

# ‘Stripping Women of Their Wombs’: Active Witnessing of Performances of Violence<sup>1</sup>

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*This essay creates a theoretical frame interweaving Jill Dolan’s concept of ‘finding hope at the theatre’ with Michel Foucault’s concepts of ‘biopower’ and ‘biopolitics’ to argue that spectators’ affective responses to performed violence in live theatre include hope and imagining social change. I draw upon my own active witnessing of theatrical performances of two works – Ruined by Pulitzer Prize-winning African-American Lynn Nottage, and Encounter by the Indian-American Navarasa Dance Theater Company. Along with Dolan and Foucault, I draw upon affect scholarship by James Thompson and Patricia T. Clough, and upon theorist Saidiya V. Hartman’s discussion of slavery that makes the human into an object ‘non-human’. Continuing forms of female enslavement and resistances to domination are evident in the representations of sexual slavery in the two works.*

Why do people continue to seek the liveness, the present-tenseness that performance and theatre offer? . . . I’d like to argue that such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like.

Jill Dolan<sup>2</sup>

‘Biopower’ (is) an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.

Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup>

Biopolitics provides a prime instance of what Foucault calls ‘strategic reversibility’ of power relations, or the ways in which the terms of government practice can be turned around into focuses of resistance.

Colin Gordon<sup>4</sup>

Violence on women’s bodies in live performance can elicit profound emotional responses from spectators. I argue, based on my own experience of viewing two striking theatrical performances – African-American playwright Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Ruined*, set during Congo’s civil war, and Indian-American Navarasa Dance Theater’s hybrid theatre-cum-dance work *Encounter*, set among India’s poor, tribal populations – that the brutalization of women onstage involves and affects audiences as active witnesses. Viewing physical violence and hearing traumatic memories inspire a range of emotions in viewers, including hope, can serve as a first step towards working

outside theatre for social justice. Affective responses such as hope, social consciousness of injustice and outrage, among other emotions, are elicited by the transformative potential of powerful theatrical representations of violence on female bodies and the latter's resistances in *Ruined* and *Encounter*.<sup>5</sup>

I rely on performance theorist Jill Dolan's enabling concept of 'finding hope at the theatre' (the subtitle of her groundbreaking book *Utopia in Performance*) to create a theoretical frame that interweaves Dolan's 'finding hope at the theatre' with philosopher Michel Foucault's concepts of 'biopower' and 'biopolitics'. I argue that spectators' responses to violence seen or heard in performance make 'palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better', as Dolan remarks, 'through the theatrical experience of exquisite moments when the audience feels charged, challenged, and reassured'.<sup>6</sup> Feminist sociologist Patricia T. Clough extends Foucault's notion of biopolitics by recognizing not only that bodies exist in networks of power, but that bodily affects are also controlled within networks.<sup>7</sup>

Although power operates in private and public, micro and macro realms, theatre audiences form communities who share what Dolan describes as 'a sense of civic participation and emotional belonging'.<sup>8</sup> They become part of

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.<sup>9</sup>

This 'hopeful feeling' during performance is echoed by theatre scholar James Thompson, who further analyses the affective terrain of 'bodily responses, sensations ... [that develop] a particular politics of practice'.<sup>10</sup> Thompson, like Dolan, contends that performance affects 'can be vital in providing resources for combating the negative effects of the worlds in which people live'. For both theorists, spectators' affective responses inside the theatre trigger for some audience members a sense of social justice that they may take outside the theatre.

I select *Ruined* and *Encounter* – set in two geographically distant parts of the world, Congo and India – for their uncanny similarities of state brutality exerted on women's bodies whether by soldiers during civil war (as in *Ruined*) or during so-called peacetime (as in *Encounter*). In *Ruined*, women are not only raped but also 'ruined', i.e. their genitals are damaged often with bayonets to the extent that they cannot bear children. In *Encounter*, the military stages 'fake encounters' with tribal leaders to capture, kill and rape them. Further, *Encounter's* depiction of tribal people's struggles evokes similar conflicts elsewhere between state power and indigenous populations 'estimated to number more than 250 million in seventy countries'.<sup>11</sup> Links between India's tribal people, Native Americans living within United States' boundaries and New Zealand's Maoris, among others, are referenced explicitly in *Encounter's* programme notes. Despite indigenous groups' ways of knowing and their sustainable management of resources, the Indian military forcibly dispossesses these marginalized communities of their land that is their livelihood. Other forms of displacement and loss are rife in many parts of the world.

Another aspect of *Encounter* that creates powerful affects in spectators is its unique hybrid theatre and dance form rooted in the ancient Indian treatise of drama, the *Natyasastra* (second–fifth centuries CE), the oldest text on drama and performance in the world. *Ruined*, on the other hand, is part of contemporary American theatre unfolding in two acts; its affective terrain emerges from dialogue, lyrical recounting of traumatic memory, and blues-like songs. *Encounter* is in the tradition of Indian *natya* (theatre) where the arts of drama, dance, movement, music and gesture are integrally linked. Hence *Encounter* effectively includes Indian folk songs, martial arts of Kerala called *kalaripayattu* (or *kalari*), and movements from *bharatanatyam*, a classical Indian dance style producing a remarkably layered stage production. *Encounter* uses voice and dance along with facial expression via *abhinaya* (gesture language) to depict the *rasas* (emotions).

*Encounter* is adapted for the stage from a short story by India's Magsaysay Award-winning writer Mahasweta Devi, whose work has not received the critical attention it deserves although prominent postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has translated Devi's stories from Bengali into English.<sup>12</sup> Devi's work is a fine example of a writer-activist committed to social change in her own environment and has implications for struggles of the dispossessed beyond India. As Spivak remarks in *Imaginary Maps*, 'Devi's work suggests a model in which activism and writing can reflect upon each other, providing a necessary vision of internationality, and the possibility of constructing a new kind of responsibility for the cultural worker'.<sup>13</sup> Both authors, Devi and Nottage, are committed to witnessing, representing and inspiring social justice for violated women and disenfranchised communities.

### Authors as witnesses

*Ruined's* and *Encounter's* authors as witnesses aim to ameliorate social injustices through their art. Nottage testified before the United States Senate Foreign Relations joint subcommittee about rampant rape in Congo's civil war.<sup>14</sup> Nottage's testimony, instead of taking sides with certain political factions (since all parties were guilty of violating women), concerned the experiences of violated women whom she had interviewed. Her recounting of what she had seen and heard, as well as her plea for urgent intervention, brought this issue much-needed attention.

Nottage had undertaken a personal journey to Uganda, a country neighbouring Congo, since she could not enter the war zone. Her work with Amnesty International in the US gave her access to Amnesty's refugee camp in Avra, north of Kampala, Uganda. As Nottage listened to the stories, she faced 'the extent to which [women's] bodies had become battlefields . . . The subject matter was not easy, but rape had become part of the vocabulary of war in Congo, and thus became a central theme in my play'.<sup>15</sup> *Ruined* is Nottage's imaginative response based on her own active witnessing and listening to the women's stories. Nottage's profoundly affective representation has the kind of emotional power that is often missing in statistical reports about rapes and wars, although reports do provide useful information.<sup>16</sup> Nottage recognizes 'the power of theater' that enables her

to peel back layers of emotion to reveal human truths that often get lost in clinical human rights reports and detached news stories. In many societies theater is at the vanguard of change. The communal nature of the medium allows us to explore difficult and troubling subject matters that ultimately lead to some form of collective catharsis for the audience.<sup>17</sup>

Like Nottage, India's Mahasweta Devi, though a middle-class outsider to tribal people, writes and speaks strongly as their advocate. For Devi, 'a creative writer should have a social conscience'.<sup>18</sup> Nottage echoes Devi's sense of artistic and ethical-political responsibility:

The onus is on all of us who have the ability to reach audiences to try and bring an end to the scourge [of rape in Congo] . . . Silence is complicity. I believe that. Our silence on this issue sends a message to the Congolese government that it can continue to rape the land and its people with impunity. Our silence on this issue means that every time we use cell phones [Congo is rich in the mineral coltan, which is used in cell phones], we are inadvertently fueling a war that is being fought on the backs of women.<sup>19</sup>

In writing *Ruined*, Nottage takes this ethical-political responsibility seriously.

Devi's writing illuminates the struggles of tribal people (one-sixth of India's total population), who are Indian citizens but denied basic rights of citizenship such as access to education and healthcare. Devi recognizes that they 'are exploited and used'; however, she admires them for not 'accept(ing) defeat'.<sup>20</sup> Further, Devi recognizes their artistic contributions:

I constantly come across the reappearance, in various forms, of folklore, ballads, myths and legends, carried by ordinary people across generations . . . For me, the endless source of ingredients for writing is in these amazingly noble, suffering human beings. Why should I look for my raw material elsewhere, once I have started knowing them? Sometimes, it seems to me that my writing is really their doing.

Both authors use testimony via interviewing victims and conducting research to write against injustice and the brutalization of women's bodies. They function as active witnesses inspiring their audiences' emotional responses when viewing violence on women's bodies onstage.

### Spectators as witnesses

Theatrical meta-affect can be found in the ontological surprise or rupture that enables feelings, if we understand them as the embodied archival trace of an affect, to be re-felt . . . the function of affect . . . works to empathically bind spectator subjectivities through relations of power to images of suffering others. This generates a form of spectatorship that hurts morally, emotionally and physically.

Bryoni Trezise<sup>21</sup>

As active witnesses, an ideal, indeed utopian, audience's affective involvement in live staged violence 'hurts', as Trezise argues above, as it is 're-felt' by spectators. During

performances of *Ruined* and *Encounter*, I witnessed audiences being moved profoundly. I saw *Ruined* in 2009 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (Ashland, Oregon). During the performance, I heard women in the audience sobbing audibly when words recounting rape and mutilation triggered their empathy for the actor onstage and possibly also painful personal memories. I saw both shows of *Encounter* in Los Angeles – at the 2010 Asian American Theatre Festival and in 2012 at the David Henry Hwang Theater. The theatre's artistic director, Tim Dang, asked me to conduct a post-show discussion. During this talkback, the audience verbalized connections among the common struggles of indigenous peoples of India, the US and New Zealand.

These theatrical experiences of pain, not sentimental or apolitical in nature, offer, according to Dolan, transformative possibilities. 'I believe', notes Dolan, 'that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable'.<sup>22</sup> I noticed that the dramatic resolutions of *Ruined* and *Encounter* left audiences hopeful, for instance, after testimonies of brutal assaults on women's bodies – Mama Nadi, the protagonist in *Ruined*, accepts the travelling salesman Christian's love. Mama's tough armour, as she fights for her autonomy and survival during a war, cracks and softens in Christian's embrace in their final dance. Christian accepts Mama although she admits for the first time in the play that she is also 'ruined'. Christian, unlike other men who reject such 'damaged' women, rather blames men for such inhumane acts. He embraces Mama's 'ruined' body; this hopeful conclusion uplifts the spectators as they exit the theatre. Similarly, *Encounter* ends with the defiant female protagonist, Dopdi, shaming the General by tearing off her clothes in front of him. He had sanctioned her gang rape by his soldiers. With formidable ferocity and impeccable logic, she challenges him: 'What use are clothes since they cannot protect one's honor? You can unclothe me but how will you clothe me again?'<sup>23</sup>

The two endings evoke different affects – *Ruined* makes space for love between Mama and Christian, whereas *Encounter* concludes on a note of intense anger and outrage at the military's brutalizing the female tribal leader Dopdi's body. Although *Ruined* ends with assertions of love, the character Salima's tragic suicide earlier in the play resonates in the audience's memory during the bittersweet ending. Both plays – whether by the creation of hope through love (between Mama and Christian), by the taking of control of an abused body through suicide (as Salima does), or through portraying justifiable rage (as Dopdi does) – leave the audience uplifted. Although Salima dies, other women in Mama's bar survive; although Dopdi's lover Dulna is killed, she is alive and defiant at the end.

### **The affect of dance theatre in *Encounter***

*Encounter's* style of hybrid theatre and dance affectively reveals the political thrust of the performance. This style includes an engaging collage of movement – martial arts *kalaripayattu*, folk dance and *bharatanatyam* – along with spoken script and songs. The movement and words work together synergistically to convey the community's story headed by Dopdi and her husband Dulna. Their dance and script, actions and songs, convey their hard work despite deprivation of basic necessities such as drinking water



FIG. 1 (Colour online) Mama Nadi (Kimberly Scott) and Christian (Tyrone Wilson), in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Production of *Ruined*, 2009. Photograph courtesy of Jenny Graham.

(although the landlord's home has plenty). Nonetheless, they continue to resist with words and militant songs. As Dopdi, the female community leader, remarks, 'our fight is for food. Our fight is for our land, our songs. We will fight till we die'.

*Encounter's* unique style is neither dance theatre, as in Western ballet where the narrative is conveyed through movement and without words, nor like Indian dance dramas where epic tales from the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* are communicated via movement, gesture and sound but without words. *Encounter's* theatre-cum-dance style is rooted, as noted earlier, in the ancient Indian treatise on drama, the *Natyasastra*. One significant chapter of this text delineates the *navarasas*, the nine primary emotions – love, fear, anger, compassion, valour, disgust, sorrow, laughter and wonder in human life and art. In *Encounter*, Dopdi effectively depicts *shringara rasa* (love) using *abhinaya* (gesture language and facial expression) between herself and her lover, Dulna, who is caught and summarily killed; Dopdi, when captured, is gang-raped. She is defiant after the rape and shows *raudra rasa* (profound rage) of the wronged woman. The community portrays *vira rasa* (valour) before the soldiers.

The *Natyasastra* also describes the qualities of 'ideal' audience members called *rasikas* (those with *rasa*) or *sahridayas* (those with open hearts). The powerful content and dramatic form of *Encounter* inspire *rasikas* whose sensitivity was evident to me in the Los Angeles post-show discussion. They demonstrated receptivity to the plight of tribal people in far-away India, making connections to similar conflicts in their own communities. Such emotional responses in theatre are inspirational in eliciting some





FIG. 2 (Colour online) Aparna Sindhoo and Anil Natyaveda. Photograph courtesy of Don Perrault.

spectators to work towards transforming social ills, if not in India (or the Congo) then in their own communities.

*Encounter's* affective terrain is represented movingly via *kalaripayattu* performed by master martial artist Anil Natyaveda. This highly rigorous physical style includes unique training – to attack an opponent using only one's body (limbs, body stance, sharp gaze,

not guns or weapons) – along with indigenous methods of healing both oneself and one's opponent. Such knowledge of fighting and curing oneself and one's enemy is impossible in contemporary warfare where soldiers are trained to kill using weapons. In *Encounter*, the audience witnesses the poignancy of the tribal community preparing to use their own bodies as weapons, along with thick wooden *lathis* (sticks), to confront an enemy that can overpower them with a single bullet. This also shows a confrontation between old and modern means of battle to redress injustice, and in this conflict the tribal community is unfairly disadvantaged. Dopdi has sworn to her community, 'if I am arrested, I will not give anyone's name. I will bite off my tongue'. The image evokes a sensory horror with the taste of blood in biting off one's tongue. In fact, the soldiers' repeated line as instructed by Major General Sena Naik, a master of 'extreme politics', is that 'Dopdi will lead them to the others'. Little do they know that Dopdi will 'bite off [her] tongue' and not speak.

Dopdi is captured and gang-raped onstage in a chillingly affective performance. Black-masked rapist-soldiers appearing as executioners use *kalari* training to ascend and descend a wooden pole – the major prop of the work – approximately ten feet tall to enact the rape. At times, Dopdi's legs forcibly spread apart and straddle the pole. At other times the men lift her, swing her side to side, and place her, again legs open, under the pole for continued assault. As the rapist-soldiers leave, satiated, the military commander appears to ravage her himself. Earlier, he had sanctioned his soldiers verbally to do 'the needful' (rape, torture, humiliate) to 'make her' talk. Although brutally bruised, Dopdi rises with difficulty, though still fiery and courageous. She confronts the commander bodily with verbal rage and, in a strategic move to humiliate her rapists, she begins publicly to tear off her clothes; apart from her injured body, that is all she has left. The audience hears the ripping of the saree as Dopdi declares that clothes guarantee no respect for women, and asks, 'What more can you do?' She portrays the fiercest form of the angry *devi* (goddess) with bulging red eyes and body upright, ready for battle as the lights fade.

The affective terrain of viewing such assault in performance, actors portraying visible bodily sensations of pain, sweating and physical impacts such as blows, and of listening to traumatic memories also gives rise, as Dopdi demonstrates, to resistant speech, song, screams and silence. In *Ruined*, when Mama Nadi tells Sophie, 'I know it hurts, because it smells like the rot of meat. So wash good', she informs the audience of a palpable smell emanating from Sophie's genital area, mutilated by soldiers who 'ruined' her.<sup>24</sup> Mama's words hit the audience's sense of smell. Only expensive surgery can correct such damage. Mama's words 'I know' indicate subtly that perhaps she herself has been 'ruined' – a fact she reveals at the play's conclusion.

A focus on affects 'does draw attention to the body and emotions', remarks critical theorist Michael Hardt, 'but it also introduces an important shift' that resides primarily in 'the synthesis it requires . . . because affects refer equally to the body and the mind; and . . . because they involve both reason and passions'.<sup>25</sup> Hardt links the synergy of emotions and reason coming together in the 'affective turn'. His further connection of the 'affective turn' to 'affective labor' with political and gendered implications illuminates the politics of using rape and mutilation as weapons against women in *Ruined* and *Encounter*. In *Encounter*, the very affects of tribal resistance (via song and movement) to unjust military





FIG. 3 (Colour online) Navarasa Dance Theater Ensemble (image of bodies on the pole). Photograph courtesy of Christopher Joseph.

power convey the political realities of their lives. In *Ruined*, Salima's family rejecting her after her being held captive by soldiers and raped repeatedly evokes the politics of her situation. Where will she go? Who is responsible for her plight? Another devastating political reality is that arming soldiers, themselves trapped in poverty during Congo's

civil war, was more beneficial to Western powers supplying arms than to the soldiers themselves. Director of *Ruined* Kate Whoriskey remarks that some male soldiers, only boys, 'were themselves victims of unspeakable violence'.<sup>26</sup> Whoriskey continues,

Rebels would invade family houses and make boys kill their parents in order to save themselves. These boys became so damaged they would join the rebel group that forced them to make this unconscionable choice . . . Worse than a suicide bomber, these boys and men are so psychologically scarred that from the point of the trauma forward, they spend the rest of their lives terrorizing and destroying others.

Such mental trauma, embodied in the male perpetrators of violence on women's bodies, is a serious political reality with few options in Congo for rehabilitating both male and female victims of the civil war.

### **Affects of re-memoried trauma in *Ruined***

Salima recounts to Sophie, a sympathetic listener, the traumatic events of a fateful morning when she was picking 'ripe tomatoes', admiring the sudden appearance of a peacock, and then the shattering of the calm. Soldiers appear in her family compound, rape her, murder her infant daughter and kidnap her, taking her to the forest. Repeated rapes over five months scar her so physically, mentally and emotionally that traumatic images continue to haunt her. Salima recounts the heart-rending events in poignant, lyrical words:

Do you know what I was doing that morning? (A calm washes over her). I was working in our garden, picking the last of the sweet tomatoes. I put Beatrice [her infant daughter] down in the shade of a frangipani tree . . . It was such a clear and open sky. This splendid bird, a peacock, had come into the garden to taunt me, and was showing off its feathers . . . I felt a shadow cut across my back, and when I stood four men were there over me, smiling wicked schoolboy smiles. 'Yes?' I said. And the tall soldier slammed the butt of his gun into my cheek. Just like that. It was so quick I didn't even know I'd fallen to the ground. Where did they come from? How could I not have heard them? . . . One of the soldiers held me down with his foot . . . as the other . . . 'took' me. My baby was crying. She was a good baby. Beatrice. She never cried, but she was crying, screaming . . . And right then . . . (Closes her eyes) A soldier stomped on her head with his boot. And she was quiet.

I close my eyes and I see such terrible things. Things I cannot stand to have in my head. How can men be this way?<sup>27</sup>

Salima's traumatized body is theatricalized here through her memory of soldiers' brutal exercise of what Foucault termed 'biopower'. Foucault's 1978 and 1979 lectures dealing with 'governmentality' – a concept that combines political and philosophical analysis – mention 'biopolitics'.<sup>28</sup> Foucault recognizes that governments regulate citizens' conduct, and such control can inspire criticism and resistance. Overall, biopower exerts less brutal kinds of control than that past sovereigns wielded over subjects. But warring factions, as in 'ethnic cleansing' between Congo's Hutus and Tutsis (or in Rwanda, or in the former

Yugoslavia), exert worse forms of power in contemporary times. Here, the assertion of biopower slides fatally into fascist tendencies of preserving one group over another, leading to genocide. Foucault is aware of the danger as he states,

If genocide is indeed the dream of modern power, this is not because of the recent return to the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of the population.<sup>29</sup>

In *Ruined*, biopower goes even further than what Patricia Clough describes, echoing Foucault, 'as biopolitical networks of disciplining, surveillance, and control', in reducing women to non-humans – Salima's husband calls her 'a filthy dog who must have tempted her rapists'. Salima herself bitterly recalls that the soldiers considered her broken body as 'soup to be had before dinner'.

Salima is forced into sexual slavery similar to what literary theorist Saidiya V. Hartman articulates as chattel slavery and power operations between blacks and whites in the nineteenth-century United States.<sup>30</sup> Hartman's discussion of domination during slavery resonates in similar scenarios of civil war in Congo or in the tribal people's struggle against the Indian state. The performance of power by dominant forces renders victims abject, argues Hartman, in terms of controlling their bodies, minds and psyches under traumatic conditions. This is as true for slaves of a bygone era as for sexual slaves such as Salima and others today, even in Mama Nadi's brothel/bar, an ironic 'refuge' for them.

Trauma resulting from viewing or experiencing violence is often repressed in memories that are difficult to uncover. Hartman analyses the interconnections among memory, trauma and their representations, noting that a slave's 'non-history erased any conventional modality for writing an intelligible past'.<sup>31</sup> A slave, when rendered a 'non-human', i.e. separated from a sense of personhood, is similar to the female sexual enslavement endured by Salima and Sophie in *Ruined*, and Dopdi in *Encounter*. Violations of their bodies are effected by first rendering them 'non-human'. Salima uses the image of her leg 'being chained like a dog to a tree' while the soldiers raped her. Hartman argues that power often remains hidden when notions of rights and humanity are propagated. However, underneath these positive values, enslavement continues to exist, if not in the bodies then in the minds and psyches of post-slavery populations. This is evident also in postcolonial societies where power holders are native neo-colonials who imitate the worst of their previous European colonizers.

Salima, stripped of her humanity, is enslaved by black soldiers, no different from previous white enslavers. She recalls bitterly,

I lay there as they tore me to pieces, until I was raw ... five months. Five months. Chained like a goat. These men fighting ... fighting for our liberation ... Five months in the bush, passed between the soldiers like a wash rag. Used. I was made poison by their fingers.<sup>32</sup>

But when Salima can finally return home, her family turn their backs on her, and her husband claims to be 'dishonored'. He 'was too proud to bear [her] shame ... but not proud enough to protect [her] from it'.<sup>33</sup> *Ruined* depicts this tragic, though

common, reality of family and community rejecting 'ruined' women. When thrown out of the family compound, they have little choice but to return to dangerous situations. If they conceived a child from their rapist-monsters, they are solely responsible for raising a fatherless child. Salima's harrowing memories evoke her physical and mental trauma that continues to echo in her bones and muscles, held in bodily memory long after the horrible events have passed. Hence Salima continues to recount past rapes that haunt her. Clough regards trauma as the 'engulfment of the ego in memory . . . Memory might better be understood not as unconscious memory so much as memory without consciousness and therefore, incorporated memory, body memory, cellular memory'.<sup>34</sup> When a trauma victim has difficulty remembering what truly occurred, 'the body becomes', in Clough's resonant phrase, 'a memorial, a ghosted bodily matter'.<sup>35</sup> Salima, ravaged over and over again, is almost a ghost of her former self.

It is a terrible irony that Salima finds refuge at Mama Nadi's brothel/bar that works partly on the backs of 'rescued', often 'ruined', women rejected by their families. Salima, unwillingly, and to her disgust, has to provide sex to the soldiers. Mama is clear that she is not running a charity for 'her girls' and that she does not 'force anyone's hands. My girls . . . ask them, they'd rather be here, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard. They're safer with me than in their own homes'.<sup>36</sup> Like a mother, though extremely tough, Mama gives them a 'safe' place to live and eat, while they provide entertainment, drinks and sexual services to soldiers.

This 'safe brothel', a contradiction in terms, is a place where Mama is in charge and controls the women's bodies – who they have sex with, who they 'dirty dance' with, and so on. Nottage regards Mama Nadi

as saving women who are optionless. It's like, 'If I did not provide a home for these women, they'd be forced to beg in the street, or they'd be back in the jungle being raped time and time again. I'm giving them an option to choose how their bodies are to be used'. She sees it as an act of defiance.<sup>37</sup>

Mama Nadi runs her bar/brothel business single-mindedly. Initially, Nottage wanted to write an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* to bring attention to the largely ignored reality of violence against Congolese women. Brecht's play dramatizes Mother Courage's near-maniacal determination to profit from a war although it took her children. Mama Nadi's personality does echo Mother Courage in that both are solely concerned with their business. However, Nottage, unlike Brecht, evokes an affective terrain for her characters and audience – Salima's despair, Sophie's courage and Mama's caring nature underneath her tough-as-nails exterior. She will not escape out of Congo when she has the chance – she has to look after her 'girls'. When she finally accepts Christian's love at the end, she admits to being 'ruined' herself, a fact that gives new meaning to her cynicism throughout the play.

Mama's revelation sheds light on her sympathy, during the play, for 'ruined' Sophie. Mama keeps her since she is beautiful and can entertain the soldiers with her songs. The lyrics and music sustain Sophie as she lives with awful memories of being gang-raped and 'ruined': 'You come here to forget / You say drive away all regret / And dance

like it's the ending / The ending of the war'.<sup>38</sup> Sophie's blues style of singing 'to keep from crying' is very different from the defiant songs in *Encounter*. Mama tries to divert soldiers from having sex with Sophie since it would be extremely painful. However, when the Commander insists on this, Sophie, in a fit of anger and fear, insults him by spitting on his boots. This puts Mama, her bar, and all her women in danger. So, in one of her harshest decisions, Mama commands Sophie to have oral sex with the Commander and Sophie has to obey. At the same time, Mama cares for Sophie, as in her generous act of using her few treasured diamonds (Mama's insurance against disaster) to pay for an operation to repair Sophie's damaged genitalia and ease her constant pain.

Women like Sophie and Salima are very alone with their bodies, bearing pain and shame. In this state, they face what I have termed in another work 'internal exile', alienated from their families and communities, as well as from their violated bodies, denied self-worth.<sup>39</sup> Salima's fatal un-belonging to her own body contributes to her suicide. She takes the only action of defiance that she can by thrusting a knife into her womb and killing herself and her unborn child. She performs this act offstage, then appears with blood spilling out of her gut, stating these devastating words to all the assembled warring men: 'You will not fight your battles on my body anymore'. Given Salima's choices – return to her husband, to family taunts, to raising a child the resulting from rape – suicide is the profoundly tragic, though triumphant, path by which she can finally control her own body.

In the Congo conflict, women's internal exile from their own bodies is exacerbated by the soldiers' mutilation of female genitalia, 'ruining' them so that they cannot bear children. Whoriskey reminds readers that this postcolonial violence is reminiscent eerily of Henry Morton Stanley, colonizer in the Congo on behalf of Belgium, who forced free labour from the local population for King Leopold's rubber trade. The inhumane punishment was that the hands of those who refused to work were cut off.<sup>40</sup> Such mutilation meant that they could hardly survive as human beings. Such butchery, practiced by colonizers a hundred years earlier, sadly resonates in current acts of violence in postcolonial Congo. Whoriskey connects her analysis to contemporary US:

We are only wealthy enough to keep it [violence] off-shore . . . we have the money to create weaponry that removes us from the violence we enact. By contrast, in the Congo, the mixture of poverty and war is a lethal combination. Due to a lack of money, the human body becomes the weapon, the teenage boy the terror, and a woman's womb 'the battleground'.<sup>41</sup>

*Ruined* dramatizes the terror of this 'battleground' along with women's traumatic memories of torture by male soldiers, many of whom are poor and frustrated with their own lives.

An active witnessing of violence in theatre, with its transformative potential, is also incredibly harsh when performed on female bodies in *Ruined* and *Encounter*. This cruelty, however, raises the possibility of inspiring spectators to imagine a more just and

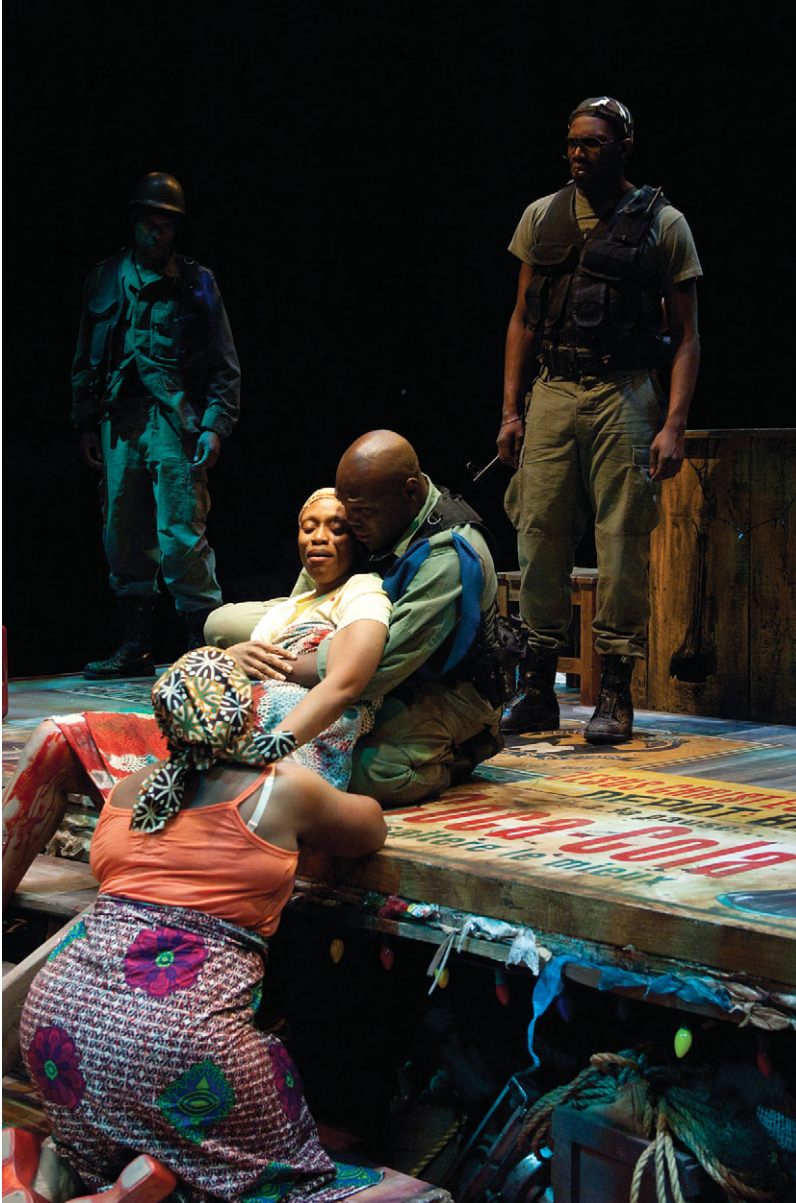


FIG. 4 (Colour online) Salima (Chinasa Ogbuagu) collapsed between Mama Nadi (Kimberly Scott) and Christian (Tyrone Wilson), OSF, 2009. Photograph courtesy of Jenny Graham.

equitable human world. The affects of violence linger in the minds of sensitive *rasikas* as they leave the theatre and as they imagine changing gender and social inequities in their communities and beyond.



## NOTES

- 1 Director Kate Whoriskey uses the phrase 'stripping women of their wombs' in her 'Introduction' to *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), pp. ix–xiii, here p. xi. I am grateful to Professor Esha De of UCLA for her suggestion of the phrase 'active witnesses' and for other useful feedback on this essay.
- 2 Jill Dolan, 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', *Theatre Journal*, 53, 3 (2001), pp. 455–79, here p. 455.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1998; first published 1976), p. 140.
- 4 Colin Gordon, 'Governmental Rationality: An Introduction', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 1–52, here p. 5.
- 5 Lynn Nottage, *Ruined* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009). I saw *Ruined* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), Ashland, Oregon in 2009. I saw a thirty-minute excerpt of *Encounter* (unpublished), codirected and co-adapted by Aparna Sindhoo and Anil Natyaveda, at the National Asian American Theatre Festival in Los Angeles, July 2010, and the full seventy-five-minute show at East West Players, September 2012, in Los Angeles.
- 6 Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 5.
- 7 Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University of Press, 2007).
- 8 Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, p. 10
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 10 James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the Ends of Effect* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 7.
- 11 World Bank Report, quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Afterword', in Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 197–205, here p. 199.
- 12 In 1997 Devi was awarded the Magsaysay Award for 'Journalism, Literature and the Creative Communication Arts', and in 2006 the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award from the government of India. See Spivak, *Imaginary Maps*.
- 13 Spivak, *Imaginary Maps*, p. xxvi.
- 14 Patrick Healy, 'Women of "Ruined" to Speak in Washington about Rape', *New York Times*, 12 May 2009, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/12/women-of-ruined-to-speak-in-washington-about-rape>
- 15 Quotations from Lynn Nottage in '100 Years of Honoring Women: Lynn Nottage', [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org), accessed 23 March 2011.
- 16 Human Rights Watch in *The War within the War: Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Eastern Congo* (New York and London: Human Rights Watch, June 2002) documents that the Congo civil war 'has taken an enormous toll on ordinary people, costing the lives of 2.5 million of the 20 million civilians in eastern Congo between 1984 and 2001, according to an estimate by the International Rescue Committee', p. 17. The same report notes that the 1994 genocide of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda (which borders Congo on the East) spilt over into Congo, including military forces from neighbouring Uganda and Burundi.
- 17 See [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org)
- 18 This and subsequent Devi quotations are from 'The Author in Conversation', in Spivak, *Imaginary Maps*, pp. ix–xxii.
- 19 See [www.enoughproject.org](http://www.enoughproject.org)
- 20 Spivak, *Imaginary Maps*.

- 21 Bryoni Trezise, 'Spectatorship that Hurts: Societas Raffaello Sanzio as Meta-affective Theatre of Memory', *Theatre Research International*, 37, 3 (October 2012), pp. 205–20, here p. 205.
- 22 Dolan, 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', p. 457.
- 23 Quotations from *Encounter* are based on notes taken in performance. Unpublished text.
- 24 *Ruined*, p. 17.
- 25 Michael Hardt, 'Introduction', in Clough, *The Affective Turn*, p. ix.
- 26 Whoriskey, 'Introduction', *Ruined*, p. xi.
- 27 *Ruined*, pp. 68–9.
- 28 Michel Foucault, 'Security, Territory, and Population' (1978), 'The Birth of Biopolitics' (1979), in Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: St Martin's Press). The term 'biopolitics' originates with Rudolf Kjellen in the 1920s who also coined the term 'geopolitics'. Kjellen wanted to study civil wars among populations using a biological angle, thus calling his study 'biopolitics'. Nazis also used the term for biologically based groups. Other uses of the prefix 'bio' are bioethics, biotechnology, etc. that study ethics, technology and other philosophical/scientific inquiries based on human biology.
- 29 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 137.
- 30 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 31 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), p. 31.
- 32 Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 67. Similar to gang rape involving perpetrators and spectators was the incident at Abu Ghraib prison when US soldiers participated in humiliating Iraqi soldiers while others looked on and some took photographs. See Peggy Phelan, 'Afterword: In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: The Photographs of Abu Ghraib', in Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, eds., *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 372–84.
- 33 Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 70.
- 34 Clough, *The Affective Turn*, pp. 6–7.
- 35 Clough, *The Affective Turn*, p. 7.
- 36 Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 86.
- 37 Alexis Greene, 'Theatre Arts: "Ruined" by Lynn Nottage Links War, Horror and Prostitution, a Preview', *On the Issues Magazine* (July 2008), [www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/july08/july2008\\_theater.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/july08/july2008_theater.php), accessed 23 March 2011.
- 38 Nottage, *Ruined*, p. 20.
- 39 Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).
- 40 Whoriskey, 'Introduction', p. x.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

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