

Chapter 1

Strangers More than Ever

Modern Drama and Alternative Modernities

Blanche: Holding tight to his arm.

Whoever you are – I've always depended on the kindness of strangers.

– Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*¹

Ruth: *Eddie.*

Teddy turns.

Pause.

Don't become a stranger.

– Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming*²

By 1960 a multitude of new realities arose, presenting “modernism” with a daunting series of challenges. These “new realities” called into question Euro-American postwar dominance of the world stage. The Cold War and subsequent collapse of communism in 1989; the rapid ascendancy of China, India, Brazil, and other nations as cultural and economic powers; the Vietnam War circa 1964–1974; the spread of AIDS from 1980 to the present; a swiftly changing global and technological landscape; financial bubbles and fiscal free falls; and the emergence of social justice for minorities, women, the poor, and other oppressed peoples (and its reactionary antitheses), created a new “modernism” unlike anything before. The rise of communication by way of computer and the Internet linked the world

in ways never previously experienced. We became more intimate and knowledgeable of each other at a pace and speed previously unimaginable. Our abilities to communicate transformed into action, as the barriers between people dismantled. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, and other works, Jürgen Habermas posits the theory of “communicative action,” whereby he describes a “binding force of intersubjective understanding and reciprocal recognition.” The rational potential for cross-border contact and intersubjective understanding, particularly through technology, informed the possibility of communicating “into dimensions of historical time, social space, and body-centered experiences.”³ Yet, despite this formidable communicative apparatus facilitating openness and availability, the idea of “strangers” – the notion that we hardly communicate despite technology – inspires the 40-year period under investigation. Dramatists illuminate the vivid paradox that the more we communicate the less we understand each other, and our technical capacity to extend our communicative reach ironically diminishes empathy. We are “strangers” – as reflected in the quotes beginning this chapter – in ways we have never thought imaginable.

Comparing Tennessee Williams and Harold Pinter illustrates several concerns of this book: how a break between modern drama prior to 1960 (modern drama taken up in Volume I) and post-1960 (postmodern) drama took hold; how a continuance of prior modernism prevailed and evolved during the last 40 years of the twentieth century; and how the relationship of, and differences between, postmodernism and modernism are reciprocal as well as antithetical. As a consequence, there are two modernisms at work here: the continuance of previous modernist ideas and a rebellious “postmodern” drama. Relations between the two ideas are complicated, containing mutuality and antagonism. The genesis of a historical phenomenon is always a challenging topic; one can find forerunners in the near and even distant past. The dramatic dialogues by Williams and Pinter quoted above exemplify thus a “pseudo-split”: both lines of dialogue arrive similarly at the end of their respective plays and both raise the specter of “stranger-ness.” Yet each playwright undertakes separate intentions in their usage of the term “stranger.”

In Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche arrives at her sister Stella’s New Orleans apartment only to find herself unwelcomed by her belligerent and territorially protective brother-in-law Stanley. Throughout the play Stanley and Blanche compete for Stella’s attention and support.

Blanche is disappointed in her sister, expecting more refinement and education from Stella's spouse. Stanley is frustrated as well, his feelings exacerbated by Blanche's intrusive (indeed, threatening) presence and her alcoholism (she consumes his liquor liberally). The conflict between them over the "soul" of Stella amplifies throughout the play, leading to Stanley's "final solution" to her presence by raping her. When she fails to convince her sister and neighbors of Stanley's savagery, Blanche, already frail, succumbs to a nervous breakdown and is dispatched to a sanatorium. Her remark, "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers," is directed to the empathetic psychiatrist who offers his arm to Blanche in lieu of a straitjacket. The statement is poetical as well as political, noting that without family, community, or government intervention via social services, Blanche and other overly sensitive and "useless appendages" – people physically or psychologically challenged and incapable of surviving on their own – are left to depend on "strangers" for charity and kindness.

Williams, like many prototypical pre-1960 modernists, cleaves to the determining defiance of bourgeois values and attacks middle-class security as false paradigms of harmony. Williams scorns capitalism, inculcating its rapacious greed and insensitivity to the helpless (Blanche, for instance, or Laura in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*). Furthermore, the ability to clarify his critique of society depends largely on the exchange between Blanche and the doctor; between them and the audience reside a mutual understanding or Habermasian "communicative action." Blanche's "speech-act" is immediately understood by the Psychiatrist; he removes the straitjacket and extends his arm in a gesture of empathy. Blanche has "always" depended on strangers for survival, for random acts of "kindness," relying on communal reciprocity and communicative action that echoes Habermasian social theory.

Habermas builds his concept of communicative action on the linguistic "speech-act" theory of J.L. Austin, who asserts a distinction between "performative" and "constative" sentences. Performative "speech-act" utterances, Austin contends, are words or communications that perform "an action" (saying "I do" at a wedding, for instance, transforms the bride-groom relationship), resulting in reciprocal, mutually understood change (we therefore "do things" with words); constative utterances report facts but hardly change reality.⁴ Blanche's words "change" the dynamic of her relationship with the Psychiatrist, making her text a "communicative action." Habermas stresses five facets of speech-act-communicative action theory in

order for a rational exchange of ideas to occur – and each facet is germane to the final episode in *Streetcar*:

The speaker must choose a comprehensible [*verständlich*] expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true [*wahr*] proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intention truthfully [*wahrhaftig*] so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right [*richtig*] so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims that reciprocally raise are justified. [The aim of communicative action is agreement that culminates] in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness.⁵

When Blanche says “I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers” audiences understand not merely the empathy involved, but its *communicative action*: Blanche’s words “performatively” change the relationship between herself and the Psychiatrist, creating comprehension, validity, rationality, shared values, agreed-upon trust, empathy, and mutual understanding between characters as well as audiences. There is a moral imperative imbedded in the phrase: the consequences of warehousing Blanche to the impersonal institutionalization of a psychiatric ward are not merely social, they are emotional, political, and psychological as well. The play’s aesthetic and moral foundation depends on critiquing alienation and disenfranchisement – that is, her abandonment – while supporting mutuality, trust, and communal bonds. Blanche’s performative relationship with the Psychiatrist forges expressive outrage against a “system” that abandons the helpless while simultaneously defends the empathy between mutually understanding communicators, emphasizing the core of Tennessee Williams’s socialist politics.

For Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*, nothing in language is certain and certainly nothing changes. Moral and political issues move through the slipstream of porous, ambiguous, and primarily “ironic” contingencies. Morality is a choice rather than an imperative; if circumstances change, morality changes too. There is no agreed-upon trust, nor immutable morality, but

instead a fungible and nimble set of circumstances and relationships requiring moral relativism and interpretation – or, to quote Friedrich Nietzsche’s assertion that has echoed throughout postmodernism: “There are no facts, only interpretations.”⁶ Not only are characters in Pinter’s play ethical free agents and interpreters of meaning, but language barely communicates; words are exchanged, but understanding is obtuse. Like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in *The Homecoming* a family member (Teddy with his wife, Ruth), returns to the fold. Teddy’s relationship to Ruth is based on a seemingly stable marital relationship. Yet immediately upon their entrance we discover that their filial bonds are (and have always been) miasmic, tenuous, and untrustworthy. Their communicative action is nil because their marriage disowns any “agreed upon truthfulness”; the principles of “character” found in Williams’s plays, where character means a deeply etched, unchangeable moral standard, is now diluted in Pinter. What Teddy thought Ruth was and is, and what Ruth actually was and is, no longer sustains a semblance of “truth” or communicative bond – no signifier–signified relationship, as the semiotician would have it.⁷ Our eyes and ears are unreliable; what are said and seen in the play bear little if any resemblance or correspondence to a Habermasian communicative action because, as Richard Gilman asserts about *The Homecoming*, “there is no logic to what has happened, no continuity with the accepted behavior of people.”⁸ What we have, instead, is a Pinteresque world where clear-cut relationships are jettisoned, replaced with deliberate situations of discontinuity and miscommunication. Language in Pinter is “deconstructed” – a particular Jacques Derrida coinage that posits a logical or rhetorical incompatibility between the explicit and implicit levels of discourse. As Mark Poster explains, the rise of deconstruction, postmodernism, and poststructuralism (terms that will be defined throughout) mark a turn in the social atmosphere where certainty gives way to a world “constituted in part by simulacra, by copies with no originals, by an unending proliferation of images, by an infinitely regressive mirroring of word and thing, by a simultaneity of events, by an instantaneity of act and observation, by an immediacy and copresence of electronically mediated symbolic instructions, by a language that generates its meaning to a large extent self-referentially.”⁹ At the end of the play Ruth calls him “Eddie,” not Teddy, tacitly implying that this diminutive yet ironically intimate imprimatur is a doubling down on indeterminacy and *mis*-communication. The play ends on this new name, Eddie, symbolic of their relationship: Teddy (now Eddie) and Ruth *have always been and always will be strangers*. Their bond is a marital simulacrum, a facsimile of what marriage is supposed to be, devoid of certainty, mired in misjudgments, and lacking truth-claims.

The modern dramatic subject exists in an expansive world as a surrogate for social affairs, while the postmodern subject exists in a contingent quasi-reality that avoids lucidity of meaning and social engagement. Modernism in general, Terry Eagleton observes, “is shot through with a desire for some solid truth while at the same time mourning its elusiveness. Modernist culture of the mid-20th century is by and large a culture of negativity – of absence, lack, void, death, otherness, non-being and non-identity.”¹⁰ The postmodern, by contrast, illustrates the external and immediate rather than the modernist cultivation of social relevancy, putting little if any stock in “truth.” Moreover, if, as literary scholar Paul De Man maintains, “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure,”¹¹ postmodernism makes little use of a “presence,” true or otherwise. Modernism, which relied heavily on structural binary conditions (East–West, ruler–ruled, origin–copy, etc.), was challenged by poststructuralism’s claim that structures are unstable, conventional, and bound up with language. In a world of simulacra, origination (the *ur* work of art), to borrow Walter Benjamin’s term, has lost its “aura,” replaced by mechanical re-productivity.¹² Postmodern characters exemplified by *The Homecoming* respond to whatever happens to be presented to them, concerned merely with base desires and longing for little else. While Blanche longs for a “meaningful relationship” that appreciates depth, aesthetics, and a true presence of identity, Pinter’s dysfunctional household has little interest in presence or inner fulfillment. Fredric Jameson clarifies this surface–depth dichotomy by comparing two works that utilize shoes: Vincent van Gogh’s painting, *A Pair of Boots*, with Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Jameson, drawing on Martin Heidegger’s 1936 analysis of van Gogh, claims that *A Pair of Boots* (likewise *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I submit) points to a broader reality of universal truth. Blanche’s homeless condition has social implications; it contains a utopian-socialist message about “humanity.” “Kindness” is a social compact, and when it is exercised amongst strangers it strengthens societal bonds. Warhol’s work, by contrast (and Pinter by extension of this idea), centers on what Jameson calls the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms to which we will have occasion to return in a number of other contexts.”¹³ Warhol and Pinter renounce the sociohistorical dimension Williams aspired to; in its place is a surface flatness and a nuanced superficiality. Pinter’s later works would turn to the political, but at this juncture of his career he represents the ushering in of postmodernism in drama.

The Critical Divide: Defining Modernism and Postmodernism

The critical and artistic background of the period between 1960 and 2000 is more diversified, both in terms of the subject matter and the interests of the playwrights, than the previous decades. This era witnessed an increasing implementation of interdisciplinary thought, with politics, philosophy, art, literature, and multiculturalism woven into the fabric of drama. Several historical, social, and linguistic factors bear significantly on the shift, or critical divide, between the dramas of Volume I and Volume II. While it is relatively easy to designate 1960 as the beginning of postmodernism and 2000 as roughly its end (though some would argue it hasn't passed), explaining what occurred during the era requires clarification.

I define modernism and postmodernism as falling under the rubric of "modernity." Modernity means the broadly construed historical period beginning with the post-Renaissance Enlightenment (c. eighteenth century) that remains with us.¹⁴ Within this larger frame I situate modernism and postmodernism as theoretical, aesthetic, and cultural practices associated with periods that divide around 1960. For some, postmodernism has been perceived as a "fad" of the 1970s through the 1990s, and has to some degree fallen out of favor because, like most fads, it engendered weariness and because it has been associated with a simplistic version of epistemic skepticism and draconian anti-realism.¹⁵ Still, its influence on the drama of this epoch is, for better or worse, undeniable, and it is worth briefly charting the trajectory of modernism to postmodernism through the rubric of modernity.

One of the distinctions between modernity and classicism is that classicism was a period prior to the eighteenth century in which expressing diversity of opinions or multiple definitions of the world were largely deemed heresy – the product of political descent and moral decay. In Western philosophy, Greek, Roman, and medieval thought generally looked askance at diversity, favoring instead unquestioned systemic religious and moral beliefs. During the Enlightenment, tolerance, pluralism, and diversity emerged, indicating social vitality, freedom of expression, and aesthetic subjectivity.¹⁶ The idea of "freedom" begins with Kant's view of the Enlightenment ("*Sapere aude* – Dare to know!"), Shakespeare's humanism, and the worldview that one is a free agent to decide values, goals, and ethics. Moreover, the Enlightenment ushered in the notion of art's autonomy. In drama this autonomy has roots in Diderot, Lessing, and the rise of humanism as drama looked to the life,

aspirations, and conflicts of the common individual rather than royalty, and to the free agency of individuals to dictate the terms of their lives.

“Modernism” in drama is a narrower period, beginning with Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov and ending with Samuel Beckett, dating from 1879 to 1959 (specifically the plays in Volume I).¹⁷ It is marked by aesthetic self-consciousness or self-reflexiveness (illuminated by the “isms” of modernism); advocating simultaneity, juxtaposition, or montage (accelerated by the rise of photography, film, Pirandello’s theatricality, and Brecht’s distanciation and estrangement theories); informed by paradox and ambiguity (highlighted by increasing urban life and its ensuing anxiety); the quest for dignity and freedom; discarding previous ideas, traditions, and habits; dedicated to revolutionary change in social and political institutions; and the demise of the integrated individual subject (influenced by Chekhov, Strindberg, Artaud, and others).¹⁸

The architects of modernity, in particular Enlightenment thinkers, put stock in individual rationalism and the unity of thought rather than unity of religion or hand-me-down ideas. Modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by philosophers of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), writes Jürgen Habermas, “consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic,” utilizing the “accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life – that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.”¹⁹ The Enlightenment revolutionized our understanding of law, politics, science, philosophy, morality, art, and literature, by jettisoning religious authority and hierarchical royalty, substituting reasoned argument, democracy, and generating a search for current events and social criticism. In art Immanuel Kant situated knowledge and aesthetics in a unity of what he called apperception, a function of synthesizing forms of perception (observing the phenomena) in combination with the schemata of imagination, culminating in formal categories of understanding.²⁰ Art and aesthetics can be identified for Kant as a universal comprehension in which judgments are informed by a detached observer who, with unified agreement, can ascertain what is aesthetic, what is not, and what “art” is.

While not necessarily a Romantic, Kant set the stage for Romantic faith in the imagination: the power to stimulate the hidden depths of the soul that addresses the puzzle of humanity’s relationship to nature and the ability to respond to nature through an aesthetic perception. The Romantics, Peter Murphy and David Roberts aver, prioritized “sensibility over functionality, particularity over universality, interiority over externality, mystery over lucidity,

the unconscious over the conscious, expression over construction, literature over technology, myth over science. Romanticism equated enlightenment with mechanism, soulless instrumentalism, and the domination of nature.”²¹ Hegel extends this idea of an aesthetic rationality, opening the way for Romanticism by placing demands on the principle of unification through a dialectical synthesis of nature and spirit (or mind, what he called *Geist*), what Fredric Jameson aptly dubs Hegel’s “collective life.”²² This collectivity or unity was in reaction to the appreciation of diversity during Enlightenment modernity while simultaneously supporting the passionate engagement of Romanticism, providing the metaphysical backdrop of modernity’s need to confront the issue of unity and multiplicity in cultures and aesthetics.

Romanticism, influenced by Kant and Hegel, took issue with Enlightenment universalism and rationalism. Various forms of Romantic Idealism (German and British Romanticism, especially) arose in the early nineteenth century as a break from both Renaissance classicism and Enlightenment’s detailed positivism by distinguishing the differences between spirituality and materiality. The Enlightenment (following the spirit of the Renaissance) celebrated the collapse of the preordained by withdrawing God to be replaced by humanity as the central theme. But in doing so, science, formalism (Aristotelian “rules”), and moral strictures surfaced devoid of creative deviance. Art followed “rules,” in order to collate and organize the appreciation of art through objectivity. The Romantic Idealists wanted to restore unity within humankind’s creative spirit without restoring religious constrictions or Enlightenment objectivity.²³ The Hegelian version of this Romanticism is called “absolute idealism,” as opposed to Descartes’s dualism and Berkeley’s subjectivism, the latter two claiming that material bodies (the senses) do not exist beyond surfaces and that the deeper layer of mental substances are the complete engagement of human consciousness. Hegel believed in a metaphysical position characterized by the idea that the mind and the world share the same categorical structures. Thought and reality are unified insofar as the mind can grasp the totality of existence and subsume it (Hegel calls it “sublation” – *Aufhebung*) into the dialectical give-and-take of worldly relationships (*Weltgeist*, in his words, or world spirit).²⁴ For Hegel, art is a process of articulating not merely form and the reconstitution of form, but also reforming that which reconstructs our perception. Hegel’s dialectic draws our attention to the complexity of art by highlighting contradictions and oppositions. We therefore undertake a process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that reconstitutes a new thesis. Thought can attain its highest achievement when it adheres to the linear-progressive movement of the

world, coupled with the dialectical struggle of thesis and antithesis. In art Idealism, which informed Romanticism, was grounded in the notion of beauty and truth, aesthetics and art, and unity of mind and materiality joined in a fount of creativity bursting forth from artistic imagination. The artist's imaginative powers were deified and subjectivism honored over collectivism as long as the subjective artist applies dialectical thinking and is endowed with "creative genius."

During the mid-nineteenth century Romantic Idealism was challenged by Marxist social critics and later by analytic philosophers during the early twentieth, because Idealism was considered detached from reality (Marxist social criticism) or too invested in metaphysics and moralizing (analytic philosophy). Idealism depended on concept over flesh – abstraction over materiality, the artist's *Innerlichkeit*, or inwardness over realism – and therefore avoided life on the ground. Materialists like Marx influenced drama through the rise of realism, the notion that a play can create a "representation" of reality and thereby critique social conditions and injustice objectively by representing these conflicts onstage. The central conflict in the modernist dramas of Ibsen, Chekhov, early Strindberg, and others is the attempt to render the disillusionment of the individual alienated consciousness with the phenomena of a rapidly changing, modernized world that is constantly transforming, encroaching, and displacing that consciousness. These playwrights attempt to provide an "authentic account" of this oscillating consciousness from the perspective of social forces intervening on the individual. This aesthetic condition combined psychology with historicism. Erich Auerbach posits that the nascent development of realism surfaced during the second half of the eighteenth century and "laid the aesthetic foundation of modern realism" that came to its fruition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This early realism, Auerbach contends, is rooted in "Historicism," in which the highest aim of Western literature lies in the representation of a "historical" reality. The past, like the present, is to be "seen as incomparable and unique, as animated by inner forces and in constant state of development," and the present is "a piece of history whose everyday depths and total inner structure lay claim to our interest both in their origins and in the direction taken by their development."²⁵ The connection of historicism and realism is the root and branch of Marxist social modernism: historical conditions of ordinary people are not the privy of the artist's inner life (as the Romantics would have it) but rather motivated by externally "historicized" incidents and circumstances stimulated by dramatic conflict (an idea coined by Hegel), where what we see onstage is "life-like" conflicts

that lead to an implicit understanding of society's give-and-take. Realism took root amidst the emergence of history as an epistemological field of research and examination. "The great realist writers," Terry Eagleton reminds us, "arise from a history which is visible in the making; the historical novel [or drama], for example, appears as a *genre* at a point of revolutionary turbulence in the early nineteenth century, where it was possible for writers to grasp their own present as *history*."²⁶

There are multiple forms of "realism" in philosophy. Fundamentally realism is the claim that the world exists independent of subjectivity and appearances. For modern dramatists, realism works to link real-world experiences with events unfolding onstage without the supposed interference of the artist's subjective manipulation. Realism doesn't mean slavish adherence to linearity or mundane life; a play such as *Death of a Salesman* is "realistic" even as it employs expressionist ideas of rage and inner turmoil and non-chronological features moving back and forth in real time and illusion. Realism stresses the mimetic features of drama; productions largely value portraits of social conditions, illumination and contextualization of periods, and psychological revelations of human behavior. Realism makes use of reportage, apropos of journalism; but it also seeks to convey dialectic struggles of competing forces that transpire objectively. The purpose of realism is to uncover the objective social forces in competition. Brecht was a "realist" in his efforts to convey social conditions while simultaneously employing commentaries on the unfolding events onstage.²⁷ For Brecht, *actors are acting*, which is more realistic than actors pretending to ignore the audience and creating the illusion of a fourth wall. Well-written realistic dramas are smartly plotted and written with an ear for quotidian dialogue, even if the rhythms are "a-rhythmic" – capturing the halting and stuttering reality of everyday speech.

The modernist vanguard of the early to mid-twentieth century rejected this "reality" concept, finding representation dubious or impossible. Avant-garde modernists critiqued realism's claim to objectivity as a false paradigm; no matter how "objective" the artist claims to be, there is a guiding hand in the creation that influences the art object's intent; to pretend otherwise is disingenuous. Instead of Ibsen or Chekhov photo-journalism, the modernist vanguard (or the avant-garde) took root in Yeats's and Maeterlinck's symbolism, Strindberg's extreme subjectivism and expressionism, Brecht's estrangement, Pirandello's self-reflective realism ("we really are in a theatre"), and even outright anti-theatricalism (rejecting theatre as a value) as some of the many ways modern dramatists sought to dislodge reality and celebrate theatre without the burden of "representation."²⁸ Vanguard modernists

accused realists of pandering to the audience or manipulating stage events; realists claimed that the avant-garde's radical disassociation of causal events was self-indulgent, tendentious, and pretentious. Realistic dramatists owe much of their structure to Aristotle, whose advocacy of the arrangement of plot (the "action") is the driving force of drama. Vanguard modernists reject Aristotle's prescriptive advice, considering the emphasis on arrangement and neatness as a false template on art. Chaos, the inexpressible, and the opaque are more in line with "reality," or at least art's autonomy, than the realists are willing to admit. The conundrum for the vanguard modernist was how to influence audiences politically without realism's obvious societal template.

Much of vanguard modernism derived its political and aesthetic foundations from "critical theory," a term from the Frankfurt School of social criticism in the 1930s.²⁹ This school of thought rejected realism's continuity of history, maintaining instead, writes Mark Poster, "an effort to theorize the present as a moment between the past and the future, thus holding up a historicizing mirror to society, one that compels a recognition of the transitory and fallible nature of society, one that insists that what is can be disassembled and improved considerably." He contends (following Adorno and Foucault) that critical theory cuts against the grain "of a legitimating process endemic to power formations, a discursive mechanism through which the finitude of institutions is naturalized and universalized. Critical theory is a disruptive counterforce to the inscription on the face of social practice which says 'Do not tamper with me for I am good, just, and eternal.'"³⁰ Critical theory challenges realism's reliance on social facts as empirical, stand-alone objects, viewing data as relational to and reinforcing normative episteme of self-conscious enlightenment. Instead of facts critical theorists rely on an ambitious social theory that would dissect reality and its underlying power relations through innuendo, suggestiveness, or linguistic slips (based on Freud). As the doyen of critical theory Max Horkheimer explains, critical theory is not a Hegelian dependence on reason alone, where the isolated individual makes a "personal peace treaty" with the world and its circumstances, but rather critical theory means "a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature."³¹ This social exchange is interactive, linguistic, and ubiquitous. "Discursive practices" – a postmodern meme popularized by Foucault – maintains that language systems reinforce the status quo, stalling social change by laying claim to representative "truths." In this way, critical theorists revivify and actualize the potential for social engagement that lay dormant in

science, history, and the arts by challenging the form and language (and not merely the content) used to describe history. History is not merely something that “just happened,” independent of interpretation or multiple dynamics. Critical theorists, Ben Agger writes, believe that “Marx underestimated” the capacity of capitalism to build a “false consciousness” in the economic system. Marx predicted that capitalism would be hoisted by its own petard; but this failed to happen, as capitalism reacted nimbly to commodity fetishism. “The Frankfurt School thought that capitalism in the twentieth century was beginning to develop effective coping mechanisms which allowed it to forestall the cataclysmic eruptions of these periodic crises into a wholesale socialist revolution.” The mechanism is *reification* (a term coined by Georg Lukács): commodity fetishism would establish a false consciousness “suggesting to the people that the existing social system is both inevitable and rational.”³²

At the risk of over-simplification, critical theory says that things are the way they are not because that’s the way they always were, but because that’s the way social power structures use language (discursive practices), empiricism (data), and commodity fetishism (desired objects) to *make you think* they are indelible and intractable. Critical theorists claim that reality is fluid and things can change because the present is merely a *moment* between past and future and not a rigid and inflexible continuum *from* the past *into* the future; it is, rather, a dynamic and ever-changing process of power cohesion and social control. While some modernist movements and dramatists were more political than others (Brecht, for example, was the apogee of politicization and a product of the Frankfurt School’s way of thinking), many vanguard modernists were dissatisfied with realism’s reliance on representation, advocating theatre’s authority to assert its own identity without being beholden to a realistic reflection of the world. But vanguard modernists shared with modern realists a reliance on scaffolding art through categorization: there may be a fine line between high art and kitsch, but a line exists. The doyen of modern art criticism, Clement Greenberg, put it succinctly when he said that modernism “consists in the continuing endeavor to stem the decline of aesthetic standards threatened by the relative democratizing of culture under industrialism; that the overriding and innermost logic of Modernism is to maintain the levels of the past in the face of an opposition that hasn’t been present in the past.”³³ Holding the line on aesthetic values – aesthetic hierarchy – was shared by modernists, whether realists or vanguard.³⁴ By the mid-twentieth century that “line” between high and low art was fracturing.

A challenge to realism *and* vanguard modernism, what Hal Foster calls a “rupture,” arose during the 1960s.³⁵ The need for unification proposed by modernists in the shape of “high art,” or at least the recognition of unity and its antithesis as Hegel would have it, is denounced as reactionary and ill-conceived by postmodernists, who celebrate pluralism, heterogeneity, incommensurability, and rejecting claims of high and low aesthetics. While postmodernism builds on the triumphalism of the avant-garde, it simultaneously expresses a critical reflection on modernist history; while it may share a revival or continuance of certain modernist principles, it jettisons monolithic ideas of “high art” as false values, operating instead on the assumption that knowledge and identity are “discursive constructions” – language and knowledge shape (construct) reality and not the other way around. Unity is jettisoned, implying unstable and fragmented juxtapositions – mash-ups, crosshatches of discourse and themes. In the postmodern sensibility, Todd Gitlin asserts, “the search for unity has apparently been abandoned altogether. Instead we have textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referred to it, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces.”³⁶

The term “postmodern” dates approximately to 1875 and became a literary, critical, and architectural catchphrase during the 1960s, but, according to Richard Sheppard, “it gained really wide currency [during] the mid- and late 1970s, beginning with the architect Charles Jencks’s 1975 essay ‘The Rise of Postmodern Architecture,’ and culminating in Jean-François Lyotard’s 1979 book *La Condition postmoderne*.”³⁷ In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard challenges the “grand narratives” of the Enlightenment-modernist tradition in favor of the “*petit recits*” of minorities, women, non-Westerners, and others. For Lyotard, a postmodern artist or writer “is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.” The artist and writer are working without rules, producing in their work “the unrepresentable in the presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.”³⁸ Postmodernists claim the ideal (Platonic or otherwise) is a false paradigm; we can never attain the purity of our goals so why persist in pursuing them? Instead of foundational purity (there is a single path to knowledge and epistemology), objective

neutrality (we can detach ourselves from what we, as artists, produce), and metaphysical certainty (there is a singular and underlying truth), all of which gain traction through reason, postmodernism blurs art and reality, truth and simulacra, high and low art, the thing and its representation, or, as Hans Bertens writes in *The Idea of the Postmodern*, it “confronts its audience with the problematic status of the real itself, with the fact that basically the world is unrepresentable.”³⁹ To break down this new era’s aesthetics, I examine some of the key constituents (in no particular order) of postmodernism.

Constituents of Postmodernism

Irreverence and bricolage

Postmodernism circa 1960 to 2000 translates artistically into irreverence for icons (drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa, for instance), encouraging collage (think of a Kurt Vonnegut novel), being skeptical of the poet Keat’s equation of beauty and truth, antithetical to the high seriousness of modernism, willfully disregarding hierarchies and value judgments, celebrating graffiti art, frivolity over functionalism, discarding judgments, mixing gauche and kitsch with “high art” (polyester and silk, for instance), and ultimately a bricolage aesthetic. Borders and boundaries blur; dismantled hierarchy unravels the cohesion of textual and visual uniformity; and postmodernism turns away from the Western ideological fixity of high modernism – rejecting the very fixity of “character” itself, which, according to Elinor Fuchs, is now “a dispersed idea of self, and that this dispersal was represented in many different ways in the contemporary alternative theater.”⁴⁰

Compare, for example, two hyper-violent films and filmmakers: Sam Peckinpah’s 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* and Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Peckinpah epitomizes modernist violence that is hyper-graphic through slow-motion realism that attempts to elicit sadness, horror, and empathy from the audience. The main characters in the film *The Wild Bunch* (five cowboy-Western bank robbers) are “serious,” firmly and resolutely entrenched in their hyper-macho ethos; they may bend their identity to circumstances, but the fact that they hold firm to their beliefs grounds the emotional content of the film. When one of the compatriots is murdered, they rise to the occasion and retaliate. The film’s violent ending assures an Aristotelian catharsis; we empathize with the characters

(even though they are criminals) because we identify with their unwavering conviction, loyalty, and nobility. Their death attempts to unleash an Aristotelian pity and terror upon the audience; we are meant to identify with their condition and feel the consequences of their demise. In comparison, the postmodern realm of irony and pastiche in Tarantino's films also accentuates violence, but here blood-splattering horror transforms into a collage of over-the-top hilarity mixed with danger, where characters are detached from ethical concerns. Loyalty is irrelevant, as the under-cover cop in *Reservoir Dogs* (played brilliantly by Tim Roth) becomes as much a part of the violence as a victim of it; and identification with "character" is tossed willy-nilly as the narrative progresses without a firm hold on morality (similarly the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century TV series *The Sopranos*, where the superb James Gandolfini evokes empathy at one moment and revulsion the next). Tarantino's films are a violent bricolage with little if any allegiance to ethics or sustained narrative consistency. Tarantino is the quintessential postmodernist director, mixing genres, playing with expectations, dissembling ideas of race, gender, and class, and taking violence past the point of hyper-realism and into a cacophony of sensations. David Henry Wallace is a postmodern novelist because he is untethered to genres, forms, or style; his work moves stylistically from scholarly to pop culture to curious tangents. Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Herring, Louise Bourgeois, and Jean-Michel Basquiat are postmodern artists because they mix kitsch with classicism, soup cans and graffiti formalized and structured, or child-like images as aesthetics.

If, for instance, modernism claims that a landscape painting is different from (and superior to) a cartographical map because it is based on, to borrow Kant's terminology, "aesthetic judgment" – lacking utility but valued as "artistic" – postmodernism would argue that there is little difference between a landscape painting and a map on your GPS driving system because to call one art and the other functional is to assert a binary and authoritarian hierarchy. Apple computer founder Steve Jobs, perhaps more than anyone else, signified postmodernism when he turned the computer from a utilitarian and drab functional piece of desktop equipment to a sleekly designed entity of aestheticism and beauty. Functionality and artistry merge effortlessly and without boundaries; postmodernism subverts received hierarchies and flattens values: opposite Kant, the computer is at once functional *and* beautiful, as much an "art" object as the painting on the wall.

Difference and repetition

Postmodernism in drama takes as its starting point the modernist vanguard notion of anti-realistic theatricality, but emphasizes what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls difference and repetition. Prior to postmodernism, philosophy locks us into a Platonic ontology: however much we disengage from reality, we are encased in our identity, and this self-formation is rooted in the Platonic notion of the self as an “authentic” being. Platonism, Deleuze writes, “is dominated by the idea of drawing a distinction between ‘the thing itself’ and the simulacra.” We can never be “represented,” as Plato sees it, because anything other than the “thing itself” is inauthentic, and therefore not a representation but a delusion. For Plato, the original is superior to the copy; if the copy becomes superior we have strayed from truth (the certainty of our being) and are living in a world of shadows and caves. Deleuze thinks otherwise, and in so doing establishes one of the key foundations of postmodernism: “Overturning Platonism,” he says, “means denying the primacy of original over copy, of model over image; glorifying the reign of simulacra and reflections.”⁴¹ Instead of arguing with, or trying to defeat representation (as the modernist avant-garde tries to do), postmodernists celebrate the copy and facsimile for just what it is – a *repetition*. We are merely a collection of games and habits, simultaneously deadened and vivified by repetition. We assume shapes and masks that become who we are because there’s no “there” to reckon with.

In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, biology professor Nick is invited to an after-party cocktail with the college president’s daughter and her husband, George. Absorbed into the drunken games that George and his wife Martha concoct, Nick threatens to break the routine. As an empty shell himself, Nick feels confident he can swing whichever way the game is played, largely because his vapidity is the very essence of his identity – his emptiness is his core. He can play the game without understanding it because the game for him has no end point, conclusion, or result: the game *is his only reality*, a repetition of a charade of a simulacrum:

- NICK: I’ll play the charades like you’ve got ’em set up. ... I’ll play in your language. ... I’ll be what you say I am.
- GEORGE: You are already ... you just don’t know it.
- NICK: (*shaking within*) No ... no. Not really. But I’ll be it, mister. ... I’ll show you something come to life you’ll wish you hadn’t set up.⁴²

Nick is a quintessential postmodern figure, having replaced an essentialist view of selfhood – one consistent, fixed, and literal. Nick will “play” any language game and “be what you say I am,” because at his core is a Schopenhauer-like id moved only by desire and will.

Postmodernism, Martin Puchner contends, is repetition that, along with identity and representation, “does away with the fixation on essence.” A representation doesn’t confirm the essence of the thing it represents, nor does it obscure it, but rather the representative mask conceals “more masks; roles refer not to preestablished characters but to other roles. Theatre here is no longer a vehicle for representation, but a technique for creating endless series of repetitions.”⁴³ Nick repeats what he is told because his life is an endless repetition of doing what he is told in order to climb the greasy pole of success. Put simplistically, postmodernism is Schopenhauer’s pure will on steroids. Walter Benjamin’s well-known theory of “aura” – in which the art object that was once revered and beatified as an originating source (having an “aura” of originality) is now merely part of a serial replication (you can’t tell the difference between the original and the copy, delegitimizing the “aura”) – is the turning point for postmodernism’s celebration of the facsimile. In postmodernism truth is not stranger than fiction – truth and fiction are mutual “strangers” to reality, with representation copied and recopied as simulacra to truth.

Differentiating humanism and improvisation

Between pre- and post-1960, humanism and literature stood for the past and post-textual improvisation and irony crystallized as a force after 1960. The dividing line is imperfect; issues from Volume I course through and resurface in Volume II. Still, shifts are evident. In Volume I, modernism relied heavily on “humanism” – what Alain Renaut defined as “the valorization of humanity in its capacity for *autonomy*,” or what “constitutes modernity is the fact that man thinks of himself as the source of his acts and representations, as their foundation (read: subject) or author.”⁴⁴ This humanism, or valorization of individuality, is reflected in Blanche: the play relies on her struggle for humanism as the underpinning of the drama’s moral and emotional power.⁴⁵ By contrast, for Ruth in *The Homecoming*, individuality is also a driving force, but rather than a communal or shared belief in what constitutes individuality, the play relies on her improvisatory abilities to negotiate the mentalities that surround her. Ruth is

more fluid and adaptable than Blanche because she is less tied to an “essentialist-humanist” identity and hardly dependent upon structural linguistic “codes” implicit in Blanche’s text. Both Blanche and Ruth prostitute themselves to survive; but Ruth is far less “hung up” about this behavior because she bears little if any social morality in a traditional sense. The characters in *The Homecoming* have little if any moral “core”; they are disloyal to others and themselves, operating in an improvisatory state of negotiating and renegotiating their advantages. Within their economy of discourse it is difficult to find traces of a unified self, or a mutually agreed upon understanding through the dispensation of morality. In *The Homecoming*, identity and the self are dispersed into a panorama of multiple-changing and radically diversified language games. Ruth and Teddy have, at the play’s conclusion, their individuality; but they were already alone and apart spiritually, and their reaction to their separation, unlike Blanche’s separation from society, is not merely “inevitability,” but rather a nonexistent entity from the start. Most of the plays in Volume II can no longer accept the historical fact or givens of marriage, loyalty, bonding, or individuality as communicative “values.” Rather, like the period, values are in flux. The essential subject, like Roland Barthes’s death of the author, “is not a line of words releasing a single, ‘theological’ meaning,” but rather “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash.”⁴⁶ The edifice upon which trust, loyalty, bonding, and communication built on understanding and mutuality is now ironically detached, irrelevant, or made to appear “ironic.”

Language

Language for dramatists in this volume is hardly dependable. Consider Henrik Ibsen or Eugene O’Neill, both of whom rely on statements of “truths” that assume their power by collective acceptance. Ibsen and O’Neill traffic in subtext: their characters aren’t ipso facto transparent, yet their desires for authenticity bleed through their discourse, often seeking to match their words to their intentions (even if the attempt to match words with meaning fails). For Pinter and beyond, statements like “don’t become a stranger” crumble under the weight of contingencies, as if Ruth is saying, ironically, “don’t become what you already are.” Pinter is trafficking in *deep irony*; we are all strangers despite the improved capacity to communicate, because “meaning and certainty” are no longer viable.

Derrida has demonstrated that language is incapable of conveying meaning and certainty supported by historical narratives. Instead, language is arbitrary, contextual, fluid, and, according to Derridean deconstructionism, functioning as much (if not more) to designate absence of meaning – the unsaid, implied, innuendo, and allusion – than to convey meaning. “Don’t become a stranger” upends past relations and future connections because the “meaning” of “become” is ironical – there is only an absence of “becoming” to the entreaty. The joke is on Teddy, who thought he had a stable and consistent wife. But the joke is also on the audience’s assumptions, too. Meaning is illusory, and language does as much to obfuscate as clarify, since metaphysical claims are unsubstantiated and, at best, taken for granted only to dissolve. Theoretical elaborations, Derrida says, “ought to suspend or at any rate to complicate, with great caution, the naive opening that once linked the text to *its* thing, referent, or reality, or even to some last conceptual or semantic instance.”⁴⁷ Marriage can hardly be “represented” onstage or elsewhere since it is, like every communicative bond, inchoate. Echoing Plato, Derrida says it is false to juxtapose mimesis – the representation of something – alongside “truth”; doing so “either hinders the unveiling of the thing itself by substituting a copy or double for what is; or else it works in the service of truth through the double resemblance.”⁴⁸ Language for Derrida reveals an “absence” (or what he calls a “trace”) – and herein lies Pinter’s ironic humor. Whereas in modernism, Derrida remarks, “the signified always already functions as a signifier”⁴⁹ – the representation is directly and “always already” symbolizing the thing it represents – linguistic meaning in postmodern or poststructural terms depends on unsustainable claims, ironic assertions, and mere “traces” of reality. Derrida’s agenda has largely been to expose the falsity of language, its deceptive practices, and its sleight of hand in communicative iteration. Rather than what Habermas might call a linguistic grounding in reasonableness leading to active engagement of trustworthy relationships, Derrida emphasizes the slipperiness of language’s irrationality, the incompleteness of words, and the cliché of linguistic certainty as little more than a mosaic of other texts. The break in the term “stranger” from Williams to Pinter can arguably be from a “text” to an “inter-text,” to borrow Julia Kristeva’s phrase, where “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations,” drawn from one source and replicated or transformed in another, with new connotations.⁵⁰ Blanche *always already* depended on the essential kindness of strangers; Ruth depends on nothing but what she see before her eyes, which is always a moving target.

Surface and subtext

In the plays in Volume I, surface and subtext are two demarcated entities that sometimes agree and sometimes disagree, but they nevertheless are definable and coherent (even if the coherence is layered and shielded). Plot, which Aristotle described as the fundamental element of drama, was already on wobbly ground throughout the modern era from Chekhov and Strindberg right through to Beckett. But somehow “plot” in the Aristotelian sense held its ground. By 1960, audiences have been suspended from one immanent presence to another; the rise of multimedia and an onslaught of multiple venues create an open-ended structure where a plot’s trajectory from beginning, to middle, to end loses its sanctified moorings. Twenty-four-hour news broadcasting inspired an eternal, malleable presence, where change is less a revelation than a quotidian occurrence. In this Volume, the plays often demonstrate a mash-up of text and subtext, past and present – a deliberate confusion and roiling destabilization. “Today’s authors seem incapable of making use of the classical dramatic text,” writes theatre scholar Patrice Pavis; “They find it unthinkable to offer plays with dialogue exchanged by characters as in social conversation.” Notwithstanding the hyperbole – the “well-made play” formula has hardly been jettisoned, dramatic structures still utilize conflict, dialogue, plot, and subplot, and even extremely experimental authors such as Peter Handke, Heiner Müller, Tadeusz Kantor, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Sarah Kane (to name only a few) still imitate speakers speaking, even if the frames of reference no longer cling to realistic events in life – Pavis is correct to claim that from “the 1960s onward, theatrical conceptions changed radically,” where authors no longer locked themselves “into indecipherable words,” the latter being the style of the modernist avant-garde. Instead, “They present a text which – even if it still takes the form of words alternatively expressed by different speakers – can no longer be recapitulated or resolved or lead to action.”⁵¹ Blanche’s subtext is an active assault against her sister and brother-in-law, the former betraying, the latter raping, as well as a political assault on capitalism’s social Darwinism that has left her high and dry. By contrast, for Pinter, “stranger” is etiolated: for Ruth and Teddy, wife and husband, their bond is nonexistent except in appearances, their awareness of each other inconsequential; and despite being married and raising three children their “stranger-ness” is their *non-communicative* condition. Language as a binary form of signifier to the thing signified in *The Homecoming* – husband/wife, father/son – is challenged as a purveyor of communicative action.

Playfulness and pastiche

Modernism relies on an adversarial attitude toward classicism that, according to Umberto Eco, “tries to settle scores with the past.” Postmodernism shares many of these qualities, but “consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence [Beckett being the paradigm of silence], must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.”⁵² Postmodernism is less arrogant and rebellious than modernism, more playfully nostalgic and ironic in its relationship to the past, to categories, to genres. Its playfulness allows the postmodern to dismantle hierarchies of high- and lowbrow art, what Linda Hutchinson calls postmodernism’s challenge to “the fixing of boundaries between genres, between art forms, between high art and mass-media culture.”⁵³ In postmodernism, art mingles the tropes of reality and theatricality, fiction and fact, with a kind of quasi-philosophical ambiguity. Plays compress stories nested within stories; doppelgängers of characters imitate their likenesses; references to reality and fiction meld together; and playwrights boldly draw mash-ups of styles, realism and fantasy side by side without complaint. Like modernism, it validates a break with the past, but puts the past in juxtaposition to the present less judgmentally than modernism (that is, without advocating a positivistic movement toward betterment and unity that modernism often advocates). Fredric Jamison calls postmodern theory “a ceaseless process of internal rollover in which the position of the observer is turned inside out and the tabulation recontinued on some larger scale.”⁵⁴ This idea of “rollover” or recycling is a defining feature of postmodernism; Marvin Carlson raises the notion of theatrical “ghosting,” in which “postmodern drama and theatre has tended to favor the conscious reuse of material haunted by memory but in an ironic and self-conscious manner.”⁵⁵ The commitment to “reusing” material is evident in the idea of “strangers” – Williams takes the term seriously as a poetic rendering of a social condition and *connection*, whereas Pinter’s version unintentionally reuses Williams’s term ironically, indeed almost bitterly reminding us of our social *disconnection*.

Rejection of the autonomous artist

Modern artists believe in their abilities to attain autonomy, to reject the commercialism and parochialism of kitsch in order to maintain high art as above the fray. Postmodern artists view autonomy as neither desirable nor attainable; instead, artists like Roy Lichtenstein embrace commercialism.

According to Hal Foster, in Pop Art “many avant-garde devices and modernist styles had become gadgets of the culture industry; that product and image, commodity and sign, were conflated, and that Pop paintings merely reiterate this structural equivalence; that, as a medium once uniquely suited to explore object relations, sculpture, too, was overridden by the commodity, whose effectivity Pop objects could only mimic.”⁵⁶ By rejecting commercialism, the modern artists create in a cul-de-sac; the postmodern artist accepted, even celebrated the commercial. Andy Warhol’s Brillo pad is, according to Arthur Danto, “not simply a container for Brillo pads; it is a visual celebration of Brillo.”⁵⁷

In modernism, truth follows Hegel’s claim of wholeness or entirety; the dialectic establishes a conflictual condition of world historical forces competing and finally merging (synthesizing) into a unity of thought. When each fragment of reality is pieced together we can discover some meaning in the multifariousness of the experienced world. In contrast, postmodernism builds on the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, who consider totality a false paradigm. Existence is never “finished” or made whole, but rather we are continually thrown into the world, not “always already” (to borrow a particular Derrida coinage meaning “fixed”) but rather cast into history, thrust into the unknown and unknowable. For Nietzsche and Heidegger, we live in a world of becoming, enveloped in constant change and irreducible diversity. Any attempt to discover a meaning through totality – a transcendent meaning of existence through some external system of reference or internal measurement of ontology – is delusional and doomed to failure. Postmodernism takes Nietzsche’s nihilism to heart, but instead of confronting it through a will to power, negates or softens the cynicism through playfulness.

Resisting definition

Postmodernism is not modernism’s alterity, at least not in the same way modernity was poised as the alterity to classicism. In fact, the resistance to definition and meaning is in itself the very feature of postmodernism; like deconstruction, it defies formal rules or signifiers, landing on the side of free-floating nebula. The term “postmodern,” Matei Calinescu writes, “is not a new name for a new ‘reality,’ or ‘mental structure,’ or ‘world view,’ but a perspective from which one can ask certain questions about modernity in its several incarnations.”⁵⁸ Whereas modernism has been linked to “structuralism,” an anthropological system of binary relationships or coupling, postmodernism,

likewise poststructuralism, is a scattershot of landmarks (past and present) with or without relationships to other marks.⁵⁹ In *History of Structuralism*, François Dosse asserts that,

The various binary couples – signifier/signified, nature/culture, voice/writing, perceptible/intelligible – that compose the very instrument of structural analysis were put into question [by poststructuralism], pluralized, disseminated, in an infinite game that peeled, disjoined, and dissected the meaning of words, tracking down every master word, every transcendence. A whole Derridean language destabilized traditional oppositions by bringing undecidables into play as veritable units of simulacrum, organizers of a new, carnivalesque order of reason.⁶⁰

Whereas modernism presented a hierarchy of aesthetic values, postmodernism favored a bricolage of high and low culture, a deconstruction of assumed earmarks of good and bad art, and a challenge to modernism “seriousness” and “truth.” Postmodernism has put the very notion of “truth” into question by challenging the supposed binary structure of truth. “If we experience life only through the filters of rigid categorizations, and binary oppositions, things will definitely be business as usual,” the artist Barbara Kruger warns, typifying postmodern skepticism.⁶¹ One of the architects of postmodern philosophy, Michel Foucault, posits that the breaking point between modernism and postmodernism occurred when the sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan “showed us that meaning was probably one sort of surface effect, a shimmering, a froth, and that what profoundly coursed through us, what existed before us, what maintained us in time and space, was the system.”⁶² For Foucault, the “system” imposes itself upon meaning: political and cultural pressures define how we shape our lives and assume meaning. Foucault, like Lacan, was suspicious of systems that rigidly deify language in an either/or binary which in turn provides so-called clarity. Meaning is no longer available through an either/or proposition, but is contingent on variables and eclecticism. Postmodernism, Diane Elam asserts, marks “a *way of thinking* about history and representation that claims there can be no final understanding” of history itself.⁶³

Simulacra

Jean Baudrillard writes that simulacra “are not only a game played with signs; they imply social rapports and social power.” To suggest that language, action, and behavior in *The Homecoming* reveal a “sign” of Ruth’s opaque

remark at the end of the play is impossible; the play is a “postmodernist” deconstruction of the well-known signs in “family” drama. We are unmoored in the play; there’s nowhere to hang our thoughts about family bonding and claim of certainty to familial relations. A significant ramification of this shifting emphasis is that the experience of self and world are radically re-situated. While Williams’s truth is structural and dialectical – two world-views in conflict – Pinter’s truth is temporal and amorphous: meaning unfolds through time, ticking its way moment by moment and continuously revising strategies undermining previous moments. As Baudrillard posits, “At this level the question of signs, of their rational destination, their real or imaginary, their repression, their derivation, the illusion they create or that which they conceal, or their parallel meanings – all of this is erased.” In *The Homecoming*, all binary relations of sign and meaning – all comforts of a “real homecoming,” good or bad – are rendered inarticulate at every discourse. Pinter short-circuits binary structuralism, leaving in its devastating wake skepticism and creating what Baudrillard defines as the central condition of simulacra:

when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the esthetic fascination is everywhere. It is a subliminal perception (a sort of sixth sense) of deception, montage, scenaria – of the overexposed reality in the light of the models – no longer a productive space, but a reading strip, a strip of code and decoding, magnetized by the signs – esthetic reality – no longer by premeditation but by its elevation to the second level, to the second power, by the anticipation and the immanence of the code.⁶⁴

The “other” is blurred; the notion of “stranger” is reformulated; and who is stranger to whom is no longer clear. The world now exists as stimulants without referents, functioning in a Disneyland-like society unhinged from moral or material certainty, and ceases to be understood as part of a strategy for understanding any social cohesion.

1968

The rise of dramatic art from 1960 to 2000 was, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of contentious “literary and artistic fields,”⁶⁵ deeply indebted to the events of, and leading up to, 1968. In many ways 1968 was for twentieth-century postmodernism what 1848 was to nineteenth-century modernism: a period of revolution where the wholesale reconfiguration of values,

governments, and ideas occurred. In 1848 the working class and the emerging bourgeoisie joined forces in an attempt to overthrow the French monarchy. The rebellion inspired other similar revolts throughout Europe. However, as soon as the old order collapsed bourgeois liberals grew increasingly alarmed by what they saw as radical elements making socialist demands. Conservatives were able to co-opt liberals fearful of impending anarchy, sexual liberation, and the demise of the traditional social order, leading to a reactionary government crackdown. The 1980s experienced a backlash similar to what occurred in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century. Conservatism arose during the 1980s, the impact of which reverberated in plays such as *Top Girls* and *Angels in America* (both of which are extensively examined here). One of the most significant observations regarding the systemic shift from pre- to post-1960 social conditions comes from Immanuel Wallerstein, whose astute observation regarding the transition is worth quoting:

The explosions of 1968 contained two themes repeated virtually everywhere, whatever the local context. One was the rejection of U.S. hegemonic power, simultaneously with a complaint that the Soviet Union, the presumed antagonist of the United States, was actually colluding in the world order that the United States had established. And the second was that the traditional anti-systemic movements had not fulfilled their promises once in power. The combination of these complaints, so widely repeated, constituted a cultural earthquake. The many uprisings were like a phoenix and did not put the multiple revolutionaries of 1968 in power, or not for very long. But they legitimated and strengthened the sense of disillusionment not only with the old antisystemic movements but also with the state structures these movements had been fortifying. The long-term certainties of evolutionary hope [that earmarked much of modernism] had become transformed into fears that the world-system might be unchanging.⁶⁶

Wallerstein's point is that oppressed people no longer held out hope from either the two world powers (US and USSR) or third-world revolutionary governments seeking to replace them. The disillusionment led to skepticism that history, or at least positivist history embraced by modernism, Marxism, or other progressive movements, was apodictic and on their side. Creeping improvements were met with setbacks, liberalism grew untrustworthy, and people could no longer be persuaded that the march of history would present a beneficial future. There arose skepticism that undermined the modernist movement as a whole.

Modern and postmodern left

The modernist left had Marxism to provide structure, a specific intellectual foundation, and a model underscoring its social theories and implementations. Dramatists like Brecht, Williams, Arthur Miller, and others could rely on the clarity of an ideological map indicating how society functioned. Left-wing modernist playwrights depended on this structural foundation to layer their narrative, dialogue, and conflict resolutions, or at least potential for social change. Postmodern leftists, by contrast, viewed the edifice of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rational change, as an arrogant, shallow expression of Western imperialism that scorned difference and was an affront to the moral dignity of non-Western ideas. The postmodern left no longer depended on Marxism's rigorous and obsessive focus on class conflict; devoid of an ideological map to provide contour, organization, and message, dramatists often inveighed randomly against society. The lack of fundamental theory of society undermines the expository power of drama just as it undermines the power and efficaciousness of politics as a whole. What remains are skepticism and uncertainty. As Terry Eagleton contends, postmodernism "represents the latest iconoclastic upsurge of the avant garde, with its demotic confounding of hierarchies, its self-reflexive subversions of ideological closure, its populist debunking of intellectualism and elitism."⁶⁷

Postmodern skepticism of politics derives partly from the collapse of communism, modernism's last vestige of hope for social change. In *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Zygmunt Bauman writes that the "collapse of communism was the final nail in the coffin of the modern ambitions which drew the horizon of European (or Europe-influenced) history of the last two centuries. That collapse ushered us into an as-yet-unexplored world: a world without a collective utopia, without conscious alternative to itself."⁶⁸ When socialist utopia failed, it precipitated the collapse of modernism's driving force. War as a means toward democratization and social equality was no longer tenable. World War II, which symbolized modernism's struggle against totalitarianism, epitomized the modernist value of conflict. Vietnam was the turning point, symbolizing the opposite; war was deemed a principal tool of oppression rather than liberation, and no justification could make the carnage acceptable or tolerable. Furthermore, while modernism decried the machine as an instrument of dehumanization, postmodernism rejects modernism's defense of the individual against the machine. The machine was viewed in modernism as the encroachment upon humanity; think of

Charlie Chaplin's 1940 film *Modern Times*, which satirized the assembly line. In postmodernism, the machine (computer, cell phone, etc.) is valorized as the extension of the human. Gianni Vattimo remarks that Martin Heidegger was "much more concerned, like much of the rest of the intellectual avant-garde of the early twentieth century, to take a stand against positivistic objectivism allied to the industrialization and the reduction of humanity to machinery."⁶⁹ Along similar lines the revolutionary poet Vicente Huidobro wrote that "Machines are tedious ... dull. They suggest modernity superficially, a facile modernity, a merely modern look."⁷⁰ Computers changed all that – the machine was now a source of social networking, human connectivity, and an instrument capable of if not defying authoritarianism, at least posing as an alterity to it.

Skepticism

Dramatists of this period, to varying degrees, create characters, situations, and dramatic circumstances that pit modernist ideals against postmodernist dismantling of these ideals, or what I call "postmodern skepticism." Postmodernism builds on radical anti-establishment notions but devalues the idea that opposition is worthwhile. Instead, postmodernism challenges traditional conceptions of truth, even those in opposition to authority, relying on skepticism of absolutes, discarding totalizing statements of reality, and doubtful even of Marxist assertions of essential class conflicts. The march of progressive history, as Foucault might contend, is fraudulent; reason, the bailiwick of modernity, is attached to what Albrecht Wellmer calls "the project of the European Enlightenment," which is born out of "the project of Greek and Western civilization,"⁷¹ and is under siege in postmodernism. Instead of documenting events as givens, Foucault says that in every text "the problem is to rediscover the point of rupture, to establish, with the greatest possible precision, the division between the implicit density of the already-said, a perhaps involuntary fidelity to acquired opinion, the law of discursive fatalities, and the vivacity of creation, the leap into irreducible difference."⁷² Instead of unity of thought and grand narrative designs, the aim is to ferret out contradictions, falsifications, manipulations, and "spaces of dissension," which, as Foucault and others have maintained, disrupt the flow of authority and power that depends on hand-me-down ideas (classicism) and discursive manipulations (modernism). Originality is not to be revered, since copies of originals are actually copies of copies, like a hall of mirrors – in short, simulacra.

Skepticism during the period took other forms as well. Whereas the modernist drama applies pressure on the dramatic form (e.g., *Waiting for Godot*) by distorting its features and appearing at times impenetrable and inscrutable, it never abandons its effort at simplicity and clarity. *Waiting for Godot* is still a well-made play, though it unabashedly calls attention to its “well-made-ness” and strips it of action. What Beckett brings to bear is a subject (character) who exists in the here-and-now, shedding historical baggage (in Stanislavskian parlance, the “given circumstances”). Alenka Zupančič observes that “The ethical subject is not a subject who brings all his subjective baggage to a given (moral) situation and allows it to affect things (i.e. by formulating a maxim which corresponds to his personal inclinations), but a subject who is, strictly speaking, born of this situation, who only emerges from it.”⁷³ By the 1960s, clarity and obscurantism collapse into each other, with little certainty, or as the Motown singer Marvin Gaye put it, “People say believe half of what you see, some or none of what you hear,”⁷⁴ and Bruce Springsteen doubles down on this: “Trust none of what you hear/And less of what you see.” “The power to see, the power to make visible,” writes David Michael Levin, “is the power to control.”⁷⁵ The plays in this volume seek to capture the texture of life in its ambiguity and untidiness, bringing us into a rewarding intimacy yet skeptical of resolution.

Continuity

In theatre and drama, despite the division notated by the pre-1960s modernism and post-1960s postmodernism, the temptation to exaggerate the difference between the two periods may be overreach. Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, often cited as a proponent of postmodernism, has argued that postmodernity is a continuation of modernity’s “crisis of experience” that began with expressionism’s efforts to articulate the aesthetics of anguish and vexed experiences of living in the modern world.⁷⁶ It is my proposition that modern drama circa 1960–2000 was co-constituted by modernism past (pre-1960) and postmodernism. Much of Volume II is concerned with the notion that postmodernism neither is simply a clean break with the past nor a continuance of prior dramaturgical ideas. Both ideas – modern and postmodern – are part and parcel of the era. For instance, playwright Tony Kushner, who is situated at the epicenter of this volume, often writes a cascade of dialogue that has its origins in Shaw or O’Neill rather than a more traditional postmodern dramatist. Yet Kushner is as post-modern as any of his contemporaries. The plays of Suzan-Lori Parks serve as

another example. While Parks's early works traffic in absurdism and postmodern repetition (characters go through the same actions, like the murder of Abraham Lincoln, several times in her *America Play*), her later plays, such as *In the Blood* (2000), have steadily moved toward realism, with the absurdity more embedded in character and situation. The plays also shift from broadly construed, non-specific settings to external (under a bridge in *In the Blood*) or domestic (*Topdog/Underdog*) specificity.

If the great merit of postmodernism is its revisionism that jettisoned modernist principles, its great weakness is that it has too easily placed itself outside the confines of modernity. Drama has an uneasy relationship with postmodernism as it has had with modernism. Drama's secondary or even tertiary status in academic circles is part of the problem; but it is also difficult to situate a modern or postmodern drama other than through a timeline because drama has always depended on the human body moving temporally through space as "representing" its vehicle of dissemination. The ubiquity of the body throughout theatre history makes demarcating change from modernism to postmodernism a more subtle challenge. Unlike architecture or design, drama and theatre, writes Johannes Birringer, "never advertised or formulated the changes that it overtook."⁷⁷ Still, while the plays examined in this work are not entirely devoid of "traditional" modernist structures – what is often called the "well-made play" – the postmodern difference will be made evident. One of the differences between modernism and postmodernism is what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the "different semiotic levels" that are distinguishable by structural forms, and, more importantly, by the "historical, social zeitgeist of the age to which the structure of relations correspond."⁷⁸ The historical period itself, the social zeitgeist, provides better clues to distinguishing the two periods.

Feminism, postcolonialism, and non-Western modernism

These final three elements also contributed to the break emerging in the 1960s. Feminists have transformed social life and social theory globally by calling into question what Julia Adams, Elisabeth Clemens, and Ann Shola Orloff call "the gendered (masculine) character of the central sociological subjects of modernity – citizens, workers, soldiers – and what has been seen as the core constituents of modernity – markets, public spheres, states," which has been "revealed by feminist analysis, challenging the universalist modern" concept of hegemony and unity.⁷⁹ And, non-Western modernism, or postcolonialism, arose as an aesthetic presence. Dilip Parameschar

Gaonkar contends that “When viewed from different perspectives, modernity appears to have an almost iridescent quality; its contours shift depending on the angle of interrogation.”⁸⁰ The idea of collage is owing to African Diasporans and their contributions to the circum-Atlantic aesthetic. Kobena Mercer observes that people outside the Western canon have pursued a dialogic strategy of selectivity, appropriation, and restructuring cultural artifacts to advance their art and culture:

Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a powerful *syncretic* dynamic which critically appropriates elements of the master-codes of the dominant culture and *creolizes* them, disarticulating the given signs and rearticulating the symbolic meaning otherwise. The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself which creoles, patois, and Black English decenter, destabilize, and carnivalize the linguistic domination.⁸¹

One of the defining features of non-Western modernism in drama is the conflict between embracing Western dramatic forms based on Aristotelian and Hegelian ideas and maintaining non-Western traditions. Before examining the playwright who initiates this period, Harold Pinter, I want to examine two significant dramas representing and exemplifying much of postmodernism in modern drama.

Marat/Sade

From 1945 (the end of World War II) to the end of the 1950s, there was a 15-year period of relative optimism worldwide. The defeat of fascism provided considerable hope that old nationalism had failed, to be replaced by a new sense of liberation. In the United States the civil rights movement arose; in Asia, Mahatma Gandhi inspired a non-violent approach to liberation from colonialism; and in Africa nations also rose up against colonialism. There were, of course, setbacks – the Cold War, McCarthyism in America, the rise of fascism in Latin America, and the Korean conflict among them – but overall the spirit of the times bespoke a new beginning in the world. There was a feeling in the zeitgeist that communication (communicative action) would unite people, creating an optimistic faith in many postwar projects. The United Nations, which was established at the end of World War II, would inspire multilateral cultures to hasten the process of peace, convergence, and harmonization. And the defeat of Nazism by Marxism in the East gave new credence to socialism. Modernism and

socialism had, in fact, enormous links; Brecht, among many playwrights, was unquestionably both modernist and socialist. However, the failure of communism throughout the 1950s and 1960s wreaked havoc on this mutual optimism and Enlightenment values. By the 1970s and 1980s, communism was on the verge of disintegration, with its imminent collapse in 1989 the result of lingering Stalinism (Stalin's death in the 1950s did not end his ideology), bureaucratic incompetency, and fundamental flaws in socialism.

These political-social events pertain to a pivotal play of the era, Peter Weiss's *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*, better known by its condensed title, *Marat/Sade* (1964). The play's central argument is between Jean-Paul Marat and the Marquis de Sade, both of whom are incarcerated in a mental asylum during the aftermath of the French Revolution. According to Weiss, "From 1801 until his death in 1814 Sade was interned in the asylum of Charenton, where over a period of years he had the chance of producing plays among the patients and appearing as an actor himself." Weiss creates an imaginary encounter between Sade and Marat, the latter suffering from a severe skin disease that requires him to remain soaking in a bathtub throughout the play. "What interests me in bringing together Sade and Marat," Weiss says, "is the conflict between an individualism carried to extreme lengths and the idea of a political and social upheaval. Even Sade knew the Revolution to be necessary; his works are one simple attack on a corrupt ruling class. He flinched however from the violent methods of his progressives and, like the modern advocate of a third approach, fell between two stools."⁸² Sade, I posit, represents the revulsion of progressives at Stalinist brutality, even though the socialist revolution began with noble intentions; and Marat represents the tradition of revolutionary zeal and a need to establish reason and order under a socialist regime. They epitomize, in many ways, the twin sides of the Berlin Wall, each dialectically arguing, in Brechtian fashion (Weiss was heavily influenced by Brecht), the merits of their ideology amidst an asylum and an attempt to produce a play.

Marat sits in a bathtub to cool his itching, burning flesh; bandages cover his head. He's also destined to die; his one-time lover, Charlotte Corday, makes three attempts to visit him with the intent to murder. The remaining characters comprise criminals, the mentally and physically disabled, failed revolutionaries, and royal dignitaries invited to see the performance (a play-within-a-play). Among the denizens is Sade, who serves as Marat's foil. They are performing a play for the aristocracy, a reenactment of Corday's murder

of Marat. But things run amok, and, in Artaudian fashion, chaos ensues. The play draws on Brechtian ideas of commentary, dialectic, and politics; and its structure is grounded in postmodern ritual and Kierkegaardian repetition (Corday goes through her paces of murder three times). What is germane here, however, is how the debate between Marat and Sade conveys the edifices of modernism and postmodernism and the turning point of modern drama.

Marat invokes methods of modern imminent criticism. For him, the state embodies elements and principles of justice and modernist politics which might appeal to the populism of the masses under conditions of duress. Marat's ideas, Weiss says, "lead in a direct line to Marxism" (149). But Marat also understands the dilemma unleashed by Revolution: "We're all so clogged with dead ideas/passed from generation to generation/that even the best of us/don't know the way out/We invented the Revolution/but we don't know how to run it" (55). Sade skeptically confronts Marat, questioning the validity of the Revolution, while four dancers mime "the cash value of all things Sade names":

Do you still think it's possible/to unite mankind/when already you see how the few idealists/who did join together in the name of harmony/are now out of tune/and would like to kill each other over trifles. (85)

Marat replies:

(raising himself)

But they aren't trifles/They are matters of principle/and it's useful in a revolution/for the half-hearted and the fellow-travelers/to be dropped.

(Mime ends. Marat stands up in the bath.)

We can begin to build till we've burnt the old building down/however dreadful that may seem to those/who lounge in make-believe contentment/wearing their scruples as protective clothing. (85)

For Marat, social justice sets a hierarchy of truths that justify violence; in order to combat specific acts of injustice it is necessary to commit a countervailing injustice. In this way Marat is appealing to traditions of modern natural rights embodied from the Enlightenment and constitutionally imbedded in liberal democratic-socialist societies: oppression must be met with force, even if it means collateral damage. His view epitomizes Eastern bloc communism; the essential theory here is that the nature of justice transcends laws natural or man-made. For Sade, however, no court of appeals exists and no laws are justifiable. A pure, Schopenhauer idea of volitional actions regardless of the consequences or for the good of "mankind" exists.

All claims of right and wrong are provisional; all courts of law are mere linguistic façades; and any sense of a Habermasian communicative action is nullified. For Sade, all human acts are “natural” – that is why they are human.

Marat stands for the tradition of modernity: Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, Marx, and the Enlightenment tradition of reason, progress, and social values as the mechanism of mankind’s well-being. Sade, by contrast, represents the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche, Artaud, Schopenhauer, and postmodern skepticism. Since we are all destined for the grave, Sade seems to be saying, we might as well hedonistically enjoy what we can and madness is not an aberration but a norm. At the conclusion of *Madness and Civilization*, a book that traces the development of reason and mental institutions during the Enlightenment, Michel Foucault raises the point of what he calls a “new sovereign madness” arising from existential nothingness. For Foucault, the Marquis de Sade symbolizes the ultimate philosopher who influences Nietzsche, the ultimate theatre artist who influences Artaud, and the ultimate painter who influences Goya. Sade, Foucault claims, makes all human activity, reasonable or unreasonable, a product of human nature, and thus the antithesis of Marat, who is the product of Enlightenment rationalism: reason can overcome nature and all man-made obstacles. Foucault posits that “After Sade and Goya, and since then, unreason has belonged to whatever is decisive, for the modern world, in any work of art: that is whatever work of art contains that is both murderous and constraining.” He adds that the “frequency in the modern world of works of art that explode out of madness no doubt proves nothing about the reason of that world, about the meaning of such works, or even about the relations formed and broken between the real world and the artist who produced such work.” Yet madness “forms the constitutive moment of abolition, which dissolves in time the truth of the work of art; it draws the exterior edge, the line of dissolution, the contour against the void.”⁸³

Rather than a social contract (to borrow Rousseau’s term) that addresses the inequities and injustices of unreason (Hegel), nature (Rousseau), or government (Marx), Sade falls on the side of “sadism” by advocating unnatural acts of violence (dubbed madness by rational society, but for Foucault and Sade, the only “logical” reaction to their contemporary world). Sade’s goal is the dismantling of any totality, any assertion (Marx or otherwise) that claims to have unquestionable answers, solutions, or hierarchies for politics and society. Sade’s anti-politicalization characterizes postmodernism, in which the overt political goals of postmodern radicalism are, as John McGowan explains in his book *Postmodernism and Its Critics*, “the disruption of this

hierarchical totality, a disruption to be enacted by empowering the suppressed differential components within that totality.” Postmodernism “favors internal models of transformation, relying on a return of the unsuccessfully repressed, of the outsider or marginalized,” contesting how we are “the always already embedded in the social, always situated within preexisting orders of significance and response from which there is no escape.”⁸⁴ Through repeated acts of freewheeling profanity, vulgarity, and shock, Sade attempts to restore a primordial madness and provide nature its sovereignty. Sade says to Marat, “My patriotism’s bigger than yours,” because rather than die for the “honor of France,” everyone is in it (the revolution) for a “taste of blood.” Sade rises to amplify his point: “The lukewarm liberals and the angry radicals all believe in the greatness of France/Marat/can’t you see this patriotism is lunacy/Long ago I left heroics to the heroes and I care no more for this country than for any other country” (64). This skepticism reflects a souring of the communist revolution, which throughout most of the twentieth century had taken root in the high hopes reminiscent of the French Revolution.

The America Play

Another play that appears toward the end of the twentieth century also examines heroes, heroics, narrative history, and national icons: Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* (1994). Both Weiss and Parks view history through the prism of a postmodern sensibility, where the facts are tools to disassemble, interpret, and rearrange; that imagination and reality impact simultaneously; that genres are a mash-up rather than a consistency; and that history isn’t something that happened *back then*, but exists in discourse, symbolisms, and quotidian functions of people. For Parks, history isn’t simply a chain of linear causality that leads inexorably to the present (the Hegelian view), but rather the past is vast congeries of possibilities and events from which we are obliged to choose – even if not every possibility is evident due to an erasure of data – an actually concretized present. In other words, history is what Hayden White calls a “tropology” where the theory of history “does not collapse the difference between fact and fiction but redefines the relations between them within any given discourse.”⁸⁵ Events are selected, with each interconnected by similar time and place, but different owing to human relationship to the events. As Brecht established in his play *Mother Courage*, although a general may have won a battle, Mother Courage has lost twelve

shirts in her business venture. One person's victory is another person's defeat; one's gain is another's loss.

In *The America Play*, Parks examines the historicity of Lincoln, emancipation, and the iconicity of the American Civil War as a façade, a fixed demarcation of events that fail to incorporate the ramifications of the event – the experience of African Americans. “I take issue with history,” Parks says, “because it doesn't serve me – it doesn't serve me because there isn't enough of it.”⁸⁶ Because she fails to observe the history of African Americans fully in textbooks or other sources, she utilizes fiction and theatricality as vicarious means of obtaining what history has left blank (August Wilson does something similar, though his work is more stylistically traditional and realistic). The opening stage direction says: “*A great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History.*”⁸⁷ The main character, called the Founding Father as Abraham Lincoln, is a black man who wears a beard and reenacts the assassination of Lincoln in a theme park. He defines himself by saying, “There was once a man who was told that he bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln” (159). Yet the Founding Father, sometimes referring to himself as the “Lesser Known,” understands that his representation is a simulacrum; he cannot fully embody the “role” of Lincoln even as he does so repeatedly at a popular penny arcade. He lives in Lincoln's shadow, dwarfed by the immensity of the Lincoln myth. The emptiness is expressed through the obvious metaphor of the “hole” in history, what Soyica Diggs Colbert accurately calls “the loss of narrative” in African American history,⁸⁸ a fallow space where history, memory, and the past have been erased. Parks defines this void:

Everyone who has ever walked the earth has a shape around which their entire lives and their posterity shapes itself. ... The Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really. Not a hole he had dugged but one he'd visited. ... A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress any Digger but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them. From the sidelines he'd be calling “Ohwayohwhyohohwayoh” and “Hello” and waving and saluting. The Hole and its historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake. (162)

Mary Brewer has argued that the “hole symbolizes the erasure or distortion of Black in White historical narratives,” reflecting “the practice of denying African Americans a recognizable U.S. parentage,” and blocking their access

to the “same privileges as the nation of White descendants.”⁸⁹ While true, there is more to this: Parks is challenging historicity, the notion of historical data as “evidence” resulting in confirmation, certainty, and totality. Parks’s view stands in contrast to the precepts of the German modernist historian, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), whose influential phrase states that the aim of historians is to “*show what actually happened [wie es eigentlich gewesen]*.”⁹⁰ Historicism of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth structured its ideas on the notion that there is a universal theme that operates temporally as foundational facts; history is linked through a linear progression underlying a transhistorical motivation aimed at progress. Human agency led by powerful individuals dictates the direction of nations and cultures. History itself is conceived as neutral, objective, and reasoned; facts and events lead to the discovery of certainties.

In contrast, Parks sees history as a “great hole,” a pun on “whole”: a miasmatic space where the unwritten and the uncertain are simultaneous with the empirical and the provable. Knowledge and data are contingent, malleable, and protean; for postmodernists like Parks, “knowledge is produced, not discovered.”⁹¹ For Ranke and others to follow, the “modern” conception of history was the doxastic belief in the commensurability of various representations of history; history can have opinions as to its motive and source, but ultimately the “facts” ascertain the validity and status of our knowledge. History for Parks and other postmodern dramatists, however, is not so much a fact of what “actually happened,” something gleaned by virtue of “evidence,” but a postmodern confluence of “happenings,” a mosaic of signs, events, and meanings that cannot be summarized empirically or teleologically, but can only be made vital by showing its impact on present-day people and circumstances. To break with empiricism, writes postmodern philosopher Alain Badiou, “is to think the event as the advent of what subtracts itself from all experience: the ontologically un-founded and the transcendently discontinuous.”⁹² The “real” past is inaccessible except by way of representation – indexical, iconic, metaphoric, or symbolic. As Parks says, theatre is the “perfect place to ‘make’ history” because “so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out”; she is inspired to use playwriting as a tool to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (4).

This way of thinking about history is apropos of the postmodern 1980s and 1990s; it juxtaposes evidence, facts, data, and other forms of documentation with the imaginary representation, creating a pastiche. Fredric Jameson has described pastiche as the “transformation of reality into images,

the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents.” The configuration of a contemporary Lincoln reenacting the assassination in Parks’s play amplifies “the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.”⁹³ Unlike modernism, which sees the past as something to be obliterated forever, postmodern pastiche acknowledges evidence of the past as only *a partial element of truth*; the reception and effect on people constitutes other elements. Modernist historiography had depended on evidence; in *The Idea of History*, for example, R.G. Collingwood writes that the philosophy of history considers the past not as a “series of events but a system of things known.” As a result, history proceeds “by the interpretation of evidence: where evidence is a collective name for things which singly are called documents, and a document is a thing existing here and now, of such a kind that the historian, by thinking about it, can get answers to the questions he asks about past events.”⁹⁴ But this negates the reception of history, avoiding the nature of how it is constructed and narrated; Parks, likewise the philosopher Ortega y Gasset, believes that history is, in Ortega’s words, “construction and not mere description of data.”⁹⁵ This “construction” of history, what Harry Elam and Alice Rayner call Parks’s “specific problem of historicity and meaning with a long dramatic tradition concerned with a dead or absent father figure”⁹⁶ (with Lincoln being one of several “founding fathers”), incorporates multiplicities, complexities, and the psychic impact on people. This is in contrast to Enlightenment thinking, which sought “truth” as a singular entity, devoid of receptivity, incorporating reason and evidence as nodal points of knowledge.

The America Play challenges Enlightenment reasoning because dramas that follow the Enlightenment support ideals of humanity, autonomy, and fidelity to knowledge that is already accepted – the unquestioned unity of the status quo and surface data. Gianni Vattimo asserts that confronting works “with the intention of evoking an event of the past” yield “meaning only for those who consider the incessant and narcissist operation of self-return as the activity of the spirit: namely, history as the progressive grasp of consciousness.”⁹⁷ We take for granted that Lincoln was a white male, that he lived amidst the Civil War, was President, and so on, and these progressive benchmarks of history become not merely facts, but embed themselves in our collective consciousness. These signifiers create a mythologized “Great

Man,” or “Emancipator,” whereby African Americans, whose presence in the emancipation was and is monumental, is nevertheless diminished, rendered as mere sidebars to the “Great Man.” It is as if Lincoln, not black people, dominates historiography and all ramifications of black life are subjected to this singular teleology, this “event” of Lincoln’s ascension and assassination. By continuing these ideas of a singular truth (however much their fidelity to “truth” really is), drama, literature, folklore, and history commit to the idea of spreading this knowledge and sense of certainty. But as Raymond Guess points out, “the conception of ‘knowledge’ embedded in the Enlightenment project is very restricted, and to take so severely limited a conception of ‘knowledge’ to be the very defining feature of reason is to make a very significant mistake.” For Enlightenment thinking, reason is “accumulated through a very narrowly defined kind of knowledge.”⁹⁸ Parks looks at drama outside the confines of received (read Enlightenment) “knowledge,” challenging the linear structure of a traditional well-made play, instead employing an ironic overlay on the Lincoln myth, what she calls “repetition & revision.” Attempting to recreate a musical score, Parks looks to the rhythm of events, to a repetition that considers revision where characters “refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew” (9). Utilized as history, “repetition & revision” (or, as she calls it, “rep & rev”) establishes, in Kerstin Schmidt’s words, “playful variation of bits and pieces of the grand narrative. When she imagines deviating histories, in this case possible variations of the story of Lincoln’s assassination, she suggests instability of alleged historical facts. Historical truth is thus mostly unveiled in its pretentiousness and dependence on a particular discourse.”⁹⁹

Parks employs a complex simultaneity of anticipated events and dissembled parts, historical data with vaudeville theatricality and somber reality (grave-digger archeologists excavating history), creating dramatic action that topples any simplistic schema of before and after, cause and effect, origin and copy. This is what Hayden White refers to as “postmodern docudrama or historical metafiction,” which is “not so much the reversal of this relationship such that real events are given the marks of imaginary ones while imaginary events are endowed with reality as the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary – realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated.”¹⁰⁰ Since historiography claims to deal with the “real,” its methodology legitimates specific standards for the conception

of reality (progressive narrative, documented evidence, and verisimilitude). As a consequence, historiography serves to project a type of certainty on the audience, which is then supposed to accept the formal structures of the documentation as the sole criterion of the “real.” This has the effect of negating, minimizing, and undermining the importance of memory, imagination, and affect that history has on people in the present. Parks acutely pinpoints how history is perceived by individuals: when in the second act the son of the Founding Father, Brazil, and Brazil’s mother, Lucy, dig in a gravesite for their ancestors, Brazil reflects on what he is looking for:

Him and Her would sit by thuh lip uhlone with thuh others all in uh row cameras clickin and theyud look down into that Hole and see – ooooo – you name it. Ever-y-day you could look down that Hole and see – ooooo you name it. Amerigo Vespucci hself made regular appearances. Marcus Garvey. Ferinand and Isabella. Mary Queen of thuh Scots! Tarzan King and thuh Apes! Washington Jefferson Harding and Millard Fillmore. Msistufer Columbus even. Oh they saw all thuh greats. Parading daily in thuh Great Hole of History. (180)

Brazil is the outsider, standing astride the grave of history and seeing in its “hole” the consequences that affect him, but of which he has little or no acknowledgment in the event. Parks’s “denial of history,” writes Una Chaudhuri, “occurs at the level of language, or rather of the recognition that history, because it exists as language, is always subject to revision.”¹⁰¹ Chaudhuri is only partially correct; Brazil is not so much denying history as deconstructing it. Brazil’s “pathos” and tragic imprimatur as slave is now deconstructed in relationship to differences and desires rather than downfall. As Terry Eagleton puts it, “Poststructuralism and postmodernism inherit this tragic strain of thought, but in a post-tragic spirit. Dionysus returns not as tragic sacrifice [Brazil dying bravely and unjustly in the end] but as the infinite proliferation of play, power, pleasure, difference, and desire as an end in itself.”¹⁰² Parks deconstructs the surety of historical tragedy, exposing reality as a representation – as merely a discourse, as Chaudhuri accurately describes – that accentuates the iconicity of Lincoln as a social-memory construct reductive in its simplicity and hardly taking into account the black experience or its perspective; or, if taking the “black experience” into account, always already defined as tragic and exploited. The “Great Emancipator” icon lives unquestioned, unchallenged, and pristine, resulting in an “all is well” mentality among minorities (why should black people complain given the great emancipator’s actions?). Parks appropriates the

“Lincoln myth” by exposing it through parody: black actor as Lincoln reenacting his assassination, creating what Roland Barthes calls “denunciation, demystification (or demythification),” yielding “stock phrases, catechistic declaration.”¹⁰³ Her use of repetition – the repeating of Lincoln’s assassination and Booth’s comments reduced to an amusement park event – is apropos of what Jacques Lacan calls the difference (in Freud) between repetition and reproduction. For Lacan (using Freud’s own German terms), “*Wiederholen* [repetition] is not *Reproduzieren* [reproduction].” This is because while reproduction seeks clarity – seeks perfect mimesis – repetition “first appears in a form that is not clear, that is not self-evident, like a reproduction, or a making present, *in act*.”¹⁰⁴ The appearance of a black actor in the role of “Founding Father” portraying Lincoln and reenacting the assassination at a penny arcade, slumping repeatedly after Booth shoots him, underscores Lacan’s point about repetition; repetition in *The America Play* is not reproduction as realism in the sense of representation, whereby the script and the actor playing Lincoln attempt to reproduce the “authentic” Lincoln to the best of their imitative abilities (as is the case of Daniel Day-Lewis in the Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln*). Rather, repetition serves to foreground the distortion of representation, to rupture the verisimilitude of *trompe-l’oeil*, which only adds to the iconicity of the image-memory of Lincoln “the Great Emancipator.” By obfuscating reality, Parks creates a slippage on our optical subconscious. Marc Robinson claims that Parks creates “a theatre in perpetual retreat from the visual, verbal and physical presence,”¹⁰⁵ but this is incorrect; she is in retreat from the “real,” but is still employing the visual, verbal, and physical presence to upend our associative connections to signifier and signified. Verbally, the language is “chiasmatic,” Rebecca Schneider’s description of the play’s entanglement of structural inversions, syntactical rearrangements, and verbal crisscrossing of signifiers (Lincoln is not Lincoln yet speaks as Lincoln).¹⁰⁶ Visually, “seeing” a black Lincoln creates a visual disjointedness, challenging and politicizing the privilege of the subject (viewer) that grounds the phenomenological object (Lincoln) by delegitimizing ownership (Lincoln is “owned” by history in a particular way).

By employing repetition, Weiss and Parks personify the postmodern sensibility of what Gilles Deleuze calls “the theatre of repetition.” This type of theatre, Deleuze says, “is opposed to the theatre of representation,” where enactment is meant to refer back to the concept underlying the event represented. “In the theatre of representation,” he asserts, “we experience pure forces, dynamic lines in space which act without intermediary upon the spirit, and link it directly with nature and history, with a language which

speaks before word, with gestures which develop before organized bodies, with masks before faces, with specters and phantoms before characters – the whole apparatus of repetition as a terrible power.”¹⁰⁷ Deleuze is advocating an anti-Platonic theatre, one opposing a distinction between the thing itself and the representation (or, in his words, simulacrum). Parks, Katherine Kelly contends, “pulls apart a constellation of defining moments in US race history (often clustered around the figure of Lincoln), exposing contradictions, gaps, lies, and holes in a record traditionally represented as a full account of a series of known causes and known effect.”¹⁰⁸ For Parks and Weiss, the Kantian thing itself is before us onstage; we observe its physical and verbal presence. The reenactment of the murders of both Marat and Lincoln are not meant as references to something “back then.” For Plato, mimesis and representation are distinct, different, and measurable – the original is the superior, the “thing” is the desired model over its representation. For Deleuze, by contrast, “Things are simulacra themselves, simulacra are the superior forms, and difficulty facing everything is to become its own simulacrum, to attain the status of a sign in the coherence of eternal return.”¹⁰⁹

Parks’s *The America Play* is a postmodern historical drama, viewing the past not as a single trajectory but inchoate and fragmented images of memory, experience, and traces of black history that refuses to sanitize the messiness and complex brutality of slavery. Andrew Sofer reminds us that “Despite its post modern trappings, *The America Play* is – like *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, or *Fences* – a classic family drama, whose son must come to terms with an absent father (the American play).” Still, this play is postmodern in the sense that it “satirizes our urge to memorialize an ideal past in sentimentalized, souvenir form as a gravitational effect of disavowed cultural trauma.”¹¹⁰ The play is less a search for truth than a search for meaning; virtually the entire second act – “The Hall of Wonders” – consists of Lucy and Brazil “digging” for their ancestor, or what Parks calls Brazil’s “faux-father” (184). When Brazil says “This Hole is our inheritance of sorts” (185), he speaks of the personal and the political: the blank in African American history, erased by white slavery and historiography, is left to the imagination, to be filled by memory, witness, experience, and the present. Brazil and Lucy find scraps, bits, artifacts: “Right heress thuh bit from thuh mouth of thuh mount on which some great Somebody rode tuh thuh rescue. That’s all thats left” (185–6).

The history of African American theatre is replete with this attempt to repair the fissures and absences of history, or at least acknowledge the void. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans

produced a play called *Jes Lak White Folks* (c. 1903), where one character shows another his “family tree.”

POMPOUS: Heah my ancestor. He was a king.

JUBE: What dat wide hole gap in de middle?

POMPOUS: Oh dat ain’t nut’in. Dats a hiatus.¹¹¹

This “hiatus” and “wide hole gap” is, likewise Parks’s “hole,” the chasm of existence that has been eradicated by racism and the denial of black historical contributions.

For Parks, the past continues to exist in the present, not as heritage and tradition but rather as phantasm, memory, fantasy, and psychic effect. History is not owned by historians, where the past is something that once happened and is now sealed, but rather owned by those still affected by it. Her use of testimony, surrealism, mythic plot reversals, repetition, poetic tropes, cliché, reverie (a fun-house), and stylization encourage a mixture of genres, a comedy and tragedy of history marked toward the grotesque and absurd rather than bolstering the linear, pristine, and ascertainable. “Parks has shaped a unique theatrical vocabulary out of a profound sense of absence,” notes Jeanette Malkin, drawing “from a variety of sources and idioms, fusing epic and poetic, the historical and fantastic in a typically postmodern rejection of the generic integrity, and in a frenzied need to ‘represent’ the present through the losses of the past.”¹¹² Historical narratives are for Parks imaginary elaborations, webs of signifiers and signified images grafted onto the referent (the event), structures that move between metaphor and metonym. This deep skepticism of empiricism, data-driven history, and modernist humanism is also reflected in the most important playwright of this era, Harold Pinter. If the following section on Pinter is disproportionately longer than others, it is because his plays, more than any others, set the tone and agenda for the remainder of the century.

