

Book Review

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Marc Maufort and Caroline De Wagter (eds.), *Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, pp312, ISBN: 9789052014548 (pb), £35.00.

In this age of mediatised attitude to socio-cultural issues, it is poignant to reinforce the significance and relevance of authenticity of cultural memory in the creation of artistic life as well as in reality. It is in fact doubly important to explore and evaluate how the impact of cultural memory is felt in drama. Maufort's and Wagter's edited collection is remarkable at this juncture of academic interrogations because it highlights the value of embedded memory in the construction of identities.

Signatures of the Past: Cultural Memory in Contemporary Anglophone North American Drama is a collection of twenty essays dealing with different aspects of how national identities are constructed upon notions of genetic and generic affinity between cultures. In this collection, the definition of 'north America' is mapped to memories that exist in Canada, the United States of America, and the Caribbean Islands, and focuses on the predominantly English speaking areas. The theses propounded are nevertheless universal in their conception and analyses.

While the essays demonstrate the problems of cultural memory and identity in the dramatic presentations and representations in the countries, the contributors redefine issues of diasporic identities, exilic predicaments, and multi-ethnic subject positions as they existed at the beginning of this century. The book, working on the definition of cultural memory as an umbrella phrasing incorporating a latent doubt of identity that hybridized Western societies suffer from in this age of globalisation, explores colonial, postcolonial, and indeed post-memory concerns on a non-existentialist interpretation of signature. Based on the French decon-

structionist Jacques Derrida's interpretation of the term 'signature', the essays in this anthology evoke both 'a presence and an absence' (p.12) examined from the different perspectives of culture, modernist and postcolonial contexts.

The first essay, 'Hopeful Monsters and Doomed Freaks' explores the development of featuring the unusual in Canadian and American drama, and suggests that cultural differences notwithstanding, theatrical practitioners in (rather than from) the two countries display closer cultural outlook. The thesis, which is echoed in several other essays in the anthology, is that irrespective of the divergent circumstances of the dramatists, the imaginative creations are adapted from similar cultural engrams. These engrams are cultural memories that persist in symbolic cultural materials, or that exist in emblematic constituents of intercultural interactions, and whose existences are traceable to the past and are stimuli to explain the present (and the future).

Michelle Elam's contribution, in the same vein, examines the role of the past as an exposition of the mind's wish to believe in the truths of history rather than in its arbitrary degrees of association. She portrays the condition of 'mixed race' as an incidental symbolism arising as a consequence of imperialism and colonial contact, but a symbol that reveals an ambiguous interpretative possibility, that is, a limitless depictions of figurative cultural permutations. Therefore, cultural memory is a more complex presence that recreates a contemporary present from a created and mythologised past, and points at an imaginative future. Creation of individual identities, local identities, national identities and even regional and multicultural identities are consequent upon the understanding of spatial notions and theatrical conventions in a constantly revised and reconfigured process of cultural examination and assimilation.

The main contribution of this anthology is in the essays' use of cultural engrams. The signatures, according to the essays, remind us that cultural memory is not a concept of ethnicity or ethnic difference, but an idea that feeds the understanding of interrelationship between and among ideas of cultures in a group of identities. For the cultures and the dramatists examined in this collection, the signatures are used to create aesthetic modes that merge the past with the present as an indication of the future.