POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN FOUR PLAYS BY LYNN NOTTAGE

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Abstract: *Since the 1990s, Lynn Nottage's drama has constantly spoken to audiences and critics alike, as her plays have depicted characters whose individual struggles question the status quo and inspire self-interrogation for audiences in the United States of America and elsewhere. Working with an expanded definition of political engagement, the analysis here examines four plays in which Nottage turns a seamstress from the turn of the twentieth century into a protagonist capable of holding the audience's attention for the entire length of a play (*Intimate Apparel*), reevaluates the communist overtones of the fight for racial justice at mid-century (*Crumbs from the Table of Joy*), exposes lingering colonialism and cultural appropriation (*Mud, River, Stone*), and attacks extreme violence enacted on women as part of the ravages of war (*Ruined*). In an interview, Nottage talks about the need to challenge oneself and she does live up to her goal of defying labels. As the current study shows, she cannot simply be celebrated as an African American woman playwright, but as an important voice in American drama today.*

Keywords*: drama, performance, African American identity, race, gender, sisterhood, social change, colonialism in Africa, rewriting history, bearing witness*

This study focuses on four plays by Lynn Nottage, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), *Mud, River, Stone* (1998), *Intimate Apparel* (2003) and *Ruined* (2008), all of which reflect on essential aspects of political engagement. The analysis first examines the African American women's experience as revealed by the focus on characters from Manhattan and Brooklyn at two separate historical moments: 1905 in *Intimate Apparel* and 1950 in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*. Further political issues, this time relevant to constructions of Africanness today, are discussed when Nottage works with two African settings: the Democratic Republic of the Congo in *Ruined* and probably Mozambique in *Mud, River, Stone*.

Nottage has emerged from a tradition of African American writing and performance that has already exposed the mainstream audience to some of the most poignant issues at the heart of the discourse on race and gender. She continues the work of previous generations who demonstrated that racial and feminist issues are not marginal, but enlightening for the debates exploring Americanness itself, as Annette Saddik explains: "During the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of American identity as performative was becoming increasingly evident in the work of African-American playwrights, who were often presenting race as a series of roles based on cultural expectations rather than as an essential and stable core of being" (72). Thus the relationship between drama and identity politics is recognized as a very special one, offering the chance for the discovery of new facets underdeveloped by other genres.

Although often discussed along African American women playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks, with whom she shares the taste for the vibrant inflections of black culture and language, as well as the impulse to innovate theatrical forms, Nottage has managed to carve her own path and to achieve critical acclaim in her own right, going beyond the label of a minority woman playwright: "The beautifully textured and layered meaning in her work place her right alongside the best, brightest and most promising writers of her time" (Shannon, "An Intimate Look" 191).

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In an interview, Nottage discloses the fact that her mission as a playwright is engagement: "I think we should somehow be engaging the culture we live in, commenting on it and helping people to understand. And just have a conversation with culture" (Shannon, "An Interview" 200-201). The need to articulate important human concerns on stage, to represent one's artistic vision, to continue the dialogue with one's predecessors, to persevere in the work of changing past and present wrongs is essential for her as it is for other major playwrights. Nottage seems to be aware of the theoretical considerations on theater that include the conviction that

> All performance arises from and expresses the community; it is public and therefore political in nature, impacting the larger society, and it operates in circular fashion, reaching backward in time to give speech to silenced forebears, and extending into the future, nurturing the next generation. (Brown 157)

With Nottage, the main preoccupation lies in giving African American women a voice and fronting their experience: "Women are my focal point. … I deal with the black woman because I feel we have been marginalized for so long that it's time for us to be center stage. The black male is there, but I am telling the story of the black woman" (Shannon, "An Interview" 199). In the same interview, the playwright further testifies to her commitment to portraying the significance of African American women's role throughout history. Her very plays are a method of forcing the mainstream audience to acknowledge these women's presence and of turning their experience into visible traces of struggle, continuance and affirmation:

> I feel I am rescuing our voices from history. We, as African American women, don't see ourselves in the history books. We don't see ourselves in the literature, unless, of course, we're serving the cold refreshments or nannying the children. And I think we play a much greater role. And so I feel like I have to constantly go back and say 'Wait a minute. I'm here!'. (Shannon, "An Interview" 200)

The current study demonstrates that on the one hand, Nottage rewrites history by reversing the practice of silencing female subjects and of relegating them to secondary positions and, on the other hand, she engages in challenging her audiences to become aware of black women's current predicament, activism, need for self-definition and fight for justice.

In a study entitled "Engaging Social Issues, Expressing a Political Outlook" precisely because the author searches for enlarging the understanding of what a play with political content means in the case of women playwrights, Gwynn MacDonald resorts to a theoretician of women novelists' productions, Sharon M. Harris[1], to explain:

> Harris argues that definitions of political literature need to expand to include literature that acknowledges the dynamic interrelation of the political and the social, as well as the impact of sociopolitical issues on the life of the individual. This expanded definition of political literature has at its core the notion that, not only is there a politicized self (the

[1] The title referenced is *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901* (MacDonald 106).

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> personal is political), but also that true social change comes from inner and individual change, which eventually spreads out into the community. (106)

Given this reconsideration, the four plays under discussion here give the full measure of Nottage's exploration of political engagement since firstly, her protagonists illustrate confrontations with themselves and others that bring about individual and communal transformation and secondly, the playwright herself engenders self-interrogation and even action among the members of her plays' audiences.

One of her most appreciated plays to date, *Intimate Apparel*, goes back to the turn of the twentieth century and reconstructs the story of a seamstress working in Manhattan. The critical reception has labeled the thirty-five year old Esther Mills as "a woman of faith, courage, and caution, combined with resolution", noticing that "she epitomizes the dutiful, docile and obedient servant" (Shannon, "An Intimate Look" 188). At the beginning of the play Esther expresses her belief that she will never marry and she seems resigned to such a fate of labor and no joy. When prompted by a client to keep believing that she will find the right man in the future, Esther confesses:

> I been working since I was nine years old with barely a day's rest. In fact, the other evening I was at my sewing machine and I stopped work and all this time had passed, gone. Years really. And I know right there that some things ain't meant to be. And that's all right, ain't it? (*Intimate Apparel* 13)

Somehow this initial vision will be the note on which the play ends and the reality to which she is condemned. The brief marriage to George Armstrong, a Barbadian man in whom she places all her hopes for a while, fails miserably and only reconfirms Esther's disappointment with the world.

Esther is seen against two, only seemingly opposed, types of femininity: Mayme, the prostitute trying to make ends meet in an infamous part of the city, and Mrs. Van Buren, the lady complying with an unhappy marriage in a respectable part of the city. With a keen sense of observation and refraining judgment, Esther notices that these two women's tastes converge and that all humanity is intent on desiring what they cannot have. When talking to Mayme, she explains: "You know that white lady I talk about sometimes … She keep asking me what they be wearing in the Tenderloin. All that money and high breeding and she want what you wearing", adding "What she got, you want, what you got, she want" (*Intimate Apparel* 19). Women's capacity to create a sense of sisterhood and to form alliances across racial and social boundaries is explored with a keen eye for detail. Using the metaphor of the "intimate apparel", an element meant to both cover and reveal a woman's body within the confines of the private space, the play actually reflects on the constraints of both private and public spaces at the time. The endeavor here is to underline the moments of transgression when the female characters in the play do not submit to their prescribed roles, but project scenarios of escape, which gives them a taste of self-fulfillment and of liberation, even if only temporarily.

In the first act, Mrs. Van Buren's vision of crossing the border into Esther's world speaks of her being discontent with her current life. Having fully assumed her role as bored wife, she looks for any form of diversion available and claims that she would like to see "a colored show" since she heard about the quality of such entertainment. Esther promptly replies: "And will you take me to the opera next time you go?" (*Intimate Apparel* 27), underlining the absurdity of the

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white lady's proposal. Familiar with the rules imposed by the circles in which she moves, Mrs. Van Buren retorts: "It would be marvelously scandalous, just the sort of thing to perk up this humdrum season" (*Intimate Apparel* 27). No matter how impractical, the scenario testifies to the two women's desire for mobility. However, the lack of alternatives to their physical and social limitations weighs very heavily at this time in history. They realize that the alliance they have formed privately, especially when the white lady embarks upon writing letters in Esther's name, since the latter is illiterate, cannot be made public. They do not possess the will and the courage to take an openly political step on the road towards a completely desegregated city.

As a matter of fact, Esther's dreams and efforts are not (necessarily) connected to going to the opera, but to opening a beauty parlor for African American women. She seems to have given it some thought since she has already set her heart on a particular area of the city: "Some place east of Amsterdam, fancy, where you get pampered and treated real nice" (*Intimate Apparel* 21). Her projection of black women being respected and even spoiled is clearly an attempt to revert the reality she is familiar with: invisibility, disrespect and exploitation. Owning a beauty parlor is not a purely self-absorbed ambition that would help her rise economically, but an initiative beneficial to her peers who would gain dignity and self-confidence when provided the services Esther has in mind: "Make yourself comfortable, put your feet up" and "you got a new look" (*Intimate Apparel* 21). Taking control of her own life, establishing her independence and helping other women in the community can be interpreted as a form of activism she had been very close to enacting, but for her husband's demolition of her plans when talking her into passing her savings to him. This outcome eliminates the presentation of other obstacles that might have prevented an African American woman from becoming an entrepreneur at the beginning of the twentieth century. Surpassing her status as a seamstress remains a fantasy for Esther. By insisting upon the insertion of a title card at the end of the play saying "Unidentified Negro Seamstress. Ca. 1905" (*Intimate Apparel* 56), Nottage invites contemporary audiences to contemplate, on the one hand, the scarcity of professional options that existed for African American women then and, on the other hand, the need to witness the stories of commonly overlooked women whose lives are worth knowing and even treasuring, since they did have a major contribution to the shaping of urban space in the United States of America.

Set almost half a century later, in 1950, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* tackles political option and political activism directly in the references to Lily Ann Green's alleged connection to the communist party. The struggle for social justice intrinsic to the communist ideals invoked in the play goes hand in hand with the struggle for racial justice and the struggle for women's rights. As an African American woman who prides herself on having gained life experience in Harlem, Lily openly redefines the red scare, the hot issue of the period, as the black scare. She takes upon herself the role of educating her nieces, Ernestine and Ermina Crump, about class, race and gender, going beyond and against the Christian discourse that is overtaking the household owing to their father's recent conversion to extreme religious devotion as a means of finding solace after his wife's death.

> LILY. Go on say it, tongue won't fall out. The communist party, amongst other things. (*Ermina giggles*.) Oh you find that funny? (*Earnestly*.) I ain't laughing. I suppose ya happy with what you got, a bit of nothing. Sure I was happy at your age "a little pickaninny" selling hot cakes to the fishermen. Taking pennies from poor people ain't a job it's a chore. This may be New York, but this still the basement. Don't none of those

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> crackers want to share any bit of power with us. That's what it's about. Red scare, should be called black scare.
> GODFREY: I wish you wouldn't conniggerate in front of the gal.
> LILY: You act like I'm saying dirty words. Worker! Revolutionary! Proletariat! There! Christian! (*Crumbs* 20)

Her words point to "what comprises the bedrock and vitality of racism's stronghold" (Williams 23). Lily is vocal about discrimination not only against the African American minority, but also against the poor. She is not afraid to emphasize the need to fight for equality in the age of McCarthyism, when being associated with communism was publicly condemned. She admits to her own situation having improved as she moved from the South of her childhood (Pensacola, Florida) to the North (New York City), but she advocates a revolution that would bring black people access to power structures, meaning decision-making positions that can bring about social change.

As far as gender identity is concerned, Lily sees herself as an educator in this respect as well. She has her heart set on teaching the girls one thing or two about feminine self-affirmation. She promotes the need for visibility and self-confidence by any means available to the African American woman of that time, even fashion, if necessary. Her "weapon", a term borrowed from the discourse on class struggle, is self-fashioning and self-esteem gained by becoming aware of her beauty and of the envy that she stirs among "white gals".

> LILY. (*Breaking the silence*.) Ya like my suit? (*Ernestine nods*.) I bought it on Fifth Avenue, sure did, to spite those white gals. You know how they hate to see a Negro woman look better than they do. It's my own little subversive mission to out dress them whenever possible. Envy is my secret weapon, babies. If you learn anything from your Auntie let it be that. (*Crumbs* 17-18)

Moreover, she promotes women's emancipation when she elaborates on her choice to remain single: "I am exerting my own will, and since the only thing ever willed for me was marriage, I choose not to do it" (*Crumbs* 23). Thus her feminism becomes an intrinsic part of her political activism. Her lessons are enlivened by a healthy sense of humor that helps her preserve hope and light-heartedness in the face of adversity. Her attitude counterbalances her brother-in-law's gloominess and strictness, which she does not consider beneficial for her teenage nieces.

Her life philosophy extends to other aspects such as employment. She combines various strands and ideas to justify her choices. In an almost self-ironic way, she explains that she cannot hold on to a job since she does not want fixedness to restrain her liberty of thinking and her strife for freedom. She twists the reality of racial discrimination around to serve her purpose and finds yet another reason to take pride in who she is: "Well, babies, a Negro woman with my gumption don't keep work so easily. It's one of the hazards of being an independent thinker. If I've ever had me a job for more than a few weeks then I knew it was beneath me" (*Crumbs* 22).

Defining herself as an "independent thinker", she defends herself against all attacks, always using wit and irony. When her brother-in-law, who works in a bakery and cares about his good name in the community, reproaches her for having an inauspicious influence on Ernestine, since the essay the latter produced as an assignment for school looked at the worker's plight and had so-called communist overtones, Lily retorts: "And I suppose I'm to blame for segregation, war and polio as well" (*Crumbs* 25), thus diffusing the accusation. She also has the lucidity and

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nerve to point to the real sources of tension and oppression, or else the inequalities in society: "I ain't the devil, I ain't paying ya sub-minimum wage Mr. Goodness" (*Crumbs* 30), proving that she is aware of the burden that hard-working African American men carry and sometimes try to unload by misdirecting their anger and helplessness in the domestic context. She refuses to be blamed for everything that Godfrey finds problematic in his household after her arrival.

Even if her lack of education combines with discrimination against her seizing an important, truly transformative role in society, she is intent on preparing the younger generation for a better, more meaningful life and hence she introduces Ernestine and Ermina to terms such as "self-determination" in order to pave the way towards subsequent quests for political involvement: "Self-deter-ma-nision, there's an uptown word for ya to digest." (*Crumbs* 35). The play reveals not only Lily's ideals and laudable intentions, but also her failures. Her attempts to find satisfying work and even replace her sister as Godfrey's female partner are not met by success. At the end of the first act he marries a German immigrant who seems to be the embodiment of the submissive feminine type he wants around as a role model for his daughters.

One of Lily's most memorable statements in the play refers to the interracial marriage she has the chance to observe closely:

> LILY: You see Ernestine that's your America. Negro sitting on his couch with blood dripping down his face. White woman unscathed and the enemy not more than five years back. You can't bring order to this world. You can't put up curtains and pot plants and have things change. You really thought you could marry a white woman and enter the kingdom of heaven, didn't ya? (*Crumbs* 55)

The passage refers to Godfrey's return home after being attacked when taking his wife to the movies, an incident showing societal prejudice and intolerance for interracial couples. As a matter of fact, Lily does not bemoan the marriage itself, but the times and the society that place so many obstacles against African Americans. Also, despite Lily's initial animosity towards the German intruder, Gerte, the two women manage to bond. Each learns about the other's world and dreams, connecting beyond their differences. Even if German, Gerte is not a Hitler supporter, as prejudiced Americans around her assume, but someone who suffered because of the war, as she explains: "I nearly starved to death after the war, I know quite a bit about pain" (*Crumbs* 48). She embraces the dream of going to America as a way to search for a better life. Back home she fell in love with jazz, but knew little about the African American musicians who created it. Marrying an African American and having to cope with his family, whose members do not welcome her at first, turns out to be a trying experience that she faces with courage and patience. At the end of the fourth scene in the second act (*Crumbs* 60-61), Gerte and Lily share a drink and a sense of sisterhood, having successfully overcome their preconceived ideas and reticence.

Lily's lectures and example in her interaction with others prove to have a lasting influence on one of her nieces in particular. Ernestine bears testimony to everything she learned from her aunt in a memorable monologue at the end of the play:

> Years from now I'll read the *Communist Manifesto*, *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Black Skin, White Masks* and find my dear Lily amongst the pages. Still years from now I'll remember my mother and the sweet smelling humid afternoons by the Florida waters, and then years from now I'll ride the Freedom bus back down home enraged and vigilant,

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> years from now I'll marry a civil servant and argue about the Vietnam war, integration and the Black Panther movement. (*Crumbs* 64-65)

Her political engagement in the decades that follow seems to be rooted in her early exposure to the need for mobilization. Her readings include seminal works by W. E. B. Du Bois[2] and Frantz Fanon[3], two thinkers who became influential for the African American intellectuals of the era. Ernestine takes Lily's revolutionary legacy further and strives for African American civil rights in an active way. Reflecting on this speech, Jaye Austin Williams considers: "She exists in perpetual migration, in search of the unfindable, and labors within the railing of political movements that later fall into the impasse of her past" (22). As the struggle continues, she passes on her ideals to the next generation whose mission may be as hopeless, unless society as a whole strives to overcome its failings. By choosing to conclude the play with this powerful monologue, Nottage gives voice not only to one character, but to many African American women whose efforts for achieving social justice go unacknowledged in history, but are worth remembering.

Besides investigating African-Americanness, Nottage has also looked at African contexts and posed interesting questions concerning what it means to be African. *Mud, River, Stone*, which was produced in New York in 1997, has political overtones in as much as it criticizes the long-lasting effects of colonization, certain forms of cultural appropriation and the contemporary world's ignorance of and indifference to communities still struggling for subsistence. The play has been noted for capturing the audience's attention through its examination of "the explosive mixtures of tribal war, colonialism, and diverse cultural identities" (Shannon, "An Intimate Look" 190).

The embodiment of lingering colonialism, even if the play is set in a post-colonial era, is Mr. Blake, "a white African business man of English descent" (*Mud* 4). From the very beginning he exposes his views of the place to the Bradleys, the African American couple who gets stranded in a remote area of the African country, probably Mozambique, which they had chosen for vacationing:

> MR. BLAKE: No wonder you got lost. The road was never built. As though putting it on the map could will it into existence. The World Bank officials come, they … they see a map, progress. A huge road cutting across the country. That's the poetry of our existence out here. On paper we are connected to the rest of the world by a glorious red line, but in reality we are obscured by the unpredictability of the weather and our government.
>
> (*Mud* 15)

Born and raised in Africa, Mr. Blake does address the reality of projects that are never finished and of funds that are diverted to other purposes, but he fails to notice or discuss the contributions of people like himself and his ancestors to the current state of affairs. Actually, he prides himself for being the heir of a visionary man who had built a hotel, a family totem, in such a distant spot, while overlooking the legacy of bringing "civilization" into the heart of this country: "The hotel functions as a symbol of the promise of colonial power, but the current reality of the totem

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) are considered "passionate arguments for social equality" (Valade 120).

[3] Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, published in 1952, translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1967 (Valade 136), is a less known work of his.

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underscores the destructive political consequences of manipulating the land and people for economic gain" (Hayes 45). He also chooses to boast about being a survivor:

> MR. BLAKE: I've been on this continent all my life. I forged a life here, a good life, a gentleman's life with barely an education. I have survived war, famine, attacks by wild beasts and disease. I'm still standing here with a martini in my hand and a fan overhead to keep me cool. I'm part of this country. I'm an African. (*Mud* 32)

He represents ruthlessness and pragmatism, but he cannot be denied a place, even if infamous, in the recent history of Africa with all its intricacies.

Interestingly enough, he appears in contrast to another type: a Belgian wanderer in search of myths and a certain spiritual core that would give meaning to his life. This character also has a claim to being an African, in his own eyes, since he has spent some time on the continent, feels that he has integrated the African way of life and strives for belonging:

> NEIBERT: … I've lived amongst many tribes on this continent, the Fulani, Kabye, Tuareg. I have been called brother by a Nuba warrior, who despised all white people. He gave me this necklace, and said it was the symbol of the lion, strength, endurance and brotherhood. I may not be a black man outside, but I am a black man. Here. (*He points to his heart* …) (*Mud* 39)

In the context of a conversation in which each member of the group is trying to show his or her allegiance to Africa, his attempt at proving his African identity is questioned by Ama Cyllah, a West African aid worker: "You can't just become an African, a black man because you want it to be" (*Mud* 39-40). Even if coming from a different part of the continent, Ama speaks for Africa and accuses Neibert of a sophisticated form of cultural appropriation: "It is our culture. Our culture. You may admire it, study it, but you can't travel here put on a robe and take possession of it" (*Mud* 40). An educated black woman, she chooses to use her skills and expertise in the service of a black community in need of help, thus proving racial solidarity. She has come to the hotel to make a phone call and find out about the arrival of supplies for the mission she works with. Having lived in the area for a couple of years, she is familiar with the surroundings. Her activism and knowledge about local cultural and social issues justify her taking a stand to explain her and the community's perspectives on the ongoing dispossession that outsiders are guilty of.

The debate on who is more African and what constitutes Africanness surfaces while the visitors of the hotel, brought together by necessity and inimical circumstances such as the rain and the lack of transportation, are held hostage by a young man from a village nearby, a former soldier working as the hotel's bellboy, who thinks that he can take advantage of the situation in order to have some basic needs be fulfilled: "I want food for my village, grain and a wool blanket for my mother" (*Mud* 32). His demands are suggestive of the utter poverty of the local community.

In this debate, David Bradley's own feeling of brotherhood and belonging, the reason for which he set out on this trip to Africa in the first place, becomes questionable. He may be black, as he emphasizes, but the experience he is going through makes him realize the gap between himself and a native African. He becomes aware of the privileges he enjoys as a journalist in New York, the minute his American life seems in danger of being just a memory. By the end of the play, he testifies: "I am proud of being an African American" (*Mud* 39). Also, he is forced

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into the position of ultimate betrayal, that is of initiating a physical attack against his African "brother", the man who had held him hostage for days: "*David retrieves the stone from next to the front desk. He raises it. He tries to decide how to strike. He lowers the stone across Joaquim's head and knocks him out*" (*Mud* 59-60). Once he is back in the United States narrating what happened while in Africa, David points to the stone as the object that memorializes the incident as well as his adoption of a Cain-like position.

David's wife, Sarah, contributes to telling the story and giving it credibility. Her interventions throughout point to the contrast between her expectations of a trip to Africa and the actual experience. An investment banker, she expects to have all sorts of touristic conveniences at her disposal and to be back to work on time. She gives her business card to Mr. Blake, thus forming a certain alliance that seems to place class privilege above race (*Mud* 16). However, her social status would allow her to have an impact in changing perceptions of Africa and even contributing to humanitarian aid in the region, if she chose to. Due to Nottage's exploring the female characters' positions and pointing to Ama's and Sarah's political choices as black women, the play has been interpreted as having a significant contribution to the Black feminist tradition in at least two ways:

> First, it places Black women within important national and global political conversations, which acknowledges their connection to issues beyond their racial community. Second, this approach represents a redefinition of community since the issues at stake in *Mud, River, Stone* impact all people. (Hayes 43)

Moreover, throughout the play, Nottage is inviting the members of the audience to face unsettling perspectives and continuously reconsider their own positions just as her characters do.

Some of the paradoxes represented in *Mud, River, Stone* are revisited in *Ruined*, a contemporary adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the world-famous condemnation of war and of those who exploit war for personal profit. At the same time, the German play has also been read as "particularly concerned with the relationship between the 'little person' and the major forces of history" (Leach 142), an aspect that is recurrent throughout Nottage's work as well. As the introduction to the play specifies, *Ruined* was written as a result of a research trip that Nottage and her team organized to Uganda to interview Congolese women (Whoriskey x). The plight of the women who inspired the plot became known in the United States and the impact of the play was immediate as delegates of the United Nations and human rights activists attended the performance. Moreover, the playwright was "invited to attend the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing of the Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Democracy, Human Rights and Global Women's Issues (Whoriskey xiii).

Despite the political force of the play, its protagonist, Mama Nadi, claims to be apolitical. Caught in between two fighting parties, the army loyal to the government, led by Osembenga, and the rebel parties, led by Kisembe, she has one rule: all customers of her brothel need to turn in their ammunition as soon as they step onto her territory ("I must ask you to leave your bullets at the bar, otherwise you don't come in" (*Ruined* 42). A metaphor for her neutrality and focus on business, rather than politics, this rule does not protect her from suffering and getting involved, as the second part of the play shows. There is no such thing as an option informed by capitalism, yet free of political implications.

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When Osembenga is struggling to convince Mama Nadi to tell him where he could find his enemy, he is actually creating a self-portrait since neither of the two factions is superior to the other as long as they continue to engage in the perpetuation of destruction.

> OSEMBENGA: This Jerome Kisembe is a dangerous man. You hide him and his band of renegades in your villages. Give them food, and say you're protecting your liberator. What liberator? What will he give the people? That is what I want to know? What has he given you Mama? Hm? A new roof? Food? Peace? (*Ruined* 44)

Osembenga himself breeds danger, being incapable of bringing peace, stability, security, prosperity or the rule of law in the country. As another character in the play notices, the governmental power is as detrimental to the people as the chaos stirred by the rebel forces. There is no shred of justice or democracy associated with the current regime:

> this man Osembenga is evil. He plays at democracy. This word we bandy about, "democracy," and the first opportunity we get, we spit on our neighbors and why? Because he has cattle and I don't. Because he is and I am not. But nobody has and nobody will have, except for men like you, Mr. Harari, who have the good sense to come and go, and not give a damn. (*Ruined* 75-76)

The words belong to Christian, a salesman, who delivers not only certain goods to Mama Nadi, but also news of recent developments in the area. An experienced, but powerless man, he criticizes the problematic state of affairs that he witnesses. Also, he realizes that Mr. Harari, a Lebanese diamond merchant, with no scruples and no ties to the land, stands for the exploitative type of businessman who will always gain material advantages. The presence of such a scavenger can be paralleled to that of Mr. Blake as the representative of colonialism in *Mud, River, Stone*.

The same Christian confronts Mama Nadi, accusing her of cruelty in her treatment of her girls. When forced to defend her establishment, she claims that she offers them a better life than they would otherwise have after being abused by soldiers and being banished by their own families and communities because of that: "they'd rather be here, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard" (*Ruined* 86). In her turn, Mama Nadi blames men for the tragedies that mark women's lives. Indirectly, she also accuses whole communities that cannot protect their young female members in the first place and that cannot forgive them after they are abused, considering them somehow responsible for bringing shame to the family. Her accusations of others do not exonerate her. Her self-justification is unfounded since the girls dream of escaping the place one day. She is clearly portrayed as a decisive factor in a system that continues to exploit women, as it has been noted: "Mama is a perpetrator of the continued sexual violence visited on these women" (Pipes).

The play testifies to the fact that the most outrageous forms of destruction that the war causes affect the local women whose bodies and minds will bear the signs of aggression long after they are inflicted. It was Nottage's intent, though, to go beyond the emphasis on trauma, as the media do when presenting a war zone, and illustrate survival, as her collaborator, Kate Whoriskey attests: "The core commitment of *Ruined* is to celebrate and examine the spectrum of human life in all its complexities: the sacred with the profane, the transcendent with the lethal, the flaws with the beauty, and selfishness with generosity" (xii). Nottage strives to present each

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woman in her play as a complex human being, and not as a stereotypical victim. Despite the physical and psychological pain they experienced not only when being raped, but also in the aftermath, when being banished from home, they are intent on rebuilding their lives.

Consequently, several scenes permit the audience to look upon the interaction between them in their living quarters. Josephine, Sophie and Salima bond, weaving support for one another in more ways than one. Telling her story (*Ruined* 67-70), Salima reaches out towards working through her sense of guilt, since her husband had managed to convince her that she had brought misfortune and dishonor on him, as well as towards healing her grief, since she had to witness the murder of her baby daughter at the time when she was abducted from her own yard by a group of soldiers. Sophie, who listens, also offers comforting words and reassurances, typical of feminine responses to a peer's confession and so necessary in this case: "You didn't do anything wrong" (*Ruined* 70).

The opening of the fifth scene of the first act is revealing for the play's focus on forms of retrieving hope even when faced with immediate chaos, as it finds one young woman reading a romance novel to the others: "*Sophie reads from the pages of a romance novel. Josephine and Salima sit listening, rapt. It is a refuge*" (*Ruined* 50). Fiction projects the possibility of love in the interaction between men and women, and this is somehow comforting, although so far removed from their reality. Also, the practice of reading shared by women from cultures all around the world gives them a sense of normality, which is badly needed under the circumstances. Moreover, the scene draws attention to the materiality of the object on which the text is printed; the book offers the chance of escaping one's surroundings not only because it helps these women imagine romantic relationships as a flight from reality, but also because Sophie is hiding money among the pages of the book and is planning to use it for ensuring pregnant Salima's and her own literal flight from Mama Nadi's place.

Towards the end of the play, when the situation deteriorates and their safety is in question, Mama Nadi herself attempts to help Sophie leave in a gesture that, at least partly, humanizes the matron in the eyes of the audience. The woman in her early forties can be seen either as a mother figure to the eighteen-year old one or as an older version of the girl who had been "ruined"[4] in the war. Unfortunately, Mr. Harari, the one asked to take Sophie to the city in exchange for a diamond, pockets the valuable stone and leaves without waiting for the girl entrusted to him, thus proving his status of ultimate profiteer. Actually, by the end of the play, the only young woman to escape the brothel is Salima, whose dying words are: "You will not fight your battles on my body anymore" (*Ruined* 94). This is one of the most politically charged statements in the play as it is the ultimate affirmation of resistance in the face of masculine aggression, violence and power. It is the duty of the survivors to identify forms of resistance and salvation (other than death), which would constitute viable alternatives for African women, as well as of the international community to contribute to peace efforts. The play asks the hard questions and forces audiences in the United States of America to find answers. As Jeff Paden explains, the members of the audience are given two positions that both require action: as

[4] When Christian, Sophie's uncle, brings her to Mama Nadi, he tells her that the girl is "ruined", adding that "militia did ungodly things to the child" (*Ruined* Act 1 Scene 1; 13). At the end of the play, Mama Nadi herself confesses to Christian: "I'm ruined" (*Ruined* Act 2 Scene 7; 100). Her special fondness for Sophie and her attempt to help her escape might be due to her identifying with the girl. By ensuring a different future for the young woman, Mama Nadi might have hoped to contribute to saving her (younger) self.

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"political allies", given their feelings of empathy with the survivors, and as "co-conspirators in the socioeconomic underpinnings of the civil war", given their belonging to "a nation state that participates in the conflict through a desire for easy access to affordable electronic products" (154).

With *Ruined*, Nottage demonstrates that she has lived up to the goals she set up for herself earlier in her career. In a conversation with other women playwrights, she reflected on the urgency of crossing borders and she mentioned some of her objectives as far as her plays' subject matter was concerned:

> But in terms of what borders we're trying to cross now, I was thinking a lot about that, and I feel that I'm going to try to challenge myself to go beyond my comfort zone. It's not that I haven't challenged myself, but I feel there are things I want to say, issues I want to address that I've circled around. I want to go deeper, go into that difficult territory. There are places my imagination wanders that sometimes surprise me. I want to be able to let go of the audience's expectations of who I am as a writer and go to some of those surprising places. I don't want to be weighted down by labels; labels limit us. I am actively engaged with the world in many levels, whether they be political, social, or personal. (Greene 124)

The final note of her intervention affirms her commitment to various forms of engagement, among which the political one is listed first. Indeed, as shown here, whether bearing witness to women's plight or whether exposing racial injustice in various cultural spaces and at different moments in history, Nottage always finds fresh angles and enthralling characters to intrigue the audience, and hopefully, to mobilize her contemporaries to make a difference in an increasingly globalized world, but still fraught with inequity.

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