

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 35 (2017)  
  
**Artikel:** Contemporary Anglo-American drama of exile  
**Autor:** Reisner, Philipp  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-737595>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.05.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Contemporary Anglo-American Drama of Exile<sup>1</sup>

Philipp Reisner

The motif of exile as a symbol for the human condition in contemporary Anglo-American literature has taken on special significance in recent American plays. Playwrights use dialogue to emphasize folly rather than the absurd, by showcasing the characters' failure to be at home in their communities. Intense parallel conversations and the polyphony of voices in rapid succession reveal the general condition of exile to be an exile from language: Following the theater of the absurd, playwrights have now returned to the deep psychology of language exchanges. With verbal misunderstandings and misconceptions, they show characters having lost their home in language and their communities. The characters' desire for community and communion and their sense of being lost in the world become tangible in their interaction on stage. This suggests that drama, too, reflects the sacralization characteristic of contemporary Anglo-American literature. This trend is evident especially in the increasing, but subtle presence of religious symbolism, often misconstrued as the "postsecular." Exile in drama refers to the first exile from the Garden of Eden. Investigating how a new sense of home emerges from these interactions can contribute to our understanding of contemporary definitions of community.

Recent scholarship on contemporary Anglo-American drama has examined the concepts of sexuality, violence, dialogue, audience participation,

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on a lecture given at the University of Bern, 5 November 2016. The author would like to thank the organizers and the Swiss Association for North American Studies for the invitation to the conference and the opportunity to publish this article. He would also like to thank Ebtehal Elrashidy and Aaron Shoichet for their valuable comments on the first draft.

ethnicity, character and subjectivity, media culture, the role of animals, and metatheater (cf. Malkin; Klaver; Delgado-García). It has been suggested that “postmodern synthetic realism” (Sauer 1) is an apt description of dramatic realizations of the polystylistic (or “synthetic”) drive of contemporary art more generally. However, these general rubrics rarely capture what unifies contemporary plays and gives them structure, aside from pointing to their experimental and innovative textual strategies. If we are justified in grouping these plays together in one category, then it is necessary to identify a more fundamental unifying theme. I believe it can be shown that the motif of exile may constitute just such a unifying theme. Anglo-American plays of the past decade from a variety of backgrounds deal with the question of human existence as exile from diverse perspectives.

While the relation between contemporary drama and exile has not gone unnoticed (cf. Meerzon), the complex theological implications of exile in contemporary Anglo-American drama have still not been examined in great detail. Exile is central to the plays by David Adjmi, Marcus Gardley, and Young Jean Lee that were published together in an anthology documenting “a variety of cultural perspectives on America” in contemporary drama of the early twenty-first century (Benson vii). While dealing with the theme of historical exiles on the surface, these authors probe on a deeper level especially the theological implications of exile. These plays may be seen as instances of performative theology, which come to replace, subvert, and question simpler understandings in drama of the experimental, political, or absurd. At the same time, their works engage with the Bible on several levels, revealing the influence of sacralization on contemporary dramatic writing. This suggests that current accounts of sacralization in twentieth-century (Zalambani 251) and contemporary culture (Ostwalt, Jr.) will have to be refined and corrected. Conrad Ostwalt Jr. in particular has depicted sacralization as a kind of late modern counter-movement to the anti-church tendencies of the Enlightenment (24-29). Yet we are compelled to ask whether the impetus of sacralization is more profoundly related to originating impulses of the Enlightenment itself and to be grasped in its institutional and not merely economic context, as both Zalambani and Leypoldt have pointed out (cf. Leypoldt; Holifield; Stievermann, Goff, and Junker). This would entail calling into question claims of the post-secular that frame the current discourse on contemporary drama (Megson). The three playwrights chosen for the present analysis – Adjmi, Gardley, and Lee – demonstrate that theology and mythology, more so than hyphenated or hybrid cultural identities, are the defining factors of contemporary Anglo-American dra-

matic writing. It is thus important to go beyond the theorizing impulse motivating questions of identity, which are often understood in ethnic, generational, and particularizing terms. By contrast, a theological perspective reveals that religious allegiances and motifs are more fundamental than narrow conceptions of identity politics and aesthetics, and that they lead to a substratum of contemporary art in which these very different dramatic approaches share a concern and interest in communities of religious, particularly biblical, engagement. These three examples show that the political relevance of theater is connected to questions concerning the convergence of historical and theological exile that transcend the genre. A similar concern with biblical text, of the Old Testament in particular, can be observed in much of contemporary Anglo-American literature, especially in short prose and poetry. The dramatists whose work is examined here share an interest in basic questions on the theological underpinnings of contemporary society. Seen in this light, contemporary drama demands much more than particular interpretations of identity – it requires that we explore the phenomenon of exile across genres in its diverse literary and historical contexts. Such an undertaking will aim to uncover the unifying strand of contemporary artistic interpretations of the communal. The present analysis may serve merely as a beginning of a broader critical engagement with the tendency in drama criticism and research, especially prevalent since the 1980s, of interpreting the communal in ethnic rather than religious terms (cf. Bruck). Peter Bruck has exemplarily shown in reference to the work of African American playwright Ed Bullins how contemporary drama persistently avoids and pits itself against the idea of community theater. Engaging with exile from a “universal” perspective – if there is such a thing – will allow us to reevaluate the function of religious motifs in contemporary drama. Research must raise these questions, for these motifs serve not merely as rhetorical embellishment, but instead quite possibly lead to the central ideas of these plays.

### Theologizing Contemporary Drama of Exile

In this context, and in light of the plays in the focus of the present analysis, the relation between community and exile needs to be considered theologically: In Genesis, the first steps towards community raise the question of the first occurrence of plurality. In Genesis 1:1, God or the divine, potentially plural itself because of “Elohim” (Hebrew), is juxtaposed with the plurality of “the Heavens” and the singularity of the

Earth: "In the beginning God [Elohim] created the heavens and the earth."<sup>2</sup> This frequently mistranslated passage, for which the singular "heaven" is given in the King James Version and some recent Bible translations, may be read to show a "divine surplus," namely the plurality of the heavens, as created in the first creative act in Genesis by a Godhead that is potentially plural within itself. It does not create a binary opposition, but instead "heavens" and a singular "earth," as a primary plurality upon which all other creation as well as the Trinity is based. In the following verses, man is created in a plural world with a plurality of heavens, waters (Genesis 1:2), days, nights (the fourth day, Genesis 1:16), plants (the third day, Genesis 1:11), and animals (the fifth day, Genesis 1:20). From the perspective of Genesis as the origin of theological thought on exile, the question of plurality and divine simplicity may be seen as the most complex task for Trinitarian theology, which establishes the spiritual relationality of man and which serves as the basis for the creation of a plurality of men and women, and hence of community, in the subsequent biblical narrative (Genesis 1:27 and 2:18). The Fall as the first exile (Postell 120) is necessary because of the original plurality of men and women in both creation stories in Genesis; the woman is the cause of the Fall and also opposes the serpent after the expulsion from Eden: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This double dialectic can be seen as the gendering of exile explored in the plays by Adjmi, Gardley, and Lee. The confusion of tongues (Genesis 11) creates the loss of language that the characters must come to terms with, whereas the Babylonian exile depicted in the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel takes up questions of community and belonging by adding an eschatological dimension. While acknowledging the relation between community and Trinitarian theology and especially placing its eschatological aspects in the foreground, contemporary (Lutheran) dogmatics, too, neglects the dimension of exile (cf. Hinlicky). Like other genres of contemporary Anglo-American literature, drama enters into dialogue with theology, drawing attention to theology's weakness in recognizing societal conflicts. Theological motifs are relevant not merely from the point of view of Liberation Theology. Tracing their role in contemporary literature and especially drama may deepen our understanding of diverse

---

<sup>2</sup> This passage is from *The Holy Bible* (2014; 29). Aside from this passage, *The Holy Bible* (1978) will be used throughout.

communities currently in exile, including North American cultures in their founding context (cf. Nanko-Fernández 41).

These contemporary Anglo-American plays engage the religious dimensions of the term “community.” From a Christian perspective, which is foundational for many of the theological aspects of these plays, community is the place where individual exile is overcome. It is to be understood eschatologically as defined in Hebrews 10:24-25, a letter which relates to the topic of exile: “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching” (cf. Barker, Lane, and Michaels 312). This passage reveals the eschatological bent of contemporary Trinitarianism and contemporary drama, and may be seen as a template against which David Adjmi explores the concept of “sin” in his play *Stunning*.

#### Probing the Depths of Sin: David Adjmi’s *Stunning* (2008)

David Adjmi’s play *Stunning* is set in the Syrian-Jewish neighborhood of Midwood, Brooklyn, and written in a deeply satirical tone that is critical of both personal and societal attitudes and deficiencies. It opens with three girls sitting at a card table discussing the life of their absent friend, the fourth girl whom they had expected to join them:

Shelly	She’s / finished
Claudine	She committed / suicide
Lily	(Oolie!) <sup>3</sup> /
Claudine	RUINED!
[STOP]	
	( <i>Crunching a carrot stick.</i> ) I like the dip What’s in this /
Lily	Chives.
Claudine ( <i>bright</i> )	Heeee: I <i>like</i> chives. /
Lily	Should we / play?
Claudine ( <i>quick</i> )	(Did you see Debbie’s haih? She cut / it).
(Benson 10) <sup>4</sup>	

<sup>3</sup> According to the “Glossary of Syrian-American Terms,” the term “oolie” is an “exclamation of shock, worry, horror, discovery – spoken with correlative intonations (reverential worry: ‘ooooollllllieeeee?’ ‘OO!LIE!’ ‘OOLIE!’ etc.)” (Adjmi, “Glossary” 8).

<sup>4</sup> Because of minor changes, the play is quoted from the later version in Benson 1-132 throughout the present essay; like the other quoted passages, this one appears with typographical changes in Adjmi, *Stunning* 15-16.



This passage showcases the sarcasm with which Adjmi caricatures the community of exiled Syrian Sephardic Jews to which he belongs. It is evident early on that the general condition of exile refers to an exile from language, reinforced by the parallel conversations and rapid exchanges of numerous voices. Through a series of verbal misunderstandings and misconceptions, the play depicts how characters lose their home in language and their communities. The exaggerated tempo of the everyday language in the dialogues does not forego violent expressiveness. In their interaction on stage, the characters' desire for community and communion and their sense of being lost in the world are made tangible.

This suggests that drama, too, is part of the trend towards sacralization that characterizes contemporary Anglo-American literature. Exile in drama refers to the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. This occurs in the context of a turn towards Old Testament texts, with special emphasis on the Book of Genesis and the Book of Psalms. Discreet references link the plays' renewed emphasis on Old Testament material to New Testament texts, especially the First Letter to the Corinthians. Investigating how a new sense of home emerges from these interactions, which at the same time is constantly in danger of disintegrating, can contribute to our understanding of contemporary redefinitions of community.

In *Stunning*, Adjmi refers to the story of Lot's wife to discuss accusations of alleged sexual "insecurity" or "instability". The protagonist Lily, a sixteen-year-old Syrian Jewish wife of an older man, employs an African American woman as her maid, ironically named Blanche and seemingly over-qualified, who is gay:

Lily ( <i>blunt textbook sanctimony</i> )	LESBIANS IS WRONG /
Blanche	(And they taught you grammar / too Nice)
Lily	And I know about Sodom and Gomorrah!
Blanche	What do you know?
Lily	They were <i>Sodomites</i> !
Blanche	And:
Lily	And they had <i>sodomy ca-an</i> ? <sup>5</sup> And God said to Lot's wife not to look back and she looked back.

---

<sup>5</sup> According to the "Glossary of Syrian-American Terms," the word "ca-an" is spoken "when challenging the veracity of something. Has a vaguely sarcastic connotation, as in, 'Yeah, right!' Sometimes serves as phatic punctuation" (Adjmi "Glossary" 8). Adjmi's meticulous attention to language inflects theatrical naturalism, adding to the polystylistic texture of the play.

*Beat.*

Blanche            Would you look back?

Lily                God said no.

*Pause.*

Blanche (*internal; faraway*)            I would. (Benson 53-54)

Exile here becomes the attempted exile of homophobic exclusion. It has been claimed that in many ways Lot's wife remains the quintessential representation of the dangers of nostalgia in exile (Hartman 30). Between the female protagonist and the antagonist, a drama of exile unfolds that leads ultimately to Blanche committing suicide out of despair at the prospect of being sent away from her new job with Lily into yet another exile. This new exile is in part a consequence of her criminal history as an attempted murderer, of her potentially abusive father, which is unveiled as the play unfolds (Benson 76, 118).

Acutely and in personified fashion, Adjmi raises the question whether and to what extent exile, as a characterization of the human condition, is ultimately bearable. He carefully links this issue to contemporary society by satirizing a New York Syrian-Jewish community and engaging the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Benson 31). While his treatment of these topics emphasizes the universality of his dramatic scenes, he goes beyond the societal to raise the deeper question concerning the concept of exile as a characterization of human existence in general. His play is a satirical tragedy that embraces the complexity of contemporary existence from multiple points of view, subtly engaging questions of race, gender, and politics. These different strands are theologically united, leading to a sobering diagnosis of the modern human condition: That people lack charity, they perpetually expulse and exclude themselves and each other.

This becomes even more apparent in Adjmi's play *The Evildoers* (2008), in which he deals explicitly with what he calls Christian fundamentalism (Adjmi, *Stunning* 147). Two Jewish-American couples discover in conversation their personal insecurity and the instability of their relationships. Carol Thernstrom, a wedding counselor, is so cynical and destructive in her claims about marriage, relationships, and human existence in general, that the play's climax is the revenge of Martin Goldstrom, the husband of the other couple: He cuts out Thernstrom's tongue. This punishment is a reference to Psalm 12:3 and Proverbs 10:31 and intricately linked to Babylonian exile expressed in Psalm



137:5.6.<sup>6</sup> The right hand is the one on which Carol presumably wears her ring, which becomes a symbol of her cynical attitude that Martin finds so objectionable. This extreme punishment for verbal “sin” is linked to the origin of the Babylonian confusion of tongues: People no longer understand each other and are exiled in a language of constant misunderstanding. Adjmi’s plays realize a theology of exile that transcends satire and tragedy and that thereby eludes Larry D. Bouchard’s critical assessment of contemporary theater studies, namely, that the relationship between tragedy and “sin” has been neglected. Adjmi re-establishes the original unity of the tragic and the satirical (Bouchard 10-11) and takes up the complicated relationship between “sin” and exile, which was present in the Jewish tradition (Karlip 256). Of the three playwrights analyzed in this paper, Adjmi’s works have received the least academic and, ironically, greatest public attention. This suggests that the public perception of contemporary theater may be useful to theater research by revealing common thematic strands like the topic of exile.

Mythopoetic Syncretisms: Marcus Gardley’s *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* (2013)

Marcus Gardley’s play *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry* deals at first sight with the topic of exodus rather than exile from the perspective of the African American tradition. It deals with the migration of the Seminoles, that is, black and Native American people, from Florida to Oklahoma in the mid-nineteenth century, where they established the first all-black town in Wewoka. The epic struggle between the full-blood and half-black Seminoles recalls Old Testament tribal struggles and questions of tribal adherence and belonging. Exile, when seen as the central myth in contemporary drama, highlights the importance of the Bible for contemporary playwrights and opposes the unjustified, but still pervasive, bias of American literary history towards exodus as an explanatory model for early New English settlement. Gardley’s mythodrama intervenes in this misperception by engaging questions of identity in a complexity similar to Adjmi’s. Like Adjmi from a Jewish perspective, Gardley makes reference to the Old Testament, for example, in the prologue

---

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 12:3: “The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things”; Proverbs 10:21: “The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out”; Psalm 137:5.6: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.”

with “Number Two,” the black god, wrestling his angel, “OR BLACK BEAR EMBRACES RED COYOTE” (Benson 137). Following an American tradition, he creates a syncretism between mid-nineteenth-century American history and Old Testament mythology, attributing universal and theological significance to minorities and successfully cutting across ethnic particularism. The frequent flashbacks and shifts in time between 1850 and 1866, besides illustrating a historic consciousness in line with nineteenth-century historicism, also mimic the complex temporal structure of the Bible. They emphasize the significance of history for relationships between generations especially in the context of (family) migration. However, the titles of the two acts and their two prologues, “THE OLD TESTAMENT OR WHY THE WELL RAN DRY” (Act One) and “THE NEW TESTAMENT OR WHY THE ROAD WEEPS” (Act Two), preceded by “NUMBER TWO WRESTLES HIS ANGEL OR BLACK BEAR EMBRACES RED COYOTE” (Prologue to Act One) and “THE GOSPEL OF FATE ACCORDING TO RED COYOTE, OR THE SILENT YEARS” (Prelude to Act Two) establish a typological balance and reference to biblical Christianity that runs throughout the play, reinvigorated by a new approach to Old Testament theology (Benson 143, 183, 137, 180). Similar to Adjmi, Gardley pays close attention to language: He expresses the human condition of exile in language by juxtaposing an African American vernacular with King James Version English. By taking up the nineteenth-century fashion of speaking in King James Version English, Gardley mythologizes the mundane and adds to the multilayered complexity also present in Adjmi’s plays, while exploring it from a historical and mythological perspective. Unlike Adjmi, Gardley places more emphasis on the notion of community and brings it to a clearer resolve; the characters come to understand their follies and prejudices, and the spectators witness the characters’ state of alienation and exile dissolve by the end of the play. But on their way there, they have had to go through “sin,” suffering, and self-reflection.

As his other plays testify, including the recent *I Am a Man* (2012), a short one-man play available in a film version online, Gardley, while rediscovering monologue – albeit in a very different way from his contemporary Young Jean Lee – intends to recover spirituality from the shocks of the mundane. Similar to *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry*, in which Gardley examines human relationships over several generations, in *I Am a Man* one male actor plays vignettes of three different males and their roles in society. In both plays, Gardley reveals the cyclical dimension of individual conditions of exile, and points to the spiritual macrostructure that penetrates the microstructure of individual human

experience. The topic of exile, which can be found throughout his oeuvre, may offer a much stronger heuristic perspective on his work than rather vague classification such as “post-black plays” (Elam and Jones xxx).

### Exile and Community as Experiment: Young Jean Lee’s *Pullman, WA* (2005)

In her play *Pullman, WA*, experimental playwright Young Jean Lee takes her hometown as the title for an exploration that combines self-help culture, escapism, religion, and insults directed towards the audience. She thus creates a transtemporal field of tension in which she explores the current manifestations of the “fallen state” of “exilic humanity”. Lee stresses the immediacy of her dramatic investigation by stipulating that the characters be named after the actor or actress who is playing them, by employing long monologues that address the audience and reflect the theatrical situation and character experiences, and by making heavy use of anaphoric structure, altered with quick and snappy verbal exchanges. The play opens with Pete, named after the actor of the first performance in its original production:

Pete                    *enters.*

Pete                    I see you out there.

I see you out there and I can see that you are all different kinds of people.

You are all going through different kinds of things.

Some of you may be happy. Others of you may be in hell. I don’t know.

But what I do know is that I know how to live. (Benson 223)

Having established, albeit in a conversational language, a biblical dimension at the very beginning by alluding to hell and the basic ethical question which “Pete” claims to have solved for himself, the play later develops a more decidedly biblical tone by (implicitly) addressing the passage on the shepherds and the sheep in Luke 2:8: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” Tom declares:

There were two shepherds, and the Lord asked them to protect and watch over his lambs in the field.

The shepherds said, “Yes, Lord, I will obey,” and tended the lambs with gentleness and care.

But soon the shepherds grew weary of their task and began to beat and flay the lambs with their staffs. (Benson 233)

Lee's play thus sets up a counterfactual scenario of religion in exile on Earth in an age that threatens the continuity of the original faith of the shepherds in Luke. As the actors fall in and out of their intermittent religious roles, the spectators are shown how unstable and dangerous faith can be, revealed through the characters' superficial religious language. Confronted with the juxtaposition between passages in biblical language and others written in everyday language, the spectators are forced to reflect on the experimental dimension of existence and the hidden omnipresence of religious motifs in contemporary society. Lee combines these theological references by engaging dramatic monologue. Her reinvention of monologue, which serves as a main device throughout her play, illustrates the importance of redefining characters on the contemporary stage (cf. Delgado-García 48) for which monologue is instrumental, and not merely in underpinning the isolation of the individual. As Deborah R. Geis has pointed out, character development through monologue recedes, and the monologues instead jolt the audience by altering, suspending, or rupturing the narrative "progress" of a play (cf. Geis). In addition, this brief analysis suggests that monologues engage biblical forms of speech, transcending the sermon-like moment by introducing the multi-generic mode of biblical text onto the contemporary stage. Exile then becomes palpable also as an exile from genre into the terrain of the experimental; conventions are permanently put in question, and biblical precepts are subverted in contorted allusions. Exile here becomes a communal theatrical experience in which actors and audience alike are exposed to an inscrutable force-field of estranged biblical texts. They explore and experience the sublime presence of the biblical text in contemporary culture, and at the same time allude to the loss of its presence as a more profoundly and consciously shared knowledge. One might even venture to suggest that Lee's dramatic text raises, in a provocative manner, the subliminal presence and significance of biblical text to the level of consciousness.

A little later, in a passage directed to the audience, Pete and Tom "*get into Jesus/God' positions*" while "*Pete is Jesus and Tom is God*" (Benson 242). The unusual use of names, the reference to the second commandment and mystery plays, and allusions to Genesis, 1 Samuel and the book of Psalms form a biblical backdrop that also challenges the audience: This backdrop compels the spectators to think about the depth of their own biblical knowledge and to reflect on where and in which contexts these

passages are found in the Bible and why they have been reinterpreted in this way:

Pete	Fear not, for I will walk upon the land.
Tom	I will walk upon the land, in the hills and the valley below.
Pete	I will walk upon the land and shout my name.
Tom	I will shout my name in the desert.
Pete	Over the plains and in the valley, you will hear my name echoing.
Tom	You will hear my name echoing into the hills.
Pete	You will hear my name echoing and fall down.
Tom	You will fall down groveling in the earth.
Pete	You will weep and curse my name.
Tom	You will curse my name and I will smite you down.

(Benson 242)

The anaphoric repetition of the future aspect (“will,” which continues beyond this passage) testifies to the eschatological dimension of contemporary dramas of exile. In this way, Lee invites and stimulates reflection on the omnipresence and simultaneous repression of biblical texts in the contemporary consciousness, trenchantly criticizing the superficial and mundane aspects of existence in a way reminiscent of the plays by Adjmi and Gardley. Her experimental approach to writing, which transcends community by exploring the limitations of theatrical community, takes up the experimental style of plays from the latter half of the twentieth century. Yet Lee deals with the exile of contemporary communities of faith from the biblical text itself, which has become submerged by the sacralization of the everyday and the mundane. In this sense, given the profound engagement of contemporary Anglo-American literature with the Romantic era at large, her writing may – despite its experimental surface – revert to motives of Naturalism as a response to individualism and to the theological landscape of Romanticism (cf. Ybarra 513-14). Besides this subversion of theatrical realism and naturalism, with regard to Naturalism and Romanticism as epochs of literary and artistic expression, her work is representative of the turn away from the Old Testament bias of Romanticism and towards the New Testament bias of Naturalism and early Modernism. Notwithstanding the somewhat courageous anachronism, this would constitute an explanatory and interpretive framework beyond the descriptive vagueness of “postmodern synthetic realism” (Sauer 1) and may account for the tangible societal concern that is clearly present in these contemporary plays, which on the surface appear very different.



## Conclusion

All three playwrights testify in their works to the structural, and not merely thematic, presence of the biblical text. With the use of poetic language, they lend support to Lorca's contention that "a play is a poem standing up" (Collins and Wishna 101). The cyclical element of biblical narrative and song thus translates into contemporary theater, poetry, and narrative, so long as the form itself is cyclical – for example, in the form of short-story and poetry collections or in innovative new plays like the three discussed here. Contemporary Anglo-American drama of exile is a genre-specific expression of the movement of sacralization that defines contemporary literature and culture as a whole, namely, the ever more subtle and subdued, yet nonetheless ubiquitous presence of Scripture in daily life. The plays, like other forms of contemporary literature, shed light on the state of contemporary society, unsettling its certainties by emphatically conveying the theology of exile as a biblical core myth. They creatively bridge the gap between the popular and the political in a quest for spiritual veracity that is driven by a deep but faithful dissatisfaction with status quo beliefs.

While the theological focus on exile can also be observed in biblically informed contemporary Anglo-American literature of other genres such as poetry and short stories, its development in drama – as can be seen from these examples – evolves within the particular rules of the genre. Contemporary Anglo-American drama of exile deals with the biographical experiences of its authors by staging and developing conflicts arising from the human existential condition of exile. The historical settings of the three plays are also remarkable in pointing to eras of particular interest for contemporary society, thus mirroring core literary and historiographical concerns: Adjmi's play is set in the "early 2000s" (Benson 5), possibly pointing to a still inextricably close era of far-reaching societal change, in which new conditions of exile and migratory movements come to the fore; Gardley's play is set in Romanticism and Naturalism, which still have such a powerful hold on contemporary art with its existential questions of belonging and loss; and Lee situates her play in a transtemporal atmosphere of an unspecified present, calling into question the historical contexts of the other plays along with their particular understandings of exile and communities. By taking up contemporary conversational atmospheres (Lee; Adjmi, *Stunning*) and stimulating overlapping mythological imaginaries (Gardley), these playwrights succeed in innovating the stage of contemporary drama by re-casting the relation between the human existential condition and present society. By devel-



oping new forms like satirical tragedy (Adjmi, *Stunning*) and a new genre of historical play adding a mythological dimension (Gardley in *The Road Weeps, the Well Runs Dry*) or satirically, experimentally, and allegorically rewriting historical plays (Lee in *LEAR*), these playwrights succeed in speaking not only to their audiences, but also to current societal concerns. Coming from very different backgrounds, they manage to recover both political impetus and author-actor collaborations for a renewed Anglo-American theater that will declare the individual and collective dimensions of the human condition of exile as the focal point for a stage that is both artistically and socially relevant.

## References

- Adjmi, David. *Stunning and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011.
- . “Glossary of Syrian-American Terms.” *Stunning and Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011. 8-9.
- Barker, Glenn W., William L. Lane and J. Ramsey Michaels. *The New Testament Speaks*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
- Benson, Sarah, ed. *The Methuen Drama Book of New American Plays*. Methuen Drama Play Anthologies. London: Methuen Drama, 2013.
- Bouchard, Larry D. *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.
- Bruck, Peter. “Ed Bullins: The Quest and Failure of an Ethnic Community Theatre.” *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*. Ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim. Munich: Hueber, 1981. 123-40.
- Collins, Ken and Victor Wishna. *In Their Company: Portraits of American Playwrights*. Photographs by Ken Collins. Interviews by Victor Wishna. New York: Umbrage, 2006.
- Delgado-García, Cristina. *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Elam, Jr., Harry J. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr., eds. *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
- Gardley, Marcus. *I Am a Man: Performed by Marc Damon Johnson*. Director Hal Hartley, editor Kyle Gilman. 9.11.2012. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB1mlwr\\_JD0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hB1mlwr_JD0)>. Accessed 28 December 2016.
- Geis, Deborah R. *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*. Theatre – theory/text/performance. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Hartman, Stacy. “‘A Romance with One’s Own Fantasy’: The Nostalgia of Exile in Anna Seghers’s Mexico.” *Edinburgh German Yearbook 3. Contested Legacies: Constructions of Cultural Heritage in the GDR*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009. 30-46.
- Hinlicky, Paul R. *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Holifield, Evander B. “Why Are Americans So Religious? The Limitations of Market Explanations.” *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*. Ed. Jan Stieversmann, Philip Goff, and Detlef Junker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 33-60.
- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version Student Study Bible*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2014.

- The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments, Translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations diligently compared and revised; Commonly known as the Authorized (King James) Version.* Philadelphia: National Pub., 1978.
- Karlip, Joshua M. *The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Klaver, Elizabeth. *Performing Television: Contemporary Drama and the Media Culture.* Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000.
- Lee, Young Jean. *The Shipment and LEAR.* New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2011.
- Leyboldt, Günter. "Literature and the Economy of the Sacred." *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States.* Ed. Jan Stievermann, Philip Goff, and Detlef Junker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 145-64.
- Malkin, Jeanette R. *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Meerzon, Yana. *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film.* Studies in International Performance. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Megson, Christopher. "Is British theatre postsecular?" *Research*, 2013. <[https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/activities/is-british-theatre-postsecular\(989a627b-ae1-4560-98a6-3556e3746101\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/activities/is-british-theatre-postsecular(989a627b-ae1-4560-98a6-3556e3746101).html)>. Accessed 2 January 2017.
- . "'Thisworldly wonderment': Contemporary British Theatre and Postsecularism." *Performing the Secular: Representation, Religion and the Public Sphere.* Ed. Milija Gluhovic and Jisha Menon. First edition. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Nanko-Fernández, Carmen M. "Alternately Documented Theologies: Mapping Border, Exile and Diaspora." *Religion, Representation, and Politics.* Contemporary Performance InterActions. Ed. Sarah Azaransky. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013. 33-56.
- Ostwalt, Jr., Conrad. *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination.* Second edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- Postell, Seth D. *Adam as Israel: Genesis 1-3 as the Introduction to the Torah and Tanakh.* Cambridge: James Clarke and Company, 2012.
- Sauer, David K. *American Drama and the Postmodern: Fracturing the Realistic Stage.* Amherst: Cambria Press, 2000.
- Stievermann, Jan, Philip Goff, and Detlef Junker, eds. *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

- Ybarra, Patricia. "Young Jean Lee's Cruel Dramaturgy." *Modern Drama* 57.4 (2014): 513-33.
- Zalambani, Maria. "Literary Policies and Institutions." *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 251-68.

