars, cowboys, rock musicians, Hollywood
agents, military personnel, mobsters, and drifters enact their repressed anxieties and depressed lives amidst the alluvia of a postmodernist set and setting. His plays take place in shabby motels and in suburbia, with empty refrigerators, '57 Chevys, rock and roll music, nearby shopping malls or deserts defining an arid world devoid of comfort. Within such a world his characters struggle, unsuccessfully, to find some authentic force. It is as if the quest, itself, becomes an all consuming preoccupation. As Lee says in *True West*, "What I need is somethin' authentic. Somethin' to keep me in touch" (Shepard, *True West* 56).

As his career developed, Shepard, probably unconsciously, benefitted from the European absurdists. He has long acknowledged the influence of Beckett. His London years were crucial to his career. There is, in the plays he writes, a Pinteresque sense of tragicomic menace. Like Peter Handke, Shepard is not afraid to call attention to the artificiality of the theatre allowing him to move more readily from the real to the dream, from the familiar realistic props and settings to a symbolic and even mythic representation. One sees a Pirandellian playfulness that darkens as his own characters search for their identities. At times it is as if he draws from Artaud the power of the sacred, the violent, and the myth. Although little evidence exists to suggest that Shepard turned specifically to these international figures for inspiration, as a young, emerging artist living in the Village, he could hardly help but be imbued with international artistic crosscurrents. Today Shepard also marvels at the aesthetic brilliance of fiction from abroad, including a Russian, an Irishman, and a Mexican (Anton Chekhov, Frank O'Connor, and Juan Rulfo).

On native ground, Shepard learned from the free associative forms of Beat poetry. He embraced the improvisational aspects of a free language, of a word play liberated from rigid structures of meter and logical coherence. A rock musician who would later become a film star, Shepard was also drawn to the improvisational forms of jazz music. From Albee, he saw the incendiary power implicit in heated repartee, and he shared with Albee a distrust of Broadway (though both dramatists would make successful transitions to Broadway). In the later 1960s, Joseph Chaikin mentioned to me recently, Shepard used to drop in on rehearsals at The Open Theatre, watching performers work on their transformational acting techniques (Roudané 65). Such experiences opened new creative
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possibilities for Shepard as he continued with astonishing rapidity to
move his instinctive experimentalism from the page to the stage. “I used
to go to rehearsals [at the Open Theatre in the mid-1960s] just to sit
there and listen to Joe and watch him. He was so eloquent about what
he was looking for in the actor. And what he was looking for was com­
pletely different from what was going on at the time. ... Suddenly Joe
opened up this whole new territory ...” (from “Conversations with
Chaikin,” n.pag.).

Once gaining entrance into this new territory, Shepard came of age as
a writer during the 1970s and mid-1980s with such plays as *The Tooth of
(1978)*, *True West, Fool for Love,* and *A Lie of the Mind*. While Shepard’s
nonrealism was in many respects reaching its apex in 1978 with *Seduced*,
as early as 1974 he voiced an interest in developing a more realistic thea tre. Beginning in 1977 with *Curse of the Starving Class,* and extending
through *Buried Child, True West,* and *Fool for Love,* Shepard experi­
mented with a modified realism, a form that also drove his work in the
1990s: *States of Shock* (1991), *Simpatico* (1994), *When the World was
Green,* and *Eyes for Consuela.* In terms of plots, characterizations, and
language, these plays were closer to realistic performances than the
works of the 1960s and earlier 1970s. A closer correspondence between
the spoken word and its intended meaning grew. Action, though richly
symbolic, sometimes followed a cause and effect pattern. Questions of
coherence and believability were no longer unanswerable, but plot reso­
olutions were hardly to be found. The mystery remained, especially in
context of the family, but the rendering of the staged realities was less
radical than in, say, a production like *Operation Sidewinder* (1970). De­
spite all of this experimentalism, there has been one unifying subject
that has been, for Shepard, his central interest: the exploration of the
primal family unit, a subject that informs his (at this writing) most re­
cent play.

Shepard’s last work of the twentieth century, “The Late Henry
Moss,” returns to the first subjects that long ago shaped the playwright’s
moral imagination. The play, Shepard says, “concerns another predica­
ment between brothers and it’s mainly the same material I’ve been
working over for 30 years or something, but for me it never gets old”
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(Roudané 79). The familiar material, of course, negotiates the problematic condition of the American family and its wayward inhabitants. As seen in so many Shepard plays, questions of heredity, legacy, and legitimacy animate the stage, as do the status of the real and the ways in which the individual apprehends his or her own version of outer experience. Competing versions of reality, conflicting accounts of what precisely happened to Henry Moss and others in the days preceding his demise fill the stage. The drama raises “regional” debates about individual, familial, and cultural identity and memory, as it does about the “global” relationship between abstract and concrete experience, fiction and reality, and, ultimately, about coming to terms with death itself. Shepard layers such debates with additional complexity and ambiguity by presenting the play’s lead character as a ghost. As Shepard told me, “The Late Henry Moss” concerns “the father, who is dead in the play and comes back, who’s revisiting the past. He’s a ghost — which has always fascinated me” (Roudané 79). This is a play about a dead man walking. It is equally a play about a family afflicted by the inevitability of their biological and spiritual fate. Whereas in the earlier Buried Child the murdered infant never had a chance to live, the about-to-be buried father in “The Late Henry Moss” lived for nearly seven decades, though his phantasmic presence redefines antiheroism.

Apparitions, waif-like beings, and corpses occasionally infiltrate Shepard’s stages. They assume, of course, differing forms: as Ghost Girl in Mad Dog Blues (1971); or as the Old Man in Fool for Love (1983); or as Henry Hackamore in Seduced (1978), who, murdered at play’s end, keeps repeating, “I’m dead to the world but I have never been born” (Shepard, Seduced 276). In the brief one-act The Holy Ghostly (1969), spectral presences are even more direct. Witches inform the father, Stanley Hewitt Moss the sixth (surely a relative of Henry Moss), “You’re already dead, Mr. Moss” (Shepard, Holy Ghostly 182); “You’re a ghost, Mr. Moss” (189). By the end of The Holy Ghostly, his transubstantiation complete, Moss sees himself only as an anesthetized, “bloodless critter” (195). “The Late Henry Moss,” however, represents a turning point within Shepard’s theatre. The play, Shepard notes, differs from his earlier dramas in that “it specifically deals with death. I’ve never di-
rectly dealt with that. The other [plays] have that peripherally, but this is the centerpiece of it" (Guthmann 2).

Shepard, who directed the Magic Theatre’s November 14, 2000 premiere, assembled a memorable cast, many of them Hollywood friends. Nick Nolte and Sean Penn star as the troubled sons, the older booze-weary Earl and the edgy younger Ray, respectively, and James Gammon plays their beleaguered father and title character. Woody Harrelson, as a reluctant and frightened cab driver named Taxi, and Cheech Marin, as a benevolent neighbor named Esteban, emerge as humorous figures who, when appropriate, work the crowd for humor. In an evocative performance, Sheila Tousey is Conchalla Lupina, Henry’s mysterious and voracious Indian girlfriend. The play sold out for its 7-week run and drew mixed reactions, though most of the reviewers, apparently unable to address the play’s complexities, wrote mainly about its stars.

When theatregoers settled into their seats, they saw a stage that at first glance seemed fairly unremarkable. As a framing device, though, Andy Stacklin’s set provides a richly symbolic point of entry into Shepard’s play. Within the yellowish “rough plastered walls” of a run-down adobe, we see the corpse of Henry Moss. We also see a bathtub upstage and a kitchen, where most of the action occurs. While most reviewers simply overlooked the stage arrangements, Shepard worked carefully to ensure a semiotic of play space that reveals much about the hardscrabble life of its occupant. It is not for nothing that Shepard insists that above Henry’s corpse is “a small barred window” that makes part of the home look “like a jail cell.”

“The Late Henry Moss” revolves around the recent passing of the play’s title character. His two estranged sons find themselves reunited after years apart, drawn by the death of their alcoholic father to his home adobe located near the outskirts of a small town in New Mexico. As the play begins, Earl thumbs through a family photograph album while Ray examines a wrench in an old red tool chest. Their father’s body lies in rest in a small anterior bedroom. While taking care of burial arrangements, the brothers immerse themselves in present confronta-

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2 Sam Shepard, “The Late Henry Moss,” manuscript draft of the play. All further references are to this manually typed and unpublished version of the play.
tions and past recollections, sometimes reconstituted through flashback sequences, that reveal not only what may have happened to Henry Moss during his last days but also what transpired years ago within the Moss family. Thus spatially and temporally, the play at times unwinds in a non-realistic, and non-linear form. Moreover, the authority of Shepard's text and its performance is negotiable. Brothers immediately contradict each other. Accusations of "mis-remembering things" fly. Whose version of reality do we accept? Whose version seems legitimate? This organic contingency of what Michael Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones would call the "performing text" (see Issacharoff and Jones) — its openness to theatrical and textual negotiations, the poignancy of its conflicting dialogues, its shifting accounts of past action and present consequence, the ways in which Shepard arranges language and nuances stage directions, its very performativity — not only gives "The Late Henry Moss" its classic Shepardian texture, but its theatrical largess and, significantly, its purchase on a contemporary audience.

"The Late Henry Moss," for some, may be viewed as autobiography. The parallels between Shepard’s father and Henry Moss — the alcoholism, the shattering of doors and windows, the violence against wives and the attendant emotional injuries exacted upon children, the move from Illinois to New Mexico, the sheer implacable sense of anger that so consumes them, fathers who served in the air force, patriarchs who do not recognize their own children, the ignoble deaths of the fathers, and so on — invite such linkages. And Shepard drew on personal experiences for imaginative materials both before and after his own father’s death in 1984. Yet, despite the allure of interconnecting autobiography with "The Late Henry Moss" and the other "family" plays, Shepard has never been "an autobiographical writer in the simple sense of dramatising his own experiences" (Bigsby 183–84). In fact, the most remarkable feature about "The Late Henry Moss" is its compelling presentation of a series of events which suddenly broaden to encompass experiences felt by too many audiences: the never-seen mother, the father, and the sons emerge as bewildered figures, in the specifics of whose confrontations Shepard sets forth the entropic condition of the American family. Shepard’s play, while regionally specific and very much about the Henry Jamison Moss family, is also informed by a larger global critique of the primal family
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unit. Our conflicted sensory perceptions and experiences interfuse with Shepard’s scripted performance and conflicted performers.

On the surface, the drama’s past events seem simple, if horrific, enough. We learn more of these events when Henry Moss suddenly comes to life in Act II. One fateful evening a quarter of a century ago, Henry assaulted his wife, kicking her into a bloody husk. Clearly the family never recovered from this defining moment. Stunned by his own savagery, Henry abrogates claims to familial duty and Emersonian self reliance: he runs away. Despite his howling that reaches a metaphysical poignance by the third act, Henry Moss never apologizes for nearly murdering his wife. She remains “that little shit” who “LOCKED ME OUT!!!!” Only at the final curtain will Henry gain perspective regarding his exiled condition and the depth of his idiocy. Henry fathoms only seconds before lapsing into his final death that, at the precise moment he assaulted his wife, he transformed himself from the present Henry Moss to the late Henry Moss. Within the imaginative logic of Shepard’s play, physical death 25 years later is a mere formality.

The Mosses emerge as characters whose very identities are under assault. For the blood-soaked mother nearly beaten to death, “identity” has been rendered invisible by a wayward husband whose anger gains its demented energy from drink and insecurity. In text and performance, she never appears in a flashback scene. Nor does she speak for herself in the present. She remains nameless. All the audience learns is that Henry used and abused her. We learn nothing else about her. For Earl, the older brother who lacked the courage to protect his mother, who ran in terror that fateful evening, and whose actions eerily replicate his father’s throughout the play, “identity” is submerged by guilt over his mother’s demise and, now, by alcohol that keeps at bay his shame. With their mother lying near death, Earl sped off in his 1951 Chevy, never to be heard from for years. Shepard provides few other details about his past. In the present, the hulking and besotted Earl exudes a sad world weariness. He seems content to ignore his own fallibility and to forgive and accept his father — and his passing — at face value. As he says to his brother, it is “not like we’re inheriting a legacy here.”

He is wrong. “We’re bound up!” Henry Moss screams. “We’re flesh and blood, you idiot!” These brothers are the beneficiaries of their fam-
ily's history. So for Ray, the skittish younger son, "identity" has been under pressure from the (de)formative experience of watching the family disintegrate and his own subsequent withdrawal. Too young to defend his mother and traumatized by the beating and subsequent abandonment of family by its elder male figures, he also ran from home. Although he wears a Hawaiian shirt, black leather jacket, and blue leather-tipped shoes, Ray appears withdrawn and paranoid. Ray seems consumed by a desire to stand up for a mother he could not protect as a boy, as if now he might make amends for the sins of the past. At best, however, he can only mop the kitchen floor in the third act with his older brother, just as the father mopped the bloody floor with their mother before. Within Ray's world of attenuated options, retribution comes too late. Expiation remains a distant force. These family members emerge as damaged figures whose only remarkable feature, Shepard suggests, is their own insignificance in the universe. As Ray says to Taxi, "You're nothing. Just like me. An empty nothing. A couple of nothings whose lives have never amounted to anything and never will."

For Henry, "identity" seems buried in a maze of denials and rationalizations. After all, he reasons, "What did I ever do to deserve this? I've led an honorable life for the most part! Few slip-ups now and then but — for the most part — I've served my country. I've dropped bombs on total strangers! Paid my taxes. Worked my ass off for idiots. There's never once been any question of my — existence. It's humiliating!" Defining his identity, however, remains as problematic as it is disturbing. Henry lives for years in his adobe, remaining drunk enough to blot out a past that forever emotionally paralyzes him.

Shepard spotlights this emotional paralysis during a tragicomedic scene in which Henry implores Taxi to gaze "past the outer covering" of his eyes in a search for some spark, ember, or "glowing center of action." Although a browbeaten Taxi claims his eyes look fine, their repartee suggests otherwise: "They're dead eyes! ... So — So you think there just might be a little spark inside there, huh? (pointing to his eyes) A little ember glowing? ... You saw something in there that led you to believe there was some — potential? Some — hope?" The answers remain open to question. Henry, immobilized because of his ghost-status, needs a substitute speaker to take up the question of his essence. Shepard's
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script takes the audience to the nerve center of the play, for Henry must raise, as he says, “the question of my being! My aliveness! My actuality in this world! Whether or not I’m dead or not! ... You can argue my case for me. I’ve got no one else.” Shepard, however, is not merely dramatizing Henry’s quest to discover if he is “to be” or “not to be.” For the play quickly deepens as Shepard interrogates the highly contested site between the real and the imaginary.

Shepard’s conflating of the real with the imaginary assumes particular resonance through the subtle use of the family photographs throughout the play. They function, in a minor key, like the films in *True West*: through the ostensibly minor stage props of photographs, “The Late Henry Moss” explores a number of epistemological questions about the ways in which the individual apprehends, distorts, and then internalizes that distorted image of the real to such an extent that the distortion — an abstracted replication of actual experience — displaces reality itself. The photographs are connections to the past, tangible objects, however inadequate or illegitimate they might be. If, as Susan Sontag claims, “the camera’s twin capacities” enable the photograph to “subjectivize reality and to objectify it” (Sontag 178), the pictures Ray and Earl gaze upon become outer manifestations of the inner distortions of the eye that perceives them. The family pictures that Ray gives away to a stranger are, for him, sentimental re-prints of the original imprint. For Earl, however, “[t]here were photographs in there going back to the turn of the century! ... Those photographs are irreplaceable.”

Even here, though, Shepard subverts the value of such objects, for the photographs are of a prehistory, shots of a young Henry Moss “standing in a wheat field,” clueless about “what’s in store for him.” Ray senses that the photographs are substitutes for a current reality, a recalling and framing of a time past. Ray, Earl, and Henry try “to picture” (a term each man repeats during the 3-hour play) earlier events but remain frustrated throughout because they only encounter various images, accounts, snapshots, as it were, not real life moments. This explains why, for Ray, photography and heredity interlink themselves through their potential falsification of outer experience. And it’s the falsification, not the image per se in the photo, that has been passed down from generation to generation, that reduces the family to “a pack of liars.” For the
Moss family as for the American family, Shepard implies, the photographs collapse into oversimplifications of past events precisely because the camera eye was never privy to the beatings and alcoholic destruction of the Moss home. An even greater danger appears if the perceiving eye of each new generation examining the photographs inevitably confers upon them the impression of objectivity, reliability and, indeed, reality itself. Then they become part of the family’s folklore, its legitimized history. Thus the photographs in “The Late Henry Moss” become nothing less than the true story, an authentic meta-narrative of the family legacy.

Hence photographs, for Ray, remain suspect. They are co-conspirators of frozen moments that are inadequate re-presentations, mere traces, of reality. This also explains why Ray berates a total stranger. After Taxi relates (in all sincerity as far as the audience can tell) that Comanche Indians killed his Great Great Grandmother, Ray menacingly approaches, saying:

Sounds like a story to me. ... Thing about that kind of story, Taxi-man, ist hat the very first fabricator – the original liar who started this little rumor about your slaughtered Great Great Grandma – he’s dead and gone now, right? Vanished from this earth! All the ones who knew him are dead and gone. So there’s really no way to verify this little story of yours, is there? This little history. No way to know if there’s even the slightest germ of truth to it. It’s just something you’ve grown to believe in. Something you’ve become convinced of because it ... gives you a sense of belonging, somewhere in time. A pathetic, sad little sense of belonging – out here in the black, black open-ended plains. ... Your whole family’s a pack of liars. They were born liars. They couldn’t help themselves. That’s why it’s important to try to get at the heart of things, don’t you think? Somebody, somewhere along the line, has to try to get at the heart of things.

Throughout the drama, metaphoric experience vies with actual experience for a purchase on human memory and consciousness. Ray distrusts the family album enough to give it away to a stranger. Perhaps Ray thinks he can transfer his family’s blighted past to someone else’s. Maybe Taxi can refurbish falsehoods about heritage, substituting the Moss photographs for his own family’s and encoding and developing them in new prints, new fictions: “Well, he can always make up some kind of story about them. ... He can tell people they’re pictures of bis
family. His ancestors. ... Maybe he's got no family. Maybe he needs to make one up.”

Shepard finished much of “The Late Henry Moss” by the premiere of Michael Almereyda’s Hamlet (2000), yet another film version of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Shepard plays King Hamlet in the film. Spectral presences were clearly on his mind. The Ghost in Shakespeare’s Hamlet may or may not gain release from purgatory, but the Ghost in “The Late Henry Moss” gains release though, in accord with Shepard’s postmodernist cosmology, his spirit will rise to heaven only after Conchalla pours booze into his mouth and eases Henry to his death. During his transfigurations from Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man, Henry Moss achieves transcendence of sorts. In his epiphanic moment, Henry Moss realizes that he always has been the source of his exile, the patriarch responsible for this family’s collective state of shock, and the one who died a quarter of a century ago. His lines represent some of the strongest of the entire script:

HENRY (on his knees). I remember – The day I died – she was on the floor.
I remember the floor – was yellow – and – her blood – was smeared across it like – orange butterflies. She was surrounded – by butterflies and – I thought I’d killed her – but it was me. It was me I killed. ... She kept – peering out at me through her swollen eyes. She just stayed there – under the sink. Silent. Balled up like an animal. Nothing moving but her eyes. She must have seen me. She must have seen me – dying – right there. She knew! I ran out into the yard and I re-

These are Henry Moss’s last words. Shepard of course ironizes those last lines: Henry just “ran out” of much more than fuel for his car, for this is a man who, like Dodge in Buried Child or the father in True West, “ran out” of his marriage, relationship, home, fatherhood, and any meaningful connection with a larger community. Henry lies near death, a blanket shrouding him. Shepard’s stage directions here are significant, for Henry’s body is covered in “a yellow, orange, and red Mexican blan-
ket,” colors precisely matching those used to describe his wife lying on the kitchen floor, blood pouring from her beaten body.

At last Henry Moss understands his source of spectral terror. As seen in so many Shepard plays, the power to terrorize can no longer be blotted from the landscape because such power has actually been carried into the landscape by his limited imagination in the first place. Shepard so successfully internalizes the terror — through inner-webbings of heredity, legacy, and legitimacy — that the outer tensions of the public disappear into the inner anxieties of Henry. His fears become the conditions and consequences of his psychic state of mind. For Henry as for his sons, the stimulus for terror ultimately comes from within. Thus there can be, in the lives they lead, no real survivors, no remissions of the terrible, and little chance to escape their fates. More often than not, it seems, the Mosses have been their own executioners. The play, for Henry, has been a self-murder mystery.

In the Moss family’s pursuit of the truth, the initial investigative question — what happened to father? — shifts to include a broader range of possibilities — what happened to father, mother, and children? What happened to other families suffering similar fates? What happened to communal decency? Thus Ray involves himself in much more than an obligatory plane trip to take care of funeral arrangements. When he decides to move into his father’s home, he embarks on a symbolic homecoming of sorts. The return is not featured as extensively as the homecoming was in Buried Child, and Shepard elects not to develop this family as fully as the ones in Curse of the Starving Class and True West. But when Earl presses, “just go back home, Ray. Back where you came from,” Ray can only respond, “Where was that? I’ve been trying to figure that one out. ... Where I came from.”

“The Late Henry Moss,” then, concerns more than two brothers and a father engaged in a fateful and fatal reunion. This is a play in which the errant Mosses debate notions of honor, duty, and responsibility, ideas for years banished to the margins of their impoverished social world as they struggled with various “tokens of guilt.” Like those in Curse of the Starving Class, Buried Child, and A Lie of the Mind, the family members of “The Late Henry Moss” experience the pressures of a dimly perceived curse. No wonder the father claims that he does not even recognize one
Matthew Roudané

of his sons. Love is absent in “The Late Henry Moss.” Isolation is the norm. Denial becomes both a source of comfort and anguish. A willed ignorance stabilizes this family. The curse must be passed on, especially as seen in Earl, who has in effect become his father.

Shepard refuses to construct a neat ending to “The Late Henry Moss.” Despite the father and sons’ intentions, they do not atone for their sins. There is no expiation, and the past legacies remain vibrant forces in a family long ago drained of its vibrancy. Henry, Earl, and Ray can only ponder the inevitability of their biological and spiritual destiny. Their father was, after all, the Henry Jamison Moss, Jr. (my emphasis). They remain, at best, vaguely aware that a replicating process ensures that the heritage propagated by their grandfather to father has been transferred to the sons through an ungovernable Darwinism. The threat to future generations, Shepard implies, is a given. It seems unlikely, given the ending Shepard has scripted, that they will ever come to terms with their identities.

Still, there is, in the end, something oddly consoling about Henry Moss’s coming to terms with his plight — and his death — as a son covers him with the Mexican blanket while the lights and music fade. Now he can leave a home Shepard described as “a jail cell.” The play has been, for a baffled Henry Moss, a valediction encouraging mourning. To allude to the epigraph Shepard invokes, Henry learns that since living, for him, has been a crime, “… ’tis no crime to be dead.” In Shepard’s latest incarnation of the depleted American family, the “real” finds its authenticity in death. Henry soon dies after Conchalla, in a paradoxically cajoling and comforting gesture, pours liquor down his throat. Henry slips into the familiar stupor that has been his life. But he also slips, finally, Shepard implies, to another and possibly more hospitable world.

Although he shows, in the some fifty plays he has written to date, a rich variety of performative styles and cultural concerns, his central subject is often the American family. Victims and victimizers, the pursued and the pursuer vie for a metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual space in his plays. Meanwhile, options slowly diminish. There are no real survivors, no remissions of pain. Spaces open up which prove unbridgeable. Necessity rules. Irony is constantly reborn from the frustrated desires of those who obey compulsions they would wish to resist. And yet there
The Theatre of Sam Shepard is "a fire in the snow" (Shepard, *Lie* 131), there is a fractured poetry, there is an energy and a passion to the lives of those whose demons he stages. There is an intensity, a resonance, and a power which lifts them above their social insignificance, just as the plays and prose fictions themselves never compromise with the banality of surfaces. He is a myth maker who deconstructs myths, a story teller aware of the coercive power of story. He is, finally, a poet of the theatre who himself discovers poetry in the broken lives which are the subjects of his plays, and in the broken society which they inhabit.

Works Cited


The Significance of ‘Horseplay’:
Global and Regional Dimensions in
Sam Shepard’s True West and Far North

1. Globalization and regionalism — two sides of the same thing

Fragmented, heterogeneous, and short-lived as our present world may be, there seems to be general agreement about the fact that we are all involved in a long-term process of globalization.¹ What then is, in contrast, the role of the regions — which still exist and even receive new attention because they seem to resist the general sweep? First of all, we have to become aware that, in fact, the interest in the local, individual, and national emerged as a historical stage in the development towards the present high degree of global density and complexity. Surprisingly, regionalism became defined by the very process of globalization that seems to eliminate it. The strategies of identity — and who could do without it? — are basically local, or, in a slightly wider sense, regional or national. The sociologist Roland Robertson (and many of his colleagues do agree with him)² has mapped out five stages in the globalizing process in which we are involved (Robertson 26–27):

The first, germinal phase in Europe lasted from the early 15th to the mid-18th century. It was characterized by the incipient growth of national communities, an accentuation of the concept of the individual and

¹ On this concept see e.g. Mike Featherstone, ed.; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds.; and Nicholas Zurbrugg.

² See e.g. the other contributors to Featherstone. Cf. also Niklas Luhmann’s detailed observations of structures in the social process in his Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik and his Ecological Communication.
of ideas about humanity, and a downplaying of the medieval ‘transnational’ system.

The second, incipient phase — mainly in Europe — lasted from the mid-eighteenth century to the 1870s. It shows a sharp shift towards the idea of a homogeneous, unitary state. Particularly obvious examples are the American Civil War, and the unifications of Italy and of Germany. At the same time, however, there are “sharp increases in conventions and agencies concerned with international and transnational regulation and communication.”

The third, take-off phase lasted from the 1870s to the 1920s. Its criteria are: “increasing global conceptions as to the ‘correct outline’ of an ‘acceptable’ national society; thematization of ideas concerning national and personal identities; inclusion of some non-European societies in ‘international society’; international formalization and attempted implementation of ideas about humanity.” There is a very sharp increase in number and speed of global forms of communication (Ecumenical movement, Olympics, Nobel Prize, World Time, League of Nations).

The fourth, struggle-for-hegemony phase lasted from the early 1920s until the mid-1960s. It showed “globewide international conflicts concerning forms of life” (Eastern vs. Western Block, the atomic bomb; United Nations).

The fifth phase is the one we are still in. We are uncertain about its direction, especially after the events of 9/11/2001. This phase began in the 1960s, bringing the end of the Cold War and a certain balance of powers by the spread of nuclear weapons. Robertson’s list of criteria reads as follows:

Inclusion of Third World. ... Number of global institutions and movements greatly increases. Societies increasingly face problems of multiculturality and polyethnicity. Conceptions of individuals rendered more complex by gender, ethnic and racial considerations. Civil rights. International system more fluid — end of bipolarity. Concern with humankind as a species-community greatly enhanced. Interest in world civil society and world citizenship. Consolidation of global media system. (Robertson 27)

The line of development sketched here makes it clear that globalization and regionalism are correlated. They are just two different aspects of the same thing, viz. human sociocultural history. But they have gone
through variations, modifications, and configurations. The question that arises here is, what is the specific complementarity of both phenomena in the present age? If one cares for an answer from a contemporary playwright, the work of Sam Shepard seems particularly suited. Leslie A. Wade writes about him:

Shepard’s roots are more deeply embedded in the bedrock of our environment and our national mythology. ... That his regionalism in some manner recovers the traditional understanding of America (and its conception of belonging) invites both scrutiny and evaluation. Like Whitman before him, Shepard sings of himself – why is his heard as an American tune? ... The land in [Shepard’s] plays indeed serves as a national repository for that which the dramatist most values. For Shepard, the enemy is the developer, the politician, the businessman, the bureaucrat – anyone who would despoil and systematize. (Wade 90)

But can the thematization of a rural, agrarian America and a rejection of abstract structuration be considered as Shepard’s full answer to the complex shifts, processes and mentalities of our time? Is Shepard a regionalist indicting national and transnational developments? Is he, though being aware of a large-scale development that seems to be irreversible in its tendency, nostalgically yearning for a lost world? Definitely not, if one takes into account the fleeting, ever-changing notion of identity and personality he presents in his plays. In a “Note to the Actors” prefixed to his play Angel City he gives the following instructions:

The term ‘character’ could be thought of in a different way when working on this play. Instead of the idea of a ‘whole character’ with logical motives behind his behavior which the actor submerges himself into, he should consider instead a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme. In other words, more in terms of collage construction or jazz improvisation. (Shepard, Fool for Love 61–62)

Two basic coordinates condition this argument: first, personality is an unstable, protean entity — and so is individuality, if something like that exists. Second, the multiplicity of character shown in his play is the result of acknowledging the individual as a force, a potential, on the one hand, and, on the other, being conscious of the manifold cultural layers it consists of. There is, in fact, no particular cultural layer to go back to, because there are so many and they are intertwined.
This attitude is also constitutive for what has been called Shepard’s “thematic preoccupation with the West” (cf. Auerbach 53). For several years, he liked to present himself in a cowboy outfit similar to the Marlboro man, obviously identifying with the Western image (cf. Wade 111, 144 and Mottram 147). However, he gives evidence of being fully aware of the many facets and the dynamics of his self as well as of that region.

Looking back to Robertson’s five phases, the idea of America and its West originated in phase two, at a time when coherent national societies of a larger scale were shaped, most forcefully by those who had the energies at their command that would be globally effective, such as the Northern states of the USA. The age of the railway and the steamship towards its end added additional strength to this. Immediately afterwards, in phase four, the West as a mass communication myth (i.e. the subject of the ‘Western’) was created, first by pulp authors, then by Hollywood. The Yale Department of American Studies has, for several decades, revealed in elaborate detail,

that most of the traditions which we associate with the American West were invented by pulp writers, poster artists, impresarios, and advertising men; excepting, mainly, those that were imported from Mexico, whose vaqueros had about a three-century jump on our cowboys when it came to handling cattle. [It is difficult to] know at exactly what point a skill becomes a ‘tradition,’ or equipment and apparel (ropes, wide-brimmed hats) become ‘apparatus,’ but many of the skills associated with American cowboys were Mexican skills moved north and adapted to Anglo-Saxon capabilities and needs. (McMurtry 24)

When the myth of the West was created in the fictions of the Western, its geographical space was already on the verge of disappearing. The transcontinental railways had soon crossed the spaces that could for a short time be filled with Western individuals and collective utopias. Frederick Jackson Turner in his influential essay The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893) observed that the frontier was more or less closed by around 1880. The West became an increasingly remote past, open for all attempts to equip present-day phenomena with developmental roots (cf. Mottram 147). It turned into a set of narratives and images utilized by fiction writers to cater, above all, for the escapist

3 The cover of Shepard’s book containing Far North presents him in the Marlboro man outfit.
needs of its, mainly Eastern, reading public. Within a few decades, whatever had been concrete of the West was turned into an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon that could be utilized by Hollywood’s vast machinery of mass media production to express the American value system and legitimate the role of America in international politics. This is regionalism in the service of a (US) national interest in (if possible: hegemonic) globalization. But it does not have very much to do with this region as such. In fact, it seems difficult to trace overlappings between the projected idea of America’s West as a space of free, open, and authentic self-realization and concrete topography. Of course, Monument Valley quickly comes to our minds. But this place is one of the really late discoveries of Hollywood (by John Ford in his film *Stagecoach* [1939] and seven further films to follow), with no actual significance in the settlement of the West (cf. Buscombe 105–08).

Under all these aspects, let us take a closer look at Shepard’s play *True West* and at his screenplay (and film) *Far North* in order to find out about the contemporary configuration of regionalism and globalism in texts that are witnesses to phase five.

2. Shepard’s deconstruction of the ‘West/ern’ concept

In Sam Shepard’s play *True West*, two brothers, Austin and Lee, meet after a long time of separation in their mother’s house on the edge of the Mohave desert, 40 miles east of L.A. Despite Shepard’s warning against an understanding of the figures in his plays as ‘whole characters,’ let us, for a start, deal with them in that way. Austin is about to write a screenplay. He is waiting for the inspiration to produce something of

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4 Shepard’s plays abound with references to popular culture (esp. film, commodity images and music). Cf. Mottram viii. His most exuberant play in this respect is *Mad Dog Blues* (1971).

5 For me this term implies an approach that exposes the function(s) of a concept in social history.

6 The play premiered on July 10, 1980 at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco. After a failed production (and version) by Joseph Papp in New York, the play came back through other productions in San Francisco and Chicago to become a real success. It was revived on Broadway in 2000. On the staging of *True West* see Wade, from 108–10. The edition used here is *Sam Shepard: Seven Plays* (referred to as *TW*).
substance. Lee is a drifter and a petty thief. When Saul, a Hollywood agent, comes for negotiations with Austin, Lee manages to engage the agent's attention and to convince him of the significance, or rather the commercial possibilities, of a trivial plot he has just made up from his recollections of Western films and similar images. The agent is prepared to pay an impressive honorarium. Now Austin has to change his plans and give up his basic attitude in order to realize Lee's story in the shape of a filmscript, although he cannot believe that the agent is serious:

**Austin.** ... How could you possibly fall for that story? It's as phony as Hoppalong Cassidy. What do you see in it? I'm curious.

**Saul.** It has the ring of truth, Austin.

**Austin.** *(Laughs)* Truth?

**Lee.** It is true.

**Saul.** Something about the real West.

**Austin.** Why? Because it's got horses? Because it's grown men acting like little boys?

**Saul.** Something about the land. Your brother is speaking from experience.

**Austin.** So am I! ... I drive on the freeway everyday. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in color. I shop in the Safeway. I'm the one who's in touch! ... There is no such thing as the West anymore! It's a dead issue! It's dried up, Saul, and so are you. *(TW 35)*

As the play progresses, the traditional, realist equation of each actor with an individual character becomes less and less plausible. In line with this, Austin says that obviously Saul, the agent, thinks that he and Lee are one person *(TW 37)*. This is also suggested by the very sudden turn of the action. It could easily be understood as a change between two related attitudes in one person's mind. Almost imperceptibly, the play turns into an allegorical 'battle' between creativity and conventionality. But then the mother of these two men, who is the owner of the house, returns. At this point the drama seems to reconfigure itself as an apparently realistic rudimentary family play (or domestic drama). However, Mom appears only to speak about her disappointment with the alleged naturalness of Alaska and that she is yearning to go to a Picasso exhibition. Thus, in fact, she reemphasizes the theme that has engaged her (one or two) son(s). This makes it clear: the play's action rests upon an open, i.e. semantically polyvalent, parable concerned with the question of authentic aesthetic and regional experience.
Each brother represents a basic artistic and intellectual attitude. Austin — his name alludes to St. Augustine, the author of the very personal *Confessiones* — stands for a deeply serious, inventive mind. Lee — on the other hand — reminds one of the tragic Confederate general. He seems to stand for being caught in regional loyalties and, perhaps, clichés. There is, however, something very powerful at the centre of these clichés, a combination of needs and a sense of belonging that reveals an irrational link with the region which these images are to articulate. The faction represented by Austin might say: to miss. This link is given through the fact that these forms of expression do, after all, define, make available and connect with a certain region by a deep emotional conviction.

This means also that, on the level of the domestic plot, Austin and Lee have invaded Mom’s sphere. They are changing it and thus take it out of her hands. They let her plants wither up and bring her house, her territory, her system of order, into disarray. Mom withdraws to a motel: “I can’t stay here. This is worse than being homeless” *(TW 58)*.

Before this reaction, Lee had attacked and tied up Austin because Austin had refused to give him his car for a trip into the desert, into what Lee considers the ‘authentic true West.’ Austin did not give it to him, not so much because he did not trust him but because he is convinced that there is no such region, in fact, never was. Austin frees himself and, in return, subdues Lee by almost strangling him with a phone cord. Ultimately, Austin releases Lee requesting only a little heads tart. But, suddenly, Lee jumps up and blocks Austin’s way out. The final scene shows them as opponents watching each other for the next move, surrounded by a desert-like landscape. Creativity, on the one hand, and a mode of experience that rests upon more conventional and irrational ties, on the other, seem to watch each other intently, if they are not caught in a permanent clinch. The desert, like the historical ‘West,’ provides a background of *tabula rasa*, completely open for all kinds of projections, to be carried out by the one that has the physical, economic, and imaginative power to do so. There is no indication as to which approach has a more objective justification. Obviously, at this point *True*
West is an open allegorical configuration representing the mode of existence of human artistic practice, as it faces a reality that is difficult to articulate and as it is dependent on a society which is dominated by the economic subsystem and its functional (and capitalist) logic.

Artistic practice is the claiming of territory, like any other social activity. The basic mode of expression of human beings is the defining and negotiating of material as well as virtual space. This even holds true for persons within a family, or for persons living in other forms of community — as it is the case in many of Shepard's plays. Negotiation of space occurs as explicit contest but also under the cover of shared interests. A significant motive in the articulation and negotiation of space is the relationship between persons, i.e. the way one is recognized, either as superior and dominant or as equal and loved. Existing forms of spatialization usually claim to secure, order and support the individual. But, frequently, these forms are experienced — at least indirectly — as inequality and even repression, due to conventionality, limitations, and — if it comes to the worst — structural or concrete violence. Thus True West has a scene in which Lee smashes Austin’s typewriter with a golf club (TW 42-43). This underlines the position represented by both. The golf club stands for conventionality plus economic power plus territorial possession plus simple rootedness. The typewriter represents the searching artist, the person that is open for a permanent redefinition of himself, of his lifeworld, and in terms of concrete as well as virtual territories. But in behaving like this he is dependent on the material world, just as the typewriter presupposes an advanced industrial world.

Desirable and authentic space is associated with liberty, openness for experience and creativity. The West had once been directly associated with these notions. Under the conditions of the expansion of functional, economic behavior there is (almost) none of such space left, even in the open desert. The West has become a cliché, a term without a correlative. In spite of his closeness to conventionality (such as the Western film) Lee, however, believes to be above the level of the cliché, because his experience of the West still conveys emotional intensity and this is his criterion of authenticity. When he goes through the screenplay manu-

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8 See e.g. Tucker 7.
script with Austin, he rejects the line “I know this prairie like the back a’ my hand” (TW 51) that Austin has put in the mouth of one the characters in the screenplay. The phrase Lee prefers is “I’m on intimate terms with this prairie” (TW 51-52) because it “sounds real mysterious and kinda’ threatening at the same time” (TW 52). The first phrase sounds naive but straightforward, the second one rings hollow and stilted. Nevertheless, for Lee it conveys the experience of what has been defined as the ‘delightful horror’ of the Sublime. This category had been introduced as the most intensive mode of aesthetic experience by Romanticism. It consists of a two-step experience on the limits of the human range of perception: first, of terror, then of liberation and aggrandizement. Significantly it had been associated with the American landscape, particularly the West. Before the pulp writers came to use the West in their way, serious and widely recognized painters such as Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt had established it as a sublime landscape. Bierstadt came to be called ‘the Painter of the American West’ (cf. Hendricks). Lee finds a place for aesthetic experience in the West in a continuation of these images. But it is not a direct continuation, it is not the former picture postcard grandiosity. For him, the West is a region endowed with certain vital energies. For Austin, however, the true West would be something in its own right, unlike the traditions of commercialization that misrepresent and exploit it. He is in search of the West as a phenomenon that transcends his endeavours for articulation and spatialization. In this sense, the historical West was nothing but a temporary manifestation of the search for a transcending aesthetic experience, for the sublime. Nowadays, only critical, skeptical, and imaginative redefinitions of the West and of any space territorialized by language and functionality, are likely to provide such an experience.

Making the notion of the West a point of controversy between two diametrically opposed ‘characters,’ Shepard reveals it as being constituted by two basic, nevertheless correlated, attitudes towards aesthetic experience: one corresponds with a protean sense of the self and of reality, the other with a deep emotional appeal, resulting in the conviction of rootedness. For both modes, the West is, in fact, obsolete. By decon-
structing the idea of the West Shepard wants to bring us on the right track. For the first, only the attitude behind it is worth to be continued. The second mode may fail even more dramatically to grasp the idea of the West. However, certain aesthetic elements of the West — which may not even be indigenous to it — still suggest the authenticity the original notion is supposed to have possessed.

3. Between man and the region: the horse

A phenomenon that carries the original sense of authenticity of the old West into our times is — in Lee’s view — the horse. When Lee tries to talk Saul, the Hollywood agent, into accepting a screenplay he thinks suitable for his viewers, he does so by recalling Western clichés. But in doing this he evaluates them according to the intensity of their emotional appeal in conveying a sense of the relationship between man and region. He remembers his experience of the old Western movie Lonely Are The Brave, starring Kirk Douglas. The hero of that film is taken away from the scene of an accident in an ambulance and he dies at the moment when he hears the shot that kills his injured horse:

Lee. ... The man dies for the love of a horse. ... You hear the horse screamin’ at the end of it. Rain’s comin’ down. Horse is screamin’. Then there’s a shot. BLAM! Just a single shot like that. Then nothin’ but the sound of rain. And Kirk Douglas is ridin’ in the ambulance. ... And then you see his eyes. And his eyes die. Right inside his face. And then his eyes close. And you know that he has died too. You know that Kirk Douglas has died from the death of his horse. (TW 18–19)

This film has been called “an elegy to the Western” (Fox and McDonagh 466). Kirk Douglas impersonates a cowboy who will not yield to the modern world. For him — and obviously for Lee — the West is a place with traces of a deeply engaging coincidence of dreams, emotions, reality, and aesthetics that are transferable into our times.

When the Americans moved westward they found horses brought by the Spaniards but living in the wild and fully adapted to life in the prairies. The domestication of those horses added to the strength of the settlers and enabled them, together with other things and the horses they already owned, to master the open space. These horses — as icons
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of vitality — helped to imagine the conquest of the West as a friendly covenant with nature.

In True West the role and significance of horses for a certain mode of regionalism is only briefly referred to, viz. in the passage we have looked at. In Far North, Shepard places a horse at the center of a regional and family play.

A horse as a catalyst between men and their habitat is difficult to show on stage. This is probably one of the most cogent reasons why Sam Shepard wrote Far North\(^{10}\) as a screenplay. The story takes place in Minnesota in the surroundings of Duluth. The action comprises the members of a family that has been living in this monotonous landscape for generations, and their relationship to Mel, a large workinghorse. The family consists of two men in their sixties, Bertrum and Uncle Dane, Bertrum’s wife, who is about the same age, and two daughters, who are in their mid-thirties or slightly beyond. Kate, the older one, is pregnant and about to become a single mother. Rita, the other one, also has no husband and does not regret it. Her daughter seems to have inherited this spirit of independence. So Rita has her hands full with her teenage daughter, who has recently discovered booze and boys. The horse in its strength and independence embodies the uniqueness of the rugged and demanding landscape. At the same time it extends the physical abilities of the family it belongs to and it is an emotional potential that connects the family members with each other and with the surrounding nature. Being an interactive partner it brings to the fore the behavioral patterns in this family and it exposes how much they are consonant or at odds with the land. As in True West, we are faced with the problem of contested space between family members, including their horse, and in regard of ties with the region.

Bertrum, the hard-headed, hard-drinking family patriarch lies injured in hospital after an accident with his horse-cart. It had turned over when the horse refused to obey his commands and started galloping. His daughter Kate, who is a journalist in New York, has come to see her father in hospital. Here she is confronted with Bertrum’s order to shoot

\(^{10}\) The text is contained in Shepard, States of Shock, Far North, Silent Tongue (referred to as FN). A video of the film Far North (dir. Sam Shepard) was released in 1988.
Hans-Ulrich Mohr

the disobedient horse. She is, however, technically and morally unable to do so. The other family members refuse, too. At the end of the play, the members of the family move through the depressively grey winterly landscape in three units. First, Bertrum and Uncle Dane sneak out of the hospital intending to walk back home. Second, the two daughters search for Mel and pick up the teenage girl from one of her flings on the way. Third, Mel, the horse, roams the forest. Ultimately, it is the horse that brings them all together. It is the focus of this family despite all its conflicts. In a key scene at the end of the play, Bertrum is foregrounded like a statue in the landscape when Mel, having Bertrum’s daughters and granddaughter seated on his back, appears on the forest road and walks up directly towards him. For a moment Bertrum perceives his women dressed up and in war-paint like Indians: for him the unruly horse and the independent women coalesce, converge in an image of an enemy from days of pre-civilization. Indeed, the horse as well as the women represent a vitality that is close to the rough persisting energies inhabiting this landscape. Bertrum’s patriarchal attitudes, however, make him ignore the vigor of this region which is also part of his self. Bertrum is convinced that “[t]he horse is at the root of this whole mess” (FN 287). The horse’s disobedience is more than he can take after all the ‘disorder’ around him. So, as the final take suggests, Bertrum intends to carry out his execution: he disappears in the forest with Mel and his rifle. This can be interpreted in at least two ways: First, Bertrum continues to misunderstand the essence of this landscape and the way he shares in it. Second, sometimes the life forces of this landscape express themselves in deadly confrontations: transience is a relevant part of it. And we also know: murder is a crime that usually occurs between people closely related and dependent on each other.

4. Conclusion: Shepard’s new ‘regionalism’

The discovery of America has been one of the decisive steps in the process of globalization. But from its beginnings, America has not only been a discovery but also an invention, drawn as the positive, if not ideal, counterpart of the European situation. Especially in the 18th century, when commercial ventures backed by new capitalist strategies were able to effectively reach out globewide (cf. Mathias, Transformation and In-
America had been conceived as the uncorrupted original state of nature where human society could have a fresh start and recover its lost ideals of liberty, happiness, and equality (cf. Wood and Stoll). This was not only expressed in terms of religious and philosophical ideas but increasingly also in terms of aesthetic practice. Even when, in the course of the 19th century, America turned out to be not too much different from Europe, the open territories in its West provided a regional space for the industrialized and crowded rest of the world with which it was possible to make believe that America's promises and dreams were still there. And when, in the final decades of that century, the settling of the West transformed it into a concrete topography like any other region, the need for its aestheticization and fictionalization remained. Even so, it even became more urgent because of the increasing industrialization. At that point the 'West,' the mid-nineteenth-century epitome of 'America,' was turned into the 'Western.' Both were fictions legitimating the role of America, successively in phases three and four of the globalization process.

Shepard's *True West*, written in a more advanced stage of globalization, is aware of the outdatedness of these regional concepts. Moreover, Shepard is not only aware of the constructedness of regionalism but of the globalization process itself. Behind the invention of regionalism he discerns a basic need for securing achievements of the globalization process, for guarding against its unpredictabilities and for preserving less functionalized, aesthetic alternatives to it. Today, both globalization and regionalism appear as results of the social construction of reality enacted by mankind in the course of history. In this sense, the difference between both poles has disappeared. Why, then, is regionalism still attractive? Shepard's answer is connected with the horse, its vitality and its almost equal companionship with men. Regions tell us something about the mysterious vitality that has carried and inspired human history since its beginnings.

11 Cf. Robert Coe's statement "the West for Shepard is where America has always hidden its promise and its dreams" (Wade 111).

12 Wade provides the following information: "The title *[True West; H. U. M.]* itself is drawn from a Western-oriented pulp magazine, a point that alerts us that the playwright understands the mythologized nature of the cowboy experience" (104).
Thus, certain elements of the West(ern) still present information about basic factors determining human existence. They provide examples of some irrational source of vitality, which links humans with their surroundings, especially the sources of life revealed in connection with a landscape. In Shepard’s text, the globalization process has reached a stage where it reflects upon itself as a globewide contest of desires conjoining into the social construction of reality. Regions, or national states, no longer exist in the sense that they provide firm ground for continuing this negotiation. Rather, the need for aesthetic experience emancipates itself from the notion of regionality. What still seems to privilege regions is that they provide a more direct access to the mystery of the vital energies of mankind. In an interview Shepard called it America’s tragedy to have moved away from an agrarian society (Wade 111) and there is also his (former) affinity to the Marlboro man image. But this should not be misunderstood as historical nostalgia or rural escapism. In a stage of development when the globalization process is topographically, communicatively, and culturally approaching its completion, Shepard (like other writers) has deconstructed it as an inconspicuous process of social construction against the backdrop of the existential openness of the human situation. The regionalism of the past was identified as the objective correlative of an aesthetic creativity (e.g. in the sense of the sublime). The alleged regionalism of today seems closer to the trivial, middle-brow. But the observation that human history is an inconspicuous process of social construction carried on by mysterious energies implies a general cultural relativism. This means there are no objective criteria to decide in favour of either aesthetic. And Shepard does not take sides with either Austin or Lee in *True West*.

The way Shepard deals with ‘regionalism’ shows, in fact, that he goes beyond it. What used to be regionalism and the privileging of a certain part of the geography is now a new concern with situations where the...
raw material of human existence\textsuperscript{14}, the potential behind the process of the social construction of reality, seems less difficult to access than elsewhere.

Works Cited


\textsuperscript{14} Significantly Fennel associates Shepard's work with Jackson Pollock and Action Painting (cf. 19).


Enacting the Farm Crisis of the 1970s: Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* as a Socially Symbolic Act

According to Martin Tucker, Sam Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) is exceptional in that Shepard “inveighs in this play, as he rarely does in other works, against a specific target: that of the greed of the capitalist ethos” (129). While it might be more fashionable to explore the effects of global capitalism (made in the U.S.A.) on the ‘coca-colonized,’ it is equally true that in the 1970s for Americans capitalism was the central “analytical prism for viewing contemporary society” (Brick 363). Rather than inquire into capitalism as a term from economics, I will approach capitalism as a cultural concept and inquire into the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism,’ which “asserted itself as hegemonic in the early 1970s” (Harvey 63). While Fredric Jameson argues that this logic is directly interrelated with postmodernism and globalization, “one of its most patently transparent features” is indeed its “rootedness in daily life” (Harvey 63).

In *Curse*, Shepard presents the daily life of a farming family disrupted by the melodramatic actions surrounding the ownership and dispossession of their house and land. Dramatizing the break-up of a farming

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1 For comments on earlier drafts I am indebted to Matthew C. Pursell, David Savran, and, in particular, Udo J. Hebel.

2 While Jameson had already asserted the link between postmodernism and globalization (cf. “Postmodernism” 78), only recently, the editors of a special issue on globalization contended that “it now seems for most critics pointless not to call this cultural logic [postmodernism] ‘globalization,’ too, and to see postmodernism as the early name for social and cultural forces whose emergence was only partially grasped two decades ago” (O’Brien/Szeman 605–6).
family, Shepard employs the productive images of the yeoman and the West to address, as Gerald Berkowitz notes, "a larger subject through demonstrating its effects on a specific domestic situation" (186). During the 1970s, the increasing internationalization of the American economy, dependence on global markets, and dollar drain from military engagements overseas exacerbated the stagflation of American economy, resulting not only in a decrease of family farms but also in the disillusionment with American exceptionalism. In the vein of the ‘me-decade,’ the members of the Tate family in *Curse* indulge in acts of excessive consumption, pursuing a rugged individualism. The gamut of local responses to cope with global threats, which one of the characters perceives as a “zombie invasion,” ranges from escapism, acts of regeneration through violence, and nostalgia for a pastoral America to attempts to ‘light out for the Territory.’

While the plight of farmers in the 1970s certainly corresponded with historical circumstances, it was also used as a metaphor for a nation mired in an economic mess and “ideological disarray” (Slotkin 626). In a speech at Des Moines, Iowa, in 1971, President Nixon, who grew up on a lemon farm, stressed the urgency of “a sound farm economy.” In light of the ongoing recession, President Ford asked to “preserve the family farm” (“Address of 1976”), while Jimmy Carter, a Georgia peanut farmer, considered it “incumbent ... to monitor very carefully the farm situation” to thwart any threats to “American democracy” (“Address of 1978”). The recurrence in political speeches of these elegiac appeals to save the farming families bespeaks the cultural resonance of the “agrarian myth.” While the political rhetoric relies heavily on agrarian ideology, Sam Shepard, who likewise considers “moving [away] from an agricultural society” as “one of the biggest tragedies” (qtd. in Wade 111) America has ever faced, presents a more subtle portrait of American farmers, showing their “dual character” (Hofstadter, *Age of Reform* 47). Whereas the presidents evoke the nostalgic image of the happy family as

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1 Farmers are interpellated as model citizens and as a group with “a special right to the concern and protection of government” (Hofstadter, *Age of Reform* 24) by the agrarian myth, which intertwined the fate of family farms with American democracy (28).
Enacting the Farm Crisis of the 1970s

depicted by Norman Rockwell, Shepard conjures up Grant Wood’s more ambivalent “American Gothic.”

At a first glance the Tate family in Curse is one of these suffering farming families that the presidents ask to save. Surrounded by a desert-like environment, the Tates live on an isolated farm that can barely sustain its inhabitants. The “empty larder” (Shepard, Curse 157), the minimal output, and above all the constant search for food demonstrate that they are an American farming family that is unable to live off its farm. During the 1970s, when Shepard wrote Curse, the American economy was marked by a period of what came to be known as stagflation. High rural poverty reigned and culminated in the farm crisis of the late 1970s. Farmers, then, received the lowest prices since the Depression (cf. figure 1 in Gardner 65), which led to a drastic decrease in family farms. Farmers who wanted to survive had to seek work outside the farm, like Weston, the father, who has recently been fired (143). From 1975 on, the off-farm income was twice as high as that from the farm portion (“Operator”). Small family farms were no longer self-sufficient, and farmers lost their independence by being forced to participate in the job market. While they still owned land — a potential means of production — they nevertheless had to sell their labor power. Yet Curse is not simply a straightforward protest farm play in the vein of the Living Newspaper’s Triple-A Plowed Under (1936), which pits innocent, wronged farmers against evil capitalists. By implying the farmers’ collusion with the capitalist system, their “dual character,” Shepard diverges from the protest plays of the 1930s in that he does not portray this conflict as a Manichean opposition, despite its melodramatic emplotment.

The farmers’ “dual character” conjures, as Ernst Bloch wrote in 1932, a “peasant gothic,” because “[e]conomically and ideologically, the peasants, in the midst of the flexible capitalist century, are situated in an older place” (25). The Tates’ reflections on the peculiar position farmers occupy in the capitalist mode of production result in arguments whether they are members of the “starving class” or rather “somewhere in be-

Their disagreement testifies to the fact that the "farm problem" as an economic crisis entailed a crisis in identity which manifested itself in the lack of trust, the pursuit of individual rather than collective goals, paranoid conspiracy plots, as well as in the change of and confusion over gender roles. Affective bonds no longer characterize the family. Ella has an extramarital affair and is subject to domestic violence, while her children are afraid of their father. When Weston appears, the stage directions read: "EMMA stands at the table, not knowing whether to stay or leave" (164). Her brother, Wesley, is even too afraid to look his father in the eyes, talks to him in a suppressed voice (164), and prefers to watch him "from a safe distance" (169). This lack of trust mirrors the widespread 1970s mistrust of any authority: Americans preferred to watch their government, in particular, "from a safe distance." While certainly an outgrowth of the 1960s rebellions, the distrust of all authority was exacerbated by the "lunatic semiology" of the Vietnam War, which resulted in the "credibility gap" (Slotkin 616). The disillusionment with America's invincibility in the lingering Vietnam War, Vice President Spiro Agnew's resignation after a tax scandal, the Watergate scandal, as well as the oil embargo, subsequent fuel shortage, and the economic crisis all contributed to a loss of faith in American government and politics. President Carter felt even compelled to diagnose a "crisis of confidence" in 1979. In this televised speech, known as his "National Malaise speech," he repeats confidence sixteen times, first by bemoaning its "erosion," then by evoking it as an ingrained national trait, and finally, in the hortatory tone of a jeremiah, by admonishing the American people "to join hands" and work towards "a rebirth of the American spirit" to overcome the "growing doubt" and "loss of unity of purpose."

The Tates' lack of basic trust, as well as their disagreements over their social status, illustrate that they have lost any sense of a collective identity and constitute paradigmatic examples of what Tom Wolfe coined the

5 In her study of the farm crisis, Kathryn Dudley concludes that American "farmers generally identify as 'middle' class" (145). Granted that we accept that America consists only of one class, Shepard's earlier draft title, "The Curse of the Middle Class" (cf. Bottoms 166), reflects that this identity crisis is one that the culture at large shares.
“me-decade.” This rampant individualism is most conspicuous in Weston’s excessive consumption of alcohol and habit of spending money. Weston explains he “just went along with” all that “plastic shuffling back and forth.” “Why,” he rhetorically wonders, “not borrow if you know it’s coming in ... Banks, car lots, investors. The whole thing’s geared to invisible money. ... It’s all in everybody’s heads. “Why not go in debt for a few grand,” he asks his son, “if all it is is numbers?” (194). The introduction of the credit card system in the 1970s (Schulman 132), to which Weston’s speech refers, galvanized what Jameson dubbed the “cultural debt crisis” (“Regarding Postmodernism” 9). By “figuring on the future” and “banking on it getting better” (193), Weston tampers with his children’s inheritance, thus reflecting the disregard for the future and posterity of the 1970s culture at large (Lasch 50–51).

“The ‘cult of the true individual’” is, as Anthony Giddens puts it, “the moral counterpart to the growth of the division of labor” (Consequences of Modernity 80). The family, indeed, never collaborates. In Act II the stage direction requires that “They each continue working at their separate tasks in silence” (160). “Family,” as Stephen Bottoms notes, “is viewed as a form of harshly competitive theatre, the characters acting themselves out in conversations which tend inevitably to turn into running battles for recognition” (164). Instead of interacting, the characters in Shepard’s plays are “performing for oneself” (165); like Weston, who delivers “Curse’s longest speech not to another person, but to the lamb” and “refuses to continue, ... when he realizes Wesley is listening to him” (165). The fact that all characters are pursuing their own dreams and desires, which often contradict each other, further underscores the prevalent self-indulgence. While both parents attempt to sell the farm without letting the other spouse know, the children are trying to reverse their parents’ deeds. Thus Emma tries to shoot up the “Alibi Club” owned by Ellis, who cheated her father out of land (179). Independently from his sister, Wesley tries in vain to protect his father from his creditors (184). “This self-absorption,” as Lasch noted in 1979, “defined the moral climate of contemporary society” and constituted the fulcrum of this “culture of narcissism” (25).

In a chapter entitled “Changing Modes of Making It: From Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker” (52–70), Lasch criticizes contemporary
notions of success, to which Shepard refers in *Curse* via the intertextual reference to *The Treasures of the Sierra Madre*, both the novel and the movie. This novel by B. Traven, made into a classic Western movie directed by John Huston in 1948, portrays the search of three men for gold in the desert of Mexico, ending in their murdering one another motivated by greed. In the course of the transition to a capitalist society, identity markers like tradition, kinship ties, and communal rituals fell prey to the “competitive search for profit” (Giddens, *Capitalism* 53) and “instead of the economic system being embedded in social relationships, these relationships were now embedded in the economic system” (Polyani 97). The land speculator and lawyer Taylor, with whom Ella has an affair, is only friendly to her as long as he thinks he can profit from their relationship by acquiring the Tates’ land. When Emma hints at the possibility that her mother might have had an accident with the car, instead of expressing concern for his wife’s health, her father screams: “In my car! In my Kaiser-Fraser!” After a pause he adds in a much calmer voice: “That car was an antique. Worth a fortune” (165). Emma has been so imbued with the belief that all social relationships are reduced to economic exchanges and success is grounded in exploitation that she twice asks Taylor when he comes to pick up Ella: “What do you want my mother for?” (151).

The pervasiveness of the reification of human relations becomes particularly evident in Emma’s future goals. Instilled with the ethos of greed, as portrayed in *The Treasures of the Sierra Madre*, which Emma adores, albeit she misses Traven’s criticism of the capitalist drive, she plans to become a mechanic and cheat people by charging “them double for labor” (162). After her arrest for shooting up a club in Wild West fashion, she changes her mind and tells Wesley: “I’m going into crime.

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6 This would be a classic showdown in a Western movie. Besides ‘cannibalizing’ on this genre, Shepard uses biblical myth from Exodus (cf. Steinke), derives the story featuring the eagle from an “adventure comic book” (cf. Oumano 135), and, among others, includes “Eat American Lamb. Twenty million coyotes can’t be wrong” (156), a slogan from a bumper sticker. This pastiche or “random cannibalization,” as Jameson called it (“Postmodernism” 65), makes *Curse* not only a play about postmodernism but also a postmodern play. Critics disagree whether Shepard should be positioned within modernism or rather postmodernism (cf. Malkin 240n.16).
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It’s the only thing that pays these days” (196). Displaying an understanding of the capitalist system, which is geared to the pursuit of economic self-interest, Emma concludes: “It’s the perfect self-employment. Crime. No credentials. No diplomas. No upkeep. Just straight profit. Right off the top” (197). By aligning capitalism with crime, Emma aligns herself not only with Curse’s confidence man, the sneaky lawyer, Taylor, but also with the con men in David Mamet’s American Buffalo (1975) and Glengarry Glen Ross (1983), which also depict the erosion of “a Puritan, Whig capitalism in which the emphasis was not just on economic activity but on the formation of character” (Bell 80). In Curse the perversion of the American dream is suggested by the implied contrast between the frugal farmer tilling his land, imbued by the Protestant work ethic, and the replacement of this agrarian myth by the Tates’ capitalist fantasies of easy-made profit.

One effect of this shift from production to consumption, which heralded late capitalism, was widespread feelings of paranoia and dislocation. All the family members mistrust one another. Ella says she is on her own (173), while Emma tells Wesley that trusting people is “deadly” (197), and Wesley ruminates on how his “heart was pounding. Just from my Dad coming back” (137). In the manner of a schizophrenic, he, furthermore, relates his father’s homecoming to an imagined war experience, casting himself as attempting to evade being tracked down by his enemies. In a similar vein, his father, too, feels threatened by some outside force. He regards his son as an “espionage spy” (168), construes his wife as an “outsider” (188), and feels he is “living in a den of vipers” (169). His confusion over who is friend or foe, that is who is family in the sense that family members are not hostile to each other, is mirrored in his inability to tell what is inside and outside when he comes home (156). Weston’s failure to negotiate his spatial surroundings is reminiscent of Jameson’s conclusion about the Bonaventura Hotel, a paradigmatic “postmodern hyperspace,” which “has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map its position in a mappable external world” (“Postmodernism” 83).

It is not surprising that these characters are paranoid because the logic of late capitalism generates schizophrenic subjects and paranoia.
constitutes “a characteristic, if not by now canonical gesture of post-
modern expression” (Rose 91). Furthermore the proclivity of American
farmers to a conspiratorial imagination due to the “predominance in
American agriculture of the isolated farmstead” (Hofstadter, *Age of Re-
form* 45), as well as the susceptibility of American culture as a whole to
conspiracy theories reinforce these otherwise culturally unspecific,
global tendencies and reactions. 1970s American culture abounded with
conspiracy theories, fueled by a perceived impotence and a corollary of
epistemological uncertainty, and employed as explanations for global
processes. Unable to explain what is happening to her family and home,
Emma spreads conspiracy theories by advising her brother not to “be-
lieve people.” He should always “look behind them” because “[e]very-
body’s hiding” and “[n]obody looks like what they are” (197). Ella’s
explanation of the family’s “curse” lends further weight to the role of
perceived loss of agency in generating conspiracy fears. The curse is
particularly vicious because it “comes unto us like nighttime,” after
[p]lotting in the womb before spreading “[i]n the air.” Ella conveys the
sense of having no control by asserting that the curse is produced by
“little swimming things making up their minds without us” (173–74).

Lack of agency provides a fertile ground for conspiracy theories and
is, along with lack of trust, part of the “development of disembedding
mechanisms,” which, according to Giddens, “‘lift out’ social activity
from localised contexts, reorganising social relations across time-space
distances” (“Consequences of Modernity” 53). These “disembedding
mechanisms” are aggravated by the non-transparency of the market.
Whereas Weston makes use of the market’s opaqueness, justifying his
unbridled consumption by the impersonal nature of the market, Wesley
is puzzled by it when trying to figure out who is after their land. He is

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7 Shepard pointed out that “[t]his play can’t take place anywhere but in the de-
sert,” and he tried to “capture the feeling of expansiveness of the desert and moun-
tains of Southern California” (qtd. in Moore 22).

8 Hofstadter (*Paranoid Style* 3–40) and Wood provided the classic accounts of
the pervasiveness of conspiracy theories in American culture. Cf. also Ed White for a
brief purview of criticism on conspiracy; Timothy Melley for conspiracy in postwar
America; and Jameson (*Postmodernism*) for conspiracy theories as a global expres-
sion of late capitalism.
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convinced that Taylor, who tries to buy their house, does not only act on behalf of himself: "Taylor is the head zombie. He's the scout for the other zombies. He's only a sign that more zombies are on their way" (163). Taylor confirms this suspicion when he threatens Wesley by pointing out that he is backed up by corporations and "[p]eople of influence" (178–79). Likewise Ellis's warning to Ella that he has "friends in high places" (180) and among the police testifies to the "iron triangle" which surrounds the Tate family, the "starving class."

"Both thematically and theatrically," David DeRose argues, *Curse of the Starving Class* "contains images of violation and invasion by hostile, uncombatable forces" (92). Concerning those enemies and "uncombatable forces," Gerald Berkowitz mentions that "Weston identifies them more explicitly with the institutions of American capitalism" (185). Weston's accusation corresponds with historical developments. During the 1960s/70s an increasing internationalization occurred in America, leading to a "multi-national corporate control of agriculture" (Newby 77). The globalization of American economy in conjunction with other global events affected the structure of agriculture and had the impact of a "zombie invasion" (163) of small family farms, as Wesley experiences it. Federal policies encouraged the development of "agribusiness" with which small farms could not compete (Newby 71). The consequence was a decrease in the number of family farms, to which global events contributed (cf. Newby 71). Exacerbated by dollar drain from military expenses overseas, the stagflation of the American economy manifested itself in the historically low balance of trade. Farmers received fewer subsidies, while they faced higher costs because of the oil crisis in 1973.

As during the Great Depression, the economic crisis "put far more pressure on male roles than on female (Ware 15). Despite the changes in

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9 While Paul E. Waggoner et al. stress the importance of international trade for understanding domestic economy in general (533), David Nye asserts that the domestic crisis of the 1970s was not due to global forces but brought about by home-made over-consumption (84).

10 Howard Newby defines agribusiness as a mixture of "both agro-input and food-processing industries." Gordon Rausser uses a more illustrative term for the forces responsible for the impasse family farmers faced. He speaks of an "iron triangle" made up of a "coalition of business, regulators, and politicians" (138).
gender roles due to the feminist movement, cultural acceptance of these shifts lagged behind as Halie’s yearning in *Buried Child* for “a hero! A man! A whole man!” (124) evinces. While “for many feminists, Sam Shepard symbolizes the dramatic backlash of [the] cultural and political gains [of the 1970s]” (Hall 91–92), Florence Falk is one of the few feminist voices ready to admit that “Shepard himself is an unlikely defender of the patriarchal system and sexual asymmetry, and both his females and males are developed with unflinching irony” (95). One of the central male characters, Weston, is portrayed as both an inept husband and irresponsible father, displaying more interest in his addictive pleasures and material possessions than in his family. Like Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman — although he lacks the former’s dignity — Weston is a breadwinner who cannot provide sufficiently for his family. He has been imprisoned several times (188), and thus left his family unattended. He does not pursue a regular job and keeps getting fired from his odd jobs (143). Not he but his wife brings home money to provide for the family (196). Moreover, instead of caring for his family, he poses a threat to them. The play opens with a violent act, in a kind of Pinter-esque scenario, in which hostile foreigners invade someone’s room and, subsequently, life. Yet, in *Curse*, the foreigner is the head of the family, breaking down the front door, threatening to murder his wife, and frightening his son to death.

His rendering as a pitiful figure is conveyed particularly by his wife’s comments. Ella tells her husband straight to his face that he is “a complete wash-out” (189). In a conversation with her son, she describes Weston as “pathetic” and as having “no competence” (173). Emma’s insights into her parents’ relationship further underscore that Ella does not regard her husband as a man meriting her respect. Whereas her brother believes that their mother entered the relationship with Taylor because she is after his money, Emma corrects him, claiming: “She’s after more than that.” In her opinion, Ella is “after esteem” (160), after the respectability of her middle-class upbringing, which her working-class husband, lacking competence, cannot offer her.

Considering the context of the 1970s, the portrayal of the strain the shifting gender roles placed on male roles is worth exploring against this particular historical moment. In *Curse*, Shepard illustrates how the up-
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surge of feminism in conjunction with a war-saturated culture caused gender anxieties. The mutually reinforcing images of castration and metaphors of dispossession convey the crisis of male identity constructions and illustrate the conflicting demands of feminism, which aimed at altering gender roles, and the Vietnam War, which entrenched existing gender roles. All in all, in feminist constructions of male identity, the 'ideal' man should be “sensitive,” able to express his emotions, treat women as subjects, and respect their decisions (Frum 202–3), just like Wesley up to, and Weston after his, transformation. Wesley displays his nurturing side by caring for a sick lamb and showing concern for the maintenance of the farm. He is also community-oriented, traditionally a female trait. He has realized that the personal is political, thus also reflecting an understanding of how local action can counter global forces and salvage a collective identity. In the conversation in which Weston tells his son that he has to sell the land because of his debts, Wesley tries to dissuade him by suggesting collective action: “We don’t have to sell, you know. We could fix the place up. ... We could work this place by ourselves” (170; emphasis added). Moreover, Wesley wants his sister to abandon the traditional, circumscribed domestic role. He justifies the destructive act of pissing on her charts, which show how to cut up a chicken properly, with the explanation that he is “opening up new possibilities for her” (143). After shedding his old clothes and old identity, Weston also rehearses his ‘sensitive side’ by assuming responsibility and apologizing for having “ignored some a’ the chores around the place” (192) and by doing domestic work (182, 186–87). Ella’s surprise at seeing her husband doing chores affirms that male homemakers were, as a columnist in *Time* phrased it, a “rare species” in the 1970s (“Men” 76). Like women’s roles, men’s roles were being redefined. Weston’s response to Ella’s surprise — “Can’t a man do his own laundry?” (187) — also indicates that cultural acceptance of shifting gender roles lagged behind.

While his performance as a model husband and father constitutes only a short interlude, Weston’s predominant representation as a violent
husband implies the centrality of the Vietnam experience in male identity constructions. Like in movies dealing with the Vietnam War, Curse "suggests that a masculine ethos that finds the abuse of women commonplace is related to the nation’s Vietnam experience" (Miller 101). Weston is "prone to fits of violence" (78) and has beaten his wife "to the punch" (173). Moreover he threatens to kill her and shows a proclivity to solve problems with his gun (169–70). If Weston’s World War II experience is read as a comment on American involvement in the Vietnam War, his behavior, marked by unmotivated fits of rage and sudden flashbacks, corresponds with the description of "post-traumatic stress disorder," from which Vietnam veterans suffered (cf. Pattengale 182).

In one of his central flashbacks, Weston not only establishes the parallel between emasculation and war but also that between masculinity and nationhood. At the beginning of Act III, Weston relates how he was castrating lambs, when suddenly an eagle appeared and took delight in snatching away the lambs’ testicles, "[t]hese little remnants of manlihood" (183). By reminding Weston of the power he had as a bomber, the eagle offers Weston an imaginary access to power (cf. Falk 97). The very act of expressing desire for power only manifests Weston’s current impotence. The imminent loss of the Tates’ house as well as his unemployment, indeed, suggest his symbolic castration. Without land or work he cannot feed his children, and if as a consequence his children die, they no longer can reproduce themselves, which, in turn, signifies Weston’s castration. The metaphor of dispossession, hence, links castration, which is invested with war memories, with the loss of the Tates’ land, which Wesley not only fancies as an invasion but also equates with the loss of "a country" (163). By spelling out that it is not "Mr. and Mrs. America who’re gonna’ buy this place" (162), Wesley emphasizes that by country he means not only their land but even more so their nation. By

12 Cf. Michael Rogin who puts forth that both feminism and the Vietnam War were a central factor in "the shocks administered to the dominant (white male) politics" (118).

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likening the loss of farmland to “a domestic Vietnam” (qtd. in Nye 89), a contemporary articulated the public’s perception of the entanglement of global and local events.

Americans lost territory in the Vietnam War. Though never stated, the Vietnam War was the first war America lost. The failure to make a stand against North Vietnam’s puppeteer, the Soviet Union, left a feeling of impotence, which was further aggravated by the “infectious perception of US weakness” (Kondracke 15) in the arms race between these two superpowers. Since in most representations of the Vietnam War, the loss of this war has been identified with both the government and, because of its assaults on the patriarchal system, the feminine, narratives of the Vietnam War attempt a “‘remasculinization’ — a regeneration of the concepts, constructions and definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it is formulated” (Jeffords 51). Weston’s story of the eagle and lamb bears out his attempt at a remasculinization via the classic American male reaction of regeneration through violence lived out at the frontier. Weston’s memories of his virility in war show that, once the frontier was declared closed, “imperial expansion overseas offered a new frontier, where the essential American man could be reconstituted,” and thus “reopen[ed] the closed frontier and reinvent[ed] the West as a space for fictional representation” (Kaplan 664, 683). The narrative sequence of Weston’s transformation right after his eagle-and-lamb story points to the link between regeneration and war. As in Rambo and other Vietnam films, where the protagonist’s remasculinization is preceded by a symbolic “purification through fire and rebirth through immersion in water” (Jeffords 130), Weston’s remasculinization culminates, after he reconnects with his land, in a hot and then a cold bath (185).

Not only Weston but all of the Tate family members link the frontier with Frederick Jackson Turner’s “perennial rebirth” (38). Yet their pastoral idea of the West as a garden, an idea related to the frontier’s rejuvenating potential, is undercut by the representation of land in Curse. The Tates’ land is barren, and the garden seems more like the desert land

14 Cf. Geoff King, who contends that “[f]rontier rhetoric was mobilized widely during the Vietnam War,” yet “also seriously damaged,” and, hence subsequently, transpolated to science fiction “to reassert the myth” (31).
that Weston hopes to get rid of. Instead of ‘virgin territory,’ we have the ‘machine in the garden’: old cars, tractors, and, once Taylor or Ellis divest the farm family of their land, “[t]here will be bulldozers crashing through the orchard ... giant steel balls crashing through the walls [and] steel girders spanning acres of land” (163); the narratives of nature defeated by the narratives of technology. “[A]griculture being slowly pushed back into the background in deference of low-cost housing” is, as Taylor explains to Wesley and Emma, “simply a product of the times we live in” (153). In an article entitled “Farmland, Farewell!,” Michael Frome chastised the prevalent “inverted sense of values,” which assists the “self-serving speculator” rather than the “real farmer” (23). The suburbanization of rural areas replaced, as a contemporary deplored, “the rural scenes of our childhood, the woods and fields where we roamed, the brooks and ponds where we communed with nature,” with “neon strips, hot top deserts, highway interchanges or gridded suburbia under the guise of the great god ‘Progress’” (Colby 24). In a similar vein, Wesley’s description of the increasing urbanization as “[z]ombie architecture” (163) implies that the loss of farm land was more symbolic than material. Urbanization corroded the belief in the mythic potential of the land, in particular that of the West, as “a collective representation, a poetic idea ... that defined the promise of American life” (Smith 123).

Except for Ella, who, though she would prefer to flee to Europe, at one point plans to turn their land with Taylor’s help into a “steak house” (177) for tourists and thus contributes to urbanization, the rest of the Tate family constantly ponders their escape from the barren farmland invaded by technology. In view of the closed frontier, Wesley’s destination is Alaska, whereas Weston and Emma opt for Mexico. When Emma asks Wesley, “[w]hat’s in Alaska?,” he answers, the “frontier,” — “full of possibilities” and “undiscovered” (163), that is, unpopulated, pristine, and unspoiled by suburbanization and technology. While Alaska might constitute, as its license plates announce, “The Last Frontier” (Limerick 79), where civilization borders on wilderness, Mexico similarly functions as an “alterity pole” for America because of its recuperative function as a “temporary escape” (Breinig “Alterity Discourse” 332). As in most American literature on Mexico, Weston and Emma consider escaping to Mexico an opportunity to overcome difficulties they face at home and
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start anew (cf. Breinig “Mexikobild” 145). After he realizes that his rebirth cannot stop the impending loss of their land, Weston takes off to Mexico to “start a whole new life down there” (194). Likewise Emma, fascinated by B. Traven’s fate and his success at remaining a mystery, wants to “disappear into the heart of Mexico” (149).

The Tates’ attempts to escape to some kind of substitute frontier bespeak their effort to go back to a more simple life and mirror the flourishing “heritage industry” (Harvey 62) in 1970s America. The interest in America’s rural past, coinciding with the ever-pervading urbanization, evidences the concomitant disappearance of “milieux de mémoire” and emergence of “lieux de mémoire.” Americans then frequented, to an unprecedented degree, museums — which to a disproportionate number were living-history farms. Early in the decade, the first living-history farm at Turkey Run opened its gates and drew large crowds (cf. Kammen 635), who, like one of Shepard’s characters, Hoss, in The Tooth of Crime (1972) wondered, “Ain’t there any farmers left?” (221).

Impelled by a “desire for authenticity,” Americans were trying to “touch base” with their history by “searching for the past, a simpler time, a hometown they never have known” (“Exploring” 55). The dislocation caused, among others, by urbanization, economic problems, a desolate war, and a corrupt government spawned a widespread nostalgia15 for an idealized, pastoral America. Instead of looking forward, Americans were, as Wesley complains, “going backward” (197). So what happened to America in the 1970s if Americans had the feeling of going backwards? By bemoaning the loss of farmland and equating it to “a scene from the Book of Revelation” (Nye 89), Americans drew on the agrarian myth to express their loss of faith in America. Although farmers are no longer the backbone of the American economy, their condition still functions as a gauge for the state of the nation and changes in American society. In the 1970s, the farm crisis as well as the frequent recurrence to the image of the yeoman captured American anxieties

15 Arjun Appadurai argued that “nostalgia is one central mode of image production ... in the peculiar chronicities of late capitalism” (30), while Michael Kammen made the point that nostalgia and progress are the “most characteristic motifs in the US” (703).
about postmodernity. By piling the doubts about America’s capitalism on the back of a farming family, Shepard found a powerful way of conveying doubts and fears that ran through the whole society.

Considering that American culture is wed to the idea of progress, “going backward” is the most devastating statement, illustrating a halt to progress and the collapse of history. Both popular and academic books published in that decade revolve, as does the Tates’ life, around a “vision of collapse” (Nye 90) of American hegemony and culture. Less apocalyptic in outlook, David H. Donald wrote an article on “Our Irrelevant History,” while Laurence Veysey made a case for “reconsidering the autonomy of American history” in face of the “sobering demystification of America, the new awareness that we are but one fractional (and internally fractioned) unit in a polyglot world” (458). The “growing concern that the United States was no longer exceptional among the nations” (Slotkin 625) signaled the end of a central American metanarrative. The belief in America’s exceptionalism, sustained by unlimited land and marvelous abundancy, was tarnished in the 1970s, the age, when “[t]he people of plenty have become the people of paucity” (Donald 27). Abundance is the cardinal factor for democracy (Potter 111–27), securing America’s representation as a nation consisting of a middle class. By worrying about her husband’s “competence” (173) Ella voices a concern of the culture at large. The lack of competence — a central feature in eighteenth-century constructions of national identity, signifying a condition of well-being, a state between luxury and want (cf. Vickers 3) — only testifies to the crisis of the American middle class. While recurring comparisons of the 1970s to the Great Depression by contemporaries elucidate the sense of crisis, only recently have we begun to reevaluate the 1970s and assess the profundity of its change,¹⁶ which occurred when a global guest, postmodernism, came to town, America.

¹⁶ Whereas previously dismissed as glamorless and unimportant and often located within a progressive narrative — succeeding the tumultuous 60s and preceding the conservative 80s — the 1970s are currently being reevaluated. In all three recently published histories this decade is valorized as a crucial period. While Schulman argues that the 1970s “marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our time” (xii) and Miller regards this period as the “most important decade” (45), Frum, employing the term “revolution” (xxiv), also agrees on the
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Works Cited


profundity of the changes and their lasting impact, yet his interpretation is more on the conservative side.

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Gender and the Performance of Local and Global Conflicts in Postmodern and Contemporary American Drama:
LeRoi Jones, José Rivera, David H. Hwang

How are local and global conflicts staged in contemporary dramatic performances? Gender, I think, represents the basic matrix to which postmodern and contemporary playwrights resort in order to perform social tensions related to specific cultural settings yet bearing relevance on a transcultural level as well. Hence, the question in which way en-gendering strategies figure in the performance of local and global conflicts will be subject of investigation in my discussion of plays such as *Dutchman* (1964) by LeRoi Jones, *M. Butterfly* (1988) by David H. Hwang, and *Marisol* (1992) by José Rivera. Gender, in my approach, is seen as a representation of social relations. Labeling the dramatic devices *engendering* strategies, I intend to illustrate how changing con-

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1 I am primarily working with an approach to gender as developed by critics such as de Lauretis and Hof. That sex/gender categories are interwoven with several social discourses is discussed by Teresa de Lauretis. As she points out, "[t]he sex-gender system, in short, is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within society. If gender representations are social positions which carry differential meanings, then for someone to be represented and to represent oneself as male or as female implies the assumption of the whole of those meaning effects" (De Lauretis 5). For theoretical issues related to the differentiation between gender and sex as categories see also Renate Hof 12–14. For social and ideological constructions of sexual differences see: Butler 1993. As Judith Butler emphasizes, male and female bodies are socially constructed and cannot be reduced to sexual differences on an essentialist level.

structions of masculinity and femininity function as vehicles to stage oppositions in their relation to ethnic, cultural, and class differences. Clearly, by drawing upon male and female encounters, the playwrights make use of an archetypal pattern of human interaction. The directions their experiments take illustrate that they view differences in terms of performativity rather than essentialist givens. That these playwrights connect the archetype of male-female encounters with aspects of change, moreover, expresses their view that identities are fluid and results of tensions which consistently cross borderlines between private and public spheres in contemporary societies.

Gender as a representation of social relations is inextricably interwoven with questions of cultural, racial, sexual, and class identities. At least two central ways of defining identity in cultural terms can be differentiated: an essentialist and a historical approach. Within an essentialist conception the problematic of cultural identity is frequently reduced to an originating moment. One may think of Pedro Morande’s location of Latin American identity in the early synthesis of Indian and Spanish culture (Larrain 158–61). Although such initial forms of cultural encounter and fusion are important for the processes of identity formation, one should not neglect the changes such models have undergone ever since. Conversely, a historical view of cultural identity, as it is described by Stuart Hall, provides the basis for more open and flexible definitions:

Cultural identity ... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformations. (Hall 225)

As Hall’s description shows, forms of cultural synthesis have to be seen as part of an ongoing process. Accordingly, identities are continually constructed and reconstructed. Even if the ideas and symbols used in the process of identity formation are recurrent, their meanings may change in the context of newly developed cultural practices. It is important, moreover, to take into consideration that in the act of defining one’s identity not all of one’s historical traditions are equally significant. Some may be applied, some may be changed, and some may have to be
omitted. In times of globalization the act is further complicated through the synchronic availability of numerous modes of identification from various cultural backgrounds.

While cultural practices of identity formation permeate various social dimensions, they bear a very special relationship to the arts. Frequently it is the artist who develops new concepts to reconfigure modes of identification within the creative process. And drama, in particular, provides space for performing new conceptions of identity and conflicting identities on stage, at the same time transmitting them to a larger public in the act of performance. In times when migration and globalization characterize the social ambience of Western societies, identity conflicts due to racial, ethnic and gender differences gain increasingly public prominence on and off stage.

We can also detect early manifestations of such developments in the dramas of the 1960s which deal on different levels with the differentiation of identity in reaction to mainstream expectations. Historically, the resurgence of immigration (in) to the United States due to the 1965 liberalization of immigration law represents a new matrix for the processes changing persistent conceptions of cultural identity. Differing from earlier waves of immigration, the new immigrants form groups new in form, style as well as numbers. They insert a decentering Third World impact into colonial and neocolonial structures. Hence, an America, attempting redefinition in the turbulent decade of the 1960s, encounters this new wave of immigrants as part of a larger movement towards globalization. The new immigrants have been different from their predecessors in many ways. Yet, most important is the fact that global migration links culture no longer to territory and memory to a specific local setting. Accordingly, the new immigrants contribute to a diversification of what culture is and what home is. As a consequence of such developments, the individual frequently encounters heterogeneous and potentially conflicting contexts which may be determined by criteria of nation, gender, ethnic group, professional group, religion, class and so

2 Cf. Welsch 172–83. Welsch discusses Cindy Sherman’s photographic art as a role model for multiple identities in postmodern times.

3 For a historical perspective on immigration in the United States see Frederick Buell 146–49, 177–90.
forth. The individual is required to participate in disjunctive constructed communities, in which the local and the global are negotiated differently. As inhabitant of a postmodern global world he or she no longer represents a unitary subject but mirrors the political, cultural, and social heterogeneity in personal performances of changing identities.

Responding to cultural changes from within and without the United States, the plays of the 1960s not only shatter long established notions of both the ideal closed family and the frontier myth, they also criticize and subvert conceptions of a homogeneous American society. The Black Theatre, the Chicano Theatre and the Gay Theatre are politically most explicit in their endeavors to establish a consciousness of cultural difference (Grabes 146). Feminist concerns, too, permeate almost all forms of performance arts such as happenings, events, dance, and drama. Accordingly, artists like Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer frequently use avant-garde practices to expose sexist cultural practices and to demand equality of the sexes in their performances. Since contemporary strategies of staging differences date back to that revolutionary period, I begin my analysis of plays with LeRoi Jones' pioneering work *Dutchman* (1964).

**LeRoi Jones's Dutchman (1964)**

LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* is definitely one of the most provocative plays staging cultural and racial conflicts. It is a brief, two-scene play and its action takes place on a subway car traveling through the underground of New York City. Its central action evolves around the encounter between Lula and Clay. As the play progresses, Lula and Clay move from playful flirtation through violent accusation and angry self-revelation toward the fatal climax. In the end Lula stabs Clay with a knife, committing an act of ritual murder. Clearly, the confrontation between Lula and Clay stages conflicts on the level of cultural and gender differences. In order to expose the sexist and racist quality behind their quarrel Jones resorts to the body as central trope of dramatic interaction. In particular, LeRoi Jones's stage directions for the actors underscore that body and language occupy an equal position as devices to propel dialogue and action on stage. In the course of the play Jones draws upon various manifestations of physical communication and aggression. Eye contact marks the
beginning of Lula’s and Clay’s verbal and physical performances. “The man looks idly up, until he sees a woman’s face staring at him through the window,” the script tells us (Jones 4). As the action proceeds, the body language becomes concrete, direct, and immediate. Lula’s way of setting her body en scène takes on explicitly sexual terms. Step by step her body talk gets more intimate. “Taking his arm,” “[t]aking him a little roughly by the wrist,” “[p]utting her hand on Clay’s closest knee,” “[g]rabs his thigh, up near the crotch,” are the playwright’s notations for Lula’s physical action in the first act (Jones 14, 11, 10, 17).

Her physical approaches toward Clay can best be described as aggressive, provocative, and suggestive of her own superiority. That Jones stages an archetypal sort of conflict becomes obvious when we take into consideration that he rewrites the biblical fall from a racialized gender perspective. Approaching Clay with the words “[e]ating apples together is always the first step” (Jones 4), Lula gives voice to Jones’s biblical references. Through the redistribution of roles – white woman, black man – the moral and ethnic dimension of the biblical story gains specific race and gender connotations, however, linked to the intercultural tensions at work within the United States. Performing fragmented versions of racial, sexual, and cultural stereotypes, Lula’s and Clay’s actions point toward discriminatory practices, as they emerge from a mutual refusal to acknowledge the other as a real human presence. Instead Clay, and even more so Lula, perform differently constructed versions of the other within their limited knowledge of historical and cultural differences. The following excerpt illustrates that much of their performance is shaped by strategies of historical reductionism:

CLAY. Wow. All these people, so suddenly. They must all come from the same place.
LULA. Right. That they do.
CLAY. Oh? You know about them too?
LULA. Oh yeah. About them more than I know about you. Do they frighten you?
CLAY. Frighten me? Why should they frighten me?
LULA. ‘Cause you’re an escaped nigger.
CLAY. Yeah?
LULA. ‘Cause you crawled through the wire and tracks to my side.
CLAY. Wire?
LULA. Don’t they have wire around plantations?
CLAY. You must be Jewish. All you can think about is wire. Plantations didn't have any wire. Plantations were big open whitewashed places like heaven, and everybody on 'em grooved to be there. Just strummin and hummin all day. (Jones 29–30)

Clearly, Jones lays bare modes of distorting history which hide behind racist and sexist stereotyping. While both characters repeatedly resort to stereotypical perceptions of ethnic differences, Jones integrates aesthetic elements within the performances which expose the actual complexity underneath intercultural processes. Lula's dance and singing interludes, for instance, connote the minstrel tradition, an aesthetic practice which allows us to retrace aspects of cultural borrowing and intercultural exchange. In particular, minstrel practices ironically expose a blackening up of America, as it emerges from white imitation and parody of African American artistic practices.

Staging cultural conflicts in Dutchman, Jones enacts a complex reversal of power models and models of violence (black/white, male/female), as they have been used to discriminate against African Americans. He plays with the stigma of the black man as rapist letting Lula perform the aggressive part and he plays with the stereotype of the licentious, exotic black woman, too, having Lula act the role of seducer. Yet, Jones's cultural critique goes deeper than simply reversing established patterns of stigmatization. Lula not only plays the part of the black male aggressor and the black female seducer in white female disguise, she also enacts the white bohemian avant-gardist borrowing from African American cultural discourse on an aesthetic level yet without acknowledging its potential for political and cultural change.

The way the characters perceive each other signals the local context of Jones's play. Clay sees in Lula a white, bohemian liberal whose interest in African American culture is of exotic rather than of authentic

4 Achilles comments on Jones's rendering of stereotyping as follows: "The conflict of Dutchman consists in the cracking up and violent explosion of racial stereotyping and the social boundaries and certainties it generates. Dutchman leads to a deconstruction of behavioral patterns and the revelation of the underlying atavistic emotions that shape both the gender and race conflicts" (224).

5 For a discussion of stereotypes of black women see Barbara Christian 11–17.
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Concern. Clay, on the other hand, is pigeonholed by Lula as the assimilated middle-class black man.

Setting his play in a New York underground context, Jones makes obvious that the interaction between Lula and Clay bears explicit references to the collaboration of black and white avantgardes in the early 1960s. \textit{Dutchman}, hence, comments upon a brief historical period of black and white cooperation on the level of artistic and intellectual discourse. The (final) end of the play may refer to Jones's own turning away from the white avant-garde of the Black Mountain group. Yet, Jones neither expands the autobiographical element nor does he transform the location within the underbelly of the city into a fully developed local setting. Instead Jones resorts to strategies which help emphasize the ritual and archetypal nature of \textit{Dutchman}. Hence, the subway car itself is incomplete. The audience can only glimpse a fragment. Moreover the artificial lighting behind the car windows distorts a realistic sense of place. Thus Jones transcends a spatial fixation on a specific locale. As the choice of the title already suggests, the action bears relevance for settings outside the New York City urban context because it calls forth images of different periods of African and African American history. We are reminded of the Dutch slave traders bringing the first Africans to Jamestown. And critics familiar with African American history will be able to connect the subway car setting with the historic underground railroad that helped slaves escape from the South to the North. Finally, by alluding to the \textit{Flying Dutchman}, the phantom ship eternally sailing the seas, Jones underscores that the spatial context of \textit{Dutchman} is not a closed and stable entity but historically and sociologically connected to places world-wide where racial discrimination builds up intercultural conflicts.

Letting Clay and Lula perform various roles, Jones emphasizes that their identities are not locally confined. Rather, they can be performed in various contexts. Particularly the fact that gender and racial role playing is associated with text and self-conscious construction in \textit{Dutchman} refers to their general performativity. Clay, for instance, announces that

\footnote{For ideological differences between white and black avant-garde artists see Sally Banes 158.}
their conversation sounds like script. And Lula claims to be, and not be, an actress, confusing the audience as concerns a distinction between the real and the performed. Since the roles, as Jones illustrates, depend upon written models and changes in the text signal changes of action as well, art indeed may take on a spearhead position within the process of transforming racial barriers and hierarchical patterns. Clay’s final monologue and emotional outburst exemplifies such a change of script:

Charlie Parker? Charlie Parker. All the hip white boys scream for Bird. And Bird saying, “Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass.” And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would’ve played not a note of music if he had just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note! . . . If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. . . . Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane. (Jones 35)

Clay’s extensive monologue on his existentialist view of black music introduces the audience to an artistic form of radical political consciousness that would shape LeRoi Jones’s plays and poetry in times of the Black Arts movement. As black protest against white forms of discrimination we should see the play as propelling force for black resistance at home. At the same time it bears transnational significance since it relates to predominant anticolonial movements, as they occurred in Africa and Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. While the ritualistic ending of Dutchman signals the play’s meaning for a pan-African understanding of black culture in particular, the encounter between Lula and Clay refers to intercultural tensions within the United States specifically. By exposing the performativity of ethnic, racial, and gender identities in general, Jones clears ground for an extended free play with changing identities, as we encounter it in the act of staging local and global conflicts within contemporary plays.

7 Music is seen as a force uniting black people and ‘poetrymusic’ is conceived by Jones as a communal experience. Cf. Lenz 225. For Jones’s aesthetics in relation to African American music see also Nielsen 196–97.
David H. Hwang’s M. Butterfly (1986)

Throughout a great part of the play’s first act Hwang summarizes and enacts the plot of Puccini’s opera through the narration of his main character Gallimard. The actual plot of Hwang’s play begins where the reenactment of the opera stops. M. Butterfly stages the story of the French diplomat Gallimard and his Chinese lover Song Liling. Attending the performance of a scene from Puccini’s well-known opera at the embassy in Beijing, Gallimard falls in love with an image of oriental female submissiveness which he derives from Song’s performance of the role of Cio-Cio-San. Song, however, being both an artist and a spy, plays up to Gallimard’s sexist fantasies in order to get access to information about French and American colonial policies. Song succeeds because of Gallimard’s cultural ignorance. As Ilka Saal points out:

His cultural indifference leads him not only to mistake the actor for a woman but, moreover, to conflate Japanese with Chinese culture. In this manner, a Chinese man playing a Japanese woman in an Italian opera in China becomes for him simply the Oriental woman . . . . (Saal 630)

In Western thinking the Orient has frequently been feminized and regarded as female inferior to the strong masculine Occident. In colonial politics in particular, this differentiation expressed a hierarchical structure converging male and cultural superiority into the image of the colonizer. Gallimard’s view of the Orient is partly derived from the Butterfly myth; yet, Gallimard fails to see the mystifying effect the opera has on him. Moreover his sense of superiority toward the Orient makes him reject Song’s warning when the latter retells the Puccini plot from a culturally different angle:

Song: Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which time she prays to his picture and turns down the marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it’s an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah! – you find it beautiful! (Hwang 17)

8 Cf. Said, Orientalism.
Song thus dismantles Gallimard’s love for the music as well as for the myth of the Oriental woman as part of his colonialist outlook. As concerns the process of male identity formation, Gallimard needs the creation of the other as an opposite to set himself apart from. When Song has revealed his masculinity Gallimard admits: “I’m a man who loved a woman created by a man” (Hwang 90). On the one hand, his statement refers to Song enacting the Oriental woman. On the other hand, it alludes to Gallimard’s imaginative construction of Oriental womanhood in his mind. His sense of male identity fuses with colonialist aspirations for supremacy. After his second meeting with Song, Gallimard addresses the audience with the following words: “Did you hear the way she talked about Western women? Much differently than the first night. She does – she feels inferior to them – and to me” (Hwang 31). Thus he thinks he has gained total control over their relationship. But, as we know, he is wrong, since Song manages to outwit him. Wearing seductive dresses and flattering his Western male arrogance, Song keeps secretly directing the course of their interaction. And Song is successful on a local as well as a global level. In Beijing, acting as a professional cross-dresser and camouflaging his activity as spy, he manages to get the wanted political information about French and American colonial politics from Gallimard. In France, dressed up as a Western business man in an Armani suit, he deceives the court and is acquitted of all charges. As Hwang makes clear, cross-dressing enables Song to perform the sexually and politically desired in a given time and place. At the same time Hwang exposes the strategies at work in the process of converting binary oppositions into hierarchical patterns. The one who holds the power to distribute roles also decides who plays the weak and who acts out the strong part.

Drawing upon cross-dressing and gender reversals in *M. Butterfly*, which we may pronounce Monsieur Butterfly, Hwang addresses the role the politics of popular culture play in the act of propagating the myth of the feminized cultural inferior. In reversing the power relation between East and West on stage, Hwang clearly criticizes colonial as well as neo-

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9 To some critics femininity represents only the absent other in Hwang’s play. See Hsiao-hung Chang 733–55.
colonial manifestations in contemporary political and cultural discourses. In his afterword to the play he expresses such criticism explicitly: "The neo-Colonialist notion that good elements of a native society, like a good woman, desire submission to the masculine West speaks precisely to the heart of our foreign policy blunders in Asia and elsewhere" (Hwang 99). In Hwang's rendering, gender gains a racial dimension and neo-colonial politics are engendered. In the afterword he refers to a number of popular movies which nourish the idea of passivity and submission by Asian females. As he reminds us, Rambo II, Year of the Dragon, Shogun and The Ninja all feature Asian women as servants to a white protagonist fighting against their own people (Hwang 99). Their submissiveness, moreover, goes hand in hand with forms of bodily colonization. Sleeping with the white protagonist represents a current feature in the role playing attributed to Asian women in the above-mentioned popular genre. According to Hwang, we face here a male counteraction against female and feminist self-assertion in the West.

As we have seen, David H. Hwang plays with engendered identity patterns in M. Butterfly. The play shows that identities emerge as a result of the interaction between constructed opposites, the imagined female and the male, the European and the Asian, the homosexual and the heterosexual. Moreover the role changes occurring within M. Butterfly underscore Hwang's conviction that identities can be exchanged. Their performance, hence, depends on context as well as purpose. Performing both the Oriental and the woman, Song Liling succeeds in deceiving Gallimard and in reversing the traditionally assumed power relations between East and West of colonial times. In the end Gallimard is imprisoned for treason in France, whereas Song is set free to return to China.

In a long series of disguises we encounter Gallimard in the last act as Butterfly while Song enacts Navy lieutenant Pinkerton from Puccini's opera. As a play within the play this scene introduces a meta-level. Parodying earlier forms of cross-dressing, the scene presents us a Gallimard in wig and kimono and Song in Armani slacks. The Asian male performs the successful masculine, the Western male the submissive female part. Whereas we encounter a cultural role reversal, the pattern of male dominance is reenacted here which is, however, subtly criticized through the
homosexual subtext of Gallimard’s and Song’s relationship. While critics such as Ilka Saal have rightly pointed out that Hwang ultimately does not break through binary oppositions suggested by heterosexuality, I want to add that this is part of the play’s logic. After all it is Gallimard that stages the story from his prison cell. And he remains trapped in his thought structures until the very end. Gallimard clearly denies aspects of a new male discourse suggested by the homosexual dimension. And it is he who fails to establish a new form of communication between male and female. As Hwang repeatedly emphasizes, Gallimard only uses women as means to please his own ego. Hence, for letting the play announce a liberating discourse beyond the defeat of the colonizer, Hwang would need a new stage director or composer within the script.

Symbolically, Hwang chooses a prison cell as setting for Gallimard’s composing act. From there we enter different spatial contexts letting the play progress between Asian and European settings. While Gallimard’s affection for Song signifies a private sphere primarily located within the walls of Song’s apartment, Hwang makes clear throughout the play that their relationship bears global relevance since it reveals the strategies of colonial politics. The spatial shiftings in the play symbolically underscore M. Butterfly’s significance beyond borderlines and a specific cultural confinement.

José Rivera’s Marisol (1992)

Similar to Hwang’s play, Rivera’s Marisol (1992) should be seen within a postcolonial context in which questions of identities are negotiated on a larger scale. As Jorge Huerta points out, “dislocation and a concomitant search for identity have always been at the center of Chicano playwrit-

\[10\] Saal 629. As Saal puts it, M. Butterfly “tackles the very foundation of Western identity by questioning and troubling its reliance on binary oppositions. Yet the playwright does not manage to do without these binaries. He can, therefore, not quite overcome the colonial burden of the Western canon.” A different attitude is expressed by Shimakawa 352. To her the distinctions between male and female, East and West collapse in Gallimard’s enactment of Butterfly.

\[11\] Similarly Christoph Irmscher stresses that Gallimard not only aspires to be Puccini’s Pinkerton but to be Puccini himself. To him it is Gallimard who functions as author of the text, Irmscher 624.
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ing, serving as a recurring leitmotif for the majority of playwrights to date” (Huerta 58). Huerta’s statement rings true for Rivera’s play, too, since strategies of displacement and reconceptualizations of identities propel the play’s action. Symbolical of a growing sense of dislocation in Marisol, the New York setting appears increasingly unreal and the main character, Puerto Rican middle-class Marisol, has difficulties in recognizing the city as a familiar local setting, as the plot progresses. Despite the fact that the homeless people we encounter in the play are partly representative of poor Puerto Rican communities in New York such as those in Spanish Harlem, in the South Bronx, and in the Lower East Side, Rivera makes clear that he does not want to restrict the plot’s meaning to a reduced urban locale. Hence, Rivera selects the real world and the angels’ world above it to signal that the action taking place bears meaning for a transcultural context as well. The homeless of New York could be substituted by the street kids in Brazil or the begging children in India. Likewise the Neo-Nazis of the play are expressions of a transcultural phenomenon, because since the 1980s we have been witnessing a resurgence of right-wing thinking and radical action across national and continental boundaries.

While the play by LeRoi Jones emphasizes racial differences and David Hwang’s play focuses on cultural differences, Rivera develops the dramatic action of Marisol around class differences. The play is about Marisol Perez, a young Puerto Rican woman who has grown up in the Bronx. Despite the racism and poor economic conditions shaping her childhood days she has succeeded in elevating herself into the white collar class working as a copy editor for a Manhattan publisher. Since she still lives in the Bronx she commutes between the Bronx and Manhattan, parts of New York City that spatially signify extreme class differences existing within a relatively small area. Marisol’s outlook is oriented toward professional status thinking and her life rhythm is dictated by Protestant work ethics despite her Catholic background. In the course of the play we recognize that Marisol’s white collar world is

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12 For further discussions of Chicano theater traditions see Huerta, Chicano Theater, Broyles-Gonzáles, and Taylor and Veillegas.
13 Cf. Mohr xii.
steadily collapsing. Repeatedly, she faces poverty and helplessness in encounters with homeless people in the streets of New York. As the setting changes from a Manhattan environment to a wasteland landscape symbolizing the Bronx, a change of consciousness in Marisol occurs. Having lost her privileged social status, she finds herself looking out for help and being rejected by people like the Woman With Furs who considers her a homeless criminal. Her initial profit-oriented outlook turns into a new awareness of social responsibility. Thus she wants to rescue her friend June from the streets of New York which have become the scene of the war in heaven between the angelic woman warriors and a senile masculine God. As the action comes to a final climax, Marisol and the masses of homeless people join the angelic fight against injustice and exploitation.

In the beginning of the play we encounter Marisol as a character that is primarily self-centered. She denies the help required by the homeless man in the subway and by the man still waiting for his pay cheque at work. In a comic way Rivera reveals her self-centeredness in Marisol’s private conversations with her guardian angel. Thus she asks her guardian angel: “Are you true? Are you gonna make the Bronx safe for me? Are you gonna make miracles and reduce my rent?” (Rivera 16). In her sleep she even dreams of having sex with God:

Am I pregnant with the Lord’s baby?! Is the new Messiah swimming in my electrified womb? Is the supersperm of God growing a mythic flower deep in the secret greenhouse inside me? Will my morning sickness taste like communion wine? This is amazing – billions of women on earth, and I get knocked up by God! (Rivera 16)

On the one hand, Rivera’s humor exposes her self-centeredness in a sympathetic way, on the other hand he emphasizes the Catholic background of her upbringing. Yet, as Rivera makes clear, there is only time outside reality for a Catholic vision in the original meaning of the Greek word ‘catholikos’ signifying “for all, in general.” In everyday life there is no space for shelter, help, and protection. The social aspect of Rivera’s view of Catholicism is bound up with the close relationship between

14 Schwank emphasizes that she is gradually deprived of her social masks. See Schwank 572.
Marisol and her guardian angel which relates back to childhood days and functions as protection against parental injustice and societal racism. In the course of the play the guardian angel leaves Marisol to join the angelic war and, dressed for battle, she announces her departure in a dream: “Listen well, Marisol: Angels are going to kill the King of Heaven and restore the vitality of the universe with His blood. And I’m going to lead them” (Rivera 18). The act of separation signals a new step in Marisol’s life. Socially she has to face life on the streets, spiritually she is forced to develop a new understanding of social involvement.

While the angelic war in heaven keeps expanding and spills over into New York City leaving behind an urban wasteland, we encounter various narratives about the presence of angels which demonstrate that Rivera engenders the battles. All angels of whom we are told that they are fighting against the old order are female. Moreover, the army of angels does not know racial or geographical boundaries. They take on black, Japanese, and Latino traits (cf. Rivera 9, 46, 57). While Marisol’s conversation with her angel is local and limited to her bedroom in the beginning, her reunion with the angels in the end signals a redefinition of religious belief practices as a means of social resistance. The play describes a movement from Marisol’s private interaction with her guardian angel to a public participation within a transcultural community of guardian angels. Clearly, Rivera’s dramatic staging of the angelic war signifies a reinterpretation of the Mary cult in Catholicism; yet it gets a political twist since both Marisol and her guardian angel take part in the crusade against economic and social injustice personified by the Citibank MasterCard People, symbol of a multinational, abstract economic power system which has distanced itself from the needs of the displaced and the socially weak. That Marisol turns into a link between religious and political visions is already indicated by Rivera’s act of name-giving. While the front part of her name refers to Mary and her worship in Catholic religious practice, the end part implies the sun and a cosmic political consciousness. Redefining the significant religious role of Mary along gender lines, Rivera turns the male army “Michael and his angels” into a combat force of female angels (Rivera 18).

We encounter further redistributions of gender roles and also manifestations of temporary sex changes in the figure of Lenny, June’s broth-
er who takes on a female body and gives birth to a dead child, and June herself who has turned into a masculine Neo-Nazi chasing a homeless person when Marisol finally finds her in the wasteland setting of New York. These grotesque devices within the play paradoxically stage Rivera’s basic belief in the possibility of change. As such they are also indicative of a specifically Latino, culturally organized form of a Catholic belief system which accepts the presence of miracles as part of real life (Huerta 115). Yet, Rivera makes clear that social action is needed for miracles to come true. Overall, the grotesque elements correspond to the aesthetic crossing of borderlines between reality and dream, religious-political vision and surreal nightmare which characterizes the overall set-up of the play.15 Resorting to such abrupt changes of sexual, political, and social identity, Rivera underscores how easily not only identity but social status can be lost in a social climate where “the law of the jungle” reigns (Rivera 29). Being deprived off of all her social masks, Marisol tries to reconstruct her changes of identity in the second act, as follows:

Lived on East Tremont – then Taylor Avenue – Grand Concourse – Mami died – Fordham – English major – Phi Beta Kappa – I went into science publishing – I’m a head writer – I make good money – I work with words – I’m clean. … I lived in the Bronx … commuted light-years to this other planet called – Manhattan! I learned new vocabularies … wore weird native dress … mastered arcane rituals … and amputated neat sections of my psyche, my cultural heritage … yeah, clean easy amputations … with no pain expressed at all – none! – but so much pain kept inside I almost choked on it … so far deep inside my Manhattan bosses and Manhattan friends and my broken Bronx consciousness never even suspected … (Rivera 43)

In Marisol’s reflections on changing identities and her sudden social decline Rivera’s social critique becomes explicit. He draws on images of the American dream but he redefines the frontier as a social category. Homelessness, poverty, and the rise of right-wing radicalism are to him the contemporary challenges of today’s communities. As the angelic war descends from heaven to earth, it becomes obvious that the frontier lies

15 Grabes sees in the magic-religious setting of the play a parallel discourse to the tradition of ‘magic realism’ as developed by such writers as Gabriel García Márquez. Cf. Grabes, *Das amerikanische Drama* 174.
in the very midst of society. Symbolically the graveyard for the homeless, where Marisol gets in touch with the very bottom of the social strata, marks the frontier space in the second act of the play. Deeply moved by the scenery, Marisol reads out loud the names of the dead scratched in the scenery:

Fermin Rivera ... born March 14, died March 16 ... Jose Amengual ... born August 2 died August 2 ... Delfina Perez ... born December 23, died January 6 ... Jonathan Sand born July 1, died July 29 ... Wilfredo Terrón ... dates unknown ... no name ... no name ... no name ... (Rivera 53)

Whereas most of the names reveal a Latino background, the inclusion of the Anglo-Saxon name Jonathan Sand reveals that Rivera's social commitment is neither restricted by geographical nor by ethnic boundaries. Homelessness and right-wing radicalism are international phenomena within a globalizing world that need to be fought against world-wide, on and off stage, as Rivera insistently reminds us.

Though in various degrees and with different emphases, all three plays discussed foreground differences, be they culturally and racially oriented or gender- and class-based. Yet, differences are not simply viewed as the presence of heterogeneity; rather they are exposed in relation to conflicts between individuals, men and women, different classes, and between ethnic and national groups. As a performative strategy cross-dressing allows contemporary dramatists such as Hwang and Rivera an even more playful rendering of multiple identities than we encounter in Jones's Dutchman. Their use of cross-dressing foregrounds the performative character of racial, cultural, and gender identity. As Marjorie Garber puts it, cross-dressing signifies a cultural phenomenon penetrating various platforms of social life. We encounter variations of it from men wearing women's underwear underneath business suits to rock stars like Madonna and Michael Jackson bending gender-categories and full-scale drag balls. Cross-dressing leads to a deliberate confusion of gender markers and puts into question such distinctions as male/female, gay/straight, subject/object (Garber 16). Drawing on such potential to differentiate difference, contemporary playwrights, especially within minority discourses, stage changing identities to dramatize racial, sexual, and class conflicts within contexts in which the local and the global intersect and, ultimately, cannot be separated from one another.
Accordingly, their plays reveal that the impact of national and transnational politics and economics shapes individual encounters such as those between Lula and Clay, Song and Gallimard, Marisol and the Woman With Furs. Although the playwrights may not completely succeed in breaking through binary oppositions, their plays expose that group alliances as well as individual identities have to be redefined, as local and global contexts interact and overlap within an increasingly globalizing world.

Works Cited


Revising America, Revisioning the Past: American Drama in a Global(izing) World

1. Introduction

Globalization has by now become such a catchword that it is present in almost any academic paper, and sometimes it is really hard to see the connection to the paper’s topic. That is precisely the risk of my paper which deals with three American playwrights who, perhaps with the exception of Tony Kushner, seem to be interested purely in American issues. Therefore, let me say a few words about the particular idea of globalization that informs my paper. One of the phenomena of a globalizing world is the constant crossing of national boundaries — in financial, geographical, and cultural terms — which renders the concept of nation superfluous or at least questionable. As we know from Benedict Anderson’s influential study, nations are imagined communities and can, therefore, be reimagined and redefined in new constellations. There are at least two possible reactions to these shifts: one is to keep the status quo as long as possible by closing borders and preventing the blurring of boundaries. The second one is to see these movements as a chance — particularly for hitherto marginalized groups — to redefine positions in this imagined community. And this is precisely where my paper takes its starting point. In the cases of the three playwrights that I have chosen to discuss, globalization as equal to a changing world gives African Americans, women, and gays the chance to reemerge as serious players in the redefinition of an American identity and history that is increasingly questioned. Additionally, the plays proclaim that the struggle for ethnic, women’s, and gay rights is not limited to the United States, but that it is a global phenomenon with multiple manifestations.
For more than a decade, globalization has been accompanied by Francis Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of History” with a capital H. In his study *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama suggests that a monolithic History as “‘mankind’s ideological evolution’” (xi) has come to an end and “liberal democracy” as “‘the final form of human government’” (xi) emerges. Despite his emphasis on liberalism, his concept nevertheless suggests a rather Western and Eurocentric form of political organization as universally acceptable and permanently established, thus erasing and denying alternative and critical voices. However, in the context of my paper, I will disconnect his “liberal democracy” from any particular national alliance and will use it in the sense of a recognition of multiple histories which both revise past History and shape future histories. “Liberal democracy” in my understanding embraces a new emancipatory consciousness that has developed in the 1990s and has found expression in cultural products at the end of the twentieth century. Both resistance to hegemonic structures and the development of a new self-consciousness of historically marginalized groups shape the multicultural landscape of cultural productivity in the United States in the time of globalization and possibly also include the criticism of the institutionalization of “liberal democracy” as a new History with a capital H.

In my paper, I will look at how American History with a capital H is taken up, revised, and rewritten in American plays of the 1990s in order to deconstruct and render useless a monolithic concept of American identity in an increasingly globalizing world. While globalization means worldwide homogenization as well as transculturation, it also implies the reemergence and cultivation of difference through renewed localization, regionalization, or ethnicization. Because globalization is inextricably linked to localization, critics have coined the term “glocalization” (cf. Robertson). This claim for a recognition of difference is possible in a system of liberal democracy but rejects this system’s homogenizing inclinations. Recent events such as worldwide terrorism and ethnic wars prove Fukuyama’s thesis right that “History” cannot be “understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times” (xii). These events, however, clearly show that the world is far from unanimously practicing “liberal democracy” and that this rejection may even be a reaction to the at
tempted imposition of one form of political government expected to be generally accepted. No matter how liberal “liberal democracy” may seem, if it is imposed it loses its liberal qualities. The playwrights to be discussed in this paper claim the recognition of a multiplicity of voices in the creation of their own histories within national as well as global contexts.

Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* (1994, 1995), Wendy Wasserstein’s *An American Daughter* (1997, 1998), and Tony Kushner’s two-part drama *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (Part I: *Millennium Approaches* [1990, 1993]; Part II: *Perestroika* [1991, 1994]) specifically revise American History by transgressing the borders of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Parks, Wasserstein, and Kushner critically turn predominantly white, male, and heterosexual History—which is often equated with “liberal democracy”—into female, black, and homosexual histories and thus reveal History as an unstable construct on its way to apocalypse. These authors also propose to see the performative qualities of multiple histories; for them, performance refers to both the subjective creation of histories and the theatrical performances of these histories. With their plays, they demand “recognition” (Fukuyama xxii) and the right to create their own histories. They exhibit an optimistic theatrical vision of future histories that will rise from the debris of American History. They claim liberal democracy by turning against the equation of American History and liberal democracy and thus also show the pitfalls and dangers of a simplistic understanding of America’s liberal democracy as a worldwide desirability. For them, the art of theatre can help raise consciousness and make the world a better place to live in.

2. *Racing American History*: Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play*

In her essay “Possession,” the African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks explains:

Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to “make” history — that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to — through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and
Carmen Birkle

real life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (“Possession” 4)

In Parks’s rather postmodern *The America Play*, the protagonist, called the Foundling Father or the Lesser Known, is a black gravedigger who resembles Abraham Lincoln, undertakes the traditional journey West as the “all-American journey” (Chaudhuri 263), and chooses to impersonate Abraham Lincoln in the theme park of the “Great Hole of History.” He organizes a sideshow for people to “participate in the deadly funhouse of American history” (Chaudhuri 263). The scene that is repeated over and over again is the murder of Abraham Lincoln — the killing of his black impersonator — while he watches a performance of Tom Taylor’s play *Our American Cousin* (1858). Each customer in this show pays first, then selects a gun, and finally fires. But it is, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, a “[r]epetition, with a difference” (50), or, to speak with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a form of “signifying.” Parks describes her aesthetics as “repetition and revision” which, as she says,
is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. – with each revisit

1 Parks picks up and continues the postmodern idea of funhouse or funnyhouse as described by the white male novelist and short-story writer John Barth in his “Lost in the Funhouse” (1967) and the African-American female playwright Adrienne Kennedy in her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1969). While Barth associates his funhouse with the national theme of America’s Independence Day, Kennedy connects her funnyhouse to the global oppression of blacks. While Barth’s protagonist Ambrose gets lost in the “endless replication of his image in the mirrors” (94) as well as “in the reflection that the necessity for an observer makes perfect observation impossible” (94) and finally decides to become a funhouse operator himself, Kennedy’s Negro is the embodiment of changing and multiple identities, thus overcoming black-white dichotomies. Both Barth and Kennedy as well as Parks play with various notions of identities that are no longer permanent and fixed, but changing, flexible, and multiple. However, while Barth indulges in repetition, Kennedy and Parks add revision to repetition and thus communicate the need for active and critical engagement in social and political issues that transcends the idea of play for its own sake.

2 This motif of the shooting of a president is reminiscent of Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Assassins*, which was first performed in 1990. John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln’s assassinator, is one of the characters in this history of presidential assassinations (cf. Lovensheimer).
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the phrase is slightly revised. 'Rep & Rev' as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score. ("Elements of Style" 8–9)

The constant repetition of this dramatic murder scene from the American past exposes history's mediatedness and representation through language and narrative and poses questions about the factual and authentic qualities of historical events and the consequences of the blurring and equal validity of original events and their simulacra. The repetition of an event makes the event unreal, but the revised simulacrum is impregnated in people's minds and takes on its own newly created reality. The simulacrum, as Baudrillard explains with reference to Disneyland,

is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (25)

Through the impersonation of the historical Abraham Lincoln in the creation of a simulacrum both Lincoln and History, i.e., the real, become performance, which by definition questions the authenticity of historical reality. In his performance, the Lincoln impersonator is as authentic or inauthentic as Lincoln himself:

There was once a man who was told that he bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and thinly built just like the Great Man. His legs were the longer part just like the Great Man's legs. His hands and feet were large as the Great Man's were large. The Lesser Known had several beards which he carried around in a box. The beards were his although he himself had not grown them on his face but since he'd secretly bought the hairs from his barber and arranged their beard shapes and since the procurement and upkeep of his beards took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his. Were as authentic as he was, so to speak. His beard box was of cherry wood and lined with purple velvet. He had the initials "A.L." tooled in gold on the lid. (159–60)

In her essay "Possession," Parks asserts: "I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events — and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the
baby is no less human” (5). Therefore, the African-American president becomes a theatrical reality as well as a reminder of racism:

The theme park-virtuality of the shootings of Lincoln and his black double does not nullify the very real desire to wipe out blackness which makes the show go on into the future. Behind the theatricality and textuality of history turned media event, the racist mindset becomes visible that motivates both the assassination of Lincoln and the shootings of his black revenant. (Achilles)

Both the figure of Abraham Lincoln and the issue of racism touch upon crucial aspects of American identity. On the level of the title these national themes are further connected to ideas of performance. While the title refers to the dramatic genre, it also connotes the idea of playing (with) America or of America as a game. In a game there are usually winners and losers, but the outcome is subject to chance and cannot be predicted. Consequently, in a new round of the game, African Americans are the winners in Parks’s America Play. But is this really a play with winners and losers? What, after all, is won if the winner is shot? Parks’s play plays with the notions of winners and losers. She has the killers shout “famous last words” known from history which are in no way connected to the actual event that has just happened. As Jochen Achilles argues, “Parks thus ironically foregrounds the determining force of performative style and memorable aphorism for the ways in which historical data become part of cultural memory.” Ultimately, if histories are (part of) games, they are cyclical because games can be played over and over again. “Time has a circular shape,” as Parks argues (“Elements of Style” 10); it has neither beginning nor end, as the theatre of the absurd, for example, of Samuel Beckett with his Waiting for Godot, has aptly shown.

In an interesting twist to The America Play, Parks’s most recent play Topdog/Underdog (2001), for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002, revises her first revision of the Abraham Lincoln murder case. In this play, which opened on July 22, 2001, at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City, the two African-American brothers Booth and Lincoln re-enact once more their historical counterparts. Booth, a former professional cardplayer and the underdog in his early thirties, and Lincoln, the topdog in his late thirties, share an apartment and live off Lincoln’s income as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. The
play brings up their family history. Their mother left them when they were still very young. Their subsequent financial hardships result in their preoccupation with money and failed relationships with women. The performativity of the Lincoln impersonation is emphasized in an ironic turn by the fact that the character Lincoln is about to lose his job and that Booth, therefore, suggests to his brother: “Then you gotta jazz up yr act. Elaborate yr moves, you know. You was always too stiff with it. You cant just sit there! Maybe, when they shoot you, you know, leap up flail yr arms then fall down and wiggle around and shit so they gotta shoot you more than once. Blam Blam Blam! Blam!” And Lincoln responds: “Help me practice. I’ll sit here like I do at work and you be like one of the tourists” (34). In the final scene of the play, Lincoln wins Booth’s inheritance — which their mother had left to Booth and which he had never touched — in a card game, constituting a severe blow to the former professional card player. Just when Lincoln is about to open the stocking where their mother had hidden the money, Booth admits to his having shot his girlfriend, because she was about to leave him like his mother did. Booth, the underdog, finally shoots Lincoln, the topdog, and thus questions the meaning of these words. Again, like *The America Play*, the play ends on Booth’s mourning over Lincoln’s dead body. In contrast to *The America Play*, the actual shooting of Lincoln in *Topdog/Underdog* reveals the human motivations behind this deed. It reveals the limits as well as dangers of performativity and collapses Lincoln’s performance and his actual death into one. The simulacrum and its “real” counterpart have produced a new “real” and are erased by their creation. While the actual shooting of the historical Lincoln (the “real”) and the performed shooting of his impersonator (the simulacrum) represent what Baudrillard calls “[p]ower[s] ... stage[ing] [of] its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy” (37), the actual shooting of the impersonator finally ends all claims to power on the part of History. Lincoln — in all his representations — is finally dead, and new histories can begin.

Concepts of American histories and identities are constructed, deconstructed, attacked, revised, and recycled in Parks’s *The America Play*. Parks suggests that theatre can shape American identity. She begins the play with a quote from John Locke, “In the beginning, all the world was
America.” At the end, the “nation mourns” (The America Play 199). This mourning nation is no longer the exclusively white America of the beginning. It may now be white and African-American, or only African-American with African Americans who are not shown in the classical positions of the oppressed. Parks’s America has certainly changed through “repetition and revision.” Christopher Innes argues that in The America Play “[h]istorical fact is exposed as the residue of accepted beliefs, given the status of truth solely by its continued existence in the popular imagination. So, being myth, history is simply another form of fiction. Thus … the actual events of the past have exactly the same validity as any fictional performance” (100). Her play Topdog/Underdog puts an end to endless repetition in the form of a new/revised shooting of Lincoln. Here, she liberates her characters from the constraints of constant repetition, lays this event in History finally to rest, and paves the way for new histories. Theatre is her medium to do so. In short, in The America Play and in Topdog/Underdog, Suzan-Lori Parks strongly suggests that “theatre … can make history” (Jiggetts 317).

3. Engendering American History: Wendy Wasserstein’s An American Daughter

The power of media is also an issue in Wendy Wasserstein’s most recent realistic feminist play, An American Daughter. Here, the Polish-Jewish-American playwright continues to pursue the feminist issues that preoccupied her earliest plays such as Uncommon Women and Others (1975-77) and discusses their representation in the print media and television. In An American Daughter, the main female characters are in their forties and have recognized that there is no naturally progressive line from the early Women’s Movement of the 1960s and 70s to the realization of its ideas in the 90s. Wasserstein shows that part of American History is the history of women’s struggles for emancipation and equality as well as for the recognition of difference. She revises History by breaking apart the white male monolith of politics and by creating women with courage competing with men. Wasserstein’s motto could also be Locke’s “In the beginning, all the world was America,” white male America, I should add, which at the end is questioned. Unlike Parks in The America Play, Wasserstein is more pessimistic about the outcome of this revision: her
female protagonist, Lyssa Dent Hughes, daughter of a Republican senator and fifth-generation granddaughter of former general and president Ulysses S. Grant, fails to be nominated for Surgeon General because the media publicize and condemn the fact that she did not do her jury duty for lack of time. Yet, she is ready to fight at the end. History in this play is evoked in its title and in the picture and memory of Ulysses S. Grant, both meant to point to the history of gender relations in the United States.

In contrast to Parks’s rather radical substitution of African America for white America, An American Daughter is much more affirmative of traditional values and emphasizes the daughter’s membership in the American community. Lyssa Dent Hughes is fifth-generation granddaughter to Grant, daughter to Senator Hughes, wife to her professor husband Walter Abrahamson, and mother to two boys. This male-dominated community is complemented by her gay friend Morrow McCarthy and Dr. Judith Kaufman, a black Jewish oncologist who cannot have children. This scenario of the “American family” shows the inclusion of various ethnic and gay groups on the one hand, but it also subtly hints at the fact that the future will continue to be white male-oriented because neither Morrow nor Judith will have children and Lyssa has two boys. These obstacles for ethnic and female emancipation are further compounded by the fact that Lyssa’s political surrender coincides with Judith Kaufman’s final acceptance of her infertility: “Just about the same time you [Lyssa] called the President, my [Judith’s] final quest for fertility collapsed” (98).

Lyssa is an American daughter because she can be seen in line with the historical Zoë Baird, Judge Kimba Wood, Professor Lani Guinier, or even Hillary Rodham Clinton, whose careers supposedly made them neglect their motherly and wifely duties. Wasserstein explains that “[w]hereas their contemporary femininity seemed at first their strength, it became their downfall” (“Preface” ix). While Parks’s black male Lincoln impersonator revises History, Wasserstein’s female politician is forced to recognize the dominance of white male politics, but promises changes for the future. Wasserstein’s play exposes the strategies employed by the media to prevent a revision. Her “repetition with a differ-
ence" is cast in the frame of gender relations which require women's constant and active resistance to the ever-present backlash tendencies.

As in Parks's play, most historical references are connected to a great figure in American history, namely Ulysses S. Grant. Both Lincoln (1861-65) and Grant (1869-77) were American presidents; both were Republicans and elected for a second term; both were involved in the Civil War and supported the emancipation of blacks. Grant is frequently described as a rather passive president, and his "Grantism" at the time stood for bribery and corruption. Ironically, this is what America seems to be all about when Lyssa quotes from Grant's memoir Unconditional Surrender: "My family is American and has been for generations in all its branches, direct and collateral" (29). This law is continued by Senator Hughes, who is described by Judith as having "almost a quarter century's unblemished record of robbing from the poor to give to the rich" (7). When the journalist Timber Tucker criticizes Grant as "a man whose public life was not always within legal limits" (86), Senator Hughes defends Grant: "Grant was a great general. He was also a man. He made bad investments, he drank, and some say he even screwed up Reconstruction..... We're human, Timber; that's what's so timeless about Grant: his foibles are our foibles. He was a great American hero, imperfect just like all of us" (86–87). Hughes eventually adds: "Our family is American and has been for generations" (103). Unfortunately, the conclusion that these lines suggest is that in the course of American history white men's vices and moral shortcomings have been considered human, and yet these men are still labeled "great," while women's so-called shortcomings are condemned by both non- and neo/post-feminists, as Lyssa exclaims referring to her own public rejection:

There's nothing quite so satisfying as erasing the professional competency of a woman, is there? Especially when there's such an attractive personal little hook to hang it on. Oh, we all understand it now! She must have hated her mother! That's why she's such a good doctor. She must be a bad cold person. That's why she achieved so much. And anyway it would be all right if she were a man and cold. That man would be tough. No one would give a damn what he felt about his mother! But a woman? A woman from good schools and a good family? That kind of woman should be perfect! And if she manages to be perfect, then there is something distorted and condescending about her. (92)
By contrasting Grant's success and Lyssa's failure, Wasserstein views American History through a gendered lens and demands a reconsideration of gender politics. While Parks's Abraham Lincoln is black, Wasserstein is too pessimistic — or perhaps too realistic? — to create a successful female successor to Grant. An American Daughter claims that American History is — and very strongly so — also American women's history (cf. Ciociola 121). The play ends on Lyssa's note of courage and willingness to fight: "'Our task is to rise and continue.'... Prepare, gentlemen, for toppling Pittsburgh like a house of cards!" (105), quoting, recontextualizing, and feminizing Ulysses S. Grant's letter to his daughter Nellie. Lyssa, like other female characters in Wasserstein's plays, is ready "to shape her life into a form in which she can trace pride" (Bigsby 367). These women will thus make a difference in American histories even though they still have a long way to go.

4. Queering American History: Tony Kushner's Angels in America

Like Parks and Wasserstein, the gay Jewish playwright Tony Kushner creates his own version, his Gay Fantasia, of American histories. In his essay "American Things," Kushner describes the very foundation of the United States as potentially liberal but practically exclusionary in the interpretation and subsequent execution of democratic ideals:

... [a] democratic process would eventually perform the action of shifting power from the mighty to the many, in whose hands, democratically and morally speaking, it belongs. Over the course of two hundred years, brave, visionary activists and ordinary, moral people had carved out a space, a large sheltering room from which many were now excluded, but which was clearly intended to be capable of multitudes. Within the space of American Freedom there was room for any possibility. American Freedom would become the birthplace of social and economic Justice. (5-6)

But, he concludes, "[p]eople who desired sex with people of their own gender, transgender people, fags and dykes, drag kings and drag queens, queers, deviants from heterosexual normality were not discussed" (6). Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that democracy is never a stable phenomenon, but always "an ongoing project" and "a dynamic process" (Kushner, "American Things" 9), and subject to interpretation. And that also implies that Fukuyama's idea of liberal democracy cannot be im-
planted once and forever. In his two-part expressionistic play *Angels in America*, Kushner becomes one of those historians who, as he claims, “are reconstructing the lost history of homosexual America, along with all the other lost histories” (“American Things” 9).

Despite the optimistic ending of Part II, *Perestroika*, Kushner’s representation of histories in *Angels in America* is in line with Walter Benjamin’s thesis, expressed in his essay “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” that the angel of history when facing the past sees only catastrophe and débris. The angel Benjamin refers to is in a painting by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus*. This angel is blown away by a storm to the future to which he/she turns his/her back seeing the increasing piles of débris which follow him/her even to paradise. Benjamin concludes that this storm is what is generally called progress (255). The past that for Benjamin is “the history of trauma” (McNulty 94) is, in Kushner’s version, America. Although the future will be shaped by this past, it will also potentially have room for the multitudes, to use Kushner’s term. But he warns people of being too optimistic: “The most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn’t rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what’s piled up behind you” (Savran 300). For Kushner, History has been and still is shaping future histories.

Kushner’s *Angels in America* transforms Benjamin’s angel into one that is “Hermaphroditically Equipped” (*Perestroika* 41) and thus suggests the queering of America as well as of American History. This idea is supported by the subtitle, *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, which “makes plain [that] this is a play that deals with national themes and identities and recognizes that gay men have been at the center of that” (Savran 299). The play shows how gay history has been overshadowed by “the monolith of White America. White Straight Male America,” as Louis says in *Millennium Approaches* (90). One way of inscribing oneself into History is the gay and white Roy Cohn’s condemnation of Jewish and female Ethel Rosenberg. Ethel, however, haunts Roy. In his final moments before his death, he claims: “I’m immortal. Ethel. ... I have forced my way into history. I ain’t never gonna die” (*MA* 112) to which Ethel responds: “History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches” (*MA* 112). Roy Cohn has repressed his gayness and participated in the “White, Straight, Male” production of past rubble and dé-
bris, which means that he has collaborated and identified himself with a system that has erased difference and has killed in the name of liberal democracy. This History, it seems, will now be judged by the approaching millennium (MA 119).

Kushner’s play describes the homosexual relationships of such diverse men as Roy Cohn, a New York lawyer, Prior Walter, Louis Ironson, Joseph Porter Pitt, and Belize, a former black drag queen. They have changing relationships, and both Roy and Prior have contracted AIDS and may have infected a number of other men. Kushner portrays the world of these people not as marginal, but as the center of life and implies that even heterosexual men, such as Joe Pitt, may eventually discover their homosexuality. While women play a rather marginalized role, gay men dominate American life when the millennium approaches. The single angel of the first part, also called the Continental Principality of America, has multiplied in the second, and these angels’ names now assume global dimensions. There are the Angels Europa, Africanii, Oceania, Asiatica, Australia, and Antarctica. Additionally, the second part shifts perspective from the United States to Russia and its politics of Perestroika which ultimately ended the Cold War, meaning History, and promised the inauguration of a “liberal democracy” which seems to be the implantation of American liberal democracy which Kushner has exposed as débris and as traumatic. In this sense, “[t]he whole world is changing!” (Perestroika 143), as Louis says, and out of this rubble and débris, gay voices rise and claim a powerful space in history in the process of queering America. At the end of the play, Prior proclaims: “We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. ... The Great Work Begins” (Perestroika 146).

5. Conclusion

All three playwrights focus on the figure of America and criticize America as a “monolithic self-fiction” (Chaudhuri 257) or “exclusive myth” (cf. Innes 101). They expose the History of America and American identity and thus the myth of the American Dream as limited monocultural constructs and the American community as imagined and thus imaginable in other ways. These limitations, however, which are often
created, perpetuated but also undermined by the media, are all defended in the name of democracy, and deviations or critical voices are punished, as the examples of Ethel Rosenberg or Lyssa Dent Hughes have shown. Democracy distorted into a monocultural fixation becomes History as a trauma. But out of this débris, new voices rise and rewrite democracy from African-American, female, and gay perspectives. Thus, Parks, Wasserstein, and Kushner find themselves in line with Fukuyama's idea of "the end of History" but question the worldwide implantation of a Western or Americanized version of liberal democracy. They believe in multiplicity and the recognition of difference which, from their perspectives, democracy does not necessarily guarantee. Therefore, these playwrights use the chance given to them by globalization, and turn their plays into agents of racing, engendering, and queering American and world histories.

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“A Blueprint of an Event”: History, Spectacle, and the Creation of an African American Perspective

Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* takes its title quite literally and the play, as a matter of fact, plays history, plays America. More particularly, it enacts one of the most important incidents of the *grande histoire* of America, namely the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, and turns it into a globalized spectacle of consumer culture, into an event in a historical theme park. My paper discusses the ways in which Parks’s play appropriates the grand historical event, turns it into a spectacle, and develops a structural framework which allows for a rewriting of history from an African American perspective.

Parks wrote *The America Play* from 1990 to 1993 on commission for the Theatre for a New Audience. It consists of two major parts, “Act One: Lincoln Act” and “Act Two: The Hall of Wonders.” Act One is a long monologue by the main character named The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln, also referred to as the “Lesser Known” (159). The “Lesser Known” is of such a distinct resemblance to Abraham Lincoln, the “Great Man,” that he is easily mistaken for him — he is just “less known.” In the play, the Foundling Father as Lincoln look-alike re-enacts the historical assassination of the Great Man in a vaudevillian

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1 *The America Play* was given workshop productions at Arena Stage and Dallas Theater Center in 1993. It received its premiere in New York City at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre as a co-production between the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Yale Repertory Theatre, and the Theatre for a New Audience in February 1994.

2 All references to the play are taken from the following edition: Suzan-Lori Parks *The America Play and Other Plays* 157–199.
mock shooting scene. In Act Two, the Lesser Known's wife, Lucy, and their son Brazil are shown digging for their father/husband's history and legacy. Scenes with Lucy and Brazil alternate with scenes presenting parts of a performance of *Our American Cousin*, the play which the historical Lincoln was watching on the evening of his assassination.

Parks stages a historical drama, but her representation of history is disturbed in many ways. Most visibly, this dramatization of a historically 'white' incident is staged by an all-black cast or by actors in blackface. And it is the particular setting that expresses the play's concerns and generates the play's central metaphor: "Great Hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" (158).

This particular location introduces the play's preoccupation, namely the representation of the "whole" of history as major events and of history as play, as a simulation — with the subversive wordplay on whole/hole and mutable meanings as a consequence. The pun on hole/whole shows how history as a 'whole' has rather been a 'hole' for African Americans, a discourse from which they were excluded — or, conversely, a hole in which they were stuck. The great whole/hole solely exists in its simulated version, as a replica of a supposed original. Parks coined the term "fabricated absence" for the ways in which American history has been constructed without an African American presence, or the negative presence of African Americans, in other words, the "hole" in the "whole" of that history.

The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln uses his resemblance to make a living by posing in a vaudevillian mock shooting scene which imitates the historical assassination of Abraham Lincoln. A typical version of this scene reads like this:

*(A Man, as John Wilkes Booth, enters. He takes a gun and "stands in position": at the left side of the Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln, pointing the gun at the Foundling Father's head)*

A MAN: Ready.

THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Haw Haw Haw Haw

(Rest)

HAW HAW HAW HAW

(Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair." Booth jumps)

A MAN (*Theatrically*): "Thus to the tyrants!"
THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Most of them do that. Thuh "Thus to the tyrants!" — what they say the killer said. "Thus to the tyrants!" The killer was also heard to say "The South is avenged!" Sometimes they yell that.

8 Or "Sic semper tyrannis." Purportedly, Booth’s words after he slew Lincoln and leapt from the presidential box to the stage of Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. on 14 April 1865, not only killing the President but also interrupting a performance of Our American Cousin, starring Miss Laura Keene.

9 Allegedly, Booth’s words. (164–165)

Parks thematizes the theatricality of history, and her approach is not far-fetched since the historical incident is thoroughly theatrical. During a performance of Our American Cousin at Ford’s Theatre, the unemployed pro-Confederate actor John Wilkes Booth entered Lincoln’s booth and shot him in the head. Waving a knife, Booth leapt onstage shouting the Virginia state motto, “Sic semper tyrannis” (“Such is always the fate of tyrants”), and then escaped, despite a broken leg.

We find the historical shooting scene repeated time and again in the play. History, Parks seems to suggest, is never past, but rather is a recurring pattern. History is defined as “time that won’t quit” in Parks’s theoretical reflections on “Elements of Style” (15). However, since every repetition comes with a difference, repeated sequences can never achieve sameness. This is expressed in Parks’s principle of “Rep & Rev” — short for repetition and revision — which means that repetitions always encompass slight variations. As Umberto Eco reminds us, repetition, redundancy, and obedience to a pre-established schema are “principal features of mass media.” The Lesser Known makes a business of the shooting, and his customers come each week to aim at the Lincoln-replica giving the more or less precise historical wording of Booth. The

3 Parks occasionally uses footnotes in the manner of a scholarly paper to give details on the historical context of the characters’ lines. In this case, the notes serve to signify historical accuracy.


5 Eco 15. Eco even argues that the repetitive patterns are enjoyed most by the audience and points out that repetition had not been devalued in the classical theory of art as it has been by modern aesthetics (14–16).
“Lincoln Act” with the re-enacted shooting scene is repeated with a difference and appears in various disguises. In “Act Two: the Hall of Wonders,” Lucy and Brazil watch a replay of “The Lincoln Act” on TV and discuss the shooting in terms of a re-enacted spectacle. As such, a certain degree of faking is involved in it, since their father, for example, carried the process as far as faking his own death (195). In another enactment, Lucy urges The Foundling Father to “[d]o your Lincoln for im” (198), and the audience witnesses another shooting when echoes of a gunshot can be heard.⁶

By “do[ing] the Lincoln,” the original has been substituted by its simulation. Ironically enough, the very moment of perfection, of near-identity of original and copy, is linked to the topic of death. It is only “when someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot it was as if the Great Mans [sic] footsteps had been suddenly revealed” (164). The parody is only successful if it includes the final act, i.e. death. However, this postmodern version of death is not final, but is doomed to endless repetition. Repeated ad lib, the historical assassination can be re-enacted as if it were an endless spiral, a historical trap without escape. It is the continual transformation of the historical incident which denies the past its finality and acquiescence, obliterating the point at which the past is past and can rest. Also, the endless repetition of the moment of death serves to take the historical seriousness off the assassination, trivializes and eventually erases it by putting it into the hole of history.

The aim of Parks’s concept of history is playful variation with bits and pieces of the grand narrative. When she imagines deviating histories, she suggests the instability of alleged historical facts. Historical truth is unveiled in its pretentiousness and dependence on a particular discourse. The Foundling Father imagines different possible developments the story could take: “It would be helpful to our story ...” (160). To the same end, he ponders deviating developments of the narrative in the repeated question: “Howuhboutthat” (161). Apart from drawing attention to the indeterminacy of history, the “Howuhboutthat” is a re-

⁶ The topic of the death of a black man features prominently in Parks’s work, most outspokenly in her play The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World.
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minder of the play's postmodern metadramatic agenda. The play, too, could take numerous roads, and it here reflects on itself and on the different directions it could choose.

A closer look at the Lincoln copy reveals that the simulation is only nearing perfection, and deliberately so. The Foundling Father has to make up for the shortcomings of nature and plays a few tricks, making use of his natural resemblance to the Great Man. He uses certain aids as, for instance, a false beard, a replica man-made from purchased hair. However, he takes the beard on as if it were his own: "... since the procurement and upkeep of his beard took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his. Were as authentic as he was, so to speak" (159–160). He alters his body according to the Lincoln-pattern and shapes it into a simulation of The Great Man's body, to the point of attaching a false wart (163). He thus not only manipulates the historical and immaterial, but also the body, the biological and material. It is a simulation, but one that deliberately points to its artificiality, inauthenticity — in line with the other incidents in which Parks raises doubts about the truthfulness of supposedly correct historical knowledge.

The America Play turns the historical shooting scene into a spectacle and popularizes it as mass entertainment, as a show. The vaudevillian quality of the shooting is underlined when The Foundling Father admits that "some inaccuracies are good for business" (168) and talks about "faux-historical knickknacks" (169) suggesting the capitalist motivating force of the event. A newly-wed couple, for instance, wants to shoot together (169), and, in a private mock-revolutionary effort, a woman keeps shouting "lies" as she aims at the Lincoln replica (167–168). A tragedy is presented in pop cultural terms. What is at stake are historical parades and pageants, in very modern terms, "a theme park" (162) and "Reconstructed Historicities" (163). History has become an artifact of consumerism, and Parks is the playwright to stage what could be termed the disneyfication of history. The merging of History and popular culture betrays postmodernist influences in the play. It is reproduced at will

7 Of course, this is not without theatrical predecessors, and Arthur Kopit's play Indians readily comes to mind. Similarly, Kopit presents incidents of Anglo-Indian history and the Vietnam War in terms of Vaudeville and creates a historical spectacle on stage.
and sold as mere commodity. The objective of Parks's history play is not historical accuracy. She presents history as a consumer spectacle, designed and staged almost exclusively for entertainment purposes.

This development finds its climactic expression when the shooting spectacle finally appears as a replay on television. In section G of Act Two, "The Great Beyond," Lucy and Brazil are watching a replay of "The Lincoln Act":

LUCY: Howuhboutthat!
BRAZIL: They just gunned him down uhgain.
LUCY: Howuhboutthat.
BRAZIL: He's dead but not really.
LUCY: Howuhboutthat.
BRAZIL: Only fakin. Only fakin. See? Hesupuhgain. (195)

The epitome of a globalized cultural entertainment, the TV version of the Lincoln assassination takes the final steps to rid the historical event of its authenticity, to ridicule its traditional meaning and make it irreverent. Only then can the story of a founding father and of the beginning of the nation be turned into a particular African American version. In the play, the grande histoire is localized when Lucy and Brazil dig for their husband's father's legacy which at once contrasts with and belongs to the global TV enactment.\(^8\)

*The America Play* mockingly assumes an attitude of historical scholarship when it incorporates footnotes as in a scholarly paper. Parks not only mixes different genres of writing, but she stages "scientifically approved historical truth," merely in order to shake it, to fully expose the absurdity of the concept of historical accuracy and truth. Whereas some footnotes correspond to certain facts, others are deliberate works of the imagination. These footnotes insinuate the subjectivity and contingency of history by the suggestion that the narration of the night of Lincoln's

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\(^8\) Parks has made drawings for each of her plays that graphically express the respective play's concern. The drawing of *The America Play* features, among others, the movement from a log cabin to a big town and thus underlines the globalizing impetus prevalent in the play. Parks's drawings are presented as pseudo-mathematical equations, based on the traditional formula: "\(x+y=\text{meaning}\)," a principle which Parks criticizes as "bad math" since it draws too much on neat one-to-one correspondences and straight definitions ("Elements" 14).
death is more what “Mary Todd Lincoln, wanting her dying husband to speak to their son Tad, might have said that night” (168). This also points to the innate though repudiated theatrical nature of “scientific” knowledge and suggests, vice versa, that theatre may very well impart that particular kind of knowledge.

The repeated and revised shooting scene lends structural coherence to a play that forfeits climactic narrative development. And yet, the goal of Parks’s “Rep & Rev” is not only to lend coherence to an otherwise fragmented play. Some revised repetitions disturb the text rather than knitting it together. One repetition of the shooting scene is rendered as a narrative by The Foundling Father. He gives a key-word summary of the assassination and frames it in dramatic introduction and ending:

... And now, the centerpiece of the evening!!

(Rest)
Uh Hehm. The Death of Lincoln!: –. The watching of the play, the laughter, the smiles of Lincoln and Mary Todd, the slipping of Booth into the presidential box unseen, the freeing of the slaves, the pulling of the trigger, the bullets piercing above the left ear, the bullets entrance into the great head, the bullets lodging behind the great right eye, the slumping of Lincoln, the leaping onto the stage of Booth, the screaming of Todd ... .

(Applause). (188–89)

The theatrical frame with announcement and applause covers a staccato-like, telegram-style, very sober account of the event. The Foundling Father denies any residual tension, or dramatic climax, that the nth reenactment of the killing may still have (189). The event is hence as endlessly transformed as is the main character. Using the acting method of transformation, The Foundling Father switches into the role of Mrs. Mount in Our American Cousin, the play-within-the-play (188). The concept of character is thus as unstable as is the representation of history.

The script also shows the fragmentation of the play. The lines of The Foundling Father are frequently interrupted by a “(Rest)” in between sentences. At times, Parks’s script even indicates double “(Rests)” (e.g. 183). When Parks refers to such pauses as “(Rest),” she makes a musical reference and treats her script as a notational score in music. As a matter of fact, the playwright describes it as a sign to “[t]ake a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition” (“Elements” 16). The “(Rest)”
breaks up the section and halts the narrative development, it forfeits empathy and fragments the theatrical illusion.

The script features another “empty marker” when characters are listed as if it were their turn to speak, but are given no lines. Such unoccupied spaces are to be filled by means of non-verbal expression and by the audience. By the same token, these silences at once are empty and overloaded markers: it is of no importance what the characters actually say, the lines are well known anyway. They have become part of the shared cultural knowledge and are ingrained in the national identity and memory⁹:

A MAN *(Theatrically)*: “Thus to the tyrants!”
*(Rest)*
Hhhh.
LINCOLN
BOOTH
LINCOLN
BOOTH
LINCOLN
BOOTH
LINCOLN
BOOTH
LINCOLN
BOOTH
LINCOLN
(Booth jumps)
A MAN *(Theatrically)*: “The South is avenged!”
*(Rest)*
Hhhh.
*(Rest)*
Thank you.
*(171–72)*

These deliberate empty spaces compel the reader to fill in the gaps; the play thus only provides for a structural pattern, a mere blueprint. Put differently, such passages communicate the full-fledged paradigm shift that has turned the reader into a writer.

In her theoretical essays on drama and theatre, Parks calls such verbal absences “spells” and defines them as “elongated and heightened (rests).

⁹ For a discussion of the significance of memory in *The America Play*, see Jeanette R. Malkin.
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Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue.” Significantly, she attributes an “architectural look” to these spells (“Elements” 16), thus indicating the spatial orientation of her play. The script of such “pieces in spaces,” however, puts a number of specific problems before those involved in their production. Upon being asked how she will communicate the ellipses and hyphens in the play, director Liz Diamond answers:

Well, that’s just learning how to read the play as a musical score, determining that everything on the page is there for a reason. Again, it’s like reading it formally, the way you would try to decode a map or the way you would read a poem. I think that periods and commas and semicolons and dashes and the distance between the heading and a line of text and the way it is written on the page are all full of clues for the director. (Drukman 69)

Liz Diamond who has directed several of Parks’s plays corroborates the view that Parks’s theatre is spatial in orientation. The script with all the “clues” is to be read as a “map.” Thus the arrangement of the lines on the page, their spacing and punctuation, carry meaning beyond verbal language. The America Play is not so much after the creation of a particular meaning, the substitution of an African American plot for a white one. The play, rather, focuses on the structural aspects of historiography, on the creation of a space for African American history.

But linguistic aspects are still of prime importance in Parks’s play, mostly in the form of subversive word play. By inserting but an /l/, Parks turns a “Founding Father” into a “Foundling Father.” In this pun, a single letter is responsible for an entirely different meaning, much less respectful, even irreverent. Further wordplay transforms the Found- (l)ing Father into a “foe-father” (191; 178) or a “faux-father” (184). The other significant and equally subversive pun of the play, the whole/hole of history, also inspires the metaphor of “digging” in the play. Brazil and Lucy dig for their father/husband’s inheritance (in Act 2). This effort is, however, turned into a farcical act. The Great Man’s legacy is reduced to stock quotations to pass on to the next generation. Some of these read: “Malice toward none and charity toward all” or “Cheat some of thuh people some of thuh time” or “Uh house divided cannot stand!” (192). The heritage is presented as a collage of quotations from Lincoln’s most famous speeches, which sound hollow when they are decontextualized
and assembled in such a random way (see Malkin 179). The Foundling Father seems thus contradicted when he says: “He digged the hole and the whole held him.” The hole signifies an absence and proves unable to hold. The inaudible difference of the hole/whole functions as an empty marker. History, Parks seems to suggest, is nothing but “this whole hole” (187).

And yet, it is not a simple task to tell the hole apart from the whole, it is only the digging which can help. In Act II, part A (“Big Bang”) Lucy keeps pushing Brazil to go on digging for the reason that “I need tuh know thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay” (175). As Brazil has it: “Digging was his livelihood but fakin was his callin” (179; 181), which foils Lucy’s quest to tell apart the original from its copy. He was even awarded a “medal for fakin” (186). History, in its African American version, is described as coming in whispers which have to be dug up with time and which “travel different out West than they do back East” (178). And Parks indeed makes such “whispers” and (African) American history travel, as she detaches history from a particular place and time and turns it into a global spectacle on TV.

Parks exhumes past stories as well as creating them. This creation story also takes place in terms of digging: “I’d say thuh creation of thuh world must uh been just like thuh clearing off of this plot. Just like him diggin his Hole. I’d say. Must uh been just as dug up. And unfair” (184). Hence the digging in *The America Play* constitutes an effort at creating the world, removing obstacles in order to re-create it from a different perspective in which historical lies have been unearthed. In another effort at exhibiting historical inaccuracies, Lucy discovers the lifts in the “Lesser Known’s” shoes which let him appear taller than he really was (177). His height was a fake, “digging up” allowed for the discovery of secrets, of the truths behind appearances.

Parks’s theatre is a conscious effort at making history in the sense of simulating it by playing through possibilities. She thus raises history to a meta-historical and self-reflexive level, ironically claiming that “[t]his

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10 In a further pun, Parks locates an alleged original of the great hole of history in the East, whereas the Western one is a replica (178–179). The eastern one is, additionally, a quite popular spot where spectators can watch celebrities appear in the great hole (180).
hole is our inheritance of sorts” (185). Parks still claims to ponder the meaning of her play: “I’m still thinking about what the American Play [sic] is about” (Jiggetts 315). Meaning, however, may not precisely be what the play has to offer or what it is after, even if the notion of digging implies the possibility of gaining knowledge about history and its histories. The play, rather, presents a continuing critique by means of repeating and transforming plots and structures — Parks’s “Rep & Rev” — and, as such, it definitely cannot grant us the pleasure of closure.

History becomes reproducible ad lib and, through this process, loses what Walter Benjamin described as the aura of a work of art in his seminar essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” What Benjamin claims with respect to works of art also applies to the representation of historical incidents: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at a place where it happens to be” (220). In The America Play, the historical incident is robbed of its specificity and authenticity and instead turned into a mere blueprint, a score to be enacted and repeated everywhere and anytime. Such a technique of reproduction, Benjamin says, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (221). And yet, it is precisely this process of losing a white-identified authenticity that creates the possibility of developing a perspective other-than-white. Via the detour of spectacularizing and globalizing history American history is made available for African Americans. They can thus claim History for a specifically African American historical interrogation and adapt it according to their ideological agenda. In line with the guidelines proposed in her essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Parks embraces the great tradition in order to construct a “next new thing,” a prospect for the future (26–31). Her strategies of spectacularization and globalization interrogate historiography as such: “The history of History is in question too,” she says in her theoretical writing, and concludes that a “play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history” (Parks, “Possession” 4).
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Myth, Media, and the Obsolescence of Postmodern Drama: Don DeLillo's Tragicomedy Valparaiso

We're just like everybody else, only quicker to pick up a danger. That's what makes an actor in the first place. ... Our speeches rattle in our throats. We're robbed of all consolations. Our only hope is other people. A handful, a scatter, sitting here and there, day or night – still, gray, nameless, waiting.

Don DeLillo, *The Day Room* (90)

Any man today can lay claim to being filmed.

Walter Benjamin (231)

In an 1987 interview with *The New York Times* the American novelist Don DeLillo admitted that “theatre is really mysterious and alluring for someone who has written a novel, and it seemed natural to me beginning a play that theatre itself would be one of the subjects I was interested in” (Rothstein H5). His first play to be produced, *The Day Room* (1986), which opened in New York on the same day the interview was published, soon garnered for the novelist-turned-playwright enthusiastic local audiences and the attention of the national media. Yet even though he wrote two more plays and in interviews and public statements repeatedly confirmed his interest in the aesthetics of theatre performance, DeLillo's dramatic texts are still conspicuously absent from academic criticism of his work.¹ This is quite surprising, since reading the plays after having read his novels and short stories evokes a sense of *déjà vu*, as Toby Zinman put it, a pleasing recognition of individual scenes, im-

¹ As of now the only comprehensive account of DeLillo's dramatic œuvre is Zinman. In its 2002 edition the MLA bibliography lists only one essay concerned with DeLillo's plays: Pastore.
agery, and strangely familiar pieces of dialogue (Zinman 79). In DeLillo’s latest play Valparaiso, first performed in 1999 by the Cambridge Repertory Theatre in Boston, we enter the same postmodern environment that informs many of his highly- praised narrative fictions. Its satirical mise-en-scène of the break-down of human relations in technological, media-dominated societies adds to rather than distracts from his recurring concerns as a novelist. If in DeLillo’s prose work, as Frank Lentricchia has argued, the “undesirability of the distinction between the real and the fictional is the key meaning,” Valparaiso turns on the related idea that even our most intimate desires are predetermined by the ever-proliferating media hype (Lentricchia 88). A dazzling exploration of secret levels of language, perception, and identity, the play takes the audience on a journey through media-mad America, a journey that eventually leads to the break-down of the real as a category of human discourse altogether.

While many of the major themes and ideas associated with DeLillo’s postmodernist fiction resurface in Valparaiso, the play also reveals some generic paradoxes involved in the process of putting postmodernity on stage. As the action moves towards the collective ritual of a television talk show, its postmodern theme, namely, the loss of meaning in a social environment entirely constructed by electronic fictions, gets increasingly blurred. By recontextualizing the postmodern subject as tragic hero of a theatre performance, Valparaiso not only transforms the postmodern aesthetics of simulacra and simulations into an aesthetics of theatre, it also lends new meaning to the hollow specters of our media-ridden lives. While exposing the treacherous dynamics of identity construction under conditions of mass media, the play reinstates the individual (as well as society at large) as witness to a new, electronic form of mythology based on the dramatic conventions of anagnorisis (recognition), pathos (suffering), and catharsis (purification).

In what follows my purpose is thus two-fold: first, I will try to delineate DeLillo’s particular take on postmodern society as represented in his major prose works and plays; and secondly, I want to probe the “postmodern” of his latest play Valparaiso or, in a broader sense, I will raise the question of how “postmodern” drama can be. There is little doubt that drama, especially when compared to novel writing, film mak-
ing or architecture, played only a minor role in propagating a postmodern aesthetics. Yet even if the “postmodern” in the term postmodern drama, as Stephen Watt points out, only veils the “discredited status” of drama in recent cultural and literary theory, this does not automatically posit drama and the postmodern as two mutually exclusive entities (Watt 4). On the contrary, dramatic performance, as I will argue, may not be seen after all as nemesis of the postmodern but rather as its epitome, as a precursor and model of the postmodern production of electronic fictions based on the theatrical idea of regeneration through violence.

According to semiotician and cultural critic Umberto Eco the ubiquitous presence of television and electronic media in postmodern society goes hand in hand with an increasing production and marketing of myth. For Eco postmodern myth-making can be described best as a movement from innovation to repetition, from the modern aesthetics of novelty to a postmodern aesthetics of recognition. To negotiate the ongoing fragmentation and change in postindustrial societies, electronic mass media — by far the most influential agents of contemporary public discourse — have adopted the mode of “iteration” as a common narrative device. “The social change, the continuous rise of new behavioral standards, the dissolution of tradition,” he writes in an influential essay, “require a narrative based upon redundancy. Redundant narrative structures would appear in this panorama as an indulgent invitation to repose,

2 As indicated in the title of Watt’s study, the postmodern and drama form a “difficult, uncertain union.” Contrary to pop cultural forms such as fiction, film, television, photography, and performance art, drama has been widely relegated to a status outside of the mainstream of postmodern artistic representations. As problematic as definitions of both drama and the postmodern might be, taken together they appear “paradoxical, even oxymoronic.” As Watt argues, the reason for the critical exclusion of drama from contemporary debates about heterotopia and multiplicity may be related to its culturally encoded valorization as a cornerstone of Western civilization: traditionally, “theatregoing, with its witnessing and congregating, is both a ‘manly’ exercise and a religious ritual; the drama, whose vocations include the representation of communal memory to its audience, serves as a catalyst to unite a disparate populace into a national version of the Attic city-state” (Watt 2).
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a chance of relaxing” (Eco 165). Eco thoroughly discusses the various forms of repetition and iteration in TV, film, and popular culture (e.g. the retake, the remake, the series, the saga, intertextual dialogue, etc.), yet his most far-reaching contribution to defining a postmodern aesthetics is certainly the idea that with the mediated pleasure in “recognition” as a formal principle, “the era of electronics — instead of emphasizing the phenomena of shock, interruptions, novelty, and frustration of expectations — would produce a return to the continuum, the Cyclical, the Periodical, the Regular” (Eco 179). This neo-baroque notion of seriality, as Eco compellingly suggests, represents a return to pure and simple myth: “Myth has nothing to do with art. It is a story, always the same. It may not be the story of Atreus and it may be that of J. R. Why not? Every epoch has its myth-makers, its own sense of the sacred” (182).

If postmodern society is thus structurally contingent upon the production and marketing of electronic myths, theatre performance, in which myth is also an important ingredient, appears to be the one art form most suitable to investigations of contemporary myth-making. Contrary to the longer and laborious epic, the dramatic arts may be seen as closest to myth because, as Aristotle pointed out, they also use “recognition” as a stylistic tool to bring about “a change from ignorance to knowledge” (Aristotle 21). To convey meaning dramatic performances stress the recurrence of types of events and characters already known to the viewer thereby expressing fundamental human needs that transcend any particular form of society or historical frame of reference. Moreover, like archaic myth, the dramatic mode involves the audience in a ritual of participation and identification. In the theatre, as Arthur Miller keenly observes, “we see what we see on the stage not only with our own eyes but with the eyes of others” (Miller 10). Because of its structural relationship with performance and public presentation it is “necessary to separate drama from what we think of today as literature. . . . Plays were written on the assumption that they would be acted before audiences” (Miller 4). Modern drama may be tainted, as George Steiner cogently suggests, by the shadow of “myth emptied of active belief,” yet the collective encounter of actors and audience in the theatre still unites the participants in a spectacle that suspends — at least momentarily —
the games of mimicry and representation (Steiner 37–38). As we enter the theatre and watch the action unravel on stage, we also enter into an arena larger than our individual lives and our fragmented sense of the real. It is an arena, to quote once more from Miller's famous "Introduction" to the Collected Plays, where the spectator is revealed to himself "so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them" (Miller 11).

II

Today DeLillo is best known as the author of 14 novels and a small number of edgy, experimental short stories. It was not until the publication of the long and ambitious novel Underworld (1997), however, that he finally established himself as a major voice of contemporary American literature. Before the appearance of this magnum opus critics mostly concentrated on two texts of the mid and late eighties, White Noise (1985) and Libra (1988). Both of these early novels are firmly rooted in American society and culture of the second half of the twentieth century and both depict America as an ambiguous, paranoiac wasteland. While Libra takes the elusive character of Lee Harvey Oswald as a model for the nation's violence-ridden self-indulgence and paranoia, the preceding White Noise effectively probes the darker side of American consumer and media culture. Set in a small-town, middle-class community of college professors and their families, this postmodern campus novel, for which DeLillo won the prestigious National Book Award, depicts American suburbia as constituted by the coercive environments of mass media, shopping malls and automobiles. What is more, it emphasizes a recurrent topic of DeLillo's fiction, namely, the increasing loss of our sense of reality, a lack of immediacy which tricks his characters into believing that the artificial, simulated worlds of TV commercials, entertainment centers and theme parks are more real than the real thing itself.

Since many of his texts blend elements of popular culture with highly sophisticated, philosophical inquiry, critics repeatedly compared DeLillo to postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut or E.
L. Doctorow.³ Obvious stylistic differences notwithstanding, his fiction shares a number of structural and thematic features indigenous to so-called postmodern writing.⁴ Besides the obvious blurring of high-brow and low-brow, of elite culture and mass culture, DeLillo’s protagonists live in artificial, commodified environments that exemplify ideally what Fredric Jameson has called “the waning of affect in postmodern culture,” that is, the exchange of feeling and emotion for compensatory, decorative exhilaration (Jameson, “Postmodernism” 59).⁵ In addition, there is often a lack of temporality, a gradual eclipse of historicity, which transforms the past into an assemblage of sheer images and stereotypes of that past. DeLillo’s plot structures are non-linear and aleatory and his narrators continuously engage in metafictional discourses. Finally, he conceives of language not just as a tool to reproduce or imitate reality as fiction but rather as generically involved in creating that very reality itself; put another way, DeLillo is convinced that language is a determining factor in the construction of subjectivity.

Of the various parameters that constitute our postmodern, postindustrial lives, the impact of mass media and, especially, television looms large in DeLillo’s fiction. In his first novel Americana (1971) we encounter a young, promising TV executive who journeys west and, equipped with a 16 mm film camera, tries to recreate his own myth-laden notion of America’s lost frontier. The dependence on technologically reproduced images and simulacra, which for DeLillo marks the vanishing point of referentiality in postmodern societies, culminates in White Noise where the effects of a toxic spill on the body are experienced only after they have been reported by TV commentators. In this stunning instance of mediated or, in DeLillo’s terms, déjà vu experience the ties between the real and the simulated event are entirely severed. Not only

³ For a critical assessment of DeLillo’s fiction, see, among many others, the essays in Lentricchia; Mottram; and Kucich.

⁴ Critical literature on the “postmodern” in literature is vast and proliferating. My own discussion is informed by Ihab Hassan’s famous catalogue of “postmodern” markers, “POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography.” Originally published as an appendix to the second edition of The Dismemberment of Orpheus, this essay has been reprinted separately many times. See Hassan 39–58.

⁵ See also his Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).
do the local authorities use the “real” accident to rehearse a program called “simulated evacuation,” the media coverage of the event makes it impossible for those involved in the accident to differentiate anymore between the authentic condition and the self-created one. In a similar vein, DeLillo illustrates how an ordinary barn can become a quasi-religious monument of awe. Introduced to visitors as “The Most Photographed Barn in America,” the trivial object immediately morphs into a cult object, of which pictures are taken because it has attained an aura of collective desire:

Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn. ... Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. ... A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. (DeLillo, *White Noise* 12)

III

If DeLillo’s narrative texts hinge on the substitution of what Baudrillard called “signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard 167), the overwhelming presence of simulacra and simulations is equally important in his dramatic works. All of his four plays, *The Engineer of Moonlight* (1979), *The Day Room* (1986), *The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed Into Heaven* (1995), and finally *Valparaiso* (1999), use disfigured, fragmented language and indulge in endless semantic doubling. Yet nowhere is the postmodern disruption of the dialectics of appearance and essence more succinctly articulated than in *Valparaiso*, the play to which I will now turn for the rest of this paper.

Formally, *Valparaiso* is a two-act comedy with distinctly tragic overtones. Its first act serves as a set-up for the second and is broken down into eight independent scenes, which, in the second act, culminate in an extended finale or dramatic conclusion. The content of the play can easily be told: Michael Majeski, an apparently ordinary businessman, sets out on a routine trip to Valparaiso, Indiana, but accidentally gets rerouted first to Valparaiso, Florida, and then to Valparaiso, Chile. After his return, the humorous story about a long, nerve-racking journey turns into a tragicomic exploration of postmodern media culture. Though basically a trivial adventure, Michael’s odyssey soon attains
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prime time status and, prodded on by the media’s heightening interest (in only two days Michael has given 67 interviews), he leaves his job to promote himself as an important public persona. While seven of the eight scenes of Act One represent one of the afore-mentioned interviews, Act Two moves to an Oprah-like talk show with host Delfina Treadwell acting as high priest of postmodern media hype. Hypnotized by the enchanting atmosphere of the TV studio, her only guests, Michael and his wife Livia, are made complicit in what comes close to a ritual sacrifice. Prodded on by Delfina’s glib rhetoric, they not only reveal the dreary details of their sexual lives but admit to Michael’s failed attempts to commit suicide (already alluded to in a video clip shown during the opening scene of Act One), a revelation that shifts the play from media satire to conventional tragedy and the dramatization of collective confession.6

While the action is often painfully static and repetitive, it rings with allusions to critical discourses on the media and postmodern society at large. Thus Michael’s ascent to “superstar” status and his ensuing transformation from ordinary business man to information manager recalls the well-known thesis of media critic Marshall McLuhan that “in the new electric Age of information, commodities themselves assume more and more the character of information” and that therefore the basic means of accruing economic wealth have switched from the production of material to the production of informational value (McLuhan 36). By the same token, McLuhan attacked Marxist historians for having neglected the dynamics of the new media of communication. “Marx based his analysis most untimely on the machine,” he writes in Understanding Media, “just as the telegraph and other implosive forms began to reverse the mechanical dynamic” (McLuhan 38). The most decisive replacement

6 This shift is also reflected in the general tendency of commercial TV “to scorn complexity and to feel, not think.” According to art critic Robert Hughes, “it has come to present society as a pagan circus of freaks, pseudo-heroes, and wild morons, struggling on the sand of a Colosseum without walls.... The basic message of network TV has been that human life tends to the condition of melodrama. Conflict. Goodies and baddies. Moral absolutes. More and more, network political coverage treats politics as a kind of gladiatorial sport, obsessively asking who’s losing, who’s winning, and failing to explore the nature of issues” (38).
yet of the means of production by the means of information was brought about, however, by the widespread introduction of TV, fax machines and personal computers. These media do not only affect the way in which we exchange data, they alter the very character and status of information as such. In postmodern, postindustrial societies it is thus no longer the content of communication that is of primary importance but the medium itself or, in McLuhan’s famous phrase, the medium now becomes the message.

The waning of content as a consequence of the structural necessities of the media is also a major theme in DeLillo’s *Valparaiso*. Epitomized by the static movement of Michael’s wife Livia, who is riding her exercise bike in front of a TV screen throughout the first act, the repetitious interviews partake in an endless loop of journalistic babble that stubbornly refuses to produce meaning. Instead of enlightening the audience as to Michael’s motives and the background of his mysterious journey, they are caught up in the same paradox of apparent movement and prolonged stasis that marks Livia’s attachment to her exercising machine. If Michael’s odyssey follows itself a circular, non-teleological movement, the interviews of Act One are monological rather than dialogical and their repetitive structure no longer refers to a reality outside the linguistic confines of the interview. When Michael at one point inquires about the exact beginning of the interview, his commonsensical attempt to distinguish what is inside and what is outside the media looks downright ridiculous:

M I C H A E L. So when we start the interview.
I N T E R V I E W E R. This is the interview.
M I C H A E L. I mean when we formally start. On the record.

7 See, among others, Daniel Bell’s classic study, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*.
8 As Livia explains to a reporter: “I do demon repetitions on my bike” (DeLillo, *Valparaiso* 30). The image of the exercise bike captures nicely the argument of communication theorist Paul Virilio that the increasing and accelerated flow of digital data in postmodern society will ultimately lead to a stand-still rather than an augmentation of information. As a tool designed to convert motion into a mere simulacrum of motion the exercise bike is marked by the tragic theatricality of a mock movement that is continually and inexorably arrested in mid-air. See Virilio.
INTERVIEWER. This is on the record. Everything is on the record. Everything is
the interview.
MICHAEL. So you’re saying – what? The interview is already underway?
INTERVIEWER. This interview was underway when I pulled into your driveway. It
was underway when I put the key in the ignition in my own driveway. It was
underway when you got on the wrong plane and went to the wrong place. The
interview started before that. How far back do you want to go? The interview
started basically when your father fucked your mother on a rainy night in May.
(25–26)

As one can easily see, the boundaries of the real and its electronic repro-
duction by the media are constantly blurred in DeLillo’s postmodern
drama: everything is the interview. Given the media’s notorious negation
of referentiality, identity can only be constructed by way of recognition,
that is, by the eternal return of what we already know. This is also why
the interviewers always ask the same questions thereby producing ex-
actly the same answers as in all preceding interviews. Following the re-
petitive pattern of electronic media, both Michael’s public and dramatic
presence (as protagonist of DeLillo’s play) pivots on the relentless repe-
tition of the trivial, well-known facts about his journey.

Yet repetition, if only of trivia and largely insignificant data, always
entails the capacity of myth-making. As pointed out earlier, the shift
from modernism to postmodernism might well be defined as a shift
from the aesthetics of novelty to the aesthetics of repetition and itera-
tion. According to Eco, obedience to “a preestablished scheme and re-
dundancy (as opposed to information)” (162) is typical of television
commercials and appears to be one of the principal features of mass
media products in general. The familiar features of, say, a soap opera or a
talk show, not only allow us to “enter into the event,” they also provide
a foil onto which we can project our own intimate desires. What be-
comes celebrated in postmodern televisual aesthetics, to quote once
more from Eco’s illuminating essay, is thus “a sort of victory of life over
art” (179). If in White Noise DeLillo satirizes the mythopoeic quality of
photographic reproduction, as epitomized by “The Most Photographed
Barn in America,” in Valparaiso he replaces dialogue with liturgy and
plot with the repetitive, standardized structure of newspeak. With each
interview the actors are made complicit in an encompassing mythologi-
cal process. Each interview adds a few minor details to what is already
known without ever elucidating the shadowy identity of the protagonist. It is thus only the act of iteration itself, the recurrence of the same elliptic discourse on Michael's journey, his marriage, and his broken dreams that provides meaning and transforms the events into a drama of epic dimensions.⁹

IV

Similar to the role of myth in Greek tragedy, air traffic — the postmodern means of transportation par excellence — figures in Valparaiso as a sacred space which is shared by actors and audience alike. Not only do passengers observe the take-off and landing operations of the aircraft on video in "real-time" thereby ideally exemplifying Baudrillard's notion of the loss of "reality." What is more, the linguistic rites of safety instructions and service announcements common to all airlines provide a universal vocabulary that allows the audience to identify with the dramatic world represented on stage. This mytho-sacred subtext of the play effectively sets the stage for the public exposure and sacrifice of the protagonist in the second act. In what seems to be a combination of rite de passage and talking cure, the devilish talk show host Delfina first cross-examines and, finally, kills Michael by forcing her hand microphone down his throat. Framed by the monotonous announcements of a chorus of flight attendants, she directly addresses the audience (both on screen and in the theatre) with the following lines:

(To camera) Someone dies, remotely known to you, but how real and deep the loss. Who is he? An image aloft in the flashing air. Not even that. A set of image-forming units, sand-grain size, that shape a face on-screen. How can it be? A life so unfleshed takes up intimate space. Someone spun of lightwaves and repetitious sounds. How is it possible? This odd soak of gloom heavy in your chest. (To audience) We live in the air as well as the skin. And there is something in these grids of information that strikes the common heart as magic. (108–109)

Delfina's speech summarizes well the major themes of the play: "someone spun of lightwaves and repetitious sounds," "we live in the air as well as the skin," the magic of those "grids of information," etc. Under

⁹ As one of the interviewers remarks, "this man's a modern phenomenon. A business traveler who blundered into a kind of epic adventure" (38).
the impact of mass media human life has lost its corporeal center and, subsequently, has itself become an electronic fiction, a composite product of technically reproduced sights and sounds. What at first sight appears a disturbing though accurate analysis of the postmodern condition, at somewhat closer inspection turns into a paean to modern technology and its hidden magic. Read in view of the ritual sacrifice by which it is preceded, Delfina’s televised oracle does not merely articulate the replacement of the autonomous subject by an anonymous community of viewers, it also ushers in a new mythology based on the repetitive patterns of electronic entertainment.

In his fiction DeLillo repeatedly ridiculed the postmodern recurrence of myth or rather its substitution by profane yet highly symbolic rituals such as shopping, eating junk food, or watching the news. While in the novels the quasi-sacred meaning of shopping malls, which are composed everywhere of the same factory outlets, video arcades, and fast-food joints, must be extracted from narrative discourse, Valparaiso adopts a pseudo-tragic setting that ultimately subverts the play’s postmodern orientation. As DeLillo explained, the second act was designed to move the play from “television to theatre,” from mediated action to the direct participation and involvement of the audience (which, in fact, takes on the role of the audience in the TV studio) (Cf. Clay n.pag.). True, the effect of this move on the reader/viewer is quite stunning; yet by turning Michael’s mysterious journey into a teleological quest including the cathartic killing of the protagonist, the play also moves from a series of postmodernist skits to neo-classical tragedy. Far from merely adding to the media’s craving for sensational events, Delfina’s performance invokes the redeeming power of Greek drama, a power that restores order by positioning the events within a preordained, tragic frame of reference.

As a satire of America’s media culture replete with archaic rituals and references to Greek tragedy, Valparaiso can thus be seen as a novelist’s celebration of theatre and its capacity to stage and, simultaneously, reinforce the electronic mythologies of postmodern society. If talk shows and soap operas, as Eco suggests, are based on an “orgiastic” enjoyment of myth, including “the intense emotional participation, the pleasure of the reiteration of a single and constant truth, and the tears, and the
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laughter — and finally the *catharsis,*” then we can also conceive of a community of viewers who are “able to shift onto an aesthetic level and to judge the art of the variations on a mythical theme — in the same way as one succeeds in appreciating a ‘beautiful funeral’ even when the deceased was a dear person” (182).

DeLillo is well-known for his interest in “death” as an obsessive topic of Western culture (see Heller). In *White Noise* its looming presence even constitutes an important narratological subtext which is underwritten by the narrator’s remark that “all plots ... move deathwards” (DeLillo, *White Noise* 26). By introducing Michael’s “death wish” as the driving force behind his erratic behavior and, later, fulfilling that wish by way of Delfina’s guiding hand, *Valparaiso* adds to the centrality of death in DeLillo’s work. Contrary to the often detached, tongue-in-cheek treatment of this topic in the novels, however, his latest play indulges in the celebration of myth and “existential angst.” Put another way, DeLillo’s tragicomedy oscillates between deconstructing the postmodern condition in the first act and promulgating an absolving, redemptive metaphysics of death in the second. Since the latter is closely related to the use of theatrical devices (e.g. a chorus, the seer, the master of ceremonies, etc.) as well as the cathartic character of dramatic performance at large, it seems as if the “reality” of the stage is not only always one step ahead of the postmodern play with simulacra and representations but, simultaneously, transforms it into something that is at once more authentic and more convincing than our flimsy, media-guided notions of the real.

Works Cited


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II.

Global Paradigms and Local Identities in England, Ireland, Canada, and South Africa
The Mother Tongue and the Other Tongue: The American Challenge in Recent Drama

Most histories of the modern British drama view the appearance of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 as marking the beginning of a new direction, a new voice, and a new view of Britain and the world in that drama. Although the earliest of the plays I will be considering today date from a decade after Osborne’s revolutionary work and the major of them are from the past few years, they all to a certain extent can be seen as written within the context of the modern Britain that was so brutally and agonizingly experienced and described by Jimmy Porter, the first and best known of the alienated and embittered angry young men of late twentieth-century Britain. In one of his diatribes Jimmy touches upon a complex of themes that are germane to a number of the concerns I will be exploring today that I can think of no better introduction than to quote the latter part of this speech. He is speaking, typically, of the pointlessness and banality of contemporary society, and here contrasts it with the comfortable if illusory and now long departed elegant world of the Edwardians:

All homemade cakes and croquet, bright ideas, bright uniforms. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. What a romantic picture. Phoney too, of course. It must have rained sometimes. Still, even I regret it somehow, phoney or not. If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasant to regret the passing of someone else’s. I must be getting sentimental. But I must say it’s pretty dreary living in the American Age – unless you’re an American of course. Perhaps all our children will be Americans. That’s a thought isn’t it? (Osborne 13)

In the half century that has passed since Jimmy Porter lamented the coming of the American age, Americans have, not surprisingly, become
increasingly common on the stages of England and Ireland, as American plays have become increasingly important even in such venues as London’s National Theatre. Today I propose to examine a number of the most significant British and Irish plays of recent years in which American characters appear and explore what they suggest about current British and Irish dramatic responses to the situation of living in what Jimmy Porter called the American age.

The visiting foreigner has for centuries been a standard theatrical character, especially in comedy, where his amusing accent and eccentric behavior provides the dramatist with an opportunity to critique certain features of his own society as viewed from outside, or, more commonly, to affirm the values and practices of that society by making comic capital from the outsider who does not quite understand the rules. England, Ireland, and America have long drawn upon characters from each other’s nations for such dramatic usage. Stage Irishmen have been utilized by British dramatists ever since Shakespeare, and the British landowner, occupier, and oppressor has naturally played a major role in the Irish drama, where the colonial relationship with England has been from the beginning a central concern. In counterpoint, on the other side of the Atlantic, the stage Englishman, often drawn in contrast to rugged and simple Yankees, with homespun virtues, is a common figure in early American drama, while the stage Irishman is one of the most familiar of the national immigrant types on the American stages of the nineteenth century.

There is a touch of this tradition of caricatured national stereotypes in recent British and Irish use of American characters, but pure examples of it are in fact uncommon and the locations where they appear are quite revealing. The only recent example of the stage American used in a traditional comic way in a British play that I have encountered is the American entrepreneur Cyrus Budge III (Junior) in the 1996 musical comedy By Jeeves by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Alan Ayckbourn, based on the work of P.G. Wodehouse. It seems to me highly suggestive that the P.G. Wodehouse world is precisely the “phoney” imaginary Edwardian world evoked by Jimmy Porter, the world of eternal “high summer, long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen,” and “the smell of starch.” In such an orderly and comfortable world, eccentric outsiders
like Cyrus Budge can provide amusing and unthreatening alien perspectives (rather like the visiting American in the current film Gosford Park, whose comic lack of understanding of the elaborate late-Edwardian milieu in which he finds himself poses no danger whatever to the self-confident workings of that milieu).

With the passing of that stable and self-assured world, however, the comic outsider who doesn’t know the rules no longer has a secure dramatic position, since there is no longer a culturally coherent set of rules. Whatever rules there are mostly arise out of a despairing search for self-preservation in an unstable world, are no more and no less accessible to the alien outsider than to the inculturated native. Indeed it is striking how often in these late twentieth-century dramatic expressions the two become merged. The visiting American is often revealed to be not simply an American, in the manner of Cyrus Budge, but a native of England or Ireland, who has spent time in America and returns not purely as Other, but as a disturbing mixture of Same and Other, impossible to fully place on either side and serving to expose the tensions and inadequacies of both.

Surely the best known example of this dynamic is Harold Pinter’s aptly-named The Homecoming, first performed in 1965. The dynamic of Pinter’s play is based upon one of the most familiar devices of the realistic drama, the initiation of the action by the return home of a major character who has been away for a number of years. The return provides a justification for the often troublesome matter of exposition, but more importantly introduces a destabilizing element which provides a clear starting point for the drama. Occasionally in the European tradition these homecoming characters have been emigrants to America, as in one of the earliest examples of the device in modern drama, the character Lona Hessel in Ibsen’s 1878 Pillars of Society. Lona is one of the earliest and clearest examples of an Ibsen reformer, who brings the fresh and free air of the new world to challenge the stultifying, oppressive atmosphere of the small Norwegian coastal town of her origins.

The apparently clear moral positions of Pillars of Society are of course nowhere to be found in the dark and threatening world depicted almost a century later in Pinter’s Homecoming. The homecoming is that of Teddy, the family’s oldest son, who six years before married Ruth, a
local woman unknown to the rest of his family, and departed for America where he has apparently had three sons and gotten a position teaching philosophy in a university. The family home to which he returns certainly seems in desperate need of some fresh air. Its inhabitants are Teddy’s aging but still cruel and aggressive father Max, Max’s vacuous younger brother Sam, who drives a cab, and Teddy’s two younger brothers, the belligerent small-time pimp Lenny, and the dim small-time boxer Joey, all of whose time is spent much like that of Jimmy Porter, in reading the newspapers and lashing out at each other and at a surrounding world seemingly offering nothing but meaningless activity and petty irritations.

Teddy and Ruth might seem, were this not a play by Pinter, to offer an ideal corrective to this grim and sterile household. They have moved to a new and apparently more open society, from the marginal society of pimps, cabdrivers and would-be boxers to the respected dignity of American academia, and from squalid conversations about racing, boxing, and sexual encounters in the back seats of cabs, to whatever ethereal considerations occupy a professor of philosophy. In fact, however, their American experience seems to have provided Teddy and Ruth with no effective means to resist the pull backward into the London life they have potentially escaped. Ruth, who seems to have been a prostitute before she left, decides to remain in London, taking up that role again in an ambiguous partnership with the local family, while Teddy, raising no serious protest, returns without her to America. To the extent that The Homecoming can be read as a conflict between the culture represented by Teddy’s London family and the alternative culture represented by Teddy and Ruth’s American experience, there is no doubt about which culture has triumphed.

Indeed one might wonder to what extent the America represented by Teddy and Ruth even exists within the world of this play, so completely and so quickly are they reabsorbed by the culture from which they presumably escaped six years ago. When speaking about America, they talk in much the same ambiguous and evasive manner as Teddy does when asked just what he teaches as a professor of philosophy. In his most extended comments on the subject, to his father Max, Teddy remarks:
It's a great life, at the University ... you know ... it's a very good life. We've got a lovely house ... we've got all ... we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment. *Pause.* My department ... is highly successful. *Pause.* We've got three boys, you know.

A later conversation between Ruth and Teddy has a similar quality:

TEDDY. ... the boys'll be at the pool ... now ... swimming. Think of it. Morning over there. Sun. We'll go anyway, mmnn? It's so clean there.

RUTH. Clean.

TEDDY. Yes.

RUTH. Is it dirty here?

TEDDY. No, of course not. But it's cleaner there. *Pause.*

Midway between these two passages is the only other description of America offered by either Teddy or Ruth. Suddenly breaking into a conversation among the men, Ruth volunteers this odd information:

I was born quite near here. *Pause.* Then ... six years ago, I went to America. *Pause.* It's all rock. And sand. It stretches ... so far ... everywhere you look. And there's lots of insects there. *Pause.* And there's lots of insects there. *Silence.* She *is still.* (Pinter 50-54)

As is so often the case in Pinter, background information is so minimal, and often contradictory, that one is tempted to question almost all of it, to wonder if indeed Teddy and Ruth have ever been to America, or indeed gotten married or had children. In any case, however, America remains for them and for this play a powerless abstraction, quite unable to resist the dark power of the seedy and sterile culture represented by the London home from which it offers at best a fleeting and illusory escape.

Not surprisingly, the motif of the homecoming from America is much more common in recent Irish than in recent English drama, because of the particular symbolic weight of America in modern Irish history. In opposition to England, the tyrannical oppressor, America traditionally represented opportunity and escape, and the waves of nineteenth-century immigration guaranteed that almost every Irish family had some first-hand experience of that relationship to America, just as they had to English domination. In the twentieth century, with the coming of Irish independence and the replacement of English political imperialism with American cultural and economic imperialism, the roles of
England and America in Irish drama have clearly reflected these changing conditions.

Significantly, Professor Brian Singleton of the University of Dublin remarked in a recent paper on Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and Marie Jones' *Stones in His Pockets*, the American has replaced the Englishman as the dominant Other in recent Irish drama. It is an Other much more ambiguously viewed than the traditional Englishman, however, because it contains a nostalgia for the American dream world of the immigrant, the land of freedom and limitless wealth and opportunity, with a more realistic view of an America of crass materialism, emotional shallowness, and indifference to traditional culture.

The homecomer in these plays is a failed immigrant, even when, as occasionally happens, he or she has achieved modest financial success in the new world, because emotional fulfillment was impossible there. These are not, however, simple fables illustrating that after all home is best, in the manner of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, since the Ireland to which they return still faces all the other problems that caused them to leave in the first place. Their travels have given them only a better insight than their stay-at-home neighbors into the difficulty if not impossibility of real happiness and fulfillment in *either* culture. The insight is a bitter one, but it is also one familiar to many in a world in which the in-between consciousness of the refugee or the immigrant has become increasingly familiar.

Nowhere is the homecomer's double disillusionment more fully developed than in Tom Murphy's aptly named * Conversations on a Homecoming* of 1985. Even the setting of the play is testimony to a romanticized Irish dream of an America now falling into decay. During the heyday of Irish infatuation with America in general and John F. Kennedy in particular, the 1960s, JJ, the proprietor of a run-down rural pub in East Galway, converted it into a kind of memorial to American vision and optimism. Now, twenty years later, the optimism is gone, as is JJ, lost and wandering in a drunken haze somewhere out in the countryside. The pub regulars, their hopes and habits now fixed in predictable and

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unproductive routines, still frequent the pub, where they are joined by Martin, one of their members who emigrated to America twenty years before. Why he returns is never entirely clear, but his avoidance of any details of his stay in America strongly suggests that he failed to find success or fulfillment there. What he finds on his return, however, is sterility and bitterness among those who have found JJ's Kennedyesque optimism an illusion. This is especially true of Tom, once the most articulate and promising of the group and now the dark antagonist of the drama. Fintan O'Toole, a leading Irish cultural critic, has hailed this play as a powerful psychic representation of the Ireland of its period, “a country which abandoned itself to American optimism and money in the 1960s and woke up in the 1980s to find itself on the wrong, rain-soaked side of the Atlantic” (O'Toole x). It is a play shot through with the dark humor of disillusionment and despair, and yet it is ultimately optimistic, because Martin at least seems to move beyond both the foolish utopianism of JJ and his vision of America and the cynical suffering of his homebound companions, bitter at the fate that has abandoned them in this pitiful backwater. Where he is going as he leaves the pub at the end is unclear, but he has at least freed himself from both his Irish and his American pasts to strike out in a potentially more positive direction.

Two more recent Irish plays, Tom Murphy’s *The Wake* (1998) and Anne McGravie’s *The Cairn Stones* (2001), are also homecoming plays. Both feature young women who leave small villages in Ireland to seek a fuller and freer life in America, returning years later to find that, like Teddy and Ruth, their native country has far stronger psychic claims upon them than they thought or desired. As Vera in *The Wake* observes: “All my life the feeling of belonging has eluded me: Why should I go on thinking I’ll find it? The thought of here hasn’t kept me going: the thought of here cripples me” (Murphy 48), while Shelagh in *The Cairn Stones* asks “What had I done? Run away to a better life. Or so I thought.... Thing is, you never run away from yourself” (McGravie 43).

In both plays real estate and romance play a central and clearly symbolic role. In both, the last member of the previous generation has recently died, leaving a former, now abandoned family home to the emigrant relative in America. The women return, purportedly to settle the
estates, but in fact to lay to rest ghosts of their pasts, which centrally involve a lover they left behind and who has continued to haunt their memories. The young Vera’s family was scandalized by her interest in Finbar, a boy of the lower classes, and forced them to separate, sending her to live with a remote grandmother. When she is old enough to flee she departs for New York, where she earns a precarious living as a call-girl. Shelagh’s American life is more respectable, but apparently equally empty. She has been away from Ireland much longer, almost fifty years, but her brief comments on her life in America are scarcely more detailed, if apparently more emotionally honest, than the bland generalities of Teddy and Ruth: “I have a good life in Chicago. Friends. A nice home. A car. The American dream. But I’m lonely too” (McGravie 52).

Shelagh and Michael are perfectly matched socially, but young Shelagh’s dream of escaping their remote and desolate island for a future in America so frightens Michael’s father and sister Brighid, who are determined to keep him at home, that they conspire to separate the lovers and allow Shelagh to depart for America with Brighid’s own lover, Joe. Joe’s death soon after in America leaves all three others to lead empty and separated lives.

Neither Ireland nor America is offered as a particularly attractive alternative in either play, the former is restrictive, oppressive, stagnant and backward, the latter bland and, at least for these characters, emotionally sterile. Back in Ireland, Vera again scandalizes her family by moving in with her old lover Finbar (Vera and Finbar = Murphey’s The Wake; Michael, Bridget/formerly Brighid, Shelagh = Anne McGravie, The Cairn Stones), now a drunken eccentric living in a shack in a seedy area known as the Punjab, but clearly this move gives her neither peace nor satisfaction. She confronts the rapacious members of her family, who are in fact less concerned with her morals than with getting their hands on the family property she has inherited, and after participating in a wake for her departed grandmother, which is also clearly an exorcism of all the Irish ghosts that have haunted her, she goes off to see a lawyer. Her plan clearly is to leave the family property to her siblings and Finbar to his fate and to return to America, finally free of Ireland. Like Martin in Conversations on a Homecoming, and perhaps even more self-consciously than he, she has had to return to Ireland to free herself at last from it.
Sheilagh in *The Cairn Stones*, achieves a similar emancipation, although one even more tinged with sadness at the emotional cost of cutting loose. Vera is still young enough to create a new life in America once she is finally free of her Irish ghosts, Shelagh has returned to Ireland to lay her ghosts to rest at a far later period in her life, after fifty years of exile. At the end of the play she at last finds a kind of peace in the realization that even after many years of exile and of suffering over the separation from her emotional roots in Ireland, she cannot accept the offer of her childhood lover Michael to return to her childhood home. Briefly she fantasizes of an alternate life she might have chosen: “Maybe Chicago’s the dream. Maybe I stayed here. We married. Had a family. My mother died contentedly in my arms...” (McGravie 92). Still, when she is confronted with the reality of ending her life as her childhood lover and his sister are content to end theirs, like cairn stones, rooted to a harsh and desolate life and resistant to any change, she again, this time permanently, makes the choice for freedom and movement, whatever the emotional cost.

Brian Friel’s 1964 *Philadelphia, Here I Come* provides an intriguing counterpoint to *Conversations on a Homecoming*, *The Wake* and *The Cairn Stones* because it looks at the emigration to America from the other end of the process, showing the thoughts and emotions of a young man on the eve of his departure. The play also contains two characters more directly parallel to those I have been examining, a former Irish couple who have emigrated to America and who years later revisit their place of origin. These are young Gar O’Donnell’s aunt and uncle, Con and Liz Sweeney, who appear in a single flashback scene which shows Gar’s memory of their invitation to join them in America. The picture they paint of their new homeland is remarkably similar to that in the other plays we have been considering, America as a land of abundance and material comforts, but one that provides no emotional grounding. The overbearing and loquacious Lizzy attempts to explain why Gareth should join them in America in the following terms:

**LIZZY.** We have this ground-floor apartment, see, and a car that’s air-conditioned, and colour TV, and this big collection of all the Irish records you ever heard, and fifteen thousand bucks in Federal Bonds –

**CON.** Honey.
Although in the discussions between Gar’s Public and Private self which are one of this play’s most distinctive features, the Private self expresses reservations about Lizzy’s vulgarities, her overbearing nature and her desire to use Gar to fill her own emotional void, the Public self suppresses these misgivings in his desperation to break free of Ballybeg, which he sees as “a bloody quagmire, a backwater, a dead-end” in which “everybody goes crazy sooner or later.” He is at this point speaking to Kathy, the girl to whom he is attracted but who must be left behind in order for him to escape, as Shelagh had to leave Michael and Vera Finbar. “You’ll die here!” Gar cries out cruelly to her, “But I’m not stuck! I’m free!... All this bloody yap about father and son and all this sentimental rubbish about ‘homeland’ and ‘birthplace’ — yap! Bloody yap! Impermanence — anonymity — that’s what I’m looking for; a vast restless place that doesn’t give a damn about the past” (Friel, Philadelphia 79).

We might as easily be listening to the young Vera or Shelagh, and it is not difficult to imagine that Gar, like them, will at some time in the future return as a haunted figure, neither fully Irish nor fully American. Friel dramatized precisely such a disillusionment in his next play The Loves of Cass McGuire. Certainly the play is full of hints that this will be the case, from the opening to the closing lines. It opens with Gar singing his adjusted version of the popular American song, “California, here I come,” his version providing the title of the play, but the second line of the song adds a qualification the implications of which seem not to occur to him: “Right back where I started from.” By the final lines of the play, however, the ebullient Public Gar has begun to take more seriously the misgivings of the more cautious Private Gar, who asks “God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why?” To which Public Gar replies: “I don’t know. I — I — I don’t know” (Friel, Philadelphia 99).

The challenge that America poses of new beginnings and material rewards is thus undercut in each of these plays by the psychic toll in-
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involved in the necessary rejection of the familiar Other of tradition, custom and family. None of these plays provides a simple solution to this conflict however. Painful as the process of choosing the American other may be, those emigrants who return home find that however its loss may have haunted their imaginations, they could never have found happiness and fulfillment by remaining, either. It is not only in *Philadelphia, Here I Come* that everybody who remains in their ingrown and stultifying environments “goes crazy sooner or later.” Vera’s old lover Finbar and the aging brother and sister Michael and Bridget Shelagh have all become faintly pathetic cairn stones, helplessly holding on to a narrow, rooted existence as the world passes them by, and all Michael’s old pub companions are left, in O’Toole’s grim words, “with little to do but pick at their sores” (O’Toole xi). Whatever the disappointments of escaping this environment, escape at least saves the emigrant from sinking into this slough of despond.

An interesting variation on this common motif of the Irish man or woman becoming an American and later returning with a different perspective to Ireland is provided by Billy, the title character of Martin McDonagh’s 1996 *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. Although *The Cairn Stones* provided, by the use of flashbacks, scenes of its protagonist in Ireland before and after her years as an American, McDonagh’s is the only one of these homecoming plays to present the full arc of this trajectory by offering a sequence actually set in America, surrounded by scenes in Ireland before, during and after the American journey of its title character. The single American scene comes late in the play. Billy, tired of his marginalization as an orphan and cripple in the tiny world of Inishmaan, eagerly embraces the opportunity to go to America for a screen test extended by an American film company visiting a near-by island. As the villagers speculate about his fate, we see him alone and ill in a “squalid Hollywood hotel room” (McDonagh 88). He delivers a rambling and disconnected speech bidding farewell to the world at the end of which he collapses on the bed, his breathing ending in an “anguished gasp” (McDonagh 92). Despite the melodramatic tone of the scene, most spectators surely assume, and are meant to assume, that the poor immigrant has passed away in America, but this is only one of a series of sur-
prises that playwright McDonagh builds into the closing scenes of the play.

Back in Ireland, Billy surprisingly reappears, first as a silhouette behind the improvised screen where the townspeople have assembled to watch the film created by the American company. To his aunt Eileen and the dim-witted but America-loving young Bartley, Billy reports that he was offered a film contract but turned it down because "no matter how much money they offered me," he realized that his true home was on Inishmaan "with the people who love me and who I love back." The sentimentality of this explanation is shortly destroyed when Billy confides to his closest friend, Babbybobby, that he was rejected by Hollywood who preferred a "blond lad from Fort Lauderdale," a "normal lad who could act crippled," rather than "a crippled fella who can't fecking act at all" (McDonagh 88, 92). He also confides to Babbybobby how he took advantage of Babbybobby to get a ride to the island where the film was being made. Babbybobby, certainly among those Billy would characterize as people he loves and who love him back, savagely beats Billy about the head with a lead pipe.

When describing his Hollywood experience, Billy scoffs at the foolish and artificial lines he was given that he spent hours rehearsing in his hotel room. He quotes several such lines, revealing that the American scene we witnessed was in fact Billy rehearsing a death scene for his film test. Thus, significantly, the only scene actually set in America in all of these America-oriented recent Irish plays, is a scene of illusion, and indeed of a layering of illusion, being the inadequate attempt of an actual Irish boy to deliver convincingly artificial lines and emotions created by some American author with only a vague and cliché-ridden idea of what Ireland is actually like.

Hollywood is a particularly powerful representative of the American Other, not only because of its visibility, power, and affluence, but even more importantly as a source for the manufacture and distribution of illusions. The global scope of its attentions (sending film crews to the Aran islands to make an American version of Irish life which in turn is witnessed in an improvised viewing room on remote Inishmaan) guarantees not only that it provides dream images of America for the rest of the world, but that it imposes its own visual, emotional and cultural
interpretations upon the rest of the world as well. Billy and his friends may scoff at the inaccurate Ireland created by the American system of representation, but its power over their lives, and even over their own self-images, is considerable.

Such issues are even more central to another major recent Irish play, Marie Jones’ 1999 *Stones in His Pockets*, which also deals with the effects of an American film company, this one filming an imaginary sentimental drama about a wealthy landowner who is inspired by love to give up his property to the peasants. The central characters are Charlie and Jake, Irish villagers in their mid-thirties who are hired as peasant extras for the film, and the actors who play these roles also play the other eleven characters in the play, English, Irish, and American. For the young men of the village, America remains the symbol of wealth and freedom. After Sean commits suicide, his friend Fin remarks that Sean “always talked about getting out. He hated this place. He used to say to me, you and me, Fin. We’ll escape. He always used that word — escape. He wanted to go to America. He wanted to be someone.” Jack, another of that group of characters who has spent time in America and returned to Ireland, responds drily: “Maybe he looked at me and realized there was no American dream” (Jones 58–60).

The American dream cannot however be so easily dismissed. The need for an alternative to the oppressive and constricted existence felt by most of the characters, especially the youthful ones, in these plays, seems essential to their psychic and sometimes their physical survival. Charlie continues to dream of his success in America as a film writer and even the cynical Jake finds solace at the end in buying into that dream. The play ends with them planning how to turn the reality of the dead Sean into a Hollywood film, complete with the happy ending of a last minute rescue.

Hollywood, as I have suggested, is a particularly apt metaphor for the dream world of America, being itself a creator of dream projections. Central to both of these Ireland/Hollywood plays is a concern with the process of fictionalization, and the dynamic by which cultures create Others upon which they can project their own fantasies, desires, and fears. The naive vision of a utopian America held by young Sean is balanced by the naive vision of Ireland held by the American actress, Caro-
line Giovanni: “Hollywood is shit, John,” she complains to her dialect coach, “a crock of shit... look around this place... god it’s just heaven on earth... I love this place... I’m third generation, you know, on my mother’s side... I do get a real feeling of belonging here you know that. You people are so simple, uncomplicated, contented” (Jones 24). Although each culture projects its fantasies upon the Other, America, thanks to the influence of constructors of the imaginary like Hollywood, has the power not only to shape its own image in the minds of others but to project its image of those others back upon their own imaginations. *Stones in His Pockets* is full of passages which recall Hollywood’s rejection of a real Irish cripple in favor of a normal blond boy from Fort Lauderdale who can provide a less authentic but more commercial simulation of such a figure. So the Irish natives in *Stones*, playing Irish peasants, are coached in proper emotional reactions which not surprisingly seem totally alien to them by Clem, the director, who is tellingly described in the cast list as an Englishman with “not much understanding of the local community” (Jones 14). Gradually, however, by the seductions of simulation and commodification, the imitation replaces the original, the other tongue triumphs over the mother tongue. Despite her intensive work with a dialect coach, Caroline, the American actress, still possesses what Jake describes as a “terrible bloody accent,” but his buddy Charlie astutely responds: “Doesn’t matter... been that many film stars playing Irish leads everybody thinks that’s the way we talk now” (Jones 23).

The subtext of *Stones in His Pockets*, according to its author, is “the whole disintegration of rural Ireland” (Jones 58–60), a disintegration to which the dream worlds of America and of Hollywood have contributed, both by providing an illusory world of happiness and success which makes less bearable the real or perceived faults of home, and by cheapening and trivializing that home existence by its clichéd and condescending representations of it.

The disintegration, stagnation, and decay depicted in *Cairn Stones, The Cripple of Inishmaan*, and *Stones in His Pockets*, against which is placed the promise of an illusory bountiful America, is not confined to the remote and impoverished village dwellers of these plays. Brian Friel’s Chekovian 1980 play *Aristocrats* shows a similar disintegration overtak-
ing a once proud and wealthy family in their ancestral home. Balleybeg Hall corresponds to the great house in the mock-Irish film in *Stones in His Pockets*, the presumed center of local power, culture, and authority, but in reality another hollow illusion. Eamon, the realistic peasant of *Aristocrats*, is both attracted and repulsed by the house. Recognizing that it is in reality little more than crumbling masonry and an interior consumed by dry rot, he still acknowledges its power. “All that is fawning and forelock-touching and Paddy and shabby and greasy peasant in the Irish character finds a house like this irresistible,” he observes bitterly. “That’s why we were ideal for colonizing” (Friel, *Aristocrats* 318).

Adding to the impression of the house as historic artefact is the presence of a visiting American academic, Tom Hoffnung, who is pursuing a study of the political and economic influence of the Irish Roman Catholic aristocracy and its effect upon the local peasantry. For the hard-headed realist Eamon, the whole thesis is a bogus one, this class having in fact no political or economic influence and certainly no cultural effect on the peasantry, his own ancestors. Undeterred, Hoffnung (surely a symbolic name) continues to gather material, and he is therefore attracted to Casimir, the only son of the house, who lavishes upon him illusory anecdotes about the connections of the house to an imposing range of famous people: John McCormack, Cardinal Newman, G.K. Chesterton, George Moore, Hilaire Belloc, W.B. Yeats, and so on. It is not at all clear how much of these fantasies Casimir himself believes. What is clear is that he is not simply playing the game of encouraging the mythical view of aristocratic Irish culture held by his American visitor, he is equally ready to provide false support to the equally mythical view of America as a land of wealthy capitalists. Building upon an off-handed remark by Hoffnung that his mother worked for the Bell Telephone company and in his childhood he thought she worked for a Mr. Bell who was his uncle, Casimir later informs others in the house that he suspects Tom may be a very wealthy man, as his uncle owns the Bell Telephone Company (cf. Friel, *Aristocrats* 312). The games of illusion Casimir enjoys provide a nexus where the fantasies of Americans about Ireland and of the Irish about America meet.

Caryl Churchill’s 1989 *Icecream* provides a complex example of British and American contact, beginning with scenes showing Lance and
Vera, an American couple, visiting a brother and sister, Phil and Jaq, in England, then continuing with scenes of Phil and Jaq visiting Lance and Vera in America. Churchill draws a disturbing picture of how their clichéd assumptions about each other play out against a background of modern rootlessness and violence. Lance and Vera have come to England to research Lance’s family tree, so their arrival in his ancestral county, Devon and meeting with their distant cousins, Phil and Jaq, operate as a kind of homecoming, even though the tangle of ancestors, taking up an entire scene of explanation, is as confused and inexact as Lance and Vera’s singing of totally corrupted choruses from *Brigadoon* which opens the play. The fairy tale village of Brigadoon, whose very evocation is so imperfectly rendered by the visiting Americans, aptly symbolizes the illusory England of their imaginations, an England of ancient history, of Alfred and the cakes, of green fields, charming ancestral cottages in Devon, quaint accents, and welcoming pubs. These clichéd American visions of England are balanced, of course, by clichéd British views of America, both of which are rudely dissipated by reality. The charming Devon cottage is now deserted except for holiday renters and Lance finds his distant cousins living instead in a dismal flat in East London, very much the habitat of Jimmy Porter, whose cynicism and anger the Brit Phil clearly shares. His interchanges with his American cousins are a series of exchanges all playing with the themes of clichéd impressions of the other and of the inaccuracy or sterility of these clichés. These begin with the interchange on America as land of opportunity:

LANCE. My grandfather, that’s Thomas, who was the son of Mavis and Frank who drank himself to death, Thomas sailed from Bristol in nineteen oh two and settled in Michigan.
PHIL. And made his fortune.
LANCE: No, unfortunately I would say no. (Churchill 61)

In the following scene the British and Americans share an amusing litany of their cultural associations with America, beginning positively enough but ending in a burst of rejection like those of Jimmy Porter:

PHIL. The idea of Oregon, just the word Oregon really thrills me. Say some more things. ... Like butter pecan icecream.
VERA. Apple pie.
PHIL. Apple pie’s not American.
Phil continues with the love of violence on American TV and its exportation around the world, but when violence erupts in the play, it is when Phil kills his landlord and convinces the Americans to help dispose of the body.

Back in America, Lance and Vera are haunted by memories of this event, especially after Phil and Jaq decide to pay them a return visit. It almost seems that their imagined images of America assemble to confront if not destroy them. Phil is run down by an automobile and Jaq departs for a strange trip across the country which seems based in part upon the American cultural associations earlier evoked in her London flat: the cactus, the long straight roads, even the TV preachers in the form of a born-again hitchhiker and his apocalypse-haunted mother. Finally in the Western mountains she encounters a professor to whom she confides as her impression of America: “I feel I’m in a road movie and everyone I meet is these interesting characters” (Churchill 96). Unfortunately the parallel continues through this scene. The seemingly normal professor suddenly attempts to rape Jaq and she pushes him off the cliff to his death. In the airport returning to England, Jaq meets a mysterious South American woman who suggests that she take a different direction, perhaps, it is suggested to an alternative destination with more positive resonances than either declining England or violent America can offer.

Despite their widely varying themes and tonalities, the use of America and Americans in this collection of recent English and Irish plays reveals some interesting repeating concerns. The simplistic nineteenth century view of America as the land of wealth and opportunity is regularly invoked, but only to be discredited. The hopeful fortune seekers
who pursue that dream find either that no such easy road to success exists or, if America does provide them with more material comforts, it is at the cost of blandness, boredom and anomie. The greater power of America as a nation is recognized, a challenge clearly more troubling to the British than to the Irish, who are long accustomed to being dominated by a foreign power, but the power is a crude and unenlightened one, achieving little more than the spread of violence, and the lowering of cultural, aesthetic, and even gastronomic standards, in the name of progress. This does not mean, however, that the exposure of the hollowness of the European image of America as a land of wealth and opportunity is used to make contemporary Ireland or Britain seem better by comparison. On the contrary, the American view of the peaceful, fruitful, cultured, and picturesque Edwardian garden party evoked by Jimmy Porter is equally exposed as sentimental wishful thinking. The reality on both sides is much more grim, and in terms of the potential for human happiness, the two may not be that different. The best hope for the future is probably that offered in Murphy’s *Conversations on a Homecoming*, where Irish-American Martin, having worked his way through the illusions of both cultures, finds at last the internal strength to forgive and even to love the illusion-maker JJ. This in turn suggests that he is now able to move on into a contemporary world far more harsh and challenging than either illusion, but with which he can form a more honest relationship, in which love and forgiveness are both possible and necessary.

Works Cited


Terror of the Contemporary Sublime: Regional Responses to the Challenges of Internationalism and Globalization in the Drama of Caryl Churchill and David Edgar

In *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche conceived of the “age of comparisons” to prognosticate our contemporary global condition and the intercultural challenges confronting us today. Indeed, he accurately de-
Cordula Quint

scribes the epoch’s transformational potential as well as the Darwinian dangers which are immanent in it since the “process of comparison” of which he speaks is fundamentally informed by the material conditions which allow cultures to gain transnational visibility. Our “enhanced aesthetic sensibility” may in fact be less constitutive of the appraisal of the many “forms” and “artistic genres” than the existing neo-colonial relations between various cultural regionalisms and a hegemonic capitalist logic which privileges economic over aesthetic concerns.

Most topically, the events of September 11th have brought with them a whole new configuration of “comparisons” — of cultural and economic divisions and geopolitical polarizations. Suddenly, the policing of borders and the invention of their beauty is once again placed at the very heart of historical experience. However, while also the end of the Cold War has brought with it an alarming rise in ethnic nationalisms, particularly in Eastern Europe, and while the Middle East as well as Northern Ireland are unendingly destabilized by explosive religious and cultural schisms, an unprecedented global rise in transnational migration and economic nomadism inherently defies the idea of nationhood as founded on ethnic rootedness or ethno-racial and cultural homogeneity. As Una Chaudhuri also pointed out recently, “the recognition of significant and sustained experience of cultures other than one’s own is no longer the optional privilege of a small Western elite but rather the often compulsory condition of vastly different and variously situated groups.”

This age is inherently defined by “the displacements of contemporary ‘travelling culture’ — the ubiquitous phenomena of diaspora, immigration, migration, and refugeehood” (Chaudhuri 1), as well as by fears and anxieties over the conceptual instabilities these developments bring with them.

Not surprisingly, dramatists have responded to these challenges by inventing “brave new worlds of fascinating characters and unfamiliar stories, [of] innovative plots thick with unexpected intercultural encounters and uncommon complications” (Chaudhuri 1). On both sides of the Atlantic, contemporary playwrights as diverse as Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Brian Friel, Robert Lepage, Tony Kushner, Charles Mee and Robert Wilson, among others, reflect on these issues and they frequently return to the legacy of German fascism.
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as a historical grounding to conceive of potential answers. In this paper, I will argue that some recent dramatic narratives not only attempt to chart the geopolitical configurations of contemporary history but also to expose the psychic processes which underpin them. Most central to my argument will be the idea that the contemporary experience of cultural-communal belonging and of the individual’s struggle for position within the dichotomy of the global and regional bears emotional and conceptual affinities with the sublime,1 as first conceived by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, and later reconceived by Frederic Jameson for a postmodern context. 2

In his seminal essay, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” Jameson explains contemporary experience in terms of the aesthetic category of the sublime. Moving beyond the theological and humanist-rational transcendentalism immanent in Burke’s and Kant’s theories of the sublime, he argues that an exclusively secular and materialist variant becomes manifest in our variously positioned regional relationships to a global late capitalist order. Jameson begins by pointing out that for Burke the sublime was “an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor and awe, of what was so enormous, as to crush human life altogether,” and that Kant then refined this description in order “to include the question of representation itself — so that the object of the sublime is now not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism

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1 I would like to thank Christopher Innes, Stuart Marlow and Hans-Ulrich Mohr in particular for their insightful and constructive comments concerning the difference between Burke’s and Kant’s concepts of the sublime and Jameson’s thoroughly materialist reinterpretation of the affective dimension of sublime experience.

2 In this context, another critic’s historicizing account of the emergence of the sublime is of interest. “The discovery of the sublime was one of the great adventures of eighteenth century England: accompanying the establishment of a commercial empire, the growth of industrialism, the invention of the common reader ... a taste developed among almost all classes of society for the qualities of the vastness, grandeur, and overwhelming power which, in a flash of intensity could ravish the soul with a sudden transport of thought or feeling.... Sublimity liberated the eighteenth century imagination from all that was little, pretty, rational, regular, and safe — although only for as long as the moment of intensity could be sustained” (Nye 1; ref. to Morris1).
with Nature, but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces” (Jameson 77). Against these historical precursors, Jameson then defines a distinctly “postmodern sublime,” and aligns it with Ernest Mandel’s periodization in his book *Late Capitalism*. Mandel conceives of three defining evolutionary moments in the history of capitalism, “each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage: these are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and finally multinational capital” (Jameson 78).[^1]

More recent developments, Jameson observes, manifest themselves culturally in that the former modernist celebration of machinery — particularly the “exhilaration of futurism” — has been superseded by a topical fascination with communications technology, that is, with the tools a civilization uses to transmit knowledge, culture and ideologies — with “machines of reproduction rather than of production ... [which make] very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation” (Jameson 78–79). Indeed, artistic attempts are made to represent “all kinds of reproductive processes ... [in] narratives which are about the processes of reproduction” (Jameson 79). For Jameson, this elusive world of communications technology elides representation, and art merely “afford[s] us some glimpse into a post-modern or technological sublime” (Jameson 79). In light of these historical developments,

[^1]: Also David E. Nye points to the historicity and the cultural contingencies which play into what “objects” generate experiences of the sublime; Nye argues that the “experience, when it occurs, has a basic structure. An object, natural or man-made, disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, forcing the observer to grapple mentally with its immensity and power. This amazement occurs most easily when the observer is not prepared for it. ... Kant distinguished between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. In either case he expected that in the aftermath of the immediate experience the individual would become conscious of ‘our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us.’ Yet this is not necessarily the conclusion everyone will draw from a sublime experience, particularly if the object is man-made rather than natural. The perception of what is immense and infinite changes over time and across cultures. ... In short, American forms of the sublime are culturally inflected. ... The test in determining what is sublime is to observe whether or not an object strikes people dumb with amazement. The few experiences that meet this test have transcendent importance both in the lives of individuals and in the construction of culture” (Nye 16).
Jameson defines the postmodern sublime as that which finds expression in the “faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network” (Jameson 79), and in the “distorted figuration of something deeper, namely the whole world of present-day multinational capitalism ... a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp — namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself” (Jameson 79–80). According to Jameson, Kant’s concern with the “question of representation” and “the limits of figuration” finds itself reconfigured in “contemporary entertainment literature” where “the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hook-up are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind” (Jameson 80). Finally, and most importantly, it is “in terms of that enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable, other reality of economic and social institutions that . . . the postmodern sublime can alone be adequately theorized” (Jameson 80).

In this paper, I would like to suggest that Jameson’s theory of a late capitalist postmodern and technological sublime also throws light on the intercultural tensions inaugurated by “the displacements of contemporary ‘travelling culture.’” The “ubiquitous phenomena of diaspora, immigration, migration, and refugeehood” in the profoundest sense redefine the subject’s ability to “represent” the self not only in relation to the social, political and economic institutions of global capitalism but also in terms of stable group affiliations. All of these recent historical developments deeply upset notions such as the rootedness, centeredness and unity of being, the organic wholeness of cultures, or the homogeneity of a people. They are replaced by experiences of interdependence and interconnectedness on the one hand and dissolution, unboundedness and interdeterminacy on the other. The struggle to accurately represent one’s position within “the world space of multinational capital” brings forth not only a state of radical spatial and social confusion, as Jameson rightly points out (92), but also an acute awareness of the proximity of cultures, of potential syncretism and irrevocable decentering. Indeed,
Terry Eagleton’s rendering of Marx’s notion of a ‘bad’ sublime also throws light on this contemporary cultural condition:

There is, to be sure, a ‘bad’ sublime for Marx, along the lines of Hegel’s ‘bad’ infinity: it resides in the restless overweening movement of capitalism itself, its relentless dissolution of forms and commingling of identities, its confounding of all specific qualities into one indeterminate, purely quantitative process. The movement of the commodity is in this sense a form of ‘bad’ sublimity, an unstoppable metonymic chain in which one object refers itself to another and that to another, to infinity. Like Kant’s mathematical sublime, this endless accumulation of pure quantity subverts all stable representation, and money is its major signifier. (Eagleton 212)

In this sense, the increased transnational commodification of labor and “culture” and the greater mobility of populations inaugurate an exponential proliferation and intensification of intercultural processes, that is, of opportunities which inherently invite us to rethink the boundaries of individual selves, their affiliation with groups and communities of belonging. Indeed, our contemporary era demands an acceptance of the contingencies of group affiliation, of indeterminacy, transience and interconnectedness in place of ideas of boundedness, roots, center and autonomy. Not surprisingly, however, these ideological “adjustments” which respond to capitalist and technological change are accompanied by a range of anxieties, in particular, a fear of cultural syncretism. The contemporary proximity of cultures, their increased intermingling, the density of a subject’s multiple group affiliations inaugurate, as also Jameson would suggest, a sense of “complexity ... beyond the capacity of the normal ... mind” (Jameson 80). And it is precisely here that contemporary experience brings forth the terror of the intercultural sublime. Undoubtedly, our present moment is underpinned by difficult tensions and overlapping of individual, regional and global interests, and the critical debates which have accompanied these recent historical changes, as Jochen Achilles has argued, negotiate between a “unitary essentialism,” on the one hand, and “multicultural polyvalence,” on the other, and are often “agreed on both the untenability of essentialist positions and on the danger of confusion, shapelessness, and loss of identities which are based on multiplicity” (Achilles 11). My proposition is therefore that these contemporary transformations engender an intensified apprehension of an ungraspable totality of interlinked relations and challenge all
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illusionary boundedness. This experience then is the intercultural sublime.

Not surprisingly, playwrights such as Churchill and Edgar respond to recent history by inventing dramatic characters who find themselves locked within social, economic, political and technological interconnections that negate all sense of autonomy and nearly defeat the possibility for individual agency or contestatory intervention. The paralysis of their figures is chiefly rooted in their confusion and in their incapacity to clearly conceive their own position within highly volatile identity constellations and often contradictory alliances. Especially the emotional dimension of the sublime resonates with these dramatists’ view of the contemporary world and of the individual’s place within it.

Already in Serious Money (1987), Caryl Churchill arrives at a deeply cynical satire of the Thatcher generation which is easily co-opted into the “conspiratorial” financial networks of late capitalism. The rapid-fire exchanges of her figures on the trading floor cross multiple geographic borders and invoke the elusive universe of Jameson’s essay. It is a world of impenetrable nodal points of globally networked economic interests. In particular Churchill’s opening scene, following the intertextual excerpt from Thomas Shadwell’s The Volunteers, or The Stockjobbers (1692), is a potent example of how contemporary playwrights engage Jameson’s postmodern and technological sublime. She creates a setting which makes use of “[t]hree different dealing rooms simultaneously. All [of which] have screens and phones” (Churchill, Serious Money 14) to create the type of complexity called for. Between the trading floors of Klein Merrick and the London International Financial Futures Exchange (LIFFE), her characters find themselves surrounded by the communications infrastructure necessary to realize the instant transnational reach of third capital. Wielding two phones each and surrounded by computers, her characters aggressively exchange commands for buying and selling to weave themselves into the wooly cocoon of international greed. Speed and simultaneity come to light as the two principal dimensions of late capitalist dynamism. The figures’ giddy exhilaration and guilt-free adrenaline rush is turned on by the power and instantaneity of their decisions as wealth is either gained or lost. Churchill’s characteristic use of language contributes to the effect. She builds a cacophony of
eight voices and combines the traders’ aggressive hustling with the opacity of their jargon to obfuscate the elite world of mobile investment power. For the audience, the serrated orchestration of interests and relations invokes precisely that contemporary experience of impenetrable global networks which threaten our powers of representation in their vast reach and complexity.

The murder mystery which evolves from here only serves to bring her figures’ incapacity for ethical agency and their downward spiral into corruption more poignantly into relief. Indeed, in her satirical portrayal, greed becomes the only “universally shared” and stable value that forges the constancy, hegemony and decenteredness of transnational capitalism. The plot subsequently unfolds a conspiratorial web of deals and their betrayal, and the speed with which these associations of self-interest reorganize themselves helps to create precisely that sense of an impenetrable totality of highly volatile relations. In fact, Churchill offers us a satire of Thatcher England and illuminates how the expansionist thrust of late capitalism penetrates deeply into hitherto “protected” enclaves and ultimately assimilates any impulses of opposition and contestatory intervention.

More recently, in Far Away (2000), Churchill explores a similar world but steps beyond the satirical focus on real history into the realm of political surrealism. In Far Away, she conjures up the collective psychic impulses which already underpin Serious Money, but she adds a distinctively Pinteresque atmosphere of totalitarian menace. In this nightmarish new play, Churchill again interrogates the present-day complexity of group affiliation and portrays her figures as caught in a merry-go-round of impenetrable transnational alliances which go beyond their individual understanding. Indeed, in dialogue passages reminiscent of Beckett and Ionesco, Churchill renders her characters’ efforts to position themselves absurd and meaningless. She poignantly captures the peculiarity of contemporary paranoia.

TODD. I know a cat up the road.
HARPER. No, you must be careful of that.
TODD. But we are not exactly on the other side from the French. It’s not as if they’re the Moroccans and the ants.
HARPER. It’s not as if they’re the Canadians, the Venezuelans and the mosquitoes.
TODD. It's not as if they're the engineers, the chefs, the children under five, the musicians.

HARPER. The car salesmen.

TODD. Portuguese car salesmen.

HARPER. Russian swimmers.

TODD. Thai butchers.

HARPER. Latvian dentists.

TODD. No, the Latvian dentists have been doing good work in Cuba. They've a house outside of Havana.

HARPER. But Latvia has been sending pigs to Sweden. The dentists are linked to international dentistry and that's where their loyalty lies, with dentists in Dar-es-Salaam. (Churchill, *Far Away* 30–31)

Clearly, Churchill places less emphasis on the logic of capitalist and technological expansion than on the emotions engendered by her figures’ attempt to map intricate, interlocking, obscure, volatile and often conflicting identities. Nationhood is irrevocably interconnected with trade and professional relations, and communal belonging has to be reconceived across a range of divergent and conflicting categories of affiliation. Churchill effectively withholds clarity in order to bring home the affective dimension of sublime terror which defines her characters’ experience. Indeed, she invokes precisely the disorientation and paralysing confusion of which Jameson speaks, when her figures find themselves confronted with a densely woven and unsurveyable network of overlapping and competing affiliations on a transnational scale. Moreover, Churchill’s text deliberately withholds the reasons for the political antagonisms and loyalties, and thus it is as impossible for the spectators and readers to position themselves vis-à-vis any of the named groupings as it is for the characters. Opacity reigns as innumerable groups form and reform in the characters’ imagination, and paranoia and isolation define their attempt to chart the dangers which surround them. Churchill’s deliberate obfuscation calls up an overwhelming sense of dread and paralysis.

Important is here that the audience only observes marginal figures. Harper, Todd and Joan are helplessly caught within a despotic regime whose ideological program, actual center of power, and international affiliations remain ambiguous and amorphous to both them and the audience. Their intense anxiety is triggered by a world where even the weather and the animals have been “recruited” for wars among innumer-
able fractions, and their confusion is intensified by their own lack of affiliation beyond their complicity with the regime.

Trapped in a sweatshop for much of the play’s action, Joan and Todd are hat-makers who apply highly developed aesthetic standards to their craft. The morbid depth of their complicity as artists is only later revealed when the political purpose of their labor is discovered. In both its visual and verbal imagery, Churchill’s surreal allegory of involuntary complicity proves as inventive as her previous work. In a short purely theatrical interlude (Scene 5), the dramatist presents “the condemned,” a “procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners ... on their way to execution” who cross through the theatrical space, each one identified in his or her “otherness” by a gigantic, surreal hat (Churchill, *Far Away* 24). Churchill’s allusion to alienation and the production of alterity in fascist Germany is rendered even more poignant when Joan proudly announces that her “degree hat was a giraffe six feet tall” (17) but finds herself at the same time unable to understand how her labor participates in a global game of alliances. Most central to Churchill’s political argument is the fact that disorientation and confusion are in fact the foundation of her characters’ collusion.

Not surprisingly, then, Churchill closes her play on a note of acute bewilderment. In her central figure Joan, the dramatist depicts an innocent’s socialization into this world and poignantly captures her attempt to navigate a hostile world beyond her individual understanding.

Of course birds saw me, everyone saw me walking along but nobody knew why, I could have been on a mission, everyone’s moving about and no one knows why, and in fact I killed two cats and a child under five so it wasn’t that different from a mission. ... It wasn’t so much the birds I was frightened of, it was the weather, the weather’s here on the side of the Japanese. There were thunderstorms all through the mountains ... the rats are bleeding out of their mouths and ears, which is good, and so were the girls by the side of the road. It was tiring there because everything’s been recruited, there were piles of bodies ... the Bolivians were working with gravity, that’s a secret so as not to spread alarm. But we are getting further with noise and there’s thousands dead of light in Madagascar. Who’s going to mobilise darkness and silence? That’s what I wondered in the night. ... I didn’t know whose side the river was on, it might help me swim or it might drown me ... (Churchill, *Far Away* 37–38)
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Here, Churchill poignantly invokes the alienation endured as a result of an absolute political instrumentalization of nature and foregrounds to what extent the individual ("everyone") suffers a complete loss of agency — "... everyone saw me walking along but nobody knew why, I could have been on a mission, everyone's moving about and no one knows why ...." Clearly, Joan's lack of orientation ensures her inadvertent complicity as mutable interconnections proliferate rapidly between the various national, ethnic-racial and professional groups. Churchill deliberately creates individuals who only experience instability and a lack of autonomy, and who are unable to understand the political alliances into which they are absorbed. The affective dimension of her characters' experience is in this sense best described in terms of the terror of the contemporary sublime.

In contrast to Churchill's surreal political allegory, David Edgar's Pentecost (1994) reflects on the post-Cold-War re-emergence of ethnic nationalisms in Eastern Europe and exposes the confusions which erupt as his characters confront the intercultural complexity of their past. The dramatist probes the legacy of central European hegemony and of various forms of imperialist and techno-scientific conquest but carefully balances his critique against the ironies which govern contemporary political impulses to undo this past. Indeed, he throws into question the conceptual artifice of the boundaries which have defined the play's nation — "an unnamed south-east European country" whose "language ... is in fact Bulgarian, though Bulgaria is not 'our country'" (Edgar xx). Not surprisingly, perhaps, his dramatic figures offer a panorama of modes of contemporary displacement, from transnational professional expertise to economic nomadism and political diaspora. Trapped in Act II within an ancient Church, a building at the crossroads of cultures and at the heart of a current historiographical controversy, Edgar's characters are forced to negotiate the possibilities of a benevolent interculturalism. The debates of the three art historians about the preservation of culture and the transmission of cultural knowledge within a transnational economy are balanced against the depiction of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants in their desperate search for a future "elsewhere." Clearly, the displacements of contemporary "travelling culture" are the central focus of the dramatist's inquiry.
Edgar’s treatment of space is of particular interest. The church has historically been a site of conquest for innumerable ideological and cultural forces. As the local curator explains, the building had once been an abandoned church. As well as warehouse, church is used by heroic peasantry for store potatoes. And before potatoes, Museum of Atheism and Progressive People’s Culture. And before museum, prison. ‘Transit Centre’. German Army. You can still see signatures of prisoners on wall. You note also wall is whitewash with clear mark of nail where Catholics hang pictures and underneath whitewashed, pictures of saints of orthodox religion. When we are Hungary, it Catholic, when we are holy Slavic people, Orthodox. When we have our friendly Turkish visitors who drop by for few hundred years, for while is mosque. When Napoleon pass through, is house for horses. Stable. Now in 1989, we have great turnaround. And everything is opened up. Including naturally files of secret police. And most of it is – recent, time of communists. (Edgar 5–6)

Like Churchill, Edgar emphasizes the contingency of borders and of politico-ideological alliances which mark the present, but he also directs our attention to the past. Indeed, the church is an architectural palimpsest of a bewilderingly rich history of intercultural intersections, all of which are the result of imperialist coercion. While drawing concretely on the actual history of the Balkans, Edgar creates in Gabriela Pecs, the acting curator of the national museum, a fictional character who is a “realistic” precursor to Churchill’s Harper and Joan. Also Pecs finds herself overwhelmed by sublime terror when she casts a retrospective glance at the fluid re-definitions of national, religious, cultural and ideological identity. Most importantly, Edgar here extends Jameson’s argument about the contemporary sublime and our inhabitation of the synchronic to the diachronic. In his essay, Jameson observes that

[w]e have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism proper. (Jameson 64)

However, Edgar conceives figures in Pentecost who have to negotiate the crisis of stable borders and rootedness not only with regard to their contemporary position but with regard to their past. They experience intercultural transnational complexity in both the diachronic and syn-
chronic dimension and become acutely aware that also history has to be revisited and conceived in terms of the conceptual changes Jameson ascribes to our contemporary condition. In his essay, “Rewriting Europe: Pentecost and the Crossroads of Migration,” the American critic Stanton B. Garner, Jr. argues that Edgar’s play suggests the epistemological shift required to undo and step beyond the mystified stabilities of our tribal past. Garner draws on James Clifford’s critique of twentieth-century ethnography in his seminal essay “Travelling Cultures” in order to tease out Edgar’s ideological purpose in the play by portraying a “field of traveling cultures” (Garner 10). Clifford, as Garner observes, attacks “ethnography for privileging relations of dwelling over relations of travelling and proposed a revised ethnographic practice that would approach cultures in terms of movement, interactions, border crossings, hybridity” (Garner 10). Thus, Oliver Davenport, one of Edgar’s art historians, redefines our vision of medieval Europe and foregrounds to what degree a historiographic practice which privileges “relations of dwelling over relations of travelling” fails to map the rich intercultural past:

You see, the problem is. We have this mindset, still, about the medieval period. That everybody knows their places, no-one travels, no-one moves. To each his own walled garden. Whereas actually medieval Europe was a chaos of diaspora. Every frontier teeming, every crossroads thronged. (Edgar 98)

The very ideas of dwelling and rootedness are here exposed as simplifying historiographic accounts which serve the ideological purpose of homogenizing relations. They produce another type of “faulty representation” of tribal cohesion based on sameness and immobility, and they foster the dangerous notion that communal stability is produced by ostracizing difference. In light of Clifford’s insight, Garner argues that European history must itself be revised as its “fiction” appears premised on the same epistemological privileges. “Europe,” he argues, “itself — the exclusionary home of a shared cultural and political heritage — can be seen as a concept formed in resistance to this historical current of mobility, dislocation, and border permeability” (Garner 10).

However, Edgar deliberately sets up ironic tensions. Pecs first acknowledges that the geographical space referred to as “our nation” is a site of astounding intercultural complexity, but she insists in the current
political circumstances on rejecting this rich overlay in favor of simplis-
tic entrenchments in notions of homogeneity. Indeed, ethnicity and
nation-building presently serve to justify and bolster a very conservative
anti-immigration policy. In Gabriela Pecs, Edgar demonstrates how eas-
ily contemporary efforts to revalue regional difference replicate the very
ideological impulses which have formerly governed Europe’s exclusions,
“I don’t see just because of war, we have to be trashcan for world misfits
... Why should we be world transit camp?” (Edgar 40). Pec’s words are
later echoed by Czaba, the Minister for Preservation of our National
Monuments: “Look. We are young poor country. Our industry is junk-
yard and our currency confetti. So, no, we cannot be dumping ground
for everybody’s rejects” (103). With the final invasion of the church by
counter-terrorist commandoes and Pec’s last entrance with a baby pram
decorated with a swastika (103), Edgar orchestrates a violent climax to
expose the Holocaust as the historical spectre of regional protectionism.
Ironically, his investigation of the current renaissance of ethnic national-
ism in the Balkans reveals it as an attempt to achieve inclusion within
Europe’s cultural fold, but this can only be achieved by mimicking
Europe’s former exclusions by means of what Garner has identified as a
“fiction ... formed in resistance to this historical current of mobility,
dislocation, and border permeability” (Garner 10). Ultimately, Edgar’s
East European characters cling to arbitrary borders and their refusal to
accommodate contemporary “travelling cultures” originates both in
current economic pressures as well as in their fear of cultural indetermi-
nacy. The American Jewish art historian Leo Katz acts as an ideological
foil to Pec’s ambition,

[and tell me, does it bother anyone that as the opera houses close, the syna-
gogues are being desecrated? That Vietnamese and gypsies – and Ukrainians –
are beaten up by skinheads on the streets and everyone applauds? That as the
walls fall in the west, there’s new ones rising just as high the other side? (39)

However, Edgar also carefully brings the problematic tensions between
regional and global interests into relief. He judiciously avoids any sim-
plistic, possibly even triumphalist indictment of the Eastern European
response to the instabilities brought on by the demise of the former
USSR and its satellite states. While he criticizes the resurgence of right-
wing xenophobia and of a tribalist, ethnic-nationalist ethos, Edgar also
exposes transnational capitalism as a present-day catalyst for the dissolution of cultural distinctions. More importantly, he calls attention to the economic inequities which determine the “cultural exchange” inaugurated by the operation embarked on by Pecs and Davenport and allows Leo Katz to throw light on the ironies of the situation, that is, to expose the neo-colonial dimension of the expertise and technological support made available to the East Europeans to preserve their cultural heritage.

What this operation does is to make the painting mobile. And sure, right now, it’s only booked in for one trip. But does anybody really reckon that’d be the end of it? You really think, Peruzzi and Deutschelecticronic, after all of this, would transport you to the National Museum, assist you with the heavy lifting, and then slope off home? Come on. It’d be—hey, we got the big bang here, you can’t keep it to yourself, what say we take it on a little tour? Just think of all that currency. Or rather, while you guys are sorting out security, maybe more like an extended loan? Or even, now we come to think of it, wouldn’t it be actually much happier, and much more accessible to doctors and professors and their ilk, in a nice new hi-tech California gallery with state-of-the-art air conditioning and three gold trowels from Architecture Quarterly? Hey, come on, Olly, wasn’t that the deal? … That’s what paintings are. They’re stars, of the Hollywood variety. With tours. And fans. And franchised merchandise. And—entourage. And as such, they are, they must be universal and eternal. (45)

Indeed, international expertise and technological aid are here presented as merely a more covert contemporary version of the plundering of cultures which has accompanied past imperialisms. Moreover, through Anna Jedlikova, the observer for the “Ministry of Law and Order,” Edgar brings into focus how the permeability of cultural borders is directly determined by the economic strength a community can bring to bear on its cultural presence in a global world of “travelling cultures,”

[but you must understand what we are losing in all this century. How communism strip away all culture from our past, and clothe us all instead in uniform. … And so yes, we turn from proletcult to Rambo, or pornography. And you know, it may be best we march to next millennium in silly national costume. When alternative is dress of Arnold Schwarzenegger, or wearing nothing very much at all. (104)

Jedlikova reveals to what extent the contemporary rise in ethnic nationalism is primarily a response to the past suppression of cultural sovereignty during the Soviet era and to the apprehension of a future neo-
colonial dependence on European and American developmental aid and trade relations. The homogenizing thrust of American popular culture is here specifically singled out as a threat to cultural sovereignty. Thus, while Edgar’s play clearly criticizes a return to regional and tribalist insularity, he also throws light on the inadvertent continuations of Europe’s colonial legacy which are residual in the development of inequities which divide East and West in the post-Cold War era. His deliberate withholding of a satisfactory resolution of the portrayed conflicts leaves it up to the audience to navigate the complex and contradictory terrain of these regional-global tensions.

However, Pentecost also portrays a number of conflicting regional interests represented by the Catholic and Orthodox churches (Father Sergei Bojovic and Father Petr Karolyi) as well as by Pusbas as the “leader of Heritage.” Edgar exposes the regional-global tensions in regard to the idea of “appropriate” cultural custody. Apart from the art historians’ difficult philosophical schisms over the conservation and presentation of cultural artifacts, the play lays bare how art is inadvertently turned into collateral in a regional struggle for control and hegemony. In this sense, the “commodification” and “displacement” of artworks at the hands of a multinational conglomerate of corporate sponsors is not all that dissimilar to their political exploitation at the hands of local interests. Edgar seems to have deliberately created a theoretical impasse over the legitimacy the various parties bring to their claims to cultural custody. However, it is also precisely this complex juxtaposition of multiple regional interests with their own geopolitical prerogatives and their inadvertent accommodation under the umbrella of late capitalist expansion that calls up the amorphousness and indeterminacy of the intercultural sublime. According to Garner, the narrative of Pentecost discloses how the “Eastern Question’ in Europe’s historical process of self-definition ... is always caught up in problems of permeability and geopolitical indeterminacy” (Garner 5).

The artwork at the centre of the controversy and the negotiations which take place over its interpretation and conservation are in this sense an index to the intercultural and geopolitical complexity of the region and its post-colonial ambition to undo the “fault lines and frontiers” which have served in the past to separate it from the birthplace of
“universal European man” (Edgar 75). Edgar closes his play with a violent invocation of Jameson’s network of “power and control ... difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp,” when a sudden explosion destroys the artwork and “armed COMMANDOES in black uniforms and balaclavas burst through the gaping hole that has appeared in the painting” (101). Sharp, rapid-fire orders delivered in French, German and English accompany the “Western” invasion of the church, which is later defended by Czaba as the second game-plan devised by “wise guys from America who say, if you don’t clean up in two days, you send in US cavalry” (102). Pentecost ends with catastrophic destruction — both human and cultural — as contingency, amorphousness and unboundedness threaten to undercut the impulse toward self and communal mastery. Anxieties and fears emerge with explosive intensity, and the regression into tribalism is indeed revealed as a response to the terrors of indeterminacy. The conceptual artifice of ethnocentric boundaries is clearly re-entrenched to stave off the representational failure at the heart of the intercultural sublime.

In this sense, both Churchill and Edgar foreground the political, economic, cultural and psychic difficulties individuals experience in making the epistemological shift suggested by Clifford. In their dramatic universe, the characters fail to find comfort in seeing “cultures in terms of movement, interactions, border crossings, hybridity” (Garner 10). Both playwrights emphasize the terror and trauma immanent in the experience of the intercultural sublime, and they also bring into focus to what extent this contemporary period bears inside it unique possibilities as well as perils. Given the injuries of past imperialisms and of present neocolonial dependencies, “the displacements of contemporary ‘travelling culture’ — the ubiquitous phenomena of diaspora, immigration, migration, and refugeehood” (Chaudhuri 1) — engender experiences of profound anxiety, confusion and disorientation. The dangers immanent in this historical moment are perhaps best captured by one of Edgar’s characters. In his closing words, the American Leo Katz points out to what extent we presently fail to transcend the past; perhaps we will remain “the sum of all the people who’ve invaded us.” Perhaps, we will involuntarily remain “each other’s guests” (104).
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Homely Northern Women in Sensible Shoes:
Alan Bennett and the Pleasures of Provincialism

Introduction

Alan Bennett is often described as the embodiment of Englishness. In recent years he has often been referred to as a ‘National Treasure’ and has a prominent position as a public persona. Despite being a prolific writer in a variety of media (stage, television, film, journalism, short story) the audience’s main interest is on the Bennett persona and on making connections between Bennett’s life and his work. The phenomenon of the persona has obviously had some impact on both the reception of Bennett’s works and on the kind of work he produces. Bennett has been described as a worthy successor to John Betjeman in addressing “the poetry of ordinary people’s speech” (Wells 2). As a “much-loved” writer, critics hold he simply cannot be cutting edge, and as a “family favourite,” writing about Northern characters who are not demonstrating against the closure of a pit and who are not escaping to realise their full potential down south, he has to be relegated to mere provincialism.

Bennett has been critically undervalued for not being fashionable, described, for example, as an “anomaly” (Bull 10) amongst contemporary playwrights, serving to enforce a safe concern with the past and writing to reinforce the political status quo — the “whimper of continuing decline” (Bull 11). In reviews, Bennett is often referred to as “retrospectively oriented, nostalgic, wistful” (Cave 58). The general critical reaction to Bennett’s work suggests that accessibility and popularity (especially with an audience of a certain age) is seen as bland and middlebrow. Apart from his image as a National Treasure and his classification as apolitical and provincial, another reason for Bennett’s problematic rela-
tionship with the critics may be his urge to please. Bennett respects, but also fears, his public’s reaction to his work. He gives the example of “sabre-toothed pensioners” warning him outside a theatre that his work “had better be good. ... We’re big fans of yours” (Bennett, “Personal View” n.pag.). It is hoped that this discussion will contribute to a differentiation between the concept of provincialism, undeniably associated with Alan Bennett, and the assumption that it must be automatically narrow-minded and politically right-wing. Instead, this paper argues for critical acknowledgement of provincially or parochially oriented work.

**Provincial**

Having the manners or speech of a province or ‘the provinces’; exhibiting the character, especially the narrowness of view or interest, associated with or attributed to inhabitants of ‘the provinces’; wanting the culture or polish of the capital. *(OED Online)*

These definitions imply that “provincial” is an unsatisfactory condition. Provincialism, or even regionalism, a term less burdened with negative connotations, have hardly received any critical attention within the field of drama, there being a tacit understanding that modernity and regionalism exclude each other: “Solcher auf ein historisches Phänomen einge­grenzten Diagnose scheint das in der Literaturkritik lange allgemein verbreitete Vorurteil zu entsprechen, Regionalismus und Moderne schlossen einander grundsätzlich aus” (Mecklenburg 7). Art should aspire to the universal, and the provincial carries the notion of the monocultural, and implies a rejection of the cosmopolitan. Alan Bennett’s northern characters certainly have “the manners or speech of ‘the provinces,’” although it would be an insult to people they resemble and the author to automatically assume that they wanted “the culture or polish of the capital.” Admittedly, the theme of escape is prominent in Bennett’s work, but the notion that Bennett would happily abandon “the internal voice he hears most clearly” (Anty 13) if he had a choice is incompatible with his status of National Treasure, where it is part of the rules to be in touch with one’s roots. Furthermore, Bennett has a “non­provincial,” or metropolitan voice at his disposal, but his choice has lately been to use the northern provincial one more extensively.
Bennett has never been an outright revolutionary or agitational playwright — and his characters reflect this. He is not the author of the grand political gesture, but of quiet and persistent subversion. Bennett’s strengths are self-contained, formally perfected miniatures of life. Regional specificity is part of these intricate structures and one of the most important features of his work. Cherished by readers and audiences, mocked by critics, this regional aspect goes beyond notions of “provincial,” which is simply defined as everything the capital is not. The expression “parochial” generally has connotations just as negative as “provincial,” but its definition includes the regionally specific, as identifiable to one particular parish. Critics such as Andy Medhurst have looked at the concept of the parochial in literature with fresh eyes. What is generally called “narrow-minded, concerned only with narrow local concerns without any regard for more general or wider issues” (Encarta Online Encyclopaedia) should, according to Medhurst, rather be considered as “speaking from a position of insideness.” Clifford and King argue:

When we change scale we think and behave differently: nations are abstractions, regions are generally defined from the outside in, they are about form and function, they are academic, institutional or political creations. Locality needs to be defined from the inside, with a cultural and natural base, less abstraction, more detail. (n. pag.)

We can thus assume that Bennett is seen as, but also shows some deliberation to be seen as, a provincial or parochial writer. Although the concept of equating “North” and “provincial” has been destabilised (Manchester and Leeds, for example, recently becoming regional centres of ‘cool’), I would still argue that Bennett adheres to what is deemed provincial. Neither does his northern work show characters who engage with the recent northern renaissance, nor is Bennett’s writing driven by sentimental, working-class, nostalgic, “we were poor but we were happy”-narratives. His characters do not live in loft apartments, nouveau north style, nor do they play in brass bands, rugged-but-beautiful northern style. Instead, Bennett is constantly stressing how unspectacular, dull and humdrum life was in his native Leeds in the 1940s and 1950s. Bennett has created his own category of Northernness, which has almost become a cliché through repetition and parody. Bennett has been accused of being stuck in the past, of representing the way people used
to speak in the 1950s. The pleasure of engaging with a specific, deliberately parochial setting on stage or screen admittedly has reactionary elements attached, but cannot simply be treated merely as a refusal to move with the times. It has to be seen as the need to have one's identity confirmed, and treated as significant. The desire for a knowable community where “... it was all clean and you could walk down the street and folks smiled and passed the time of day” (The Complete Talking Heads 116), is an unfashionable, anti-modernist appeal to restore things to their former order. More importantly, however, it has notions of a deep unease about an environment that is becoming less and less identifiable as belonging to a regional or social setting, and where people unable to keep up with changes become redundant. In Bennettland, globalisation creates isolation.

National Treasure

It is suggested here that there are strong connections between the status of provincial writer and National Treasure. Bennett’s persona is seen as entertaining, harmless and slightly eccentric; he has “mutated into the kind of national treasure who can be depended upon to make a seasonal appearance — a role that used to be shared out between John Betjeman and Morecambe and Wise” (Sexton 20). This suggests a certain indispensability from the British cultural landscape. Most National Treasures seem to be from a working class or lower middle-class background. He was a butcher’s son and many come from the North of England. Bennett came from an aspiring working-class background, and became a scholarship boy, his education paid for by the City of Leeds. He went on to study history at Oxford, graduating with a first. While always expressing gratitude for his educational opportunities, Bennett has openly admitted that he sometimes deliberately takes his background down the social scale, conveniently forgetting some of the privileges and successes he enjoyed during his early years. This aspiration to deprivation shows that Bennett does not want to be seen as showing off. Modesty and self-deprecation are encouraged in a traditional Yorkshire environment, and

1 See, for example, the Introduction to Telling Tales (13–14).
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it is also crucial for a National Treasure: not getting above oneself, not forgetting where one came from, denying that success is deserved.

Bennett’s public role happens to be one the British public adore: the most successful playwright of his time as a nebbish with bicycle clips. Public envy, so easy to ignite, is undercut by his self-presentation as a socially crippled eccentric in tweeds and owlish glasses. (Buruma 16)

The other aspect of deprivation Bennett aspires to is his wanting to conform to what he calls “the myth of the artist’s life” (Kafka’s Dick 64). Clichés surrounding writers dictate that adverse circumstances have to be overcome before the full talent of an author can unfold. Since Bennett has always felt that growing up in Leeds in the 1940s and the 1950s meant that “life is generally something that happens elsewhere” (Telling Tales 26), he has often expressed the wish for more deprivation and personal drama in his earlier life.

Although he appeals to a working-class audience, Bennett is at his most popular as the voice of the middle classes. This is the Bennett who is mockingly but kindly parodied as wearing slippers indoors, cycle clips outdoors, and having a nice cup of tea with Thora Hird. He can also reproduce the idiom of the upper classes in his plays set in southern, metropolitan contexts. Although a “household name” with such a diverse audience, Bennett has not developed a sense of belonging to any of the locations he is writing about, and states he does not feel at home in either of the mentioned class groupings. His parents referred to themselves as “not working class, certainly not middle class, but ordinary” (Telling Tales 10), and Bennett himself seems to adapt his class to the environment he is in, or the audience he writes for.

Bennett, the National Treasure, manages to mirror both the qualities and the insecurities that are seen as essentially English: the embarrassment, the understatement, the self-deprecation. Public adoration obvi-

2 In the satirical Radio 4 series, Dead Ringers, and in one of its predecessors, Granada’s Spitting Image, Bennett is parodied together with Thora Hird, the conversation always ending with “a nice cup of tea.” This parody is not far-fetched, as the following example shows: in Waiting for the Telegram, Violet, a nonagenarian played by Thora Hird, replies to whether she requires counselling after an exhibitionist has exposed himself to her that “a cup of tea would probably do the trick” (The Complete Talking Heads 197).
ously brings with it an obligation. Consequently, Bennett often censors his own work when he feels it does not correspond to his image. He sees it as his mission not to inflict the dark side of his writing on his readership, calling current developments in his writing “too bleak to visit on the public” (Hill). His latest short story, “The Laying on of Hands” (2001), is “as dark as I could let myself be publicly without being rejected altogether” (Hill). Bennett felt this much-feared rejection with two plays which could be described as odd ones out within his oeuvre: *Enjoy* (1980) is his only stage play set in the North of England. A departure from Bennett’s generally naturalistic texts, it is a surreal, almost Ortonesque exploration of memory loss and a stinging attack on the patronising approach to preserving working class heritage in Yorkshire. *Enjoy* was rejected by both critics and audiences when it opened in the West End. *The Old Crowd* (1979), a television play and a collaboration with Lindsay Anderson, received even harsher treatment for being a departure from Bennett’s usual style (see also Lindsay Anderson in Bennett, *The Writer in Disguise* 161–75). Bennett was enthusiastic about the chance to take a more experimental approach, stating that “the play’s greatest virtue is that it does not seem like mine” (15). Bennett has become “a universally recognised turn” who knows what is expected of him. Readers and audience “want more of the same, please, with just enough variation to show it’s not actually a repeat. It can’t be easy” (Sexton 20).

**The Bennett Persona**

Bennett states that he’d “rather the public had an image, and not quite fit it. That way, you’re free” (Adams 3). It is not possible to define the Bennett person and the persona separately, because only the persona is accessible to the public. In order to shield his privacy, Bennett has an interest in maintaining his persona, which passes as him, but works almost like a mask which is made from his own face. Some of his characters are also equipped with this self-knowledge, which results in them being able to manipulate their persona in their favour. Guy Burgess in *An Englishman Abroad* sums the concept of persona up: “If I wore a mask, it was to be exactly what I seemed” (243). The less this invention *seems* like an invention, the more successfully will the “real” author be
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able to hide behind it. Bennett’s persona is not an invention such as a pseudonym, but shields the real him with the creation of himself. His awareness of the way others perceive his behaviour results in the ability to repeat a “performance” that is expected, and thus to seem like himself. Bennett is an unlikely example of the postmodern thesis of the image’s dominance over the concept it represents: he shows a playfully self-conscious approach to the concept of his self within a cultural climate that capitalises on inventions and reinventions of the self. In analogy with the semiotic structure of signifier (the persona), signified (the person) and recipient, the sign has a figurative character, with signifier and signified easily confused by the recipient. The persona thus performs mimicry on the person, often making the recipient believe that persona and person are identical. Bennett using his life as material means that, in his audience’s eyes, there is no difference between the source and its outcome on stage or screen. The shy, cycle-clipped neurotic with an accent that gravitates between Oxford and Leeds is the foundation on which Bennett develops contradictions. It gives him the freedom to accommodate his being in two minds. Bennett’s political ‘colour’, for example, is difficult to pin down. In the 1970s he described himself as “politically left-wing but socially right wing” (Carpenter 22). This self-assessment is one of the keys to understanding Bennett, who wrote against Thatcherism, refused to condemn the Cambridge Spies as traitors, turned down an honorary doctorate from Oxford because of the creation of the Rupert Murdoch Chair, but is the Chairman of the Settle Conservation Society and has a passionate protest against the replacement of The Book of Common Prayer in Writing Home. Nicholas de Jongh remarks that Bennett may lack party political punch, but “there’s no missing his political and social courage.” Getting On (1971), for example, is a play about the scheming duality of a Labour MP, and effectively a critique of Harold Wilson’s government. Seeking an alternative in the SDP in the 1980s, Bennett’s hatred of the Thatcher government drove him to disowning his Englishness at the invasion of Port Stanley: “this is just where I happen to have been put down. No country. No party. No Church. No voice” (Writing Home 168). Margaret Thatcher’s re-election in 1983 made him “spit blood.” This anger has found its way into his works, especially the season of television plays, Objects of Affec-
tion (1982) and The Madness of George III (1991), where William Pitt the Younger is presented as an early propagator of Thatcherism. The fear of expressing strong opinions without being in two minds about them betrays a certain timidity on the validity of Bennett’s political opinions, which is of course sensed by those critics who see him as apolitical. Bennett remarks on the way his popularity and his ambiguity seem to produce a political void: “An article on playwrights in the Daily Mail, listed according to Hard Left, Soft Left, Hard Right, Soft Right and Centre. I am not listed. I should probably come under Soft Centre” (117).

Being seen as a “flaxen-haired Northern lad” means a kind of safety for Bennett, and the freedom to fill his ‘unfashionable’ writing with subversive twists. This does not mean that his voice is limited, but that he will get away with more than most. The reception of his work is influenced by his National Treasure persona, meaning that his work is often considered more cosy and nice than it actually is. Despite shying away from rejection and wanting to please, Bennett is always trying to fight ‘niceness.’ “It can’t just be being nice. Nice is so dull,” as one of the two Alan Bennetts remarks in the play The Lady in the Van (28).

Audiences will not register the use of swearwords, graphic language, or think of murderers or paedophiles in connection with Bennett. Yet most of his plays take considerable liberties, both thematically and linguistically. The second series of Talking Heads (1998) is populated, amongst others, by two murderers, a foot fetishist and a paedophile. The characters discussed in the following could be seen as typical inhabitants of Bennetttland and share their author’s fate of being considered more harmless and one-dimensional than they actually are.

Women in Sensible Shoes

In portraying northern lives, Bennett gives a voice to those who would normally not be heard. His approach is a very detailed picture of a person, sometimes rather unflattering, and demands that attention must be paid. It does not, however, demand blind sympathy. Despite choosing the supposedly humdrum lives of ordinary people, and making them regionally specific, Bennett does not make dramas like Talking Heads I and II easy to watch. Several characters are portrayed as boring, nearly
all of them lie to themselves or to others, and all plays forcefully bring home the notion of characters unhappily trapped in their own lives.

Remarkably, most of these northern characters are female, Alan Bennett ironically referring to elderly ladies as his "niche" or his "bread and butter" in *The Lady in the Van* (20). In Bennett’s own family and its environment, the women did all the talking. Although he had always preserved the conversations he eavesdropped on as a child, Bennett only realised the linguistic and behavioural distinctiveness of northern women when he saw Denis Mitchell’s documentary *Morning in the Streets* (1959). Having been educated to believe that art and northern everyday life were not combinable, Mitchell’s work demonstrated to Bennett that everyday lives made excellent raw material for art. He has since made elderly Yorkshirewomen into his hallmark.

Northern women are another species. Like the Galapagos turtles (whom some of them resemble) they have developed own characteristics and attitudes. Hopes are doomed to be dashed, expectations not to be realised because that’s the way God, who certainly speaks with a Southern accent, has arranged things. (Bennett, *Office Suite* 2)

As most of Bennett’s northern characters, these women find it difficult to adjust to linguistic and social change, mirroring the anxieties within Alan Bennett’s core audience. Changes in language (politically correct speech, for example) document the instability of a world which seems to be no longer theirs. Language is seen as part of this destabilisation, and new words and trends are mocked. The new and the other are generally seen as threat.

**Older Women**

These elderly women are based on Bennett’s mother and his elderly female relations. They will often be shown in scenes with their grown-up sons, whom they treat as if they were children, asking them interfering questions about their digestive system and uttering a steady stream of assumptions and non-sequiturs. The favourite topics are dirt, disease and the lavatory: “What memory was for Proust the lavatory is for my mam” (Bennett, *The Lady in the Van* 6). Hygiene is the standard against which all things in life are measured, and there will be an intricate value system involved when judging other people, based on social distinctions.
Bennett’s mother had established: “She’d talk about people being ‘better-class,’ ‘well off,’ ‘nicely spoken,’ ‘refined,’ ‘genuine,’ ‘ordinary’ and — the ultimate condemnation — ‘common’” (Bennett, Writing Home 43-44). According to someone who grew up in circumstances similar to Bennett’s, ‘common’ is still a worse insult than a four-letter word, and this judgement will not depend on money, origin or class background. It seems to be a question of behaviour, dress sense and appropriate restraint (see also the discussion of “showing off” above).³ This restraint creates the feeling of being trapped, and often Bennett’s elderly women will blame their social restrictions on their lack of education.

The Middle Aged “Respectable” Lady

The other Bennett ‘prototype’ is middle-aged, often a spinster, who has a job as a secretary or in a shop. She lives alone or is caring for a relative. Examples are Miss Schofield in A Woman of No Importance, Miss Ruddock in A Lady of Letters and Miss Fozzard in Miss Fozzard Finds her Feet.⁴ These middle-aged ladies are constantly trying to increase their importance in the world. Although people do not take much interest in them, they manage to convince themselves that they matter, and that they are a cut above the rest. This attitude expresses itself in a particularly mannered way of speaking, exaggerated in syntactic construction and using words that seem heightened and betray social pretence: Miss Fozzard says that her brother “broadcasts the entire contents of his bladder down the stairs” (147), Miss Schofield “frequents a table” (14). Like most of Bennett’s northern characters, these women are trapped in restrictive lives which can only be made bearable through shielding themselves from obvious truths and through editing reality. They are built up convincingly as characters to whom nothing is more important than respectability, and we see how this aim has stifled their lives. Yet, in many cases, Bennett very gradually turns these carefully constructed images on their heads. While Miss Fozzard’s appearance and speech do

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³ I am grateful to my neighbour, Simon Childs, for clarifying the use of this expression.

⁴ These three monologues are all published in The Complete Talking Heads. All three characters are played by Patricia Routledge in their televised versions.
not change throughout the monologue, the subtext gradually makes us realise that she is offering sexual services to her chiropodist, who is a shoe fetishist. The encounters between him and Miss Fozzard are described in minute detail, yet we are unsure until the very end whether Miss Fozzard realises (or wants to realise) what she is actually doing. When it becomes clear that she does, she solves the problem by simply not naming her activities — as long as there are no words for them, she can continue to convince herself of her respectability:

Little envelope on the hall table as I go out, never mentioned, and if there’s been anything beyond the call of duty there’ll be that little bit extra. Buys me no end of footwear generally. I keep thinking where’s it all going to end but we’ll walk that plank when we come to it. . . . I suppose there’s a word for what I’m doing but ... I skirt round it. [FADE] (157)

Through showing the gap between appearance and reality, Bennett uses a technique similar to the Brechtian “Verfremdungseffekt,” and creates a climate of parochial subversion. The Bennett women are much ridiculed, and instantly recognisable. The audience’s pleasure in knowing somebody who speaks and acts just like the person on stage creates expectations, which are gradually turned upside down. The world of respectable ladies is a place where freedom can be felt only in prison (A Lady of Letters), old people talk about sexual repression (Waiting for the Telegram) and supposedly nicely spoken middle aged women offer special services to shoe fetishists. The case of Miss Fozzard can be applied to the larger picture: Bennett’s northern portraits and Bennett’s supposedly cuddly persona fulfil expectations at first, but if one is bothered to look behind the façade, one discovers subversion, anger and sadness. Both his work and his persona invite the audience to closely observe and reconsider the familiar. As Gillian Reynolds puts it:

Think of lime pickle, or a teddy bear stuffed with rusty wire, or how ice burns your hands. Alan Bennett is not what he is often mistaken for. Because he has spectacles and a floppy fringe of hair he is assumed to be cuddly.... Bennett’s work never stops telling us he is angry, melancholy, scornful, doubtful. (21)
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Revising the Nation: 
Globalisation and Fragmentation of 
Irish History in Sebastian Barry’s Plays

I

The assumption that the effects of globalisation on collective memories are purely negative is widely shared. Globalisation of culture is often equated with the forgetting of local knowledge and traditions, the erosion of cultural memory and its replacement by the superficial and ever-changing present of the media (Nora 11–12). Such a diagnosis regularly includes a reference to the nation as the opponent of globalisation, as still the primary site of memory, identity and solidarity. The sociologist Anthony D. Smith, for instance, stated ten years ago:

Unlike national cultures, a global culture is essentially memoryless. Where the ‘nation’ can be constructed so as to draw upon and revive latent popular experiences and needs, a ‘global culture’ answers to no living needs, no identity-in-the-making.... There are no ‘world memories’ that can be used to unite humanity; the most global experiences to date – colonialism and the World Wars – can only serve to remind us of our historical cleavages. (180)

Yet a rigid opposition of national and global culture reduces globalisation to a process of world-wide homogenisation and underestimates the simultaneity and interpenetration of the global and the local. The concept “nation” did not only emerge as a reaction to globalisation but contributed to the spread of specific practices and institutions: National states, national literatures, and national histories were created following or opposing the models of other nations. Theorists like Roland Robertson emphasise the plurality of centres from which globally diffused cultural elements emanate and point to the great variety of their local adap-
tations, leading rather to a hybridisation than a homogenisation (Robertson 26–27). Thus, even without a coherent global collective memory, similar memories and ways of remembering may emerge.

Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider argue that in the present phase of globalisation, the references of collective memories to other collective memories have significantly increased. The African-American and Irish communities, for example, have adopted the Jewish term “diaspora” for their own experiences. The memory of the Holocaust possesses a new importance for the collective memories of nations other than Israel and Germany. During the 1990s, it mobilised transnational solidarity as well as legitimised international interventions in Bosnia and the Kosovo. The sufferings caused by imperialism and the resistance against it have become transnational narratives that reinforce national narratives and transcend them at the same time. Apparently, current tendencies do not lead to a replacement of national memories but to their increasing integration in networks of local, national, transnational and global memories, by which the dominance and the exclusiveness of national memories is weakened.

Over the last fourteen years, Sebastian Barry has written a cycle of seven plays, starting with *Boss Grady’s Boys* in 1988 up to *Hinterland*, which was first performed in January 2002. These plays reinvent and reflect on Irish history in perspective of the present experience of globalisation. Most of them focus on neglected or forgotten communities, classes, and groups of Irish society — an obscure Protestant sect on Sherkin Island, Catholic loyalists, Home Rulers etc. — and interweave their fates with events and developments beyond the scope of national history — the Indian Wars, Victorian show business, the First and Second World Wars, etc. Barry’s history plays thus question the boundaries and the homogeneity of the national narrative. From the margins of the nation, his plays disclose alternative views on central events and developments of national history. Time and again in Barry’s texts, reflection on the Irish national narrative takes the form of a dialogue with the central narrative of another nation, the American frontier myth, which has been turned into a global popular genre by modern mass media, the western. My paper will examine the ways in which Sebastian Barry relates Irish to American history, concentrating on two plays: *White
Globalisation and Fragmentation of Irish History in Sebastian Barry's Plays

*Woman Street* and *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn*, first performed in 1992 and 1995 respectively.

The transnational dialogisation of Irish history in Sebastian Barry's plays appears particularly significant in the context of a dramatic tradition which has long restricted the treatment of history almost exclusively to the exploration of its own national past. It is very easy to name several English, French or German history plays based on historical figures and incidents that are not part of their respective national histories. In the case of Irish dramatic literature, such an observation is difficult to maintain. During the Irish Renaissance, Yeats and Lady Gregory even excluded all Englishmen from their history plays, although conflicts with England form the very background of these texts. Plays like *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *Devorgilla* or *The White Cockade* focus on collisions within the Irish community, especially the decision between the eternal national tradition and the individual interests of the moment. Irish history is systematically isolated in these texts. That Ireland possessed its own individual history separate and independent from that of Britain had still to be demonstrated.

One of the most important criteria for defining a nation is a common past, perceived as a series of unique experiences in homogeneous, empty time. In his seminal study *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson has analysed the ways in which the novel and the newspaper facilitate a vision of the simultaneity in which individuals unknown to each other lead their lives, forming the nation as a social organism moving through time. It is this notion of simultaneity that changes a territory into an imagined unity of experience (24–36). To attain its legitimising force, national history has to be unique. Yet, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out, Anderson's "secular, historically clocked, imagined community" (Anderson 35) also introduces a time of repetition (Bhabha 294–97). In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, for instance, a tradition of martyrdom is evoked that transcends linear time and stabilises as an eternally recurring pattern the space of the nation:

There was a red man of the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die tomorrow (Yeats 224–25).
In this passage, different conflicts, enemies and martyrs are superimposed upon each other. Ignoring chronology, Cathleen blends Brian Boru's fight against the Vikings with the resistance against the Elizabethan conquest. When the protagonist joins the tradition of martyrdom in the end, his sacrifice is not a deficient imitation but a true repetition, recreating the nation as a whole. Paradoxically, neither such a repetition nor the implicit reference to Christ's self-sacrifice seriously endanger the uniqueness of the national narrative but, on the contrary, strengthen its coherence as a mythical fate.

Only when intertextuality transfers central national topoi into unusual contexts, it starts to question the national narrative. After the foundation of the Irish Free State, dramatists like Sean O'Casey, Denis Johnston and Brendan Behan demonstrated that the reference to a heroic tradition is first of all a rhetorical strategy that can be used in an inflationary way. Nevertheless, these parodies of the national historical canon maintained an almost exclusively national perspective. By ridiculing the official version of Irish history and its instrumentalisations, they also attempted to represent Ireland in a more realistic way.

The critique of the national memory often implied a general doubt whether the past could supply any orientation for present action and experience at all. Interestingly, references to the western and the frontier myth in Irish literature repeatedly occur in this context. In Brian Friel's Philadelphia, Here I Come, for instance, the wide open spaces of the American West, symbolising freedom and progress, are compared with the Irish "quagmire," foiling self-realisation by a suppressive reverence of the past (34, 79). Another example for a quite similar constellation is Seamus Heaney's poem "Bogland" (55–56). Contrasting the Irish condition with the American Dream, these texts aim at depicting particularly Irish situations. Though its mythical status is ironically marked, the coherence of the central American national narrative is maintained and used to construct a distinct, Irish narrative. Barry's plays, however, initiate dialogues that do not foreground the differences but the similarities, affinities, and transitions between the two national narratives.
II

Motifs of the American West can be found throughout Sebastian Barry’s dramatic works. Since the plays cover almost the whole period from the 1890s to the 1990s, the spectator can observe how the American West enters Irish culture through different channels and in different forms over the course of history: In *Prayers of Sherkin*, set during the 1890s, some characters have read dime novels about Jesse James, while in *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn*, set in the early 1900s, Buffalo Bill himself, with his Wild West on tour in Britain, appears on stage. Other plays, like *The Steward of Christendom*, refer to films and movie stars, and one is actually itself a kind of western.

*White Woman Street* is set in Ohio at Easter 1916, that is: at the time of the Easter Rising, one of the most decisive and undoubtedly the most mythologised event of twentieth-century Irish history. Its principal character, Trooper O’Hara, left Ireland in his youth and fought in the Indian Wars. At the time of action, he is the leader of a strange, multicultural gang of outlaws, consisting — apart from O’Hara — of an Englishman, a former Amish, a man from Brooklyn of Chinese and Russian parentage, and an African-American from Tennessee. Trooper O’Hara persuades his men to go east and raid a gold train near the little town White Woman Street. His motivation, however, is more complex. White Woman Street was the scene of a traumatic experience of his in which the whole horror of the Indian Wars is encapsulated. The town was named after a famous prostitute, the “only white woman for five hundred miles of wilderness” (147). Thirty years before, Trooper O’Hara went to see this prostitute and found out that the woman in the dark bedroom was actually not white at all but a very young Native American girl. After he had slept with her, she cut her throat before his eyes. This encounter is the central event of the play unfolded in an analytical structure.

As the principal clients of the “white woman,” Trooper mentions Irish immigrants, some of whom even believed her to be Irish. Their longing for the prostitute bordered on religious worship: “Weren’t she like a saint to those men, a place of pilgrimage.” Trooper calls her “a holy well, a shrine, St Bridget,” and explains his own decision to go to her with “[t]hat need to view a sight of home, a goddess of my own...
Jürgen Wehrmann

countrymen” (148). For Trooper and the Irish workers, the “white woman” functioned as a personification of home, of Ireland herself.

Thus, the “white woman” is linked to figures like Cathleen ni Houlihan, Dark Rosaleen, or Shan Van Vocht and the underlying myth of sovereignty. In Ireland, there is an old and particularly strong tradition to allegorise national feeling as love towards a woman, personifying the nation (Innes 18-22). After the Elizabethan invasion, Ireland was represented as a woman in distress, sometimes even as a whore debased and raped by the English oppressor (Jordan 62). In Yeats’ and Lady Gregory’s drama Cathleen ni Houlihan, Cathleen’s chastity is emphasised (226-27). The martyrdom for the nation is substituted for the sexual act as expression of love, because the marriage of country and people is barred. Yet the protagonist’s turning to Cathleen is also a return to the past, to Irish tradition. The leaders of the Easter Rising dreamed of the restoration of an idealised pre-Norman Gaelic culture and claimed to act in the name of a personified female Ireland. Accordingly, the republic as the marriage between Ireland and the Irish people was envisaged as the renewal of a lost state of unity.

Trooper’s encounter with the “white woman” inverts this sexual drama. Rather than trying to rescue the woman in distress from English molestation, Trooper uses her as a prostitute. He does not die for her but helps to cause her death. Furthermore, he finds out that the “white woman” does not match his idea of racial purity. Instead of finding a new home and unity, he destroys another. Nor can the ruin of primal wholeness be reversed, as Trooper realised witnessing the suicide of the Native American girl: “Jesus of the world, I couldn’t put her together again, Mo, she had a waterfall coming from her wound, and making a sound of water too. She just choked and died in front of me” (Barry, Plays 163).

The strange simultaneity established between this western endgame and the Easter Rising suggests a reading as a bitter comment on Irish republicanism. The story of the “white woman” questions the essentialist idea of national homogeneity and exposes the imaginary character of the nation. It is readable as a parable how nationalist violence legitimised to restore a lost cultural unity can replace and continue imperialist oppression.

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By merging the two national narratives, Barry discloses the triadic model of history underlying both, pervasive in European and American thought at least since Romanticism: The loss of a primal unity is followed by a phase of estrangement that is to be overcome by a renewal of unity on a higher plane. The frontier’s time structure has always been more complex than the simple equation of the frontier with future and progress to be found in Friel’s cited text. On the one hand, the frontier is indeed perceived as “a gate of escape from the bondage of the past” (Turner 229), but this regeneration is supposed to be achieved through a return to a former, more natural, authentic way of life. Frederick Jackson Turner described the movement westward as one into both past and future, as a departure that is also a return:

American social development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. ... This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (229)

The “crucible of the frontier” (187) is supposed to create a new, specifically American culture that maintains the achievements of western life and reconciles nature and civilisation — often symbolised in novels and movies by the marriage of the western hero and a schoolteacher from New England.1 Thus, in the story of the “white woman,” the central narratives of both Ireland and America are represented as varying a utopian promise of unity and redemption which appeared to justify violence and exclusion. The intrusion of another national narrative allows to deconstruct the notion of national history as a closed and unique whole.

III

While the frontier myth as a national narrative sustaining an exclusive identity and legitimising violence is criticised in Barry’s plays, the American West also serves as a reservoir of images inspiring individual emancipation. The protagonist of The Only True History of Lizzie Finn,

1 The paradigmatic example is usually Owen Wister’s The Virginian (1902), “the founding text of the twentieth-century western” (Pye 14).
identifies herself with figures from the American West in a way significantly different from Brian Friel’s hero Gar O’Donnell who imagines a new life in another country. Descending from a family of travellers in Kerry, Lizzie Finn has risen to some fame in Britain as a dancer and singer in music halls, when she marries Robert Gibson, a shell-shocked veteran of the Boer Wars. She learns only later that he is the heir of an impoverished Ascendancy family. In Ireland, the two become social outcasts: Apart from Lizzie’s low descent and indecent former profession, her husband’s declaration that he had changed sides during the war and later fought for the Boers alienates the Ascendancy neighbourhood. As Lady Gibson, Robert’s mother, is stigmatised with her son, she drowns herself. In this situation, Lizzie sees her husband and herself as outlaws comparable to Frank and Jesse James: as people outside of all frameworks of society who have thereby gained a fragile freedom. In contrast to Friel’s Gar O’Donnell, Lizzie interprets her own and her husband’s life in Ireland in the terms of a western novel, The Only True History of Frank James, by Himself: “What’s our history, Robert, but something like that poor Frank James had, a true history of lies, and written by nobody, as you told me yourself? There’ll be nobody in the wide world to remember us. ... So what odds where we are?” (Barry 233). During the last dialogue between Lizzie and her husband, the southwest of Ireland is transformed into a Wild West, quagmire becomes prairie. At a time when the Irish Renaissance imagined Ireland as one huge space of memory in which every landmark and place was connected with traditions and stories to be known and revived, Lizzie and her husband resist a repetitive and deterministic cultural memory and treat the national territory as open for new inscriptions.

The anxiety of forgetting and being forgotten, of losing one’s place in the cycle of tradition and ritual is a central problem throughout the play. The spectator learns of two different threatened collective memories. First, there is the oral popular culture of the countryside represented by Lizzie’s father, “a memory of singing” (179). In contrast to the Irish Literary Revival’s idea of an unspoiled oral culture, this is a memory far from homogeneous that connects many different groups of the area:
He knew songs from the islands that he didn't sing much, unless we were rowed over to the Blasket on a sweet summer day. He knew tradesmen's songs and tinkers' songs and he knew little parts out of operettas that he could sing for the rich people if he were asked. (179)

Second, there is the memory of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, aristocrats like Lady Gibson or the Castlemaines who strive to maintain tradition in the face of economic and political decline. As the ideal of decorum and ceremony observed, Lady Gibson perceives the evensong of the Church of Ireland: “The clockwork, the rightness of it all. The truth of it. All simplified before God by the singing” (225). This Anglo-Irish collective memory is highly homogeneous and exclusive. Both memories structure space and assign people to specific places, by which they identify themselves and are identified. Memory, space, and identity are inextricably interwoven, as the explanation of the gardener Bartholomew to his new mistress demonstrates: “Every district has its custom by which a district endures. You must revere the custom or die away” (219).

The integrity of the land, the space of memory, is threatened by the sea which develops into the prominent image for the threat of oblivion in the course of the play. Already the first dialogue refers to the proximity of the sea, its pervading presence in the air and even in the costumes, which do not dry, so that the idiom becomes a true comparison: “Shipshape as ships,” Lizzie calls Jelly Jane and herself before the performance (174). The sea is the element of movement and change. Within the Anglo-Irish community, there are recollections of a former positive attitude to the sea. A great-uncle of Robert “helped to lay the telegraph cable across the Atlantic” (212), and during the childhood of Robert and his brothers, the games on the beach, their “Africa,” anticipated their service for the Empire (197). Of course, the mastery of the sea constituted a central element of the British imperial narrative with which the Ascendancy identified itself. Accordingly, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* begins with a meditation on the sea as an imperial place of memory which can “evoking the great spirit of the past” like no other (Conrad 47). Yet such an identification with change and progress proves to be fragile in the case of the Anglo-Irish in Barry’s play. Lizzie meets Robert on the beach, a stranded man (174–76). Robert’s big house is situated near the coast which is exposed to constant erosion, and his fear of “falling into
the sea with poor Red house” expresses the fear of all Anglo-Irish in the face of historical change (234). His mother drowns herself in the sea (228). The ocean, connecting, mingling, engulfing everything, cannot be constantly controlled.

Paul Gilroy describes the ocean not as a medium of civilising influence, radiating from the imperial centre, but as “a system of cultural exchanges” which occur in manifold directions and lead to the emergence of hybrid cultural phenomena that cannot be easily placed (14). *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* appears to follow a quite similar idea of the Atlantic, when the circulation of international Victorian show business throws Lizzie Finn and Buffalo Bill together in one coastal town. Buffalo Bill, of course, is a spectacular example for the blending of historical action and representation. Commuting between the western prairies and the eastern theatres during the 1870s, he gave his deeds in the west a theatricality imbued with his knowledge of the audience’s ideas of the West. Buffalo Bill managed, for instance, to stage himself as the avenger of General Custer for the American public (Slotkin 71-73). Thus, he became both a central idol as well as an important creator of the frontier myth. In *The Only True History of Lizzie Finn* however, his depiction as an inventor of history is ambivalent. His show re-enacts the archetypal fight between “Settlers” and “Redmen,” the triumph of civilisation over wilderness (186–87). The Indian Wars are represented as historically necessary and ultimately defensive “savage wars” which were imposed on the American nation by the Indian’s inability to adopt civilisation.² When Buffalo Bill appears “in all his moustached splendour” (Barry, *Plays* 187), he personifies this heroic movement westward, the Manifest Destiny structuring the narrative of the American nation. Later, however, in a melancholy song, Buffalo Bill looks back to the time when he wandered on the prairies before the settlement, “in the Land that Time Forgot:” “... a man could live here all his life/ and never would grow old” (191). He represents himself as somebody who fled civilisation, who sought a new, individual life. This is of course an ambivalence typical of many westerns that question the

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² Cf. Slotkin’s description of the concept of “savage war” (12–13).
possibility of a reconciliation between nature and civilisation, individuality and community.

Lizzie Finn rejects the triumphant, collective narrative of conquest. Watching Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, she wants the Indians to win. Yet she embraces the individualist narrative of permanent departure, and also the idea of inventing one’s own history. The costume becomes the alternative to the opposition between the land, structured by an oppressive and exclusive memory, and the oblivion of the sea. Clothes give the opportunity to invent a new and playful identity, to transcend custom by imagination. Lizzie’s dresses and performances in the music halls went beyond the codes sustaining the social and sexual order, but such a behaviour only becomes a real transgression when it leaves the liminal theatrical space with Lizzie sewing magnificent dresses for the servant girl (222–23). The parallel history of the American West, fictitious as well as true, allows Lizzie and Robert an alternative imagination of their own situation: as outlaws. This implies accepting the failure of their attempt to come home. It even means to reject being at home as a goal at all: “ROBERT: ... I’m not so keen to be at home. I’d rather be a foreigner some place. Like Cork, for instance.” (234)

The Only True History of Lizzie Finn and White Woman Street correspondingly use the outlaw as an image for migrants, minorities, and hybrid biographies, crossing the borders and living between them. The creation of open space by the outlaw is not a strategy of oblivion but one of transformation and enlargement. The recognition that the outlaw has only “a true history of lies” (Barry 233) bound and constituted by the discourses of society facilitates the imaginative construction of alternative histories: both as action and representation. Lizzie Finn’s remark cited above describes what Roy Foster has called Barry’s “project ... of recovery” (Foster xxiii), aimed at lives whose histories could not be contained in conventional national narratives. By varying the western novel’s title in that of his own play, Barry marks the fictional character of his project and emphasises that he does not want to create a new authoritative memory. Although the retrieval is necessarily imaginative, the invention of possible pasts visualises the complexity and the openness of every historical moment.
In Barry’s plays, the American and the Irish national narratives intersect in coincidences and suddenly observable analogies. When the Native American manager of the brothel tells Trooper the news of the Easter Rising, when Lizzie Finn meets Buffalo Bill, simultaneities are established which subvert the national unity of experience. What Levy and Sznaider describe as the impact of the present phase of globalisation on collective memories, is pursued as deliberate strategy in Sebastian Barry’s plays. These tendencies can be summarised as follows: dislocation and pluralisation of collective memories, increased reflectivity, a transition from narratives celebrating national heroes to narratives focused on the victims of history, and a decreased mutual exclusion of opposed narratives of former enemies or culprits and victims (219-36).

Sebastian Barry may not be the first Irish dramatist to transcend the boundaries of national history — Brian Friel’s *Volunteers* and Tom Kilroy’s *Double Cross* could be named as earlier examples — but he has probably done so in the most radical and persistent way. In Barry’s plays, the ‘globalisation’ of national history, the disclosure and amplification of globalising tendencies in Irish history, takes the form of a fundamental critique of the national narrative. The rejection of a narrow and suppressive collective memory by characters like Lizzie Finn could be interpreted as a plea for forgetting the past and living in the present. Indeed, the most celebrated newcomers during the last decade, Marina Carr, Martin MacDonagh and Conor McPherson, do not write about history but contemporary life in specific regional or subcultural environments. They focus on individuals who are not designed to be typical in a national sense. Barry’s plays, however, indicate a continuous concern with the history of minorities and the everyday life of the majority which were not contained in the heroic narratives of national history. In contrast to O’Casey, Johnston and Behan, Barry, like Brian Friel and Stewart Parker before him, combines the critique of the Irish memory not with a general devaluation of the past but with the project of alternative histories, of an enlarged and plural memory which is perceived as necessary for orientation in the present.

Although the current phase of globalisation certainly erodes the contents and the authority of national memories to a certain extent, the
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nation retains its place in the plural networks of memory. Sebastian Barry's new play *Hinterland* is an interesting departure from his former treatment of history. Its principal character is a major Irish political figure from recent history, who is depicted in the present, when he is publicly accused of entanglement in corruption. In Barry's character Johnny Silvester, Charles Haughey, chairman of Fianna Fail and head of various Irish governments for many years, has been recognised, and the play has instigated a fiery debate. Barry's choice of this subject seems to reflect the problem that a national perspective cannot be completely given up, as long as the nation remains an important political field of action. Furthermore, such a character raises questions of political responsibility and historical truth which could be evaded in Barry's earlier plays. The demonstration of the fictionality of all discourse appears to be an appropriate means for the undermining of the authority of collective memory. Yet to accuse somebody of a crime, claims of truth become necessary. Johnny Silvester attempts to seek refuge in questionable historical comparisons: "It's like the Salem witch trials, the McCarthy era, ... the last years of Tsarist Russia, the Third Reich, Kristallnacht, is anyone safe?" (16–17). The problematic analogy between the outlaw and the neoliberal ego only interested in his own profit is exposed when a corrupt politician chooses an utterance of the hero of a western movie for his motto: "Never explain, never say you're sorry" (37).

Works Cited


Local or Global? Negotiations of Identity in Drew Hayden Taylor's Plays

Ethnic Identity in a Globalized World

For at least the past fifteen years, multicultural criticism has been predominantly circling around questions of identity. What can also be diagnosed in ethnic studies is an ever-popular presence of essentialist approaches with particular emphasis on origin and biological heritage. In times of open borderlines, crumbling concepts of 'nation' or 'culture,' increasingly vigorous forces of 'political correctness' and worldwide communicational networks — however elitist or regional these may actually be — this is an understandable move. As historian Arthur Schlesinger puts it, “[t]he more people feel themselves adrift in a vast, impersonal, anonymous sea, the more desperately they swim toward any familiar, intelligible, protective life-raft; the more they crave a politics of identity” (Schlesinger 12). In this quest for certainties, however, a radical focus on separatism seems to stand in direct opposition to a peaceful global coexistence, as the recent proliferation of terrorism in the United States, in Northern Africa, and in the Middle East has shown. On the

1 Reinhold Wagnleitner convincingly shows that contrary to common belief, the internet is not a global phenomenon, as less than 4 % of humanity have access to it, the majority of which are educated, male, urban-based and wealthy. It can rather be considered a U.S. American phenomenon, as 90 % of all internet documents are in English, and 99 % of all servers are based in the USA (Wagnleitner 11). Nevertheless, the internet has come to be the main forum for all economic, cultural, political, and military competition on a global scale, which makes it part of a project that Wagnleitner calls the American “Sili-Colonization” of the world (Cf. Wagnleitner, 11, 12, 16).
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one hand, humanity seems in need of group labels that are differentiated and protected against a loss of specifics; on the other hand, the globalized threats that arise from these struggles universalize our need for peace.

There have been various attempts at mapping out new identity strategies to deal with this dichotomy. Writers such as Cornel West, Arnold Krupat, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Schechner — to name only an arbitrary few — have taken up the historical oppositions of difference and the melting pot and developed concepts that confirm, complement or transcend this dualism. More and more, the belief in identity as a fixed, ontological unit is substituted by the concept of a dynamic, polysemic, and non-linear process. David Hollinger, for instance, has argued in his *Postethnic America* that human beings usually choose to be part of various (even conflicting) social groups at the same time. Therefore, ‘identity’ as an exclusive and predetermined category has to be replaced by the term of voluntary and revocable “affiliation” (cf. Hollinger 6-13; 105-11). Julia Kristeva, whose theory is another case in point, has convincingly argued that the recurrence to origin is only a “hate reaction” that arises from the unstable nature of subjectivity. In her *Nations Without Nationalism*, she argues psychoanalytically that we tend to suppress our inner conflicts and project them onto others (Kristeva 4). Hence, a solution would be to accept the dichotomy of self and other as an internal phenomenon inherent in every individual: “Let us then ... endeavor ... to recognize ourselves as strange in order better to appreciate the foreigners outside us instead of striving to bend them to the norms of our own repression” (Kristeva 29).

Identity, deduced from Hollinger and Kristeva, is thus not an ontological but a functional term; it is the arena where the political and the

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2 While West and Kingston clearly propagate the celebration of difference or assimilation, respectively, most of the other theories usually come in dialectic threesomes with various terms such as pluralism, syncretism, and cosmopolitanism (Hollinger); multiculturalism, fusion, and interculturalism (Schechner), or nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and indigenism (Krupat).

3 A similar distinction of identity concepts has been outlined by Werner Sollors and Arthur Schlesinger, although the latter’s political agenda is slightly more on the universalist side.
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personal overlap, and it is most significantly a battlefield of power. In the discursive struggle for selfhood, what matters most is the distribution of discursive agency: whether one identifies oneself or is identified by someone else makes all the difference. As Linda Alcoff has warned, the practice of speaking for others manifests “a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation [which leads to] erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies” (Alcoff 29). Therefore, identity is always performative, and the stage as the field for its process of establishing power relations is more than a metaphor.

In Native American and Native Canadian studies, the issues of ‘authentic’ identity have always been particularly relevant. Ever since colonial times, constructs of “Nativeness” have been instrumentalized and appropriated for profit, and the unbroken demand of anachronistic or pan-tribal stereotypes today — which has been termed “Indianenthusiasm” by Harmut Lutz (cf. Lutz 15) — dangerously feeds on notions of authenticity. Similarly, a politics of authenticity as a method of censorship is also quite visible in the field of Native theatre. In most of contemporary criticism, its existence is either completely ignored and denied, or it is categorized as somehow ‘outside’ theatre, classified as ritual and religious activity and displaced into the field of anthropology. If acknowledged at all, Native theatre seems to count only as a regional phenomenon that serves the celebration of differences and provides “authentic” material for binary constructions of self and other. As Cherokee director Elizabeth Theobald regrets, what is expected from Native theatre is both authoritative and limiting: “Native playwrights are writing about powerful women, family crises, adoption, cultural alienation. The wider public wants Geronimo, Cochise, and Black Elk…” (Theobald 142).

Fortunately, this current misconception of Native theatre finds an exception in Canada, where Tomson Highway’s play The Rez Sisters first

4 Besides, as Dominique Legros points out, most contemporary Native cultures are marked “inauthentic” because of their temporal distance to pre-colonization traditions, which not only assigns them a clearly inferior place in the hierarchy of cultures but which simply undercuts the cultural authority of any indigenous people. Cf. Legros 131.
paved a broad path to mainstream recognition in 1986 and officially represented Canada at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1988 (cf. Highway ix). Drew Hayden Taylor enjoys an equally successful reputation — with more than fifty professional productions of his plays, and five major theatre awards — and he is also increasingly famous abroad, with one of his plays already being available from a German publisher.

*Drew Hayden Taylor’s Plays*

In his first and in a more recently published play, *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* from 1989 and *Alternatives* from 1999, Drew Taylor discloses the strategies of domination behind various approaches to identity by disentangling their components of ontological substance, violence, exclusion, and appropriation. Both plays reveal that the borders of selfhood are usually drawn along the lines of authenticity, the concept of which is then deconstructed. His characters negotiate and perform Hollingerian “postethnic” identities by choosing their affiliations and learning to acknowledge one another. Eventually, both texts rely on the strong forces of humor and dialogue to reconsider given power systems, to lay open the relativity of all positions, and to subvert the discursive processes of domination. Thus, apparently focusing on a regional (Native Canadian) context, both plays actually have a global impetus in their transcultural invitation to characters and audiences alike to explore alternative identities without either essentializing or losing their political relevance in universalist generalization.

*Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*

*Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock*, first staged in October 1989 at the Sheshegwaning Reserve on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, brings together three 16-year-old boys who share the same ethnic background (Odawa and Ojibway) but who come from three different points in time. Rusty, a contemporary teenager in search of a quiet Saturday night with a few beers, climbs “Dreamer’s Rock” — a place formerly used for vision quests and meditations — which now becomes the setting of a crack in what astronomers would call the “spacetime continuum.” He is mysteriously and involuntarily joined by Keesic, who actually lives around the year 1590 and is just as confused and taken aback by the meeting as
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Rusty. The boys seem to have nothing in common, and although by “magic” (T 13) they suddenly speak the same language, their conflicts seem insurmountable. Just when Rusty has successfully marginalized Keesic as “primitive,” the third protagonist Michael appears from 2095 and relativizes both of them. They all engage in a conversation about their tribes, tradition, personal problems, and survival, always trying to challenge each other’s claims to their identity. In the beginning, the dialogue is marked by power struggles, cynicism, and misunderstandings, but as the evening proceeds, they finally realize that they canvaluably contribute to each others’ lives when they see things from a larger perspective and acknowledge each person’s right to speak for himself. A temporal form of universalism translates into a spatial one, and when Keesic and Michael finally return to their times, Rusty has been enriched by a feeling of community and a deep understanding of his place in society at large. What he carries with him to his regional present time is an agency of reinforced global scope.

Domination, Cultural Censorship, and Deconstructions of Authenticity

At first glance, we may think that each of these characters represents a generalized (or “authentic”) feature connected with his time: Keesic from the 1590s seems to stand for the “true,” unspoiled, Native tradition; Rusty apparently represents a stereotypical idea of contemporary reservation life (marked by alcoholism, lack of future perspective, and poverty), and Michael is the icon of a future in which medical care has progressed but the environment is polluted and the distinct Odawa culture has been lost. At a second glance, however, this clear-cut set of categories blurs its own lines.

In overlapping personal and political power struggles, the characters employ various strategies of dominance. When Keesic first appears, Rusty derives his claim to power and superiority from the place, stating that “I was here first” (T 15). This ‘anti-colonial’ attempt to preserve his literal and psychological space does not only resound with historical irony, but it remains ineffective: Keesic does not waive his right to be there. In a next step to keep his opponent and his “fortune-cookie talk” (T 16) at bay, Rusty names him, thus inscribing on him fixed sets of identity like “Tonto” (T 16), “Moses” (T 22), “Rip van McGregor” (T
21) or “Buckskin Bill” (T 25). He later tries the same strategy of categorization with Michael, labeling him “Flash Gordon” (T 25), “Sherlock” (T 37), “Obi-Michael-Kenobi” (T 38) or “Buck Rogers” (T 41). Interestingly, although Rusty believes in biological origin, his anachronistic name catalogue already undermines this concept by destroying the idea of a homogeneous self. “Moses” adds a Christian component to Keesic, “Rip van McGregor” alludes to Irving’s fictional Dutch colonist, and the “fortune-cookies” point to yet another construct of (Chinese) culture. For Michael, his reference to a 19th century European detective does not carry any of the implications that the two science fiction comic heroes or the Star Wars mentor of the Jedi do. However unaware Rusty may be of it, his use of such a variety of labels imparts that the identity that is authentically “Indian” to him, is already heterogeneous, multicultural, and global.

Similarly to Rusty, Michael also employs the strategy of categorization to dominate others — although he does so a little more subtly. He assigns Keesic and Rusty to different historical drawers, both below his level. Unlike Rusty, he does not show any overt rejection but instead assumes the role of the well-meaning teacher. Not only does he interrupt or correct the others’ statements (T 23, 41), but he also plays with his power to reveal or withhold information about Rusty’s future. What is even worse, and quite similar to the attitude of many anthropologists, he considers Rusty and Keesic interesting objects of historical study: “I have a history teacher that would love a chance to interview subject matter like you” (T 24). Interestingly, Michael too undermines his own strategy. When Rusty asks him who he is, he refutes his own belief in authenticity and acknowledges the multiple dimensions of subjectivity instead: “Philosophically, psychologically, economically, culturally? Be specific” (T 24).

In contrast to the other two, Keesic does not try to overpower either the place or the people. Through his curiosity, he (literally) questions all the discursive patterns and hierarchies that the other two automatically accept. Thus, his openness turns out to be the key to overcoming the conflicts induced by their struggle for superiority, is the practical realization of Linda Alcoff’s call for the right to speak for oneself, and illustrates an appeal that critic Kathryn Shanley has summarized: “[b]etter
many voices speak at once and we learn how to listen than allow only one voice to ventriloquize our own love song back to us” (Shanley 697).

The notion of authenticity is most forcefully deconstructed by the characters’ negotiations of their ‘Nativeness.’ From the beginning, this concept is eroded by Keesic, who when asked what nation he belongs to simply replies that “We are the people” (T 28) or, logically from his point in history, does not even know what an “Indian” is (T 34). In a central scene toward the end of the play, the boys’ biological, political, and even cultural criteria of validation have to crumble:

MICHAEL. You know in many ways, we’re all very much alike.
RUSTY. I hate to disappoint you there, Michael, but look at the three of us. We ain’t nothing alike ...
MICHAEL. We’re all Indians.
KEESIC. I am Odawa, not this ‘Indian.’
MICHAEL. Okay then, we’re all Odawa.
KEESIC. No.
MICHAEL. Pardon?
KEESIC. No. I don’t think you’re Odawa. Or you, either. Everything I have heard today is not Odawa.
RUSTY. Hey, I was born on the reserve. I am so Odawa and Ojibway. I got a card and everything.
KEESIC. It’s more than blood. ...
Until our language is spoken again and rituals and ceremonies followed, then there are no more Odawa.
MICHAEL. That’s not fair. I know I’m Indian. Just because I don’t like muskrat or moose meat is no reason to say I’m not Indian. (T 45–47)

While Rusty — in an ethnocentric line of argument — claims his identity with reference to biological essence and his accredited belonging to a political group (his status card), Keesic represents a more indigenist point of view by placing the language, the ceremonies, and the traditions at the center of Odawa identity. Michael, who would have the least of a claim according to both these standards, tries to transcend these definitions by simply maintaining the right to decide for himself, from what Hollinger would call a “postethnic perspective” (Hollinger 105). When all three of them stick to their own ideology and deny the others’ claims to be “Native,” they necessarily feel existentially threatened and their conflict escalates in violence. It is only when they focus on their shared and universal human experience, such as conflicts with parents, emo-
emotional turmoil in love relationships, and an insecurity of values, that they stop fighting and accept each other’s existence. In addition, their constellations continually change, thus disclosing the dynamics of group formation as temporal and contextual, and undercutting the notion of any communal authenticity. What also subverts this construct of authenticity is an inescapable feature of language — the multiplicity of meaning. Thus the entire political message is condensed in the polysemic title of this play: The essence of the place “Dreamer’s Rock” is neither just a concrete location in Ontario, a spiritual place of vision quests, a point of outlook, or a tourist attraction, but all of the above. Similarly, Toronto is not only a city in Canada (with all the associations of urban, mainstream life) but a word whose etymology provides the key for understanding the entire play: in its original Odawa sense, Toronto means “where people gather to trade” or “any place where important things happen” (T 27), which turns the plot into a global event.

AlterNatives

While in Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock the gap between individual and communal identity is successfully negotiated through dialogue, openness, and learning, these methods largely fail in AlterNatives. First produced on July 21, 1999 in Kincardine, Ontario, this comedy additionally brings all attempts at establishing authentic group affiliations to a clash. Angel, a 24-year-old Ojibway science fiction writer, and his partner Colleen Birk, a Jewish professor of Native Literature, are the hosts of a dinner party. Also invited are two other couples: Michelle, a “vegetarian veterinarian,” and her partner Dale; and Bobby and Yvonne, a former friend and a former lover of Angel’s, who are now a couple. In the discussions circling around identity, the personal and the political significantly overlap: relationship problems, personal insecurities and professional failures all fuel aggressions which are then acted out in a political field. As in Toronto, the need for fixed identities is instrumentalized for the establishment of social hierarchies, for which political labels are used as masks. In a step further than the former play, however, these labels go beyond Nativeness and cast a spotlight on the heterogeneity of “whiteness” to include transnational denominators, such as Jewish or Celtic heritage, and, furthermore, even ingredients such as eating, drinking, or
smoking habits, profession or literary preferences. Witty dialogues, sharp cynicism, and characters that are occasionally reminiscent of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* carry the audience through an evening of conflict and struggle. The "exorcism" here, however — to take up the comparison with Albee — is not one of personal illusions or imaginary lives but one of politically correct labels, which eventually prevent us from seeing what we share behind our carefully chosen roles and which paralyze a potential of communication that may enrich us.

Power Struggles, Political Correctness, and Deconstructions of Authenticity

In attempts at manifesting personal superiority, the characters try to dominate each other by various strategies. Colleen does not only claim Angel as her property ("He's all mine, including his DNA" [A 32]) but she tells him what to do, wear (A 10), read (A 37), write (A 16,100), and even what to be. By trying to shape him into the writer of "the great Canadian aboriginal novel" (A 102), she tries to inscribe a Nativeness on him that fulfills her own expectations and may increase her prestige. Michelle, too, is dominant towards her partner; she openly shows her disrespect for Dale (A 32, 74) and forces him to be a vegetarian. Both women claim they only want to "broaden [their partners'] horizons" (A 37), but the oppression at work is too obvious to let the historical, colonial allusions go unnoticed. While these two women impose their desired 'authenticity' upon others, Bobby uses this strategy for himself. Through a compulsive use of historical sarcasm, he continuously stages himself as a political victim and tries to gain credits of compensation by evoking guilt in others. His initial joke of having "to sign a treaty ... to get a drink around here?" (A 44) is met by an awkward silence, but despite this sanction he continues his game of breaking codes. When his provocative conflict with Michelle about vegetarianism escalates, and Michelle announces that she will go home, his cynicism culminates: "Home? To Europe?" (A 121). In perfect contrast to Bobby's separatism, Dale's strategy to maintain his position can be described as assimilationist. He does whatever is required of him, as long as it restores the harmony and extinguishes differences.
All of these strategies are based on the belief in authenticity, and, via situational silences (which are effective methods of social sanctioning, cf. A 44, 62, 95, 99, 125), they lead to the breakdown of communication in the end: First Michelle, then Bobby and Yvonne, and finally Colleen resign from the dialogue by leaving the party in anger or bitterness. Dale joins Michelle out of solidarity but misses her and returns, so that the little hope for understanding that remains in the end is carried by those two characters who tried to evade the conflicts in the first place.

As in Toronto at Dreamer's Rock, the desire for domination here is nourished by essentialist categories. "Authentic" Nativeness is initially defined by features such as oppression, extinction (A 37), spirituality (A 20), or more specific denominators such as eating moose meat (A 17), having an opinion on Dances With Wolves (A 47), or a good sense of direction (A 22). Similarly, the icons of "Jewish" identity are assembled as knowing how to make Rugelach (A 18), eating kosher meat (A 35), circumcision (A 36), or owning a Menorah (A 112). None of the characters fulfills expectations that match with their origin; on the contrary: according to these criteria, Angel fits more into the category of Jewishness while Colleen is certainly more Ojibway than anyone else. Bobby on the one hand establishes a clear role of authentic Nativeness (which he vaguely bases on the collective experience of "roaming this continent for 15,000 to 100,000 years," [A 119] and of presently being oppressed) and benefits from playing it. On the other hand he contradicts his own constructions, because, as chosen influences on his mindset, he lists a multicultural selection of Martha Stewart (A 41), Jean-Paul Sartre (A 48), or Friedrich Nietzsche (A 49) and even expresses the irrelevance of all labels by stating that "[i]t doesn't matter where the message came from as long as it's delivered" (A 50).

Yvonne most radically lays open the fissures in political correctness, because she writes a thesis about the inherent falsities of ethnocentric positions (A 76). Professionally proving that traditionalism itself relies on exclusion and selection and is thus an oppressive ideology, she severely criticizes that the need for "authenticity" silences historical truths:

In their hurry to recapture the old days of our Grandfathers [sic] and grandmothers, these people are being very selective about which traditions they
choose to follow, often excluding many ancient practices that would not be considered politically correct in today's society. ... Centuries ago there were arranged marriages, frequent inter-tribal warfare, slavery, and in some cases, rumours of cannibalism. These are not even mentioned at Pow wows or Elder's conferences. It's as if they didn't exist. It's become a form of cultural hypocrisy. (A 76)

What her arguments show is that authenticity has little to do with historical truth, and is established on a very thin line between generalization and appropriation. The fact that Yvonne, who calls herself an "alterNative Warrior" (A 78), has been marginalized and excluded by her own community casts a highly critical light on the policing and control of what can or cannot be spoken (as does the fact that the play received a bomb threat in Vancouver). Her example shows that the dynamics of oppression and power work just as effectively within an ethnic community as they do transculturally.

The Dimension of Trickster Performance

Just like Toronto at Dreamer's Rock, this play's title already signifies its multiplicity of meaning. The character who most strongly personifies this semantic openness — not only through his name — is Angel. He refuses to subscribe to any fixed set of rules, but instead self-critically deconstructs his own affiliations one after the other. When he reveals that he likes science fiction, and Dale wants to categorize him as a "Trekker," his answer mocks both the affiliation to Star Trek and the notion of heritage: "Only half, on my mother's side" (A 94). Angel grants himself the right to move outside the restrictions of protocol and shapes himself by references to other cultures (e.g. Chinese, A 98) or even denotes himself as an outsider to Native identity: when Yvonne and Bobby arrive, he stages himself as the European American frontier hero: "Oh oh, time to circle the wagons. The Indians are here" (A 40). As all of this happens playfully and eventually serves the subversion of hierarchical concepts, Angel can be considered an agent of trickster performance, in which, according to Tina Wikström, the elements of community, interaction, love, and humor are the ingredients for survival (Wikström). His name, of course, underlines this by its allusion to a metaphysical sphere, but it reveals itself as another unstable sign by
ironically adding the connotations of protectiveness and goodness from a Christian context. Just like Coyote, Nanabush, Raven, or other mythical personifications of the trickster, Angel evades questions and critically points them back at themselves:

COLLEEN. Do you have a history with her?
ANGEL. That’s a difficult question to answer considering Native people tend to view history differently than non-Natives.
COLLEEN. Stop these silly word games. I want to know if there’s anything here I should worry about?
ANGEL. Global warming? (A 91)

His humor and playfulness additionally illustrate the instability of signification and point beyond the essence of the trickster sign itself. Quite significantly, the play’s central revelation about Angel is the element that finally extinguishes all belief in authenticity: we find out that when they were eleven, Angel and Bobby were paid by anthropologists to tell them legends “as long as we promised they were authentic, handed down to us by our ancestors” (A 128). The stories they told were entirely made up, and they were published in a collection of Legends of the Ontario Ojibway (A 127), which is not only in its seventh printing but also widely studied as “authentic” material at universities (A 129).

However, as tricksters are not destroyers but creators of culture, Angel contributes to the disturbance of social order only to eventually help reconstruct it. The end of the play reveals that it is also clearly within Angel’s trickster power to draw and highlight the line between fiction and reality: after he has told Dale a science fiction story, his words “The End” do not only mark the closure of the tale but also of the entire play.

If Angel’s power extends beyond his story to include the play that frames him, it certainly also reaches out to cover the audience. May this trickster-like communal interaction happen more or less overtly, both plays are in any case an invitation to the audience to look behind the dynamics of individual constitution and group formation. In their complete deconstructions of intra- or transcultural authenticity, both plays uncover the dynamics of power and reveal that identity labels of everyday life are not existential fixities but merely masks with a market value. From both a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, Taylor’s two plays...
explore identities as universal processes of performance that are instrumentalized for personal needs. In line with Hollinger's performative postethnicity, his plays propagate that to identify and speak for oneself is a basic human right which should not be sold out for labels of political correctness. Impersonating Kristeva's notion of the "étrangers à nous-même," his characters show that "otherness" is always something inside ourselves which we project outside to protect the illusion of a homogeneous unit of "self." It is probably no coincidence that it was Nietzsche — Bobby's favorite philosopher in *AlterNatives* — who stated in 1870 that the subject — as all human truths — is a fiction; a necessary illusion to keep us psychologically functioning, but an illusion all the same (cf. Nietzsche 881). The trickster discourse, the irony, and the humor in these theatrical texts provoke a critical awareness of this illusion and provide an incentive not to take its ideologies too seriously.

Drew Hayden Taylor himself has not grown tired of mocking the ideologies of identity in trickster-like fashion, for instance when he labels himself a "NAIFNI" ("Native /Aboriginal /Indigenous /First Nations /Indian" [Taylor, "First" 44]) or when he invents his own community:

> This is a declaration of independence, my declaration of independence. I've spent too many years explaining who and what I am repeatedly, so as of this moment, I officially secede from both races. I plan to start my own separate nation. Because I am half Ojibway, and half Caucasian, we will be called the Occasions. And I, of course, since I'm founding the new nation, will be a Special Occasion. (Taylor, "Pretty" 439)

The question thus does not seem to be whether we define ourselves as regional or global agents, but whether, in a world of open and negotiable borderlines, this distinction makes any difference at all. What seems to be more important is to cast some critical light on the hierarchies behind those questions, to unravel their mechanisms of power, to break the silences of the unspeakable and — possibly — to meet the restrictions of identity with a universal trickster smile.
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The Theme of Political Betrayal in the Plays of Zakes Mda

Africa’s political history has been a continuous song of promises and betrayal. Mike van Graan captures this sad reality very eloquently in his paper titled “Theatre in the New South Africa: Sellout or Vanguard”:

Utopia is a relative state of being. For many in oppressive situations, the kingdom which they pray might come has for so long been “a pie in the sky when you die.” Many died, and for those left behind, the demise of the immediate tyranny which drove them to prayer in the first place has been confused with the notion that the kingdom has come ... Yet for many postcolonial Africans, for many postmilitary junta Latin Americans, for many postcommunist dictatorship East Europeans, the kingdom which they at one stage thought was nigh, if not among them has still not come and may indeed be further away.

But maybe for some it has come. Either new elites have emerged or old elites have continued to enjoy their privileges, but now with greater legitimacy as the tyranny under which they acquired their privileges has been cast on the scrap heap of history and the cocktail party and caviar boundaries have been redrawn to accommodate a few former victims. (Van Graan 23)

This summary of the realities of the third world political landscape forms the bedrock of Zakes Mda’s political vision in most of his plays in the seventies and eighties. His scepticism of the political future of his country South Africa is born out by the fact that many African countries which have acquired independence are no better than South Africa which at the time was gripped in the turbulent political atmosphere created by apartheid. Broken promises seem to be the rule rather than the exception in all of these countries. He articulates his disillusionment in an interview with Myles Holloway: “Yes, I am disillusioned with independent Africa. I don’t see any overt independence at all. Most liberated
countries have just taken over the colonial structures” (Holloway, “In-
terview” 85).

Mda’s disillusionment found expression in We Shall Sing for the Fa-
therland, a play produced in 1978 in which he accurately predicted the
state of the common man in a post-independent South Africa. It is a
play that concretely demonstrates the concept of betrayal, for like mil-
ions of other Africans, the South African masses represented by the
two hoboes in the play would find out that all their sweat and blood for
the liberation of their country was in vain. Like other Africans north of
the Limpopo, they would find out that independence has merely been a
change of guard; only this time the new guard happens to be black. Ma-
futha, a character in the play who is representative of the new ruling
elite, demonstrates his lack of concern for the welfare of his people.
While the veterans Sergeant and Janabasi were trying to reach out to
him, he was busy negotiating with the white banker, symbolic of West-
ern neo-colonial institutions, for a position in the country’s Stock Ex-
change. The sense of betrayal prompted the veterans to ask the all-
important question:

SERGEANT. We are the men who sacrificed our sweat and blood for the cause. Was
it for this Janabari?
JANABARI. We made the sacrifice, our only mistake was to come out of it alive.
(Mda, Fatherland 7)

Mda’s intention in this play is to explore the idea of betrayal in the lives
of the common people. Throughout the play he exposes the veterans to
all kinds of ill treatment reminiscent of the colonial days. There is,
firstly, the Cabinet, the highest policy maker in the land whose sole aim
should be the welfare of the poor masses but whose callous eviction of
the veterans from the park could only be compared to the landgrabbing
tendencies of the colonial masters.

OFISIRI. Cabinet is interested in you insofar as it wants your type cleared of the
streets. (Brandishing the letter). Our country is chairing an international confer-
ence on Environment. Delegates from all over the world will be flocking all over
the city. Tours will be conducted for them throughout our beautiful city, and as I
told you before you are not anyone’s idea of a tourist attraction. (Mda, Father-
land 16)
The thematic similarity between this incident and another that took place in Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s play *This Time Tomorrow* needs to be emphasized. Mda has repeatedly stated that his inspiration and perhaps scepticism came from reading the works of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o of Kenya. In *This Time Tomorrow*, Wa Thiong’o also highlights the callous evictions of the poor masses from their slum dwellings in Nairobi. Kiongo, the city council health inspector in *This Time Tomorrow*, declares:

*By twelve o’clock today these shacks must be demolished they are a great shame on our city. Tourists from America, Britain and West Germany are disgusted with the dirt that is slowly creeping into a city that used to be the pearl of Africa.* (Wa Thiong’o, 193)

Notice the similarity in reasons given by both officials for the eviction of their people in both *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* and *This Time Tomorrow*. In both cases the interest of visiting European and American tourists came before that of the masses of the people.

Later on in the play Mda presents the audience with the cumulative effect of the suffering and the feeling of betrayal by the veterans. He articulates their loss of patriotic zeal through their inability to sing for the fatherland:

*SERGEANT. Come Janabari, let us sing for the fatherland. The land we liberated with our sweat and blood. Our fatherland. (They stand together, and then open their mouths wide, trying to sing. But the voice won’t come out. In frustration they stop trying and sit down). It is of no use, Janabari.*

*JANABARI. Our voices are gone.*

*SERGEANT. And we can’t sing for the fatherland before we sleep.*

*JANABARI. Let us sleep without the song. (Mda, Fatherland 23)*

The song element is important here because it represents patriotism and love for one’s country. In the European tradition, the national anthem is supposed to stir up the spirit of love and commitment to one’s country. In the African tradition, a song is used to demonstrate joy and happiness. This means that there is always a song for every occasion. The fact that the veterans are unable to sing for their father means that they have lost their love and patriotic zeal for their country.

If there is one character that Mda uses effectively to buttress the theme of betrayal, it is Mafutha, who, as mentioned earlier, is symbolic
of the new leadership in post-independence Africa. This is the leader upon whose shoulders rest the hopes and aspirations of millions of people who had suffered in the hands of the colonial masters. What Mda portrays of the character of Mafutha is the metamorphosis that takes place in the mind-set and attitude of African leaders after independence. Thus we see through the character of Mafutha an example of a self-centred, egocentric and corrupt leadership. Mda represents these qualities through Mafutha’s actions. When he comes across the veterans in the park, he ignores them:

JANABARI. Good morning, sir, Mr Mafutha.
SERGEANT. How are you, Mr Mafutha.
Businessman looks the other way and walks on with offended pomposity. ...
JANABARI. Mr Serge it is our people who snub us. (Mda, Fatherland 140)

In the African tradition, especially in black communities in South Africa, greeting is a very important aspect of social relationships. When people greet each other, it is a sign of respect and care. When people fail to greet, it is regarded as arrogance and lack of respect. Mda draws from this aspect of the African tradition to highlight the gross neglect of the masses of the people by the leadership. The fact that Mafutha was negotiating his political future with a foreign power reflects his lack of sensitivity to his people’s needs. Frantz Fanon highlights this point in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, when he says:

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land and restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the General President of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie. (Fanon 133)

It is important to point out that Mda’s indictment of the postcolonial situation is based on his Marxist-Leninist principles. His distaste of capitalist exploitation is voiced later by Janabari who says:

We are not getting our share of whatever there is to be shared. That is what the learned ones call Capitalism. It has no place for us. ... Only for the likes of Mr Mafutha and the other fat ones as The Chamber of Commerce and Stock Exchange. Serge, I have been trying to tell you that our wars were not merely to re-
place a white face with a black one but to change a system which exploits us, to replace it with one which will give us a share in the wealth of this country. What we need is another war of freedom, Serge, a war which will put the land back to the hands of the people. (Mda, *Fatherland* 22)

Marxist-Leninist ideology is the key distinction at the time between Mda's social criticism and the more or less monolithic nationalism of the Black Consciousness practitioners. Mda locates the source of oppression at the conjuncture of class, race, and capital. According to Myles Holloway:

>Mda's political vision, particularly in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* is more comprehensive than the dichotomy of black heroism and white oppression that characterise a great deal of black theatre. Mda attempts to encompass in dramatic terms the complex interaction of race, class and capital as the determinants of oppression and exploitation. (Holloway, *Social Commentary* 30)

In Mda's view the concept of oppression is the prerogative of the rich and powerful but frightened class who are paranoid about losing everything. It does not matter whether they are the colonial masters or the new black elite. It is usually the poor and the helpless who suffer.

If Mda was predicting the concept of betrayal in the political state of affairs in post-independent South Africa in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, he is certainly being vindicated in "Mother of all Eating." As the title implies, "eating" which is a synonym for corruption has taken on a far greater dimension than that expressed in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*.

Mda must certainly have felt betrayed, for his earlier scepticism arising from his experiences in other African countries, namely Lesotho, where he spent a greater part of his life and which he articulates in his earlier play, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, seems to be manifesting itself in the new South African democracy. "Mother of all Eating" centres around the activities of a Principal Secretary in one of the government Ministries (Health) simply referred to in the play as "The Man." Through the actions and dialogue of this character, Mda exposes the extent of corruption and betrayal of the poor masses by government bureaucracy in the post-independence era. The audience will certainly react with shock to the level of corruption being portrayed on stage but as The Man rightly points out, this is no time to point accusing fingers
or gasp in horror because everyone in society is guilty of corruption in one way or another:

I hear your whispers and snide remarks. Who of you here can claim to have clean hands? Now tell me! Did you buy those BMW's and Benzes that you drive with your meagre salaries? I am no different from any one of you. The word that we use here at home is that "we eat." Our culture today is that of eating. *Re ne re ja soft*. Everybody eats. From the most junior civil servant to the most senior guy.

(Mda, "Mother" 9)

Using the character — audience interaction device which again is drawn from the traditional African theatrical repertoire, Mda points out that because the society is rotten, no one should sit in judgement. The audience here sit in judgement not only on the characters on stage but on themselves as well. Mda’s intention in this play is to shock the audience with the reality of political independence in Africa and South Africa in particular. He presents this play using direct symbolism, a total deviation from the vague and ambiguous symbolism he applied in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*:

MAN. Oh it is you Mr Director of Department of tenders. ... Ah so you have received the five thou[sand] that I left in your pigeon hole at the club. That’s very nice isn’t it? ... Well it is true that we chose that particular tender because the contractor promised to pay us ten percent kick back if we gave him the contract ... Yes the contract was tendered at 10 million rands. Yes of course ten percent of ten million is one million ... let’s not kill the goose just yet, we are going to get lots and lots of golden eggs from it. (Mda, "Mother" 7)

The use of direct symbolism as opposed to the vague and ambiguous symbolism used in the earlier play demonstrates the playwright’s anger at the turn of events in the new dispensation in South Africa. He had warned that South African masses may not reap the fruits of independence in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*. His scepticism seems to have been vindicated by the high levels of corruption demonstrated by officials of the present government. The central character describes the extent of corruption in the ministry:

You see in government, when they discover your corruption, they promote you. There are two reasons for that. The first is that they want to shut your mouth so that you won’t reveal what you know which may expose some of the top dogs in government. The next reason which is more important is that they appreciate
The theme of corruption and subsequent betrayal of the poor masses is further emphasized by Mda’s use of contrasts. He presents another character Joe who is a close friend of the main character. Joe is a picture of the ideal citizen. He is committed, patriotic and exceptionally honest in the discharge of his duties, but the irony here is that he is regarded as a villain because of his honesty. He is fired from his job and finds it difficult to secure other jobs. When he manages to secure jobs he is fired from each of them because of his honesty:

MAN: Well, the big guns had had enough of Joe and his holier-than-thou attitude towards our noble tradition of “eating.” They fired him. After being kicked from Power Supply, Joe moved from job to job. Every time he gets a good job with a lot of prospects for “eating” he tries to be honest. So they kick him out. I have told him “wake up Joe, wake up” but Joe will never wake up. Right now he is unemployed. (Mda, “Mother” 24)

Another of Zakes Mda’s recent plays that highlight the theme of political betrayal is “You Fool How Can the Sky Fall.” Produced in 1995, the play mirrors the illusions of petty dictatorship in a country that has just achieved political independence and exposes the extent of nepotism in government; how new cabinet posts are created for friends and family. The play also shows how preoccupation with power can bring a halt to the normal running of a country, causing chaos. In a review of the play in *The Citizen* of February 1995, Daniel Raeford says:

Zakes Mda’s play “You Fool How Can the Sky Fall?” was written, I understand, sometime before the new dispensation came about in South Africa. So while some of the situations contained therein may be deemed painfully close to the bone, one can only hope that the playwright was not being overly prophetic. (Raeford 16)

The play centres around a small band of Cabinet Ministers confined in what looks like a prison cell. They spend their time paying sycophantic deference to the benevolent President, lusting after the female minister among them and suspecting each other of betraying the cause (throughout the play the ministers never discuss anything regarding the improvement of the standard of life of the people). In the course of the play, the ministers are taken away one after another to be interrogated.
and tortured by some unnamed power referred to simply as “them.” At the end, the traitor is revealed to be the benevolent dictatorial President and he gets his due punishment.

Presented in the form of a comedy, this play bears close resemblance to *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* for it makes far reaching comments on the ugly state of affairs in post-independence Africa, using a combination of satire and symbolism. Thus while the audience will be amused by the dialogue on stage, the message will nevertheless be clear to them:

You remember when the daughter of the Honorable Minister of Agriculture was getting married? Yes, the wedding of the year ... or was it the decade now? The wise one, the father of the nation instructed the Honorable Minister of Information to decree that for the whole of that week nothing newsworthy in the country and indeed in the world would happen. Those who were going to commit murder and rape, waited in eagerness for the week to end. All international struggle and natural disasters were on hold. All the news on radio, on television and in the newspapers was about the wedding and only the wedding was to be reported ... and in meticulous detail too. (Mda, “Fool” 6)

It is this preoccupation with trivial issues and the total neglect of the real issues affecting the life of the ordinary man in the street that dominates this play and forms the central theme. Mda here suggests something irresponsibly carefree in independence. He jokes about how lightly the cabinet takes its responsibilities. He presents a cabinet on whose shoulders rest the hopes and aspirations of the majority of the people, but who are more concerned with trivial matters than to bother about this very important responsibility, as demonstrated here by the Culture and Agriculture Ministers fighting over the affection of the Minister of Health, a woman who seems to enjoy the attention as well:

*CULTURE*. May I wash your feet beautiful princess?

*HEALTH* (*amused*). We don’t have any water here.

*CULTURE*. With my tongue (*To AGRICULTURE*) See if you can top that.

*AGRICULTURE*. Me, I don’t lick your feet. I give you the time of your life as only a man can do. *He pinches her bottom.*

*HEALTH*. You do that again I am going to cut your thing, which is already not there in any case. (Mda, “Fool” 22)

While the Ministers of Agriculture and Culture struggle over the affection of the Minister of Health, the Minister of Works is revered for his
numerous money-spinning contracts he had brought the way of the Honourable Cabinet Ministers:

JUSTICE. Why would we wish him dead. We all admired him. We all owe our wealth to his resourcefulness. (Mda, “Fool” 11)

The concept of deception which goes hand in glove with betrayal is emphasized by symbolism. Mda has done this before in We Shall Sing for the Fatherland where the removal of the hoboes from the city streets and parts was done to present a façade of prosperity and cleanliness to visiting delegates of an environment conference. In “You Fool How Can the Sky Fall?” Mda shows how the Cabinet manipulates the perceptions of the public, using its influence to deceive and betray. There are painted roads to bluff the pontiff, the frontage of film set housing to deceive investors into perceiving prosperity. The daughters of the revolution represent the only real threat to the dominance of the President and his cabinet. Mda uses them to symbolize the suffering masses who have had enough of the neglect and oppression that characterize post-independence Africa. The shrapnel wounds on their naked bodies symbolize the wounds of colonialism, oppression, poverty, lack of dignity and the struggle for liberation. The fact that these wounds have not healed is symbolic of the fact that oppression, poverty and lack of dignity, which were characteristic of their lives in the colonial era, continue even in the post-independence era and highlights the corruption, dictatorship and insensitivity that characterize the post-independence era. The fact that their wounds have only healed on the surface symbolizes the disappointment felt by the masses who have sacrificed so much for independence only to be betrayed by their own people whom they fought to put in place.

HEALTH. You said when you saw the naked women they had scars ... healed scars.
YOUR MAN. Scars ... wounds. ... Ma’an, I tell you they may look like scars, but inside they are dripping with the agony of freshness. (Mda, “Fool” 66)

It is these scars dripping with the agony of betrayal that characterize life in post-independent South Africa and by extension Africa. It is important to note that when one looks at the political situation in this country, Mda’s criticism of post-independence Africa is very close to the
situation at home. The theme of betrayal is especially relevant to South Africa when one considers the fact that South Africa should have learnt useful lessons from the political situation in other African countries. What we see here, however, is a situation where the real heroes of independence are abandoned to a life of hopelessness and despair while the black elite, having achieved power through the sacrifice of these poor masses, abandon them to a life of poverty — the same situation they suffered under apartheid. In The City Press of 10th June, 2001, Mpumelento Mkabela writes that after sacrificing their youth for freedom, thousands of ex-soldiers are now faced with a bleak future. The writer goes on to say: “Seven years into the new dispensation, there are thousands of former cadres roaming the streets unemployed with no hope for the future as the 25th anniversary of June 16th approaches” (Mkabela 21).

It is a credit to Mda that he could foresee this situation before it arose and this reinforces the fact the theatre needs to play a more active role as vanguard of the poor masses of this country. As Robert Kavanagh rightly put it: “The changed political atmosphere in the country makes a revaluation of the function of the theatre in South Africa a painful necessity” (Kavanagh 38).

Mda himself has pointed out in a paper he presented at a Yale seminar that a truly South African theatre will not be that which is the sole privilege of the dominant classes but that in which peasants and workers are active participants in its production and enjoyment (Mda, “Politics and Theatre” 35). Mda’s creativity and foresight is never in doubt. At a time when playwrights were concerned with the evils of apartheid he had the foresight and courage to deal with issues beyond the demise of apartheid.

Works Cited

The Theme of Political Betrayal in the Plays of Zakes Mda

III.

Teaching Contemporary Drama in English
Making Play-Texts Live: Teaching Drama as Experience

"The aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible"
(Ramsden 5).

1. Introduction

This workshop was developed out of conversations on the nature of CDE conferences and our awareness of a general lack of guidance for university tutors. Although we do agree that a conference such as this one cannot be expected to provide a panacea, we think that it can be a forum for exploring each other’s teaching experiences, for exchanging ideas and possibly for developing new approaches to the teaching of contemporary drama. We proceeded in the following manner: First, Merle Tonnies presented an experience-based report on the teaching of "in-yr-face" theatre. We then presented a framework of teaching methods based on the “deep learning” approach and Mike O’Neil’s model of the learner in higher education which were discussed in detail in individual groups. For the group discussion we provided more specific questions developed with an emphasis on teaching drama. In order to provide a focus, we decided to apply all questions to Top Girls by Caryl

1 The participants of the workshop were: Carmen Birkle, Jutta Pallasch, Ulrike Hatterner, Werner Huber, Paul Friedemann, Michael John Hayes, Marion Hebach, Kara McKechnie, Anja Müller-Muth, Cordula Quint, Peter Paul Schnierer, Mark Schreiber, Heiko Stahl and Eckart Voigts-Virchow. The authors would like to thank all participants for a lively discussion and for the teaching tips and hints they suggested.
Churchill. The workshop ended with the summing up of ideas which offered new insights into the possibilities of teaching drama in a way that is student-oriented and efficient. In this paper we would like to present the theoretical basis and the results of the workshop.

2. Teaching “In-Yer-Face” Theatre

Merle Tönnies’s report focused on her experience teaching British ‘youth drama’ in an undergraduate seminar (Proseminar) at Bochum University. ‘Youth drama’ was a label that allowed her to mix recognised authors of the new wave of 1990s “in-yer-face theatre” (Aleks Sierz) with less well-known young dramatists, who show the same impulse— in Benedict Nightingale’s words— to “evoke a world unlikely to be familiar to most Times readers” (Nightingale 34). The works chosen were Mark Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking (1996), Claire Dowie’s Easy Access (For the Boys) (1998), Rebecca Prichard’s Yard Gal (1998) and Enda Walsh’s Disco Pigs (1996). As a contrastive foil, a key representative of ‘youth drama’ in the more established sense, Nigel Williams’s Class Enemy (1978), was included.

The group started off with 41 participants, of whom 35 stayed until the end of the semester. It is thus noticeable that plays which sent reviewers into an ecstasy of outrage not only attracted more than the usual number of participants (25 to 30 in Bochum), but entailed more-than-average student commitment. Group standards, of course, vary irrespectively of the topic, but it is at least possible to conclude that the ‘shocking’ elements of the plays did not antagonise the student readers. Nevertheless, whereas the participants without exception perceived Williams’s Class Enemy as ‘dated’ rather than offensive (with the language alienating them by the incomprehensibility of the seventies slang), the plays from the 1990s polarised the group. The most controversial point turned out to be gay sex. Most noticeabally, the explicitly described ‘normal’ penetration scenes in Shopping and Fucking sparked off more discussion about the limits of the representable than the hints about Gary’s

2 Walsh is, of course, Irish and not British, but as commentators have often included Disco Pigs in the new trend after its 1997 UK première at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Tönnies felt justified in doing so as well.

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(apparent) death. On the other hand, the characters’ ‘unfamiliar’ world as such (with violence, poverty and drug abuse) did not repel the students. As their responses showed, they were often ready to identify with the protagonists, thereby implicitly refuting critics like Michael Billington who see these figures as much too ‘extreme’ to function in any way as “a social metaphor” (Billington 6). Especially with regard to Yard Gal, participants explicitly referred to the shared age group as a basis for identification. With all four plays, it was conspicuous that the class participated far more energetically in attempts to characterise the dramatis personae than with many other contemporary plays. The 1990s works proved to be very useful teaching materials in this respect, as they shift between types, clichés and (apparently) round characters, thereby familiarising students with a whole range of possible approaches to dramatic character.

In terms of theatrical presentation, a similar degree of variety is observable. On the basis of the printed text, Ravenhill’s drama seems relatively conventional, keeping the theatrical illusion intact and using a chronological plot-line. For a more complete impression, students thus had to be asked to imagine the “rhythm [of] club culture” that Sarah Hemming has observed in the “ear-splitting music and garish fluorescent signs” in Max Stafford-Clark’s original production (Hemming 17). As the neon design took the form of ‘labels’ attached to each scene, there was a multi-media dimension in this version. This is an aspect emphasised in Easy Access, where the protagonist — a male prostitute — tries to come to terms with the sexual abuse to which he was subjected by his father (note the parallel with Shopping and Fucking) by creating a video of his experiences and thoughts. The play frequently cuts from live action to video projections (which sometimes overlap), so that the audience is invited to take up multiple perspectives, and the boundaries between the different levels of ‘reality’ become blurred. This effect is intensified by scenes where the protagonist participates in two situations at the same time. Especially his friend Gary can thus be read as a ‘ghost’ character conjured up by his psychological needs.³ Yard Gal and Disco

³ The author herself indeed created a solo version of the play in 1999, again using video elements (Gardner n.pag.).

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Pigs, on the other hand, are typical examples of “nineties poor theatre” (Sierz 227). They deliberately focus the spectators’ attention on the actors, who function as ‘narrators’ and recreate the (past) events of the plot. Prichard openly breaks down the fourth wall in this process, having her two ‘yard gals’ tell the audience about their gang and the events that have come to separate them. Walsh’s play remains more ambiguous. As the narration is less conscious, the audience is left without any kind of mediation. The spectators of Disco Pigs have a lot of work to do — and readers even more. After all they have to do without the help of the actors’ gestures and facial expressions, and the protagonists’ idiolect is much harder to unravel when read than when heard. This is, of course, especially true for non-native speakers of English, so that it is perhaps no surprise that in the final survey, more than three quarters of the participants considered this the least appealing drama discussed. The reasons given, however, were not restricted to difficulty. Students remarked that the play had no relevance beyond the idiosyncrasies of the two basically inaccessible characters and indulged in ‘formal’ experiments for their own sake. Ravenhill, on the other hand, received a fair share of criticism for making his ‘points’ about the commercialisation and globalisation of contemporary society rather too overtly, which mirrors the opinion of many theatre critics on Shopping and Fucking and demonstrates that the students were not primarily looking for ‘easy’ plays. Yard Gal indeed turned out to be by far the most popular play and was lauded for combining social relevance with some degree of theatrical innovation, as well as for its authentic and unsentimentally depicted characters. Against this background, it is also possible to explain the participants’ general rejection of Class Enemy with the rather overt message of this drama — all the more so because it ultimately presents the

4 See e.g. Nightingale’s complaint that “Ravenhill bludgeons us so much and so often with his overriding point” (Nightingale 34). Paul Taylor comments on “the occasional explicitness of intent” in the play (Taylor 7).

5 In the last two respects, the participants’ views were very close to the reviewers’, who praised Prichard for avoiding “every sentimental temptation” and achieving “absolute authenticity” (Nightingale 34; see also Spencer n.pag. and Benedict 7). As to the form of the play, on the other hand, the students explicitly did not wish — like Michael Billington — that “it showed more and told less” (Billington 14).
young characters as victims of society, whereas Prichard pointedly refuses to show her protagonists in such a way (see Nightingale 34). All in all, the 1990s plays proved a success in the seminar, both according to the students’ impressions and with regard to teaching aims reached.

3. Approaches to Learning — Approaches to Teaching

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight suggest two metaphors for tutor-student interaction in higher education:

1. the tutor as banker, paying out knowledge in predefined units to student customers who have been accepted and are prepared to invest in a bank loan;
2. the tutor as midwife, assisting at the birth of knowledge, which is likely to remain with students for a long time and have a major impact upon their lives. (80)

The first metaphor has been strongly criticised. And yet, it still remains influential in higher education in particular where course syllabi are primarily concerned with ‘ground to be covered’. The second metaphor obviously sounds better. But how can we assist or ‘facilitate’ students’ learning if we are subject to a curriculum that is filled to overflowing? How do we deal with our own awareness of the complexity of the topic we are trying to teach and avoid overloading the students with knowledge? Furthermore, although the content-driven teaching approach showers the students liberally and indiscriminately with ‘knowledge,’ we cannot be sure that each individual student takes that knowledge on board. Looking at all these challenges to teaching in higher education we decided to concentrate on a teaching approach which emphasises learning as experience.6

As tutors in higher education we need to be aware that students have already developed approaches to learning which they make use of quite deliberately. Entwistle describes three distinct approaches to learning, namely the “deep approach” where the intention is to understand material for oneself, where the student is actively interested in the course content. Students relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience, and look for principles and underlying patterns. Ramsden links this with

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6 We would like to encourage further teaching workshops which deal with the knotty problem of how the balance between the content-orientated and the more time-consuming approach of teaching as experiencing knowledge can be struck.
the “holistic” approach where students attempt to understand the whole of a learning task rather than just its individual parts (42 ff.). A second approach is the “surface approach,” which Ramsden connects to an “atomistic” approach to learning, in which students focus on parts of a learning task rather than the whole (Ramsden 42ff.). The intention is to cope with content and tasks set. Students study without reflecting on either purpose or strategy. They treat the course as providing them with unrelated bits of knowledge. They find it difficult to make sense of new ideas and tend to memorise facts rather than trying to understand them. Students using this approach are likely to feel pressurised by the amount of work to do and they tend to worry about work. A third approach to learning is the “strategic approach” where students’ intention is to excel on assessed work. Students are alert to assessment requirements and they are attentive to the perceived preferences of lecturers. Students employ time and effort effectively to maximise grades (cf. Entwistle quoted in Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 87). We cannot claim that any one of these approaches is ‘bad’ while another one is ‘good’: the approaches are, after all, only a strategic reaction to the pressures of the syllabi. Graham Gibbs, for example, has shown that students tailor their learning approaches to the specificities of their courses (cf. Gibbs 23). We might deplore students’ persistent use of the “surface approach” or the “strategic approach,” but as long as it makes sense to them and seems to deliver the desired results, they will not choose the more time-consuming “deep approach.”

In the workshop we tried to develop methods which encourage students to use the “deep approach.” Ramsden has shown that “[d]eep approaches are related to higher quality outcomes and better grades. They are also more enjoyable” (Ramsden 53). Gibbs, quoting a study by Marton and Biggs in Australia, emphasises that “[s]tudents tend to take a deep approach where they are motivated to understand, where they are active, where they discuss what is to be understood, and where they encounter knowledge in well-structured ways” (Gibbs 24). We focused on the specifications and concretisations presented by Mike O’Neil in his article “Towards a Model of the Learner in Higher Education.”

The best way to achieve a positive attitude towards “deep learning” is to use “student experience as a learning resource” (O’Neil 119). This
involves acknowledging the students' present academic level, their personal interests and experience as well as their future professional goals. In practice, the experiential approach leads to a "spiral" curriculum, "sequentially developing learning activities based on the learner's previous learning" (O'Neil 119). This can be enhanced by an open curriculum and self-constructed modules, which try to integrate students' needs — be it work-related skills or areas of special interest. During the group discussions in the workshop, however, it was observed that self-constructed modules seldom work on an undergraduate level. Students at that level have not developed a broader knowledge of texts or a critical awareness of the relative importance of a text to be able to suggest them for in-class discussion. Tutors need to strike a balance between a closed and an open curriculum — i.e., they must be open about their choice of texts and situate them within a wider context of a canon while, at the same time, drawing attention to the constructedness of any kind of canon. It was also suggested that, as far as seminar papers are concerned, it might make sense to allow the students greater freedom to choose their own primary as well as secondary material, because then they should possess a greater awareness of questions of canon.

O'Neil stresses the importance of motivating cooperation and responsibility (120–121). The main methods of achieving this are student-managed workbooks or portfolios, which serve as the basis for discussions in class or in groups. All this, ideally, could culminate in student-managed projects, which enable them to practise their research skills, their analytical skills and their information-processing skills. Students either simulate 'normal' everyday situations or they cooperate with 'real life' institutions. Eventually, students turn into tutors when they present their results to their fellow students.

The participants in the workshop came to the conclusion that in order to encourage a deep learning approach, the tutor must consciously relinquish a major part of his or her responsibility for the contents of the course. Instead, the students need to learn to increasingly take responsibility for their own learning.
4. Teaching Recipes

In the following we present the ‘teaching recipes’ that were developed in the workshop. Firstly, we present ideas for the presentation of ‘background knowledge’. Secondly, we look at the possibilities for increasing students’ awareness of the plurimediality of theatre through visualising a performance, improvising short scenes and, finally, through mounting a full production of a scene. These exercises are complemented by discussion- and production-oriented exercises. Lastly, we reflect on the assessment of students’ work.

4.1 Developing Learning Tasks

In order to encourage the students to take responsibility for both content and structure of courses it is useful to ‘devolve’ some of the learning tasks. As tutors we must be aware that, although the students can distinguish between good and bad presentations, they often lack the necessary knowledge, self-confidence and/or time to prepare their presentations well. Thus we must take care to teach presentation skills and to assess these skills as well as the content of the presentation. Students must be alerted to the fact that presentation skills form a key skill with regard to their future careers.

A. The Pre-Show Talk

| Duration: | about 5–10 min. in-class presentation |
| Students: | presentations by one or two students at a time |
| Method:   | in-class presentation |

A short oral report is presented within a performative frame which casts the student in the role of a presenter of a (real or fictional) show on TV. The presenter fills the ‘audience’ in on background and context information, e.g. on Thatcherism and its relevance for Top Girls, but it is important that he or she does not start interpreting the play. True to their role, the presenters are only allowed to refer to bullet points and must not

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7 The group agreed that research tasks should focus on background- or context-information only. Analysis and interpretation of play-texts or performances should not be left to the individual student alone.
read out a prepared text. It might make sense to video some of the students and to analyse their presentation skills in detail. This method involves careful coaching of the 'presenters' outside class.

B. Students as Experts

| Duration: whole semester |
| Students: small groups |
| Method: group work outside class; presentation of background information in class |

Students form teams and gather expert knowledge on one assigned play (i.e., background information; interpretations; performances). During the session they provide their fellow students with this information on demand. Works as an apt substitute for oral presentations, which often enforce passivity and confront the rest of the students with a heap of (mostly) not easily digestible information.

C. Students as Tutors

| Duration: (nearly) a whole session |
| Students: one / a small group of / student(s) |
| Method: students take over role as tutors for one session |

The students are cast in the role of tutors; i.e., one student or a small group of students take/s control over a session. Although the course is prepared by the tutors in advance, this method enables students to focus on aspects of a topic which they regard as important, and they can try out methods of teaching — something which is especially important for students who prepare for a teaching qualification. Students sometimes underestimate the amount of preparation involved and many lack both ideas and the confidence to go beyond the traditional 'question-answer'-pattern of teaching. To teach presentation skills and teaching methods is thus of vital importance, otherwise the students feel lost and the other students do not benefit from the session.
4.2 Performance of Scenes

All participants of the workshop agreed that the best method to make a play come alive is to perform a scene of it in class. Tutors must be prepared, however, for students who do not wish to act and who cannot see why they should spend extra time to prepare for a performance. It is therefore important to emphasise the use of performance for their interpretative skills and for their presentation skills. The peculiar dynamics of theatre and allowing some students to be directors or stage technicians instead of actors will usually help to overcome initial reluctance. Besides encouraging a genuine “deep learning” experience, performance-related activities will help students to challenge their often quite firm conviction that there are only two possible interpretations of a text, a ‘right’ one and a ‘wrong’ one — and that the ‘right’ one will be handed to them on a silver platter in due course. Furthermore, it is important not to overuse group work as a method. Students sometimes don’t feel ‘taken seriously,’ and it is quite easy for them to opt out: “It is always the same few people who volunteer to present the results in class,” one tutor observed during the workshop discussion.

D. Getting Started

| Duration: | 15 min. in class |
| Students: | 1 or 2 student/s |
| Method: | autobiographical writing and short improvisation |

In order to motivate students to act out scenes from the play they are asked to write down characteristics of the roles they themselves perform in their lives (student, daughter/son, friend, customer, lover, cyclist, car driver, etc.). Following this, roles can then be given to individual students who will perform these in class (e.g. in a parent-child, or tutor-student role play). From this exercise one can then proceed with scenes from the play.
E. Improvisation and Speaking Skills

| Duration: 20 min. in class; preparation outside class |
| Students: small groups (2–3 students) |
| Method: improvisation |

Drawing on the students’ experience of a particular situation/topic, these could be acted out by students in class. The example given in the workshop was the subject “women and work.” It was suggested that students could set up mock job interviews, perform these in class and then discuss the subject. This role play can be combined with conversation, or, in this case, business English classes.

F. Playing with Props

| Duration: 10–15 min. in class |
| Students: whole group |
| Method: game / improvisation |

Bring a prop to the class and have the students play with it. How would they use it in the context of the play? What is the dramatic potential of the prop? Bring a bag full of props and have the students decide which ones to use for the play discussed. Why did they make these choices? Which other props would/could they use? Which costumes go along with these props? Which set? This exercise could be used for the introduction of a play or as part of an acting project.

G. Students as Directors

| Duration: one whole session |
| Students: small group of students act; other students as directors |
| Method: improvisation and directing skills (i.e., interpretation text as performance) |

This method does not require preparation beyond the tutor’s choice of scene. The scene must be fairly short and contain a lot of dramatic potential. A small group of volunteers enacts a scene spontaneously (script in hand). The rest of the students are cast in the role of directors who
H. Discussing Performance

**Duration:** 15 min. plus discussion time  
**Students:** small groups (2–5 students)  
**Method:** group work and discussion

As a variation to the above exercise, small groups are given one particular scene and will be asked to discuss its performance. At least two groups should be given the same scene. When the results are presented to the class, students’ awareness of the inappropriateness of the categories ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ concerning drama and literature in general will be raised. In addition, they are encouraged to visualise the stage and to grasp the importance of the semiotics of the stage. (Cf. the exercises on developing visual skills below.)

I. Students as Theatre Critics

**Duration:** 20-25 min. plus discussion time / preparation at home possible  
**Students:** individual work  
**Method:** writing analytically and discussion

Students are asked to take on the role of theatre critics and to write their own reviews of parts of a play. These are then exchanged in class (the reviews are anonymous) and read out by their fellow students. At least two or three students should be given the same scenes in order to en-
courage comparison and discussion of the reviews. In this way, students can voice their own opinion. They are led to do so, however, in a form that requires and trains their analytical skills.

J. Casting

| Duration: 5–15 min. in class  |
| Students: whole group        |
| Method: discussion           |

Ask the students which famous actors they would cast in the play. Why? How do different casting decisions change the perception of the play (e.g., Judi Dench as Marlene vs. Madonna as Marlene in Top Girls)? This could lead to discussions of the characters, the character configurations (if you have Madonna as Marlene would Debbie Harry be a good Joyce?), specific productions and their cast. This exercise might also be used at the beginning of an acting project.

K. Student Performance Projects

| Duration: preparation time + about 20–30 min. in-class presentation |
| Students: small groups of students                                  |
| Method: project (rehearsals outside class) and performance in-class |

Students prepare a scene from a play for performance. This task can be given as a long-term assignment (as alternative to oral presentations), involving, e.g., costumes, props and sound effects, or as a short-term task for group work in class (with props etc. provided by the tutor). The aim is to show that a text has the potential for manifold theatrical versions; that the ‘meaning’ of a dramatic text is very much influenced by the choice of actors, choice of props, choice of acting style, of gestures, facial expression, etc. Acting out scenes then can lead into discussions of characters and their relationships (‘how did you feel, when you played X?’). It might be a good idea to cast one or two students (in each group) as directors. They co-ordinate the project and are responsible for the result (see G above). It might also be a good idea to put some effort into
finding a suitable performance space for the productions: it will heighten the sense of occasion and motivate the students to put more effort into their performance.

L. Set Design

| Duration: 5–10 min. group work plus discussion time |
| Students: small groups; or individual students when the class is small |
| Method: visualising the stage as a tool to interpret a play |

Students are asked to draw a sketch of the set. This helps them to visualise the acting area, to learn how to interpret didascalia. Good as interactive introduction to a play. Compared with pictures from actual productions, this helps students realise how seemingly irrelevant elements like the set can become central for the ‘meaning’ of a performance. They learn how to evaluate and visualise stage directions and, in turn, the play-text as such. Similar to the acting projects, students should also become aware of the polyvalence, plurimediality and the potential of dramatic texts (as opposed to the concrete performance).

M. Developing Visual Skills

| Duration: a whole session |
| Students: whole group |
| Method: group work |

To develop students’ visual skills, a part of a performance could be shown on video. In small groups, the students work on different aspects of performance which are not concerned with the dialogue alone. To aid them in this, the tutor develops a questionnaire for each group. At the end of the session, the students present their findings to the other students. It might be a good idea to put the questionnaires in a course reader/folder to allow all students access to all questionnaires. It might help to draw on the students’ ability to ‘read’ film to explain the various categories on the questionnaires.
N. Writing Helps You to Focus

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<td>Method: writing, group discussion</td>
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Ask the students to think about a problem/interpretation and to write down their solutions, ideas etc. After that two or three read out their notes. This exercise gently forces students to actively engage with a problem and also helps students who are 'slower' in answering or who need more time to structure their thoughts.

O. Working in Pairs

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<td>Students: in pairs</td>
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<td>Method: discussion in pairs, writing and group discussion</td>
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Have students discuss a problem, interpret a scene etc. with their partner. This enhances discussions in class, because disputants' contributions are backed up by their partner. They do not feel completely off course and are more likely to volunteer their results.

P. Rewriting the Text

| Duration: preparation outside class, 20–30 min. in class |
| Students: small groups |
| Method: group work outside class, maybe as a project, and presentation in class |

Students rewrite one or several scenes of a play, focusing either on the characters (what if Marlene in *Top Girls* were as conservative as her sister Joyce?) or on the plot. Makes students realise the specific quality and the functions of the actually realised versions in the play. In the long term they should learn not to take authorial decisions for granted or to assume them to be commonsensical.

8 The recipes N–P are not drama-specific and can be used for teaching other fictional genres as well.
Variation: Students are asked to rewrite scenes from the play in different genres. It can then be discussed in class whether the dramatic form proves to be the most suitable or not and why this is the case. In this way, students will learn about, or be reminded of, the particularities of drama as a genre. Before the exercise it might be helpful to briefly revise literary genres. If this is a project, the resulting stories, diary entries, poems etc. should be displayed.

4.3 Feedback and Assessment

Students need clear and immediate goal-oriented feedback and all their work in class or in projects needs to be assessed adequately. Peer assessment has proved to be a good method because students become aware of assessment criteria and are not the passive 'victims' of a mysterious hidden marking scheme. Students often are reluctant to assess each other, but if they are introduced to the various assessment criteria, some of which they should develop themselves, they usually prove to be astute critics of their peers who proceed with humility and compassion.

Q. Spontaneous Feedback

Spontaneous feedback depends on the group taught — if there is an atmosphere of trust, spontaneous feedback can be successful. One student says one word in praise of the students who are to be assessed, the student next to them says one word in criticism and so on. Thus, a whole catalogue of praise and criticism is assembled. Usually the students will run out of criticism earlier than praise and thus the feedback generally ends on a positive note. It might be useful to take notes and to present the students with their assessment.

R. Feedback by Questionnaire

Here, the students fill in a questionnaire (not too long, but still detailed with a few 'open' questions) to assess another student while they are 'performing' (i.e., presenting a report etc.). The assessment criteria should be discussed with the students in advance and they should include content-specific as well as presentation-specific criteria. After each session, one student or the tutor collects the questionnaires and pre-
pares an assessment sheet for next session where they quickly present the results of the assessment to the whole group and then pass them on to the student/s concerned.

5. Conclusion

It is in the nature of workshops to be much too short and only to scratch the surface of issues discussed and this workshop was no exception. However, we would like to emphasise its positive atmosphere which allowed colleagues to speak freely about their own teaching difficulties and to share teaching methods. The collection of teaching recipes is tangible proof of how much can be achieved in a 25-minute discussion. Obviously, the teaching recipes are not the solution to all our questions, but they are practical, they have been tested and they work. Above all, these teaching and assessment methods are designed to encourage a “deep learning approach.” In the end, “[n]o one can ever be certain that teaching will cause students to learn.” But what we can do is attempt to “create favourable conditions” (Ramsden 80). We hope that our discussion of teaching and learning as well as the teaching recipes will work towards that goal.

Works Cited


JOCHEN ACHILLES is Professor and Chair of American Studies at the University of Würzburg. He taught at the University of Mainz for many years and was Visiting Professor at Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, in the academic year 1992/93. His publications include *Drama als problematische Form* (1979), a study on the development of Sean O’Casey’s plays in the context of modern drama, and *Sheridan Le Fanu und die schauerromanische Tradition* (1991), a book on the interface between the gothic tradition and psychological fiction focusing on Sheridan Le Fanu. He co-edited *Irische Dramatiker der Gegenwart* (1996) and *Trans)Formations of Cultural Identity in the English-Speaking World* (1998). He wrote numerous journal articles and book contributions on the American Dream, gothicism, the development of modernist aesthetics, modern drama in English, Irish literature, and on individual authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Donald Barthelme, Eugene O’Neill, Alice Childress, Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Kennedy, James Baldwin, and August Wilson. His research interests are the development of cultural identities, American short fiction, and modern drama.

Notes on Contributors

Americani, GRAAT, Amerikastudien / American Studies and Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik.

INA BERGMANN is working as an Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Würzburg. She studied English and German at the University of Würzburg and the State University College at Oneonta, NY, and received an M.A. degree from Würzburg University. She also took the First State Examination for Teachers. Her Ph.D. thesis “And Then the Child Becomes a Woman”: Weibliche Initiation in der amerikanischen Kurzgeschichte 1865-1970 is forthcoming.

CARMEN BIRKLE is Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Mainz and currently guest professor at the University of Vienna. She received her Ph.D. in 1994 from the University of Mainz with a dissertation on Women’s Stories of the Looking Glass: Autobiographical Reflections and Self-Representations in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde (1996) and finished her Habilitation on “Migration – Miscegenation – Transculturation: Writing Multicultural America into the Twentieth Century” in 2001 at the University of Mainz. She served as co-editor with Jochen Achilles of (Trans)Formations of Cultural Identity in the English-Speaking World (1998) and with Sabina Matter-Seibel and Patricia Plummer of Frauen auf der Spur: Kriminalautorinnen aus Deutschland, Großbritannien und den USA (2001). She has published articles on American women’s literature and culture, postcolonialism, ethnic writers, and detective fiction. She is also assistant editor of the journal Amerikastudien / American Studies and associate editor of the journal Feminist Europa as well as guest editor of a special issue of Feminist Europa on “Women’s Detective Fiction in Europe.”

MARVIN CARLSON is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He received his Ph.D. at Cornell University and served on the faculties of Cornell and Indiana before coming to CUNY. He has received the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the ASTR Distinguished Scholarship Award, the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism and is a Fellow of the American Theatre. He has served as a judge for the Cairo Festival of Experimental Theatre and the Onas-

BIRGIT DÄWES teaches American Literature and Culture at the University of Würzburg. She studied at the University of Mainz, at University College Galway, Ireland, and at the Bread Loaf School of English, Middlebury, Vermont, and received her M.A. degree from the University of Mainz in May 2000. The Ph.D. thesis she is currently working on centers upon Native Theatre in the United States and Canada, and she has published on Native American writing and globalization. Her latest publication, “‘Being Born Native in Canada is a Political Statement in Itself’: Excerpts from a Conversation with Drew Hayden Taylor,” is forthcoming in Contemporary Literature 44.1 (Spring 2003).

KATHARINA ERHARD is an exchange lecturer at the University of California, Davis. She holds M.A. degrees of Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, and the University of Regensburg. She is currently working on her Ph.D. thesis on Early American Drama. Forthcoming is an article entitled “Rape, Republicanism, Representation: Founding the Nation in Early American Women's Plays.”

KARA MCKECHNIE is programme manager for the BA (Hons) Theatre Dramaturgy at Leeds University. She is a Scottish-German hybrid with a background in theatre and opera, and came to Britain on a Ph.D. bursary after receiving an M.A. in English and German Literature from Heidelberg University. She will complete her Ph.D. thesis on Alan Bennett's
works in 2002, and has published on Bennett, British historical film, television drama and opera.

HANS-ULRICH MOHR has been professor of American Literature at the University of Technology in Dresden since 1993. He received his doctoral degree from the University of Konstanz, his Habilitation took place at the University of Bielefeld. He was professor of English and American Studies at the University of Bielefeld and has also taught at the universities of Siegen, Tübingen, Bayreuth, and Paderborn. He has been a visiting professor in Norwich and Pasadena. His research and publications focus on the social and functional history of literature from the 18th century to the present. His interest in postmodern drama has materialized in several articles on Mamet, Shepard and Rabe.

ANNETTE PANKRATZ teaches English literature at the University of Passau. She received an M.A. from the University of Regensburg in 1992 and a Ph.D. from the TU Dresden in 1997 with a thesis on Repertoires of Values in Restoration Comedies. Since 1996 she has been lecturer at the University of Passau and works on a Habilitationsschrift on The Representation of Death and Dying in Contemporary British Drama.

CORDULA QUINT is currently a Lecturer for the English Department at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, Canada, and a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Toronto. Her doctoral dissertation studies the early stage works of American director Robert Wilson in the context of postmodern and poststructural theory. She has also worked as a dramaturg and director. Her publications have appeared in Closely Watched Brains, Space and the Postmodern Stage, in Snips, Snails and Puppydog Tails: Cinemas of Boyhood, and in The New England Theatre Journal.

WILFRIED RAUSSELT has been Privatdozent at the Humboldt-University of Berlin since fall 2001. Currently he is Visiting Professor for American Studies at the University of Mississippi, Oxford. His first book Negotiating Temporal Differences: Blues, Jazz, and Narrativity in African American Culture was published in 2000 within the American Studies Series. His second book Avantgarden in den USA 1940-70 is currently in print and will be published by Campus (Frankfurt/New York) in May
2003. His new project focuses on questions of interculturality and transculturality within American culture and literature.

**Alyce Von Rothkirch** is currently writing a Ph.D. thesis on contemporary Welsh drama in English at the University of Wales, Swansea. Her teaching and research interests include Welsh drama in English, modern British drama, theories of place, feminist theory and practice and the use of modern technologies in (distance) teaching and learning.


**Kerstin Schmidt** teaches American Studies and Intercultural Anglophone Studies at the University of Bayreuth. She has published on contemporary American drama, ethnic literatures, and the Harlem Renaissance. She co-edited the women’s studies journal *Freiburger Frauen-Studien* and is currently co-editing *From Landscape to Technoscape: Contestations of Space in American Culture* [forthcoming]. She has just completed a book-length study on “The Theatre of Transformation: Postmodernism in American Drama.”

**Kathleen Starck** studied British Studies, American Studies, and Sociology at Rostock, Leipzig and Bradford Universities, graduated in 1997, and has held various positions at the Institut für Anglistik, Leipzig University, currently teaching British Cultural Studies. Her Ph.D. thesis on
"Contemporary British Women's Drama" has just been submitted. Her publications include articles on the Edinburgh Fringe Theatre Festival and encyclopedia entries on British women playwrights. She also founded and directed the Leipzig students' theatre group "Salt 'n' Vinegar."

MERLE TÖNNIES studied English, Russian and International Law at the universities of Bochum and Oxford, completing her studies with an M.A. and an M.Litt. In 1996, she obtained her Ph.D. degree from the University of Bochum and is now working as an assistant professor in the Bochum English Department. Her main research interests are twentieth-century British drama, the Victorian Age and Cultural Studies, including a Habilitation project on the representation of women in popular British drama of the nineteenth century. Apart from articles and reviews in those fields, she has published Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Strategy: Audience Laughter and the Postmodernist Debate (1997) and co-edited, among others, Youth Identities (1999). In 2001 she has become co-editor of anglistik & englischunterricht.

CHIJIOKE UWAH is Lecturer of English at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. His area of specialization is African Literature with emphasis on political dialogue through drama, and he is currently working on a doctoral thesis on theatre for the fight against HIV/AIDS in South Africa. He has also published a number of articles and poems, and is married with twin boys.

JÜRGEN WEHRMANN studied Comparative Literature, English Literature, Philosophy, and History at the University of Hamburg, University College Galway, Ireland, the University of Mainz, and the Université de Fribourg, Switzerland. In 2000 he participated as dramaturg in a production of The Censor by Anthony Neilson (Director: Michael Uhl) at the Nationaltheater Mannheim. He currently receives a scholarship from the Graduiertenkolleg "Pragmatisierung/Entpragmatisierung. Literatur als Spannungsfeld autonomer und heteronomer Beziehungen" of the Eberhard Karls-University, Tübingen, and works on a Ph.D. thesis on metahistorical Irish drama.
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