“Putting Fear and Prejudice on Trial”: New Narratives for Queer Documentary Theatre in Dustin Lance Black’s *8*

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary documentary theatre within the context of queer studies. While there are many plays that fall into the category of queer documentary theatre including *The Laramie Project*, *Another American*, and *Execution of Justice*, this research examines Dustin Lance Black's new play, *8*. After identifying regimes of representation present in queer documentary theatre, I highlight how *8* breaks new ground in the genre as it stages a moment in which queer people overcome adversity as opposed to staging queer people as victims of violence and hate (*The Laramie Project*, *Execution of Justice*). I examine the role of empathy in *8* through a close reading of Black's construction of family. Finally, I use memory theory, specifically Pierre Nora, to investigate why queer people create documentary theatre and the role documentary plays have in preserving collective memories.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Despite significant gains made by activists, queer people have historically been and continue to be a marginalized population in the United States. Queer people are criminalized, murdered, victims of hate crimes, underrepresented in political and social realms and the media, denied basic legal protections and rights, and silenced. This history of oppression has been well documented by queer playwrights.

This thesis explores contemporary documentary theatre within the context of queer studies. The history of queer people as a marginalized and oppressed group has been well documented in queer documentary theatre. From Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice* 1984) to what is arguably the most well-known (and studied) example of the genre, Moisés Kaufman and The Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project* (2000) this form has been consistently used to "educate the masses" about the plight of queer Americans. I examine a new piece of queer documentary theatre, Dustin Lance Black's *8* that moves away from the victim narrative prominent in its predecessors and instead, stages a moment in which queer people "put fear and prejudice on trial" and won (Black 47). My primary goals in this thesis are to explore the broad questions of "why *8* matters" and "why *8* matters beyond its community of origin, California, within a Canadian and international context"? I seek to do this by examining the ways in which *8* creates new narratives in the canon of queer documentary theatre while asking "how and why do queer people represent themselves within this form".

Dustin Lance Black is an American screenwriter (*Pedro* (2008), *Milk* (2008), *J. Edgar* (2011)) and playwright (*8* (2011)). His work demonstrates his commitment to using his art for activist means and to telling queer stories. *Pedro* is a film based on the true story of Pedro Zamora, a Cuban-American AIDS activist who became famous by appearing on MTV's *The Real World: San Fransisco*. *Milk* is a biographical film about Harvey Milk, a San Francisco city supervisor and the first out queer person to be elected to public office in California. Black has also narrated the 2010 documentary *8: The Mormon Proposition*. Black's films have been official selections at the Toronto Film Festival, nominated for GLAAD Media Awards and Academy Awards, and have won Academy Awards. Black sits on the board of the American Foundation for Equal Rights and has served as grand marshal for several pride parades. In 2009 *The Advocate* honoured Black by including him in their "Top 40 Under 40".

8 premiered on Broadway on September 19, 2011 and opened in Los Angeles on March 3, 2012. The producers of *8* manage to bridge the gap between cultural representation and activism by linking *8* directly to activist organizations including The American Foundation for Equal Rights (AFER) (who hold the rights to produce *8*) and Broadway Impact. The opening of *8* in New York "generated more than $1 million for the American Foundation for Equal Rights" (Cox 39).

The Los Angeles production was live streamed and is currently available for public viewing on Youtube. Choosing to live stream the production and keep the footage online and available is an exciting decision on the part of the producers of *8* as it greatly increases the accessibility and in turn reach of this piece of activist

theatre. AFER also renders *8* accessible by providing the rights to produce staged readings of *8* at no cost. *8* is currently being performed by schools and community groups in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. As of this moment, *8* has been produced twice in Alberta. Theatre Transit and Hillhurst United Church produced *8*'s Alberta premiere in Calgary on November 30, 2013 as a benefit for Camp fYrefly. I produced and dramaturged the second Alberta production and Edmonton premiere of *8* on February 26, 2014 as part of the University of Alberta Pride Week[1].

8 is a piece theatre that examines a pivotal moment in the fight for marriage equality in the United States, the proceedings of the Perry vs. Brown trial which deemed Proposition 8 unconstitutional. In being a piece of documentary theatre, *8* cannot be properly examined without an analysis and understanding of the event it documents. As such, a brief history of the fight for marriage equality in the United States, specifically that of California, is essential.

Marriage is an important societal institution that carries significant legal and symbolic weight in American society. Throughout many parts of the United States same-sex couples do not have the right to marry and queer people and their allies have come together across the United States to challenge discriminatory laws that prevent them from marrying the partner of their choosing.

While it is easy to think of the fight for marriage equality as a relatively recent phenomenon, and it is without question that this issue has gained prominence in recent years, it is important to acknowledge the work of early

[1] For information on these readings see http://www.8theplay.com/readings/theatre-transit/ and http://www.8theplay.com/readings/university-of-alberta/

activists in any social movement. Same-sex couples in the United States have been trying to achieve marriage equality since the 1970s: “attempts to gain recognition for same-sex marriages began in the 1970s. Couples attempted to obtain marriage licenses at their local courthouses, and individual couples filed lawsuits in Minnesota, Washington and Kentucky” (Howard and Steigerwalt 142). In response to these guerrilla attempts at obtaining marriage licenses, “states began to pass laws which limited marriage to opposite sex couples: in 1977, Florida passed a law prohibiting homosexual marriage, while California passed a law preventing clerks from issuing marriage licenses to gay couples” (Howard and Steigerwalt 142).

Myles Horton discusses how activists can learn from the work of activists in other social movements (Horton and Freire 46). “The debate over gay marriage gained national prominence in the 1990s” and activists in the marriage equality movement have engaged in this kind of learning, drawing on similar strategies to those used during the civil rights and women’s movements. Like their predecessors in the civil rights and women’s movements, activists in the marriage equality movement “have generally focused on utilizing state laws and state constitutions, rather than the U.S. Constitution” (Howard and Steigerwalt 142). This has recently changed with activists successfully bringing the Defense of Marriage Act and Proposition 8 to the Federal Supreme Court.

There is a long history of states issuing “domestic partnerships” to same-sex couples and “between 2004 and 2008, California did establish what it termed legal ‘domestic partnerships,’ which accorded ‘virtually all’ of the rights and benefits accorded to married couples” (Howard and Steigerwalt 148).

While it may seem obvious, it is important to point out that a "domestic partnership" is not marriage. According to the Human Rights Campaign, "there are 1,138 benefits, rights and protections provided on the basis of marital status in Federal law" ("An Overview of Federal Rights"). Emily Gil documents some of these 1,138 benefits including "family leave, health insurance, disability insurance, pension and Social Security benefits, inheritance, and favorable treatment in income and estate tax matters, not to mention civic recognition and respect." (62-3).

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) is a 1996 federal law that prohibited same-sex marriages from being legally recognized by the federal government. DOMA also left it up to individual states to determine whether or not same-sex couples can marry within their borders, "more fundamentally, it also allowed states the power to not recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states" (Howard and Steigerwalt 155). This meant that a couple that married in Vermont's marriage was suddenly void if they moved to a state that did not recognize same-sex marriage. It is important to note here that the marriages of opposite-sex couples have always been valid and recognized in all states regardless of the state in which they were performed.

In May 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that the law prohibiting same-sex couples from acquiring marriage licenses was unconstitutional making it possible for same-sex couples to be legally married within the state of California. Not surprisingly, the backlash began and groups that oppose marriage equality organized a "voter-initiated ballot initiative, Proposition 8" (Howard and Steigerwalt 160). Proposition 8 stated "'only marriage between a man and a woman

is valid or recognized in California'" and passed on November 4, 2008 (Morain and Garrison).

When Proposition 8 passed, it "amended the California Constitution to reserve marriage to one man and one woman" (Howard and Steigerwalt 160). Supporters of marriage equality took Proposition 8 to the courts and "in *Strauss v. Horton* (2009), the California Supreme Court upheld Proposition 8, but also determined that same-sex marriages performed prior to November 5, 2008, were still legally valid" (Howard and Steigerwalt 160). This meant that couples who married during the brief period in which same-sex marriage was legal in California were still married and were still entitled to state level benefits associated with marriage, but that any same-sex couple who wanted to get married after November 5, 2008 could not do so legally. What makes Proposition 8 especially concerning is the fact that when it passed, it became the first time in California's history in which the Constitution was amended in such a way that rights were taken away from, and not granted to a group of people ("Attorneys Urge California").

Following the *Strauss v. Horton* (2009) ruling that Proposition 8 was constitutional, the case was brought to the federal district court in *Perry v. Brown* (aka *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* and *Hollingsworth v. Perry*) and on "On August 4, 2010, District Court Chief Judge Vaughn R. Walker ruled … that Proposition 8 violates the U.S. Constitution's guarantees of equal protection and due process. The case proceeded to higher courts, which have ruled Proposition 8 time and again to be unconstitutional." ("California"). The Perry vs. Brown case was not broadcast

publicly and as such, *8* serves a valuable purpose as a piece of documentary theatre in its ability to expose audiences to the closing arguments of this trial.

So where are we now? March 2013 was an important month in the fight for marriage equality as both Proposition 8 and the Defense of Marriage Act were brought to the United States Supreme Court on March 26, and 27 respectively. Decisions on these hearings were made in June 2013 and "the Supreme Court of The United States'" deemed "that the so-called "Defense of Marriage Act" was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court also dismissed the case to uphold California's Prop. 8, which California's courts previously ruled unconstitutional. (Coppola).

Having grounded this research in the historical context of Proposition 8 and *8* as a piece of documentary theatre responding to it, it is now necessary to begin to examine frameworks that inform critical readings of *8*. This research draws on theories of documentary theatre, representation, and queer theatre. Critical perspectives on documentary theatre and queer theatre are used to position *8* within a larger canon of work and at this point, it is pertinent to ask "what is documentary theatre?" and "what is queer theatre?" These questions will be examined in detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

Attilio Favorini provides a definition of documentary theatre that informs the use of the term throughout this thesis to refer to "plays characterized by a central or exclusive reliance on actual rather than imaginary event, on dialogue, song and/or visual materials … 'found' in the historical record or gathered by the playwright/researcher, and by a disposition to set individual behaviour in an articulated political and/or social context" (*Voicings* xx). At their core, all

documentary plays have one thing in common: they are trying to share a story with an audience, a story rooted in reality, in people's lived experiences. They encourage audiences to see how these specific stories are (or are not) reflected in their own. Practitioners and theorists who work in and/or study documentary theatre continually discuss and debate constitutes "reality" and/ or "truth. It is important to remember that like all accounts of events, documentary plays are never more than one version/ retelling of an event. There are as many versions of an event as there are people who experienced it, and even more when we account for interpretations of events by people who did not experience them directly.

Shifting our focus to terminology, the terms docudrama, documentary theatre, and verbatim theatre are at times used interchangeably. In this thesis the term documentary theatre is employed for both its specificity and its breadth. Documentary theatre, as opposed to docudrama that can also refer to television and film, positions us clearly within the realm of plays, the stage, and live performance. Moreover, documentary theatre encompasses a broader range theatre than verbatim theatre, which designates more specifically a strict use of "word for word" as spoken or written text. I use the term documentary theatre as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which text can be altered while still creating fact-based theatre.

The term "queer" is equally in need of contextualization. Rosalind Kerr states that "by the early 1990s the term queer replaced gay and lesbian in recognition of the need to move beyond the identity politics they implied" (viii). Since the 1990s, queer has become an umbrella term that is used both within and outside of the

academy to refer to a diverse range of identities that challenge "social norms of gender and sexuality" (Niles). Janelle G. Reinelt reminds us that while having a broad category that encompasses a range of identities can be beneficial, there are also times when it is necessary to use more specific terminology: "acknowledgement of the diversity of human identities required a proliferation of categories … sometimes, but not always, these have been collected under the sign queer. Other times it has seemed important to hold onto the more specific signifiers." ("Gender and Sexualities" 311). Noreen Giffney maintains that "Queer can function as a synonym for 'lesbian and gay' or as shorthand for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community more generally … as a needed but 'false unifying umbrella'" (2). It is with this understanding of the term queer that I use queer as an umbrella term to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identities throughout this thesis[2]. When I believe it is pertinent to use terms more specific than queer, I do; when I do not see this to be necessary I allow queer to serve as an umbrella term for a wide range of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender identities. I use the term queer theatre to refer to plays and performances created by, for, about, or with queer people.

Queer theory is about asking questions. It is about understanding that we are socialized to understand the world, particularly but not exclusively the ways in which sex, gender, bodies, and sexualities exist within the world, in certain, often heterosexist and cissexist ways. Queer theory challenges us to resist these ways of knowing while learning new ways through which to live in and understand our

[2] I recognize that queer is not a "perfect" umbrella term and I recommend Rand and Khayatt for interesting commentary on the word queer, its possibilities, and its limitations

world. Giffney highlights the importance of critical inquiry in queer theory stating "questioning while simultaneously interrogating the structural formation of such questions, at the same time as being self-reflexive about the process of interrogative thinking, is a central tenet of queer theory" (1). This research uses queer theory and Stuart Hall's theories of representation in concert to ask how *8* challenges the ways in which we are expected to understand marriage, family, and queer identities. There are always more questions than answers and potentially even more answers than questions. This thesis begins to explore possible answers to some questions hopefully inspiring even more.

In addition to critical analyses of documentary theatre and queer theory, this thesis draws largely on social semiotics. Social semiotics are a critical paradigm that situates people at the center of interpretation and meaning-making, and emphasizes how meanings can change over time. In discussing the difference between structural semiotics and social semiotics, Phillip Vannini argues that "structural semioticians … are primarily interested in understanding how signs and structures of semiotic rules make people, rather than in understanding how people make, use, and renegotiate semiotic rules" (115). Social semiotics examines the ways in which meaning(s) are instable and socially constructed as well as the ways in which groups of people construct meaning together. Theo van Leeuwen highlights how we can create meaning based on our own wants, needs, desires, and understandings and how meanings "are both objective and subjective" (4-5). Social semiotics emphasize the influence of "culture, society, and politics" on meaning making and in turn recognize the ways in which systems of power and oppression contribute to the ways in which

we understand the world (Vannini 120). Systems of power and oppression have profound effects on dominant discourses or meanings. To use an example related to the study of queer documentary theatre, heterosexism and homophobia inform the ways in which many opponents of same-sex marriage assign meaning to marriage as an institution both symbolically and legally.

Favorini describes theatre "as an activity of remembering" and states that "as a 'time art' (like music, dance, and literature), rather than a 'space art' (architecture, painting, sculpture), theatre has a formal affinity for memory" ("Some Memory Plays" 31, 30). I am particularly interesting in how memory theory can inform our understandings of documentary theatre. Memory theorist Pierre Nora discusses the need to "transmit and conserve collectively remembered values", events, moments of significance, etc." and I will draw on Nora to examine how the theatre becomes a space in which marginalized groups can engage in this transmission and conservation of memories (7). Nora's concept of "Lieux de Memoires" informs an exploration of how documentary theatre can be a space in which memory and history meet.

Chapter one of this thesis contextualizes *8* within the genre of queer documentary theatre and asks: "what systems of representation exist within queer documentary theatre"? *8* is examined in relation to other significant examples of queer documentary theatre, notably Emily Mann's *Execution of Justice*, Marc Wolf's *Another American: Asking and Telling*, and Moisés Kaufman and The Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project*. I argue that by moving past the paradigms of

queer people as "victims" and/or "criminals", *8* expands the context of queer documentary theatre.

Chapter two discusses the role of empathy in documentary theatre and how empathy is created and used within *8*. Through a close reading of *8* I analyze how Black constructs his narrative to assign meaning to family and uses family to create empathy. This chapter considers how narratives of family have evolved and changed in queer documentary theatre going from being non-existent/ separate from the queer experience to being central to the queer experience.

The third and final chapter of this thesis aims to offer answers to pressing questions that are intrinsic to the theory and practice of documentary theatre: Why do we create dramatic and theatrical documents? Why are marginalized groups, specifically queer people, drawn to this form? Can documentary theatre help us create and preserve collective memories? I seek to provide possible answers to these questions while examining the role of the audience in documentary theatre, the possibilities for theatres to become Habermasian "public spheres", and the ways in which memory theory can inform our understanding of queer documentary theatre.

Chapter 1: Resisting Regimes of Representation

8 breaks new ground in queer documentary theatre as it stages a moment in which queer people overcome adversity as opposed to staging queer people's identities as criminal and/or queer people as victims of violence and hate (*The Laramie Project*, *Execution of Justice*, *Another American*). This chapter establishes contextual roots for *8* as a piece of queer theatre, documentary theatre, and the hybrid genre, queer documentary theatre. Through close readings of *8*, *The Laramie Project*, *Execution of Justice*, and *Another American* I examine current regimes of representation within queer documentary theatre and the ways in which *8* resists these narratives.

Queer Theatre

The Stonewall Riots (1969) are often credited as being the "start" of the gay rights movement in the United States[3] and John M. Clum argues that these riots were also the "starting point for contemporary lesbian and gay drama" ("Contemporary Drama" 1). Clum also makes a distinction between what he sees as "politically correct 'gay drama'" and "transgressive 'queer theatre'" ("Contemporary Drama" 2). Clum argues that queer people are drawn to theatre due to the lack of queer representation in the media ("Contemporary Drama" 5). David Roman also reflects on the power of theatre to contribute to positive social change in addition increasing queer visibility: "performance is a cultural practice that does more than illustrate the social and historical context in which it is embedded. At its best, it

[3] See Armstrong and Crage

shapes and transforms the way we understand and experience our lives" (*Not about Aids* 8). This sense of the theatre as a space in which queer identities can be celebrated is reflected in the mission of The Glines, an early queer theatre founded in 1976 by John Glines, Barry Laine, and Jerry Tobin (Haagensen 25). The Glines was "'devoted to creating and presenting gay art in order to develop positive self-images and dispel negative stereotyping'" (Haagenson 25).

Clum discusses how the AIDS epidemic "ironically both decimated and galvanized the gay community" and notes that since the epidemic, "the majority of gay drama has centered on AIDS" ("Contemporary Drama" 5). Haagensen also examines the impact of the AIDS epidemic on theatre and argues that during the epidemic, "gay theatre companies would be presenting work largely split into two categories: AIDS plays, and what were deemed 'cute boys in underpants' plays (sex comedies with dollops of nudity)" (25).

In discussing the current state of queer theatre (in 2001), Haagensen reflects on the increase in "acceptance of gays and lesbians into the fabric of American society" and argues that with this progress and AIDS no longer being a death sentence, "theoretically, gay and lesbian theatres should be freer than ever to produce a wide range of work" (25). In surveying queer theatres across the United States, Haagenson proves this to be true, but while there is diversity in representation in smaller productions and/or in exclusively or mainly queer companies, the shows produced by larger companies or that gain recognition outside the queer theatre community within the mainstream still tend to be about homophobia, someone dying (whether as a result of AIDS or homophobic violence),

or the criminalization of queer identities (*Corpus Christi*, *The Laramie Project*, *Rent*, *Angels in America, Execution of Justice*, *The Temperamentals*, *Gross Indecency*).

Documentary Theatre

Whether one calls it verbatim drama, docudrama, or documentary theatre, there has been a renewed interest in fact-based theatre in the twenty-first century. There is little scholarly work on the history and development of documentary theatre in the United States making it difficult to trace a clear history of the form in the United States that would be relevant to this research (from the end of the 20th century to the present). There has however been significant scholarly attention devoted to documentary theatre in the United Kingdom. This research provides pertinent critical perspectives on the form that can contribute to an examination of the role documentary theatre plays in the United States.

In the introduction to *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theatre*, Attilio Favorini defines documentary theatre as plays that emerge not from the imagination of a playwright but from real events, people, and stories (xx). Documentary plays rely on personal and historical artifacts, interviews, objects, and images (Favorini, *Voicings*, xx). In terms of establishing a canon, this definition is sufficiently broad while also being specific. In defining documentary theatre it does not limit us to that which is "verbatim" while highlighting the centrality of "the real" in the genre.

In examining the purpose of documentary theatre, Anderson and Wilkinson state that the purpose of "Verbatim Theatre is … to connect with an audience

emotionally and intellectually, to emphatically inform and empower through authentic story" (156). This purpose elucidates two important functions of documentary theatre: empowerment and information. These functions echo the distinct styles of documentary theatre Paget categorized as "celebratory plays" and "controversy plays". Celebratory plays seek to honour the experiences of groups whose experiences are "not normally privileged by either the journalistic or entertainment media" while controversy plays attempt to raise awareness of issues of importance as they address current events (Paget 322). In "Bodies of Evidence," Carol Martin cites six more specific functions of documentary theatre: "to reopen trials in order to critique justice", "to create additional historical accounts", "to reconstruct an event", "to intermingle autobiography with history", "to critique the operations of both documentary and fiction", and "to elaborate the oral culture of theatre" (12-13).

So why have we, from the 1980s to the present, been experiencing a "resurgence" (to borrow from Anderson and Wilkinson) of documentary theatre? Why are 21st century theatre practitioners and audiences drawn to plays based on real events? In *Documentary Trial Plays in Contemporary American Theatre,* O'Connor argues that the documentary trial play in particular is "a genre that contributes to the century's preoccupation with fact-based narratives" (4). While O'Connor is speaking specifically about trial plays, this statement can easily be applied to documentary theatre in general. O'Connor links documentary theatre to the "mediatization of everyday life" which she claims "television's ambiguous 'reenactments,' 'docudramas,' and 'reality' shows" also contribute to (13). The rise

of reality television is a clear example of our cultural fascination with "the real" (at least in the global West). It is only a "preoccupation with fact-based narratives" that can produce *Jersey Shore* and create and sustain entire television networks (like TLC) devoted to the "real" (O'Connor 4).

As fascinated by the real as we might be, a second oft-cited reason for the revival of documentary theatre is a societal distrust and dissatisfaction with traditional media outlets. David Hare, an active practitioner of verbatim theatre in the United Kingdom argues that "the world is changing. Very, very complicated things are happening that people struggle to understand, and journalism is failing us, because it's not adequately representing or interpreting these things" (Hare in Hammond and Steward 63). Anderson and Wilkinson argue that a "lack of depth, diversity and intelligence in media coverage of areas in the public interest … is leading to an Australian democracy characterised by distrust, apathy and ultimately anger" (153). They go on to link this dissatisfaction to the production of new verbatim plays stating:

> This lack of diverse voices and stories in our community may be a contributor to the resurgence and evolution of the Verbatim Theatre form, both nationally and internationally. Like the proliferation of bloggers on the Net providing alternative voices to mainstream media, Verbatim Theatre provides a platform for diverse, authentic voices, unheard in popular media (Anderson and Wilkinson 154).

In "The Promise of Documentary", Janelle Reinelt also cites dissatisfaction with traditional media outlets and "the increasing awareness of 'spin'", or the ways in

which media outlets carefully craft stories with specific goals (as opposed to objectivity) in mind, as contributing factors to documentary theatre's "revival as a popular form" in the 21st century (12). Reinelt also cites "technological developments allowing experimentation and incorporation of many forms of documentary in everything from live theatre to internet sites or even mobile phone performances" as contributing to the revival ("Promise of Documentary" 12).

Artists are often drawn to the documentary from a commitment to using the arts for educational and/or activist means. Soans states "the arts are more than mere entertainment. In my view they should also be the vessel which houses the conscience of a nation; they should ask the difficult questions others would rather leave unasked" (Soans in Hammond and Steward 17). Closely related to the desire to use art to educate or inspire change is the potential the arts have as a tool through which marginalized populations can share their stories, "to provide a setting, the stage, where his voice can be heard is to provide an amplification of an otherwise lost voice – and is the reason why I think verbatim theatre is so important" (Soans in Hammond and Steward 32). Finally, documentary theatre can be a form of artistic research, a chance to try to grapple with a complex issue: "we turn to verbatim theatre because we feel that it is somehow better suited to the task of dealing with serious subject matter. The world seems to have become a more serious place, and we want our theatre to help us understand it" (Hare in Hammond and Steward 11).

Constructing a Canon

Documentary theatre, let alone the more specific category of queer documentary theatre, in the United States is understudied. In turn, it can be difficult to identify a "canon" of queer documentary theatre. What is clear however, is that queer people are not only drawn to theatre as a means of sharing stories, history, and building community, but that queer people are also drawn specifically to documentary theatre. Favorini argues that American documentary theatre is often "event-specific" and it is interesting to note how this is particularly true of the plays within the queer documentary canon (*Voicings* xxx).

Through my research on queer documentary theatre, I have identified eight plays that along with *8* can be considered examples of queer documentary theatre: *Execution of Justice* (Emily Mann), *The Normal Heart* (Larry Kramer), *Gross Indecency* (Moisés Kaufman), *Another American: Asking and Telling* (Marc Wolf), *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* (Moisés Kaufman and The Tectonic Theatre Project), *The Temperamentals* (Jon Marans), and *Hit the Wall* (Ike Holter).

While all of these plays are rooted in historical or current events, some (*The Normal Heart*, *The Temperamentals*, and *Hit the Wall*) are more memory plays or re-imaginings of historical events than strictly documentary theatre. It is important to recognize that within the genre of documentary theatre, there are active debates about how "true" a play needs to be to fit into the genre[4] (must a play be verbatim? Can two or three individual narratives be woven into one? How much license can we

[4] See Hammond and Steward, Fisher

grant to a playwright?). I am choosing to include these plays within this canon as their roots in reality link them to the genre. While they share important stories and provide us with important insight into the past and what experiencing a time, place, or event might have been like, they are not to be treated as fact, but then again, it is arguable that neither should documentary plays.

The Plays

Execution of Justice (Emily Mann) premiered in 1984 and stages the trial of Dan White for the murder of Harvey Milk. While the bulk of *Execution of Justice* is text pulled from trial transcripts, Mann also includes excerpts from "reportage and interviews" (296).

The Normal Heart (Larry Kramer) premiered in 1985 and is a semi-autobiographical plays that document the early years of the AIDS epidemic and Kramer's (Ned in the plays) involvement in early AIDS activism. In 2014 it was adapted as an HBO film.

Gross Indecency (Moisés Kaufman) premiered in 1997 and stages the trials of Oscar Wilde. *Gross Indecency* was created from "courtroom testimony with excerpts from Wilde's writings and the words of his contemporaries" ("Gross Indecency"). Moisés Kaufman also wrote *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* with The Tectonic Theatre Project. *The Laramie Project* premiered in 2000 and examines the town of Laramie, Wyoming's reactions and responses to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard. The text in *The Laramie Project* is derived from interviews conducted by members of The Tectonic Theatre Project with Laramie

residents only one month after Shepard's death ("The Laramie Project Cycle"). *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, premiered in 2009 and consists of follow up interviews conducted by the company as well as new interviews with murderers Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* also addresses recent attempts by members of the town and the media to argue that Shepard's murder was about drugs, and not in fact a hate crime.

Marc Wolf's *Another American: Asking and Telling* premiered in 1999 and examines the impact of the United States military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. It is a unique piece of documentary theatre due to the fact that it is as a one-man show consisting of stories told during hundreds of interviews Wolf conducted with current and former members of the United Stated military as well as organizations that support queer members and veterans of the military.

The Temperamentals by Jon Marans premiered in 2009 and stages the formation of the Mattachine Society, one of the first queer rights organizations in the United States, in the 1950s. While *The Temperamentals* has been labeled as a piece of documentary theatre, and while the play is rooted in history, and its characters based off of real people, the text from the play is largely created by Marans, and the piece reads more like a fictionalized retelling/ reimagining of history than a piece of true documentary theatre.

Similarly to *The Temperamentals*, *Hit the Wall* has been labeled as a piece of documentary theatre, despite it being a fictionalized interpretation of a historic event. *Hit the Wall*, written by Ike Holter, premiered in 2013 and is a fictionalized retelling of the Stonewall Riots that centers on the stories of ten characters present

at the real 1969 riots. In describing the characters, Marylin Stasio states: “more stereotypes than individuals, they include the closeted rich snob, the curious virgin, the flamboyant sissy boy, the stately drag queen, and the brutal cop who symbolizes all the brutal cops of this unkind era”.

Regimes of Representation

To analyze the canon of queer documentary theatre and explore how *8* forges new ground within it, I will be utilizing Stuart Hall’s theory of “regimes of representation” as outlined in his article “The Spectacle of the Other” in concert with queer theorists such as Richard Dyer and Christopher Pullen. While Stuart Hall writes explicitly about representation and “*racial and ethnic* difference”, Hall encourages readers to “bear in mind … that what is said about racial difference could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability” (225). Hall encourages us to look at how marginalized groups have been represented throughout history and to ask: “have the repertoires of representation around ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ changed or do earlier traces remain intact in contemporary society?” and if “there can be an effective ‘politics of representation’?” (225, 226). Hall’s second question is challenging and may never be adequately answered. In examining the canon of queer documentary theatre, my position is that while we may not have (and may never will) achieved a fully “effective ‘politics of representation’” *8* brings us one step closer towards one. Pullen explores “new storytelling” within queer media and argues that this “new storytelling” involves “narrative progression where gay men

and lesbians reject imposed mythic identities of the past and create new, optimistic and self-focused constructions … This involves transitions in storytelling, where new storytellers break free from … stigma, shame and repressive myth, in service of narrative development and recreation" (13). A central tenet of Pullen's "new storytelling" "is that gay identity is presented as a 'positive' central narrative drive" (15). *8* operates within this realm of "new storytelling".

Hall argues that "people who are … different from the majority – 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to … *binary* … representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes" (229). This is similar to Foucault's understanding that one means through which people become "objectified" is the division of self from other: "In the second part of my work, I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call "dividing practices". The subject is either divided himself or divided from others." ("The Subject and the Power" 777-8). Foucault provides us with the example divisions of "the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys'" ("The Subject and the Power" 778). We can easily add to this list: the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the men and the women, the straight and the gay. Divisions objectify the human experience since in existing within binaries, they do not allow for nuanced understandings of identities and/or difference. You are this, or you are that. There is no room for the shades of grey that really make us who we are.

In examining images of black athletes, Hall argues that the images cannot be read alone, "they gain meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another" (232). This is echoed by Dyer who states that "the

analysis of images always needs to see how any given instance is embedded in a network of other instances" (*The Matter of Images* 2). Hall argues that while "each image carries its own, specific meaning …. We can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another" (232). This idea that images do not (and cannot) exist in isolation is echoed by Dyer who in discussing the stereotype of the "sad young man" states: "like all stereotypes, the sad young man is a combination and condensation of many traditions of representation" (*The Culture of Queers* 118). Hall describes "the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which 'difference' is represented at any one historical moment as a *regime of representation*" (232). While it is important to recognize that images cannot be read alone, it is equally important to recognize how the meanings assigned to images can vary significantly between groups and Dyer highlights the importance of understanding the different ways stereotypes can mean specific things for "those who are members of the stereotyped group as opposed to those who are not" (*The Culture of Queers* 133).

So why is representation important? According to Dyer "how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life" (*The Matter of Images* 1). Representation relates to how we understand ourselves, our communities, and ourselves in relation to our and other communities. Representation can help us form and understand our identities. For members of marginalized communities, representation can contribute to a sense of solidarity, or that an individual is not alone. As Christopher Pullen states: "narrative expressions offer landscapes of possibility" (6). On the other hand, a lack of representation can

contribute to feelings of isolation and otherness: "if … representation attaches to power, then that invisibility evidences the powerlessness of the queer community" (Raymond 101). Representation also influences how we "understand" the experiences of groups to which we do not belong.

Hall draws on Freudian and Lacanian psychology and argues that representation contributes to identity formation as we construct our identities (the self) in relation to what we perceive as different from us, what we are not (the other) (238). Hall links representation to power, asking us to question who has the "power to mark, assign and classify" (259).

Returning to regimes of representation, Hall argues that meaning can change over time. This is echoed by Pullen who argues that "all storytelling involves the placement, or displacement, of myths, and potentially the context of stereotypical representation" (16). Hall examines three strategies through which stereotypes are challenged and meanings are reconstructed: "reversing stereotypes", "positive and negative images", and "defamiliarization." This research examines the use of reversing stereotypes and positive and negative images in queer documentary theatre.

Reversing stereotypes is a fairly self-explanatory strategy. Reversing stereotypes involves identifying a stereotype, and directly challenging it by replacing its image with other images that are often thought of as more "positive". This strategy becomes problematic when it is not accompanied by a critical discussion of why stereotypes are problematic, why they exist, or the ways in which negative stereotypes could be reinterpreted in positive ways. This strategy can be

critiqued for running the risk of promoting a politics of assimilation and Hall discusses how in the 1950s, "Blacks could gain entry to the mainstream – but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks and behaviour" (270). Hall also discusses how this strategy can simply replace one end of a binary opposition for another instead of creating nuanced characters and situations (272).

The second strategy Hall offers for changing image repertoires is to "substitute a range of 'positive' images … for the 'negative' imagery which continues to dominate popular representation" (272). Hall is speaking directly about race but this strategy is equally applicable to queer representation. Hall argues that this strategy "has the advantage of righting the balance. It is underpinned by an acceptance – indeed, a celebration – of difference" and that "it tries to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected" (272). This is a key departure from the tactics of assimilation that can be associated with "reversing stereotypes". In this strategy, Hall encourages us to examine how negative stereotypes may be reinterpreted in positive ways (272).

Hall cautions us to remember that while "adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire … increases the diversity of the ways in which 'being black' is represented" it "does not *necessarily* displace the negative" (274). This is another important distinction between the first and second strategies. "Reversing stereotypes" aims to eliminate negative stereotypes and in doing so, may run the risk of creating new ones: "escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme … may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical 'other'" (Hall 272). When we add

positive images to the regime of representation, as opposed to attempting to reverse existing regimes, we allow ourselves to recognize that negative images exist and that they might exist for a reason (while also asking us to question why and if these images really are negative).

Negative images are only negative so long as they dominate regimes of representation and, at its core, this strategy is about recognizing this and "righting the balance" (Hall 272). Queer documentary theatre provides us with a strong example of this. It is not inaccurate or inherently problematic to tell the stories of queer people who are criminalized and/or victims of violence and hate. In fact, these stories are important parts of our history. These stories become problematic though when they are the only ones being told.

Regimes of Representation Within Queer Documentary Theatre

In discussing the development of documentary theatre in the United States, Favorini states that American documentary plays tend to stage events or specific moments in time. The plays identified as examples of a canon of queer documentary theatre fit very much within this paradigm (*Voicings* xxx). *Execution of Justice* deals with the trial of Dan White for the murders of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, *Gross Indecency* stages the trials of Oscar Wilde, *The Laramie Project* responds to the murder of Matthew Shepard, *8* stages the Proposition 8 trials. Interestingly, the only "true" piece of queer documentary theatre identified (as opposed to other fact based pieces of fictional theatre) that is not event focused is *Another American*.

Stuart Hall argues that images cannot be read in isolation and what becomes clear in examining these plays along side each other is that they are not just event focused (or issue focused in the case of *Another American*), their dramaturgical foci, with the exception of *8,* are on tragic as opposed to hopeful events (232). In discussing queer representation in the media, Raymond notes that "those rare depictions of glbt people tended to both dichotomize anyone glbt as victim or villain and they reinforce demeaning stereotypes and caricatures" (101). In these plays, queer characters are universally criminalized, murdered, or both. While one might look a these narratives as calls for acceptance, they cannot help but reinforce social imaginaries that construct being queer as somehow wrong or dangerous, and queer characters as victims.

Queerness is most explicitly criminalized in *Another American*. *Another American* documents the effects of a law ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue"), that made it illegal to be "out" and queer in the United States Military. While this law only explicitly affected people in the military, it still was legally sanctioned homophobia and as such, sends a clear message to the American public that there is something "wrong" about being queer because if being queer is in fact "okay", why would we need laws preventing people from being out? While it formalizes a culture of "don't ask, don't tell" in the military, it normalizes a culture of "don't ask, don't tell" within civilian culture. As Wolf states in the forward to *Another American* "the brutal history of the twentieth century has taught us that silencing a community can lead to disastrous consequences, and I consider "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" a dangerous

formula for the continued gagging and stereotyping of the gay and lesbian community" (544).

The criminalizing effects of "Don't Asked, Don't Tell" are felt and demonstrated throughout *Another American*. The play begins with a prologue in which Marc interviews an anonymous woman:

> Woman: Ok, well let me start off first. Right the anonymity, but I have to do something paranoid. Just to cover my ass. Are you… do you work for the government?
>
> Marc: No.
>
> Woman: Are you a police officer?
>
> Marc: No.
>
> Woman: Are you in the military?
>
> Marc: No.
>
> Woman: Are you FBI or CIA?
>
> Marc: No.
>
> Woman: Alright you're fine then. (Wolf 550).

If an audience were to hear this exchange without the context of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", they would likely expect that the woman was about to confess to a crime, and a significant one at that, not to being gay or sharing the story of someone who is.

"Don't Ask, Don't Tell", *Another American*, and this scene in particular, are reminiscent of Foucault's discussion of panopticism. The panopticon is a model for a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century in which it is possible for a guard to be supervising any prisoner at any time, without them knowing

(Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200). The panopticon creates the sense of paranoia experienced by the woman, who feels constantly under scrutiny by the authorities. In discussing the panopticon Foucault makes a statement that is eerily similar to life under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell": "full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap" (*Discipline and Punish* 200). To stay "in the (dark) closet" is to be safe; to be visibly queer is dangerous.

Foucault's discussion of panopticism extends beyond the prison and Foucault applies the notion of the panopticon to the ways in which systems of power and oppression operate so that we, even as supposedly "free" citizens, control our behaviour so as not to be "caught". This is one way in which queerness is policed within American society despite it being entirely (mostly) legal to be gay in the United States[5]. The fear of being "caught" is also expressed in *The Laramie Project*. In discussing meeting Matthew Shepard Doc O'Connor, a limousine driver, states that before engaging his services Matthew said "I am gay and we're going to a gay bar. Do you have a problem with that?" (Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*, 19). The fact that Shepard had to out himself and ask if his queerness would be a problem in order to preserve his safety illustrates the effects of a culture that polices queer identities in civilian life.

Within the military, being queer comes with a sense of fear and this fear of being "discovered" is a recurring theme throughout *Another American*. In the monologue "Don't Ask Don't Tell" Hannah (pseudonym) states:

What I told her when you come out –

[5] Contrary to popular belief there are still States in which sodomy laws exist (Maza)

> I said you know he could be a spook from the …
>
> spook shop or something come down here to find out …
>
> something about us so …
>
> you could be part of the old time witch-hunt people. (Wolf 553).

Hannah also hopes that sharing her story will help younger members of the military learn that they will have trouble advancing in the military unless they learn to "keep their mouth shut about who they sleep with" (Wolf 553).

Being queer is criminalized in a very direct way in Ed Clayton and Ed Modesto's stories. Clayton was handcuffed, held in a cell without food or water, and physically assaulted by military personnel and guards who tormented him with questions of "'who else do you know that's queer'" (Wolf 576). Modesto was "sentenced to nine months at Fort Leavenworth" for "conducting unbecoming" after military personnel found him doing drag (Wolf 589).

The issue of fear is significant in that it reinforces regimes of representation that discourage people from being "out", as again, why should someone be scared of being "out" unless there are very real, and negative consequences associated with being out and queer? These "consequences" bring us to the second regime of representation within queer documentary theatre, "queer person as victim".

The regime of queer person as victim is a regime that is found within all the examples of queer documentary theatre identified, except for *8*. Here I use the characterization of victim to mean that the person's experience with violence and hate becomes a defining feature of their character and/or story.

In *Another American*, we very clearly see queer people as victims of discriminatory employment practices. We also see queer people as victims of violent crimes and hate directed against and towards them. An anonymous colonel tells the story of Gotta, a member of his squad who was beaten by his squad; Miriam Ben Shalom, a former sergeant, discusses having her "brake lines cut", the "the lug nuts on the drive wheel of [her] … vehicle … loosened" and receiving death threats; and a mother discusses her son's discharge and how he was killed before he could come home, and how she is sure he was murdered for being gay (Wolf 563, 581-2, 605).

The regime of victimhood is central to *Execution of Justice* and *The Laramie Project* which both respond to the murder of a queer person. In both these plays, we also see the queer person being re-victimized, in a sense, as the community around them attempts to justify the murder, and deflect any claims that the murder was rooted in hate and homophobia. In *Execution of Justice*, Dan White is portrayed throughout the trial as a clean cut, "all-American" man, with solid values who was simply pushed to the brink due to a combination of stress, diet, and mental health issues. While a number of the citizens interviewed for *The Laramie Project* express their clear convictions that Matthew Shepard's murder was a) wrong and b) a hate crime, we also see a number of Laramie citizens sympathize with his murderers, again using the rhetoric of "good kids who made a bad decision" ("Russell was just so sweet. He was the one who was the Eagle Scout", "Aaron was a good kid, I liked Aaron a lot") (Kaufman, *The Laramie Project*, 33). In *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, some citizens also express their belief in claims that have been made that

Shepard's murder was not a hate crime but a drug related crime, despite his murderer's attempt to use "gay panic" as a defense.

In *The Laramie Project*, Jedadiah Schultz states: "Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime" (Kaufman 9). Again, these plays cannot be read in isolation and when read together, we begin to see a community, the queer community, being defined by a series of crimes, hate, and fear.

Celebrating Queer Identities

I've already discussed Paget's distinction between "celebratory" and "controversy" plays, the former being pieces of docudrama that aim to honour the experiences of groups whose experiences are "not normally privileged by either the journalistic or entertainment media", the later being plays that "are 'investigative', or address some *present* national 'controversy'" (Paget 322). The canon of queer documentary theatre almost exclusively falls into the controversy play category and while they may *commemorate* queer lives, they deal with subject matter with which it would be entirely inappropriate to construct a celebratory play.

This binary division between celebration and controversy can be a bit limiting and it is interesting to note how contemporary queer theatre is blurring the line between these two genres. Black's *8* provides us with an exciting example of this combination of celebration and controversy. While *8* is a play that examines a controversial issue, marriage equality, it is also a play that celebrates a pivotal moment in the fight for marriage equality. *8* breaks new ground within the genre by

presenting us with the first queer example of "true" documentary theatre that while addressing current, controversial issues, is celebratory in tone. The plaintiffs and witnesses in *8* do not live in a homophobia-free bubble and do indeed speak about the effects of homophobia on their lives however instead of remembering the dead, *8* celebrates the resiliency of the living. For the first time, we see a story that's central theme is not "the effects of hate" but "victory over hate", and in this way, *8* challenges the regimes of representation that have positioned queer people as victims.

Resisting Regimes of Representation

Returning to Hall, by celebrating queer lives, *8* resists regimes of representation by offering a positive portrayal of queerness. Throughout the trial, the plaintiffs' testimonies position them as good, hardworking, family-oriented Americans. Black has structured the play "to construct a positive identification with what has been abjected" (Hall 272). Black's desire to "construct positive identification" is most clearly demonstrated by the sections of the play he added that were not part of the trial (Hall 272).

Black chose to intersperse the trial with scenes between two of the plaintiffs, Sandy Stier and Kris Perry and their sons, Elliott and Spencer. The family scenes are heartwarming and depict a very likeable, very "normal" family that loves and supports each other. On the note of "normalness", the rhetoric of "normalcy" was used significantly throughout the trial as the prosecution actively sought to construct gay and lesbian families as "normal", even exemplary, while the defense

tried to argue that while they might be worthy of respect, they are inherently different from heterosexual families. This rhetoric is closely related to Hall's strategy of "reversing stereotypes".

Black chose to include actual "Yes on 8" ads alongside trial testimony and in doing so structures the play with a clear goal of stereotype reversal. This attempt at reversing stereotypes is also evidenced dramaturgically by Black's choices of advertisement placement. *8* opens with an ad that states "Teaching children about gay marriage will happen here unless we pass Proposition 8" this ad is immediately followed by Spencer and Elliott talking about how they have always understood their parents to be married making the implication "who cares if we teach children about gay marriage, they already know about it" (Black 1-2). Another ad asks if people have "thought about what same-sex marriage means" with a reply from a child "to me?" (Black 25). This ad is followed by testimony in which Paul describes himself as "the 'cool uncle'" and argues against the "insinuation" that he is someone children need protection from (Black 26). Through these dramaturgical choices, Black is clearly attempting to have his audiences "construct a positive identification with what has been abjected" (Hall 272).

Chapter 2:

Empathy and Shifting Family Narratives in Queer Documentary Theatre

8 is a play about marriage but it is also a play about family. Throughout *8* the argument is made that same-sex couples often chose to "settle down" in monogamous partnerships to create families in very similar ways to their straight counterparts and that essentially the only difference between these family situations is that families built on opposite-sex relationships are able to reap the social and material benefits of marriage while those of same-sex couples cannot.

While *8* is the only play that I've identified within the canon of queer documentary theatre that has marriage or family as its central theme, it is critical to see what its predecessors have to say about family. In both *8* and *Execution of Justice* family and the narrative of being family oriented as being connected to being a good American are used to create empathy. Family narratives are used in *Execution of Justice* to incite empathy with Dan White (Harvey Milk's murderer). *8* differs from its predecessors in that it uses empathy to forge connections between audiences and queer characters and in doing so, normalizes the queer experience.

In *Execution of Justice* family is constructed as being something separate from the queer experience. The family narrative throughout the play is limited to Dan White. While Harvey Milk's friends and coworkers are given voices during the trial and throughout the play, there is no mention of Harvey Milk's legal or chosen family, at least not in terms that would indicate a familial relationship. Milk is part of a community, but not of a family.

The family narrative is also intrinsically linked to being a good person, a good citizen, a good American. This is capitalized on by White's defense attorney who attempts to construct White throughout the trial as someone who, in his right mind, could not have committed murder because "good people, fine people, with fine backgrounds, simply don't kill people in cold blood, it just doesn't happen" (Mann 300). White's defense goes on to argue that "Dan White came from a vastly different lifestyle than Harvey Milk who was a homosexual leader and politician. Dan White was an idealistic young man, a working-class young man. He was deeply endowed with and believed very strongly in the traditional American values, family and home" (Mann 300). Stating that White "believed very strongly in the traditional American values, family and home" gains significance given that it is said immediately following the statement that "Dan White came from a vastly different lifestyle than Harvey Milk who was a homosexual leader and politician" as it implies that as a "homosexual" Milk cannot also value "family and home" (Mann 300).

From a social semiotic perspective, the conflation of "family-man" with "good citizen" or "good American" becomes especially problematic if it is a label that queer people cannot gain access too. As Pullen notes, there has been a "historical disconnection of homosexual identity from normative family life" (139). If queer people cannot be *the marker* (family-oriented) of a good citizen, where does that leave them? This question becomes particularly interesting when we look at the rhetoric used by groups that oppose same-sex marriage. Black includes three "Yes on 8" ads in *8* and each of these ads attempts to argue that people in same-sex relationships are somehow either un-American or deviant. They are certainly not

capable of creating good, American families and marriages. Marriage, or at least "real" marriage based on the social meaning assigned to marriage by groups opposed to marriage equality, is separate from queer peoples' experiences.

One "Yes on 8" ad featured in in the play consists of a girl telling her mother how she learned in school that "a prince married a prince, and I can marry a princess one day" (Black 1). The ad then goes on to inform viewers that "under California law, public schools instruct kids about marriage. Teaching children about gay marriage will happen here unless we pass Proposition 8. Yes on 8" (Black 1). While this ad does not explicitly say that there is something wrong with same-sex relationships, it implies as much by stating that parents need to protect their children from the possibility of learning about same-sex relationships in school.

Another ad featured in *8* consists of a series of questions asking viewers if they have "really thought about" same-sex marriage (Black 25). This ad begins by asking "what it means when gay marriage conflicts with our religious freedoms" (Black 26). This question implies that by legalizing civil marriages for same-sex couples, same-sex couples will try to infringe on the "separation of church and state" that is central to American beliefs. The inherent irony here, that is religious based groups trying to influence the formation of laws while calling for separation of church and state, is not lost. The ad also returns to the "fear for children" narrative asking "what it means when our children are taught about it in school" (Black 26). After this statement, a woman's voice says "have you thought about what same-sex marriage means" and her voice is interrupted by that of a child saying "to me?" (Black 26). Again, these statements construct queer people as people you need to be

afraid of, and in doing so, "bad people" because, who needs to be afraid of "good Americans"? Finally, the ad closes with "Voting yes restores traditional marriage. Yes on Proposition 8" (Black 26). This statement clearly constructs marriage, at least "traditional marriage" or "real" or "good" marriage as something that people in same-sex relationships cannot access which again constructs queer people as deviant, imposters, and/or bad. These ads also reinforce the idea that meaning(s) assigned to marriage are in flux and remind us that the idea of "marriage" and the meaning(s) assigned to it are something Americans (on both sides of the marriage debate) do genuinely care about. If the meaning of marriage was not important, there would be no ads, and no debate around same-sex marriage rights.

While family is also not directly dealt with in *The Laramie Project*, it is indirectly addressed as Matthew Shepard is murdered before he can begin a family of his own. While Matthew's parents are present in the play, Matthew is killed before he can create his own family. Since Matthew is killed for being queer, he is indirectly denied the opportunity to grow up, settle down, and start a family, and in doing so, fulfill an important part of the American Dream, because of his sexual orientation. In *Asking and Telling*, family becomes separate from the queer experience as queer members of the military cannot talk about their same-sex partners in fear of losing their job, or worse. To be queer and in the military, you literally have to construct a separate identity for yourself that excludes your family.

In *8* narratives around family shift as family moves away from being *separate from* the queer experience to being *central to* the queer experience. While family may not be central to all queer's experiences and identities, it is to *8*'s main

characters, the plaintiffs. As Paul states "I have found someone that I know I can dedicate the rest of my life to. And when you find someone who is not only your best friend but your best advocate and supporter in life, it's a natural next step for me to want to be married to that person" (Black 6). Later, Paul discusses how "we would love to have a family, but the timeline for us has always been marriage first, because it solidifies the relationship" (Black 10). When Kris discusses falling in love with Sandy and coming to terms with her sexuality, she states "I grew to realize I had a very strong attraction to her and I was falling in LOVE with her. -- And not only were we in love, but we wanted to join our families and have that kind of life of commitment and stability that we both really appreciated" (Black 20). In these statements, Paul and Kris assign symbolic meaning to marriage while demonstrating the significance of marriage and family to their lives, constructions of self, and relationships. To Paul and Kris marriage means: friendship, support, love, dedication, commitment, family, stability, and commitment.

In "Lesbian Television Personalities – A Queer New Subject", Jennifer Reed discusses how increasingly, famous women who are out are known as "public people first and as lesbian after that" and describes these women as "just-happen-to-be-lesbian" (307). Reed describes these women as "a new subject in American culture: out lesbians integrated into their respective media, not defined primarily as lesbians" (Reed 307). Throughout *8*, Black constructs the plaintiffs to read in this way, as people who in addition to being many other things happen to be queer. Yes, Sandy, Kris, Jeff, and Paul are queer but they are also mothers, uncles, executive directors, computer instructors, PTA members, Californians, and Americans. Being

queer is an important part of the plaintiffs' identities, but they are not defined by their queerness.

8 is primarily constructed verbatim from trial transcripts, however, Black chose to insert scenes with Kris and Sandy's twin sons Elliot and Spencer throughout the play. This choice demonstrates Black's commitment to *8* being a play not just about marriage, not just about law, but about family. These scenes show a family in action. Reed discusses how "the heteronormative impulse is strong enough that we still cannot always see the lesbian before our eyes" and in discussing an article about Jodie Foster and her family, Reed states "the article cannot compute this group as a family" (310). Reed is discussing the ways in which heterosexism blinds us to the myriad of ways in which people form families. Black's choice to stage a queer family, and place them at the heart of the play's narrative, forces audience members to confront internalized heterosexism as they "actually see the family before their eyes" (Reed 310).

Black has structured *8* so that audiences see a queer family in action immediately after arguments are made that devalue their experiences. Maggie Gallagher's[6] rant against marriage equality is broken up by segments that stage a conversation between plaintiffs Kris and Sandy and their children Spencer and Elliott. This conversation, which consists of children wondering "how long do we have to be here?" and plans for supper is very normal and almost banal. These segments stand in stark contrast to Gallagher's discourse of queer parenthood and families as "unnatural"(Black 27-29). Throughout the play, Elliot and Spencer are

[6] Gallagher is an anti-marriage equality activist and former president of the National Organization for Marriage

presented as well rounded, well-adjusted, and very likeable teenagers. If, to quote Gallagher "this thing called 'same-sex' marriage" is "a vast… social… experiment – on children", it's a social experiment with positive results that do not, in fact, put "all children, not just the children in unisex unions, at risk." (Black 29). Black's argument that same-sex parents can raise happy and healthy children is, contrary to Gallagher's beliefs, well documented by sociological and psychological studies.[7]

Black's construction of family in *8* is very much in line with Stuart Hall's notion of "de-familiarization". In discussing this strategy, Hall argues that "it is more concerned with the *forms* of … representation than with introducing a new *content*. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable category of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while acknowledging that, since meaning can never be fixed, there can never be any final victories" (274). Black acknowledges that family means different things to different people and asks audiences to consider how family is not a fixed concept. He disrupts, or queers, heteronormative social imaginaries of the family and in doing so de-familiarizes the concept of family for audiences. This strategy relies on taking time to critically examine issues of power, privilege, oppression, and stereotyping that one might consciously or unconsciously ignore. It is about making "explicit what is often hidden" (Hall 274). In *8* Black asks the audience to critically examine what family, a category often taken for granted, really means; what it might mean for others; and what its role is in individuals' lives and society as a whole. By staging queer families and placing them at the centre of his narrative, Black makes them visible.

[7] See Perrin, Ellen C., Bejamin S. Siegel, and the COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH

“There are lots of kids in my school who don't want to see them as married.”: Shifting Definitions of Family and the Social Meaning of Marriage

Black takes a social semiotic approach to family in *8* and presents family as something multi-faceted: there are many kinds of families and what they look like evolves and changes over time. This is the rhetoric used by the prosecution who argue against the existence of “traditional” families making analogies to the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia case, which legalized interracial marriage in the United States (Black 14, 40, 49).

While *8* is a play about the legal right to marry, it is interesting to note how throughout the piece more emphasis is place on the social and symbolic benefits of marriage than the significant legal benefits and protections granted to married couples. As noted by the Human Rights Campaign, “there are 1,138 benefits, rights and protections provided on the basis of marital status in Federal law” (“An Overview of Federal Rights”). Gill documents some of these 1,138 benefits including “family leave, health insurance, disability insurance, pension and Social Security benefits, inheritance, and favorable treatment in income and estate tax matters, not to mention civic recognition and respect.” (62-3).

The symbolic and social benefits associated with marriage are incredibly important and with reference to interracial marriage, Gill highlights the symbolic importance of marriage, stating “if the nonrecognition of interracial marriage had the effect of maintaining white supremacy, the nonrecognition of same-sex marriage has the effect of maintaining the moral supremacy of heteronormative ideals” (Gill 62). Goldberg and Kuvalanka mirror this statement in their article stating,

"advocates have also emphasized the symbolic benefits of marriage, arguing that marriage equality may help to legitimate same-sex relationships and to combat the discrimination that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people and their families face" (35).

Throughout *8* the plaintiffs argue that the social benefits of marriage are of utmost importance. As Jeff states "the word 'marriage' has a meaning. If it wasn't so important, we wouldn't be here today" (Black 7). Theodore B. Olson, one of the plaintiffs' lawyers, also highlights the symbolic importance of marriage maintaining that "their state has rewritten its constitution in order to place them into a special disfavored category where their most intimate personal relationships are not valid, not recognized, and second rate." (Black 5).

Black opens *8* with a conversation between Elliot and Spencer that highlights the symbolic importance of marriage while emphasizing the reality that queer people are already creating families that are very similar to those of their peers in opposite-sex relationships. As Elliot says "I mean, we thought our parents WERE married, that's how they explained it to us. So when we think of marriage, we think of Kris and Sandy. We think of our parents. But I know for a fact that there are lots of kids in my school who don't want to see them as married." (Black 2). When Elliott discusses how there are other youth in his school who do not want to see his mothers as married, one aspect of the social significance of marriage is highlighted. Social semioticians emphasise the influence of systems of power on meaning and while meaning is always contextual and individuals can always choose to assign meaning in specific ways, van Leeuwen notes how within certain contexts "rules or

best practices … regulate how specific semiotic resources can be used or leave the users relatively free in their use of the resource." (4). Without laws recognizing that same-sex couples can in fact be married, it is up to individuals to decided how they want to understand long-term partnerships of same-sex couples regardless of how the couple understands and identifies their relationship. This is highlighted by Paul who states that "being able to call him my husband is so definitive. It's something that everyone understands." (Black 7).

Throughout *8* the argument is made that the marriage contract does not *make* the family, the family already exists, what the marriage contract does, is add important legal and societal recognition to the families created by same-sex couples. Families are unique and come in many forms and there are many families that are not built upon marriages. Some people chose to live in common-law relationships, some people chose to be single, some people create a "chosen family" of significant friends, ideally families of all sizes and varieties would be recognized. For the plaintiffs in *8*, being able to be married is an important part of their values and desires for their families. Black ends *8* on a note that reiterates the symbolic and social benefits of marriage for the plaintiffs Kris, Sandy, Paul, and Jeff with each plaintiff stating why marriage is important to them. As Sandy says "the first time somebody said to me, 'Are you married,' and I said 'Yes,' I would think, 'That feels good and honest and true.' I would feel less like I had to protect my kids or worry that they feel any shame or sense of not belonging." and as Jeff states "I would be able to stand alongside my parents and my brother and his wife, to be able to stand

there as one family who have all had the opportunity of being married; and the pride that one feels when that happens." (Black 52).

Creating Empathy and Empathy's Role in Documentary Theatre

8 is a play that relies heavily on empathy and Anderson and Wilkinson highlight how one of the strengths of documentary theatre as a genre is its "ability to explore complexity … both intellectual and emotional" (156). In stating the purpose of documentary theatre, Anderson and Wilkinson return to the emotional/ empathic stating "its purpose – to connect with an audience emotionally and intellectually, to empathically inform and empower through authentic story" (156). John Keefe explores similar ideas and expands on Bertolt Brecht arguing that when we experience empathy as audience members:

> Such complicity is not a 'disjuncture' but a double, phenomenological recognition of the stage itself and what it is showing. But that recognition is no less empathetic for being so removed; our empathetic imagination and experience allow us to feel and know we are feeling, to think and know we are thinking at the same time. Such distance is not the death of theatre, nor the preserve of an Epic niche but a necessary and always present factor in our being able to bear witness to the acts of theatre (43).

Black uses this aspect of documentary theatre, the combination of emotion and intellect, to the fullest in *8* by including witnesses who cater to the intellectual arguments for and against marriage equality alongside the testimony of the plaintiffs who cater to the emotions of the court and the audience, as Paul states "I

can't speak as an expert. I can speak as a human being that's lived it." (Black 8). Anderson and Wilkinson discuss how an audience's understanding that the stories shared in documentary theatre are "real" can contribute to empathy: "apart from the strength of the stories themselves, that is why hearing them makes them so accessible, emotional and empathic for an audience" (166). By sharing their lived experiences the plaintiffs in *8* demonstrate the very real affects of state sanctioned discrimination. The characters in *8* speak to audiences on a human, conversational level. By communicating with audiences as equals, the characters in *8* engage with complex moral and philosophical issues without over simplifying the issue of same-sex marriage or going "over the heads" of their audiences.

Documentary plays often deal with content that extends "beyond the communities that gave rise to their stories" and Anderson and Wilkinson cite *The Laramie Project* and *Talking to Terrorists* as examples of such plays: "embedded in these plays are issues like fear, disempowerment, ignorance and demonization" (158). When playwrights successfully use their pieces to demonstrate the ways in which the issues the plays stage transcend specific circumstances to address larger issues, they are able to access audience members' capacity for empathy in powerful ways.*The Laramie Project* is not just about the murder of Matthew Shepard, *Another American* is not just about Don't Ask, Don't Tell, *8* is not just about Proposition 8.

Anderson and Wilkinson argue that documentary theatre invites audiences to use their "emotional intelligence" and that this intelligence "is triggered by effective Verbatim Theatre: an intelligence, a capacity to connect, an opportunity to identify ourselves with others, a chance for our humanity to be touched and our

world to be understood" (166). Blank and Jensen, American practitioners of documentary theatre, argue that the empathy experienced by audiences of documentary theatre is a powerful tool that can be a catalyst for change due to its ability to challenge "self/other" binaries: "when we empathize … we can no longer view the other as an abstraction or an object – we have to experience the other as human; as human as ourselves. And then the questions that their stories raise …. become our questions too" (19). Blank and Jensen argue that "if the audience empathizes, they are implicated and involved" (19).

This type of empathy is closely related to Sally Munt's notion of "the visiting self". "The visiting self" "leans into the experience of others and listens and learns. When her story becomes (interactively) their story, identities are created" (Munt 5). Munt's visiting self relies on realism and asks visitors to find points of commonality that are specific so as not to universalize. The visiting self does not assume to understand the entirety of a person's experience but rather can relate to specific parts of it: "this sensibility produces a sense of belonging, a sense of 'we', which is not an attempt to universalize, but rather an articulation of quite specific experiences which are highly dependent on the use of realism as a narrative form" (Munt 5). Reed expands on Munt: "this kind of identification, necessary for human connection across any difference, maintains that we operate within each other's stories and create subjectivities in relation to those stories" (309).

Blank and Jensen discuss their experience listening to the story of a man on death row "hearing his voice, right there, in the room … took our experiences out of the newspaper-story ' isn't that terrible' abstraction, and into the realm of human

empathy" (16). Blank and Jensen argue that "good theatre could, if done right, allow an audience member to empathize with someone from completely different circumstances" (16). While this is a valid argument, it is important to note that while this may have been the approach of other examples of queer documentary theatre like *The Laramie Project* and *Another American*, this is not the approach *8* takes. Rather than asking audience members to relate to "someone from completely different circumstances" *8* asks audience members (assuming the majority of people in an audience want to be in monogamous married relationships) to relate to someone who may be more like them than they think (Blank and Jensen 16).

This tactic, asking audiences to find commonalities and points of entry with characters is described by Reed who in discussing Ellen DeGeneres argues that the "identification" much of the American public has with Ellen is "not based on sameness" (312). Ellen is an out lesbian who "is able to create a rapport with a mainstream audience based on her likeability and use of humor" and Reed argues that in doing so, Ellen forges "political friendships" with audiences (312). Reed cites Allen who drawing on Aristotle argues "that the key to effective political rhetoric was through the cultivation of goodwill and friendship" (312). Reed goes on to state that Ellen "is able to connect based on what audience members share, not based on how they are the same, which for Allen is the essence of political friendship" (312). As a celebrity, Ellen operates in a unique space. People inherently relate to her in a different way than with "regular people". The notion of the political friendship however still provides us with an interesting lens through which to examine the role

of empathy in documentary theatre, particularly when read alongside Munt's notion of the "visiting self".

The family scenes throughout *8* invite audience members to connect with the plaintiffs and their families based on what they share as they become Munt's "visiting selves". What parent has not at some point said something along the lines of "your *moms*. It's a special kind of torture to be, like, at a restaurant with your moms. Right?" or in a moment of exasperation "fine. Tacos, takeout, whatever you want" to their teenager (Black 28, 43)? Many parents and/or people who want to become parents can also relate to Kris' statement that her kids "are about the most responsible, important, meaningful things I will ever do in my whole life" (Black 43). The desire to forge political friendships is clearly articulated in one of Kris' monologues in which she states:

> I don't want to draw people's criticism. In fact, quite the opposite. I would really like people to like me. So since I know I have this trait that I can't change that people don't like, I go to great lengths to have other traits people do like. So I put a significant amount of time and energy into being likable so that when discriminatory things happen, I can turn it around. (Black 24).

In discussing the difference between novels and stories shared orally, Walter Benjamin argues that "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual…" (364). The role of the storyteller as described by Benjamin

is arguably the role of the documentary playwright, to share a group or an individual's story in such a way that an audience can forge an emotional and intellectual connection to it. Benjamin highlights the importance of communal as opposed to solitary experiences of stories and this is a key element of documentary theatre that will be discussed later and in more depth in the third and final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 3: Collective Memory, the Scene, and the Public Sphere:

An Examination of the Audience and its Role in Documentary Theatre

"Every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity" (Nora 15)

In "Memory, Mimesis, Tragedy: The Scene Before Philosophy", Kottman states "the birth of tragedy lies in nothing other than the radical separation of work from the scene" (94). Kottman's scene refers to the audience of a particular performance and their socio-political identities (94). In discussing the impact of political theatre in ancient Greece, Kottman also addresses the notion of *"oikeia kaka*" or "something bad that touched home" and states that the tears that occurred following performances of Phrynichus' *The Fall of Miletus* were a direct result of "the scene", particularly an audience's shared memory of the events documented in the play (84-5).

I believe that this "radical separation" is not possible or even desirable where theatre for social change is concerned and am interested in expanding on Kottman's "scene" by exploring it in relation to the Habermassian notion of the "public sphere". Kottman argues that shared memories "die with the people who bear them" and in this chapter, I will also argue that documentary plays are a medium through which communities can preserve collective memories to resist their death (Kottman 85). Pierre Nora argues that "the quest for memory is the search for one's history" and I will draw on Nora to explore how queer people have used documentary theatre to "transmit and conserve collectively remembered values" and events (13, 7).

The Scene as the Public Sphere

Kottman's scene not only consists of the play that took place, but the audience and their connections (or lack thereof) to what is being performed. Kottman argues that the root of tragedy is the ability to separate the story being told from the community it is being told to (94). He implies that as a genre, tragedy aims to create situations in which emotions experienced by an audience are "reducible solely to the effect of its [the play's] 'imitation of action'" and its "plot or script" as opposed to their lived experiences and how these are (or are not) reflected in the work (94, 84).

While this "radical separation" may be at the root of tragedy, to be effective, plays that address systems of oppression need to be written with specific goals and communities, or "scenes," in mind. This makes an analysis of the scene particularly interesting in relation to theatre for social change since the identities, experiences, and memories of audience members become paramount in both the creation, and reception of such theatre.

To expand on, and use Kottman's scene to explore theatre for social change we can combine it with Habermas' "public sphere". In the article "From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre," Botham defines the public sphere as "the locus, distinct from state and market, where private individuals gather together as a public to debate matters of common concern" (309). The possibilities for theatres to fulfill this role are plentiful and Nancy Fraser actually uses the word "theatre" in her definition of the public sphere as "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is

enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs…" (Fraser 110).

One of the defining characteristics of the public sphere is its members' ability to "temporarily disregard status in favour of rational argumentation" (Kottman 94, Botham 309). This is important in that it presumes that upon entering into the public sphere people are magically able to shed intrinsic parts of their identities, particularly those that are linked to systems of power and oppression such as educational level, race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and religion. As Carol Hanisch reminds us, "the personal is political" and the attempt to "disregard status" becomes problematic when people attempt to create spaces for change as it assumes that people can create a space unaffected by external systems of power and oppression. The emphasis on rational argumentation is also problematic in that it privileges one way of knowing disregarding other forms of knowledge production and distribution.

A number of scholars, including Habermas, have critiqued the notion of the public sphere for not taking into account power structures that limit access to specific marginalized groups and for its reliance on "rational argument" at the potential expense of other ways of knowing (Botham 309-10, Reinelt, "Rethinking", 17-18). Feminists have provided significant critiques of Habermas' discourse of rationality and have argued that "the supposition that the idea of the critical public sphere requires a separation between private and public rests upon a repressive attempt to render some human attributes and modes of interaction foundational, beyond the realm of public discussion" (Johnson 33).

In his reflections on the public sphere, Habermas acknowledges "the coexistence of competing public spheres", including spheres that are "subcultural or class-specific" and that there are "processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere" (Habermas in Calhoun 425). In her feminist critique of the public sphere, Fraser argues that "not only were there always a plurality of competing publics, but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual" (Fraser 116 in Calhoun).

Michael Warner expands on Habermas' understandings of the public sphere and offers many definitions of the public, emphasizing that in any time, at anyplace, in any society, multiple publics exist (49). There exist publics organized around geographic location, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Publics may arise out of specific events or out of a more general sense that an issue needs a forum for discussion. Increasingly, publics may also be found and created on-line. In discussing counterpublics, Warner clearly states that it is important to recognize that not all publics have equal access to power wielding bodies (84). These counterspheres are spaces which seek to challenge "dominant" ideologies and "a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (Warner 86). They are spaces that seek to be "transformative, not replicative merely" (Warner 88). Fraser expands on the role of counterpublics arguing that "the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics" can lead to "greater democracy" (117).

Habermas, Reinelt, Botham, and Warner draw attention to important accessibility issues related to the notion of public sphere. Habermas argues that "we

call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs" (1). This high level of accessibility is nearly impossible to achieve and if this is the standard for a space to be considered public, can any space really fully be considered public? How can practitioners of theatre for social change ensure that their spaces are as accessible, and in turn, as "public" as possible?

While there are accessibility barriers associated with any public sphere, there are particular ones that ought to be recognized with regards to theatre. Not all theatrical spaces or events will ever be fully accessible, but by taking time to think about accessibility, practitioners of theatre for social change can increase their potential audience while also working to mitigate systems of oppression that would inhibit potential audience members from participating in the event. Some accessibility issues that theatre practitioners should consider include: physical accessibility (physical barriers), cost (price of tickets), location (transportation to/from the venue), time (most performances are at night), and the reliance on speech (lack of sign language and captioning options).

In addition to these obstacles, there are also barriers associated with the codes and conventions of traditional theatre. If people don't attend theatrical events frequently, they may not know what is expected of them as audience members. In particular, it is common practice not to leave the theatre during a performance. This can become an issue when dealing with sensitive material as theatre for social change often does. Can audience members leave? If so, how? If someone needs to leave, can they reenter?

David Hare, an English practitioner of verbatim theatre believes that "'a play is […] what happens between the stage and the audience'" (David Hare in Botham 308). This speaks to the power of the scene and how each audience member will have a particular experience with a play based on their identities and lived experiences. By combining Kottman's notion of the scene with elements of Habermas' public sphere (most significantly the desire to cultivate spaces in which people can convene to discuss issues of significance) we can begin to understand the type of scene or sphere that needs to be created for theatre for social change. This space is one in which theatre creators acknowledge the importance of audience members' identities while attempting to create arenas in which issues of importance to particular communities can be discussed.

Similar to Kottman's scene, one definition Warner offers of a public is "a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in a visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, grounded by the event or by the shared physical space" (50). This definition highlights the importance of the temporal and spatial nature of theatre. The theatre provides a space in which people can "gather together as a public to debate matters of common concern" but this debate is contained to the time and space of the performance (Botham 309). While people may (and hopefully will) continue to discuss ideas raised by the play after the performance is over, as soon as they leave the theatre they bring the discussion into new and different spheres.

Reinelt discusses how people who have been "excluded from the official public sphere" throughout history have found alternative spaces in which they could

engage in discussion and debate and how in creating these alternative public spheres, marginalized populations often turn to theatre ("Rethinking" 18-19). In an examination of Warner's "counterpublics", Reinelt highlights how Warner cites "theatre as one of the vehicles" counterpublics use ("Rethinking" 19). In addition to the obvious opportunity theatre affords marginalized individuals to share their stories and in turn challenge oppressive regimes of representation, one reason why marginalized groups may turn to the theatre to organize as counterpublics is that as an art form theatre is relatively accessible, particularly when compared to other story-driven, means of communication such as television or film. Groups do not need extensive resources or training to stage successful small scale theatre productions and perform them for public audiences.

Theatre has the ability to operate as a counter sphere to other spaces of discussion and debate by combining "rational argumentation" with opportunities for people to express their knowledge emotionally and through embodied means (Kottman 94, Botham 309). Theatre creates a space for people's lived experiences to contribute to public discourse, for their lives and histories to be valued, through the sharing of stories. This is especially true for people who belong to marginalized groups whose stories are not frequently reflected in mainstream media.

We are all bearers of knowledge. The act of simply living and being in the world provides members of marginalized populations with an understanding of the ways in which systems of oppression affect people, and this understanding is not merely theoretical, but practical. Members of marginalized populations may not know how to express their experiences of oppression in theoretical or academic

ways and as such risk being excluded from traditional public spheres rooted in "rational argumentation". To be considered rational, we are often asked to negate our feelings and our embodied knowledge. In a pursuit of rationality traditional public spheres deny the value of knowledge gained through lived, personal experience. When we share our experiences with others, particularly experiences of marginalization, powerful learning can happen. Theatre provides performers/creators and audiences with opportunities to learn through the sharing of stories and is a particularly important counter sphere in that it not only allows for multiple ways of knowing, but celebrates and foregrounds them.

So what is the role of theatre in activist efforts? Most plays will not change laws or public policy. Most plays will not feed hungry people. Most plays cannot provide housing or childcare or end gender based violence. That's all true. What plays can do is spark conversation: "In political theatre as in Habermasian philosophy, the road to reconstruction starts with the possibilities of communication" (Botham 308). Plays are spaces in which people engage with subjects they otherwise would not consider. They can also create a space for people who already are engaged in activist efforts to raise awareness and create connections. As the American Foundation for Equal Rights and Broadway Impact (the organizations behind Dustin Lance Black's *8*) states "together, we hope to change hearts and minds" (19). In a different but similar vein, Botham argues that "whatever influence those standing on the stage attain depends ultimately on those sitting in the galleries" (Botham 310). Ultimately, the public sphere becomes important in understanding the scene in which theatre for social change occurs as the goal of activist theatre is not to change the world but

rather to spark the thoughts and conversations that might.

Preserving History

So why do create documentary theatre? Why are queer people and other marginalized groups drawn to this form? The notion of the public sphere begins to provide us with some valuable insights into why marginalized groups turn to the stage. As we have already established, the theatre creates a space in which discussions can occur and community can be built. In discussing education and social movements, Corina Dykstra and Michael Law argue that having a clear vision and a means to communicate it is central to activist work, "transformative education requires the 'articulation and remembrance of a vision' and the values that sustain it" (123). Theatre provides activists with one means of "articulating and remembering" and even sharing their vision.

Kottman's argument that memories are lost when the people who originally held them die has the potential to be particularly true for queer people whose histories, like those of many marginalized populations, are not accounted for in dominant narratives. As the creators of *The Gay Heritage Project*, a new piece of queer theatre that premiered at Buddies in Bad Times[8] in November 2013 state "after centuries of queer history being hidden in the closet and the loss of almost an entire generation to HIV/AIDS, *The Gay Heritage Project* is an important step in the excavation, preservation, and promotion of a community's cultural history" ("The Gay Heritage Project"). For members of marginalized groups like queer people,

[8] Buddies in Bad Times is Canada's largest queer theatre company and "the largest and longest-running queer theatre company in the world" ("Our History.")

uncovering a lost history can be an important element of identity formation, a way to connect with something larger than yourself, as Favorini says: “we may ‘have’ memory, but memory also has us: it tells us who we are” (Favorini, 2007, 30).

Martin argues that “how events are remembered, written, archived, staged, and performed helps determine the history they become” and theatre provides one means for marginalized groups to actively share their stories as they resist the “death” of their memories (9). Not only does the theatre provide a space in which memories can be shared but it may also be an ideal space for this process to occur. Favorini describes theatre “as an activity of remembering” and states that“as a ‘time art’ (like music, dance, and literature), rather than a ‘space art’ (architecture, painting, sculpture), theatre has a formal affinity for memory” (Favorini, “Some Memory Plays”, 31, 30). The process of searching for and sharing the stories of minoritized people allows for counternarratives and spheres to emerge. Stories and memories allow us to incorporate individual lived experiences into larger narratives. Memory scholars Selma Leydesdorff and Nanci Adler state “testimonies and memoirs can be invaluable sources for filling in the blanks of official history” (ix).

In the seminal text "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Pierre Nora speaks to the importance of actively preserving memories, particularly for members of marginalized communities:

> *Lieux de memoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations … because such activities no longer

> come naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory … intensely illustrates the truth of *lieux de memoire* – that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. (Nora 12)

Nora argues that "the remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition, in the silence of custom, in the repetition of the ancestral, have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility" (7). If we examine memory in relation to the public sphere, memory which is not inherently rational and that is rooted in personal experience is excluded while history which strives to be "intellectual and secular" is privileged (Nora 9). This positions memory within the domain of counterpublics and as such it is up to these counterpublics to actively seek ways to preserve memories and recognize their importance and potential in public discourse.

Remembering is both an individual and a collective process. Nora references Maurice Halbwachs and argues that "there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual" (Nora 9). The process of searching for and staging memories can allow for individuals to understand their identities in new ways as they find connections between their story and the stories of others. It can also be incredibly edifying and empowering as people are able to take ownership over the ways in which they represent themselves and are represented. To quote Nora "the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history. The task of remembering makes everyone his

own historian" (15). In becoming our own historians, we are able to understand the powerful ways in which histories shape our lives and identities. We are able to locate ourselves within cultural narratives so that we can create our own. We are able to uncover and share the knowledge that is held within memories and communities that is often denied by historians and left waiting to be accessed (Nora 7).

Memory, The Scene/ Sphere, and Docudrama

In discussing the impact of political theatre in ancient Greece, Kottman addresses the notion of *"oikeia kaka*" or "something bad that touched home" and states that audiences were affected by performances of *The Fall of Miletus* due to their shared memories of the events documented in the play (84-5). As I've discussed, Kottman argues that collective memories are lost when the people who originally held them die. This understanding of memory and the scene does not take into account the ways in which memories can be shared across generations and times/ locations. A more nuanced understanding of memory can help us understand the impact of theatre for social change, particularly the ways in which "*okeia kaka"* can impact audiences whose lived experiences may differ from those depicted theatrically.

Nora argues that *lieux de memoire* are the spaces in which history and memory interact (19). Documentary theatre stages both memory and history and exists within Nora's *lieux de memoire*. Importantly, a playwright or playwrights mediate the histories and memories that are staged in documentary plays. In a

departure from other mediums of sharing history, the process of interpretation is fore grounded in documentary theatre. As Martin states, "those who make documentary theatre interrogate specific events … through the creation of their own versions of events" (9). While traditional sources of history (books, encyclopedias, newspapers) are biased we often read them as if they are neutral. Audiences of documentary theatre recognize that they are engaging with a work of art, and in doing so understand that they are witnessing an interpretation of the events being staged by the playwright and production team as opposed to some unbiased truth. To approach a piece of documentary theatre as if it were unbiased "ignores the process of change that any verbatim testimony is subjected to as it becomes theatre" (Anderson and Wilkinson 155).

Nora's *lieux de memoire* operate in a similar space: "*lieux de memoire* have no referent in reality: or rather, they are their own referent: pure exclusively self-referential signs. This is not to say that they are without content, physical presence, or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieux de memoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history." (23-4). Documentary plays both stage history and are history themselves. They stage memories and create new ones. In describing documentary plays, Favorini states that they are "a play that is not only written from documents but itself strives to be one" (Favorini, *Voicings*, xxviii).

Nora argues that "an archive, becomes a *lieu de memoire* only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura" (19). The process of assigning symbolic significance to historical events is central to the creation and staging of documentary plays. It is largely due this investment of new meanings and

significance to events beyond their original importance that pieces of documentary theatre continue to be performed long after the events they initially responded to took place. How does *The Laramie Project* move beyond the events that took place in Wyoming in the late nineties to become symbolic of the effects of homophobia on communities? How does *Another American* encourage us to look at the impact of laws on our cultural consciousness, attitudes, values, and behaviours? How is *8* about more than marriage?

Returning to the idea of the death of memories, Walter Benjamin claims "the value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new" but that stories (as opposed to mere facts) are able to survive and thrive long after they are originally told (366). Stories have this power due to the imagination we invest in them. The creators of documentary plays invite audiences and theatre practitioners to use their imaginations to invest symbolic meaning onto their plays and to allow this symbolic meaning to move their plays away from being merely historical accounts. By turning historical events into stories, the creators of documentary theatre ensure that events they believe should not be forgotten continue to be discussed.

While the story of Matthew Shepard's death may continue to be discussed by queer people and their allies, it is no longer something that the general public is aware of. Thanks to *The Laramie Project* over a decade after Shepard's death, people continue to learn about, and hopefully learn from, the tragic events of October 1998. In becoming a story and not just an event, Shepard's story has retained its significance long after the "moment in which it was new" (Benjamin 366). In writing

this thesis, I have begun to notice a similar pattern with *8*. In discussing the subject matter of my thesis I have learned that Proposition 8 happened just long enough ago that at least here in Canada, it has become something that many people no longer know about and/or remember. Through performances of *8* in which the events around Proposition 8 become stories, audiences are able to re-access the information while negotiating its significance in new contexts.

As documentary plays escape history and enter into *lieu de memoire* they allow for audiences to connect to them in different ways and in different circumstances. In discussing the connections between history and memory James Wertsch and Henry Roediger note that memory, unlike history, is intrinsically linked with the present, it has "an ongoing, vital connection with contemporary cultural discourse and identity" (320). Anderson and Wilkinson express similar ideas in relation to the theatre stating "stories are about a particular place, time and community. But recent Verbatim plays … have universal themes that reach beyond the communities that gave rise to their stories" (158). This is particularly true of *8.* While *8* is a play about a particular court case that challenged a particular proposition in California in 2010, it is also a play about homophobia, an issue that is not confined to the courtroom, the state of California, or the United States of America.

When audience members use their imaginations to access universal themes while finding new meaning in historical events they are able to gain a deeper understanding of issues that may not directly affect their lives. Events on stage remind audiences of stories from their own lives, allowing audience members to

find connections between seemingly foreign stories and their own lived experiences and memories. This is highlighted by Leydesdorff and Adler who state that "narratives also serve as a means through which subjects can express how they consider their lives to be interwoven with others. When the narrative is told to a responsive listener, this expression is part of a seemingly shared world, with shared frames of reference" (x). Leydesdorf and Adler also argue that "memory not only stores the past but restructures, mediates, and adapts it to the semantic frames and needs of a given society" (xviii).The testimonies presented in *8* ask audiences to allow their minds and memories to work in this way as they discover how the plaintiffs' encounters with Proposition 8 and state sanctioned discrimination relate to their lives and experiences. One moment that serves as a particularly good example of this is when Paul speaks about his desire to start a family with his partner Jeff: "we would love to have a family, but the timeline for us has always been marriage first, because it solidifies the relationship. And we gain access to that language that is global, where it won't affect our children in the future" (Black 10). This is a sentiment that many people who have wanted to start families can connect to regardless of their sexual orientation. A similar moment occurs when Kris describes her children as "the most responsible, important, meaningful things I will ever do in my whole life", a sentiment many parents would be able to relate to (Black 43). These moments in the play provides heterosexual audience members who have desired to "get married and start a family" or who are parents to see the ways in which their stories are "interwoven" with those of the queer people represented on stage.

Throughout *8* the plaintiffs' and witnesses' testimonies often speak to the impact heteronormativity and homophobia have had on their lives. Kris describes the ways in which "coming out" is not a one time event: "the decision every day to come out or not, at work, at home, at PTA, at music, at soccer, is exhausting … I have to decide every day if I want to come out everywhere I go and take the chance that somebody will have a hostile reaction" (Black 24). While I am not Californian, I am queer and this moment of the play, exemplifies a point in which I experience *"oikeia kaka*" as I am able to tap into a body of knowledge (in this case, living in a heteronormative and at times homophobic society) that I share with the people whose stories are being staged.

A nuanced understanding of memory is critical in an examination of theatre for social change. By exploring the ways in which collective memory can extend beyond the realm of lived experiences we are able to develop a fuller and richer understanding of the ways in which audiences experience plays. Approaching pieces of documentary theatre as *lieux de memoires* allows us to explore the unique relationship this form has with both memory and history and the ways in which pieces of documentary theatre are able to speak to situations and audiences different from that which they originally addressed.

Conclusion

There has been little research conducted around *8* by other scholars, and this has provided me with an exciting research opportunity and the chance to make some contributions to the study of documentary queer theatre. This thesis has argued that *8* is an important piece of queer documentary theatre as it moves away from the victim/ criminal paradigms to show queer people as happy, healthy, caring, and productive members of society who stand up to discrimination and win. I have argued that *8* invites audiences to empathize with the characters and their stories and that documentary plays provide marginalized groups with an important way of creating and preserving their stories and history while also serving as a space of discussion and debate around current and past social issues.

8 is a play that engages with what I define as "performative activism". In watching *8* audiences see "normal Americans" take on the role of activists. Audiences learn that sharing stories can be a powerful activist tool and that anyone can be an activist. Furthermore, they may be encouraged to take on activist roles themselves. *8* stages activist efforts while engaging with larger movements that extend beyond the play itself. *8* is a particularly strong piece of activist theatre due to its focus on "what happens when the curtain closes". Broadway Impact and The American Foundation for Equal Rights, the organizations that grant performance rights for the play, provide local production teams with resources to facilitate talk backs as well as ample information to help them further their and their audiences' understandings of Proposition 8 and the marriage equality movement in the United States. Through these resources, production teams and audiences are linked to

organizations that they can get involved with should they want to engage further with activist work.

In *Geographies of Learning*, Jill Dolan argues that "for queer theatre to really flourish" we cannot just be academics ("thinkers"), practitioners ("doers"), or audiences ("consumers") (105). "We need a community that thoughtfully, passionately, and responsibly goes about engaging in all three" (Dolan 105). *8* provides exciting opportunities for people to do just that. The producers of *8* encourage communities to stage readings of *8* and in doing so, encourage people who may normally identify as audience members to become practitioners. Talk backs are encouraged after these productions and when they occur performers and audience members are able to engage in a critical discussion about the play and the issues it raises. This is performative activism. This is where documentary plays thrive.

I had the opportunity to stage a reading of *8* during Pride Week 2014 at the University of Alberta. At the begging of the process of writing this thesis, I asked myself "How does *8* succeed in both documenting a pivotal moment in queer history while addressing larger issues and themes including love, family, and human rights that extend beyond the context of the Perry vs. Brown trial?" This production marked the second Alberta production of *8* and provided me with an interesting opportunity to reflect on these questions and the role *8* plays in an international setting.

During the rehearsal process the cast, our director, and I engaged in discussions about the issue of marriage equality, the rhetoric used by opponents of

marriage equality, and the arguments of both sides of the Perry vs. Brown trial. A recurring theme, especially among younger members of the team was shock. Shock that people can be so blatantly, and so vocally homophobic; shock that fear, hate, and prejudice can have such a profound affect of the legal system of a country that prides itself on supporting human rights; shock that Proposition 8 (which some of them learned about for the first time through this production) could actually happen. The play also reminded us of how fortunate we are to have marriage equality in Canada. As a production team, we were keenly aware that homophobia, whether we see/ experience it on a daily basis or not, is alive and well. That having our rights enshrined is just the beginning. That is why events like Pride Week are important and why we need to continue to (re)educate ourselves, our peers, our families, our friends, and our communities and country about queer issues in Canada and the world at large.

While *8* stages a specific moment in queer history and deals explicitly with the issue of marriage equality in the United States, it also deals with more universal themes and, at its core, *8* is a play about human rights, family, and love, issues which transcend national boundaries and make this play equally relevant for Canadian and other international audiences. *8* serves as a reminder for Canadian audiences that the fight for queer rights, and societal acceptance does not end with marriage equality. Queer people continue to be marginalized within North America and internationally. We must fight for the rights of those who face even more marginalization than "mainstream adult queers" including queer youth and queers of colour. We need to remember that trans people are an important part of the

queer community and fight for their rights while acknowledging the struggles that are specific to trans community.

As the fight continues, I hope to see new pieces of queer documentary emerge. Documentary plays do something special. They stage and celebrate the lives, stories, and histories of real people. They help us remember our past while teaching us how to take action towards a better future. They help build community, both through their creation and performance, and invite people to engage with activist thought and issues related to social justice through an accessible medium: storytelling.

So what's next? *8* is still a relatively new play and it will be exciting to see how it continues to develop. Will the play be published in print? Will the livestream stay up on Youtube? Will performance rights continue to be free for community organizations? Will the play continue to be performed around the world? Will *8* have a life after marriage equality is achieved across the United States? Once marriage equality is achieved will performances of the play change? How? I am also excited to see what kind of scholarship begins to surround the play. I doubt that I am the only scholar examining this culturally significant piece of theatre and hope that some of the scholarship happening around *8* is published and shared. While this thesis focused on *8* as a piece of queer documentary theatre, future areas of research surrounding *8* could include research into *8* in relation to other works of

art that address marriage equality[9], the use of celebrities in activist art, and the use of social media and the internet in theatre.

[9] For example *Standing On Ceremony* (Brian Shnipper et al.), *Glory Box* and *Us* (Tim Miller), "I Do" (and Andrea Gibson) among many others

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