Lecture on Lynn Nottage's 'Sweat' (BAAS) Transcript

Content note: This lecture includes a discussion of the following themes: race, racial violence.

TRANSCRIPT

Hello, my name is Jenny Kirton, and today, I'll be looking at Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer prize-winning play, *Sweat*. The slide here features an image from a 2020 production of Sweat at Huntington Theatre, Boston.

The contextual backdrop of Nottage's play relates to the industrial decline in Reading, Pennsylvania, between the years 2000 and 2008. This is a rust belt region where - in Nottage's own words - "for years, if you got off a bus, within an hour you could have a job. Within the course of maybe 30 years, those jobs began to disappear to the point where it had a staggering unemployment rate and was deemed the poorest city of its size in America." So Reading, Pennsylvania underwent a dramatic shift in terms of its economic and political landscape, as did all regions belonging to the US rust belt.

In this lecture, I'll examine how, in *Sweat*, Nottage reflects on some of the cultural narratives that have been connected to the origins and the development of the US rust belt. The US rust belt refers to a group of regions in the US that were formerly considered the industrial centre of America, but which experienced widespread unemployment, poverty, and a decline in population, as a consequence of deindustrialisation. I'll consider the ways in which certain cultural narratives attached to the emergence of the US rust belt are revealed in Nottage's *Sweat* to uphold racial hierarchies and gender hierarchies. I'll also consider how

Nottage centres the experiences of women and people of colour, whose voices have been erased from many prevailing cultural narratives about the emergence of the rust belt.

But to begin with, what exactly are cultural narratives, and why are they so relevant to the study of 'Sweat'? Cultural narratives enable communities, as well as nations, to make sense of their histories, by assigning meaning to events and experiences. They are stories adopted to make sense of historical moments and to understand their origins. Theatre offers a vehicle through which cultural narratives can be scripted and performed, and even challenged.

Often, playwrights will offer counter-narratives through their plays, meaning that their work challenges accepted ways of understanding a particular historical event. Lynn Nottage does just this in *Sweat.* As scholars and critics have identified, Nottage challenges certain cultural narratives that have emerged around the issue of US deindustrialisation. Nottage does this by centring the often-erased experiences of people of colour and women.

First performed in 2015, *Sweat* follows the lives of a group of labourers who work at a steel tubing factory in Reading, Pennsylvania. As the plot develops, the factory workers confront escalating job insecurity, wage and benefits cuts, a steep decline in the power of their labour union, and an eventual lock-out by their employer. Through their discussions and experiences, Nottage contests certain cultural narratives about the US rust belt, connected to race and gender.

One way that Nottage does this is by approaching de-industrialisation from the perspective of its impact on personal relationships. Notice how the narrative structure for the

scenes set in 2000 follow the birthday celebrations of Cynthia, Tracy, and Jessie. That the friendship between these three women is so central to the plot speaks to Nottage's interest in dramatizing the gendered dimensions of the working-class experience. So many narratives of blue-collar workers focus on the experiences and feelings of white men who are unhappy with the circumstances of deindustrialisation. This play guide, produced for a 2018 production staged at Everyman Theatre, Baltimore, visually demonstrates this positioning of women's voices as central. You may have already identified that, interestingly, the factory floor does not feature at all in the play, although characters discuss events that have occurred inside its walls from the environment of the bar. In this sense, the factory floor functions as an absent presence in the play; it signifies patriarchal power in a male-dominated industry, and so could even be read as a male space for this reason.

A drastic shift occurs in *Sweat* when Cynthia, who Nottage informs us in the character list is a 45-year old African American woman, is promoted to a management position at Olston's. Racial tensions emerge between the friends when Tracey, who Nottage informs us is a 45-year old white American of German descent, is unsuccessful in applying for the role. Tracey puts Cynthia's success in landing the management role down to her race.

Slide features quote: Act 1 Scene 5: *TRACEY: […] I know the floor as good as Cynthia. I do. […] I betcha they wanted a minority. I'm not prejudice, but that's how things are going these days. I got eyes. They get tax breaks or something. […]*

Cynthia's and Tracy's sons, Chris and Jason, who are also close friends, navigate racial tensions in their relationship in a scene where Chris shares his plans to attend college and continue his education.

Slide features quote: *Act 1 Scene 3: Chris: [...] But I kinda wanna do something a little different than my moms and pops. Yo, I got aspirations. There it is. And I won't apologize. Jason: You got aspirations? What is this, Black History Month? [...] Actually, it shouldn't be called Black History Month, it should be called "Make White People Feel Guilty Month."*

The scholar, Julie Burrell, highlights that 'Cynthia and Chris, as Black Americans, understand the intimate effects of global capital in a way that white characters do not, realising that manual labour will not grant them the status of noble worker that whites could claim during the high point of labour organising.' As Black Americans, the social hierarchies of race distinguish Cynthia's and Chris's working-class identities from that of their white friends, Tracy and Jason.

Consider, as well, the steelworkers' union, which historically excluded Black Americans. The cultural narratives used to justify such exclusionary measures are evidently still at play in 2000 in *Sweat*. In Act 1 Scene 4, Brucie speaks of his experience at the union office where he is accused of stealing jobs based on his racial identity. Brucie's recollections of his father's pivotal role in the union challenges a cultural narrative that positions white men as exclusively responsible for the labour and economic prosperity of the region. This same narrative positions non-white immigrant workers as a threat to the continued success of the manufacturing industry. It's significant then that Brucie underscores the important contribution of marginalised groups who helped to establish the power of the labour unions.

Slide features quote: *Act 1 Scene 5: BRUCIE: […] this old white cat, whatever, gets in my face, talking about how we took his job. We? […] He don't know my biography. October 2nd, 1952, my father picked his last bale of cotton. He packed his razor and a Bible and headed North. Ten days later he had a job at Dixon's Hosieries. He clawed his way up from the filth of the yard to Union Rep, fighting for fucking assholes just like this cat. So I don't understand it. This damn blame game, I got enough of that in my marriage.*

Consider as well, the scene where Oscar, who is a 22-year old Colombian-American man, asks for Tracey's assistance joining the steelworkers' union. The slide here features an image from a 2020 production of *Sweat* at Huntington Theatre, Boston, which features Oscar, Stan and Tracey. Nottage offers an insight into some of the gatekeeping that goes on, as Tracey responds "Olstead's isn't for you". Oscar's decision to cross the picket line is met with physical violence and verbal abuse by the workers, again demonstrating the detrimental impact of this historical moment in terms of amplifying divisions between racial groups.

As a final note I'm going to turn to the work of a scholar named Julie Burrell, who has underscored the importance of two particular cultural narratives around the US rust belt, that are really relevant to *Sweat.* And these cultural narratives Burrell explains actually emerged in the period running up to the 2016 US presidential election that saw Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump go head-to-head. So, she's arguing that Nottage's work actually goes some way in pre-empting the way that this historical period would be chronicled, or narrated, by figures in positions of power, as part of a political agenda.

Slide features quote: *[The play] at once predict[s] and confront[s] the two racialized narratives of US deindustrialization that emerged with force around the 2016 presidential election: the fi rst, a tale of a white American heartland whose future had been jeopardized by economic restructuring; and the second, that of a depopulated yet also Black- inhabited space of death inherently devoid of all productive futurity, a ghetto, a slum, a no- place.*

The first narrative, Burrell explains, is "a tale of a white American heartland whose future had been jeopardised by economic restructuring." This narrative portrays the rust belt as historically central to American prosperity thanks to the labour of exclusively white

workers. The fact of economic restructuring is figured as a component that will spell the death of this white American heartland.

The second Julie Burrell describes is, "that of a depopulated yet also Black- inhabited space of death inherently devoid of all productive futurity, a ghetto, a slum, a no- place." This second narrative also introduces this notion of death as synonymous with the region. Notice that this narrative does acknowledge the *presence* of Black Americans in the region, though then goes cite a "no-place," and to describe "no futurity" so at the same time invoking this notion of absence and erasure, which Burrell summarises as a Black wasteland being described. The use of racialised language across these two narratives really stands out then, as does the way ideas about race are mapped onto the very geography of the rust belt.

Can you identify any other moments in *Sweat* than the ones I've mentioned in this lecture, wherein Nottage challenges these two cultural narratives?