Trans-generational Past and Trauma on Stage: Audience Involvement in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Wajdi Mouawad

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Abstract

This paper explores the dramaturgical innovations of Suzan-Lori Parks and Wajdi Mouawad, two contemporary playwrights who deploy theatrical form as a medium for interrogating historical silences, inherited trauma, and the ethics of spectatorship. By engaging with Parks' The America Play (1994), Topdog/Underdog (2001), and Father Comes Home from the Wars (2014), alongside Mouawad's Incendies (2003), Scorched (2009), and Tideline (2011), the paper investigates how these dramatists resist linear narratives and instead employ fragmentation, repetition, silence, and mythic structures to illuminate marginalized histories. Drawing upon trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra), postmemory (Hirsch), performance studies (Schneider), critical race and postcolonial theory (Hartman, Said), and postdramatic theatre theory (Lehmann), this study argues that Parks and Mouawad transform the stage into a civic space of ethical reckoning. The paper contends that their plays do not offer resolution but demand engagement, positioning spectators as participants in a collective process of historical excavation. In doing so, Parks and Mouawad craft a theatre of rupture—one that activates memory, reconfigures time, and challenges audiences to witness the past not as something distant but as something insistently present. Their dramaturgies function as counter-archives, offering embodied, affective alternatives to dominant historical narratives and prompting a reassessment of theatre's role in shaping collective memory.

Key words: Suzan-Lori Parks, Wajdi Mouawad, past, trauma,postmemory.

Introduction:

Theater is a place where culture is presented extensively. Social and historical dimensions of any culture are rather introduced quite accurately onstage to draw a more inclusive portrayal of this or that culture. Consequently, theatre is the place where audiences remain in contact with and to reflect on the collective cultural memory of society. Yet, there are playwrights like Suzan Lori Parks and Wajdi Mouawad who consider theatre as a place of not only reflection, but also a space of opposition, disturbance, and involvement.

Theatre for those playwrights is an atmosphere where audiences are profoundly required to play a part and actively antagonize and to be more alert rather than staying in a state of passivity while spectating the performed plots. Accordingly, the optimum requirement for the audiences is not to be merely inactive spectators, but the aim of these playwrights is to instigate the memories of the audiences, making them active witnesses to the events they consume. One prominent in common aspect between Parks and Mouawad is that the political scope in their plays is eye-catching. It is an icing-on-the-cake feature of their dramas: the remembered, marginalized and the trans-generational traumas inflicted by political conflicts.

Both Parks and Mouawad build their theatrical performances away from being simply marked by traditional structures. Hence, they are more committed to presenting recursive structures, broken temporalities, and mythic overlaps that irradiate the recurring nature of violence and remembrance. For this reason, the past in their plays is not a stagnant component that must be overlooked, but an active, trans-generational pulse that penetrates the present to reshape identities and cultures. To them, theatre is a metaphorical excavation site where audiences are demanded to dig out and reconstruct stories that have been deliberately secreted. Parks and Mouawad feel ethically responsible to uncover and dramatize the aftermaths of generational traumas, enact its recognized logic and, more importantly, to invade the audiences' comfort zones. As a result, a close study of their plays aims to expose how their theatre functions as a postmodern formality of remembrance.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Postmemory

A projecting factor that unites the plays of Suzan Lori Parks and Wajdi Mouawad is their involvement in history and memory. A key concern to them is the presentation of trauma. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is an "insistent return of the events," one that "cannot be fully known or represented" (Caruth 5). The two playwrights work on trauma, not by means of description, but through disagreement, quietness, recurrence, and indirectness.

The distinctive line between the notions of "acting out" and "working through" is suggested by Dominick LaCapra as the former encapsulates irrational repetitions and disorientations, while the latter involves a movement toward understanding and integration (LaCapra 70). Thus, Parks' notable procedure of "Rep & Rev" and Mouawad's oblique plots both demonstrate this style.

The theory of postmemory, by Marianne Hirsch, suggests that trauma is trans-generational; it is inherited by succeeding generations. It refers to the relationship between children and the traumatic histories they did not witness nor experience directly, yet they shape their identities. Hirsch states, "Post memory's connection to the past is thus not acutely mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 106). This is quite noticeable in Mouawad's Incendies, where wartime trauma is dramatized, exposed, and projected by the protagonists, and in Parks' Father Come Home form War, where memory is emblazoned into the language and plot of the play. In terms of staging memory, both playwrights favor the performative memory over written and official memories, as they privilege it as an instrument for knowledge. Schneider's notion of "performing remains" reinforces this method, suggesting that live performance offers a mode of historical reckoning that is affective, ephemeral, and necessarily incomplete (Schneider 91). Furthermore, Hans-Thies Lehmann's Postdramatic Theater provides a framework for understanding the non-linear and disjointed structures that Parks and Mouawad adopt. He writes that postdramatic theater "opens up the scenic space for other non-narrative, and non-representational forms

of theatricality" (Lehmann 85). The two playwrights operate within the same orbit, preferring experience over mere descriptions and fragmentation over harmony.

History and geopolitics are two highlights contributed much to fabricate the plots of their plays. Putting Black communities as a core of interest, Parks targets the ongoing traumatic aftermaths of slavery, racial discrimination and systematic violence inflicted on those communities. Nevertheless, she is not in the process of archiving historical reenactments, but presenting acts of confrontation against the brain-washing narratives that pervade American memory. She denies the "Great Hole of History", the void and the missing Black entity in the national memory. Parks refuses what Saidiya Hartman call the "narrative restraint" of the archive, where Black suffering is either erased or aestheticized (Hartman 13). Instead, Parks insists that Black voices and bodies must not be deprived their presence in the history and memory of the nation.

Mouawad, similarly, relies on the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), a sectarian and political conflict, as a framework through which he presents his dramatic visions. While Parks employs the American South as platform for her dramatic presentations of memory and history, Mouawad left Lebanon and immigrated to Canada. Consequently, his writings are characterized by having a diasporic dimension. His plays frequently focus on the dilemma of second- generation immigrants who try to find logic in a viciously violent past along with its traumatic effects, but masked by silence. The Lebanese Civil War witnessed massacres and war crimes, many of which have been denied.

Equally, Parks and Mouawad share the same notion: drama is meant not to show history, but to perform and exemplify. The characters in their plays are presented investigating history, not by choice, but by inevitability. These are not inactive heritages, but burdensome legacies that claim consideration. In this sense, the plays reverberate with Edward Said's notion of contrapuntal reading- comparing narratives that have been historically kept apart in order to uncover the power relations that put together the cultural memory. Whether in the racialized settings of the American South or the war-

torn cities of the Middle East, Parks and Mouawad dramatize the individual as political and the political as profoundly individual.

Suzan-Lori Parks: Drama of Black History and Myth

Parks' dramatic production is intensely characterized by African American traditional aspects, including blues, jazz, and verbal storytelling. Her dominant practice of "Rep & Rev" (Repetition and Revision) copycats the Black musical methods and works as both a plot stratagem and an ethical standpoint. In The America Play, the Foundling Father, a Black gravedigger who mimics Abraham Lincoln, recreates the president's assassination. Audiences pay to "shoot" him, transforming trauma into a performance, repetition into ritual. Parks belittles the effect of real history proposing instead the idea that Black bodies are required to implement a history that thoroughly rejects them. To her, the "Great Hole of History" where the Foundling Father digs is an exact and figurative emptiness. It stands for the void of Black voices and bodies in the national narrative, in addition to a history of violence inflicted upon them. Parks real demand of the audience is to fill the hole by facing it. She paves the way to her audiences in the second act when audience members become "diggers," spectators must sort through wreckage, remains, and reverberations.

In Father Comes Home from the Wars, Parks resonates with Homer's Odyssey. The story revolves around an enslaved man who is offered a deal of freedom in return of fighting for the Confederacy. The play's triple structure mirrors the epic's sporadic nature, but Parks infuses it with moral intricacy. Evidently, Hero's name is sarcastic as his expedition is not one of magnificence but of cynicism. The crucial question asked by Parks is about the meaning of being a hero in a system that rejects your humanity. The play evaluates the very notion of freedom in a nation constructed on captivity and oppression. As Douglas Jones notes, Parks "reinscribes slavery not as a historical backdrop but as a living structure of feeling" (Jones 207).

Parks' commitment to classical myth is both reverence and involvement. She recollects the backbone of the epic but infuses it with

Black tones, figures, and paces. Penny, a Penelope figure, sings a blues dirge that resonances African American women's spirit and confrontation. Parks, in doing so, "blueses" the classical form, as Tricia Rose might say, inserting a "hidden transcript" into dominant narratives (Rose 100).

Topdog/Underdog advances Parks' concentration on historical repetition and performative trauma. The brothers, Lincoln and Booth, are confined in a fatal game that reflects the bigger historical inclination of racial ferocity and financial crisis. Their card manhandling is not just a way of living but a symbol. As Catanese argues, "Parks implicates the audience in the spectacle, making us complicit in the tragic game we watch unfold" (Catanese 79).

Wajdi Mouawad: Legacy, Absence, and the Poetics of Violence

Mouawad's drama is preoccupied with silence. The plays habitually initiate with silences that are not void but loaded with sense and significance. In Incendies, the silence of Nawal Marwan, who declines to speak for 5,000 days subsequent to her rape in a Lebanese prison, is not a withdrawal from language but a manner of objection. Her silence is both an indication and a confrontation, a denial to permit violence to be rationalized. The disclosure that her son is also her rapist, father, and brother to her twins, is conveyed not with tragedy but with scarce, elongated language. The shock lies in the sarcasm.

Mouawad's procedure of nonlinear plots echoes the extents of trauma and postmemory. Incendies and Scorched both ask audiences to embrace numerous realities at the same time. The plays reject to differentiate evidently between past and present, cause and effect. This structure echoes Hirsch's assertion that postmemory is mediated through "fantasmatic investment," a projection onto the past that is always incomplete and constantly visionary.

In Scorched, Mouawad is in favor of implementing the insignificant staging over utmost effect. A sole chair may signify a courtroom, a battleground, a household. The onstage scarcity requires creative effort from the audience, placing them as co-creators of meaning. Peter

Brook's concept of the "empty space" is fully realized here; theatre becomes a site where the invisible is made tangible through suggestion, gesture, and presence (Brook 7).

Tideline shows parallel subjects of hereditary trauma and performative mourning. Wahab, a second-generation refugee, comes back to put into grave a father he never saw. The body converts a exact and metaphorical problem. The trip, at times odd and absurdist, underlines the hopelessness of immaculate end in the consequences of war. As Joseph Danan observes, Mouawad renovates the stage into a "landscape of memory where the past keeps washing ashore" (Danan 76).

Mouawad's language is emotional, expressive, and frequently disturbed by minutes of cruel simplicity. His characters are not purely traumatized; they are means through which history communicates. The theatre, for Mouawad, is not a place of illustration but of evocativeness. As he states in interviews, he writes "not to remember, but to understand what remembering costs."

Comparative Amalgamation: Estrangement, Myth, and Ethical Time

Though Suzan-Lori Parks and Wajdi Mouawad surface from different ethnic, artistic, and educational backgrounds and theatrical perspectives, but their dramaturgical novelties interconnect in thoughtful means. Equally, they discard the Aristotelian unities, direct development, and character psychologization, favoring what Lehmann describes as "the fractured temporality of memory" (Lehmann 72).

Their employment of repetition works inversely but converges in its epistemological consequences. For Parks, repetition is harmonious, deeply rooted in jazz and the Black colloquial speech, a recurring element that both enacts and repels historical violence. Mouawad's repetition is ancestral, dramatizing the reappearance of trauma across generations and the unfeasibility of cutting oneself off ancestral agony. Both forms of repetition undermine plot inevitability and focus on the effort of elucidation.

As far as myth is concerned, it also functions as a common platform for both playwrights. Parks bones up Homer through Black American experience, while Mouawad familiarizes Greek tragedy to express Middle Eastern trauma. These mythical extents do not universalize anguish; rather, they domesticate the universal by grounding it in personified, racialized, and gendered histories. As Edward Watts reasons that Mouawad's work "provincializes Greek tragedy by locating its moral dilemmas in modern war zones" (Watts 117). Parks similarly "Blackens" the epic ritual, emphasizing that Blackness is not negligible but vital to the structure of American mythos.

However, unlike the Greek dramaturgy, the end of their plays witness neither purgation nor revelation. Instead, their plays end are characterized in uncertainty, silence, or unanswered anguish. This does not necessarily mean a failure to find answers, but rather radical and artistic excellence. As Mouawad notes, "I don't write to provide answers, but to make the questions inescapable." Parks reflects this feeling, stating in interviews that her work aims "not to close wounds, but to make us feel them more precisely."

Conclusion

Parks and Mouawad do not propose a theatre of answers. Instead, they present a theatre of conflict, one that refuses historical clichés and appealing relief. Their plays are counter-archives, sources of alive remembrance, sentimental significance, and moral investigation. To them, history is not simply events related to the past, but a trans-generational pulse that lasts to shape the present. In staging silences of the past, they give voice to those denied ones.

Their plays crack time, fragment the plot, and perplex space, imitating the rationality of trauma and the impulsiveness of memory. They give no recovery arcs, no well-ordered ethical perseverance. What they offer instead is a laborious plea to consideration. Audiences are supposed to observe their performances and to convert to witnesses, not only to what is revealed on stage but to what remains to trouble the collective cultural awareness.

In an age of cultural obliviousness and historical reassessment, their work is instantly essential. They are reminders that theatre can be a

stagnant and a sacred place for collective reckoning. As Parks writes, "Theatre is the art of facing the music, especially when the music is unbearable." Mouawad would agree: it is precisely in the unbearable that we find the obligation to remember.

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