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Recommended Citation

Mohler, Courtney; McMahon, Christina; and Román, David, "Three Readings of Reading, Pennsylvania: Approaching Lynn Nottage's Sweat and Douglas Carter Beane's Shows for Days" (2016). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Arts*. 19.
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Three Readings of Reading, Pennsylvania: Approaching Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* and Douglas Carter Beane's *Shows for Days*

Courtney Elkin Mohler, Christina McMahon, and David Román

SHOWS FOR DAYS. By Douglas Carter Beane. Directed by Jerry Zaks. Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center Theater, New York City.

SWEAT. By Lynn Nottage. Directed by Kate Whoriskey. Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Angus Bowmer Theatre, Ashland.

Courtney Elkin Mohler, part 1: *Sweat*, 14 August 2015

While few Americans were left unscathed by the financial crisis of 2007–08, the manufacturing industry and the unions upon which its workers relied began to rapidly decline over the prior decade when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed into law. NAFTA and the spiraling set of deregulatory policies it epitomized are specters in Lynn Nottage's new play *Sweat*, which premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in July 2015. Under the keen direction of Kate Whoriskey, who also directed the award-winning premiere of Nottage's *Ruined* in Chicago in 2008, the extraordinarily talented and well-cast ensemble communicated the interpersonal devastation caused by the collapse of American industry. A joint commission by OSF and Arena Stage, the production will open in Washington, D.C., in January 2016. The play's themes are cardinally relevant as President Obama rushes to pass his own multinational trade agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which opponents predict will result in further economic disparity, job losses, and declining wages for workers.

Nottage transforms intimate testimony and scrupulous research on the social and economic hardships experienced by the people she interviewed in Reading, Pennsylvania, one of the nation's poorest cities, into a character-driven drama that explores the human costs exacted by the contradictions of late neoliberal capitalism. Like NAFTA, the Bush administration and its economic policies also loom as the story unfolds, with scenes bouncing between the years 2008 and 2000. The tragedy showcased in *Sweat* then rests on a kind of "ironized nostalgia," to borrow a term of literary critic Linda Hutcheon;¹ the wrenching, grim scenes that take place in 2008 beg us to examine our feelings of nostalgia for those moments in 2000 when we did not yet realize the

¹ Linda Hutcheon, "Nostalgia, Irony and the Postmodern," in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, vol. 6 of the *Proceedings of the XVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association "Literature as Cultural Memory" (Leiden, 16–22 August 1997)*, ed. Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 206.

extent to which the neoliberal project would turn America's industrial cities into economic ghost towns. In a style normally associated with docudrama, the design relied upon crisp projections of text to communicate the time and setting for each scene. Timely broadcast news clips were also used to transition between scenes, conveying that the national political discourse of these two election years significantly framed the play's action. Toward the beginning of act 2, President George W. Bush's giant talking head was momentarily projected onto the stark cement wall that backed the most depressing of the play's scenes—an example of the presentational signage and audiovisual transitions that smattered the biting realistic dialogue, plot, and character development. With a nod toward Brecht's A-effect, these scene changes disrupted the emotional power of the realistic aspects of Nottage's storytelling and contextualized them within their specific sociopolitical moments.

The script centers on a group of steel workers whose close-knit relationships corrode along with their union-backed jobs at Olstead's Metal Tubing. The play opens in the year 2008 as parole officer Evan (Tyrone Wilson) counsels two young men: a penitential, recently born-again Chris (Tramell Tillman), who is African American; and a defiant Jason (Stephen Michael Spencer), whose face is covered in Aryan nation tattoos garnered during his prison stay. When the scene switches to 2000, we meet three long-time friends, Cynthia (Kimberly Scott), Tracey (Terri McMahon), and Jessie (K. T. Vogt). These women have been working together on the floor of Olstead's for decades and have gathered to celebrate Tracey's birthday in their favorite post-shift bar. At that relatively simpler time, Chris and Jason, the sons of Cynthia and Tracey, respectively, were best friends who also worked on the line jacking steel at Olstead's.

Most of the scenes take place in the year 2000, announced by projections (for example, March 2000). Over the course of the passing year the tone in the bar turns from harmless workaday complaining to anxiety over cutbacks, and finally seethes with rage, fear, and blame when half of the machines at Olstead's are packed up and shipped overseas, leaving Chris and Jason out of work. By the end of 2000 all have been locked out, forced to "take handouts from the union," and spend their days harassing strike-breakers from their picket line (103)—all except Cynthia, who was promoted to management in April 2000. Tracey and Jessie feel betrayed by their friend; Chris and Jason are overcome with anger and unsure where to direct it. Nottage develops tension in the interplay between the scenes that take place in 2000 and those few that happen in 2008 because we know that Chris and Jason have committed a crime and served eight years in prison, but we do not yet know what that crime is or its exact circumstances. This dual-time dramatic structure supports two levels of interrelated tragic irony: first, the societal foreknowledge that we as a nation are headed for disaster; and second, a more personal, direct knowledge that Chris and Jason embody through the devastating loss of their friendship, well-being, and freedom (figs. 1–2).

The frustrating economic policies on which the play's tragedy revolves are put into perspective through brash humor, shared work-related rants, and the familiar relief found at the bottom of a pint glass. But the humorous and tender moments also have hard edges, like when the ladies roar with a laughter that turns uncomfortable as the bartender Stan (Jack Willis) tells them about their friend Freddy who shot his own ear off while attempting suicide after hearing rumors that the factory was going to cut back his line. From the post–Great Recession perspective of its audience,

Tracey's apropos crack, "What the fuck is NAFTA? Sounds like a laxative. NAFTA," rings with pinching irony (22).

Both intensifying and setting off this irony, scenic designer John Lee Beatty and costume designer Jennifer Moeller created a mood of nostalgia not normally associated with a time period so close to the present. Paying homage to many great American dramas, the majority of the action took place in a worn though charming watering hole. Beatty's smart set rotated to reveal three different spaces: the bright interior of the bar, the bar's shadowy exterior and front door, and a stark-gray cement wall that establishes the play's bleakest moments. This grim façade was the backdrop for the scenes with the parole officer and became the depressing interiors of both Tracey's and Cynthia's low-income apartments in 2008. The designers successfully created a visual representation of the structure of the play itself. Even in the midst of debauchery and violent interactions, the bar swelled with life and the kind of energy only possible in spaces where hope exists: this was where Cynthia and Jessie sang the chorus to Cher's "Believe"; where Tracey challenged Cynthia to join the strike with the rest of the line workers; and where Tracey provoked Chris and Jason to commit the act of violence that landed them in prison. The bare concrete wall that signaled "2008" stood in blunt contrast with the warm amber lighting of the bar's wood panels and red leather stools. The painful juxtaposition of life in the very same town, a mere eight years later, deepened the play's tragedy and its formal tie to docudrama.

A testimony to her ability to create dynamic structure and nuanced characters, Nottage presents the trauma caused by the past twenty years of international economic policy without being pedantic. Perhaps the play avoids feeling preachy because of our own selfawareness (complacency even?), as people with the means to attend professional theatre, that circumstances have drastically changed for the nearly extinct lower-middle and middle classes of our nation. The play's subject matter smarts with relevance as the United States, on an uptick from the Great Recession, approaches a presidential election and faces the possibility of another behemoth, multinational trade agreement. If *Sweat* asks us to see how the actions of the powerful (and the electorate who enable them) in 2000 affected the economic crash of 2007–08, the play also underscores our responsibility to think ahead as we prepare to vote once again in 2016.

I became a little wistful as I heard the familiar late-'90s music playing between scenes, a little squeezed in my skinny pants when Cynthia entered the bar looking so comfortable in her bootleg jeans. As an audience member in 2015 I found myself longing for the rosiness of the Clinton era, and then recoiled as I espied the folly of that nostalgic impulse. It was, of course, the Clinton administration which passed NAFTA, grossly deregulated Wall Street by repealing the Glass-Steagall Act, and rewrote the Community Reinvestment Act, which incentivized banks to make home loans in the country's poorest neighborhoods. It is ironic (and vexing) to feel nostalgia for 2000, considering what I know now about our country's recent socioeconomic history. Despite seemingly oppositional characteristics, both irony and nostalgia share a hermeneutic similarity: "the element of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective."² One *feels* nostalgic, longing for an idealized time, dissatisfied with the present moment; one *perceives* something as ironic. In the case of ironized nostalgia, those nostalgic pangs are coupled with the

² Ibid., 199.

recognition of their romanticization, that the moment for which one longs has been largely invented—how ironic! The scenes that Nottage sets in 2000 affect nostalgic longing for a time of fiscal prosperity, or at least for the chimera of a “strong economy” brought on through unsustainable deregulatory policies. In those relatively hopeful scenes in which Tracey and Cynthia spiritedly debate what the unions will be able to do for the workers there seems to be a through-line connecting American manufacturing jobs of the past hundred years. But Nottage splices the more innocent moments of 2000 with scenes of destitution set in 2008, which are made all the more tragic because of their chronological proximity to our own moment.



Cynthia (Kimberley Scott) explains to Stan (Jack Willis) why she just might throw her hat into the ring for a new job at the factory in *Sweat* (2015). (Photo: Jenny Graham.)



Stan (Jack Willis, center) keeps a low profile as Jason (Stephen Michael Spencer, left) and Chris (Tramell Tillman) discuss future plans in *Sweat* (2015). (Photo: Jenny Graham.)

Sweat invites its audience to remember our nation’s recent past, the “fortune” of 2000, the strength of the American manufacturing unions, the pride of working-class people and the bonds among them. But whatever nostalgic longing we may feel is entwined with irony, creating “the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past.”³ There is, I am afraid, an implicit guilt trip at work here, implicating us as audience members and citizens within a country increasingly divided by economic disparity. For an audience burnt out on “liking” things ironically and tired of distrusting politicians and journalists, feelings of nostalgia offer a break, a moment to reflect. This pause allows us to critically evaluate the times that we romanticize as inextricably connected to the moment in which we live. *Sweat* disallows the impulse to throw up our hands in weary disgust at what happened during the first decades of this millennium; we are not off the hook. As our economy rebounds we must remember, reflect, and act accordingly.

Christina McMahon, part 2: *Shows for Days*, 29 June; *Sweat*, 23 August 2015

“It’s like the whole place just shut down for business.”

—Cynthia, a factory worker in *Sweat*

Around the time I was making my travel arrangements for Ashland to see a preview production of Lynn Nottage’s new play *Sweat* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I got wind that there was yet *another* play opening about Reading, Pennsylvania—*Shows for Days*, by Douglas Carter Beane, which enjoyed a successful run Off-Broadway at Lincoln Center Theater last summer. I had only

³ Ibid., 207.

one question: How did my hometown become so trendy? The two playwrights would answer that question very differently. Beane also grew up in Reading, and any playwright would relish exploring his roots in his hometown's community theatre scene, particularly when Patti LuPone is onboard to play the eccentric local theatre maven. Nottage came across Reading in the pages of the *New York Times* in 2011, the year that a national census named it the poorest city for its demographic, with 49 percent of its citizens living below the poverty line. My dad, Thomas McMahon, was mayor at that time, and he busily fielded interview requests from NPR and *NBC Nightly News* about the city's predicament.

In 2012 Nottage began traveling to Reading regularly to interview poor Latinos, blacks, and whites in the community. This was not far afield from how she wrote her Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Ruined* (2008). After learning about wartime atrocities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo through the *New York Times*, she traveled to Uganda to interview Congolese women in exile who were survivors of gender violence. In an article in the *Reading Eagle*, Nottage said that “[h]ere you have factory workers downsized out of their jobs. I heard over and over again from people here during interviews, ‘we’re shouting, but no one hears us!’ The women in the Congo told me, ‘we are here, but no one is listening!’”⁴

I am certainly viewing *Sweat* from a situated and privileged vantage point: I am the daughter of a long-time mayor of Reading, and I left the city long ago to eventually take up my place in an ivory tower in California. Therefore, any meaning I make of the “place” underlying this play is necessarily overdetermined by my own positionality, as well as the larger economic and educational imbalances that loom over most contemporary US cities. Certainly, as a white middle-class woman who actually grew up in a suburb of Reading (as did Beane), I cannot claim to have firsthand knowledge of the economic distress plaguing the factory workers in *Sweat*. Nevertheless, there was something so familiar to me about those characters I saw on the stage in Ashland. Not only did Nottage get the facts right about factory closings in Reading, but on a visceral level, the characters from *Sweat* just felt like people from my city. They felt like people I might run into at the Ugly Oyster on Fourth Street, the bar of choice for me and my high school friends when we meet up over the holidays. How exactly did a playwright and outsider to the community accomplish this?

To answer that, we must first take a trip down Reading's memory lane, a journey that begins appropriately with a railroad. Yes, that's us on the Monopoly board. Parker Brothers was paying tribute to the Reading Company, the inheritors of a railroad line that had transported coal among Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware since 1833, and an industry titan of iron-making, shipbuilding, and coal mining for the first half of the twentieth century. Reading's role as a transportation nexus sparked huge industrial growth; in earlier eras we were a hub for textile makers (our factory-outlet shopping malls today are a remnant of that legacy); by 1848 we were the “Pretzel Capital of the World” as bakers and breweries alike set up shop (Tom Sturgis is still located there, as evidenced in *Sweat*, when Jason's new job is described as “making pretzels” [1]); and for much of the twentieth century Reading was a hotspot for the metal-making and automobile industries. After coal use decreased in the post-World War II years, the Reading Company began

⁴ George Hatza, “Tales of Survival,” *Reading Eagle*, 31 October 2013, 19.

a downward spiral that culminated in bankruptcy in 1971. Like dominoes, the other industries came down with it, and job loss has continued up until the present day.

As an East Coast city formerly prominent on the corporate map, Reading has virtually faded from our national memory. Only a census highlighting Reading's status as a distressed city could alert America to the city's former glory. This is perhaps *why* Reading has become so trendy in the professional theatre scene: it is a stand-in for a myriad of postindustrial cities in crisis across the United States that long to have their stories told. Like Reading, those cities have largely "shut down for business" (as Cynthia says in *Sweat* [90]), since our globalized economy champions outsourcing over local production. Given Reading's valiant efforts to rejuvenate itself after adopting Act 47 (Pennsylvania's stringent economic recovery plan that pledges state funds for distressed municipalities), Reading is either a harbinger of economic revival for the nation or else the "canary in the coal mine" for what may befall cities in similar situations at the start of the new millennium.

For Reading, the most devastating blow in the 2000s so far came from the closing of two major factories in town: Agere Systems (formerly Lucent Technologies), a silicon chip-maker that exited Reading after the dotcom bust and now outsources overseas; and the Dana Corporation, an auto parts manufacturer that closed its doors in 2000, bleeding out 800 jobs after 1,100 had already been cut three years earlier (a trimmed-down version of Dana remained until 2010). During the first decade of 2000 alone employment dropped by 10 percent in Reading, as estimated by the president of Berks Economic Partnership, which supports city-based businesses.⁵

Sweat pays homage to those workers by putting faces to the statistics. The bar was modeled after Mike's Tavern downtown, a former hangout for Dana employees that Nottage highlighted in a photojournalist essay she wrote for the *New York Times* (scenic designer John Lee Beatty's vibrant set even featured a neon sign for Yuengling, a favorite local brew). The characters themselves were inspired by workers that Nottage met who had been long locked out of Hofmann Industries, a steel tubing manufacturer that began hiring temps after the union rejected the drastic pay cuts and long hours the company proposed. Perhaps this is why the characters seemed familiar to me: their frustration with the changing economic tides shone through every line they uttered.

This frustration was evident in Brucie's (Kevin Kenerly) wistful stories about the cushy retirement package his factory-worker father had enjoyed, and Jason's dreams of opening up a Dunkin' Donuts with his pension, post-retirement. The irony here is that his vision of economic self-empowerment is tied to a multinational corporation, which only casts more doubt on the redemptive possibilities of businesses rooted in Reading itself. In the play the workers' pensions are endowed with a near-mystical symbolism; they are the dreams that dissolve when the workers' jobs are threatened. As Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie meet at the bar for increasingly desolate birthday celebrations throughout the year 2000, questions about their future earnings loom large.

⁵ Sabrina Tavernise, "Reading, Pa., Knew It Was Poor. Now It Knows Just How Poor," *New York Times*, 26 September 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/us/reading-pa-tops-list-poverty-list-censusshows.html>.

While Cynthia at first seems to find higher ground in her new management position at the plant, the interactions with her co-workers become ever more fraught as the story progresses.

Clearly, the racial tensions brewing among the characters contribute deeply to Jason and Chris's assault on Oscar (Carlo Albán). In Reading racially motivated crimes have risen in recent years, and the city's dwindling budget has resulted in cuts to vital public services, including those involving crime prevention and management. As Jason and Chris attack Oscar mercilessly at the end of act 2, spectators of *Sweat* can only imagine the potential for increased urban violence in cities like Reading as residents and budgets alike become more and more impoverished.

At the end of the play, Chris and Jason, now on probation, make a pilgrimage back to the bar, hoping for closure. By then, Oscar has literally switched positions with Stan. He is now the manager and weekend bartender, while a severely brain-damaged Stan clumsily wipes the tables. This also is true to Reading: programs like the Initiative for a Competitive Greater Reading (ICGR), founded in 2003, have invested heavily in the downtown Latino community, establishing a Latino Chamber of Commerce and training programs for aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly among the city's youth. While Oscar symbolizes a rise in Latino business leadership in Reading, he also portends a recovered sense of humanity among these workers, whose lives have intersected in such tragic ways. When a now mild-mannered Jason acknowledges Oscar for taking care of Stan, Oscar replies, "That's how it oughta be" (144).

The ambiguous ending of *Sweat* leaves room for a sequel, and Nottage is writing one that will follow Jason and Chris as they pursue their separate destinies after prison time. As representatives of the younger generation, the two men are powerful symbols of the two paths that appear after the proverbial fork in the road. Chris highlights the potential for education to alleviate crime and poverty, particularly in the African American community to which he belongs. While the other blue-collar characters are forsworn against higher education, Chris has continuously hinted at a teaching degree from Albright, a local university. In 2011, the year that Reading was named the poorest city in the country, only 8 percent of city residents had a bachelor's degree, compared to a national average of 28 percent. Struggling Reading-ites have reported that local companies are increasingly looking for college degrees, even for positions that previously did not require one, such as clerical work. Many city dwellers are now holding down low-paying jobs while earning GEDs and college degrees on the side.⁶ Chris may thus become a harbinger of hope in the sequel, just as actual Reading residents formerly destined for factories must likewise reshape their futures to fit a new economic schema.

Similar to *Sweat*, the plot of *Shows for Days* revolves around urban survival—in this case, for theatre-makers (figs. 3–5). The set (also designed by Beatty) epitomized community theatre: props and mismatched furniture leaned against the walls, racks of tawdry costumes framed the acting space, and tacky yellow tape decorated the floor. Into this space stepped Car (Michael Urie), the narrator and Beane's alter ego. Fluctuating between naive teenager and worldly wise adult, he replayed scenes from his glory days in the Prometheus theatre group in the 1970s. Dominating his flashbacks is Irene (LuPone), a charismatic and conniving artistic director who sabotages her rival

⁶ Ibid.

theatre company, the Civic Players of Reading, while scheming to save Prometheus from the wrecking ball threatening their condemned building (she is modeled after the deceased Jane Simmon Miller, a local legend and cofounder of the Genesis Theatre Company).

In Beane's play the wrecking ball (conveyed by Leon Rothenberg's jarring sound design) symbolizes white flight from the city. The Tooneys, a rich family from wealthy Wyomissing, have funded a summer theatre season at the suburban Penn State Berks campus, which threatens to upstage the community theatre scene downtown. Irene views this as a ploy to redirect theatre patrons away from the city, and she is probably right. From my upbringing in white suburbia I noticed that as crime rates rose in Reading, more of my friends had parents who forbade them to enter the city. In *Shows for Days*, Car ties this phenomenon to race when he remarks that one of the things "killing" Reading is the white community's fear of racial Others. Here, *theatre* becomes metonymic of the lethal mix of racism, crime, and economic decline plaguing all postindustrial cities in crisis; Prometheus thus sounds a warning bell for urban community theatre everywhere. The actual Genesis Theatre Company in Reading still struggles to attract audiences, and the decrepit state of its building at Tenth and Walnut streets does not help. Ironically, that building is the real-life referent of the "new" building that Irene snags triumphantly at the end of *Shows for Days*. Given such adverse circumstances, her ruthless behavior (which includes backstabbing her gay company members by blackmailing their closeted lovers, who are city and state leaders with access to subsidies) seems a mere survival mechanism. Indeed, the middle-class characters in *Shows for Days* confront the same issue as their blue-collar counterparts in *Sweat*: how to rebuild home when the city they love seemingly betrays them at every turn.



Michael Urie, Patti LuPone, Lance Coadie Williams, Dale Soules, and Zoë Winters in *Shows for Days* (2015).
(Photo: Joan Marcus.)



Jordan Dean and Michael Urie in *Shows for Days* (2015). (Photo: Joan Marcus.)



Lance Coadie Williams and Patti LuPone in *Shows for Days* (2015). (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

Appropriately, it was a real-life community theatre project that painted the most promising picture of Reading's potential. In fall 2013 I returned to Reading to research a production of *Ruined* staged

by a new community theatre alliance—Greater Reading Alliance for Community Theaters (GRACT)—that was commemorating Nottage’s presence in the city by performing her most famous play. Community outreach was a major goal of the production, and I soon found myself within a network of big-hearted community organizers. My dad was one of them. People in the community theatre scene were also, as were professors at the local colleges, staff from shelters providing services to distressed residents (such as BWIC—Berks Women in Crisis), business leaders, social workers and psychologists, and an array of people from City Hall. They represented a range of economic statuses and racial identities and regularly held conference calls to hash out their next moves on a spectrum of urban-development projects. These were people who loved Reading wholeheartedly, wanting it to grow and evolve because it *belongs* to them. Such networks exist in cities in crisis everywhere, and perhaps they are the real harbingers of hope. While the future of Reading may still be uncertain, the people I met are doing something right because they genuinely care. It is “how it oughta be.”

David Román, part 3: *Sweat*, 29 August 2015

Sweat, Lynn Nottage’s remarkable new play, was commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s “American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle” program, which plans to commission thirty-seven plays (the same number as the Shakespeare canon) over a ten-year period. Bill Rauch, OSF’s visionary artistic director, created the history cycle as a means for the theatre to explore American history and its politics, especially moments of revolutionary change, in a way similar to Shakespeare during his age. “How could we address the anxieties of our age and create new paths to the future by dramatizing moments of change in our own country’s history?” he asked in *Prologue*, the festival’s magazine for OSF’s members.⁷ Playwrights are invited to explore these themes in whatever capacity they choose as long as they write about a moment of change in US history. *Sweat* is one of seven plays from the cycle to be produced so far by the festival. Each commission is coproduced with another regional theatre working with OSF to ensure that the plays have full-scale productions. So far, theatres such as American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Seattle Rep, Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Berkeley Rep, and Signature Theatre in New York City have been involved with the cycle. Robert Schenkkan’s 2012 play *All the Way*, which considers the political career of President L.B. Johnson and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and that transferred to Broadway in 2014 and won the Tony Award for Best Play, is the OSF’s most commercial and critical success. The festival enables playwrights to imagine as large a cast as necessary and offers financial and practical support throughout the process. *Sweat*, which received its world premiere at Ashland this season, is a co-commission with Washington, D.C.’s Arena Stage, which will produce the play in 2016.

Sweat begins with a split scene between a black parole officer and two young men in their late twenties—one white and one black—who committed a violent crime together eight years ago. It is 2008, an election year, and the place is Reading, Pennsylvania, perhaps the most impoverished place in the United States. The two men, Jason and Chris, worked together at Olstead’s, the main

⁷ Oregon Shakespeare Festival, *Prologue* (fall 2014), 4.

regional manufacturing plant that employed generations of local residents before jobs started to be outsourced to Mexico. Initially an emblem of the cross-racial alliances and the kinship models of the local community, Jason and Chris have taken divergent paths since their crime; Jason now sports white supremacist tattoos on his face, while Chris claims a newfound religious calling. Each is interviewed independently: Jason speaks with more anger and aggression, while Chris speaks with more confusion and remorse. Neither has found a job since leaving prison, a source of tremendous stress in their lives. Some of their anxiety also has to do with the fact that they have not seen each other in years, and while running into each other is an inevitable given where they live, when it happens it does so unexpectedly. We learn nothing of the crime and little of the characters' backstories. The scene ends when Chris, the young black man, with growing suspense, describes to the older black man, his parole officer, his vulnerability in seeing Jason for the first time since returning home. From this short scene one of the play's most striking concerns emerges: how race and class inform the shifting dynamics between and among generations (fig. 6).

Immediately in the following section, however, we are introduced to the scene of the crime and the year it occurred. The setting is the longstanding local tavern, beautifully designed by John Lee Beatty to include historical detail and convey casual comfort. Stan, a middle-aged white man and former employee at the plant until he was injured on the job, manages the place and oversees Oscar, a young Latino barback. The time is January 2000. Each subsequent scene moves the play a month into the future until we arrive at the moment of the violence in October 2000. Nottage populates her play with three middle-aged women—Tracey, Cynthia, and Jessie—who have worked together at the plant for over twenty years; Tracey's and Cynthia's sons, Chris and Jason, respectively; Brucie, Cynthia's ex and Chris's father, who was laid off from a neighboring plant and has since developed a drug habit; and Stan and Oscar from the bar. *Sweat* is a play about labor and the workforce, and about how the decline in the economy, which is to say the effects of poverty, erodes the longstanding bonds of friendship and family. Based on interviews that Nottage and director Kate Whoriskey conducted with residents of Reading, *Sweat* is an ensemble piece that seems most concerned with portraying a lower- to lower-middle-class community and the emotional landscape they mine as they maneuver severe economic changes. Like most of Nottage's plays, *Sweat* invests in the communal ties on display. Her work dramatizes the lives of black people and the social worlds they build in response to racism, oppression, and war. Her characters generally work hard to survive situations that are often brutal or demeaning, and they bond over their shared racial or gendered identities. But unlike her two most recent plays, *Ruined* (2008) and *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark* (2011), *Sweat* departs from a singular racial experience to address cross-racial tensions and alliances. While most of her plays show black women together in struggle, *Sweat* dramatizes a multiracial world that includes people of color, but is not exclusive to them; in fact, Cynthia is the only black woman among the eight characters represented in the play. The color that Nottage wants to foreground in *Sweat* is not black, but blue; *Sweat*, more than any other recent US play, is entirely focused on the lives of blue-collar Americans.



Parole officer Evan (Tyrone Wilson, left) tries to find out from Chris (Tramell Tillman) what happened in *Sweat* (2015). (Photo: Jenny Graham.)

In many ways *Sweat* is an old-fashioned play; it asks its audience to buy into the representation of the world of the play as real, in part through its traditional acting, set, and costume. Given that the play is based, as was *Ruined*, on interviews with people living through the historical circumstances being staged, *Sweat* further promotes this sense of realist authenticity. While we know that the characters are not actually living people—this is not documentary theatre—we are manipulated by all elements of the production to see them as believable. *Sweat* echoes the bar plays of Eugene O’Neill and William Saroyan, where a range of characters share their points of view and experience the bar as an alternative home. The bar patrons, whether they are longstanding regulars as in *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) or a random assortment of walk-ins as in *The Time of Your Life* (1939)—forge meaningful relationships fueled by drinking and a shared space and time. As in these classics of American drama, Nottage presents a primarily working-class community. One major difference, however, is that Nottage emphasizes the dynamics of family relationships as they play out in the public sphere; seemingly private dynamics generally consigned to the domestic sphere find expression at the bar. The people in *Sweat* live together, work together, and drink together. The first bar scene, in fact, is a celebration of Tracey’s fortyfifth birthday, a festive occasion that stages the characters drinking and dancing despite, or perhaps in light of, their seven-in-the-morning shift start. It also presents us early on with the sense that these people, especially the women, are all friends. Whether or not they can remain so as they undergo change becomes one of the dramatic tensions of the play.

Sweat also shares much with Clifford Odets’s 1930s labor dramas, where characters struggle against alienated labor, corporate greed, and moral corruption. As in so many of Odets’s plays, *Sweat* provides various characters the opportunity to mouth off about their increasingly dire situation at work and voice their aspirations for a better life. Nottage’s summoning of the 1930s is

largely devoid of nostalgia, and seems more of a reminder of American drama's long history of addressing issues of labor and class. *Sweat* introduces race and ethnicity into this mix and updates the concerns of these earlier plays to a contemporary setting. The economic recession of the post-Clinton years, deindustrialization, NAFTA and the outsourcing of labor, the prison-industrial complex, racial and ethnic tensions—these recent and contemporary factors all contribute to the world of Nottage's play. Like Odets, and to a lesser extent Saroyan, Nottage is drawn to capturing the particular vernacular speech of her subjects and highlighting its poetics. Here, however, there is no set protagonist whose awakening to political consciousness we are asked to follow, as in *Awake and Sing!* (1935) or *Golden Boy* (1937). Instead, each of the characters in *Sweat* is already aware of their particular class, racial, and even gendered standing, and in the spirit of naturalism, on which *Sweat* builds, they maneuver to change their given situations. The tragedy of the play resides in their failure to improve their lives despite their efforts to do so.

Nottage provides the ensemble with several beautiful set pieces, where characters reflect on an earlier era increasingly lost to them. In these moments her writing is at its most powerful and evocative and the production's strength most apparent. In perhaps the most moving of these scenes, Jessie is at the bar celebrating her birthday—all three women celebrate their birthdays at some point in the play—and begins to reminisce. Like most of her coworkers she had no idea she would be working her entire life at Olstead's; she had planned to work at the plant for a few months then leave with her boyfriend to Alaska. The younger men, Chris and Jason, egg her on to explain what happened (fig. 7):

Jessie: That was so long ago. We were gonna do Alaska, camp, live clean, you know, save enough money to get to India. Live in an ashram for a while, then bum along the hippie trail. Istanbul, Tehran, Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar, Lahore, Kathmandu. Places. Still remember 'em all. I used to say 'em every night like a mantra, a prayer . . .

Jason: What happened?

Jessie: Started working, met Dan, I guess I got caught in the riptide, couldn't get back to shore. That's how it is.

Chris: You ever sorry?

A moment. The weight of the questions overwhelms Jessie.

Jessie: I guess, I wish, I had gotten to see the world. You know, left Berks, if only for a year. That's what I regret. Not the work, I regret the fact that for a little while it seemed like, I don't know, there was possibility. I think about that Jessie on the other side of the world and what she woulda seen.

Tears. Her words resonate for all of them.

Jessie: Whoa, I'm sorry. I didn't see that coming.

Stan: Look, I got to see a little of the world after 'Nam. Shit follows you everywhere. In some ways you're better off not knowing.

Jessie: Yeah? You don't know, until you wanna know, right? And then it's too late. Istanbul, Tehran, Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar, Lahore, Kathmandu. (73–75)



At her forty-fifth birthday celebration, Jessie (K. T. Vogt) recalls her plan to see the world with bartender Stan (Jack Willis) and Oscar (Carlo Albán) in *Sweat* (2015). (Photo: Jenny Graham.)

This short set piece on “the hippie trail” is the primary information we get about Jessie’s backstory. Nottage mines Jessie’s past in order to provide her audiences with a sense of what is at stake for the character now. It is a seemingly throwaway moment: people are sitting at the bar waiting for Tracey to arrive for the party, and the actual dramatic tension is about Tracey’s lateness. And yet, in the meantime, Nottage creates another current of emotional tension as Jessie quietly and tenderly remembers a time when “there was possibility.” For her at least, that moment has passed.

The play benefited from the direction of Whoriskey, who never embellished a scene and always directed her actors to highlight Nottage’s words. The OSF’s production was a showcase for the playwright and the ensemble. In one striking encounter, Tracey, the middle-aged white woman, argues with Oscar, the young Latino barback, about the politics of the plant and her sense of entitlement to her job. Oscar plans to apply for a position at Olstead’s, which is recruiting Latinos for lower-paying nonunion jobs. Tracey’s racist tendencies are initially subtle, underscored as micro-aggressions: first about Cynthia, her best friend, who she presumes was promoted because she is black; and second to Oscar, who she assumes is not American born. And yet, despite Tracey’s biases she remains, to a degree, sympathetic. Nottage’s characters are never one-

dimensional; she creates moments for characters to reveal the power dynamics inherent in their relations. For example:

Tracey: You know how long I been working at the plant? Forget it. . . . Never mind, it's not important. . . . But I know the floor as good as Cynthia. I do. You wanna know the truth, the only reason I didn't get the job is because Butz tried to fuck me and I wouldn't let him, and he told everyone in management that I'm unstable.

Oscar: That's some shit.

Tracey: Yeah, it sucks. . . . And I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudice [*sic*], but that how things are going these days. I got eyes. They get tax breaks or something.

Oscar: I don't know about that.

Tracey: It's a fact. That's how things are going. And I'm not prejudice [*sic*], I say, you are who you are, you know? I'm cool with everyone. But I mean . . . C'mon . . . you guys coming over here, you can get a job faster than—

Oscar: I was born here.

Tracey: Still, you wasn't born here, Berks.

Oscar: Yeah, I was.

Tracey: Yeah? Well my family's been here since the '20s, okay? They built the house I live in. They built this town. (64–65)

Tracey continues to defend her position by summoning an era when “if you worked with your hands, people respected you for it.” That has all changed, she argues. Oscar represents the changes that Tracey resists, and that she and the others will go to great lengths to oppose. This scene will serve as a turning point in the play, as Oscar decides to pursue a nonunion job at the plant. The others see him as a scab and a traitor. Tracey's initial micro-aggressions escalate into full-throated hate speech later in the play, once Oscar starts working at the plant. I will not give away the ending here, but suffice it to say that the play erupts in a terrible display of white rage. The multiracial working-class community regularly meeting at the tavern is unable to sustain the sense of community they have built for one another over time. The economic stakes are too high, especially as characters are pitted against one another for jobs and promotions. The violence that ensues is as much inflected by anti-immigrant sentiment as it is by white entitlement and the frustration that white working-class people have toward the loss of their jobs. Tracey's decline into racist aggression is embedded in this economic context, and although Nottage does not by any means endorse it, she ensures that her audiences understand it. The play is anything but polemical and thoroughly open to having audience members pass their own judgments on the characters and their situation.

The OSF's superb production of *Sweat* insisted that the loss of employment and the fear of poverty are tragic. The play asks us to consider what constitutes a livable life when there are no jobs. The desperation of those most vulnerable to lose the most leads to a violence that seems inevitable. And yet, the play ends in a surprisingly satisfying moment that returns us to its initial temporal

frame, eight years after that violent crime. I did not anticipate finding any comforting resolution to this tragedy given its dismal reality, but the ending of the play was effective in its tone and commentary. Without disavowing the tragic events that have shaped her play, Nottage leaves her audience with a small glance into the potential for social transformation. It took a lot of sweat to get there, but in the end it pays off.