

# focus

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## Identity at Thresholds and American Dramatic Frames: Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* and Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?*

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The aim of this essay is to explore the thresholds of identity in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) and Edward Albee's *The Goat or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002). These works are highly controversial plays written by a lesbian and a gay playwright; they have shocked the American audience but were awarded afterwards with the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award for best Play, respectively. Another, earlier play of the same category is Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991 and 1992). Here the author stages an image of America where "religious, racial, sexual identities co-exist and intermingle" (Bigsby, *Modern* 423) in order to shape a world in which "the breaching of boundaries is both method and subject" (423). The transgression of boundaries in Kushner's play happens mainly in the context of gender and political issues; he depicts AIDS, race and homosexuality, the versatile topics of the eighties and nineties, in a straightforward, outspoken manner comparable only to the world of Vogel's and Albee's plays.

The thresholds of identity are visible in *How I Learned to Drive* and *The Goat* through the central characters of the plays. Vogel's protagonist is subject to incestuous desire; Albee's main dramatic figure is involved in a love affair with an animal. Vogel focuses on the ambiguity and the behavioral uncertainties resulting from the sexual abuse which haunts a young girl. The playwright follows this girl's journey through the thresholds of identity and draws her identity profile through given situations and periods. The play detects delicate moments when the characters' ambivalent feelings border on problematic behavioral patterns in order to build up a profile of attitudes that unmask imposed identities. Albee tackles the limits of human understanding and love within and outside the frames of conventional marriage; the protagonist in *The Goat* is testing the verge of social acceptance in the context of human relationships. The protagonists of *How I Learned to Drive* and *The Goat* transgress the borders of expected social behavior; through their actions they reflect a displaced position within family and society, which manifests itself in their unfolding identity.

The liminality of dramas in the American literary canon and the potentials contained by the dramatic texts for the identities in the making justified my choice of the dramatic genre and that of the two plays. Today, when literary histories are continuously contested, negotiated, recontextualized and rewritten, American drama and theater, too has become "as diverse and unmanageable as the country itself" (Hischak 462). Despite its popularity, the dramatic genre remained on the side(s) of the main cultural road, a "no man's land" of peripheral position in literary and even American studies. Two years ago, in the second edition of *Modern American Drama* C.W.E.

Bigsby remarked that American drama—however acclaimed its authors might be on the domestic and global stages—is still enjoying a “casual disregard” (1) and a condescending attitude on the part of the critical establishment. Bigsby’s observation on the marginal position of the American dramatic genre dates back to 1978. In a response to Walter Meserve’s derogatory claims about the status of American drama, Bigsby drew attention to the fact that American dramas are essential cultural paradigms. Drama, unlike other literary genres, functions as a present-time instrument that measure essential and sometimes invisible changes in the mainstream and more general culture and is sensitive to cultural and aesthetic shifts (Bigsby, *Drama as a Cultural Sign* 331).

The discussion of the two dramas here has a double aim: to push forward the interpretive boundary of the dramatic genre into that of the larger discipline of American Studies and to contribute to the body of textual challenge to mainstream critical stages of practice by providing another, possible addendum to the current readings of America’s unfolding identities.

The choice of dramatic frame for the topic of identity at thresholds was conditioned by the nature of the theatrical metaphor itself, a metaphor that was creatively used as a shaping paradigm in American studies. Twenty-seven years ago it was Gene Wise’s “paradigm dramas” metaphor that forged the contour, the structural frame, and the basic configuration of the cultural and institutional history of American Studies. This drama metaphor suggested not only a “dynamic image of ideas” (296) with “trans-actional quality” (296) but it also established the premises of a “continual dialogue” (296) in the field of American Studies. It is the trope of the dialogue inherent in the essence of theatre which posits American drama as a borderland space or rather a threshold zone present at the same time in text, context and performance. Drama is a space of exception when it comes to what Mary Dudziak and Leti Volp call “hydraulic relations” (598) in constructing American identities. While America continues to be seen as a “contested space, in which identity must, immigrant country that it is, constantly be making and remaking itself” (Bigsby xi), the theatre, it seems, takes that space of contest and transfigures it, from a no man’s land into that of a border space or a contact zone of cultural mediation where issues of identity construction are still explored, publicly placed and re-interpreted according to contemporary discursive and cultural practices.

Shelly Fisher Fishkin evoked the arbitrariness of border spaces in “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies” Presidential Address to the American Studies Association in 2004 and, following Gloria Anzaldúa’s ideas from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pointed out that the power of the borderland zone lies in its potential to transmute “the buzzing” of challenges into sites of “creative energy” (17). The problem of borders and borderlands seems to be a topic in permanent vogue not only in the frame of the American dramatic genre but also in the wider context of American Studies itself. In the preface to the 2005 special issue of *American Quarterly* entitled *Legal Borderlands. Law and the Construction of American Borders*

Marita Sturken posed the "murky and complex" question of "borders of and within identities" (v) in the context of an interdisciplinary approach to identity construction characteristic of third millennium America. The borderland approach, alongside with other current approaches, de-centers the construction of American identity, which was traditionally centered on an accepted heteronormativity, and "consolidated around the normal masculine through the casting out of perverse behavior" (Dudziak and Volpp 600).

The internal spaces of dramatic frames in Albee's and Vogel's dramas enable the contestation and interrogation of identities which disrupt celebratory national narratives (Fisher Fishkin 19) or mainstream plots and add other possible way of identity expressions to the repertoire of culturally tabooed subjects (homosexuality and AIDS, for example, in the seventies and eighties). This strategy of remapping identities necessarily opens up a space of real and symbolic transgression within the so-called "internal American space" (595), a threshold of multiple accesses that made visible—or readable—within the synthetic monoculture of "normality," a topos that Akhil Gupta and James Fergusson call the "space[s] of ideological ambiguity" (qtd. in Dudziak and Volpp 596). Drama contains active, creative, contextual frames where identities not only "intersect, transfigure, and continually redefine each other" (Cristian 41) but also, as Austin Sarat observed, provide fertile terrains on which they are and can be "constructed, contested and made meaningful" (qtd. in Dudziak and Volpp 598). This American cultural space, which in the current global context is not entirely internal any more, seems to be now more than ever a threshold of transgression.

The American drama of the turn of the century and the beginning of the third millennium inherited the practice of framing identities from a radical perspective. This radical, pervasive concern with identity construction dates back to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, a decade of social and political imperatives which opened the way to many silenced voices, marginal discourses and invisible or less visible identities. During and after the sixties a specific current of literary texts by African American, women, gay and lesbian authors emerged together with the literature by Native Americans, Latino/a, Asian Americans and American Jewish writers. The Vietnam War also contributed to the body of texts pertaining to contemporary identity construction in the United States, which echoed the need to write from a substantially different perspective from that of the mainstream community of canonized authors. The social and political changes that took place from the sixties exposed in American dramatic frames a more genuine picture of identities, where "the freedom of becoming" was more powerful than the "stasis of being" (Bigsby, *Modern* 267).

Many post-sixties dramatic works in the United States depict starkly intimate themes; the themes and topics are provocative and discuss issues of gender construction and identity search within a culture of unfolding voices. American dramas written at the end of twentieth century discuss the fall of the nuclear family and depict non-traditional family forms (Cristian, "Delicate"), confused relationships between spouses and/or among family members, offer introspection into the tabooed topics

of pornography, prostitution, AIDS, homosexuality, sexual abuse, incest, etc. This is what Bigsby calls the "theater of transformation" (*Modern* 267), an exemplary form of theatre in which identity is pushed under the mask of archetypes in order to show how the pressure of tradition, history, social prejudice or economy shapes individual and/or social performances of the self. The plays of transformation depend on the very system they oppose, and so they become essentially rebellious (Bigsby, *Modern* 268).

The intertextual inspiration for Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* is rooted in Vladimir Nabukov's *Lolita* (which inspired Albee also, who made an ill-fated adaptation of the novel in 1981), David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992) and the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) directed by Robert Mulligan. As C.W. E. Bigsby claims, Vogel "touched the national nerve" (*Modern* 415) with her play that tackles the sensitive subject of abuse, incest, seduction and victimization. The choice of the topic places the author against the grain of so-called safe issues fashionable at the end of the century America; with this drama she challenged both existing "theatrical models and moral presumptions alike" (Bigsby, *Modern* 418). After Lillian Hellman—who was until the seventies the only representative of American women playwrights—, Lorraine Hansberry—whose works focus on issues of race—Vogel is with Wendy Wasserstein the main literary spokesperson of women's identity crises in contemporary American drama.

Vogel's earlier plays such as *Desdemona* (1979), *And Baby Makes Seven* (1984), *The Oldest Profession* (1988), *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), *Hot 'N' Throbbing* (1993), and *The Mineola Twins* (1996) dealt with less traditional characters and situations that provoked "negative empathy" (412). Accordingly, her first plays were rejected by virtually all theatres they have been sent to or had to wait years before they were finally produced. *How I Learned to Drive* is constructed in flashbacks which gradually present, through the metaphor of driving lessons, the stages of the sexual maturation and progressive awakening of a young girl (nick)named Li'l Bit. She is the protagonist of the drama and also the narratorial voice; Uncle Peck—named after Gregory Peck who played Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—the antagonist of the play and a former war veteran, is obsessed with Li'l Bit, whom he teaches to drive. Uncle Peck is married and keeps up the appearance of a happy marriage despite the fact that he is irresistibly drawn to Li'l Bit.

The drama follows the route of Li'l Bit's maturity and maps the most important points of her identity crisis that are present in the guise of driving lessons. Commenting on the stir the play had produced in an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1998, the author claimed that her play was not merely about the traumatic motifs of the *Lolita* syndrome. Vogel says it is about how remembering and voicing of different moments of crisis can pave the way to a solution for earlier traumas. The playwright stresses the importance of "healing, forgiving and moving on" (qtd. in Farnsworth, 1998), which are therapeutic strategies similar to the effect of women's oral histories. The play is bittersweet in tone and style; the issue of sexuality is openly

treated with an informal air of naivety recalling the innocent spirit of an Eden-like, borderless mythic America neighboring on the comic terrains of rated contemporary sit-coms.

LIL'BIT. In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia. Uncle Peck for example. My mama's adage was "the titless wonder" (Vogel 12). [. . .] "Even with my family background, I was sixteen or so before I realized that pedophilia did not mean people who loved to bicycle. (13)

Delicate facets of identity construction are brought in the forefront of attention from the perspective of Li'l Bit, who appears in the play both as a mature woman and as a "little" girl. As a mature person she is aware of the cause of her present identity problems and acknowledges herself as a woman in full control of not only the car she drives but also of her life and her body. When the 35 year-old Li'l Bit recalls the first driving lesson, which occurred when she was ten, she acknowledges its traumatic content: "That day was the last day I lived in my body" (59), emphasizing that afterwards she "retreated above the neck," and lived inside the "fire" in her head ever since (58). The car becomes the metaphor of her body, what she sees in the rearview mirror at the end of the play correlates to time as past continuous; she keeps herself among safe boundaries by telling her past, by fastening the seat belt and adjusting not only the seat she occupies but also herself to a changed position of power.

In the end, the adult Li'l Bit re-members the objects and movements of her own car that relate her to the traumatic, past stories behind each item. The radio, the tank, the tires, the doors, the key, the seatbelt, the dashboard, the side, and especially the rearview mirror, which symbolizes her past, are all checkpoints, borders, milestones of her identity construction. She is able to build and rebuild her identity only in relation with these objects. Li'l Bit's sexuality is symbolically located between gear shifts and speed limits; she extracts her behavioral patterns from driving rules and makes up new signifying practices in a drama of her own, where Uncle Peck becomes a passive observer and finally, a victim of his own desires. The material inventory of the car is also a psychic projection and a landmark of her development; she constructs her identity in the symbolic thresholds present among these objects, the music she hears while driving and the stories they evoke.

LI'L BIT. [. . .] The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving. On a day like today. It's five A.M. The radio says it's going to be clear and crisp. I've got five hundred miles of highway ahead of me—and some back roads too. I filled the tank last night, and had the oil checked. Checked the tyres, too. You've got to treat her... with respect. First thing I do is: Check under the car. To see if any two year olds or household cats have crawled beneath, and strategically placed their skulls behind my back tires. (*Li'l Bit crouches*). Nope. Then I get in the care. (*Li'l Bit does so*).

I lock the doors. And turn the key. Then I adjust the most important control on the dashboard—the radio— [ . . . ] Ahh. (*Beat.*) I adjust my seat. Fasten my seatbelt. Then I check the right side mirror—check the left side. (*She does.*) (58-59)

Vogel, as Bigsby remarks, is keen to remind her audience of the “arbitrariness of the lines drawn by society,” because “[W]hat is legitimate at eighteen is statutory rape at the age of seventeen” (*Contemporary* 322). The issue of the boundaries and lines is clearly (im)posed by Li'l Bit. Once she tells Uncle Peck: “[. . .] You've got to let me—draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it” (47). He transgresses the voiced but invisible lines of restrictions despite Li'l Bit warning, who realizes the dangers of crossing symbolic lines: “You have—you have gone way over the line” (54).

Li'l Bit's identity in the play suffers several changes perceived as shifts from the innocence symbolized by the stages of driving lessons (first to second gear, reverse gear, neutral gear) until her body functions in the manner of an automatic gear at maturity. Demarcations between stages of development are subtle and sometimes difficult to discern; her identity is built at the threshold of childhood and maturity, in the realm between questions and answers. Vogel makes her audience, readers or spectators, become subject to a “constant reassessment of their attitude towards the characters” (Bigsby, *Modern* 417) and by doing so “to disturb earlier assumptions and make the observer aware of his or her shifting moral perspective” (417). The author performs here a morally challenging journey; she explores lives that are “tangential to the thrust of her society” (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 329) and, with the help of the possibilities the dramatic genre has, she exposes to the large public problematic and complex liminal zones of identity construction by making visible the volatile nature of the lines drawn by the society and the effects these metaphorical frontiers involve.

Vogel's surrealist approach in *How I Learned to Drive* maps the crucial points in the development of Li'l Bit identity. She is entangled in the web of an incestuous relationship, which—harmful as it is—secures her a safe drive out of it. Vogel's protagonist finds in this double-edged situation a unique voice for herself, and builds an identity out of taboos and silenced subjects. She is finally in charge of her own car, her own body on an open road of possibilities.

In *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a definition of tragedy*) the spotlight is shed on “affective ‘primordial’ and familial bonds” (Somerville 660) that take place among the characters inhabiting this drama of Albee. The title and the theme of the play—recalling Aristotle's *Poetics*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—sharply divided critics and reviewers alike by focusing on the question of the nature of love, veiled under the mask of identity, which is constructed on the tropes of the dysfunctional family, gender issues and bestiality. Albee's aim with this drama was to “test the tolerance of the audience” (McNulty 2002). The critics' response to the test was controversial: while Elysa Gard-

ner denounced the play as “nauseating” (qtd. in Gainor 203), Clive Barnes saw it as “one of the wittiest and funniest plays Albee has ever written” (qtd. in Gainor 204). In most of the playwright’s dramas the pivotal point of dramatic departure consists of the parent(s)-child relationships and the sharp conflicts these entail (Bollobás 753).

However, in Albee’s most recent play the tension shifts from the structural frames of the traditional family and humans liaisons to that of the fauna world and bestial relations. This unusual habitat holds a more primordial conflict, one that tests the general boundary of love but also the frames of human relationships, family, friendship, and overall, tolerance. *The Goat* is spiced up with the love-story between Martin, the protagonist of the play and a goat named Sylvia. Its theme contains a special dramatic setup, a queer configuration of characters that neither of the previous animal stories authored by Albee had before: neither the love-hate relationship between Jerry and the landlady’s unfriendly black dog in the *The Zoo Story* (1959), nor the sad story of euthanasia of Tobias and his formerly beloved cat in *A Delicate Balance* (1966), and it is definitely not the case of Charlie and Nancy in *Seascape* (1975).

With *The Goat*, Albee confronts categories of the dominant culture and makes the readers—in a way akin to Vogel’s negative empathy method—rethink these norms in the context of a drama where it is extremely difficult to make “clear-cut distinctions among the manifold, polymorphously perverse expressions of sexual desire” (Gainor 213). In addition, Steven Bottoms observes that in this story of marital infidelity, Albee destabilizes not only epistemology (the ways and modes of knowledge), but “the very ontology of the stage world we are watching (where *are* we; what world *is* this?)” (14). The drama exposes an unusual love-affair, with which boundaries have, indeed, been pushed far enough for the readers and spectators. Gainor suggests that *The Goat* be interpreted as a work of social criticism stretching from the classical era through the modernist theatre tradition to that of the contemporary problem plays (211-12).

The plot of this problem play is simple: Martin and Stevie, a couple of “tragic” characters are seemingly happy with their successful lives and mundane habits of upper class Americans. They have been together for twenty-two years and have a seventeen-year-old “funny son” (Albee 77) son, Billy, who is gay “as the nineties” (21). Homosexuality is neither a taboo here nor the source of any domestic conflict. Stevie and Martin accept their son as he is. Martin even declares his parental approval: “[Y]ou’re gay, and that’s fine” (48).

Similar to the lives of Albee’s other married characters like Mummy and Daddy in *The American Dream* (1961), Martha and George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Agnes and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* (1966), She and He in *Counting the Ways* (1976), Gillian and Jack in *Marriage Play* (1987), Girl and Boy in *The Play About the Baby* (1998) the marriage of Stevie and Martin is at a crucial point, in serious crisis. The fifty-year-old, successful architect, Martin feels a “misfit” (75), who is alienated from the urban and artificial world that surrounds him. He sees his life as a displaced configuration of basic elements and tries to find refuge in looking for another house outside the city. As he walks in the countryside to in search of a weekend



farmhouse for his family, Martin unexpectedly meets a goat with whom he falls in love. Paradoxically, the goat he names Sylvia is the being that embodies his pastoral ideal. Their short but intensive relationship makes him reevaluate his seemingly lost, mis-represented identity, his natural self that almost vanished among the values of urban, post-industrial society.

Martin describes this detour from the grey, mundane days as a journey into an exotic realm, a territory that is hard to imagine, a terrain with no boundaries whatsoever, a dip into the unknown, into something that cannot be related to anything known by him before. In a tensed dialogue with Stevie, Martin confesses the context of his adulterous mishap:

MARTIN. And I was driving out of the town, back to the highway, and I stopped at the top of a hill [. . .] And I stopped, and the view was... wonderful. Not spectacular, but wonderful—fall, the leaves turning [. . .] I stopped and got us things—vegetables and things. [. . .] And it was then that I saw her. [. . .] And I closed the trunk of the car, with all that I'd gotten—(pause)... it was then that I saw her. And she was looking at me... with those eyes. [. . .] And what I felt was... it was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It was so... amazing. There she was. [. . .] She was looking at me with those eyes of hers and... I melted, I think. I think that's what I did: I melted. [. . .] I'd never seen such an expression. It was pure... and trusting and... and innocent; so... so guileless. [. . .] I... I went to where she was—to the fence where she was, and I knelt there, eye level...

STEVIE. (*Quiet loathing*) Goat level.

MARTIN. [. . .] It was as if an alien came out for whatever it was, and it... took me with it, and it was... and ecstasy and a purity, and a... love of a... (*dogmatic*) un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing *whatever*, to nothing that can be *related* to! Don't you see? Don't you see the... don't you see the "thing" that happened to me? What nobody understands? Why I can't feel what I'm supposed to!? Because it relates to nothing? It can't have happened! It did, but it can't have! (*Stevie shakes her head*) [. . .] (79-81)

The idyllic love is unmasked by Ross, who tests the limits of friendship with Martin by writing the truth to Stevie. The eco-affair pushes other boundaries, too: it tries the father-son relationship and pushes it to the edges of a pseudo-Oedipal crisis. Finally Stevie puts an end to her husband's passionate affair. She finds and kills the goat in an act of ritual murder. The goat becomes thus the scapegoat for past sins and a memento for future. With this she "places" the alienated Martin back where she thinks he belongs: not only to the traditional cosmic order symbolized by the Great Chain of Being (Gainor 214) but back to the traditional, social and domestic realm. However, rules seemingly do not and will not apply to this dysfunctional family. Martin is not sure of the limits when he claims: "I don't know that there are any rules for where

we are" (97). Billy concludes that his family is "beyond all the rules" (98). His final question "Dad? Mom?" (110), the last line of the drama, suggests what Gainor sees as the need for the negotiation of roles (214), and the impetus for tolerance and even more dialogue(s).

Martin rebuilds himself, in a moment of crisis: from a famous architect and a model husband he becomes an infamous family man who has known the calling of the wild. He knows that his identity quest needs sacrifice and he succumbs to the tragic situation hoping that his deed will find understanding. Sylvia is, in this context, indeed a scapegoat that "saves" old Martin, who becomes a character that knows its limitations and questions identity not where identity stops being visible but where it starts acting itself out. In *The Goat* the protagonist's identity is constructed as emerging from the nuclear family model. This model is destroyed by the protagonist's inability of coping with rigid paradigms under increasing stress factors generated by an urban, metropolitan culture in tandem with social expectations. Similar to Eugene O'Neil's Yank in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Albee's alienated protagonist finds a kindred being that is an animal. While Yank, the hairy ape, dies in the final embrace of the freed gorilla and understands his identity after meeting the encaged wild beast, Martin is doomed to live in the permanent embrace of the consequences of his love affair with Sylvia, the goat, leaving the question of the object of love open.

Vogel's and Albee's works exhibit radical experiences and portray unusual facets of identity. Under the aegis of American identities always under construction they subscribed to a mode of transgressive writing employing the strategy of the open end. This open end generates a threshold territory of creative energies, a no man's land of unusual identity constructions where figural or real borders are subject to arbitrariness. In the third millennium when the making of America is still in vogue, its identities, accordingly, are caught in a process of permanent production. Bigsby claims that both the dilemma and the strength of the American theater lies in these cultural acts of presenting multiple identities at play in a plural country (*Modern* 361).

Vogel and Albee interrogate and put under the heavy public scrutiny of theatrical performances facets of complex and sometimes extremely difficult questions concerning identities and identity crises in contemporary American culture and society without imposing any borders of value judgments or creating moralizing frames on them. The American theatre today undergoes significant changes in the presentation and discussion of dynamic identity constructions; there is an increasing number of playwrights from America's political, racial and gender margins that are open and daring with the radical subjects they employ. Commenting on what he saw as the redefinition of the centre in American drama Bigsby notes:

The blandness, the anonymity, the conformity which was America's gift as well as its burden was now to be met with a determination to reach back beyond homogenizing myths to a self and a group identity which had their origins in other times and other places. The result was a transformed society

[. . .] The making of America has never ended. That is its dilemma and its strength [. . .] The theatre, likewise, is never complete. It, too, requires the collaborative efforts of those who bring to the same stage experiences which differ radically. (*Modern* 361)

Vogel does not write, nor intends to create thesis plays; for her theatre is an enunciatory place of public discourse, a threshold zone of collective game-playing where maverick voices must be made heard (Sherman). Theatre for Vogel is about confronting serious issues, especially if those go astray from the main borders of social discourses. For her "[T]hat's theatre [. . .] in terms of the consequences of doing work that's upsetting, that's disturbing" (Sherman). Albee also shaped—and still does—a theatre that goes further and which he exemplified as one that "shakes people up, and make them change in some way. [. . .] It's called playwriting" (qtd. in Bottoms 249). Vogel's and Albee's plays best expose those special cultural signs that echo the arbitrariness of borders by depicting problematic identity positions at the thresholds. Last but not least, if seen in a larger frame, these works of dramatic literature are workable paradigms of collective cultural experience that accurately exhibit the current aims and critical imperatives of a more open, international New American Studies.

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