

“WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?”:  
LYNN NOTTAGE’S MULTICULTURAL PLAYS

by

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For the courage to make new traditions, I dedicate this dissertation to

Ruby Jean Kendrick and Regina Lynn Hinds.

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## ABSTRACT

In “‘Will the Circle Be Unbroken?’: Lynn Nottage’s Multicultural Community Plays,” I argue that the playwright creates progressive communities by incorporating African American female characters within multicultural circles. By acknowledging African American women’s membership within diverse groups, Nottage encourages audiences to rethink community. To make this point, I extend Patricia Hills Collins’ transversal political theory to contemporary African American drama. Whereas Collins argues that intercultural interactions produce short-lived coalitions, Nottage’s plays suggest that they produce lasting multicultural alliances.

Nottage provides historical context for African American women’s membership in multicultural communities by connecting memory with community. In *Intimate Apparel* (2003), she uses photography as evidence of multicultural community and self-definition by demonstrating how historical contexts promoted African American women’s erasure from history. In *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), Nottage creates an African American female trickster that uses call and response to signal personal and communal identity transformation by connecting interactions with external responses. By redefining success, Nottage revises migration narratives in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995) shifting focus from escaping oppression to cultivating familial relationships. Nottage employs choral elements in *Mud, River, Stone* (1998) through a mimetic retelling of an African American couple’s journey to Africa. She creates a traditional Greek chorus while establishing a progressive communal connection between the audience and the performers. In her most recent play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*

(2011), Nottage models how audiences should engage with past racial iconography to move discussions of African American women and their literature from isolation to inclusion. My discussion of this play frames the dissertation.

Ultimately this study highlights Nottage as a major contemporary figure in African American women's literature by demonstrating her development of community within the tradition. By combining intercultural interactions with multicultural communities, Nottage's plays exemplify Collins' argument that meaningful change occurs only through cooperation. Moreover, by incorporating audiences within diverse alliances, Nottage encourages spectators to recognize their ability to promote change within their individual interactions.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION: Engaging With the Past: Multicultural Community in Selected Plays by Lynn Nottage.....	1
Theoretical Background.....	3
Two Snaps: Nottage’s Call to Black Feminist Critics.....	13
CHAPTER ONE: Beyond the Frame: Remembered Identity in Lynn Nottage’s <i>Intimate Apparel</i> .....	23
Putting the Pieces Together.....	25
Esther’s Relationships.....	31
Active Witness: Transforming the Image.....	42
CHAPTER TWO: “Allow Me to Reintroduce Myself”: Progressive Antiphonic Exchanges in <i>Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine</i> .....	45
Acknowledging the Past.....	50
Connecting Threads.....	58
CHAPTER THREE: “Movin’ On Up”: The Great Migration and Revisionist Memory in <i>Crumbs from the Table of Joy</i> .....	75
Revisionary Models and Nottage’s Progressive Strategy.....	76
Mile Markers: Acting Out Key Features of Migration Narratives.....	82
All Aboard: Catalyst for Movement.....	84
Stop 1: Confronting the Urban Landscape.....	89
Stop 2: Negotiating the Urban Landscape by Resisting Negative Impacts of Urbanization.....	98
Departure.....	104
CHAPTER FOUR: “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”: Choral Aesthetics in <i>Mud, River, Stone</i> .....	106
Historical Resonance: The Greek Chorus and African American Theater.....	109
On Display: Multicultural Aesthetic Praxis.....	116
CONCLUSION: Concluding Reflections.....	133
WORK CITED.....	139

## INTRODUCTION

Engaging With the Past: Multicultural Community in Selected Plays by Lynn Nottage

In her most recent play *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), Lynn Nottage challenges audiences to visualize the connections between past and present images of Black femininity by debating how cinema creates and perpetuates reductive roles for Black women. *By The Way* is divided into two distinct acts. In the first act, the audience meets Vera Stark, an African-American actress in Hollywood circa 1933. She works as a maid for aging American screen actress Gloria Mitchell. The first act centers on their struggle to acquire roles in the fictional 1930s film *The Belle of New Orleans*. Stark's desire to perform is tempered by the shallow roles Black women can portray. In the second act, a contemporary panel evaluates Stark's role in the film and her greater racial impact. Three critics, Herb, Afua, and Carmen, debate Stark's position by analyzing video clips, images of performance, and her last known interview. Nottage situates Vera Stark within contemporary academic discussions of race. As the panelists review footage from Stark's breakout role in *The Belle of New Orleans* as the house slave Tilly, they question whether her performance demonstrates a willing perpetuation of stereotypes or resistance against them:

HERB. Even so, the Vera I know was aiding and abetting

Hollywood's// distortion of history... We all agree Vera was simply breathtaking in "The Belle of New Orleans," but ultimately she still was just another shucking, jiving//fumbling, mumbling, laughing, shuffling, pancake making mammy in the kitchen.

AFUA. Stop! NO! My girl may have been many things, but she refused to be reduced to an image on the screen.// She says so much!

HERB. Theories! Rumors! Conjecture! I don't give a God damn! The images remain problematic. And those images are indelible, and they can't simply be apologized away--

CARMEN. But we have to actively engage with them, listen to them and understand why they exist, and perhaps what the performer was attempting to tell us about the ethos of the time--

AFUA. She was interrogating the medium from the inside--

CARMEN. Yes, but remember she was also fragile, human, an actress playing a role. Are we demanding too much of her?!

HERB. What happened to Vera Stark? In the words of that wise old sage Grandford Ellis, "History is a question constantly being rephrased." (90-91)

The panel's discussion underscores the impact past images have on the present. The tension among the panelists involves the question of Stark's culpability in the continuation of negative representations of Blackness. While Herb, the panel's facilitator, repeatedly frames the discussion by asking "What happened to Vera?" the female panelists contextualize her performance within racial and gender expectations of her time, which complicates Vera's opportunity to effect change. And while Herb demonstrates control over the discussion, his masculine perspective diminishes the cultural context that supported the creation of Tilly. Herb's question challenges the audiences of both the panel and the play to think deeply about why this actress ended up as a footnote to history. But Afua's and Carmen's questions position the audience to reflect on the circumstances that allow a space for Vera as Tilly to confront racial and gender oppression while simultaneously restricting her ability to personally influence a progressive movement forward. The connection between the audience and characters results in a progressive community of inquiry that establishes new bonds between diverse individuals and allows the theater to function as a reflective body.

### *Theoretical Background*

One unfortunate consequence of the rise of Black feminist theory is the tendency to interpret African American women's literature through a racial vacuum. This approach has reinforced the differences between literature written by African American women

and men. However, Lynn Nottage writes plays that interrogate stereotypical representations of African American women by reconsidering their historical significance through a contemporary understanding of the nexus between race, gender, and class. Nottage's plays demythologize difference by emphasizing the complex communities to which African American women have historically belonged. By focusing on key contemporary Black feminist concepts such as intersectionality and multiculturalism, Nottage's plays relocate African American women characters from positions of racial isolation into positions where progress requires intercultural cooperation. In this study, I will argue the importance of Nottage as a significant new figure in the tradition of African American women's literature. Through her commitment to redefining community, Nottage's plays position African American women as key members of expansive alliances. I will discuss why this breakthrough in identity studies occurs in drama and how performance encourages the audience's cognitive involvement within these new diverse performative communities.

In order to fully understand the progressive nature of Nottage's contribution to the African American women's literary tradition, one must comprehend the simultaneous development of the Black feminist theoretical tradition with the burgeoning contemporary renaissance of African American women writers. Black feminist literary theory developed from the civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Farah Jasmine Griffin has documented the simultaneous development of the African American women's literary tradition with the growth of Black feminist socio-political

and literary theorists. For Griffin, “the development of African American women’s literature and the criticism it spawned were a direct response to the masculinist bias of the civil rights and especially the black power and black arts movements” (485). Griffin further claims that the development of Black feminism “was also a response to the feminist movement’s tendency to normalize the experiences of middle-class white women as equivalent for all women. In both instances, black women found themselves ‘lost in the cracks’” (485). Consequently, Black feminism initially questioned the circumstances that situated African American women as subordinate members even within politically progressive groups.

In “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977), Barbara Smith suggests the connection between “the politics of feminism” and “the state of Black women’s literature” (158). The connection Smith identifies works as a tool “for the exploration of Black women’s lives and the creation of consciously Black woman identified art” (158). Smith advocates critical methods that consider the specific subject positions of the characters within African American women’s texts, and she further suggests that critical approaches to African American women’s texts have not acknowledged “the state of Black women’s culture and the intensity of all Black women’s oppression,” which results in a predominately racist and sexist approach to their literature (158). Smith argues that “all segments of the literary world--whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian--do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist” (157). Smith designates the lack of critical attention as a type

of “invisibility” that contributes to the necessity of a theoretical approach that can recognize the credibility of the texts constructed by African American women writers (157).

Other Black feminist critics have answered Smith’s call for “a Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women,” by expanding the body of criticism surrounding texts written by African American women writers (159). Several Black feminist scholars have attempted to define the key characteristics of the texts. Mary Helen Washington suggests:

If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women —and this accounts for their lack of recognition— it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written.  
(35)

As Washington suggests, this distinctive perspective emerges in the transmission and transformation of lived experience into creative language and through the details of silenced lives in the language of literature. Dramas written by African American women advance this transformative impulse to the next level by visually performing historical reclamations on the stage. These performances enact a recovery that encourages

audiences to consider the links between historical depictions of African American women by unpacking the context that promotes the creation of narrow identities. The plays complicate the incomplete impressions audiences repetitively see associated with Black femininity by emphasizing the legacy of this reductive imagery. Glenda Dickerson describes this process as “a rite of passage” where the collaborative performers, from the directors to the actors, transform from their role as dramatic performers to PraiseSingers or individuals involved with the preservation of a culture’s images. “Today, with you as my witnesses, I resign from the ranks of directors of plays and become instead a full-time PraiseSinger. A true PraiseSinger is a guardian of the archetypes of her culture’s collective unconscious. Her function is not to invent but to rediscover to animate” (187). While Dickerson claims this role for herself, the entire theater, including the audience, is responsible for the preservation and consideration of the “culture’s collective consciousness.”

Mary Helen Washington posits that “what we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men” (32). When African American women dramatists challenge historical representations of Black identity in their plays, they assert their power over their own representations by recuperating stories, characters, and images. They further challenge reductive types by transforming them into more complicated human characters. Although “tradition” remains a debated term because of its connection to manifestations of power, Michael Awkwad argues that African American women’s

literary tradition exists through “the textual affinities between black women’s works” and more specifically via “black women writers’ conscious acts of reconfiguring and revision of the earlier canonical texts” (4). In other words, a defining characteristic of the African American women’s literary tradition is its revisionist approach to storytelling. The writers within this tradition respond to images and stories through expansion. For instance, Cheryl Wall explains that “whether one perceives texts as responding to their precursors or as signifying on them, the tradition constitutes a theoretical line in which texts produce and are produced by other texts” (11). While contemporary Black feminists have refined their critical approach and explored the baggage connected to traditional or established terminology associated with literary criticism, benefactors of these conversations have proposed new terms and highlighted thematic commitments as a means to critique African American women’s literature.

Black feminist critics have classified the African American women’s literary tradition through several thematic commitments and have focused on the importance of community. Of the African American women’s literary tradition, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims, “This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet stands independent of, the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison” (2). While both Black men and women writers have challenged limited representations of Blackness in their literature, they resist dominant stereotypes in strategically different ways. Washington identifies the “model of literary paternity” in the African American men’s literary tradition as a kind of one-upmanship process “in which

each male author vies with his predecessor for greater authenticity, greater control over his voice, thus fulfilling the mission his forefathers left unfinished” (33). Awkward relates this trajectory is similar to Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence.” The African American women’s tradition differs from the men’s through its commitment to previous writers. Moreover, the women deemphasize competition, instead offering a “type of positive symbiotic merger,” where literature is “an occasion for cooperative textual interactions with maternal mothers” (Awkward 7-8). This practice revises and offers present-day reflections without discounting previous generations’ contributions.

However, there have been negative consequences in focusing solely on positive relationships between African American women writers. The pattern of cooperative textual interactions has resulted in criticism that isolates African American women writers’ texts from literature written by other groups, which suggests African American women’s membership within intracultural groups but detachment from intercultural communities. So, critical considerations of contemporary African American women writers often reinforces discussions of African American women’s experiences as separate from experiences of White communities and African American men. The critical pattern of discussing African American women’s literature by emphasizing African American women characters’ alienation from both White and African American communities diminishes the opportunity for critical discussion of identity formation through intracultural and intercultural interactions. Furthermore, attempts to classify the African American women’s literary tradition have narrowly defined community by

emphasizing African American women's alienation from groups and within groups, but Black feminist scholars have historically made connections between texts written by African American women writers and writers from other traditions, including examinations of various aspects of identity such as race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Although critics within the African American women's literary tradition have in many ways narrowly defined discussions about identity and community in what Ann Ducille designates "critically introspective" ways, Black feminist scholars have laid the foundation for critical conversations concerning identity and community beyond this restrictive space (33). For example, Ducille questions the scope of Black feminist theory: "What can Black feminist theory give to its 'other'? What does black feminist theory have to offer to that which is not its own?" (34). Ducille's questions presume an opportunity for Black feminist theory to engage in critical discussions beyond conversations solely focusing on African American women. Sherley Anne Williams emphasizes the danger of self-isolative criticism: "[T]o focus solely on ourselves is to fall into the same hole The Brother has dug for himself--narcissism, isolation, inarticulation, obscurity. Of course we must keep talking to and about ourselves, but [literature] is about community and dialogue; theories or ways of reading ought to actively promote the enlargement of both" (74.) One strategy for examining Black women's membership in intercultural alliances involves an intersectional approach. Black feminist social critic Kimberlé Crenshaw sees political ramifications for continually marginalizing African American women's experiences through analysis that observes

only a “single axis framework” (209). Crenshaw calls for the use of “intersectionality” to address the “problems of exclusion” by including African American women in expansive conversations about political policy. Although Crenshaw’s argument was meant to address the creation of “antiracist policy,” her identification of the tendency to limit African American women’s experiences is crucial to the expansion of the literary critical discourse about community.

Black feminist theory continues to promote areas of analysis that refuse singular considerations of the complexity of African American women’s experiences and their literature, yet the complex ways African American women have historically interacted with other communities remains an untapped avenue for analysis. However, Black feminist literary critics could appropriate strategies from other discourse communities to address this complex issue. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins’ transversal political model establishes a framework for linking diverse communities. Collins investigates “the complexities of African American women’s [group] experiences” beyond literature, arguing that “[c]oming to terms with [...] diverse group histories provides a new foundation” for feminist activism (264). Such a perspective offers a compelling vantage point for considering the representation of African American women in recent literature (264). When an African American feminist literary critic shifts attention from isolation to emphasis on evidence of coalition-building in African American women’s literature, she extends the impact of African American women’s literature beyond our own racial communities. Lynn Nottage performs this shift in *By the Way*. The panelists’ discussion

of Vera Stark's performances extends her connection with racial images to an expansive audience. Their dialogue assesses how her film and television work culturally represented diverse issues. The images further support the audience's recognition of Vera's historical membership within complex groups. Afua, Carmen, and Herb demonstrate an intersectional approach by considering Vera within and beyond racial community. In this way, they resist diminishing Vera's presence to Black and White issues.

Collins' transversal political approach expands community by opposing binary considerations of race. Collins extends Nira Yuval-Davis's theory, explaining that transversal politics "reject[s] the binary thinking that has been so central to oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation [...]. This recognition [establishes] that group histories are relational [and] fosters a final important dimension of transversal politics--the dynamics of coalitions" (264-268). For Collins, coalitions function as temporary multicultural communities that effect political change, but I will argue that transversal politics encourages the creation of long-lasting multicultural communities within the theater space.

Following this trajectory, I will argue the relevance of multicultural community to contemporary African American women's literature through study of the work of playwright Lynn Nottage. Nottage relocates African American women characters from positions of isolation into positions where progress requires intercultural interactions and multicultural community development. This study will not only highlight the importance of Nottage as a significant new figure in the tradition of African American women's

literature but will also offer a new interpretive framework for African American women's literature and American literature more broadly by illustrating the representation of African American women as key members of ever more expansive conversations about identity, representation, and power.

*Two Snaps: Nottage's Call to Black Feminist Critics*

In a 2004 interview with Linda Winer, Lynn Nottage speaks openly about her commitment to multiculturalism as stemming from a "nomadic imagination" born from her experiences growing up in "a working-class neighborhood in New York that was very multicultural" (Nottage). Nottage states that she was "very curious about what was happening in each of those brownstones" and that she "made it her mission to get inside" (Nottage). In this interview, Nottage acknowledges that community for her stemmed not just from ethnic background but from her geographical connection to her neighbors. Nottage's definition expands the way community has typically been incorporated within African American literature by emphasizing connections beyond race.

Later in the interview, Winer asks Nottage: if she could snap her fingers what changes would she make to improve theater for women. Nottage responds that first she would incorporate more female artistic directors to encourage more participation from women in theater, but if she had two snaps she would have more women writing about theater. She argues that the reason some plays by women receive poor reviews is because

they are at a disadvantage when reviewed by men. This dissertation functions as a response to Nottage's call for more female critical attention to drama. In this study, I will explore five plays: *By the Way*, *Meet Vera Stark* (2011) *Intimate Apparel* (2003), *Fabulation or The Re-Education of Undine* (2004), *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1995), and *Mud, River, Stone* (1998). Each presents African American women characters in periods of the twentieth century as members of complex multicultural communities. These five plays emphasize African American women's historical presence within complex groups, which advances the way community has been written about thus far in the African American literary tradition. By situating African American women within diverse groups, Nottage creates complicated characters that grapple with various issues including race.

In *Intimate Apparel*, Nottage introduces Esther, a young African American seamstress living in New York in 1905. Her talent for fashioning beautiful undergarments connects her with a diverse cast of characters from her customers Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren, the former a young African American prostitute and the latter a well-to-do White married woman, to Mr. Marks, a Jewish Romanian immigrant fabric distributor. Esther's professional relationships offer opportunities for her to establish connections with individuals of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, Nottage creates complicated personal relationships between Esther and individuals who belong to similar racial and ethnic groups, such as Esther's friendships with her African American widowed landlady, Mrs. Dickson, and with her Barbadian pen pal and eventual husband,

George. In these relationships, Nottage problematizes the links that connect individuals within presumably closely related communities.

In *Fabulation* (2004), Nottage offers a strikingly different depiction of African American femininity with her protagonist, Undine, a successful urban sophisticate. This African American businesswoman lives in contemporary New York City and, at first, enjoys a luxurious lifestyle. As a public relations specialist, Undine maintains connections with a diverse array of individuals including professional handlers, secretaries, and celebrity clientele, but when her glamorous persona unravels Undine must journey back to her unglamorous roots. Nottage avoids sentimentalizing Undine's journey by injecting 21st-century issues into the narrative, including drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, and white-collar criminal activity. Nottage refuses to allow Undine to rely on relationships with members of her family or racial community to transition beyond her dire position; instead the constant disappointments from family members and loved ones force Undine to look beyond her comfort zone to establish a support system with individuals with whom she would not typically associate.

In *Crumbs*, Nottage dramatizes the migration of an African American Southern family, Ernestine, Ermina, and Godfrey Crump, to New York City in 1950. The cultural shift instigated by the move evolves when Godfrey suddenly marries a German immigrant, Gerte Schulte. The differences among the characters' experiences of race and nationality present an immediate tension in their abilities to establish relationships with one another, yet these initial distinctions do not prevent them from observing similarities

within their familial experience. Nottage's refusal to portray the family's interactions romantically emphasizes their human connections by diminishing the differences that initially separate them.

In *Mud, River, Stone*, Nottage establishes a multicultural global community within an American context. This complex play starts at a dinner party in New York as two travelers, David and Sarah Bradley, recount their journey to Africa to connect with their roots. The setting soon shifts to Africa where their narrative becomes an extended retelling of their trip. Once in Africa, the Bradleys quickly realize that the continent they fantasized about prior to their trip was a romantic vision. During their excursion, they encounter native Africans, Africans of European heritage, and other travelers who have diverse interests in the continent. As the Bradleys encounter these characters the group transforms into a contemporary Greek chorus. Their mimetic retelling of the Bradleys' travel experience transitions into the revelation of a hostage situation. Ultimately, Nottage uses the chorus to expose the connections that continually link Americans to global communities.

Throughout these plays, Nottage depicts non African American characters who engage in friendships and familial and romantic relationships with African American women. These relationships challenge the traditional ways community has been presented in African American women's literature. The interactions among these unique groups of people inform the ways in which the African American women characters perceive their own identities and the identities of other people. Nottage's plays offer a

progressive representation of community through her focus on interactions between different cultural groups. More importantly, the plays are comprised of characters that look beyond their racial identities to establish connections with dissimilar individuals. These characters consistently question who they are through their interactions with individuals from various communities. These multicultural communities shape both African American women characters' and non African American characters' perceptions of their own identities beyond race.

Nottage does not create multicultural communities from thin air; rather she infuses her plays with historical contexts that highlight African American women's membership in diverse communities. She uses elements from memory plays in her works to emphasize this point. She incorporates reflections, pictures, films, and complex settings that highlight past events within present circumstances. Nottage's use of memory does not create a surrealistic tone as in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) where the audience is constantly reminded of the present moment as a past reflection; instead Nottage produces a realistic quality while relying on mimetic depictions of past events. Often Nottage's characters are transparent about their reflections, as they remember an artist's performance or recall a long departed relative's promise. Their transparent reflections emphasize the importance the past has on present encounters. The remembered events help establish connections between diverse characters and the audience. By establishing bonds between the audience and the characters, Nottage

encourages the audience to rethink community by acknowledging past multicultural bodies and new communities formed in the theater between the audience and performers.

I will argue that Nottage's plays effectively illustrate progressive multicultural communities in two key ways. First, these plays emphasize that "participants bring with them a 'rooting' in their own particular group histories, but at the same time realize that in order to engage in dialogue... they must 'shift' from their own centers" (Collins 264). Second, Nottage's plays highlight that shifting requires a "rethinking of cognitive frameworks" through a rejection of binary reasoning which destabilizes the "longstanding view of group organization as fixed, unchanging, and with clear-cut boundaries" (264). The second point applies simultaneously to the characters within the plays and the audiences. While the characters present circumstances encourage the development of community beyond their racial background, the audience is encouraged to rethink their conceptions of community through Nottage's agenda by participating in the recovery process.

While Collins argues that coalitions are the likely result from membership in intercultural communities, Nottage's plays suggest that membership within multicultural communities produces a more permanent impression. I will examine the impact multicultural communities have on African American women characters as well as the audience. In the first chapter, I will analyze the photographic elements within *Intimate Apparel*. Specifically, I will explore Nottage's use of photography as evidence of multicultural community and self-definition. I will incorporate Leigh Reighford's concept

of “critical Black memory.” Reiford identifies photography as an approach to interpreting historically significant visual markers of identity. Nottage incorporates photography by creating old-fashioned pictures on the stage in the forms of tableaux. Nottage creates nondescript titles for the photographs that emphasize the characters’ diminished presence in history. Through *Intimate Apparel*, the audience is presented with an opportunity to engage with static images from the past and realize the historical contexts that promoted Esther’s erasure from history.

I frame this discussion by combining Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” with Barbara Christian’s “contextual” approach to African American women’s literature. In “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism,” Christian argues that “language is not merely an object but is always situated in a context” (51). I extend Christian’s critical approach to contemporary African American women playwrights by highlighting Nottage’s emphasis on the image as the object. The photographs within *Intimate Apparel* mimic the restricted identities African American women have been placed within. The play intervenes within that historical process and extends Esther’s impact by underscoring her significance outside of her racial community.

In the second chapter, I focus on *Fabulation* as a contemporary interpretation of call and response. I argue that Undine Barnes represents a contemporary African American female trickster figure that uses call and response to signal personal and communal identity transformation. In *Fabulation*, Nottage questions whether self-

definition is necessarily positive. While the African American literary tradition has long confirmed the power individual women can express by demonstrating control over their own identities, Undine's self-definition seems more problematic than affirming. In this chapter, I argue that Nottage combines call and response with the trickster figure as a method to question racial authenticity.

In the third chapter, I argue that Nottage again reconfigures traditional African American forms by uniting revision with migration narrative. Nottage repositions revision beyond an oral reactionary mode in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* by privileging self-reflective performances that encourage internal revision. Often the characters experience grief in relation to a past stimulus they cannot change, such as death, and this grief promotes revision and the creation of diverse supportive communities. I use Farah Jasmine Griffin's "*Who Set You Flowin'?*" *The African-American Migration Narrative* to define the four key components to migration narrative. I further suggest that Nottage takes the quest for home a step further by removing the focus on physical space from the revisionary process of migration; in its place she positions family or the connection between blood kin and other kin as the new objective for migratory success. What good does it do to completely uproot your family and experience the same negative incidents in a different location? Movement becomes more than a onetime occurrence; instead it signals a continual process of renewal as new members are added to the family and previous members take on more complicated roles within the familial unit.

In chapter four, I analyze Nottage's global commitments in *Mud, River, Stone*. In *Mud*, Nottage utilizes a traditional Greek chorus to underscore how global communities come together through response to a shared event. While an ancient Greek chorus performed as a living history book preserving the traditional myths and stories of national identity, Nottage's chorus accomplishes this traditional role while establishing a progressive communal connection between the audience and the chorus. Nottage's progressive use of the chorus brings together diverse people through a mimetic retelling of the Bradleys' vacation. Though the retelling shifts quickly from present to past, the seamless transition helps the audience visualize the connections among civilizations, geographical locations, and times.

This dissertation suggests more expansive ways to engage with contemporary African American drama by considering the complex communities African American women have belonged to. In *By the Way*, Afua, Carmen, and Herb debate Vera's presence within the past by exploring her performances alongside historical conflict. Afua and Carmen draw on Black feminist principals as they grapple with Vera's complex presence in film history, but they shift the conversation forward by evaluating how present viewers of her work should respond. Their discussion seemingly acknowledges past Black feminist political activists and literary theorists, but they also develop the theory by considering present encounters with difficult past images. Afua's and Carmen's critical approaches demonstrate a broader purpose for Black feminist criticism including "obtain[ing] gender equality for black women, as well as ... inscrib[ing] black women

and their cultural contributions into the historical narrative” (Patterson 90). In order to accomplish these goals, Black feminist critics must move beyond isolating practices that diminish the prospects of Black feminist theory by denying the interconnected nature of communities and identity formation in African American women’s literature and American society more broadly. Audre Lorde asserts that “there is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (115). In this study, I take up Lorde’s and Nottage’s challenge to critics to move beyond discussions that focus solely on divisions that reduce the complexity of identity and additionally distract from more meaningful conversations about connectivity in order to promote an extension of the African American women’s literary tradition as well as Black feminist scholarship.

## CHAPTER ONE

Beyond the Frame: Remembered Identity in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*

In the final moment of *Intimate Apparel*, Nottage uses photographic imagery to frame Esther's narrative. "*She walks over to the old sewing machine and begins to sew together pieces of fabric, the beginning of a new quilt. Lights shift: sepia tone, the quality of an old photograph. A slow gentle rag plays in the distance. As the lights fade, projected title card: 'Unidentified Negro Seamstress, Ca. 1905'*" (*Intimate Apparel* 56).

This image solidifies Esther's continued artistic work through quilting. While the conclusion invokes Esther's promise of progress, the projected title card emphasizes her erasure from history. Although Esther's work and relationships demonstrate her significance, the value associated with her position is undercut by the word "unidentified." The play's final impression dramatizes the historical tension between the narrow spaces allotted for African American women's identities and their complex realities.

Esther's photograph simultaneously signifies her experience and mystifies her worth, and Nottage's use of photography presents an opportunity for contemporary audiences to engage with static images from the past. Photography as a tool promotes intervention by encouraging evaluations of "history and human experience as it truly was, unmediated by human hands" (Raiford 113). Photography is a historically important technology "of memory for African Americans" since "throughout the twentieth century

[they] have utilized photography to interpret and critique a dominant history that more often than not excised, degraded, and silenced them “ (112). The most important historical quality is photography’s ability to “mirror with a memory,” a term borrowed from Oliver Wendell Holmes’ initial description of the power of photography. Memory functions as a “repository for human experience,” while a mirror with a memory “offers reflection and identification that can be archived and fixed in place” (113). Photographs can be used then as interpretive resources that reposition African American characters into a historical framework that typically removed and reduced their importance. In other words, photography serves as evidence for revisionary academics, artists, and scholars struggling to reclaim ancestral African American figures from the past. Furthermore, photography challenges older prescribed perceptions of African American people by offering complicated depictions of their lived experiences.

Raiford proposes “critical black memory” as an approach to interpreting historically significant visual markers of identity. By emphasizing the medium’s function for recording “that which exists in the material world,” Raiford argues that the power photographs demonstrate lies within their capacity to signify “a truly existing thing” (113). Photography reveals a legitimate memory of a people’s experience, which suggests their value. Nottage harnesses photography to legitimize Esther by inserting her within a historical context. Raiford’s explanation of photography speaks to Nottage’s exploration of Esther’s experiences in turn-of-the-century Brooklyn, particularly through the portrayal of Esther’s intricate quilt.

*Putting the pieces together*

The quilt unites Esther's past and present by symbolizing her journey North and her progression as a seamstress. Quilting traditionally represents a creative expression of history in the African American feminine community. Alice Walker describes the importance of the quilt and quilter for African American women in an anecdote:

In the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the crucifixion. It is considered rare, and beyond price, though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago. (239)

Like Esther, the Alabama quilter's significance is evidenced through her artistic presence, yet history's inability to preserve the individual emphasizes the lack of recognition she received in life. Nottage foreshadows Esther's erasure from history through the use of the quilt, while the play accounts for her presence. As Esther pieces together a new legacy with the quilt, the custom emphasizes the fragmentary knowledge that future generations will have about her. What remains will confirm the quilter's existence but will not express the complexity of her reality. Yet the placement of the quilt within the urban

tenement dwelling signifies a desire for recognition. Whereas past quilters imbued their quilted texts with personal history, Esther, a sojourner within the Great Migration, suggests a desire for personal and professional acknowledgement. For Esther, the quilt evolves from a bed covering and a way to transport her history to a symbol of her journey and personal growth. Initially, the quilt functions as a bank: “This quilt is filled with my hard work, one hundred dollars for every year I been seated at that sewing machine. It’s my beauty parlor” (Nottage 25). As a reservoir of Esther’s savings, the quilt symbolizes the foundation for a future business, life, and identity.

Nottage’s reclamation of Esther echoes Alice Walker’s recovery of past African American artists. Walker chronicles her womanist aesthetic through several journeys into the Deep South. Her investigative journeys helped generate the term *womanism*, which she coined as a counterpoint to traditional conceptions of feminism. For Walker, a womanist is:

Black feminist or feminist of color...Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good for one.”...Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. (xi-xii)

Walker's description of the key qualities of womanist theoretical approaches underscores her need to willfully know more about the atmosphere that contributed to the development of her own unique aesthetic approach to writing essays, fiction, and poetry.

Interestingly, Walker only truly experiences the complexity of the South through the juxtaposition of her own and Flannery O'Connor's experiences in Milledgeville, Georgia. Once she recognizes the connections between these divergent experiences, she articulates the importance of acknowledging the totality of experience. In "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," Walker merges travel narrative, biography, and argument as a framework for her investigation of the complexities of her own and O'Connor's southern experience. Accompanied by her elderly mother, Walker interrogates the difficult realities of her past, first by visiting one of the old sharecropping shacks the family called home so many years ago. Walker displays a level of trepidation before entering the property "[b]ut my mother had already opened the gate. To her, life has no fences, except, perhaps, religious ones, and these we have decided not to discuss" (43). Following her mother's lead, Walker feels the rush of complicated emotions that resonate with past fears and pleasures: "My mother and I stand in the yard remembering. I remember only misery: going to a shabby segregated school [...]; almost stepping on a water moccasin on my way home from carrying water to my family in the fields (44). Yet, Walker's mother does not retain an overwhelmingly negative dominant impression of the family's time on the land; instead she is shocked to see that the daffodils she planted twenty-two years ago have "multiplied and are now blooming from one side of

the yard to the other” (44). Like Esther’s quilt, Mrs. Walker’s daffodils confirm her presence in a place that systematically disavowed her importance. Mrs. Walker’s response to the daffodils instructs Walker and Walker’s audience to recognize the significance of the garden as evidence of the gardener. Likewise, Nottage encourages her audience to acknowledge the existence of Esther by evidencing her presence throughout the play with photographs and quilts.

Walker’s somber recollections of her Milledgeville experience are tempered by the evidence of her family’s positive impact on the land. However, her experience represents only one thread of the South’s complicated history. Before visiting Andalusia, the O’Conner estate, Walker’s mother instigates a series of inquiries that flesh out the importance of her individual and subsequent treks to the past:

When you make these trips back south...just what is it exactly that you’re looking for? A wholeness, I reply. You look whole enough to me, she says. No, I answer, because everything around me is split up, deliberately split up. History split up, literature split up, and people are split up too...I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all the sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story. And the whole story is what I’m after. (48-49)

Walker's deliberate journeys to the past anticipate an important aspect of contemporary African American women writers' contributions to the American literary tradition. Their journeys backward to reclaim ancestral figures elicits a complicated understanding of African American feminine identity in the past and present. Cheryl A. Wall suggests that "'Beyond the Peacock' represents a way of piecing together a new understanding" of the complicated history of the south (224). Wall's claim can be extended to the North. While Walker journeyed home to resolve the artificial distinctions visible in literature, art, and history, audiences of Nottage's plays perform historical recognition by acknowledging Esther's significance in the North.

In *Intimate Apparel*, audiences witness Esther's importance and are empowered to make connections between her past erasure and her present recovery. In an interview with Nilo Cruz, Nottage explains the connections between *Intimate Apparel* and her own historical perspective. She begins by acknowledging that the play grew out of the experience of losing her mother: "I feel like *Intimate Apparel* is my most deeply personal play. It's a play that I began writing shortly after my mother died" (23). Nottage then reflects on the central relationship within the play between Esther, a poor, Black, single seamstress, and Mr. Marks, a Romanian, Jewish, fabric distributor: "My husband is Jewish and of Romanian descent. I was really curious, if we had lived a hundred years ago, what would have been the nature of our relationship?" (23). Nottage's personal exploration of her familial history functions as a vehicle for investigating the realities and opportunities for African American women in New York in the early twentieth century.

Nottage connects quilting with African American women's membership in multicultural communities to demonstrate that identity is not formed in isolation. Rather like an intricately crafted quilt, identity is born through diverse relationships. By focusing on Esther's relationships with disparate individuals, Nottage signals a shift in the way community has been represented in the African American women's literary tradition. Instead of focusing primarily on intraracial relationships, Nottage explores African American women characters within multicultural communities to foreground the impact of such relationships on one's ability to construct self-affirming identities.

Self-definition starts with the deconstruction of negative roles. Barbara Christian suggests we must acknowledge the restrictive roles African American women have been assigned such as "the domineering mother, the black prostitute, [and] the martyred mother" ("Sculpture and Space" 80). Christian further argues that African American women writers construct historical narratives of the past as an act of preservation: "As we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history...if we want to be whole, we must recall the past" ("Somebody" 98). For Christian, it is imperative for readers to recognize stereotypes within historical characters in order to "see how we have not perceived their essences as they move within the space of our culture" ("Sculpture and Space" 81). Nottage fulfills Christian's directive by infusing *Intimate Apparel* with dominant negative images of Black femininity, such as the Black prostitute Mayme. But Nottage deconstructs negative images by providing the audience with an intimate perspective of Mayme's experiences. As multiple representations of

Black femininity are performed, the audience is empowered to evaluate the residual impact of dominant negative images on African American femininity, which encourages them to distinguish the residue of shallow constructions of race from more complicated characterizations.

### *Esther's Relationships*

Nottage foregrounds the importance of relationships within Esther's life through Esther's personal conversations with various women. In the opening scenes of the play, family denotes African American community, while marriage confirms the familial bond. Through Esther's reflections to Mrs. Dickinson, the owner of her boardinghouse, Nottage highlights the tension women felt to adhere to this expectation. The characters' honest conversations highlight Esther's fears about being single. For Esther, marriage reflects an ultimate status level that she has not achieved. As fellow border Corrina Mae marries, Esther exposes her insecurities about her own marriage prospects:

ESTHER. If you must know, I turned thirty-five Thursday past... And  
 Twenty-two girls later, if you count Lerleen. That's how many of  
 these parties I have had to go to and play merry. I should be happy  
 for them, I know, but each time I think why ain't it me.

MRS. DICKINSON. Your time will come child.

ESTHER. What if it don't? (Nottage 8-9)

Esther's question displays her deeply felt fears about fulfilling traditional expectations. As long as Esther remains unmarried, her position within the community remains unstable, an idea Mrs. Dickinson underscores stating, "It's tough for a colored woman in this city. I ain't got to tell you that" (9). Esther's relationship with Mrs. Dickinson symbolizes a mother-daughter connection, where Mrs. Dickinson consistently uses her personal experience to instruct Esther about the realities of marriage. While Esther envisions marriage as a necessary gateway out of her unstable position as a young, African American, single woman, Mrs. Dickinson undercuts the fantasy with her own memories: "I married him, because I was thirty-seven years old, I had no profession and there wasn't a decent colored fella in New York City that would have me" (32). Her reflection reveals a certain level of desperation, similar to Esther's compulsive drive to marry. Mrs. Dickinson cautions Esther about entering into a relationship quickly yet demonstrates the types of sacrifices necessary to achieve the status Esther so desperately desires: "Bless his broken down soul. He had fine suits and perfect diction, and was too high on opium to notice that he was married...But you have godly fingers and a means, and you deserve a gentleman" (33). Mrs. Dickinson reveals her husband's drug addiction in order to complicate Esther's romantic vision of marriage. Though Mrs. Dickinson currently occupies a secure position through her business and status as widow, she entreats Esther to take a chance and wait for a respectable gentleman. Her maternal advice demonstrates a different kind of romanticism born from her own negative

experiences. Mrs. Dickinson admonishes Esther to secure a more stable union than her own, since her past experience reveals financial security does not secure emotional stability.

Although Mrs. Dickinson romantically envisions Esther with a “gentleman,” she does not connect that fantasy with marrying for love. In fact, Mrs. Dickinson offers her own familial history as a warning against allowing romantic desires to outweigh the importance of securing economic and cultural status within the community:

But you see, my mother wanted me to marry up. She was a washerwoman, and my father was the very married minister of our mission...Marry good. She didn't ever want me to be embarrassed of my fingers the way she was of hers...She wouldn't even let me help her, she didn't want my hands to show the markings of labor. I was going to marry up. Love was an impractical thing for a woman in my position “Look what love done to me,” Mama used to say. “Look what love done to me.” (33)

Mrs. Dickinson demonstrates that a woman worker does not occupy a safe position, and further suggests that a woman's social status can diminish her opportunity for security. Her family's history exposes the obstacles African American women encounter when trying to establish secure bonds within their own racial communities. Mrs. Dickinson's secure status belies the sacrifices made to ensure social stability. Nevertheless, as a widow, she occupies a safer position than Esther. Mrs. Dickinson's marriage fulfills a

societal expectation, which explains her trepidation about entering another romantic relationship.

ESTHER. You have plenty of suitors to keep you busy.

MRS. DICKINSON. But ain't a working man amongst them. (32)

Mrs. Dickinson's cautionary tale foreshadows Esther's problems with her future husband, George, because of Esther's idealistic thoughts about marriage. Esther has not developed a sophisticated understanding of relationships, or considered the qualities she values in a companion. Surprisingly, her own heritage similarly reveals a shallow understanding of companionship: "I come here from North Carolina at seventeen after my mother died of influenza...My father died two years later, he was a slave and didn't take to life as a freeman. He'd lost his tongue in a nasty fight...He was ...silent. Broken really" (37-38). Although Esther remembers her support system, she does not apply her memory to her own situation. Additionally, Esther's memory does not suggest any prior examples of relationships that demonstrate a loving quality. Even though she recognizes negative characteristics, the deaths of her parents help explain Esther's desperate need to secure stability in New York. Without a supportive family, Esther occupies an increasingly vulnerable social position despite her individual financial security.

Esther's vulnerability motivates her desire to marry. Yet, Nottage offers Esther a sterner warning through Mrs. Van Buren, an upper-class, white, childless, 30-something, married woman. Van Buren purchases intimate apparel from Esther hoping to sexually

excite her verbally and emotionally abusive husband. She occupies a more privileged position than Esther because of her race and marital status, but she struggles with a lack of intimacy in her marriage. “But what does it matter? Has he spent an evening at home? Or even noticed that I’ve painted the damn boudoir vermilion red” (11). Mrs. Van Buren’s concerns echo Mrs. Dickinson’s and indicate their shared experience of marital absence. While Mr. Dickinson’s addiction prevented intimacy, Mr. Van Buren’s dysfunction results from his obsession with procreation. Mrs. Van Buren’s feelings of insecurity account for her desire to sexually stimulate her husband, and Mrs. Dickinson affirms the importance of sexuality: “Trust me, your man’ll have needs, and it’s your duty to keep his member firmly at home” (31). Mrs. Van Buren seems fully aware of this duty, yet she seems unable to accomplish this important task:

MRS. VAN BUREN. I feel exposed. I think the straps need to be  
tightened, Esther.

ESTHER. No ma’am, that’s the way it’s meant to be, but I’ll add a little  
more fabric to—

MRS. VAN BUREN. No, No, if this is what you made for that singer it is  
what I want [...] Ha! I feel like a tart from the Tenderloin. Granted  
I’ve never been, but I’m told. Are you sure this is what you made  
for that...singer? (11)

Mrs. Van Buren expresses her feelings to Esther since she remains unable to communicate meaningfully with her husband. She addresses her burgeoning sexual anxiety by commissioning the fabrication of a sexy ensemble. The clothing resembles lingerie a prostitute would wear, and Mrs. Van Buren seems willing to adopt a role below her privileged standing to secure her marriage. She plays the part of the temptress to seduce her husband but can never fully occupy this role since she does not have to market her sexuality as a prostitute does. She looks awkward in a prostitute's uniform. When she initially emerges from her dressing room, she simulates self-confidence, but her insecurities arise. *"She's an attractive white woman in her early thirties and attempts to carry herself with great poise and confidence. Mrs. Van Buren examines herself in the mirror, at first with disgust, which gradually gives way to curiosity"* (11). Her complicated reaction to her sexualized image emphasizes an internal conflict. Her physical behavior coupled with her language highlights the extent of Mrs. Van Buren's struggle to save her sexually unfulfilling marriage: "I look ridiculous, and I'm behaving absolutely foolishly, but I'm not sure what else to do" (11). Mrs. Van Buren's lack of options is similar to Esther's attitudes toward marriage. Their shared inability to acknowledge other options underscores the limited choices for multiple groups of women in the United States.

Moreover, Mrs. Van Buren's experience represents immobility. As a young married woman, she is expected to produce offspring for her husband. So her inability to fulfill this obligation undermines her marriage:

I've given him no children. (*Whispered.*) I'm afraid I can't. It's not for lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn't who is to blame? They think it's vanity that's kept me childless, I've heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it's like he's given up. (13)

Mrs. Van Buren's childlessness impacts her social life as well. "They want to know. All of them do. 'When are you going to have a child, Evangeline?' And my answer is always the same, 'Why we're working on it, dear, speak to Harold'" (12). The constant questions suggest that others interpret Mrs. Van Buren's childlessness as a choice. The focus on motherhood prompts Mrs. Van Buren's feelings of inadequacy, which she associates with motherhood. As she "gulps back [...] brandy," she reflects, "It's come to this. If Mother dear could see what has become of her peach in the city" (12).

Nottage plays with the image of the Southern Belle through references to Mrs. Van Buren as a "peach in the city." Although the Belle is known for her beauty and charm, Nottage highlights the tension manifest in her image. How can a woman be charming and flirtatious yet virginal and modest? The tension within the Belle corresponds to Van Buren's stressed relationship. Kathryn Lee Seidel emphasizes the conflict within the image of the Southern Belle as an "insistence that she be innocent, [the] denial of her sexual desire, and ...[by] forbidding her to have sexual experience" (31). Nottage's portrayal questions the symbol by highlighting Van Buren's fears and her overwhelming desire for companionship, even with Esther.

The opposition to the idealized image of the Belle is the Jezebel, which offers a similarly reductive depiction of womanhood through the sexualization of Black women's bodies. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that "historical jezebels and contemporary 'hoochies' represent a deviant black female sexuality" (89). As the Jezebel represents a sexual counterpoint to the Southern Belle, Mayme characterizes an oppositional force to Mrs. Van Buren. Nottage stresses their connection through a similar dress-fitting scene: "*Another bedroom...Mayme, a strikingly beautiful African American woman ... sits at an upright piano. She plays a frenzied upbeat rag. Her silk robe is torn, and her face trembles with outrage*" (18). Mayme's lingerie marks her position, but unlike Mrs. Van Buren, Mayme does not suppress the anxiety she feels towards her predicament. Mayme fumes over the negative treatment she endures. Perhaps she feels able to outwardly reflect her internal frustrations since she is not bound by the same social demands as a lady. Mayme's candid observations suggest a grounded rational awareness of the expectations women must fulfill.

While Mrs. Dickinson and Mrs. Van Buren link their mothers' influence to appropriate decorum, Mayme's recollection positions her father's behavior as a central guiding force. As Mayme plays the piano, she recalls the physical abuse she endured from her father. His physical admonishment ironically results in a sexually promiscuous daughter, whereas Mrs. Dickinson's and Mrs. Van Buren's mothers' cautions lead to a lack of physicality:

ESTHER. Oh, pretty. Did you write that Mayme?

MAYME. Yeah... My daddy gave me twelve lashes for playing this piece in our parlor. One for each year I studied the piano. He was too proper to like anything colored, and a syncopated beat was about the worst crime you could commit in his household. I woke up with the sudden urge to play it. (19)

Mayme's memory challenges the standard her father establishes for appropriate behavior, yet she simultaneously acknowledges that she has endured a penalty for stepping outside of the prescribed appropriate behavioral standards: "Yeah, baby, I wasn't born this black and blue (*Mayme picks up a bottle of moonshine and takes a belt*)" (19). Mayme's drinking is similar to Mrs. Van Buren's, but Mayme's interactions with Esther suggest a less self-conscious attitude toward the judgment she perceives from Esther and elsewhere: "You don't approve of me, Esther. I don't mind" (18). Mayme presents a confident temperament, but her interactions with Esther suggest a deeply felt need to be treated with dignity and respect. Although she works as a prostitute, the reality of Mayme's experience does not reflect an authoritative position. The "outrage" she exhibits from "all the pawing and pulling" exposes the sordid and dangerous aspect of her work (18).

Mayme's outrage contributes to her practical observations about her future. Although she fantasizes about a more fulfilling life, she tempers those fantasies with realistic reflections: "Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered

all over the room. Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me" (22). Mayme fantasizes about her musical talents: "I am a concert pianist playing recitals for audiences in Prague and I have my own means" (20). As a concert pianist, Mayme's value would not originate from her body but would depend upon appreciation of her skills. In the beginning of the play, Esther likewise envisions an opportunity to find fulfillment beyond marriage but only because she feels that she will never marry. Mayme's fantasies about liberation suggest acceptance of her current state, since marriage is not an option because of her status. Esther's thoughts reveal a desire to marry because she has not given up on marriage. Nottage correlates the ability to envision oneself beyond social, gender, and racial expectations with an inability to fulfill preconceived requirements. If one can never be a wife and mother, then she can mentally envision a life beyond established boundaries.

Despite Esther's mobility between different communities of women, she maintains an unwillingness to envision her life beyond marriage. Regardless of Esther's geographic journey from the South to New York, she is mentally immobile and unable to take a likewise risky expedition beyond the expectations of marriage. Instead she receives encouragement from Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme to initiate correspondence with George, "[a] man in Panama" whom she knows very little about (14). For Esther, her correspondence with George creates an opportunity to marry. At first, Esther's correspondence suggests her individuality, but her illiteracy coupled with a lack of confidence positions others to shape her identity. As she responds to Mrs. Van Buren,

Esther considers her own importance: “(with conviction) I live in a rooming house with seven unattached women and sew intimate apparel for ladies, but that ain’t for a gentleman’s eyes. Sure I can tell him anything there is to know about fabric, but that hardly seems a life worthy of words” (14). Esther’s responses indicate the beginning stages of her burgeoning consciousness. After Mrs. Van Buren questions her, Esther verbally documents the aspects of her day: “I go to church every Sunday, well practically...And on Tuesdays...I take the trolley downtown to orchard street...” (14-15). Once Esther documents her day, she begins to move toward collaborative composition, first with Mrs. Van Buren and then with Mayme.

MAYME. I ain’t romantic, I find this silly, [...] So how do I begin?

ESTHER. Dear George. (23)

These collaborations indicate Esther’s increasingly confident attitude, through her ability to engage others and extract meaning from her daily activities. She discloses personal information, which allows for unguarded moments that promote self-examination. Furthermore, Esther’s ability to frame her own experiences demonstrates a growing awareness about the value of her work and daily encounters. Additionally, Esther’s collaborative compositions accentuate her burgeoning confidence, which uncover her capacity for sensuality.

ESTHER. Do you think we could describe this silk... Will you tell him what it feel like against your skin? How it soft and supple to the

touch. I ain't got the words, but I want him to know this color, magenta red. What it make you feel right now. It—

MRS. VAN BUREN. The silk? Are you sure...Mercy, if my friends knew I spend the day writing love letters to a colored laborer, they'd laugh me out of Manhattan.

ESTHER. People do a lot of things that they don't ever speak of. (28)

Esther's desire to express the feeling and vivid hue of the fabric illustrates her need to connect on a physical level with George. Until this moment, marriage was connected to status, but her compositions reveal the need to connect physically. The collaborative process stresses the complexity of her character and demonstrates the development of her own articulate voice. As she writes with others, Esther develops more confidence by asserting her voice. These collaborations connect the process of documentation with self-confidence.

### *Active Witness: Transforming the Image*

Witnessing Esther's narrative allows the spectators to join the collaborative process. For example, when one sees a picture, a cognitive progression occurs where the viewer recognizes the image. Recognition encourages the audience to attribute meaning to the image based on its past encounters with visual texts. The viewer makes judgments

based solely on the limited characteristics of the photograph and her past knowledge. As she views the image, the audience decides about the key features, characters, and location. Moreover, the audience affixes meaning to its observations which shapes its perception of the individuals populating the photographic space. As the narrative progresses and distinct objects within the image are given a background, the audience's perceptions change. Its interpretation depends largely on its remembered encounters with identifiable characteristics of the picture. Nottage encourages the audience to reinterpret Esther's image with the knowledge gained from the performance. For Esther to move from unidentified to recognized, the audience must shift its views by incorporating their past knowledge with its present theater experience.

Nottage models this behavior through the reinvention of the quilt. In the beginning of the play, the quilt lies on the bed within the background of the stage. As the narrative progresses, the history of the quilt becomes known to the audience. It transitions from a blanket to a historical record. Ultimately, the quilt is physically torn apart and remade into a similar image with a more complicated metaphorical meaning. The audience views the final quilt from a different perspective as it moves from the background to the foreground of the performance. This transformation occurs through Esther's active remaking of the quilt in addition to her cognitive reconstruction of the image. After Esther's marriage falls apart, when her husband gambles away the money from inside her quilt, Esther makes a new quilt. Her present and past experiences inform her final reaction to the quilt and suggest a pattern the audience should imitate. The

audience's view of static images should be as physical as Esther's. They should grapple with images by combining their past memory with their current knowledge. While this process can result in dismembered images, the final product will produce a more thoughtful reflection.

By repurposing Esther's image, Nottage intervenes within Esther's photographic narrative via exploration of the multifarious relationships she maintains. These personal relationships shed light on the richness of her particular experience by remembering her existence. Barbara Christian stresses the importance of remembering "those who came before us, the means they use[d] to hold onto their humanity, and the ways in which they failed" as an important approach to becoming conversant in the "wisdom" alive within missing past presences ("Becoming the Subject" 125). The context of Esther's personal struggle to maintain integrity and achieve status highlights a factual historical tension in a fictional story. If the knowledge remains lost or beyond the frame of the image, this wisdom represents unknown pieces of the historical thread that compose our contemporary awareness of identity. By understanding the historical representation of African American women as absent from expansive communities, we develop an image of African American women beyond the limited portrayal of Black femininity as "unidentified Negro wom[e]n."

## CHAPTER TWO

Allow Me to Reintroduce Myself?: Progressive Antiphonic Exchanges in *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine*

In act 2, scene 1 of *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004), Nottage depicts a classic yet atypical antiphonic exchange. Antiphony, commonly referred to as call and response, is a crucial part of African American oral performance. Cultural linguist Geneva Smitherman describes call and response as “spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all the speaker’s statements are punctuated by expressions from the listener” (*Fabulation* 104). Her exploration confirms antiphony as “a basic organizing principle in Black American culture generally, for it enables traditional black folk to achieve the unified state of balance or harmony which is fundamental in the traditional African world view” (104). Smitherman’s definition emphasizes antiphonic interactions as a cultural pattern that makes possible exchanges that promote a coming together. This active communication positions the audience and speaker to perform collaborative speech acts.

Nottage incorporates antiphony within *Fabulation* in three key ways. First, she employs a traditional exchange between a lead speaker and a community of listeners, where the listeners respond by confirming their agreement with the speaker. Second, she incorporates modified direction, which occurs when an audience member’s verbal response disagrees or diverges from the speaker’s initial position. As a result, the speaker

maintains his focus while acknowledging the audience member's reaction. Finally, a character initiates a call to the theater audience in the midst of the initial exchange between the performers. This call positions the audience within the interaction occurring on stage. These three interpretations of antiphony emphasize the interconnection between speakers and listeners, which encourages theater audiences to see themselves as members of the performance.

Nottage integrates all three methods simultaneously during antiphonic exchanges in *Fabulation*. She uses an addicts anonymous meeting to foreground the importance of communal exchange. The meeting provides the speaker with a platform to interact with the audience, while the play provides the audience an opportunity to join the conversation. At this particular meeting, Undine Barnes, the main character in the play, observes a confession from a former English Professor. Undine is not an addict. However, she was convicted of possession of heroin, and her punishment includes regular attendance at addicts anonymous meetings. As she attends these meetings, Undine rarely connects with the addicts; instead, she addresses the audience of the play:

ADDICT # 1. I miss it. I miss the taste and the smell of cocaine, that  
 indescribable surge of confidence that fills the lungs. The  
 numbness at the tip of my tongue, that sour metallic taste of really  
 good blow. (*The Addicts savor the moment with an audible*  
*"Mmm."*) It was perfect, I mean, in the middle of the day I'd  
 excuse myself and slip out of an important faculty meeting, go to

the stairwell and suck in fifteen, twenty, thirty dollars' worth of crack. (*The Addicts savor the moment with an audible "Mmm."*)

I'd return a few minutes later full of energy, ideas, inspired, and then go teach a course on early American literature and not give a goddamn. In fact, the students admired my bold, gutsy devil-may-care attitude ...But, I don't remember when I became a criminal, it happened at some point after that. The descent was classic, it's not even worthy of detail...

GUY. But you're clean, son. You're clear.

ADDICT #1. One year, one year clean and I still walk around the city wondering how people cope, how do they survive without the aid of some substance? A boost? It makes me angry—no, envious [...]

ADDICT #2. Fuck them!

ADDICT #1. Excuse me, I didn't interrupt you. Thank you. And you know what I think? I think that they will never understand the joy and comfort of that very first moment you draw the smoke into your lungs... They won't know that kind of passion...because I know the Shaolin strength that it takes to resist it, to fight it, to defeat it.

(*A chorus of agreement rises up.*)

UNDINE. (*to audience*) The perversity of this moment is that, in the midst of his loathsome confession, I'm actually finding myself strangely curious to smoke crack cocaine...(Nottage 111-113)

Initially, Nottage maintains the traditional exchange between Addict #1 and the audience. As Addict # 1 confesses, the audience audibly moans confirming their agreement with the speaker by acknowledging their shared struggle. Yet, two responses alter the direction of Addict # 1's revelations. Guy and Addict # 2 encourage the speaker to think about his subject differently, and his responses modify the exchange by addressing their concerns.

Nottage alters the setting where antiphonal exchanges typically take place within African American literature. Call and response is most often connected with Black churches, where a boisterous preacher initiates a dialogue with the audience. The exchange between the speaker and audience flows from the pulpit through the congregation. The purpose of the communication within the church seems more individually minded. The preacher's sermon teaches the congregation and perhaps encourages its reflection and future behavior. But the purpose of the interaction in the compulsory drug counseling session seems more complex. The speaker constantly changes in the counseling session, which impacts the dynamics of the exchange. Multiple speakers allow different voices to direct the group's interaction. Their communication vets behavior but acknowledges the difficulty individual members have maintaining their sobriety. The focus on individual experience within community reflects Michael Awkward's claim that call and response "emphasizes a fundamental interdependence of

all entities” which encourages the audience to “not only aid a speaker” but to “also perform in its own right” (49). Thus, Nottage’s use of call and response moves beyond a “*co-signing* and *co-narrating* of a shared communicative reality” (Yancy 296). Guy’s and Addict # 2’s responses do not co-sign Addict # 1’s confession; rather they question his reaction, which alters the direction of the exchange. For example, Guy’s response, “But you’re clean,” does not directly reference Addict # 1’s point about his descent; instead, Guy shifts the discussion to a different issue within the topic of sobriety (Nottage 112). In this way, Guy demonstrates Awkward’s notion of “interdependence” and independence by emphasizing Addict # 1’s sobriety. Guy accentuates the purpose of the community, which is to provide support for struggling addicts, but at the same time Guy’s interjection diverges from Addict # 1’s revelatory experience.

Undine’s response functions in a more complicated way because she links her personal response to the audience. The audience stands apart from the community of addicts, and while they can observe the verbal interactions, they cannot cosign the addicts’ call. Similarly, Undine remains apart from the addicts because she does not belong to the community but has been forced to attend the group sessions by a court order. Her call to the audience distances her from the addicts while confirming her intimacy with the audience. Undine’s connection with the audience promotes their engagement in the narrative. Traditional call and response is “interactive, process-oriented, and concerned with innovation, rather than ... [stasis]” (Sale 41). Call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience

performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community (Sale 41). Within the group-counseling session, the interaction between the speaker and audience demonstrates community through the creation and maintenance of an active support system. The relationship reveals itself through the constantly in-flux conversation. When fellow addicts support the primary speaker, they generate a useful communication by encouraging each other. In *Fabulation*, Nottage uses call and response to signal personal and communal identity transformation by connecting interactions, personal development, and demonstrable external responses. Moreover, Nottage uses call and response to engage her audience about difficult contemporary issues including drug use, unplanned pregnancy, and poverty. Multiple perspectives are communicated by “people with stakes in a topic,” and Nottage intimates that “the act of communicating their own challenges becomes a step toward resolving them” (Cohen 68). The audience’s connection with Undine allows her the platform to represent the issues that permeate her life. As the audience witnesses Undine acknowledge her issues, she in turn becomes integrated into a community that facilitates their resolution.

### *Acknowledging the Past*

Contemporary African American women writers have incorporated acknowledgement within their literature by reclaiming past writers, giving voice to

silenced perspectives, and by renaming themselves and characters. Naming has signified the claiming of authority through self-definition and self-affirmation. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde claims the power of definition via naming. In two key sections of the text, Lorde responds to separate calls. In each response, Lorde transforms her identity by reacting to the way her identity is perceived by others. Cheryl A. Wall describes the power of these individual moments within Lorde's text claiming, "Audre invents a new spelling of her name—preferring the "evenness" of "audre" to Audrey. By the end of the text, she assumes the name inscribed in the title, one that denotes a change in self-definition rather than orthography" (Wall 42). Wall suggests that the first change reflects a merely orthographic<sup>1</sup> reorganization, but Lorde's revelation suggests an important relationship between the subject named and the individual naming: "I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey [...] but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and because [...] that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was" (Lorde "Zami" 24). The first change from Audrey to *Audre* does not reflect a change in denotation but suggests a change in aesthetics. Although this renaming results from a physical reconstruction, it nevertheless articulates an important recognition. By personally claiming the power to rename herself, she effects a new purpose for her name. It now symbolically represents her identity more than the original name given to her by her parents. The renaming reacts to her mother's control over her identity from birth. The second name change, however, reflects more than an

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines *orthography* as, "spelling as an art or practice; the branch of knowledge which deals with letters and their combination to represent sounds and words; the study of spelling" ("Orthography").

improvement: the adoption of *Zami* suggests a development in identity: “Every woman I have ever loved has put her print on me...And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. *Zami. Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*” (Lorde 255). One characteristic of this new identity is the loving connection Lorde has maintained with various women who have shaped her identity by leaving their residue on her memory. Lorde’s reflection informs her view of herself. Furthermore, this new name reflects her ethnic identity and functions as a crucial bridge that connects her individual identity with personal encounters with other women. By situating multiple verbal and lived exchanges as symbols of her reality, Lorde fuses genres and experiences in *Zami*, which replicates the same synthesis of experience that characterizes her understanding.

Undine Barnes’ renaming has more negative connotations. Initially Undine Barnes was known as Sharona Watkins, but in college she adopted the name Undine from a character in a novel before her graduation. Her decision to develop a new identity demonstrated her power to separate from her past. While Lorde’s renaming manifests control over her identity and a renewed connection to her family, Undine’s renaming claims authority by separating herself from her family:

Is this it? Is this the end of the story? A dramatic family confrontation.

Catharsis. Is it that simple? A journey that began miraculously at the Walt

Whitman projects and led me to Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the*

*Country*, an intriguing parvenu discovered in an American Literature course at Dartmouth. (Nottage133)

Undine discovered her name in Edith Wharton's 1913 novel about a Midwestern young woman named Undine Sprigs who moves to the city and subsequently embarks on a journey to attain wealth and social status. Christopher Gair notes that in *The Custom of the Country* "the focus [is] very much on female identity" (353). For Wharton, the problem of 'American' identity is more directly concerned with the effects of publicity and the culture of consumption" (353). Wharton's Undine is characterized by her desire to attain financial security, which jeopardizes her connection to her family. Undine's revision also problematizes the power Black feminists associate with self-definition. Through Undine's name change, Nottage considers whether there are specific instances when disavowing the personal results in a politically destructive creation.

Unlike Lorde, Undine replaces acknowledgement with denial. In order to be successful, Undine thinks she must demonstrate her educated identity by denying her racial background. Undine confesses to Guy during the group-counseling session:

I killed my family. [...] Yes, I killed all of them on the day of my college graduation... And I decided on that day that I was Undine Barnes, who bore no relationship to those people. I told everyone my family died in a fire, and I came to accept it as true. And it was true for years. Understand, Sharona had to die in a fire in order for Undine to live. (138)

Denial defines Undine's identity throughout the play. She consistently refuses to occupy the present moment, and this refusal distances Undine from developing meaningful relationships with supportive communities. The denial is a means to attain social status by creating distance from her family. Through her interactions with the audience she tries to resolve her self-imposed isolation by acknowledging her mistakes.

Undine is motivated to isolate herself because of her fears. Initially she feared discovery from her peers and symbolically kills off her parents: "But I didn't mind, no, I didn't mind until I heard a group of my friends making crass, unkind comments about my family. They wondered aloud who belonged to *those* people" (138). Undine has separated herself from her family but suggests she feels remorse about her choices. "I should have said that my mother took an extra shift so I could have a new coat every year. My father sent me ten dollars every week, his lotto money" (138). Undine acknowledges it was a mistake to disassociate herself from a family that contributed to her success. The sacrifices her parents made depict the positive results of familial community.

Subsequently the fear of discovery merges with the fear of failure. As Undine develops her affluent persona, she further separates herself from her family. She has shed a working-class identity and developed a "very fierce boutique PR firm" (87). Undine purposefully creates a professional persona as a public relations specialist. A public relation specialist "establish[es] or maintain[s] a good relationship between an organization or an important person and the general public ("Public Relations").

Undine commits herself to a life of focusing on the interactions between organizations and public figures, which in her mind demonstrates a physical separation from the failures she perceives in her familial community. But Undine focuses so much on the surface-level interactions that she fails to understand the deeper meaning behind verbal and nonverbal exchanges in her life. Her accountant Richard carefully highlights this point: “The truth is you haven’t heard anything anyone has said in years!” (Nottage 85). While Undine tries to deny the consequences of her shallow exchanges, she cannot avoid the bankruptcy, pregnancy, and divorce: “I don’t want to talk about bankruptcy. I’ve spent fourteen years building this company. Bankruptcy—no. That implies that somehow I failed ... I will do what it takes. I will beg and borrow—but damn it, I’m not giving up my business. That’s what I have, this is what I am” (85). In this moment, Undine acknowledges the sacrifices she has made by committing her life to public relations. Externally her identity reflects a powerful businesswoman whose success is contingent on superficial verbal exchanges. Her inability to maintain the success of the firm emphasizes Undine’s inability to maintain her personal façade.

Undine’s pattern of denial results in a physical reaction. “In the next twenty seconds I will experience a pain in my chest so severe, that I’ve given in a short, simple, ugly name—Edna” (86). Undine’s naming of her panic attack represents the first time within the play that she deeply engages in dialogue because she cannot deny the reality of the pain. The physical attack exposes the consequences of her activity. By naming her physical reaction, she demonstrates a deep-rooted need to control her identity. The

severity of the chest pain instigates a conversation with the play's audience. This dialogue permeates the remainder of the play in moments where the reality of any particular encounter becomes too overwhelming. In those tense moments, Undine disengages from the speaker and shifts her dialogue to the audience. These metacommentaries start a new call to the audience. During these transitions, Undine transforms the conversation into a reflective space where she analyzes the stimulus to her anxiety. Though Undine directly addresses audience members, they remain silent, but Undine doesn't acknowledge the silence. Unlike the addicts who are invigorated by their community, the silence allows Undine to reflect on her circumstances, which promotes her development. While the audience does not verbally respond to Undine, her body physically responds to the calls.

Undine's pregnancy echoes her earlier physical response with Edna. In the midst of her business failure, Undine discovers she is pregnant. This pregnancy, much like the anxiety attack, is a physical response to her behavior. Her body's reaction compels Undine towards acknowledgement, which initiates a call to the audience:

DR. KHADIR. Well, all of your tests came back normal. But there's one other thing Ms. Calles. I ran some routine tests and, congratulations, you're pregnant. (*A moment.*)

UNDINE. Pregnant? (*To audience*) I met Hervé years ago at a dinner party three years ago. He was standing by the crudités, dipping broccoli spears into the dip. (88)

Similar to the memory of her graduation when she “locked [her]self in [her] dorm room and refused to come out,” this memory indicates a moment of transition (138). Undine processes the significance of her unborn child by thinking about how she became pregnant. Dr. Khadir’s announcement encourages an internal call that Undine acknowledges through a flashback. During the flashback, two past male suitors enter and “retreat into the darkness” (89). The audience witnesses Undine’s memory of her first encounter with Hervé. Later, she recounts her reflections of her rapper ex-boyfriend, “he’d become addicted to painkillers and his paranoia was making the relationship tiresome...” (89). The audience does not know whether these reflections reveal a genuine understanding of either character; nevertheless Undine’s representation of both figures suggests this is how she currently understands both men. As she moves from the doctor’s office into the past, Undine connects her present to memories.

The audience sees Undine’s movement from present stimulus to past memory again as she reflects on the dissolution of her relationship with her rapper ex-boyfriend. Their breakup occurs since she is repelled by his isolation “from the folks” (89). His bigger-than-life ghetto fabulous lifestyle hits too close to home, and instead of addressing his flaws she leaves him. His destructive behavior is similar to Undine’s and demonstrates her affinity towards individuals whose identity performances are as false as

her own. Her marriage to Hervé mimics this previous relationship, because Hervé's destructive behavior is also similar to her own. Their eventual separation speaks to the unconscious rising to the surface. When her deceptions collapse, Undine must acknowledge the reality of her situation. Her business is failing, she is pregnant, and her husband has abandoned her. Until this point she has simply avoided addressing problems, but she cannot easily dismiss the pregnancy.

### *Connecting Threads*

Nottage's "author's notes" to *Fabulation* highlight the thematic overlapping within the diverse ensemble of characters: "The ensemble of four women and four men play multiple characters, with the exception of the actress playing Undine. The pace of the play should be rapid and fluid, allowing the scenes to blend seamlessly into each other without ever going to blackout until the end" (Nottage 78). These directions emphasize the connections between multiple characters, while the pacing encourages the audience to see the relationship between Undine's experiences before and during pregnancy. Her pregnancy functions as a long-standing call which positions her to reconnect with herself. The characters form a community of responders that similarly react to Undine's calls beginning with the pregnancy. These connections occur mutually as Undine acknowledges her pregnancy and anxiety by verbally responding to the cast.

Once Undine acknowledges her physical state, connections emerge between her past and present. As she anticipates motherhood, pregnancy changes Undine. While she may be financially bankrupt, her body indicates emotional potential to establish connections with her family and other supportive communities. As Dr. Khadir names the pregnancy, he unleashes its connective potential, which Undine directs. Dr. Khadir is a sensory character that unhinges Undine's guarded behavior through his frank conversation. His up-front approach encourages Undine to reflect on her pregnancy:

DR. KHADIR. I believe you've suffered a severe anxiety attack. It's not uncommon.

UNDINE. Anxiety? Me? Oh no, I don't think so.

DR. KHADIR. And why not?

Dr. Khadir's response challenges Undine to accept her stress. The diagnosis neutralizes Undine's defensive responses by suggesting the ordinary nature of her condition. By reducing Undine's anxiety attack to an everyday occurrence, Dr. Khadir implicitly questions Undine's pattern of dramatizing her personal experiences. While Undine typically produces exaggerated responses that sensationalize an event, Dr. Khadir's office, demeanor, and approach diminish Undine's ability to overreact to the moment. Their roles as doctor and patient create an opportunity for frankness, which further fractures Undine's pretense. Even though she initially avoids acknowledging the

pregnancy, Dr. Khadir's rejoinder continues the interaction and shifts the direction of the communication from denial to acceptance.

Like Dr. Khadir, Grandma's interaction compels Undine to acknowledge a physical reality. When Undine moves back in with her family in Brooklyn, she must share a room with her grandmother. In their room, Undine discovers her grandmother is a heroin addict by finding her grandmother's drug paraphernalia. The other members of the family believe that Grandma suffers from diabetes. For Undine, the family's reaction denies Grandma's problem:

*(Undine lifts up a paper bag. The contents tumble out into Grandma's lap: a baggie of white powder, a box of matches, a hypodermic needle, a spoon and a tourniquet.)*

GRANDMA. Pass me my works.

UNDINE. *(Undine picks up the needle and Grandma snatches it from her hand)* This is crazy.

GRANDMA. Change be what it will. I'd say it were crazy if it wasn't so necessary... Sweet pea, I thought that I'd get to this point and be filled with so much wisdom that I'd know how to control the pain that's trailed me through my life... One would think you'd be closer to God at my age, but I find myself curiously further away.

(102-103)

While Undine appears shocked by the behavior, the drug use oddly resembles Undine's pattern of denial. The grandmother's addiction is a similar response for addressing discomfort. Undine acknowledges that the family's denial concerning this ongoing abuse has negative consequences, as she tells the audience: "And this concludes the section entitled Denial and Other Opiates" (103). Undine recognizes the negative ramifications of denial but does not actively initiate new possibilities for her grandmother; instead she decides to purchase more drugs for her grandmother, which suggests her understanding of the overwhelming desire to escape at all costs.

But other women characters avoid denial when they respond to the challenges they encounter. Undine's actions contrast with the authenticity these women demonstrate through their capacity to engage sincerely with others. Primarily the audience witnesses the difference between Undine and Stephanie, her young assistant. Initially, the description of Stephanie would suggest her silliness, but her actions evidence an understanding Ivy-League educated Undine cannot express. As Undine and Stephanie prepare for an event, Stephanie's ethics counteracts her physical appearance:

*(Stephie, a spacey twenty-something, enters in a very, very short light blue fur miniskirt.)*

UNDINE. Jesus, how difficult is it? They can send probes to Mars, and I'm just asking for someone slightly fabulous.

STEPHIE. Like?

UNDINE. Like the fuck blond with the perky nipples. You know the one.

She's what's-his-name's girlfriend. The comedian. You know.

Her.

STEPHIE. She's an alcoholic, Undine...

UNDINE. So...

STEPHIE. But... It doesn't feel right. (80)

Undine's tone indicates a desire to control the way all speakers in the conversation react. She generates hostile calls, while Stephie fosters cooperation. This tense encounter signals Undine's unwillingness to collaborate. Undine's dialogues become soliloquies since she rarely seriously engages with her counterpart's responses. The affectations of the public relations firm support Undine's self-indulgent discussions, through her ability to carefully manipulate discourse. But outside of her business she is forced to respond directly to other characters.

After Undine acknowledges her pregnancy, she visits a drugstore in Manhattan to purchase prenatal vitamins. Although at this point she lives in Brooklyn with her family in public housing, she ventures to Manhattan to escape. As she searches for the vitamins, Undine encounters Stephie working as a stocker in the store. The local pharmacy now equalizes the two speakers, whereas the Undine's office previously emphasized their distinctions:

*(Duane Reade. A young woman, dressed in a uniform, busies herself stocking items on a shelf.)*

UNDINE. Miss. I'm looking for calcium tablets and vitamins.

STEPHIE. Undine? *(They gawk at each other.)*

UNDINE. What are—

STEPHIE. This is only temporary. Actually I'm interviewing like crazy.

I've come really close to several things. God, look at you... This is about paying a few bills. I'm told it's like important to have all kinds of experiences... Man how far along are you?

UNDINE. Almost seven months [...]

STEPHIE. Hey, Undine. *(No response)* Undine! Are you happy? *(Undine turns away.)*

UNDINE. *(To audience)*: I want to turn back, but I don't. I do not answer [...] I walk all the way home fighting a tinge of envy, because Stephie, my former assistant, might actually be named Employee of the Month at the pharmacy. (125-127)

Undine's final encounter with Stephie is the only occasion when they actually engage in conversation. Their previous exchange highlighted their employer-employee relationship; as a result the women did not share information. Undine's language

commanded Stephe to perform but did not encourage her participation in communication. Apart from the performances in the public relations office, the encounter at the pharmacy emphasizes their similarities. Both women are ambitious, but their conduct before now has largely stressed their different positions. In this meeting, Stephe appears superior to her former employer through her willingness to adapt to changing situations. Stephe is interviewing for positions and views her current job as an experience that will contribute to growth. As Undine struggles to establish her identity outside of her career, Stephe exhibits an active presence. She stacks the shelves, she inquires about Undine's health, and she acknowledges the value in her present experience which troubles Undine, because Stephe is responding gracefully during a trial.

Undine takes refuge in the pharmacy because it is in Manhattan and she does not anticipate having a personal conversation with anyone, but her encounter with Stephe encourages personal reflection. Similarly, Undine views the doctor's waiting room as a neutral space. She does not anticipate connecting with anyone, but is drawn into conversation by a young pregnant woman.

*(We're in a waiting room. A very Young Pregnant Woman sits down next to Undine. The woman noisily sips on a can of grape soda. Undine tries hard to ignore her. Finally:)*

YOUNG PREGNANT WOMAN. Twins a boy and girl. The jackpot first time around. What about you?

UNDINE. First.

YOUNG PREGNANT WOMAN. Your first? Really? But you're so old.

UNDINE. But you're so young. (*A moment. To audience*) Surely, I don't look that old, do I?...I say nothing, though I want to let her know that I don't belong here, that my life experience is rich and textured and not represented well in this low, course clinic lighting. As such, I show her a touch of condescension, perhaps even pity....And I look at her and I realize, she's looking back at me with a touch of condescension. Pity even. And we both look away.  
(123)

Like the pharmacy, the waiting room deemphasizes the pretense Undine has relied on during her interactions before becoming pregnant. The seriousness of her situation prevents Undine's standard unfriendly demeanor from dominating the scene. Instead, their shared fear regarding the uncertainty of the future bonds the characters: "*A moment. Undine reaches out and uncharacteristically takes the Young Pregnant Woman's hand*" (124). This moment of recognition outwardly manifests Undine's need for interaction and the consequences of leaving her family. She needs a support system but struggles to acknowledge her need for community.

Meanwhile Devora, a childhood friend, represents an alternative to Undine's detached relationships. Their reunion depicts an alternative to Undine's distance from

community. While both characters achieved economic success, Devora demonstrates positive progress through her ability to redefine herself while maintaining connections with her racial community:

UNDINE. I'm sorry. I'm like, you know, dealing with a lot. What are you up to...Are you still living in 4?

DEVORA. Oh no. I just bought a brownstone in Fort Greene. I'm a senior financial planner at JP Morgan. I come around once in a while. You know, to see my girl Rosa. And you? (*A moment.*)

UNDINE. ...I'm, um, pregnant and trying—

DEVORA. I bet it's tough Sharona—

UNDINE. Actually, my name is—

ROSA. That's right, I hear you changed your name to Queen?

UNDINE. No Undine.

DEVORA. Undine, funny, like that public relations exec, Undine Barnes Calles? Pity what happened to her. I hate to see a sister get hurt. I hear she was quite a remarkable diva, but got a little lost...Listen, I'm starting a financial program for underprivileged women. Rosa has joined us. I'd love for you to stop by. Here's my card.

UNDINE. (to audience): And as she thrusts the tricolor card into my hand  
it gives me a slight paper cut, just enough to draw blood. (118-119)

Devora uses her experiences to benefit the community by providing opportunities for development. Her sincerity literally cuts through Undine's indifferent attitude via the card, which sheds blood. This symbolic gesture emphasizes the alternative to Undine's decision to sever ties with her community by framing her as a lost diva. Most of the play privileges Undine's perspective, but in this scene the audience can objectively consider the consequences of the choices she has made. Devora, Stephie, and the Young Pregnant Woman present counter perspectives. While they might inhabit different classes, they collectively present women in transitive moments. These characters' choices present other responses that engage Undine's reactions and further complicate the authenticity of her narrative.

Undine's authenticity is repeatedly challenged by her brother, Flow. Flow and Undine's tense interactions dramatize the tension between representations of "authentic" Blackness versus the stigma of assimilation. Their conflict emphasizes the struggles many African Americans face with fulfilling personal and communal obligations. Undine's educational success at an Ivy League institution is a communal achievement, but she sees her matriculation as an individual victory. Undine's behavior suggests she accepts the American mythic connection between individual productivity and personal success, and by disregarding the cultural expectations of communal celebration, Undine performs a cultural taboo. Her education and professional triumphs signal a desire to

separate herself from her community. Her return home in disgrace offers her family an opportunity to voice their disapproval. Flow challenges her disappearance by focusing on the name change. For Flow, Undine's true crime, the denial of her own ethnic heritage, overshadows the denial of her family.

FLOW. Well, I ain' calling her Undine. If it was Akua or Nzingha, a proud African queen, I'd be down with it. But you are the only sister I know that gots to change her beautiful African name to a European brand.

UNDINE. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you weren't exactly born with the name Flow. So shut up. (100)

Flow's denial of Undine's new name contrasts with Undine's disavowal of her heritage because Flow attributes Undine's name change to the acceptance of a different culture. His condemnation does not diminish Undine's ability to redefine herself but critiques her choice as an adoption of a Western identity. While Flow charges Undine with accepting a false identity, he replaces his name, Tyrell, with a name that embodies his cultural artistic persona. Implicitly he believes that the communal art he creates signifies an important function within his community, while her creative change embodies a selfish quality; thus Flow conflates Undine's moniker with a preoccupation with individual success.

When others fail to meet his principles for social commitments to the community, Flow likewise accuses them of disrespecting their traditions. He takes every opportunity, even at work, to encourage acceptance of cultural values. Flow works as a security guard

in a local store and uses his position to educate customers about their heritage. For instance, he recalls one incident with a young shoplifter:

And I took the shoplifter to the back of the store and gave him my Nelson Mandela speech. I said, “The African brother gave up twenty-eight years of freedom for his ideals, for his principles, for the struggle to liberate black Africans from the gripping lock of apartheid.” I said, “Little brother thief, liberating a box of lubricated super-strong Trojans ain’t a reason to go to jail. Don’t let the system fuck you because you’re horny. If you’re going to give up your damn freedom, make sure it’s for a just cause.”...And then the little fool is gonna ask, “Who Nelson Mandela?” I had to slap homeboy out of his chair and call 911. Shit, there ain’t no greater crime than abandoning your history” (128).

Flow’s standards are hard to live up to. The young shoplifter who exhibits a genuine lack of knowledge about his community seems different than Undine. The shoplifter’s youth denotes his lack of understanding about the consequences of his behavior, and while Flow abstractly chronicles Nelson Mandela’s plight, the shoplifter’s question suggests a failure within the community because he does not know about his history. Flow’s recollection of this event highlights a key question: Who is responsible for passing along cultural history? Flow’s argument with Undine suggests the importance of women’s roles in maintaining oral traditions, but Flow’s story suggests men and women should be held responsible. When directly questioned by an individual who desperately needs to hear

about important Black cultural figures, Flow interprets the young man's ignorance as insolence. If Flow won't answer, who will teach young men about their leaders? This interaction emphasizes that men have an important role in the transmission of cultural history, but Flow misses an important teaching moment. His interaction with the shoplifter reveals his artificial agenda. While Flow purports his investment in the community through his lyrical poetry, he does not demonstrate a commitment to the community's youth. His focus seems superficial as he gives Nelson Mandela speeches but does not live a principled life. Nelson Mandela is a talking point instead of an example to live by. When read this way, Flow's interaction with the shoplifter appears just as artificial as Undine's name.

Nottage complicates Undine's denial with the family's pretense. From the grandmother's drug addiction to Flow's racial bravado, Nottage uses satire as a tool to stimulate recognition. Randy Gener argues that *Fabulation* "is a barbed satire about the perils of self-invention and social climbing... a classic trickster fable" (144). Scheub explains that a "trickster becomes little more than a character who moves about easily and readily through a variety of experiences" (10). Although Gener correctly emphasizes Nottage's use of folkloric elements, his estimation that *Fabulation* upholds a classic trickster fable is harder to imagine. "Trickster characters [...] achieve freedom from alienating circumstances by using dexterous and creative resistance strategies [that incorporate] wit, kinship, communal support, verbal adeptness, and courage [as] necessary tools of rebellion [...]" (M'Baye 4). In *Fabulation*, Nottage depicts a

progressive African American uniquely female trickster, who manifests a complicated identity based on her inability to resolve racial expectations. By incorporating call and response into the trickster narrative, Nottage emphasizes the importance of Undine's individuality, since her responses articulate specific issues within the community that need to be addressed. In the classic trickster, "the experiences define the trickster," but Undine's race and gender influences the choices she makes in her encounters. Undine's family questions the choice she makes to disassociate from them but does "not question the vertical lines of power or authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of ...competition" (Lorde, "Scratching the Surface" 48). Lorde highlights a problem within intraracial communities that plays out within Undine and Flow's interactions. Flow quickly challenges Undine's choice based on his cultural understanding of appropriate behavior. He does not acknowledge that Undine operates within a multicultural space. Her choice was meant to make her movement more fluid between social groups but ended up creating stagnancy. Instead of moving easily between different social and cultural groups as Devora does, she became stationary and removed from her racial community.

Flow cannot comprehend the significance of Undine's decision to rename herself. Nottage uses Devora as a model of positive movement, while Undine embodies a cultural tension. The trickster typically represents an "ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox," which results in the "trickster [as] a boundary crosser in the standard line" (Hyde 7). But Undine's behavior opposes the typical

trickster behavior of a High John de Conqueror<sup>2</sup> or a Brer Rabbit<sup>3</sup>, because in her fable “the trickster creates a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight” (7). In Undine’s story she crosses a racial boundary. Her fable teaches the audience the cultural values of family while questioning Undine’s behavior. Her drive to individually progress creates a conflict within her racial community. Flow’s poem reflects this tension when he says, “It that ghetto paradox/ When we rabbit and we fox” (Nottage 131). Nobody wants to live in a ghetto, but community members want to maintain their roots as they achieve success. Nottage portrays a potential resolution for Undine’s fable with Devora.

Jason Zinoman describes Nottage as “an equal opportunity satirist” who “zeroes in on upper-middle-class African Americans who ignore their roots” (6). Does this particular fable question more than that? After all, the subtitle to the play is the “Re-education of Undine.” What does the audience learn from Undine’s fable? Should the audience simply acknowledge its past in order to better understand the present? The

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<sup>2</sup> “Zora Neale Hurston appears to be the first to claim that the trickster in the cycles of John and Marster tales is High John. In these tales, John, a cunning slave, may assume the posture of a rogue, naive rascal, or fool when he encounters an oppressive master who reminds him of his limited possibilities on the plantation. John may outsmart his dumb-witted boss, or he may be the unwilling recipient of a misapplied plan. Hurston eloquently valorizes the slave voice through this association. High John is a symbol of the slave’s indomitable spirit, which Hurston argues began in Africa but assumed a more physical form in the New World through High John who metaphorically becomes the ultimate conjure maker” (Johnson, “High John the Conqueror” 355).

<sup>3</sup> Brer Rabbit “is the archetypal trickster character from African American oral literature. While Brer Rabbit got much exposure in Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881), folklorists and literature scholars are well aware of the rich cycle of tales that circulate around this tricky and cunning figure. These tales thrived especially during the pre and post slave era up until the mid 1900” (Kulii and Kulii “Brer Rabbit” 96-97).

simplicity of these questions dismisses the reality of Undine's homecoming, where she is greeted by individuals denying every aspect of their painful condition. From the family's denial of Grandma's heroin addiction to Flow's portrayal of a "down brotha," Undine's reluctance to acknowledge her family doesn't read as unforgivable alongside the reality of her messy home life. So the moral of this narrative isn't a clear-cut admonishment to remember one's heritage; instead Nottage drops her audience in the middle of a fable and removes them before Undine's story comes to fruition. Undine's journey is about realizing her place within different communities. Her pregnancy presents an opportunity to connect with diverse individuals who can support her growth. But as the play ends, what happens to Undine is unclear. In the delivery room, she refuses to breathe while other characters including Guy and her grandmother encourage her. During the birth, Undine does not speak, and as she gasps for air a baby's cry is heard. The audience is along for Undine's pregnancy and they hear the birth, but the outcome remains unclear. Throughout the play Undine communicates her feelings, but during the birth her silence rings loudly. The stage directions note a release, which could be interpreted as Undine's decision to let go. But how does she let go? Her behavior thus far has not outlined any strategy to successfully navigate between the two communities she occupies, at work or at home. Her release takes on a less optimistic tone if the reader views her giving in as her death. Perhaps Flow's statement that the poem "is open-ended. A work in progress. A continuous journey" posits a more appropriate reaction to "this very conundrum that intrigues and confounds" (Nottage 97). The pregnancy continues to function as a call

compelling Undine's response, but instead of her voice we hear the voices of her new support system. Her survival depends upon developing an identity that allows fluid movement between diverse groups of people. This movement reveals itself in this scene through her silence. Instead of commanding the exchanges, Undine retreats to the background to play a part in a community experience. As she gasps for air, Undine's physical response overwhelms her mental desire to control her exchanges. She is overpowered, and the baby is born. If the pregnancy is the call, then the birth is the response. While the call emphasizes acknowledgement, the birth, much like Undine's interactions with the audience, emphasizes a shift. The possibilities resulting from the birth are not outlined to the audience. Yet, the sound of the baby's cry offers a more promising response than the silence or denial Undine has typically used to engage members of her community.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Movin’ On Up”: The Great Migration and Revisionist Memory in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*

Lynn Nottage’s play *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* begins with seventeen-year-old Ernestine recalling the driving force that propelled her family from Pensacola, Florida to Brooklyn, New York. Ernestine Crump is the oldest daughter in the family. After her mother’s death, her father struggles to deal with the loss. He decides to move the family, which consists of Ernestine and Ermina (15 years old) to New York for a new beginning. The audience sees the family adapt to their new environment from Ernestine’s perspective:

Death nearly crippled my father, slipping beneath the soles of his feet and taking away his ability to walk at will. Death made him wail like a god-awful banshee [...] Death made strangers take hold of our hands and recount endless stories of Mommy [...] Death made us nauseous with regret. It clipped Daddy’s tongue and put his temper to rest... And then one day it stopped and we took the train north to New York City. (Nottage *Crumbs* 7-8)

Ernestine emphasizes her father’s reaction by framing the family’s move with her mother’s death. Sandra Crumps’ death marks a specific instance of grief that motivates

every member of the family to alter his/her behavior in response to this painful unchangeable reality.

Although the mother's absence remains permanent, the family's move to Brooklyn signals their development. Though Sandra's absence negatively impacts the family, their response to her death presents opportunities for growth. As they adjust to New York, the Crumps must combine their cultural values with new expectations in the North. The tension between stasis and movement echoes throughout the organization of the text. Nottage divides the play into four key sections indicative of the four seasons. The first is the prologue, subtitled "Fall." By beginning the play in the fall, Nottage invokes seasonal imagery to reflect this transitional period within the family's life. The seasons further symbolize progression, which contrasts the present moment and important past memories. Through fall, Nottage emphasizes how an ending can motivate a transformation within another period of an experience.

### *Revisionary Models and Nottage's Progressive Strategy*

Contemporary African American women writers have challenged negative past and present representations of African American femininity through revision. By revising the images ascribed to African American identities, these writers have questioned the origins of reductive racial and gendered images. By exposing underlying myths applied to Black women's identities, Black feminist theorists have argued against depictions of

Black femininity that have centered on the sexualization and objectification of African American women's bodies. In *Ain't I A Woman* (1981), bell hooks articulates a pattern of mythologized identities applied to Black femininity. Her overarching term for this idea is the "Black Matriarchy," which refers to the prevailing impression that African American communities are led by Black women. She further argues that their roles within the community are distorted and used to negatively mark Black women as overly aggressive and masculine. hooks identifies many historical systems that demonstrate an investment in controlling Black women's bodies, such as slavery, yet more systems have emerged which continually define Black women's identities.

The Black matriarchal figures that linger are the Sapphire and the Jezebel. The Sapphire's fiery tongue and aggressive demeanor characterize her behavior, whereas the Jezebel's overt sexuality defines her image. One of the most popular challenges to the Sapphire image can be found in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston confronts the stereotypical Sapphire with Janie Crawford. While the Sapphire stereotypically embodies a vicious, emasculating, verbally aggressive shrew, Janie's use of language reflects a complex need to share her experience with others and defend against intracultural violence. Initially, the reader sees Janie use her verbal prowess to tell a story: "They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together...Janie full of that oldest human longings-self revelation. Phoeby held her tongue for a long time, but she couldn't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke" (Hurston 6-7). The language shared between Phoeby and Janie reflects the closeness of their relationship, which

humanizes Janie and distinguishes her from the mean-spirited Sapphire. However when Janie's language becomes more forceful, she is responding to a provocation instead of initiating verbal offensive tactic: "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do" (70-71). Janie's remarks respond to a discussion belittling women. She uses language to counter negative treatment. Her reasoning suggests an intelligent and persuasive understanding of gender roles in her society. While her tone is aggressive, it contrasts with the arrogant conversation that precedes it. Unlike the Sapphire, she is not nagging or mean-spirited; rather, she advocates a different viewpoint. Overall, Janie's verbal prowess throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates her intellect and the substance of her relationships. Janie's oral strategies reflect a complex system of utterances. While she often must defend herself, her oral performances function as responses to the criticism she endures.

Many contemporary African American women playwrights employ revision to counteract negative representations of African American feminine identity; most notably Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks analyzes the welfare mother as an extension of the Black matriarchy, in *In the Blood* (1998). Patricia Hill Collins defines the welfare mother as "a third, externally defined controlling image of Black womanhood— that of the welfare mother[...]. Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during

slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy" (87). Parks revises Nathaniel Hawthorne's character Hester Primm from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), refashioning Hester Primm into Hester la Negrita to investigate the systems that work together to create the welfare mother myth. Parks exposes the connection between systems of oppression and Hester's characterization. In the beginning of the play, Parks uses a chorus entitled "All" to label Hester. Parks suggests the connection between "All's language and labeling with the creation of the welfare mother/queen myth for Hester La Negrita: "She Knows Shes No Count, Shiftless, Hopeless, Bad News, Burden to Society, Hussy, Slut, Pah!" (Parks 6-7). Parks uses a Greek-style chorus to announce the assumptions concerning Hester to the audience, which makes the audience complicit in the devaluation of Hester's identity. The chorus' oral performance reduces Hester by sexualizing her. Parks emphasizes the negative consequences of revision through All's power to rewrite her identity for their purposes. Their revision objectifies Hester by conflating her humanity with promiscuity.

Parks questions the negative consequences of revision by demonstrating the repetitive nature of dehumanized representations of African American women. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. suggests, "Parks herself is known for her formula 'rep and rev': repetition and revision. Do it again, do it differently" (xvii). This formula positions the audience to witness the interactions between "ritual, memory, history, language, gender, ethnicity and the interaction of all of the above elements" (xvii). All's expressive labeling demonstrates

how institutional forces repetitiously apply harmful terms to Hester's identity. In the prologue, All's language precedes any physical representation of Hester confirming their power to revise. Young argues that Parks' repetitive use of the Greek chorus reflects a deliberate historical impulse to connect the audiences' involvement with the stigmatization of the key characters of the play (30). This language effectively begins the process of limiting Hester's reality within her own narrative, which importantly foregrounds her inability to fashion a self-made identity. Parks employs multiple revisionary strategies within *In the Blood*, but she emphasizes one particular revision problem. Revising someone else's identity can be problematic when that process objectifies the person.

Parks further challenges the root of All's ability to create an identity for Hester by examining their attempt to force Hester to internalize negative images of herself: "It Won't End Well For Her/ How You Know? I Got Eyes Don't I/ Bad News In Her Blood/ Plain As Day" (7). All foreshadows the result of the negative image placement onto Hester. Her autonomy over her identity diminishes as she accepts the sexual construction presented by All. All explains the process by declaring that the negative attributes associated with her character are now internalized because they are *in her blood*. By questioning the origins of the welfare-mother myth, Parks examines the language that negatively revises Hester's identity.

In *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, Nottage uses revision differently. Whereas Parks' exploration emphasizes systematic structures that encumber Black characters,

Nottage investigates revision beyond resisting limited representations and positions revision beyond an oral reactionary mode. Characters in *Crumbs* exhibit self-reflective performances that privilege internal revision within oral and physical responses to personal and community issues. Often the characters experience grief in relation to a past stimulus they cannot change, such as death, and this grief promotes revision within their present circumstances. Unlike Hester, they exhibit control over the revision process, which prevents their objectification.

Nottage speaks to political issues while foregrounding individual instances of revision within group settings. Particularly within *Crumbs*, Nottage emphasizes the connections between varied individuals who encounter similar personal obstacles. In an interview with Kentucky Educational Television, Nottage claims she wrote *Crumbs* “as an exercise to see if I could write a play for a multi-generational theater audience that had resonance for teenagers, but for an older audience as well. At the time I was interested in the period of the 1950’s. It was a moment in history in which I felt so much change...People’s lives were their lives, regardless of what was going on” (par. 17). The 1950s resonate historically as a period that marks the beginning of an identifiable cultural shift in the United States. Audiences might associate this tumultuous era with the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, The Korean War, and the Mississippi bus boycotts, by focusing solely on its vertical political challenges. For instance, instead of exploring conflict within individual communities, a playwright might concentrate on tension between the individual and Jim Crow laws. While the politics of the time define

the period, Nottage encourages her audience to appreciate the horizontal tensions between individuals by focusing on familial relationships. She maintains the significance of this political period by situating the action within the Second Great Migration (1940-1970)<sup>4</sup>, and she encourages the audience to undergo a symbolic transformative experience as they, like the characters, grapple with complicated cultural memories.

*Mile Markers: Acting Out Key Features of Migration Narratives*

Farah Jasmine Griffin's pivotal text "*Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*" highlights the four key qualities within African American migration narratives:

The narrative is marked by four pivotal moments: (1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South. These moments may occur in any given order within the context of the

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<sup>4</sup>“The Second Great Migration brought approximately five million black migrants to northern cities, leaving these cities, and the migrants themselves, forever transformed” (Boehm 3). See Boehm for an analysis of African American women and the Second Great Migration.

narrative; in other words, it is not necessary that there be a straightforward linear progression from the South to a vision of the consequences of migration, although this is most often the case. (3)

These four pivotal moments within migration narratives largely mark the plot of *Crumbs*, but Nottage adds to this narrative framework what Soyica Diggs Colbert calls “spatial authority” (33). Colbert identifies the tension between “home and homelessness” as evidence of “the precarious relationship the trans-Atlantic slave trade [has] for African Americans” (33). She argues that African American theater has resisted this sense of “statelessness” by utilizing the “spatial dynamics” of a set to foreground African American attempts to claim safe spaces for their own. Colbert uses the idea of statelessness to explain that, historically, some African American people often felt dispossessed since social institutions worked to minimize their agency. For Colbert, “theater can approximate the psychic reassurances of home by creating a safe space of belonging” (33). The creation of Black theaters counteracts the feeling of homelessness as African American artists and audiences cultivate places to explore their experiences.

Nottage takes the quest for home a step further by removing the focus on physical space from the revisionary process of migration; in its place she positions family or the connection between blood kin and other relations as the new objective for migratory success. She asks: what good does it do to completely uproot your family and experience the same difficulties in a different location? Movement becomes more than a one-time occurrence; it signals a continual process of renewal as new members are added to the

family and previous members take on more complicated roles within the familial unit. Nottage eradicates issues earlier playwrights, such as Lorraine Hansberry, dealt with by relocating the potential of home within familial bonds. In *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the Youngers dream of leaving their tenement life in south side Chicago for better prospects in a residential community. However, they experience racial difficulty as the community tries to buy them out to avoid racially integrating the neighborhood. In *Crumbs*, the Crumps move into a racially diverse apartment complex that houses Jewish families and African American families. Their move was not motivated by social climbing. Rather they focus on strengthening familial bonds amidst while dealing with their grief over Sandra Crump's death. The challenges they experience, while similar to the Youngers, do not define the plot of the play.

*All Aboard: Catalyst for Movement*

While the death of Sandra Crump motivates Godfrey to relocate his childrens North, two characters leave their homes for different reasons. Before the start of the play, Aunt Lily Ann has moves north because she is unable to stand still:

The scent of the ocean used to travel up our porch on the back of a nice summer breeze, your mama and I would stand patiently for hours, courting boys...Everyone always said I would be the one to marry early, 'cause I was considered the better looking of the two. Ain't it funny how things

work out. Well, hell, I didn't like standing still, and you gotta stand still long enough to attract yourself a man. (Nottage 54)

Lily Ann's memory juxtaposes the movement within nature with the feminine expectations she encounters in her youth. As she recounts the conflicting imagery of the tranquil breeze, Lily Ann emphasizes the difficulty that motivated her transformative journey. While she clearly manifests positive recollections of her childhood home, the imagery of the porch, the breeze, and the ocean oddly reflect an openness that Lily Ann could not experience due to her gender. Her move from Florida to Harlem was an attempt to dwell within a less restricted environment. The first time the audience sees her, the "Lights rise on Lily Ann 'Sister' Green standing in the Crumps' doorway; she is wearing a smartly tailored suit and sparking white gloves..." (21). The figure in the doorway reveals her transient nature. Her smart suit and her emphasis on being the most attractive suggests that a part of Lily Ann still clings to traditional ideas about a woman's value. Her physicality signifies a part of her old life that she embraces, yet she attempts to refashion her outer appearance into an attractive, independent, and confident woman. This physical transformation evidences a superficial change, which ultimately exposes her inability to truly move forward.

Like Lily Ann, Gerte, Godfrey's future German wife, appears to the audience as a woman on the move, but unlike Lily Ann she lacks confidence. Instead she bears her vulnerability to the audience and to Godfrey:

*(Flickering light shifts into subway lights, which reveal Godfrey on the IRT Train. He sits with his hat pulled over his eyes, asleep. Gerte, a thirty-year-old German woman, sits next to him with her luggage surrounding her feet. She nudges Godfrey.)*

GERTE. Do you mind if I talk with you?

GODFREY. We talking already.

GERTE. I guess we are.

GODFREY. What, ya trying to git me in trouble?

GERTE. Have I done something wrong [...]Are you getting off? Should I get off here? Which way should I be goin?

GODFREY. I don't know where it is ya going, ma'am. Are you all right?

GERTE. No. (46-47)

This scene presents a revision of Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), in which Clay, a twenty-year-old African American man, is tempted by Lula, a thirty-year-old White woman. The temptation occurs on a subway car in what Baraka describes as "the flying underbelly of the city" (Baraka 1946). In this encounter, Lula seductively engages a seemingly unaware young man. When she initially approaches Clay, Lula behaves in a predatory manner: "*LULA enters from the rear of the car...She stops beside CLAY's seat and hangs languidly from the strap... It is apparent that she is going to sit in the seat next*

to CLAY, and that she is only waiting for him to notice her before she sits” (1947). Lula’s approach resembles yet differs from Gerte’s interaction with Godfrey. First, both women display a desire to engage with a stranger to engender a connection with the unsuspecting target. While Lula intentionally encourages Clay to violate social taboos, Gerte’s actions seem more about securing her own survival. Gerte needs information and a companion, while Lula’s temporary association with Clay represents a pattern of behavior where she flirts with unsuspecting African American men and ultimately kills them. Additionally, she functions as a temptress as she eats her apple and offers one to Clay, but Nottage reverses this imagery within her scene. “*Godfrey hands [Gerte] a cookie, she greedily stuffs it in her mouth*” (47 Nottage). Godfrey does not use Gerte’s hunger as a means to take advantage of her situation; he even offers her an opportunity to be fed at the Peace Mission. Nottage’s revision speaks to the African American literary tradition by taking a dominating image of Black masculinity and undercutting the negative connotations. Instead of displaying sexually aggressive behavior, Godfrey actively challenges brutish depictions of Black men. Nottage’s revision of *Dutchman* complicates issues of race by exploring multicultural relationships. Baraka politicizes the interaction between Clay and Lula which dehumanizes their characters, while Nottage emphasizes Godfrey’s and Gerte’s humanity by delving into their relationship.

The subway setting reemphasizes the desire to move forward, but Gerte has no idea where she is going. Her lack of direction contrasts with Godfrey’s relaxed demeanor and emphasizes Gerte’s need. Unlike Godfrey, Gerte is alone. She has no dependents and

no one waiting for her to come home. She mysteriously appears on a subway train in New York looking for a jazz musician:

GERTE. Is this the Bronx?

GODFREY. This may well be the Bronx.

GERTE. The gentleman said, “Lady, if you reach the Bronx, you know you’ve gone too far.” Do you know Pierre Boussard?

GODFREY. Should I?

GERTE. I have his address in New Orleans. I was told I must go to Pennsylvania Station to catch the train. (45)

Gerte never explains why she is in the U.S. beyond this brief exchange with Godfrey. While she announces she’s from Germany, she does not disclose why she has left the country after the war. Whereas Lily Ann ran away to manifest a sense of control over her destiny, Gerte is a truly lost figure whose isolation reveals a more serious level of desperation through her hunger to connect with anyone to establish a bond.

When Gerte nudges Godfrey, she takes an important step in her journey to establish community. Her physical touch crosses racial and gendered boundaries in a more concrete way than Lily Ann’s suit or Lily Ann’s move to New York, primarily because she engages a stranger but also because she willingly violates cultural taboos in her efforts to connect. Her German heritage prevents her from apprehending racial taboos

in the United States; even so her contact with Godfrey reveals her desire for kinship. Gerte's impact on Godfrey propels the second act of the play. By awakening Godfrey to the possibility of life after his first wife's death, Gerte's presence forces the audience and the other characters to consider alternative pathways for fulfillment.

*Stop 1: Confronting the Urban Landscape*

Gerte's urgent need to connect with Godfrey exposes her desire for approval. The audience sees Gerte repetitively question Godfrey about the appropriateness of her behavior by positioning herself as an uncertain foreigner: "Is this the Bronx [...] Is it far New Orleans [...] Do you mind if I talk with you [...] Have I done something wrong [...] Are you getting off? Should I get off here? Which way should I be going [...] May I have another [...] These are good [...] your wife make? You're not getting off are you [...] May I follow you?" (Nottage 45-48). Gerte defends herself against Godfrey's apprehension by emphasizing her unfamiliarity with her surroundings and prospects. Gerte's admission reduces his fear; however, her questions suggest an understanding about her vulnerable position. She purposely infantilizes herself in response to Godfrey's outburst "I'm a family man" (46). She moves from doubt concerning her whereabouts (Bronx versus New Orleans) to transparency by questioning Godfrey's marital status. Her questions encourage Godfrey to disregard his initial uneasiness. Gerte continually provokes Godfrey by nudging him and making small talk, but she ultimately presents

herself as a figure that needs protection, and Godfrey's response reveals the essence of his character. Godfrey defines his strength in his ability to take care of his family. From moving after his wife's death to admonishing Lily Ann for her brazen communist values, his behavior confirms his dedication to the family. Godfrey's sense of parental responsibility motivates his actions. When Gerte behaves like a child needing guidance, Godfrey combines his positions as baker and protector by feeding her cookies in the same way that he plies his children with bakery sweets.

Gerte's hunger becomes her identifying characteristic and her catalyst for movement. After she establishes a familiarity with Godfrey, he asks her, "Are you hungry?" and "*(she nods)*" (48). Her dialogue focuses on the abundance of food in New York, which reveals a previous lack of food. At a banquet she complains, "relish, brisket...Is so much food necessary? There are starving children in Europe. *(lifts the lids of containers)* Pudding, dumplings...gravy, peas" (55). While we do not know much about Gerte's background, she is a recent immigrant from Germany. She discloses pieces of her past as she considers food. The alliance Gerte establishes with Godfrey is an attempt to resolve her problem with food.

Whereas Gerte's consumption acknowledges a past lack of sustenance, Lily Ann's present consumptions reveal emotional issues that she addresses physically. Lily Ann appears as mysteriously as Gerte. However, she justifies her arrival claiming, "I promised Nana I'd look after these girls for her. She don't think it's proper that a man be living alone with his daughters after they've sprung bosom" (28). Although Lily Ann

claims her appearance concerns the girls, like Gerte, her consumption of food exposes her need for provision:

It do seem colder in Brooklyn, but don't it though [...] What you got to sip on... Oh ya a Christian now [...] Don't you tell me you've given up everything? Everything [...] Well, could I get a soda pop at least, spent half the day underground [...] Let me see what you got me to eat. Didn't have no mayonnaise? (*Ermina returns with a glass of soda. Lily drinks it down, then ravenously bites into the sandwich, fighting to force down the half-chewed chunks of food.*) (27-29)

Lily Ann's questions are more direct than Gerte's because of her familiarity with Godfrey, and their interaction demonstrates Godfrey's growth by his decision to give up alcohol and to live a more pious life. His sobriety, however, does not confirm his piety. He becomes instead addicted to his position as a father and devout follower of Father Divine. His obsession disguises his compulsion, and Lily Ann's appearance jeopardizes his performance. His piety contrasts with her tactlessness. While Lily Ann's questions are meant to establish closeness with the family, they emphasize her difference instead. She lacks familiarity, so the past reveals itself in her oral performance in negative ways. Her memories of the juke joint or Godfrey's drunken behavior elicit negative responses from Godfrey primarily because they depict him in an unflattering light in front of his children. These memories also establish Godfrey's past coping mechanisms. Her questions presume that Godfrey behaves in a similar fashion despite their new home. Lily Ann's

observation about Brooklyn's frigid temperatures suggests the inability of the North to satiate the immigrants that move there.

Godfrey's fixation on Father Divine operates similarly to Lily Ann's compulsions. Although Godfrey has relinquished drinking, he has adopted a new obsession in Father Divine. Throughout the play, Godfrey's connection to Father Divine is prominently featured through the visits to the Peace Mission, Father Divine's portrait in the living room, and via Godfrey's desire to change the family's surname from Crump to Goodness:

GODFREY. Well now, I's expecting the *New Day* paper and a little word from Sweet Father. Been putting all these questions to him, it's only a matter of time before he answers...(*Hands the letter to Ernestine*) [...]

ERNESTINE. I have considered your request and decided to bestow upon one of my most devoted disciples beautiful names for your family [...] I give you the names Godfrey Goodness [...] For your eldest, Darling Angel. And for your baby, Devout Mary. (16-20)

Godfrey's anticipation of the letter from the "Sweet Father" communicates his addiction. His behavior further reveals the addiction as he inquires about the letter, and his focus on Father Divine motivates his actions throughout the play. He believes that the Father's words of wisdom will act like a soothing tonic to alleviate his discomfort from racism

and mourning, so he single-mindedly pursues this source of relief. It is hinted strongly throughout the play that Father Divine is fraudulent, for example when Lily Ann asks, “Oh I see, the Peace Mission, Father Divine. He still alive and playing God?” (27). Godfrey’s pursuit of the Father replicates his obsessive drinking habit.

Lily Ann’s compulsive drinking later functions as a physical response to her inability to revise her position within Harlem or Pensacola. After a night out, “*a very drunk and disheveled Lily enters [the living room]. She accidentally knocks into Ernestine’s dressmaker’s dummy... Lily catches it just as it’s toppling over and does a halfhearted cha-cha with the dummy as her partner*” (37). Although Harlem is painted as “the equivalent of reaching the promised land,” Lily Ann continually expresses the need for a revolution because she faces similar problems with racism and sexism in New York (21). Even though she remains unable to politically alter either space, the physical staging of her baggage, from the luggage to her drunken behavior, encourages familial renewal in Ernestine’s and Ermina’s respective engagement with Brooklyn.

Ernestine’s and Ermina’s memories of the South physically distances them from their Brooklyn peers. Their country hairstyles and clothes mark them as outsiders in their new urban home. And while Lily Ann seems determined to numb herself to the realities of the difficulties of New York, Ernestine and Ermina engage the North by first acknowledging the negative experiences they endure. Ernestine relates the trauma they first encountered when schoolgirls negatively reacted to their country appearance:

They...them...the gals laughed at us the first day at school, with our country braids and simple dresses my mommy had sewn...Our dresses were sewn with love, each stitch. But them, they couldn't appreciate it! So Ermina fought like a wild animal. Scratched and tore at their cashmere cardigans and matching skirts. She walked home with a handful of greasy relaxed hair and a piece of gray cashmere stuffed in her pocket. (8-9)

Their initial confrontation with Brooklyn signals a change in their standing. Their hairstyles and clothes mark their difference, announcing their othered status. But both girls resist, Ermina by fighting and altering her hairstyle and Ernestine by transposing cinematic imagery into her daily life.

While destructive, Ermina at least refuses to accept the negative feedback she encounters in Brooklyn. One distinguishing feature of her experience is that it comes from within her social and racial group. Ermina's inability to fulfill the intracultural gendered expectations in the North results in physical outbursts that expose a new level of class tension that the girls must navigate. Her destructive behavior signals horizontal issues such as intraracial racism, which Nottage signals when Ermina walks home with a corporeal trophy of "greasy relaxed hair" (9). Later in the play, the audience witnesses the results of the initial tension as Lily Ann presses Ermina's hair and offers words of survival meant to aid Ermina's integration into a Northern social milieu. As Ermina "squirms in her chair," Lily Ann instructs her:

Sit still, don't fight me on this. Choose your battles carefully, chile, a nappy head in this world might as well fly the white flag and surrender ... We're at war babies. You don't want to be walking around school with a scar on your head. You want people to think your hair's naturally straight. That it flows in the wind ... Frankly, I git tired of them telling you how you supposed to look good ... Ermina, sit still and maybe I can take a little bit of this nap our this kitchen ... (*Lily presses the hot comb against the back of Ermina's hair. Ermina lets out a terrible wail.*) (32-33)

Lily Ann's motherly advice reminds the audience of Sandra's absence, which is reinforced by Ermina's and Godfrey's "god-awful banshee" wails (7). The physical pain she endures while Lily Ann straightens her hair echoes the pain Godfrey experiences over the death of his wife. In this instance, Ermina's wail reminds the audience that she has lost an important guide for the transformation from adolescent to young woman in the death of her mother. Lily Ann is a poor substitute; while she challenges an unknown "them" from dictating physical standards of beauty, she simultaneously encourages Ermina and Ernestine to tolerate the pain of conformity by pressing their hair. This tension between outright defiance and painful acceptance resembles the physical tension between the curly nature of the hair shaft and the heat-manipulated follicle. It requires a delicate hand and tedious upkeep to balance the line between nap and straight within one

strand, and Ermina's wail emphasizes how painful the conflict can be when trying to accomplish that balance.

Ernestine manifests less destructive consequences in her response to Lily Ann's advice. For Ernestine, while Brooklyn certainly poses many challenges, the new locale also fosters positive impressions. For instance, in the dark movie theater halls, Ernestine has the freedom to experience film with a racially diverse audience. As "she sits down," the "blue flickering light from a motion-picture projector" diminishes the racial differences in the movie audience: "The Fox, right smack between two white gals...Practically touching shoulders. And we wept. Wept unabashedly. Watching our beautiful and wretched Joan Crawford's eyebrows and lips battle their way through one hundred and three minutes of pure unadulterated drama, we could be tragic in Brooklyn" (9-10). As Ernestine recounts the uniting experience of the cinema, the flickering projection light signals the interruption of difference in the theater. The Black and White audience sits together watching the movie, not reacting to each other's differences but instead enraptured within the progression of the cinematic narrative. Its unified focus on screen star Joan Crawford suggests that all are informed by the screen legend's physical presence. Yet, Ernestine's understanding of Crawford's beauty highlights the conflict within the on-screen persona. The "beautiful and wretched" description suggests the friction between the silver screen goddess's sensual demeanor and the dramatic scenarios within the film. "Beautiful and wretched" evokes Paule Marshall's term "beautiful/ugly," which refers to the complexity in the daily experiences of New York working-class

women of color. Similarly, Crawford signifies a beautiful/ugly tension. While known for her beauty and dramatic carriage, melded with this image is the raving drunken mother screaming “No Wire Hangers.” There are real-life consequences for the false images that we try to perpetuate. And while this “unadulterated drama” transfixes the audience for “one hundred and three minutes,” outside the Cineplex Ernestine faces an equally challenging dramatic landscape filled with individuals trying to control the way their images are perceived.

Ernestine consistently revises the difficult scenes within her life by cinematically improving her reality. She manipulates her present when she feels unable to alter complex situations. The tensions among her father, Lily Ann, and his new wife Gerte simmer under the surface for an extended period. Ernestine craves acknowledgement of this tension and rewrites the dinner scene to include an outward demonstration of the conflict resonate within their relationships. As she explains in an address to the audience: “Then, suddenly, in the middle of the feast (*Gerte rises from behind the table and sheds her dress to reveal a slinky white cocktail dress. She climbs onto the table as music swells. A bright spotlight hits Gerte as she slowly traipses across the table singing ‘Falling in Love Again’ ... (to audience) well at least I wish she had...*” (55). Ernestine craves a demonstrable reaction from Gerte during this scene. Although Gerte expresses her repulsion of the excess at the banquet, she does not demonstrate any intent to change this present situation. Instead she momentarily voices her concerns and then immediately becomes silent. Ernestine imagines Gerte as a screen seductress dramatizing the

ostentation of the spread. Ernestine simultaneously empowers and diminishes Gerte's authority in the scene by depicting Gerte as a provocateur. By imagining alternatives for Gerte, Ernestine emphasizes Gerte's inactivity to the audience. Furthermore, Ernestine expresses a fascination with Gerte's racial difference, which associates a sexual stigma to her persona. In this way, she negatively revises Gerte's experience with hunger by casting her as a vapid blonde bombshell, in spite of Gerte's obvious sense of restraint.

*Stop Two: Negotiating the Urban Landscape by Resisting Negative Impacts of Urbanization*

The conflict within Gerte and Ernestine's relationship signifies the larger contradictions within New York. Though the North embodies a promised land for weary travelers from the South, Nottage depicts characters grappling with issues of poverty, racism, and sexism. Their respective struggles undercut romantic images of the North by calling into question the benefits of the journey. Each sojourner must cope with individual pressures to succeed by adapting to new challenges while simultaneously maintaining previous virtues. The boundary between new expectations and fixed values articulates the process of adaptation and growth.

Ernestine and Ermina accomplish their careful balancing act through education. For Ernestine, graduation reflects the possibility of the move. As she mentions: "Always thought of myself as smart. Down home, smart meant you got homework done in time.

Not so smart in... Brooklyn. They put Ermina back one grade” (8). The girls face new expectations in school, which they have difficulty meeting. Both use different strategies to meet present challenges while exemplifying past standards. For Ernestine the dominant image for this challenge is her graduation dress. Before they moved to Brooklyn, Sandra promised Ernestine material and a pattern for a graduation dress. Throughout the play, Ernestine focuses more on the dress than her classes:

ERMINA. Oooo! Ernie! Look like that pattern for your graduation dress finally here. Bet you dying to see it. I bet it pretty. (*Examines the envelope. She keeps it away from Ernestine*) It feel nice. Feel expensive.

ERNESTINE. Give me!

GOODFREY. Expensive? What’s that there?

ERMINA. You gonna tell him? ...Well, if you ain’t, I will. (*Defiantly*) Mommy promised Ernie a graduation dress and se gonna need some money for the fabric (*To Ernestine*) All right, it been said!

The dress reminds the family of promises before the journey. Yet the family must address current challenges if they intend to survive. New York is expensive, so Ernestine resists asking her father for the money to complete the dress. However, the cost does not prevent her from ordering the pattern. The pattern reveals Ernestine’s longings while simultaneously exposing her predicament. How can she navigate the difficult challenges

of this city without confidently using her own voice? Ermina breaks the news to their father and articulates the problem the girls have avoided while waiting for the pattern. Ernestine's internal conflict often presents itself as silence to her family and revision to the audience. This strategy helps her process but prevents her from actively shaping her space. As Ernestine gains the courage to articulate her point of view, the dressmaker's doll serves as a subtle reminder that Ernestine is capable of effecting change, even if she initially seems timid.

Where Ernestine displays modest silence when faced with conflict, Ermina boldly uses language to highlight the tension between present expectations and past standards for success. Ermina uses language to address problems. For instance, when Ermina verbally challenges Godfrey's directive against playing music on Sunday, the audience perceives Ermina's negotiation between religious and cultural values:

GODFREY. It's Sunday gal [...]

ERMINA. Ain't no use in having a radio. Might as well be a log, 'least we could burn it to keep warm.

GODFREY. You sassing.

ERMINA. Nah, sir!

GODFREY. Could have sworn you was.

ERMINA. Really, well I ain't. (10-11)

Ermina's altercation with her father demonstrates the tension between values. While Godfrey imparts restrictions founded in religiosity, Ermina privileges cultural expectations through popular music. When the two ideologies meet, the father seemingly wins by successfully preventing both girls from listening to the radio, but Ermina's rejoinder suggests that his is a temporary victory. Godfrey states that Ermina is "sassing," which confirms expectations regarding the proper decorum for a young lady. While she denies this indiscretion, her response effectively expresses defiance. She flippantly disregards his interpretation. Ermina shapes her own identity with language in the midst of a contentious environment.

Outside of the apartment, in Brower Park, Ermina again reveals her capacity for language by mimicking Northern slang. Outside the apartment, Ermina feels free to play with the language of the city. "Without a breath," Ermina unleashes a rhyme: "Scat cap, hip, jive, cool baby, dip dive. Be bop, shoo bop, de dap, de dop, Give me some skin, babe. Far out, sweet daddy. Hang tight, hang loose, dig this, out of sight, take it easy, you're blowing my mind, everything is copacetic, the most, gonest, funky!" (57). Importantly, this verbal feat sheds light on Ermina's powerful ability to redefine her identity. She transitions from a meek daughter to a woman able to code switch at will. She does not seem timid as in previous scenes; rather her verbal dexterity indicates a growing confidence. Her performance demonstrates a progression in her ability to resist the restrictions of her father and his religion. While Ernestine relies on film icons to channel her frustration inside her head, Ermina accesses the language of the street, which

reveals her transformation. Ernestine perceives change indoors with the dressmaker's dummy and the movie theater, while Ermina expresses Northern conventions outside at the park. Although her onslaught of language does not impart any meaningful message, Ermina challenges the way words can be used. In this scene, Ermina asserts her membership into the Northern verbal community by demonstrating her competency with the sign system.

Ernestine and Ermina use film and language to endure Brooklyn, while Gerte and Lily Ann try to connect with Godfrey. Gerte takes on the role of a good wife and mother through cooking, cleaning, and attending worship services with her new husband but is unable to physically consummate the marriage. At first, she feigns acceptance of this issue: "We've asked each other no questions. And if his Sweet Father does not permit us to lie as man and wife, then I accept that. I love Godfrey" (58). Her attempts at domesticity reflect a need for protection. Later, Ernestine alludes to the consummation of Gerte's marriage after Godfrey abandons his obsession with Father Divine: "We'd recovered my father from Divine only to lose him to passion." (78). Gerte's love for Godfrey transforms their platonic marriage into a passionate relationship.

Meanwhile, Lily Ann tries to initiate a sexual relationship with Godfrey despite his marital status. Lily Ann challenges the legitimacy of Godfrey's marriage through race. She asserts that Godfrey should establish a stronger connection through an intracultural marriage:

LILY ANN (*Whispered*). I ain't good enough for you, Godfrey.

GODFREY. You plenty good.

LILY ANN. Then why I ain't the one in your bed? You'd rather take  
blows to the head and be a nigger to some simple ass on the  
subway than lie with me [...]. (76)

Lily Ann argues that racial bonds and memories from the past confirm community. However, Godfrey disagrees with Lily Ann's views of race. In order to strengthen his new role in New York, he mimics Father Divine's behavior by marrying a White woman. Lily Ann interprets Godfrey's new marriage as an affront to her desirability. But Godfrey's resistance of this interpretation signals a deeper issue: "We on two different roads, Lily" (76). They have been driven North by different stimuli, but both realize that in order to flourish in New York they must establish mutually beneficial relationships. For Godfrey, the damaging consequences of a relationship with Lily far outweigh any sexual benefits she offers. Once the possibility of marriage with Godfrey dissolves, her resolve to function as a positive female figure for her nieces ends as well. Her exit from the scene reveals a failed attempted return to normalcy and traditional gendered expectations for women. When Lily Ann cannot successfully establish a marriage with Godfrey, she fades away because she cannot envision a beneficial alternative reality. The alternative she initially presents is her involvement in "the communist party," but the reality is that her suit, like her ideals, are a front (27). She suggests that she desires

advancement, but her actions reveal her desire for domesticity. After Godfrey's final refusal, she returns to Harlem, and years later Ermina "identif[ies] Lily's cold body poked full of holes, her misery finally borne out" (87).

### *Departure*

While Godfrey initiates the move North, Lily Ann's presence motivates Ernestine's maturation. Though her aunt has been unable to discover any positive prospects for herself in Pensacola or New York City, she does encourage Ernestine to move forward in her revolutionary journey: "You want to be part of my revolution? You know what I say to that, get yourself a profession like a nurse or something so no matter where you are or what you say, you can always walk into a room with your head held high, 'cause you'll be essential" (82). In this way, Lily Ann articulates a different value system the girls can fulfill through work. Ernestine benefits from Lily Ann's advice and learns that success includes economic independence as well as familial intimacy. What matters is the ability to maintain a connection with one's past while shifting forward. Gerte serves as the most successful example of transformation. She risks everything with her move and marriage to Godfrey. Since she has left her country and has forged a new relationship, Gerte adapts to New York but maintains her integrity. While she faces strict penalties for crossing racial and national boundaries, her migratory experience concludes optimistically. She becomes a permanent member of the Crump family, evidenced by her

presence at Ernestine's graduation. At the party, Godfrey announces he has secured Ernestine a job "down at the bakery" (85). Gerte advises Ernestine to take the baking job because "it's a good job, Ernie, steady" (85). Gerte's conciliatory attitude secures her relationship with Godfrey but seems inappropriate for Ernestine's development. For Ernestine to succeed, she must combine Lily Ann's idealism with Gerte's prudence. Nottage evidences Ernestine's integrative approach by her later matriculation to Queen's College, her "ride [on] the Freedom Bus back down home," and her marriage to "a civil servant" (88). The family's success is reflected through Ernestine's advancement and memories. Her narrative demonstrates that successful migration depends on melding present experience with past knowledge. Ernestine's survival reflects Lily Ann's argument that a migrant's success hinges on her ability to internally transform and meet challenges. Although Lily Ann is unable to make this difficult transition, her nieces, grandnieces, and grandnephews have an opportunity to rise to the occasion if they remember her lesson.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” Choral Aesthetics in *Mud, River, Stone*

*Mud, River, Stone* (1998) is Nottage’s first full-length play set outside of the continental United States. This journey abroad comes full-circle within the narrative structure of the play, which presents a recollection of the misadventures an African-American couple experience while trying to reconnect with their ancestral roots. At a dinner party, the Bradleys produce a souvenir of their trip, a stone:

*They are surrounded by party guests.*

DAVID. This is the stone.

SARAH. A reminder. (Nottage *Mud* 169)

The appearance of the stone symbolically establishes the agenda for the play. As they share their story with the dinner party guests and the audience, the Bradleys remember an important event. Their desire to visit Africa was largely shaped by their romantic notions of the continent. Instead of chartering an organized tour of a particular country in Africa, the Bradleys decided to chart their own course and investigate their location solo. David explains: “One of my friends had been to Africa a few years back, raved. He said it would change our lives. He said, If *he* had to do it all over again *he’d* go it alone, sans tour. See the continent without the filter. I thought it would be easier. You know, on us” (170). Yet, the stone’s presence contradicts David’s initial ideas about visiting Africa.

While trekking across the continent, their car ran out of gas. Alone in the wilderness, Sarah explains, that David “picked up this stone to defend us, so brave and misguided, not sure from which direction danger might come” (172). While David anticipated an invisible danger, one real danger he encountered was his idealized view of Africa.

David’s explanation emphasizes the couple’s romanticization, which ignores the reality that many parts of the continent are currently undergoing a transformation from colonial dependence to independence. For the audiences of the dinner party and the play, this initial point of reference contextualizes the transformative journey the Bradleys experience.

As the Bradleys frame the narrative with their romantic vision, the audience shifts from sedentary members of an exchange between party guests into active participants in the recollection experience. “*As David and Sarah speak...the dinner guests slowly strip them out of their party attire and dress them in muddy safari gear*” (171). Although the stage directions suggest that the action of the play takes place during the present, the audience’s actions coupled with the Bradleys’ framing device emphasizes a transition in time from the dinner party to the past experience in Africa. The present moment occurs at a New York dinner party as the Bradleys recall their trip abroad. By framing the memory with the present party, the Bradleys emphasize the significance of the experience. They authenticate their journey with the stone and the muddy safari gear. The stone and mud add a physical dimension to the narrative that contrasts with idealistic images of African savannahs and sprawling vistas. These visual elements foreshadow the grittiness of the

trip and help the audience differentiate the present New York moment from the remembered experience in Africa. As the scene ends, the dinner guests change the Bradleys' clothes and they themselves transform into characters in the jungle while the audience merges into the African landscape.

The wardrobe change marks an evocation of the trip. Nottage conveys the communal responsibility of telling the story by incorporating the connection between the dinner guests' actions with the Bradleys' verbal frame. In effect, Nottage produces a contemporary chorus that verbally and visually performs a remembered event. In this way, Nottage marries the historical context of post-colonial Africa with present American success. Nottage establishes the connection even more strongly by emphasizing the setting/place of the play as "Briefly Manhattan; Southeast Africa" (168). This combination of seemingly divergent historical and global perspectives accomplishes the purpose of the traditional Greek chorus, which primarily was to encourage remembrance of cultural events in order to have a deeper understanding of one's own heritage, nationality, and the connection with the past. The audience witnesses two choruses in the play. The initial chorus consists of the dinner guests. They work together to frame the Bradleys' vacation, while the vacation frames the event in Africa. The second chorus members are the individuals in the Imperial Hotel in Africa. Their interactions provide the audience with a tragic lesson about the contemporary impact of colonialism on Africans, Americans, and Europeans alike.

*Historical Resonance: The Greek Chorus and African American Theater*

Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. argues that African American theater traditionally has incorporated elements of Greek drama because it: “is distant enough to say things that audiences would not be as comfortable hearing and seeing directly” (3-4). African American playwrights may address present problems by linking issues with familiar theatrical traditions, which encourages audiences to focus on the conflicts in their plays. These issues range from racial identity to war and to the lack of basic infrastructure. Nottage links these global issues to the Bradleys’ vacation, which eases the audience into the complex global dynamics of the play. By seemingly lowering the stakes by presenting a familiar style, Nottage avoids bombarding the audience with complex issues. Instead, her approach encourages the audience to see the familiar within a foreign landscape.

The Bradleys’ vacation is the audience’s gateway to Africa. At first visiting an exotic locale seems like a typical aspiration for travelling abroad, but the Bradleys’ journey is more meaningful because they are trying to establish a connection with their ancestral roots:

SARAH. And folklore shows that made us sentimental...But he wanted to really see the continent, like the naturalists on the “Discovery Channel.”

DAVID. And why not? The splendid savanna speckled with trees and high grass. The sun melting into a distant mountain range covered in a perpetual mist.

SARAH. He wanted to see the mud and stone ruins of our ancestors. (170)

In preparation for their adventure, the Bradleys highlight a problem members of the African diaspora encounter beyond the sense of loss of their ancestral homes and identity: the sentimentalization of Africa. The continent begins to take on mythic proportions when David romanticizes the landscape. The consequence of such a narrow view is a reduction of the complexity of current political, social, and national conflicts that resonate within the dense geographical location.

Historical issues grow into contemporary personal problems when the simple path to Africa becomes a waterlogged impasse. “Our road became a river. Our passage back...was subsumed by nature” (172). David envisions the vacation as a homecoming and expects the continent to welcome his symbolic return. While David has never been to Africa, he imagines Africa as a motherland that would welcome him. However, the landscape presents more challenges than he anticipated. The trip transforms into a contemporary Middle Passage, where the difficulties inherent within historical memories expose reductive sentimental relationships in the present. The Middle Passage was the second portion of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, where slaves were taken from the west coast of Africa to locations in the New World. The Bradleys’ adventure transposes the

route by moving them from separation to togetherness. Their goal is to claim their heritage by visiting Africa, but their affluent lifestyle and naiveté remove them from the current difficulties Africans face. As the Bradleys make their way through the forest, the arduous drive exposes David's fantasies. Their journey exposes them to other individuals with vested interests in Africa including: Africans, Africans of European ancestry, and Europeans. When these individual characters come together at the Imperial Hotel, they form a choral body. Their perspectives identify several issues the continent faces and inform the audience about the residual impact of the slave trade on African and Western people. By identifying issues such as lack of water, passable roadways, and medicine, the chorus teaches the audience about the complex issues that complicate David's romantic visions. The chorus' historicizing function emerges through what Wetmore calls an "examination of the historical record-primary documents, eye-witness accounts, etc" (5). As members of the chorus publicize current problems, the audience receives a more grounded perspective. Wetmore envisions members of the theatrical community as the producers of this historical work, since they incorporate "Greek cultural material" to "present, represent, define, and explore African American history and identity" (4-5). But Nottage positions the audience to produce a collaborative result "in order to correlate the dramatic work [...] to the larger cultural and historical contexts..." (5).

Nottage's chorus plays a traditional Greek role while establishing a progressive communal connection with the audience. Graham Ley contextualizes the *choros* as "a group of people expected to sing and dance," and their "songs or dances accompanied

decisive events in the lives of Greek communities” (30). The chorus performed as a living history book, preserving the traditional myths and stories of national identity. Their performances were a central component of drama. Helen Bacon highlights Aristotle’s observation about the chorus: “Aristotle observes [...] one ought to consider the chorus one of the actors. It should be part of the whole and participate in the action” (Bacon 7). However, many contemporary scholars reduce the choral component of ancient Greek theater “as a source of interludes and peripheral lyrical commentary on the action performed by the actors” (7). This interpretation diminishes the impact choral presence has on the scope of the performance since “what happens in such a play cannot be fully understood without taking into account the nature and function of this group of individuals...occasionally speaking and always there” (Bacon 9).

The consistent presence of the chorus on the stage emphasizes what Bacon calls “the wider significance of the event, of the involvement of other human beings in the meaning, sometimes also in the consequences of the outcome” (8). Nottage underscores this important visual theme immediately as the Bradleys begin their narrative and as the present moment shifts into the past. As they recount their journey, the audience watches a mimetic performance of their vacation. David Wiles suggests that mimetic choral performances were rooted in imitation (88). Imitation of the events does not appear as a contemporary flashback, which results in an interlude that provides historical context to support the present moment of the play. Instead the movement in time that Nottage accomplishes does not remove the audience from the present action of the play. The

seamless transition in clothing helps the audience, as well as the Bradleys, visualize the connections among diverse people, different geographical locations, and disparate times.

Immediately, the apartment transforms into the hotel, and the dinner guests transform into the hotel guests. This transition shifts focus from the Bradleys to their relationships with other individuals in Africa. The hotel setting provides an opportunity for the Bradleys to interact with diverse characters. The bellboy, other guests, and travelers all make their way to the hotel. Their meeting changes these unrelated players into a choral unit as they negotiate the space. Their conflict stems from their confinement within the hotel and develops as group tensions expose complex issues. The introduction of new choral characters demonstrates that the Bradleys are not the key players within the story; rather they represent a component of a larger choral group. Judith Fletcher maintains that “students of choral voice tend to focus on the distinction between the authorial and characterological voices of the chorus,” making distinctions between choral leaders and other lesser prominent members of the group (30). While Fletcher suggests students typically focus on the interaction between choral leaders and other choral members, Nottage encourages the audience to see the chorus as one body. During the play each member of the chorus individually speak, which diminishes the prominence of any one character. Although many Greek choruses were “more or less homogeneous in age and sex and social status” the important bond that linked the members of the chorus was actually “a common interest in the event... [so] they represent not the community at large but some segment of the community specially concerned in the event, what we

might call a constituency” (9). Nottage’s chorus challenges the homogeneity of choral groups by combining different types of people. This diverse group exposes the impact the problems in Africa have on many different people. Wetmore claims that the issue with chorus in the modern American theater is the conflict between individual voice and communal voices (67). American audiences have been conditioned to focus on individuality instead of community, yet community remains an ever-present thematic element within African American texts. Consequently, African American artists have to find logical ways to incorporate the chorus within the landscape of modern drama.

Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) represents one interpretation of contemporary choral performance. Shange’s achievement gives voice to various African American women’s experiences by incorporating seven African American female characters. Their individual performances meld specific perspectives into communal expression. David Savran defines the choreopoem as “a deeply political mode of expression” that “combines poetry, prose narrative, song, dance and music” and “represents less a synthesis of these arts than an attempt to use them to energize and transform the human subject... for both performer and spectator” (190). Shange’s combination of diverse artistic forms revitalized choral performance in contemporary theater but focused more on establishing a broader context for understanding Black femininity than preserving an event. Carol Christ suggests that the play’s goal was to “give voice to the ordinary experiences of Black women in frank, simple, vivid language” (97). The experiences of diverse Black

women take center stage and provide a complex definition of self that challenges reductive representations. The practice of self-definition within the context of the choreopoem implicitly emphasizes the relationship between internal versus external perceptions of race and gender. It empowers African American women to define themselves by verbalizing their experiences. However, Shange does not extend this power to the audience since she focuses on establishing community on the stage instead of between the performers and the audience. Moreover, members outside of the community represented on stage are not afforded the opportunity for self-definition. Shange reserves the power of self-definition for African American women because they had not been afforded an opportunity to shape their own identities.

Conversely, Nottage's choral members all grapple with identity and struggle with self-definition. Nottage's progressive usage of the chorus brings together diverse people and perspectives while underscoring the traditional connection of choral members. The constituency that she establishes among choral members in the Imperial Hotel contrasts with the way previous African American women playwrights have used choral bodies. Nottage expands community by incorporating multicultural choral members. Because the bonds between the chorus are not motivated by identifiable cultural markers, the chorus' purpose likewise does not involve defining the group. The chorus focuses more on exploring the event that brings the members together than on identity. Nottage crafts a body of voices that creates a complicated harmony concerning the hotel experience. This progressive yet historical use of the chorus suggests a return to the traditional purpose of

the Greek chorus: to generate meaning about important cultural events through their performance for audiences for generations to come (Bacon 8). Nottage encourages her audience to historicize the event by inviting their presence at the dinner party and by incorporating them within the physical space of the hotel. As the Bradleys recount their experience, they establish familiarity with the audience through references to Martha's Vineyard and The Discovery Channel (170). Moreover, the audience is invited into the hotel as the characters continually look out of the window at the audience. By including the audience within the landscape of the play, she challenges them to comprehend their connection to global events despite their geographical and cultural differences from the historical moment.

*On Display: Multicultural Aesthetic Praxis*

Nottage's multicultural choral performances display an advancement in what Lynnette Goddard calls a "Black feminist performance aesthetic" (39). During the twentieth century, particularly within the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, African American playwrights, novelists, and critics delineated a connection between aesthetics and praxis. Goddard claims that "from the outset, black aestheticians conceived [of art as] an oppositional practice that would foreground black experiences and the struggles for racial equality," which should result in the creation of texts "distinctly different from white American theatre in form and content" (44). Goddard

presents W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke as Harlem Renaissance aestheticians who “wanted to use theatre to reveal the Negro to the white world as ‘a human feeling thing’” (44). This particular commitment was extended during the Black Power Era of the 60s and 70s as “Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) and Ed Bullins argued for a black aesthetic that rejected white American norms of form and content” (44). The critical leaders in theory and arts were largely African American men who privileged racial issues. As a reaction to the narrow focus on racial models, Black feminist critics arose to fill the space. For example Barbara Smith in "Toward a Black Feminist Consciousness" (1982) emphasizes critical aesthetic issues within African American critical paradigms as well as feminist critical paradigms since they both neglect African American female perspectives within approaches to texts written by African American women. Smith astutely analyzes Toni Morrison’s *Sula* using a Black lesbian feminist perspective, highlighting the cultural context that prevents the development of a relationship between Nel and Sula. Smith clarifies the connection between the theory and the text, which solidifies the beginning of a Black feminist aesthetic agenda.

Nottage’s work presents the next dimension in Black feminist cultural praxis because it moves beyond a primary focus on either convincing the audience of African Americans’ humanity or of African American women’s unique cultural experience. She shifts focus from America to global cultural experience. In *Mud, River, Stone*, Nottage explores a hostage situation in southeast Africa. Joaquim, a former child soldier, currently works as a bellboy at the Imperial Hotel. This past colonial resort becomes the

stage for a contemporary conflict. The hint of an impending war induces Joaquim's fear, and he decides to hold everyone in the hotel hostage. Nottage privileges defining the event rather than fully delineating choral members' backgrounds. As a result, the role of hostage and captor blend seamlessly through the ordeal as political and social roles between each member complicate the internal relationships within the chorus.

Nottage calls her audience's attention to the intricate web of bonds that connects the chorus with the audience by physically restricting the chorus' movement to the hotel lobby. The limitations of space highlighted by the veranda and an expansive window in place of the fourth wall emphasize the chorus' intimacy and their connection with the audience. When Sarah looks out at the audience, Nottage establishes the spectators' involvement within the narrative: "*She gazes out the window, toward the audience*" (Nottage 177). As the audience gazes back, it frames the event and blends into the natural environment. By incorporating the audience within the framework of the narrative, Nottage moves from multicultural theory to praxis by exposing the bonds between the chorus and the audience and by emphasizing the transformative quality of the experience. When each member of the chorus is transformed by his or her membership within the choral body, the audience sees an opportunity for transformation from innocent bystander to active participant of the narrative.

The physical boundaries within the lobby further frame the event. The front desk, the sitting area, and the bar collectively prompt the audience to consider the social context that fuels the tension among the choral members in the hotel. What better

metaphor is there for the connections that unite the chorus than the jungle? With its intermingled vines of colonial and postcolonial tensions, the jungle simultaneously represents the audience's complex relationship to the event. Adding to this already complex context is the rain. The constant downpour first compels the Bradleys toward the hotel for shelter and then acts as an impediment to their escape. Neibert, a Belgian traveler, adventurer, and choral member, articulates this idea when he claims "It's the rain that brought us all together" (197). The rain confines the chorus to the hotel, and its proximity leads to growing tensions within the group. As the hotel guests grapple with their immobility, the distinctions that order their everyday interactions dissolve. Thus, the rain serves as a catalyst for the breakdown of order in the hotel, similar to the jungle's reclamation of political progress. More importantly the rain characterizes the cyclical nature of peace and war within the burgeoning nation states in postcolonial Africa, which Mr. Blake confirms when he claims, "we are obscured by the unpredictability of the weather and our government" (182). The distinctions between these two polarities, war and peace, evaporate as peace takes on more dangerous connotations than war. This particular unidentified African locale has been engaged in war for so long that peace seems unfamiliar. As different factions assert their leadership, the short-lived armistice seems fragile. A delicate peace appears more problematic than an all-out civil war since the characters are unsure about their position within the political milieu.

The artificial separation between war and peace relates to the man-made distinctions between members of the chorus, particularly at the front desk, which reflects a visual barrier between guests of the hotel and Joaquim, the bellboy:

*Joaquim, a young African man, wears a bell boy uniform that harkens back to the colonial age. He leans against the wall peering out into space wearing an expression of discomfort and boredom....Joaquim shuts the door and returns to his perch. David quickly fumbles through a Swahili phrase book, searching for the appropriate words. Joaquim speaks with a heavy accent.*

JOAQUIM. Welcome to the Imperial Hotel.

DAVID. He speaks the language!

SARAH. It's a hotel, sweetie. (173)

Nottage's description of Joaquim's physical presence from his apparel to his physical response emphasizes his internal tension. Although Joaquim lives in the contemporary period, his clothes emphasize the presence of colonial expectations. The Bradleys' response also demonstrates this tension when David expects Joaquim to speak a native language. His position as a bellboy symbolizes the tension between colonial and postcolonial behavioral expectations. They expect him to simultaneously behave progressively and subserviently. This brief interaction reflects conflict in Joaquim's calm yet internally turbulent demeanor. The staging reveals the historical tension through

Joaquim's mannerisms. Beyond the invisible barriers that seemingly separate the bellboy from the guests, Joaquim's inner conflict foreshadows his inability to fully portray a passive hotel employee. He has not perfected this role. His performance as a bell boy confirms choral expectations, but his eventual outburst through the hostage situation highlights his inability to internally resolve the tension between peace and war. His professional expectations are complicated by his country's political fragility.

In addition to the front desk, the sitting area establishes expectations for Joaquim's behavior. Joaquim's position behind the desk differs from the sitting area where guests such as Mr. Blake rest. While Joaquim greets guests and introduces them to their accommodations, Mr. Blake looks on from the sitting area: *Mr. Blake, a bombastic white African of English descent, lounges on the couch, drinking a martini and smoking a cigar...satisfied. He brushes a fly away from his face...David and Sarah exit. Mr. Blake stands, revealing a gun in a holster around his waist. He checks the register (173-175).* Mr. Blake's visibly relaxed demeanor contrasts with Joaquim's quiet internal tension. His posture presents an image of comfort while Joaquim's awkward leaning on the wall further symbolizes his discomfort. The cigar and martini work together to establish a sense of success and class difference within this small space, yet the physical swatting of the fly reveals the fragility of this seemingly empowered position. Blake's ease is tempered by the presence of others, yet it depends on Joaquim fully assuming a subservient role. Thus, Mr. Blake's characterization intimates an equally complex mood.

While the front desk and sitting area suggest seemingly disparate realities for Joaquim and Mr. Blake, the tension between their posturing resolves itself in the lobby's bar. Though the desk emphasizes the physical border between Joaquim and Mr. Blake, the bar serves as a meeting place. At the bar, Mr. Blake requests a drink from Joaquim and encourages the Bradleys to partake as well. Mr. Blake demands Joaquim to make them all martinis, but Joaquim suggests that the Bradleys might desire a different beverage. Ultimately, the Bradleys decide to drink martinis. Joaquim and Mr. Blake's initial distinct positions converge at the bar, which results in a physical posturing for power: "*Joaquim goes to the bar to mix the drinks. Sarah smiles at Joaquim as he crosses to the bar. Joaquim remains expressionless...A moment. Joaquim turns around from the bar, his face hardens into a grimace*" (180). This interaction resembles a choral dance. Dance in this scene becomes a physical demonstrative movement where the choral members react rhythmically to the context of the situation and their individual partners. Each character occupies a clear position and posture. While sometimes dance partners change, the dance continues. Joaquim's face likewise reflects the mental and physical strain of performing this dance. As Mr. Blake seeks to affirm his superior position, Joaquim counters Blake's movements through his seemingly expressionless gaze, but when the dancers relinquish their holds, Joaquim's natural animosity surfaces in his grimace. The audience witnesses the high stakes of this unique rhythmic confrontation as the mood intensifies from an ostensibly casual encounter into a deliberate display of reactions meant to distinguish power. The audience's proximity to the dance represents

an overarching attempt to weave the spectators' experience into the breadth of the play.

The audience frames the dancers' movements like wallflowers at a dance.

Along with the dance, the dramatic pacing supports the audience's participation within the scope of the performance. They are not distracted by obvious breaks in narrative pacing through Nottage's symbiotic plotting of distinct narrative encounters. For example, the amount of time between the Bradleys' arrival and their eventual appearance at the bar seems unclear. Nottage does not provide the audience with concrete time markers to chronicle the period the Bradleys spend in Africa. Although she incorporates an apparent chronological structure, the audience initially encounters the chorus after the hostage event and then transitions to the past experience. She minimizes the transitions between present reflections at the dinner party with the past experiences in Africa. The conflation of time allows the audience to follow the action despite the gaps.

Nottage's pacing differs from other contemporary playwrights who freely utilize the chorus within their dramas. For instance, Paula Vogel's more self-conscious usage of the chorus in *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) creates a drastically different experience for the audience. Vogel distorts time by incorporating jarring transitions between Li'l Bit's childhood memories and adult recollections. More importantly Vogel's subject matter, pedophilia, requires a distancing from the issue that Nottage's play does not. Vogel purposefully presents Li'l Bit's recollection of her incestuous relationship with Uncle Peck in a nonsequential order so that the audience is able to distance themselves from the moments of molestation. Vogel's choral members are distinct characters in the play,

while primary characters like Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck take center stage. The chorus helps the audience understand both Li'l Bit's and Uncle Peck's humanity despite the destructive nature of their relationship. This strategy protects the audience and the characters from experiencing the trauma of pedophilia, so the mimetic ancient Greek strategy of choral performance seems inappropriate for the play's subject matter, which is why Vogel avoids implementing it within her work. Moreover "[t]he scrambled chronology, which suggests the ways memories attack by stealth and out of sequence, makes it harder for the audience to form conventional judgments" (Ben Brantley's *NYT* review 17. Mar. 1997). Vogel rejects chronology to encourage her audience to forgo initial judgments. But Nottage accomplishes a completely different effect when she seamlessly shifts from future to past and back to future again. The audience can interpret the fully integrated connections in time as representative of a present moment, which more easily positions them within the play's landscape. Instead of distancing the audience from the theme, Nottage encourages the audience to see themselves as connected to the issues in the play. Nottage's manipulation of time frames the past with the future to encourage the audience to make connections.

Although Nottage incorporates a mimetic performance strategy, she nor Vogel presents the audience with an opportunity for catharsis. Wiles defines Aristotelian catharsis as "the principle that tragedy exists not to articulate and clarify conflict but to purge and purify the emotions of the audience" (41). *Mud, River, Stone* does not provide the audience with an easy out where it can distance itself from the reality of the play.

The Bradleys' recollection does not exhibit a historical resonance; rather the story's pacing reverberates loudly as it reflects timely connections to the characters through the performative event. The audience performs as the jungle does, omnipresent yet inactive. We consume the evidence of the event as the jungle consumes the railroad and roadways. The effect encourages the audience to spread the story beyond the theater.

Although *Mud, River, Stone* represents an extended dramatic choral performance, there are distinct moments when members of the chorus assert their individual voices in the style of traditional Greek dramas. In traditional Greek dramas, the chorus demonstrates an intense connection with the audience and one central character within the play. Ley clarifies the relationship between the lead actor and chorus: "In many cases, the chorus has a leading relationship with one character in particular, and much of the dynamics of the play will flow from the fluctuations in that relationship. This central dynamic will be affected by the introduction of other characters to whom the chorus as well as the leading characters will respond" (42). Throughout *Mud, River, Stone*, distinct choral voices articulate their perspectives about the Imperial Hotel and their personal judgments concerning the hostage situation. For instance, Ama provides a context for choral members and the audience that explains Joaquim's decision: "I said, Maximo would never have done this. No! He was a decent and good fellow. I miss him. He used to sit at the desk and jot down notes. He liked to write down what I said, that way when the hotel was empty he'd read our conversation and wouldn't feel alone. No this wouldn't have happened if he had stayed put" (212). Ama's reflections of Maximo, a previous

bellboy, illustrate the intense isolation of the hotel and its workers. Her opinion, while distinct from the choral body, contributes to the collective response to Joaquim's seizure of authority. Ama's opinion provides a context for their difficult response and transforms the chorus into a complex body of individuals responding to a particular situation from a collective space. She emphasizes not only the emptiness of the hotel but the differences between how individuals respond to isolation. "Maximo would never have done this" (212).

Different members of the chorus use a similar strategy that moves the storyline forward. Their continuous references to phantom characters establishes an intimacy within the group. Throughout *Mud, River, Stone* the audience hears references to individuals who never appear on the stage but deeply impact the views of the chorus. David refers to one of his friends who recently visited Africa; Ama refers to Maximo, a previous bellboy whose behavior she claims was different than Joaquim's; several choral members reference "the Missus," whom Mr. Blake calls the cook yet also the proprietress of the hotel. Ama, Joaquim, and Mr. Blake all refer to her as a superior figure. Ama even "*races to the front desk and bangs on the bell*" in desperation seeking an appearance from the Missus to stop the hostage situation (213). Ama screams loudly begging for help:

AMA. Missus! Missus! MISSUS! (*Joaquim laughs.*)

JOAQUIM. I don't think she can hear you. Maybe Mr. Blake is right. She has gone to the city also. (213)

The physical absence but oral presence of these characters emphasizes to the audience that other individuals are connected to this event. The phantom characters reflect a thematic choice by Nottage to underscore the audience's involvement within the narrative despite their absence from the stage. She encourages their active involvement not just in the play but in the plight of individuals who need help. While the chorus searches in vain for individuals to help them escape the hostage situation, Nottage intersperses inactive characters to symbolize the inaction of foreign governments and individuals who could affect a positive change in the characters' lives. For instance, Neibert's perpetual search for the "agogwe," takes on epic dimensions through his claim that "we pretend to know it, but we are afraid of it. Afraid of what we will find if we disturb the delicate balance between myth and reality" (Nottage 192). The agogwe embody the balance between nature and man, but Neibert's inability to discover physical evidence of their existence signals the imbalanced political and social climate. As the chorus debates the existence of the agogwe, the continuation of the nation's fragile peace seems less secure.

Beyond the phantom characters, Nottage situates physical objects to additionally demonstrate the connection between the chorus and audience. One clear example of a prop shifting between members of the chorus can be seen through the focus on shoes:

JOAQUIM. Attention! Hands up! SHOES! Shoes! Off! Place them there!

DAVID. Here we go again.

MR. BLAKE. Shoes now.

SARAH. I will not! Not these shoes. No, no, no. Not these, Lieutenant Sir.

And what if I say no, what if we all say no....

*(Sarah reluctantly removes her shoes and adds them to the pile...They line up at attention...Joaquim carefully surveys the shoes. He removes his old worn boots and measures his feet against Neibert's... Joaquim pretends to pay target practice with the shoes. He picks through the pile and chooses the best pair). (210-211)*

The shoe ritual signals a forced coming together. While Joaquim positions himself as the choral leader, he concocts a simple idea that at once diminishes the choral members' individuality by emphasizing their shared humanity. The hotel guests stand together made equally vulnerable by Joaquim's demands. Yet, he participates in the ritual by discarding his own shoes and adopting a new pair. His performance emphasizes his position within the chorus, though he continually tries to assert his separation from the group. Moreover, his eagerness to wear another man's shoes demonstrates his willingness to alter his station. The event again diminishes identity while encouraging the audience to see connections beyond the chorus. The shoe episode resembles a choral dance as all members of the chorus are encouraged to occupy specific positions to demonstrate order.

SARAH. I don't understand why we're doing this.

JOAQUIM. BECAUSE, when the authorities arrive, Mrs. Bradley, I want them to see order! It is how things are to be done

MR. BLAKE: If they come. (210)

Joaquim encourages the chorus to perform a dance that emphasizes the repetitive approach he associates with the authorities. Although Mr. Blake questions whether the authorities will ever surface, Joaquim forces the chorus to behave as if the authorities will appear. Their absence reinforces the isolation of the hotel, while encouraging the audience to observe the constant transference of authority between political forces off-stage.

When the guests resist removing their shoes, they signal their unwillingness to change positions with other less privileged members of the chorus. Though the shoes represent the artificiality of class, cultural, gender, and social differences, these distinctions matter as individual choral members seek to assert their dominance over others. The stakes are raised when Joaquim challenges their distinctions with the shoes, and the consequence of that decision encourages the choral body to act violently toward Joaquim with another key prop, the gun. When Joaquim is subdued toward the end of the play, the movement of the gun between choral members signals the difficulty with the resolution of the event. Even as “*they all stare, hard and contemptuously*” at Joaquim, they do not know what to do with the gun (242):

AMA. Get the gun.

*(Sarah retrieves the gun, Joaquim, dazed, manages a smile. Joaquim laughs... Sarah begins to pass Mr. Blake the gun.)*

SARAH. David, what should I do?

JOAQUIM. Throw away the gun... You keep it...

*(She slowly passes Mr. Blake the gun; he examines it. He fires one shot at Joaquim, who slumps to the ground. Mr. Blake returns his gun to the holster at his side). (242-243)*

The gun is a clear signal of power. From the first moment it appears on stage in Mr. Blake's holster to Joaquim's seizure of the weapon and instigates the hostage situation the audience perceives the connection between authority and the person possessing the weapon. Sarah appears visibly uncomfortable handling the weapon and quickly gets rid of it and her power. Anton Chekhov famously declared, "A gun placed on the wall during the first act of a play must be used by the third" (qtd. in Delaney 167). The presence of the gun foreshadows the resolution as power transitions among choral members. Though Joaquim tells Sarah to keep it, she willingly gives it to Mr. Blake who solidifies his position by killing Joaquim. The gun solves the tense choral dance between Joaquim and Mr. Blake but does not resolve any of the cultural or political circumstances that brought the group together. The audience is not allowed catharsis even when Joaquim dies because the issues that created the tension still exist. Although the resolution soothes some of the tensions, Sarah admits her feelings of guilt.

MR. BLAKE. You, Mrs. Bradley, you said you wanted him dead.

SARAH. But I didn't mean it. (Nottage 243)

Sarah's desired resolution feels unsatisfactory even though she is free to go home. At this point, she feels invested in the crisis in Africa, and her imminent departure does not separate her from the action. Nottage encourages the audience to feel connected to the conflict through the Bradleys' experience by not providing a sense of closure from the scene.

The stone symbolizes the violent end of the Bradleys' experience. "*David retrieves the stone from next to the front desk. He raises it. He hesitates, trying to decide how to strike. He lowers the stone across Joaquim's head and knocks him out*" (242).

David uses the stone to end Joaquim's power but hesitates to strike, stressing his identification with Joaquim. Ultimately, David chooses self-preservation over communal survival. The chorus separates shortly after Joaquim's death, and the Bradleys take the stone as a reminder of their experience. When the Bradleys first got stuck in the African jungle before even arriving at the hotel, David thought he might need to defend his wife in the bush when their car broke down. But the stone's purpose has shifted in the midst of the dinner party guests and on the theatrical stage. The destructive capacity of the gun does not resonate within the stone. The gun distinguishes members of the chorus from one another, but the stone brings individuals together. The manifestation of the stone on the stage heralds the formation of the chorus because it signals the possibility of

divergent entities colliding. Although David initially uses the stone destructively, he reuses it as a teaching instrument to convey the seriousness of the experience to their peers. The stone similarly conveys the Bradleys' dangerous adventure to the stage audience, but it also suggests the fragmentary nature of the collective experience. The Bradleys' knowledge represents only one layer of the stone. Joaquim embodies a vital layer of the stone's sediment. The stone's intricate layers emphasize that complex issues remain unresolved.

Most importantly, the stone diminishes romantic visions of Africa. It has actually helped David achieve the transformative experience he yearned for initially. The physical presence of the stone allows a piece of Africa to materialize on the stage. Distant from glorious savannahs, luxurious safaris, or posh resorts, the stone emphasizes an oppositional image of the place that counteracts romantic images of the motherland. Yet this particular experience does not represent the totality of the diverse cultures or nationalities within the continent. Therefore the jungle counteracts David's acquaintance's positive experience in Senegal. The stone embodies the complex rugged nature of a continent still dealing with the repercussions of colonialism, and it simultaneously challenges individuals seemingly removed from those struggles to recognize the interrelated contexts that exist between our realities.

## CONCLUSION

### Concluding Reflections

On May 27, 2013, my mother and I travelled to Chicago, Illinois, to experience Lynn Nottage's *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* at the Goodman Theatre. The trip was an opportunity to fully place myself within the audience of a Nottage play. I anxiously looked forward to observing the audience's reactions to Nottage's use of humor within a serious topic. But more importantly, I wanted my mother to experience a part of my life she had only been exposed to in vague conversations that started something like, "So how's your dissertation going?"

As we entered the Goodman, I was overwhelmed by the diversity in the lobby. This was not my first theater trip to Chicago. The previous year I witnessed Nathan Lane in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, and that outing, while enjoyable, was markedly different. At 27, I was clearly the youngest individuals in the theater, which suggests the limited appeal O'Neill or at least that particular O'Neill play has on my generation. But the lobby I encountered for *By the Way* was filled with different kinds of people: young and old, Black and White congregated. Many audience members were talking to each other, browsing through print copies of Nottage's plays, or purchasing memorabilia. In my rush to get to our box, I practically pulled my mother away from the lobby. She looked over her shoulder and asked, "Do you have any of those books?" "Yes I have them all." I sounded more snobbish than I intended. But who could help it? My focus

concentrated entirely on getting to our seats. When we arrived, I was pleased with our vantage point. In box 6, we sat slightly above stage right and could see the stage, backstage, and the audience. As a critic, I considered my view crucial to understanding my mother's and the audience's reactions to the play.

Afterwards, we went to Petterino's, an Italian restaurant within the theater. Once seated, I noticed the walls were filled with caricatures of famous Chicagoans and entertainers alike. These pictures reminded me of the images from *Intimate Apparel* that Nottage used to frame Esther's journey. However, unlike the tableaux Nottage presents, the caricatures on the wall did not look like the actual people. The images in *Intimate Apparel* depicted the characters in real-life scenarios. For instance, at the end of the play Esther is presented sewing. This one characteristic marks Esther's identity, while the play provides the audience with details about her life. My mother and I guessed at the true identities of the figures of the caricatures while waiting for our food. I took the opportunity to ask her what she thought of the play. "It was good but..." My stomach sunk as I sensed her criticism approaching. "I didn't understand the second act." "What do you mean didn't understand it? Did you not know what was going on?" "Well of course I knew what was going on, but I didn't understand why." She was referring of course to the distinct differences between acts. In act 1 the audience encounters Vera Stark, a down-on-her-luck actress trying to break into Hollywood in the 1930s. The second act takes place today, and scholars debate Stark's impact on cinema. Where Vera Stark ends up is a mystery as the panelists struggle to answer the question, "what

happened to Vera?” Frequently within the second act, video and still images from Vera’s past are projected onto the stage. My mother felt this was self-consciously done and commented, “I just didn’t need that.” While I remembered Raiford’s idea of “critical Black memory” that emphasizes photography as a tool for intervention in the past by acknowledging African American’s presence in history, my mother viewed the images much like the caricatures, shabby renditions of lived experience. She thought the machinery of the play operated too loudly: “I could tell how [Nottage] wanted me to feel or even think about these characters. I wish she would have just let me think about it instead of directing my response.”

Intrigued by her reaction, I thought about the staging of the second act. Most of the action took place center stage on a rotating platform. Past Vera came to life during an interview as older images and videos were projected overhead. At the same time, stage right was organized as a colloquium. The panelists were seated away from the action but constantly commented on what the audience saw. The panelists, Afua, Carmen, and Herb, frequently called out questions to the audience about Vera’s historical location and her ability to affect change within Hollywood. I asked my mother what she thought of the staging, but she didn’t want to talk about that; instead she focused on the critics themselves and their interactions with the audience: “I didn’t like that part at all.” “Why not? Did you not like the characters talking to the audience?” “Well, that didn’t matter. I just didn’t like the way they spoke about themselves to us. Why did we have to know that one girl was homosexual? What difference does that make? The story was about the old

movie star not Afua's sexuality." I laughed at that point because I hadn't paid attention to Afua's announcement. She proclaims her sexuality while dismissing Stark's supposed sexual relationship with Gloria. Afua's announcement in that scene demonstrates the type of call and response pattern Nottage implements within *Fabulation or the Re-education of Undine*. In that play, Nottage advances call and response by shifting the focus from an individual conversation to the audience of the play; she incorporates the audience within the flow of the performance by positioning Undine to set out calls to the audience. For my mother, this technique in *By the Way* transferred the focus from Vera to Afua, and this transferral seemed forced. "I have attended every conference you have ever spoken at, and I can't recall a time when you announced your sexuality to the audience to make a point. I think that character couldn't back up what she was saying, so she resorted to 'I'm a Black lesbian so my opinion counts.' I just didn't buy it." Mama's response was a legitimate reaction to Nottage's call. While Afua verbalized her identity, my mother was left wondering how that subject position should impact her. Whether or not Mama liked the call and response, she definitely noticed it, which was a small victory for me.

After all, we had travelled all the way from Nashville to Chicago to view this play; we enacted our own mini migration for an opportunity to observe Nottage's characters in the flesh. While members of the Second Migration left the South in a mass exodus between the 1940s and 1970s for better economic opportunities, we ventured North, or to the Midwest, for a cultural encounter. The Crumps in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* travelled North for a different reason, to escape the memories of their recently

departed mother. Their migratory experience challenges audiences to view historical periods as reflections of individual choice instead of group duress. While many of the characters experience some level of discrimination, their journeys are not simply consequences of racism, sexism, or nationalism. Instead, the Crumps move northward to preserve their family and ultimately extend it through Godfrey's marriage to Gerte. Our brief trip was not permanent like the Crumps', but our trip does speak to Ernestine's eventual return home. As we return home with knowledge, we benefit in a similar way from our encounters.

As we finished our dessert, I asked Mama about her overall impression of the play. I wanted to know what she thought about the interaction between the characters and the audience. "Well, I don't know. I liked that there were so many different people in the audience." I did too. I enjoyed that they laughed equally as hard at the Southern Belle as they did to the stereotypical Mammy figure. In my estimation, the audience recognized these past figures and responded to them with a current understanding of their historical place and purpose. While Mama didn't perceive a literal connection between the audience and the performers, I did. The characters on stage worked together to inform and entertain, much like a traditional Greek chorus. Only this chorus reminded the audience of painful memories within a contemporary framework. They encouraged our reflection through the critics' analysis of Vera's performance and contributions. Though Mama felt that the critics' performances fell flat and did not reflect the panelists she'd observed at past conferences, she immediately understood what they were trying to do.

Remembering Vera Stark and questioning her position in history allowed us to create our own memory about the experience, as two Southern girls ventured North to reflect on a not-too-distant past.

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