

“At any given Before moment”: Memory, Trauma, and Pop Culture in Washburn’s *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*

This paper investigates the interconnectivity of trauma, fetishization, and popular collective memory in Anne Washburn’s dark comedy, *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*. With the interpolation of the “Cape Feare” episode of FOX’s *The Simpson’s*, American consumer products like Diet Coke, and contemporary American pop music, Washburn creates a space that is hyper-aware of its own performance. As the characters in the play attempt to perform “normalcy” in this space, that is to say their daily actions prior to the crash of the electric grid, they struggle with recreating the “Before moment.” The characters’ clamber for comfort takes place firstly as remembering *The Simpson’s* episode, the memory of which will become a commodity of comfort as time passes. Since life has changed, so have personal performances and the understandings of identities. The survivors of the post-electric society must find comfort in establishing theatrical performances of popular culture -- whether through music videos or television shows. As these theatrical performances shift from casual conversations of recollection to high Greek tragedy they become the cornerstone for the surviving generations.

However, these recreations are not entirely authentic. How do these productions shift with time? What is modified? While they are remembered, these products of popular culture are also misremembered in the tense pauses that Washburn creates. To be clear, these are not wasted pauses. This pause in memory is the space to rewrite and investigate social performance. It is within these tense pauses that the characters are able to, and almost necessarily, fetishize and effectively rewrite aspects of the American narrative in order to cope with their trauma, including the representations and performances of sexuality and gender. Thus, *Mr. Burns* provides a microcosm for observing the interpolation of pop culture in American memory and identity as it specifically relates to our collective processing of trauma.