Iperstoria
2025, no. 26
ISSN: 2281-4582

DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2025.i26.1622
iperstoria.it

Exploding Black Patience

Afro-presentism and Fugitive Affect in Lynn Nottage's *POOF!*

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Keywords

American studies

Black time studies

Signifyin(g)

Lynn Nottage

POOF!

Abstract

Lynn Nottage's one-act play *POOF!* (1993) centers on Loureen, a black woman who causes her abusive husband to combust by the power of her voice. In this essay, I employ a critical methodology informed by black time studies, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g), and black feminist thought in order to interpret Loureen's vocal revolt against intimate partner violence as a response to the demands of black patience, a race-based disciplinary device that functions as an antiblack instrument of white supremacy and as the conceptual framework to Julius B. Fleming Jr.'s *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation*. Like the theatre artists and activists of the Civil Rights Movement to whom Fleming devotes his critical attention, Loureen enacts an urgent demand for 'freedom now', refusing to perpetuate a performance of patience that conforms to the patriarchal demands for docility and deference rooted in US slavery. In doing so, she follows in the footsteps of Janie and Celie, the protagonists of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), respectively. By Signifyin(g) upon Hurston and Walker, Nottage situates her playwriting within the "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) that constitutes the African American literary tradition, and the "webs of affiliation" (Colbert 2017, 7) that link post-civil rights enactments of black freedom to those of earlier periods. Furthermore, she allows for the expansion of black time studies in an intersectional direction informed by black feminist thought, favoring an alternative deployment of the concepts of Afro-presentism and fugitive affect as advanced by Fleming in his study of performative acts of civil disobedience.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

(Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival")

1. From "Harlem" to *POOF!*

In his 1951 poem "Harlem," African American writer and civil rights activist Langston Hughes reflects on the consequences of systemic antiblackness[1] in the United States. Written eighty-six

[1] Afropessimism posits antiblackness as a system of oppression rooted in the transatlantic slave trade and US slavery that targets black people based on an enduring view of blackness as the antithesis of

years after the end of the Civil War (1861-1865) and the abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, "Harlem" challenges dominant national narratives that celebrate the progressive incorporation of formerly enslaved people and their descendants into the American body politic. Assuming *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, disenfranchisement, and persistent discrimination as the extratextual forces shaping the poem, Hughes begins his lyrical meditation on the broken promises of US democracy with a question about the perpetual delay in granting equal rights and opportunities to black citizens. The lines that follow offer tentative answers:

> What happens to a dream deferred?
>
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore –
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over –
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?* (1995, 426, italics in the original)

Taking her cue from the closing line of "Harlem," African American playwright Lynn Nottage Signifies upon Hughes's poem to illuminate the transgenerational and gender-specific implications of antiblackness. Written and first performed in 1993,[2] her debut play *POOF!* – whose title ironically conjures up the explosive outcome of perpetual subjugation expressed in the final line of "Harlem" – transposes Hughes's reflection on fraught freedom from page to stage, shifting the chronotope from the Civil Rights era to the early 1990s and from the public

humanity. As objectified beings whose very existence was commodified, slaves were excluded not only from social life but from being recognized as human. In the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2007, 6), former slaves and their descendants became racialized as black in order to maintain their ontological status as "the foil of Humanity" (Wilderson 2020, 13) and to continue to be subjected to social exclusion and gratuitous violence. On the ontological premises of antiblackness in Afropessimist thought, see, among others, Hartman 2022; Jung and Vargas 2021; Wilderson 2020; Warren 2018; Sharpe 2016; Sexton 2012; Hartman 1997; Gordon 1995; Patterson 1982.

[2] *POOF!* premiered at Actors Theatre of Louisville on March 20, 1993, as part of the Humana Festival of New American Plays. It was directed by Seret Scott and starred Elain Graham (Loureen) and Yvette Hawkins (Florence). In 2003, a PBS television adaptation directed by Fred Barzyk and starring Rosie Perez (Loureen), Viola Davis (Florence), and Isiah Whitlock (Samuel) aired as part of the American Shorts series. The first Italian production of *POOF!*, translated by Valentina Rapetti, directed by Paola Rota, and starring Nadia Kibout (Loureen), Martina Sammarco (Florence), and Yonas Aregay (Samuel), premiered at Teatro Torlonia in Rome on June 7, 2024.

to the private sphere. While "Harlem" evokes an urban site of collective black struggle, the dramatic action of *POOF!* unfolds in a domestic setting, the kitchen of an African American couple that Nottage transforms into the scene of a surreal crime accomplished through a magical speech act. Before being beaten for the umpteenth time, Loureen, the play's central character, tells her abusive husband to go to hell, an utterance that causes him to spontaneously combust and turn into a heap of ash. Announced in the play's onomatopoeic title, the detonative power of Loureen's voice serves as an acoustic marker of *POOF!*'s intertextual relation to "Harlem." By playfully echoing the final line of the poem, Nottage reiterates Hughes's poetic and political discourse on "the unfinished project of emancipation" (Fleming 2022, 39) in what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "a signal difference" (1988, xxiv), engaging in the rhetorical game of repetition and revision characteristic of African American literature from a post-civil rights perspective.

Building on the resonances between Hughes's poem and Nottage's play, this essay analyzes the political premises and rhetorical strategies of *POOF!*, drawing primarily on, though not limited to, Julius B. Fleming Jr.'s study of black patience and Gates's theory of Signifyin(g). As I will argue, Loureen's vocal revolt against intimate partner violence is a dramatic response to the temporal, spatial, and affective demands of black patience, a race-based disciplinary device that functions as both an antiblack tool of white supremacy and the conceptual framework to Fleming's *Black Patience: Performance, Civil Rights, and the Unfinished Project of Emancipation* (2022). Like the theatre artists and activists of the Civil Rights Movement to whom Fleming devotes his critical attention, Loureen embodies an urgent demand for 'freedom now,' refusing to perpetuate a performance of patience that conforms to the patriarchal demands for docility and deference rooted in the history of US slavery.

Nottage's gender-inflected dramatization of black patience furthers an intersectional approach to black time studies,[3] a field of critical inquiry that "foreground[s] the social, political, and aesthetic significance of time to black people, to black experience, and to the black cultural and political imaginations" (Fleming 2022, 14). Moreover, it enables the deployment of Gates's theory of African American literary criticism in the theatrical domain. By dramatizing the transformative potential of a black woman's voice in the coercive context of abusive relationships, Nottage takes what Gates terms the "possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing" (1988, xxv) to a performative space that allows for the staging of a black feminist theatre aesthetic "actively engage[d] in a consciousness-raising critique of the interlocking systems of class, gender, race, and sexual oppression" (Goddard 2007, 40).

[3] Aligning his work with previous studies – among others, Colbert, Jones Jr. and Vogel 2020; Vogel 2018; Warren 2016; Wright 2015; Reed 2014; English 2013 – Fleming positions *Black Patience* within a framework of critical inquiry that he calls "black time studies" (Fleming 2019).

That she does so in a play whose title ironically alludes to the final line of "Harlem" is noteworthy. In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry paid an analogous homage to Hughes, her mentor and friend, by giving her debut play a title taken from the third line of the same poem. Written and first performed at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was the first play by an African American woman to be staged on Broadway,[4] paving the way for subsequent generations of black playwrights in mainstream US theatre. By replicating Hansberry's intertextual tribute to Hughes, Nottage establishes a connection between her own playwriting and that of a literary forebear who experienced theatre as both "a vital technology of civil rights activism" (Fleming 2022, 4) and an ideal platform for black feminist expression.

However, *POOF!*'s intertextual "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) extends far beyond the references to Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Hughes's "Harlem," encompassing less immediate but equally significant sources that add further layers of complexity to Nottage's rhetorical game of repetition and revision. In using her voice to counter male oppression and assert her subjectivity, Loureen follows in the footsteps of Janie and Celie, the central characters of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) respectively, who also draw upon "the killing timbre of [their] true inner voice" (Gates 1988, 205) to silence abusive husbands and claim spaces of self-determination. By Signifyin(g) upon Hurston and Walker, Nottage performs "an act of ancestral bonding" (Gates 1988, 244) that places her playwriting within a broader African American literary tradition written by, about, and for black women, one in which the explosion of black patience allows for an expansion of the critical scope and scale of black time studies.

2. Signifyin(g) black patience

In *Black Patience*, a time-centered study of plays, productions, and performative acts of civil disobedience staged during the core years of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1965), Fleming defines black patience as "a race-based structure of temporal violence" (2022, 6) that entails specific affective postures and protocols based on deference and the rhetoric of resilience. Conceived as a global project that "weaponizes time […] as a means of racializing the modern world," black patience reinforces white supremacy by imposing "forced performances of waiting" (Fleming 2022, 12) on black people. As Fleming points out, black people have been coerced into racialized performances of waiting patiently that sustained their exploitation and civic

[4] Directed by Lloyd Richards and featuring an all-black cast (with the exception of John Fiedler as Karl Lindner), *A Raisin in the Sun* opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was voted best American play by the New York Drama Critics' Circle that same year. At twenty-nine, Hansberry was the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the first African American to win the prestigious award since its inception in 1936.

exclusion whether they be in the slave castle, in the hold of a slave ship, or on the auction block during slavery, or whether it be a case of the debt peonage economy, the convict leasing system, and the chain gangs of the post-Reconstruction South, or the modern industrial prison complex and its death row.

In positing black theatre as a key site for exposing the racial project of black patience, Fleming foregrounds its underrecognized political importance for the Civil Rights Movement. Given its rootedness in the circumscribed immediacy of performance, theatre allowed civil rights activists to articulate a "radical grammar of the now" (Fleming 2022, 5) and to counter any calls to go slow in their fight for full citizenship. In staging "a political aesthetics of now-time," black theatre artists enacted Afro-presentism, which is "a black political and ontological orientation" (Fleming 2022, 33; 26) rooted in the possibilities of the present. Eschewing any form of deferral that postpones social justice to an indefinite future,[5] Afro-presentism stands as "a radical structure of racial time" (Fleming 2022, 26) that insists on immediacy as a strategy for claiming equal rights. Another trenchant theoretical tool employed by Fleming is fugitive affect. Drawing on Fred Moten (2003), Saidiya Hartman (2022; 2007), and Christina Sharpe (2016), Fleming redefines the concept as "a dissident practice of straining against the affective protocols of black patience" (2022, 33) through counter-normative performances of black affective expression that transgress white demands for deference and docility.

Conceived as both experiential and analytical paradigms, Afro-presentism and fugitive affect underpin Fleming's analysis of Civil Rights theatre but are equally relevant to the study of more recent plays and performances that address persistent forms of antiblack violence and overlapping systems of oppression. As my methodological approach to reading Nottage's *POOF!* will illustrate, Fleming's ideas on the interweaving of race, time, and affect can be integrated with African American literary criticism and black feminist theory to examine how black women playwrights have used theatre to disturb the patriarchal protocols of black patience in the post-civil rights era. Drawing on foundational studies of the literary, social, and political significance of the black female voice (Smith 2015; Lorde 2007; Collins 2002; hooks 1990, 1989a and 1989b; Christian 1988; Gates 1988; Washington 1987; Christian 1985), I will build on Fleming's notion of black patience to expand his examination of performances of civil disobedience to contemporary African American women's drama via Nottage's *POOF!*.

[5] While acknowledging the importance of Afrofuturism in developing temporal notions of blackness that transcend a traumatic past (Lavender 2019; Anderson and Jones 2016; Womack 2013; Eshun 2003; Nelson 2002), Fleming cautions against its potential to reinforce the vicious logic of delay inherent in the racial project of black patience (2022, 26-30). After the publication of Fleming's *Black Patience*, *the Black Theatre Review* dedicated an issue to black theatrical enactments of Afrofuturism (Green 2023).

This analytical approach marks a partial departure from Fleming's study. While engaging the Civil Rights body "not only as a site of formal political activity but also as a locus of sexual action," Fleming focuses on "the radical nature of the queer visions of erotic desire" (2022, 132; 134) and their theatrical manifestations.[6] If, as he rightly points out, "[t]he pathologization of same-sex desire has rendered black queer subjects even more vulnerable to the gratuitous violences of black patience" (Fleming 2022, 133), the double marginalization of black women has rendered them invisible in both male-dominated anti-racist discourses and white-centered feminist movements (Smith 2015). This calls for careful and constant consideration of their often underrecognized contributions in the struggle for racial and gender equality.

Acknowledging that the disciplinary device of black patience has targeted the black female body in ways that reflect the brutal logic of patriarchy alongside that of white supremacy (Lindsey 2022), my critical analysis of *POOF!* focuses on the gendered implications of "time-based modes of racialized violence" (Fleming 2022, 3). In doing so, it advances an intersectional approach to black time studies informed by black feminist thought. This analytical perspective engages with the "black body in waiting" (Fleming 2022, 5), a concept Fleming borrows from black performance scholar Harvey Young (2010), while also considering its gendered dimensions. As I will explain in the following section, Nottage's dramatic treatment of Afro-presentism and fugitive affect is a creative response to contemporary acts of antiblack and gender violence that draws attention to the unfinished project of emancipation in the post-civil rights era. Through a black woman's explosive cry for freedom, Nottage expresses a "political aesthetics of now-time" (Fleming 2022, 33) that is equally traceable to, and consistent with, the ethos of the Civil Rights Movement and the tenets of black feminism. *POOF!*'s intertextual references to literary texts produced within the context of these two movements situate Nottage's playwriting not only within the "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) that constitutes the African American literary tradition, but also within transgenerational "webs of affiliation" (Colbert 2017, 7). As Soyica Diggs Colbert argues, these connect past and present enactments of black freedom across time and space in order "to remember, revive, and reimagine political movements that seem to have stalled" (2017, 7) and to envision a more democratic society.

3. Contextualizing *POOF!*

Nottage wrote *POOF!* in the aftermath of the William Andrews case, which she had followed closely as national press officer for Amnesty International.[7] In 1992, Amnesty filed an appeal for clemency to obtain an immediate stay of execution for Andrews (Amnesty International

[6] See chapter 3 of *Black Patience*, "Black Queer Time and the Erotics of the Civil Rights Body" (132-180).
[7] Hereafter, Amnesty.

1992), a thirty-seven-year-old African American man who had spent eighteen years on death row (a harrowing example of black patience). Andrews had been sentenced to death for his role in the "Hi-Fi murders," a brutal crime that took place on April 22, 1974, in Ogden, Utah. During an armed robbery, Andrews and Dale Selby Pierre, also a black man, tortured five white people in the basement of a hi-fi store. Although Andrews had left the crime scene before Pierre shot the five hostages, killing three of them, the two men were tried jointly before an all-white jury. During the trial, an anonymous napkin note reading 'Hang the Niggers,' accompanied by a drawing of a black man hanging from a gallows, circulated among the jurors. Although this demonstrated that an antiblack bias might influence the verdict, the judge refused to grant a mistrial. Sentenced to death in 1974, between 1977 and 1992 Andrews filed several appeals and survived eight death warrants, coming within a few days of his execution on at least three occasions. Despite the Utah Board of Pardons conceding that Andrews was not present when the killings occurred, and two justices calling the napkin note "a vulgar incident of lynch-mob racism reminiscent of Reconstruction days" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 1997), the US Supreme Court declined to grant a review of the case.

When Amnesty appealed for clemency in 1992, Andrews had been a "black body in waiting" (Fleming 2022, 5) for nearly half of his life, longer than any other death row inmate in the US system. The only person in Utah to be condemned to death who had not directly killed anyone, Andrews was kept in a one-man cell, which he was never permitted to leave for more than three hours a day. Nottage and her colleagues worked around the clock to stop the execution, and when the Utah governor eventually granted a stay, they went home "feeling victorious and confident" (Murphy 2013). However, upon their return to the office the following morning they were met with the news of Andrews's execution, "a terrible blow" (Sweet 2017, 209) that caused half of the staff involved in the campaign to resign shortly thereafter.

A few months later, while Nottage was still experiencing "the feeling of gloom and doom" (Sweet 2017, 210) caused by this case of government complicity in antiblack discrimination,[8] photojournalist Donna Ferrato approached Amnesty seeking support for her efforts to expose intimate partner violence, which she had been documenting since the early 1980s:[9] the 1991

[8] In 1996, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights determined that in the case of William Andrews the United States had violated its obligation to ensure racial equality as established in the Charter of the Organization of American States (1948) and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man (1948) as well as in other international human rights instruments.

[9] Ferrato (born 1949 in Waltham, MA) is internationally renowned for her documentation of intimate partner violence. Her photographs have appeared in major news publications in the US and in nearly five hundred solo exhibitions worldwide. She has received numerous accolades, including the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Outstanding Coverage of the Plight of the Disadvantaged and the Missouri Medal of Honor for Distinguished Service in Journalism. In 2009, she was honored by the justices of the New York State Supreme Court for her work in advancing gender equality.

publication of her book *Living with the Enemy* had shone a spotlight on "the dark side of American home life" (Kaufman 1993, 13).[10] At Amnesty, Ferrato brought pictures of women fleeing abusive relationships taken the moment they entered the shelters (see Fig. 1) and inquired about whether the organization could take up her cause.

Fig. 1: Donna Ferrato, "Woman holding her lip." Courtesy of the artist

At the time, gender-based crimes were not considered human rights violations, and although Nottage was part of a committee that tried to broaden Amnesty's focus to include women's issues, the organization could not respond positively to Ferrato's request. The photographs,

[10] In 1991, 21,000 domestic crimes against women were reported to the police every week in the United States (Committee on the Judiciary US Senate 1992). In 1992, the National League of Cities estimated that fifty percent of women were at risk of abuse in marriage, while the American Medical Association declared that up to 35% of women's visits to emergency rooms were the result of domestic assaults (Gibbs 1993). That same year, a group of experts testified before the House of Representatives that three million women annually were victims of domestic violence, and up to four thousand were murdered by a partner. Yet while police seldom arrested male abusers and prosecutors frequently dropped domestic violence cases, women who killed their husbands in self-defense were routinely sentenced to life imprisonment or the death penalty (Florida Supreme Court 1990). In response to pressure from a national clemency movement contesting a gender-biased criminal justice system, in 1992 President George H. W. Bush signed the Battered Women's Testimony Act, urging states to admit expert testimony in criminal cases involving women affected by "battered woman syndrome," a "psychological condition of a woman who is repeatedly attacked […] by an intimate partner" that explains "why victims of domestic violence […] have sometimes resorted to killing their battering partners" (House of Representatives 1992) in self-defense. The Act called for the use of expert testimony to seek the commutation of sentences.

however, had a haunting quality that compelled Nottage to act. If the mismatch between Ferrato's mission and Amnesty's mandate prevented her from responding as a press officer, she could do so as a playwright. Impatient to overcome the sense of impotence she had experienced since Andrews's execution, Nottage wrote *POOF!* as a cathartic response to the temporal, spatial, and affective protocols of black patience and gender-based violence in the post-civil rights era.

POOF! was Nottage's first attempt at playwriting since she had left Yale University in 1989 with an MFA in Drama – and much disillusionment. The second African American woman to enter the Yale School of Drama, she felt "terribly unsupported" during her "difficult and unfortunate" (Shannon 2007, 196; 195) time at Yale, a predominantly white and male-dominated institution where she was marginalized on both racial and gender grounds. Potential black mentors, such as Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and bell hooks were teaching in other departments, and Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale School of Drama and artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre, was absorbed by his creative partnership with August Wilson, whose work he had been nurturing since the early 1980s.[11] As Nottage recalls when looking back on her experience as an aspiring black woman playwright at Yale, "for many years playwriting was considered the domain of white males, and then white and black males" (Wilson 2005), and although Richards had directed the landmark 1959 Broadway production of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, he seemed to espouse this tacit belief. Though it provided her with valuable skills, the theatre training she received at Yale led Nottage to perceive drama as an elitist art form, so that when she graduated in 1989, she "pivoted completely" and joined Amnesty, determined to attend to more "urgent and necessary" matters (Anderson 2023, 46).

Her four-year experience in human rights introduced her to some of the major activists of the time[12] and to the geopolitical consequences of colonialism and its racist premises, which laid the foundation for her future work as a writer. However, she also learned that the clinical language of human rights reports can have an anesthetizing effect, whereas drama can "infuse [people] with life and humanity" (Murphy 2013). With *POOF!*, Nottage "arrived at a total synthesis of the human rights brain and the writing brain," an "incredibly liberating" experience that is echoed in the protagonist's cry for freedom (Vincentelli 2019). Indeed, Loureen's discovery of her vocal power equals Nottage's recovery of the artistic voice that had lain dormant during her activist work.

[11] After meeting Wilson in 1982, Richards directed five of his plays at Yale Repertory Theatre before they transferred to Broadway. In 1987, Nottage worked as a dresser for the first production of *The Piano Lesson*, which won Wilson his second Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1990.

[12] Nottage introduced Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú to the editorial boards of major national newspapers and she met with Nelson Mandela on his visit to America in 1990. Both Menchú and Mandela were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize during Nottage's time at Amnesty, in 1992 and 1993, respectively.

4. A double-voiced cry for freedom

POOF! is a one-act play that subverts prevailing narratives of intimate partner violence centered on victimhood by empowering a black woman through the transformative potential of her inner voice. The play opens with Samuel, an abusive black husband, threatening his spouse Loureen, a housewife in her early thirties. Exasperated by years of brutal behavior, she damns him to hell, inadvertently causing his spontaneous combustion. Appalled by her newly discovered pyrokinetic power and its criminal consequences, Loureen calls her black neighbor and friend Florence, herself a victim of domestic violence, to help her decide how to dispose of Samuel's remains, a huge pile of smoking ash in the middle of the kitchen-turned-crime scene. In an intimate, albeit ironic, conversation, the two women follow what black feminist scholar Barbara Christian calls a "trajectory of self-definition" from oppression to freedom (1985, 171). When a complicit Florence eventually leaves, advising her friend to postpone reporting her missing husband to the police, Loureen sweeps Samuel's ashes under the carpet and proceeds to eat her dinner.

As the play's synopsis reveals, both the chronotope and dramatic action align with the formal features of naturalist theatre. Set in the kitchen of an African American household, *POOF!*'s twenty-minute arc presents a slice of life in a seamless, chronologically linear manner, with no temporal breaks from the initial darkness to the final blackout.[13] The uninterrupted sequence of action, the use of black vernacular, and the attention to environmental detail all convey an impression of offstage life. However, in keeping with the "aesthetic eclecticism" (Bigsby 1982, viii) of US drama and the "black double-voicedness" (Gates 1988, 51) of African American literature, Nottage transcends the strict naturalism inherited from the European theatrical tradition by introducing a supernatural element drawn from Black diasporic culture. Florence's suggestion that Samuel's disappearance is a result of Loureen "messing with them mojo women" (Nottage 2004, 97) provides a link between the paranormal phenomenon that drives the play and hoodoo, an "indigenous African American spiritual tradition" and "magical system" (Flowers 2001, 12) born from the hybridization of Christian and Yoruba religious practices.

Besides locating both characters and dramatic action within a black diasporic culture of conjuring (Chireau 2003) that has resisted the racial project of black patience since the transatlantic slave trade, *POOF!*'s "black magical core" positions Nottage's playwriting within

[13] Several thematic, stylistic, and rhetorical features align *POOF!* with Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916), a landmark of American naturalist theatre. Like Glaspell, Nottage situates two complicit women in a domestic setting and constructs the plot around the absent body of an abusive husband killed in self-defense. While working within a naturalist framework, both playwrights subvert theatrical conventions that privilege male figures as the loci of power, knowledge, and action. Blending vivid depictions of domestic life with incisive social critique, they invite the audience to adopt the perspective of women when witnessing an abused wife's extreme response to intimate partner violence.

a broader, "blues-toned" African American literary tradition of black women writers who have "cast healing spells" (Gussow 2008, 46) on their readers. Part of "an extended ebony chain of discourse" (Gates 1988, 256), this tradition includes novels, poems, and plays that have exposed antiblackness and its gendered ramifications from a black feminist perspective. It is a tradition that pays "careful attention to how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality provide the backdrop for black heterosexual love relationships" (Collins 2002, 158) that sometimes deteriorate into sexist brutality. Steeped in the same black feminist thought that informs this literary "tradition of grounded repetition and difference" (Gates 1988, 256), *POOF!* also expresses a black feminist theatre aesthetics that similarly "reveals the abuse that black women suffer at the hands of men of all races" (Anderson 2008, 116), as announced in the play's opening:

> SAMUEL: (*In the darkness*): WHEN I COUNT TO TEN I DON' WANT TO SEE YA! I DON' WANT TO HEAR YA! ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR –
> LOUREEN: (*In the darkness*): DAMN YOU TO HELL, SAMUEL! (2004, 93)

Highlighted in the text by capital letters, the thunderous tone of Samuel's threat echoes "an overall climate that defines black masculinity in terms of black men's ability to 'own' and 'control' their women" (Collins 2002, 157). Moreover, it foregrounds the nexus of time and affect at the core of Fleming's concept of black patience, demonstrating its crucial role in shaping both racial and gender dynamics. For Samuel, forcing Loureen into a state of silence in under ten seconds validates his ability to exert patriarchal power. By using time as a tool of male supremacy, he places a "race-based structure of temporal violence" (Fleming 2022, 6) at the service of gender domination.

Throughout the play, time emerges as a disciplinary device that regulates black women's existence and daily interactions. In a belated attempt to placate the husband she has just incinerated and revive his smoldering remains, Loureen states that "dinner's waiting" and promises to wash his dirty shirt "right now" (2004, 93). The same panicked pressure to complete domestic tasks in a timeframe dictated by male needs is expressed by Florence later in the play:

> FLORENCE: No, stop it, I don't have time for this. […] Why'd you have to go and lose your mind at this time of day, while I got a pot of rice on the stove and Edgar's about to walk in the door and wonder where his goddamn food is. (*Losing her cool*) And he's going to start in on me about all the nothing I've been doing during the day and why I can't work and then he'll mention how clean you keep your home. (2004, 95; 98; 99)

These lines evidence the temporal constraints inherent in the productive and reproductive work that black women have been made to perform in America. They also evoke the dual temporality

that strategically governed black people during slavery: one that favored the frantic speed of extractive capitalism by exploiting their labor while simultaneously forcing them to be patient, thus forever postponing their rights. In *POOF!*, the gendered dimension of this dual temporality emerges through Nottage's dramatization of a double standard. Whereas Loureen's and Florence's time is tied to their housekeeping responsibilities and confined to the domestic sphere, Samuel and Edgar are entitled to leisure time, which they spend "playing poker," "go[ing] to the movies" (2004, 97; 101), or roving about with their male peers, enjoying the temporal and spatial freedom denied to their wives. In this context, Florence's "Take your time" (2004, 96), addressed to a traumatized Loureen as she recounts Samuel's outburst of rage and subsequent combustion, is an invitation to make a counter-hegemonic use of the temporal protocols of black patience. This allows the two characters to inhabit the play's temporality and to unravel Loureen's vocal gesture of self-determination – what Audre Lorde calls "the transformation of silence into language and action" (2007, 40) – on their own terms.

5. Coming to voice

Just as Samuel's imperious demand for silence and invisibility echoes patriarchal practices of subjugation dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, Loureen's vocal revolt is an act of resistance that articulates "the [black] feminist focus on coming to voice – on moving from silence into speech as revolutionary gesture" (hooks 1989b, 12). On a thematic level, Samuel's sexist brutality and Loureen's act of defiant speech place *POOF!* within an intertextual "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) comprising literary works by African American women writers that address the intersection of racial and gender oppression. Halfway through the play, a still incredulous Loureen asks, "How often does a man like Samuel get damned to hell, and go?" (2004, 97). The answer is that such an implausible occurrence is not unknown in African American literature: indeed, it has distinguished fictional antecedents. In using her voice to counter male supremacy and assert her subjectivity, Loureen honors a legacy of defiance that links her to Janie, the protagonist in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)[14] and Celie, the central character in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

A series of parallels attest to the Signifyin(g) relationship between Nottage's play and the two novels. Like Janie and Celie, Loureen is married to a violent man who brutalizes her and, like them, she manages to free herself from patriarchal tyranny through a speech act, relying on a black female friend for self-affirmation. Jody Stark, Janie's second husband in *Their Eyes*, is the patronizing mayor of an all-black town whose masculinity and social status are reinforced by confining Janie to silent subalternity. As he declares when he forbids her to speak at a public

[14] Hereafter, *Their Eyes*.

ceremony, "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 1995, 208). The silencing and beating she receives from Jody gradually lead to Janie's coming to voice, and when she finally speaks in public about his impotence, she destroys his male authority, a metaphorical murder that translates into his actual death within three chapters. Similarly, Celie's first and only open defiance of Albert in *The Color Purple* strips him of his patriarchal power and, like a healing spell, brings an immediate end to decades of violence.

> I curse you, I say. […] I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. […] Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. […] Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words. […] Anything you do to me, already done to you. (Walker 2017, 187)

Figuratively linked to natural elements – Celie is directly empowered by the "trees," the "air," and even "dirt" (Walker 2017, 187) – this liberating curse possesses a supernatural quality that is both reminiscent of Janie's presumed psionic power in *Their Eyes* and is paralleled by Loureen's paranormal power in *POOF!*. Like Janie and Celie, Loureen turns her husband's threat back on him to even greater material and dramatic effect. If, as Gates notes (1988, 202; 252), Janie's defiant speech annihilates Jody's "big voice" (Hurston 1995, 196) and Celie's words transform Albert's voice into a stutter "like some kind of motor" (Walker 2017, 180), Loureen's magical speech act turns Samuel into a silent "pile of smoking ashes" topped by a "pair of cheap spectacles" (2004, 91), a symbol of the fatal short-sightedness that prevented him from perceiving his wife as a human being worthy of respect. In reducing her oppressor to a voiceless and almost completely dematerialized presence, Loureen turns his injunction of silence and invisibility against him, enacting a radical reversal of power dynamics.[15]

On a rhetorical level, Loureen's vocal act functions as a *mise en abyme* of Nottage's own coming to voice in her first professionally produced play. As Loureen silences her husband and takes center stage, Nottage dismantles the phallogocentric order represented by his voice, exorcising both the haunting figure of the male playwright looming over American theatre and a misogynistic model of black masculinity that has contributed to the historical marginalization of black women in the cultural and political spheres (Smith 2015). It is a marginalization that

[15] Samuel's dematerialization is the physical equivalent of Jody falling from his metaphorical pedestal after he first slaps Janie: "So […] he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store. Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was *her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered*. But looking at it she saw that *it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams*. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over" (Hurston 1995, 232-233, emphasis added).

Nottage herself experienced firsthand as a black female student at Yale, which led to her four-year alienation from the theatre. By making Samuel a mute and myopic synecdoche, Nottage – like Hurston and Walker before her – articulates a feminist critique of the authority of the black male voice in the African American literary and theatrical tradition, creating a dramaturgical and performative space for the staging of an assertive black female subjectivity.

Samuel's disappearance is the dramatic enactment of black feminist "exclusionary practices" aimed at providing "safe spaces" that "simultaneously remove black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for [their] independent self-definitions" (Collins 2002, 111). Indeed, Samuel's extraordinary exit is immediately followed by the providential entrance of a sisterly figure who assumes an important formal function in the play. Florence, the theatrical counterpart of Phoeby in *Their Eyes* and of Shug Avery and Nettie in *The Color Purple*, is the character who enables the protagonist to recount her story of becoming, while ensuring the development of the dramatic action. Her active listening fosters Loureen's coming to voice, which accompanies her coming to terms with Samuel's disembodied presence.

Fig. 2: Martina Sammarco (Florence) and Nadia Kibout (Loureen) in the first Italian production of Nottage's *POOF!* (Teatro India, Rome, June 25, 2024). Photo by Roberto Mieli, courtesy of Dominio Pubblico

Florence's testimonial role mirrors the analogous function that Nottage assigns to the readers and audiences of *POOF!*, further emphasizing the play's intertextual links to Hurston's and Walker's novels. If, as Gates notes, in *Their Eyes* we overhear Janie telling her story to Phoeby and in *The Color Purple* we read Celie's letters over her shoulder (1988, 245), in *POOF!* we are cast as eavesdroppers on Loureen and Florence's conversation, bearing witness to the former's crime and confession and the latter's complicity. Nottage, however, repeats the same rhetorical strategy deployed by her literary forebears with a Signifyin(g) difference that manifests in specific language use, moving from Hurston's free indirect discourse and the narrative present of Walker's letters to the direct discourse typical of dramatic literature. In doing so, she takes what Gates calls the "possibilities of representation of the speaking black voice in writing" (1988, xxv) from a fictional to a performative level, allowing for the staging of both black oral culture and an important dimension of black feminist epistemology: dialogue.

Derived from the Greek word διάλογος, which combines the preposition διά ('through') and the noun λόγος ('discourse'), dialogue is, at root, the movement of embodied discourse. A black feminist practice that figures prominently in the works of African American women writers (Smith 2015; Christian 1988; Washington 1987; Christian 1985; Marshall 1983), the dialogue in *POOF!* is the ongoing verbal act that defines Loureen's trajectory of self-affirmation. In the play, as hooks would have it, "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject" (1989b, 12). The "pithy language" that Loureen and Florence use to explore and expose "the power relations of their world" is the same black vernacular that Christian finds "celebrated, refined, [and] critiqued" (1988, 68) in the works of Hurston and Walker, among others.

As the play progresses, Loureen overcomes her fear of her own voice and becomes increasingly aware of its transformative power. While at first she "struggles to formulate words" and "covers her mouth as if to muffle" them, "mumbling softly to herself" (2004, 94; 95; 100), later she says to Florence, "I barely got words out and I'm looking down at a pile of ash […] All these years and just words, Florence. That's all they were" (2004, 96; 101). This provides an explanation for her husband's insistence on suppressing her speech: "Samuel always said if I raised my voice something horrible would happen. […] All this time I didn't know why he was so afraid for me to say anything, to speak up. Poof!" (2004, 97; 100).

As Christian maintains, "to be able to use the range of one's voice […] is a recurring struggle in the tradition of [black women] writers" (Christian 1985, 172), one that reflects a black feminist standpoint and remains a crucial concern in African American literature. Drawing on Christian, Gates agrees that "the quest of the black speaking subject to find his or her voice has been a repeated topos of the black tradition, and perhaps […] its most central trope" (Gates

1988, 239). Therefore, Nottage's dramatization of Loureen's self-reflective voice is a self-conscious Signifyin(g) strategy that aligns her playwriting with both the black feminist and the African American literary traditions, placing *POOF!* in the same "web of filiation" (Gates 1988, xxii) that comprises *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple*, as well as within transgenerational "webs of affiliation" (Colbert 2017, 7) connecting past and present enactments of black resistance.

6. Dramatizing Afro-presentism and fugitive affect

Attested by the thematic, diegetic, and rhetorical parallels analyzed so far, *POOF!*'s intertextual relation with Hurston's and Walker's novels is further strengthened by a Signifyin(g) difference evidenced in Nottage's temporal treatment of Loureen's coming to voice and Samuel's concomitant disappearance. While Janie's and Celie's vocal revolts occur in Chapter eight of *Their Eyes* and in the seventy-fifth letter of Walker's epistolary novel, Loureen's cry ignites *POOF!* with an explosive immediacy that reflects "a black political and ontological orientation" rooted in "the revolutionary time of the 'now'" (Fleming 2022, 26), that is, Afro-presentism. Immediacy, after all, is also an ontological quality of performance, like the ephemerality represented by Samuel's disappearance, a quintessentially theatrical ploy that Nottage uses to Signify upon the slower narrative progression of Jody's death in *Their Eyes* and Albert's belated loss of power in *The Color Purple*.

When Florence tells Loureen that Samuel "must have done something truly terrible" for her to lose her patience, she replies, "No more than usual. I just couldn't take being hit one more time," to which Florence retorts, "You've taken a thousand blows from that man, couldn't you've turned the cheek and waited" (2004, 99). Patient passivity was not a viable option, says Loureen, whose response to Samuel's violence at the beginning of the play articulates both Nottage's Signifyin(g) strategy and the "radical grammar of the now" (Fleming 2022, 5) of Afro-presentism. Reading *POOF!* through an Afrofuturist lens, Isaiah III Lavender maintains that the play "ignites the twin flames of hope and agency for black women," representing their "desire to make better futures" (2023, 18; 15). Although I agree with the claim that Loureen's speech act stems from the "thought" – or rather, the threat – "of her impending future" (Lavender 2023, 19), I would argue that the key temporality in *POOF!* is the present. Loureen refuses to postpone her freedom and invests in immediacy to counter the combined forces of black patience and patriarchy, the violent protocols of which regulate black affective expression and gender behavior in mutually reinforcing ways.

This Afro-presentist strategy enables her to recognize and reject the displays of docility she has been pressured into performing since childhood, and which even as an abused woman

caused her to act like a "gentle child" (2004, 98):[16] "Everybody always told me, 'Keep your place, Loureen.' My place, the silent spot on the couch with a wine cooler in my hand and a pleasant smile that warmed the heart" (2004, 100).[17] This passage is particularly effective in expressing the spatial, temporal, and affective dimensions of black patience. Loureen's passive attitude exemplifies "the racialized logics of spatial constriction, slowness, and stasis" that have governed black people's lives since slavery, while her forced smile is part of a broader "repertoire of postures, sentiments, and dispositions" (Fleming 2022, 8; 34) that weaponize affect as a biopolitical tool of racial and gender domination. Sick of sitting in silence and smiling sweetly, Loureen yells incendiary words that bring about her immediate liberation. Her magical speech act is a counter-normative performance of black affective expression that aligns with Fleming's concept of fugitive affect, a "revolutionary gesture" (hooks 1989b, 12) that every woman is called to make for herself.

When Florence urges her to go upstairs and "spit out [her] words" at her own husband Edgar, Loureen replies, "I can't do that" and assertively "shakes her head no" (2004, 102), a theatrical enactment of Janie's similar refusal in *Their Eyes*: "It's uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (Hurston 1995, 332). By rejecting Florence's request, Loureen, like Janie, insists on the irreducible necessity of direct, embodied experience as the basis for liberation. Like Janie, and like Shug Avery and Sophia in *The Color Purple*, by "talking back" (hooks 1989a, 5) Loureen can only provide the inspiration for another woman's coming to voice, even though black feminist self-affirmation does not exclude, and indeed often involves, the complicity of a sister in crime:

LOUREEN: I can't just throw him away and pretend like it didn't happen. Can I?
FLORENCE: I didn't see anything but a pile of ash. As far as I know you got a little careless and burned a chicken.
LOUREEN: He was always threatening not to come back.
FLORENCE: I heard him.
LOUREEN: It would have been me eventually.
FLORENCE: Yes. (2004, 102)

[16] Loureen's line, "He's made me a killer, Florence, and you remember what a gentle child I was" (2004, 98), echoes Celie's self-description in her first letter to God at the opening of *The Color Purple*: "Dear God, I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl" (Walker 2017, 3, erasure in the original).
[17] Nottage's juxtaposition of stillness and silence recalls a passage from Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action": "We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, […] we can sit on our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid" (2007, 42).

Florence's concealment of Loureen's crime is markedly different from Samuel's mother's silence about his abusive behavior, which Loureen alludes to in the play. While the former aims to circumvent the criminalization of an act of self-defense, the latter is a form of intraracial, familial secrecy that stems from the normalization of antiblack and intimate partner violence by institutional actors, such as the police, whom both women understandably distrust:

LOUREEN: I should call the police, or someone.
FLORENCE: Why? What are you gonna tell them? About all those times they refused to help, about all those nights you slept in my bed 'cause you were afraid to stay down here? About the time he nearly took out your eye 'cause you flipped the television channel?
LOUREEN: No.
FLORENCE: You've got it, girl! […]
LOUREEN: I'll let the police know that he's missing tomorrow.
FLORENCE: Why not the next day? (2004, 102; 103)

In advising Loureen to postpone reporting her missing husband to the police, Florence, for the second time in the play, invites her to strategically appropriate the logic of deferral inherent in black patience. She then takes her leave in a parting scene that sutures the play's Signifyin(g) relationship to *Their Eyes*:

LOUREEN: Chicken's warming in the oven, you're welcome to stay.
FLORENCE: Chile, I got a pot of rice on the stove, kids are probably acting out… and Edgar, well… Listen, I'll stop in tomorrow.
LOUREEN: For dinner?
FLORENCE: Edgar wouldn't stand for that. Cards maybe.
LOUREEN: Cards.

The two women hug for a long moment. Florence exits. (2004, 103)

Florence is very much like Phoeby in the last chapter of *Their Eyes*, who becomes "fretful" at the thought of her husband "waiting for her," hugs her friend "real hard and cut(s) the darkness in flight" (Hurston 1995, 332; 333). Once alone, Loureen "stands over the ashes for a few moments contemplating what to do," until she "decides to sweep them under the carpet, and then proceeds to set the table and sit down to eat her dinner" (2004, 103). If postponing calling the police is an anti-racist technique of "doing time otherwise" (Fleming 2022, 26), hiding Samuel's incinerated corpse is a non-violent means of putting a violent man who used time as a tool of male supremacy in a perpetual state of waiting. Both gestures recall the creative ways in which black people have historically "repurposed black patience by transforming the wait into a time and a performance of black political possibility" (Fleming 2022, 3), whether as enslaved individuals timing their escape, civil rights activists staging sit-ins at lunch counters,

or jazz musicians deliberately playing behind the beat. But sweeping Samuel's ashes under the carpet is also a Signifyin(g) enactment of Celie's warning words to Albert shortly before she casts her curse: "It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the *welcome mat* I need" (Walker 2017, 180, emphasis added). In *POOF!*, Nottage translates this threat from the metaphorical to the material, as Samuel's ashes end up under an actual carpet in Loureen's apartment, a newly constituted domestic reality brought into being through her own words.

Like the female characters in *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple*, Loureen finds her freedom in a house devoid of men,[18] one in which she experiences a profound sense of rootedness in the here and now of a liberated space and self. With an ending that highlights the personal and political importance of the present, Nottage concludes her theatrical tribute to Hurston's and Walker's novels while simultaneously Signifyin(g) upon the temporal and spatial treatment of deferred dreams in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her rhetorical game of repetition and revision comes full circle.

6. From *A Raisin in the Sun* to *POOF!*: doing time otherwise

Defined by Amiri Baraka as "the quintessential civil rights drama" (1959, 10), Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* moved the reflection on deferred dreams expressed in Hughes's "Harlem" from a poetic to a performative ground thirty-four years before Nottage's *POOF!*, placing a particular emphasis on the temporal dimension of antiblackness. As Fleming notes, throughout the play the characters' "movements are choreographed by, and to the violent tempos of," black patience, while their dreams "never come to fruition within the dramatic present of the play" (2022, 50; 55). As the curtain closes, the Younger family move out of their cramped apartment in the black ghetto of Chicago's South Side and into their new home in the white neighborhood of Clybourne Park. This offstage and ostensibly upward movement toward a better future can be read either as an enactment of fugitive affect, or as an Afrofuturist attempt to transcend a traumatic past. In either case, by the conclusion of the play the Youngers' dream of inhabiting a more just and equitable society remains unfulfilled as they exit the stage and go in search of better housing, jobs, and life opportunities beyond the domestic and dramatic boundaries envisioned by Hansberry.

Unlike the Youngers, Loureen leans into the possibilities of the present and finds freedom within her home, that is, within the chronotope of Nottage's play and the here and now of its theatrical performance. Over *POOF!*'s twenty-minute arc, her "homeplace" rapidly transforms

[18] As Gates notes, "Celie, Nettie, Shug, and Janie all find a form of freedom in houses in which there are no men: Nettie's hut in Africa, Shug's mansion in Tennessee, and Janie's empty home in Eatonville" (1988, 253).

from a setting of intimate partner violence into "a site of resistance and liberation struggle," what hooks defines as a domestic space "of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression [and] sexist domination" (1990, 42). Whereas in *A Raisin in the Sun* Hansberry employs a realist framework to dramatize Hughes's lyrical musing on antiblackness, in *POOF!* Nottage experiments with magical naturalism to continue where Hansberry left off, offering an Afro-presentist rejoinder to her groundbreaking work. In doing so, she honors a literary tradition "characterized by [an] urge to start over, to begin again, but always […] on a well-structured foundation" (Gates 1988, 256), situating her work within transgenerational "webs of affiliation" (Colbert 2017, 7) that connect black political and artistic movements across time and space.

In positing drama as a platform to expose the gendered implications of black patience, Nottage revitalizes its political function in ways that are both traceable to and consistent with the ethos of the Civil Rights Movement and the tenets of black feminism. As many black people and women worldwide are still forced to wait for racial and gender justice, and as black artists and activists in the US articulate new principles and practices to build anti-racist societies,[19] Loureen's explosive cry for freedom reasserts "the power of voice as gesture of rebellion and resistance" (hooks 1989b, 14). This confirms the role of theatre as "a vital technology of civil rights activism" (Fleming 2022, 4) in challenging the violent and mutually reinforcing protocols of black patience and patriarchal power.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Grazia Presti, an esteemed librarian and generous friend, for the support she provided during the writing of this essay.

Bionote

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[19] I refer to the Black Lives Matters movement and to the following initiatives: "The Visibility Report: Racial Representation on NYC Stages," drafted by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition (http://www.aapacnyc.org/); "We See You, White American Theatre," a network of BIPOC playwrights, performers, and practitioners fighting structural inequality in US theatre (https://www.weseeyouwat.com/); "The Count," an ongoing, intersectional study of US theatre productions conducted by The Lillys in partnership with The Dramatist Guild (https://the-lillys.org/the-count-3); and "Fall of Freedom," a nationwide, decentralized, and open-source initiative of creative resistance that began on November 21-22, 2025, and has involved galleries, museums, libraries, comedy clubs, theatres, and concert halls across the nation in opposing the authoritarian turn of US politics (https://www.falloffreedom.com/).

Parks, and Lynn Nottage, as well as interviews with internationally renowned playwrights and practitioners. She is the creator and curator of "Theatrical Citizenships: African American Drama as a Form of Art, Activism, and Agent of Social Change," a practice-based research project that promotes the inclusion of Italians of African descent in the national theatre ecosystem through translation, education, and outreach activities centered on African American drama.

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