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Debt and Control: Indebted Subject in Contemporary American Drama

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Extended ABSTRACT

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 rekindled authors' interest in investigating the interaction between literature and the economic milieu. In particular, it exerted a dramatic impact on American drama, influencing playwrights' visions, themes, and concerns, leading to a more diverse and socially conscious theatrical landscape. Many dramatists, who had themselves been affected by the financial collapse, shifted their focus towards the economic struggles and social instability triggered by the recession, creating works that reflected the anxieties and deprivations of economically insecure people and captured the human cost of neoliberal economy. To explore this post-crisis tendency in contemporary American drama in the 2010s, this paper concentrates on a number of American plays produced in the years following the financial collapse, including Annie Baker's *The Flick* (2013), Stephen Karam's *The Humans* (2014), Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* (2015), and Dominique Morisseau's *Skeleton Crew* (2017). References will also be made to Ayad Akhtar's views presented in *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt* (2016). This paper suggests that these plays, in their attempts to denounce the neoliberal ideology, highlight the adverse impacts of debt and debt culture upon the lower classes of society. In order to do so, the article draws upon the thoughts of Gilles Deleuze and Maurizio Lazzarato concerning neoliberalism and its socioeconomic logic. Their examination of contemporary Western societies delves into the intersection of debt and the preservation of capitalist domination. They contend that debt functions as a means through which the ruling class consolidates and extends its dominance, effectively binding individuals to cycles of indebtedness and economic subjugation. Indeed, they view debt as a form of biopolitical control, illustrating how indebtedness is deeply embedded within the structure of neoliberalism, and how it fosters conditions of precarity and restrains individuals' freedom and agency within the neoliberal age. The paper, then, explores the representation of the indebted individuals in the plays mentioned and demonstrates how neoliberalism regulates and constructs its preferred subject through debt: a calculating subject singly focused on self-interest with little, if any, regard for non-economic and/or moral considerations. In these plays, debt is portrayed as a source of anxiety and an effective control mechanism that weighs heavily on the characters, shaping their decisions and familial and interpersonal relationships. These plays, then, point to the interaction between neoliberal debt and the self-interested conduct of the characters to investigate how neoliberalism affects communal harmony and unity, precluding the solidarity required to counteract the exploitative policies of the neoliberal order effectively.

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