OTHER AMERICAS

THE DARK SIDE
THE PROVINCE
CYBERSPACE

A CURA DI SALVATORE MARANO E GIGLIOLA NOCERA

AGORÀ & CO.

Laborem saepe Fortuna facilis sequitur

Volume realizzato con fondi per la ricerca di Ateneo 2022-2024
dell'Università degli Studi di Catania

PASSAGGIO A NORD OVEST IS AN INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED SERIES

E-mail: infoagoraco@gmail.com
www.agoracommunication.com

ISBN 979-12-80508-23-2

Table of Contents

"IT HAPPENED HERE." VOICE, OTHERNESS, AND AUTHORSHIP IN THE TECTONIC THEATER PROJECT'S *THE LARAMIE PROJECT* (2000)

Vincenzo Bavaro

On October 6, 1998, Matthew Shepard, a 21 year old gay student at the University of Wyoming, was found tied to a fence, brutally beaten and close to death in a rural area on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. He died a few days later in a hospital bed in Colorado. One month after his murder, nine members of the Tectonic Theater Project traveled to Laramie, and over the course of a year and a half collected more than two hundred interviews, in an attempt to explore and understand the root of the hatred and the murderous violence, and in the process illuminate the complexity of a specific town in the heart of America.

In the wake of the exceptional media coverage the murder and the ensuing trial received nationally and internationally, Moisés Kaufman and the other members of the New York-based Tectonic Theater Project crafted the award-winning play *The Laramie Project* (2000) struggling at once with two different sets of issues. On the one hand, the question of how a community can speak of and about the "Other" without silencing it or ventriloquizing it, but instead allowing its voice to emerge at the center of the stage, in all its uneasy complexity and depth, in its abrasive bigotry but also in its brilliant resilience. On the other hand, the play explores the power inherent in theater to ignite a political conversation, and a social transformation, through specific modes of dramatic story-telling that merge performance with reportage, individual voices with the tale of a whole community, and ultimately a portrait of the entire country. *The Laramie Project* premiered at the Denver Center for Performing Arts in February 26, 2000, before going to its New York Off-Broadway premiere at the Union Square Theater on May 18, 2000, where it ran for five months, before it was made into a movie by HBO, and before "scores of stage productions in regional and local theaters, universities and high schools across the country."[1] During the com-

[1] Jacqueline O'Connor, "Individual Interrogation, Communal Resolution," in *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 156.

pany final visit to Laramie in November 2000, the group staged the show for the community featured in it, which somehow brought the company's theatrical process full-circle: as Debby Thompson wrote about this staging in Wyoming, "the talkback redoubled my appreciation for the company's creative process, its sense of accountability to the community it investigated, and its thoughtful, self-monitoring strategies of representation."[2]

With its *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, in 2009, the cast goes back to Laramie just to find out that the community has re-framed the narrative of that murder turning a hate crime into a robbery, or alternatively a drug narrative, despite most evidence. The rewriting of the story was encouraged by a 2006 television report on the American television program *20/20*, in what may look like a terrifying post-truth reversal, or alternatively an exemplar case of "confirmation bias," for both the original investigators and the conspiracists were allegedly partial toward those evidences that would confirm their original claim.[3] The *Ten Years Later* play was staged on October 12, 2009 at Lincoln Center, New York City, and simultaneously around the world with more than 150 theater companies performing it while connected online with each other and their audiences for the introduction, by Kaufman, Glenn Close and Matthew Shepard's mother, and final debate. More than 50,000 people watched the show that night, and around one thousand actors performed the play around the world. As Kaufman writes, "the play we eventually wrote deals with history—how it's created, written, recorded, and told. It deals with how communities (as well as individuals) construct their own narratives, and how these narratives change as a result of traumatic events."[4] Just a few days later, on October 28, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard Act, or technically the Hate Crime Prevention Act, an expansion of the 1969 federal hate-crime law, which had been originally introduced in 2001 but was never signed into law.

[2] Debby Thompson, "*The Laramie Project* by Moisés Kaufman Review,": *Theatre Journal,* Vol. 53, No. 4 (Dec., 2001), pp. 644-645.

[3] New interpretations of the events surrounding the murder, often rebutted by the people involved in the original investigation and by evidence themselves, include the claim that Shepard knew his killers, and that he was actually involved in drug dealing activity. See also Stephen Jimenez, *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2013).

[4] Moisés Kaufman, "Anatomy of an Experiment," *American Theatre* (July/August 2010): 26-30.

In this article, I will focus almost exclusively on the first landmark play, addressing initially the issues of voice and otherness, and subsequently the related question of dramatic genre. In the final section, I will try to understand the unique combination of authorial creativity and documentary ethos that make *The Laramie Project* a work of grief and resilience, of rage and forgiveness, but foremost a play that seeks to establish a dialogue across a wide divide, an attempt to shed some light into the heart of the nation.

The Voice of the Other

My interest in this project, and the Tectonic Theater more broadly, was awakened by the invitation to join a research group investigating the American Heartland, the peripheral space which is paradoxically at the very heart, geographical and quite often psychological, of the nation. Only later I realized that this endeavor intersected with two of my main research interests of the last few years: the issue of the "voice," and the issue of the "other". These two concepts are clearly related in profound ways. The voice is a central notion for literary studies: literary scholars often investigate the positionality of writers, narrators, characters, interrogating their discursive practices, their ideology, their cultural background, their social performance of selfhood. In a narcissist culture so dependent on like-mindedness and yet obsessed with individualism and identity, literature and drama offer a powerful and sometimes troubling way to walk in someone else's shoes, to *hear* their voice, and for writers and cultural producers, to *speak* someone else's voice.

As an Italian scholar of the United States, the voice of the other is also central to my professional life. I am an outsider all the time, not just when I happen to write about Indigenous Hawaiians activism, or African American theater, and regardless of the ways in which my life and identity have been influenced by my work on the United States. The cultural landscape in the U.S. has been shaped increasingly in the past few decades by a celebration of diversity and identity, in relation to individuals as well as communities, but also by an intense scrutiny related to discursive practices and the power imbalance they conceal, and therefore it enabled a sometimes problematic policing of the voice: who can speak? And more specifically, who can speak about the other?

Celebrated scholar Gayatri Spivak famously asked, "can the subaltern speak?"[5], and as it is well-known, her sophisticated answer interrogated and undermined Western binarism between self and other, subject and object of knowledge, revealing the discursive practices and epistemic violence of the West. In fact, despite a heightened sensitivity to issues of power imbalance, structural inequality and uneven access to the production and circulation of discourse and representation, almost forty years after Spivak's words, binarism is alive and well in U.S. popular culture. US cultural sphere, in a diametrical reversal from the reasons behind Spivak's original publication, is increasingly becoming an arena where one's legitimation to speak is measured mostly on the extent of one's own cultural backyard, one's own identity, one's legacy, however we conceptualize that. What originated as a groundbreaking interrogation of a speaker's positionality and the conditions of possibility for their speaking on behalf of the other, developed into an arguably simplified understanding of essentialism.

This habit(us) in academia which could be polemically called, borrowing a term from Werner Sollors, "biological insiderism,"[6] is further complicated by a more general issue of compartmentalization of our society, catalyzed by customized, personalized digital spheres. There seems to be a proliferation of discrete, like-minded communities, which thrive in their isolation, like bubbles, never having to confront with alterity and otherness, never encouraged to cross over, in a reassuring, galvanizing yet dystopian series of echo-chambers, where all one can hear is one's own voice, ever louder and clearer. We find a wide range of examples in the contemporary social landscape: not just groups like confederate sympathizers or anti-abortionists, but also communities such as queer parents or vegan advocates: we find strength and identity in our niche, but we often lose the ability to listen *to* the other, and we struggle to escape stereotype and simplification when talking *about* the other.

But let's go back to *The Laramie Project*: here we find both the issues I mentioned above, listening *to* and talking *about* the other. The play is a

[5] Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988,) 267-310

[6] Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14.

three-act drama in which the actors interpret both themselves as actors/interviewers, *and* a variety of townsfolk from Laramie, Wyoming, recreating the cadences of their speech and body language. The interviews were edited and shaped by Kaufman and the Tectonic group in a manner previously deployed by brilliant artists and playwrights like Emily Mann (*Still Life*, 1984,) Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror,* 1992; *Twilight: Los Angeles*, 1993) and others. *The Laramie Project* constructs at least two communities, each multilayered and complex, and engages in the attempt to establish a dialogue across a wide divide. The communities here may be on the one side, the actors/interviewers from the Tectonic Theater Project, and on the other the Laramie townspeople, as we understand this dialogue as it took place in Wyoming when the company moved there from New York to conduct the interviews. But the two communities listening to and looking at each other can also be the theater audience of its massive national tour, and the people of Laramie as represented on stage. As scholar Jill Dolan notes, in many of its performances the theater companies were actually local, composed of local performers and theater professionals, not the original members who had conducted the interviews; in this sense, then, these actors were never really playing themselves, unlike in the New York staging, but instead they were performing two layers of characters, "as a result, the performer-ethnographers were held up for a certain level of scrutiny instead of being played for truth."[7] The act of *hearing* the voice of the other, with enough care and sensibility in order to then reproduce it and articulate it yourself—which is at some level at the core of dramatic and literary endeavors—is thus the subject of a peculiar *mise en abyme* here.

The Issue of Genre

The issue of genre is central for a company who is invested in crafting an original dramatic language for each one of its plays. The scholarship on this play has adopted several labels to describe its structure and dramatic strategies: *reality-based theater*, *stage-reportage*, and the somewhat wider category of *verbatim theater*, which helps to identify a socially engaged

[7] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 129.

performance whose text is constructed largely or exclusively from words actually spoken or officially recorded off-stage. Let me briefly introduce some of the generic categories that may prove useful to understanding the dramatic strategies at work in this play and shed light on some possible motivations and potentialities inherent in them. The *theater of testimony*, introduced as a label by theater historian Loren Kruger in her work on South African Drama, often focuses on trauma and repressed memory and builds on the aesthetic and emotional distance between the events and the audience.[8] The scholar Ryan Claycomb describes *The Laramie Project* as "staged oral history": as he argues, one of the distinguishing features of staged oral history is "the fragmentation of narrative and perspective," a rejection of an overarching singular, third-person approach in favor of multiple, first-person perspectives on the events under scrutiny. As Claycomb writes, "staged oral history radically fragments the unitary subject and creates montages of voice that indicate a polyphonic subjectivity."[9] For the scholar, a typical element of oral histories is the way in which the group of performers integrates with the community represented in the play, arguing that "part of the goal of [oral history] plays seem . . . to establish in the city at large a dialogue that engenders more meaningful connections across the smaller, more insular communities that it harbors, a goal that many of these plays, in fact, accomplish," highlighting the important function that the TTP experiment may have served for the Laramie community itself, bridging the "city" with its "insular communities", but also, and maybe more impactfully, the nation at large with its smaller communities.[10] This fascinating dimension the theater project had on the people of Laramie is also noticed by Dolan, who writes that "the play creates a conversation among people who might not otherwise have spoken to each other . . . creating a public sphere in which to scrutinize the events leading up and following Shepard's death."[11]

[8] Loren Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa. Plays, Pageants and Publics since 1910* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[9] Ryan Claycomb, "(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject, and Progressive Politics," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 96. See also Ryan Claycomb, *In the Lurch: Verbatim Theater and the Crisis of Democratic Deliberation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

[10] Claycomb, "(Ch)Oral History," 100.

[11] Dolan, *Utopia*, 113.

Fragmentation of narrative is also crucial to the various forms of *documentary theater*, whose genealogy goes back to Bertolt Brecht and his strategy of estrangement, alienation, and didactic theater. Brechtian technique of estrangement and didacticism, as Sarah Hagelin underlines, "emerged in resistance to the illusion of realism, and as a technique, it is intended to constantly remind the audience of the constructed nature of what they are seeing."[12] Derek Paget, a well-known theorist of documentary theater, explains how the methods of documentary drama are capable of acting as a brake on naturalistic performance and adds that "naturalism, with its emphasis on 'through line' for the performer, is unforgiving of interruption; [on the contrary] documentary theatre is a theatre of interruption."[13] The late 20th century documentary drama departs from its realist antecedent in questioning the notion of truth and authenticity, interrogating media discourse and its bias, and exploding the single narrative into multiple voices and subjective perspectives on "facts." As Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson highlight in their collection, "documentary theatre has complicated notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the 'real'."[14]

The performance scholar and Laramie former resident, Amy Tigner, adopts the concept of *Western Pastoral* as a generic structure to understand the play. Starting with the acknowledgment that place is central in this play, that this is not the Matthew Shepard project but the *Laramie* Project, Tigner states that the small town represents mythological or historical violence, the violence of the Western. She then relates Shepard's missing figure on the stage to the play's resemblance to a pastoral elegy whose "central figure is always present in the minds of others but absent himself" as the tragic death of the hero in pastoral "is what calls the community together."[15] Stressing Matthew's race, class, age (a white, middle-

[12] Sarah Hagelin, "Matthew Shepard's Body and the Politics of Queer Vulnerability in *Boys Don't Cry and the Laramie Project,*" in *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univrsity Press, 2013), 113.

[13] Derek Paget, "The broken tradition' of documentary theatre and its continued powers of endurance," in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 229.

[14] Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, "Introduction", in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

[15] Amy L. Tigner, "The Laramie Project: Western Pastoral," *Modern Drama* 45, no. 1, 141.

class, attractive young man) and the location of the crime to explain the appeal of this tragedy for the rest of the nation, she argues that "such a sensational death perpetuates the image of Laramie as the Wild West and Matt as the Western heroic yet tragic figure."[16] "In the pastoral, those from the epitome of civilization leave society and enter into a wilderness, a rural landscape, or a pasture, and then disguise themselves as local country folk. While in this guise, their main occupation is storytelling through song and poetry."[17] This image evokes, among other things, the production, and construction of narrative, which quite often follows specific generic codes, as a fundamental human activity as opposed to an objective, raw non-fictional reporting. In fact, the tradition of performing and producing the West to "document" it for outsiders goes back to at least Buffalo Bill Cody.

Similarly, in her essay on the play, scholar Jill Dolan, while also praising the *Laramie Project* for its potential for utopian performatives, uses the term *performed ethnography* to stress the kinship and the ideological burden and power imbalance it shares with its non-performed cousin. Dolan writes that "[a]lthough its motives are sympathetic and benign, the play positions the people of Laramie as specimens to be amiably studied by an audience that's presumed to be from New York (like the performers) or from other sophisticated urban centers," therefore representing outsiders for outsiders, and approaching a concrete "danger of condescension" to the locals, which however the play seems to counterbalance effectively, as we will see later.[18] Finally, the critic Tony Magagna also recognizes that "[b]y proposing to travel 'into the West'—a phrase Kaufman himself has used to title an essay about the process of creating *The Laramie Project*—and then to return home with material that can be used to offer apparently authentic, accurate revelations about the region and its people, the play relies still on a perception of an othered West, of an alien territory and culture that needs to be revealed, explained, and interpreted for audiences elsewhere."[19]

[16] Tigner, "The Laramie Project:" 140.

[17] Tigner, "The Laramie Project:" 140.

[18] Dolan, *Utopia*, 117.

[19] Tony R. Magagna, "Say It Right, Say It Correct": Documenting the American West in 'The Laramie Project'," *Queer Wests. Western American Literature* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2016), 202.

Unravelling Positions

The New York-based Tectonic Theater Project (TTP) was founded by Venezuelan theater director Moisés Kaufman, in 1991 and it has since created over twenty plays and musicals, including *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1997), Doug Wright's Pulitzer Prize-winning *I Am My Own Wife* (2003), and the Tony Award-winning *33 Variations* (2009). The company develops new plays using their unique method *Moment Work*, the development of a play based on units of theatrical time which substitute traditional "scenes" divisions. TTC's Moment Work is influenced by Mary Overlie and her theory of "horizontal" dramatic structure, that "levels the text, so to speak, by putting it on par with other theatrical elements, such as acting, blocking, lighting, and so on."[20]

The company became well known nationally with the play *Gross Indecency*, which through "a process of research and collaboration in a laboratory environment" (TTP website) dramatized the trials of Oscar Wilde through a plethora of original documents, court transcripts, and Wilde's own writing. Unlike the critically acclaimed *Gross Indecency*, however, *The Laramie Project* has a more intimate dimension, since the official documents of the Wilde's trials are here substituted by original interviews of the cast with Laramie residents, often in a one-on-one private setting.[21] In addition, there is here an important self-reflexive quality: the interviewers are very visible mediums on stage, and they are often questioning and highlighting their own positionality in the process of "reporting" factual dialogues and interacting with real people. As Dolan writes, "the Tectonic Theater Project attempted to stay self-reflexive about their own complicated positions as outsiders in the western prairie town,"[22] and therefore "[t]he company's working process in generating the text for the play thus becomes an explicit part of the play's narrative, with the various tensions and misapprehensions engendered by their presence in Laramie being explored, self-critically, alongside the Shepard story itself."[23]

The play dramatizes the divide between official narration and private conversation, since it opens on the issue of silence and the lack of closure,

[20] Jacqueline O'Connor, "Individual interrogation," 160.
[21] Jacqueline O'Connor, "Individual Interrogation," 158.
[22] Dolan, *Utopia*, 115.
[23] Dolan, *Utopia*, 65.

as it takes place in the wake of the media invasion of Laramie after the small college town had become the object of several news reports, newspaper editorials, and televised debates across the nation. Leigh Fondakowski, assistant director and head writer for the Tectonic Theater, points out, that "the people didn't feel like they had had any closure. They were very upset with how they had gotten represented in the press."[24] Rebecca Hilliker, Head of the Theater Department at the University of Wyoming and one of the TTP first contacts, after an initial resistance accepted to help the company "I thought about it and decided that we've had so much negative closure on this whole thing. And the students really need to talk. When this happened, they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all dialogue stopped."[25]

The members of the Tectonic started to interview people from the university first, then the officers involved with the case, then slowly enlarging their circle to people who knew Matt, LGBT groups on campus, various ministers and religious representatives, customers and bartenders of the Fireside Bar where he was last seen, and where he tragically left together with the two guys who will rob him and pistol whip him nearly to death later that same night. The amount of data collected for documentary theater is considerable, and we can sense that the process of selection favored diversity of voices, from different economic and cultural backgrounds, including many voices who most deliberately seem to challenge an arguably common preconceived notion of a Western small town as backward and monocultural.

As Allen Ellenzweig points out in his review, the strength of the play lies in the multiple "channelings" of Laramie's townsfolk by the Tectonic cast: "the play delivers a cross-section of local characters, not just social types: the straight college student who, hoping to become an actor, defies his parents by auditioning with an excerpt from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; the guileless young lesbian activist who's determined to drown out a homophobic demonstrator by enlisting her friends to surround him in white costumes complete with angel wings; the female sheriff's deputy who handles Matt's bloodied body despite recent cuts to her hands—

[24] Michael Kuchwara, "The Laramie Project (Review)," *Associated Press Online*, 18 May 2000.

[25] Moisés Kaufman, et al., *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: ten Years Later* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 9. Henceforth TLP parenthetically in the text.

only to find that she must undergo HIV testing to determine if she's been infected."[26]

Among the first objectives of the Tectonic group was that of investigating a relatively submerged and silenced side of the story, in the midst of clamor and spotlights. Unlike the mainstream media discourse, Moisés and his team position the townspeople as a central part of a national discussion in which they were mostly excluded. In fact, as Debbie Thompson highlights, "much of the [media] coverage took on a condescending tone, appraising the Western prairies as a cultural wasteland where homophobia and the Christian right's hegemony ruled unchecked."[27] The year following Shepard's murder (1998), the nation was cinematically exposed once again to the horrors of rural homo/trans-phobic violence in the Oscar-winning film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which recirculated the tragic story of Brandon Teena, a 21 year old trans man murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska, in 1993. News of brutal murders and hate crimes feed into this representation of the rural US, in a way that city-based hate crimes do not. In 1999, Billy Jack Gaither was murdered in Alabama as a result of a homophobic attack, and Private Barry Winchell, a 21 year old infantry soldier was murdered in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for dating a trans woman.[28] In just about two years, between 1998 and 2000, as Amy Tigner writes, at least 17 people were murdered in the U.S. because of their sexual orientation.[29] Author and blogger Andrew Sullivan argues that instrumental to the representation of the rural West, and to the exceptional American fixation for this crime and the murder of Brandon Teena, but not the other several hate-crimes immediately preceding or following these two, was also that in their media representation, both victims were divested of any maturity, effectively narrated as children, and that the iconography of vulnerability and victimhood was functional to elicit pity from the audience.[30]

We have previously interrogated, with Tigner's evocation of the Pastoral hero, the uncanny appeal of victims like Matthew Shepard and Brandon

[26] Allen Ellenzweig, "Rev. of The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman. Tectonic Theatre Company, Union Station Theatre, New York," *Gay and Lesbian Review* 7, no. 4 (2000): 64.

[27] Debby Thompson, "The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman Review," *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 4 (December 2001): 644-645.

[28] Sarah Hagelin, "Matthew Shephard's Body," 103.

[29] Amy L. Tigner, "The Laramie Project: Western Pastoral." *Modern Drama*, *45*(1), 2002, 138–156.

[30] Andrew Sullivan, qtd. in Sarah Hagelin, *Reel Vulnerability*, 103.

Teena, and how their identities and representations are re-produced to gather to the fear and morals of a mostly urban audience, but let us now focus on how hate crimes in rural America feed into a narrative that mainstream audience love to consume, a narrative that exoticizes the West and its communities while typically reinforcing the identity of the "urban community."

A student interviewed in the play, Jedadiah Schultz, says that "after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We've become Waco, we've become Jasper. We're a noun, a definition, a sign!" (*TLP*, 7) Another character, sergeant Hing, a second-generation Wyomingite, recounts a frustrating conversation with a reporter who couldn't believe that somebody had accidentally found Matthew's body while mountain biking around Laramie.

> *Reporter*: Who in the Hell would want to run out here?
> *Sergeant Hing*: And I'm thinking, "Lady, you're just missing the point". . . I didn't feel judged, I felt they were stupid. They're, they're missing the point – they're just missing the whole point. (*TLP*, 7)

In a conversation, Zubaida Ula, described as "Muslim woman in Laramie; an inquisitive mind; passionate; twenties" (*TLP*, xviii) has a different reaction to the constant objectification of Laramie in the eyes of the outsiders, and counters the defensiveness of some other interviewees with a fascinating gesture of defiance and recognition. In the *scene* "Moment: It Happened Here," Zubaida says:

> We went to the candle vigil. . . . And it was so good to be with people who felt like shit. I kept feeling like I don't deserve to feel this bad, you know? And someone got up there and said uh—he said um, blah blah blah blah blah and then he said, I'm saying it wrong, but basically he said, "C'mon guys, let's show the world that Laramie is not this kind of town." But it IS that kind of a town. If it wasn't this kind of town why did this happen here? I mean you know what I mean, like—that's a lie. Because it happened here. So how could it not be a town where this kind of things happen? [...] I mean these are people trying to distance themselves from this crime. And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this. (*TLP*, 57-58)

It happened here then becomes a way to face the reality of the event, to own it, the opportunity to stop looking at the traumatic experience as an alien event from the outside but as something that originates right "here."

When this play circulates the nation, Zubaida's words echo a recognition from many people in the US, and it may challenge the very assumption that "here" is not my place, here is a faraway alien land (here, in Wyoming? Here, in the United States? Here in New York?).

The play criticizes the invasion of privacy that Laramie and its citizens endured under the media pressure (which significantly excluded their voices), but at the same time, to some extent, it may also seem to reproduce it, in its commodification and capitalization of the other's trauma. A member of the Tectonic, Stephen Belber, states on stage that upon being invited to go to Laramie to conduct interviews, he was hesitant, "I have no real interest in prying into a town's unraveling" (*TLP*, 8). Dolan writes that "[t]he text tries to even the score by shining the white light of inquiry onto the performers as well as the people they interview; the company's journals, for instance, become part of the public record."[31] Scholars Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster, discussing the HBO special on *The Laramie Project*, gave credit to the authors for giving "more of a detailed picture of the internal struggles of the TTP members as they came to terms with their own fears and their complicity, while trying to remain objective in the face of glaring bigotry and homophobia."[32] Stephen Bottoms praises the self reflexivity in the play, while also recognizing that it is a defining, necessary element of the documentary theater tout court: "the kind of theatrical self-referentiality . . . is precisely what is required of documentary plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both 'document' and 'play.' Without a self-conscious emphasis on the vicissitudes of textuality and discourse, such plays can too easily become disingenuous exercises in the presentation of 'truth'."[33]

The commitment to dialogism in the way the actors approach the townspeople, the effort they put into reserving judgement, and their effective encouragement of honesty in their interviewees is remarkable; however, I would argue that this is not merely a pursuit of neutrality, or the presumption of invisibility of one's own position, but rather a recognition of one's own capacity for bias and prejudice. In a scene when two members of the TTC, Leigh Fondakowski and Greg Pierotti, are seen re-

[31] Dolan, *Utopia*, 116.

[32] Jay Baglia and Elissa Foster, "Performing the 'Really' Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in The Laramie Project," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 131.

[33] Stephen Bottoms, "Putting the Document into Documentary," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (T 191), Fall 2006: 56-68.

luctantly going to conduct an early morning interview with Father Roger Schmit, Pierotti exclaims "So here we go: seven-thirty A.M., two queers and a Catholic priest" (*TLP*, 63). The unspoken here is the expectation that the Catholic priest would condemn not so much the aggressors as the queers, but it will instead be eloquently contradicted by Schmit's words. The TTP member Pierotti declared in an interview that what was "really amazing about this project [was] going back to Laramie . . . constantly being shaken up by what happened, meeting people I never would have ordinarily met and being stretched in ways that I never would have been stretched, plus confronting my own stereotypes about the West and being constantly surprised by the humanity I have encountered."[34]

The multiple strategies of storytelling, revelation, and authorship at work in the play should certainly be understood as a form of staging and performance in their own right, aimed at producing a trustworthy, non-judgmental interlocutor, for a twofold audience: their interviewees and the audience in the theater. For example, when Tectonic member Amanda Gronich interviews the Baptist Minister, he says:

> "Now, as for the victim, I know that that lifestyle is legal, but I will tell you one thing: I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence . . . that before he slipped into a coma, he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle".
> Amanda: "Thank you reverend, I appreciate your speaking with me."
> *(Rain begins to fall on the stage)* (*TLP*, 66).

For all its frustrating powerlessness, and her subsequent self-questioning, Gronich's reaction may be read as a performance of coward docility, or more likely as a polite and firm refusal to engage with the outrageous comments of her interviewee, and it is commensurate to the Reverend's own overall disavowal of a dialogic conversation, from a man who perceives himself to be in a position of power and knowledge, handing truth to the unknowing. Unlike this figure, the play constantly strives to question its own assumptions and preconceived notions and refuses both to moralize and to offer any sort of narrative closure for its audience. Nonetheless, in this scene the dramatic effect of rain pouring on stage after the Reverend's words, adds a powerful evocative and emotional layer to the reception. As Bottoms argues

[34] Pierotti, qtd. in Michael Kuchwara, "On Stage. Coming to Term with the Death of Matthew Shepard," *Associated Press*, Feb 15, 2000.

in his essay, "such performances need to foreground their own processes of representation in order to acknowledge the problem and encourage audiences to adopt an actively critical perspective on the events depicted."[35] The balance between the pursuit of objectivity and the authorial editing of the source material is at the heart of this play's critical and popular appeal.

In conclusion, I believe that *The Laramie Project* finds a unique equilibrium in a complex cultural field: it departs with the explicit agenda of countering a powerful media discourse that silenced and exoticized the town of Laramie, its citizens, and more broadly fed into a stereotypical representation of the West, while at the same time it questions the positionality of the cast, writers, and performers as they function as visible, embodied filters, in very literal sense as both eyes and mouths, through which the audience access the story of this town. Issues of appropriation, objectification of someone else's trauma, and the risk of a blinding power of emotional appeal to override rational understanding of a complex reality, are all crucial element of the performed storytelling. In particular, the fragmentation of the documentary drama and its Brechtian approach to narrative inhibit an emotional reading of the performance while blurring easy binarism between "them and us." In addition, the actor's self-questioning and reflexivity problematizes the coherent authoritative voice of traditional political theater. The critical and commercial success of the play testifies to the Tectonic's remarkable operation of portraying a town in its many layers, refusing to simplify it, to exoticize it for a predominantly metropolitan audience, but also resisting the liberal urge to universalize it, to smooth its uncomfortable edges, downplaying its unique, and at times uncanny, social and cultural fabric.

[35] Bottoms, "Putting the Document," 61.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baglia, Jay, and Elissa, Foster. "Performing the 'Really' Real: Cultural Criticism, Representation, and Commodification in The Laramie Project," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2005).

Bottoms, Stephen. "Putting the Document into Documentary." *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (T 191), Fall 2006: 56-68.

Claycomb, Ryan. "(Ch)oral History: Documentary Theatre, the Communal Subject, and Progressive Politics." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 17, no. 2 (Spring 2003).

Claycomb, Ryan. *In the Lurch: Verbatim Theater and the Crisis of Democratic Deliberation.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023.

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Ellenzweig, Allen. "Review of The Laramie Project by Moises Kaufman. Tectonic Theatre Company, Union Station Theatre, New York." *Gay and Lesbian Review.* 7, no. 4 (2000).

Forsyth, Alison, and Chris Megson. "*Introduction*." In *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 1-19.

Hagelin, Sarah. "Matthew Shepard's Body and the Politics of Queer Vulnerability in *Boys Don't Cry and the Laramie Project.*" In *Reel Vulnerability: Power, Pain, and Gender in Contemporary American Film and Television.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013.

Jimenez, Stephen. *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard.* Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2013.

Kaufman, Moisés, et al. *American Theatre* (July/August 2010) 26-30.

Kaufman, Moisés, et alii. *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014.

Kruger, Loren. *The Drama of South Africa. Plays, Pageants and Publics since 1910.* London: Routledge, 1999.

Kuchwara, Michael. "On Stage. Coming to Term with the Death of Matthew Shepard." *Associated Press Online,* February 15, 2000.

Kuchwara, Michael. "The Laramie Project (Review)." *Associated Press Online*, May 18, 2000.

Magagna, Tony R. "'Say It Right, Say It Correct': Documenting the American West in 'The Laramie Project'." *Queer Wests. Western American Literature* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2016), pp. 199-229.

O'Connor, Jacqueline. *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theater.* Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013.

Paget, Derek. "The Broken Tradition' of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued

Powers of Endurance." In *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, 224-238.

Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity. Consent and Descent in American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Spivak, Gayatry Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 267-310.

Thompson, Debby. "The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman Review," *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 4 (December 2001): 644-645.

Tigner, Amy L.. "The Laramie Project: Western Pastoral." *Modern Drama* 45, no. 1, 2002: 138-156.