Interrogating War Stories:
Dramaturgical Encounters with National Trauma

By

Alison Christy

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Chair: Jane Barnette

Nicole Hodges Persley

Mechele Leon

Rebecca Rovit

Ani Kokobobo

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The dissertation committee for Alison Christy certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Chair: Jane Barnette

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Abstract

Interrogating War Stories: Dramaturgical Encounters with National Trauma examines the intersection between dramaturgy and trauma studies. I argue that by incorporating trauma-informed approaches to the practice of dramaturgy, the dramaturg can serve as mediator and negotiator between the artistic team's mimetic narrative, the nation-state's dominant narrative, and the expectations of the spectators present for the live performance. Additionally, I consider practical ways for the dramaturg to bring the audience into conversation with a counter-narrative of socio-cultural trauma rather than a confrontation. These considerations are at the core of fostering more complex approaches to engaging with counter-narratives in the aftermath of national trauma.

Using interdisciplinary analysis that will incorporate archival research, interviews with dramaturgs, and popular press reception, this project will investigate productions and their socio-historical context as well as the work performed by the dramaturg (if one was present), and consider how trauma narratives are performed and countered (both onstage and by spectators), in the wake of national catastrophe. Two plays will be used as case studies —Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001), and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless* (2011), both of which involve U.S conflicts associated with the War on Terror. Within such context, this study will grapple with the benefits of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy.

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The world is a theatre. Each character who enters believes himself to be the center of the world. And in a certain sense, because he believes it, he is. Each one of us is the center. And each center is besieged by the other centers."

— Hélène Cixous, *The Place of Crime, The Place of Pardon*[1]

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore an intersection of artistry and scholarship—namely, ways that ideas rooted in the field of trauma studies can enhance and expand dramaturgical practice. This study situates the dramaturg as a mediator who is responsible for both working alongside theatre artists to aid their practices as well as creating a supportive space for spectators. While there are many methods of storytelling that engage with a whole range of human experiences, this project grapples with the benefits of a trauma-informed dramaturgical practice that can be utilized for productions whose narratives incorporate socio-cultural trauma. Two productions serve as case studies to explore the role of the dramaturg as mediator and negotiator between playwright and audience: Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and France Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless* (2011). Bringing established dramaturgical practices into conversation with approaches and concepts from the field of trauma studies, this project uses interdisciplinary analysis that incorporates archival research, interviews with dramaturgs, and popular press reception to examine the productions and their socio-historical context. Additionally, this study considers ways that socio-cultural trauma is staged and performed, and how dominant narratives are both disseminated and countered (both onstage and by spectators) in the wake of national

1. Hélène Cixous, "The Place of Crime, The Place of Pardon," in *Twentieth Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. Richard Drain (New York: Routledge, 1995), 341.

trauma. I argue that by incorporating trauma-informed approaches in the practice of dramaturgy, the dramaturg can serve as mediator and negotiator between the artistic team's fictional world of the play, the nation-state's narrative as disseminated by the media, and the expectations of the spectators present for the live performance. In this way, the dramaturg can bring the audience into conversation with a counter-narrative of trauma, rather than a confrontation. These considerations are at the core of fostering more complex approaches to engaging with counter-narratives in the aftermath of national trauma.

Context

My professional work has largely centered on dramaturgy. At different times, I have acted as a production dramaturg, a new-play dramaturg, and a literary associate. While the specific needs of each play, theatre, and artistic team vary widely, dramaturgical practice tends to be concerned with inward-facing tasks that directly support the production by addressing the interests of the director, playwright, designers, and actors. Some of the tasks of the dramaturg, such as curating a lobby display or developing program content, are outward facing and are intended to introduce audiences to the production. Both of these categories, however, are focused on the play, the playwright, and the director. In short, this model of dramaturgical practice situates the dramaturg as an advocate for the production and the artistic work of those involved. While this model has many potential benefits and has created much solid production work, it can fall short for scripts that deal with socio-cultural trauma. By the time a production opens, the artistic team has been exploring the play for many months, possibly years. The director, designers, and actors have spent countless hours grappling with the playwright's script and working through ideas and aesthetics. The audience, however, has far less experience with a

production. Some spectators may be familiar with the script, and may have even read a review or two. A few audience members may have seen other renditions of the script. Every audience member (at least once) watches a production for the first time, and may only have limited knowledge of what lies beyond the proscenium arch.

This project is largely conceptual in nature, though both the productions that will be used as case studies included a dramaturg. In order to explore the potential benefits of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy, I must approach the analysis from my own subject position as a white, upper-middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual woman with over a decade of experience as a dramaturg. I draw upon that experience and praxis in order to move fully explore the intersection between dramaturgy and trauma studies.

Definitions of Terms

I begin my analysis of the role of the dramaturg's work in staging plays that present narratives of socio-cultural trauma by defining key terms that will appear throughout this study: dramaturgy, national trauma, national narrative, counter-narrative, and nation. This is necessary because many of these terms, including 'dramaturgy,' do not have a universal definition.

Michael M. Chemers defines 'dramaturgy' broadly as "a term that refers to both the *aesthetic architecture* of a piece of dramatic literature (its structure, themes, goals, and conventions) and the *practical philosophy* of theatre practice employed to create a full performance."[2] Eugenio Barba breaks down dramaturgy into three categories, all of which are rooted in the playwright's script and simultaneously concerned with the spectator's experience.

2. Michael Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 3. Italics original.

On the surface is 'dynamic dramaturgy,' which is concerned with the sensorial dynamics of the production as a way of maintaining the spectator's attention. The next category is what Barba calls 'narrative dramaturgy,' or the events that happen on stage that allow the spectators to make meaning of what they are watching. The final category, and the one most pertinent to this discussion, is 'evocative dramaturgy.' Evocative dramaturgy is the dramaturgy that "distills or captures the performance's unintentional and concealed meaning, specific for each spectator."[3] This definition, with its focus on the individual spectator, highlights the usefulness of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy—one that acknowledges and accepts that a production cannot create a single experience for all spectators in the same way that a director can create a unified vision.

'National trauma' falls under the umbrella of collective trauma, or a disruptive shared event that "falls outside the range of ordinary human experiences."[4] Collective groups can use many identity markers to define themselves, including race, social class, ethnic or religious identity, sexual orientation, or gender expression, just to name a few. According to psychiatrist Thomas Singer, collective identities arise from *group spirits*, or a sense of belonging to a community based on a shared identity or core beliefs.[5] Group spirits can form around many things, including a sense of national identity. There is, however, no universal consensus of the definition of a nation or the parameters of national identity.

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3. Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy: Burning the House* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 10.
4. Arthur Neal*, National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 2005), 9.
5. Thomas Singer, "Unconscious Forces Shaping International Conflict," *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 5, no. 1 (2007) 47.

Because this study is focused on counter-narratives of socio-cultural trauma, the terms national narrative and counter-narrative must be discussed in relation to each other. I use the term 'national narrative' to refer to the interplay of rhetoric, images, and events which create a sense of national pride and a shared identity. Specifically, I will ground my discussion of national narratives in what anthropologist Ajurn Appadurai calls *mediascapes*: "the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film production studios, etc.)."[6] These "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality… offer those who experience them… a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places."[7] Appadurai's concept is particularly useful to a dramaturg as a way to think through the knowledge and experience of a spectator, and emphasizes the fractured nature of media-based narratives and the tensions that arise from them.

I use the term 'counter-narrative' to refer to the actions, language, images, and events in the mimetic world of the play which disrupt, challenge, and contradict the national narrative put forth in the mediascape. I use the juxtaposition of the terms 'narrative' and 'counter-narrative' as the starting point of my study in order to situate the in-between space that the dramaturg must map and navigate.

For 'nation,' I bring together the scholarship of both political scientist Benedict Anderson and cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha. I begin by borrowing Anderson's definition: "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[8] Anderson

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6. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy, *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2-3 (1990) 296 and 298-9.
7. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," 298-9.
8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

considers a nation limited because even the largest nation has boundaries and borders, and no nation considers itself universal to all mankind.[9] While the United States is a large geographical space and its citizens are racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse, there are state and federal limits to who and what can be considered "American." Anderson also points out that, because the concept of nation was created in an age when Enlightenment and revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained dynastic realm, a nation is considered a sovereign power.[10] Finally, Anderson notes that, while a nation and nationhood may encompass a vast physical space with social, racial, and cultural differences, there exists a conception of a deep, horizontal comradeship amongst its citizens.[11] This study uses Anderson's assertion that "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time"[12] and asks questions about theatrical performance that are complicated by race, class, gender, and cultural differences that become more visible and audible during times of war. Though Anderson offers a solid definition, more recent scholarship complicates the definition of 'nation.' Homi K. Bhabha suggests that a nation is an inherently unstable entity and constantly "coming into being."[13] In this way, a nation, its members, and its culture can be further understood as representations of social life, practices, attitudes, and mores, rather than be defined by an overarching political system.[14] Thus, the very definition of what it means to "be a nation" allows space for continual redefinition, change, and competing discourses. While Anderson's definition suggests that a

9. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, 6.
10. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, 7.
11. Ibid.
12. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread of Nationalism*, 3.
13. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-2.
14. Ibid.

nation is a stable, albeit imagined, community, Bhabha's definition rests on performed social and cultural life.

Methodology

My primary aim is to explore and (re)imagine ways that the dramaturg can bring audiences into conversation with provocative political counter-narratives that attempt to address the complexity of individual and collective identity. Both of the case studies— *Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless*—present a narrative that explores national war trauma at varying degrees of temporal distance from the presumed spectators. These case studies examine potential ways for the dramaturg to prepare audiences to watch plays that present alternatives to and contradictions of the collective trauma narratives. The first production I will examine is the 2001 U.S. premiere of Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*. The play opened just a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, while the memory of the event was still raw and present. *Homebody/Kabul* explores the political landscape in the late 1990s and focuses on a British housewife who leaves her family and travels to Afghanistan. The second case study, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless*, moves a bit further away from the traumatic event. The play is set at a vague future date fifteen years after the War on Terror has ended. The production was mounted in September 2011 and intentionally aligned with the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. When examined together, however, they create a site of plays that grapple with counter-narratives of the national trauma of a single on-going conflict at varying temporal distances.

During the War on Terror, national narratives of patriotism, courage, enemies, and allies were and continue to be created by the state and disseminated by print media, news outlets, television, literature, social media, and the theatre. In response, many playwrights chose to

support national narratives that focused on the bravery and valor of those involved. Others, however, chose to offer the theatre-going public counter-narratives that challenged the United States' seemingly monolithic narrative of unified patriotism. For the dramaturg charged with negotiating a counter-narrative to national patriotism for a production in a time of post-war trauma, the task of mediating the space between the ideas and situations performed on stage and the national rhetoric becomes a difficult one. While the entire production team is concerned with telling the story put forth by the playwright, a dramaturg must also be concerned with bringing the audience into a place of conversation with both the story on stage and those stories circulating in the media.

In order to explore potential dramaturgical interventions, I bring together different sites of analysis: textual analysis, academic scholarship, production research, archival research, and interviews. In addition to the texts, I have assembled an archive composed of popular press and academic reviews of the productions, production stills, production programs, digital archives, and available video footage from the productions. To analyze these materials, I employ the broad and interdisciplinary work of the dramaturg articulated by Geoffrey Proehl as "the willingness to enter into conversation on the edge of the known and unknown."[15] This study enters the conversation by broadening the "known" of dramaturgy as an artistic practice and pushing it into the "unknown" or unexplored interplay of the production of a counter-narrative and the multiple narratives of nationalism and national trauma that surround it.

These specific cases—*Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless*—have been chosen for two reasons. First, rather than offering action-based accounts of war, each of the playwrights recasts the

15. Geoffrey Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 10.

archetypal enemies as characters worthy of empathy, who have a right and a need for their story to be told. At their crux, narratives of war rely upon an us-versus-them binary and reduce the enemy Other to a one-dimensional archetype. These playwrights and theatre artists have chosen to subvert this approach and present characters and situations that ask spectators to be open to the plight of enemy Others. Second, each of these plays has been performed during times of war, though not exactly the one depicted in the action onstage. *Homebody/Kabul*, written between 1997 and 2001, and had its U.S. premiere just months after the 9/11 attacks. The character of Homebody romanticizes life in Afghanistan in a manner that echoes the United States' support of the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the early 1980s. *Lidless*, written between 2008 and 2011, begins in Guantanamo Bay and picks up fifteen years later in an imaginary world where the War on Terror has ended.

In order to explore the interplay between the role of the dramaturg and the aftermath of national trauma, I bring together the above-mentioned production materials into conversation with their respective mediascapes by considering print and broadcast news. This is necessary because the dramaturg's acknowledgment of the audience's presumed exposure to the contemporaneous mediascape becomes a baseline for the dramaturg's work. By reconstructing the mediascape, I will trace, to borrow from sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, the "new master narrative" of trauma.[16] Building upon Jean-François Lyotard's distrust of metanarratives,[17] Alexander suggests that in the aftermath of a collective and group trauma, populations create new narratives as a method of coping.[18] Alexander posits that trauma narratives are collective in

16. Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 16.
17. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-xxv.
18. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 16.

nature and are manifested into existence through performance. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be.[19]

I will analyze the productions against the backdrop of their respective mediascapes by adapting from dramaturg Jane Barnette's "spectator-based model of adapturgy," which positions dramaturgical analysis in "relation to the spectator's point of view."[20] Though Barnette's model was developed to address the adaptation of literary texts into theatrical works, its framework can also be modified to support a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy. Using a three-dimensional Cartesian coordinate system and placing the spectator at the center, the model guides the dramaturg's thinking through the mimetic narrative's "there" and "then" and the audience's "here" and "now" of the performance.[21] As a dramaturgical practice, this begins with explorations of the play's structural landscape: how does the playwright move the plot from its beginning to its conclusion? Once a general shape has been established, the dramaturg can turn their attention to the relationships of the play, the relationships between the characters, and the relationships between the characters and their world. Further readings will identify instances or themes of socio-cultural trauma within the world of the play and the relationships between characters. By exploring the mimetic world of the play—the play's "there" and "then"— the dramaturg can expand their scope by identifying the socio-cultural trauma woven throughout the script that effects the characters. After exploring the script's references to socio-cultural trauma, the dramaturg can expand their focus to the "here" and "now" of the spectator and engage with trauma narratives that exists outside the world of the play. By engaging with the interplay

19. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 4.
20. Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), 41.
21. Ibid.

between the play's mimetic narrative and narratives of socio-cultural trauma present in the milieu of the spectator, the dramaturg can work to identify places of tension between different, competing, and counter-narratives of trauma, and can focus their work on preparing audiences to encounter such productions. The overall focus of my analysis of the productions, their respective mediascapes, their historical moments, and spectator perspective seeks to illuminate the intersections between dramaturgy and trauma.

Review of the Literature: Intersections of Dramaturgy and Trauma Studies

Because this study is interdisciplinary in nature, I weave together literature from two main areas—dramaturgy and trauma studies—and consider dramatic literature written against the backdrop of the events of September 11, 2001 through the ten-year anniversary of the attacks.

The theatre is a place of storytelling. Audiences look to theatre-makers to create narratives populated by characters and situations that mirror both themselves and their lives. Audiences also attend theatre and witness events that are vastly different from their own lived experiences, led by characters who are tremendously distinct from themselves. Therefore, the presentation of sensitive topics such as the collective trauma resulting from socio-cultural upheaval must be considered and situated as a place not only of mimesis and spectacle, but as a place of witnessing and encountering. In her essay "A Play of Crime, a Place of Pardon," Helene Cixous writes:

> We are the characters of an epic which we are forbidden, by the laws of mediocrity and of prudence, to live. And yet it is an epic…The world is a theatre. Each character who enters believes himself to be the center of the world. And in a

> certain sense, because he believes it, he is. Each one of us is the center. And each center is besieged by the other centers.[22]

Cixous notes that, for each and every spectator, they themselves are the center of their world. Individual audience members all arrive at the theatre with their own unique sets of expectations, beliefs, and experiences. What is presented on the stage before them may align with those beliefs or may be counter to their experiences. It is the role of the dramaturg, however, to build an environment that allows for different—even contradictory—narratives to encounter each other.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag notes that representations of war create a paradox for the spectator: war does not become real for an observer until it is captured on film,[23] but images that are too aesthetically harmonious are criticized for "looking like art"[24] and not being 'real' enough. The plays that are examined in the following chapters—whose plots deal with forced evacuation, torture, and war—were likewise panned by critics because they "were too artistic," and "not real enough." Though Sontag was writing about photography, this paradox is at the heart of the dramaturg's task. That is: what are strategies that can be employed by a dramaturg to hold space for both the artistic work *and* the audience experience? She also raises a further point for the dramaturg when discussing photography, arguing that "all photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. *They create the illusion of consensus*."[25] This notion can be extended to the theatre as well.

22. Cixous, "The Place of Crime, The Place of Pardon," 314.
23. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 21.
24. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 76.
25. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 6. Italics added for emphasis.

Dramaturgy: Dramaturgs as Mediators and Ambassadors

Much of the existing literature on dramaturgy focuses on the role of the production dramaturg or the new-play dramaturg in the development and/or storytelling of a play, and the duties they must fulfill to do so. This literature explores the role of the dramaturg from a task-based perspective. For example, Anne Cattaneo's "Dramaturgy: An Overview" (1997) provides a historical survey of the field and discusses the professional expectations of practitioners. The tasks of the dramaturg are further investigated by Leon Katz in "The Compleat Dramaturg" (1997) and by Ian Andrew Carlson in "Thinking Like an Actor: A Guide for the Production Dramaturg" (2014). Beyond outlining and documenting the tangible tasks of the dramaturg, the literature also explores a more philosophical side of the practice that is rooted in the quest for knowledge and meaning-making. In *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (2001), Geoffrey Proehl describes this ethos as 'a dramaturgical sensibility' or "the process of trying to unravel the mysteries and indeterminacies of a play's dramaturgy [which] creates in those who undertake this work—the work of dramaturgy—an awareness of the limits and potential of *knowledge*."[26] Katalin Trencsényi defines the practice of dramaturgy as "the action through which meaning is created by the recognition and arrangement of patterns."[27] Positioning the dramaturg as thinker is also echoed by Mark Bly. In "Bristling with Multiple Possibilities," (1996) Bly writes that when pressed for an answer about what a dramaturg does, he answers, "I question."[28]

26. Proehl, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey*, 17. Italics original.
27. Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making: A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners* (New York: Bloomsberry, 2015), xxi.
28. Mark Bly, "Bristling with Multiple Possibilities" in *American Dramaturgy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Michal Lupu (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 49.

In addition to the role of the dramaturg in the rehearsal hall, some dramaturgs broaden their role to that of an ambassador who mediates the space between artists and audiences. Such expansion shifts the practice from primarily internal, behind-the-scenes, and artist-focused to one that is also audience-centered and has the potential for public impact. D.J. Hopkins considers the role of the dramaturg to be one of "troublemaker," who has the potential to shake-up a neat, linear process by creating a 'counter-text' or a compilation of research that is independent of the production and serves as "an accumulation of meaning…and situates dramaturgical practice in a wider cultural discourse."[29] This newer model requires the production dramaturg—in addition to preparing a script, conducting external research, and creating program materials—to guide the audience into a place of conversation with the play.

As dramaturgs explore new ways of staging plays that are audience-centered, they are faced with the challenge of what Herbert Blau identified as an inherent feature of the theatre: the separation between the artists and performers and the spectators.[30] In his influential book, *The Audience* (1990), Blau writes that the very idea of theatre is characterized by this separation. He writes that while the "desire has always been…for the audience as community, similarly enlightened, unified in belief, all the disparities in some way healed by the experience of theatre…there is no theatre without *separation*."[31] Recently, however, dramaturgs have started to question Blau's insistence that the separation between performers and spectators is integral to the theatre, and have begun to explore ways in which that separation could be overcome. Dramaturg Paul Kosidowski suggests that, rather than situate the artists' experiences and institutional needs

29. D.J. Hopkins, "Research, Counter-Text, Performance- Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 1 (2003): 2.
30. Herbert Blau, *The Audience*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 10.
31. Ibid. Italics original.

at the center of theatre-making, the needs of the audience should be repositioned, and their connection with the material should shift from an afterthought to a place of primacy.[32] Above all, dramaturgs should be thinking about productions *through* the eyes of their audiences.[33] This notion is further explored by Jane Barnette in her discussion of theatrical adaptation. Barnette positions the spectator's point of view as a foundation of storytelling rather than an afterthought.[34] By emphasizing the primacy of a spectator's perspective, the dramaturg can practice a habit of empathy with spectators.[35]

The central role of the audience is echoed by Elinor Fuchs in her influential essay, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to ask a Play." The piece, positioned as a tool for theatre practitioners, especially dramaturgs, attempts to guide artists to a place of discovery by offering a series of questions for them to answer as they explore the world of the play. Fuchs writes:

> Ask, what has this world [of the play] demanded of me? Does it ask me for pity and fear? Does it ask me to reason? To physically participate in the action on the stage? Does it ask me to interact with other spectators? To leave the theatre and take political action? To search my ethical being to the core?[36]

This short essay reminds dramaturgs and other theatre practitioners to be mindful of and responsive to what a play will ask of its audience. For Fuchs, understanding what a play will ask, even demand, of its spectators, is vital to the artists' interpretation and staging.

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32. Paul Kosidowksi, "Thinking Through the Audience," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 1 (2013) 83.
33. Kosidowksi, "Thinking Through the Audience," 84-5.
34. Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation*, 39.
35. Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation*, 40.
36. Elinor Fuchs, "E.F.'s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," *Theatre* 34, no.3 (2004) 5.

Martin Esslin defines the function of the dramaturg as that of the artist charged with creating the "cultural atmosphere in which a healthy theatre can operate."[37] Not only should the demographics of the audience be at the center of season planning and programming, but the dramaturg "must be an expert on the problems, demography, prejudices, and prides of the community he serves, to have his or her finger on its pulse."[38] Michael Lupu takes Esslin's stance a step further and suggests that the dramaturg is not a professional artist, but rather a professional ambassador between artists and audiences.[39] These definitions and descriptions begin to address how dramaturgy and the dramaturg can produce a production that speaks *with*—rather than simply *to*—an audience. Theatre scholar Peter M. Boenisch, artist-scholar Pedro Ilgenfritz, and theatre scholar-critic Milan Zvada, among others, have paid particular attention to the relationship between dramaturgical work, the experience of the spectator, and the phenomenological impact of the combination of these elements on storytelling.[40] Additionally, attention has turned to public-facing dramaturgy, or dramaturgical work that happens outside of the rehearsal hall. The recently published *Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* includes a section entitled "Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager: Immersions, Talkbacks, Lobby Displays, and Social Networks."[41] The section includes contributions from several practicing

37. Martin Esslin "Towards an American Dramaturg: Adapting the Function of Dramaturgy to U.S. Conditions," in *Dramaturgy in the American Theatre: A Source Book*, ed. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl and Michael Lupu (New York: Hartcourt Brace, 1997), 27.
38. Esslin, "Towards an American Dramaturg: Adapting the Function of Dramaturgy to U.S. Conditions," 28.
39. Michael Lupu, "There is a Clamor in the Air" in *American Dramaturgy: A Source Book*, ed. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Michal Lupu (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 111.
40. See Boenisch (2014) "Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience's Experience in Contemporary Theatre," Ilgenfritz (2014) "Dialectical Theatre and Devising: Dramaturgy as a Dialogue Between the Author and Audience," and Zvada (2016) "Dramaturgy as a Way of Looking into the Spectator's Aesthetic Experience."
41. See *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 457-514.

dramaturgs whose artistic work and scholarship seeks to expand the responsibilities for the dramaturg to include practices that are audience-centric in nature. In her work as a dramaturg, Katie Rasor emphasizes the importance of awareness and acknowledgment of the cultural knowledge of a theatre's target audience as a component separate from cultural knowledge used by the artistic team to develop and stage a production.[42] This is in addition to any production-specific research that may be undertaken by a dramaturg in order to explore the world of the play itself, and requires taking careful steps to understand the broad cultural viewpoints of the audience. Rasor stresses that this practice is not to ensure the comfort of the audience, but rather to create a situation where spectators are prepared to engage with the production. This benefits both the audience and the playwright.[43] The distinction that Rasor makes—the cultural knowledge of the audience as different from the cultural knowledge necessary for the artistic process—becomes the foundation from which a dramaturg working in the immediate aftermath of a national trauma can use as a guiding light as they build a transitional space for the audience. Keeping the focus on the cultural knowledges and experiences of spectators, Martine Kei Greene-Rogers has created a set of guidelines for leading post-show talkbacks for plays that engage with sensitive subject matter. The dramaturgical interventions discussed later in this dissertation contribute to this segment of the conversation that advocates for the spectator's experience.

42. Katie Rasor "The Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 482-3
43. Rasor "The Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager," 483.

Trauma Studies: Linking Trauma and War to Counter-Narratives on U.S. Stages

Trauma studies is a broad and intersectional field that links together biology and cultural-meaning-making. Discussions of trauma and trauma studies often circle back to Sigmund Freud and his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). In his study, Freud explicitly links his understanding of trauma to questions of nationalism and national belonging. His work expands upon his previous work on sexual repression and the shell shock of soldiers returning from the trenches of World War I. The impetus for Freud's study is rooted in the question of Moses' nationality.[44] Using a framework that is more of a thought exercise than historical fact, Freud argues that Moses was Egyptian rather than Hebrew, and was killed by the Israelites during a rebellion. After Moses' death, the Israelites regretted their actions, leading them to suppress his memory, though it never fully disappeared from the collective memory. Generations later, as the Israelites continued to carve out a religious and national identity, the memory of Moses was reconstructed and brought into the Jewish narrative, and the memory of Moses as a leader and liberator was merged with a volcano god.[45] While Freud's historical account has been widely rebuked by scholars, his imaginative framework is particularly useful in illuminating his understanding of trauma. Furthermore, upon a closer reading, it is clear that Freud is situating his whole understanding of the nature and origin of trauma around the building and sustaining of a national identity—one that arises in the wake of collective trauma.

44. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), 15.
45. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 12.

E. Ann Kaplan, however, closely links individual and cultural trauma. In *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005) she concedes that it is impossible to delineate between the self and cultural reactions.[46] Kaplan suggests:

> One finds the complex interconnections between the individual and cultural trauma—such that, indeed, where the 'self' begins and cultural reactions end may seem impossible to determine. One can also find the single hopeful thread of a catastrophe, namely the perhaps short-lived but real creation of new public-sphere communities as specific crises are 'translated' from group to group.[47]

Writing in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Kaplan suggests that these new communities can offer hope to both the survivors, as well as the newly formed communities. These communities are formed by embracing the new master narrative and learning to live a new life within it. When theatres stage narratives that counter this new reality, it both confronts the national identity of the spectator and challenges any hopefulness they may have gained from their new communities.

In *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (2005), sociologist Arthur G. Neal suggests that the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center caught Americans in a state of unpreparedness and were interpreted not only as physical attacks on livelihood, but, more importantly, as an affront to identity and values.[48] In 1941, the unexpected attack on Pearl Harbor acted as a catalyst to intensify the war effort: news accounts of heroism in the Asian Pacific Theatre became common,

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46. E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 2.
47. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss*, 2.
48. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, 58 and 180-81.

factories that produced vehicles and instruments of war increased their output, and popular entertainment (movies, plays, music, television shows, etc.) became saturated with stories of war and patriotism.[49] On 11 September 2001, the United States found itself in a situation that echoed the earlier trauma of Pearl Harbor. While the CIA had been collecting intelligence on Osama bin Laden for over a decade, radical Islam, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban were new concepts introduced to the general public in the wake of the attacks. Only a few thousand people were directly involved in the attacks, but the country as a whole was traumatized.

Neal writes that the 9/11 attacks created a state of national trauma because they shattered three long-held assumptions. The first assumption was the relative security that had been felt since the end of the Cold War. Though the United States had been involved in armed conflict during the 1990s, there was little perceived threat of an attack on U.S. soil. The second assumption that was shattered was that commercial airlines were safe and trustworthy. Lastly, Americans were forced to confront the fact that American Exceptionalism was not loved and accepted by the rest of the world.[50] In both attacks—Pearl Harbor and 9/11—the United States was forced to confront not only a physical attack, but, more importantly, an attack on its collective identity. Neal also points out that collective traumas are different from personal traumas because they are shared with others.[51] He writes that collective and national traumas arise from an event that is "unscheduled, and thus fall[s] outside the range of harmony of the

49. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, 63-4.
50. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, 180-1.
51. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, 4.

social system," and "threaten[s] [the] usual assessments of social reality."[52] Both the attack on Pearl Harbor and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did just that.

Questions of national and group identity are central to understanding the impact of trauma. Jeffrey Alexander writes that no single event or action is inherently traumatic, and that collective trauma is rooted in "wounds to social identity."[53] Alexander's work shifts the focus of trauma away from psychology to the performance of social suffering. In *Trauma: A Social Theory*, he defines cultural trauma as a state that "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[54] Alexander continues: "collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be."[55] By considering collective trauma as 'symbolic renderings,' rather than a medical condition, Alexander emphasizes the performativity of trauma. While an individual trauma victim may cope with their ordeal by denial, repression, and "working through," the collective group works through its suffering by the symbolic reconstruction and framing of characters and stories,[56] and what is ultimately at stake is not the individual, but "the collectivity's identity, its stability in terms of meaning."[57] Echoing Kaplan and noting that

52. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*, 4-7.
53. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 2.
54. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 6.
55. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 4.
56. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 3.
57. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 15.

personal identities and national identities are blended together[58] he writes that: "trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of [the] acute discomfort entering into the core of the collective's sense of its own identity."[59] Thus, the trauma is not the event itself or any physical danger that the event may have caused, but rather, it is the impact that the event had on the group's collective identity. In this way, national trauma is not simply a way of understanding what may have happened; it is dependent upon the social performance of the event's aftermath.

Alexander suggests that in the aftermath of a collective and group trauma, impacted populations create new narratives as a method of coping.[60] Drawing upon the nomenclature coined by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and calling trauma narratives "performative speech acts," Alexander notes that it is often the work of a dominant or carrier group, who then convince others that they too have been traumatized by the event.[61] This convincing is achieved by the creation and dissemination of what Alexander calls a "new master narrative" of trauma.[62] The new master narrative has four critical components:

1) The narrative of the pain: What actually happened?
2) The nature of the victim: What person or group was affected by this pain?
3) Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience: While the trauma may initially only affect certain individuals or a particular group, it is only once the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity that the audience will be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the trauma.

58. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 5.
59. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*,15.
60. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 16.
61. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 16-17.
62. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 17.

4) Attribution of responsibility: In creating the trauma narrative, the identity of the perpetrator must be clearly established.[63]

Thus, Alexander roots his theory of trauma not in the act itself, but in the event's aftermath. This model will be utilized throughout this dissertation as a mechanism for understanding and mapping narratives of national trauma.

Kai Erikson expands on Alexander's definition and suggests that, when a group realizes that an event has disrupted and permanently altered the fabric of the community and sense of self, trauma can even *create* communities. This process is often slow and subtle, but still powerful.[64] E. Ann Kaplan notes that, as news outlets print stories and circulate accounts of the event, people who were not necessarily directly involved begin to identify with the new narrative of trauma.[65] Dominick LaCapra writes that, as accounts of the traumatic event continue to circulate and new communities are being formed, wounds cannot heal, because such wounds "incapacitate one as an agent in the present."[66] By choosing to stage a narrative that is counter to the public's new master trauma narrative, a theatre is choosing to attack its audience's identity and reminded them of their lost agency. Both the trauma and the new master narrative of trauma linger in the ever-present mediascape.

During the War on Terror, spectators were/are bombarded with media accounts—via print, radio, and television—of the wars, of the politics and policies, of the enemy, and ultimately, by messages of patriotism wrapped in a nationalist narrative. As I stated in my

63. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 17-9.
64. Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 187.
65. See *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*.
66. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 144.

methodology, this study uses the theoretical apparatus of Judith Butler and her work, *Frames of War: When Is Life Greivable?* Butler notes that participation in war is not simply limited to soldiers and politicians, but extends to civilians as well. Though someone may not perceive himself or herself as actively participating in war, they are still subject to "visual modes of participation in the war"[67] by means of news and other types of media. This is problematic for theatre artists and dramaturgs, because, as Butler notes: "visual and conceptual frames are ways of building and destroying populations as objects of knowledge and targets of war, and … such frames are the means through which social norms are relayed and made effective."[68] Staging a narrative that is counter to such framing thrusts spectators in a place of confrontation, and this is the very place that can be navigated by the dramaturg. Guiding audiences through this space is no small task, and a very delicate matter. Butler notes that epistemological problems arise through the "issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend, or indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated."[69] Both of the plays included as case studies were performed at times of war, and audiences coming to see these plays would have been familiar with the national narrative and the archetypes found within them: the War on Terror, "The Terrorist," "The Muslim," etc. The initial framing of their identities and that of the narrative of war happens outside of the proscenium arch, before audiences arrive at the theatre, and must be considered by the dramaturg. By considering what the audience knows or does not know about a conflict, the dramaturg finds a starting point for conversation with the audience.

67. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), xix.
68. Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, xix.
69. Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, 1.

Post 9/11 Drama

There was no shortage of plays written in response to the events of September 11, 2001. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, playwrights responded in many ways, though most plays fall into three broad categories: plays about and that speak to the immediate aftermath of the attacks, political satires, and documentary theatre. The landscape of late-twentieth-century drama dealing with war and its aftermath has been mapped extensively by Jeanne Colleran in *Theatre and War: Theatrical Responses Since 1991* (2012), which explores the "overlap of politics and aesthetics characteristic of contemporary events."[70] Many plays were realistic or domestic dramas set during the relatively immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and centered around characters processing the event and rebuilding their lives. Such dramas include Anne Nelson's *The Guys* (2001), Neil LaBute's *Mercy Seat* (2002), and Craig Wright *Recent Tragic Events* (2004). Other plays, such as Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros' *Omnium Gatherum* (2003) and *The God of Hell* by Sam Shepard (2004), examined the attacks, the aftermath, and the surrounding events using a lens of satire. Additionally, as more information about the attacks became known to the public, playwrights constructed documentary pieces, such as *Betrayed* by George Packer (2007) and *A Question of Impeachment* by Alan Buchman (2007). This is not an exhaustive list, but serves a snapshot of post-9/11 plays by American playwrights that either directly or indirectly address the attacks and their aftermath.

70. Jeanne Colleran, *Theatre and War: Theatrical Responses Since 1991* (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 6.

Significance and Overview

By creating a study that investigates a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy, this project contributes to several different fields—theatre studies, practitioner training, and trauma studies. The following chapters build upon the intersection of dramaturgical practice and its capacity to interface with the collective trauma that audiences experience during the aftermath of national trauma. Focusing on the productions of *Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless*, my exploration is not intended to be linear or comparative. Rather, just as every theatrical production is its own, unique endeavor in its own cultural moment, each case study will be considered independently from the other. The thread running through each of the chapters that will tie them together is the mediascape that enveloped the War on Terror and the countering narrative of the dramatic world. In this situation, the dramaturg must concede that their work is not only mounting the production and working with fellow artists, but guiding audiences through such narratives that are perceived as a threatening attack on their identities. By highlighting the importance of the dramaturg's acknowledgment of the audience's exposure and the ways that a mimetic narrative may counter a contemporaneous mediascape, and by advocating for the dramaturg to bring dramaturgical practice into conversation with trauma studies, my project expands upon current conversations about the applicability of theatre scholarship to the artistic craft.

In order to make this case, I have selected two case studies—*Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless*—because they present a counter-narrative of national trauma and form a site wherein the spectator's capacity for empathy is paramount to the meaning-making of the production. These plays were mounted during a time of socio-cultural trauma and commemoration, and artists were faced with challenges when trying to get audiences—critics included—to engage with the work. This chapter sets up my research design and situates the discussion within the existing literature.

Chapters Two and Three will provide the case studies for my argument. Chapter Two, "'The Present is Always an Awful Place to Be:' *Homebody/Kabul*, 9/11, and Dramaturgy in the Immediate Aftermath of National Trauma," will focus on Kushner's play and its unexpected circumstances. The play opened in New York just months after the 9/11 attacks, though Kushner had been working on the script for several years before. The chapter situates the play in its contemporaneous mediascape—the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Chapter Three, "'Americans Love Reinvention:' *Lidless*, the War on Terror, and Reexamining a Trauma Narrative" examines the dramaturg's process during a time of national commemoration and a shifting trauma narrative. Finally, Chapter Four, "We're Not Set Up to Handle Something Like That" concludes my study and expands the discussion of trauma-informed dramaturgy by considering the present moment and the COVID-19 pandemic. During such a time of uncertainty, it advocates for the importance of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy to help the theatre community prepare for what many expect will be a challenging future.

"The Present is Always an Awful Place to Be":
***Homebody/Kabul*, 9/11, and Dramaturgy in the Immediate Aftermath of National Trauma**

> *"And if you're thinking how awful these sentiments are, you are perfectly correct, these are awful times, but you must remember as well as* this *has always been the chiefest* [sic] *characteristic of The Present, to everyone living through it; always throughout history, and so far as I can see for all the days and the years to come until the sun and the stars fall down and the clocks have all ground themselves to expiry and the furniture has long long shaded away into Time Immemorial: The Present is* always *an awful place to be."*[71] –Homebody

Introduction

Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* was just a few weeks away from beginning its rehearsal process at the New York Theatre Workshop when American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The impact of the 9/11 attacks was unprecedented, both in terms of loss of life and impact on the nation's psyche. Things, events, and time were reinterpreted and understood in relation to the attacks. In the immediate wake of the attacks, dozens of new plays premiered in New York, and, indeed, throughout the world, that grappled with the fallout of such a seismic ontological shift. While the timing of the premiere of Kushner's play was entirely coincidental, the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath impacted audiences' meaning-making of the production.

In this chapter, I discuss strategies for the dramaturg to consider when working on a production during the immediate aftermath of a catastrophic event with content that counters the newly developing narrative of trauma. Typical approaches to new-play dramaturgy focus on the playwright's writing process and the relationship between the playwright and the dramaturg. No

71. Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), 11. Emphasis original.

doubt these are integral components of creating new plays, but the unique circumstances surrounding the world premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* highlight a situation that eludes existing literature or articulated practice. What follows is a theoretical exercise in *what could be* rather than a historical examination of what took place. Though the artists involved in the world premiere understood that the world surrounding the play was drastically altered during the weeks leading up to its opening, the focus of their work seemed to carry on as planned. It is understandable; the 9/11 attacks were unprecedented and unthinkable—even for a playwright like Tony Kushner.[72]

This chapter explores the potential role of the dramaturg in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks and how to navigate theatrical projects both artistically and with audiences, keeping the discussion focused on the interplay of storytelling, meaning-making, and dramaturgy. The first section of the chapter will provide a brief overview of the play and its background. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to discussing a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy in the immediate aftermath of a large-scale tragedy. The first section discusses the premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* within the context of the 9/11 attacks, as a dominant narrative regarding the event was taking shape. The next section addresses ways that Kushner's production countered that dominant narrative. The chapter's final section positions the dramaturg as the artistic mediator at the helm of creating both a character-focused production and an audience-centered theatrical event. Two things are worth noting: First, I situate myself at the center of theoretical endeavor in the role of dramaturg, and, therefore, want to acknowledge my specific subject position—that of a white, upper-middle-class woman. The work that follows has been

72. With the premieres of his two-part epic, *Angels in America: The Millennium Approaches* (1991) and *Angels in America: Perestroika* (1992), Kushner established himself as a formidable playwright whose writing embraced both controversy and the zeitgeist.

generated through that very specific prism. Second, all of my research, thinking, and writing was done almost twenty years after the event itself. Dramaturgs Oskar Eustis and Mandy Mishell Hackett, who worked with Kushner as his drafts developed and throughout the rehearsal process, did not have those advantages when they were suddenly catapulted into this unmapped territory.

On a fundamental level, plays are a reflection of the richness, complexity, and tension of the historical moment in which they are written. By the time Kushner's play began rehearsals in the fall of 2001, his draft had gone through several revisions. In its early stages, the play was a one-act monologue from the character Homebody. Over the next couple of years, Kushner expanded the play, keeping much of Homebody's monologue, and adding to it an exploration of what happens after she goes to Kabul. Kushner first began writing *Homebody/Kabul* in the late 1990s because he was both "fascinated and concerned" by the United States' involvement with Afghanistan. He set out to write a play that "plunges [the audience] into an examination of [their] own assumptions about possibility, change, the meaning of history, about [their] role and [their] country's role in the world."[73] The subtext of the playwright's stated intentions points to a very specific intended audience—likely middle-to-upper class patrons who possessed a presumed physical, cultural, ethnic, and political distance from Central Asia. For this audience, the play was quite timely, though the playwright could not have anticipated 9/11.

The 9/11 attacks generated shockwaves that propelled the country into a state of national trauma. On the morning of September 11, 2001, a total of four commercial airplanes were hijacked. Two of the hijacked planes were deliberately flown into the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center. The third hijacked plane was flown into the Pentagon outside of Washington D.C.

73. Tony Kushner and Naomi Wallace, "Grist for a Writer's Mill," *American Theatre Magazine*, October 2001, 37.

Just before a fourth hijacked plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed from the plane's impact. Less than half an hour later, the World Trade Center's North Tower toppled. In total, 2,753 people, including the airline crew and passengers, those at the impact sites, and rescue teams, perished in the attacks. Hundreds more died in the aftermath from health complications relating to the attacks. While much research has been done to address individual experiences of trauma—the emotionally complex processing of an unsettling event—both in the fields of psychiatry and in the humanities, this chapter examines the trauma of 9/11 as a *collective* experience. Therefore, I am less concerned with individual and personal accounts of the event, and more interested in the event's broader cultural impact. Though every event will be experienced and processed through the intersectionality of a person's race, gender, and class, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander notes that the dominant narrative of the trauma will belong to the group with the most access to performative power.[74] Thus, while individual experiences of the trauma narrative of 9/11 varied tremendously, the dominant narrative was fueled by the assumption that "American" was synonymous with whiteness.

In the days immediately following the September 11, 2001 attacks, news networks and journalists scrambled for information to broadcast, and a collective trauma narrative of the event began to take shape. The United States had been wounded, both physically and psychologically. Though much of the country was not present in New York or Arlington that morning, many watched the event unfold in real-time on television from the moment the second plane flew into the South Tower until the North Tower collapsed. On September 12, 2001, the country was a different place than it had been just one day before. The collective American consciousness was forever altered, and the country found itself working through a state of national trauma. National

74. Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 2.

trauma falls under the umbrella of collective trauma, or a disruptive shared event that "falls outside the range of ordinary human experiences."[75] According to psychiatrist Thomas Singer, collective identities arise from *group spirits*, or a sense of belonging to a community based on a shared identity or core beliefs.[76] Group spirits can form around many things, including a sense of national identity. There is, however, no universal consensus on the definition of a nation or the parameters of national identity. Because, as Homi K. Bhabha suggests, a nation is an inherently unstable entity and constantly "coming into being,"[77] group spirits organized around an idea of national belonging are inherently precarious. On an individual level, the 9/11 attacks impacted people and groups differently. The dominant discourse that emerged and was subsequently circulated, however, was rooted in a narrative that foregrounded the primacy of whiteness, a shattered presumption of physical safety, and an idealized assumption that equated these ideas with an identity of Americanness.

It was against this backdrop in the fall of 2001 that Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* opened. Even without the complication of 9/11, *Homebody/Kabul* is a complex and haunting play. Much like plays, narratives of collective trauma are formed and reshaped over time. The events of 9/11 put the dramaturg and the playwright in the unique position of having to work through an emerging trauma narrative as it unfolded. This difficult situation set up an unusual task for the dramaturg—the need to simultaneously respond to both a rapidly forming narrative about 9/11 and the narrative of a stage production that counters it.

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75. Arthur Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 2005), 9.
76. Thomas Singer, "Unconscious Forces Shaping International Conflict," *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 5, no. 1 (2007) 47.
77. Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-2.

The (Con) Text of the Performance[78]

While theatres in New York City went dark in the days immediately following 9/11, they had resumed their regular production schedule by December 2001 when *Homebody/Kabul* was set to begin rehearsals at the New York Theatre Workshop. Kushner had first workshopped the play in 1998 in London, when it was just Homebody's monologue. The play was later expanded and was in some stage of development until 2001, when artistic director James C. Nicola chose to include it in the New York Theatre Workshop's 2001-2002 season. As is typical with theatres and their season planning, the decision to stage the world premiere of the play was made and announced in early 2001, many months before the attacks. That *Homebody/Kabul* premiered just eight weeks after 9/11 was completely coincidental.

Homebody/Kabul premiered on December 19, 2001. The production was directed by Declan Donnellan with dramaturgy by Oskar Eustis and Mandy Mishell Hackett. The premiere staked its claim in the theatrical landscape of post-9/11 New York, when the city's theatre district was still reeling from the aftermath of the attacks. While there was a city-wide initiative to encourage audiences to attend Broadway theatres, little attention was given to reigniting audience attendance at Off-Broadway theatres like the New York Theatre Workshop. When *Homebody/Kabul* went into previews on December 5, 2001, Broadway was already close to full strength again. However, the New York Theatre Workshop, an Off-Broadway theatre, was still recovering. The most immediate impact was financial, not artistic. The artistic content of the

78. All references to and quotations from *Homebody/Kabul* refer to the original version of the script that premiered at New York Theatre Workshop in December 2001. The version of *Homebody/Kabul* that premiered in December 2001 is somewhat different than the version that has since been widely published and circulated. In 2002, while the play was in rehearsal at Steppenwolf, the playwright made noticeable changes to the script and later published it as *Homebody/Kabul: Revised Edition*.

theatrical terrain remained intact, and productions and premieres were executed mostly on schedule and according to season plans that were set into motion many months prior, with rehearsals for *Homebody/Kabul* beginning in October 2001.

Homebody/Kabul is set "just before and just after the American bombardment of the suspected terrorist training camps in Khost, Afghanistan, August 1998."[79] The character Homebody is a lonely housewife living in London. It is 1998 when she reads from an old guidebook about Afghanistan, dated 1965. As she reads through the country's history, she grows more and more infatuated with the country. Homebody also describes her current situation: she is married with a daughter, and both she and her husband take antidepressants. In long, winding sentences, Homebody's monologue drifts between her real-life situation and her created imaginary world, slipping into the Afghani past of the guidebook. Eventually, she imagines herself landing in the nameless store referred to in the script as the "shop on _____ (*gesture*)."[80] In the shop, she buys "these abbreviated fezlike pillboxy attenuated yarmulkite millinarisms."[81] When she goes to pay for the hats, she, without any explanation, finds that she can speak Pashtu. The Afghani clerk, who also speaks Pashtu, is missing three fingers on his right hand. She observes that they "have been hacked off, following the line of a perfect clean diagonal from the middle to ring to little finger."[82] He tells her that he fought with the Mujahideen and that the Russians cut off his fingers. After Homebody completes her purchase, she imagines herself walking around Kabul with the clerk and kissing him. Upon returning

79. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 5.
80. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 17. In an explanatory note at the beginning of the script, Kushner writes that the Homebody does not give the name of the shop that she visits. Instead, "where the name would fall in the sentence, she makes a wide, sweeping gesture in the air with her right hand, from left to right, almost as if to say: 'I know the name but will not tell you.'"
81. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 16-17.
82. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 21.

home, she wonders about the clerk. Homebody's fantasy about the clerk is spliced with short interjections about her marital troubles and her uneasy relationship with her daughter. As her momentum builds, she pushes talk of her own family off to the side, and returns to her fantasy world with gusto. She tells the audience about an imaginary party that is underscored by Frank Sinatra's song "It's Nice to Go Traveling." She imagines herself wearing the hats and telling her friends about the clerk and their relationship, even quipping, "would you make love to a man with a mutilated hand if the opportunity was offered to you?"[83] By the end of her monologue, she is even more in love with the city of Kabul than she was before. With both determination and infatuation, she recites a poem by seventeenth-century Persian poet Sa'ib-I-Tabrizi about the beauty and wonder of Kabul.

In the next scene, the action moves to a hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan. Homebody's husband, Milton, and their daughter, Priscilla, have learned that Homebody has been killed. They have come to collect her body and bring it back to London. Dr. Qari Shah, a physician, and Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni, a Taliban minister, meet them in a hotel room and give them the gruesome news. Durranni tells Milton and Pricilla that Homebody was sightseeing in Kabul without wearing a burqa and was beaten by a group of locals. There is, however, no body for the family to take home. After Homebody's corpse was examined and presumed dead, it disappeared as it was being transferred between hospitals. Upon hearing this news, Priscilla questions if Homebody is actually dead, and leaves the hotel room to find her mother.

Alone on the streets of Kabul, Priscilla is approached by Khwaja, an English-speaking Tajik guide, who offers to help Priscilla search for her mother in exchange for payment. Priscilla accepts his offer. Khwaja reveals that he was asked by a local hat-seller, Zai Garshi, to find

83. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 29.

Priscilla and bring her to his shop, because he had something to tell her. Upon arriving at the shop, Zai Garshi tells Priscilla that her mother is alive, but she does not wish to have any contact with her daughter. She has converted to Islam and has married a local Afghan man. The Afghan man, however, is already married, and has requested that Milton and Priscilla take his wife, Mahala, to London on their return.

Milton and Priscilla, who have always had a tumultuous father-daughter relationship, continue to argue about Homebody's fate. Milton is convinced that Homebody is dead, while Priscilla insists that she is still alive. Priscilla's continued search and questioning of locals in an attempt to make contact with her mother eventually gets Milton, Mahala, and herself captured. Durrani arrives and informs the group that Homebody was in fact killed and suggests that Mahala made up the whole situation in order to leave her husband. This is an offense with a death sentence. Desperate to avoid further carnage, Milton offers a bribe in exchange for Mahala's life. Durranni relents and takes the bribe. The ending of the play is ambiguous, and it remains unclear who is telling the truth and what ultimately became of Homebody.

A Trauma-Informed Approach to *Homebody/Kabul*

Since its premiere in 2001, Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* has been called one of "the most timely—even eerily prophetic—plays ever to have landed in New York at a moment of national tension and emergency."[84] When *Homebody/Kabul* opened a few weeks after the attacks, the country was still grappling with their aftermath and learning how to navigate through the loss. Martin Esslin describes the responsibility of a dramaturg as one who, among other things, "must

84. Peter Marks, "For Tony Kushner, an Eerily Prescient Return" *New York Times*, November 25, 2001, AR 1.

be an expert on the problems, demography, prejudices, and prides of the community [they serve], to have [their] finger on its pulse."[85] The remarkable coincidence between the premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* and the attacks of 9/11 presented a situation wherein considerations about the "pulse" of the community became an integral part of the meaning-making process, and provided an opportunity for dramaturgs to aid playwrights and production teams in navigating through moments of unforeseen national trauma. Dramaturgs Oskar Eustis and Mandy Mishell Hackett could not have foreseen the events of the morning of September 11th, yet we can still imagine how they might have responded, had they been trained in trauma studies as well as new-play dramaturgy.

Literature about trauma and the aftermath of tragedy is typically written years or even decades after an event has taken place, and little help exists for the dramaturg in such a situation who must respond immediately. The following sections offer suggestions for ways that a dramaturg can work alongside other artists who are working through a production that finds itself culturally recontextualized only a few short weeks before its world premiere. The primary objective of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy is not to suggest that playwrights alter their work simply for the comfort of the audience (though they may come upon situations where this suits the needs of the storytelling). Instead, what a trauma-informed approach could aim to achieve is an environment for spectators wherein they feel empowered to engage with the production, both emotionally and intellectually. Perhaps the most difficult realization to grapple with is that the play that they have developed and prepared will take on new meaning for spectators in the aftermath of a catastrophic event. Before the cultural vantage point of an

85. Martin Esslin "Towards an American Dramaturg: Adapting the Function of Dramaturgy to U.S. Conditions," in *Dramaturgy in the American Theatre: A Source Book*, ed. Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl and Michael Lupu (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 28.

audience can be utilized to support a production, the dramaturg must acknowledge their own cultural knowledge as well as their own limitations. These knowledges and limitations will, of course, be specific to the production, the dramaturg, and the location where the production is mounted. No dramaturg can account for every demographic variation that may be present in a theatre's audience for any given performance. They can begin, however, by comparing the world of the play with the location in which the production is taking place. To clarify, I use the term *the world of the play* to encompass the interplay that includes the location in which the play is set, the cultural and historical milieu, the overall tone or mood, and the characters that inhabit the play and the ways in which they interact with each other. All of this begins with straightforward research and pre-rehearsal preparation, for which methods and strategies have long been discussed and codified in the field of dramaturgy. In this section, I will discuss the second part of the equation: applying location-specific cultural knowledge and utilizing that information to create an environment wherein spectators are willing to engage with a production.

Because of the uncanny timing and location of *Homebody/Kabul*'s premiere, playwright Tony Kushner has been called upon by critics to discuss the genesis of the play and his reasons for writing it. In the afterward published with the first and all subsequent editions of the play, Kushner quips: "the play was written before 9/11. I am not psychic."[86] The coincidence was unsettling, to be sure, but audiences flocked to see *Homebody/Kabul*. The production played to sold-out houses almost every night, and served as a site for audiences to grapple with a counter-narrative of national trauma, even as the aftermath of the event was taking place outside of the theatre's doors in real time.

86. Kushner, "An Afterword," in *Homebody/Kabul* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002), 146.

In recent decades, conversations about dramaturgical practice have expanded from the dramaturg-as-researcher and the dramaturg-as-critic, and have become more spectator-focused. In the context of a play like *Homebody/Kabul*, any consideration of the spectator must include questions about their coping strategies and overall mental wellbeing. That said, while this chapter advocates for a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy and suggests that theatres can be sites of both collective mourning and reconciliation, it does not suggest that theatres and theatre artists can (or should) take the place of mental health professionals. What I do suggest, instead, is that an understanding of and a sensitivity to the interplay of trauma narratives between a theatrical world and a production's spectators can positively serve both the artists and the audience. It is important to note that, though theatre artists are not medical doctors, social workers, or mental health care professionals, drawing on specific ideas from those fields can be beneficial for a dramaturg working on a production whose mimetic content relates to a recent tragedy. In her profession as a social worker and scholar, Michal Shamai has worked extensively in situations of collective and national trauma, and has outlined a framework for addressing such situations. Similar to Mark Bly's dramaturgical approach of "the questioning spirit," Shamai suggests a path led by delicate questioning rather than the imposition of heavy-handed knowledge. Though her work suggests strategies that range from the individual to the systemic level, two points are especially important for the dramaturg's process. She first suggests considering whether expressions of traumatic stress are widely acceptable.[87] Second, she asks for consideration concerning the role of those suffering from traumatic stress within a larger cultural

87. Michal Shamai, *Systemic Interventions for Collective and National Trauma: Theory, Practice*, and Evaluation (New York: Routledge, 2016), 118.

system.[88] When preparing a new work that ties to a recent national trauma, I suggest that these same two questions be the first ones considered by the dramaturg.

Shamai's first consideration—whether expression of a trauma is widely acknowledged and accepted—presents a paradox for the dramaturg. While the traumatic aftermath of 9/11 was collectively acknowledged, the audience that had been imagined or assumed by the production team before the attacks no longer existed. The first step for the dramaturg is to adjust their own expectations of the project. A different audience, one grappling with the aftermath of a recent event, had taken their place. Though this may seem obvious, it cannot be stressed enough. *Homebody/Kabul* was a different play on September 10, 2001 than it was on September 12, 2001. The historical moment and the cultural context in which the play was written had changed. Cultural milieus are constantly shifting, but changes are typically gradual, and often so minor that they are not recognized from one day to the next. *Homebody/Kabul*, however, was recontextualized—literally—overnight. Many years of work and planning had gone into the New York premiere, and the New York Theatre Workshop opted to move forward with the production. Dramaturgs typically discuss playwriting and developing new work as a *process*, where initial drafts serve as a starting point for exploration. Attention is given to the dramatic structure, social and cultural commentary, the development of characters and their relationships to each other. Any focus on the spectator's experience is often left until the weeks before the formal rehearsal process begins, and usually occurs within the marketing department. For the dramaturg who finds themselves working on a new play that has been suddenly recontextualized, the starting point must be an acknowledgment of this shift.

88. Shamai, *Systemic Interventions for Collective and National Trauma: Theory, Practice, and Evaluation*, 118.

When this situation presents itself, the dramaturg likely does not have the luxury of time for a full and complete reimagining of the production. Once the dramaturg accepts that the work has, through no fault of its own, been forced into a new context, they can begin to apply a trauma-informed approach to the project. It is not, however, a situation wherein the dramaturgical process must begin from scratch. Indeed, it is unlikely that there would be an opportunity to do so. Furthermore, the dramaturg, too, is human, and is learning how to navigate through the early aftermath of an upending event themselves. The old adage that "the show must go on" is applicable, though I would adjust it to say that the show must go on with careful attention given to a new contextualization. The dramaturg should allow themselves to get used to the play's new context.

Analysis of *Homebody/Kabul* Through a Lens of National Trauma

The second part of a trauma-informed approach is for the dramaturg to be able to articulate and identify the interplay between the mimetic trauma narrative in the production and the real-life trauma narrative that envelops the consciousness of the spectators. Reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss uses the term *horizon of expectations* to describe the mediation that happens when a spectator encounters an artistic work and interprets it through a prism of their contemporaneous situation.[89] More recently, theatre scholar Susan Bennett has noted that: "multiple horizons of expectations are bound to exist within a culture, and these are, always, open to renegotiation before, during, and after the theatrical performance. The relationship then between culture and the idea of the theatrical event is one that is necessarily flexible and

89. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward and Aesthetic Theory of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 22.

inevitably rewritten on a daily basis."[90] Even though the nature of a horizon of expectations is both incredibly complex and widely unstable, the potential framework that it creates for spectators cannot be overlooked, and serves as an integral component of the dramaturg's work.

When *Homebody/Kabul* went into previews on December 5, 2001, both audiences and critics flocked to the show out of a curiosity to see the newest work by the playwright of *Angels in America*, as well as to make some sense of recent political events. Reviews of the performance were mixed: some were intrigued by Kushner's take on the subject matter, while others were horrified that the playwright had dared to go through with a play about such a topic during a time of national panic.

While the artistic team of *Homebody/Kabul* was working through the typical pre-rehearsal logistics of mounting a production, the focus of their work was on the world of the play as Kushner had presented it in his draft. As the dramaturg embarks upon a trauma-informed approach to a production, it is important that this approach not attempt to alter the text of the play itself, or any other artistic choices. The objective of trauma-informed handling of a production is intended to impact the experience of the *spectator*. Thinking through the mimetic narrative of the play and then considering any countering narratives that spectators may have encountered before arriving at the theatre can create a roadmap for the dramaturg.

During the fall of 2001, there were many questions surrounding the attacks, and answers were slow to emerge. The mediascape was saturated with speculative commentary, and replays of the planes flying into the twin towers and their subsequent collapse. On the evening after the attacks, President George W. Bush gave a short, televised speech from the Oval Office. He

90. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 106.

opened his address by telling the nation: "today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist attacks."[91] Though such a speech was presumably intended to create feelings of unity and inspire a sense of collective belonging to the group spirit of Americanness, Bush's rhetoric helped give shape to a newly emerging narrative that entangled Americanness with the terrorist attack, and thus began to solidify a dominant narrative of the aftermath. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has written extensively about how collective narratives develop in the wake of large-scale traumas. By focusing on the collective trauma of groups, rather than individually experienced trauma, Alexander removes collective trauma from the medical realm entirely, and instead considers it to be a social performance. He specifically links his understanding of collective trauma to performativity in the aftermath of catastrophic events, describing collective trauma as "reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them,"[92] suggesting that the belatedness of response is expressed through a group's performance of the event's memory. He uses the term *new master narrative* to describe the time after an upsetting event that impacts a collective consciousness takes place, where a renegotiated understanding of collective identity begins to take shape. [93] The crafting of this new, trauma-impacted identity, however, is not universal, nor is it inclusive of every individual affected by the event. Rather, the dominant narrative is a direct result of both material and cultural power structures. In the aftermath of 9/11, the emergent dominant narrative situated

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91. George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks, September 11, 2001." *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008*, 57-58. https://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.
92. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 4.
93. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 17.

a presumed homogeneous, unified, and physically safe nation as the target of an unprovoked terrorist attack by a people characterized as primitive and barbaric.

This new narrative was shaped and circulated by a nebulous cloud of headlines, replayed videos, and cable news commentary. The word 'patriotism' seemed to be used in conjunction with every possible action. American flags were displayed with gusto.[94] The assumed group spirit of the United States had been wounded, and the country's presumed sense of relative security had been breached. Additionally, the notion of American exceptionalism—the widespread ideology that the United States is unique among nations for its democratic ideals, morality, and stance on human rights—was challenged by an overt physical attack that was organized by a group that took umbrage with this very idea. On the surface, it likely appeared that the United States was the target of an unprovoked bombardment on the morning of September 11th. Reading and watching the news that followed the attacks, it was almost impossible to conclude that any blame for the destruction of the Twin Towers lay with the United States of America.

Tony Kushner's play, however, presented a different narrative. The notion that the United States could be so hated by some in the world that an external group would want to plan and execute such an attack in the first place was equally mind-boggling to the status quo. While the motivations and actions that led up to the attacks were complex and convoluted, they were present, even if they were not widely acknowledged in mainstream discourse.

As print and broadcast media circulated a flurry of information, a clear narrative quickly began to emerge. Political leaders and newscasters quickly began framing and disseminating a

94. See Gordon Coonfield's "New Images as Lived Images: Witness, Performance, and the U.S. Flag After 9/11," in *Culture, Trauma, and Conflict: Perspectives on War*, ed. Nico Carpenter (New York: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

narrative, made up of four distinct parts whose prominence in the discussion ebbed and flowed as necessary. The first, and perhaps the most salient, was that the United States was completely and utterly blameless for the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. At first glance, it appeared that the United States had little to do with the country of Afghanistan. The U.S.'s involvement in an Afghani civil war in the 1980s, which had served as a proxy war with the Soviet Union, had long since faded out of the foreground of public memory. The U.S.'s bombing of Khost in 1998, the event that inspired Kushner to write *Homebody/Kabul*, was only a brief blip in the headlines. The knowledge vacuum surrounding Afghanistan made the narrative of U.S. blamelessness relatively easy to maintain and circulate. In the wake of the attacks, the United States was frightened and uncertain, and looked to the president for leadership and guidance. Almost immediately after the attacks, President Bush's rhetoric focused on Al Qaeda's baseless hatred of the United States. On September 20, 2001, the president gave a speech before a joint session of Congress that was televised to the nation. In it, he told the chamber and the country:

> Americans are asking, 'why do they hate us?'
>
> They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedom: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.[95]

The president's words focused precisely on two values often considered to be at the core of an American identity—participation in a democracy and freedom of religion. In his speech, the

95. George W. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001." *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001-2008*, 65-74. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf.

president vaguely alludes to a hatred of "our way of life." Such terminology frames the attacks in the language of trauma and plays directly into what Singer calls *group spirit.* Singer explains that when a group perceives its core values being attacked, the group spirit propels it into action to protect and defend those values.[96] It is important to note that the parameters of group spirit are complex and unstable. A person may feel deeply connected to more than one group simultaneously, even when those groups are in direct conflict with each other.[97] The phrase "our way of life" is just vague enough to allow space for the individual to interpret "our" as "my." Furthermore, positioning "our way of life" as the target of the attack suggests to listeners that, regardless of their physical distance from the event, their group spirit, the very thing that holds them together, is under attack. The critical reception of *Homebody/Kabul* pointed directly to such an idea of conflicting loyalties. Nothing in Bush's speech brought attention to the long-standing and complex relationship between the United States and Afghanistan. Rather, the speech told Americans that they were hated for the simple reason of being American and living "our way of life." By using language that labels the target of the attacks as "our way of life," the president's speech tapped directly into the vulnerability of a group spirit and, by doing so, justified any retaliatory action.

Kushner's play, however, directly challenged President Bush's claim that the United States was blameless. In their first meeting together, Mahala tells Priscilla about what life in Afghanistan has become under the Taliban. Mahala is highly educated, multilingual, and worked as a librarian until the Taliban came to power. Speaking with a translator but barely waiting for them to finish translating, Mahala barrels through her speech, telling Priscilla: "America buys

96. Singer, "Unconscious Forces Shaping International Conflict," 48.
97. Singer, "Unconscious Forces Shaping International Conflict," 48.

this, bombs, from Communist Chinese to sell in secret to Taliban through Pakistan. Afghanistan kill the Soviet Union for you, we win the "Cold War" for you, for us is not so cold, huh?"[98] By 1998, when the play was written, and 2001, when the play premiered in New York City, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was a distant memory, an event that ended in 1991. Mahala reminds them, however, that the U.S.'s involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War did not end neatly, and its effects were still very present in everyday Afghan life. In the late 1970s, civil war broke out in Afghanistan. The two main warring factions were the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (PDPA), a political party that came to power through a coup and sought to establish a secular government in the country, and the mujahideen, an opposition group that favored an Islamic-based government. Seeking additional monetary and material support, the PDPA accepted backing from the Soviet Union, which hoped to extend its influence into the country. Fearful of expanding Soviet and communist influence, the United States got involved and supported the mujahideen with funding and training. Though the United States did not send troops to the region, its contributions and involvement in a proxy war left an impact on the country. Over the next few years, the various U.S.-funded factions of mujahideen reorganized themselves into several groups, one becoming the Taliban, the political group that held power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Another sub-faction became Al Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

The second part of the national narrative stresses the backwardness, unsophistication, and barbarism of Afghanistan. In his televised speech to a joint session of Congress, President Bush placed the responsibility for the 9/11 attacks on Al Qaeda, and described the brutality that it had inflicted on Afghanistan, saying:

98. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 83.

> In Afghanistan, we see Al Qaeda's vision for the world. Afghanistan's people have been brutalized, many are starving, and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television, religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.[99]

To those unfamiliar with Afghanistan, Bush's description only furthered the notion that the country was primitive and that its people were backward.

The third part of the narrative designated the recently dubbed War on Terror as a noble and worthy cause that would justify any loss of life resulting from military action. This final component of the narrative suggested that the whole problem of 9/11 and Afghanistan could be mitigated by military might. After all, Al Qaeda did more than attack the Twin Towers and the Pentagon—they attacked *Americanness* and, therefore, needed to be pursued with all possible military strength. In the same speech, President Bush laid out the steps that the United States was going to take to combat both Al Qaeda and global terrorism as a whole. There would be calculated military action and a newly created Office of Homeland Security that would oversee national security. "These measures," the president told the country, "are essential. The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows."[100] Throughout his speech, President Bush was careful to remind listeners what was at stake and what needed to be protected. What was really attacked was not the Twin Towers or the Pentagon, but rather "our way of life," freedom, and Americanness. The president vowed: "I will not forget the wound to our country, and those who inflicted it. I will not yield, I will not rest, I

99. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001," 67.
100. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001," 70.

will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security of the American people."[101] To be sure, those words were likely intended to be reassuring and offer calm resolve. In addition, Bush's rhetoric fed into the narrative of U.S. blamelessness.

Bush's advocacy for American exceptionalism brings us back to the discussion of Jeffrey Alexander's model of a trauma story and the creation of dominant trauma narratives introduced in the previous chapter. Unlike the other play discussed in this dissertation, the world premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* opened just a few weeks after the trauma-inducing event. There was not time to process the event, nor to gain any physical or psychological distance. As audiences bought tickets and came to the theatre to watch the latest play by Tony Kushner, the swirling fragments of information and news coverage began to coalesce into a cohesive new trauma-centric narrative. Alexander posits that trauma narratives are collective in nature and are manifested into existence through performance. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be.[102] The swirling rhetoric of U.S. blamelessness, the perceived primitiveness of the Afghani people, and the nobility of ensuing military action soon began to build a new post-trauma national narrative. Alexander's model of the trauma narrative has four distinct components. The first component is the nature of the pain. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the pain was twofold. The first part was the physical destruction of the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and the literal wounding of the landscape. The second part of the pain is more symbolic—in this case, the wounding of Americanness that was caused by the attack. This part of Alexander's model identifies a victim: in this case, the U.S. Americans who felt a sense of belonging through their Americanness. The third component of Alexander's model identifies a

101. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001," 73.
102. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 4.

relationship between the victim/s and a wider audience. In the post-9/11 narrative, the relationship between the victims and the wider audience became the narrative's linchpin. According to the new trauma narrative, *everyone* was a victim of the events of 9/11, because the attacks took aim at Americanness, something that all U.S. Americans were presumed to share. Ultimately, the new narrative removed the distance and erased the distinction between a victim from the actual attacks and the wider audience of U.S. Americans, and collapsed them into a single entity.

The final part of Alexander's model is perhaps most relevant to the reception of Kushner's play. The last component identifies the perpetrator of the pain and requires the wider audience to clearly answer the question: *who* did this to *us*? This last component of the equation seeks to identify the group responsible for causing the collective suffering while simultaneously creating a new foundation of a group spirit. Within the new narrative, the *us* is everyone who shares in Americanness. Because the distance between the victim and the wider audience has been folded into the same group, the *us* is widely inclusive and also incredibly divisive; it sets up a clear us-versus-them binary. Who was on the *them* side of the binary, however, was less clear in the few weeks after the 9/11 attacks. In his speech, President Bush named Al Qaeda as the group responsible for the assaults. The group was mostly unknown to those outside of the intelligence-gathering community, and many Americans were learning about the group for the first time. The president introduced the group thusly: "Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money, its goal is remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." [103] He went on to immediately link the group with Islam, telling

103. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001," 66.

the American people that "the terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children."[104] The president's speech served to solidify the final part of the nation's new trauma narrative by giving a name and a description to the group responsible for the attack. As new trauma narratives work to oversimplify complex histories and experiences, the president's distinction between the fringe group of Al Qaeda and Islam as a whole was erased. The new trauma narrative set up an arch wherein the *them*—the group behind the attack—were all those who practiced Islam. Thus, the final trauma narrative could be understood as follows: The wounding of Americanness was caused by the religion of Islam.

Homebody/Kabul's Countering Narrative of Trauma

As a new trauma-centric identity of Americanness was taking shape in New York City and the United States, *Homebody/Kabul* premiered with much fanfare. Critic Robert Brustein called the play "relevant to the point of prescience and woefully out-of-date."[105] That sentiment was echoed by the playwright himself. In an interview for *Newsweek* published a few days before the play's official opening, Kushner said that, prior to the attacks, when we would tell people the name of the piece, they would often confuse *Kabul* with *cobble*. "Now," he stated, "everyone knows what I'm talking about."[106] As a playwright, Kushner had a great deal of clout, both as an artist and a political essayist, thus, in the context of his oeuvre, his tackling of such a topic was not surprising.

104. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001," 67.
105. Robert Brustein, "Angels in Afghanistan," *The New Republic*, March 18, 2002.
106. Marc Peyser, "Tales from Behind Enemy Lines," *Newsweek*, December 17, 2002.

Homebody/Kabul set up a narrative that played directly counter to the one circulating in the mediascape. On the surface, *Homebody/Kabul* feels like a family drama. The playwright sets up a very clear conflict that drives the action of the play: the British Homebody, after romanticizing the country of Afghanistan and the suffering of its people, naively travels to Kabul, fails to take heed of local customs, and is set upon by a group of locals. Her husband and daughter, though upset by her death, arrive in Kabul with the assumption that collecting the remains and returning them to London will be straightforward. Kushner has made no secret of the fact that he began writing *Homebody/Kabul* in late 1998 after learning about the U.S. military bombing Khost, Afghanistan. Ordered by then-president Bill Clinton, the missile attacks targeted Al Qaeda training camps in retaliation for Al Qaeda's attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Central Intelligence Agency and military intelligence members were well aware of Osama bin Laden and the growth and actions of Al Qaeda by the late 1990s. News coverage of the bombardment of Khost was extensive, but it quickly faded from public consciousness.

The attacks at Khost were not the sole cause of the 9/11 attacks; indeed, the United States and Al Qaeda were engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with each other during the latter years of the 1990s and the very early aughts. It was that event, however, that captured the imagination of the playwright, and provided the moment around which he chose to ground his play. *Homebody/Kabul* is set in 1998, a time when the Taliban controlled more than three-quarters of Afghanistan. In the U.S. imagination, the Cold War had ended in the early 1990s, the Iron Curtain had crumbled, and countries in Europe and central Asia had regained the sovereignty they had enjoyed prior to Soviet interference. In reality, central Asia, particularly Afghanistan, was still reeling from the Soviet invasion of the country in the 1980s and the subsequent civil wars. The world that Kushner's writing takes on is only a few years post-attack and still coping

with the fallout. The anger and frustration of the Afghani characters is present, raw, and palpable. In a pointed confrontation with Kushner's character Milton, Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni reminds him:

> Afghanistan is Taliban and we shall save it. No one else shall, no one else care. England betray us. United States betray us, bomb us, starve us to…*distract* on adulterous debauch Clinton and his young whore. *This* is good for women? Islam knows what dignity a woman shall have. U.S. and Russia destroy us as destroy Vietnam, Palestine, Chechnya, Bosnia. As India destroy Kashmir. As Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan keep Islam from its people. As U.N. deny Taliban to be recognize. All plot against Islam. Iran plot against Islam. For five thousand years, no one shall save the Afghan people. No one else but Allah may save it. We are servants of Allah.[107]

While many scenes in the play offer subtle political commentary of the United States and the West, it is when Homebody's family attempts to leave Kabul with Mahala that the critique becomes direct and overt. At the time of its writing, *Homebody/Kabul* was perhaps a play about an outrageous family situation set in a distant and foreign political situation. After the attacks, however, the political and historical context of the play became more relevant to its meaning-making. Most importantly, this passage of dialogue, among other interactions, tied Kushner's play directly to public discourse, and offered a narrative that disrupted the one that situated the United States as the blameless party.

In addition to countering the dominant national narrative of U.S. blamelessness, Kushner's play also pushed back against the mediascape's picture of Afghanistan, portrayed as a

107. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 133. Italics original.

primitive and backward country in news reports. *Homebody/Kabul* situates the Western characters as base, animalistic, and overindulgent, while the Afghan characters are erudite and articulate. Though the characters of Homebody, Milton, and Priscilla are British and not U.S. American, they serve as a representation of the white, privileged Westerner with the means and ability to travel with few restrictions. The characters unapologetically demonstrate little understanding of Afghanistan, its history, or its culture.

The Ceiling family's ignorance about the country and culture of Afghanistan is present from the very beginning of the play. During Homebody's monologue, she frames her fantasy with a distinct Orientalist lens. Edward Said famously coined this term in 1978 to describe a Western-centric world view that positions peoples, cultures, and ideologies of the non-Western world as things to be dominated, restructured, and interpreted through Western-based thought and power structures.[108] In her monologue, Homebody reads from a guide book about Afghanistan that was written in 1965, the decade before the civil war and political strife that allowed the Taliban to rise to power. While she acknowledges that the guidebook is outdated, she has little concern about the idea, and tells the audience, "a subject strikes my fancy: Kabul—you will see why, that's the tale I'm telling…"[109] The Afghanistan that Homebody is reading about in her guidebook—the one from which she situates her fantasy—no longer exists by 1998, though this detail is largely lost on her.[110] She presses on, whimsically telling the audience that she wants to

108. Edward Said, "Orientalism," in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 69.
109. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 5.
110. At one point in her monologue, the Homebody does tell the audience about the civil unrest that took place in Afghanistan after the 1965 publication of the guidebook, but she treats this more as a trivial detail rather than something that could alter her romanticized picture of Afghanistan.

have a party and that "a party needs hats."[111] In order to purchase the perfect hats for her party, she goes to a nearby shop run by Afghani refugees. While in the hat shop, Homebody briefly acknowledges the political struggles endured by Afghanistan after the publication of the guidebook. She also tells the audience that "in Afghanistan today I would be shrouded entirely in a *burqa*, I should be subjected to *hejab*, I should live in terror of the *sharia hudud*, or more probably dead, unregenerate chatterer that I am."[112] The character views Afghanistan through an Orientalist lens, one that is likely familiar to Kushner's audiences. Though Homebody seems aware that Afghanistan has changed significantly since the publication of the guidebook, this knowledge is overpowered by her indulgent imagination, as she exoticizes her imagined life in Afghanistan while simultaneously revealing her disdain for what little she actually knows about the culture.

She notices that the clerk at the counter is missing fingers, and assumes that they have been cut off by a machete. The clerk becomes central to Homebody's fantasy. She positions him as a tragic curiosity in her imagined tale, not as a human being that has been mutilated and resettled far away from his homeland. She imagines that she can suddenly speak fluent Pashtu and asks him what happened to his hand. Homebody nonsensically tells the audience about the suffering of the nameless clerk, integrating conflicting bits of information drawn from her misunderstanding of the political landscape of contemporaneous Afghanistan. She imagines him telling her:

> I was with the Mujahideen, the Russians did this. I was with the Mujahideen, and the Russians did this. I was with the Mujahideen, and an enemy faction of the

111. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 14.
112. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 22-3. Italics original.

> Mujahideen did this. I was with the Russians, I was known to have assisted the Russians, I did informer's work for Babrak Karmal,[113] my name is in the file if they haven't been destroyed, the names I gave are in the files, there are no more files, I stole bread for my starving family, I stole bread *from* a starving family, I profaned, betrayed, according to some stricture I erred and they chopped off the fingers of my hand.[114]

According to Homebody's invented background for the nameless clerk, his fingers were cut off because he was a member of the United-States-backed Mujahideen, and also working for Soviet-backed Babrak Karmal. His fingers were also cut off by an internal fringe faction of the Mujahideen while he was working with the Mujahideen. His fingers were also cut off as punishment for stealing. It is clear from Homebody's lines that she has little understanding of the politics of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and is haphazardly stringing together names and phrases that she has heard elsewhere to create a tragic-yet-heroic backstory for the nameless clerk. She continues to tell the audience about her adventure with the nameless clerk, as they "romp about, grieving, wondering,"[115] while all the while describing the nameless clerk's past with a tone and vocabulary that suggests the destruction of Kabul and the suffering of the Afghan people is little more than whimsical fodder for her love story. She describes their trip through the streets of the city:

> I hold on tight to his ruined right hand as he leads me on a guided tour through his city. There are the mountains, unreal as clouds; it is shamelessly sweet, the

113. Babrak Karmal was an Afghan politician who was installed as president of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union upon their invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.
114. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* 23. Italics original.
115. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* 24.

> wreckage rack and ruination all there of course, it's ineffaceable now, this holocaustal [*sic*] effacement, but the gardens of Babur Shah are there too, just like the outdated guidebook promised, and the room in which handsome Shah Shujah, about thirty years of age, of olive complexion and thick black beard, puppet monarch of the British Mission […] displays himself with breathtaking effect, […] he wears a green tunic over which are worked flowers of gold and a breast plate [*sic*] of diamonds, shaped like flattened fleur-de-lis…[116]

She continues describing the emeralds, diamonds, and pearls that adorned him with great wonder and admiration, seemingly unaware of Shah Shujah's legacy of extreme cruelty to his people. Her whimsy undercuts the magnitude of the devastation and keeps the focus on herself and her joyful adventure. On several occasions, Homebody refers to the Afghanistan of the present, but those thoughts are immediately pushed to the side so she can indulge in the romantic and charming Afghanistan of her fantasy.

Upon arriving in Kabul, Homebody's attitude toward and understanding of the country is no different than when she was back in London. By the beginning of the second scene, Khost has been bombed by the United States and Homebody has been killed in Kabul. Her family is told by Doctor Qari Shah that, while sightseeing the ruins near Cheshme Khedre, she upset some of the locals by not wearing a burqa. The attack took place only a few days after the U.S.'s bombardment of Khost and the Afghan people were "angry against Western aggression-disregard-disrespect for Afghanistan."[117] Kushner's narrative positions Homebody as the clueless Westerner who has constructed a version of Afghanistan through an Orientalist lens. Such a

116. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 25.
117. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 33.

construction allows this character to cobble together bits and pieces of Afghan culture and history that she finds appealing, while ignoring everything else. Homebody's blatant disregard for local dress standards upset the locals, and she was attacked. In contrast to the mediascape's characterization of Afghanistan as a backward and primitive place, Kushner's narrative situates the Western traveler as unenlightened and unadaptable.

Such characterization extends to the members of Homebody's family as well. Like her mother, Priscilla, too, displays a lack of respect for the local culture. After she learns about her mother's attack, Priscilla covers herself in an abaya and bolts from the hotel room onto the streets of Kabul to find her mother. Outside of the hotel, Priscilla finds herself in a world that she does not understand. To emphasize Priscilla's foreignness, the playwright creates a situation where half of the dialogue is in English and the other half in Pashtu. Priscilla has made no attempt to learn even the basics of the local language, and wanders through the streets asking passersby if they speak English. When she presses further and says that she is looking for her mother, one woman repeats the word *mother* back to Priscilla in English as though she understood Priscilla's situation. In her impatient excitement, Priscilla removes her burqa. The woman is disgusted with Priscilla for taking off her burqa, and terrified of the consequences of associating with a woman improperly dressed, and rushes away. A mirror image of her mother, Priscilla demonstrates no respect for local customs. This is magnified by the fact that she is completely aware that said customs exist. She puts on the burqa before leaving the hotel room, presumably aware that she must be covered when she is out in public. Her impatience and frustration get the better of her, however, and she removes it at the very first opportunity. Like Homebody, who was allegedly attacked because she was "not clad in decent attire for the street,

not wearing burqa, uncovered,"[118] Priscilla travels from the United Kingdom to Kabul with her Western-ness on full display.

Homebody, after reading an out-of-date travel guide, romanticizes what she thinks present-day Afghanistan is. While she does not bother to display any sensitivity to the culture and political situation of Kabul, her husband, Milton, belittles the recent bombing. Quango, a British aid worker who serves as Milton and Priscilla's unofficial guide and liaison, tries to explain the strife engulfing the country. Carefully laying out the religious, ethnic, and political conflict, he attempts to sum up by telling Milton that "the Taliban exports their desperation."[119] Milton is indifferent to the conflict, and does not take the situation seriously. As Quango continues to explain things to him, Milton cuts him off with a laugh, quipping, "until last week when America bombed them! It's down the rabbit hole!"[120] Milton and Priscilla are white and British, and the civil unrest in a far-away country populated by Central Asians is of little importance to them. Their only priority is bringing Homebody back to the United Kingdom. In their eyes, the Afghani people and their suffering do not warrant concern, and any explanation only induces eye-rolling and laughter.

The Western characters, Milton and Priscilla in particular, are portrayed as overindulgent, crude, and constantly giving into bodily impulses. While Priscilla is out searching for her mother on the streets of Kabul, Milton and Quango stay behind in the hotel room. After the two men finish off a bottle of scotch, they move on to opium. Milton is high on opium when Priscilla returns later that afternoon. Under the influence of the drug and confronted with the dysfunctional relationship amongst the members of his immediate family, his conversation with

118. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 33.
119. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 97.
120. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 97.

Priscilla begins to echo the sentiments found in the mediascape and the trauma narrative. The combination of the alcohol and the opium removes any inhibitions as he viciously tells Priscilla that he doubts the possibility that Homebody is still alive. Milton tells Priscilla:

> And, and, she… *married* a Muslim? Which, allow me to point out, she might have just as easily done in London, and a nice Western sort of Muslim too, not one of these…barbarians. […] These people who are the ruthless creatures of a culture, if I may call it that, a culture of betrayal and brutality and dismembering, are practicing on you, they see you as…vulnerable.[121]

As Milton describes the Afghani people as barbaric, ruthless, and inhabiting something less than a culture, he paints a picture similar to a post-9/11 vision of Afghanistan. He warns Priscilla that she is a target for Afghan men, and the undertone of his statement suggests that the sight of her and her perceived vulnerability would cause them to lose control and give in to their violent sexual desires. Kushner's narrative, however, sees Priscilla and Quango give in to their lust for each other. While high on opium, Quango confesses to Milton his attraction to Priscilla. After Milton, who is also high on opium, passes out, Quango takes a pair of underwear from Priscilla's suitcase, sniffs them, places them on his head, and begins to masturbate. A few moments later, Priscilla walks in on Quango, and the two characters depart to Quango's residence to consummate their relationship.

In contrast to Kushner's framing of Western characters, many of the Afghan nationals are portrayed as worldly, erudite, well-informed of their nation's political situation, and emphatic. They are not the cruel, backward, primitive people of the mediascape's narrative. In Kushner's play, most of the Afghan characters seen onstage are not the source of suffering; rather, they are

121. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 78. Italics original.

helpful to the Ceiling family. After seeing Priscilla scolded for not wearing a burqa while she is out in public, Khwaja steps in, apologizes for her actions, and offers himself for hire as her Pashtu-speaking guide. Khwaja, who speaks both English and Esperanto fluently, tells Priscilla that he knows who she is and why she is in Kabul. Back at his apartment, the two characters speak freely and openly without the fear of being overheard, and Priscilla's crassness is juxtaposed with Khwaja's civility. Khwaja is patient and hospitable, offering Priscilla fruit and naan, and explaining that Cheshme Khedre is not, as Homebody thought it to be, the resting place of the Biblical Cain. Impatient, Priscilla interrupts him. He tells her that "interruption is impolite" and reminds her that "politeness shows respect."[122] Khawaja continues to be insulted by Priscilla, yet reacts with patience, and brings her to a hat seller who has information about her mother. It is through the hat seller that Priscilla meets Mahala, a multilingual former librarian. Mahala speaks urgently and honestly to Priscilla about the city of Kabul and the political and cultural changes brought about by the Taliban. She speaks about the brutality that the Taliban has inflicted on the non-Pashtu-speaking people of Kabul. Mahala switches easily between Dari, English, French, and Russian, presenting Priscilla with a nuanced account of the political situation in the country and its impact on global politics.

Critics were quick to question Kushner's portrayal of the play's Western white characters. Writing for *USA Today*, critic Elysa Gardner faulted the playwright, writing, "but in trying to illustrate the historical and political complexities behind Afghanistan's suffering—and the vulnerability of all men—[Kushner] ultimately makes the Afghan characters more sympathetic, and more interesting, than the Anglos, who are portrayed as mostly nattering,

122. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 64-5.

navel-gazing substance abusers and misanthropes."[123] Barbara D. Philips, a critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, also took the playwright to task for his characterization of Western characters, writing:

> But the characters we meet in Kabul are an especially sour, weak, and squalid bunch. Milton Ceiling quickly partakes of the alcohol, opium, and heroin proffered by Quango, an aid worker and self-described 'dope-fiend' who masturbates with Pricilla's panties on his head. And Milton loathes his daughter, calling her "an unstinting hook-beaked virago dedicated to punishing everyone she's indebted to." […] But foul-mouthed Priscilla is about as good as Mr. Kushner's Westerners get. The others are shallow, sordid caricatures of Western decadence who might as well have been created by a Taliban playwright.[124]

Theatre critics, it seems, were uncomfortable with *Homebody/Kabul*'s violating of the national narrative. Rather than playing into a narrative that positioned Afghanistan as a country whose actions were the source of pain, Kushner's play offered audiences a place in which to confront a wider and more complex perspective. All of the characters that appear onstage in the play have names, pasts, and personalities, though some are more likable than others. Some critics, however, found fault with a script that premiered so soon after the attacks offering a sympathetic and thoughtful view of a people that were characterized in the official narrative as the perpetrators of national trauma.

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123. Elysa Gardner, "'Kabul' Takes Four-Hour March Down Road of Western Guilt," *USA Today*, December 20, 2001.
124. Barbara D. Philips, "Review/Theatre: Devil's in America: Taliban Lunacy Foreshadowed," *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2002.

Audience and critical reactions to most plays are often mixed, especially immediately after a world premiere of a new work. In this way, the simultaneous positive and negative reactions to *Homebody/Kabul* were not unusual. On one hand, the New York, and indeed national, theatre communities were eager to see the newest work of a well-respected playwright. On the other, said new work premiered in the midst of a country navigating the aftermath of a large-scale national trauma. Theatre scholar Jacob Juntunen has called *Homebody/Kabul* "an especially important site of resistance to the Bush Administration because it allowed 188 people to come together nightly and experience an alternative view."[125] *Homebody/Kabul* spoke directly to the circulating national conversation. As a wave of patriotism swept through the United States, Kushner's play provoked a discomfort rooted in ideas of conflicting loyalties. So, how can a dramaturgical team help to navigate these conflicts?

Bridging the Gap Between A Character-Centered Production and a Spectator-Focused Experience

A trauma-informed dramaturgical approach seeks to find a balance that bridges the gap between a character-centered approach to the storytelling and a spectator-focused event. None of this is to suggest that the production or the script itself should be altered. Rather, the task of preparing audiences to navigate the production's new circumstances falls to the dramaturg. In a press release circulated to popular press for promotional purposes, Kushner described *Homebody/Kabul* as a play about:

125. Jacob Juntunen, "Repairing Reality: The Media and Homebody/Kabul in New York, 2001," in *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the* Plays, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006), 181.

> Afghanistan and the West's historic and contemporary relationship to that country. It is also a play about travel, about knowledge and learning through seeking out strangeness, about trying to escape the unhappiness of one's life through an encounter with Otherness, about narcissism and self-referentiality as inescapable booby traps in any such encounter; and it's also about a human catastrophe, a political problem of global dimensions to which no clear solution suggests itself. It's also about grief.[126]

Kushner himself was very careful not to contextualize his play through a post-9/11 lens, even going so far as to clearly articulate that "my play is not polemic; it was written before September 11, before we began bombing, and I haven't changed anything in the play to make it more or less relevant to current events."[127] Though these words were a part of the New York Theatre Workshop's press release, few of these ideas made it into the promotional materials publicized by the popular press. It appears that the theatre took steps to mitigate the temptation of characterizing *Homebody/Kabul* as "a play about 9/11." Much of the pre-production press and reviews, however, focused on the presumed connection between Kushner's play and the attacks on the Twin Towers.

The story arc of Kushner's play is a relatively straightforward one. At its core, *Homebody/Kabul*, like many plays, is about a family in a moment of crisis. Under different circumstances, the play would have likely garnered attention because of its playwright, and a few spectators may have called to mind vague memories of the United States' bombardment of Khost a couple of years before. Because of the timing of its premiere, however, the play will likely

126. *Homebody/Kabul* press release. 2001.
127. *Homebody/Kabul* press release. 2001.

always be linked with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The intersections of the two narratives—the trauma narrative and the national narrative—become the starting point of any writing or outreach work the dramaturg intends to do.

The world premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* included little audience preparation originating from the production team. Instead, much of the discourse that circulated before previews and during the run originated from the popular press. The coverage for *Homebody/Kabul* before 9/11 and after 9/11 painted the premiere in two completely different ways. In the months after it was announced that it would be produced at the New York Theatre Workshop, even local coverage was relatively sparse and mainly focused on comparing the play with Kushner's *Angels in America*.[128] The reviews for *Homebody/Kabul* were, no doubt, colored by the events of September 11, 2001, and the play itself inextricably linked to the event. During the many years that the play was in development, the country of Afghanistan, its culture, and its political situation were unfamiliar to many in the United States beyond the occasional nightly news story. By the time the show began previews on December 5, 2001, audiences' awareness of the country had changed.

In the month before the production began its previews, potential theatre-goers were offered some guidance about what to expect from Kushner's new play. Theatre critic Peter Marks called the play "eerily prophetic" in the *New York Times*, and offered readers a bit of background about the its development.[129] The article even addressed some of the potential controversy surrounding the play, and noted that, in the wake of the events of 9/11, Kushner was

128. See Howard Hall, "Angel on His Back," *Time Out New York*, August 30, 2001; and Jesse McKinley, "On Stage and Off," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2001.
129. Peter Marks, "For Tony Kushner, an Eerily Prescient Return," *New York* Times, November 25, 2001.

encouraged to alter some of the dialogue.[130] The article also informed readers that parts of the play had been included in a staged reading weeks before, where a confident Kushner spoke about how he landed on what had seemed at the time to be an obscure topic. Just two days before previews began, Kushner appeared on NPR's *All Things Considered* to discuss his new play. The interview frames *Homebody/Kabul* as a piece that "is meant to cast an equally critical eye on the political and social chaos in Afghanistan, and its relationship to the West—and about trying to escape unhappiness by seeking out 'otherness.'"[131] Neither of these articles sought to sidestep the content and potential controversy of the play. Together, these articles served as useful, even dramaturgical, introductions to the play by offering some insight into what a spectator would encounter during a performance. However, relatively little contribution to the discourse was made by the theatre or the artists directly working on the project (including its dramaturgical team) other than Kushner himself.

As would be expected, critical reviews of *Homebody/Kabul* began circulating shortly after the premiere. The topical connection to recent political events did not go unnoticed by critics, and many of the reviews and commentary drew direct links between the production and the events of 9/11. Having watched the play during its previews, critic Charles Isherwood wrote in his review: "another, [sic] inevitable dramatic liability is the audience's possible saturation with reporting from Afghanistan in the past few months; oddly, given its seeming timelessness, the play probably would have made a stronger dramatic impact if its information about the tangled political and cultural map of the country were not all burned into our memory banks

130. Marks, "For Tony Kushner, an Eerily Prescient Return."
131. Tony Kushner, interviewed by Noah Adams, *All Things Considered*, NPR, December 3, 2001, https://legacy.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2001/dec/kushner/011203.kushner.html.

thanks to the tragic events of Sept. 11 and their ongoing consequences."[132] In a long-form piece published in *American Theatre Magazine*, freelance critic James Reston suggested the play as one that was especially suitable "for those who are interested in the root causes that preceded Sept. 11, for those who can see through the fog of patriotism to the finer distinctions, who are finally ready to ask how on earth do we get out of this godforsaken place, who can bear to contemplate the thought that we have participated to some extent in our own tragedy."[133] He went on to stress that the conversation in Kushner's play was urgent and that it featured timely writing, "What theatre can display, better than any other medium, is passion. This includes the passion of the Arab religious fanatic and the passion of his most immediate victims. That passion is something the West desperately needs to understand…in its own best interest."[134] As theatre critics noted the connection between Kushner's play and the contemporaneous political discourse, they, too, were contributing to the meaning-making of the event. Looking back on the popular criticism that circulated soon after previews of *Homebody/Kabul* began, playwright and theatre scholar Jacob Juntunen, among others, noted that Kushner's play could not stand alone as a production, and could only be viewed by audiences through the prism of 9/11.[135]

Audiences arrived at the theatre and enveloped themselves in a discourse that collapsed any distance between the events of 9/11 and Kushner's play. Though theatres have only limited ability in influencing popular discourse surrounding a production, they can prepare and shape the

132. Charles Isherwood, "Review: *Homebody/Kabul*," *Variety*, December 19, 2001, http://variety.com/2001/legit/reviews/homebody-kabul-3-1200552204/.
133. James Reston, "A Prophet: Premonition and Reality in Tony Kushner's Homebody/Kabul," *American Theatre Magazine*, March 2002, 53.
134. Reston, "A Prophet: Premonition and Reality in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*," 51.
135. Jacob Juntunen, "Repairing Reality: The Media and Homebody/Kabul in New York, 2001," in *Tony Kushner: New Essays on the Art and Politics of the* Plays, ed. James Fisher (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2006), 177.

material elements of the performance space, especially those that the audience will encounter in the lobby prior to the beginning of the play. Marvin Carlson, among others, has emphasized the importance of the interior of a performance space as an integral part of the overall meaning-making of a production.[136] The site of the premiere, New York Theatre Workshop in the East Village, is located just a few miles away from Ground Zero. During the run of the show, their relatively small lobby provided little information that would prepare audiences for what they would shortly encounter. The only show-related item in the lobby was a black and white sign that listed the dates and times of the production along with a handful of reviews.[137] The programs given to patrons were equally sparse, consisting of stapled black and white pages that listed biographies of the artists who had worked on the project and some of the New York Theatre Workshop's ongoing artistic programming. The brief note from the playwright—sandwiched between the artists' biographies and a 'special thanks' list—was devoted to acknowledging personal relations and professional colleagues who had supported Kushner as he developed the script. In different circumstances, this austere set-up may have been an effective artistic choice, allowing Kushner's play to stand on its own, free of any visual, architectural, or spatial distractions. In the context of the East Village in December 2001, however, spectators were arriving straight from the street into the world of the play. The use of transitional material—a lobby display, a more elaborate program, etc.—could have been tactfully employed to aid audience members as they navigated between the recent national trauma just outside the theatre's doors and the mimetic world of *Homebody/Kabul*.

136. Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989), 128.
137. Juntunen, "Repairing Reality: The Media and *Homebody/Kabul* in New York, 2001," 178.

Such navigational tools need not disappear when the performance is over. Recently, increasing attention has been given to public-facing dramaturgy, or dramaturgical work that happens outside of the rehearsal hall. As one example, the recently published *Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* includes a section entitled "Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager: Immersions, Talkbacks, Lobby Displays, and Social Networks."[138] The section includes contributions from several practicing dramaturgs whose artistic work and scholarship seek to expand the responsibilities of the dramaturg to include practices that are audience-centric in nature. In her work as a dramaturg, for instance, Katie Rasor emphasizes the importance of awareness and acknowledgment of the cultural knowledge of a theatre's target audience as a component separate from cultural knowledge used by the artistic team to develop and stage a production.[139] This approach is in addition to any production-specific research that may be undertaken by a dramaturg in order to explore the world of the play itself; in following her example, dramaturgs can take careful steps to understand the broad cultural viewpoints of the audience. Rasor stresses that this practice is not to ensure the comfort of the audience, but rather to create a situation where spectators are prepared to engage with the production—doing so benefits both the audience and the playwright.[140] The distinction that Rasor makes—the cultural knowledge of the audience as separate from the cultural knowledge necessary for the artistic process—should become the foundation from which a dramaturg works, especially in the immediate aftermath of a national trauma, thereby providing a guiding light for building a transitional space for the audience.

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138. See *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 457-514.
139. Katie Rasor "The Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 482-3.
140. Rasor, "The Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager," 483.

One final tool for the dramaturg is the presence of a post-show talkback. Talkbacks (or post-show conversations), while ideally helpful to audiences and the artistic team, should be approached with adequate preparation. There are two important questions for the dramaturg to consider when planning a talkback. The first question is perhaps the most obvious, but the most crucial: does this particular production need a talkback in the first place? Talkbacks have gained popularity in recent years—many productions, particularly new works, often include one or several talkbacks as a routine matter of course. The thought process behind these habitual talkbacks is that bringing the artists onstage and allowing the spectators to ask them questions is a beneficial way to foster a sense of community and build audience engagement. It gives artists a chance to discuss their approach to the process. Talkbacks also offer an opportunity for audience members to look behind the curtain, hear reactions of fellow spectators, and ask lingering questions. In talkback situations after performances of a new work, the playwright is often on hand to engage with the audience as well. Overall, the basic format of a talkback provides an opportunity for spectators to converse with artists—to respond to or converse with the production. While talkbacks have become standard operating procedure in some venues, other skeptics wonder—are talkbacks always necessary and whom do they benefit? The answer to the former part of the question will vary by show. The answer to the latter part of the question is, of course, the spectators. In the wake of a performance whose content has been recontextualized by a recent national trauma, a post-show conversation may be necessary as a way for spectators to debrief and process their theatrical experience before leaving the theatre. Professional dramaturg Martine Kei Greene-Rogers has created an excellent set of guidelines for leading talkbacks for plays that engage with sensitive subject matter. At the top of the discussion, she lays out five ground rules for the participating spectators, three of which are particularly useful in this context:

when responding to the answer of someone else, identify what idea you are responding to but not the person who originated the idea, always feel free to share what is on your mind, and foster a spirit of non-judgment and respect.[141] Such advice is both practical and productive, and offers a guiding hand to spectators as they begin to process what they have witnessed.

Conclusion

During the opening monologue of *Homebody/Kabul*, Homebody's excitement grows as she reads to the audience from her outdated guidebook, and she tells the audience that "I invariably seek out not The Source but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source."[142] In the case of *Homebody/Kabul*, any meaning-making a spectator might make of the production began on their way to the event, and could not be immediately abandoned upon entering the theatre. Though the world premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* was set into motion long before the events of 9/11, before information about Afghanistan was in the foreground of the news cycle, and before the United States found itself grappling with a new and very recent national trauma, it nevertheless opened in the shadow of 9/11. In addition to the relationship between the subject of Kushner's play and the 9/11 attacks, the production of *Homebody/Kabul* took place at the New York Theatre Workshop, located just two miles away from where the Twin Towers had stood. While this was, in fact, a completely coincidental correlation, it cannot be ignored, and offers a site for investigation. This chapter has explored the world premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* as a site whose sudden recontextualization calls for expanding a trauma-

141. Martine Kei Green-Rogers, "Talkbacks for 'Sensitive Subject Matter' Productions," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 491.
142. Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 9.

informed approach to dramaturgy. A decade later, there would be another opportunity to exercise this methodology in production, with *Lidless*, the subject of the next chapter.

"Americans Love Reinvention:" *Lidless*, the War on Terror, and Reexamining a Trauma Narrative

ALICE. I stared at the photo you gave me. But nothing's coming back.

BASHIR. What do you want to know?

ALICE. I want you to not exist.

BASHIR. You like your new roles.

ALICE. I like my life a whole lot.

BASHIR. Americans love reinvention.[143]

Introduction

Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless* opened in New York on September 20, 2011. The production opened after a decade-long shifting narrative of national trauma, and was intentionally scheduled to coincide with the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. The previous chapter discussed dramaturgy in the immediate aftermath of a national trauma, when spectators were grappling with the fallout of the event. This chapter temporally moves further away from the attacks themselves and explores a dramaturgical project that took place a decade after the event, by which time, the attacks had become a became a memory. During the decade following the 9/11 attacks, U.S. Americans absorbed a national narrative of trauma that was both modified and intensified, and they began to believe that the possibility of a foreign attack was no longer unthinkable. Military action almost immediately followed the 9/11 attacks, and remained constant throughout the following ten years. It was against this backdrop of conflict and

[143] Frances Ya- Chu Cowhig, *Lidless* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2010), 29.

commemoration that playwright Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's play, *Lidless*, premiered in New York at Page 73 Productions, a theatre in Brooklyn that focuses on developing new work.

Cowhig wrote *Lidless* early in what has grown into a long and versatile dramatic career. Her play is set in the future, fifteen years after the War on Terror has ended. The play's main characters—army veteran Alice and Guantanamo Bay detainee Bashir—are reunited in the aftermath of the war. The play was selected for inclusion in Page 73's season because it touched on many timely issues, including the War on Terror and the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay,[144] but at its heart, *Lidless* is about a unique family in a moment of crisis learning to navigate in the wake of global warfare.

This chapter expands on the previous chapter by exploring the dramaturg's work as they analyze the play using the prism of trauma studies, and placing that field into conversation with theatre artistry. *Lidless* is a play that intermingles two narrative threads: the imaginative post-War on Terror narrative of Cowhig's text, and the atmosphere of 9/11 commemoration that enveloped the spectators during the play's production. I address the national trauma of both by keeping dramaturgy and dramaturgical strategies at the heart of the discussion. In order to do so, I begin by framing the discussion, placing myself hypothetically in the role of a dramaturg tasked with providing background information about the playwright, her writing process, and her linking of the play to the aftermath of trauma. In the next section of the chapter, I offer a textual analysis of the script as well as a visual analysis and description of the production. I analyze the production through a lens of national trauma that considers both mainstream and counter-narratives and discusses how a trauma-informed approach to analysis can enhance dramaturgical

144. Michael Walkup, interviewed by Alison Christy, March 2017.

work. This chapter concludes by offering dramaturgs practical methods and considerations to utilize when confronted with plays that grapple with national trauma.

The (Con)Text of the Performance

Lidless premiered at the Lab Theatre at the University of Texas-Austin in 2009 and was awarded the Yale Drama Series Prize later that year.[145] Cowhig began writing *Lidless* after reading a piece in *The Economist* about intimate interrogation tactics used by female interrogators against male detainees at Guantanamo Bay. When she started writing, all she knew was that she wanted to write a five-person ensemble piece that was not a "political diatribe or anything that could be reduced to a simple 'shame on you America' anti-war piece that could just as easily be expressed in an op-ed essay."[146] The play went on to be produced at the HighTide Festival in Suffolk in the United Kingdom, and then transferred to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland.

When *Lidless* opened in September of 2011, it joined a plethora of other New York-based theatrical productions set to mark the anniversary of the attacks. Productions included docudramas as well as new work timed to premiere in the fall of 2011. Perhaps the most notable was Richard Nelson's *Sweet and Sad*, the latest installment of *The Apple Family: Scenes from an American Life*, a four-part series. The *Apple Family* productions were produced at the Public Theatre, and *Sweet and Sad* featured the Apple family on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, trying to make sense of the event and their lives a decade later. Off-Off Broadway's Flea Theatre was

145. The Yale Drama Series Prize is a prestigious award given annually to an emerging playwright by the David Charles Horn Foundation.
146. Caridad Svich, "Recovering Trauma: An interview with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig," *Hunter On-line Theatre Review*, http://www.hotreview.org/articles/recoveringtrauma.htm.

producing Swedish playwright Jonas Hassen Khemiri's Obie-Award-wining play, *Invasion!*, which had had its U.S. premiere earlier that spring at Play Company. The play explores the post-9/11 identity of Middle Eastern men. Rehana Lew Mirza's *Barriers*, a play about a South Asian family's experiences post-9/11, was staged by Despina and Company. Additionally, Sarah Tuft's docudrama, *110 Stories*, was compiled from interviews and staged at the Public Theatre to coincide with the 9/11 anniversary. For the text, Tuft drew upon her experience as a volunteer in the days after the attack and gathered together interviews that she conducted with those she met. Most noticeably absent from the plays that were produced during the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks were remounting and revivals of older and previous produced plays placed in conversation with the anniversary. E. Ann Kaplan suggests that in the wake of trauma, there is an urgent and immediate impetus to find "ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself."[147] In order to do that, it seemed that theatre artists were looking to the present, rather than to the past, for inspiration. Plays and new works that were produced in 2011 tended to focus on making sense of 9/11 ten years after the event, particularly how individual people and families adjusted to their situations in the aftermath.[148]

Lidless opened among these plays at the Walkerspace in Tribeca, and was directed by Tea Alagic as part of Page 73's season.[149] The black-box theatre was transformed by set designer Scott Bradley into a simple, open, and stark space with a white floor and a white upstage flat.

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147. E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and* Loss. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005) 19.
148. Perhaps the most well-known play of this era, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*, premiered in January 2012, shortly after the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.
149. Page 73 does not have its own performance space and therefore used the Walkerspace in Tribeca, a small 73-seat theatre space owned and operated by the SoHo Rep, for the premiere of *Lidless*.

The openness of the set allowed the action to flow between the fast-paced and short scenes. Throughout the performance, different locations were established using minimal set pieces, and the theme of isolation was intensified by lighting.

The play begins in Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba. Alice, an army interrogator from Texas, has almost gotten her Pakistani detainee, Bashir, to crack and confess. Alice is frustrated with herself for not being able to coax a confession from Bashir, and she is frustrated with Bashir for not giving up information. Riva, Alice's friend and an army medic, warns Alice that whatever she does, she cannot leave a mark on Bashir. Alice then pulls a memo out of her jacket pocket that outlines the military's new strategy—*invasion of space by a female*, a euphemism sanctioning sexual assault and rape as tools and methods of interrogation. Alice returns to the interrogation room, convinced that she will be able to extract a confession from Bashir. The scene ends just as Alice takes off her shirt, revealing a red lace bra, and offers Bashir one last chance to confess.

The following scene picks up fifteen years later in Minnesota. The War on Terror is long over; Guantanamo Bay detention camp no longer exists. Alice has a new life and a new identity. She is a florist, happily married to Lucas, and they have a fourteen-year-old daughter named Rhiannon. Alice does not remember much about her time in the army. Rhiannon, however, is curious about her mother's former career. Rhiannon is working on an oral history project for school, and uses it as an excuse to try to ask Alice questions about her time in the army. Alice does not answer, insisting that Rhiannon is not old enough to understand. The following day, Alice is at work in her flower shop when Bashir arrives and reveals that he contracted hepatitis during their interrogation sessions at Guantanamo. He needs a liver transplant to survive, and asks Alice for a part of her liver. She refuses and makes him leave the

shop. The next day, Rhiannon is in the shop alone when Bashir arrives. He leaves a package for Alice. Rhiannon is curious about him and asks if he would be willing to be her interview subject for her school project. He agrees to her request. Later, Rhiannon opens the package and finds herself holding the orange jumpsuit that Bashir wore while he was detained at Guantanamo.

Later, alone in her bedroom, Rhiannon "interrogates" the orange jumpsuit, asking it "are you now, or have you ever been a member of Al Qaeda? Do you know Khalid Sheik Muhammad?[150] Muhammad Atta?[151] Are you a Taliban? Where's Osama?"[152] Downstairs, Bashir has arrived at Alice's home, and Alice realizes that Rhiannon is Bashir's daughter, not Lucas', and that she became pregnant with Rhiannon during her interrogation sessions with Bashir. Rhiannon comes downstairs, trying to understand her connection with Bashir. Out of frustration with herself, her parents, and Bashir, Rhiannon punches him. The impact of the punch ruptures his already damaged liver. After Bashir leaves, Rhiannon goes back up to her room and puts on the jumpsuit, still trying to make sense of her mother's actions at Guantanamo. She puts herself in a stress position by handcuffing her hands behind her back, a technique she learned from the memo in Alice's army jacket pocket. While she is in the position, she has an asthma attack, is unable to free herself to get to her inhaler in time, and dies. Alice donates Rhiannon's liver to Bashir. In the final moments of the play, Alice realizes that she and Bashir will always be connected and "electricity crackles between them. They stare at each other as the lights crescendo to full, blinding brightness, then fade to black."[153]

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150. Khalid Sheik Muhammad was the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks.
151. Muhammad Atta was the hijacker of American Airlines flight 11during the 9/11 attacks. He flew the plane into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.
152. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 36.
153. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 45.

The play had been selected both because of Page 73's mission to support early-career playwrights, and, perhaps more specifically, as a reaction to the Obama Administration's inaction in the closing of Guantanamo. Though the play was written two years prior, Page 73 considered the conversation surrounding the closure of Guantanamo Bay detention camp as vital then as when Cowhig had initially written the script.[154] Within days of taking office in 2009, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13492 to initiate the closing of Guantanamo Bay.[155] Yet, two years later, as Page 73 was making preparations to begin rehearsals, the detention center had still not been closed.

When rehearsals began at Page 73, there was no definitive version of the text.[156] For this reason, the dramaturgical approach combined techniques for new-play development as well as strategies for established plays. Overall, the play did not change significantly during the rehearsal process in terms of structure and content, though the playwright did make small changes to some parts of the dialogue. The dramaturgical work for the New York premiere of *Lidless* was executed by Michael Walkup, who had recently joined Page 73 as a dramaturg. The 2011-2012 season was his first full season with the theatre, and *Lidless* was one of his inaugural productions. Considering both the nature of the show and Cowhig's writing process, the rehearsal process proved to be challenging for all involved. Once rehearsals began for the New

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154. Michael Walkup, interviewed by Alison Christy, March 2017.
155 . U.S. President, Executive Order, "Review and Disposition of Individuals Detained at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and Closure of Detention Facilities, Executive Order 13492." *Federal Register* 74, no. 16 (January 27, 2009): 4897, https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/eo/eo-13492.pdf.
156. Though the play had been given productions in Austin, Texas, the High Tide Festival in Suffolk, England, and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland and won the Yale Drama Series Award before its premiere in New York, Cowhig continued to tinker with the text. The two most widely published versions of the text—the version published in recognition of the Yale Drama Series award (2010) and the version published by Dramatist Play Service in 2012—contain minor differences in the text.

York premiere, the cast struggled with the material. As Cowhig worked to understand the "horrifying but very real bond"[157] between Alice and Bashir, she was more interested in visceral gestures on the stage than in language, and the actors struggled with the lack of dialogue.[158] Walkup, too, found the process to be a challenge. He observed that Cowhig had landed on a topic—female interrogation tactics used on male detainees—and then wrestled with it in order to turn it into a dramatic form. The play, he noted, was searching for the way to tell the story.[159]

After the play opened, critics were not fond of the production. Though the script had received mostly favorable reviews when it appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, U.S. reviewers were less enthusiastic about the New-York-based production. Critics mainly took issue with two things: Cowhig's use of language, and concerns about the play's plausibility. Critic Jason Zinoman, writing for the *New York Times*, called the play "an old-fashioned melodrama," and wrote, "the play has more than its share of implausible moments…And the ornamental language and reliance on metaphors can be excessive […] It's the kind of thing only a playwright would [write].[160] The implausibility of the script was a theme highlighted by several critics. *Village Voice* critic Alexis Soloski wrote: "but in the last half hour, the improbabilities accumulate, and the direction becomes increasingly heavy-handed. The resolution strains belief."[161] On the surface, *Lidless* is all of these things—it is "implausible," full of "ornamental language," and has a "reliance on metaphors." One critic did find merit in the play, however: *Backstage* critic David Rosenberg said of it, "if it's not all of one piece, and if the events are not

157. Michael Walkup, interviewed by Alison Christy, March 2017.
158. Michael Walkup, interviewed by Alison Christy, March 2017.
159. Michael Walkup, interviewed by Alison Christy, March 2017.
160. Jason Zinoman "Trembling Before the Turmoil of the Past," *New York Times*, October 6, 2011.
161. Alexis Soloski, "Lidless: Gitmo Comes Home," *Village Voice*, October 5, 2011.

always convincing, it nevertheless makes for a purposely discomforting evening. The emotions that *Lidless* engenders are not the classic [characteristics of tragedy] pity and terror, but anger and shame."[162] Unlike many of the critics who found fault in Cowhig's play, Rosenberg identified, even embraced, the play's tackling of post-war trauma and the resulting discomfort of the spectators. The uneasiness experienced by the audience is what theatre scholar Laura Edmondson has termed the "aesthetics of discomfort," a phenomenological experience brought about by "a systemic dismantling of boundaries between nightmare and reality, poetry and fact, the quotidian and the extreme."[163] While there are instances of physical violence that take place onstage (the interrogation and a few physical altercations between characters), the root cause of the tension that *Lidless* creates stems from the co-existence of the brutality of war and tranquil domestic life.

A Trauma-Informed Approach to *Lidless*

The intentions behind Page 73's project were, no doubt, thoughtful and provocative. Companies often craft their seasons to speak directly to current events and cultural discourse. The complex relationship between storytelling and national trauma adds additional considerations, especially when a production is mounted alongside commemoration events. In interviews about *Lidless* and subsequent plays that she has written, Cowhig has been open about

162. David A. Rosenberg, "Lidless," *Backstage*, September 28, 2011, https://www.backstage.com/review/ny-theater/off-off-broadway/lidless/.
163. Laura Edmondson "Genocide Unbound: Erik Ehn, Rwanda, and the Aesthetics of Discomfort," *Theatre Journal* 61 (2009): 66.

the fact that she is interested in writing about trauma, particularly its aftermath.[164] After her brother's suicide while she was in college, Cowhig began writing a play that would eventually become *[401] GONE*. In an interview with *American Theatre Magazine*, Cowhig explicitly links her writing to trauma exploration:

> I guess the blunt way to answer that is to say that in all my plays I'm interested in trauma and recovery…Something traumatic happens to the main character, and then the question becomes: What now? How does one make meaning when the world as she knows it, her cognitive framework, has been shattered?[165]

Cowhig wrote *Lidless* relatively early in her writing career, while she was a graduate student at the University of Texas-Austin's Michener Center for Writers. Before applying to graduate school, Cowhig spent her undergraduate years at Brown University, majoring in sociology. During her freshman year, a friend enrolled in a playwriting course, and Cowhig decided to sign up too. It was during that course that Cowhig discovered that she enjoyed writing, and she was encouraged by her faculty to continue to hone her skills. She writes that her journey into writing was "not really the story of finding your passion and pursuing it. More like pursuing something until it becomes your passion."[166] Thus, understanding *Lidless* through a lens of trauma falls in line with the author's articulated intention. An explanation of an author's intention, however, cannot solely support creative decisions or dramaturgical choices.

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164. Caridad Svich, "Recovering Trauma: An interview with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig," HotReview.org, http://www.hotreview.org/articles/recoveringtrauma.htm; Diep Tran, "The China Connection: A Conversation with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig and Christopher Chen," American Theatre.org, https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/01/22/. the-china-connection-a-conversation-with-frances-ya-chu-cowhig-and-christopher-chen/.
165. Tran, "The China Connection: A Conversation with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig and Christopher Chen."
166. Svich, "Recovering Trauma: An Interview with Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig."

In addition to the playwright's intentions, the dramaturg must consider the many variations of how a production like *Lidless* can impact spectators phenomenologically. In order to begin to create a performance event that encourages spectators to watch the play from a place of curiosity, the dramaturg must first untangle the events in the world of the play from the socio-cultural events surrounding the performance. In the early stages of analysis and preparation, these two elements should be considered separately, and only brought back into conversation with each other during the middle and later stages. It is not so unusual for a play to present a spectator with a world completely different from their own. Dramaturgical work often begins with the question *who is the audience?* For this play, that question, about an audience's cultural, societal distance from the world of the mimetic narrative, becomes a guiding force in its dramaturgical exploration.

Situating a Production in an Atmosphere of National Trauma

A trauma-informed dramaturgical approach considers the socio-cultural context of a performance that stretches beyond the world of the play and the actions of the characters and reaches into the world beyond the theatre's doors. This attention to context is critical. While many productions link themselves to the 'present moment' in which they are staged, this relationship becomes more delicate when enmeshed in an atmosphere of national trauma and mourning. Theorist Herbert Blau has written extensively on the interplay between performance and ideology, noting that "when it appears to be about ideology, it is about performance; when it appears to be about performance, it is about ideology."[167] When *Lidless* premiered in the fall of

167. Herbert Blau, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992), xii.

2011, the spirit of 9/11 commemoration that was circulating throughout New York City and the rest of the nation was one of somber remembrance and heroic valor. The tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks not only commemorated the events that took place that day, but marked the United States' ten-year anniversary of navigating the aftermath of a national trauma. Though the flow of new information about the attacks, the United States' response, and subsequent military action were almost constant, the narrative of the event remained mostly stable.

During that time, Cowhig and her colleagues at Page 73 were preparing for plays at the Walkerspace in SoHo, about a mile and a half away from Ground Zero and the National September 11 Memorial, which had opened to families of victims on September 11, 2011 and to the public on September 12, 2011. On a national level, the date of the anniversary of the attacks did not go unnoticed and was widely marked and commemorated. What distinguished *Lidless* from many other plays that were running concurrently in New York was its depiction of aftermath and responsibility, and how the mimetic narrative of the play pushed back against the nation's narrative that the United States was blameless, courageous, and righteous.

News stations across the United States broadcast the commemoration ceremony. The ceremony began early in the morning, timed to mark the planes' moments of impact with the towers. Then-president Barack Obama arrived with his wife, Michelle Obama, followed by former-president George W. Bush, who was president during the attacks, and his wife Laura Bush. After a children's choir sang the national anthem, then-mayor Michael Bloomberg[168] took the podium and asked the audience to observe a moment of silence with him at 8:46 a.m., the time when American Airlines flight 11 stuck the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

168. Michael Bloomberg was mayor of New York City from 2002 until 2013. He was preceded by Rudy Giuliani, who was in office during the 9/11 attacks.

President Obama read from Psalm 46, reminding the audience that "The lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."[169] His reading was brief; the emphasis of the event was kept on those who died in the attacks, with each of their names being listed alphabetically and read out loud by surviving family member. The reading of the names continued, stopping only at 9:03 a.m. for a moment of silence marking the moment that American Airlines flight 175 hit the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Former president George W. Bush read the Bixby Letter, a letter from Abraham Lincoln that he wrote upon learning that a mother had lost five sons in the Civil War, wherein Lincoln comforts her by writing of "the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."[170] The rest of the names of those killed in the attacks were then read. Both CBS and ABC covered all three hours of the memorial service, and then followed up with an additional three hours of commentary.

In addition to the broadcasting of the memorial service, print news also focused on commemorating the 9/11 attacks. Similar to the commemoration ceremony and news broadcasts, a lot of print news focused on remembering the victims of the attack. Sociologist Arthur G. Neal notes that events that are documented by news agencies are considered "news-worthy," or out of the ordinary. Furthermore, he writes that news-worthy events are used by viewers for linking the past with the present, and the relationship becomes symbolic and its complexity is reduced.[171] The September 11, 2011 edition of the *New York Times* dedicated an entire section, titled "The 9/11 Decade: The Price of the New Normal," to the attacks and their aftermath. The section centered upon the ten years following the event, and covered a wide range of topics, including

169. Psalm 46:11.
170. Quoted in "President Obama Attends the 9/11 Memorial Service in NYC."
171. Arthur Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 2005), 11 and 16.

the U.S.'s War on Terror, the U.S.'s military activity in Afghanistan, the lives of survivors ten years on, accounts of those who lost loved ones, oral history projects that documented survivors' accounts, changes in how media portrayed middle eastern Muslims, and changes in the lexicon. What was, perhaps, most news-worthy about the commemorative section of the *New York Times* was that the collection of articles reached two seemingly incompatible conclusions. The first was that, except for those who had lost a loved one, life after 9/11 was not really very different ten years later.[172] One of the articles, "Getting Here from There," summed it up thusly: "outside of the families of the victims, most people's lives may not present themselves as remarkably different. But there is residue, lingering wisps of September 11."[173] The second was that everything from art to discourse to daily rituals and habits—everything—was different.

Clearly, then, even ten years after the 9/11 attacks, their impact was still widely present in the American psyche. Any distance that the previous decade had managed to forge was weakened by the spirit of commemoration circulating around *Lidless*'s intentionally timed premiere. Unlike *Homebody/Kabul*, whose premiere was scheduled long before the 9/11 attacks, *Lidless*'s opening was intentionally set to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the attacks. For this reason, the dramaturgical approach for the production would be expected to stretch beyond the world of the play and to consider it as a performance event whose meaning is made by the interplay of the contemporaneous cultural milieu with the production. Utilizing a trauma-informed approach to the dramaturgy illuminates not only the characters' arcs, but also creates a supportive atmosphere for the spectators that encourages them to engage with the production.

172. See N.R. Kleinfield, "Getting Here from There," *New York Times*, F2.
173. N.R. Kleinfield, "Getting Here from There," *New York Times*, F2.

Lidless's Countering Narrative of Trauma

Though not intended to be prophetic, the play nevertheless presents a narrative of *what could be*. Much like Rhiannon learns during her conversations with Bashir, audiences were confronted with "two histories," or countering narratives of trauma. After Rhiannon meets Bashir for the first time, she becomes quite curious about him and his life. She has been struggling to find an appropriate yet captivating subject to interview for her oral history project and seizes the opportunity.

> RHIANNON. Can I interview you for my oral history project?
>
> BASHIR. Which history do you want?
>
> RHIANNON. How many you got?
>
> BASHIR. There's the history of who I am and the history of who I wanted to be.
>
> RHIANNON. How'd you get two histories?[174]

In order to begin to explore this tension between competing histories, I will return to Alexander's model of trauma narratives. In *Lidless*, the nature of the pain, the victim, the connection between the trauma and the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility are reframed in direct conflict with the post-9/11 mediascape. In the world that Cowhig creates, the victim is not the United States, but the wrongly imprisoned and tortured Bashir. The attribution of responsibility, therefore, rests with Alice, acting as a representative of the United States. When Bashir confronts Alice about her role in his confinement and interrogation, she is unapologetic as she tells Bashir:

174. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 22.

> Yes, I was a soldier. An interrogator who did her job. Her job! Whatever tactics I used that resulted in your ability to recall the exact shape of a birthmark on my chest was authorized by the government of the United States of America.[175]

Alice's comment places the responsibility for Bashir's imprisonment and torture with the United States government that used Alice as its conduit. During the very first scene of the play, the only time the characters are seen at Guantanamo, Alice is excited, almost giddy, as she takes a break from interrogating Bashir. Frustrated that she has been unable to coax any information from Bashir and feeling that he is right on the edge of a confession, Alice excitedly pulls a piece of paper out of her jacket pocket and hands it to her colleague Riva.

> ALICE. […] Big guy in Washington, he's figured it out…Latest memo from someone who's paying attention.
>
> RIVA. (*Reading*) "Invasion of Space by a Female?"
>
> ALICE. A spankin' new strategy, straight from the top. "Invasion of Space by a Female." Catchy, huh?
>
> RIVA. You'll be back in Corpus [Christi] in a week. You don't have to do this.
>
> ALICE. But I'm allowed to. Dick Cheney says so.[176]

Riva goes on to warn Alice that she is not allowed to leave even a single bruise or laceration on Bashir.[177] Knowing that that stipulation limits what Alice can do to Bashir, Riva offers her a final tip: when interrogating Bashir, Alice should smear red lipstick on her hand and tell him that it is menstrual blood. As a child Riva grew up as a Christian in Iraq and is familiar with the rules and customs of Islam. In this moment, she weaponizes her knowledge of Islam and shares it with

175. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 28.
176. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 9.
177. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 10.

Alice. By leading Bashir to think that he has come into contact with menstrual blood, Alice also leads him to believe that he has violated a part of his Islamic faith. Alice believes that such psychological discomfort will further weaken his spirit and resolve, and that she will be more likely to get a useful confession from him. When Alice returns to the interrogation room, she immediately begins to seduce Bashir as a tactic of her interrogation, telling him: "I'm touching myself. My fingers trail up my thigh as I think of all our bodies could do. I could sink onto your hard, hot cock. I could bury my face in your neck."[178] In the final moments of the scene, Alice gives Bashir one final chance to confess, before a blackout. During this blackout, Alice rapes Bashir.

The character of Bashir is not onstage during the interrogation. Bright orange lights illuminate Alice as she interrogates Bashir, who is not given a voice or even a presence in the scene. Alice is alone onstage during the interrogation, giving the audience the opportunity to bear witness to her actions. Because the playwright structured the first scene of the play as she did, it is impossible for the audience to deny Alice's role in Bashir's torture—they have witnessed it with their own eyes and cannot deny that she—both as herself and as a representative of the United States—was responsible for Bashir's suffering and resulting trauma. Unlike the trauma narrative that was being circulated in the mediascape that positioned the United States and those represented by the United States as victims, Cowhig's play places Bashir, and by extension, other Guantanamo detainees, as victims. Thus, the responsibility for the victim's pain, for Bashir's pain, rests with the United States and Alice.

Lidless counters the mainstream narrative of 9/11 in other ways, as well. Cowhig shifts the attribution of responsibility, and, therefore, the identity of the victim, the nature of the pain,

178. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 10.

and the relationship between the pain and the wider audience. Because Cowhig repositions the attribution of responsibility to rest with the United States and the character of Alice, the other elements in Alexander's model are repositioned as well. The contemporaneous mediascape situated the United States as the victim of the 9/11 attacks; Cowhig's trauma narrative, set fifteen years after the end of the War on Terror, gives a voice and a presence to a different victim—the Guantanamo detainee Bashir. For audiences ensconced in the post-9/11 mediascape, this was a problematic repositioning. As mediascape-crafted narratives circulate, they present not only an overview of events, but often use accurate-yet-coded language that suggests to the viewer how they should feel about a particular event. As American Studies scholar Evelyn Alsultany has noted, since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, sympathy for the Muslim man has been highly regulated, and is often completely absent.[179] In *Lidless*, however, Bashir was the victim of rape and torture and is situated as the object of the audience's sympathy. During a meeting in Bashir's hotel room, Alice asks Bashir what he wants, knowing that Bashir is suffering from hepatitis and in need of a liver transplant. He replies that he wants to live.

> BASHIR. I want to live. I want to see my daughter. I want to smell bread and honey and the sea. I want to dine with friends, with family. I want to walk beside my brothers, beside people who knew me before I was this man, this broken body. I want to lie beside my wife and get lost in her ruby black hair while we sing each other to sleep.[180]

In this passage, Bashir tells Alice not only that he wants to live, but what exactly life is to him. The character of Bashir is humanized as he tells Alice what life means to him: time with family

179. Evelyn Alslutany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (New York: New York UP: 2012) 102.
180. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 29.

and friends, and simple sensorial pleasures. He reminds Alice, and, by extension, the audience, that he is a human being with a family, who had a life, a past, and an identity before Guantanamo. This creates a tension, however, with the post-9/11 mainstream narrative that situates the Muslim man as the one responsible for causing the trauma.

Cowhig's narrative also resituates the nature of the pain in the mainstream narrative. Because Bashir is positioned as the victim, it is *his* pain that lies at the center of the narrative, specifically his wounding and humiliation. The widely accepted and circulated master narrative perpetuated by the mediascape situated the nature of the pain as the wounding and humiliation of the United States, and is thus quite different than the stage narrative of *Lidless.* When *Lidless* premiered in New York in 2011, seven years after the infamous Abu Ghraib photos were circulated, the goings-on at Guantanamo and the handling of prisoners were still highly speculative to those outside of the federal government and the military. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*, widely known as The Torture Report, would not be released to the public until April 2014. The committee, led by Senator Dianne Feinstein, reviewed over six million pages of CIA materials, including intelligence reports, internal emails, briefing materials, interview transcripts, and other documents.[181] The project was started in 2009, and the final draft contained 6,700 pages. Only about 520 pages, some heavily redacted, were ever released to the public, but those pages were enough to remove any speculation about prisoner treatment at Guantanamo. Though the project was in progress when Cowhig's play opened, it was far from completed, and its contents classified. The playwright, cast, and crew were unaware that, even as

181. Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, 5.

they staged a play that was chosen as a protest against the Obama administration's lack of action concerning Guantanamo, a large-scale investigation was taking place that would make clear and indisputable the fact that United States tortured detainees at Guantanamo. In Cowhig's narrative, however, there is no need to speculate about Bashir's treatment at Guantanamo Bay. The audience is able to watch and bear witness to Alice's interrogation of Bashir as she flirts with him and masturbates in front of him. As Bashir confronts Alice about her actions, she emphatically denies them, and tell Bashir that she does not remember him or much of her time as an interrogator. The stage narrative Cowhig creates sets up a situation wherein the audience is directly confronted by a counter trauma narrative where they bear witness to both the pain and its aftermath.

Finally, because Cowhig's narrative repositions the first three elements of Alexander's model, she further complicates the relationship of the trauma to the wider audience. As I have discussed earlier in this document, the notion of Americanness—that is, who is entitled to claim an 'American' identity—is unstable and constantly shifting. Indeed, in the days immediately following the attacks, symbols and performances of patriotism—flags, ribbons, songs, etc.—were displayed with gusto. On the surface, it seemed that all 'Americans' were united in mourning during the aftermath of the attacks. Almost immediately, however, it became apparent that living in the United States and holding U.S. citizenship was not sufficient for one to be considered American. As the new narrative began to formulate and circulate, the identity of the victim, the United States, became clear. What also became clear in this narrative was the identity (however vague and broadly construed) of the responsible party—Muslim men. Suddenly, anyone who could potentially be identified as Muslim was a suspect. While the post-9/11 master narrative created an over-simplified explanation of the attacks and the resulting trauma, the

image of the Muslim man became little more than a stereotype. As cultural historians Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin (among others) have noted in their study of Muslim representation, "the stereotype seeks to fix an image of the Other, to freeze it at a particular present-centered moment in time, then the eradication of the historical perspective—both personal and cultural—becomes crucial."[182] Cowhig's narrative takes the stereotyped other who, in addition, occupies a position of responsibility in the master narrative, and resituates him, not as a perpetrator of trauma, but as the victim of it. This repositioning violates the very core of the mediascape's trauma narrative and disrupts its relationship to the wider audience.

The accepted narrative of 9/11 and its aftermath made it easy to understand and seemingly inclusive to those who shared in Americanness. That Americanness, however, almost immediately shifted to exclude Muslim Americans and those who appeared to fit the stereotype. This narrative was comforting and easily digestible to the broad American public; the victim and perpetrator were clearly defined. Furthermore, the trauma of 9/11 played out on T.V., and many who were not present in New York that morning watched the attacks unfold live.

Perhaps no other character embodies the tension created between opposing narratives than Rhiannon. Rhiannon has spent the previous few months pestering Alice to talk about her time in the army. Much to Rhiannon's disappointment, Alice has refused, telling her that she did not remember much of her service. After a while, Riva realizes that, rather than keep Alice's secrets about their time at Guantanamo, she should help Rhiannon understand her mother's past. Meeting on a street corner, Riva gives Rhiannon the army jacket that Alice wore at Guantanamo. On one of his visits to Alice's flower shop, Bashir gives Rhiannon a package wrapped in brown

182. Peter Morey and Anna Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 27.

paper containing his Guantanamo jumpsuit, and asks her to give it to Alice. Though Bashir does not reveal the true nature of his relationship with Alice to Rhiannon, he is open with her about his time spent at Guantanamo as a detainee. Rhiannon agrees to give the package to her mother, but she is too tempted by her curiosity, and unwraps the package and keeps the jumpsuit. As the play progresses and Rhiannon learns more and more about Bashir's detention and a little more about her mother's army service, Rhiannon's curiosity intensifies. When Bashir visits the family's home, both Alice and Rhiannon finally realizes that Bashir, not Lucas, is Rhiannon's biological father.

The inclusion of a character such as Rhiannon creates an interesting opportunity for the dramaturg. The character herself is, no doubt, a wonderful acting challenge for a young actor; the character is also a unique challenge for a dramaturg, because Rhiannon's very presence encapsulates the audience's journey as they are confronted with different narratives of the same event. On one hand, Rhiannon must contend with her army veteran mother who, while she does not remember most of her time at Guantanamo, strongly believes in what she did and the United States' cause. On the other, Rhiannon is almost instantly drawn to Bashir, feels a connection with him, and empathizes with him. The presence of the character of Rhiannon is one that must navigate between the 9/11 trauma narrative and the same event's counter-narrative. Thus, the nature of the pain in *Lidless* is the struggle of competing trauma narratives onstage, and the presence of that same struggle offstage.

As the post-9/11 dominant narrative began to circulate, many U.S. Americans embraced it and took comfort in 'knowing' that the atrocity to which they bore witness was being remembered and commemorated. Cowhig's counter-narrative of trauma, however, attributes the cause of the pain to the United States, something that violates the master narrative and disrupts

its relationship to the wider audience. In the case of the Page 73's staging of *Lidless*, two different narratives were at odds—the narrative set forth onstage by the playwright, and the more general, but still significant, new master narrative of trauma that enveloped the audience in September 2011.

Dramaturging an Intolerable Image

When audience members arrived at the theatre, they were stepping out of a mediascape heavily saturated with 9/11 commemoration, constant reminders of the attacks, and all sorts of commentary about the impact of the attacks ten years later. In the previous chapter, I discussed Hans Robert Jauss's work on reception studies, particularly his phrase the "horizon of expectations." It is a concept that I would like to return to here and discuss in relation to the New York premiere of *Lidless*. Jauss has noted that literary works exist within a "horizon of expectations"—that is, a work cannot stand alone, and is mediated by the receiver's contemporaneous situation.[183] Though it is impossible to say exactly what each patron was exposed to prior to their arrival at the theatre, it is unlikely that they were unaware of the anniversary of 9/11, especially because Page 73 timed the play's opening to coincide with the anniversary. The interplay between the play's narrative and a spectator's horizon of expectations becomes central to the dramaturg and the space that they must navigate.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, philosopher Jacques Ranciere asks: what makes an image intolerable?[184] On the surface, this question seems straightforward, if vague. Applying this question to theatre and live performance might lead a dramaturg to think about instances of

183. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward and Aesthetic Theory of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 22.
184. Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2011) 83.

violence or abuse that happen within the action of the play. Raciere probes this question more deeply and concludes that an image's intolerability is found not simply in gruesome spectacle. Rather, an image becomes unbearable when a spectator realizes that they are only *looking* at an image, not taking action against the injustice that the image depicts. The image, juxtaposed with reality, provokes a feeling of guilt. The spectator's feeling of guilt is further compounded by the fact that the image exists in the first place.[185] Though Ranciere was writing about still images, his understanding of the *intolerable image* can be applied to live performance.

There is no doubt that some of the action in *Lidless*—the interrogation, the physical altercations between characters—is uncomfortable to watch. Viewing a mimetic narrative about the aftermath of the War on Terror and Guantanamo Bay against a backdrop of commemoration of the events that ignited the conflict heightens that tension. This section discusses both—the action onstage and the circumstances surrounding the performance—and elucidates dramaturgical approaches and interventions that focus on creating an experience for the spectator during which they are encouraged to engage with the performance event.

Consent and Content Disclosures

Rethinking dramaturgical approaches to national trauma is not limited to discussions of the text and how a spectator might experience a performance. A dramaturg can, and often does, take steps to introduce a play to an audience before the lights go down. Often, these include notes in the program that help elucidate the play or displays in the lobby that begin to immerse the spectator in the play they are about to watch. Another trend that has popped up in recently is the inclusion of a pre-show advisory. In the past few years, pre-show advisories—some sort of

185. Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 84.

description of the subject matter contained in the play— have sparked important conversations and incited considerable controversy. They have been called many things: trigger warnings, content warnings, content advisories. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the term *content disclosure*. I prefer that term to the ones listed above for several reasons. First, the term content disclosure suggests that, though a play may be dealing with difficult and potentially upsetting subject matter, the play's merit does not rest on the shock-value of its content. While *Lidless* presents its audience with difficult conversations, upsetting visual images, and a potentially uncomfortable actor/spectator relationship, those things are not intended to stand on their own as the sole foundation of the work. Rather, those elements are thoughtfully included by the artistic team to explore the play's narrative. Second, using the word *disclosure* sets up the relationship between the spectator and the theatre as one founded on trust. An audience member can be assured that they will not be exposed to anything during the performance that is unexpected that may potentially cause distress. Third, providing a disclosure is empowering for spectators. It equips them with information that allows them to decide whether they want to engage with the specific production.

Most importantly, however, the wording of content disclosure, rather than trigger warning, allows for trust to build between a spectator and an artistic organization. By framing the document as a *disclosure*, it suggests to patrons that they can, with full knowledge, decide if the content of a production is upsetting to them. In this way, it is not the dramaturg that is compiling a list of the most violent or upsetting moments of a play and telling patrons that they will be in for some uneasy viewing. Instead, a disclosure fully describes the play in terms of both action and aesthetics. It also does not presume to know what may be upsetting for spectators—it simply and matter-of-factly explains the production and its context. The specific crafting of the

disclosure takes two things into consideration: the onstage action and the cultural context of the production.

Beginning with the onstage action, one of the more potentially upsetting moments of *Lidless* happens at the very beginning of the show. The play begins in Guantanamo during Bashir's interrogation. Because *Lidless* grapples with the lingering trauma caused by war and its wake, it is to be expected that at least one scene of the play takes place in a space associated with combat and international conflict. When the lights come up at the top of the show, a shaft of orange light appears and delineates an interrogation room in Guantanamo Bay.[186] Soon after, Rhiannon enters the playing space, though she does not enter the orange light. During the scene, she keeps to her space, asking questions that none of the other characters can hear. It is important to note that the only other visible characters in the scene are Alice and Riva. In the interrogation room, only Alice and Riva appear on stage. The scene begins with Riva conducting a medical examination on an unseen patient that she refers to as a detainee. When she is finished, she and Alice step into a nearby hallway outside of interrogation room. When Alice is in the room conducting the interrogation, the character of Bashir is unseen, and rather than situate him as the target of the interrogation, Alice directs her words to the audience. Because of the combination of staging and dialogue, it is clear that this scene also includes a third—albeit unseen—character. After a brief pep talk from Riva, Alice returns to the interrogation room. Bathed in the orange light—similar in tone to that of a prisoner's jumpsuit—and alone in the room, Alice proceeds with her interrogation, weaponizing her sexuality. During this scene, the actor playing Alice is facing the audience and looking them in the eye as she conducts her "interrogation," and thus placing spectators into the role of the interrogated.

186. Cowhig, *Lidless*, 7.

The situation described above is not the first time the performativity of interrogation and the uncomfortable correlations between the actions of an actor and those of an interrogator have been explored. Writer, scholar, and performance artist Coco Fusco began to explore the intersections between gender, power, and military service in her performance piece *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2008), which was later developed into the book, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (2008). In her performance piece, Fusco plays the role of The Interrogator. The play is organized as an informative briefing given by The Interrogator with projections behind her that offer visuals of prisoner mistreatment at Abu Ghraib as well as demonstrative illustrations of female interrogators with detainees, and videos of her sessions with prisoners. The Interrogator is proud of her work collecting information from sources, as she calls detainees. As the interrogator speaks, she uses carefully sanitized language that detaches the topic of interrogation from the harsh physical and psychological violence that it denotes. Detainees and prisoners are *sources*. Sources are not tortured, but rather encounter the "military's skillful deployment of sex" and "find themselves caught between their immediate physical and emotional needs and their rigid moral framework.[187] Throughout the work, Fusco carefully draws attention to ways that misguided gender, racial, and culturally-based assumptions have subverted the progress of women in the military, particularly in the War on Terror. As The Interrogator, she tells the audience:

> Ladies and gentlemen, the strategic deployment of female interrogation represents a giant leap for womenkind. I recognize that I am speaking to a particularly enlightened group of people, and that we share a lasting commitment to promoting the equality of women in

187. Coco Fusco, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," *TDR: The Drama Review* 52, no.1 (2008): 148.

> America and around the world. So I know you will grasp the significance of the point I am about to make. As many of you are aware, one of the principal goals in bringing democracy to Afghanistan has been to liberate Afghan women.
>
> […]
>
> Let us not forget that the United States military is exemplary in its embrace of equality. It is the most integrated labor force that our country has.[188]

Most importantly, Fusco's piece highlights the irony of female interrogators—in being encouraged to use bodies that are usually seen as weak or inadequate—to uncover information in a way that is not open to male interrogators, they are simultaneously both empowered and subjugated.[189]

Fusco's work with interrogation extended beyond the stage. As a part of her research, she met with and later interviewed Michael Ritz, a military interrogator and founder of Team Delta, a company that offers an interrogation training program for civilians. Noting the close connection between acting technique and interrogation strategies, Ritz says:

> The vast majority of good interrogators have a background in dramatic performance before attending interrogation school. Interrogation school, itself, is similar to a class in Meisner technique, where student interrogators must quickly assume characters and identities to engage their instructors, who are playing the role of prisoners…in an improvisational environment."[190]

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188. Fusco, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," 152.
189. The Interrogator: "Each time a female interrogator draws actionable intelligence out of captured Islamic fundamentalist, she knows that she is saving the lives of fellow soldiers." Fusco, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," 151.
190. Fusco, "A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America," 153.

While perhaps troubling, this explanation links performance and the role of the interrogator together, and suggests that interrogation is rooted in basic techniques of Western acting styles: an actor assumes the role of a character, identifies the character's objective, and tries various tactics on their scene partner—in this case, the detainee.

Alice's interrogation supplants the detainee, Bashir, who is the presumed other character in the scene, with the audience, thus entrenching the spectator into the scene. In the past few years, performance studies scholars Catherine Bouko, Gareth White, and others have been critical of what has often been termed "immersive theatre."[191] Bouko notes that there is a difference between environments that physically integrate spectators and "dramaturgical immersion," writing that the latter "place[s] the immersant [*sic*] at the center of an environment, between simulation and representation," and therefore creating a situation of "the immersant's dramaturgical integration," or "first-person dramaturgy."[192] During the opening scene at Guantanamo, the spectator cannot interact with or react to their physical environment in a manner typical to immersive theatre. Instead, they are 'detained' in their seats. Rather than a physical restraint that would be used on a detainee during an interrogation, spectators are held captive in their seats by societal expectations of how one is expected to behave in a theatre. Their role as spectators in a traditional performance space/audience space delineation does not imply any sort of agency with which they could actively engage with performance. Instead, they are thrust into the storytelling of the scene and assume the role of Bashir, but at a slight distance, and not in any way that could alter Cowhig's narrative. The spectator is both powerless and captive

191. See Catherine Bouko, "Dramaturgy and the Immersive Theatre Experience," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2015); Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 37, no.3 (2012).
192. Bouko, "Dramaturgy and the Immersive Theatre Experience," 459.

in the scene. This particular relationship between the actor and the spectator is limited to the first scene and is not something that is revisited later in the performance. Nevertheless, the traditional separation and safety provided by the fourth wall is disrupted.

Rather than create a scene where the audience witnesses a realistic depiction of Bashir's interrogation, something that would no doubt be disturbing, the playwright removes the presence of Bashir's body, and Alice directs her tactics toward the audience. This, of course, creates limitations wherein the spectators are reminded that they, while positioned as Alice's scene partner, are not fully immersed in the scene. For example, at one moment as the interrogation intensifies, Alice reacts to being spat upon by the not-present-but-still-present Bashir. By setting up the scene in this way, the playwright and the director remove the spectacle of watching violence at a safe distance and place the audience in a position between that of a scene partner and a helpless observer. While wholly immersive, it is not completely immersive by more traditional definitions. The spectator's role during the scene is not clearly defined—are they an observant spectator, or a restrained scene partner? This ambiguity is coupled with the nature of the scene itself. Staging mimetic violence is a delicate balancing act—there are concerns about the safety of the performers, fidelity to the playwright's words and intentions, and the overall arc of storytelling. The latter two of these, in particular, fall into the realm of the dramaturg. Because of the situation that Cowhig sets up in her script, it is clear that the character of Bashir is not visually present—though his presence is known and felt—and that Alice's interrogation is directed toward the audience members.

A more traditional trigger warning might simply label the scene as an interrogation, which does, to a point, describe the scene and flags it as something that may be upsetting to some patrons. A trauma-informed interpretation of the scene, however, considers not only the visual

experience of the spectator, but takes a more sensorial and holistic approach. The wording of the content disclosure, then, would explicitly address that experience. Rather than only including 'an interrogation' as part of a list of potential triggers, the scene would be marked as an interrogation wherein the actor situates the spectator as the detainee, and its entire aesthetic context would be taken into consideration.

The remaining violent encounters stay between the characters onstage and do not ask the audience to stand in for unseen others. Onstage violence is seldom easy to present, and often requires a delicate touch. Though, ultimately, the specific blocking and staging of mimetic violence falls to the artistic discretion of the production's director, there are many ways for the dramaturg to assist and support the artistic process. Dramaturg Graça P. Corrêa has paid particular attention to the relationship between dramaturgical work, the experience of the spectator, and the phenomenological impact of the combination of these elements on storytelling. She writes that dramaturgy should "endow the spectators […] with knowledge and ability to speculate about the interrelationship between the performance-text and the world in which they live."[193] Spectators are again reminded of the larger context of the play and its link to the War on Terror when Bashir arrives in Alice's flower shop. He buys a bouquet of flowers and then shows Alice a satellite picture of Guantanamo, now a resort. Alice denies interrogating him, but he presses on, asking her about all the things he learned about her during their sessions: "Is your name Alice?... Are you from south Texas? Do you smoke Parliaments? Are there moles along your collarbone spaced like Orion's Belt? Do you wash with Ivory soup? Chew cinnamon gum? Bite your fingernails until they bleed? Is there a birthmark, shaped like a raven, an inch above

193. Graça P. Corrêa, "Dramaturg as Context Manager: A Phenomenological and Political Practice," *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (New York: Routledge, 2015) 309.

your left breast?"[194] Alice continues to assert that she does not know Bashir, but he does not back down. He continues to hold his ground until Alice grabs him, twists his arm behind his back, holds him down on the counter, and tells him to leave. This moment is the first physical confrontation between Alice and Bashir when both characters are present onstage and in view of the audience. The exchange is also reminiscent of an interrogation, wherein one person asks questions and the other claims not to know the answers to those questions, though the characters' roles are reversed. Though Alice's mind cannot remember her time in Cuba, her body does, and she quickly creates a situation where she is fully in control by physically overpowering Bashir, who does not fight back. The confrontation ends when Bashir agrees to leave. Before he does, however, he makes a final attempt to jog Alice's memory.

As he heads for the door, he places a black plastic bag over his head and stands with his arms on an angle out to his sides, recreating the photo of Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh standing on a box at Abu Ghraib with a black bag on his head and wires dangling from his hands. The physical and sexual violence that was inflicted upon Bashir during his time at Guantanamo is being seen be the audience for the first time. Alice, the white American soldier, is physically restraining the brown body of Bashir. This interaction is not limited to a mimetic physical altercation, but confronts the audience with a far more complicated image. By composing a scene wherein physical violence between an interrogator and a detainee ends with the detainee's reenactment of one of the most infamous images of the United States' use of brutality during the War on Terror, Cowhig draws attention to one very troubling aspect of the conflict—its continual presence. Susan Sontag has written extensively on the power of photography in the context of war. In 2004, after photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib were circulated,

194. Cowhig, *Lidless* 15-16.

Sontag wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times Magazine* called "Regarding the Torture of Others." The piece, whose title riffs off of her earlier book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, made a crucial point about the photographs: the horror of what is depicted in the photographs cannot be separated from the fact that the photographs exist in the first place, and that the Bush administration handled the circulation of the photographs as a public relations disaster rather than examining the systems and policies that allowed the prisoner abuse to take place.[195] Technology allowed the photographs to be taken and then disseminated within a few seconds. The Abu Ghraib photographs have since been widely documented and reproduced and, thus, cannot be erased, destroyed, or removed from public memory. While the playwright is clear that Alice was stationed at Guantanamo and not Abu Ghraib, the two sites have become synonymous with prisoner abuse and torture. This time, unlike in the opening scene at Guantanamo, Bashir has a physical presence in the scene as the target of violence, and holds a pose almost identical to one of the infamous photographs of Abu Ghraib prisoners.

When *Lidless* was written in 2009, little information about the U.S. practices concerning detainees was publicly known. Five years prior, in April 2004, news broke of prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib, and cell-phone images circulated of prisoners wearing hoods, being intimidated by dogs, and in positions of physical stress and sexual humiliation. Before that time, the United States' use of torture was largely invisible to the public. Two years later, in 2006, the Associated Press filed a request for the names of Guantanamo detainees under the Freedom of Information Act, and the U.S.'s abuses became front-page news.[196] Even though the first prisoners had

195. Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times Magazine*, May 23, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.
196. Andy Worthing, *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison* (London: Pluto Press, 2007) xiii.

arrived at Guantanamo Bay in January 2002, almost nothing of the site as a detention center was initially known to those outside of government and military. Within the State Department, however, conversations immediately turned to the legality of detaining suspected enemy combatants indefinitely and without trial. Much of the United States' actions toward detainees at Guantanamo Bay and the internal memorandums between the White House and the Department of Justice that sought to provide a sound legal foundation for using torture to interrogate and indefinitely detain them took place behind closed doors and on private servers. As Cowhig was writing *Lidless*, solid information about the detainees held at the camp and their treatment was not publicized widely. The photographs from Abu Ghraib, however, were circulated throughout the world. It has been well established that *Lidless* was produced to enter the discourse not only about the commemoration of 9/11, but also as a theatrical response to President Barack Obama's failure to close the detention center at Guantanamo Bay. Though the detention center was housed at an established military base, its repurposing was not widely known until many years after the first prisoner was brought there.

Strategies for a Trauma-Informed Approach to Dramaturgy

In a manner that is similar to work I described when discussing *Homebody/Kabul*, it is paramount for the dramaturg to understand the nature of the pain in the mimetic narrative and how it may counter a national trauma narrative. It is important to note, however, that the trauma in the mimetic narrative of the play is distinct from any individual or personal trauma that a character may experience. Additionally, the dramaturg must have a firm grasp of any pertinent corresponding trauma narrative with which audience members might be familiar and that is linked topically to the trauma in the mimetic world of the play. This is especially important when a play is produced with the intention of joining a wider political discourse. The strategies

outlined below are intended to serve as guidance for the dramaturg who is approaching a play where national trauma is central to the narrative and the spectator's meaning-making. No two plays or rehearsal processes are ever the same, and these approaches should be applied to the dramaturg's process as needed, not necessarily used to reshape the dramaturg's processes entirely.

The trauma felt in the aftermath of the attacks was, no doubt, genuine. What Cowhig's narrative highlighted, however, was that the national narrative of trauma was not inclusive of all suffering that resulted from the War on Terror, but only the suffering of particular groups. The play is set fifteen years after the end of the War on Terror, and therefore at an uncertain point in time. Because of this, the play's narrative provokes both the discomfort associated with a repositioned trauma narrative as well as what E. Anne Kaplan calls *pretrauma*,[197] a term she uses to describe the "severe anxiety about the future in Eurocentric cultures."[198] *Lidless* became particularly upsetting because not only does it offer a counter-narrative to the national trauma narrative, but it does so by completely resituating the roles of victim and perpetrator. Joining the wider conversation about 9/11 and the War on Terror, the play also presents another scenario—that two different narratives can simultaneously exist. Due to the nature of the counter-narrative and the content of the show, the dramaturgical work necessary to bring Cowhig's play to the stage creates its own challenges. Not only must the dramaturg think through the moments of brutality between characters, but they must also consider the interplay between the world of the

197. In early stages of her book project, Kaplan used the term *future tense trauma*. As the project expanded, she renamed the phenomenon *pretrauma*. See "Trauma Studies Moving Forward: Interdisciplinary Perspectives" and *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*.
198. E. Ann Kaplan. *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 2016) 1.

play and the spectator's perception. *Lidless* offers two specific sites for expanding upon the conversation about the intersection of dramaturgy and trauma. First, it offers a unique example of the aftermath of war positioned as the site of trauma, and simultaneously situates that site as a counter-narrative of national trauma. Second, the play's use of violence extends to both characters on stage and spectators in the audience. The following section explores these two ideas in reference to *Lidless* and offers some practical suggestions for the dramaturg.

The mimetic world of *Lidless* was centered around Guantanamo, its memory, and the aftermath of the War on Terror. In *Lidless*, while the nature of the pain lies with Bashir's interrogation in Guantanamo and his relationship with Alice, the role of trauma and the aftermath of war permeate the play's narrative. I have written previously in this chapter about using Alexander's model of collective trauma, and should clarify that that model is useful to understanding the interplay between the mimetic trauma narrative of a play and a mediascape-circulated trauma narrative. While it is important for the dramaturg to understand and acknowledge any conflict between the two narratives, it is not necessary to place that conflict at the center of text-based dramaturgical work. In other words, understanding the world of the play as created within the text is not the same as understanding the differences between different and conflicting narratives of trauma, though both are simultaneously present. In fact, the socio-cultural trauma of the War on Terror becomes the character's personal trauma in the aftermath.

For example, while understanding the nature of the pain in both the real and the mimetic world is important to structuring dramaturgical work, it is not inherently necessary to structure any research about the play in that way. *Lidless* provides a helpful example of this. Though the circumstances in *Lidless* are extraordinary, the play's storytelling is rooted in the relationship between the characters and their actions. On a structural level, Bashir's torture and detention are,

of course, the catalyst for the plot and the forward movement of the action. The trauma, however, is a part of the characters' story—it is not *the* story. Thus, while it is important for the dramaturg to recognize and acknowledge the trauma narratives of both the mimetic world and any competing mediascape, and any tension between those narratives, it is the actions and arcs of the characters that make up the story. In this way, a text such as *Lidless* requires a three-pronged approach. As with many plays, the dramaturg's first objective is an understanding of the immediate mimetic world of the play. In this case, it would be a matter of thoughtfully imagining, approaching, and exploring a world that exists fifteen years after the end of the War on Terror, specifically, the world that Alice lives in with her family and that Bashir's appearance disrupts. As that analysis unfolds, trauma narratives begin to reveal themselves.

The characters in *Lidless* are not unaware of their own trauma, and it is important that the dramaturg distinguish between an external narrative of collective trauma, how that narrative is resituated in the mimetic world of the play, and any emotional or physical trauma experienced by the characters. Though any emotional and physical turmoil will need to be handled with care by the director and actors, this is distinct from the trauma narrative that is addressed by the dramaturg. Throughout the play, characters articulate stories of their own individual personal trauma, and the text is deliberate in ensuring that all narratives of personal trauma are simultaneously present, and that none of the narratives are competing or invalid.

A priority for a dramaturg working on this production is to understand and be able to communicate the different types of on-stage violence that will be encountered by artists and audiences during this play. What is perhaps most unique about *Lidless* compared to *Homebody/Kabul* is that this performance includes onstage violence that is witnessed by the spectators, and contextualizes that violence within a larger political landscape of war. In

producing a play that begins during a prisoner interrogation at Guantanamo and then proceeds from there, there is a temptation to allow the violence to take over the storytelling. When presenting a counter trauma narrative, however, the violence, in whatever form it takes, is there to support and expand the narrative, not to be the main spectacle.

Content disclosures should stretch beyond obvious lists of things that may cause physical or mental distress to spectators with medically diagnosable conditions, such as the use of strobe lights for spectators with epilepsy, or loud and sudden sounds for those with post-traumatic stress disorder. Instead, content disclosures should include an honest description of the material of the play. This information must be made easily available to audiences before they arrive at the theatre or even purchase tickets. One solution is to include such information on the theatre's website. Another avenue is to encourage spectators to call the box office to discuss the show's content. This may initially appear to add extra responsibilities to those already taken on by the box office staff, but they need not be. In fact, this is an opportunity for the dramaturg to impact the frontlines of the theatre. The dramaturg should prepare a document, a cheat sheet of sorts, for the box office that discusses the content of the play, a description of any potentially upsetting images and themes, and how particular moments are staged. The idea is not to withhold any information from potential audience members, but to encourage them to decide if they would like to participate as a spectator for a given production. Because a dramaturg cannot foresee or identify every moment, image, or theme that could be potentially upsetting—indeed, the slippery and unpredictable nature of trauma does not allow for it—the dramaturg can also make themselves available to the box office to field any unexpected questions that may arise. Additionally, theatres can work to be sure that audience members know that such information is available to them in an honest and straightforward way. The document will include a description

of any potentially upsetting actions and themes, how these things are dramaturgically situated, and what the staging looks like. Specific to the production of *Lidless,* the document will highlight Alice's interrogation of Bashir and the hand-to-hand encounters in the hotel room and the flower shop, and will specifically describe Alice's use of sexualized and racially-charged violence. The document will be given to the box office (or any staff that directly interacts with patrons) in order to aid them in answering any questions a patron may have. Theatres will make known that they are able and willing to participate in this manner of inquiry. The subject matter and the portrayal of violence in *Lidless* can create an uncomfortable experience for the spectators. While some level of discomfort may be encouraged, and even welcomed and thrilling, choosing to cross into the discomfort zone must be at the discretion of the spectator. The violence—physical, sexual, and identity-based—is present in order to support the play's narrative, and must be kept at the center of the storytelling.

Lastly, I encourage dramaturgs to rethink the idea of talkbacks after plays which deal directly with ideas of personal and national trauma. In some situations, talkbacks can help to illuminate a production, give audience members an opportunity to speak directly with the artists, and lead to lively discussion. However, after a play like *Lidless*, forcing a conversation about the play creates a needlessly tense atmosphere. Furthermore, a post-show talkback asks spectators to immediately and publicly put their thoughts into words. Such conversations are of little benefit to a patron. Instead of a talkback centered on the play, dramaturgs can work to create a debriefing space of sorts where patrons would have the option of staying in their seats for a bit after the play has concluded. Perhaps they might suggest that patrons participate in some deep breathing, but the emphasis should be on creating a transitional space for spectators before they leave the theatre. Given the nature of the play and its complex relationship to national trauma, further

discussion of the play quickly following the performance does little to enhance a spectator's experience.

Conclusion

While *Homebody/Kabul* opened immediately after the 9/11 attacks, *Lidless*'s opening a decade later allowed for some physical and psychological distance. The recontextualization of *Homebody/Kabul* was sudden and unexpected. The production of *Lidless*, on the other hand, was intentionally timed with 9/11 commemoration events ten years later. In this chapter, I have demonstrated the benefits of applying a lens of trauma studies to dramaturgy, both in theory and in practice. I have explored dramaturgical strategies for engaging with plays rooted in the tension of narratives and competing counter-narratives of national trauma.

The September 2011 New York premiere was complicated further, however, by its location and timing, taking place only a few days after the ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. While every play and performance situation is unique unto itself, this exploration of *Lidless* brings attention to particular considerations and offers concrete approaches for the dramaturg grappling with a play whose trauma narrative directly intermingles with the spectator's understanding of an event. The final chapter will expand on this conversation by discussing the unexpected and current state of national trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the theatre community.

Conclusion:
"We're Not Set Up to Handle Something Like That"

"The reason those moments are so terrifying is that people know what can happen, in the world we live in now, the air we breathe touches the air that EVERYONE breathes, and people, borders are so porous now. The planet is smaller. The disease that is in one place reaches another so quickly. And the next pandemic, it will kill billions…And we're not set up to handle something like that…"—Ned, *The Nest*[199]

This dissertation demonstrates that theoretical frameworks from the field of trauma studies can directly impact dramaturgical practice. This approach has the capacity to directly intervene with the collective trauma that audiences experience during the aftermaths of national trauma. In the first chapter, I used *Homebody/Kabul* as a case study that addressed dramaturgy in the immediate aftermath of a national tragedy. When I initially conceived the chapter, I thought about the events of September 11, 2001, their wide-scale reverberations throughout the nation, and their direct impact on the theatre. For the dramaturg, these considerations pointed at the importance of understanding a play within the direct cultural context of the performance, not the one that was anticipated or one for which we may have hoped. Such an approach centers the experience of the spectator and the interplay between the mimetic trauma in the theatrical narrative and the national trauma that shadowed the production. The following chapter explored *Lidless* and the examination of a shifting trauma narrative. In a manner similar to the previous chapter, the discussion focused on the tension between the mimetic narrative of the play and the circulating trauma narrative in the public sphere. A primary difference between the two case studies, however, was the position of time and distance. *Lidless* was mounted against a backdrop

199. Theresa Rebeck, *The Nest* (New York, Samuel French, 2019), 11.

of re-remembering and commemoration, after some time had passed between the premiere and 9/11. *Homebody/Kabul*, on the other hand, opened as the United States was in a state of shock and only just starting to grapple with its aftermath of national trauma. In both instances, disentangling the mimetic narratives from discourse circulating in the mediascape and contextualizing them became the main task for the dramaturg, and an integral component of the spectators' meaning-making. This, however, could only be achieved by incorporating a foundation of trauma studies into dramaturgical practice.

This dissertation is structured around two plays: *Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless*, beginning with a discussion about Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* and its world premiere only two months after the 9/11 attacks. The play started its development in the late 1990s, and its December 2001 opening was slated during the previous spring. Much of the action of the play is set in Kabul, Afghanistan, and follows a British family as they search for their missing member, Homebody. The play ends ambiguously; it is unclear if she was killed by the Taliban or married to one of its members. The play follows the family during their search, uncovers deeply buried secrets, and tackles the political landscape of late-1990s Afghanistan. A few weeks before rehearsal began, however, a series of planes flew into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Such a major event of collective national trauma immediately recontextualized the mimetic narrative of Kushner's play. The ontological fallout of the 9/11 attacks was swift and tremendous, and directly impacted the meaning-making of the production. Irrespective of the 9/11 events, Kushner's play is powerful, but those events coincidentally brought the play into a whole new perspective. A decade later, amidst the ten-year commemoration of the 9/11 attacks, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig's *Lidless* opened just a few blocks away from Ground Zero. Between the premiere of *Homebody/Kabul* and the opening of *Lidless*, the national discourse surrounding the

event had changed: more information about the attack was known, the United States had been actively engaged in combat abroad, and the trauma narrative expanded to include the aftermath and memorialization. At the center of both of these discussions was the role of the dramaturg and the active role they could have in the meaning-making process.

Stories of cultural and national trauma have a rich history on American stages. Though this project has focused on a timeframe ranging from the 9/11 attacks through the War on Terror, national trauma is by no means limited to that period. Indeed, it is something that we are currently living through. As wars continue to be fought, lives lost, and the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause suffering, the need to use storytelling as a way of healing, understanding, and reconciliation continues. In late 2019, I saw a production of Theresa Rebeck's play *The Nest*, about a group of long-time friends who regularly meet up at a neighborhood bar. The play begins with Ned, a regular, on a date that is going badly. Already a few beers in, he begins to passionately tell his unamused date about the flu pandemic of 1918. As he gains momentum, he concludes that, compared to a pandemic, something like a war "isn't really that bad," because "tiny tiny organisms" are far more dangerous, and are a much more ominous threat to humanity. This is not only because of their potential for destruction, but because civilization is "not set up to handle something like that."[200] In war, an enemy is usually visible, and wars can be ended through the will of those involved. The enemy in the form of a potentially fatal virus, however, is invisible, and human beings are left to the whim of nature taking its often-unpredictable course. Within the context of the play, the scene was humorous, both because of Ned's tangential drunken reasoning, and because the genuine concern about a wide-scale pandemic seemed like a long stretch of the imagination when the play was performed last fall.

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200. Theresa Rebeck, *The Nest*, 7-11.

By the spring of 2020, however, much of the country and world found themselves ordered to stay home while a global pandemic spread just outside of their doors. About six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, I was in the final stages of revising this dissertation about national trauma and plays that framed characters' experiences of war. During the many months of writing, the foundation of my project was mostly theoretical. I had examined plays that were produced immediately after the events of 9/11, focusing on the generative possibilities of combining dramaturgy with trauma studies. Mine was no practical experimentation; rather, it was a series of guiding questions that explored what *could* be enlightening about viewing the practice of dramaturgy through a lens of trauma studies. As I was editing and sharpening the writing, it occurred to me that the topic of this dissertation—staging national trauma—refracts differently now, amid a pandemic.

Once the virus began to spread, theatres in the United States quickly responded by going dark. Theatre is a unique practice that relies on both the gathering of a community and the presence of liveness. No longer could audiences come together to experience the wonder of live storytelling. Almost immediately, many theatres responded by halting all live performances and by releasing recordings of productions and readings of new work that were streamed over Zoom and other online platforms. While these responses appeared to allow for the show to (sort of) go on, and greatly improved accessibility for many, they were, and still are, no substitute for live events. Artists soon converged on various social media platforms to grieve their lost projects, vent their frustrations about the decimated theatre industry, and seek out other virtual spaces to continue performing and creating. A counter-view also began circulating on social media. An anonymous theatre artist, writing under the name Nicholas Berger, published a blog post entitled "The Forgotten Art of Assembly, or Why Theater Makers Should Stop Making," that suggests

that artists temporarily step away from their work during the pandemic and allow themselves to wrestle with the grief that it created. Berger calls out the "concerted effort on the part of the theatre artists everywhere to *keep making*."[201] He argues that that approach—the push to continue to create and make—runs counter to acknowledging the deeply rooted loss the pandemic created by blocking audiences from gathering together to watch performances in a shared space. The piece was widely read, and the backlash was immediate and biting, most directly in Anna Caldwell's "Why Theatre Makers Should *Keep* Making: Or, The Unforgettable Art of Assembly."[202] Caldwell argues that, rather than stop making until conditions return to what they were pre-pandemic, continuing to create, however small, fosters a spirit of collaboration that makes it possible to endure the bleakness of the situation.[203] Both blog posts were written in April—more than six months ago. At that time, the closure of theatres was still quite new and unprecedented in modern times. While both present a different approach to the pandemic, I do not think that they are mutually exclusive of one another. Berger's suggestion, that theatre-makers temporarily halt the creation of theatre, allows for a space to acknowledge grief, process loss, and hold space for those productions that will never be. Caldwell's counter-approach positions theatre, community, and gathering *as the means of* coping with the havoc caused by the pandemic.[204] Given this conversation surrounding current theatre practices, the

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201. Nicholas Berger, "The Forgotten Art of Assembly: Or, Why Theatre Makers Should Stop Making."
202. Anna Caldwell, "Why Theatre Makers Keep Making: Or, The Unforgettable Art of Assembly." Italics added for emphasis.
203. Anna Caldwell, "Why Theatre Makers *Should* Keep Making: Or, The Unforgettable Art of Assembly."
204. Though both Berger and Caldwell limited their discussion to the impact that the pandemic had on the practice of live theatre, the pandemic was by no means the only social strife impacting the United States. A few months into the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd by a police officer ignited large-scale demonstrations and calls for justice.

need for a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy is not only necessary, I believe there is a strong case to be made that it has never been more urgent.

As dramaturgs, we are in the habit of talking about our "dramaturgical work on a play," as though we owe our fidelity strictly to the text, and any information about the world of the play that can be amassed and organized into a neat and tidy packet for the actors and director. Dramaturgical work, however, does not end at the edge of the stage. In plays concerning national trauma, especially, the dramaturgical work cannot be confined to the text. Before audiences arrive at a theatre, they have seen some sort of advertising that has enticed them to buy a ticket, and perhaps they have been exposed to some type of news article that gives a behind-the-scenes look at the artists or the rehearsal process. Furthermore, when spectators arrive at the theatre, they walk out of a mediascape[205] saturated with information. As spectators take their seats on opening night, they do so through a complex web of national trauma interwoven with the contemporaneous mediascape. The theatrical narrative that confronted them in the theatre, however, frequently counters the clear and accepted narrative circulating outside of the theatre.

Some of the current trends in the theatre have called for more responsibility amongst artists, most notably to protect the actors telling the playwright's story. There is a long history of fight choreographers coming to the rehearsal hall to work with actors and help stage physical conflict in a manner that is both faithful to the needs and tone of the text, and safe for the body and mind of the performers. More recent is the emergence of the intimacy choreographer, who

205. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy, *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2-3 (1990) 296 and 299. The term *mediascape* was coined by Appadurai and refers to "the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film production studios)… and the images of the world created by these media" which are available for both public and private interests."

works with performers in matters pertaining to staging physical and sexual intimacy necessitated by a playwright's script. As with the fight choreographer, the work of the intimacy choreographer is focused on the physical and mental wellbeing of the actors as they explore and solidify moments of sexual intimacy. I applaud the steps being taken and the positions that foster responsibility and protection of artists in a manner that also preserves the creative intentions of the playwright.

This conversation, however, leads me to one of the essential questions in this dissertation: what responsibility, if any, do artists have to the wellbeing of their audiences? A general assumption in theatre might be that the act of buying a ticket and showing up at the theatre is tantamount to *consenting* to watch and witness whatever the artists have prepared, regardless of the nature of the content or how the audience might react. Even in cases where audiences are given a warning in the form of a program note or lobby signage such as "this show contains nudity/physical violence/strobe lights," the nature of the nudity or violence is vague at best, misleading at worst. But, as has been substantiated with the previous case studies, the meaning of the show is created by more than enactment of a text. Who, then, is thinking on behalf of the audience? Can or should we produce plays in a manner that helps guide the emotional response of the audience? As the conclusion of this dissertation, I propose a new and separate role—a trauma specialist. While this role may be fulfilled by a dramaturg familiar and experienced with handling plays that deal with, draw upon, and navigate through national trauma, I propose such a role be created as a separate entity. An understanding of trauma in general and national trauma in particular is absolutely necessary for any director or dramaturg preparing a play about experiences of war, and requires more than the typical production-specific research and preparation.

The emergence of a trauma specialist, or, at the very least, specialized trauma-informed training for dramaturgs, will have a number of benefits. This new and necessary role would sit alongside the fight choreographer and intimacy choreographer, but rather than focusing on helping the actors to behave safely and responsibly, the work of the trauma specialist would focus on the *reception* of the production within its socio-cultural context.

There is no end in sight to the pandemic, but theatres have moved past immediate triage, and are now able to think about the long-term implications of the pandemic—for worse, or maybe for better. Theatre, as it was widely practiced until early 2020, will not return anytime soon. As dramaturg Lauren Halvorsen quipped in her recent newsletter, *Nothing for the Group*: "if you still think you're producing in-person shows in March [2021], you're living in a sweet, sweet fantasy, baby."[206] Beneath the tongue-in-cheek reference to the 1995 Mariah Carey song,[207] however, lies a far more sinister reckoning: an entire field can no longer function as it once did, and its future will require a massive rethinking. Many people in professional theatre have lost their positions, which has had a devastating impact on both career progression, and the current and near-future artistic output of theatre. Among the many considerations of how theatre can continue in the era of COVID-19, the role of the dramaturg becomes even more important. In addition to more traditional activities like new-play development and production research, dramaturgs—especially those with an understanding of socio-cultural trauma—can take the lead in the reimagining of the practice.

More specifically, dramaturgs can use trauma-trained eyes to center their artistic practice. Evidence of socio-cultural trauma, in some way, can be found in many—perhaps even all—

206. Lauren Halvorsen, *Nothing for the Group*, September 25, 2020.
207. Mariah Carey, "Fantasy," track 1 on *Daydream*, Columbia Records, 1995, compact disk.

plays. For centuries, narratives of social struggle, oppression, dominance, and uncertainty have played out on the stages of the world. Though this dissertation examines only two of those plays, they are by no means the only plays to which the ideas discussed previously could be applied. Beyond theoretical or academic applications of a trauma-informed approach to dramaturgy, the practice has the potential to tangibly influence theatre-makers as well. Though all dramaturgs, like actors, develop their own processes through a combination of training, practice, and lots of trial and error, there are a few specific tactics dramaturgs can utilize in the early stages of their analysis. For example, after the dramaturg has engaged with the script a few times and has a grasp on the play's interior landscape and its overall shape, they can focus their attention on a close reading of the text. This includes identifying the presence of socio-cultural trauma within the play's dialogue or stage directions that pertains directly to the action of the play and the immediate world of the characters. During further reads, the dramaturg can expand upon this, and mark any references to or allusions within the dialogue that engage with an unseen (yet still present) collective trauma within the mimetic narrative of the play.

Once the dramaturg has identified ideas and references of socio-cultural trauma, they can then turn their attention to broader narratives that exist outside the world of the play. This can happen in two places—the historical moment in which the play was written and the current moment in which the play is being performed. By analyzing the play and its world from two historical moments, the dramaturg will be able to identify sites of trauma in both the mimetic world of the play and the interplay between the play's narrative and various narratives of socio-cultural trauma likely to be present in the cultural milieu of a spectator. It is in this particular gap—between the content of the play and an acknowledgment of cultural trauma of the present—that the dramaturg can be particularly useful. This type of work, however, is not

without limitations. Like all artists, dramaturgs interact with their practice from their own subject position. This must not only be acknowledged, but it must inform the dramaturg's decision to seek out specialists, academics, activists, and others whose expertise is especially pertinent to the trauma narrative of the script and the related external cultural trauma narrative that reverberates through the production.

Looking to the immediate future, theatre cannot be done without an understanding of the interplay of trauma narratives in the mimetic world of the play with those present in the real world in which the performance is taking place, and dramaturgs have a vital role to play. Though institutional dramaturgs are frequently part of season planning, upcoming seasons will need to be reframed and constructed with an acknowledgment of the trauma of the pandemic, racial reckoning, and audiences who are simultaneously terrified of the situation, yet hungry for programming. I think it is likely that theatres may choose to revisit plays like *Waiting for Godot*[208] and *Marat/Sade*,[209] and other plays that confront existentialism and confinement. Plays about disease, like *Angels in America*[210] or *One Flea Spare*,[211] although entirely relevant for these times, might be even more challenging. There is also a useful role for the trauma specialist during outreach activities before or after the show. They would use this opportunity to speak to the audience directly, informing them of the historical and socio-cultural context of the play. They would also discuss how trauma and the potential impact on an audience member can be examined and explained, while considering the emotional well-being of the audience, which is

208. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).
209. Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (Long Grove, Waveland Press, 1965.
210. Tony Kushner, *Angeles in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013).
211. Naomi Wallace, *One Flea Spare* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1997).

particularly important during these difficult times. Perhaps most importantly, the dramaturg will be vital in reimaging performance spaces and ways of bringing spectators together in a manner that allows for a collective experience, yet keeps audiences safe.

Alongside the pandemic is a growing and shifting state of national trauma that has impacted the theatre community especially hard. While there are many ways that theatres have responded and stretched themselves, one of the most noticeable and prevalent is the conversation surrounding trauma—not in relation to characters and events represented onstage, but in relation to spectators and meaning-making. This very question is being explored by Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, a professional organization that represents dramaturgs, through their "Dramaturging the Phoenix" series. Beginning in April 2020, the organization issued a call for short essays from its members that "explore theatre's potential to transform through global crisis."[212] The response was enthusiastic, and what initially began as a collection of short essays has grown into a weekly speaker and discussion series. Additionally, Harvard's Mahindra Humanities Center has started hosting an ongoing digital seminar, Transmedia Arts. Curated by dramaturgs Magda Romanska and Hana Worthen, talks address topics such as "Transmedia Dramaturgy of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Theatre," "Covid-19, Transmedia, and the Art of Posthuman Existence," and "Spectral Storytelling: Social Engagement through Technology in Traumatized Environments."

The COVID-19 pandemic swept across this country and the world at a frightening pace. As of this writing, more than 250,000 people in the United States have have tragically lost their lives: this is higher than the combined number of Americans who died in the wars in Vietnam

212. "Dramaturging the Phoenix," Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, https://lmda.org/dramaturging-phoenix.

and Korean. Over twelve million people in the United States have been infected to date, twenty-two million lost their jobs at the onset of the pandemic, and many more millions of lives have been disrupted in this country and throughout the world. I ask: how would this country respond to a play about the COVID-19 pandemic? Who would be the heroes, and who would be the villains? Would there be a large audience interested in seeing such a play? As mentioned, while *Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless* explore counternarratives of national trauma, the pandemic has brought an additional trauma to the shores of this country. Depicting these current events in plays will be challenging. However, I fully believe it will be absolutely necessary as a means of cultural healing. Managing how audiences navigate mimetic narratives that explore and document the experience will be extremely important. It is my sincere hope that the discussions surrounding the interplay between dramaturgy and trauma in *Homebody/Kabul* and *Lidless* will be especially useful for such plays in the future. As Tony Kushner reminds us: "If you choose to write about current events, there's a good chance that you will find the events that you've written about to be…well, current."[213]

213. Tony Kushner, "An Afterward," *Homebody/Kabul*, 146.

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