

A LAND OF DESPAIR AND CHANGE: LANDSCAPES OF WEALTH AND POVERTY IN SELECTED PLAYS OF NAOMI WALLACE

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When you return to the place you're from, it remembers you. The landscape remembers you (Bell 112).

For Naomi, it has to do with making the body—for which read 'class'—burst its bounds. Now here's the catch: it's all in the name of change, hope, possibility (Daniels, qtd. in Gornick 31).

Writing for the theatre is at its best an act of transgression—and as teachers of playwrights, we should encourage our students to step over the line, redraw the line, erase the line, even multiply the lines so that we sit up, step forward, strike out (Wallace, *On Writing as Transgression* 1).

KEYWORDS

Naomi Wallace; *The War Boys*; Utopianism; *Slaughter City*; *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*; Romanticism; *Things of Dry Hours*; *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*

PALABRAS CLAVE

Naomi Wallace; *The War Boys*; visiones utópicas; *Slaughter City*; *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*; romanticismo; *Things of Dry Hours*; *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*

ABSTRACT

“A Land of Despair and Change: Landscapes of Wealth and Poverty in Selected Plays of Naomi Wallace” examines Wallace’s use of a utopian dramaturgy to articulate the desire for a better future throughout her plays. The plays I examine are *The War Boys*, *Slaughter City*, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, and *Things of Dry Hours*. While the despair and poverty of body and spirit in Wallace’s plays has received critical attention, I argue in my essay that Wallace’s plays also contain a utopian spirit of change and hope that has not been critically examined. It is the passion and intensity, even romanticism, of this hope that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday and leads to final scenes of salvation in Wallace’s plays. By illuminating these moments of utopic romanticism, Wallace reveals political and social possibilities for change.

RESUMEN

“A Land of Despair and Change: Landscapes of Wealth and Poverty in Selected Plays of Naomi Wallace” analiza el empleo de Wallace de una dramaturgia utópica para articular el deseo de un futuro mejor en toda su obra. Las obras que estudio son *The War Boys*, *Slaughter City*, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, y *Things of Dry Hours*. Aunque la desesperación y la pobreza de cuerpo y espíritu en las obras de Wallace ha recibido atención crítica, en mi ensayo argumento que las obras de Wallace también contienen un espíritu utópico de cambio y esperanza que no ha sido analizado por la crítica. Es la pasión y la intensidad, incluso el romanticismo, de esta esperanza lo que niega el carácter lóbrego de lo mundano y lo cotidiano, y lleva a escenas finales de salvación en las obras de Wallace. Al iluminar estos momentos de romanticismo utópico, Wallace revela posibilidades de cambio políticas y sociales.

A wood cabin in Alabama in the early 1930s, the Texas/Mexico border in the 1990s, an anonymous American city in 1936, and an unidentified slaughterhouse/industrial complex somewhere in the contemporary American heartland: All of these physical landscapes of the United States are reflected in the plays of American playwright Naomi Wallace. But Wallace’s varied landscapes are not just of physical space, but reflect her concerns with materiality, embodied inequalities, and economic disparities all over the world. Within these explorations of the blurred boundaries of place, Wallace uses a highly theatrical, historically informed dramaturgy and a fiercely lyrical language style to excoriate and eviscerate gender, class, race, and economic/political inequities and assumptions that exist in the contemporary world. In this essay, I will focus on four American-located plays—*The War Boys* (1993), *Slaughter City* (1996), *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998), and *Things of Dry Hours* (2007)—that are geographically situated and historically rooted in the US and illuminate critical fault lines in wealth and poverty in American culture and identity. By examining these cracks and fissures in American history, Wallace explores socioeconomic issues and, in the words of *One Flea Spare*, “sticks her fingers in” to viscerally explore the landscape (Wallace 53). More importantly, I seek to illuminate

how Wallace articulates the desire for a better future, as well as the possibilities of change and hope, throughout her plays. While the despair and poverty of body and spirit, readily apparent in her plays, has received critical attention, I argue that Wallace's plays also contain a utopian spirit of change and hope.

Wallace identifies as a socialist and political writer and her feminist dramaturgy has been examined by scholars including Shannon Baley, Alexis Greene, Claudia Barnett, and Kim Solga. Baley especially delineates a connection between feminist performance, utopian performance, and Brechtian *gestus*, and a feminist dramaturgy in Wallace's *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*. I am indebted to her work. These and other scholars have argued that Wallace writes about space from the perspective of Marxism and historical materialism and usually features contested, historical, and even ruined, spaces. Her dramaturgy is also Brechtian as she uses *gestus* frequently in her plays, even in stage directions, which are deliberately vague, with just enough detail to give some context of an American city or town. Wallace's language, however, reveals a specificity of place and time that might be perceptible only to American ears. The dialects of her characters clearly define an American landscape of the US South. Her plays are known for an anti-realistic style, in keeping with her Marxist and American feminist style. She is also concerned with the primacy of the community and communal good over the individual. Wallace has said that she is interested in the "citizen's place in the political world" and is "committed to exploring cross-social, cross-cultural relationships" in her work (Bell 111).

For this essay, Jill Dolan's "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,'" is a useful lens through which to examine Wallace's ultimately hopeful aspirations for change and growth. Dolan theorizes theatre as a place where "perhaps desire to attend theatre and performance is to reach for something better." She argues that theatrical performances offer spaces "for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other" (455). Dolan, as a critic, theorist, and audience-goer allows for a space where the political combines with the emotional to move us, not just to *identify* with the other, but to *become* the other. Naomi Wallace takes us to those spaces, those dystopian cracks and fissures in history where we experience horror and chaos; her characters, however, have a great capacity for desire, for a glimpse of something greater, where they, and we, can envision a taste of a better world. As Wallace has observed, "desire, that's really what I'm talking about. I don't mean love. I'm not sure I know what that means. Desire serves the need to end one's singular state. It creates the space in which to reimagine oneself. That alone ends loneliness" (Gornick 30).

Dolan quotes political scientist Lyman Sargent in constructing her argument: "Utopian thought construed more widely . . . is not restricted to fiction and includes visionary writings united by their willingness to envision a dramatically different form of society" (qtd. in Dolan 457). It is this vision, this glimpse, of a better world

that draws me into Wallace's work. All of the plays I examine in this essay contain these glimpses into a future of utopian possibilities.

As Vivian Gornick relates, sensuality, the cruelty of politics, the politically inscribed body, and the hope of redemption are crucial in Wallace's plays (31). Again, Dolan's writings on the utopian performative inform my argument, as she argues that "utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings" and that utopianism is "contained in the feelings it embodies" (Dolan 459). All of the characters in Wallace's plays that I examine contain a dual embodiment. They embody the cruelty and misuse of others found in a post-modern society, but I argue that they also embody an affective hope for change.

Lastly, and most intriguingly for my purpose, Dolan argues, quite passionately, for the presence of the affective address of romanticism in utopian performance. She argues that:

its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and every day. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and our experiential capacities—not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life. This intense, utopic romanticism is what creates those moments of magic and communion in performance (Dolan 471).

Furthermore, I am quite intrigued by what Dolan calls "the politically progressive possibilities of romanticism in performance" (Dolan 472). In this essay, I hope to illuminate some of these possibilities that Wallace presents in her work.

Many of these utopic elements are found in her early play, *The War Boys*. In this play, Wallace is already exploring the contested area of racial identity and belonging, the casual cruelty of privilege and class distinctions, and the sensuality and centrality of the body in gender and power relationships. For Wallace, *War Boys* represents a space where a border is literally represented and where boundaries of identity are constantly being broken and reformed. Three young men, all in their early twenties, are "hanging out," on an imagined "citizen's patrol" on the contested US border with Mexico. David is the white, college-educated son of privilege. Greg is working-class and a high-school dropout, and while bi-racial (white father, Mexican mother), he questions his identification as Mexican-American. George is a white "home boy," part of a lower class that in many ways is opposite to David, but also to Greg. Identity boundaries blur for these young men: while David and George are both white, they belong to very different class hierarchies. Wallace is exploring the historical fissure of the "melting pot" mythology of America, which has always been fractured as new Americans grapple with their evolving identities.

The play takes place on a deliberately bare set where a barbed wire fence, a visual metaphor for the American West and its mythology, is minimally represented, meant to suggest a border. In the guise of a "game," using their spotlights to focus on phantom migrants illegally crossing the border, Wallace takes the three young

men on an American journey of approaching manhood. During their “game,” the boys act out a casual cruelty with physically violent actions, including slapping each other across the face, seeing which one can last the longest before falling over. They tell monologues of stories that may be true or may be imagined. The violence of these young men is not limited to each other. They target the imagined migrants, or the “other,” as they attempt to cross the border. They act out a scenario of what they would do to a “phantom” Chicana coming across the border. The boys are in constant flux as they identify first with one character, then switch allegiance to the other as they act out their games. During these games, the war boys verbally assault each other to expose vulnerabilities. The uneducated, lower-class white male character, George, quickly falls out of the power hierarchy as real conflict begins to develop between David and Greg. By the end of the play, the games have become truly violent as George and David combine forces to physically attack Greg. Greg has the last monologue of the play, a chilling story of class, privilege, sexual awakening, family identity and confusion, and American identity, told through acts of violence (Wallace, *The War Boys* 47-55).

Wallace finds an appropriate male voice for these characters as she describes this male experience linking violence and sadism to sex, race, wealth and privilege. Dominick Dromgoole, artistic director of England’s Bush Theatre and director of *In the Heart of America*, sees this as a strength, as he argues that Wallace “presents male violence and aggression without proselytizing about it, but baldly, as it is, with enthusiasm” (Barnett 156). In Wallace’s poem, *Preparing for War*, published the same year as *The War Boys*, she uses the metaphor of a young man preparing for a drag race, linking young male activities such as car-racing, to a type of pre-war conditioning for the violence of war (127).

In this early play, Wallace is already using Brechtian *gestus* and alienation to distance the characters to transpose sexual violence. The acts of transgressive and sexualized violence in the play push at the boundaries of class and ethnic identity as the boys act out both victim and victimizer. To use Dolan’s terminology, they *become* the “other.” In one early example, the boys use each other’s bodies to act out physical and sexual violence, as in this monologue by David:

She was my friend. (*Takes off britches, lays them out. The shape of a person is now laid out on the floor.*) Now, which one is me? This one? (*to self*) or that one? (*To suit on floor*) Or is that old Sis lying there? (*Beat*) Sis and I were from an aspiring middle class neighborhood. Even as kids we were smart enough to keep our eyes on the next rung of the ladder. (*While David tells the following, George crawls into David’s space, climbs onto the clothes and does push-ups over them [. . .], George flips over on his back and is motionless. David stands over him [. . .] kneels over George’s body. George is lifeless.*) (*War* 26-27)

As David describes the sexual assault on his sister, in both his and his sister's voices, George remains motionless, even when David provides George with a *gestic* kick "hard in the side" as he describes the act of penetration. At some point in the dialogue, George moves out of David's "show" leaving David alone to finish his story (26-27).

The last episode centers on both a landscape of confused identity and sexualized violence in the family as Greg tells his last story. Greg is the pivotal character in the play. He desires and dreams of a middle-class utopian "upward mobility," yet he questions his racial and cultural identity, especially in the final monologue. Is he Mexicano or WASP? American or Mexican? Out of this fissure of identity, comes the violent resolution of the play. The physical violence that has been threatening finally explodes. What begins as a story of sexual awakening becomes a tale of sadistic sexual torture. Once again, Wallace dramatizes it by transposing the violence onto the boys' bodies. In Greg's final monologue, he uses David's body to illustrate the violence done to Evalina, the female character in Greg's story. Later in the scene, when he acts out the scenario of his parents' domestic violence, he uses David's hand into illustrate how his mother hit him. In both of these sexually violent scenarios, Wallace gives clear stage directions that the dialogue is delivered with no "affectations" or "emotion" (50).

In *The War Boys*, Wallace literally stages a landscape of "crossing borders" in the formation of contemporary American male identity. Wallace uses violence, played out against the body in a series of role-playing scenarios, to explore the American male psyche's interplay with the constructs of class, race, sex, and privilege. Yet, even in this early play, Wallace plants a seed of change that offers hope and possibility. As the play draws to a close, Greg, on the verge of the ultimate gesture, shooting David, chooses not to perform that final *gestic* act. Greg explains, in Spanish, that he no longer wants the violence, the "fighting" that has been going on. Greg rejects American culture and attempts to give its symbol, the "Made in the USA" gun, back to David as he says "you can have it back." David refuses to accept it and Greg drops the gun at his feet. He leaves the stage as the stage goes to black. In this rejection of violence, Wallace opens a fissure where change can occur. In this final, *gestic* act of dropping the gun and leaving the stage, Wallace offers a romantic possibility of change. One person, in one act, can make a difference.

In *Slaughter City* (1996), Wallace demonstrates a more focused use of Brechtian technique to expose the gendered assumptions, racist attitudes, and spiritually-poor lives of the working class and the landscape of American commercialized production factories, as well as the almost casual cruelty and hypocritical corruption of those in power. As historical context, Wallace is using the American journalist Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle*, an expose of the horrendous social, working, and physical conditions in the Chicago meatpacking district, as a framework for the play. Wallace is also using a local incident which occurred during her childhood in Kentucky. A 1992 strike at the local Fischer Meat Packing Company plant left many

of her friends and neighbors out of work. She talks of witnessing the economic and emotional consequences of that strike and talking to strikers on the picket line at the plant (Barnett 154).

In this play, Wallace transgresses gender and sexual boundaries as well as racial boundaries. By the use of these devices, Wallace changes the boundaries of what is possible to reveal the corruption at the heart of the human relationships in the play. Each scene examines dehumanizing aspects of the factory culture: dangerous work conditions, low union wages, sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace, racial assumptions and expectations, and corporate mismanagement and greed. Wallace has developed a more detached, distanced writing style from *The War Boys*. She is still using language, history, and Brechtian distancing devices to dramatize American culture, yet her use of language is richer and more lyrical. In this play, Wallace begins to manipulate time to make the events in the slaughterhouse not just representative of one day, but representative of a whole history of labor in microcosm.

In an anonymous Slaughter City, USA, in the late twentieth century, four workers in a meat-packing plant go about their daily duties in a landscape of hell as Wallace depicts a dehumanizing story of exploited labor. Maggot, Roach, Cod, and Brandon are workers, while Tuck is a supervisor and Baquin is the company manager. The landscape of the stage is divided into two main sections, the slaughterhouse work floor and the office area. Tuck, the supervisor, bridges the gap between these two areas, as well as bridging the gap between the poorly paid union workers and the much better paid manager, Baquin. In *Slaughter City*, the dehumanizing degradation of the body is analogous to the production of meat for public consumption. Wallace delineates the poverty of spirit and body found in the profit-driven myopia and greed of capitalistic management of the factory and its graceless, soulless effect on human beings. She makes an explicit connection between labor exploitation and sexual exploitation by exposing the gendered assumptions of factory work and the physical assaults on women's bodies in this environment. In one scene exemplifying this theme, Wallace stages it as a violent, *gestic* displacement of gender and sexual touch. Cod, a recent immigrant to the US, is encouraging the other workers to go on strike. Brandon, a young man on leave from college who is angry for having been passed over for promotion to management, challenges Cod. As in *The War Boys*, Wallace has the characters act out a scenario. Brandon turns on Cod and begins to verbally and physically assault him. While this is occurring, the two female workers, Maggot and Roach, are "mesmerized. They are watching themselves in Cod." Wallace's stage directions are just as important as the dialogue in this scene: "He runs the knife up and down Cod's body, sensually [. . .] He knocks Cod down [. . .] He hits Cod [. . .]" (*Slaughter City* 226-227). Wallace physicalizes a representation of gender and sexual violence in the workplace.

Cod also problematizes gender as a character whose gender placement is unclear. What the audience doesn't know yet is that Cod is a cross-dressed "ghost" character. By presenting this cross-dressed character, Wallace displaces gender as she reveals the need for a female worker to hide her gender in a place where the female body attracts ridicule and abuse. Wallace addresses the imbalance of gendered power dynamics by having Cod explain to Sausage Man why she dresses as a man: "This garb? You think I'd have had a chance in hell of catching their attention—of catching anyone's attention in the last fifteen decades—if I hadn't worn this garb" (241)? Wallace dramatizes the gender inscribed body that women have manipulated many times throughout US history to transgress social and gender boundaries and about which many scholars have written. Bonnie Tsui, in her book, *She Went to the Field: Women Soldiers of the Civil War*, has chronicled women who masked as military men during the American Civil War and convincingly argued that they did so to escape detection in a traditional male environment (243). To travel or work in a female body invites harassment and violation. Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, in *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage*, has convincingly argued that cross-dressed performers were able to subvert hegemonic institutions and categories. While her study is confined to stage performers, her point is valid: when women wear men's clothing, they "threaten both the status quo, by questioning the legitimacy of social asymmetry (. . .), and the institutions that perpetuated such separate spheres" (11-12). Cod is a threat to the company and, as a result, invites violence.

The play's landscape of industrial violence and abuses by those in power against women is even more cruelly depicted in a later scene in the manager's office. Under the guise of corporate ownership of their uniforms, he orders the female workers Maggot and Roach to remove their uniforms. Wallace exposes not just the cruelty, but also the voyeurism and exploitation of these women, as the manager humiliates them. This brutal scene also opens a crack through which to view the double dehumanization of race and gender in the industrial workplace, as the manager humiliates Tuck, the African-American supervisor, by forcing him to assist in the physical act of "cleansing" the women, especially the African-American female character, Roach.

Wallace's vivid use of language reveals the cracks and fissures in American racial and immigrant history as Tuck makes clear in a monologue to Cod:

Did you know you were once thought of as a nigger? Now don't take offense. I know white folks don't like being called nigger. It gets them confused [. . .] When you Irishmen came over here in the 1800s, after that British potato problem, you were called a dark race, low-browed and savage. Oh, yeah. You were more feared than us blacks. You were the Celtic Beast, and you chased the women and raped the chickens. That's a fact. You lived side by side with us in the slums. Chums we were, you and me. Chummed up and slumming it together. Then you were given a raise. That raise

was the right to call us “nigger” and the right not to be called a “nigger” yourself. So you see, whiteness don’t have to be a color. It can be a wage. (213)

Race has often been used in American industry to divide and conquer labor. In the US South, textile mill owners and operators used racial fears to keep unions out of the workplace. In the Midwest and North, factory owners used nativist versus immigrant status, as well as race, to create discord among those factions in the labor force (Roediger 18).

In addition, Wallace is now clearly incorporating a technique of non-linear time in *Slaughter City*. She describes the play in early stage directions as occurring in “now and then” stages of time. Claudia Barnett has argued that Wallace amplifies Julia Kristeva’s theory of time as a “continuum in which the same situations and similar people exist” (155). Wallace herself says that, for her, “the past informs the present” in her work and that “the theatre is the only place where (. . .) the past, the present, or the future, can be in the same moment” (Baker 202, 206). She has said she uses this strategy because to “embody the past on stage, one needs to get to it through the *body*” (Baker 207) (*italics mine*). In *Slaughter City*, this is especially present in the characters and bodies of Cod, Sausage Man, and the young anonymous textile worker. Sausage Man and Cod seem to inhabit a type of liminal twilight, capable of appearing in the past and the present. Moreover, Cod role-plays gender and materialism that pervades the American industrial workplace.

While the prologue is bleak, Wallace provides an opportunity for transformation and a utopian as s/he travels through time, endlessly playing out a catastrophic history of chaos, violence, and exploitation of labor throughout the industrial age. The young, female textile worker only appears with Cod and is a figure from the past, a very specific past. This doomed “ghost worker” is based on a true incident, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan, New York in 1911, and Wallace uses this character as a reference to that event (*Triangle*).

Cod and Textile Worker’s scenes bracket the play as they weave their ghostly tale. By using this early twentieth-century storyline to serve as prologue and epilogue in the play, Wallace gives us hope that there is, in the words of Cod, “another way. What if, over time, all this friction, all this fire, began to burn a hole in your [Sausage Man’s] playground? Then we’d just walk through that hole to the other side. And from the stink and wreckage of your death, we’d build something new” (Wallace, *Slaughter* 241). Wallace projects a desire to change the poverty of spirit possibility of building something better in the last scene of the play. Cod calls for action as she cries “we have to do something” and brings herself to yell “fire,” alerting the workers to the present factory fire. In stage directions, Wallace writes that “Cod has located herself. She shouts out, as though she were already somewhere else, as though her voice were crossing a great distance of time and place [. . .].” Cod gives us the warning that it is not too late to change, to know that we can affect the next generation to come and that the workers of the world “will never die” (241).

The last scene of the play depicts Maggot and Roach rushing in, “having heard Cod’s shout of warning,” and fighting the fire. Wallace once again cracks open a space where chaos, catastrophe, and dystopia can be stopped. By reaching out to the community of workers, Cod bridges the past and present into the utopian hope of the future as the play closes with the workers fighting the fire.

The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek (1998) was Wallace’s first play actually staged in her native country (Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival). Again, Wallace uses a story told by a childhood friend in Kentucky of a local boy who was killed trying to outrun a train on a bridge crossing or trestle (Barnett 154). Set in 1936, in the heart of the Great American Depression, the play paints a devastating portrait of a family lost within the grips of an economic meltdown not of their creation. The parents, Gin and Dray Chance, are struggling to keep their marriage and family intact and healthy. The father has lost his factory job and occupies the house in silence, threatening to explode in violence at any attempt at intimacy by his wife. The mother struggles to hold her family together in face of unemployment and hard times by working at a factory. In addition, the family is in crisis because their 15-year-old son, Dalton, is in jail being charged with the murder of a 17-year-old girl, Pace Creagan. The teenagers were playing chicken, or racing against a train, and Pace didn’t make it across and was hit by the train. The authorities have jailed Dalton while they investigate what really happened.

In *Trestle*, as in the earlier *Slaughter City*, Wallace again displays a dramaturgical use of shifting time as the stage landscape transitions between past and present actions, suggesting that there are no distinctions between these time categories. The play begins in the present with Dalton in jail, but quickly transitions to a landscape of the past where Dalton and Pace, teenagers “hanging out” at the trestle, talk of courage and outrunning trains, but their dialogue contains an underlying subtext of teenage sexual yearning and desire. The play oscillates in time between the jail cell, the trestle, and the Chance home. The boundaries of stage space and landscape shift as the jail cell and the Chance home serve as metaphors for the social and political oppression and stagnation imprisoning Dalton and his family. The trestle, however, is the place where Dalton and Pace are free and the landscape, while threatening in its wildness and power, presents a wealth of freedoms to be discovered.

The parents inhabit a landscape of emotional and material poverty. The mother, Gin, works in a factory putting radium on watches. Wallace uses this true historical detail to once again illustrate the dangerous working conditions, especially for women, in US factories. One infamous story, chronicled by Claudia Clark in *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910-1935*, concerned women throughout the US who were poisoned by radium while working in World War I era factories. Groups of female factory workers contracted radiation poisoning from painting watch dials with glow-in-the-dark paint at the United States Radium factory in Orange, New Jersey around 1917. The women, who had been told the paint was harmless, ingested deadly amounts of radium by licking their paintbrushes

to sharpen them; some also painted their fingernails with the glowing substance. Five of the women challenged their employer in a court case. That landmark case established the right of individual workers who contract occupational diseases to sue their employers (110, 152, 173).¹⁴ Wallace includes a scene in the play that dramatizes this phenomenon. In the dark before the scene begins, we see only two blue hands as they move about in the dark. When the lights go up, it is Gin who has the blue hands (Wallace, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* 40-41).

Wallace's focus on the used-up body is reflected in the characters of Gin and Dray. Dray is so destroyed and his identity as "breadwinner" for the family is so devastated that he is incapable of making or accepting any physically intimate gesture from his wife. Wallace explains her interest in this phenomenon and its effect on utopian and sexual desire:

Some labor destroys the body. What happens in the workplace affects every aspect of the rest of our lives. If your hands are damaged, it doesn't just mean that you can no longer work and earn a living. It also means that you will no longer be able to touch someone you love. If your body is destroyed and exhausted, then how can you desire? Capitalism is very good at plundering the sensual wealth of the body (Gardner 5).

The only physical action of the play that makes Dray come alive is tossing the dishes back and forth with Gin. This landscape of dish tossing is not just a Marxist riff on materialism, as argued by Gornick and others, but a sad realization that for Dray and Gin, this is the only way for intimacy, a displaced form of touching. This *gestic* act suggests a poverty of marital intimacy in the play as the stress and emotional deadening of these two once vibrant and sexually alive people lead to an emotional and physical distance between them. The detached tossing back and forth of these material objects, and Dray's sudden desire to connect with Gin, posit a landscape where the materiality of objects substitutes for real intimacy. Wallace makes clear in this scene that the struggle for a material existence leads to a poverty of emotion as marital intimacy is frequently a casualty of unemployment as well as labor exploitation (Gornick 31).

Wallace sees hope in the sexual yearning and excitement that Pace and Dalton experience that results not just in sexual release, but in a release from the constrained local economy and environment that has locked in the previous generation of Dalton's parents. Playing chicken with the train ultimately becomes a metaphor for dodging this sexual awakening. In the early scenes between Dalton and Pace at the trestle, Wallace again challenges sexual and gender expectations as she has Dalton say to Pace, "you don't talk like a girl. Should" (4). Dalton calls attention to Pace's sexual and gender subversion and it is this subversive act that offers freedom and sexual awakening for Dalton. In these tentative steps toward sexual yearning and desire, it is Pace who displaces gender by using the metaphors of mounting

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupational_disease

sexual desire and tension, in the guise of preparing to run the train: “We won’t do it tonight, okay. We’ll work up to it. Tonight we’ll just watch her pass. Take her measure. Check her steam. Make sure we got it down. Then when we’re ready, we’ll run her. It’ll be a snap” (8).

The last scene of the play, with Pace and Dalton, once again at the trestle, combines past, present, and an imagined future as Wallace dramatizes a utopian vision of Dalton and Pace “consummating” their relationship, not through a realistic coupling, but through a transgressive role-playing of both gender and sexual assumptions and expectations. The scene uses a now familiar Wallace dramaturgical device of sexual displacement to illustrate a healing integration of the two characters. This Brechtian distancing device allows no touching for Pace and Dalton. Unlike *The War Boys*, however, this sexual acting out is not violent but tender and poignant as Pace spreads out her dress and tells Dalton to lie down on it as she “instructs” him on how to “make something happen.” Female sexual pleasure is displaced into Dalton as he feels the sexual release and energy no longer allowed to the dead Pace. While Wallace, the playwright, does not allow the physical gesture of the characters touching each other, Dalton touches himself as Pace would experience it and in this sexual transgression, the audience is complicit as they gaze on it. As Dalton and Pace switch sexual roles, they enter into a new place, a new landscape of hope and possibility, and even a new identity. As Pace relates in the closing lines: “There. We’re something else now. You see? We’re in another place.”

The closing of the play, however, still belongs to a series of embodied, utopic gestures. As Pace goes to blow out the candle, Dalton “makes a slight movement, as though touching his mouth. Then he raises his arms, as though welcoming her vision. Pace blows out the candle; at the same moment Dalton seems to do the same.” These gestures are positive, as literally, Dalton reaches out with his arms, “as though welcoming her vision” (*Trestle* 66-68). This moment of *gestus* is the fissure in this localized history that allows hope. Similarly to *The War Boys*, Wallace allows the young people to posit a utopian yearning for a better life. Dalton is a teenager with no hopes in his hometown, who longs to escape to a better, larger world, a familiar complaint from young people not just in the US but all over the world. Dalton has nothing to aspire to but dead-end and dangerous factory jobs, like his mother, or chronic unemployment, like his father. Intimacy of self and sexual pleasure offers another glimpse of hope from Wallace. The son is ultimately released from jail and, hopefully, can break out of his stifled existence and find a new vision for his life, an escape from poverty, both spiritual and material. Dalton’s gesture of reaching out, of desiring and yearning for Pace’s vision, offers an embodied, utopian hope for the future.

The last play, *Things of Dry Hours* (2007), is set in Birmingham, Alabama, the heart of the old Confederacy, in the early 1930s. Once again, Wallace uses the landscape of the Depression as a setting. It takes place in the humble wooden cabin of the African-American Tice Hogan and his widowed daughter, Cali. Hogan has

just been laid off from the local steelworks factory, a branch of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company and is a member of the Alabama chapter of the Communist Party. His daughter works as a laundress for affluent white families in the town. Corbin Teel, a lower-class, uneducated white laborer, enters the space of the Hogan family cabin, asking for shelter and protection. Teel, it turns out, has been blackmailed and sent as a spy by those in economic and political power. The play records what happens during the time Teel spends with the Hogans.

Wallace dramatizes a landscape of politicized tension with undercurrents of sexuality and economic inequities. While materially poor, father and daughter enjoy some creature comforts. Tice's reading material consists of the Bible and Engel and Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, and they have simple food, and wood for fire and warmth. Teel, however, has nothing; indeed, has been cast out by other whites and has nothing but the ragged clothes on his back. Both the Hogans and Teel, however, suffer from different types of spiritual poverty. Tice and Cali are isolated from not only whites, but from fellow blacks. Teel is uneducated and has been dehumanized and reduced to the point of just surviving on his meager wits.

Within this landscape of poverty and wealth, Wallace explores the idea of racialized white privilege as well as black disenfranchisement. Is Teel really the privileged one? While his skin color would make him privileged in 1930s Alabama, his lack of education and lower social class continues to lower his privileged space while in the cabin. The play tracks the continued upheavals in social, racial, and sexual place and privilege during the time Teel is with the Hogans.

Wallace is once again exploring how the loss of a job and material culture can lead to demeaning, dehumanizing acts and events. Teel eventually reveals that he has killed a foreman at the Tennessee Coal and Iron factory and has lost his job. Instead of charging him with the crime, however, the company has blackmailed him to find Hogan and extract the names of members of the local Communist Party. Teel believes his very life is at stake and rejects the possibility of redemption offered by Hogan.

As in earlier plays, Wallace enters into the consciousness of the "other." Her language is in tune with Southern rhythms and captures the poetry of American vernacular speech. Wallace's use of history is also evident in *Things of Dry Hours* as she explores the history of the Communist Party in Alabama in the 1930s. This is a history that is very different from the history of the Party in the Northern part of the US, more rural than urban, more Christian than Jewish, more working class than intellectual, poorer, blacker, less-educated, more displaced, and consisting of "poor" whites mixing with blacks, a strong taboo in that time and place. Tice is more interested in the Communist Party as a venue for black advancement and social change over the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) because of its Marxist ideology of redistribution of material wealth. Tice criticizes them for being too middle class when he says they are "nice people, but nice people aren't poor people" (Wallace, *Things of Dry Hours* 38-39).

Wallace continues her exploration of using ghost characters to connect the past, present, and even the future and using those characters to interact with people in all time periods. In *Dry Hours*, the character is Tice. Tice begins the play outside the primary stage area, with a monologue about a journey, while describing the physical and political landscape of the play. He changes his clothes and only then comes into the cabin. What the audience may suspect, but doesn't know, is that Tice is a ghost. The play is his memory of events.

In *Things of Dry Hours*, Wallace explicitly explores religion and spirituality for the first time. A strong undercurrent of religious and spiritual conflict between father and daughter is apparent in the play. Historically, in America, African-Americans have found strength and ammunition for social justice, as well as personal solace, in Christianity and the Bible. For Tice, however, Communism and Christianity appeal to his sense of social justice. While Tice attends church, sings in the choir, and teaches Sunday School, the social and material aspects of Communist ideology also appeal to him. Tice reads the Bible and the *Communist Manifesto*, faithfully attends Communist Party meetings, and takes inspiration from both sources.

Cali, however, denigrates all of it. She has a poverty of spirit as she believes in nothing. She is "dry," devoid of passion, bitter, angry, and cynical. Cali is widowed and, in her dialogue, describes the marriage as unhappy. Cali rebels against her father who wants her to remarry. She shows her disillusionment with marriage when she says:

My husband's eyes were not open in his grave. They were closed when he lived and closed when he died. He never could bear to look at me. I mean, really look at me.

You ever have a hand touch you like it was touchin' a table, or reachin' for a bowl of soup? Then you'd know me (13).

Cali has endured a poverty of marital love and desire and she is not interested in marrying again. This would have been considered a subversive act for many women in the 1930s America. Women were expected to get married; especially poor women who "needed a man to earn a living." Teel awakens desire in Cali as she is sexually attracted to Teel and is changed by her encounter with Teel. She now desires a different life as she says to Teel as he's dying, "me, you, my father, the rest of us. We're not born to live broken lives" (89). By the end of the play, Cali is driven by desire, initially awakened by Teel, to try to change the world through joining the Communist Party. Cali rediscovers her desire, not for marriage or religion, or even for political and social action, but for a meaningful life itself, when she says:

I'm not talking about that kind of desire, touching the body of someone you want for the first time, better even the second. I'm talking about the kind of desire that wakes you when it's still dark and you go outside and even the ground at your feet is asleep. But then you listen real hard and you hear the world waking up, leaves talking

about things you forgot, insects making a quarrel, and then a little piece of morning comes to rest on your neck. That kind of desire. That everything out there's a gift. It's that simple (89).

As in her earlier plays, Wallace uses a distancing effect to displace gender, to refocus on sexual expectations and assumptions. Yet in *Things of Dry Hours*, she uses *gestus* to displace race as well. In a scene between Teel and Cali, she once again has a man and a woman role-playing as the sexualized "other." She does not allow Teel to touch Cali, which reverses the power dynamic of the sexual tension. Cali controls the physical gestures and actions, while Teel is forced to remain still. In the first part of this scene, Cali binds him with her laundry, pinning his arms to his side. The winding of the sheet around Teel resembles a dress, in effect transgressing his gender, making him into a woman. Cali, however, goes further, reversing their skin color by applying black shoe polish to Teel's face, turning his face black, and grits (a form of corn ground into a cereal and popular in the South) to her face, turning her face white. Cali controls the touching, until the end when Teel escapes his "bonds" of captivity and explodes into violence, but is checked by Cali's words "you are a decent man." This is a charged scene of race, sex, desire, control, and privilege.

In two later scenes, Cali still controls the *gestic* touch. In one silent scene they kiss, but their lips do not touch; they kiss through Cali's hand, Teel kissing Cali's palm as she holds her hand to her mouth. The characters stand close, but the touch is *gestic*. In the final scene of the play, as Teel is dying, he asks Cali if he can touch her. She takes his hand and places it on different parts of her body—"not necessarily sexual places, but also on her ribs, her breastbone, her arm, elbow"—controlling Teel's access to her body (90).

Cali's most intimate scene is not with a person, but with the laundry of the white people for whom she works. In this "labor love scene," Cali laughs and seems to be free, as she runs around the stage trying to "catch" the sheets. In the New York Theatre Workshop production, stagehands dressed in black ran around the stage with the sheets mounted on poles, an old theatrical technique but still very effective (*Things of Dry Hours*, New York Theatre Workshop). The sheets are what imprison Cali but now they entertain her. They're free like she wants to be. They refuse to be folded as they take to the air and rise like beautiful, elusive cloth birds. The sheets, however, also symbolize the bindings that hold Cali, and all of us, within confinement as they later morph into the bindings of the dress that holds Teel captive. It is through this "women's work," or labor of doing laundry, that Cali finds her freedom. Moreover, this scene allows for the magic of theatre, a concept Dolan uses in her theorizing of utopian performance. She argues that "moments of magic and communion in performance" are found in utopian performance. (Dolan, 472) In this utopic moment in *Things of Dry Hours*, Cali can escape the banality

and harsh physical reality of her life and embody a new physical world, one where desire reigns and hope is glimpsed.

As in her earlier plays, Wallace offers a utopic glimmer of hope at the end of *Things of Dry Hours*. Just as Teel and the Hogans are changed by each other, there exists hope for change in the world. Tice fights for Teel's redemption as he teaches Teel how to read and, as he says late in the play as justification for why he allowed Teel into his home

You'll never have a chance like this at your door again. Let him in. Go to work. Perform a miracle [. . .] If I could turn a snitch like you into a comrade, there wouldn't be a thing outside this house that could stop me. Not a thing. And I'd blow apart that noise inside my ear I fight every damn day that says, 'Human nature doesn't change.' 'You can't remake the world.' If I could change a man like you, hallelujah. What's next? (*Beat.*) This isn't about you. It never was about you. That's just yourself telling you lies (80-81).

At the end of the play, only Cali survives, now an active member of the Communist Party. By the end of the play Teel is the one who is poor in spirit as well as in material wealth. Teel loses everything – a possibility for love and sexual connection, a possibility to become educated, even his life. Wallace, however, allows hope and desire to have the last word. Tice has been killed by anti-Communist forces, but as a ghost character, he closes the play as he opens it, dressed in his “traveling” clothes and holding an apple. For Wallace, the apple is a romantic metaphor of hope. The possible flowering of racial harmony is possible, as Tice explores the apple's “white meat with black seeds,” just as he did in the prologue. It is the seeds that carry the future of the tree and ensure the continuation of the species, as Tice tells us:

Or hey, maybe, just maybe, an apple is a letter from another world. The world that walks behind us. The world that won't let us go. The world that whispers: 'We lived. We lived. Oh listen to our call.' And all you have to do [. . .] (*neatly cuts the apple in two*) is open it. Read what it says on the inside. And then, get to work (93).

Wallace's plays contain those “little black seeds” that offer a new beginning, a utopian possibility of hope and change for all. By viewing the plays through the lens of utopian performance, possibilities of hope, desire, and change are readily apparent in Wallace's work. While the dehumanizing effects of modern American culture remain a primary focus of her plays and ground us in the present, Wallace offers us a romantic glimpse of a better future. Her characters clearly embody Wallace's landscape of the unblinking reality of class, race, and oppression and reveal the economic inequalities, sexualized repression, alienation, despair, and exploitation found in modern American society. Yet, they also embody utopian possibilities as they throw down the gun, fight the fire, leave the town of their birth, and become

politically active. Through her plays and characters, Wallace offers an utopic hope that America, and the world, can change.

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