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## Memory as Resistance in Documentary Drama

### The Laramie Project and The Exonerated

#### *Belgesel Tiyatroda Karşı Duruş olarak Bellek*

#### *The Laramie Project ve The Exonerated*

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#### Abstract

Focusing on major differences between nostalgic and documentary memory in contemporary plays, this paper argues how *The Laramie Project* (2001) by Moises Kaufmann and *The Exonerated* (2002) by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen reinvigorate the concept of memory as an alternative political stand on stage. Memory plays use historical documentation as a forerunner of their dramatic material. In this respect, *The Exonerated* tells the story of six wrongfully convicted death row inmates through testimonies of the freed convicts, court recordings, and other documents. *The Laramie Project* belongs to another category of verbatim plays, which is still centered on edited interviews and testimonies but it is characterized by the elimination of the protagonist. It reconstructs and rewrites the story of brutally murdered Matthew Shepard to question this tragedy and disclose the reasons for his murder, but Shepard himself is not represented as a character on stage. *The Laramie Project* is similar to *The Exonerated*, but their methodology and construction have fundamentally different incentives and elements. Their emphasis on identity politics and insistence upon a more extended public discussion of politics and social issues separates them from other genres and trends. The way memory is stripped of its nostalgic layers in these documentary plays aims to foster a new understanding of dramatic constructions while challenging mainstream accounts and shifting to side of the silenced figures. Although there is little overlap between the contents and messages of the plays, a key point in both of these works is their emphasis on current issues through a variety of memory forms. Their accent on harsh realities of history is especially pronounced when audience members are invited to witness the flaws of our society. It might be a wrongfully convicted person, a screened and scrutinized life of a transvestite, or a brutally murdered homosexual, but in the end, documentary drama shows us the urgent need to look back to understand the present. Our mistakes are all buried in the magical box of the past. They can be our guides for tomorrow as long as we do not glorify them.

**Keywords:** Documentary Theatre, *The Exonerated*, *The Laramie Project*, Memory Studies.

#### Öz

Çağdaş oyunlardaki nostaljik ve belgesel bellek farklılıkları üzerine yoğunlaşan bu makale, Moises Kaufmann'ın *The Laramie Project* (2001) ve Jessica Blank ile Eric Jensen'in *The Exonerated* (2002) adlı oyunlarının belleği nasıl bir alternatif politik duruş haline getirdiğini incelemektedir. Bellek oyunları olarak adlandırılan bu metinler tarihsel dökümantasyonu dramatik malzemelerinin öncüsü olarak kullanırlar. *The Exonerated*, örneğin hatalı yargılama sonucunda ölüm cezasına çarptırılmış altı mahkumun hikayesini mahkumların tanıklıklarından, mahkeme kayıtlarından ve diğer belgelerden elde edilen malzemelerle anlatır. *The Laramie Project*, belgesel oyunların yine temelini kurgulanmış röportajlardan ve tanıklıklardan alan bir başka kategorisinde yer alır ancak bir baş kahramanın metinde olmaması bu oyunu tamamen farklı kılmaktadır. *The Laramie Project*, Matthew Shepard'ın hunharca öldürülüşünün hikayesini bu trajediyi sorgulamak ve cinayetini bulmak için yeniden kurgulanmış ancak bunu Shepard karakteri olmaksızın yapmıştır. *The Laramie Project*, *The Exonerated* oyununu andırır da her iki oyunun da metodolojisi ve kuruluşu birbirinden farklı sebep ve malzemelere sahiptir. Ancak kimlik politikalarına yaptıkları vurgu ve politik ve sosyal meselelerin daha geniş bir kamusal tartışması üzerine ısrarları onları diğer türler ve

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akımlardan farklı kılmaktadır. Bu belgesel oyunlardaki bellek, nostaljik taraflarından sıyrılıp ana akım versiyonlarını karşısına alırken, sessiz yığınların lehine kullanılmıştır. Tarihin acımasız gerçeklerine yaptıkları vurgu, izleyicilerin de bu haksızlıklara tanıklık etmeleri istendiğinde artmaktadır. Haksızlığa maruz kalan yanlışlıkla hapse atılan bir kişi veya acımasızca öldürülen bir eşcinsel olabilir ama belgesel tiyatro bizlere bugünü anlamak için geçmişe bakmamızın yaşamsal aciliyetini gösterir. Bizim yanlışlarımız mazinin sihirli kutusunda gömülüdür. Yanlışlarımız bizim gelecek için rehberimiz olabilir tabii, onları yüceltmediğimiz sürece.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Belgesel Tiyatro, The Exonerated, The Laramie Project, Bellek Çalışmaları.

## Memory at Work

Focusing on major differences between nostalgic and documentary memory in contemporary plays, this article argues how *The Laramie Project* (2001) by Moises Kaufmann and *The Exonerated* (2002) by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen reinvigorate the concept of memory as an alternative political stand on stage. The way memory is stripped of its nostalgic layers in these documentary plays aims to foster a new understanding of dramatic constructions while challenging mainstream accounts and shifting to side of the silenced figures. These plays, in Jeannette Malkin's words, "recall the past from repression or from its canonized 'shape' in order to renegotiate the traumas, oppressions, and exclusions of the past" (1991, p. 1). Although there is little overlap between the plays' contents and messages, their penetrating commentary on current issues through a variety of memory forms is a key point in both. Accordingly, *TLP* and *TE* also "champion the hitherto suppressed stories of those excluded from mainstream theatre by dint of class, gender, or ethnicity" (Malkin, 1991, p. 4) and challenge the epistemologies underlying institutionally endorsed histories.

Memory plays use historical documentation as a forerunner of their dramatic material and they have various types. Verbatim theatre, which is one of the primary types of memory plays, is often constructed largely or exclusively from words actually spoken or recorded. Similarly, trial plays have lines taken directly from court records. *The Exonerated*, for example, tells the story of six wrongfully convicted death row inmates through testimonies of the freed convicts, court recordings, and other documents. *TLP* belongs to another category of verbatim plays, which is still centered on edited interviews and testimonies but it is characterized by the elimination of the protagonist. It reconstructs and rewrites the story of brutally murdered Matthew Shepard to question this tragedy and disclose the reasons for his murder, but Shepard himself is not represented as a character on stage. *TLP* is similar to *The Exonerated*, but their methodology and construction have fundamentally different incentives and elements. Although both plays merge historical materials with fictional elements, their genres, styles, rhetorical strategies, politics, and concerns cannot be melted in one pot. Their emphasis on identity politics and insistence upon a more extended public discussion of politics and social issues separates them from other genres and trends.

Documentary theatre explores the present through an elaborate investigation of media culture, new forms of narration and representation, and authentic documents. Most contemporary practitioners' treatment of materials as secondary sources to understand the present is significantly different from their twentieth century predecessors, who were more scrupulous about using records, files, and other historical documents as the main source for their plays. As Derek Paget points out, "In diverging from previous forms, the New Documentarism on stage responds to changed social and political contexts in which modes of communication themselves have acquired new significances" (2009, p. 129). The concept of truth has changed significantly in the twenty-first century as there has been a common skepticism about the news on mainstream media. 9/11 and its aftermath should be the zenith of conspiracy theories in modern times, and the emergence of personal blogs, opinion columns for public in local newspapers, and the popularity of social media have diversified interpretation all around the world.

As a signifier of the shift in philosophical and scientific thinking, documentary drama in the twenty-first century pumps red cells that opposes the perception of manipulated realism. In a way, documentary drama has inherited the legacy of Off-Off Broadway, a rebellious form that has re-emerged in local theatres funded by commissions and sponsors. At the same time, these plays have been "the product of a more

dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life than had ever been attempted before” (Watts, 2000, p. 9). I believe that Ian Watts’ account is useful to identify similar traits of the rise of the novel and documentary theatre. The pioneering position that the novel had in the 18<sup>th</sup> century resembles the resistance of documentary theatre to amplify a realist vein in drama. Documentary theatre practitioners draw attention to the issue of correspondence between dramatic works and the reality. Inviting an epistemological inquiry, documentary drama is reminiscent of the realist novel that arose in the modern period as a detachment from its classical and medieval heritage. Similarly, the heritage of dramatic forms and content was not left behind in documentary theatre practices, but the restrictions and impositions stemming from traditions have been, to a significant extent, ignored and removed. This change has enabled documentary plays to be free from the body of past assumptions and conventional methods.

The twenty-first century interpretation of authenticity has shifted artistic concentration from single-perspective notions of truth toward commencing open conversations and exposing silenced viewpoints. In response to the scandals of “deliberate misrepresentation and indifference to truth in the mass media,” (p. 20) “documentary theatre has complicated notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the ‘real’” (Forsyth and Megson, 2009, p. 2). Although social venues have given people opportunities to share their concerns, a formal occasion such as a play with a prepared message for masses seems to bring more attention to its topic. The Tectonic Theater Projects’ *The Laramie Project* (2000) and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005) were all signs of yearning for more veracity on stage. Peter Marks, *The Washington Post*’s chief theater critic, acknowledges this appetite for documentary theatre: “There’s always been theater looking at current events in a very direct way, in an almost nonfictional way, but I think it’s really taken off in the last 20 years.”

### **The Exonerated**

*The Exonerated* is a harsh account of time wasted in isolation. The past Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen narrate through interviews is not a pleasant place. It is not a refuge to escape from the problems of the present. On the contrary, the past needs to be cleared, rewritten, retold, or re-made to fulfill the expectations of the present. There is a thin line between a nostalgic narration of the past and documentary report, but there is nothing relieving in this account of the past. As a major difference, documentary history is a sign of discomfort. In their memoir, *Living Justice*, Blank and Jensen mention the “emotional immediacy” they felt at a conference on the death penalty at Columbia University where they listened to the voice of a man on death row over speakerphone. They wrote this documentary play, which was first performed by the Actor’s Gang in Los Angeles, after interviewing sixty people who “had been sentenced to die, spent anywhere from two to twenty-two years on death row, and had subsequently been found innocent and freed by the state” (*TE* xi). Blank and Jensen added police interrogation, personal correspondence, and six of those interviews to create a play focusing on the problems of the criminal justice system and capital punishment. Based on personal memory, the play was very successful and the playwrights related it to “people’s hunger for real stories that start real conversations that challenge them and move them outside their comfort zones” (Blank and Jensen, 2005, p. 15). It ran for six hundred performances off-Broadway in New York, toured the country and Europe afterwards, and became a Court TV movie featuring many celebrities.

*The Exonerated* highlights the contrast between documentary memory and nostalgic memory. Nostalgic memory serves the status quo by impeding an effective assessment of current problematic factors and offers a vantage point for conformism despite its subversive messages or effects. This conformism is a result of dissatisfaction with the established system, but nostalgia looks for temporary refuges and optimistic resolutions rather than question the system for answers. However, documentary memory posits itself against the status quo and challenges the embedded versions of official or acknowledged history. Memory (personal or collective) used in documentary dramatic forms interrogates norms of the society. It does not necessarily seek a happy resolution, but it aims to prove its point through the real documentary feature of its construction without forgetting its mission and sometimes by compromising the entertaining side if necessary. In contrast

to nostalgia, documentary memory is driven by an impulse for authenticity, accuracy, and historical legitimacy.

*The Exonerated* is not a conventional play because it is intended to be read by actors and mimetic characterization is minimal. Far from traditional identification strategies, this technique reminds of Bertolt Brecht's theory of distancing and alienation, and Blank and Jensen also approve the minimization of theatrical atmosphere as long as "the focus [is] on the stories and on the actors who were telling them" (TE xv). The sparse minimalism reminds the audience that this is "not the reproduction of real life, but a theatrical demonstration of a political process, which all too obviously pushed an ideological message." (Innes, 2007, p. 437). However, they also warn performers to balance between pushing an ideological message and being too didactic in their presentation of the play.

The US accounts for only 5% of the world's population, but contains nearly 22% of the world's imprisoned population. An average of 5 million American people are under supervision in the form of probation or parole. In addition to these high numbers, there is racial discrimination because one in three black men will go to prison if current trends do not change, according to Amnesty international reports in 2016 on their website. I think these statistics tell us the secret behind the success of *The Exonerated*. Incarceration discrimination is an underestimated problem of lower classes whose voice cannot be heard on stages or at other cultural venues unless they are sponsored by the federal government or produced by private individuals like Blank and Jensen. Uncovering the problems of people for whom being represented in front of the rest of the nation is almost impossible, but the emergence of such plays provides space for reflecting these memories through elaborate aesthetic devices.

This play is a strong testimony to a history of individual struggle against institutional violence and racism. These individuals' memory is more important than political components as the moral tone is often reduced to highlight had atrocities they to suffer. When the curtain goes up, one of the characters, Delbert, welcomes the audience as narrator of the play and fills the gap between stories with his poetic wit and humor. Centered as an African-American choral figure, Delbert recites a poem that explains the hardships and dangers of being convicted. Delbert says, "How do we, the people, get outta this hole, what's the way to fight/might I do what Richard and Ralph and Langston'n them did?" (TE 8). He positions himself in a line of African-American poets fighting against injustice and highlights the lingering lineage of violence and discrimination in American history. Thus, the play opens up with memory and then mingles the mnemonic narrations of now with the past.

Representation in documentary drama is a valuable concept because the history incorporated within the play is in dire need of narration and recognition. The people about whom Blank and Jensen write were wrongfully imprisoned and their stories could not find venue to be told to other people through artistic expressions prior to this play. Even if their stories have been mentioned somewhere else, the impact *The Exonerated* made has not been matched. Having these ex-convicts' stories in the center of its plot, *The Exonerated* provides a forum for thinking through these characters whose years have been stolen from them because of the flaws in local administrations or the incompetence of people in the judicial system. In a strange but powerful way, *The Exonerated* gives their memories back to them by analyzing the judicial system under the control of neoliberal system, which ignores or detriments those who cannot afford to hire a proper representation in defense of themselves. Clearly, some of these people were convicted because they were not aware of the jargon, discourse, and complicated concepts of the judicial system. If they had had the means to be properly represented at the court, they would not have to spend time in jail. Revealing the capitalist character of the American justice system, *The Exonerated* calls for a more accurate assessment of imprisonment and judicial process.

*The Exonerated* dismantles courts' discourse and unmask their rhetoric by avoiding law jargon and complicated terms. It shows that it is our stories at the core once all of those embroidered language is removed. What the play focuses on is people and their stories. The playwrights do not aim to outsmart other people through the complicated construction of judicial system. There is no miracle or *deus ex machina* in

their play. This is not one of the solidly old-fashioned courtroom dramas where the lonely lawyer Paul Newman walks in to save the day for everybody. On the contrary, what permeates through the stories is the sentiment of being defeated. Although it is difficult to avoid sentimental messages, the play focuses on a subversive interrogation of the justice system. For example, when prisoners articulate the vulnerability and destitution they felt because of being sentenced to death, bewilderment embraces them. The play moves away from this emotional mood to highlight how the same mistakes have been repeated similarly in each case. What the playwrights emphasize is beyond the emotional and personal consequences of these imprisonments, as the main point eventually becomes the U.S. prison and incarceration system. Thus, the proper emotional response to this performance should evoke a feeling for characters and perhaps elicit civil action rather than fear or pity. Documented memories in this play inhibit a rebellious tone not a soothing one.

Kerry, “a nineteen-year-old trapped in a forty-five-year-old’s body,” (TE 5) was arrested for the murder of a girl whom he met a couple of months before the incident. Kerry, who had a criminal record, became the main suspect in the case after his fingerprint was found in the victim’s apartment. The only witness of the incident pointed at Kerry as the person whom she saw in the apartment on the night of the murder. Although her description fit the victim’s former lover rather than Kerry, his lawyer did not object to her testimony. In attempting to explain how the neoliberal dynamics of the judicial system mediate the acceptance of such a statement, Kerry suggests that the structure of the court system cannot be understood independent of his financial condition: “My court-appointed attorney was the former DA who jailed me twice before. He was paid five hundred dollars by the state, and in Texas you get what you pay for” (TE 16). Kerry’s words sum up the neoliberal structure of justice as well as any other public service expected from the government. Money is a key concept for understanding the relationship within any kind of system including the judicial one. The stories in *The Exonerated* are interwoven and there are dynamic bounces in the text to remind other cases where wealth could change the verdict. For example, another character Robert also reminds the audience of Orenthal James Simpson’s case and claims that everybody knows that O.J. was guilty, but his wealth protected him from going to prison. David, who is another exonerated character falsely accused of having robbed his grandmother’s house, also illustrates how local politics play a key role in solving such cases: “The sheriff was running for reelection at the time, and this was a big unsolved crime, so he had to bring somebody in for it” (TE 18).

Performers are reminded “to find the humor in their characters” as “too much gravity and depression” (TE xvi) can destroy the real intention and turn it into a tearful melodrama. After all, this is a call for action, not tears. As a final warning, the playwrights ask for caution and respect for the people whose stories are told in the play, because they do not desire to see replicas of these people; “It’s all in the words, and in the stories” (TE xvii). They are pleased with having celebrities such as Danny Glover, Susan Sarandon, Vanessa Redgrave, Robin Williams, Brooke Shields, and Mia Farrow among many others to take part in their play because “the audience is made aware that the actors are not playing characters but reading actual people’s words.” (Ryan, 2011, p. 137). This strategy of creating a significant distance between the actors and characters keeps the audience aware that what is narrated in this text gives voice to the testimony of real people. At the same time, it stresses the fact that these are the memories of silenced people and there is no need for an emotional catharsis. This is not a play where audiences fall in love for the artistic bravado an actor shows in a character because it is not entirely a fictional text.

Christine Bean worked as a dramaturg in the 2013 production of *The Exonerated* and found out that the directors totally ignored the fact that one of the characters, Bill Hayes, whose story was told in the play, was incarcerated again for a murder that predated the crime referenced in the play. Bean asserts that Hayes’ recent conviction creates ethical problems for the play which fights against the issue of wrongful conviction. However, as Hayes’ case illustrates, the notion of truth in the play is damaged and a further editing of the text might be prerequisite for other theatre practitioners before they stage the play. Although Bean has plausible reasons to criticize “aesthetically conservative characteristics which shout out loud the leftist political messages rather than addressing troubled epistemologies about truth, authenticity and reality”

(2014, p. 193), keeping Hayes' testimony unchanged in the play also invites a philosophical investigation on the nature of crime and guilt. Hayes' situation complicates the normative notions of the judicial system and exposes the dilemma of individual testimonies at the core of court system and documentary drama. However, Bean's call to the playwrights about informing their audience on Hayes' situation attempts to bring in a balance between informing the audience and raising awareness. On the other hand, Hayes' story is not about his former crimes and the play does not vindicate his character or actions. An update on his situation would convey evidence for the slippery nature of individual testimony of which the play is critical. This might result in completion of play's objective assessment of both sides of the judicial system; the convict and the judge.

The playwrights engage with the set of historical investigation through silent moments as a reminder of the time spent in a prison for audience members. That time is a redefinition of loss just like the way people look at the stage and see nothing. That silence is threatening because lack of action changes the whole tone. Memory in *The Exonerated* is an embodied silence. There is no romanticism for these characters' memories. Close to end of the play, Jacob asks audience members perhaps a rhetorical but provoking question: "1976 to 1992, just remove that entire chunk from your life, and that's what happened" (TE 66). This question is reminiscent of what documentary drama aims to accomplish. It does not glorify the past, because it does not exist within the repertoire of collective memory. It is suppressed in a prison, in a secluded place; it is kept away from the witnessing eyes. Thus, documentary drama brings in new testimonies and other materials to fill that gap. It is a wakeup call and a reminder. History is not written by victors in documentary drama. On the contrary, it is the story of the forgotten, abhorred, and the innocent. In their memories, Blank and Jensen reiterate the essence of *The Exonerated*: "[T]he exonerated people had something to teach us about facing darkness—even death—and coming out the other side... [T]he exonerated people had something to teach us about survival, endurance, and hope. That was the heart of the play" (Blank, and Jensen, 2005, p. 254).

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

### **The Laramie Project**

*The Laramie Project (TLP)*, as the name aptly suggests, is a group work and attempts to explore an issue rather than stage a finite image or a well-made play within the context of Western dramatic tradition. Its quality of being a project moves the discussion from staging an incident to inciting a sophisticated investigation of a deeper phenomenon. *TLP* constructs a public interview around the murder of Matthew Shepard, who was picked from a pub by two local thugs, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, on October 6, 1998, robbed, and pistol-whipped nearly to death. His body tied to a fence was found the next day by a cyclist, and Shepard died in a hospital five days later. His death commenced protests and demonstrations all over the country and members of The Tectonic Theatre Project (TTP) in New York travelled to Laramie to collect material about this incident. *TLP*'s dramatic construction is based on conversations taken from interviews which scrutinize the events before and after the death of Shepard. *TLP* addresses the phenomenon of violence in American society through the interviews of people in a small town and observations of actors/playwrights. It brings in a new perspective to understand why this murder took place and provides an opportunity for Laramie residents to be heard and represented. The encounter of

Laramie residents with “others” in a major role on stage operates as an ethical prologue that questions the nature of theatrical dynamics as well as social problems.

The play has three acts and the first one portrays a happy and safe Laramie for most of its inhabitants. Testimonies from different age groups verify that the “live and let live” attitude of the state provides a sense of safety and freedom. However, this image is shattered with the brutal beating of Shepard. Kaufman skillfully stacks up layers in the first part, and he and his crew find a crack in the soil. From the beginning, Kaufman<sup>2</sup> uses contrast in testimonies so that different ideas on the same issue can be heard. For example, Rebecca Hiliker, who is the head of theatre department at the University of Wyoming, points out that “You have an opportunity to be happy in your life here.” (*TLP* 13) Kaufman’s strategy is to portray a regular place in America and then expose how a hidden danger is embedded within that place as well as anywhere else in the country.

In the second act, more detail is given through the testimonies of a local sheriff and the bicyclist who found and gave first aid to Shepard. One question that is repeated in this part is why Shepard’s death has been so important for the nation. Amy L. Tigner lists 17 people who were murdered because of their sexual orientations between 1998 and 2000, and asks the same question: “Why did Shepard, in particular, become the focus of enormous mainstream media and popular attention, including that of the White House?” (p. 138) Tyler, one of the characters in the play, mentions Matthew’s race, class, age, and the location of the crime to explain the attractiveness of this tragedy for the rest of nation and adds that “Such a sensational death perpetuates the image of Laramie as the Wild West and Matt as the Western heroic yet tragic figure” (*TLP* 3). However, Kaufman strips Laramie of this exotic Western town image and illustrates how citizens of this place lead a similar life just like they do anywhere else. Thus, this play is called *The Laramie Project*, not *The Tragedy of M. Shepard*, as a mainstream version would have been named.

The fence which Shepard was tied to becomes an icon/metaphor which represents suffering and pain. The way people started to visit this fence as part of a pilgrimage recalls how Shepard’s experience has been assessed through a religious perspective. A local pastor, Stephen Mead Johnson quotes from the Bible, “God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (*TLP* 24) to describe the emotional frustration and highlight the victim imagery in this situation. A fence, as a signifier of Laramie’s mountainous and agricultural geography, becomes one of the first images to describe Shepard as he is not represented on stage. Therefore, Kaufman inserts images instead of a character. This method respects Shepard’s memory and reduces his personal involvement without adding emotional points. Tigner relates Shepard’s missing figure to the play’s resemblance to a pastoral elegy whose “central figure is always present in the minds of others but absent himself” as the tragic death of the hero in pastoral “is what calls the community together” (Tigner, 2002, p. 4).

The amount of the data collected for documentary drama is often abundant and the process of selection requires a significant elimination. However, the TTP shares the selection process during the performance and some guidance about the selection process is offered to the audience. Putting the concept of community forward, *TLP* reminds its audience that the editorial process of highlighting some of the interviews more than others does not hinder the ethical engagement of the group to question the nature of this murder. For example, Dolan believes that “Implicitly, the play blames Shepard by giving Laramie’s homophobes so many chances to express their disdain for him and by giving their speech so much credence” (2005, p. 125). However, providing room for Laramie’s homophobes to express their disdain is a way to start a conversation and find a mutual point of negotiation. If the purpose is to provide channels between different layers of society, Shepard aims to create a balance between ideas regardless of their malicious content.

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<sup>2</sup>Although Leigh Fondakowski (Head Writer), Stephen Belber, Greg Pierotti, and Stephen Wang are also writers of *TLP*, Kaufman will only be mentioned for practical reasons.

Whenever there is death or injustice, it is inevitable to have an emotional structure which might be threatening to dramatic cohesiveness of a docudrama. To avoid emotional encounters, for example, Kaufman does not include the victim, Matthew Shepard into the play. As Leslie Wade points out, “One could argue that the play is more about Kaufman (and the authorial self) than Shepard, more about inserting a politics than opening a space of investigation.” (2009, p. 21) Although Wade’s point makes sense as the group’s voice sometimes dominates the rest of the issues, Kaufman uses these moments to include everybody’s, including his own troupe’s, feelings within the emotional repertoire of the play. The interviewees stay self-reflexive about their positions to reflect on their personal experiences with political resonance. Dolan notes that “The Tectonic performers, oscillating between playing themselves and playing others, conveyed most clearly their own mystification with the culture of Laramie, rather than a considered deconstruction of their own powerful perspectives as the ones shaping the telling of this story in this forum” (2005, p. 127).

In his introduction to the play, Kaufman describes his project as focusing on “moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus” (TLP iv). In an interview he adds that “The hypothesis was that if my company listened to the people of the town at this moment in their history, we would be able to create a document that would serve as a portrait of that town – and, by extension, the country – at the end of the millennium” (Svich, 2003, p. 70). Performance becomes a means of investigating personal experience with political resonance through the layers of society by triggering a conversation about historical events. Dolan believes in the utopian power of *TLP* despite being skeptical: “While I believe *The Laramie Project* is flawed as a political project, I support the work it tries to do and appreciate it as an example of the complexity of using theater to comment on and participate in national dialogues” (2005, p. 125).

Following the footsteps of an absentee archetypal hero’s journey, the TTP members go through several stages and the sense of journey is highly visible in *TLP*. This feeling facilitates the discussion to reflect implicitly from a distance on the events that the protagonist(s) have suffered. Suggested to sound like “cacophony” or “invasion” (TLP 46) by Kaufman, *TLP* positions the townspeople as part of a national discussion in which they were mostly excluded. The mentioning of back and forth travels from New York to Laramie creates the there/here divide to illustrate that there are many things both parties need to learn from each other. Just like a hero’s journey in archetypal stories, they need to listen to each other, and find out the virtuous and vicious aspects. Although Jill Dolan criticizes the play because it “inadvertently exoticize[s] Laramie—sometimes belittling it and sometimes romanticizing it,” she admits that *TLP* leads a sophisticated audience to think that such a crime “couldn’t happen here,” a wrongheaded and false understanding of hate crimes as a practice of only rural communities” because “Gay bashing happens in New York and other large cities every day” (Dolan, 2005, p. 118). Their journey has unfolded the disillusionment of local people with the press as Leigh Fondakowski, assistant director and head writer in The Tectonic Theater, points out, “The people didn’t feel like they [the media] had had any closure. They were very upset with how they had gotten represented in the press.” (Kuchawara, 2011)

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

*TLP*’s positioning of memory as a transformative force appears to be their activist method because this effort at rediscovery of hidden motives is tied to reconceptualization of the memory that eventually coalesced into such incidents representing violence and hatred towards marginalized or stereotyped figures of the society due to the ethnicity, gender or sexuality. This act of mnemonic recovery attempts is not a simple retrieval, but it inspires people to understand and reevaluate their experiences in new terms. For



example, two characters, Jedediah Schultz and Romaine Patterson, express the impact of the whole incident on their daily and social lives. Patterson, a friend of Matthew Shepard, became an activist after witnessing the homophobic sentiment surrounding Shepard's murder. She and her friends organized a protest against the ultra-right-wing Reverend Phelps who visited the University of Wyoming campus. Patterson decided to work as an activist and lead a career in political activism after being honored for her contributions by the Anti-Defamation League in Washington D.C. Her transformation from an obedient small town girl to an activist cosmopolitan woman represents the rebellion against the conservative climate behind Shepard's murder. This transformation is a signal at the productive capabilities of urban settings.

Schultz is another Wyomite character who always had a desire for acting. He prepared an excerpt from *Angels in America* to apply for auditions, but his conservative Christian parents did not come to watch him because they were averse to his playing a homosexual character. Schultz's mixed feelings about homosexuals and homosexuality because of his family's attitude completely changed after Shepard's death and his encounter with the TTC. He later takes part in his department's production of *Angels in America* and this time his family embraces his professional and sexual identities. Kaufman shows the healing aspect of performance through Schultz's journey. Tigner calls this "a conversion narrative, not from sin to Christianity, but from narrow Christianity to tolerance, from small town conservatism to urban liberalism" (Tigner, p. 145). However, associating this change with religious concepts would be out of the TTC's purposes. The journey of a hero as a literary pattern fits better to describe Schultz's transformation rather than a conversion because conversion sounds against the egalitarian principles which implies that people need to be converted to respect the other party. *TLP* aims to prove the opposite and show everyone that listening to each other despite their shortcomings is what we need in the first place. Changing your side from one to another is not an act of conversion, but it is a part of human nature. We fear what we do not know. The more we know each other, the more we listen to each other, the less we will have to fear.

## **Conclusion**

The past, the present, and the future are embodied in both plays to represent and revise a transition between a failed yesterday and a potential tomorrow. They aim to alter our understanding of the past as well as the present to generate an inquisitive space especially about divisive topics. They constitute a public sphere where audience members are invited to consider the presupposed meaning of the events and be part of a temporary sociality to witness and attend. Under the guidance of critical reasoning, most of the time what these plays evoke can be defined as "a noninstitutional forum for public debate based upon a wide variety of expressive concerns" (Roberts and Crossley, 2004) These texts allow for collective experiences of social solidarity, grief, oppression, as well as "political mimesis" which Jane Gaines defines as having a capacity to respond to and to engage in sensuous struggle (p. 10).

Nostalgic memory, explored by European Romantics, particularly Rousseau, Goethe, and Wordsworth, has a restorative, nurturing potential, but documentary memory questions its conformism and exposes the artificiality and the real discomfort beneath. Documentary memory is a voluntary recall of the past, which appeals to logic. It purports to be transformative and highly critical of its subject matters including their own methodologies. On the other side, nostalgic memory is an involuntary recall that is seductive and appeals to emotions. Nostalgic memory is mostly psychological, as opposed to cerebral, in its interest in how memory creates images in the brain to maintain selfhood. Full of incomplete and inaccurate psychological images of the past, it is highly conservative and yearns to go back to a fictional past. In contrast to nostalgic views of the past as a way to protect the present or at least reduce the call to action for present problems, memorial plays use the flaws of the past to reconstruct the present. John Su defines memory as signifying "intimate personal experience," countering institutional histories and nostalgia to signify "inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests" (p. 2). Blended with nationalism and right-wing politics, nostalgia aims to reduce current neoliberal policies' impact by offering a fictional and selective refuge in the past. However, memory plays point at the

problematic components of the past to view the present under the light of a progressive culture. After all, nostalgia is often used as the legitimate, appropriated, and the most naïve response of millennials to the shock and disillusionment of neoliberalism, which has neutralized most reactions against it and has established a culture of protest that does not aim for futuristic gains but yearns for what is lost.

Modern societies tend to share a linear view of time with an expectation of an unprecedented future. A linear view of time supports the idea of an evolving and changing universe whereas the cyclical one accepts the concept of an eternal universe. Nostalgia curves this line into a cycle pointing to an erosion in confidence in the present and suggesting an elegiac turn to the past. Documentary memory, on the other hand, stresses a coherent timeline, which allows dynamic comparisons between decades or even centuries where the present analyzes the past through a critical reading unlike the understanding of time in a religiously interpreted cosmos, which begins and ends with the Absolute God. In the theater of memory, a linear timeline does not reflect an advanced society destined to advance through time. Derek Paget (2009) explains how the methods of documentary drama are capable of acting as a brake on naturalistic performance and adds that “Naturalism, with its emphasis on ‘through line’ for the performer, is unforgiving of interruption, and documentary theatre is a theatre of interruption” (p. 229). This break with the past enables actors with freedom rather than a restraint on the performance. The problems of the past can recur and exposing these flaws through the lens of historical documents can help societies identify former problems and offer guidance to the future.

*The Laramie Project* and *The Exonerated* are outcomes of collective labor. In contrast to mainstream theatre, their writers have combined forces with others to produce the text, rehearsal, and performance. If nation is an imagined community, this is a dynamic process where a synchronic reading of this community is produced by artists and theatre practitioners. The past narrated and repeated in *The Exonerated* and *The Laramie Project* has a disturbing tone different from postmodernist models. Their accent on harsh realities of history is especially pronounced when audience members are invited to witness the flaws of our society. It might be a wrongfully convicted person, a screened and scrutinized life of a transvestite, or a brutally murdered homosexual, but in the end, documentary drama shows us the urgent need to look back to understand the present. Our mistakes are all buried in the magical box of the past. Without glorifying those, they can be our guides for tomorrow.

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