The presence of absence in the American West

A presença da ausência no Oeste americano

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Abstract

The American West has long been depicted by the media as a place for strong, heterosexual cowboys, but theatre presents a different view of it. Based on a qualitative-comparative approach (Denzin; Lincoln, 2006), this paper demonstrates how theatre is a space for the re-creation of different perspectives on homophobic violence in *The Laramie Project* (Kaufman, 2000) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Robinson, 2023). To this end, the concept of a palimpsest (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019) is applied to theatre to understand how past events impact the present. In terms of relevance, it is understood that the theatre unveils the challenges faced by the queer community in the American West. As a result, both plays re-use homophobic violence (a real-life event and a fictional one) to construct the present American West. While queer locals become lonely and afraid of becoming victims, conservative locals reinforce their prejudice based on religious and moral beliefs.

Keywords: *Brokeback Mountain*; *The Laramie Project*; Theatrical palimpsest.

Resumo

O oeste americano tem sido retratado por muito tempo pela mídia como um lugar para cowboys fortes e heterossexuais, mas o teatro apresenta uma visão diferente. Com base em uma abordagem qualitativa-comparativa (Denzin; Lincoln, 2006), este artigo demonstra como o teatro é um espaço de recriação de diferentes perspectivas sobre violência homofóbica em *The Laramie Project* (Kaufman, 2000) e *Brokeback Mountain* (Robinson, 2023). Para tal, o conceito de palimpsesto (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019) é aplicado ao teatro para entender como eventos passados impactam o presente. Em termos de relevância, entende-se que o teatro revela os desafios enfrentados pela comunidade queer no oeste americano. Como resultado, ambas as peças reutilizam violência homofóbica (um evento real e um ficcional) para construir o oeste americano atual. Enquanto moradores queer locais se sentem solitários e com medo de se tornarem vítimas, moradores conservadores reforçam seu preconceito com base em crenças religiosas e morais.

Palavras-chave: *Brokeback Mountain*; *The Laramie Project*; Palimpsesto teatral.

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1 Introduction

Throughout art and literature, the imagery of the American West "was created for and consumed by audiences outside the region, audiences hungry for glimpses into this distant, unknown land" (Magagna, 2016, p. 203). Heterosexual cowboys embodying rugged masculinity, such as John Wayne, and traditional gender roles in the American West have been widely disseminated through Hollywood films and television. In such representations, LGBTQIAPN+ identities have often been positioned in tension with ideals of traditional masculinity and heterosexuality, and theatre can play a social role in making violence against marginalized communities visible.

To this end, this paper examines two contemporary plays set in the American West. On the one hand, *The Laramie Project* (2000), by Moisés Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project, is a documentary play which focuses on a real-life case: the ruthless murder of Matthew Shepard (1976-1998). Four weeks after the crime, Kaufman and nine members of Tectonic Theater Project "traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, to collect interviews that might become material for a play" (Kaufman, 2012, p. 12). This play "reconstructs and rewrites the story of brutally murdered Matthew Shepard to question this tragedy and disclose the reasons for his murder, but Shepard himself is not represented as a character on stage" (Gül, 2018, p. 100).

On the other hand, *Brokeback Mountain* (2023), by Ashley Robinson, is a memory play adapted from the homonymous short story by Annie Proulx (1997). In this play, the events take place in Wyoming approximately thirty years after the events of Proulx's original story. Older Ennis Del Mar, now living alone in a trailer, remembers his earlier secret life with his deceased soulmate, Jack Twist. This is "a story of love and the closet, and the relentless tension between desire and oppression" (Román, 2024, p. 402), and the play looks back on past events: "looked back with sadness, even despair. No one won in this story" (Román, 2024, p. 402). Unlike *The Laramie Project*, this play raises the ambiguous possibility of Jack Twist being murdered because of homophobic violence. For the purposes of this study, I consider this scenario when comparing the two plays.

Their formal structures differ significantly. *The Laramie Project* is more epic, narratively speaking, by relying on documentary and testimonial strategies divided into moments (instead of scenes) within three acts. Each moment constitutes "a unit of

theatrical time, which is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning" (Kaufman, 2012, p. 19). In contrast, *Brokeback Mountain* employs more conventional dramatic features, being divided into thirty-one scenes within a single act with a prologue and an epilogue. It is a memory play, wherein there is a "looking back at an intense and vivid period in a life lived" (Robinson, 2023, p. 6).

Both plays explore narratives of queerness, violence, and loss in Wyoming. This proximity raises the following question: how does contemporary theatre re-create the American West through distinct real-life and literary backgrounds and shape the representation of homophobic violence?

The main objective of this study is to demonstrate how theatre is a space for the re-creation of different perspectives on homophobic violence. To achieve this objective, this study employs a qualitative-comparative approach (Denzin; Lincoln, 2006) by dividing this paper into three parts, namely: (i) describing the circumstances surrounding Matthew Shepard's murder and Jack Twist's death; (ii) comparing representations of conservative and queer perspectives on these two cases; and (iii) examining the theatre as a palimpsestic space where documentary and fictional layers of memory intersect.

As a theoretical background, this paper draws on the concept of theatrical palimpsest by Ruth Hellier-Tinoco (2019), wherein theatre is construed as a place for re-creating and re-framing the past. In theatre studies, palimpsests are "inherently trans-temporal, containing traces and remains of previous existences even as they are experienced in a present moment" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 5). In dialogue with Hellier-Tinoco (2019), the studies of Daniela Mizrachi (2024), Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn (2013), and Margherita Laera (2014) are also used herein, among others.

In terms of their relevance to literary and theatre studies, these plays demonstrate the importance of the theatre in unveiling the challenges faced by the queer community in the American West. Both plays show how theatre can function as a palimpsestic space in which different temporalities, perspectives, and representations of violence intersect. In this sense, the theatre can make otherwise silenced experiences visible and invite audiences to reconsider the social and cultural conditions surrounding violence against queer people. Their different formal structures may also shape how audiences engage with and remember the represented events.

2 Matthew Shepard and Jack Twist: a different American West

In "Finding Matthew Shepard," a moment in Act One of Kaufman's play, Officer Reggie Fluty describes how she found Matthew on a road:

> REGGIE FLUTY. When I got there, the first — at first the only thing I could see was partially somebody's feet and I got out of my vehicle and raced over — I seen what appeared to be a young man, thirteen, fourteen years old, because he was so tiny, laying on his back and he was tied to the bottom end of a pole. I did the best I could. The gentleman that was laying on the ground, Matthew Shepard, he was covered in dry blood all over his head. There was dry blood underneath him and he was barely breathing .... he was doing the best he could. I was going to breath for him and I couldn't get his mouth open — his mouth wouldn't open for me. He was covered in, like I said, partially dry blood and blood all over his head — the only place that he did not have any blood on him, on his face, was what appeared to be where he had been crying down his face. His head was distorted. You know, it did not look normal — he looked as if he had a real harsh head wound.
> […]
> REGGIE FLUTY. He was tied to the fence — his hands were thumbs out in what we call a cuffing position — the way we handcuff people. He was bound with a real thin white rope. It went around the bottom of the pole, about four inches up off the ground. His shoes were missing. He was tied extremely tight — so I used my boot knife and tried to slip it between the rope and his wrist — I had to be extremely careful not to harm Matthew any further (Kaufman, 2012, p. 44-45).

On the other hand, in scene twenty-eight of Robinson's play, Jack Twist was found dead in a manner similar to Matthew Shepard:

> ENNIS *moves to the phone and dials* JACK's *number in Childress, Texas*.
> ENNIS. Pick up, Jack… c'mon… goddammit, pick up.
> *A woman's voice answers*. LUREEN *appears, isolated, throughout conversation. Her clothing, jewelry and refinement is in stark contrast to anything we've seen onstage. A real 'Texas Rose'*.
> LUREEN (*through phone*). Hello?
> ENNIS. Hel- hello. This is Ennis Del Mar.
> LUREEN (*through phone*) Who? Who is this?
> ENNIS. Ennis. Del Mar? I'm Jack's friend. I got this – postcard returned here and it's – stamped de-? (*He stops cold, mouth won't make the world. Then*:) Let me talk to Jack.
> LUREEN (*through phone*). Jack? Jack passed. This is Lureen, his wife. Late wife. He is gone. There was a accident. He was pumping up a flat on the truck out on a back road when the tire blew up. The bead was damaged somehow and the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face, broke his nose and jaw and knocked him unconscious on his back. By the time someone came along he had drowned in his own blood.
> ENNIS (*to himself, realising, horrified, the words spill out before he can stop*

them). They got him. Tire iron.
LUREEN (*through phone*). What?
ENNIS. Nothin, nothin[2] (Robinson, 2023, p. 57-58).

The description of the accident makes Ennis immediately associate Jack's death with a tire iron. This is caused by Ennis' childhood trauma, when his father made him look at Earl's dead body, a neighbor who lived on a ranch with Rich, his lover. The imagery of the tire iron is important to Ennis' trauma, since it was the tool used to kill Earl. The murderers "took a tire iron to him, spurred him up, drug him around by his dick until it pulled off, just bloody pulp" (Robinson, 2023, p. 47).

The fact that Ennis thinks of the tire iron used to murder Earl suggests that Jack's death was not a mere accident, but a murder. This ambiguous possibility draws a parallel between Jack and Matthew: both are associated with homophobic violence. Matthew was found tied to a fence and covered in dried blood, and he passed away five days later, due to health complications, while Jack Twist was found dead, drowned in his own blood.

This type of violence is often associated with big cities, such as New York, as explained by Dr. Cantway (Kaufman, 2012, p. 44), one of the doctors who was working at the hospital when Matthew arrived. In Kaufman's play, Wyoming is depicted differently from the way Hollywood has traditionally portrayed the American West, since the "play relies still on a perception of an othered West, of an alien territory and culture that needs to be revealed, explained, and interpreted for audiences elsewhere" (Magagna, 2016, p. 202).

By presenting a region that needs to be revealed, explained, and interpreted, as Tony R. Magagna (2016) sets out, *The Laramie Project* "has a moral message, and denounces homophobia and discrimination" (Corsa, 2020, p. 10). Thus, after Matthew's murder:

> The idea that Laramie, and the West in general, was 'a cowboy place' would become an oft-repeated notion in national media reports in the months following the attack, connoting a bigoted, masculinist, and violent place, where anyone who does not fit in faces constant threat (Magagna, 2016, p. 207).

According to Magagna (2016), Robinson's play (adapted from Annie Proulx's short story) can also be construed as a work which reiterates the rural atmosphere of the American West, since "the 'Wyoming Stories' of Annie Proulx, or the popular television

[2] In Robinson's play, the language used in the characters' dialogue reflects the characteristics of the spoken language of cowboys in the American West.

show Longmire, for instance— are frequently couched still in terms of rural grit and isolation" (Magagna, 2016, p. 206). The isolation is not merely connected to the figure of the cowboy living in an isolated place, but also to the otherness and queerness of Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist.

The plays have different backgrounds: *The Laramie Project* is based on a real-life case, while *Brokeback Mountain* is based on Annie Proulx's literary work and, more broadly, on an already established cultural imaginary associated with its film adaptation. These differences may also shape the ways in which audiences engage with the two plays. This does not necessarily mean that one play will remain more strongly in the audience's memory than the other; rather, it suggests that audiences may engage with the two plays through different modes of identification.

During an interview with John Moore, Leigh Fondakowski (a member of Tectonic Theater Project) said that when she was at a production in Washington, D.C., "a boy came out as gay during the talkback. The audience applauded him, and his life changed forever from that moment. This play created a space for that" (Moore, 2020, n.p.). Fondakowski's account suggests that Kaufman's play can create a space in which audience members may feel sufficiently connected to the material to share personal experiences. Its documentary form may contribute to a particular sense of connection with Matthew Shepard and with the testimonies presented in the play.

Regarding Robinson's play, David Román states "I hadn't seen the film in years, and I was not all that invested in it when it first came out, which is to say I did not remember all of the plot points and secondary characters" (Román, 2024, p. 400). That is, the film adaptation can function as a cultural reference through which audiences approach Robinson's play. Rather than encountering the characters and narrative exclusively through dramaturgy, audiences who are familiar with the film adaptation or barely remember it may bring with them memories and cultural associations established by its previous circulation.

These different forms of audience engagement may also be related to the dramaturgical structures of the plays. *The Laramie Project* employs an explicitly documentary and predominantly epic structure, assembling testimonies from multiple members of the Laramie community rather than centering the narrative on a single protagonist. This structure also encourages audiences to adopt a more observational and

reflective position in relation to the events represented.

Brokeback Mountain, in contrast, relies more extensively on dramatic conventions by organizing its narrative around the relationship between Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist. Although Robinson's play makes use of flashbacks, this feature does not necessarily distance the audience from the characters; rather, it allows past events to be reconstructed within the present dramatic action. In this respect, the play can be situated within a broader tradition of American drama in which memory and temporal shifts are integrated into dramatic structure, as in Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* (1949) and Tennessee Williams's *The glass menagerie* (1944).

3 Different perspectives

To further elaborate on the perspectives of Wyoming locals, I will divide my discussion of both plays into two main subsections. The first, entitled "Hatred toward queer community," examines the perspectives of conservative locals on Matthew Shepard's murder and Jack Twist's death. The second subsection, entitled "Queer locals," discusses how queer individuals perceive these events, as represented in the plays. This second subsection is further divided into two parts, each focusing on one of the plays.

3.1 Hatred toward queer community

The Laramie Project "explores the controversial topic of hate crime, [which] was based on real-world occurrences, was closely based on real-world interviews, and was carefully designed to show a plurality of different views on its topics" (Corsa, 2020, p. 10). In Kaufman's play, prejudice is presented in the guise of opinion. In "Matthew," a moment in Act One, the prejudice against gay people is perpetuated by Doc O'Connor even after Matthew Shepard's murder:

> DOC O'CONNOR. […] The fact is … Laramie doesn't have any gay bars ... and for that matter neither does Wyoming .... so he was hiring me to take him down to Fort Collins, Colorado, about an hour away. Matt was a blunt little shit, you know what I'm sayin'? — he always was. But I liked him 'cause he was straightforward, you see what I'm saying? Maybe gay but straightforward, you see what I'm saying? (Kaufman, 2012, p. 31).

The limousine driver explicitly expresses his views, presenting himself as a conservative individual. According to his perspective, being gay is considered acceptable as long as gay people remain discreet and "honest". In this view, society would accept gay people if they kept their sexuality private. This attitude reflects a form of intolerance in which claims to uphold "moral" and "religious" values coexist with hostility toward and calls for vengeance against minorities.

In relation to moral and religious beliefs, in Act Two, "Lifestyle 2" moment, there is a conversation between Amanda Gronich (a member of Tectonic Theater Project) and the Baptist Minister about Matthew Shepard and his murderers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson:

> BAPTIST MINISTER. Now, those two people, the accused, have forfeited their lives. We've been after the two I mentioned for ages, trying to get them to live right, to do right. Now, one boy is on suicide watch and I am working with him — until they put him in the chair and turn on the juice I will work for his salvation. Now I think they deserve the death penalty — I will try to deal with them spiritually.
> AMANDA GRONICH. Right, I understand.
> BAPTIST MINISTER. Now, as for the victim, I know that that lifestyle is legal, but I will tell you one thing, I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence that he had time to reflect on a moment when someone had spoken the word of the Lord to him — and that before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle (Kaufman, 2012, p. 67-68).

The Baptist Minister shares a perspective on Matthew's murder rooted in religious and moral beliefs. The fact that he hoped Matthew had asked for forgiveness – solely because of his homosexuality – reflects a deeply cruel attitude, particularly from someone whose religious position is commonly associated with compassion. Matthew was brutally beaten and left to die on a road, yet the Baptist Minister's primary concern was whether Matthew had repented for being gay. In contrast to the Baptist Minister's response, "Kaufman recognized the crime as an important and polarizing event for the gay and straight communities alike" (Magagna, 2016, p. 212).

When a hate crime occurs, regardless of its motive, the broader population may be affected, polarized and haunted by such violence. When this play shows the intolerant position of conservative ideals in response to a homophobic crime, it seeks "to express their values and beliefs in response to the event, and thus to define a part of their culture at that particular moment in time" (Magagna, 2016, p. 212). It is not possible to state that all Wyoming locals are entirely conservative, but some of them expressed conservative

ideals regarding this crime.

In Act Three, "Snow" moment, Reverend Fred Phelps appears:

> REV. FRED PHELPS. We wouldn't be here if this was just another murder the state was gonna deal with. The state deals with hundreds of murders every single day. But this murder is different, because the fags are bringing us out here trying to make Matthew Shepard into a poster boy for the gay lifestyle. And we're going to answer it. It's just that simple. (*Reverend Fred Phelps continues sotto voce*.)
> […]
> REV. FRED PHELPS. That perfect of attribute of God. Well, *we* love that attribute of God and we're going to preach it. Because God's hatred is pure. It's a determination — it's a determination that he's gonna send some people to hell. That's God's hatred… (*Continues sotto voce*.) We're standing here with God's message. We're standing here with God's message. Is homosexuality — is being a fag okay? What do you mean it's not for you to judge? If God doesn't hate fags, why does he put 'em in hell? ... You see the barrenness and sterility of your silly arguments when set over against some solid gospel truth? Barren and sterile. Like your lifestyle. Your silly arguments (Kaufman, 2012, p. 73, author's emphasis).

Reverend Fred Phelps was widely known for his speeches and anti-gay activism in the United States of America, particularly through his website GodHatesFags.com. Since Phelps criticized the gay community for allegedly turning Matthew into a martyr, some conservative individuals in the American West expressed prejudiced views and propagate hatred toward queer people. Such an attitude contributes to a polarized and potentially dangerous environment for queer individuals living in that region.

According to Andrew J. Corsa (2020, p. 10), Kaufman's play "privileges the perspective of those who disdain discrimination and intolerance". From this perspective, Magagna (2016) argues:

> Kaufman's version of Laramie thus proposes to subvert the tradition of Wild West representations that would set this crime apart from the rest of society, relegating it to some still-untamed frontier. Instead, the West of Laramie, Wyoming, is here presented as contemporary, accessible, and relatable— a kind of Anytown that may be seen as a mirror to the rest of American society, revealing the harsh limits of our own social values (Magagna, 2016, p. 216).

In contrast to Kaufman's representation of Wyoming, *Brokeback Mountain* portrays prejudice against queer people within a rural American West setting. In Robinson's play, intolerance toward homosexuality is depicted in a more subtle and internalized manner than in Kaufman's play, since "the inner turmoil of sexual repression is as debilitating as

the exterior homophobic environments in which the two men live" (Román, 2024, p. 400).

After a postcard is returned, Ennis Del Mar contacts Jack's widow, Lureen, by phone. Now, he is aware Jack has died and of the circumstances surrounding his death. During the call, in scene twenty-eight, Ennis asks about the funeral as follows:

> ENNIS. He buried down there?
> LUREEN (*through phone*). We put a stone up. He use to say he wanted to be cremated, ashes scattered on Brokeback Mountain. I didn't know where that was. So he was cremated, like he wanted, and like I say, half his ashes was interred here, and the rest I sent up to his folks. I thought Brokeback Mountain was around where he grew up. But knowing Jack, it might be some pretend place where the bluebirds sing and there's a whiskey spring.
> ENNIS. We herded sheep on Brokeback one summer.
> LUREEN (*through phone*). Well, he said it was his place. I thought he meant to get drunk. Drink whiskey up there. He drank a lot.
> ENNIS. His folks still up in Lightnin Flat?
> LUREEN (*through phone*). Oh yeah. They'll be there until they die. I never met them. They didn't come down for the funeral. You get in touch with them. I suppose they'd appreciate it if his wishes was carried out (Robinson, 2023, p. 58-59).

It can be inferred that Lureen still harbors some resentment toward Jack, even after his death. When Lureen tells Ennis that Brokeback "[…] was his place. I thought he meant to get drunk. Drink whiskey up there. He drank a lot" (Robinson, 2023, p. 59), the widow subtly implies that she may have been aware of the real nature of Jack and Ennis' relationship. That mountain was clearly a special place for Jack, and Lureen seems to know that its meaning was connected to his romantic relationship with Ennis.

Jackson Mattocks (2024) explains that "[r]epresentations of the cowboy typically present the cowboy figure as a lone gunslinger who is particularly adept in wilderness survival and prefers inwardness and reticence above sociality" (Mattocks, 2024, p. 196). Lureen then invokes stereotypical cowboy imagery when describing Jack, stating that her deceased husband used to prefer the mountain. This preference may have been strategically used by Jack "to hide behind the identity of the cowboy in order to mask his dual identity as a homosexual" (Mattocks, 2024, p. 198), much as Ennis did.

In the following scene (namely, twenty-nine), Ennis visits Jack's parents at their ranch. Then, the following conversation takes place:

> ENNIS. Thank you, ma'am, I'll take a cup a coffee but I can't eat no cake just now.
> JACK'S FATHER *stays silent, hands folded, staring at* ENNIS *with an angry, knowing expression*.

> I feel awful bad about Jack. Can't begin to say how bad I feel. I known him a long time. I come by to tell you that if you want me to take his ashes up there on Brokeback, like his wife says he wanted, I'd be proud to.
> *Silence*. ENNIS *clears his throat*.
> JACK'S FATHER. Brokeback Mountain? Thought he was too goddamn special to be buried in the family plot.
> JACK'S MOTHER. He used a come home every year, even after he was married and down in Texas, and help his daddy on the ranch for a week, fix the gates and mow and all.
> JACK'S FATHER. I can't get no help out here. Jack used a say, 'Ennis del Mar,' he used a say, 'I'm goin a bring him up here one a these days and we'll lick this damn ranch into shape'. He had some half-baked idea the two a you was goin a move up here, build a log cabin and help mee run this ranch and bring it up. Then, this spring he's got another one's goin a come up here with him and build a place and help run the ranch, some ranch neighbor a his from down in Texas. He's goin a split up with his wife and come back here. So he says. But like most a Jack's ideas it never come to pass (Robinson, 2023, p. 59-60).

Unlike Lureen, Jack's father openly expresses a deep and painful disappointment in his deceased son. Such disappointment appears to come from two different reasons, namely: (i) Jack failed to fulfill his promise to help on the family ranch; and (ii) Jack suddenly showed up with another man, someone other than Ennis Del Mar. As Jack's father says, "like most a Jack's ideas it never come to pass" (Robinson, 2023, p. 60). In other words, this statement reveals not only his disappointment but also his intolerance, especially regarding Jack's sexuality. Implicitly, if Jack was straight – like the stereotypical imagery of an American cowboy – he would have been a man of his word.

In addition, Jack's father says "He's goin a split up with his wife and come back here" (Robinson, 2023, p. 60) right after telling Ennis his son had brought another man to help on the ranch. It can be inferred that he was aware of Jack's sexuality, which fuels his prejudice against Jack and the angry way he was staring at Ennis Del Mar. According to Jack's father, Jack's failure to return and fulfill his promise is tied to his homosexuality, bringing shame to the traditional, patriarchal values upheld by the older generation of the Twist family.

All the above-mentioned excerpts from both plays show how some Wyoming locals can be intolerant toward queer people. Reverend Fred Phelps and the Baptist Minister, for instance, use religion to justify their hatred toward Matthew Shepard and to condemn how people responded to the crime. On the other hand, Doc O'Connor, Lureen, and Jack's father represent how some Wyoming locals can be prejudiced against queer people based on social and moral beliefs.

3.2 Queer locals

This subsection explores the perspectives of queer locals on Matthew's murder and Jack's death. I examine how they cope with both events by dividing this subsection into two parts. The first, entitled 'Frightened people', focuses on *The Laramie Project* and discusses the fear experienced by queer locals after Matthew's murder, namely, the fear of becoming victims of homophobic violence. The second, entitled 'A silent queer cowboy', focuses on *Brokeback Mountain* and discusses how Ennis Del Mar copes with life after Jack's death.

3.2.1 Frightened people

Having examined the conservative perspectives on Matthew Shepard's murder and Jack Twist's death in both plays, it is now essential to consider the voices of queer locals who lived in Wyoming and were haunted by the fear caused by such violence. In Act Two of *The Laramie Project*, "Live and Let Live" moment, the perspectives of Zackie Salmon, an administrator at the University of Wyoming, and Jonas Slonaker, a gay man, are emphasized:

> ZACKIE SALMON. Yes, as a lesbian I was more concerned for my safety.
> […]
> ZACKIE SALMON. I think we all were. And I think it's because somewhere inside we all know it could happen to us anytime, you know. I mean, I would be afraid to walk down the street and display any sort of physical affection for my partner. You don't do that hate in Laramie.
> JONAS SLONAKER. Well, there's this whole idea: You leave me alone, I leave you alone.
> […]
> JONAS SLONAKER. And it's even in some of the Western literature, you know, live and let live. That is such crap. I tell my friends that — even my gay friends bring it up sometimes. I'm like, 'That is crap, you know?' I mean basically what it boils down to: if I don't tell you I'm a fag, you won't beat the crap out of me. I mean, what's so great about that? That's a great philosophy? (Kaufman, 2012, p. 60).

Both testimonies above express a profound sense of fear – not a general or abstract fear, but the fear of being murdered in the same way Matthew was. This type of fear is paralyzing for queer individuals, as it forces them to live in the shadows, constantly avoiding physical confrontations and hiding their identities in order to stay safe. For

many, not disclosing their sexuality becomes a survival strategy.

Zackie, for instance, states that she is deeply concerned about her safety and that of her partner, knowing that something bad could happen to them at any moment. Jonas Slonaker suggests that as long as no one knows he is gay, he will be safe. According to Magagna (2016, p. 215), Jonas "may bristle at the don't-ask, don't-tell mentality inherent in the standard live- and- let- live ethos".

In other words, living in the shadows may offer some degree of safety, but it is ultimately an unreasonable and unfair expectation placed upon queer people in the aftermath Matthew's murder. The question Jonas himself asks is: what is the point of living in the shadows? In addition, such isolation becomes a symbol associated with Matthew.

Furthermore, in Act Three, "Epilogue" moment, Jonas Slonaker reappears, reflecting on the theme of fear and survival through a more rational and critical perspective:

> JONAS SLONAKER. Change is not an easy thing, and I don't think people were up to it here. They got what they wanted. Those two boys got what they deserve, and we look good now. Justice has been served. The OK corral. We shot down the villains. We sent the prostitutes on the train. The towns cleaned up and we don't need to talk about it anymore. You know, it's been a year since Matthew Shepard died, and they haven't passed shit in Wyoming ... at a state level, any town, nobody anywhere, has passed any kind of laws, anti-discrimination laws or hate crime legislation, nobody has passed anything anywhere. What's come out of it? What's come out of this that's concrete or lasting? (Kaufman, 2012, p. 87).

Jonas reflects on what has concretely changed in terms of protecting the queer community since Matthew Shepard's murder. Basically, nothing has changed. The murderers, Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, were sentenced after a trial, as would be the case with any other crime committed in America. Justice, as a legal concept, was served, but what impact did it have on queer individuals who continued to feel isolated and unsafe in Wyoming? What did it change for the queer community in terms of legislation to protect them? What lessons did society truly learn from Matthew's murder?

Even one year later, the sense of abandonment is still experienced by Jonas and other queer individuals living in Wyoming. As Corsa (2020) argues, Kaufman privileged the testimonies of conservative individuals as to report the prejudice in the American West. Further, queer voices are not prominently represented when compared to the

number of conservative perspectives included in *The Laramie Project*.

3.2.2 A silent queer cowboy

In Robinson's *Brokeback Mountain*, the only queer character, aside from Jack Twist, is Ennis Del Mar. After Jack's death, Ennis visits his parents' ranch, as shown in scene twenty-nine. There, he takes two shirts — his own and Jack's — as tokens of memory and affection. In the Epilogue, the play concludes with the following action:

> ENNIS *hammers a nail in the wood-paneled wall, and on it he reverently hangs up the pair of shirts, and beside them tacks a postcard with a picture of Brokeback Mountain.*
> *He steps back and looks at the ensemble through a few stinging tears*.
> ENNIS. Jack, I swear –
> ENNIS *goes to the cabinet, grabs a bottle of Wild Turkey and sits in the chair where we found* OLDER ENNIS *at the start of the play*.
> OLDER ENNIS *breaks down into sobs, looks up at the shirts*. JACK *enters, and speaks to* OLDER ENNIS…
> JACK. If you can't fix it, you've got to stand it.
> JACK *appears again in* OLDER ENNIS's *memory, younger* ENNIS *doesn't see him*.
> JACK *stands by the campfire's glow on Brokeback Mountain. The sky is star-filled, infinite*.
> OLDER ENNIS *comes up behind* JACK *and pulls him close, mirroring* JACK *and* ENNIS *in the earlier scene. Their silent embrace satisfying some shared and sexless hunger. They stand that way for a long time in front of the fire as it settles into coals, the shadow of their bodies a single column against the rock*. OLDER ENNIS's *breath comes slow and quiet, he hums, rocks a little in the sparklight*. JACK *leans against* OLDER ENNIS's *steady heartbeat, and standing, he falls into a drowsy trance, nearly asleep*.
> OLDER ENNIS. 'Come on, you're sleepin on your feet like a horse.' My mama used to say that to me when I's a little boy.
> OLDER ENNIS *gives* JACK *a shake, a push*. JACK *rouses a bit*.
> Time to hit the hay, cowboy. I got a go.
> ENNIS *pulls hard from the Wild Turkey*. OLDER ENNIS *holds* JACK *close*.
> *End of play* (Robinson, 2023, p. 62-63).

In this highly descriptive and emotionally charged scene, there are a few words and a powerful silence. Older Ennis, now living in 2013, experiences a final encounter with his beloved cowboy, Jack Twist. As a gay man living in the American West and shaped by a traumatic past, Ennis was never able to openly demonstrate any affection for any man other than Jack. His only possible path was to live a solitary life, distanced from the possibility of truly knowing someone else. As Mattocks (2024) discusses:

> Ennis Del Mar is someone who appears to hide behind the identity of the cowboy in order to mask his dual identity as a homosexual. Ennis's closetedness is vitally necessary being that he lives in 1960s Wyoming, a setting which is particularly hostile to queer identities (Mattocks, 2024, p. 198).

The loneliness experienced after Jack's death becomes an intrinsic part of Ennis' identity as a queer cowboy. If Ennis were to fall in love with another man in Wyoming, he would be rejected (or murdered) by society. Basically, "Ennis is characterized by most all things that make a cowboy a cowboy: he works with the land; has a short temper; is a man of few words; and to top it off wears a cowboy hat" (Mattocks, 2024, p. 206). In view of these characteristics, being a gay man goes against all the stereotypical imagery of a cowboy. Social rejection would be almost inevitable, if he were to openly express affection for another man.

In the Epilogue, the ghost of Jack Twist appears to Older Ennis. This may be a result of Ennis' profound loneliness, considering how much he misses his soulmate. In literature, ghostly appearances often symbolize unresolved emotions, the pain of separation, and the *continuum* of love after life. As an example, Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), by Emily Brontë, is haunted by the ghost of Catherine. It is a representation of "pain of separation" (Levy, 1996, p. 173), since "[t]hrough his obsession with her ghost, Heathcliff makes his loneliness in adulthood simulate the only intimacy he knew in childhood: sharing with Catherine the state of banishment or expulsion from company" (Levy, 1996, p. 171).

Like Heathcliff, Ennis Del Mar is familiar with loneliness. In addition, this feeling is deeply related to Matthew (Kaufman, 2012, p. 40), when Phil Labrie, his friend, states that being a lonely guy was part of Matthew's character. The loneliness shared by Ennis Del Mar and Matthew Shepard makes both characters vulnerable to some sort of violence, in particular, homophobic violence.

The Epilogue glassily illustrates the depth of Ennis Del Mar's loneliness after Jack's death. The cowboy intensely misses Jack. Even thirty years later, he is unable to move on. Jack Twist haunts his mind and heart, preventing Ennis from seeing life from any other perspective and making him a lonely man. Mattocks (2024) characterizes this feeling as ethical loneliness, since it is "the experience of being abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard" (Stauffer, 2015, p. 9).

Mattocks also argues that "[e]thical loneliness is all but an inescapable fact of life for Ennis, who can never openly express his sexuality for fear that he, […] like previous homosexuals in the community, may be murdered because of it" (Mattocks, 2024, p. 207). This same fear experienced by Ennis Del Mar is echoed in *The Laramie Project* through the testimonies of Zackie Salmon and Jonas Slonaker. In addition, Ennis Del Mar:

> […] is more than just a trait of his Western masculinity and lowly social status; it is more importantly the silence of the closet, the quelling of desire and the feeling that homosexuality is not something that can be properly expressed either to himself or even to those closest to him (Needham, 2010, p. 54).

For the queer cowboy, loneliness is not a choice but an inevitable condition. As a homosexual man living in a deeply conservative society, he is unable to express his identity openly, and the only person who truly loved and knew about the "real Ennis" is dead. In conservative communities where queer individuals have no one with whom to share their lives, loneliness becomes their only possible future.

4 A theatrical palimpsest

Originally, the term "palimpsest" refers to "a historical manuscript in which the original text (termed under-text) was erased and overwritten with another script in order to recycle the parchment" (Starynska; Messinger; Kong, 2021, p. 181). Such manuscripts "were hand-written on animal skin-based parchment, which is a time-consuming and costly process" (Starynska; Messinger; Kong, 2021, p. 181). Due to the scarcity of materials and the lack of advanced technology as we know it today, people used this technique as a way of recording important information.

When applied to literature, the concept of the palimpsest can also be understood in another way, that is, "commonly used by writers or poets was to take a piece of parchment or paper and write in a portrait layout. After filling the page, they would turn the page to landscape layout orientation and write in between the lines made by the first text" (Mizrachi, 2024, p. 8). Through this literary technique, the palimpsest manuscript became "a visual tool in which to understand the presence of absence" (Mizrachi, 2024, p. 8).

Both in archaeology and literature, palimpsests are manuscripts in which previous information was erased to record something new. However, the past information is still

present in the "new" manuscript, like a trace of what came before. Removing the past is an arduous task, as past events can rarely be fully erased or forgotten. This is referred to herein as "the presence of absence", and to better illustrate this concept, the famous painting of the Brontë Sisters is presented below:

The Brontë Sisters (Anne Brontë; Emily Brontë; Charlotte Brontë).
Oil on canvas (c. 1834) by Patrick Branwell Brontë.



Source: National Portrait Gallery (NPG 1725).

In the painting above, there is something (or someone) erased between Emily and Charlotte. This figure is Patrick Branwell Brontë, the sisters' brother. In the original painting, there was only Branwell therein; however, he erased his own image to paint his sisters. As described by the National Portrait Gallery, "in the centre of the group a male figure, previously concealed by a painted pillar, can now be discerned; it is almost certainly a self-portrait of the artist, their brother Branwell Brontë, later painted out" (2025). In the painting, Patrick Brontë represents a blurred presence that can be perceived through absence.

The concept of the palimpsest can also be applied to theatre. Ruth Hellier-Tinoco (2019) defines a palimpsest as "inherently trans-temporal, containing traces and remains of previous existences even as they are experienced in a present moment" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 5). In other words, a theatrical palimpsest involves "strategies of re-using and re-forming, where traces endure, sometimes scarcely palpable, sometimes ghostly, yet always remaining" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 5). That is, this concept draws on previous (or past) events and information to create something new by re-interpretating, re-forming and re-using what came before to construct a new present.

4.1 *The Laramie Project*: re-interpretation

In the author's note, Kaufman states: "[w]e transcribed and edited the interviews, then conducted several workshops in which the members of the company presented material and acted as dramaturgs in the creation of the play" (Kaufman, 2012, p. 10). In other words, this was not a mere 'copy-and-paste' process, but rather a creative process through which *The Laramie Project* was constructed. This process involved the presence of the entire team in determining what should be reproduced and what should be modified.

Julia Rössler (2021) points out:

> As it moves from the anthropological to the political, from the individual to the collective, from the private to the public, the play–at least on one level–explores its own concept of the 'real' by its theatricalization of the public sphere (Rössler, 2021, p. 19).

Rössler (2021) elucidates that Kaufman's play draws on real-life events to "theatricalize" reality. In doing so, Kaufman and his team introduce an interpretative layer to the interviews they conducted, as the editing and selection of the material were essential to transforming the interviews into theatrical work. In addition, Rössler (2021) states:

> *The Laramie Project* increasingly addresses the uses of the document as a device for theatrical representation to explore what constitutes our sense of the 'real' – however provisional or elusive – and how this idea can function as a basis for political and social agency (Rössler, 2021, p. 15).

In terms of the theatrical palimpsest, Hellier-Tinoco (2019) supports the notion of "theatrical representation" previously discussed by Rössler (2021). In a theatrical

palimpsest, there is a re-activation of past events "from images, texts, embodied repertoires and barely tangible traces [that] connects personal lives with collective memories in composite environments" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 5). In *The Laramie Project*, the collection, editing, and selection of interviews were essential to the creation of the play.

When asked about the shape of the script when rehearsals for the Denver premiere began in January 2000, Fondakowski answered:

> When we arrived in Denver, the play was not yet finished. It had only two acts then. [Director] Moisés Kaufman wasn't sure the audience could sit through a three-act play with such challenging subject matter. It was through the rehearsal process that we discovered that the third act should revolve around the trials of the two perpetrators, Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney. Once the third act was written, the play was very long, so cuts had to be made. Moments were shifting, and the order of scenes kept changing all through previews. On opening night, the play was still new, even to the performers. I don't remember the play ever being 'locked' in Denver, even after opening (Moore, 2020, n.p.).

Fondakowski's account illustrates what Hellier-Tinnoco (2019) describes as the process of editing material in the creation of a play. The past events were reorganized by Kaufman, and the order of the scenes was changed before the premiere. Sinan Gül (2018) states that this type of play is "a voluntary recall of the past, which appeals to logic" (Gül, 2018, p. 107), since "[t]he past, the present, and the future are embodied […] to represent and revise a transition between a failed yesterday and a potential tomorrow" (Gül, 2018, p. 107). Kaufman and the Members of Tectonic Theater Project jointly reinterpret the interviews in relation to the events surrounding Matthew's murder, as pointed out:

> Kaufman visits the West and gathers authentic artifacts and details of the region in the form of local interviews, and he and his group retain the authority— granted them by their roots in a more civilized elsewhere— to 'return' and to interpret what they 'saw and heard' according to their own perceptions and intentions (Magagna, 2016, p. 219).

Kaufman's concern with the "real" is the starting point for the "theatricalization" of life, while the stage becomes a fictional place in which theatre is transformed into a political environment that gives voice to the queer community. Kaufman's play reflects his perception and interpretation of the interviews. In this sense, the play can be construed as a palimpsest, as Kaufman draws on a past real-life event (Matthew's murder) to re-create the present through the perspectives of those living in Wyoming. Although Matthew Shepard does not appear in the play, he remains present throughout the narrative. Thus,

the young man can be understood as the "presence of absence", as conceptualized by Mizrachi (2024) in her dissertation.

4.2 *Brokeback Mountain*: memory

As a memory play, Older Ennis remembers his youth with Jack, but the middle-aged cowboy is "always there, as were the ghosts of the murdered men whom Jack would soon be joining" (Román, 2024, p. 400). This suggests that the cowboys' past relationship and Jack's death become the starting point for creating something else, much as Kaufman does in his play. *Brokeback Mountain* is defined as a "looking back at an intense and vivid period in a life lived" (Robinson, 2023, p. 6), but this "life lived" is situated within a particular space that shapes who Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist are, since:

> Like race, which helps locate self in a context both socially constructed and ethnically determined; and gender, which helps locate self in a context socially constructed and sexually determined; and class, which locates self in a context socially constructed and economically determined, memory helps locate self on a continuum of characteristics socially constructed and both autonomically and auto-noetically determined, that is, driven by one's neurocognitive profile and history. We may 'have' memory, but memory also has us: it tells us who we are (Favorini, 2007, p. 30).

In other words, Attilio Favorini (2007) explains that memory identifies who an individual is and how their identity is constructed in terms of social characteristics. Thus, the adaptation of the original short story into a stage play can be seen as an attempt to reveal the "real" Ennis Del Mar, a queer cowboy who challenges traditional stereotypes.

In addition, the fact that the play is itself an adaptation is also significant, since "[a]daptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon; O'Flynn, 2013, p. 7). In other words, Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn (2013) state that an adaptation originates from pre-existing material (in this case, a short story), but the adapter must re-create and re-interpretate the original work, offering a distinct perspective thereon.

In the case of adaptations for the theatre, Margherita Laera (2014) defends:

> As a memory machine, theatre is the site for the recollection, re-elaboration, and contestation of readily available cultural material, and for the production of new, and newly adaptable, ideas out of established ones: this makes the position of the theatre spectator uncanny […] (Laera, 2014, p. 3).

That is, theatre serves as a space for re-elaborating and reinterpreting what has already been established. In addition, it "refers to a kind of interpretative intervention which involves transposing a source or stimulus into a different language, medium, or culture, seeking 'matches' for certain features of the source and proposing 'mismatches' for others" (Laera, 2014, p. 4). The perspectives of Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) and Laera (2014) are echoed by Favorini (2007), who states that "theatre's fundamental mode of repetition makes it a child of memory" (Favorini, 2007, p. 30).

As a palimpsest, *Brokeback Mountain* does not merely repeat the original short story but re-creates and re-interpretates it from Jack Twist's death. As explained in the Prologue, the play is set in Wyoming (2013). Ennis Del Mar is now a middle-aged alcoholic man who still broods over Jack's absence. This loss continues to affect his life even thirty years after Jack's death. In Robinson's play, Jack becomes the "presence of absence".

Starting with the Prologue, Jack's absence becomes present when Ennis sees the shirts they wore on the mountain. It is described, "*[a]s he blows over the top to cool it, his attention lights on the hanging shirts shuttering in the draft, allowing a panel of memory to slide forward, as the wind strikes the trailer loke a load of dirt coming off a dump truck*" (Robinson, 2023, p. 9). After this moment, the play begins, and all the past events are performed as a materialization of Ennis' memories of his beloved Jack. In other words, Robinson's play seeks to intimately connect the audience with the narrative, drawing the audience deeper into the emotional core of the story.

Like Kaufman (2000), Robinson (2023) presents his own interpretation of events to help the audience understand how Jack's death emotionally affected Ennis over time. Older Ennis Del Mar, living in 2013:

> was left alone and mournfully broken. There was no place for nostalgia here, only regret. The play thus archived the trauma seemingly inherent in gay life, or in what was once gay life, where the tragic felt inescapable. Even in paradise—death (Román, 2024, p. 402).

4.3 The theatrical palimpsest beyond the literary phenomenon

In both plays, death functions as common character, regardless of whether the plays are based on real-life events or not. Hellier-Tinoco (2019) states that a theatrical palimpsest involves two interconnected processes, namely "1) creating live performance from traces (images, objects, texts, sounds, movements, sensory ephemera and experiences); and 2)

translating from live performance into words" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 17).

As theatrical palimpsests, *The Laramie Project* and *Brokeback Mountain* "connect personal lives with collective memories in composite environments" (Hellier-Tinoco, 2019, p. 5). Both plays use the absence of Matthew Shepard and Jack Twist as powerful factors in the present. Through their deaths, the playwrights re-create the present. Supporting Hellier-Tinoco (2019), a palimpsest is something that endures through time, since "[t]his trace is theatrically often referred to in a hauntological sense, meaning it's part of the past within a present context" (Mizrachi, 2024, p. 31). In addition, Mizrachi (2024) states that Hellier-Tinoco (2019) "implies that by interacting with and playing with items from the past, they can be 'taken in' and added to the performers repertoire; applying what they have felt or learned in a performance" (Mizrachi, 2024, p. 31).

Since Matthew's murder and Jack's death are the "items" or the "experiences" from the past that continue to influence the Wyoming locals' lives in the present, "both dramatist and psychologist concluded that a failure to integrate a traumatic event into a life narrative can be associated with the repetition of the trauma" (Favorini, 2007, p. 37). Remembering their deaths, therefore, is not only a repetition of the trauma – which still haunts Wyoming – but also, through the lens of a theatrical palimpsest, a form of resistance. It is a way to give voice to those who were silenced and to stand in solidarity with the queer community by reframing the American West through the memory of Matthew and Jack. As Mizrachi (2024) concludes:

> If palimpsest is trans-temporal, and the past is always active, then it is possible to engage with spaces and the bodies that occupy them, as a type of material. By engaging the body as a palimpsest being, the performance becomes more complex and will involve more than just the chosen site's history, but also the bodies of the performers alongside it (Mizrachi, 2024, p. 31).

The premiere of *The Laramie Project* at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts (2000) featured eight actors playing sixty characters. When asked how they charted the changes, Fondakowski answered:

> Stage management at the Denver Center made these very large poster boards with the present order of the show on them and posted them in the wings. The actors would be running offstage doing their costume quick-changes and looking at the poster boards to know which scene came next. It was harrowing, but also exciting in its own way. The play was truly a

> work-in-progress that was constructed collaboratively (Moore, 2020, n.p.).

As a theatrical palimpsest, the re-organization, re-collection and re-ordering of costumes, actors and roles allow Kaufman's play to broaden the boundaries of dramaturgy. This corroborates Mizrachi's (2024) idea of bodies engaging with space. In comparison with Robinson's play, a production of *Brokeback Mountain* at the @sohoplace (2023) "was performed on a flat rectangular stage" (Román, 2024, p. 399), and:

> The play began with Ennis in bed alone. He was already onstage when the audience entered the theatre, as a radio played 'Don't Let the Years Get You Down,' a sad country song that set the tone for the entire production. The radio disc jockey also announced that the year was 2013, and the actor playing Ennis was middle-aged. […] The older version of Ennis, played by Paul Hickey as a separate presence from young Ennis (Lucas Hedges), haunted the stage. Thinking back on his time with Jack, Hickey's Ennis was always there, as were the ghosts of the murdered men whom Jack would soon be joining (Román, 2024, p. 400).

The middle-aged Ennis Del Mar is present throughout the entire play, observing his past life as a spectator. In the final moments, however, he interacts with the actors from his past. For example, "ENNIS *puts the postcard in the mail*. OLDER ENNIS *looks on, pulls hard on a pint of whiskey, and sees* JACK *as he knew him on Brokeback Mountain*. OLDER ENNIS *hands* ENNIS *the returned postcard. It's stamped: 'DECEASED'*" (Robinson, 2023, p. 57). The performance thus becomes more complex as Older Ennis Del Mar engages with the theatrical space and with the actors representing figures from his past. In both plays, the body becomes a palimpsestic material, broadening the concept of the palimpsest beyond its origin in the arts and literature.

5 Final considerations

As set out in the introduction of the present paper, the main objective of this study is to demonstrate how the theatre is a space for the re-creation of different perspectives on homophobic violence. Then, a qualitative-comparative analysis of *The Laramie Project* and *Brokeback Mountain* was conducted, considering the perspectives of both conservative and queer locals in Wyoming on Matthew Shepard's murder and Jack Twist's death.

Considering the possibility that Jack Twist died as a result of homophobic violence, he and Matthew Shepard suffered strikingly similar deaths. They were not merely

attacked but beaten and left behind alone to die in agony.

Conservative locals express their views with no fear of being socially judged or criminally prosecuted. The Baptist Minister, for instance, prayed for the murderers but wished Matthew had asked for forgiveness due to his "sin" (being a homosexual), while he was tied to the fence. In addition, Jack's father seemed to know that Jack and Ennis were more than just friends and was openly unwelcoming toward the cowboy.

On the other hand, queer locals tend to be more concerned for their safety, often living in isolation or concealing their sexuality to avoid retaliation. For example, Jonas Slonaker adopted "the don't-ask, don't-tell" mentality as a way of keeping himself safe. In addition, Older Ennis Del Mar is portrayed as a lonely, broken man who has been afraid of moving on since Jack's death. The cowboy chooses to live reclusively in a trailer with his memories rather than become a possible victim.

Finally, homophobic violence in the American West is the starting point for re-creating and re-presenting different perspectives of Wyoming, including its environment and people. *The Laramie Project* and *Brokeback Mountain* are palimpsestic plays, since the absence of Matthew Shepard and Jack Twist shapes the present. The concept of the palimpsest is broadened by both works, as palimpsestic bodies are engaged on the stage, making the performance more complex. Kaufman's play uses interviews and testimonies to re-interpret Wyoming, while Robinson's uses Ennis Del Mar's memories to re-create the same region.

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