

Casting Stones: The Men of Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

Shayla Atkins

Abstract

While scholars read the issues in *Ruined* as primarily about the women, one should note the issues also affect the men, both in the play, arguably, in the continuing violence against women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other parts of Africa. This essay examines how *Ruined* also offers a nuanced commentary on the men and the war's impact on them as well. There is a potential for misreading the work if one does not consider, first, the narrative in cultural context, and second, the portrayal of the Congolese men who are divorced from family and home. An examination of the men's negotiation of their liminality exposes their efforts to resist the structure.

In discussions of Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2009), one reoccurring issue among theatre scholars is the work that the play does as a performance about war and women. In his review "Mama Nadi and Her Women" in *American Theatre*, Randy Gener explains that Nottage creates "a humanist exposé" about women's ravaged bodies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While Sharon Friedman acknowledges *Ruined*'s negotiation of the war's effects on women, she maintains that the play fails to address the issues of the civil war taking place in DRC effectively (2010). Further, Barbara Ozieblo questions in "Pornography of Violence" the ways violence is spectacularized and thereby made pleasurable compared to other plays that deal with violence, but she maintains that *Ruined* "ends with a glimmer of hope" (2011, 75). Moreover, in his *New York Times* review in February 2009, Ben Brantley identifies moments in the play as overly sentimental and unnecessarily longwinded, thereby taking away some of the import of the war awareness effort, and in *The New Yorker*'s March 2009 issue, Hilton Als claims the "speeches...are too self-consciously purposeful not to be corny. Still, we believe them, if only because [1]Nottage does."

It seems, then, that *Ruined* oscillates between being too violent and too melodramatic to being adequately insightful and convincing. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the work draws the audience into it, and the women's narratives constantly remind the audience of the dangerous reality that the women's lives rest in precarious positions in the DRC. Still, they do not examine how the men fit into this dynamic beyond being the assailants of the crimes against these women. This acknowledgement is key as Nottage readily admits she wants audiences and readers to connect the work to the issues unfolding in war torn African countries, and while the issues are primarily about the women, the men are also affected by the issues in their country even if on a different level. Although *Ruined* is widely regarded as a play about war's effects on women, it is also a play that offers a nuanced commentary on the men and the war's impact on them as well.

In this article, I have three main objectives. First, I discuss how performance relies on the involvement of the audience, director, and actors, which highlights the play's performative differences that can be absent in a text. Further, I discuss how the text relies on the readers' interactions and background knowledge when reading stage directions and dialogue that are absent for an audience. I contend there is a potential for misreading the work if one does not consider, first, the narrative in cultural context and, second, the portrayal of the Congolese men who are divorced from family and home. Second, I discuss how the patriarchal structure informs the men's perceptions and ideologies that determine the men's treatment of women. I posit that an examination of the men's negotiation of their liminality exposes their efforts to resist the structure. Third and finally, I discuss how the men's shifted perception suggests the possibility of a more beneficial and positive relationship with women.

Written after Nottage interviewed Congolese women and spoke with men devastated by the war and civil unrest, *Ruined* brings to light the varied issues and realities that the communities in the DRC face. *Ruined* tells the story of a group of Congolese women—Salima, Sophie, Josephine, and Mama Nadi—who are caught between the war and the men who claim rights to their bodies and the land. Living at Mama Nadi's bar, the women choose life as prostitutes after being raped and banished from their villages rather than face a country on their own where they risk being abused again. On the fringes of this narrative are the stories of the men—Jerome Kisémbé, Commander Osembenga, Fortune, and Christian—who are involved in the war to varying degrees. Jerome Kisémbé and Commander Osembenga are the warring faction leaders; Fortune is a soldier and the estranged husband of Salima, and Christian is Sophie's uncle, Mama Nadi's suitor, and a traveling salesman who traffics women. Christian and Fortune wrestle with their upended lives as they participate in the war while Jerome Kisémbé and Commander Osembenga battle to claim the land and terrorize those they deem opposed to their claim. Though both sets of men are involved in the war effort, their goals shape how they engage with women.

Literary and performance studies scholars seem preoccupied with the focused attention that *Ruined* gives to violence against black women. However, the play teaches us much more about the complex interrelationships within the pervasive rape culture in the embattled Congo by extending that attention to include the collateral impact that this violence has on the men of the play. More often than not, it seems that the impulse is to read Nottage's work as an overall indictment against violence and as a depiction of women's bodies as target of such violence. Phylisa Deroze and Ann Fox evaluate *Ruined* as a play that simultaneously addresses war and violence against women and also considers trauma recovery and disability. Fox posits in "Battles on the Body" that although *Ruined* uses disability to articulate how disability is inscribed on women's bodies, the project is ineffective because the romance, particularly Mama's and Christian's slow dance, attempts to subvert disability and women's rights discourses (2011, 2, 13). By asserting that the final scene overshadows the entire project, Fox fails to recognize the ways in which disability, women's rights, and romance can exist simultaneously. Mama is just as physically ruined during and after the dance as she is before it; therefore, disability is not marginalized because of Sophie's background stage placement. In fact, disability remains center stage as one realizes the play is about Mama not Sophie, and Christian participates in the centering.

In “Womanist Restorative Drama,” Deroze explores the work for its employment of trauma therapy and recovery, and she argues that the black female body is a space that typically is not given appropriate attention, protection, or veneration (2010). The result is black women are not afforded resources that enable restoration (physical, mental, or emotional) following gendered traumatic abuse but more often are blamed for their trauma; thus, black women playwrights like Nottage have written works that portray black women creating their own spaces for restoration and providing it for one another. Indeed, Nottage follows the traditional trajectory starting the play with the women after they are ostracized; however, she extends this approach by also showing men wrestling with their role in placing blame.

Nottage places the women’s restoration effort as a foil to the men’s struggle. Thus, a reader and audience are introduced to men who are not all violent but caring; they are not quickly pledging allegiance to the cause in order to claim more but striving to carve a niche for themselves separate from the war. Nottage depicts a re-defined, alternative community as the women rebuild and redefine themselves, not as abandoned victims but as independent victors. Nevertheless, each scholar limits the reality of the characters in his/her focused reading: as a war play, living life becomes secondary to the activism in fighting for war’s end; as a disability play, having a romantic relationship is to be undesirable and unattainable; and as a violent play, the women’s and men’s peace and camaraderie are to be lost. However, *Ruined* problematizes these Nottage reveals the realities that her subjects face without devaluing their experiences and focuses on their lives post-trauma rather than how trauma takes place or ruins their lives.

Arguably, the key to any performance is the director’s and actors’ reading of a dramatic work because their understanding leads to what the actors do, how they speak, and how the director stages the work, all of which contribute to a performance’s success. The performances dually inform the audience through sound and sight, shaping and questioning audiences’ assumptions and reactions. The moments that are to be the most climactic and most significant are those that the audience will see or hear in detail to allow its full engagement with the action. Thus, one should ask what is left unsaid and unperformed not because it is more important but because it further highlights the significance of what is performed.

In “Writing the Absent Potential,” Sandra Richards offers a performative approach that melds the literary and the theatrical realms of a dramatic text by calling for one to explore the text as both a work dependent on the written word and one reliant upon the spoken word and performance (1995). She argues that by ignoring the performance, literary scholars miss the significant moments that actors and directors convey to an audience through depictions of contextual and cultural material and with actions and sound on stage. The necessity of reading the works as both literary and dramatic enables one to create and assess what takes place through dialogue, stage directions, and behavior.

The “absent potential” of text and performance in *Ruined* as defined by Richards, is most apparent in the stage directions and actors’ roles. This absence for the literary scholar is what can be found in the work that would indicate moments of performance, which may be missed when only reading the text. The first significant moment is the casting of the men. While not stated explicitly in the character list, the premiere and succeeding Goodman Theatre productions cast soldiers as playing multiple roles: “Jerome Kitembe/Soldier,” “Simon/Soldier/Miner,”

“Fortune/Soldier/Miner,” and “Commander Osembenga/Soldier” (Nottage, 3). The interchangeable roles and the significance of the interchangeability are only apparent to an audience not a reader. These men at one moment are the soldiers of rebel militia leader Jerome Kisémbé, and then later, they are soldiers for government leader Commander Osembenga. Furthermore, both Kisémbé and Osembenga serve as soldiers on one another’s force. The factions never appear on stage at the same time, so the conflation is not about the actual warring sides. Instead, what is placed before the audience is the fluidity and instability of war and peace. As Kisémbé or Osembenga is a leader one moment but a foot soldier the next. Mr. Harari, a Lebanese merchant who frequents Mama’s bar, explains the situation: The war is “everybody and nobody’s It keeps fracturing and redefining itself, militias form overnight and suddenly a drunken foot soldier with a tribal vendetta is a rebel leader The man I shake hands with in the morning is my enemy by sundown” (59). The war is not clearly defined; the enemies are not easily identifiable, for at any moment one ill deed could result in a new shift and new battle. That the war is everyone’s and no one’s is also evident by Fortune and Simon’s, Fortune’s friend, enlistment in the war although they say they are farmers. Thus, men’s roles are constantly shifting and being redefined in DRC’s war; the effect of such fracturing, reorganizing, and renegotiating is that the extent of instability is far reaching. Such continuous re-identification of one’s home and place results in a trauma itself, different from the women’s trauma but a trauma nonetheless.

The war over land and pride that plagues the DRC is not easily fixed by inviting opposing forces to sit down to negotiate, for the forces are continually readjusting and shifting, and as Mr. Harari points out, just because one faction comes to agreement for peace does not mean another will not arise to battle. Indeed, the history of the DRC is plagued by such shifting wars. Beginning with Belgium’s King Leopold’s claiming the country for himself, the then named *Congo Free State* underwent five name changes and ruling regimes in the span of one hundred years. Following Leopold’s leadership and under the guise of humanitarianism in 1908, the country fell under Belgium’s colonial rule and was renamed the *Belgian Congo* (Neihuus 2014, 13-19). During the next sixty years, the modernization of the country took place, making it one of the most modernized African countries along with South Africa, but the colonial presence and improvement were done at the expense of the people. The eventual withdrawal of Belgian rule in 1960 resulted in a five-year war and a renaming of the country as *Republic of Congo* before Mobutu Seko ascended to rule and renamed the country *Zaire*. Under Mobutu’s leadership, Zaire faced bankruptcy and inflation; the economy shrank; roads were no longer passable; and cities lost food, electricity, and water by 1995, coinciding with the Rwandan genocide. Stealing the country’s money, Mobutu had successfully in thirty years reversed the progress the country had made in social, economic, and technological endeavors. In 1997, Mobutu was removed from office, and Kabila rose to power. In 1998, another war broke out as Kabila exiled Rwandans, and neighboring countries Zimbabwe, Chad, Uganda, Rwanda, and Angola joined in fighting Kabila to lay claim to the resources in the newly named *Democratic Republic of Congo*. The next five years resulted in the Great War of Africa, one of the largest in the continent’s history and deadliest since WWII (Mangus 2010, 8). In 2003, countries and various groups were fighting still for DRC access and land rights while the war was deemed officially over by western nations (Neihuss 13-19; Meger 24-25).^[1] The impact of war on the citizens is not only a matter of acknowledging the war’s continued existence or the ways war is constantly changing leadership but also a matter of examining war’s effects on the economy,

men, women, and their relationships when war has been ever-present for over a century. The men's characterization is a duality of victim of and contributor to the problems the women face, resulting in relationships replete with tension as the men navigate their conflicting identities and beliefs.

The Men in *Ruined*

Stage directions for *Ruined* reflect the troubling relational and social constraints the men in the play experience as the state of the ensuing war and its toll on those actively participating comes to the forefront. The stage directions in the second scene of the first act underscore the volatile atmosphere: “*At the bar, drunk and disheveled rebel soldiers drain their beers and laugh too loudly.... Mama ...wears a bright red kerchief around her neck, in recognition of the rebel leaders' colors....*” (Nottage, 14). Many issues converge that the audience must process in this moment. Despite the men's drunken behavior, Mama Nadi is aware of war politics enough to know the importance of showing support of their cause by way of her red accessory—even if it is pretended.

Mama Nadi's allegiance to the soldiers, however, may very well be unclear to an audience. One is unaware that Jerome Kitembe leads the militia, that he is a rebel, and that there is more than one leader in the militia. The previous scene introduces Sophie and Salima, but there is no conversation regarding the participating sides and identifying markers of each group. Thus, when the second scene begins, the color *red* simply establishes the group as part of the war. It is less obvious that Mama Nadi's splash of red indicates any kind of allegiance. Moreover, in a wicked display of dramatic irony, the women entertaining the group seem unperturbed by Sophie and Salima's presence while the audience knows the militia has brutally raped them. To add further to the tension is the insight Christian provides that “the militia did ungodly things to” Sophie that leaves her ruined and smelling like “rot of meat” (10). Thus, the complicated relationship the women must forge is reinforced through Sophie and Salima's movements around the men as they grope, drink and laugh.

The tenuous relationship between the men and women in Mama Nadi's interact highlights the inescapability of the warring circumstances. Without questioning the scenes and interactions, one can wrongly conclude that the men and women are in complete accord with the situation. However, such a conclusion disregards the complexities of war and human behavior that Nottage constructs in *Ruined*. To the objective observer, it appears that the soldiers do go to the bar for a well-deserved reprieve from the trauma of war. Further, who is to say that some—if not all—of the men may indeed regret their involvement in the war and abhor the acts they have committed. In this sense, the desire for alcohol can be regarded as a way for them to wash away the primitive and inhumane acts inflicted upon Congolese women and the other inhabitants of this war torn area.

Sophie's words as a reproach against the men make clear that whether the men are complacent or not, they still must reconcile what they have done. That means that neither drinking nor music will provide the escape and relief they seek. Yet one can draw multiple conclusions: that, as soldiers, they are *forced* to participate in the war or die, that they are immune to the same acts of violence that their families suffered or that they are—in their

estimation—within their rights to seek revenge by any means necessary. Indeed, as Lerner, Laudati, and Clark note, “Some Congolese people, particularly in the east of the country, find strategies to survive, cope and in some cases even profit from the liminal socio-political environment in which they find themselves” (2013, 1). Without question, the various possibilities for the men’s continued involvement in the war are complicated.

The dual struggle of the men and women as they face their multiple realities in the Congolese forest necessitates an engagement with African feminist scholarship to consider how the characters’ interactions inform their actions, mindset, and behavior. In *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures*, Susan Arndt explains that the principles of African feminism vary to fit the different African ethnicities. Her perspective facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the characters in *Ruined* who are from different Congolese tribes and villages. Arndt classifies African feminism as being obliged to critique African gender relationships (2002, 72-3), but insists that African feminism demands that African men and women ally themselves to not only critique patriarchal structures but also to “discuss scopes of action and alternative perspectives for women which might help overcome their discrimination and oppression” (73-77).^[2]

For Arndt, African feminism goes beyond rethinking and reconstructing sociopolitical dynamics; it interrogates how men, too, are susceptible to patriarchal structures. This feminism is applied through the practice of methods that allow women and men to work together to redefine and re-form their ideologies and living and social practices. While *Ruined* is written for an American audience, African feminism is necessary to understand the place and people who inform the subject matter. African feminism establishes that there are interrelationships among ethnicity, gender, and class that take place simultaneously. This sensibility not only allows one to recognize inequalities on a gendered level but also to consider how the men’s class and ethnic backgrounds impact their treatment of and interaction with the women and each other.

African feminism offers a scope through which to consider the complex dynamics of the men and their represented realities. Commander Osembenga explains in an extended narrative,

This Jerome Kisémbé is a dangerous man. You hide him and his band of renegades in your villages. Give them food, and say you’re protecting your liberator. What liberator? What will he give, the people? ... Kisémbé has one goal and that is to make himself rich on your back, Mama. ... He will burn your crops, steal your women, and make slaves of your men all in the name of peace and reconciliation. Don’t believe him... And remember the land he claims as his own, it is a national reserve, it is the people’s land, our land. (Nottage, 30)

Unsurprisingly, Kisémbé shares a similar sentiment about Commander Osembenga:

[Commander Osembenga] is giving us trouble... His men set fire to several of our mining villages, now everyone has fell deeper into the bush. ... They’re burning everything to save bullets. ... They took machetes to anything that moves. ... Believe me, when we find Osembenga and his collaborators, he will be shown the same mercy he showed our people. ... They say we are the renegades. We don’t

respect the law...but how else do we protect ourselves against their aggression? Huh? How do we feed our families? Ay? They bring soldiers from Uganda, drive us from our land and make us refugees...and then turn us into criminals when we protest or try to protect ourselves. How can we let the government carve up our most valuable land to serve companies in China? It's our land. Ask the Mbuti, they can describe every inch of the forest as if were [sic] their own flesh. (52)

From each perspective, the opposition is the greater evil. Osembenga demonizes Kisémbé as a guerilla warfare fighter trying to hinder democratic progress by attacking the leadership that is protecting Kisémbé and his soldiers. Similarly, Kisémbé galvanizes the people by pointing out how destructive the government is; it outsources production and soldiers and expels citizens, depleting the economy. Both groups assert the other destroys, claims ownership of land, and harms women and families. However, the play does not offer any clear identification of a group that is any worse than the other. One may argue that Osembenga is worse between the two based on his willingness to attack the women and destroy the bar, but one must also note the attack occurs after Fortune tells Osembenga that Kisémbé was there. This very sentiment of terror and assault would likely have resulted in the same actions had it been Kisémbé hearing of Osembenga's presence.

Both men have made it clear that they are willing to destroy anyone they identify as sympathizing with their enemy's cause, so the response is expected but surprising to the uninformed because of the real implications that their actions represent and the destruction their behavior shows. The behavior of Mama Nadi and her patrons during each man's tirade also makes clear that the listeners are wary because the men's passions for their cause may result in attacks. In this way, the delicate balance among the patrons of the bar is clear, for while they may disagree with one, both, or neither side, they must always show allegiance for survival's sake. As each leader identifies his principles as the right one to be upheld, neither is proven to be such. Instead, their arguments indicate the elusiveness of safe allegiance, of a clear enemy; they both hold the same argument and use the same tactic for the same reason. Both approaches will likely, it seems, lead to a soldier's recruitment.

This pervasive pseudo-allegiance among both the men and women of *Ruined* situates the men as more layered figures where notions of good and bad are nuanced because they must tread the fine line that separates the two sides, whose politics and motives are often blurred. The soldiers and leaders appear to straddle this space. One questions if the men are good or bad; however, such simplistic binaries prove insufficient given the reality of their lives, especially when considering the multiple ambiguities in the characters of Fortune and Christian.

Among the soldiers in *Ruined*, unqualified allegiance to the rule of Osembenga or Kisémbé is far from unanimous, as shown by Fortune and Simon. Their ambivalence is just as undefined as the ever illusive solution to the war. Fortune is just as bad and just as problematic as Simon or any other leader. When Salima returns from five months of captivity, Fortune "beats her legs with a switch" as he chases her away, exclaiming she disgraced him and was dirty because of the rapes. However, he does eventually look to reunite. Fortune admits that he and Simon exist in a state of tension: "We are farmers. What are we doing? They tell us shoot and we shoot" (Nottage, 50). Fortune's acceptance, albeit a troubled one, of killing others reflects a

tenuous amount of blurred lines. He is a farmer who is a victim of the war as he loses his baby daughter when the soldiers crush her head while raping Salima, yet he still becomes a soldier. His appearance and attempts to get Salima back signal his struggle over his initial rejection.

Fortune's determination to reclaim Salima is problematized by Simon's admonitions and Salima's rejection. Simon makes clear how long they have been searching—three months—for Salima to no avail as they travel from village to village. Nonetheless, Fortune remains resolved to reunite with his wife. His behavior while seemingly commendable (he carries the iron pot that she sent him to purchase the day of her attack) is even more out of place because of the other men's commentary about the disreputable places where he searches to find Salima and the kind of women who live in such places. Thus, through Simon what becomes clear is that the patriarchal structure condemns women's sexual status regardless of men's culpability that places women in such spaces. Fortune, then, becomes one vessel (hence, a nod to the pans he carries) of possible solution as he remains undeterred.

Simon's later comments and attempts to persuade Fortune to move on reinforce the general subscription to disclaiming women and the rarity of a husband seeking out his wife. Simon implores Fortune:

It's time to consider that maybe she's dead.... We have to go by morning, with or without her.... Look here, Fortune, they're making a joke of you. The men are saying, "Why won't the man just take another woman." "Why is he chasing a damaged girl?" ... Everyone [is saying this.] Every damn one of them. ... If you are angry, then be angry at the men who took her. Think about how they did you, they reached right into your pocket and stole from you. (Nottage, 49-50)

Simon's plea to Fortune makes clear that the women and their women's bodies are not valued. Considering Simon's description of the other's viewpoints in the army, one learns that Salima is a damaged girl who is no longer worth a man's commitment or attention. Because of her low value, any time, especially three months, is too long to dedicate to finding her. More appalling though is the justification to serve in the army and kill others that Simon offers: the rapists' actions against Fortune not Salima. Simon's argument proffers a perspective that has nothing to do with the woman other than her body, and its unapproved usage by the husband is the catalyst for killing without question.

This perspective brings to bear the extent of the patriarchal structure and corrupt systems that relegate African women to a position that is disadvantageous, and it suggests a much more ambiguous and problematic issue. The men are willing to combat the rape of women by joining the very forces that participate in the rape, but they are also complacent in the rape of other women and attack of other men in an attempt to reclaim lost honor. Such a conclusion is what lies in the absence of what Fortune and Simon say when they acknowledge that they kill when told to kill; it then makes sense to presume that when gendered attacks take place, they too follow those orders. Following such logic, his perspective of women does not change. His attempt to reconnect is about reclaiming not reuniting with Salima, which is made apparent when he tells Osembenga that Kiseembe was at the bar despite knowing how Osembenga will respond: attack the women. Thus, one can see how Salima's disdain for Fortune's eventual search is

troubled yet rational, for if he is abiding by the same ideology Simon holds, he is neither carrying nor protecting her from her shame because his search and presence still remain about him and his honor rather than about her and her trauma.

Furthermore, Fortune's endeavor also forces a reconsideration of the perceptions of the men in a larger context as they get involved in the war effort. Though Fortune's decision appears to be a rare response, the apathy for the devastation the soldiers cause becomes more evident. The men's battle of wills and justification grounds and propels the movement, for if the men join to remain safe or to redeem their own lost honor, their ability to "[divorce] themselves of the responsibility" of caring about the harm they cause is terrifyingly significant as it undermines American perceptions of the full scope of soldiers' combat psyche and desensitization to death (Gener 2010, 21). As soldiers' involvement exposes the trauma they must endure in order to get to such a mental state, their psyche shows why and how they can kill and attack without being "contrite, apologetic and ashamed" (21). Moreover, it further highlights how those affected on both sides of the war are able to interact with one another, for not everyone has joined the war effort for one reason.

In contrast to the soldiers, Christian's trafficking endeavor is double-edged as he sells women who, presumably, have been raped already. Initially Christian appears to be a simple merchant with a longstanding working relationship with Mama. They flirt and taunt one another, and he works hard to get her the supplies she needs to run her business. That his specialty is in trafficking women is a key point in his subscription to the patriarchy, for he does not question the impact he has on the women's lives. Christian and Mama's easy camaraderie and quips make the audience and reader comfortable so that Christian arguably lives up to the allusion of his name, but the knowledge of his job makes the situation all the more off-putting. Not only does he encourage Mama's purchasing the women, but he does not always inform them that he is selling them into a brothel. When negotiating with Mama, he pleads he will "throw in the cigarettes for cost" and give her a "good price if [she] take[s] all of them" to avoid continuing to travel with them (Nottage, 8-9). Without context, Christian's and Mama's nonchalance about discussing the monetary value of women as comparable to cigarettes shifts one's view of Christian; his moral standard seemingly gets worse as he continues that he told them where he was taking them and that "they came willingly" this time (9). However, it is his admission that Sophie is "my sister's only daughter. ... I told my family I'd find a place for her. ... And here at least I know she'll be safe. Fed. ... And as you know the village isn't a place for a girl who has been. ... ruined. It brings shame, dishonor to the family" (11). Christian's comments situate him in a convoluted identity space. He barter women for soda and as low as fifteen dollars, and they do not always know into what situation they are being sold, nor do they always go with him willingly, but scarier is that one of the women he sells is his niece because she is no longer able to stay with her family because she has dishonored it. The rationale he offers is made more problematic as he follows up with an explanation that she is safer in a brothel than with him.

The reality for women is that continuous traveling requires constant avoidance of areas where the warring regimes may be and that the perception of a ruined woman draws a distinctive line in how a man handles her. When Christian chastises Sophie for laughing at him, his benevolent role changes immediately: "Why are you smiling? You're a lucky girl. You're lucky you have such a good uncle. A lot of men would've left you for dead" (13). Christian's

admonishment of Sophie's behavior addresses a dubiousness in his good-natured role. His comment is overly harsh given what has happened to Sophie. He has just told Mama about her brutal rape; Mama has told Sophie that she "smells like the rot of meat" (12), providing an image of Sophie's condition, yet he reminds Sophie that she likely would be dead if he was not a good man or relative. That his standard of goodness is putting his niece in a brothel shifts the good/bad dynamics and spectrum, for if good is trafficking women, what, then, is bad? To unpack this anomaly, the audience and reader have to reconstitute the terms' meanings. However, the work does not leave this fully to the reader, for one is made aware of the changing meanings, allowed to re-evaluate the meanings, and shown how the characters also readjust to the same notions.

One's perception of Christian as an increasingly antagonistic character changes and becomes more unclear as his role in the prostitution ring changes. While initially only a supplier for Mama's brothel, Christian is forced to change as Sophie's presence forces a shift toward becoming more invested in the women's experiences and lives following their traumatic experiences as prostitutes. Though he has been bringing Mama women for several years and knows them, he still manages to remain unassociated with what they do and who they become as individuals. However, with Sophie there, he finds himself having to confirm the girl's mental and emotional state and make sure she is not getting in trouble. Sophie's servicing Osembenga brings to a head his altering perception. Unprepared to face the reality of what Mama's business is, he can only stand by shocked: "Business. Just then when you said it, it sounded vulgar, polluted" (56). Christian's acknowledgement of Mama's glorified whore house, however, is more about condemnation than culpability. Her business has been the same for years, and he has been the one to ensure that she has the clients and all the trappings that she needs to guarantee its longevity and success, but he sees her business as divorced from what he does, which leads to his re-thinking his role. Mama makes it clear that he is just as guilty in the women's subjugation as she is. The difference between them is that he only views what he does as a form of ensuring the women's safety when no one else will have them: he reads his role, in short, as community service. Mama, on the other hand, views it realistically, understanding she is profiting from the women's subjugation. But, with Sophie's experience and their relationship, Christian must come to terms with what he has done by placing her and other women in Mama's custody.

Christian's re-evaluation of his beliefs serves as the moment of crossing the patriarchal line. Throughout the play, he pursues Mama in an effort to develop more than a business relationship, but she rejects him. He recites poetry, poses riddles, talks politics, and provides community updates. Nevertheless, his willingness to traffic women also establishes his thoughts on women's roles and their condition. Unlike Simon who eventually succumbs to the other soldiers' beliefs about women and their value, Christian disagrees with the war as more people whom he knows become victims of it. In his disagreeing with the war and seeing Sophie, he moves closer to a perspective that upholds women as valuable beyond their body. After he confronts who he has become, he returns to Mama:

CHRISTIAN. We have unfinished "business"!

MAMA. Look around, there's no business here. There's nothing left. ...

CHRISTIAN. (*Blurts.*) Then Mama, settle down with me. ... [I]f I said, I'd stay, help you run things. Make a legitimate business. A shop. Fix the door. Hang the mirror. ... How long has it been, Mama, since you allowed a man to touch you? Huh? A man like me, who isn't looking through you for a way home. (66)

“Business” for Christian carries the double meaning. For Mama, their relationship is about her business—the bar and brothel. For Christian, however, their relationship is about their romantic relationship. That Mama’s business appears to be on the decline grants him the excuse and access to make progress in starting a relationship. Her previous rejections of his advances, it appears, have been contingent upon her business’s success. However, the key to Christian’s transformation is his final comment and actions after her learns Mama Nadi is ruined: “God I don’t know what those men did to you, but I’m sorry for it. I may be an idiot for saying so, but I think we, and I speak as a man, can do better” (67). His response seemingly negates his earlier comments about women’s blame in their victimization. His initial response reflects a viewpoint that identifies only the women as involved in their devastation, much like his initial response to Sophie’s and Mama’s roles and positions. However, when he learns Mama is *ruined*, his statement seems to be an admission of the men’s culpability in women’s decimation. No longer is it only the women’s fault for being attacked or sole responsibility but it is also the men’s. Thus, the sentiment places Christian on a clearly defined side against the war and gender relations’ distorted lines.

Ruined does more than place Nottage’s interviewees’ narratives center stage to explore the implications of the influences of war on their lives. Ozieblo begins to capture the sentiment when she notes, “It is not a play dedicated to the women victims of war, but a play that gives them an opportunity to share their stories” (76). It is, I suggest, also a play that shows that men also struggle to navigate the patriarchal space and can, in fact, change as a result of the encounters with the women, particularly when the dynamics of a personal relationship become a factor. This is not to say that *Ruined* condenses and melds all men’s involvement in the subjugation and abuse of women in order to give possible solutions. Rather, I am suggesting that the work examines the range of men’s roles from ignored involvement to conscious atonement in the women’s healing process. The men, like Christian, who partner with the women to change the perspectives and the dynamics of their relationships do not allow their cultural subscription of gendered roles to be the defining identifier of their gendered perspectives but instead seek to re-define themselves in attendance to the women they have cast out.

Acknowledging—as does Berthold Brecht in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), which provides the template for Nottage’s *Ruined*—that in times of war, the good/bad binary is just as ever-changing and unstable as each day enables the conversation to appreciate but see beyond the more obvious and immediate conflict. By turning attention to Fortune, Christian, and the other men in *Ruined*, one can appreciate that the play opens itself to an interrogation of how *all* humans reconcile broken, distorted, and intersecting identities and changes unstable, often conflicting beliefs that emerge in the fog of life.

Works Cited

- Als, Hilton. "Life during Wartime." *The New Yorker*. 85:3 (2 March 2009): 72.
- Arndt, Susan. 2002. *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures*. Translated by Isabel Cole. Asmara, Eritrea, and Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Deroze, Phyllisa. 2010. "Womanist Restorative Drama: Violence, Community, and Healing by Contemporary Black Women Playwrights." PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University. Dissertations and Theses: Full Text (2014421008).
- Fox, Ann. 2011. "Battles on the Body: Disability, Interpreting Dramatic Literature, and the Case of Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 1:1-16. Accessed April 12, 2013, doi: 10.3828/jlcds.2011.1
- Friedman, Sharon. 2010. "The Gendered Terrain in Contemporary Theatre of War by Women." *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 4:593-610. Accessed February 20, 2015, doi: 10.1353/tj.2010.0061.
- Gener, Randy. 2010. "In Defense of *Ruined*." *American Theatre* 27, no. 8:118-22.
- . 2009. "Mama Nadi and Her Women." *American Theatre* 26, no. 3:21.
- Larner, Miles, Ann Laudati, and John F. Clark. 2013. "Neither War nor Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Profiting and Coping and Violence and Disorder." *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no. 135:1-12. Accessed March 3, 2015, doi: 10.1080/03056244.2013.762165.
- Meger, Sara. 2010. "Rape of the Congo: Understanding Sexual Violence in the Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 28, no. 2:119-35. Accessed November 8, 2013, doi: 10.1080/02589001003736728
- Neihuus, Rachel Marie. 2014. "'We Live in War': An Ambivalent Every day in Eastern DRC." PhD diss., U of California, San Francisco and U of California, Berkeley. Dissertations and Theses: Full Text (3642682).
- Nottage, Lynn. 2010. *Ruined*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- Ozieblo, Barbara. 2011. "'Pornography of Violence': Strategies of Representation in Plays by Naomi Wallace, Stefanie Zdravec, and Lynn Nottage." *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 23, no. 1:67-79.
- Richards, Sandra. 1995. "Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature." *Performativity and Performance*. Edited by Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick. New York: Routledge, 64-88.

Notes

[1] For more information on the DRC’s political, economic, and war history, see Nancy Rose Hunt’s “An Acoustic Register, Tenacious Images, and Congolese Scenes of Rape” (2008), Dan Fahey’s *Rethinking the Resource Curse; Ituri: Gold Land, and Ethnicity in North Eastern Congo* (2013), Janet MacGaffey’s *The Real Economy of Zaire* (1991), and Stephen Lubkerman’s *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (2008).

[2] Arndt explains that some of the components have characteristics that are also mixed with other forms of inequity that also affect men: “sexism and patriarchal social structures...racism, neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, religious fundamentalism, socio-economic mechanisms of oppression and dictatorial and/or corrupt systems” (Arndt, 73).

Shayla Atkins is a Lecturer in the Department of English at Howard University. She earned her Ph.D. in African American Literature from Howard University in 2016. Her research interests include sites of trauma, family dynamics, gender studies, and intersections of literary and performance studies in 20th/21st century African American literature and drama.
