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**“Events of Sand”: Affirmative Speculations
in Contemporary American Drama**

MA THESIS / DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):
Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD. M.A.

Zpracovala (author): Bc. Daria Shakurova
Studijní obor (subject): Anglophone Literatures
and Cultures – American Literature and Cultural
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Declaration

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V Praze dne 16.07.2024

Daria Shakurova

Permission

Souhlasím se diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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I was writing this thesis in times of precarity, sadness, loss and war, of being dislocated and separated from my home country and loved ones, and of sickness and deepest self-doubt. When I started my research, the topic was making my misery even stronger and my questioning of life even more unbearable. Eventually, however, it turned into a glimpse of hope.

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I hope I'll defend this thesis before my next birthday and, most of all, that we'll end up imagining better worlds.

As Mark Fisher wrote: "No more miserable Monday mornings", indeed.

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Chapter 1. Introduction – “To invent, rather than relive”:¹ Capitalist Realism, Af/firmative Speculations, and American Theatre

The second edition of C.W.E. Bigsby’s *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* closes off the twentieth century with a brief overview of Tony Kushner’s works. At the centre of this subchapter’s focus is the two-part, epic-scale *Angels in America*, which Bigsby names “surely the most successful play of the 1990s”.² Set in the testing years of the HIV/AIDS epidemics – although not restricted to this timeframe in its explorations – *Angels in America* exposes the social and political structures under whose oppression a group of interconnected characters are struggling against the waning of hope. It is a play of liberation. Kushner, as Bigsby suggests, uses fantasy as a cure for the debilitating, seemingly unshakeable “common sense” of the dominant systems: “Fantasy becomes not merely a style but a mode of being. Variety, heterogeneity, unpredictability, transformations, pluralisms, ambiguities, anarchic gestures are [deliberately] contrasted with the arbitrary codes, legalisms, fixities of a society which works by exclusion”.³ What appears innate and unyielding is loosened up and brought into play. From the beginning of Part One, *Millennium Approaches*, realistic sets transform into a dreamscape; imaginary friends and ghosts of the past smoothly enter dialogues; angels abandoned by God tumble down from the cracked-open skies; a marginal man on the verge of death is proclaimed the Prophet of the world’s survival. All the while, new and unexpected models of relations are forged across the temporarily erased boundaries. Even though the play’s ending does not let this fantasy replace the painful reality, it still witnesses the sickness retreat just enough to let in the possibility of an alternative: against all odds, the AIDS-positive protagonist wins himself more time and more life by denying the Angels’ order to cease all progress. Prior proceeds to turn his project into a collective agenda

¹ Lauren Berlant, “The Traumatic: On BoJack Horseman’s ‘Good Damage’”, *Leaving Hollywood: Essays After BoJack Horseman* (22 Nov 2020), *Post 45*, <https://post45.org/2020/11/the-traumatic-on-bojack-horsemans-good-damage/>.

² C.W.E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama: 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 419.

³ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 422-3.

by blessing the audience with “More Life” too and proclaiming in his final speech that it is now that “The Great Work Begins”.⁴ With radical imagination liberated from its stasis, *Angels in America*, in the best tradition of what Bigsby calls the “theatre of praxis”⁵ – the theatre of intervention and change – calls for conjuring new futures that society could potentially spin into.

Whether or not this kind of liberation is still on the agenda of contemporary American drama is the question that serves as the outset of this thesis’s investigation. Simultaneously dreaded and anticipated in Kushner’s subtitle “Millenium Approaches”, the 2000s have opened with two decades increasingly associated with crises. Some have torn through lives indiscriminately while some continue to affect only selected groups; some have sparked debates and demands for action while some saturate the ordinary in such a way that their presence would be strongly denied by the majority. The nature and magnitudes of these vary. The severe consequences of the Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, including economic recession, unemployment, housing market crash, and austerity policies, have been reverberating globally far beyond its official timeline; new ecological disasters and accelerating climate change are both outcomes of ongoing, all-encompassing environmental degradation. Beyond these two obvious examples, the world has also been subjected to an upsurge of right-wing populism, renewed deepening of inequalities, eruptions of violence and hate crimes, humanitarian catastrophes, forced displacement, crises of education, incarceration, alienation, and food, while, in their private lives, individuals struggle to navigate the rough terrain of precarity, social isolation, and the epidemic of mental health issues. The list is not nearly exhaustive. On the contrary, a continuous and unbridled proliferation assures that the probability of not being exposed to at least one or two tends to zero even for those who used to enjoy relative security.

As academic engagement grows alongside this long crisis of the 21st century, more and more prominent voices choose to address it not as an assortment of concurrent yet isolated events

⁴ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013) 290.

⁵ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 11.

but as intersecting, correlated conditions that ultimately refer to the current state of hegemonic neoliberalism. Such reframing has given rise to varying approaches. For some, especially among the political progressives, writes Gareth Dale, it has become an incentive to estimate, following in Karl Polanyi's influential steps, the final collapse of an inherently malfunctioning structure that can only take so much patching up before it disintegrates and lets in either a dystopian ruin or a utopian project.⁶ As Martijn Konings observes, the argument for it often comes from perceiving monetary relations in all their forms as an aloof, emphatically "external force devoid of human content" or merely a "fiction that exists only by virtue of all-too-human irrationality".⁷ Both options imply a relatively straightforward – and, most importantly, not ruinous to the overall integrity of existence – progression from upcoming disillusionment to consequent united rejection once inconsistencies in its autonomous narrative become too obvious to ignore.

Others, in the meantime, have adopted a significantly more reserved stance, associating the capitalist order not with instability but rather with astounding, unshakeable tenacity. According to this line of thought, instead of detaching itself from the "human content", market exchange became so firmly embedded in it that it turned into what David Harvey calls an invisible "guide to all human action",⁸ which translates into a complex web of relations, associations and patterns everywhere from career and consumption habits to something less predictable like intimacy, emotional life, race, gender, ethical beliefs, social interactions, and even dissent. To the majority, it is an era of post-ideology: neoliberalism has blended into the background to such a degree that it appears timeless, synonymous with life itself, and the appeal to "obvious", "rational" and "common sense", as Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge shrewdly point out, serve as the most effective tools of contemporary enforcement.⁹

⁶ Gareth Dale, "At the brink of a 'great transformation'? Neoliberalism and countermovement today", *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1535100/14>.

⁷ Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressive Have Missed* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) 4.

⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 3.

⁹ Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2014) 1-2.

Under these circumstances, crises do not function according to Polanyi's predictions. Over the years, the foretold "fatal blows", even of the global financial crisis, have resulted not in the uprooting of the malfunctioning system but, on the contrary, in its further strengthening and reinvigoration. Naomi Klein (2008), Mark Fisher (2009), Slavoj Žižek (2009), David McNally (2011), Ghassan Hage (2015), and Martijn Konings (2015), among others, suggest, based on this tendency, that crisis has been absorbed by neoliberalism and converted into a key feature of its power. What one generally experiences today is a threat that looms in an increasingly abstract, anxiety-inducing way. Unlike Cathy Caruth's widely recognised definition of trauma as an exceptional, destructive occurrence that leaves an individual temporarily incapacitated,¹⁰ the threat rarely turns into an actual shattering event. Amidst the "crisis ordinariness",¹¹ as Lauren Berlant calls it, "the beings under pressure and disturbed by what's happened around are usually destined not to be defeated unto death but to live with the light and heavy effects of damage, still acting, being acted upon, and trying to keep things moving".¹² The latter does not involve any radical solutions since the myth of an absence of myth, described above, allows even at the moment of a thorough disaffection to play the "it's unbearable but that's just life" card – identifying and addressing the actual cause of traumatisation, even though the effects of damage are undeniable, would feel absurdly like going up against the "reality" itself. So, what one is left with is mitigating specific symptoms and dealing with smaller, discernible problems by building with and around what is not functional. According to both Konings and Berlant (see, for example, cruel attachments¹³), the paradox is that, in their search for a compensatory, therapeutic network, individuals turn back to the familiar "norms, symbols, and institutions" that are the very root of their troubles and work creatively to sustain them at least in some form.¹⁴ Konig writes:

"Capitalism does not so much stomp on us when we're down but rather enables us to access new

¹⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 176.

¹¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, CA: Duke University Press, 2011) 1.

¹² Berlant, "The Traumatic: On BoJack Horseman's 'Good Damage'".

¹³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

¹⁴ Konings, 95.

powers and to deploy these to restore and elaborate the metaphorical modalities of our own subordination”.¹⁵ In this fashion, betrayals of trust simultaneously become opportunities for deepening the bond: the neoliberal order casually reinvents and spreads itself by incorporating adjustments and improvisations and, as Žižek notes, opening up new markets for investment where the fractures are wide and anxiety levels are high enough.¹⁶

Although a famous, if slightly worn-out, phrase “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”¹⁷ sums up this bleak perspective, it does not necessarily entail that no kind of (re-)imagining has been taking place among those who share it. For many, the considerations simply have shifted from projects with change as the ultimate goal to creating an environment where changes might eventually become a realistic option. To name a few, Wendy Brown (1999) calls for resistance to what Walter Benjamin defined as “Left Melancholia” and for reorientation from mourning for the failed ideals of the past to bringing to life the conditions of the present that can produce new potentials.¹⁸ J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006), as well as Imre Szeman and Eric Cazdyn (2011), reiterate Brown’s observations by emphasising the need to “loosen the structure of feeling that cannot live with uncertainty or move beyond hopelessness”¹⁹ and to search for a “*will* for the present to be different”.²⁰ Ghassan Hage (2015) adds to a more familiar “anti-” politics the “‘alter’ dimension”, which, at this particular historical moment, finds a more useful resource in “taking us outside [the established structures] precisely to continuously remind us of the actual possibilities of being other to ourselves”.²¹ In every case, the agenda is not to pinpoint a desirable course of action or to outline the context of its actualisation, but to re-engage the very idea of the future, which is currently foreclosed on all fronts.

¹⁵ Konings, 121.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso Books, 2009), 18.

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek and Frederic Jameson quoted by Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 11.

¹⁸ Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholia”, *Boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1999) 19-27, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/303736>.

¹⁹ J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Post-Capitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) 4.

²⁰ Imre Szeman and Eric Cazdyn, “Conclusion: ‘Oh, Don’t Ask Why!’”, *After Globalisation* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1013682/11>.

²¹ Ghassan Hage, 62.

A combination of such strategies for interrupting the neoliberal “forever” is employed by this thesis as a tool kit for tracking down the liberating impulses. *Speculate This!*, a 2013 manifesto co-authored by an anonymous scholarly group “the uncertain commons”, provides the general framework with its proposal to differentiate between two distinct practices of attending to the future. What they call “firmative speculations” has been briefly outlined in the preceding paragraphs. As another term for the neoliberal instruments of reproduction of life, firmative speculations “seek to pin down, constrain, and enclose – to make things definite, *firm*” and safeguarded against any far-reaching intervention, even when, or more likely especially when, the precarious is overwhelming.²² If this practice is dominant, the deviations are systematically kept to a minimum: potentialities do not emerge naturally, equally frightening and exciting in their unpredictability, but are purposefully created, curated, and then exploited to ensure the return on investments. The unknown is banished from the mind whenever it cannot be put into circulation or be convincingly rationalised. Notable is the growing popularity of such disciplines as risk management, financial analytics and insurance. While the worst-case scenarios are rendered palpable and claustrophobically imminent, the avalanche of related anxieties gets, in uncertain commons’ words, “cathartically managed” by the professionals who reduce the disorienting variability and turn it into comprehensive statistics and trustworthy predictions, the tight “linear causality” of which allows to then consensually steer the population towards the selected “reasonable” solutions.²³ In the “smooth, abstract, well-managed world” that encapsulates everything in totality and does not hold any surprises, the future is realised as something achingly close to an eternal present that is swelling more or less as it is, comfortably unchanged and believed to be unchangeable.²⁴

At the heart of “affirmative speculations”, on the other hand, is not a “self-congratulatory affirmation of what we are”, which can be mistakenly surmised from the term, but “rather an

²²The uncertain commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham, CA: Duke University Press, 2013) 12-15. Italics are mine.

²³ The uncertain commons, 41-42.

²⁴ The uncertain commons, 15.

affirmation of what we *might* become”.²⁵ This practice, similar to Chantal Mouffe’s “agonistic pluralism”,²⁶ perceives the world as a shifting realm constantly rearranged by the frictions between mismatched living experiences, including the margins that never get acknowledged by firmative speculations. These experiences sprout innumerable coexisting, overlapping, clashing, and often incalculable and inconceivable futures that force uncertainty instead of risk calculus to take centre stage. Here, the uncertainty no longer feels like something inconvenient or alarming; embraced and employed by this practice, it turns creative and playful. When unknown worlds yet to come temporarily materialise in the present as a “prototype” with all “the expectation of bugs, kinks, failures” and other unpredictable particularities, they become available for free play and experimentation, the main goal of which is not to identify what should be done but rather what we are capable of doing otherwise and, crucially, as the reading of Giorgio Agamben’s *Potentialities* suggests, what we are capable of not doing at all – “a sense of latency, a withholding, even recalcitrance; a not acting, a not sending of inherent force down well-charted pathways”.²⁷ These capabilities, along with the fact that it is impossible to become aware of all the emerging futures or know which contexts of actualisation will come to be, work against the totalising tendency. As the horizons stay open even at the moments of damage and failure, risks lose their overwhelmingly negative connotation and are allowed to be once again productively unsettling and not paralysing.

Lauren Berlant’s last study, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), suggests a way to shift between these modes of speculation. To “lose, unlearn and loosen objects and structures” is the first step to take.²⁸ They write:

what we commonly call ‘structure’ is not what we usually presume – an intractable principle of continuity across time and space – but is really a convergence of force and value in patterns of movement of force and value in patterns of movement seen as solid from a distance. Objects are

²⁵ The uncertain commons, 73. Italics are mine.

²⁶ Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki, eds., *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 11-16.

²⁷ The uncertain commons, 73-74.

²⁸ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, CA: Duke University Press, 2022)

always looser than they appear. Objectness is only a semblance, a seeming, a projection of interest in a thing we are trying to stabilize.²⁹

To unlearn the object/structure is to reveal that the components, from which these objects/structures are built, are available for reconfiguration and rearrangement into alternative forms of life, where what is damaged and damaging does not have to be reproduced. This does not necessarily involve the shift on the foundational level but mostly on the level of an episode, a potentiality in the cluster of futures that constitute affirmative speculations. An episode, according to Berlant, is crucial, for it is “a goad to rethink seriality, continuity, analogy”.³⁰ The effectiveness of their accumulation is that it might eventually “snap the chain of discourse” and replace affirmative speculations with the affirmative ones in its position of a primary mode.³¹ Along with the uncertain commons, Berlant points out that such episodes spring up from within the crisis of ordinariness already today.

The outpour of drama scholarship that tracks new developments, responses and strategies mirrors the attempts of engaged theatre to stay involved in the collective search for alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. As Florian Malzacher writes, theatre is where “societies in all their – actual or imagined – varieties are performed, expanded, verified, or even re-invented”, “where things can be shown and said that don’t find a form elsewhere, and where radical imagination is, in rare moments, still is possible”.³² A considerable British trend can be easily identified. The works of playwrights like Caryl Churchill, Mark Ravenhill, Lucy Kirkwood, Debbie Tucker Green, Tanika Gupta, Tim Crouch, Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens, and Andy Smith among others are repeatedly scoped out for the exploration of aesthetic trends on the national stage or used to support more general theoretical explorations (see, for example, Vicky Angelaki (2017), Joe Kelleher (2009), or Liz Tomlin (2019)). Still, instead of being confined to one specific location,

²⁹Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 26.

³⁰Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 115.

³¹Andrés Green quoted by Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 115.

³² Florian Malzacher, ed., *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (Berlin: House on Fire, 2019), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1045336/10>.

the dialogue also connects a number of theatres across the globe, all the way from the United Kingdom to Brazil, Colombia, South Africa, Poland, India, and China, which is demonstrated by such collections as *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres* (2011) edited by Laura D. Nielsen and Patricia Ebarra, *World Political Theatre and Performance* (2020) edited by Mireia Aragay, *Performance in the Blockades of Neoliberalism* (2012) edited by Broderick Chow, and Florian Malzacher's *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre Today* (2015).

In comparison, theatre in the United States continues to keep to the shadows. Although separate playwrights do make their way into publications, including a chapter in Nielsen and Ebarra's and Malzacher's collection, there is still a significant shortage of studies that would concentrate exclusively on the dramatic interactions with the hegemonic socio-political discourse and crisis-ridden landscape of the 21st-century America. A few conjectures can be mentioned here regarding this tendency. Historically, as Konnings writes, the "dynamics of American finance" followed a trajectory of development that differed vastly from that of "the Old World" in that it wed the Protestant work ethic and populist republicanism: a subject, "in the world of markets and money, [...] would succumb to neither indulgence nor dependence but be fully committed to an ethos of purifying self-reliance" and its promise of redemption on earth.³³ Over time, along with American exceptionalism and manifest destiny, this provided a fertile ground for the emergence of neoliberalism, the most intense, bone-deep version of which is still perceived as distinctively North American.³⁴ The bond was solidified further during the Cold War when state-induced paranoia insisted on protecting at all costs the "inherently" American ways against the invasion of communism and other leftist ideologies. Thus, while elsewhere, especially in the UK, a softer form with some democratic inclinations allows more space for the search for alternative horizons, in the US, such projects of radical change and resistance are habitually perceived as a blatant attack on the national character itself. Additionally, Sienglinde Lemke draws attention to the fact

³³ Konnings, 66.

³⁴ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) 5.

that “precarity” and “precariousness” as notions have not been embraced by the American public as readily and widely as in Europe, for it is still frequently foiled by the return to the American Dream as a simple, ready solution to it, and the belief that any kind of inequality is caused primarily by personal attitudes and actions. It is only in 2013, almost five years after the Great Recession, that President Barack Obama for the first time publicly acknowledged the specifically “precarious” state of the nation.³⁵ The narratives of crises have entered the output of economists, academics, journalists and artists since then; however, as expected, the shift in focus is not immediate and the topic only gradually gains more mainstream visibility.

Some general developments in American drama are also of note. According to Christopher Bigsby, the post-war years saw a major turn from a “project of transformation or regeneration” that “exposed the economic and social determinisms of the capital system” and celebrated “the resistant spirit” to a more introspective, inward-looking drama.³⁶ From the open solidarity and collective action of Cliff Odets’s works to Arthur Miller’s plays where a man is both “psyche and citizen”³⁷ to a deeper dive into an individual and their subjective – the trend seems to keep intensifying. This can also be applied, and maybe even to a greater degree, to the theatre scholarship and critique. Nelson Pressley, for instance, examines a variety of cases, in which an American reviewer would implicitly privilege “psychology and character while assuming politics to be an intrusion on the autonomy of rounded characters”.³⁸ Studies, too, appear to be favourably disposed towards the national debate on identity as well as, what Martin Medekke calls, “the private anxieties of an individual”, and their focus is often on preoccupations of a specific playwright rather than the assessment of overarching patterns.³⁹ The latter might also be ascribed

³⁵ Siglinde Lemke, “Introduction”, *Inequality, Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3491683/2>.

³⁶ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, 72.

³⁷ Christopher Bigsby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 14.

³⁸ Nelson Pressley, *American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice: Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 45.

³⁹ Martin Medekke et al., eds, *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) 3.

to the ongoing decentralisation of the American stage. With the repertoire largely based on a high probability of commercial success, Broadway has lost its status of “initiating” theatres; instead, as Christopher Innes observed in the introduction to *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights* (2013), “a healthy number of ‘major’ and lesser-known but important playwrights” “open their shows both geographically and symbolically well beyond Broadway” – as self-directed productions in university or, locally, in regional and/or experimental venues.⁴⁰ On that account, discerning a common trend has become a more complex and laborious task than often elsewhere.

Notwithstanding all the stumbling stones and particularities, this thesis attempts to contribute to a broader dialogue in such a way that would suggest American drama as yet another active participant in searching for and imagining an “otherwise”. Pressley, in his book *American Playwriting and the Anti-Political Prejudice*, claims that *Angels in America* was the last politically literate text that, despite its immense popularity with the audience, reviewers, and academia alike, failed to “revitalize” the drama of resistance and set off the emergence of other, similarly charged works.⁴¹ Without insisting on the presence of a trend – the scope of the research does not allow for such assessments here – the thesis argues that, on the contrary, liberating impulses, as in impulses towards open horizons, continue to inhabit the American stage in the new millennium. The dramatic works under examination share more or less the same social, cultural, and political background of the United States and were produced between 2006 and 2018. All the characters are stuck with something in life that is inconvenient, absurd, exhausting, painful, threatening, or hits the limit but is also foundational in a way that feels immutable. No escape routes are proposed; at the same time, it does not mean that the plays simply “relive” the normative and accompanying trauma through representation. Instead, each of them is built around episodes, in which the crisis ordinariness sets off not just the adjusting that helps to stabilise familiar patterns, but, as glitches

⁴⁰ Christopher Innes et al., eds, *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary American Playwrights* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) 2-3.

⁴¹ Pressley, 26.

betray a significantly more dynamic nature of what organises the everyday, also a different, inventive kind of recalibration. In some works, the loosening of structures is the main focus, and the emergence of alternatives is only vaguely hinted at. Other plays do offer a glimpse of an “otherwise” – what Berlant defines as an improvised space within the “broken world” where the brokenness is made available for play and is disturbed so “the conventional forms of its violence” do not have to be reproduced.⁴² Either way, affirmative speculations temporarily substitute the firmative ones. Each dramatic work, even when witnessing the return to the routine logistics of the hegemonic system, still closes with an aftertaste of uncertainty that prompts questioning what exactly is possible in life.

As this Introduction has covered most of the theoretical framework, from here the thesis moves directly onto the analysis, introducing additional concepts in the course of the plays’ examination. Chapter 2 looks at Annie Baker’s *The Flick* (2013) and two plays from Quiara Alegria Hudes’s “Elliot Trilogy”: *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006) and *Water by the Spoonful* (2012). All three are inhabited by characters trying to live with (and despite) their attachment to individualism and entrepreneurship that more often than not, are synonymous with overwhelming precariousness and isolation. Rooted in realism more than any other examples, these also offer the clearest, most immediate and “realistic” glimpses into the “otherwise”, for discerning which such concepts as “crisis infrastructure”, “sovereignty”, and “inconvenience of other people” are introduced. The “infrastructure”, along with Sianne Ngai’s “animatedness”, is also central to Chapter 3. Both playwrights here, known for radically shifting perspectives, breaking conventions, and disorienting their spectators, seek to destabilise the contemporary racial relations – Young Jean Lee in her 2007 *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and Jackie Sibblies Drury in her 2018 *Fairview*. What is the world’s “overcloseness” and why alienation from it is a good thing are also discussed. Finally, Chapter 3, is inspired by Dan Rebellato’s article “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre” (2017), although it explores the theme of apocalypse on the

⁴² Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 27.

American stage instead of the British. The main question posed in this chapter is how the proximity to death can feign off death and open up future(s); however, it also deals with building the alternative space from inside of the “Capitaloscene” and its exploitation of nature. The driving concepts are “necrofuturism” and “wanting the world without being in it”, and the play under examination is Shawn Wallace’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2009). The following subsection will provide a short overview on a foundational object/structure in question – in this case, “*homo oeconomicus*” – and similar overviews will appear at the beginning of every chapter.

Chapter 2 – On Being Together: Individualism, Inconvenience, and Intimacy

The phrase “no man is an island”,¹ introduced into wide circulation by John Donne, has been rapidly losing its previously unquestionable legitimacy. Colonised by neoliberalism and turned into the ruling life-building strategy, individualism insists on establishing personal sovereignty. This is not, however, the sovereignty as in evidence of freedom, or as in boundaries that a nation or a person establishes *in relation* to something or someone, but too often a totalising, defensive denial of relation in the first place.² “In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it”, writes Wendy Brown in her book *Undoing the Demos*, “we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*”:

Far from Adam Smith’s creature propelled by the natural urge to ‘truck, barter, and exchange,’ today’s *homoe oeconomicus* is an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavours and venues.³

As a self-sufficient business project, to be worthy of consideration an individual requires an entrepreneurial drive, inexhaustible investments, ongoing development and careful management. This is applied to everything, including work, education, choosing a hobby, buying property, creating a personal style, grocery shopping, creativity, and even social and love life. Each small decision directly affects the probability of yielding future returns. Under this logic, popular insistence on “being your authentic self” gets easily translated into “being your best marketable self” (ironically eradicating any authenticity from it) while the equally popular idea of self-care – which Audre Lorde once sought to activate as an “act of political warfare” against colonisation and domination⁴ – is remastered into a scene of replenishing one’s productivity and efficiency. Accordingly, the others in this equation appear in two roles: as a competitor or a business partner,

¹ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emerging Occasions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 98.

² Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 3.

³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015) 10.

⁴ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light, and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 2017) 130.

both of which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Either way, however, a careful distance always needs to be maintained. Getting close now feels, in a paranoid and narcissistic manner, like a threat to one's position of power, like an encroachment on one's sovereignty. The request to accommodate another "inconvenient" person seems unwarranted, even offensive, while the necessity to take care of someone or react with compassion appears on the radar with a decreasing frequency.

In her conversation with Joe Dziemianowicz, Annie Baker emphasises that even though *The Flick*'s protagonists are often misrecognised by reviewers as "loners", they are decisively not.⁵ Isolation is not a space they choose to retreat to because, for them personally, it feels safe and comfortable but is something systematically and involuntarily felt and lived by people across all layers of society in this neoliberal moment. The characters here and in Quiara Alegría Hudes's "Elliot Trilogy" are to be considered according to the aforementioned logic as "entrepreneurial failures".⁶ The majority of them are contingent workers – cinema ushers, a Subway cashier, a janitor, a contracted teacher abroad, and a university adjunct – but they are also wounded veterans, recovering drug addicts, unemployed, divorcees, homeless, and a whole struggling diasporic neighbourhood. On one hand, they are isolated from the outside. Having entered the free market, an individual is granted the right to choose their own financial destiny and, therefore, bear full responsibility for personal successes and, inevitably, failures it has in store. If they fall, there is no one there to catch them. As the government disinvests itself, whatever "glitch"⁷ occurs in the general reproduction of life – whether it is marginalisation, poorness, unemployment, sexual violence, alcohol or drug abuse, or the epidemic of mental health disorders – the blame is shifted,

⁵ Joe Dziemianowicz and Annie Baker, "'The Joe D Show' Episode 9: *The Flick* Take 2 With Playwright Annie Baker, Director Sam Gold, and Actor Matthew Maher", Interview, *Daily News* (May 7, 2015) New York Daily News <https://www.nydailynews.com/2015/05/07/the-joe-d-show-episode-9-the-flick-take-2-with-playwright-annie-baker-director-sam-gold-and-actor-matthew-maher/>.

⁶ Daniel Dufournaud, "'When things are bad': Entrepreneurial Failure and Levinasian Ethics in Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Water by the Spoonful*", *College Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Summer 2020) 447, EBSCOhost <https://web-s-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=0f212eca-49b9-434f-9652-ad9ad82eb42d%40redis>.

⁷ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 24.

as Mark Fisher observes, firmly onto “supposedly pathological individuals, those ‘abusing the system’, rather than [...] the system itself”.⁸ Because they struggle to measure up to whatever arbitrary standards of profitability are there, the lives of these “pathological” individuals are consequently moved into the shadows, to the periphery of the social, where they are rendered, as Judith Butler calls it, “ungrievable” and ultimately disposable.⁹

On the other hand, on the periphery, these isolated characters are also disconnected from each other. In their case, fantasies attached to individualism and entrepreneurship are revealed to be unreachable and, even more importantly, damaging. Nevertheless, because these are what currently provide the sense of connection at least to some kind of life, they hold onto them regardless. This, however, is not the only thing that happens. Lauren Berlant proposes that something called “crisis infrastructuralism”

emerges when we are compelled to understand that nothing from above or on the outside is holding the world together solidly; the emergent threads become manifestly loose and knotty and multiply while still reproducing *some* aspects of life. In a crisis, what passed as “structure” passes into infrastructure.¹⁰

Exactly because “individualism” fits the protagonists so badly and they have to work so hard to keep their attachment to it, they are good candidates to understand that what they think is “eternal”, in reality, is pliable, multiplying, transitional, and always coming into being (note the prefix “infra-”). If these adjustments, negotiations and shifts are already taking place, creating heterotopias of managed inconsistencies – the angle Berlant borrowed from Michael Foucault’s thought – then, essentially, nothing prevents more configurations from being created.¹¹ In the following sections, Annie Baker’s *The Flick*, Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* and *Water by the Spoonful*, provide such episodes, where the characters disturb the glitched aloneness even further at the moments when they are pushed to the very limit and the world

⁸ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*,

⁹ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).

¹⁰ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 24. Italics are mine.

¹¹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 14.

becomes too violent and unbearable. The characters do not abandon their individualism but only give it, in the words of Adriana Cavarero, a slightly “different posture”¹² – an incline towards each other – which allows them to temporarily tap into alternative “ways of inhabiting and co-experiencing social worlds”, of being alone together.¹³

2.1 “Turn around and look at me”:¹⁴ Annie Baker’s *The Flick*

Annie Baker’s 2014 *The Flick* takes place from beginning to end in the empty auditorium of a “falling-apart movie theater in Worcester County, MA”.¹⁵ A new usher, Avery, joins already seasoned Sam and Rose in a drab series of shifts spent chatting, quoting films, playing games, and trying to reach each other. There is not much else happening in terms of action. In the background, a transition from projecting celluloid film to going fully digital is shown through the change of management, which also brings about an unlucky resolution to a petty theft conducted by a few generations of underpaid employees. Possibly as an act of racial discrimination, Avery, whose handwriting is recognised from ticket stubs resold for “dinner money”, is made a scapegoat and abruptly dismissed. However, neither of these larger-scale developments are given enough details or allowed to realise their dramatic potential. In a purely Chekhovian style, from which, according to Amy Muse’s *The Drama and Teater of Annie Baker*, Baker has been drawing her inspiration, the centre stage is left to subtler shifts and quieter developments of interpersonal relations.¹⁶

A digression needs to be made right at the start to point out some of the formal aspects of the play. When it was first produced, *The Flick*’s excruciating slowness led to an unprecedented case of the theatre’s artistic director, Tim Stanford, sending an email to the audience with the rationale for not shortening the first production from its original three hours. Under the tyranny of

¹² Adriana Cavarero, “Introduction”, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), Perlego <https://www.perlego.com/book/745285/inclinations-a-critique-of-rectitude-pdf>

¹³ Dufournaud, 447.

¹⁴ Annie Baker, *The Flick* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2014) 99.

¹⁵ Baker, 4.

¹⁶ Amy Muse, “Listening to the Lonely: Chekhov’s and Baker’s *Uncle Vanya*”, *The Drama and Theatre of Annie Baker*, ed. Patrick Lonergan and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr (London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2023) xi.

a fast-paced environment, human attention is crippled, so the opportunities to halt and properly process a situation, or test out what is solid, what only appears to be so, and what is built in the cracks of its disturbance, are generally foreclosed. In contrast, the strategy adopted by *The Flick*, writes David T. Johnson, is that of slow theatre, as it consciously goes against the acceleration and against the general cultural obsession with entertainment that leaves no space for boredom or wandering, questioning minds.¹⁷ Here, the audience is challenged to feel profound perturbation and submerge into insecurity triggered by witnessing stretched-out silences not loaded with any significant subtext or traditional action but with the everyday routines, ruled by normalised pressures, moments of respite, and prolonged, almost painful, anticipation. Since one cannot simply go with the flow of the plot but has to actively make oneself keep watching, the experience is no longer that of simply observing the events unfold on stage but turns into something more personal without a need to be straightforwardly didactic.

A similar agenda is found attached to the set. Talking about the feeling that sparked the idea behind *The Flick*, Baker explains that she attempted to recreate the moment when you are unexpectedly snapped out of a “film reverie and brought into the liveness of where you are”¹⁸: the dissonance between the dream-like landscape of a film and life is so stark that for a split second one is shocked into an ability to see with startling clarity. The audience is positioned where a movie screen should be: “The beam of light from projector radiates out over our heads”.¹⁹ At the same time, the rows of seats are put in the centre of the stage, like a mirror that the audience is uncomfortably reflected unto. Every scene starts when the credit “song and the unknown movie ends, and there is a bright flash of green, and the white”, signalling that whatever dream-like, fictional narrative the audience has occupied all this time is put on pause. The sole focus is now

¹⁷ David T. Johnson, “‘A very very long amount of time passes’: Slowness, cinema and Annie Baker’s *The Flick*”, *New Cinema: Journal of Contemporary Film*, Vol. 18, No. 1&2 (2021): 61-75, EBSCO <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=e105a971-bb9a-4a1a-851e-c95da3db45be%40redis>.

¹⁸ Annie Baker quoted by Amy Muse, “The Presence of Silence: *The Aliens* and *The Flick*”, *The Drama and Theatre of Annie Baker*, ed. Patrick Lonergan and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr (London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2023) 53.

¹⁹ Baker, 7.

shifted to the unapologetically “real”, unvarnished world that the audience members have somehow come to share with the characters.

Like at least 30% of the American population, the crisis ordinariness of contingent labour is amidst what Rose, Avery and Sam find themselves.²⁰ “While [precarity] suggests fragility”, as Walter Hunt explains, “it really implies permanent fragility or a state of tense expectation” that has no expiration date.²¹ The state of the crumbling building in which the play is set perfectly mirrors this insecurity that has been eating through the fabric of the everyday. Scene Seven opens with Sam and Avery gazing up at a hole in the ceiling from when a chunk of tile came crashing down the previous Sunday. Although the hole is initially described as “ominous”, the reactions from various characters quickly turn it mundane and normalised. The owner, even though notified of what has occurred, does not break out of his apathy and only makes an effort to suppress a potential conflict with a member of the audience. The woman who was almost killed in the crash readily forgets the close-to-death experience when offered as an apology “six free popcorns and six free sodas” for her future visits.²² Even Avery and Sam, who at first seem relatively concerned, choose not to linger on the topic and, after complaining that their boss refuses to spend money not only on the collapsing ceiling but also on a nachos machine, go back to sweeping.

While the building is the most dramatic one, other illustrative examples of proliferating pressures and the characters’ adjustments are scattered throughout the play. The original incentive that was used to attract the masses to nonstandard work arrangements has promised a chance to combine flexibility, the space for personal enterprise, and merit-based career growth. In the case of the majority, however, none of it proves achievable, so individuals have to settle with a dangerously low income, very little power over working hours, no real possibility for development, no job security, and a strengthening conviction that they are profoundly worthless

²⁰ Sandra E. Gleason, *The Shadow Workforce: Perspectives on Contingent Work in the United States, Japan, and Europe* (Kalamazoo, MI: Upjohn Institute, 2006) 4-5.

²¹ Walter Hunt quoted by Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen, ed, *Precairety in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021) 177.

²² Baker, 68.

and replaceable. In *The Flick*, the cheap, anonymising uniforms, which are described specifically as “degrading”, are worn by the employees day after day.²³ The competition is present but is hardly real and has nothing to do with equality or fairness. The only career growth that is available is moving from cleaning duties to a projectionist booth and, as Sam’s case demonstrates, it is not even close to merit-based: Rose, who has been working at The Flick for a shorter period, is made a projectionist over him simply because the manager finds her sexually attractive. The already discussed tickets scheme no longer poses any ethical questions for the employees: “Well”, explains Rose, “it *is* kind of dinner money, because we’re so vastly underpaid and because Steve is a total douchebag and doesn’t have a credit card machine and is like totally fishy anyway with his finances”.²⁴ Finally, the passion for cinema that both Rose and Sam mention wistfully in the past tense has been emptied by the drudgery of their work to the point that they just cannot find it in themselves to care, which wipes away the remaining crumbs of their drive.

As was pointed out before, because they do not fit into the general myth of the entrepreneurial self, their individualist aloneness turns into isolation. Symbolically, Rose, Avery and Sam inhabit the space of the cinema only when it is deserted between films, keeping to the shadows of the “real” world. Contacts with other people are excluded from what is explicitly depicted, and the sole encounter that is allowed to slip in – running into the “Dreaming Man”, who fell asleep during a screening – is deeply uncomfortable and frustrating for all the parties involved. While hastily escaping, the Dreaming Man keeps his eyes averted as if unwilling to accept the protagonists’ existence, and Avery and Sam find themselves completely frozen, exaggeratedly oblivious to what is done in such a situation. In fact, the closest the ushers get to those who are “in” is through the waste of their lives. Lengthy parts of *The Flick* are dedicated to discussing or cleaning up spilt popcorn, unfinished food, old shoes, and even shit smeared on the bathroom walls. Ultimately, for them, it becomes a formative experience. When Sam visits another cinema

²³ Baker, 5.

²⁴ Baker, 34.

with the family, he brings a takeaway and, in an attempt to escape a foul-smelling woman, leaves it unfinished on the floor. Having noticed his mistake, Sam is shaken by two insights. The first is that he can be “his own nightmare”, which instead of erasing the distance, makes it even more tangible with how unnatural it feels. The second comes when another audience member picks up the box and – Sam puts a distressed emphasis – “*throws it in the trash*”.²⁵ He later confesses to Avery: “It’s like...it’s like I was dead or something. I was watching the world like go on without me”.²⁶ As the unassuming passerby robs Sam of his role that has come to bring a speck of value and sociality to his existence, the threat of complete alienation sends his mind spinning. As Berlant explains in *Cruel Optimism*, “the loss of what’s not working is more unbearable than the having of it”.²⁷

At the beginning of the play, Avery, Rose and Sam are, too, hopelessly alienated from each other, which is primarily shown through communication, or the lack of it. Annie Baker perceives speaking as “a kind of misery” because of the way people “quietly suffer as we go about our days, trying and failing to communicate to other people what we want and what we believe”.²⁸ In her article on *The Flick*, Fernández-Caparrós writes that it is, indeed, “built on constant understatement and dissociation from authenticity and deep feeling in the form of irrelevant small talk crafted in a carefully pared-down language of ‘cools’, ‘likes’, and ‘whatevers’ that seemingly conceal the possibility of addressing any serious matters”.²⁹ “Cools”, “likes” and “whatevers” are accompanied by inarticulate cut-off sentences, overlapping dialogue lines, and frustratingly long pauses. Struggling to speak coherently (“we, uh, we, uh, we, uh”³⁰) and persuasively (“It all made

²⁵ Baker, 106.

²⁶ Baker, 107.

²⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 27.

²⁸ Annie Baker and Adam Greenfield, “Annie Baker Discusses *Circle Mirror Transformation* With Playwrights Horizon’s Literary Manager Adam Greenfield”, Interview, The Huntington, <https://legacy.huntingtontheatre.org/articles/Annie-Baker-discusses-iCircle-Mirror-Transformation-i-with-Playwrights-Horizons-Literary-Manager-Adam-Greenfield/>. Accessed on July 12, 2023.

²⁹ Fernández-Caparrós, 126.

³⁰ Baker, 34.

more sense in my head”³¹) the protagonists tend to give up and crawl back into their lonesome shells, drifting from scene to scene feeling awkward, confused, self-conscious, angry, or in pain.

Both Ellen B. Anthony and Ana Fernández-Capparrós see these failures of connection as evidence of an unescapable dead-end. The first observes that, in *The Flick*, “intimacy is interrupted by an ugly reality, and throughout the narrative true human connections are continually forestalled by the careless or disgusting actions of others”,³² while the latter states that although “the recognition of a shared ontological precariousness brings [the characters] together, their precarity will eventually take their relationship apart”.³³ However, drawing on my theoretical framework, I argue for a different, more open-ended reading. From the perspective of crisis infrastructuralism, all the described cruelties of the protagonists’ everyday can be perceived as the emerging effects of the glitch, and the appearance of Avery is yet another one that is to become a catalyst. As an African-American, he is included among Baker’s three “great Others” alongside Rose, who is working-class woman with a hefty debt weighing her down, and Sam, a man of Jewish origin, who never went to college and, after many years, is back haunting his parents’ attic.³⁴ Unlike his colleagues, however, Avery comes from a household that is doing relatively well. As it eventually comes to light, he has a full scholarship at the expensive and fairly prestigious Clark University, in the same place where his father teaches. His choice to work at *The Flick* is not driven by necessity but is motivated purely by his belief in the preservation of film projectors. Still, despite more fortuitous circumstances, Avery is revealed to be as vulnerable to precarity as the other two: he is suffering from severe depression with suicidal tendencies, his employment is equally insecure, and isolation is also about to swallow him up. With Avery added to an equation, the idea of pathological beings within a generally functioning system is challenged.

³¹ Baker, 107.

³² Ellen B. Anthony, “Arthur Miller and Contemporary Women Dramatists”, *Arthur Miller for the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Views of His Writing and Ideas*, ed. Stephen Marino and David Palmer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3480225/8>.

³³ Fernández-Capparrós, 129.

³⁴ Annie Baker quoted by Amy Muse, “The Presence of Silence: *The Aliens* and *The Flick*”.

The incoherence and inconsistencies of entrepreneurial self-making become increasingly discernible, and this “disturbance of normative havens into a disorganized meanwhile”, where our objects of attachment need to go through constant negotiation to be sustained, “allows for risking inventive flailing and experiments [...] that might lead to something or nothing”.³⁵

While Anthony argues that, in *The Flick*, intimacy is “interrupted by an ugly reality”,³⁶ it is the “ugly reality” that gets temporarily interrupted by episodes of intimacy, as the characters, are no longer so firmly anchored in the semblance of structure, embark on the experimenting search for “spaces of alternative life *alongside* threat and breakdown”.³⁷ Three seemingly unrelated moments allude to those spaces. The first one occurs early on when Rose brings a book to flirt with Avery. The book is a cheap, kitschy title, “Astrology and Your Love Life: How to Find True Compatibility and Long-Lasting Relationship”, out of which a section is read out loud for every pair (Avery/Rose, Avery/Sam, Sam/Rose) on the team of ushers.³⁸ None of them are expected to have a smooth ride due to clashing personalities, but “an incredible and fruitful collaboration” is offered as a potential if “there is not a power struggle”.³⁹ The second pointer is found in the game that Avery and Sam create to entertain themselves. A variation on the Six Degrees of Separation, it requires one player to name two actors who never appeared in the same film and the second player to establish a connection between them despite this fact, using other on-screen partners.⁴⁰ Significantly soberer in tone, the third one comes from the letter that Avery writes to the new management on going fully digital:

Film is light and shadow and it is the light and shadow that were there on the day you shot the film. [...] Digital movies [...] are actually just millions of tiny dots. These dots, or pixels, cannot express the variation in color and texture that film can. All the dots are exactly the same size and the same distance apart.⁴¹

³⁵ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 33.

³⁶ Anthony, 27.

³⁷ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 120.

³⁸ Baker, 47.

³⁹ Baker, 53-54.

⁴⁰ Fernández-Caparrós, 126.

⁴¹ Baker, 140-141.

Not just the simple snobbery of a cinephile, this speech brings to attention the circumstances of living in the neoliberal moment, where, despite the appearance, everything and everyone is cast in the same mould like pixels, where no room for diversion is allowed, where the artificial distance is to be maintained, and the real colours and textures, light and darkness of a person are hopelessly smoothed out for the sake of a perfect, more effective picture. In another emotional conversation with Rose, Avery translates:

the answer to every horrible situation always seems to be like, Be Yourself, but I have no idea what that fucking means. Who's Myself? Apparently there's some like amazing awesome person deep down inside of me or something? I have no idea who that guy is. I'm always faking it. And it looks to me everyone else is faking it too.⁴²

To not reproduce isolation, to know and to be known by someone is not only the biggest fear, since, as Lauren Berlant observes, it is profoundly inconvenient, but simultaneously the biggest desire the trio share.⁴³ Avery, who declares about sexual intimacy, "I'd rather be watching a movie",⁴⁴ still demands, desperately, during the call with his therapist, "How do you like *do* that? How do you ask someone to be friends with-".⁴⁵ Rose, whose sexual fantasies involve only herself ("everyone is really blurry except for me. I'm like totally in focus"⁴⁶) is still disturbed by the fact and craves the presence of another so much that she throws herself at Avery. Meanwhile, deeply private Sam continues to dream of respect, closeness and reciprocity, both from his humiliatingly younger colleagues and a woman he claims to love. Since individual aloneness, despite its increasingly detrimental nature, is still a foundational infrastructure of their existence, they cannot lose the attachment to it without losing the world. What they can do, however, is try to rearrange it in such a way that the borders are still mostly preserved but others are allowed close enough to create a connection – being alone together.

⁴² Baker, 99.

⁴³ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 7.

⁴⁴ Baker, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 93.

⁴⁵ Baker, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 62.

⁴⁶ Baker, 95.

A suspension of the neoliberal “Myself” (that “amazing awesome person” Avery is so torn about) seems to do the trick. The first couple who experiments with it is Avery and Rose, and it happens as early as in Act I, Scene Eight. Sam has to attend his brother’s wedding, so the other two agree to have a private film night before closing the cinema. Left alone with the new usher, Rose tries to seduce him. Although this is an attempt at some sort of intimacy, it is an unproductive one for it would feed Rose’s sex-related “isolation” instead of serving as an interruption of it and ends up bringing no relief, either physical or symbolic. Unable to reciprocate, Avery is brought to the verge of tears, and Rose, completely mortified, moves to another row. Yet, it is here that the distance between them decreases. At the moment when isolation becomes particularly overwhelming, instead of retreating back to safety, Rose leaps into the uncertainty. Putting on pause the “stereotype” (“stereotype...of like...exactly who you’d think they’d be”⁴⁷) Rose confesses to her strange case of nymphomania. Reciprocating this time, Avery sheds a mask too and speaks about his repulsion towards sexual acts, depression, and a failed suicide attempt. The vertical “Myself” with its forceful insistence on an individual’s uniqueness, essentially, has no uniqueness to it – it is nothing but a supposedly perfect image you need to fake. In this scene, though, Rose and Avery start to establish the borders of the real, unique “selves”, which do not deny the presence of the other but are established in relation to them. Something of substance is articulated and heard for the first time. Their experiences are not collapsed into one other; they discuss them without necessarily finding them relatable (“I don’t get suicide”⁴⁸) or arriving at a smooth consensus. Still, their reciprocal inconvenience does not seem to bother them. At the close of the scene, having returned to the adjacent seat, Rose puts her head on Avery’s shoulder, not in a conventional form of romantic or sexual intimacy but as something new possibly emerging.

⁴⁷ Baker, 100.

⁴⁸ Baker, 97.

A similar scenario catches up to Rose and Sam in Scene Two of the second act. The story of one-sided love comes to a halt when Sam decides to address his colleague's refusal to teach him how to use the projector. The harsh competitiveness of precarious labour, however, is soon abandoned, and the conversation moves on to the feelings. The major stumbling block they come across is when Rose enquires about the nature of Sam's attraction:

ROSE

But is this the kind of thing where you want the person to love you back or you actually secretly *don't* want them to love you back?

Pause.

SAM

That's a good question.

ROSE

Because it sort of seems like it has nothing to do with me.

Like *me* me. You know?⁴⁹

Heartbroken, Sam nevertheless cannot deny the truth behind the accusations: "That's not how I wanted it to seem", he despairs before making an important correction, "*Be*. That's not how I wanted it to be".⁵⁰ If subjugated by vertical individualism, Rose puts up walls in her sexual fantasies, Sam creates such totalising sovereignty in the romantic ones, where another person once again appears blurry, too unrecognisable to be inconvenient. Notably, at the beginning of the play, he continues to falsely insist on Rose's homosexuality as the reason for her unresponsiveness, having created a completely separate persona for his love interest. "Turn around and look at me", becomes Rose's plea for an inclination – to be acknowledged as herself. The first conversation does not bring any significant results, put on pause by the arrival of Avery. Three scenes later, however, they pick it up again and make progress by finally abandoning all pretences and "turning" to each other with all their flaws. "Just like GET TO KNOW ME", Rose shouts. Initially reluctant ("You think I'm like a total bitch"⁵¹), Sam appears to accept the request because after a few weeks and one more scene, "*We see Rose and Sam enter the projection booth and turn on the lights. [...] They seem to be getting along. Maybe at one point Rose laughs and hits Sam on the*

⁴⁹ Baker, 124.

⁵⁰ Baker, 124. Italics are mine.

⁵¹ Baker, 150.

arm".⁵² This is the single moment in the play outside the actual stage and the audience's hearing range as if they now inhabit a new space where they can be together. It is never revealed whether their status has been adjusted though it is not important. As it happened with Rose and Avery, the conventional relationship, which just reaffirms the all-consuming disconnection, is left behind in favour of something more vulnerable, tender, uncertain and still unfolding.

The relationship between Avery and Sam is, arguably, the most problematic out of the three, and it is their friction that prompts a pessimistic view of the play's direction. From the start, their longing to get closer is what dominates the plot: Sam, not Rose, is the reason Avery desperately seeks out advice on initiating a friendship, and Avery becomes the first with whom Sam shares secrets. Yet, if Rose and Avery are similar in age and education, and Sam and Rose come from the same less-than-fortunate social strata, Avery and Sam struggle to find common ground to the point where their inconvenience turns from a micro-resistance and micro-adjustment into a heft of disturbance. The pressure builds up and does not subside. Attempts at the same type of intimacy between the two get cut off over and over again until Avery declares in the last scene: "Every man for himself, you know?".⁵³

This, indeed, can be read as precarity once more tearing their relationship apart as was suggested by Fernández-Capparrós. When Avery comes to ask his colleagues to tell the truth about their involvement in the "dinner money" scheme (as well as forcing him into it) both refuse to do so, too afraid of losing their jobs. The last disillusioned quote appears in the aftermath of this situation. Still, despite the seeming hopelessness, even this case is oriented towards open horizons instead of a knowable, calculable one. While Avery and Sam fail to establish a sustained connection during the play, experimentation, according to uncertain commons, is not about capturing and calcifying yet another singular collective strategy but playing with alternatives that never get or need to be fully actualised.⁵⁴ In the grand scheme of things, nothing could have

⁵² Baker, 161.

⁵³ Baker, 173.

⁵⁴ uncertain commons, 15.

changed: as was mentioned a few times, neoliberal individualism is an infrastructure that currently organises life, so it cannot be dismissed; thus, Rose and Sam's decision is not surprising. At the same time, by the end of *The Flick*, some of the analogies do get broken. For Sam, who out of the trio struggled the most, the ordinariness of precarity is no longer as violent and incoherent as it was. Because of his newfound relationship with Rose, whatever they are, it seems genuine when confesses, "I know my life might seem kind of depressing to you and you know, in a lot of ways it is. But there's some good stuff in it".⁵⁵ Caring has slipped into the routines of self-investment even though compassion did not change the outcome of the "dinner money" case: the last scene shows Avery picking up his beloved projector that Sam and Rose saved and hid with him in mind. In the same gesture, the passion for film with all its flaws, instead of a more profitable and effective digital format, is recognised and preserved.

The very last moments of the play require a closer look. Having interrupted Sam's attempts to convince him not to submit to the worldview of "not expecting anything" from people, Avery moves towards the exit. Then, "*As he walks out:*

SAM

Macaulay Culkin to Michael Caine.

Avery stops and shakes his head no.

The door closes behind him. In the early scenes, when the two had just started playing the game, Sam told Avery that his talent of bringing together two seemingly incompatible people was some sort of a "disability", with which Avery vehemently disagreed insisting that it was "actually like the opposite of disability".⁵⁶ Based on this remark, the inescapable limbo of isolating precarity could have been confirmed if the Six Degrees of Separation stayed rejected and even Avery would not use his talent. Yet, Sam keeps waiting. When "a very long amount of time passes", and hope is already hanging on a thin thread, Avery comes back in and through the pain names an on-screen

⁵⁵ Baker, 175.

⁵⁶ Baker, 27.

partner after an on-screen partner until the connection is complete; “Easy”, he finishes airily.⁵⁷ A small episode of release rather than a return to confinement that seemed forthcoming unsettles once more, in uncertain commons’ words, the “worn pathways of managed anticipation by opening up to” the unknown.⁵⁸ Now, that there is no power struggle and, therefore, no predefined way of being (not) in relation to another, an alternative possibility of “an incredible and fruitful collaboration” from Rose’s book is released back into the future. The curtains are drawn on Sam, who looks up at the collapsing ceiling without the same old fear, not for one second losing his “beatific grin”.⁵⁹

2.2 Not a “Guide to Proper Gardening”:⁶⁰ Quiara Alegría Hudes’s *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* and *Water by the Spoonful*

It is “a play about communities – different communities. It’s about human beings and how they find friends and family. It’s a play about survival”.⁶¹ Although this is how Quiara Alegría Hudes summarises her Pulitzer-winning *Water by the Spoonful* in an interview with Harvey Young, the overview applies to each work in the “Elliot Trilogy”, which also includes preceding *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* and following *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (2014). All three plays differ from Annie Baker’s work. *The Flick* is sparsely inhabited while the “Trilogy” is overcrowded. If *The Flick*’s setting is inventive but rooted firmly in reality, the sets in Hudes’s work, especially the first two (*The Happiest Song* is the most conventional both in its form and plot), are heavily dependent on imagination, constructed out of thin air through the characters’ lines. Where *The Flick* is painfully slow and threaded with silence, the “Trilogy” is in deliberate chaotic disarray –

⁵⁷ Baker, 176.

⁵⁸ uncertain commons, 15.

⁵⁹ Baker, 177.

⁶⁰ Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2012) 21, Perlego <https://www.perlego.com/book/729757/elliot-a-soldiers-fugue-pdf>.

⁶¹ Harvey Young and Quiara Alegría Hudes, “An Interview with Quiara Alegría Hudes”, *Theatre survey*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2015): 194, Cambridge Journals <https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/core/journals/theatre-survey/article/an-interview-with-quiara-alegria-hudes/866138384289792C5FED656F4E18DE1F>.

full of shifting locations, fleeting scenes, and overlapping timelines accompanied by music. Yet, the aloneness slipping into isolation is the same, as well as the general orientation towards alternative lifeworlds improvised “alongside threat and breakdown”.⁶²

The “Trilogy” starts with *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* that congregates, despite a single name in the title, three soldiers: Elliot himself, a young Latino-American man, about to be deployed to Iraq; his father, years ago, on the way to Vietnam; and grandfather, arriving in 1950’s Korea. The endless war, fought in different locations, appears to be integrated into the fabric of existence. The editors’ note to the issue of *Radical History Review*’s on militarism and capitalism calls attention to the fact that these two strategies of life-building have been in “symbiosis, from at least the period of the triangular trade one-half millennia ago” and have grown even more indistinct since then, supporting and stabilising each other’s activities. “Further”, add Man, Pail and Pappademos,

as capitalist activity continues to seek new markets and forms of production, in concomitant fashion, policies of human dispossession, dislocation, and destruction inevitably are normalized. In the United States, for example, state and private enterprises approach these twined forces of expansion and destruction with the false yet clichéd appeal of spreading the “greater goods” of capitalism and democracy through the War on Terror.⁶³

Within the context of *A Soldier’s Fugue*, three generations of the Ortiz family live out these “economies of permanent violence”⁶⁴ side by side, even though the focus is, undeniably, on the youngest generation. In the opening scenes, everything points to Elliot treating his deployment as a personal enterprise. Using the service to boost his marketability, he tries out a few related roles to see where it can get him, personally and professionally. A certain level of success does not keep him waiting, and already in Scene 2, Elliot is a “hometown hero”⁶⁵ throwing an opening pitch at a baseball game in Philadelphia, followed by appearances on television and radio shows in Scenes 7 and 11.

⁶² Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 120.

⁶³ Simeon Man, A. Naomi Paik, and Melina Pappademos, “Violent Entanglements: Militarism and Capitalism”, *Radical History Review*, No. 133 (January 2019) 1, EBSCOhost <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=c84bb7c1-1955-4366-93ed-f87c4e83f7e1%40redis>.

⁶⁴ Man et al, 2.

⁶⁵ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, 16.

The effects of a glitch, however, once again start to multiply. Bigsby points out that as Elliot gives his interviews, the producers and hosts are invariably “more concerned at his swearing” and his digressions from what they want to hear “than capturing the truth, even rehearsing him, each a step further away from the reality of the moment, now packaged and processed for consumption”.⁶⁶ Here too, the neoliberal “Myself” turns out to be something different from the actual “myself”. As Elliot quickly realises, no one is interested in hearing about him specifically, only the recycled experiences coming from his “heroic” mouth that would confirm some pre-existing narrative. Slowly sinking into isolation, he is left one-on-one with everything that he knows is broken. Nobody in the army truly cares about the political incentive of spreading the greater goods. Most of the soldiers are simply disoriented and confused, aimlessly violent, even incoherent. For many of them and especially for those from a minority like Elliot, choosing to be in the army is the only escape route from the misery of precarious labour (“I’m not trying to stay here and work at Subway hoagies”⁶⁷) although it being a step up is deeply questionable. Despite the army being a collective endeavour, the ethics of care are unsurprisingly absent: in the scene, where Elliot is injured, he continues to call out for help that pointedly never arrives. Finally – and this is the revelation that he’ll carry through the whole trilogy – the “Other”, the enemy, might turn out not to be an enemy or that much different from you at all.

Another dismissed confession that Elliot makes during an interview is that he joined simply to forge a connection between his father and himself. Much like in Baker’s play, bending towards each other is the alleviating alternative lifeworld, and both the music and set here provide the directions. The set is dependent on imagination; there are, however, two distinct spaces defined by light. One is an “empty space”, which is “stark, sad. When light enters, it is like light through a jailhouse window”, while the second is a “garden”, “a verdant sanctuary, green speckled

⁶⁶ Christopher Bigsby, *Staging America: Twenty-First Century Playwrights* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) 83.

⁶⁷ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* 50.

with magenta and gold”.⁶⁸ When explaining the garden, the fourth character, Elliot’s mother Ginny reveals that it used to be a dead parking lot full of waste until she started planting:

A seed is a contract with the future. It’s saying I know something better will happen tomorrow. I planted bearded irises next to palms. I planted tulips with a border of cacti. All the things the book tells you: “Don’t ever plant these together,” “Guide to Proper Gardening.” Well, I got on my knees and planted them side by side. I’m like You have to throw all preconceived notions out the window. You have to plant wild. [...] Each leaf is actually a cap. It collects water. So any weary traveler can stop and take a drink.⁶⁹

Elliot does not get to enter it until Scene 12. Before that, the garden is where the episodes of intimacy and lucidity take place as Ginny, her husband George and George’s father listen to each other’s stories, either in “real” time or through letters.

Music supports this spatial arrangement. The fugue from the title – and Bach’s supposedly “best” – is described by Grandpop as “an argument”:

It starts in one voice. The voice is the melody, the single solitary melodic line. The statement. Another voice creeps up on the first one. Voice two responds to voice one. They tangle together. They argue, they become messy. They create dissonance. Two, three, four lines clashing.⁷⁰

All the “Fugue” scenes in the play are set in the empty space, where three Ortiz men experience the ongoing war alone, independently, even though side by side, which, indeed creates a mess. Often the pressure of inconvenience is almost unbearable as the time, speech, and music stack on top of each other. At the end of Scene 1, for instance, Grandpop plays the flute, as Pop performs a military cadence, and Elliot does a sing-along to a hip-hop track without attempting any sort of harmony.

It is important to remember, though, that the fugue is not a mere argument but also has the primary melodic idea – the subject, which puts all these disparate voices under one roof and allows them to coexist.⁷¹ It is always already there. While the experiences often diverge, they also

⁶⁸ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, 4.

⁶⁹ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, 22.

⁷⁰ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*, 35.

⁷¹ “Fugue”, Cambridge Dictionary, Accessed on 23 July 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fugue>.

blend when the characters narrate each other's actions, or when the individual lines from another period fit seamlessly into someone else's story – this is, as Bigsby puts it, “an assonance, an internal rhyme, in that their lives are contained by war”.⁷² In the empty space, the assonance is not acknowledged. The characters do not acknowledge each other, staying firmly in their sovereignties where the incoherence, precarity, and normalised violence is an incorrectly processed glitch not of the shared but of their own “pathological” life. For Elliot, who goes to war in the 21st century, it is especially hard to escape this impasse, because whatever community Ginny, Pop, and Grandpop managed to improvise by now has fallen apart. Symbolically, Grandpop gave away the flute, the source of the “primary melodic idea” to his son George, after which the clarity left him: “But without it my fingers grew stiff. I started losing words. Dates. Family names. The battles I fought in”.⁷³ Pop, too, eventually, overtaken by the impulse to destroy, throws the flute into the river and afterwards can react only with the angry, anguish silence to any questions. What he is left with is the aloneness of those impersonal interviews where “himself” is substituted with the “amazing awesome person” that he is asked to fake.

Yet, the alternative horizon of being alone together is not completely destroyed. The garden is planted by Ginny, and it is there, in the space of dissonance and intimacy combined, that she brings her son to heal his injury. Having braided vines around his leg, she also finally gives him the letters sent by Pop to his father, making it possible for Elliot to experiment with something like a community, at least in this limited way. He mentions two important revelations: “here it is who you are, Elliot, and you never even knew” and “Pop, I fucking walked in your shoes”.⁷⁴ His boundaries as an individual are outlined and truly felt, seemingly for the first time. They are also established in relation to someone else, to someone irreducibly inconvenient but similar to him. The next, closing scene is a return to war: the threat and breakdown cannot and are

⁷² Bigsby, *Staging America*, 82.

⁷³ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, 37.

⁷⁴ Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, 54.

not completely abandoned, yet the future is kept open as Elliot brings with himself a duffel bag full of souvenirs from various family members, a sort of a promise.

The next play, *Water by the Spoonful*, continues *A Soldier's Fugue* in several ways. The focus now shifts from the nuclear families as the realm of community-building to other possible configurations. Elliot is back from the army, is disabled, has overdosed three times on his pain medications, is experiencing hallucinations, is soon-to-be-homeless, working part-time at the Subway (exactly where he did not want to be) and doing odd acting jobs on the side. Ginny, his mother and the local embodiment of compassion, dies within the first three scenes, not once appearing onstage, and his father sells the house along with the garden and leaves the town. The relatives tear through Ginny's belongings like it is "a shopping spree" with no regard for the memory of the dead. The only ones Elliot has left are his distant cousin Yaz, an uninspired university adjunct who just been through an ugly divorce, and his biological mother Odessa, Ginny's sister, who lost custody after failing to take care of her sick children, which resulted in her daughter's death from dehydration.

Although, until the very end of the play, Elliot's relationship with Odessa is almost non-existent, it is she who provides yet another scenario of coming together, this time more culturally unconventional. She is introduced as an older Puerto Rican, a janitor and an administrator of the chat for recovering drug addicts like her. Among the others who join that chat on an everyday basis are Orangutan, a thirty-one-year-old recent community college graduate of Japanese-American origin, and Chutes & Ladders, an African-American in his fifties, who has been in a low-paid job at the IRS since the Reagan era. All three are entrepreneurial failures, long rendered ungrievable and pushed to the margins of society. As was already pointed out, brought to the limit, they are well equipped to push against and disturb the "haven" of individual aloneness. The internet facilitates this agenda. With this group, as Dufournaud points out, "the chat room works paradoxically: instead of suffusing the participants' respective identities in the real world with a layer of fiction", it affords "interpersonal communication unmediated by overdetermined

epistemological lenses”.⁷⁵ By substituting the marketable “Myself”, which in their case is already eroded, with a new username they get to come not anonymous but ironically as they truly are.

When Fountainhead joins the chat, the others rise against him because he does not stick to this rule. With a username that is a reference to Ayn Rand’s novel⁷⁶ celebrating atomistic individualism, a white liberal John writes his original message in the style of a highly competitive resume: “MBA from Wharton. Beautiful wife, two sons. Built a programming company from the ground up, featured in the *New York Times*’ Circuits section”). Moreover, he presents his recovery from addiction as yet another enterprise he is ready to take on: “it’s a psychological battle and I’m armed with two weapons: willpower and experts”; “Healthy habits and rational thoughts”.⁷⁷ Right away, he pointedly sets himself apart. In John’s vision, his life-building practices are not reorganised or suspended by the glitch but have merely run into a small inconvenient bump (“Michael Jordan is benched with a broken foot but he’ll come back in the finals”).⁷⁸ Accordingly, the relationship he wants to establish is not one of reciprocity but of consumption: you provide me with “tips” and “techniques”, and I “pay attention, and do my homework” before rushing back to the unleashed self-making.⁷⁹

What he is to learn, however, is that no one in this group is an expert, because in reality there is nothing to be an expert in. Recovery, as the others explain to him, is not a race with a finish line, not a solution to be learned and applied, but an endless struggle against exposure to the pressures, both personal and structural, which can potentially tumble them back into a relapse. For Orangutan, it is her diasporic problem of belonging both among Americans and Japanese, while for Chutes & Ladders, it is the painful estrangement from his son.⁸⁰ Showing up for each other does not repair things, but it helps, first, not to be defeated by precarity and the struggle and,

⁷⁵ Dufournaud, 449.

⁷⁶ Dufournaud, 451.

⁷⁷ Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2017), 24, Perlego <https://www.perlego.com/book/729635/water-by-the-spoonful-revised-tcg-edition-pdf>.

⁷⁸ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 36.

⁷⁹ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 23.

⁸⁰ Berlant, 70.

second, to secure interim successes when possible. For it to even be on the table, Fountainhead needs to confess that things do not work. Similarly to what took place in *The Flick*, John surrenders when the aloneness is about to swallow him up, right after Orangutan and Chutes & Ladders try to chase him away with “If you’re not a crackhead, leave, we don’t want you, you are irrelevant”.⁸¹ The resume binned, the truth pours out: “I’m currently unemployed. An unemployed crackhead”, “I obsessively pursue feeling good, no matter how bad it makes me feel”,⁸² “Day two? Please, I’m in the seven-hundredth day of hell”.⁸³ Accepting Odessa’s advice to “stop being a highly functioning *isolator* and start being a highly dysfunctional *person*”,⁸⁴ he is immediately accepted among their ranks.

The setting and music are as significant here as they were in *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue*. The stage is again divided into two realms. The first one is the “real world” populated with chairs. The production notes specify that these should be of a wide range (from “living room, an office, a seminar room, a diner”) but all are invariably to have “the worn-in feel of life”: “A duct-taped La-Z-Boy. Salvaged trash chairs. A busted-up metal folding chair from a rec center”.⁸⁵ Exhaustion and decay are visibly pervasive, as well as the continuous practices of patching things up. The choice of chairs also emphasises the desolation of living in this crisis infrastructure, as the chairs are not meant to be shared and, here specifically, are “facing in all different directions”.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, as the garden in *Elliot* brought together disparate plants with improper gardening, the second realm of “online world” spreads through and over the insular islands with a potential of connection. The music works towards it as well. In Scene 3, Yaz explains new jazz, central to this play, with the example of John Coltrane:

A Love Supreme, 1964. Dissonance is still a getaway to resolution. [...] Diminished cords, tritones, still didn’t have the right to be their own independent thought. In 1965 something changed. The ugliness bore no

⁸¹ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 37.

⁸² Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 43.

⁸³ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 47.

⁸⁴ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 43.

⁸⁵ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 6.

⁸⁶ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 6.

promise of a happy ending. The ugliness became an end in itself. Coltrane democratized the notes. He said, they're equal. Freedom.⁸⁷

A happy ending from this quote can be read as an example of a firmative speculation, which “binds collective desires so that select options appear as a reasonable foresight”.⁸⁸ Berlant when writing on commons in the context of infrastructure suggests putting in suspicion the prestigious understanding of it, which embodies some idealistic horizon of public consensus that would provide healing and eventually substitute the current broken structure, and possibly shift to mobilising “commonality of difference”, which brings together incompatible, always inconvenient perspectives in the ongoing negotiation.⁸⁹ As Yaz says, the ugliness is an end in itself. The chairs do not have to be shared or uniform, but they can be put in the same metaphorical space, where they can be alone together – equal, free, and all a part of the same dialogue.

The new forms of sociality emerge from within the online chat. In Scene 6, Orangutan offers Chutes & Ladders to transfer their relationship out of the realm of the internet by inviting him to visit Japan, where she is currently teaching English. This is, as she points out, a challenge, and Chutes & Ladders initially declines, first, by listing all of his shortcomings and imperfections, which should put a stop to any relationship between them (still clinging to the idea of an “amazing awesome person”) and then, by insisting that you can only stay clean if you “stay in the box”. Odessa, though, reminds him that the imperfection, in their case, is the point: “When’s the last time someone opened your closet door, saw all them skeletons, and said, ‘Wassup? Can I join the party?’”.⁹⁰ After some hesitation, a sold car, distressing news, failed attempts to board a plane, and a panic attack, Chutes & Ladders winds up in Narita airport, where Orangutan and he share “a hug of basic survival and necessary friendship”.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 18.

⁸⁸ uncertain commons, 42.

⁸⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 77-84.

⁹⁰ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 36.

⁹¹ Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 88.

On the other side of the world, meanwhile, Odessa, whose username “Haikumom” refers to her role as a caretaker in the group, OD’s after being reminded by Elliot of his little sister’s death and her direct involvement in it. The only person to catch her at the time turns out to be John, whom Odessa wrote down as her emergency contact. When he shares the news in the chat, he is told by the other two that “your job on this earth has just changed. It’s not to stay clean. It’s not to be a husband or a father or a CEO. It’s to stay by that woman’s side”.⁹² The next time Odessa and John appear onstage, it is in the bathroom where he washes her before taking her to rehab. This shared moment is painful and awkward but also terribly tender. Her body, which he describes as not even looking “human”, is a stark reminder of the unescapable precarity of their existence. He also finds it embarrassing to bathe it because the act feels overwhelmingly intimate and unfamiliar. Nonetheless, gentle with movements and listening attentively to her weak whispers, John pushes on. Like in *The Flick*, the improvised social arrangements here are unconventional: not sexual, romantic, familial, or even reminiscent of friendship in its traditional sense. These people have nothing in common besides the mess of a broken world and usually would not be found in any kind of association with each other. Still, the relationship of reciprocity and mutual care (the incline towards the Other) springs out, even for a moment, like the title’s spoonful of water, out of the cracks of disturbed individualism.

At the end of the play, having found inspiration both in Ginny and Odessa, Yaz takes over the chat’s administration and decides to buy Elliot’s old house to tend to the garden, so she too can work on reviving the neighbourhood community. This is what is explored in the final, arguably the weakest play in the trilogy, *The Happiest Song Plays Last*, which is not examined closely in this thesis. It is not a smooth ride for her: Yaz tries to care for the community, who end up refusing to reciprocate; the death of her lover shakes her to the bone, as she learns that people had been passing him by for hours before someone noticed what had occurred; her attempts to have a child to somehow beat the loneliness turn out to be futile. Even the music is gone. She does,

⁹² Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*, 77.

however, manage to improvise yet another form of sociality with an all-around “outsider” Lefty, an older disabled man who calls her “Mom” and with whom she establishes an odd kind of mother/son connection she has been craving. Elliot, meanwhile, initially finds solace in a more conventional union with a woman he has met on a film set, although the true moment of a broken analogy does not come until he faces the Other, the first Iraqi man he killed, and inclines towards him, acknowledging his life as grievable:

(Elliot stands above the grave.)

Elliot: Taarek Taleb. It’s been a long journey we’ve taken together, hasn’t it? You and me, man. If I could give up my voice so your kid could utter one single word, I would do it. Or maybe I wouldn’t. I don’t know, man, maybe I’m not that brave. Taarek, may your little boy speak. Your son, my son. May both our little boys open their mouths and sing.⁹³

As the characters travel from *A Soldier’s Fugue* to *Water* and then to *The Happiest Song*, the temporal and plot progression is more or less observed; yet, the experiments of coming together occur in waves, brushing an otherwise again and again without latching on it firmly. The newly emerging threads are sometimes cut off violently, swallowed back up by the crisis ordinariness as in the case of Elliot, Pop and Grandpop, sometimes get voluntarily abandoned as with Yaz and the neighbourhood, and at times, as with the chat users or Eliot and the Iraqi man, are left there unactualised, as an open-ended possibility. Similarly to *The Flick*, this is not a confirmation of the validity of one totalitarian horizon but a loosening of the object of attachment, which sets free heterogeneous lifeworlds.

⁹³ Quiara Alegría Hudes, *The Happiest Song Plays Last* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2017) 86, Perlego <https://www.perlego.com/book/729776/the-happiest-song-plays-last-pdf>.

Chapter 3 - On Creating Constructive Distance: The Racialised Subject and the World's Overcloseness

The new millennium opened with the sentiment of “we live in a post-racial era” and “I don’t see colour, I see people” shared by an overwhelming number of Americans, suggests Meghan A. Burke. As the “abstracted notions of equal opportunity and individualism” have become axiomatic in the latest form of the neoliberal order, racism has started to be approached by a wide population, in the government, and even to a certain degree in the academia as the problem of the past, persisting, as Burke points out, in this historical moment primarily as “the product of fringe actors” – the extreme reactionaries and individual citizens with obsolete, distorted, and uneducated beliefs – in contrast to something that lives on at the very heart of the society.¹ The 2009 election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States only strengthened this conviction. Since affirmative actions and structural solutions were deemed long past necessary, when dealing with the “remaining” issues on the top level, preference were increasingly given to soft liberal strategies. These include calls for more self-awareness and personal responsibility, the increase of “emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific programs”,² and the strict observation of the standards of “diversity and inclusion”.³ The cautious optimism of the beginning of the 21st century nudged racial trauma towards the already summarised experience of a threat that looms in a vague, anxiety-inducing way without betraying its true sources.

For all that, the second decade did not inherit this positive outlook in full. The deaths at the hands of the police first of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and then of Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor,

¹ Meghan A. Burke, “Racing Left and Right: Color-Blind Racism’s Dominance across the U.S. Political Spectrum”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2017) 279, Taylor & Francis Online, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2017.1296335>.

² Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Dietrich, “The Sweet Enchantment of Color-Blind Racism in Obamerica”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 634, Race, Racial Attitudes, and Stratification Beliefs: Evolving Directions for Research and Policy (March 2011) 200, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29779402>.

³ Arun Kundani, *What is Racism? And Why It Means Anticapitalism* (London: Verso Books, 2023) 161.

and George Floyd, among other unarmed African Americans in the next few years, left a still-unhealed wound in the post-racial fantasy.⁴ In the grand scheme of things, no fundamental change has been achieved in anti-racism politics. Even today, despite the use of the seemingly “appropriate” terminology, writes Konings, the Biden White House’s plan to tackle what they call “systemic racism” continues to cover only the shortcomings of inclusivity and microaggressions of personal “biases against minority populations”.⁵ Yet, certain developments, such as the establishment and subsequent global recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement along with other like-minded organisations, do signal the return of structural and systemic oppression to the forefront of public consideration. While its interconnectedness with the current capitalist order continues to lack significant attention, the debate on race has started to involve more questioning and articulated confrontations, more demands for revision and radical action, and less reliance on dignified compromises of the previous years.

This chapter joins Arun Kundani in his argument that “racial domination does not simply survive under the seemingly racially neutral auspices of neoliberalism but is actively reworked as an internal aspect of its redrawing of the social, the political, the cultural and the economic” of today.⁶ The historical contradiction at the very heart of neoliberal thought is its irreducible impulse towards universalisation of the market, theoretically open to every player irrespective of any existing borders, that goes directly against its foundation in the particular cultural frameworks of Western civilization. At the same time, because capital accumulation and market competition inevitably produce a surplus population, race “serves as the means” to dampen the anxiety coming from the failure of universalisation by organising, coding, and managing “the complex, dispersed boundaries between these populations and others, between the ‘exploitable’ and ‘unexploitable’,

⁴ Keon West et al, “Implicit racism, colour blindness, and narrow definitions of discrimination: Why some White people prefer ‘All Lives Matter’ to ‘Black Lives Matter’”, *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 60 (2021) 1137-1138, EBSCO <https://web-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=fa05aa13-302b-40e9-a219-11aea926737d%40redis>.

⁵ Kundani, *What is Racism?*, 4.

⁶ Arun Kundani, “The Racial Constitution of Neoliberalism”, *Race & Class*, Vol. 63, No.1 (2021) 59, Sage Journals <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/doi/full/10.1177/0306396821992706>.

‘free’ and ‘unfree’, ‘deserving and undeserving’”.⁷ Ideologically externalised, the issue no longer lies within the system but within the hands of those who draw the limit to its functionality. For it not to rely on constant reassertion through various acts of overt oppression, which would only deepen the tensions and contradictions, it needs to be naturalised. In relation to this, Kundani draws on Étienne Balibar, who suggested that in neo-racism, culture is established “as a kind of nature” that with a rare exception “determine[s] one’s whole being and [does] not alter its characteristics through contact with others”.⁸ Thus, the dark side of the celebration of diversity, which has enjoyed enormous attention in the US, is that, for the non-white population, the cultural differences, including traditions, expressions, and ways of life, are sought to be honoured and preserved specifically in their “mummified” configurations. Thus, in popular culture and elsewhere, the marginalised groups are continuously being recast “as consumers of their own distinct culture”, which instead of sourcing “individual empowerment and uplift”, “package” them into certain predispositions, foster separation from other groups, and gently deradicalise them so they cannot come to pose any political threat to the division of labour and its fruits.⁹ What is important is that Western cultures are simultaneously held as profoundly individualistic, endlessly diverse, and, therefore, always resistant to representation.

Sianne Ngai’s concept of “animatedness” as a “racializing technology” helps to trace the processes of “mummification” or rendering culture “fossilised” and “incapable of living and breathing” on their own, even though “liveliness” is the main illusion it creates.¹⁰ To be “racialised” in America, she writes, is similar to the principle of stop-motion cinematography. First, the “agitated lump” of the subject seemingly resolves “itself” into quiet inertia; from this state, the lump can be imbued with life again: it is gradually transformed into moving and talking “images of humans of unmistakable social distinctions” “cleverly-wrought” and then fully

⁷ Kundani, “The Racial Constitution of Neoliberalism”, 64.

⁸ Étienne Balibar quoted by Kundani, *What is Racism?*, 230.

⁹ Kundani, *What is Racism?*, 211.

¹⁰ Kundani, *What is Racism?*, 84.

controlled by an invisible hand.¹¹ The naturalness of such a recognisable image is highly dependent on “the always obvious, highly visible body” – in other words, on the “exaggerated emotional expressiveness” and other normalised aesthetics of a minority subject.¹² While a stylized African American is suggested by her as the most illustrative of examples, Ngai also stresses that their narratives of “vivacity and zealously do not cover every racial or ethnic stereotype”. An Asian American as deferent, stoic, and inscrutable is yet another cultural template (among others) into which one can be forced to become animated and, therefore, “uniform, accountable”, and “safely disattendable”.¹³

Before this chapter moves on to the analytical part and the plays’ respective renditions of neoliberal attachments to the animated, racialised body, one last concept is to be outlined.

“Overcloseness” from the chapter’s title refers to an obstacle that Berlant identifies in relation to loosening and unlearning of such attachments. The term is derived from Adam Phillips’s article “Close-Ups”, which expands on Freud’s claim that a patient with trauma is “too close” to it to become the “historian of himself”. Phillips writes:

Too close means there is an excess, a too much of something, that hampers representation, what [Mark] Phillips refers to as ‘possibilities for finding new meaning’. Too much closeness means too much of something – call it feeling, though it could be called various things – means too little of something else, call it meaning, or simply words.¹⁴

Along this line, Berlant proposes that contrary to a widespread assumption that the current “problem of the world isn’t alienation from it but [...] its overcloseness”, its overwhelming “ongoing pressure”.¹⁵ While alienation is about being disconnected and dislocated – about a “failure to be in relation”¹⁶ – an individual today is tangled in relations even when pushed to the very margins of reality. Neoliberalism saturates life in all its realms so when something traumatic

¹¹ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 100.

¹² Ngai, 94.

¹³ Ngai, 93.

¹⁴ Adam Phillips, “Close-Ups”, *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 57 (2004) 143-8, Project Muse <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/169736>.

¹⁵ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 41.

¹⁶ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 41.

occurs, it is not a destructive event that makes a connection impossible; instead, one is forced to interact with the glitching anchoring structures all the more intimately, adjusting and rearranging to latch on them firmly and steady oneself as they start to slip. In crisis, what has already been near, crowds in. It causes something akin to a sensory overload: “The closer things are to you”, writes David Hockney, “the more difficult it is to locate their exact position – they don’t really have an exact position”.¹⁷ They indeed may seem too complex to comprehend, more solid than they are, common-sense, all-encompassing and timeless because the big picture distorts in proximity. To escape the repetition as a defence tactic and to interrupt “living in the present as if it were the past”,¹⁸ an affective distance has to be created from inside.

Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2007) and Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018) begin from within the claustrophobic overcloseness of contemporary racial relations, from which the distance – not only affective but also aesthetic and formal – is built slowly throughout the acts. Neither end up experimenting with “spaces of alternative life *alongside* threat and breakdown” like the works from the previous chapter did. Instead of improvising a new configuration of a racialised body that would make it possible to live on “despite, with, against, and in a dynamic relation to [a] structuring thing”, they focus on forcing that structure into an infrastructure, which is revealed to be simply a “convergence of force and value in patterns of movement”.¹⁹ As it kept from enclosing and pinning something down again, the curtains are lowered on an invitation to pick up loose threads and start improvising.

¹⁷ Phillips, 145.

¹⁸ Phillips, 142-3.

¹⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 26.

3.1. “It was the most wonderful dream”: Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

On the website of Young Jean Lee’s Theatre Company, the synopsis provided for *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* starts with “Young Jean Lee’s worst nightmare was to make a predictable, confessional Korean-American identity play with a flowery Asian-sounding title. So that’s exactly what she did”:²⁰ she had an on-stage nightmare about it. After the audience is allowed inside but way before the first character appears, *Songs* opens with a lengthy, ten-minute video that emerges from complete darkness. The close-up of Young Jean Lee that dominates most of the screen shows her crying. Tears and snot run freely; her head snaps back time after time, and although the hand never appears in the frame, it is obvious that she is getting “hit in the face repeatedly”. Eventually, as if prompted by the swell of music, loud slaps start raining down harder and quicker. Lee’s character continues to “regain her composure” after each one and stays resolutely silent, except for “one more” mouthed at the “abuser” right at the end.²¹ All the while, the lyrics of the “pansori”, a Korean narrative song, add an oddly sensual and intimate note to this violent display: “Love, love, love, my love. It is love. Definitely, my love”,²² sings a male voice.

This covers only five minutes out of ten. The other five, in fact preceding this intense “prologue”, consist of an audio recording of a fantastically mundane conversation between Lee and her friends as they prepare to shoot the video. In comparison to what is to follow, its atmosphere is jarringly different: the close-knit group sets boundaries, shows care, and makes silly jokes about slaps – when Lee receives her first one off-camera, she actually giggles. Examining the play’s “‘ugly’ affects of animatedness”, Karen Shimakawa finds it mobilised most

²⁰ Show. *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Young Jean Lee’s Theatre Company Archive <https://youngjeanlee.org/work/songs-dragons-flying-heaven/> Accessed on December 11, 2023.

²¹ Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009) 39.

²² Seunghyun Hwang, “Debunking the Diasporic ‘China Doll’ with Satirical Disquietude: Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*”, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2016) 123, EBSCO <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=8337d971-3659-4024-a7cf-76ec2087e812%40redis>.

“spectacularly” in the “racial performances” of Koreans 1 through 3, who appear further into the play.²³ However, it is in this video, perceived as a dynamic whole and not as two disjunctive halves, that the protagonist is initially marked as subjected to animation. Like Ngai’s “lump”, Lee’s character is being beaten, not just metaphorically, into a stylised spectacle of a Korean American woman – self-hating, docile, and restrained. As noted, careful montage ensures that the hitter, or the “modeller”, is never visible, which presents her body as moving not under duress but, oddly, out of her own volition. This illusion of autonomy is not damaged even in the audio. While the hand is identified there as belonging to Yehuda, “Lee” is still the one seemingly in charge, giving directions, regulating strength, and telling him when to stop – or, more importantly, not to stop. The accounts claim that usually by this point around half of the audience begins to get “restive”.²⁴ The harsher implications of this scene might be softened by the character’s willing participation, the cheerful amiability of the recording and the appropriate level of artificiality, all of which turn it almost “normal”, or at least “normalised”. Still, the clear presence of some violent “moulding” force, which never betrays what it is, looms like an abstract but anxiety-inducing threat. This crisis ordinariness of being marked as a racial body is “*something about Korean Americanness*”²⁵ that is offered as the starting point of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*.

At the end of the video, the lights are turned back on, revealing the set that is decidedly not what was heavily suggested from the outside. As a matter of fact, before the doors open, the audience is beset by a very specific type of representation, which involves, for instance, the already mentioned “flowery” title coming from “the foundational hymn of the 15th century Choson dynasty” *Yongbi-och ’on-ga*²⁶ and the flyer/poster that crams in all possible “Asian” imagery from the red disk of a rising sun and resting hill roofs to the Great Wall of China and slit-

²³ Karen Shimakawa, “Young Jean Lee’s Ugly Feelings About Race And Gender: Stuplime Animation in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*”, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2007) 89, Taylor & Francis Online <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1080/07407700701246323>.

²⁴ Bigsby, *Staging America*, 112.

²⁵ Shimakawa, 90.

²⁶ David Richard McCann, *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 160.

eyed rickshaw pullers. The space itself is employed too: having entered the theatre foyer, the audience finds “*itself stuck behind the set, which is a quasi-Korean-Buddhist temple with a large, multipaneled Korean dragon mural painted on the back. [...] Colored paper lanterns hang from the ceiling [...], and there is the sound of Asian flute music and tricking water*”.²⁷ “Ideally”, notes Lee, people would “*be crowded together behind the temple in a claustrophobic manner and made to steep in this oppressively ‘Asian’ environment for a long time*”.²⁸ This aesthetic, as Shimakawa points out, is “seen as appropriate” only in the worst case scenario, either setting off “the alarm bells for the vigilant anti-racist” or usually perceived as “kitschy” or cliché by an ordinary theatregoer.

What the play is interested in, however, are the conventions and narratives that are significantly harder to pinpoint as coming from “the stock”. Thus, having experienced the oppressive Asianness of the foyer, the audience finds something of a relief inside, in a “bare room made of sheets of unpainted light birch plywood” with the only element reminding of the temple being a “large rectangle” on the stage that just approximates “the pattern of floor planking” there.²⁹ In his article on *Songs*, Ryan Hatch describes the room that has the “overall effect of emptiness and light” as “neutral and rough, at once conspicuously artificial and devoid of theatricality”.³⁰ It fits well with Ngai’s animated subject, who is, too, constructed around the “exaggeratedly expressive body” but whose “exaggeratedly expressive body” is simultaneously recognised as something neutral – as the bare truth about race.³¹ The “‘plasmaticness’, elasticity, and pliancy” of such a set that can be imagined as and manipulated into any location – like it happened, for example, with the garden built out of light and emptiness in Hudes’s *Elliot* – also echoes the racialised subject’s “vulnerability to external manipulation and control”.³² Yet another

²⁷ Lee, *Songs*, 35.

²⁸ Lee, *Songs*, 35.

²⁹ Lee, *Songs*, 35.

³⁰ Ryan Anthony Hatch, “First as Minstrelsy, Then as Farce: On the Spectacle of Race in the Theater of Young Jean Lee, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Psychoanalysis and Race (Winter 2013) 89, JSTOR <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.13.3.0089>.

³¹ Ngai, 97.

³² Ngai, 101.

aspect to consider here would be that, against this particular backdrop, all the characters in the play seem to fail at being anything else but the “always obvious, highly visible bodies”.

The first of those is the Korean American, who, at this point, is already waiting on stage, gazing straight at the audience. From here and on, she is played by an actual actress and, symbolically, bears no other name besides a racial identification. Since the convention sees Asians and Asian Americans as inexpressive and inscrutable, her otherness is fittingly “signalled by the pathos of emotional suppression rather than by emotional excess”:³³ a placid, overtly pleasant smile she wears rarely slips regardless of a topic she touches upon. At the same time, her acting, like the acting of other characters, is deliberately exaggerated, slightly awkward and invariably amateurish. The lines the characters utter give off an impression of being rehearsed to the point they come out automatically without much thought involved – the latter reminds of a “vocal” lump that lodges itself in a person’s throat and, “individuating into an agent capable of speaking *for* the human character”, “contractually binds” them to a certain group.³⁴ According to Ngai, the animation of such a body aches to the usage of “one turn one picture” technique.³⁵ Each “pose” of the otherwise inert matter is captured separately until the frames form an easily recognisable movement or an easily recognisable representation imbued with life. At first glance, *Songs* is divided, for exactly this reason, into what Hatch aptly describes as a “repertoire of familiar gestures and stylizations of the body, a narrowly prescribed range of signifiers and narrative motifs”, and, most importantly, a repository of words, phrases, and the whole speeches to be delivered by the characters.³⁶

When the Korean American begins her monologue, it rapidly becomes obvious that the nightmare has hijacked the stage action. During the opening video, a glitch, an elusive sense of something being amiss with the racially marked subject, has manifested itself. As was already

³³ Ngai, 94.

³⁴ Ngai, 93.

³⁵ Ngai, 89.

³⁶ Hatch, 107.

explained, when such a glitch occurs, an individual's first response is to interact with the broken object/structure even more intimately in order to creatively stabilise it. Here, though, such interaction gets precluded and suspended at every turn. Having elicited a shocked, horrified and/or offended laugh with the question "Have you ever noticed how most Asian Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents?", the Korean American elaborates that

It's like being raised by monkeys—these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and who are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status. Most of us hate these monkeys from an early age and try to learn how to be human from school or television, but the result is always tainted by this subtle or not so subtle retardation. Asian people from Asia are even more brain-damaged, but in a different way, because they are the original monkey.³⁷

While one's mind is still reeling from this onslaught of the savage racist talk coming from the mouth of a minority subject, she moves on, without the smallest pause or change in facial expression to first admit, "I am so mad about all of the racist things against me in this country, which is America", and then, just a moment later, to preach about the importance of "getting to know your roots".³⁸ As it draws to the end, the Korean American claims the decisive superiority of her people over whoever the spectators are: "You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writhing under our yoke".³⁹ Satisfied by another burst of confused laughter, she raises her fist and commences the "Korean dancing", which turns out to be just an odd twirling that grows increasingly violent to the sound of 2003 "I Was Born (A Unicorn)" by The Unicorns.⁴⁰

The same disorienting arrangement is used for the rest of the play. In a dream-like, non-linear manner, it jumps, as it did in the monologue, not exactly between the fully-formed scenes but some sort of "episodes", which include more outlandish dancing, more family stories, some possessed singing, pastiches on horror films, national myths, and ancient love poetry, stylised

³⁷ Lee, *Songs*, 39.

³⁸ Lee, *Songs*, 39-40.

³⁹ Lee, *Songs*, 41.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Songs*, 41.

suicides, sex talk and rape talk, anti-racist protests and “yellowface” minstrelsy, as well as one amusing parody on a “Korean Airlines promotional video”.⁴¹ All, without exception, even those that appear nonsensical to the spectators not recognising all off the references, are related to the conventional repertoire of racial representation in one way or another. Regardless of this fact, the plot fails to acquire a structure. In the middle of a crisis, writes Konings, “[t]he production of new metaphors is geared to the maintenance of a capacity to not see, to see selectively”.⁴²

Theoretically, in search of a common theme, or some loose shared meaning, one should be able to fish out the required puzzle pieces while turning a blind eye to the other inconvenient, contradictory elements in a pile.

For example, as *Songs* progresses, the spectator can attempt to focus only on the “confessional” episodes with “the playwright’s” grandmother, which elsewhere could very well be the source of revelations and personal truths – of that mysterious “authenticity”; or, they could search for “*something*” tangible “about Korean Americanness” in the numerous interactions between the protagonist and Koreans 1, 2 and 3, fluttering around the stage in colourful hanbok dresses and acting out the cultural particularities of the old country. There is also the “minority rage” erupting from time to time against discrimination and, as a last resort, some self-serving assimilation tendencies of “I want to be white”.⁴³ The trails of crumbs are pointing in various directions. However, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is designed in such a way that as soon as the spectator latches on the most plausible thread, it slips out of hands. The characters’ lines start to break off, conversations abruptly stop and restart, topics shift with no care for coherence, overlap or crowd together, and one statement immediately contradicts another:

KOREAN 1: Oh, Dong-Dong, how we have longed for you!

KOREAN-AMERICAN: Let me tell you about a certain little fishing village in Northern Dongju. In that village is a Jew with a crap stand, and

⁴¹ Lee, *Songs*, 51.

⁴² Konings, 98.

⁴³ Lee, *Songs*, 68.

on that stand are little pieces of crap that he sells for souvenirs, and I am going to take you to that crap stand and sell you there!

(The Koreans look confused.)

KOREAN 2: Oh, Dong-Dong! I missed you!

KOREAN 3 *(Getting up)*: I hate you, Dong-Dong!

KOREAN-AMERICAN: [...] Stand back monkeys! I'll show you how it's done!

(to audience) [...] Back to my point, which is minority rage! I hate white people, and this is why.

Other formal aspects of the play also add to the impossibility of finding one's footing. For example, a big part of *Songs*, where Koreans 1, 2, and 3 have the stage, is performed in a foreign language with no subtitles; what is more, Lee's directions dictate that only one of the trio should be a Korean actress and the other two ideally Chinese and Japanese. On one hand, this is a jab at the tendency to conflate all Asian ethnicities into a single one; on the other hand, it also renders several episodes incomprehensible even for those few who do understand Korean. With each failed attempt to create a provisional firmative sense of the unfolding action, the disorientation, discomfort, and, most importantly, the estrangement grow. As the spectator is forced to stay perpetually hungry for a "compensatory, therapeutic network", a kind of nightmarish and "paranoid watchfulness", which notices all the inconsistencies, takes over from selective perception.⁴⁴

In one of her interviews, Young Jean Lee described her method of writing as building "traps":

I'm building a trap to trap myself in, and therefore my audience. Whenever I go in the world, wherever I bring my shows, it's almost always a similar audience: college-educated, liberal artsy people who go see experimental theatre in an experimental theatre venue. People like me. If I do an Asian American identity politics play, I know exactly how I'm going to respond to that: [...] I'm going to be like, 'You're preaching here, I've seen that

⁴⁴ Stefka G. Mihaylova, "Feeling Bad about Being White: Young Jean Lee's Theater and the Progressive Avant-Garde", *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, Religion, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the 21st Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023) 130.

trick done before.’ There’s an impulse to categorize and dismiss, and so when I make a show, every step is basically about shutting another door.⁴⁵

One more trap to look at in *Songs* is the dizzyingly unexpected arrival of white people halfway through. “In classic realist plays”, observes Stefka G. Mihaylova, “physical and mental pathologies are strategies for individualizing a character who is otherwise to be perceived as average. Individual pathology thus becomes synonymous with character complexity, transforming middle-class whiteness into a realist aesthetic object”.⁴⁶ The anticipated difference between the Koreans/Korean American and White Person 1 and 2 is accentuated by the lighting (only their episodes are lit by the tubes directly above), the subgenre (something like an introspective, inward-looking drama), and the content of their conversations. Both Bigsby and Hatch note that because “White People in Love” originally was a part of *Songs*’ title, their presence becomes longer with every appearance, and because theirs is the final episode of the play, it seems as if they triumph over the racialised subject and, ultimately, “colonise the stage once and for all”.⁴⁷ This is, however, exactly the door through which the play is trying to lure their spectators.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the white couple is rendered no more “stable, legible, and meaningful”⁴⁸ than the other identity categories that, as was demonstrated, have been rapidly losing their integrity up until now. The allegedly realistic dialogue they are having, which is to convey their “physical and mental pathologies” and, therefore, individualise them into “complex characters”, goes like this:

WHITE PERSON 2: I was driving over a mountain range in the middle of a golf course, and what I saw was the hole. There was a hole, and it was winking at me down there in the grass and saying, “Come here, you little piece of shit. Come out here and take a crack at me.”

(He looks at White Person 1 expectantly.)

WHITE PERSON 1: I want to go to Africa.

⁴⁵ Grace Overbeke, “An Interview with Young Jean Lee”, Interview, *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2016) 41, Cambridge Journals: Full Collection <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/10.1017/S004055741500054X>.

⁴⁶ Mihaylova, 133.

⁴⁷ Hatch, 90.

⁴⁸ Hatch, 91.

WHITE PERSON 2: I wake up in the morning with a horrible feeling, a horrible dread pushing down on me, and it's your responsibility to make me feel better about that.⁴⁹

The manner of speech, as it becomes apparent from this excerpt, is the same mechanistic recitation of passages as in the Korean episodes; the acting is more “appropriately” subdued and less exaggerated but similarly awkward in its unnatural flatness. They talk about addiction, incompetence, relationship issues, sex, and racial politics but, like the others, they are stumbling over contradictions, rapidly shifting between the topics, giving up and starting anew, and getting consumed by frustrated violence – it is important to note that violence in *Songs*, here and in the Korean section, is always sudden, as if the threat slips in through the cracks and floods the scene. In many ways, instead of being “complex characters” with psychological depth, they, too, seem to be inert lumps awaiting to be “transformed into ‘cleverly-wrought’ images of humans”,⁵⁰ which gets perpetually postponed because the “modeller” – the spectator’s gaze – cannot put together and in the right order the repertoire of recognisable movements. This is still not the full extent of the trick. Lee herself drew attention to the ironic fact that “[w]hite people identify with those characters, but they don’t realize that they’re identifying with them because they’re in a relationship, and not because they’re white”.⁵¹ Typically, as was established above, the white is the only race that resists representation – if the illusion can be created for a moment, and destroyed right after, then this too challenges the foundational idea of the culture as nature and the racial hierarchy still linked to it.

The attachment to “constructing bodies *as* raced”⁵² never gets destroyed in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*. At one point, the Korean American, after a painful pause, slips out of her role and “slumps over” like a puppet with her strings cut:

KOREAN 2: What’s wrong?

KOREAN-AMERICAN: I give up.

⁴⁹ Lee, *Songs*, 57.

⁵⁰ Ngai, 90.

⁵¹ Young Jean Lee quote by Bigsby, *Staging America*, 113-4.

⁵² Ngai, 125.

KOREAN 3: What do you give up?

KOREAN-AMERICAN: I give up on being a Christian. Also on being Korean.

A moment later, she “springs back” and proclaims with a wide smile, as if nothing happened: “I’m just kidding!”.⁵³ Yet, the destructive impulse is present and it is directed at the very show, daringly allowed to “just eat itself”.⁵⁴ What is consumed here is the illusory solidity of structures: the plot with any sort of progression, dramatic logic, dialogues, and the naturalised conventions of the body spectacle, all loosen up and slowly unravelling into what Berlant calls a “disorganized meanwhile”.⁵⁵ Every time the audience gets disappointed, the distance between them and what is taking place on stage grows. Laughter, which *Songs* gets in abundance, assists with that.

Typically, a joke, as a coping mechanism, makes it possible to dampen anxiety and resolve what, in any other situation, would be unresolvable; meanwhile, in Lee’s dramatic works, jokes succeed only in taking a willing spectator to an uncomfortable place, but once there, refuse to deliver a punchline that would fix a glitching relation – cutting off and moving onto something completely unexpected, they leave one defenceless and facing the overwhelming ambivalence on their own. They never get to escape it. Before the white couple “takes over” for the final time and somehow finds their way to the phantasmatic vision of socialism, all-embracing love, and free therapy for everyone, the Korean American confesses: “I don’t know what the white people are doing in this show. I don’t even know what the Asian people are doing”, which efficiently summarises this short, one-hour long play.⁵⁶ This pervasive uncertainty can be a nightmare, or, it can also be “the most wonderful dream” in place of what the White Person 1 conjured up. After all, if nothing is capable of making “things definite, firm” – mummified – then there is space for invention.

⁵³ Lee, *Songs*, 59.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven; Script Sabotage”, *American Theatre*, Vol. 24, No. 7 (2007-9) 73, Gale Literature Resource Center link.gale.com/apps/doc/A168775729/LitRC?u=karlova&sid=summon&xid=9cb9a098.

⁵⁵ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 33.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Songs*, 66.

Despising preaching, Lee invents nothing for the audience at all except for ways to keep the horizons open.

3.2. Watching Someone Watching the Play: Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*

The initial impression of Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* after *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is that the plotline has made a grand comeback. Act One opens in a “*theatre set that looks like a nice living/dining room in a nice house in a nice neighborhood*”.⁵⁷ One of the protagonists, Beverly Fraser is cooking a birthday dinner for her mother, Mama, who is currently resting upstairs. As the action progresses – and it does progress here – the other family members join her: first, her doting but absent-minded husband Dayton, then good-looking but slightly pretentious sister Jasmine, and finally her teenage, about-to-graduate daughter Keisha. All of them have their own everyday issues that get introduced and addressed in the dialogue. Keisha, for example, “rebelliously” hopes to take a gap year before going to college. The biggest shared concern though is the satisfaction of an allegedly high-standard, imperious matron, and the family is faced with various “obstacles”, including a delayed flight and a burnt cake, on their path to a perfect birthday celebration. In his analysis of the play, Bigsby notes that the comfortable familiarity of what is unfolding is owed to numerous “comedies featuring Black characters, *The Jeffersons*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Cosby Show*”, and many others that served as something of the mould for *Fairview*.⁵⁸ The golden age of these sitcoms fell in the period between the 1960s and early 2000s, after which their viewership and popularity started to dwindle. Still, its largely realistic, clean, carefully deradicalised and glamorised representation would hardly evoke more than a vague suspicion from a younger spectator, since, as was mentioned before, the selling of the commodified spectacle continues to be widely practised in popular culture under the flag of “diversification” and “authenticity”. Down the line, Jasmine directly (if jokingly) compares the

⁵⁷ Jackie Sibblies Drury, *Fairview* (London: Oberon Books, 2019) 5.

⁵⁸ Christopher Bigsby, *American Dramatists in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023) 73.

first part of the play (and Beverly's life) to one of "those movies that's a family drama": "You know", she says, "nothing big and flashy, / just watching real stories about real people".⁵⁹

Since Drury, like Lee, does not stop at simply reproducing an object of one's cruel attachment but seeks to actively loosen and unlearn it, the plot here is, too, doomed to break down. As in all the other examples in this thesis, "a glitch of some kind" is present from the very start as an intrinsic attribute of the characters' ordinariness. In *Fairview*, it appears in "the music from the speaker" that suddenly "goes a little funny"⁶⁰ or "restarts, without anything onstage initiating it";⁶¹ in the "pretend mirror" on the fourth wall, looking in which is not "a very normal thing to have happen in a play";⁶² in Beverly overreacting to being watched by Dayton, and in Keisha instinctively understanding that there is "something" that made her who she is.⁶³ As they are too close to their own animation, the character's response to a malfunction is predictably to activate a defence mechanism of interacting with the broken world even more intimately:

*There is a glitch of some kind.
It makes BEVERLY nervous.
BEVERLY glares at the speaker.
The speaker fixes itself.
BEVERLY thinks:
Everything is fine.
Everything is going to be perfect today.*⁶⁴

Jasmine makes the same choice:

*JASMINE looks around, like "um, what."
She decides to ignore it. She looks good.*⁶⁵

In a peculiar way, the "obstacles" referred to above eventually turn into a glitch as well, because Beverly's attempts to organise a perfect dinner somehow merge with their duty to live out this perfect construction of the "Black" experience and something inexplicable is a threat to it. The nervousness she is already feeling according to the stage directions intensifies every time she is

⁵⁹ Drury, 22.

⁶⁰ Drury, 5.

⁶¹ Drury, 10.

⁶² Drury, 5.

⁶³ Drury, 26.

⁶⁴ Drury, 5.

⁶⁵ Drury, 10.

informed about a new hindrance, whether it is an odd assortment of unusable cutlery, new eating habits of her sister, or a missing root vegetable. It peaks when the last scene of Act 1 spirals out of the world of a comedy sitcom. Something is clearly not right and both Jasmine and Dayton are trying to calm Beverly down; that's exactly when Keisha announces the burnt cake and an irrational, full-blown, even violent panic attack commences:

DAYTON: Bev, it'll be fine-

JASMINE: Dayton will run out and buy a cake-

BEVERLY: I can fix it.

JASMINE: Won't you Dayton?

BEVERLY: I can fix it.

DAYTON: I'll be happy to get a cake!

BEVERLY: I can fix it.

JASMINE: Why don't you just sit down and I'll get you some wine.

BEVERLY: I can fix it! Alright? Everything is fine!⁶⁶

The other two offer her a logical, easy solution but Beverly seems to be deaf to their words. Her answer, which sounds more like a broken record, is reminiscent of "fixing" a glitching speaker earlier in the play, so it is unclear if they actually mean the same thing. Whichever the case, unlike in the situation with the speaker, the glitch does not get resolved and Beverly, suddenly glassy-eyed as a lifeless doll, loses her consciousness.

As the integrity of the realist living-room drama gets disrupted, it no longer feels as familiar anymore. What until then has masqueraded as a neat, solid structure becomes visible at a distance that materialises in place of the overcloseness. In a twist, Act Two does not pick up from the fainting spell but brings Beverly and the audience back to the very beginning, where she, once again, cheerfully peels carrots to the lagging music. The fact that it can be affected, rewound, and played again, confirms that watching Act One was not "watching real stories about real

⁶⁶ Drury, 29.

people” at all but watching animated “lumps” inhabiting a social role and its repertoire of gestures and stylizations of the body, a narrowly prescribed range of signifiers and narrative motifs”. The onstage action is muted this time like one would be able to mute an episode of a comedy sitcom, and the new addition of the white voices, similar to the invisible hand in Lee’s “hitting video” only actually identified this time, can be heard over the character’s lines. Their appearance increases the distance even further. Instead of re-watching Act One, the audience is now “watching” someone else re-watching it.

Four of them – Suze, Mack, Jambo, and, later on, Bets – have a rather casual chat, as if they are, indeed, just an ordinary group of friends fooling around in front of the TV. While the onstage scenes are performed in a realist if dramatically heightened style, the disembodied dialogue still feels more real in comparison, for it “*begins in medias res, rapidly, conversationally, with overlapping text and ad-libbed reactions, stutters, and sounds*”.⁶⁷ None of them is exactly eloquent, so they occasionally stop making sense, repeat themselves, do not finish their sentences and freely interrupt each other:

SUZE: no, right,

JIMBO: yeah, I think it’s an interesting question.

SUZE: no, sure, it might be, some day,

JIMBO: It’s definitely interesting.

SUZE: no, yeah.

JIMBO: Because I think about things like that. Do you know what I mean?

SUZE: Yeah, yeah.

JIMBO: I actually like to think, like to think about things, you know?⁶⁸

In the previous section on *Songs*, a “vocal” lump was defined as “an agent capable of speaking *for the* human character”. Likewise, Ondřej Polák shrewdly points out that, in Act Two, “the dialogue of the voices synchronizes, as if by accident, with the action on stage, giving the impression that

⁶⁷ Drury, 31.

⁶⁸ Drury, 32.

the voices speak *for* the family”, “possessing” them;⁶⁹ therefore, the expectation is that they would smooth over the glitch and “contractually” re-bind the Fraisers to a specific group of “regular and accountable subjects”.⁷⁰ On the surface, the “authenticity” and the “intellectual” tone the four use might suggest that this is, indeed, the intention. Yet, it is as much of a trap as the ones used by Lee. A considerable amount of what is said skirts the familiar liberal discourse or can be occasionally even misrecognised as progressive: “I would like to pose [a hypothetical question] to you if you consent”,⁷¹ “I’m just thinking about it critically”,⁷² “I value your culture, [...] and because your culture is different than mine, I don’t judge it at all”,⁷³ “Asian people don’t have to be just this one thing”,⁷⁴ “[t]his history of oppression and inequity”,⁷⁵ “to express something essential about myself”,⁷⁶ “that’s more of a gender question than a class section”,⁷⁷ “it wouldn’t be...very authentic”,⁷⁸ “in the African-American tradition”,⁷⁹ “[i]t’s something called Racial Blindness”.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, rather than rebuilding the mummified configurations of racial difference, which have been disturbed by a glitch, their talk destabilises and cracks them open even further. The repertoire of recognisable rhetoric they dip into from time to time is used too inconsistently and more often than not inappropriately; they also barely agree on anything with each other and have a tendency to contradict themselves. The primary question that drives the conversation is “if you could choose to be a different race, what race would you be?”.⁸¹ Jimbo, who starts the whole thing in the first place, readily shares that he would be an Asian American because it is a

⁶⁹ Ondřej Polák, “‘It’s a common story’: Staging Animatedness in Plays by Amiri Baraka and Jackie Sibblies Drury”, *Literaria Pragnesia*, Vol. 32, No. 63 (2022) 100, https://litterariapragnesia.ff.cuni.cz/wp-content/uploads/sites/62/2022/06/Ondrej_Polak_88-104.pdf.

⁷⁰ Ngai, 93.

⁷¹ Drury, 39.

⁷² Drury, 57.

⁷³ Drury, 36.

⁷⁴ Drury, 35.

⁷⁵ Drury, 61.

⁷⁶ Drury, 40.

⁷⁷ Drury, 58.

⁷⁸ Drury, 57.

⁷⁹ Drury, 70.

⁸⁰ Drury, 56.

⁸¹ Drury, 31.

traditional culture, the impression he got from “reading” about it and his ex-girlfriends. Mack, in Bigsby’s words,

wishing to opt for an identity in line with his sense of himself as ‘fiery’, would choose to be Latinx, careful to use a gender-neutral term, more anxious to avoid the implied sexism of the words Latino or Latina, to be up to date with shifting linguistic sensitivities than with any conception of other cultures or race.⁸²

Full of stereotypical imagery, these choices are still not too disparate from the generally accepted conventions, but the longer it goes on, the more ignorant, outlandish and grotesque the dialogue grows, reminiscent of the dialogues in *Songs*. Race is claimed to be a construct but a construct with something inarguably essential about it but one race can be more constructed than the other (“you’re like, oh, that person is black that person is Asian, / but with Latinx people it’s like, / they don’t think, they just are what they are”); this “core” can be remade into something else (by a white man only: “I’d be Asian but I’d be rebellious”,⁸³ loud, difficult, impolite, in therapy and so on) but, at the same time, by doing so, one would destroy the “authenticity” of it, which has to be preserved at all costs (“if you want to be a real black person, then you have to be a poor black person”⁸⁴). Bets, an immigrant herself, introduces a new disorienting brainteaser by collapsing all the Slavic countries into one shared landscape of “flat flat flat, just, you look and a what, a boulder, with a little snow” and, then, persuading the others that “Slav” and “Turk” are, in fact, different races too because, after all, the “food is different, the culture is different, the look of the people is different”.⁸⁵ It continues in the same key for a painfully long time until no stable and legible definition of a racial subject is left to latch one. Meanwhile, the stage action, which has been bound as a mirror to what is said by the quartet, acquires a fittingly bizarre quality to it. More tripping/fainting takes place, Jasmine brings a cutting board with carrots out through the front door, and all the family members suddenly start to dance. As was already observed, in Act One,

⁸² Bigsby, *American Dramatists*, 74.

⁸³ Drury, 35.

⁸⁴ Drury, 56.

⁸⁵ Drury, 47-9.

the perfect birthday dinner became synonymous with the perfect representation of “Blackness” and here, as the “Black experience” starts to be harder and harder to pinpoint, it symbolically turns into a celebration of in-your-face grotesque artificiality:

*and the fake foods get stranger and stranger,
in different ways, some of it it is less food-like, and the
family brings it all out of the kitchen while dancing,
and smiling, with glee,
and puts it on the table, piling it up,
maybe till it threatens to overflow the table,
and maybe at one point there is a conga line of fake food⁸⁶*

In the background, Jimbo recites a four-pages-long, wordy monologue, the main point of which is that he is “the villain in this movie”.⁸⁷

Similarly to the way the white couple “takes over” in the second half of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Bets, Suze, Jimbo and Mack attempt to take over in Act Three of *Fairview*. It goes as well as it did in Lee’s play. Unsatisfied with the mainstream commodified spectacle they have been watching, the quartet decides to adjust it but not with an invisible hand. Hence, when Mama, the matron of the Fraiser family, descends at last from the second floor, it is actually Suze, and she is not alone in her roleplaying: Jimbo follows her shortly as Tyron, Beverly and Jasmine’s brother whose flight was delayed, Mack as Eirka, Keisha’s classmate and, probably, girlfriend, and Bets, yet another version of Mama. Immediately, they establish themselves as “always obvious, highly visible bodies” through excessively stylised “Black” aesthetics: out with the everyday chatter, in with heightened manner of speech, rapping, jazz, glitter and confetti. They begin to play with the Fraisers’ story in small ways, like intensifying their love for dance and substituting a better brand of beer with a cheaper, more “appropriate” one. Big ways that come next include impregnating teenage Keisha (which would not be biologically possible with a female partner), denying her college education, uncovering Dayton’s adultery resulting in syphilis, and rewriting Mama’s history to make her a hard-working, retired maid. The

⁸⁶ Drury, 80.

⁸⁷ Drury, 77.

biggest and final revelation they throw at the family is that the money was all spent on Beverly's drug addiction, and the mortgaged house they all are standing in is about to be gone too.

These are not figments of the quartet's imagination or some outdated stereotypes but a racial representation that continues to live on today alongside the deradicalised, glamorised spectacle of family comedy. Still, it does not stick. The illusion of the integrity of the *Fraiser*'s world was broken already in Act One and failed to patch itself up in Act Two. Because nothing holds it together any longer, it has slipped into a transitional infrastructure that can be, indeed, experimented with but that now resists narrow and fixed orders. The estrangement from the unfolding action, which builds up throughout the play, is echoed through Keisha, who, like the audience, begins to notice the white characters' manipulations. Initially, it is more of some abstract unease, as if the modeller was carefully edited out but one suspects they are there: when Suze enters as Mama, she cannot stop staring at her and confesses: "It's not...Um. I'm just confused. I guess".⁸⁸ Just a few lines later Suze enters her aside, which technically is not possible – the illusion of "reality" in animation can only be preserved as long as it is smooth and the animator stays outside of the frame. Thus, from there on, it is no longer just a feeling for Keisha: she marks when a sudden dance break occurs, refuses to act along with Erika/Mack, does not recognise Bets as her grandmother, and never accepts the changes in her plot even when the others seemingly do. Ultimately, instead of successfully enclosing the family in another conventional narrative, in another solid structure of racial representation, the set gets symbolically "destroyed" in a grotesque and violent Food Fight.⁸⁹ As if freed from one more bind, Keisha gains more control and addresses Suze directly: "I need to ask you something".⁹⁰

If the quartet could experiment and improvise with the infrastructure, then the others have that ability too and, in the very last scene, Keisha tries it out, if only for the moment and more as the confirmation it could be done, a brief glimpse of the otherwise. It is important to note that even

⁸⁸ Drury, 84.

⁸⁹ Drury, 105.

⁹⁰ Drury, 107.

here the object of attachment does not get lost, only unlearned. What Keisha ends up asking not only Suze but the audience as well is to switch: people who identify as white would come up on stage while the non-white would either stay in their seats or get down there and take one.

“Normally, it’s the reverse”, explains Drury her idea, “people of color have to shift to fit into the room. I thought it could be cathartic to create a space in which some audience members make themselves uncomfortable in order to try to make people of color feel more comfortable”.⁹¹ The object’s destruction would be exactly the “fair view” from the title: the world where there is no division, no stories to watch, only the ones about “what you had done to try to make the life that you had lived”, and then the “sum of all of it”.⁹² Although this time around, it is the white people who are turned into a spectacle and are forced out of their fantasy sovereignty where they do not need to shift for anyone, Drury’s temporarily improvised space is still divided into “us” and “them”, the “observers” and “the observed”, the ones benefited and the ones impeded. This means that this configuration is created not outside of the relation but from within it and thus too needs to be questioned and reimaged – “no one can own a seat forever”, reminds Keisha, and “no one should”.⁹³

Written eleven years later, during the second decade less optimistic about post-racial America, Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* no longer shies away from pointing fingers: structural racism lives on, even if edited out better than during any other century, and its colour is still white. However, to make the whiteness central would be letting it dominate yet again. Both *Fairview* and Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* end in the “disorganised meanwhile” with the horizons firmly open on what else the racially marked subject could potentially be.

⁹¹ Jackie Sibblies Drury quoted by Michael Pearce, “Making Whiteness Visible and Felt in *Fairview*”. *Humanities*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2023) 9, EBSCO <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020081>.

⁹² Drury, 113.

⁹³ Drury, 110.

Chapter 4 – On Good Apocalypse: From “Necrofuturism” to Futures Beyond the End of This World

Two terms, “Necrocene” and “necrocapitalism”, go hand in hand in shedding light on the level to which today the accumulation of capital directly depends on the everyday widespread dislocation, dispossession, and potential extinction. The “extinction” here, observes Justin McBrien, is not “simply the biological process” related to certain species, but

also the extinguishing of cultures and languages, either through force or assimilation; it is the extermination of peoples, either through labor accumulating extinction or deliberate murder; it is the extinction of the earth in the depletion of fossil fuels, rare earth minerals, even the chemical element helium; it is ocean acidification and eutrophication, deforestation and desertification, melting ice sheets and rising sea levels; the great Pacific garbage patch and nuclear waste entombment; McDonalds and Monsanto.¹

All these produce what Jason W. Moore calls “The Four Cheaps: food, energy, raw resources, and human life”.² As the wheel of capitalism continues to gather momentum, creating even more demand for these means of production and, therefore, for structural violence, the alarm bells start to go off. Since the beginning of the century, their calls have become especially urgent. War, poverty, and famine continue to rage on a horrific scale across the globe. “The droughts, wildfires, superstorms, and floods have increased in both number and intensity” paving the way for “the ultimate catastrophe of climate change”.³ Eyes have turned towards the future where, simply put, there will be no future,

Logically, it should mean that by driving the “potential extinction” to turn, probably sooner rather than later, into the real one, capitalism also tumbles itself into a fatal crisis. And yet,

¹ Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene”, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed, Jason W. Moore (Binghamton, NY: PM Press, 2016) 116-7.

² Moore, 3.

³ Gerry Canavan, “If the Engine Ever Stops, We’d All Die: *Snowpiercer* and Necrofuturism”, *Paradoxa*, No. 26 (2014) 7, Marquette University e-Publications
https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1298&context=english_fac.

the Introduction has already touched upon the way the traumatic has been integrated into the order's rationalising machine and used for its renewal – the same principle, despite everything, works here too. Catastrophising, even when emerging from the existing trends and their real outcomes, as it happens, for example, in terms of ecological catastrophe, becomes the best advertising campaign, which opens up new markets to tap into (see, for example, volunteering programmes), allows to introduce “professionals” who would “cathartically manage” the crises, and, this way, blaze a trail in the desired direction. Gerry Canavan draws on Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's study of necrocapitalism to argue that the “perpetual threat” serves as a “double-bind” that reinforces neoliberal practices:

things must be this necrocapitalist because, if they were not, our society would be even more necropolitical and wretched than it is now. That is: necrocapitalism's own horrors are perpetually taken as proof of necrocapitalism's necessity, even its own self-prophylactic. We ingest the poison to keep ourselves from becoming even sicker.

In relation to this, he also suggests the concept of “necrofuturism” that

names our deflationary belief that the condition of exploitation and extraction that make contemporary society “function” are foundationally unsustainable and thus manifestly have no future, and yet despite this fact they will simply not be altered in any way, even if it kills us all.⁴

The “endless rehearsal” of the “landscape of death”⁵ in culture is, therefore, hardly surprising, although the anti utopian tendencies detected in a significant part of such films, tv series, and books do not convey the full picture. Dan Rebellato when surveying the developments on the postwar British theatre scene, observes that, indeed, this century has witnessed “a hypertrophic escalation in the scale of violence represented, to a point one could reasonably call apocalyptic”.⁶ At the same time, the aspect that puts all of the plays mentioned in his article under one umbrella is the vehement refusal to be graphic about it. The ways to achieve this are numerous: unbearable action gets veiled by thick darkness where no one can see what happens on

⁴ Canavan, 8.

⁵ Canavan, 2.

⁶ Dan Rebellato, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing”, *Sillages critiques*, Vol. 22 (March 2017) 4, Open Edition Journals <http://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/4798>.

stage, it is tumbled into a supernatural realm, substituted with abstract images on the screen or, more often than not, with verbal images, presented by characters. When it comes to the agenda behind such a strategy, Rebellato proposes two levels to it. On one hand, it can be perceived as the unwillingness to participate in the ever-present “brutal economy of specular violence” that has been dealing in the detailed visual coverages of atrocities to be consumed.⁷ Primarily though, he suggests it to be a counter-offence on what has been discussed since the beginning of this thesis – “capitalist realism”.⁸ The refusal to be “realistic” reactivates oppressed and suppressed imagination, putting it to work in constructing the disturbing imagery. However, because no framework of “common sense” is provided – and cannot be provided due to the escalation of violence to the degrees one would not be closely familiar with – imagination is used to gradually invite to these images play, ambiguities, pluralisms and uncertainty; not to partake in evading the real but to offer “glimpses of how far capital has come to duplicate and replace it”.⁹ From here, the proximity to “the end of the world” does not have to mean just that – a safe, if terrible, haven of “necrofuturism” where things simply will get worse – but, perhaps, also the possible “end of the world as it is now”, which is a significantly more optimistic outlook.

Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* that is to be analysed in this chapter could have very well appeared on Rebellato’s list. Profoundly unconventional and controversial, Shawn has always been more celebrated as a playwright in the United Kingdom, where the Royal Court Theatre even hosted the 2009 world premiere of *Grasses* while it took 4 more years to produce it on the American stage.¹⁰ The play begins in the unidentified but seemingly near future, where the shortage of food is projected as an imminent threat. The protagonist Ben introduces himself as a “man of medicine” turned “man of science” turned businessman, who perfectly fits the profile of the neoliberal expert ready to cathartically manage the fear and stir people towards a better future

⁷ Rebellato, 37.

⁸ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

⁹ Rebellato, 65.

¹⁰ Innes, 298.

while opening a new market for acquiring wealth (“deriving some benefit ourselves from that, through various ridiculous instrumentalities we call salaries, stocks, investments, what have you”).¹¹ The solution he and other like-minded professionals implement is to create new sources of sustenance by making it possible for animals, the herbivorous ones included, feed on all species, dead or alive. In a pointed way, *Grasses* never discloses the struggles that the world has been going through before, singling out the consequences of this particular entrepreneurial intervention. A strange condition spreads through human society, causing the actual food shortage: one by one food items turn poisonous to a body until vomiting eventually starts, from where the only escape is through slow and painful death. Ironically – and this is a clear example of necrofuturism – the extraction of profit does not stop here. Using the opportunity, the lab of the “last private nutritionist” produces “Gross”, a mud-like consumable substance, that either postpones or speeds up the process for the privileged who can afford it.¹² No other indication that the condition is (or should be) battled is given – even though capitalism has effectively “destroy[ed] the conditions for its own existence”, the breakage of the system can mean only one thing: an even quicker demise without something like “Gross”.¹³

Once again, imagination is what opposes it. John Lahr, when describing Shawn’s style, writes that, typically, his “stage is stripped of most of its comforting dramaturgical devices – no plot, no set, no action – so the audience has nothing but the actor, the words, and its own moral compasses to steer by”.¹⁴ This is the case in *Grasses* too, where the only source of information is lengthy monologues, a few brief, direct interactions between the characters, and some abstract videos and images that occasionally appear on the screen. As will be demonstrated below, the apocalyptic story that is fully told – not played out – by Ben and three of his lovers almost

¹¹ Wallace Shawn, *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009) 9-11.

¹² Shawn, *Grasses*, 21.

¹³ Canavan, 7.

¹⁴ John Lahr quoted by Robert M. Post, “Theater as Persuasion: The Plays of Wallace Shawn”, *American Drama*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2001) 70, EBSCOhost <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=748941ec-3396-4690-b8d9-ab48b993bc82%40redis>.

immediately starts to accumulate increasingly sordid, outlandish and petrifying details that, transcending the established limits of the rational, turn their world less and less familiar and, as a result, less and less supported by pre-existing normative structures. When talking about the foundational structures that hold together Capitalocene (another, more general, term for the aforementioned Necrocene) Moore emphasises the centrality of a binary nature/society, which is “immanent to capitalist development”. The paradox in it is discernible: from one angle, the production of “The Four Cheaps” brings nature and humans together as victims; simultaneously, the need to exploit nature renders it productively alien, inferior, and, therefore, devalued to humans; and finally, exploiting and exploited, the human gets isolated on both fronts.¹⁵ Thus, when new arrangements start to spring from within the loosened relations in *Grasses*, each of them experiments with these broken dynamics between the human and nonhuman. The play, despite their alleviating presence, still ends in death. Why this ultimate self-destruction is not a nihilistic response but is, too, related to affirmative speculations will be touched upon in the final section of this chapter.

4.1. “Naked on the bed”:¹⁶ Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*

In his opening lines that immediately break through the fourth wall, Ben lets the audience know what this evening is all about: he is going to read to them from his memoirs. In the United States, the choice of such a genre has its specific implications. Thomas Couser, in *Memoir: An Introduction*, draws attention to the fact that “early American literature *consisted* in large parts of what we now call life-writing”, and the tradition, heavily impacted by Protestantism and Individualism, has gained a central position in the national canon, further evolving since then in the captivity and slave narratives, the first classic success stories of the founding fathers, and the

¹⁵ Leila Michelle Vaziri, “Alienation, Abjection, and Disgust: Encountering the Capitalocene in Contemporary Eco-Drama”, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, Volume 10, No. 1 (2022) 236.

¹⁶ Shawn, 38.

“prophetic” works of Thoreau and Whitman – today, with the rise of the image-based consumer culture that deals in “authenticity”, the genre has been experiencing yet another golden age.¹⁷

Because “civilization on this continent was so much in progress”, writes Couser, American memoir has formed as profoundly utilitarian and instrumental and “unlike its British counterpart, often attempts not so much to record history as to shape it” by building identities, promoting and reinforcing conventions, and speculating firmly towards a stable horizon.¹⁸ By all means, the memoir at the heart of the play should have continued the tradition, and some of the initial “readings” do give a taste of what kind of “authentic” narrative was going to be communicated.

As “charter members of the generation of the improvers and the fixers”, states Ben proudly,

of course we always loved to tinker with things and fix things, but at the same time, you know, it went without saying that we cared about the world. [...] There was on the one hand, an enormous crowd of entities – ourselves and others – roaming the planet, trying to find something to eat; and, on the other hand, there was a tiny, inadequate crowd of entities available on the planet to *be eaten*. [...] in any case, we all know that if you don’t like *my* book, you can easily go and read on of the many fascinating books that have recently come out, written by some of the members of the new generation, the generation of the *non*-improvers and the *don’t*-fixers – books which will attempt to show you in an extremely passionate, possibly somewhat incoherent way, that all the things that *our* generation did – in combination with about seven hundred and fifty million other factors [...] – somehow caused the problems we have today.¹⁹

This short excerpt right away positions the human in the position of the one choosing who will be “eaten”, and the nonhumans in the position of “cheap food”. Additionally, the emphasis on enterprise, effort, and, most importantly, coherence of the neoliberal subject portrays it as decidedly superior to any alternative and strongly denies all the accusations towards it in regard to the unfolding catastrophe. Down the line, Ben also attempts to provide “factual” proof, which takes the form of “a colorful, bright, cheerful image [...] of him when he was in his thirties, accompanied by an amusing-looking dog”.²⁰ Since nothing appears truly off about the animal

¹⁷ Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 110-138.

¹⁸ Couser, 112.

¹⁹ Shawn, 11.

²⁰ Shawn, *Grasses*, 12.

except for some abstract “amusing” quality, he presents it as their project’s first big success – one of many.

Despite this, the instability of the account betrays itself right away. Ben, for all his breezy boasting, does not appear confident when it comes to writing. He ponders on where exactly he should start, repeatedly seeks affirmation from the audience, throws out a thick pile of the already written introduction, recovers the epigraph, shares a not yet confirmed title, then “defines” himself for a bit only to state that he had “planned to be real, but everything about me turned out to be fake”.²¹ As the glitch in the “production of a seamless surface of images” becomes apparent,²² someone else’s voice manages to slip in through the cracks. Cerise, Ben’s wife, makes her first mysterious appearance by suddenly hijacking the screen. In an obvious juxtaposition to the photograph, her video is an old-fashioned, “scratchy black-and-white film” and, unlike the dog, she does not look entirely healthy. At first, Ben is taken aback by someone encroaching on his sovereignty only for a second; however, as she returns to stay on longer and even begins her own recollections amid the narrative he theoretically should dominate, it starts to require more and more to compose himself. The story that she finally gets to tell as he stands aside, forces the audience to peek beyond the exaggeratedly perfect spectacle presented by her husband:

[The wolf is] so weak that it can’t really stand up, and it’s making its way toward the woods on its belly, like a sort of fat worm with legs. [...] ...the dogs’ muzzles *pressed* into the ground, as if they were trying to bury themselves to stop the pain, as if their faces were covered with actual flames. Dear Rose, I’m not talking, darling, about one or two animals – there must be almost a hundred of them here, pawing in the mud by the porch, trying to stick their faces into the mud – squealing so loudly that I can’t think, I can’t sleep, I can’t eat...²³

At the sheer monstrosity of the scene above, the coherence of Ben’s clean, self-celebratory, and “rational” memoir gets hopelessly undermined. When he takes over next time, there is no other

²¹ Shawn, *Grasses*, 14.

²² Rebellato, 45.

²³ Shawn, *Grasses*, 14-16.

choice for him left except to simply bin it: “I’m going to tell this in a slightly different way,” he says. “It’s a slightly different story”.²⁴

The apocalyptic, as Rebellato proposes, disrupts “the assuredness of language, the unity of meaning, the clarity of expression”: “One notices a persistent pattern of linguistic negation at work, in which parts of these plays are offered, as Derrida might say, under erasure”.²⁵ The cancelling of the memoir as a stable written account is the most literal example of such a negation, although the erasure only intensifies from here. The immediacy of an “oral” form, which comes in its stead, suggests even more space and opportunity for inconsistencies, slips of tongue, pauses, ellipses, overstatements, adjustments, and improvisations as one is trying to gather their thoughts on the go. Accordingly, when the “different story” commences, a sort of dream-like logic to the narrative settles in, creating the distance from the overclosure. Perfectly realistic, mundane scenes begin to co-exist with a grotesque fairytale. The spatial and chronological arrangements turn vague and progressively harder to follow. “Hours”, “days”, “more days”, “then weeks, then three or four years” pass only briefly identified, crowding on each other only to stretch out indefinitely a moment later. The characters wander in and out of hastily outlined locations and travel between them with suspicious ease. Additionally, because the narrators multiply (Ben and Cerise are eventually joined by Robin and then by Rose) the story splits into four independent threads, which often diverge or contradict each other, taking away from the overall clarity and unity of meaning.

Amidst this process of loosening the structures, the very meaning of “human”, which has been hopelessly intertwined with a neoliberal subject, also becomes tinted with uncertainty. Off on a trip with his new lover Robin, Ben suddenly notices, bewildered,

on the floor, so far below us, all of our clothes, in their arbitrary pattern, as they’d fallen – what awfulness, what falseness they represented: everything in the world which we supposedly were but really were not [...] Sometimes – when? – before we were twenty – we’d reached into the heap of available thoughts and available practices and grabbed one thing and another to cover our nakedness, but always knowing it wasn’t really what we wanted. The tastes, the beliefs, the manner, the style – they all were

²⁴ Shawn, *Grasses*, 20.

²⁵ Rebellato, 54-5.

hastily improvised approximations, as if we'd always planned to return to them later and revise them, fix them, but we never had. Naked on the bed, we forgot all the things we'd decided we were and said we were – we started again. I wasn't the real person I'd always pretended to be – I was hardly a particular person at all.²⁶

While they do get dressed at the end of this episode, returning to their usual, artificially stable selves, to be “naked on the bed” becomes a recurring theme. In his essay “Shock to the system”, which came out the same year as *Grasses*, Shawn explains his “excessive preoccupation” with sex as a preoccupation with the great power it holds. “Sex”, he writes, “seems capable of creating anarchy, and those who are committed to predictability and order find themselves either standing in opposition to it or occasionally trying to pretend to themselves it doesn't even exist. Nudity somehow seems to imply that anything could happen”. This fear stems from two sources. The first one, according to Shawn, is that in terms of anatomy, sex exists in an uncomfortable border-realm between “reality and dream” and “the meaningful and the meaningless”, since each part of the body and detail of copulation are a result of a “particular choice that evolution made”, “the adaptive value” of which is generally unknown and unknowable to us and thus presented as uncomfortably arbitrary. Second, because sex is an activity that humans engage in like a plethora of other creatures – including those earliest ones who still “swam in the mud” – the acknowledgement of it can “violently disrupt” one's “normal picture” of oneself as a part of something evolved, singular, and thus superior, and reforge the connection to nature in a profoundly “humbling” and “equalising” way.²⁷

In *Grasses*, the taboos related to sex, which keep its fearful, anarchical power at bay, get temporarily unlearned along the other foundational structures. Ben and others talk about masturbating, their genitals in various contexts, hetero- and homosexual intercourses, infidelity, incest, sadomasochism, and bizarre bestiality – all of it emphatically and equally normalised. The sex talk, whether it is a description of the act or more of philosophising on the topic, is invariably

²⁶ Shawn, *Grasses*, 38.

²⁷ Wallace Shawn, “Shock to the System”, *The Guardian* (20 June 2009)
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/jun/20/wallace-shawn-writing-about-sex>.

thorough and detailed, drawn-out to the point of discomfiture, and more often than not outrageous and audience-assaulting. Leila Michelle Vaziri argues that

disgust establishes hierarchical orders that separate and alienate by rendering its object intolerable, by cheapening its worth. [...] [R]evolt against a primordial animality is usually identified as the cause for disgust or abjection. [...] In other words, humans feel superior to nature despite their animal origin and reject disgusting/abject objects because they can be a reminder of said origin.²⁸

Here, disgust subvertingly finds its object not only in nature but also in human beings, and, as an outcome, effectively unsettles the hierarchy and blurs the erected borders. As “the environment com[es] inside” and the shared origin gets acknowledged,²⁹ the animalistic qualities start to arbitrarily and grotesquely mix with the anthropomorphic ones. Thus, describing the first intercourse with Robin, Ben puts it in the following way: “I opened my mouth and went for her neck; I could see my face as a dog’s face. Then her face became a dog’s face too. Her jaws opened, teeth bared”.³⁰ The same happens to the animals: “I was drying the tears of a father sad little fawn – attractive, though – a rather sad little fawn who kept getting herself worked up over nothing”,³¹ “The cats found that fantastically funny, as they were mostly quite drunk”,³² “Er – how is that prepared? Meow–”.³³

Una Chaudhuri calls these fantastical transformations “turning the body inside out” in a “preparation for entering and tolerating the new conceptual territory”.³⁴ Significantly, even though for most of the play the mysterious condition has not started to spread yet causing a mass extinction (at least not in the human world), the strong impression of desolation and isolation follows the characters everywhere – beyond the thick walls of city apartments and countryside

²⁸ Leila Michelle Vaziri, “Alienation, Abjection, and Disgust: Encountering the Capitalocene in Contemporary Eco-Drama”, *Journal of Countemporary Drama in English*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2022) 232-235.

²⁹ Shawn, “Shock to the System”.

³⁰ Shawn, *Grasses*, 32.

³¹ Shawn, *Grasses*, 43.

³² Shawn, *Grasses*, 44.

³³ Shawn, *Grasses*, 43.

³⁴ Una Chaudhuri, “Anthropo-Scenes: Staging Climate Chaos in the Drama of Bad Ideas”, *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. Sian Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Perlego <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3482386/20>.

cottages – as if “shin[ing] a spotlight on the myth of human exceptionalism”.³⁵ The new territory Chaudhuri mentions, however, finds a spacial representation somewhere that is unmistakably not a part of this realm: in an otherworldly castle. When Ben breaks out of his self-inflation and unlocks the animalistic side with Robin, it is almost as if he gets “called” there: horses just happen to wait for him at the lake not that far from the hotel, they require no directions to get where he is supposed to go, and the distance shrinks to a short ride through the park/forest. There, a new type of intimacy with nature – “creepy and uncanny” but at the same time “indescribably cozy”, as Wendy Aron puts it – is tried to be “made sense of” in Ben’s lascivious affair with an anthropomorphic cat.³⁶ Since this is the episode Shawn has been harshly condemned for by the reviewers (“I felt [...] sickened by the playwright’s pervy and frequently bestial fantasies”³⁷), Aron makes an important observation that the “language [...] makes clear that what is at stake goes beyond the fulfilment of sexual desire; sex is rather how Ben approaches what appears to be a transcendent state of connection with an ‘other’”.³⁸ At the peak of their first shared intercourse overlapping with voracious feasting on mice (as a signal that nonhumans are no longer food for humans but share it with them), he says: “My God – finally. Finally, to be known, I thought, as hot sperm flowed out of me, flowing over her paw as if it would never stop. To be seen and known”.³⁹ The connection feels both like a further disturbance and a great relief. Subsequently, as if an “equalising” alternative lifeworld is set free, the coldness of the castle gives way to absurd, dizzying, densely-populated parties where humans and nonhumans are intermingled, socially and physically, to the point where it becomes difficult to tell them apart:

I was immediately surrounded by a group of brightly costumed young animals, who seemed to be greeting me and welcoming me to the party. Then a thin dog in a sailor hat bounded towards me with a vile grin on his ugly face. [...] I handed the plate back to the drooling dog and rushed out of the room. A dark passageway led to a huge dining hall where adults

³⁵ Wendy Arons, “Queer Ecology / Contemporary Plays”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Dec 2012) 575., JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41819890>.

³⁶ Wendy Arons, 573.

³⁷ Chaudhuri.

³⁸ Arons, 573.

³⁹ Shawn, 35.

were gathered – mostly men – and food was being served at a big long table. [...] The dinner was not a very refined affair, because donkeys – asses – stood at the table, interspersed among the seated people.⁴⁰

As it happened in other plays examined in this thesis, here too, the otherwise does not last, and the world keeps trying to revert to its routine logistics even under erasure. The second trip to the castle takes place when Ben happily goes back for the whole year to “the lives we called “ours”. The things we’d chosen. Thoughts. Selves. The tastes. The beliefs. The city. The buildings”.⁴¹ Then, Robin follows him and, in an episode of the apocalyptic level of horror, cuts the cat’s head off in a bout of jealousy. The cat does not die; however, when her head grows back, she loses her anthropomorphic features and, as a result, for a while, Ben’s attachment to her: “Blanche”, he describes her new form, “this strange, sickly, uninteresting cat, whom I didn’t like...”.⁴² Curiously, this period is also characterised by something aching to the loss of appetite, as the condition makes its first appearance and sex vanishes almost completely or, at least, gets stripped of its radical powers (“I would stare at his member. I’d watch him caress it. I’d look and look. But there were no answers in there”).⁴³ Fittingly, it is also when Robin takes Ben to a party that is less than a shadow of the non/human ones, dreadfully void of life with its claustrophobically “low ceilings”, “glassy eyes, meaningless expressions”, and soul-crashing discussions about lawnmowers.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, even if no one retraces the path through the woods afterwards, the rest of the play does continue to brush against the alleviating alternative occasionally, acquiring a new configuration each time. For example, for a few years, Ben, Rose (his last lover) and Blanche The Cat manage to rekindle it in a considerably less intense – and more friend-like – threesome; in the meanwhile, Cerise, who turns out to be the human form of shapeshifting Blanche, goes back to animalistic sex with Ben and forms a close, possibly sexual relationship with two other women.

⁴⁰ Shawn, 42-3.

⁴¹ Shawn, 39.

⁴² Shawn, 48.

⁴³ Shawn, 49.

⁴⁴ Shawn, 51.

4.2. Halfway “across the meadow”:⁴⁵ Other Ways to Die

Part Three of *Grasses* witnesses a plethora of deaths as the condition starts to wreak havoc on the world; the focus, however, is on two specifically: first, on Robin and then, at last, on Ben himself. Although her name suggests a link to nature – a much closer connection than “Cerise” or “Blanche” could ever imply — it is Cerise’s “Letter to a Bird” that gives a better sense of Robin’s character: ““I only asked you, Robin, where you wanted to live – but flight, perhaps, was itself your answer. Is it always that way – in the world of birds? Is that the bird’s awful, silent response – to everything? Flight?””.⁴⁶ There are moments throughout the play when she does appear to be on the verge of accepting the thinning borders between human and nonhuman. For example, Robin is the one who accompanies Ben when he gets his revelation about “clothes”, agrees to strip off her identity with him, and willingly wanders around naked in an animalistic manner, “laughing like hyenas”.⁴⁷ And yet, something like an urge to “flight” pulls her firmly back into the “microcosm” of “human exceptionalism” every time that it is about to happen.⁴⁸ Her problematic relationship with sex tellingly mirrors this struggle. While most of the descriptions of unbridled intimacy in the play are lush and debauched, most of the time Robin’s scenes are either about her withholding it (“Sometimes he’d beg me to masturbate in front of him. I’d always decline”⁴⁹), something oddly abrupt and sterile (“Sometimes her kisses were wet and tempting, and as her breasts fell over my face, I’d sort of reach out to touch them, and she’d always pull away”⁵⁰), or “prudent”, like sex with her actual husband. In one of the scenes, she even confesses that “taking a pleasure in [her] own body” is a “rare” occasion for her.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Shawn, 88.

⁴⁶ Shawn, 69.

⁴⁷ Shawn, 39.

⁴⁸ Arons, 575.

⁴⁹ Shawn, 49.

⁵⁰ Shawn, 48.

⁵¹ Shawn, 46.

It is important to note here, that the night she follows Ben to the castle, Robin does end up experiencing pleasure although in an extremely distorted form. It all goes wrong from the start. First, the bodily transformations necessary for entering the “new conceptual territory” in her case simply get faked with a “large rubber dick”⁵² and some male clothing; then, instead of truly participating in the human/nonhuman mingling, she loiters on the periphery, her time there tinged with disgust, boredom, and annoyance. When she finally arrives at the cat’s room, she is swayed, for a moment, by a strong wave of attraction to the sleeping animal and “almost feel[s her] smooth rubber penis starting to stir”.⁵³ Still, the choice Robin makes is different from making a connection Ben’s way: “Forcing myself with difficulty out of my trance-like state,” she recounts, “I pulled the heavy knife from where it lay between my breasts, and with all my strength, trembling, I brought it down in a furious stroke and cut off the cat’s head”.⁵⁴ After she orgasms to the satisfaction from this ultimate violent domination of a nonhuman, it becomes the only relation that she truly understands. Their affair with Ben turns into a sadistic dance, where Robin not only torments him creatively but also, from time to time, attempts to engage in a knife-play, which is not a play at all, either in her sexual fantasies or face-to-face (“*She tries to stab him with the knife. They struggle, fight*”).⁵⁵ Later on, in a conversation with Cerise, whose feline form Robin ends up murdering brutally not once but twice, she betrays her confusion:

ROBIN’S VOICE

But why do you sound so terribly sad? What’s wrong? It’s as if you somehow think I was trying to hurt you...

CERISE

Yes—yes, that’s what I think.

ROBIN’S VOICE

But my god you’ve known nothing but love from me. Don’t you realize that?⁵⁶

⁵² Shawn, 42.

⁵³ Shawn, 45.

⁵⁴ Shawn, 45.

⁵⁵ Shawn, 54.

⁵⁶ Shawn, 69.

In the crisis infrastructure of the play, she, imposing “a relentless pattern of violence on nature, humans included” as it happens in Capitalocene daily, somehow turns more incomprehensible and irrational than the other human/nonhuman characters improvising bizarre and outrageous intimate connections.⁵⁷ By the end of her life, Robin, like many others in their profoundly sick world, starts to behave “unusually”, “insane”, which is the symptom that signals that time is running out.⁵⁸ Unable to understand what her position is lacking and, therefore, unable to change, she succumbs to the horrifically painful death when back to her safe, ordered married life and held together by clothes and elaborate makeup.

If Ben, propelling towards his own demise, followed Robin down this path towards the clearly marked necrofuturist horizon, then the apocalypse in *Grasses* would truly be able to offer only the images of the unrestricted end of the world. Yet, the deliberate contrast between hers and his last scenes is impossible to overlook. As one learns before the story even commences, the morning of his death, Ben received an envelope containing an invitation to a “rather large gathering” that he simply could not resist.⁵⁹ Unlike the frenzied, anguished goodbye to his second lover, the atmosphere at Cerise/Blanche’s house is amicable and serene: suffering subdued, they get to sit outside and eat, there is a pool full of children splashing and giggling in the sun, and Blanche’s voice, as she and Ben talk, is “so melodious and gentle” that it makes him dewy-eyed.⁶⁰ Although this get-together is considerably less radical than what was taking place in the castle (the hostess, for example, has lost all of her animalistic features and became “a sort of ordinary, bourgeois middle-aged woman, with basically ordinary tastes”⁶¹) some of its central qualities have carried over. The revelations start to pile up. Ben learns, for example, that his wife, his life companion, has, indeed, accompanied him as The Cat and Blanche throughout the years. Since a woman, too, is often a victim of cheapening and exclusion under Capitalocene, her shapeshifting

⁵⁷ Vaziri, 236.

⁵⁸ Shawn, 78.

⁵⁹ Shawn, 84.

⁶⁰ Shawn, 87.

⁶¹ Shawn, 85.

nature makes a further commentary on the inadequacy of separating the human from nonhuman. Then, she shows him the photographs of the full scale of ruin caused by his little enterprise: “black landscapes”, recounts Ben, “covered with – naked–? well, they were dead animals, I guess, cats and other animals, but the bodies were misshapen, bloated, the skin was broken”.⁶² At last, as a mocking gesture towards Ben’s original attempt at writing his own memoir, all the guests are provided with their real biographies, based on which he confirms that just about everything in his life has evaded a stable and predictable narrative: “I’d been wrong about people, about why things had happened, even about facts that had seemed completely indisputable”.⁶³ As was demonstrated above, Robin used to react to such erasure of certainty by fighting it or fleeing from it. Ben, on the other hand, hesitates only for a short moment, where a wave of hot anger goes through his body, after which he begins to take the general arbitrariness of the world’s organisation in stride and even comes to enjoy the joke of his life story.

For this reason, death also loses its usual “human” significance. Instead of letting Ben perish in a bathroom, confined beyond the walls portraying ordinary violence, Blanche reveals to him a “somewhat nicer way out”, the nature way, through an “enormous meadow, filled with buttercups, across which one could walk until one pleasantly fell asleep, no vomiting at all”.⁶⁴ In their closing conversation, she explains that when seen through the prism of nature and not through the artificial narrative of man’s “own centrality to every enterprise” dying effectively loses its tragic connotations.⁶⁵ In fact, on closer inspection, it becomes obvious that nature’s resistance to totality and finality and its ability to be destroyed, reborn, and change shape have already been alluded to throughout the play. Cerise, for instance, “crosses over that barrier”, as she calls it, not once but on multiple occasions, only to return shortly afterwards and notes in her first monologue that “to change shape for a while” is simply one of her most basic necessities.⁶⁶

⁶² Shawn, 86.

⁶³ Shawn, 86.

⁶⁴ Shawn, 87.

⁶⁵ Arons, 575.

⁶⁶ Shawn, 17-18.

Moreover, when describing the organisation of the castle, she adds that all the cats there take “turns wearing that bright red ribbon and deciding things” to ensure that “if we made terrible decisions, they’d probably be corrected later” by the next “generation”.⁶⁷ As no fixities or a single dominating perspective is accepted in their world of heterogeneity, arbitrariness and transformations, the end of a particular configuration can only mean more heterogeneous horizons to look forward to.

So, the voluntary self-cancellation at the play’s closure, as well as the apocalyptic proximity to death in *Grasses* in general, can be understood as Berlant’s “being in life without wanting the world”.⁶⁸ As a type of dissociation, it, once again, implies not the total loss of the world but its most anarchical unlearning at the time when life just hits the limit. “When an ordinary form of life is radically disturbed”, writes Berlant,

such that a subject’s or people’s sense of continuity is broken, what results is the release of the affective enmeshment from its normative attachment habits. The freed energy and attention can be inconvenient, even frightening, because without the object organizing your inconvenience drive or your fantasies of the stabilizing object, you’re now at loose ends that are threatening; at the same time, those energies are available for recomposing the world, causality, and possibilities. This is how dissociation can be at once a blockage and a defense whose cleavages can threaten and protect the attachment to life.⁶⁹

Curiously, the way the story is narrated – strictly through memories, in the past tense and, regardless of the circumstances, by Ben himself – leaves a space to read the looped plotline as him acquiring some of Cerise/Blanche’s powers to go on even after “crossing over that barrier” with the “different story” of Nature/Human relations at hand. Whether this is intentional or not, *Grasses of a Thousand Colours* still lowers its curtains on an optimistic note and leaves behind no “self-congratulatory affirmation of what we are”, only “an affirmation of what we might become”.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Shawn, 84.

⁶⁸ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 123.

⁶⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 138-9.

⁷⁰ The uncertain commons, 73.

As yet another quotation by Berlant goes: “Once you let in the deaths, all that follows is life”.⁷¹

⁷¹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, xi.

Chapter 5. Conclusion - “Tomorrow a new walk is a new walk”¹

As Mark Fisher observed, “the slow cancellation of time” – the term that he borrowed from Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s *After the Future* – is felt on every level of human experience, from grotesque 34 seasons of *The Simpsons* to waning political expectations, from mutation of everyday boredom to cruel good-life scenarios.² “The sense of a forward momentum”³ has disappeared, and it is not fresh news. For the past few decades, the future has been exiled to the realm of financial forecasting, risk analyses and technological and scientific advancement. The latter, for example, while having the potential to be the most secure argument against the profound stasis of the 21st century, in practice, turns out, according to Darko Suvin, to be nothing more than a “stream of sensationalist effects largely put into service of outdating and replacing existing commodities for faster circulation and profit”.⁴ In the buzzing, busy era of great progress, the catchphrase “there is nothing new under the sun” has acquired a truly sinister dimension.

These pathologies of time, like circles on water, are traceable back to the “capitalist realism” located at the very centre. “Capitalist realism”, as Fisher formulates in the book of the same title, “is the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it”.⁵ Despite the pessimistic diagnosis, Fisher himself argued against resigning to this fate as a response to it, and, as was discussed in the introductory/theoretical chapter, has not been alone in his call for action. The problem of finding a better purchase for imagination and freeing the idea of the future from its present invisible, but iron-like binds, which make devising a new order simply

¹ A.R. Ammons, *Corsons Inlet: A Book of Poems* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965) 6.

² Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writing on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014) 8.

³ Mark Fisher, “The slow cancellation of the future”, Public lecture (21 May 2014) YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCgkLICTskQ&ab_channel=pmilat. Accessed on 26 January 2023.

⁴ Darko Suvin, “On Communism, Science Fiction, and Utopia: The Blagoevgrad Theses”, *Mediations*, Vol. 32, No.2 (Spring 2019) 145.

⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

impossible, has been traversing along various fields including that of theatre and theatre studies. A significant amount of research that has contributed to the ongoing overarching dialogue has been conducted based on British plays, although several other countries, too, offered their valuable input. Meanwhile, a gap is discernible in relation to the scholarship on contemporary American drama. For the English playwright David Hare, it presents “a very disempowered and impoverished form” that cannot “access society at large”,⁶ while David Mamet confesses: “If I were British I’d be a political writer. But I’m American so I can’t be”.⁷ The Introduction has provided a brief overview of potential reasons behind such a strong conviction that, first, intervention and change are no longer considered a priority on the agenda of the national theatre and, second, that the current neoliberalist order simply cannot be a target of that intervention.

The aim of this thesis was to demonstrate that, notwithstanding the widely shared preconceptions, American drama of the 21st century has been an active participant in rehearsing ways to suspend the reproduction of power. In order to identify patterns and gather specific scenarios, it adopted a theoretical framework that drew primarily from two texts: uncertain commons’ *Speculate This!* and Lauren Berlant’s *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. *Speculate This!* differentiates between firmative and affirmative speculation. The first mode is what maintains capitalism realism by

operating as if there were no limits to the annexation and incorporation of the future into the present, as if everything in the future were representable, knowable and calculable in principle, as if nothing of the future could possibly escape valorization, through either thought or money.⁸

The second mode, on the other hand, is a desirable mode, the mode that has to become prevailing if we are to escape the detrimental stasis of the “best of possible worlds”. Affirmative speculation is not about living “ephemerally” – like its firmative counterpart, it does hold onto certain

⁶ David Hare quoted by Christopher Bigsby, *Staging America*, 1.

⁷ David Mamet quoted by Judy Lee Oliva, *David Hare: Theatricalizing Politics* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990) 180.

⁸ uncertain commons, 9-10.

horizons actualised in the present to secure necessary stability; what it is about, however, is holding onto them only temporarily, allowing a constant modification of “worn pathways” as new horizons and new potentialities that can “never be fully anticipated” continue to emerge all around us.⁹

While uncertain commons suggest the direction, they do not focus as much on how to shift from one mode to another. For this particular purpose, Berlant’s idea of “unlearning” or “loosening” the object/structure of attachment was introduced in addition to it. Firmative speculations produce the perception of the world as something smooth, rational, uniform, and eternal despite its undeniable brokenness. The crises multiply, and the inconvenience of things that should, theoretically, provide meaning is felt more and more strongly. As was discussed before, one of the central neoliberal strategies is to use the anxiety that is generated by these glitches to make one interact with and bind oneself even closer to the normative through adjustments and negotiations. Yet, what Berlant suggests is that if a “contact with inconvenience” that “disturbs the vision of yourself you carry around” gets registered, it can be stopped from sliding straight into the repair – even if it is an easier route – but, instead, used to crack the “structural” even further, unlearn its “objectness”, and to test a new, alternative configuration improvised from its broken shards.¹⁰ While this already takes place more or less subconsciously now, according to Berlant, drawing attention to it by gathering the individual episodes and offering them for examination side by side can result, in cultivating a greater self-awareness and wider understanding that it is a dynamic infrastructure, not structure, that organises our existence and that it allows for affirmative speculations on what else we potentially could become.

Accordingly, all five plays examined in this thesis were chosen based on the appearance of a scenario, in which a singular stable horizon gives way to the co-presence of numerous potentialities and creative uncertainty. Each of them dealt with its own neoliberal object/structure

⁹ uncertain commons, 13-14.

¹⁰ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 3.

that, in this historical moment, is generally believed to be life-defining: in Chapter 1, it was the unbreachable sovereignty of a “homo oeconomicus”, Chapter 2 looked at the latest version of an American racialised subject, and Chapter 3 aimed as high as the Capitalocene’s rigorous division of the world itself into “society without nature”, “nature without humans”, and “society without humans”. The renditions of their unlearning processes, however, were as diverse as their subjects. Some of the plays, like Quiara Alegría Hudes’s “Elliot Trilogy”, spent time representing the exact landscape of crisis ordinariness the characters were stuck with and adjusting to, while others – for example, Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* – identified the presence of a glitch, of a structural violence, only in passing. In Annie Baker’s *The Flick*, the “otherwise” took a particular form, which although left at a stage of an experiment, was still something that might be worth pursuing in real life. In Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview*, the alternative, if it even can be called that, was as problematic as the original configuration. Meanwhile, in Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*, its sheer grotesqueness kept it firmly in the category of affirmative but still unimaginable and simply symbolic. The unlearning was triggered by forcing a spectator even deeper into the real, like it happened with the slow theatre of *The Flick*, or by eroding the “real” completely, like in Shawn’s work. Finally, the unlearning itself felt, at times, like a relief from the unbearable (*Water by the Spoonful*), like intense discomfort and confusion the other times (*Songs*), or more like the end of your life and the world (*Grasses*).

Such a variety in scope, formal solutions, concerns, angles, and points of focus in the analytical part was ensured deliberately, so it could serve as evidence that it is neither an exception from the general rule, nor a matter of a specific playwright, sub-genre, or a central topic. The engaged theatre continues to strive in a new form in this part of the globe as well. Because of the aforementioned gap in scholarship and the fact that this thesis has only scratched the surface, attempting to confirm the mere presence of a response to the neoliberal status quo, the potential for further research is unlimited. More plays commenting on the glitching structures/objects of attachment, including the three examined here, can be explored and further categorised based on

the present strategies and trends. Taking into account the ongoing developments in the overarching discourse, the theoretical framework that I used can be easily substituted down the line, or perhaps even now, which might help shed light on other scenarios focusing on the liberation of radical imagination. One more path that might prove useful to take is tracing shifts in renditions over the years – as capitalism continues to renew itself, increasing its saturation of the ordinary every time, it is expected that the aesthetic responses will evolve accordingly.

As a final note, I would like to mention that the first part of the work’s title comes from the poem “Corsons Inlet” written by A.R. Ammons after one of his seaside strolls. What starts as a promise of a snapshot of the New Jersey landscape on a particular day, captured, embalmed, and framed by the speaker’s eye, ends up a vocal refusal to capture anything at all except for the “events of sand”:

I have reached no conclusions, have erected no boundaries,
shutting out and shutting in, separating inside
from outside: I have
drawn no lines:
as

manifold events of sand
change the dune’s shape that will not be the same shape
tomorrow,

so I am willing to go along, to accept
the becoming
thought, to stake off no beginnings or ends, establish
no walls:¹¹

Ammons was not against the structures and systems as a notion. In his celebrated lecture, “A Poem is a Walk”, he paid due respect to definition and rationality as the “ways of seeing” and acknowledged the necessity of their presence as the safeguard for “whatever provisional stability we have”. What troubled him, however, was the stasis – the danger of these safeguards easily becoming “prisons when they blank out *other* ways of seeing”, which always the loss of

¹¹ Ammons, *Corsons Inlet*, 6.

something vital.¹² Although this thesis has focused on drama and not poetry, Ammons with his appeal for keeping reality open to variability and change, to the sands that keep moving, aptly encapsulates its main concern with firmative and affirmative speculations. “Corsons Inlet” closes accordingly:

I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will not run to that
easy victory:

still around the looser, wider forces work:

I will try

to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening
scope, but enjoying the freedom that
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk.¹³

¹² A.R. Ammons, “A Poem is a Walk”, *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1982) 4.

¹³ Ammons, *Corsons Inlet*, 8.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that, notwithstanding the widely shared preconceptions, contemporary American drama did not lose its tradition of engaged theatre and has been an active participant in the collective search for alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. The theoretical section opens with a brief overview of the current state of the hegemonic order and attempts to provide a comprehensible background to why the phrase, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”, has come to be considered axiomatic. From here, it moves on to the shift in the ongoing anti-capitalist debate and the contributions that have been made to it by global theatres. In order to unlock the critical potential of the American stage, the thesis adopts a theoretical framework that draws primarily on two studies. The first one is uncertain commons’ 2013 *Speculate This!*, which argues for re-engaging the very idea of the future, foreclosed on all fronts today, by switching from the mode of “firmative speculation”, actively utilized by neoliberalism for its reproduction of power, to “affirmative speculation”, which refuses to close the horizons on what else we might potentially become. The way to achieve it is borrowed from Lauren Berlant’s 2023 *On the Inconvenience of Other People* that focuses on the idea of “unlearning” our attachments to what we think binds us to life and organizes our world. The analytical part focuses on six dramatic works: Annie Baker’s *The Flick* (2013), Quiara Alegría Hudes’s “Elliot Trilogy”: *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006) and *Water by the Spoonful* (2012), Young Jean Lee’s *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2007), Jackie Sibblies Drury’s *Fairview* (2018), and Wallace Shawn’s *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2009). Each chapter dedicated to a separate foundational structure of neoliberalism (individualism and entrepreneurship, racialised subject, and the binary Nature/Society) seeks to identify a recurrent scenario, where the structure is unlearned enough to make space for affirmative speculations on the alternative, if only on the level of an episode.

Key Words

Contemporary American drama

Twenty-first-century American drama

Political theatre

Affirmative speculations

Firmative speculations

Neoliberalism

Abstrakt

Cílem této diplomové práce je ukázat, že navzdory obecně sdíleným předsudkům současné americké drama neztratilo tradici “engaged” divadla a aktivně se podílí na kolektivním hledání alternativ k neoliberálnímu statu quo. Teoretická část začíná stručným přehledem současného stavu hegemonického řádu a pokouší se poskytnout srozumitelné pozadí toho, proč se věta “Je snazší představit si konec světa než konec kapitalismu” začala považovat za axiomatickou. Odtud přechází k posunu v probíhající antikapitalistické debatě a k příspěvkům, které do ní vnesla globální divadla. K odhalení kritického potenciálu americké scény práce využívá teoretický rámec, který vychází především ze dvou studií. První z nich je 2013 *Speculate This!* od uncertain commons, která se zasazuje o znovuzapojení samotné myšlenky budoucnosti, dnes na všech frontách uzavřené, a to přechodem od modu “afirmativní spekulace”, aktivně využívaného neoliberalismem k reprodukci moci, k “afirmativní spekulaci”, která odmítá uzavírat horizonty toho, čím bychom se ještě potenciálně mohli stát. Způsob, jak toho dosáhnout, je vypůjčen z knihy Lauren Berlantové 2023 *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, která se zaměřuje na myšlenku “odnaučit se” našim vazbám na to, o čem si myslíme, že nás poutá k životu a organizuje náš svět. Analytická část se zaměřuje na šest dramatických děl: *The Flick* (2013) Annie Bakerové, “Elliotovu trilogii” Quiary Alegríi Hudese: *Elliot, A Soldier’s Fugue* (2006) a *Water by the Spoonful* (2012), *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2007) Young Jean Lee, *Fairview* (2018) Jackie Sibblies Drury a *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2009) Wallace Shawna. Každá kapitola věnovaná samostatné základní struktuře neoliberalismu (individualismus a podnikavost, rasově podmíněný subjekt a binární vztah příroda/společnost) se snaží identifikovat opakující se scénář, v němž je tato struktura natolik nenaučená, že vytváří prostor pro afirmativní spekulace o alternative, byť jen na úrovni epizody.

Klíčová slova

Současné americké drama

Americké drama 21. století

Politické divadlo

Afirmativní spekulace

Firmativní spekulace

Neoliberalismus