

Compounded Oppressions and Intersections of Identities in Nottage's Sweat

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Abstract

Intersectionality has become the primary analytic tool in feminist and anti-racist scholarship to understand identity and oppression. This article critically interrogates the assumptions of intersectionality while underpinning white man's supremacy and privilege in order to focus on the oppressed position of immigrant, African-American, and menial workers. In Lynn Nottage's Sweat the white people enjoys the privileged position by belittling the underdogs. The social components like class, gender, race, and their discursive techniques work together to form and consolidate such an oppressed position. While looking from the perspective of feminism, this article encapsulates the equation mediated by multiple identity locations intersecting each other. The result of such an intersection of class, race and gender produces compound oppression which is the stigma of American democracy.

Keywords: Intersectionality, migrant workers, oppression, Sweat, and Whites' privilege

Introduction: Locating Nottage's Sweat Activism

Sweat is one of Lynn Nottage's angry plays that shows massive anger against structural discrimination over the underdogs in America. On the prima facie, *Sweat* also sheds light on race, class and gender and their spillover effects in American life. It implicitly interrogates the white privileged position among workers and migrants. As an attempt to probe over the structural oppression, the play brings African American feminists' concern for the intersection of race, class and gender on the board. Using Kimberly Crenshaw's idea of identity as a site of intersection of forces, the paper criticizes white privileged position as a granted identity.

White privilege refers to unearned social advantages of people that they get by birth breeding discrimination along the class and racial line. The term has repeatedly been circulated in race studies to denote the constellation of advantages that white people have over blacks, Hispanics, indigenous and other minority in the US.

The paper examines how Lynn Nottage investigates white privilege and its spillover effects in the play, *Sweat*. Her concern is on how this privilege position becomes a category to condition's one's own identity. Moreover, the characters fail to recognize these advantages/disadvantages in either way. Which characters recognize and call out white privilege and why? Why is it important to recognize

privilege based on things like race, gender, sexual orientation, ability and class or any other ways where discrimination occurs due to inheritance or given aspects and qualities of life? To investigate these issues I will examine four characters—Cynthiya Bruce, Trecey and Jason—and their life in a factory in Pennsylvania Redding. In other words, my purpose here is to analyze the position of these four characters as a product intersection of race, class and race.

Intersectionality designates a concept to explain a condition of an individual or social class who negotiate with multiple locations of identities like race, class, gender or any other identity indicators. As a legal term, intersectionality gets into the humanities from the work of African American lawyer Kimberle Crenshaw in the late 1980s. Since then, the term has been used more broadly to understand identity. The black feminist movement during 1970s and 80s provided a theoretical basis for the approach known as intersectionality. Crenshaw systematically explained the multiple forces working to form an identity in her article, "Mapping the Margin." She used the term intersectionality to refer to the multiple facade of oppression against colored women: "multiple dimensions of inequality do not exist separately from one another but rather are constructed in relation to one another" (1241). Hence, intersectionality has become, as Rodrick Furgeson understands, "a signature feature of the critical vocabularies of queer studies and academic feminism, [in] gender studies, ethnic studies, American studies, sociology, literature, history and so on" (91). As it has become a major methodological tool to study identity positions across the disciplines, it has a variety of definitions to accommodate namely legal, cultural, political and ethical studies.

Kathy Davis, in an article, "Intersectionality in Translation Perspective" understands the idea as a theory that goes beyond academic buzzword to something significant that offers new potential perspectives for the connectivity of a broad range of social justice and ethical issues. In fact, intersectionality offers a possibility to be a new paradigm for the scientific community through its some "set of terms, theoretical interventions, premises, problem definition and suggested solutions" (20). Intersectionality becomes a relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations where one does not exclude the other rather all the modalities work together to form a living experience, an identity for that matter. In other words, intersectionality explains the complex relationship between race, class, and gender. In understanding it Jennifer Nash argues it has become a primary tool for feminist and anti-racist scholars to "provide a voice to respond to the critics of identity politics" (2). Identity in this approach is understood as a site formed through and by different factors working at the same time.

Set in the decaying industrial city, Pennsylvania, *Sweat* shows decades of concessions, deindustrialization and plant shutdowns have done to the living

standards and social conditions—and texture of existence—of millions of workers and their families. Cynthia and Tracey are both working class women and best friends, living in the same town and working at the same factory. How are Cynthia and Tracey's backgrounds, identities and circumstances similar? Do they have the exact same opportunities at work? How do you think Cynthia would answer this question? How do you think Tracey would respond? Similarly, Chris and Jason are the same age. They are best friends who grew up together in the same town and whose parents had the same jobs and level of education. Chris and Jason fares the same predicament; so do Cynthia and Bruce. Their opportunities and constraints are similar yet they experience discrimination in different ways. Looking into their lives, working condition, situations and circumstances where they live and work reveal to the readers that they negotiate their identity in multiple ways. Nottage shows the overall trajectory in the lives of immigrant, poor working class people through these four characters in the play. The characters and story line is fictional, yet these are the product of the intensive research and interviews conducted by author.

The play is situated within a definite time and place, the action framed by exact dates that introduce, via supertitles, the various scenes in the narrative. Much of the action is set in the year 2000. A brief prologue, however, takes place in 2008. A parole officer is interviewing two young men, Jason and Chris, who have just been released from prison for a crime which is not further explained at that point. The play then proceeds to explore the background, leading up to events eight years earlier that changed the lives of these and the other characters.

After the introduction of Jason and Chris, the next scene flashes back eight years to a neighborhood bar, where we meet the other characters. They include Tracey and Cynthia, friends and co-workers at a local steel-tubing factory and the mothers of Jason and Chris, respectively. Jessie, another worker, Stan, the local bartender and a veteran worker at the same plant. Oscar is an immigrant from Colombia working as Satan's helper. And, Bruce is estranged husband of Cynthia, who succumbed to despair due to 93 week factory lockout.

The action unfolds over a period of several months. The atmosphere is one of increasing fear and helplessness in the face of the ever-present and mounting threat of a plant shutdown and job losses. At one point Tracey and Cynthia discuss the possibility of applying for a supervisory position in the plant. They both wind up applying, and Cynthia gets the job. Tension continues to grow as the threat of a lockout looms on August 4, 2000. The workers are replaced by scabs. Over the next three months the stresses expand to the boiling point. November 3, 2000 is the fateful day that charts the course of the next eight years for these characters. The final scene, set on October 18, 2008 and including Chris, Jason, Stan and Oscar, brings the various strands of the story together in a grim, unsentimental and

vaguely humanist conclusion.

Nottage shows that workers of different races and nationalities facing the same conditions and challenges. This is not to say that racial and ethnic tensions are ignored in the play. They are present, but they are depicted in a realistic and almost matter-of-fact manner. What emerges from the dialogue and the actual story of these workers and their families is how similar they all are, beneath the surface of their skin color.

Despite changes in the composition of the working class, the basic social issues remain the same. Amidst the tensions between them, all of the characters express, in one fashion or another, their disgust with the existing system and its political representatives. In one scene, in March 2000, characters receive politicians with resentment. In August of that year, one character says that after "watching these candidates talking bullshit, I decided I'm not voting" (42). And all of them agree.

Nottage makes a distinction between the black and white workers she met in Reading that contains a grain of truth if properly understood. The playwright, who is black, told the *LA Times* that "The language they [white workers] were using sounded very familiar to me, language that for 100 years or more African Americans have been using to describe our circumstances. *Sweat* exposes the economic inequalities worsened by the deindustrialization of the United States and argues that the working class's objections are oftentimes subdued through misdirection that grows the felon class.

Drawing primarily on interviews conducted among former and current factory workers in Reading, Pennsylvania, Nottage constructs a play following the deindustrialization of that city. The action follows the workers' reactions to the movement of factories from the United States to Mexico—a move enabled by NAFTA. In a *Theatre Journal* article, "Three Readings of Reading, Pennsylvania" writers Courtney Elkin Mohler and others take reference to the play's debut production as part of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which commissioned it. Mohler evokes the Brechtian elements so often associated with Nottage's work—particularly *Ruined*, which began as a retelling of Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Mohler interprets their usage as an intentional departure from the realism Roman notes, saying, "With a nod toward Brecht's alienation effect, these scene changes disrupted the emotional power of the realistic aspects of Nottage's storytelling and contextualized them within their specific sociopolitical moments" (80). While the play is set in 2000 and 2008 alternately, its emergence during Donald Trump's presidency and the nationalist rhetoric guiding renewed insistence on border walls and travel bans endows the play with a particular timeliness.

In discussing her prevailing impressions while researching the play, Nottage foregrounds the overlapping perception of disenfranchisement across class and

race. Of her interviewees in Reading, Nottage remarks that these were "people who felt helpless, who felt like the American dream that they had so deeply invested in had been suddenly ripped away"

The use of the split stage functions to present these two men's lives as deeply intertwined despite their differences. The play opens with a central mystery: how did these two men get here? What crime(s) did they commit, and where did Jason's white supremacy enter into it? However, the split stage functions as more than a foreshadowing device promising a plot that connects these characters; their parallel positioning onstage also previews what the play will later illustrate—that they are intertwined by systems that disadvantage them both via similarly limited social and economic mobility, yet paradoxically function to divide them in the manner effected by the split stage, along the racial lines indicated visually by their physical difference and the animosity evident in Jason's tattoos.

All these characters are the members with consistent work, and so do not yet have concrete reasons to resent one another. However, within this intimate setting, Nottage establishes slow-burning racism that the audience expects will erupt. Even at this early point, Nottage introduces the specter of racism through the character of Oscar, whose initial onstage appearances are notably ghost-like. He is most often seen, but not heard, and the stage directions state: "*(Oscar, the Colombian-American busboy, twenty-two, hauls in a rack of glasses. He wipes down the bar. He goes about his business, rarely acknowledged by anyone except Stan)*" (Nottage 16). The studied ignoring of Oscar by the bars' patrons, even early in the play, is notable for he represents lower economic class; thus ignoring him means ignoring the whole class. It may initially appear that this work merely functions as realism; after all, Oscar is at work and such work demands the wiping of tables and carrying of boxes, etc. However, in the context of a play, the constant silent movement gains further import, drawing audience eyes to Oscar as a symbolic representative of an underrepresented class of workers, while perversely—given his silent, ghost-like presence—inviting the audience to view him as a threat.

Nottage's mystery framing device and audiences' knowledge of prevailing anti-immigrant attitudes—which often function as anti-Hispanic attitudes—Nottage seeks to discomfit audiences with Oscar's presence and all that might arise from it. Given Nottage's broader effort in the work to make shared oppressions visible to groups otherwise encouraged to separate along lines of race/ethnicity, Oscar's movements might be viewed as a form of inverted black movement. My application of this movement to Oscar, then, is an intentional extension of the intersectional condition of race and class. Oscar's oppression does occur because he is Hispanic, black, poor and working class swat worker.

The racism lurking behind Oscar's initial ghostliness is quickly given voice

among the patrons. Oscar breaks his silence only when directly addressed, and these interactions are shown to be problematic from the beginning. In one early exchange, Tracey, a white woman, stereotypes Oscar.

TRACEY. You Puerto Ricans are burning shit down all over Reading, you gotta know.

OSCAR. Well, I'm Colombian. And I don't know.

TRACEY. Yes, right. (21)

Oscar's reply is venomless, almost polite correction reveals the quotidian nature of the stereotypes Oscar encounters and the care and personal control he must maintain to remain safe. Soon, Tracey's casual racism merges with her envy to begin marring her close friendship with Cynthia, a black woman. Both women attempt to secure a promotion—a management position that would remove them from the physically-taxing work on the floor. Cynthia gets the job. Oddly, when Tracey needs a confidant to share her anxieties about the plant and her envy, she chooses Oscar. She makes these confessions after Oscar reveals that the plant has been advertising openings—unbeknownst to the union—at the Centro Hispano. She tells him that he must be wrong, and then asserts that Cynthia's promotion stems from her race:

TRACEY. Yeah. It sucks. I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudice, but that's how things are going these days. I got eyes. They get tax breaks or something.

OSCAR. I dunno know about that at all. (48).

Throughout this conversation, Tracey demonstrates no awareness that she is sharing these offensive theories with a man who may not identify with her race, and further assumes that Oscar is an immigrant, and does not apologize when he tells her he was in fact born in the area. Instead, she justifies her superior sense of belonging by telling Oscar, "Well, my family's been here a long time. Since the twenties, okay?" (49). Tracey further tries to locate herself:

TREACY. My grandfather was German, and he build anything. Cabinets, fine furniture, anything. He had these amazing hands. Sturdy. Meaty. Real firm. You couldn't shake his hands without feeling his presence feeling his power. . . . I'm not talking about now, how you got these guys who can patch a whole with spackle and think they are the shit. . . . Whatever.

OSCAR. You Okey?

TREACY. Listen, that piece of paper you are holding is an insult, it don't mean anything. (49)

Tracey's angry rant against almost everything is a context through which Nottage makes an argument about the pervasiveness of a perception of invasion among non-Hispanic white working-class communities that the hardships they encounter in the time of deindustrialization are due to their jobs being stolen—not eliminated or outsourced—an attitude that Tracey fails to see as misguided. Her focus on invasive communities redirects her focus away from the business itself and their union-busting tactics. Like many factory workers confronting the realities of deindustrialization, Tracey's cry that they are taking our jobs remains blind to the fact that this is an impossibility. The employee can only take what the employer offers.

While Tracey and, later, her son Jason serve as representatives of white working-class anger and resentment, Nottage develops Oscar as the target of those emotions. When Tracey and the rest of Olstead's threaten strikes and later get locked out, Oscar crosses the picket line. Oscar feels no loyalty to the locked-out workers he sees in the bar. He tells Stan that his father's work as a janitor at the plant did not gain him any access to the union and the behavior of Stan's patrons has done little to endear them to him: "They brush by me without seeing me [. . .] If they don't see me, I don't need to see them" (92). Immediately, the tensions and anger Oscar's actions evoke are revealed; Tracey enters the bar and sees him and hurls insults. Only Stan's intervention prevents the altercation from becoming physical. The scene that follows marks the climax of the play; Jason and Chris attack Oscar, beating him badly, and when Stan attempts to intervene, he receives a blow to the head by a baseball bat, causing a major head wound that will injure him for the rest of his life. This, we learn, is the cause of the prison sentences that have just ended as the play opens.

In the acceleration of the scene toward this violence, the anger directed at Oscar quickly shifts from his behavior to his ethnicity. While he is initially a "scab," Jason escalates, calling him, "That fucking spic" (100). Tracey, Jason's mother, joins in with the stereotype, "So what he's got an apartment filled with seventeen relatives that gotta eat" (100). Tracey eggs on the ire, while Chris initially attempts to deescalate, but once Jason attacks, Chris's attempts at intervention only mean that Oscar's headbutt hits him, rather than Jason. At this, Chris's own anger takes over, leading him to join Jason in beating Oscar. As the scene plays out, the audience becomes aware that they are watching a lynching, one all the more upsetting given the fact that Chris is driven to participate.

In Nottage's words, the American working and middle classes' tendency is to "cannibalize each other" through racial animosity. The play further exposes the psychic effects of capitalism that drive the traumatic monotony of casually racist and classist systems. In their article for *HowlRound*, "Black Women Have Theorized Everything," Sola Bamishigbin and Tia-Simone Gardner argue that

"Nottage is careful to reflect a particular problem of laboring people". She allows us to reflect on the space and time we are living in; the rich characters she has developed reflect a number of lived realities of racism, sexism, classism, mass incarceration and much more.

This observation rings true, and many characters speak of or show through a scene's blocking the physical and mental exhaustion brought about by their labor. However, Nottage also seeks to reveal the ways in which the material realities of mass organizing have changed under NAFTA. That is to say, it is not merely exhaustion that inhibits the characters' motivation to resist, but rather government and corporate strategies that have all but destroyed union clout. She shows her characters to be formidably unionized, and initially the characters have faith that the union negotiations will produce favorable change. They remain prepared to strike and hold out for long periods. However, at the end of Act I, Chris and Jason rush to their workplace, telling Bruce, "Wilson says they moved three of the mills outta the factory over the long weekend" (62). Bruce's sharp reaction, "What?" sums up the situation in this way:

JASON: Don't ask me. All I know is he passed by there about an hour ago to pick up something form his locker, and the machines were gone.

CHRIS: Gone . . .

JASON: Fucking asshole. He's calling everyone.

BRUSE: What are you talking about?

CHRIS: Gone. Removed. // Gone. (62)

The factory moved out without the workers' knowledge, rendering them jobless over a night. What is most striking about this revelation is not the fact of it, which has been foreshadowed throughout the action. Rather, it is Nottage's decision to mire the audience in the same cycle of rumors and dismissals that marks the characters' environment. Thus, when the outsourcing begins in full force, the fact that the characters and the audience have been kept completely in the dark as to management intentions allows the shock and betrayal to hit audiences and characters simultaneously.

The employers never materialize, and Cynthia's liminal position as a new supervisor who still feels she belongs on the floor increasingly reveals itself to be a bargaining tactic by the higher ups; in her effort to preserve as many jobs as possible, Cynthia plays into the management's plan to gouge workers' benefits, reduce their pay by 60%, and extend shift hours (74-5). Fearing a full outsourcing, she urges her friends to take this deal; however, not only is the deal untenable, but her newly attained outsider status earns her only distrust. Once the lockout takes

place, Cynthia begins to suspect her own exploitation, telling Stan, “I wonder if they gave me this job on purpose. Pin a target on me so they can stay in their air-conditioned offices” (77). By presenting Cynthia as a pawn and a target—albeit one who quickly gets wise to her treatment—middle management and the union itself are shown to be ineffectual in a world of globalization.

Nottage seeks to historicize this new reality for her audience by placing the anti-Hispanic public attitude under NAFTA in line with the long history of black labor in the United States—a history she expectedly positions as African diasporic. Brucie, estranged husband of Cynthia, father of Chris, serves as the initial example of the disposable African-American worker. Nottage initially frames Brucie in a negative light because the audience is first introduced to him through Cynthia, who justifies her decision to kick him out by telling the bar of his drug addiction and related theft (17). However, she quickly complicates this negative image. Brucie's union has failed negotiations with his textile mill leave him destitute, and his later recollections of the negotiation process reveal how impossible his situation was: “We offered to take a fifty-percent pay cut, they won't budge, they want us to give up our retirement” (35). These workers have nowhere to go now as they have spent their youth and life in the factory. The reflections become touching:

BRUCIE: I been on the hustle for many years? Worked hard. Right? Had the family. Now, forty-nine.

SATAN: Get outta here.

BRUCIE: Yesh, forty-fucking-nine, but listen, I was thinking the other day, I gotta do this for the next, what? fifteen twenty years. You know this. You know this! Worrying. The hustle, man, my pop didn't go through this shit. I mean, he . . . chocked in everyday until he didn't, went out with a nice package. . . Me, shit, I run the full mile, I put in the time, do the right thing, don't get me wrong, I had some good years . . . But, dude, tell me what I did wrong huh? (36)

Brucie's anger and resentment on being kicked out of the work which they have been doing brings larger historical memory back into the present and they start haunt more than ever.

Long after this history, which seemingly closed with the once substantial victory of union inclusion, Brucie finds himself again discarded, foreshadowing both the similar fate of his family and the rancor Oscar will encounter. As he witnesses Chris recalling his former activism, he has just returned from a disappearance of several days, and his disheveled appearance leads the audience to understand he has been on a bender. He does not recognize Chris's quote, responding simply, “Did I say that?” (88). By the time the audience meets him, Brucie no longer

maintains the hope he once had in collective action.

In revealing the material conditions of deindustrialization and the racism stoked to divide the populace, *Sweat* uses stage projections to make conspicuous absence of the forces truly driving the action: the multinational company heads and trustees and Wall Street investment manipulators. These projections are vital because the characters rarely directly identify the forces behind the job loss and outsourcing. Stan, who functions as the voice of reason throughout the play, attempts to prevent Oscar's beating and redirect the patrons' anger toward the true cause of their misfortunes: "It ain't his fault. Talk to Olstead [the plant owner], his cronies. Fucking Wall Street. Oscar ain't getting rich off your misery" (102). Nottage allows government and corporate interests and processes to operate outside the daily awareness of the majority of her characters.

Conclusion

Sweat represents an equation which consists of the intersectional variables like race, class and gender that works together to position African and migrant workers at the bottom of hierarchy. The four characters in the play are constrained by different forces. In fact, their identity and social position as well as economic horizons are products of race, class, and gender. Their choices and options are not limited to race or class or gender, rather all these categories work together to force an identity in them, which they can't resist.

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