ULUSLARARASI DİL, EDEBİYAT VE KÜLTÜR ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ
UDEKAD
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE RESEARCHES
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ЖУРНАЛ ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИХ, ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЧЕСКИХ И КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ

E-ISSN: 2667-4262

Atıf/Citation: Can, M. (2025). Stages of healing: Reclaiming collective memory in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson" and Witi Ihimaera's "Woman Far Walking". *Uluslararası Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi (UDEKAD)*, 8 (4), 1939-1951. DOI: https://doi.org/10.37999/udekad.1800561

Meltem CAN*

STAGES OF HEALING: RECLAIMING COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN AUGUST WILSON'S *THE PIANO LESSON* AND WITI IHIMAERA'S *WOMAN FAR WALKING*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987) and Witi Ihimaera's *Woman Far Walking* (2000) turn theatre into a medium of remembrance and healing for communities shaped by slavery and colonialism. Both playwrights portray the historical weight of oppression on African American and Māori identities through their characters' struggles to face ancestral trauma and reclaim their cultural roots. By tracing an inner journey from silence and repression toward recognition and recovery, the plays suggest that genuine healing begins with confronting the past. Drawing on trauma theory, this study argues that both works achieve a kind of cultural catharsis by giving voice to pain that has long been silenced. Theatre becomes a ritual space where hidden histories are revisited and reimagined, and a sense of communal solidarity is restored. Through their portrayals of remembrance and resistance, Wilson and Ihimaera show that facing the traumas of slavery and colonization is crucial to empowerment and the renewal of cultural identity. Finally, both plays end with a hopeful picture of a future grounded in collective memory, resilience, and cultural heritage, where reclaiming the past becomes a path toward freedom and autonomy.

Keywords: Cultural trauma, collective memory, theatre, cultural catharsis

İYİLEŞMENİN SAHNESİ: AUGUST WILSON'UN *THE PIANO LESSON* VE WITI IHIMAERA'NIN *WOMAN FAR WALKING* OYUNLARINDA TOPLUMSAL BELLEĞİN YENİDEN KAZANIMI

ÖZET

Bu makale, August Wilson'ın *The Piano Lesson* (1987) ve Witi Ihimaera'nın *Woman Far Walking* (2000) adlı eserlerinin, kölelik ve sömürgecilikle şekillenmiş toplumlar için tiyatroyu, nasıl bir anma ve iyileşme aracına dönüştürdüğünü incelemektedir. Her iki oyun yazarı da karakterlerinin atasal travmalarıyla yüzleşme ve kültürel köklerini geri kazanma çabaları aracılığıyla, Afro-Amerikan ve Māori kimlikleri üzerindeki baskının tarihsel ağırlığını tasvir etmektedir. Sessizlik ve baskıdan tanınma ve iyileşmeye uzanan içsel bir yolculuğun izini süren oyunlar, gerçek iyileşmenin geçmişle yüzleşmekle başladığını öne sürmektedir. Travma kuramından yola çıkan bu çalışma, her iki eserin de uzun süredir susturulmuş acıları dile getirerek bir tür kültürel katarsis sağladığını savunmaktadır. Tiyatro, gizlenmiş tarihlerin yeniden ele alındığı ve tasavvur edildiği, toplumsal dayanışma duygusunun yeniden kazanıldığı ritüel bir alan haline gelmektedir. Wilson ve Ihimaera, hatırlama eylemini ve direnişi tasvir ederek, kölelik ve sömürgeleştirilmenin travmalarıyla yüzleşmenin, kültürel kimliğin güçlendirilmesi ve yenilenmesi için çok önemli olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Son olarak, her iki oyun da toplumsal belleğe, dayanıklılığa ve kültürel mirasa dayanan, geçmişi geri kazanmanın özgürlük ve kendi kaderini belirlemeye giden bir yol haline geldiği umut dolu bir gelecek tablosuyla sona ermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kültürel travma, toplumsal bellek, tiyatro, kültürel katarsis

* Instructor (PhD), Manisa Celal Bayar University, School of Foreign Languages, Manisa/Türkiye. E-Mail: meltem.can@cbu.edu.tr / Öğr. Gör. Dr., Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Manisa/Türkiye. E-Posta: meltem.can@cbu.edu.tr

Article Info (Makale Bilgisi): Research Article / Araştırma makalesi, Received (Makale Geliş Tarihi): 12.10.2025, Accepted (Makale Kabul Tarihi): 24.12.2025

Introduction

Throughout human history, countless tragedies have unfolded in which dominant groups have oppressed and exercised violence against the powerless, whose painful experiences have left deep scars on their cultural memory. Despite the elusive and unsettling nature of trauma, theatre has long represented societal and individual tragedies, giving voice to the unspoken agonies. *The Piano Lesson* by August Wilson, which explores the enduring aftereffects of the enslavement of the African American community and *Woman Far Walking* by Witi Ihimaera, which dramatizes the British colonisation of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, both portray these deeply wounded histories of these communities and convey how the traumas of the past persist in shaping the communities' cultural self-understanding. The protagonists Boy Willie and Bernice in Wilson's work, and Tiri or Tilly in Ihimaera's play, embody the racially marginalised protagonists who can emancipate themselves from painful pasts only through confrontation with their own personal legacies. This article contends that by depicting African American and Māori characters scarred by the violence and racial oppression imposed by the white colonizing powers, both plays illuminate the interrelated processes of personal healing and collective catharsis. By confronting trauma through theatrical representation, Wilson and Ihimaera enable their marginalized communities to reclaim a sense of belonging and continuity.

This article foregrounds performance and witnessing as central sites through which memory is articulated and negotiated. As Youssef notes, "collective memory is a conglomeration of individual recollections of past experiences handed down from one generation to another, thus helping in the formation of a group identity that differentiates it from other groups, each with its own collective memory" (2021, p. 166). From this perspective, theatre emerges not simply as a medium for representing the past but as a space in which collective memory is actively produced through testimony and performance. Shifting the focus from symbolic representation to the ethics and politics of lived remembrance in theatre studies, this study first examines the representation of trauma, its belated nature, and the phase of *acting out* as manifested in Bernice, Boy Willie, and Tiri/Tilly. It then considers the characters' gradual movement toward *working through* and liberation by revisiting repressed memories. Finally, this study highlights how each play accomplishes a form of cultural catharsis by allowing African American and Māori audiences to re-engage with their communal histories by witnessing the theatrical re-enactment of silenced collective traumas.

This study adopts a comparative literary analysis grounded in trauma theory and cultural memory studies. Following Stampfl's view that **"**trauma itself is the name of a realm of experience large and diverse enough to require a pluralistic conception of the unspeakable, one that recognises the trope's alternative or even antithetical possibilities," the article treats trauma as a complex experience shaped by cultural, historical, and social conditions (2014, pp. 16, 25). Drawing on the theories of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Greg Forter and Jeffrey C. Alexander, this study addresses the ongoing debates on the representability of trauma and adopts Forter's argument that trauma is not unrepresentable because it is "originary" or "beyond history and representation" but because it results from the "enforced rupture with precolonial pasts and the prohibitions against remembrance enforced by particular regimes of power" (2019, p. 74). The analysis focuses on two plays shaped by different colonial histories, namely African American slavery and Maori colonization, yet meeting in their dramatization of intergenerational trauma. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how memory, ritual,

and performance lead from repression to working through, thereby enabling cultural catharsis and communal regeneration.

Performing Healing and Cultural Memory in *The Piano Lesson* and *Woman Far Walking*

Trauma, originating from the Greek and meaning injury, describes a profoundly upsetting event that can leave enduring marks on an individual's sense of self and mental health. As Cathy Caruth (1991) notes, "to be traumatized is ... to be possessed by an image or event" (p. 3). Traumatic memories, as essentially non-verbal and painful, are difficult to describe. Since trauma cannot be fully grasped at the time it takes place, it comes up again and again through memories and flashbacks, which exposes its belated and cyclical structure. As Caruth (1996) further asserts, trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (p. 4). Additionally, trauma is marked by its "belated" nature and "acting out" as a "repetition compulsion," in which traumatic memories are persistently and repeatedly re-lived, which impede the individual's ability to engage with everyday life fully (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 14, 12). Representing African American conditions across the twentieth century, August Wilson captures the community's experiences through legends, Blues music, and prayers drawn from African traditions. In this context, *The Piano Lesson* portrays the struggles of a Black family that, as they confront racial discrimination and strive to build a sense of cultural identity in the 1930s, follows the abolition of slavery. The play, set in Pittsburgh, centres on Bernice and Boy Willie, siblings who respond in contrasting ways to the painful legacy of slavery in their family, embodied by the piano whose carvings convey the story of their ancestors' enslavement. In this regard, *The Piano Lesson* examines the relationship between African Americans and their lineage. Living with or without one's past is a significant issue treated in the different ways Bernice and Boy Willie react to their family history and the legacy of slavery. Boy Willie and Bernice represent the severe consequences of inherited trauma. Yet their suffering and defiance transform the play into a moving yet powerful reflection on individual and societal trauma. Boy Willie is tormented by childhood trauma due to his marginalization and dehumanization as a child: "The world ain't wanted no part of me ... The world say it's better off without me" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1258). Boy Willie's memories of his father also highlight the systematic oppression and economic exploitation Black people have experienced at the hands of white society: "Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring of his hands. ... 'I got these big old hands, but what I gonna to do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr Stovall" (p. 1257). His comments reveal how Boy Willie embraces his father's feelings of oppression and highlight the ways that systematic racism hinders familial identity and how trauma is passed down through generations.

Likewise, Bernice's trauma is shaped by her mother, who mourned her husband's brutal murder throughout her life after he was killed for trying to reclaim the piano. The instrument, therefore, became a reminder of the suffering endured by Boy Charles and those of his enslaved lineage: "Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me I don't play the piano cause I don't wake them spirits. They never be walking around this house" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1250). The piano becomes a powerful emblem of slavery, oppression and the killing of Boy Charles that pervades the painful family history and embodies the enduring effects of ethnic violence that continue to shape their current sense of selves.

Nonetheless, memories of trauma resurface in a delayed manner but as persistent recurrences in the form of bad dreams, visions, and disturbing ideas, exemplified by a previous white slaveholder's apparition in Wilson's play. The ghost of Sutter, whose family once enslaved the siblings' forebears, represents the buried recollections of slavery that emerge to torment Bernice and Boy Willie following Boy Willie's return. Thus, although traumatic experiences are often inexpressible, the delayed reappearance of these distressing memories via the ghost places the siblings in what Herman (1997) describes as a struggle "between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (p. 1).

Concerning their constrained state, Bernice and Boy Willie developed dissimilar psychological defences to relieve the anguish caused by their emotional wounds. Bernice refuses both to play the piano "polished" by Mama Ola's "seventeen years" of "tears" and to allow her brother to sell it (Wilson, 1998, p. 1245). Boy Willie's plan to trade the piano to purchase acreage from the Sutters further annoys Bernice. Her opposition suggests her attempt to maintain the memories of her father's senseless death and her tragic family history. By abstaining from the piano, which evokes memories of her father's loss over "a piece of wood," the sister gets stuck in the traumas of her childhood, haunted by recollections of her mum's suffering during "seventeen years ... of cold nights and an empty bed" (p. 1250). In this way, the piano becomes both a symbol of inherited trauma and an obstacle to Bernice's own emotional recovery. As a material archive serving as a reminiscence of the family's past, "the piano stands prominently as the site of both history and collective memory" (Youssef, 2021, p. 167). Bernice's mum pretended that "all her life went into that piano" after losing her husband (Wilson, 1998, p. 1250). She encouraged her daughter to play the piano and claimed that "she could hear him talking to her" when Bernice played (p. 1250). Therefore, Bernice believed that the images "came alive and walked through the house" (p. 1250). As her friend, Avery also cautions her about being confined by her tragic upbringing and urges her to "pull that behind" and "play that piano" rather than "carry[ing] them with" her (p. 1250). By showing Boy Willie's involvement with Bernice's hesitancy, the play explores the different ways people deal with trauma and emphasizes the fact that facing the past rather than avoiding it is essential for healing and reclaiming cultural and personal identity. Boy Willie plans to sell the piano to purchase land from the Sutters and assert his equality with the white people. The siblings' different approaches to the piano reveal their attempts to reconcile with their ancestral history, which, in turn, evokes the ghost's continual presence. The apparition of Sutter is stirred by "the neglect of the ancestors," which eventually poses a threat to the community's "destruction" (Morales, 1994, p. 109). In this respect, along with the piano, which symbolized their ancestry, Sutter also "had" the siblings and metaphorically ensnared them "in slavery" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1251). Thus, Boy Charles stole the piano not to avenge the family's painful past but to assert their freedom from white control. In response, the ghost lays claim to the piano to reassert dominance over the Charles family and impede their liberation.

This intergenerational struggle over memory and agency extends beyond the African American context to the Māori experience in New Zealand, where colonial domination has profoundly shaped communal identity. Witi Ihimaera's *Woman Far Walking* addresses the oppressive practices of British colonialism that divided Māori and European-descended Pākehā. Recognized as a "both indigenous and foundational" voice in Māori literature in English, Ihimaera stages the social and political consequences of colonial oppression through the figures

of Tiri, a "160-year-old" Māori woman, and Tilly, her mid-thirties counterpart embodying Tiri's conscience (Wevers, 2013, p. 115; Ihimaera, 2000, p. 1). Set during the few hours on Tiri's 160th birthday, the play shifts between her son's home and memories that "flow like a river," giving voice to unofficial and suppressed histories of the nation (2000, p. 4). Through Tiri's testimony, the play articulates Māori collective trauma shaped by colonization, internal conflict, the Spanish influenza, racial subjugation, World War I, and the Māori rights movement; events she is continually "forced to remember" even when she "wants to forget" (2000, p. 51). Thus, the play presents memory as a relational, intergenerational process grounded in pūrākau and whakapapa, which bind individuals to their ancestry, land, and collective history. Describing "*pūrākau* stories" as their "ancient-futures" that offer "lessons on how we should conduct ourselves today and tomorrow," Ihimaera portrays memory as an ethical framework sustaining these connections (Ihimaera, 2023, p. 92). Through Tiri and Tilly's testimony, personal trauma is situated within an intergenerational network that fosters belonging and cultural continuity. In other words, "by phenomenal memory, they kept all this orally in existence, the past alive in the present and future where it continues functioning as a continuum" (2023, p. 92).

While Ihimaera highlights the intergenerational and collective dimensions of memory, his portrayal also echoes the personal experience of trauma, showing how individuals navigate the conflicting demands of daily life and the burden of past pain. Traumas undeniably urge the individual to reside in dual realms that are "utterly incompatible" at once, in the reality of daily life and the realm of the traumatic experience (Caruth, 1996, p. 7). According to Caruth (1995), trauma is the experience of confronting an event that, because of "its unexpectedness and horror," cannot be accounted for in "the schemes of prior knowledge," as a result, it keeps coming back "in its exactness, at a later time" (p. 153). Thus, both Tiri and Tilly are forced to relive their horrific past in an attempt to put together these devastating instances with the representation of Tiri's traumatic recollections that keep returning. During the birthday thrown for Tiri, she is profoundly distressed by five pivotal traumatic experiences in her life: the first traumatic event takes place in her childhood, at six years old, when her mother instructs her to "go with two weavers" to help and "cook for them" (Ihimaera, 2000, p. 2). The second takes place in 1888, when she was "a member of Te Kooti's rebellious army" engaged in combat with the Pākehā at the age of forty-two (p. 2). The third occurs during "the flu epidemic, 1918, when she is at seventy-eight" and is the sole elderly woman who survived and cared for the "four remaining children of her tribe" (p. 2). The fourth unfolds in 1981 during the Springbok Tour, "when she is 142 years old," and the fifth takes place in 1990, when her cherished valley "is subjected to land development" (p. 2).

These events, spanning more than a century, show the persistent nature of Tiri's trauma and reveal how her personal suffering is deeply connected with the broader history of her people. Although she repeatedly tries to forget and repress them, Tiri cannot escape from these memories, as all her life, "history, keeps coming at [her] no matter where [she] looks" (Ihimaera, 2000, p. 86). In this way, the play underlines that the individual and collective histories of the Māori are closely linked and that the traumatic memory persistently resurfaces and demands recognition. Furthermore, Tiri's traumatic history is overwhelmingly marked by the arrival of "the pale-skinned" British colonizers, whom Tiri describes as "goblin" (p. 32, 76). The colonial invaders fostered a polarized society, generated internal conflicts and imposed ethnic marginalization on the Māori, and left a lasting imprint on the collective historical consciousness

of the nation. In the struggle against the Pākehā, Tiri is critically injured and endures the loss of three of her children, one of whom is just seven years old, as well as her husband. She loses her sons in Gallipoli while fighting for the British Empire during World War I, along with her second husband and children, in the catastrophic epidemic. Thus, as one of "the living" who must survive "to bury the dead," Tiri finds herself unable to silence her memories, which resembles a powerful "spider's web" that "nothing, not even Time, can escape" once ensnared (pp. 67, 49). These individual and collective spectres of the past never stop following her which points out the lasting impact of past trauma that continues to chase the living: "if she sleeps she dreams ... Of blood-red skies and people falling from a cliff. ... the bodies of her babies," they continue to push on "the door of her dreams" and she realizes that the "only way to keep them out" is "not to sleep, not to dream, not to live" (p. 56). This portrayal illustrates how unresolved trauma can take over a person's consciousness and daily life and trap them in memories and horror. Yet, in Saul Friedländer's (1992) terms, the adverse effects of such memories can be lessened by recognising the significance of a traumatic event and participating in the healing process known as "working through" (pp. 39–59). Within the plays, Wilson and Ihimaera both illustrate that facing trauma is the first step towards healing. The siblings in *The Piano Lesson* confront and challenge Sutter's ghost, which stands for white dominion and power. While Bernice addresses her trauma on a spiritual level and confronts the ghost by playing the piano and summoning the ghosts of her parents and ancestors, Boy Willie's physical struggle with the ghost signifies his resistance to the lasting impacts of slavery and oppression. She begs again and again, "I want you to help me," and invokes Mama Bernice, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola (Wilson, 1998, p. 1203). By performing these, the siblings turn the piano from a traumatising instrument into a tool for empowerment and a link to their roots. The siblings renew their solidarity and commitment to their cultural heritage after the exorcism of the ghost, aiming to rob the Black family of their freedom and collective identity. They also begin to come to terms with their painful familial history. Despite his inability to raise enough money to purchase the land, Boy Willie attains a sense of peace through the restoration of his spiritual connection with his ancestors, suggesting that, rather than material accomplishment, healing necessitates the recognition of historical, collective agonies. Bernice, in turn, releases herself from her trauma by acknowledging her troubling memories, as both siblings discover that their trauma has a sacred significance rather than being meaningless. The play's ending shows that confronting traumatic memories not only promotes personal healing but also strengthens community ties and allows the protagonists to develop a stronger sense of belonging, rather than being overwhelmed by the marginalisation of their past. Regarding African American identity "defined or rather imposed on them through the experience of slavery and its subsequent reproductions that gave rise to the group's collective memory," Wilson presents the Charles family as "a microcosmic representation of that collective memory which binds the different group members together and ultimately saves them from utter loss and despair" (Youssef, 2021, p. 166). Thus, while trauma tends to "isolate" and "degrade" individuals, communal support helps to rebuild "belonging" and recover their "humanity" (Herman, 1997, p. 214).

Regarding *Woman Far Walking*, Tiri is forced to confront her painful family history through Tilly. Tilly's character aligns with Tiri's, yet often adopts a challenging, essential stance, resulting in tension and the two protagonists occasionally "pull against" one another (Ihimaera, 2000, p. 3). Tilly is perceived as an adversary, overwhelming Tiri with recollections and "squeezing [her] hearty" by way of stirring, challenging, critiquing and revealing her painful

memories (p. 52). Her existence and comments constantly trigger her painful past described as "candles" that "can blow and blow", yet persistently "come back" (p. 58). As Tiri is gradually confronted with each of these painful recollections, she ultimately faces her most devastating trauma, signalling the concluding stage of this process of working through. Eventually acting "Tiri's conscience" by compelling her to confront "the secret of Pirma," she recalls the sexual assault she suffered from a group of men that marks both her confrontation with the past and the start of her journey toward self-compassion (p. 95). Hence, as a traumatised woman, Tiri can recreate a coherent story from a series of painful events like loss and sexual assault, which leads her to recovery. She releases herself from her trauma by confronting and reconciling her deeply suppressed memories, and her subsequent death signifies that spiritual liberation.

A community's cultural heritage and identity are identified and preserved through collective memories, which are acts "of remembrance" dictated by "the surrounding culture" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 124). However, those memories are often overshadowed by traumatic events that result in collective, deeply felt experiences of pain and loss. Such experiences construct historical traumas that "occur when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). Conversely, as "acting out" might serve as a prerequisite for "working through," theatrical performances enable traumatized communities to begin the process of "working through" by acting out and simulating traumatic experiences (LaCapra, 2001, p. 70). The power of theatre to imitate and re-enact the past on stage bridges the temporal and spatial gap separating audiences from those historical traumas. Consequently, theatre or "live performance" becomes "more than any other art form ... perfectly placed to attempt a dialogue with trauma" and "even a representation of" it (Duggan, 2012, p. 30). Furthermore, it serves as a tool to rebuild community ties and allows people to rethink national stories. In this regard, the representation and dramatization of collective traumas function as a form of cultural catharsis. By witnessing the traumatic event or its aftereffects on stage, audiences transcend emotional distance and identify with the victims as they sense the depth of their pain and loss. Thus, art, through its undeniable impact, contributes to collective recovery by allowing trauma to be "opened" and its suffering "worked through" via artistic representation (Kaplan, 2005, p. 19).

Thus, these two works provide moments of shared cathartic experience and healing for historically oppressed non–Anglo-Saxon people by guiding them to confront "the extremities" of despair and horror and the enduring aftereffects of these through theatrical performance (Herman, 1997, p. 33). In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson (1998) contrasts the Charles family's individual struggles with the shared historical suffering of African Americans, and challenges notions of "cultural identity," ultimately leading to the "attempt to exorcise the ghost that has haunted the Charles family" (p. 1255). As part of Wilson's cycle of plays that dramatize the historical legacy of slavery and the African American struggle against racial segregation in the 1930s, *The Piano Lesson* creates a space for confronting and symbolically purging these inherited traumas. When the dreams of African Americans for equal citizenship were frustrated by persistent white racism, slavery itself became "articulated as cultural trauma" and transformed into a shared locus of memory and identity for the entire Black community (Eyerman, 2001, p. 16). For instance, Boy Willie, portrayed as an every(Black)man figure of the early twentieth

century, embodies an African American's marginalized identity by the long history of racialized subjugation. Born into a world of turmoil, he realized from the age of seven that "[t]he world ain't want no part of [him] and "say it's better off without [him]" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1238). Following the official abolition of slavery in 1865, African Americans' efforts "to forge a collective identity" from "the trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another" remain deeply significant (Eyerman, 2001, p. 1). Lymon's story also serves as an example of how Black people were still viewed as inherently inferior even after they gained official freedom decades later. He remembers being compelled into labouring by a white boss to pay back a hundred-dollar fine: "judge say I got to work for him to pay him back ... I told that I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1239). Wilson uncovers how racial dominance has evolved into new institutional forms and how post-slavery exploitation has persisted. In other words, the play emphasizes how African Americans' freedom remained largely illusory within the racially constructed social order. Because racial hierarchies and social exclusions still governed their lives, the Black community was not viewed as being on par with white society at the turn of the century. Therefore, *The Piano Lesson,* functions as a collective emotional release and enables the community to face and purge its repressed pain, much like the exorcism of the ghost that represents the protagonists' liberation from the haunting memories of slavery. Thus, summoning the ghost in the climactic scene serves as a cathartic moment that allows the protagonists and, symbolically, the African American community to heal and purge the agony of slavery. In this sense, Wilson turns the stage into a domain of reconciliation, where the hidden wounds of the past are opened for recognition and healing. Because, just as individual victims "carry an impossible history within them," so do communities sharing the weight of their traumatic histories (Caruth, 1991, p. 4).

Ihimaera's (2000) play also focuses on the life of a single woman to dramatize the Māori people's "survival, struggles and resilience" by extending Tiri/Tilly's autobiographical memories (p. 3). Tiri's depiction as a one hundred sixty-year-old woman who views her existence as "an aberration" and "affront to God," signifies the ongoing historical trauma endured by the marginalised Māoris (p. 9). Her prolonged life represents the wounds of colonialism as well as the weight of remembering. The unimaginable traumas of Tiri's past, which reflect the tyranny and dispossession of her people under colonial subjugation, are therefore closely linked to her Māori female identity. She remembers how her grandmother warned her about the colonial powers. She explains that before Tiri was born, someone "white as a ghost" arrived on their island, "they welcomed this new goblin, but he killed them with his musket", and she has been at war with him since then (p. 10). Through Tiri's memories, the play gives voice to Māori collective consciousness and historical suffering silenced or distorted by colonial narratives that favour European perspectives. *Woman Far Walking* challenges these dominant histories by presenting indigenous people as not passive victims of oppression, but as active subjects who reclaim and retell their past on stage. The play represents a history of ongoing violence and loss by dramatizing such buried wounds in the collective consciousness as colonial invasion, civil wars that claimed countless Māori lives, the loss of 15,000 New Zealand soldiers in World War I, and the devastating 1918 epidemic that killed 6,000 people, the majority of whom were Māori. As another emblem of collective trauma, the atomic tests conducted by former colonial powers on Moruroa Atoll further underline the unbroken continuity of colonial domination: "wherever [the colonizer] goes, he murders people. ... He murders even his own. ... Now he murders the land and the sea" (p. 76). Moreover, Tiri brings the harrowing episodes in Māori history to life,

such as the Ngatapa massacre, the 1918 influenza epidemic, and the protests on Molesworth Street, rendered with striking realism over two hours through the play's sound effects and lighting. Thus, *Woman Far Walking* compels the Māoris to face their two-century history of suffering, as embodied in Tiri, the living vessel of their collective memory. The audience experiences Tiri's fear and despondency through the re-enactment of such horrors, animated by "amplified" voices, "cries of terror," high-pitched sounds of rifle and musket fire, drumbeats, and the noises of horses and dogs, with dimming lights and shifting costumes (p. 41, 45). Her plea to a soldier to take her kids' lives swiftly so they will not suffer confronts the audience with the inescapable brutality of colonial history and the scars it has left on the Māori psyche.

Besides, the plays' engagement with collective trauma reconnects a person with his or her community, as exemplified in Wilson's play, where the two siblings develop a renewed sense of connection to their familial legacy after coming to terms with their painful histories. Viewed from a broader perspective, Wilson's work extends this healing process to the entire African American community and awakens their communal attachment to a long-suppressed cultural legacy through various mechanisms. *The Piano Lesson* employs African traditions through rituals, music, songs, and supernatural figures, all of which serve to inspire the Black community to rediscover and claim its roots. The songs, which emerged as a way for Africans under slavery to communicate their grief and resilience, capture the timeless essence of African culture and convey it to a people on the verge of collective amnesia. As the play points out, throughout the enslavement era, African Americans used the piano as a medium of preserving their ancestral music of their African heritage through artistic endeavours. The songs evoke the agonising memories of slavery while also transforming them into a collective spiritual rebirth for the African American community by summoning the spirits of their ancestors and banishing the ghosts. The African Americans in the play experience a new feeling of solidarity and belonging as a result of facing and bearing witness to their history of trauma.

Another fundamental aspect of African heritage is the oral storytelling tradition, which likewise serves as a vital tool for cultural continuity and remembrance. Wilson's characters reclaim the voices of those marginalised and silenced by systematic injustice through Doaker's stories of Boy Charles, their family history, and the piano. These stories, which document history from the viewpoints of those without political authority, promote recognising the past rather than its rejection. Doaker, thus, like a shamanic storyteller who acts as a mediator between the realms of life and death, uses the piano to convey the family's past: "See, now ... to understand about that piano…you got to go back to slavery time" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1232). In this sense, storytelling not only helps to preserve history but also creates cultural catharsis by using performance to reflect and transform the Black community's collective traumas. It is communicated through theatre, which is the primary form of expression in African cultural practice. Finally, the use of supernatural elements in the play, such as the ghosts of their ancestors and Sutter, who is thought to have been killed by "the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog," which may respond if "their names" are uttered at a particular moment, highlights the African spiritual heritage that prioritises the mystical and the communal over Western rationalist thought and individualism (p. 1255). Additionally, Bernice invokes the spiritual powers of her ancestors through African songs and ceremonies. In contrast, Avery, an African American Christian priest, is unable to expel the ghost using Western religious rites. Her triumph serves as proof of the power of indigenous spirituality and ancestry as a means for attaining freedom and autonomy. In

this respect, the play inspires African Americans to rediscover their shared history, rebuild their cultural identities, and struggle against assimilation and silencing through the use of music, oral storytelling, and the spirituality inherent in African culture. It is through this act of cultural remembrance that they symbolically challenge "the White man" who resents the Black people resisting him, saying 'I got it, too'" (p. 1256).

By guiding the Māori community to experience and relive their historical traumas, and thereby liberating them from marginalization, forced assimilation, and historical erasure, *Woman Far Walking*, likewise, fosters collective emotional release. In addition, the decolonisation of the Māori community encourages them to rebuild their collective identities and reconnect with their traditions in resistance to homogenising Western narratives. Ihimaera addresses this silencing by describing his work as an effort to recover the "absent or invisibilised, Māori text" (2023, p. 90). As Faris similarly suggests, the dramatization of communal trauma sustains and constructs "cultural or group identity" by serving as a bridge "between the cultural heritage of the past" and contemporary cultural legacies (2004, p. 105). In this light, the play compels the Māori to remember the systematic violence inflicted upon their ancestors by colonizers, the impact of European-descended Pākehās on the decimation of their population during civil wars, the involvement and significant losses of young Māori men in World War I under the British Empire and, the survivors who were eventually devastated by the 1918 influenza pandemic, which killed more Māori than Pākehā due to poor hygiene and living environments. Besides, *Woman Far Walking* features Māori cultural elements such as oral storytelling, spiritual practices, music, dance, songs, and rituals to foster a sense of belonging among a community long undermined and assimilated by colonial forces. As part of indigenous cultural expression, storytelling in the play serves to reveal the Māori's marginalization and to recover their cultural identity by retelling their own historical narrative. During the second act, Tiri becomes the storyteller, narrating her harrowing recollections of the civil war during which her children died. Her testimony is abruptly interrupted by a reporter who asks whether she was a queen of cannibals, a question that mirrors Tiri's recounting of her community's history, as her ancestors did, keeping oral storytelling as a kind of collective memory. The play also draws on key Māori magical elements to bridge the gap between the mythical and historical aspects of trauma, as exemplified by the centenarian protagonist who speaks with Death and vividly recalls her past despite her age. Finally, the play revives the community's cultural legacy while highlighting its traumatic past through the use of the Māori language, ritualistic chants, and traditional performances such as "Ka pananpa" and the "haka" (Ihimaera, 2000, p. 19). These performative acts inspire a renewed sense of communal identity and belonging among a people long silenced under Anglo-Saxon colonial domination. Remembrance emerges as a future-oriented ethical practice rather than a retreat to victimhood, exemplified by Ihimaera's effort "to convert a sense of injury into a sense of opportunity," thus offering "an example of transformative imagination" (Heim, 2007, p. 320).

Hence, the analyses of *The Piano Lesson* and *Woman Far Walking* show that personal trauma and collective memory are inseparable in post-slavery and postcolonial contexts. Both plays illustrate how theatrical performance enables marginalized communities to transform inherited suffering into cultural agency. While Wilson presents ancestral remembrance and ritual as mechanisms of healing, Ihimaera foregrounds trauma as unresolved but articulated through memory and testimony, which allows him "to engage with the legacy of colonization as an

unassimilated cultural injury" (Heim, 2007, p. 312). Despite these differences, both playwrights represent remembrance as an ethical and political act essential to communal survival rather than a burden.

Conclusion

As powerfully portrayed in the works of August Wilson and Witi Ihimaera, otherized communities such as African Americans and Māori engage with and begin to overcome their historical traumas and reclaim suppressed identities through the theatrical portrayal of the suffering endured by their muted ancestors. Both playwrights focus on the haunting memories that torment the characters until they are confronted, enabling them to embrace their ethnic identities and reassert their sense of belonging to their cultural and historical legacies. Therefore, the plays suggest that the only way for people and societies to recover from those painful, traumatic memories entirely is to remember and confront them. In this respect, Bernice, Boy Willie and Tiri/Tilly are all examples of this therapeutic journey. By facing and articulating their traumas, they not only reclaim their cultural identities but also serve as a means for collective healing. Their communities regain a sense of solidarity and cultural continuity by reliving and purging the suffering of slavery and colonial oppression through these acts of memory. Theatre, in *The Piano Lesson* and *Woman Far Walking,* turns into a ritual of recollection and an artistic space where cultural traumas are re-examined, recreated, and eventually transcended. Finally, both plays conclude with the hope that future generations will protect their cultural heritage rather than succumb to collective amnesia. Beyond the critique of the historical brutality and suppression caused by Anglo-Saxon colonisation, they foresee a peaceful future based on memory, resiliency, independence and cultural endurance, as suggested by Tiri's advice to Jessica: "it is your song, moko. For as long as you breathe, sing it out loud" as "the keeper of the fire" (Ihimaera, 2000, p. 92).

References

Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In J. C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, & P. Sztompka (Eds.), *Cultural trauma and collective identity* (pp. 1–31). University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0001.

Caruth, C. (1991). Introduction. *American Imago*, 48(1), 1–12. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304030

Caruth, C. (1995). Recapturing the past: Introduction. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 151–157). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.20656

Duggan, P. (2012). *Trauma-tragedy: Symptoms of contemporary performance*. Manchester University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt212165r

Eyerman, R. (2001). *Cultural trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.003.0003

Faris, W. B. (2004). *Ordinary enchantments: Magical realism and the remystification of narrative*. Vanderbilt University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/40158753

Forter, G. (2019). Colonial trauma, utopian carnality, modernist form: Toni Morrison's beloved and Arundhati Roy's the god of small things. In M. Balaev (Ed.), *Critique and utopia in postcolonial historical fiction: Atlantic and other worlds*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198830436.003.0002

Friedländer, S. (1992). Trauma, transference, and "working through" in writing the history of the "Shoah." *History & Memory*, *4(1),* 39–59. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25618626

Heim, O. (2007). The Interplay of the local and the global in Witi Ihimaera's revisions. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *43*(3), 310–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850701669641

Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.

Ihimaera, W. (2000). *Woman far walking*. Huia Publishers.

Ihimaera, W. (2023, July 3). *Toward our ancient futures: An interview with Witi Ihimaera* (A. Knox, Interviewer) [Interview]. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2023.2208971

Kaplan, E. A. (2005). *Trauma culture: The politics of terror and loss in media and literature*. Rutgers University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-2007-060

LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/3685496

Morales, M. (1994). Ghosts on the piano: August Wilson and the representation of Black American history. In A. Nadel (Ed.), *May all your fences have gates: Essays on the drama of August Wilson* (pp. 105–115). University of Iowa Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20h6vmw

Stampfl, B. (2014). Parsing the unspeakable in the context of trauma. In M. Balaev (Ed.), *Contemporary approaches in literary trauma theory* (pp. 15–41). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137365941_2

Wevers, L. (2013). Striding both worlds: Witi Ihimaera and New Zealand's literary traditions. Journal *of Postcolonial Writing*, *49*(1), 114–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.718512

Whitehead, A. (2009). *Memory*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888049

Wilson, A. (1998). The piano lesson. In J. C. Coldewey & W. R. Streitberger (Eds.), *Drama: Classical to contemporary* (pp. 1231–1261). Prentice Hall.

Youssef, L. (2021). Remnants of the Past and the quest for identity: Reading August Wilson's the piano lesson in the context of collective memory. *The Explicator*, *79*(4), 166–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2021.2005518

Ethical Statement/Etik Beyan: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. / Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Declaration of Conflict/Çatışma Beyanı: It is declared that there is no conflict of interest between individuals or institutions in the study. / Çalışmada kişi ya da kurumlar arası çıkar çatışmasının olmadığı beyan olunur.