Pamukkale Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences Institute
ISSN1308-2922 EISSN2147-6985

Article Info/Makale Bilgisi
vReceived/Geliş:03.04.2019 vAccepted/Kabul:16.07.2019
DOİ: 10.30794/pausbed.548680
Araştırma Makalesi/ Research Article

Fişek, E. (2019). "The Deindustrial Generation: Memory, Biography, And The Body In Lynn Nottage's Sweat" *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, sayı 37, Denizli, s. 97-109.

THE DEINDUSTRIAL GENERATION: MEMORY, BIOGRAPHY, AND THE BODY IN LYNN NOTTAGE'S SWEAT

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Abstract

American playwright Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Sweat (2017), is set in the town of Reading, Pennsylvania, and traces the life of a working-class community as they experience the devastating, multi-faceted effects of deindustrialization across the first decade of the twenty-first century. While concerned with the changing nature of American manufacturing under late capitalism, the play's depiction of labor draws on a broader historical lens, and charts the intergenerational transmission of class inequalities over time. Nottage uses a series of formal and structural strategies to draw attention to how characters remember and narrate the past, and how these memories' racial and gendered tensions ultimately constrain their efforts at mobilization. In its focus on memory, biography, and the body, Sweat not only participates in what has been called the recent deindustrialization literature, but also revisits some of the key aesthetic choices surrounding the depiction of capitalism in modern American drama.

Keywords: *Lynn Nottage, Sweat, Modern drama, Capitalism, Deindustrialization, Memory.*

SANAYİSİZ NESİL: LYNN NOTTAGE'IN SWEAT OYUNUNDA BELLEK, BİYOGRAFİ VE BEDEN

Özet

Amerikan oyun yazarı Lynn Nottage'ın Pulitzer Ödülü alan oyunu Sweat (2017), Pennsylvania eyaletinin Reading şehrinde geçer ve yirmi birinci yüzyılın başlangıcında bu şehirde yaşayan ve işçi sınıfının parçası olan bir topluluğun sanayisizleşmenin beraberinde getirdiği kapsamlı yıkımı nasıl tecrübe ettiğini anlatır. Oyun, kapitalizmin geç döneminde Amerikan üretiminin değişimiyle ilgilenir, fakat emek sorunsalını daha geniş bir tarihsel çerçevede ele alır ve sınıf eşitsizliklerinin nesiller arasında nasıl tekrarlanıp yeniden üretildiklerini gösterir. Nottage oyunda bazı formel ve yapısal stratejiler kullanarak karakterlerin geçmişi nasıl hatırladıklarını ve anlattıklarını, ve bu hatıraların toplumsal cinsiyet ve ırk açısından taşıdıkları gerginliklerin işçilerin güncel seferberliklerini nasıl etkilediğini inceler. Bellek, biyografi ve beden sorunsalları üzerinde duran Sweat sadece sanayisizleşmeyi anlatan edebi akıma katkıda bulunmaz, aynı zamanda modern Amerikan tiyatrosunun kapitalizmi tasvir edişindeki temel estetik seçimleri de yeniden ele alır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Lynn Nottage, Sweat, Modern drama, Kapitalizm, Sanayisizleşme, Bellek.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sweat, the brief title of American playwright Lynn Nottage's 2015 play, sparks a series of associations that are uniquely bound to the work's themes. Sweat, we automatically assume, is meant to signal the byproduct of physical exertion, evidence of the body's need to regulate its temperature as it labors. The cultural associations of perspiration, however, can be multi-faceted, ranging from the pride associated with the expenditure of physical strength and effort, to the shame associated with a frowned-upon bodily excess. In the context of new age cultures of self-care and wellness, sweat can signal a form of bodily self-realization, whereas its class connotations can shift radically when sweat is reframed as a question of hygiene and self-sufficiency. This array of associations is central to the questions at the heart of Nottage's play, which depicts two specific historical moments, 2000 and 2008, in the life of a working class community based in Reading, Pennsylvania. Nottage asks: What are the connotations of blue-collar labor in the United States in the twenty-first century? On the continuum that runs from pride to shame, what are the psychological experiences that have accompanied the changing nature of American manufacturing under late capitalism? And how do histories of class, race and gender inform efforts to redress the workplace exploitations that characterize this period?

Like many artists who were surveying the American landscape in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, Nottage arrived at these questions by focusing on the transformations taking place in the country's industrial heartland. In 2008, towns across Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Michigan, Ohio and Indiana were reeling from several decades of de-industrialization, as key employment opportunities in manufacturing, coal-mining, ship-building and textiles were increasingly relocated to offshore facilities via legislation like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Labor unions were particularly hard hit, as their ability to negotiate for worker benefits and pensions was undermined by the growth of neoliberal deregulatory policies. The deregulation of the savings and loan industry, coupled with the so-called housing bubble, resulted in the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis and deepened an existing predicament. In 2011, Nottage happened upon a *New York Times* article based on census data from the same year, which identified Reading as the poorest city in the United States for its size:

> In January 2012, I began traveling to Reading with an eye toward collecting the stories of people battling to survive in a city crippled by economic stagnation. What I found was a racially diverse and fractured city that had once been a steel and manufacturing powerhouse but had since become plagued by rising crime and unemployment. (Nottage 2015)

Nottage had been commissioned by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage to contribute a play for their "American Revolutions" cycle, and she chose to focus on what she called the De-Industrial Revolution (Brown 2016). Following a two-year period of extensive interview-based research in Reading, Nottage created a fictional world steeped in these ethnographic vignettes. The play premiered in Ashland, Oregon in 2015, moved to Washington D.C. in 2016, and eventually moved to the Public Theatre in New York, where it enjoyed a sold out run during the months leading up to the pivotal American elections of 2016. The following year, the play earned Nottage her second Pulitzer Prize for Drama, but not before being hailed "the first theatrical landmark of the Trump era" (Schulman 2017).

Critical to *Sweat*'s plot is what Courtney Elkin Mohler calls a "dual-time dramatic structure" (Mohler, McMahon and Román, 2016: 81). The play begins in 2008, as parole officer Evan checks in with Jason and Chris, two young men who have committed an undisclosed violent crime eight years ago. Chris, who is black, has since found solace in the Church, whereas Jason, who is white, has white supremacist tattoos covering his face. In their respective interviews with Evan, both men describe their experience of seeing each other for the first time since returning home, a reunion made all the more poignant by the contrast between their former intimacy and present vulnerability. The following scene is set in 2000, where Nottage begins to weave the broader background against which the audience will inevitably locate Chris and Jason's tragic trajectory. In 2000, Reading stands at the cusp of the de-industrial revolution: Chris's mother Cynthia, Jason's mother Tracey, and their close friend Jessie are long-term employees at Olstead's Metal Tubing, and they conclude their long work days at their local bar, which is managed by Stan and also frequented by Chris and Jason. This tight-knit group is thrown into disarray when Cynthia is promoted from the floor to management, only to find that her promotion coincides with the

company's decision to lockout their workers and move the majority of their machinery to Mexico. Lockouts are not new to the community; Cynthia's estranged husband Brucie has been refused entry to his own workplace, a textile mill, for 93 weeks, a nod to the lockout of the Hoffman Industries workers whom Nottage had interviewed in Reading. Over the course of *Sweat*, anxieties over longer hours, reduced benefits, slashed pensions, and ultimately, unemployment, trigger a series of racial and gendered fractures. These tensions culminate in Chris and Jason's assault on Oscar, the young Latino barback who works with Stan, and who applies for a temporary, non-union position at Olstead's.

For Elkin Mohler, *Sweat*'s dual time zones allow Nottage to make full use of the powers of dramatic form, imbuing the play's development with the wistfulness of nostalgia for a better time (2000) as well as the devastations of a foreshadowed future (2008). At stake here are "two levels of interrelated tragic irony; first, the societal foreknowledge that we as a nation are headed for disaster; and second, a more personal, direct knowledge that Chris and Jason embody through the devastating loss of their friendship, well-being, and freedom" (Mohler, McMahon and Román, 2016: 81). Building on this key insight, I suggest that the tensions of 2000 and 2008 also underline one of the key concerns with which the play approaches the experience of labor, that is, the intergenerational transmission of class inequalities. The eight years that compose the life span of the play's diegesis do not constitute a generation, but the trope of passing time allows Nottage to draw attention to the historical evolution of structures of disadvantage. Most importantly, Nottage utilizes this structure to demonstrate how the characters *remember* and *narrate* the past, and how the ironies, elisions and blindspots of this recall can shape, support but also often undermine their efforts at mobilization. As such, Nottage's formal choices do not simply create dramatic tension; they are a vital part of her effort to contextualize the crises of the twenty-first century, and to understand their uniqueness *and* their continuities against a longer history of labor relations.

Sweat's depiction of class reproduction is complex: on the one hand, the reproduction of manual labor from one generation to another appears to function in line with what Paul Willis, in his groundbreaking *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, called "damnation" (3), rendering the very possibility of upward mobility "so remote as to be meaningless" (126). On the other, Nottage is interested in the interaction between the political processes that sustain class inequality, and the everyday practices through which that inequality is modified, contested, or, as Willis argues, appropriated as a form of (often racialized and gendered) resistance by members of the working class. Indeed, in interviews, Nottage is clear that her play does not pit the innocent against the ill-intentioned: "everyone on that stage in some way is culpable," she notes, "and takes responsibility for the outcome. Some more than others, certainly, but I think that that's what I was interested in" (Brown 2016). *Sweat*'s characters thus exemplify the key concerns of social theory *and* tragic drama: their shared investment in the interplay between structure and individuality, or prophecy and agency.

In what follows, I will examine this interplay in the context of generational transmission and its changing politics of gender, the racial and national tensions that fracture possibilities of class-based solidarity, and the bodily experiences that accompany both industrialization and de-industrialization. Throughout, I will draw attention to how past experiences of labor are remembered, as well as how they are narrated, ultimately underlining the extent to which life history narrative itself becomes the predominant medium for claiming the right to stable, protected employment. In the conclusion, I will think through the possibilities and limits of Nottage's realism.

2. GENDER, GENERATIONS, AND LABOR'S MEMORY

The key forms of generational transmission that structure *Sweat* are maternal, as Olstead's is the shared workplace of Cynthia and her son Chris, and Tracey and her son Jason. Marking the passage of time are Cynthia, Tracey, and Jessie's birthdays; it is through the celebration of Tracey's birthday that we are introduced to the group, through the celebration of Jessie's that we witness the tensions brought about by Cynthia's promotion, and through the absence of Cynthia's celebration that we recognize communal bonds gone astray. It is not a coincidence that Nottage chooses to map the play's central plot progress onto markers in the women's life-span development, because the women's youth, their partnerships, their experiences of parenting and ultimately the ways in which they register aging are all linked to labor. In contrast, men are largely absent from this picture.

Tracey's husband Hank has died young. Jessie is divorced and her husband Dan has remarried. And Cynthia's husband Brucie is estranged from his family, the result of a pattern of substance abuse that was precipitated by the lockout at the textile mill where he worked. In *Sweat*, in other words, women are the primary breadwinners, thus redressing the middle-class tableau of women as (unpaid) household laborers, as well as a working class tableau that might separate a male-dominated industrial economy from a female-dominated service economy.

Paternal transmission is not entirely absent from this picture, but it is telling that the only instance in which fatherhood, working class politics, and pride are joined together is through the idiom of childhood fantasy. In the second act, both Brucie and Chris have been locked out of their respective workplaces; whereas Brucie is going through a particularly trying spell of hopelessness, his son has faith in the value of collective bargaining. "You taught me how to throw a rock" (Nottage 2017: 87), Chris reminds Brucie, recalling a resonant image from his childhood:

> CHRIS: There was this one night you had a big meeting at the house.
>
> BRUCIE: //Yeah –
>
> CHRIS: Like ten-fifteen guys. It was loud, like a street brawl. I was hiding in the doorway, I had no idea what you guys were talking about, but it felt like it was gonna get ugly –
>
> BRUCIE: It was when Bobby Holden lost his hand in the mill.
>
> CHRIS: And you were all shouting about how you were gonna vote if they didn't meet your demands.
>
> BRUCIE: That's right.
>
> CHRIS: And suddenly you stood up, and for like a second you looked like another man, bigger, like a Transformer, and when you spoke everyone got real calm and began nodding. You said, um… "We… we will not continue to bear our backs for them to strike us down." (87-88)

In Chris's recollection, Brucie is "another man," an extra-human "Transformer" who rallies his coworkers. Chris adds that he later witnessed the same men picketing outside the textile mill, looking "like warriors, arms linked, standing together" (88), a show of solidarity that he invokes as the moral grounds of his own conviction that it is necessary for Olstead workers to "stand together." In these brief excerpts, the association between labor and masculinity is linked to the strength derived from collectivity, and illustrated with extra-daily metaphors of linked warriors and towering Transformers. Nottage's decision to represent working-class masculinity through the lens of a childhood memory is complicated; this move renders the romance with masculine labor into an emblem from an almost mythical past, and indeed Brucie soon reveals his own ambivalence with regards to working-class solidarity. "It's tough for me to say, I'm union to the end," he tells Chris, "but this don't have to be your fight" (88), later adding that he might prefer to see Chris pursuing school (89).

If this dialogue implicitly frames the school as a counterpoint to the masculine world of the union, however, these gendered associations are hardly elaborated, and all such evidence of the "femininity" of mental labor (Willis, 1977: 148-149) seems outdated in 2000. In Cynthia, Tracey and Jessie's world, women are breadwinners, they are a strong part of the industrial work force. Furthermore, the union mobilization in which they all participate evidences no gender segregation. Throughout *Sweat*, however, Nottage is clear that the gains of second-wave feminism have not only come with particular challenges for women, they also risk reverting back to patriarchal divisions of labor under the pressures of neoliberal capitalism. The scene featuring Cynthia's announcement that she will apply for the management position triggers a conversation about whether Olstead is a malleable workplace that would promote someone from "the floor." Cynthia is hopeful:

> CYNTHIA: It's been a helluva lot better since Olstead's grandson took over –
>
> STAN: Gimme a break. That place hasn't changed since I walked in there in '69. Not a lightbulb, not one single nut or bolt. As a matter of fact it hasn't changed much since my grandfather began working there in '22. Good luck, sweetheart. I don't know him, but I can tell you that Olstead's grandson is the same brand of asshole as all of 'em, stuffing his pockets, rather than improving the floor.

CYNTHIA: //Word.

STAN: Now, the old man, he used to be on the floor every single day. I didn't like him, but I respected him for it. You know why?

TRACEY: He was a prick and a perv –

STAN: Because he knew what was going on, and you can only know that by being there. A machine was broken, he knew. A worker was having trouble, he knew. You don't see the young guys out there. They find it offensive to be on the floor with their Wharton MBAs. And the problem is they don't wanna get their feet dirty, their diplomas soiled with sweat… or understand the real cost, the human cost of making their shitty product. (25-26)

In this excerpt, two forms of intergenerational transmission are pitted against one another, with Olstead's family history featuring the paternal transfer of wealth, and Stan's featuring that of poverty. The shifting nature of Olstead's management captures one of the key transformations of American labor in the early twentieth century, encapsulated in Frederick Winslow Taylor's "Principles of Scientific Management." Taylorism, as it has come to be known, replaces the human supervision of labor (here embodied by the elder Olstead's ubiquity on the factory floor) with a more "rational" and distanced management (likewise embodied by the MBA-holding younger generation). The results are far ranging. Workers are responsible for small-scale and repetitive tasks that do not supply them with a comprehensive understanding of the broader production process; this renders them both less skilled *and* dependent on the rhythms of mechanical instruments, a mind-numbing process best captured in Charlie Chaplin's assembly line dance in *Modern Times*.

For Stan, the elder Olstead's human presence does not garner affection, but it does inspire respect when compared to the newer generation's detachment. Yet Nottage does not allow the audience to indulge in the wholesomeness that Stan associates with this memory. The "presence" that Stan remembers as an expression of responsible micro-management, Tracey remembers as an irksome supervisor preying on women. Tracey's comment is brief, as she, like Cynthia earlier, is sharply interrupted by Stan. Her implications, however, are clear: "the real cost" of working at Olstead's can only be universalized as a "human cost" at the expense of women's memories. The transition from Olstead elder to Olstead younger may represent the introduction of ever-finer methods of discipline in the American workplace, but these changes can simultaneously offer women the relief of having been released from other forms of abusive control. The fact that Tracey cannot fully articulate her disturbing memory is evidence of how easily gender can be sidelined in the collective need to condemn the profit motive, encapsulated in the trans-generational Olstead manager who is busy "stuffing his pockets, rather than improving the floor." Put differently, Nottage's goal is less to condemn Stan for colluding in the silencing of Tracey's memory, than to underline the extent to which *memory*, with all of its subjective blindspots, cross-references, elisions and emphases, is at stake in the characters' narrative attempts at making sense of their exploitation.

The next section will engage the racial dimensions of this memory politics, but where gender is concerned, a final and equally fleeting comment will round out how Nottage approaches not only the past but also the present politics of the gendered division of labor. As I have suggested, *Sweat* presents Cynthia, Tracey, and Jessie's generation as one of dual-breadwinner households, where both men and women work. This is partly a reflection of the fact that the working class cannot afford the gender prototypes underwriting the middle-class division of labor, but this financial necessity does not erase the women's pride as organized members of the paid labor force. The few glimpses that Nottage provides from the next generation, however, indicate that this hard-won status risks dissolution. There are no women who belong to Chris and Jason's generation, but there are two brief references to Chris's relationship with Monique, the more fleshed out of which depicts an overly demanding girlfriend:

CHRIS: I told my girl that things were gonna be tight for a little while. And she's all like, "What does that mean for us?" I break it down. It's gonna get real. And she's like, "Well, you need to find another job, playa." I tell her that's what I'm trying to do. But she got that old-school mentality, she wants what she wants in the moment, and can't be thinking about tomorrow. Yo, she was too much work for a man outta

> work. She was plenty happy when I was a paycheck, numbers and pretty things, but the minute I ask her to borrow twenty dollars to put a little gas in the car she treats me like I've broken into her crib. What's that about? (98)

Since *Sweat* never introduces us to Monique, nor offers a broader view of her world, Chris's comments are the play's only window into the second generation's view of heterosexual partnerships. The contrast with the previous generation's division of labor is stark: In Chris's story, he and Monique are not co-workers; he labors, she consumes. Moreover, the figure of Monique seems to embody a full-fledged transformation of intimacy under neoliberalism, as love, affection, and partnership themselves appear to be measured in terms of profit. Intimacy, in Chris's account, constitutes "work" in the marketplace of human relationships.

A feminist analysis might read between Chris's lines, endowing Monique with a different set of desires and needs. In the world of *Sweat*, protracted lockouts wreak havoc on families, including Chris's own. Cynthia and Brucie's relationship breaks up beneath the pressures of Brucie's unemployment and subsequent substance abuse, and the first mention of Brucie's damage involves Cynthia's narration of how he has stolen items from her home, a space in which he is no longer allowed and whose mortgage now lies squarely on her shoulders. Monique's concern for how the Olstead lockout will impact her and Chris's relationship, her impatience with the prolongation of this impasse, and her insistence on financial autonomy speak to a set of contextual fears and precautions. Perhaps most significant, however, is how *Chris* narrates these conditions, that is, as an outdated dynamic of male breadwinning and female homemaking that puts pressure on "a man outta work." In other words, a dynamic that "revert[s] to the gender templates established in the old economy," (Sweet and Meiksins, 2017: 158) but among the pressures of a new economy. It is perhaps not surprising then that the gendered pressure described by Chris soon precipitates in the play's climactic violence against Oscar, which is egged on by Tracey's explicitly sexualized language of shame: "We will be fucked" (103). What Chris's narrative of Monique reveals is a fear of being unable to live up to standards of working-class masculinity under neoliberal capitalism, as well as the narrative process by which this fear is attributed to the outdated patriarchal assumptions of *women*.

3. RACISM, NATIONALISM, AND LABOR'S "BIOGRAPHY"

How might we make sense of Brucie's ambivalent relationship to collective bargaining? In what ways is his ambivalence informed by the racial politics of working-class solidarity? Moments of class-based intimacy and solidarity permeate *Sweat*, but Nottage is clear that racial tensions persist just below the surface of late neoliberal capitalism's seemingly uniform ills. In an early scene featuring Jason and Chris chatting with Stan about their respective financial woes, the duo's long-term economic plans reveal key disparities in how they perceive their lives, as well as each other's choices. Jason's plan is to retire from Olstead's with a decent pension, "buy a condo in Myrtle Beach, open a Dunkin' Donuts and live my life" (32). Chris, on the other hand, feels stretched between the demands of his "new lady" and the tuition that he is trying to save to enroll in a teaching program at Albright College (29-30). This final item catches Jason off guard and he declares it to be a poor choice, as the local high school is severely underfunded and resembles "a prison yard" (30), promising little in the way of financial security. Chris, however, is unequivocal:

> CHRIS: That's cool. Good for them. But, I kinda wanna do something a little different than my moms and pops. Yo, I got aspirations. There it is. And I won't apologize.
>
> JASON: You got aspirations? What is this, Black History Month?
>
> CHRIS: As a matter of fact, it is. You got a problem with that?
>
> JASON: If we're being perfectly honest, I get a little tired with the syrupy commercials. Actually, it shouldn't be called Black History Month, it should be called "Make White People Feel Guilty Month." Right, Stan?
>
> STAN: Don't pull me into this.
>
> JASON: And how come there's no White History Month?
>
> CHRIS: Psh. I'm gonna let you ponder that question. Which may be a little difficult for you, I know, and I'm sorry.

JASON: Fuck you. You haven't even gone to college, and you're already an asshole. (31)

Shortly after this heightened exchange, Nottage makes clear that Jason's casually offensive comments are connected to his perceived abandonment. Jason is upset that Chris's "aspirations" are not only unknown to him, but exclude him from his friend's desired life trajectory, a fact that becomes clear when he later opines: "What about me?" (32) What Jason's initial reaction reveals, however, is how perceptions of social mobility are deeply intertwined with racial history. Chris's desire is for educational opportunities that might yield an alternative career, although it is clear that higher education no longer corresponds to a higher income, much less middle-class status in twenty-first-century Reading. Nonetheless, the implicit dichotomy between manual and intellectual labor immediately sparks Jason's racial backlash, as he paints Chris's middle-class ambitions as a caricaturized program for universal racial uplift. For Jason, this program comes at the expense of white dignity and self-certainty, engendering anxiety over a series of imagined structural advantages for minorities that Jason himself does not voice, but his mother, Tracey, later does: "They get tax breaks or something" (48). This racialized paranoia exists alongside Jason and Chris's deep affection for and intimacy with one another, thus transforming Jason's fear of being condescended to by his newly mobile friend into a casual denial of the foundational traumas that permeate African-American history.

The tensions released by this brief exchange reveal a key historical fault-line of the American working class, but Nottage is also quick to triangulate this tension. Embedded within Chris and Jason's brief exchange is the "quiet but visible presence" of Oscar: "Throughout the scene," the stage directions note, "Oscar scraps gum from the bottom of the tables. It is an unpleasant task, but Oscar is focused and determined" (29). This task is significant, as it demonstrates that the release that Stan's bar promises to Olstead laborers at the end of a long workday requires its own infrastructure of labor. Where does Oscar stand in relation to the fraught racial history at stake in Chris and Jason's conversation? This is a question that permeates *Sweat*, as the characters repeatedly measure their own classed, racial *and* national belongings against their perceptions of Oscar's affiliations. What is interesting about Oscar's entry into the world of Olstead's Metal Tubing, however, is that it builds on existing paradigms of national anxiety and working-class solidarity.

This dynamic is visible in Stan and Brucie's conversation in the next scene. Brucie and his coworkers have been locked out of their workplace, a textile mill, for 93 weeks, and negotiations have stalled over the union's insistence that the workers' retirement packages remain in place. In the absence of their regular workforce, the managers have been hiring short-term employees without benefits, "mostly Spanish cats" (36) who are not only underpaid and routinely dismissed every few months, but are also shunned for crossing picket lines. Brucie dismisses these "temps," but it is soon clear that he himself has been accused of compromising the integrity of previous generations of labor:

> BRUCIE: Last week, I was at the union office signing up for some bullshit training and this old white cat, whatever, gets in my face, talking about how we took his job. We? I asked him who he was talking about, and he pointed at me. ME?... Like I'm fresh off the boat or some shit. He don't know my biography. October 2nd, 1952, my father picked his last bale of cotton. He packed his razor and a Bible and headed North. Ten days later he had a job at Dixon's Hosieries. He clawed his way up from the filth of the yard to Union rep, fighting for fucking assholes just like that cat. So, I don't understand it. (37-38)

Brucie's anecdote reveals that the nationalist resentment that scorns temporary Latino laborers like Oscar is repeating an earlier trope: that of the lingering resentment directed at black factory labor in the urban North, a history that the story of Brucie's father connects to the Great Migration, the mass movement of African-Americans to Northern metropolises in the period after the Second World War. The "old white cat" that confronts Brucie displays how the stigma of being "fresh off the boat" is never about an individual's geographic origins but about an ever-shifting racial imaginary of deserving vs. usurping laborers.

Brucie's emphatic "We?" and "ME?" index his mounting shock at having been designated an undeserving laborer by an older white man. As Stephen Sweet and Peter Meiksins point out, however, the history of American labor unions is rife with such designations, and African-Americans are often excluded from union organizing in the aftermath of the Civil War. Well after the First World War, Sweet and Meiksins note, "the racial hostilities

that permeated American culture were strategically exploited by employers in some parts of the country, using African Americans as strikebreakers or threatening to replace low-wage white workers with African Americans unless workers acquiesced to management's terms" (2017: 183). In later decades, the formula remained the same but the specific racial geometry of exploitation changed, such that recent immigrants came to embody the new threat of crossed picket lines and broken strikes. For the recently dispossessed characters in *Sweat*, this history lingers as a disavowed palimpsest and Oscar becomes the latest in a long line of unjust appropriators who seemingly compromise collective labor struggle for personal gain.

Tellingly, the characters' reactions to Oscar often emerge in the form of vindications of earlier generations' relationships to labor. For example, when Oscar tells Tracey about an Olstead flier at the Centro Hispano recruiting shippers and packers, Tracey is initially incredulous, and paints the company as a tight-knit community, arguing that "You gotta know somebody to get in. My Dad worked there, I work there and my son works there" (48). Soon, it becomes clear that Tracey's vision of this "community" extends to the broader category of "American" workers under threat from "you guys coming over here" (49). Oscar is quick to inform her that he was born and raised in Berks County, but Tracey's reply soon reveals that, once again, geography is irrelevant to the emotional sources that feed her racial resentment. What is at stake, rather, is the loss of a sense of urban belonging and pride:

> TRACEY: Well, my family's been here a long time. Since the twenties, okay? They built the house that I live in. They built this town. My grandfather was German, and he could build anything. Cabinets, fine furniture, anything. He had these amazing hands… And those hands, let me tell you, they were solid, worker hands, you know, and they really, really knew how to make things. Beautiful things. I'm not talking about now, how you got these guys who can patch a hole with spackle and think they're the shit. My grandfather was the real thing. A craftsman… (49)

This excerpt is from Tracey's lengthy monologue, which is by far the longest speech in *Sweat*. As Tracey's recollections continue, she remembers dressing up to go downtown with her grandfather, where he would show her the woodwork that he had produced for the city's office buildings and banks, and point out the small details, like "an apple blossom" (49), that he had carved into the wood just for her enjoyment. "That's what I'm talking about" (49) Tracey says, and it is clear that this item of *personal beauty*, planted in the midst of an instrumentally built environment, epitomizes skilled and dignified labor.

The fact that Nottage allows Tracey's recollections such space and historicity is worthy of note: this romantic longing for rightful origins, skilled artistry, material beauty, and urban belonging establishes a deeper history of compromised nostalgia in *Sweat*, one that extends further back than the play's earlier temporal zone, 2000. I call this nostalgia compromised, for like the shorter-term irony outlined by Elkin Mohler, it cannot recognize the larger forces at work in the de-skilling of American labor, a process that Tracey can only frame as the personal failure of contemporary (and for her, racialized) laborers "who patch a hole with spackle and think they're the shit." For Tracey, generational comparison and the memory of older forms of working-class labor forms the basis for both experiencing deindustrialization's traumas, and seamlessly legitimizing its racisms.

Moreover, it is not only the content of Tracey's monologue that matters, but also its form. In conversation with playwright David Henry Hwang, Nottage notes that in constructing *Sweat*, she "wanted every person to have an aria," that is, despite the play's structure as an ensemble piece, "every scene focuses on a different person's relationship to that factory and to self" (Glasberg 2017). Tracey's effort to claim her rightful ownership over the labor performed in Olstead's Metal Tubing thus reveals a key dynamic of labor struggle in *Sweat*: ultimately, it is *personal history*, or what Brucie calls "biography," that serves as all of the characters' predominant mediums for claiming *the right to work*. Nottage's repeated use of the trope of characters' justifying their claims to labor with reference to their familial lineages is a testament to this dynamic. This is not to suggest, of course, that Cynthia, Tracey, and Jessie are not aware of the havoc that NAFTA has begun to inflict on their lives, nor that they are uninterested in articulating a universal claim to stable, protected employment. Rather, the point is that such an articulation cannot be distinguished from personal biography, familial history, and the sedimentation of this past

in their respective bodies. As such, their political projects carry all of the tensions and uncertainties associated with the racial resentments and injuries that pattern this history.

4. BODILY SEDIMENTATION, HEALING, AND INJURY

Sherry Lee Linkon has noted that intergenerational transmission is central to "the identity narratives of deindustrialization literature" (2018: 58), a growing body of writing of which *Sweat* is a key part. The fact that "biography" is not just a matter of discursive elaboration, however, becomes evident in those moments when characters voice their experiences of exhaustion and fatigue, what Paul Connerton (1989) would identify as the stratified nature of habit memory. Shortly after her promotion, Cynthia joins her friends at the bar and recounts her first day as a member of Olstead management:

> CYNTHIA:… First day, I park. Get out, and immediately head for the floor, it's a reflex. I just do it, get to the door, same as usual, I smell the oil and metal dust, I hear the machinery churning and feel the energy of the room. I go to my station, say, "Hey Lance, Becky," get ready, my body knows it's there to pack tubes. That's what I do.
>
> STAN: //That's what you do.
>
> CYNTHIA: I fire up the machine, but everyone is looking at me, and Tracey says, "What the fuck you doing here?" Then I remember. I can go sit down.
>
> JESSIE: //Yes, you can.
>
> CYNTHIA: I'm not wearing my Carhartt, not gonna be on my feet for ten hours, I loosen my support belt, I don't have to worry about my fıngers cramping or the blood blister on my left foot. I can stop sweating because goddamn the office has air-conditioning. These muthafuckers got air-conditioning. (53)

As Cynthia's comments make clear, the bodily sedimentation of classed dispositions, an orientation towards the world that Pierre Bourdieu (1990) captured through his use of the term *habitus*, is often best visible in those moments when that individual's orientation shifts, when the "field" in which they are habituated to social play grows to encompass alternative spaces of sociality, in this case, the office. Not coincidentally, Cynthia's narrative of this new position is also focused on her bodily experience: her outfit has changed, her lower back no longer requires the protection of a support belt, and she anticipates her cramped fingers and blistered feet healing once her body habituates to the soothing embodiment of being able to sit while at work.

In the excerpt above, Cynthia's narration of the experience of her "first day" includes the wholehearted participation of Jessie and Stan. Throughout *Sweat,* Nottage uses the (//) symbol to indicate overlapping dialogue; this is one of the ways she means for the actors to capture the rhythmic patterns of bar conversation. The coinciding voices signaled by the // reveal a small community invested in Cynthia's success, her bodily healing celebrated by those who not only care about her wellbeing, but whose own bodily histories have unfolded in close proximity to hers. In *Sweat*'s second scene, for example, we learn that Stan walks "with a pronounced limp, an old bothersome injury" (15). It is revealed later, during his conversation with Brucie, that Stan sustained the injury while working at Olstead's:

> STAN: Getting injured was the best thing that ever happened to me. Got me out of that vortex. Three generations on the floor. Loyal as hell, I never imagined working anywhere else. I get injured. I'm in the hospital for nearly two months. I can't walk. Can't feel my toes. Not one of those Olstead fuckers called to check on me, to say, "I'm sorry for not fixing the machine." They knew that machine was trouble. Ramsey, Smitz – everyone wrote it up. (36)

Stan's comments illustrate the duality of the bodily sedimentation experienced by Olstead laborers. On the one hand, their bodies are vulnerable to the sudden trauma of injury, of corporeal damage that causes them to lose abilities and sensations. On the other, there is predictability to this trauma, an obviousness that is as banal as it is preventable. Stan's injury is a heightened version of the daily pain that Cynthia describes earlier on: "Don't know about you, but I can feel my body slowing down, a little every day," she tells her coworkers to justify her

decision to apply for the office position, adding, "I go home and my hands are frozen, I can't even hold a frying pan. I gotta rub 'em together for an hour before they even move" (25). In *Sweat*, bodies grow numb from the passage of time, so much so that the abrupt damage of a workplace injury can seem like a stroke of luck.

Cynthia, Stan, and Jessie's shared celebration of bodily healing is made possible in part because of its juxtaposition with an entirely different category of embodiment: the air conditioned offices of management. On her first day, Cynthia is as shocked by the comfortable environment in the office as she is by how little she knows about the people who populate it. "It's like looking at a map," she says, "and discovering that you're only just a few miles away from the ocean. But you didn't know because it was on the other side of the damn mountains" (54). Cynthia's metaphor reemerges later in the scene, when Jessie, remembering her teenage dreams of "bum[ming] along the hippie trail" (56), recites her list of unrealized destinations: "Istanbul, Tehran, Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar, Lahore, Kathmandu" (56). When Chris and Jason ask her why this expedition never came to pass, Jessie replies that she "started working, met Dan, I guess I got caught in the riptide, couldn't get back to shore" (56). In this way, Jessie transforms Cynthia's metaphor of the ocean as an experience of revelation into a metaphor of the ocean as a space of danger that threatens to submerge those who remain in it for too long.

The ocean's flexibility as a metaphor is an apt way to characterize Cynthia's own unrealized comforts, post-promotion. Cynthia hardly enjoys her discovery of the "ocean" before beginning to feel as though she was never intended to partake in the comforts of management: "I wonder if they gave me this job on purpose," (77) she muses to Stan, after watching her coworkers get locked out of Olstead's. She adds: "Pin a target on me so that they can stay in their air-conditioned offices." That Cynthia hasn't "slept in… in over a week" (78) is a testament to the renewed bodily anxieties that structure her experience of neoliberal capitalism. The cramped fingers and blistered feet of the floor have given way to the sleep-destroying anxiety of achieving life-long desires and ambitions but only in return for dispossessing those who accompanied her along that journey.

Ultimately, if there is one figure that embodies the helplessness of Cynthia's situation, if not the paradox that renders Stan's injury "the best thing that ever happened to [him]," it is Freddy Brunner, the long-term Olstead employee. Early on in the play, Stan tells the others that Freddy has burned down his own house (18). When they respond incredulously, he explains that Freddy's wife had left him, and that he was "up to his neck in fucking debt" (19). Freddy tried to shoot himself, Stan adds, but sustained a wound instead, eventually collapsing on his neighbor's lawn. As the others digest this story, the discussion quickly turns to whether it is legal to set one's own house on fire. "Dunno," Stan responds, "I think you need a permit" (20), to which both Cynthia and Tracey jokingly respond by contemplating the destruction of their own homes, in Cynthia's words, a "crappy little money trap."

Nottage folds Freddy's story into a late night conversation at the bar, and duly disperses the shock and grief that is briefly sustained in the wake of Stan's report. Yet there remains an ethics of care in how *Sweat* ultimately handles Freddy's story, neither dismissing its tragedy, nor sensationalizing its singularity. The story comes back to haunt Cynthia during her post-promotion conversation with Stan:

> CYNTHIA (*Emotionally*):… You remember about seven months ago? Remember when Freddy Brunner burned down his house?
>
> STAN: Of course.
>
> CYNTHIA: We thought he was crazy.
>
> STAN: Yeah.
>
> CYNTHIA: Was he? (79)

Implicit in Cynthia's dismissal of the group's earlier diagnosis is an acute awareness of the forms of valuation that underwrite both the body and property under capitalism. Freddy has sought to destroy his home, the implied source of his debt, before attempting to take his own life. As Cynthia and Tracey digest this news, however, they automatically wonder whether Freddy has the legal *right* to destroy anything other than his own body. The destruction of property, it turns out, requires the agency of a mediating entity. Cynthia and Tracey

wonder whether hiring others to burn down their homes might short-circuit this mediation and result in profit. Resonating with Stan's framing of his injury as a serendipitous release from the Olstead "vortex," their comments lay bare the fragile, paradoxical relationship between injury and profit, suffering and survival.

Freddy's body is not shielded by the mediation that protects the "proper" destruction of his home, nor does it betray a connection between self-annihilation and some sort of revenue. Freddy's attempted suicide, in other words, exceeds the logic of entrepreneurialism, the shadow of which haunts that other dramatic instance of self-destruction under capitalism: traveling salesman Willy Loman's suicide in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The first time that Linda Loman mentions Willy's attempts to kill himself to their boys, it is because an insurance inspector has told her that Willy's car accidents were self-sustained. In the play's final funeral scene, Linda addresses her dead husband, pleading with him to explain why he would kill himself just when they had "made the last payment on the house" (Miller, 2000: 112). Death, in the modern drama of capitalism, is inextricably linked to a logic of profit, and not only because it triggers the acquisition of wealth through inheritance. Rather, in these plays, the body itself is always already leveraged, an asset that exists in a precarious space between gain and loss.

5. CONCLUSION

My reference to *Death of a Salesman* is not arbitrary, as Nottage herself often identifies Miller's oeuvre as a source of inspiration for *Sweat*. "When Arthur Miller was writing," she tells David Henry Hwang, "he certainly had that urgency of being from a marginalized group trying to give urgency to the voices of those people" (Glasberg). In *Death of a Salesman*, the urgent narrator is Willy Loman, who watches helplessly as postwar American salesmanship devalues the skills that he has spent a lifetime honing. In yet another round of generational comparisons, Willy compares the image of the turn-of-the-century American pioneer to his own career as an early twentieth century salesman who got by on charm and personality, to newer discourses of customer satisfaction and rational management. Over the course of the play, Willy reminisces about a time when "personal attractiveness" (Miller 2000: 11) could translate into profit, and marvels at his sons' inability to get ahead despite their being endowed, in his estimation, with so much of it.

As Willy's ruminations transition between past and present, however, Miller is clear that this journey is both subjective and internal, and he mandates an expressionistic production strategy that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. In this he builds on key plays from the interwar American drama of capitalism, including Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal,* Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape,* and Karel Capek's *Rossum's Universal Robots*, that rely on expressionism to depict the bodily sedimentation of alienated labor, as well as the helplessness of the laborer faced with industrial, profit-driven reason. Nottage's *Sweat*, in contrast, is a realistic play, and relies on the formal cues of docudrama, such as projections of news items that clearly identify (historical) time and place at the onset of each scene. The play is as concerned with remembrance as *Death of a Salesman*, but there is no specific stage language for representing memory's distortions. This choice, coupled with the playwright's emphasis on each character having an "aria," in other words, a monologue that draws on their personal history, contributes to what David Román calls Nottage's "realist authenticity" (Mohler, McMahon and Román, 2016: 91).

Sweat's documentary underpinnings are a significant part of the play's political claim. In recounting her experiences in Reading, Nottage notes that the workers whom she met "wanted to go on record" (Brown), and that, contrary to her own expectations, "a whole army showed up to tell their stories" (Glasberg). In many ways, *Sweat* is that record, and it chronicles the pride and shame, as well as the anger and abandonment left behind by deindustrialization and globalization, a weakened welfare state and an anti-union culture, and undemocratic workplaces. At the same time, the emphasis on monologue-heavy realism does risk instituting an inevitable connection between life history narrative and labor protest, even as Nottage is at pains to demonstrate the subjective nature of the former, as well as its compromised connection to the latter. In many ways then, *Sweat* is a record of precisely these tensions, and underlines the difficulty of approximating any aesthetic form as a direct corollary for progressive politics.

Shortly before the play's climactic violence, Stan has an odd, uncharacteristically expressive moment in which he tells Chris and Jason that perhaps Reading is no longer their home. While participating in the play's repeated use of generational comparison, he pushes this genealogical logic to its limits, saying "sometimes I think we forget that we're meant to pick up and go when the well runs dry. Our ancestors knew that" (96). As Chris and Jason nod, however, he adds that "nostalgia's a disease. I'm not going to be one of those guys who surrenders to it" (97), thus underlining the double-edged gifts of history and memory. The play's final scene, set in 2008, is doubly poignant in light of these comments. Eight years ago, Stan sustained a traumatic brain injury while trying to protect Oscar from Chris and Jason's blows, and this condition has rendered ancestral migration a near impossibility. In the process, however, he has acquired a new lineage in Oscar, who now manages the bar and takes care of him. The "fractured togetherness" (112) that Nottage mandates for the final scene, which places Chris, Jason, Stan and Oscar in the same room, silently contemplating the past, balances the play's verbosity with a brief moment of hopeful lyricism that is as promising as it is painful.

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