

STORYTELLING, WAR TRAUMA, AND APORIAS
OF HISTORY ON STAGE:
RICHARD KALINOSKI'S *BEAST ON THE MOON*
AND
JOSÉ RIVERA'S *CLOUD TECTONICS*

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the respective and distinctive efforts of playwrights Richard Kalinoski and José Rivera to examine the reception of particular aspects of war trauma, resorting effectively to the exclusive modes in which drama and theater accommodate narratives. The two plays discussed here showcase the ways in which the nonrepresentability of trauma can be addressed on stage. Elaborating on Dominick LaCapra's definition of "aporia" as an endlessly melancholic, impossible type of mourning and a resistance to working through trauma, the article argues that these two plays offer unconventional yet poignant remarks on practices which establish persistently melancholic approaches to limit events and highly debated, critical moments in history, ranging from the Armenian genocide in the first case to traumatizing and traumatized instances spawned by U.S.-led war enterprises of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the second one.

RESUMEN

El artículo se centra en los esfuerzos respectivos y diferenciados de los dramaturgos Richard Kalinoski y José Rivera por analizar la recepción de ciertos aspectos del trauma de guerra, recurriendo de manera efectiva a las modalidades exclusivas a través de las cuales el drama y el teatro acomodan las narrativas. Las dos obras aquí analizadas ponen de manifiesto los modos en que puede plantearse en el escenario la no representabilidad del trauma. Elaborando sobre la definición de Dominick

LaCapra de la “aporía” como tipo de duelo interminablemente melancólico e imposible, y como resistencia a superar el trauma, el artículo argumenta que estas dos obras ofrecen comentarios poco convencionales pero conmovedores sobre prácticas que establecen aproximaciones persistentemente melancólicas a acontecimientos límite y a momentos altamente debatidos y críticos de la historia, que van desde el genocidio armenio, en el primer caso, a ejemplos traumatizantes y traumáticos generados por empresas bélicas lideradas por los EEUU en los siglos XX y XXI, en el segundo.

Artists and theorists who direct their attention to trauma in general and war trauma in particular are faced with a major challenge. The instances, the events and experiences they seek to examine defy representation in multiple and consequential ways, despite or rather because of the fact that they are deeply and thoroughly inscribed on private as well as collective inner landscapes. In his seminal work on trauma, historian Dominick LaCapra offers an insightful analysis of this matter in succinct phrasing: “Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel” (42). In the same vein, Cathy Caruth in her ground-breaking research recognizes “incomprehensibility” along with “belatedness” (Caruth, *Traumatic* 89) as the primary defining features of the traumatic experience. Even further, on occasions such as Judith Butler’s far-reaching examination of the domestic battlefield and careful anatomy of incest, trauma is studied as “the gap that disrupts all efforts at narrative construction” (153). The theorist addresses the issue in a direct, highly-revealing mode and informs her reader that “trauma takes its toll on narrativity” (154). In her own turn and on disparate grounds, critic Janet Walker turns to documentaries as well as fictional films that chronicle major historical events and recognizes as particularly valuable individual works which “figure the traumatic past as meaningful yet as fragmentary, virtually unspeakable” (809).

The ever-growing body of relevant theory is itself proof that the struggle to account for trauma and its effects is not only exceptionally demanding but also one that remains perennially pertinent. Outlining the researcher’s course in this field E. Ann Kaplan accurately stresses the significance of literary texts and cultural entities that allow one to become aware of “all aspects of the nonrepresentability of trauma and yet of the search to figure its pain via narration” (65). It is in a sense paradoxical that what trauma mostly invites are constantly reinvented types of responses to its special nature, persistently revised narrative modes aimed at countering precisely this resistance to representation. The art of drama comprising and relying by definition on the resources of both *poesis* and *praxis* proves a particularly hospitable ground for interrogations of this type. Intensely intriguing moments arise on the

stage whenever what Walter Benjamin describes as the “germinative power” (90) of stories¹ is met with and counteracts trauma, that “foreign body” which Freud and Breuer insist that “long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work” (6). Taking carefully into account Benjamin’s point that right at the core of storytelling lies the potential of “exchang[ing] experiences” (83), it is important to note that drama and theater succeed admirably well in turning even the very incommunicability of experience itself into new experience. In these terms, drama and theater are indeed incomparable to any other mode of artistic expression. What Benjamin notes about storytellers and their talent in transforming one’s own experience into “the experience of those who are listening” (87) acquires stronger or at least exclusive and unmatched realization in individual plays.

Stage images may indeed harbor amply stories that accommodate and simultaneously counterbalance “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur” (Caruth, *Traumatic* 89). Following Raymond Williams’ observation that this is an “inherently multivocal” (288) form, it can be argued that drama can serve to show in unparalleled, exceptional modes how and why “[t]rauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; [and that] it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered” (LaCapra 41). The task of stage images rests precisely on exposing those holes in experience but more importantly as the present discussion aspires to show they may also be productively employed to expose the holes on the very body of history. In other words, the interest here focuses on the playwrights’ efforts to identify the modes in which specified agents invest carefully in leaving particular pressing questions unanswered, intensifying and perpetuating thus dark areas of history that ultimately reinforce the after-effects of trauma, hinder all efforts of working through them and cancel all acts of ideally alleviating the pain. Further questions thus formulated include the following: How do these disruptions and wounds help define subject positions? How is one supposed to relate to the void, the emptiness and the nonrepresentable? How difficult is it after all to say “true things” as well as “right things”² about history when trauma is never mastered?

¹ Walter Benjamin—who according to Hannah Arendt, “found it easier to communicate with poets than with theoreticians” (14)—intrigued by the work of Nikolai Leskov, took the chance to offer along with a penetrating insight into the Russian author’s oeuvre some of the shrewdest remarks ever made on the art of storytelling and the exclusive assets of storytellers, in his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936).

² A phrase borrowed, and considerably reclaimed for the sake of this discussion’s argument, from historian Frank Ankersmit. In his article “Reply to Professor Zagorin” (1988), Ankersmit addresses the persistent question of politics “when [historians] select [...] statements,” and argues that “saying *true* things about the past is easy—anybody can do that—but saying *right* things about the past is difficult” (209, emphasis in original).

Contemporary American playwrights' critical interrogations of war trauma are not merely considerable in number but also intriguing in terms of innovation, diversity and depth. Exemplary highlights range from David Rabe's insight into the trauma of homecoming for Vietnam veterans, in his autobiographical venture of the early seventies, *Sticks and Bones* (1971); to Sam Shepard's effort to review the impact of the first Gulf War on American collective sensibility in the early nineties, in *States of Shock* (1991); to Eve Ensler's interest in the Bosnia-Herzegovina war in the early 2000s and her careful study of the implications that the role of the observer of war trauma entails, in *Necessary Targets* (2001). The present discussion recognizes as a point of departure two entirely different plays which not only address and challenge the reception of particular aspects of war trauma but also offer intriguing insights into the open wounds, the very voids of historical understanding per se. The first work, Richard Kalinoski's *Beast on the Moon*³, constitutes an occasion of witnessing specific yet multisided aftereffects of traumatic experience, allowing thus the author himself as well as prospective artists to question the very modes in which deeply inscribed limit events are to be productively approached. Kalinoski⁴ devotes his interest to the plight of the Armenian people during the later phase of the Ottoman Empire and focuses on two survivors who find themselves in America in the early decades of the twentieth century. Being acutely aware that the narrative of the bearers of trauma defies easy transliteration he accurately notes that he is decided to stage a narrative of which a considerable lot is communicated in utter silence. Thus, introducing the two main characters he particularly insists that "part of what they say is silent" (100).

Kalinoski invites his audience to be attentive to silence but also invests skillfully in the presence of a narrator. Facilitating the process of witnessing as such, "the old Gentleman" (102) as an observer of the aftermath of trauma guides the action and is primarily committed to turning the main characters' pain into a meaningful experience for the audience, while its resistance to representation is fully respected. Since the very first image what is being revealed and argued is that recounting one's own traumatic moment cannot and should not be dissociated from the more daring act of exposing the pressing need of facing consequential gaps,

³ *Beast on the Moon* was workshopped for the first time at Nazareth College in 1992 and went on to receive worldwide success, ever since its highly acclaimed production by the Actors Theater at the Humana Festival in 1995, with translations in twelve languages and productions in seventeen countries. The play has received a number of significant awards, including the Osborn Award of the American Theater Critics Association (1996) and the Garland Award (2000). Yet, up to this point it has not been approached as the object of substantial scholarly critical work.

⁴ Richard Kalinoski, an American playwright of Polish, Irish and German origins himself, approaches the issue as a particularly sensitive and careful observer, having been "inspired by conversations in the early 1970s with his former, third-generation Armenian-American wife's grandparents who were survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide." ("Shooting at the Moon")

addressing directly what remains unwritten. In an effort to serve precisely this aim, the playwright asks that the narrator enters holding a photo that shows the members of an Armenian family the heads of whom are missing. In the development of the plot, the audience is brought to realize that these beheaded figures are ones of multiple significations. At this early point, they mainly serve to draw attention to particular and “conspicuous” sites of emptiness, the very holes of history. The questions arising here pertain directly to the factors which dictate that distinctive historical moments remain unattended and specific, thorny issues are left unaddressed. As one becomes familiar with the photo, one cannot help but wonder who should be considered responsible for keeping the figures permanently beheaded as well as what the full implications for historical understanding will be if the picture continues to be displayed in its present form.

In a Brechtian fashion, at first the narrator is assigned a position clearly outside the action of the play; one that allows him to comment on it while also exposing his eagerness to know and share the very gist of the stories he ushers in on the stage. Greeting the audience in the language of the two bearers of trauma with the use of the phrase “*gar oo chugar*” (102), there was and there was not, i.e. the Armenian equivalent to “once upon a time,” he moves on to imperceptibly suggest his own connection with the two main characters via concise and unaffected explanation that his own birth in 1921 coincided with “the aftermath of the Great war; six long years after Turkey, under the roar of guns and fire, began to dispose some of its people. People we call Armenians” (102). As the narrator swiftly gives his place to the first scene, the audience is directly introduced to two figures colonized by pain that can only afford minimal rapport with America, the new topos approached merely as the terrain on which their primarily “silent” stories may now unfold. Inevitably, posttraumatic instances constitute the center of action throughout the first act, as both Aram Tomasian, a photographer recently settled in Milwaukee of the early 1920s and Seta, his picture bride who has just been received, cling passionately on even the slightest available material link with the past.

The early moments of actions draw attention to the significance these palpable tokens of the past carry for the two characters, as they provide them with an accommodating context, even if one of minimal depth. Thus, it becomes apparent for the audience that Seta’s doll serves exactly the same purposes as Aram’s photo; in the character’s own words, “something to hold. It’s ... it’s what I have” (106). These words also capture how and why survival for them proves synonymous and inextricably bound up with the traumatic moment itself. As the scenes of the first act unfold, Seta’s awkwardness and resistance to maturity are cast as the very equivalent of Aram’s intense desire to replace his family by just following the same mechanical way in which he makes everybody look beautiful in his photos. In particular, there are clear and immediate connections between Aram’s refusal to explain what he intends to do with the photo of the beheaded family and Seta’s

violent reaction at seeing the perpetrator on her husband's face: "but I saw him, I saw him just then, oh I saw him on your face I saw him on you, in your eyes I saw him" (115). These are moments meant to highlight the fact that in acting out war trauma, in reliving its scenes what is stressed is precisely how one is "possessed by the past" (LaCapra 28), and even further that "flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth, *Traumatic* 89) reflect and at the same moment elude the essence of it. It is important to note that Seta's experience can by no means become the experience of the audience; it is only its affect that shapes the dramatic action on the stage. Scenes of this type can prove particularly difficult to handle as the ever lurking danger of sensationalizing and even universalizing traumatic experience has to be efficiently combated. What can indeed prove valuable in this fight are modes of foregrounding the complexity of individual responses. The paradoxical qualities of the persistent, painful moment have to be respected and carefully attended.

This is the type of respect the narrator highlights when act two opens, emphasizing anew his primary concern with which the audience should be familiar by means of the first encounter with him: "They came time from a time that I want to understand [...] Aram and Seta came from a certain place and a certain time. I am looking for it" (125). What he claims for himself and by extension the play in its entirety aspires to gain is to offer the audience counsel, just like any true storyteller. In Benjamin's terms: "[i]n every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers" (86). It is through this desire to acquire "counsel" effect that the narrator gradually and carefully discloses that all this forms part of the narrative frame of his own childhood. Act two accommodates the old gentleman's reminiscence of his introduction to the Aram family. Appearing now on the stage as a character fully embedded in the action, he is Vincent, the Italian American and also deeply traumatized teenager that Seta picks up from the streets to offer him warmth and care, literally saving him from an utterly hostile orphanage and a particularly cruel urban environment. What is of primary importance is the mode in which Vincent manages to bring to light the multiple factors for which it is imperative that Aram's story and Seta's story are put on, not just for his own interest but in a very productive mode for the sake of the audience. The old gentleman/Vincent's presence serves to highlight primarily the fact that memory should always be fully respected. Mnemosyne, the Muse of the "epic faculty *par excellence*" (Benjamin 97) suffers and yet at the same moment finds peculiarly an incomparable context to be celebrated in traumatic moments, as becomes apparent thanks to the simple, almost naïve yet alarmingly disarming questions posed by Vincent, who challenges Seta and at the same time paves ground for their exceptional kinship through lines such as "What's it – all Armenians orphans?" (127) and "They look like you and they killed you? Damn" (128). More than the validity of his questions, the weight of Vincent's own presence as a third member of the family triggers the act of

addressing the sphere of traumatized being. In a revealing mode, the force against which these characters have to fight is outlined by the old gentleman/Vincent himself as “something crawling around inside [...] Looking for a way out” (135). The course thus prescribed proves a particularly demanding and intensely painful enterprise for all three characters.

The pivot for the development of the plot but also the catalyst in this encounter with the force that asks for its way out is Seta’s own consequential metamorphosis in the twelve years, from 1921 to 1933, that separate act one from act two. Being initially terminally awkward and clueless, she is brought in this later phase to launch a vehement attack on the treasured tokens of the past. On her way to maturity the character demands that the aftereffects of war trauma are, if not worked through, at least addressed. In this vein, she argues that “the portrait is a picture with holes in it” (140), “[Aram] a grown man who cuts the heads off his murdered family” (141) and she herself “a dead person living too” (142). What the play showcases in the second act is the fact that the storyteller cannot be muffled even when his/her material constitutes the very epitome of the impossible. The stories have to be told even if the addresser knows that what cannot be enacted is the moment of inscription. However, consequentially enough what can be staged is the act of narrating; productively enough that voice “paradoxically released through the wound” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 2) is given space. What Seta herself and Aram himself relate are the particulars of narrative frames they can never escape. Seta knows that her story remains unanswered, unattended:

And I talked for hours about how they took my father, put him in the Army, took his gun, made him their slave, and my mother, nailed into wood because she would not forsake her God and my sister raped because I was a child ... I was left. Did you listen? Did you hear me?
(143)

To his wife’s plea for an addressee Aram cannot respond; he can only recount his own story:

There were shouts and shots and screaming—they poked at the pile of the blankets. The Turks were clumsy or lazy or drunk. They didn’t find me. I lay for a long time, shivering ... under my father’s coat. When I came out, it was all wet, with urine, and sweat ... and there was blood ... blood on the floor and the walls ... on the ceilings, in the air. Oh, I ran into the backyard ... outside anywhere I thought, and then I saw ... My mother had a line outside, for her wash, the Turks they had hung ... the heads of my family on the clothes ... the clothesline. The heads of my family, in my backyard, next to my mother’s wash.
(144)

Ideally, the impetus of these narratives on the stage should serve to make the audience fully aware of the acute difficulty, the impossibility as such the war victim experiences in his/her efforts to transcend the double binds and aporias that

the traumatic moment generates. Focusing on the bearer's private experience LaCapra defines aporia as "an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through [trauma]" (23). Elaborating on this definition, it is significant to argue that Seta and Aram's stories can be admirably employed to expose also a different type of aporia. The accounts of these two characters serve as an unconventional yet poignant remark on practices which establish an endlessly melancholic approach to limit events and highly debated, critical moments in history. Specifically, in a highly productive mode the exceptional and particular qualities of these moments of storytelling serve to emphasize the fact that the private, unsurpassable difficulties Aram and Seta face capture what is general and consequentially collective about the larger historical moment of the Armenian genocide. This is by no means a case of recounting a safely restricted and exceptional occasion of traumatized experience. Rather, the particular and concrete reality on the stage serves to highlight what is communal and wide-ranging. Thus, the audience becomes aware of the collective war trauma that still gapes as an ominous aporetic opening that paradoxically remains muffled, since different socio-cultural and political agents insist that endlessly melancholic acts of mourning are the only candid response to it. An entire century later, historical sound accounts of the Armenian genocide are still questioned by at least one of the two sides and rarely if ever become universally welcome. Like on numerous such occasions throughout history, nationalist politics depends heavily on casting thorny, controversial issues as inherently unsettled and terminally unresolved, while great care is taken to avoid working towards the establishment of common understanding, within the context of which different sides would recognize their responsibilities for atrocities and crimes committed in times of war.

The fact that this is a complicated occasion of aporia of far-reaching consequences is often epitomized even through acts of seemingly minor significance. Thus, for example, not only individual historians but even different types of professional voices addressing the matter, from a variety of angles and for numerous, different reasons, often strive to maneuver their way out of the use of the term "genocide." Such is the case, for example with New York Times theater critic Charles Isherwood who opted for words and phrases such as "killings" and "mass deportations," in his review of the 2005 production of *Beast on the Moon* directed by Larry Moss at Century Center, raising thus questions primarily about the type of political correctness that dictates such acts. On a level of more thorough and deeper interrogation, historical research does indeed identify clearly the factors for which both the use and the refusal to use the word "genocide" on European ground proves troublesome even nowadays, in the second decade of the twenty-first century. And yet the fact itself that both responses are concurrently possible and in specific socio-cultural and political contexts, whether in present-day Turkey or outside of it, both find official hospitable ground constitutes proof that what gets valorized are

precisely aporias of history, endlessly melancholic responses that cancel out all efforts to work through trauma. In other words, the questions that would help promote common understanding and sound readings of limit events of this type are not given ample space; instead, they are carefully and deliberately left unaddressed. It is indeed imperative to stress that although it is often suggested that the matter is raised owing to the special nature of the limit events in question, in fact what generates aporias of history is nothing else than the very modes in which these events are approached carefully and programmatically so that each time one side can secure profits.

Furthermore, Aram and Seta's stories and by extension the piece in its entirety problematize trauma also as an inalienable part that addresses the bearer in one's own mother tongue and thus can easily lead to the acceptance of it as a "valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group" (LaCapra 23). Throughout the two acts, the two characters struggle with narration and yet they never succeed in clearly defining their present positions. The one thing that this suspension of Aram and Seta renders clear—once it is carefully studied—is the fact is that what they claim for both themselves and their history is adequate grounding. These moments of storytelling highlight the fact that it is not helpful for the bearer either to merely disregard the moment of inscription or to dearly treasure trauma as such. In either case, pain endures and as a result the teleology of history—in sharp contrast to its etiology—relies heavily on covering up these aporetic openings.

In *Beast on the Moon* even when the narrative is concluded with the promise that these stories survive thanks to the old gentleman/ Vincent's own presence, no answer is given to the two characters' persistent questions, no remedy for the aporias of history is provided. Towards the end of the play the character steps outside the action and assuming once more the pose of the narrator informs the audience: "They took me in. Nothing was said. [...] I still see plainly certain days; each is a whole picture, unframed but living in my head" (145). By means of the remarkable interconnection and correspondence between Vincent's promise to move forward and Aram's words: "But I never forget. I never do" (144), the audience is adequately reminded of the fact that there is still a lot of work ahead for the storyteller. To a considerable extent, the act of storytelling is trusted to combat the persistence of aporias on a private as well as a public terrain. The stories which are offered space and time here can never cover those aporetic openings. Rather, they may serve to expose precisely this lack of common ground, this dire ellipsis of reciprocal understanding. This is indeed a difficult task epitomized here though the Armenians' effort to re-read and comprehend anew the Turkish fable, they formerly found fascinating, when they see that they themselves have taken the place of the original target in their neighbors' firing towards the moon during an eclipse of the sun.

The persistence of aporias is also carefully examined in José Rivera's *Cloud Tectonics*⁵, while this time it is a totally different type of war trauma that proves of primary importance. In a typical and loyally trusted mode of his, Rivera⁶ resorts to the resources of magic realism and places on the stage a character that causes time to stand still. Early on, the specifics of an improbable yet dramatically effective storyline are related to the audience: Celestina del Sol, a young Latina who survives the unexpected loss of both her parents and the culmination of an intense yet painful sexual relationship, loses track of time, remains pregnant for years, and is hence destined to keep travelling with the hope of a true union. Aníbal de la Luna picks her up in a stormy and post-apocalyptic Los Angeles and their love affair kicks off the minute all clocks in his place pause for good. Celestina openly confesses that "'Time' and [she] don't hang out together" (284) and proceeds to explain the difficulty she faces whenever she is asked to tell a story (288). In his own original mode, Rivera captures in dramatic terms what Slavoj Žižek recognizes as one of the main idiosyncrasies of the present moment, arguing that "the problem of our post-historical era is not that we cannot remember the past [...] but that we cannot remember the present itself—that we cannot historicize – narrate it properly" (277); and proceeds to explain that in effect it is late capitalism that is inherently "post-historical" (277). In the opening scene, noted by the playwright as "the prologue," it is suggested that Celestina's absolute suspension both spatially and temporally should be seen as a direct consequence of the peculiarities of a highly disorienting terrain, no other topos than that of a typical, late twentieth-century urban setting of the Western world. Furthermore, it is argued that this post-apocalyptic terrain often proves all the more hostile and ultimately dystopic for figures disenfranchised for the additional reason that they belong to ethnic minorities⁷. Yet, despite the fact that Celestina's body is seriously marred as it is only allowed to hover above and about a totally inhospitable topos, at the same moment her presence on the stage is full of

⁵ Incidentally, both *Cloud Tectonics* and *Beast on the Moon* premiered at the 19th Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays. Like Kalinoski's play, with the exception of few peripheral references, Rivera's piece has not as yet received substantial scholarly critical attention.

⁶ José Rivera, highly influenced and exceptionally inspired by his mentor Gabriel Garcia Marquez, constantly and consistently draws on the resources of magic realism to answer the needs of his work for the theater as well as the cinema.

⁷ These early moments of action evidently echo and reflect Rivera's pointed critique on the devastating effects that late capitalism and its globalized corporate giants have on contemporary urban spaces in general and on disenfranchised ethnic bodies in particular, in his earlier work *Marisol* (1992). Focusing on characters whose burned out bodies reflect and totally merge with the thoroughly disrupt urban spaces surrounding them, the playwright examines a world whose disintegration is primarily a direct consequence of what Fredric Jameson insightfully stresses about the absolute dependency of late capitalism on "sheer speculation" that "now reigns supreme and devastates the very cities and countrysides [capitalism itself] created in the process of its own earlier development" (Jameson, *Antinomies* 249).

promise. All in all, this is a female figure that remains both literally and figuratively pregnant for an exceptionally long time.

As time freezes because of Celestina, germs of different stories are offered ample space to expose their power. One of the stories the particular qualities of which are thus illuminated is that of Anibal's brother, Nelson, who rushes in and attempts to upset the affair announcing that he is ready to fight defiantly for Celestina. Nelson is a military man whose own framing is revealed when he is required to make use of his sense of geography: "I'm good to go, bro, desert training for the Middle East or some towelhead shithole with oil underneath it" (295). Similarly important and full of implications is the character's pronounced difficulty at outlining his mission: "I'm serving our country in the armed forces of the U.S. Protecting us from ... uhm ... not communists ... uhm ... illegal aliens, drug king pins, and Arabs" (298). The analogies between Celestina's suspension and Nelson's dislocation are cleverly captured in dramatic and theatrical terms. In effect, early on in the development of the plot, it becomes apparent that the same factors keep Celestina and Nelson displaced. In general, the two characters are allowed access to experience devoid of any clear connections with their own specificity and as a result they remain unable to ground their presences. In particular, the interest here develops around identifying those mechanisms operating in the socio-cultural and political context of late twentieth-century America targeting people like Celestina and Nelson, while they themselves are also brought to subscribe to those forces and conditions positioned against them. Thus, Nelson as a figure epitomizes the occasion of a soldier constantly on the run, fighting an obscure, deliberately vaguely defined enemy and serving the purposes of a warfare of which he himself is one of the main victims. Both a perpetrator and a bearer of war trauma, Nelson finds himself at a loss when he is faced with the very essence of traumatic experience. The character is forced to come to terms with his own stance as "the survivor whose life is inextricably linked to the death he witnesses" (Caruth, *Traumatic* 98).

Furthermore, Nelson's displacement, in an indirect yet telling mode, reflects his brother's dissociation from his mother tongue; a Puerto Rican who has totally forgotten Spanish, other than a four letter word he constantly and absurdly repeats throughout the scenes. Resembling present-day TV viewers who consume images of war, in Kaplan's terms, "without context and a continuity that would bring events into [their] own lives, [and thus] such images can only elicit empathy that in the end is 'empty'" (100), the two brothers approach the enveloping context acquiring a thoroughly vacant gaze and a meaningless, neutral stance. This is the reason for which, despite the fact that they often express an acute desire to escape the confines of different types of narrow framing, the two characters eventually succumb to it and are thus led to support the forces fighting them. Anibal's pressing need to escape the racist framing is a case in point. In an open and direct manner, he addresses the issue: "I wanted to get away from the racists who thought of me only

as a spik” (302). And yet, he surrenders over and over as he dissociates himself from the Spanish language, severing all connections with his mother-tongue. Struggling with the difficult task of storytelling, Celestina passes a sharp comment not only on this desire for transcendence but also on what all three of them have to fight against: “sometimes [...] there’s no ‘time’—only an endless now that needs to be filled with life. To be rescued from habit and death” (305).

Celestina’s plea to rescue one’s own presence and then the enveloping context from habit and death acquires specific, concrete dimensions in the second act. Nelson’s return a number of years later is a re-entrance after a short interval of only a few minutes of proper action time. The act of informing his onstage and offstage audiences that he has just arrived from Bosnia is one of multiple significations: “yo, the war? The Battle of Mostar? Are you stoned or what?” (307) More than the physical injuries he suffers—he reappears walking with a cane (306)—, it is due to his rigid sense of time that the character is assigned the position of an absolute outsider in the context of this love story. For his onstage audience Nelson’s frantic leap within a split moment from one war to the next remains simply inexplicable. For the offstage audience the instance serves to highlight the predicament of a figure who fails tragically to establish any type of association with the setting in which he gets wounded. This is the predicament of a professional military man, of late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, confined within the dire consequences of his own blank and cynical response towards war. As a soldier programmed to operate at any place and time, the character proves a perpetrator of war trauma of historically unprecedented qualities. Nelson’s own trauma bespeaks an aporia of history of significant proportions as he remains terminally inept when he asks himself to make sense even elementally of the warfare fought thanks to his own hands and in his own name. He is allowed access only to an endless loop of senseless mourning and a resistance to working through trauma. In this case, no thorny issues are dealt with, no pressing questions can be even vaguely posed.

It is this very impossibility of ever establishing viable links, the very predominance of the aporetic opening that the character himself comments on when he confesses: “Something in myself got taken out sometime as I was looking through the sights of the tank, linking up targets, watching things blow up [...] I got so much I gotta forget!” (309-10). What Kaplan notes about US-led war enterprises of late twentieth century—when she joins her voice with that of John Berger—is directly pertinent here, as she argues that serious problems of the present moment are directly related to “our lack of political freedom—our inability to have any influence on wars engaged in, in our name” (94). In *Cloud Tectonics*, what Nelson fails to combat is the emptiness of his own presence on the battlefield and thus, this is a war trauma for which healing cannot be considered even as a faint possibility. Towards the end of the play, Nelson has to deal with the aftermath of having willingly allowed essentially hostile forces to make full use of him. It is now

painfully evident that his own interests always lay far from the battlefield on which he was present. Ultimately, his body became the site on which totally conflicting interests and diametrically adversary viewpoints were allowed to coexist.

The fact that the above discussed two different cases of aporias are interestingly related becomes apparent through an exchange, a dialogue, an unconventional narrative that can be established between Aram's "But I never forget. I never do" (144) and Nelson's "I got so much I gotta forget!" (310). The desire to have "counsel" should lead one to expose, through the interrogation of the particular qualities of different types of war trauma, two equally resonant aporetic openings that mark the body of history. As argued above, these gaping wounds prove resistant to all types of healing and remain pertinent whether trauma is seen as an inalienable part, recognized not necessarily in healthy ways as the basis of identity, or just as an excuse to evade disconcerting issues. It is important to note that aporias generated out of the simultaneous occurrence of directly opposed visions and sharply adverse responses to critical moments and limit events constitute in themselves distinctive moments in history. At present, the weight of aporias still looms over particular sociocultural and political horizons predominantly, for as Slavoj Žižek explains: "We live in the 'postmodern' era, in which truth-claims are dismissed as an expression of hidden power mechanisms" (176). As a result, that the very thought of posing the question 'is it true?' often becomes easily stigmatized. Commenting precisely on the complexity of this issue, LaCapra accurately stresses that "the continual need to come to terms with certain unsettling problems and their effects in the present may be denied or wished away" (217). Thus, on specific occasions when this imperative need to account for traumatic events and their aftereffects arises all that one experiences is the proliferation of blind spots and the endorsement of indeterminacies and impasses.

The two plays discussed here exemplify the modes in which drama and theater can prove indeed highly constructive in this fight against the "penchant for blandly generalized, unearned judiciousness that harmonizes problems and may even signal a numbing sensitivity to their import and implications" (LaCapra 35). Thanks to the power of its stories and the distinctive qualities of its materiality, it can be argued that up to a certain point drama and theater resemble "historiography [which] in its own way may help not speciously to heal but to come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past" (LaCapra 42). In a similar vein, it is important to stress that drama and theater can, in their own turn and thanks to the specificity of their own reserves, undertake the arduous task that Butler prescribes for psychoanalysis in its relation to trauma in the following lines: "one will have to become a reader of the ellipsis, the gap, the absence, and this means that psychoanalysis will have to relearn the skill of reading broken narratives" (155). It must be underlined that this task of deciphering shattered narratives proves all the more difficult at a moment in time when according to Jameson "it has become

customary to identify political freedom with market freedom” (Jameson, *Culture* 256). At present, it is clear that Frantz Fanon’s plea for “a world of reciprocal recognitions” (218) is still urgent in all different types of socio-cultural, political and historical contexts. For as long as reciprocity of recognitions is deferred, aporias secure their centrality in history, as they are designedly employed to keep the gap between teleology and etiology firm and unyielding.

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