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More than a Props List: Redefining Material Culture as Survival and Pleasure in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

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A small mining town. The sounds of the tropical Ituri rain forest. The Democratic Republic of Congo. A bar, makeshift furniture and a rundown pool table. A lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful. A stack of plastic washtubs rests in the corner. An old car battery powers the lights and audio system, a covered birdcage sits conspicuously in the corner of the room. ([1])

How might you approach these opening stage directions from Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Ruined*? Would you start by picturing specific pieces of furniture? Does the quality and type of sound come to mind first? How does your own positionality inform these choices? As a theatre and performance scholar who also serves as a production manager, designer, and professor, I am rarely able to separate a scholarly reading from the material conditions of production. Thus, I approach these stage directions through many different lenses. For example, as a sound designer, I notice that the first specific thing Nottage mentions is the "sounds of the tropical Ituri rain forest" followed by a reference to an audio system that is plugged into "an old car battery." These details would impact technical and artistic choices I might make. Similarly, as a lighting designer, I notice that the same battery powers the lights, which means that a production would likely need practical lighting instruments to be hung around the set, in addition to the stage lights. A props-centered approach is particularly compelling because Nottage lists "makeshift furniture" – a phrase which sparks a larger conversation, not just about the logistics of acquiring or building these objects for the stage, but one which hails the production team into the world of the play and into the minds of the characters. Therein lies the challenge.

Ruined is a 2011 drama which tells the story of Mama Nadi, a Mother Courage-like figure who owns and operates the described bar in the Congolese rain forest. Her patrons are often miners of the mineral coltan, used in cellular phones, and soldiers on both sides of a bloody civil war. What does "makeshift furniture" look like in the world of this play? What objects are available to these characters, and where do these objects come from? What were these objects originally intended for and what does their second life as "makeshift furniture" reveal about the objectives, survival, innovation, and pleasure of the characters? When members of a production team must put themselves in the place of the characters to make artistic decisions, other aspects of our positionalities manifest themselves as assets or limits in this theatrical process. For example, how would my experiences as a white-ethnic, middle-class, and queer theatre scholar/practitioner in the United States help or hinder my ability to access the world of the play and the lived experiences of the characters to make well-informed, ethical, and dramaturgically accurate production decisions? I begin with this discussion of props because I contend that delving into the specific material histories of objects in the text provides new avenues of nuance and complexity that can help bridge the gap between Western scholarly, practical, and personal lived experiences and those of the characters.

An article like "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" by Chandra Talpade Mohanty establishes what is at stake when Western knowledge production relies on archetypes instead of the material realities of the "third world"—especially women. She describes this archetype of the "average third world woman" as falling into gendered stereotypes such as sexual constraint, and "third world" stereotypes of "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc." ([2]) She then argues that the victim narrative, in particular, reduces the complexities of the lives of "third world" women to socioeconomic or sexual terms, reinforcing the sexist stereotype of women as weak. ([3]) In focusing on the material objects listed in a play like *Ruined*, through an application of material culture theory as a methodology, this article outlines how Western theatre makers and scholars can approach plays set in the "third world" in a way that Mohanty argues would be more grounded in the "material and ideological power structures" which shape these women's lives. ([4]) Toward this end, *Ruined* is a useful vehicle for the application of a material culture reading precisely because the play was created with the intent to "sustain the complexity" of the civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, knowing that her Western "first-world" audience would only know about the conflict through fragmented news clips. ([5]) Nottage wrote the play based on ethnographic testimony of real women who survived the war, but she also uses specifically-named material objects in the text to ground the character's larger given circumstances in material reality.

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In the play's first descriptive paragraphs, referenced above, Nottage paints a picture of a place that is "worn" but "cheerful," "rundown" but "tropical"—evoking a comfortable place more than a war zone. As a play about what Mohanty terms the "third world" written for a "first world"

audience, Nottage does not fully immerse the audience in the horrors of war immediately. I use the phrase “third world” in this context throughout this paper because it is the word that Mohanty uses to describe the groups of women who fall under this Western label. “Third world,” in its immediate context, refers to the Cold War language which identified the “first world” as the capitalist nations, who were in opposition to the Soviet Union and the expansion of communism. As Mohanty details, this term has taken on more cultural meanings than its technical use from the Cold War era—so that even words like “Western” are tied to the division between “first” and “third” world. I use the term, knowing that it is outdated and problematic in many ways, but also knowing that many of the perceptions associated with this word still exist. I use it with the knowledge that it is a cultural touchstone, conjuring a specific iconography which I hope to complicate. Hence, I will keep it in quotations to highlight the fact that it is a construction.

The first allusion to violence happens five lines into the first scene, where Mama Nadi exclaims to her stock supplier Christian, a “*perpetually cheerful traveling salesman*” that she has been expecting him for three weeks. Christian explains that “Every two kilometers a boy with a Kalashnikov and pockets that need filling.” ([6]) Nottage begins to reveal the larger given circumstances of the play through specific mentions of an object: the Russian-made and distributed Kalashnikov, often referred to in American lexicon as an “AK.” ([7]) In his book on gun history aptly titled *The Gun*, CJ Chivers informs readers that

More than six decades after its design and initial distribution, more than fifty national armies carry the automatic Kalashnikov, as do an array of police, intelligence, and security agencies. But its fuller terrain lies outside the sphere of conventional force. The Kalashnikov [culturally] marks the guerilla, the terrorist, the child soldier, the dictator, and the thug—all of whom have found it to be a ready equalizer against morally or materially superior foes. ([8])

Because the AK, especially the infamous AK-47, is often wielded by the NATO members’ military opponents, it is often viewed, in the American cultural archive, as a “bad guy” weapon. Conversely, it is often seen by those who wield them as a symbol of defiance against colonial powers and Western, capitalist values. For the characters in the first scene of *Ruined*, it represents their position as both citizens of a post-colonial, “third world” country and their vulnerability to violence at the hands of their own countrymen—thus complicating the “bad guy/good guy” or “Western/Anti-Western” binaries. Nottage’s specific mention of the Kalashnikov and other objects in the script serves as what the Combahee River Collective calls “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” ([9])

Nottage’s ability to “sustain the complexity” of many topics has earned her much critical acclaim and scholarly attention. According to data from *American Theatre*, Nottage was the most produced playwright for the 2022-2023 theatre season in the United States. ([10]) Her play *Clyde’s* earned the top spot as the most produced play, with her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sweat* at number five. *Intimate Apparel* was the most produced play of the 2005-2006 season and the fifth most-produced play of the 2006-2007 season. ([11]) *Ruined* held the fourth spot in the 2010-2011 season. Poignantly, *Intimate Apparel* returned to the top-ten list in 2016-2017, and *Sweat* was second in the 2018-2019 season before returning to the list for 2022-2023. The data suggests that Nottage’s plays have enjoyed many “lives” beyond their initial premiere dates. As Nottage’s work continues to weave in and out of America’s top ten lists, it is necessary for scholarship to reexamine her work and the body of scholarly and dramaturgical literature dedicated to her plays. Each new “life” evidences a relevance or usefulness to public discourse in the United States on political issues of national interest including immigration, deindustrialization, globalization, and incarceration. Likewise, as national discourses now include robust discussions of the environmental and moral ethics of mining minerals in “third world” countries for electric vehicle batteries, *Ruined* offers readers and spectators a material methodology that can help to circumvent many of the traps of homogenization, reduction, or “Othering” that can too-often arise in public discourses on the “third world” and its women.

Third World Feminism and Material Culture Theory

Cultural theorist Celia Lury defines material culture as “a culture of the use or appropriation of objects or things.” ([12]) She continues: “The first half of the term—‘material’—points to the significance of *stuff*, of *things* in everyday practices, while the second half—‘culture’—indicates that this attention to the materials of everyday life is combined with a concern with the cultural, with norms, values and practices.” ([13]) A material culture theory reading of Nottage’s script follows what Mohanty insists that Western beholders should do every time we encounter stories of women in the “third world.” Material culture theory is an interdisciplinary way of analyzing the various ways that objects are connected to larger given circumstances and power dynamics. For marginalized groups who might be absent from the written archive, material culture theory is a way to give voice to the voiceless, or to highlight the everyday lives of people who never wrote about themselves.

Material culture theory, however, is not to be confused with materialism or the Marxist tradition of historic materialism, which often only regards material objects in terms of their means of production, consumption, and the role they play in exploitation. In centering the systems of oppression in a discussion on “third world” Black women, there is a danger of falling into the “archetypal victim” that Mohanty warns against. Material culture theory considers the role that objects play in these negotiations: its production—particularly the unseen labor that goes into making it and maintaining it—but also its intended function, the ways that it participates in the creation of self-identity, its special relationships to people and other objects, and how these meanings change over time. ([14]) A study of objects in the script reveals the interlocking oppressions which affect the characters’ everyday lives, but also how these objects can be used as sites of agency, survival, resistance, or other negotiations of power within that structure. The play’s original director, Kate Whoriskey, states, “As a director committed to staging complexity, my task is to counter the drama with humor, spirit and wit, and to treat the stories collected in Central Africa with the understanding that at every moment the Congolese are determined to survive.” ([15]) I am interested in the way that role that objects play in the leveraging of these dramatic moments in favor of survival, as reflective of the way that real women in the Congo, such as the ones that this play is based on, do the same.

Furthermore, material culture theory resists the anti-materialism (victim/passive) narrative that suggests that consumers are manipulated or subordinated into purchasing or gathering things. The production and consumption of material objects can just as much oppress an individual as it can empower one. Like “third world” feminism, material culture theory demands that a methodology be used to consider the individual circumstances of an object’s relationship to a person, time, and place to “sustain the complexity,” as Nottage would say. I’d like to push the conversation beyond mere survival into one of joy and pleasure. Mohanty warns that confining the “third world” woman to a survival narrative can perpetuate their image as “archetypal victims,” and “freezes” them into “objects-who-defend themselves.” ([16]) This essay thus considers how material objects can be used as both a means of survival *and* pleasure. This positioning comes in direct response to critics who have chosen to praise the play’s portrayal of sexual violence but decry the fact that Nottage wrote a romantic ending for her principle leads. Other scholars, such as Jeff Paden, have defended the play’s romantic ending in the name of its political potency. ([17]) Is the ending of a Black/postcolonial play predetermined to be sad or ambiguous? If so, who determines this? It is possible that this ending disturbed critics because it challenged preconceived Western notions of what the “third world” is supposed to be. And perhaps the justification of “third world” characters’ pleasure

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determined by its political efficacy. In the context of this paper, “third world” feminism manifests itself as both Black feminism and postcolonial feminism with an emphasis on self-definition, and how material objects are used to that end. A material culture theory reading of the text that considers how these objects contribute to the world-making that Nottage employs insists that the objects in the script are more than a props list. They are a means understanding the complex world contexts that a production has taken on the responsibility to portray.

Fanta, Don't You Wanna?

The field of material culture theory has a plethora of methods for analyzing these relationships. Many are in the form of a series of questions which can be applied to an object. This section will use the questions developed by Igor Kopytoff to go through the objects in the script for *Ruined* to identify the characters' material circumstances, which reveal their position in larger systems and “interlocking oppressions.” While detailing the material circumstances and synthesis of oppression is only a first step, it is a vital one.

Kopytoff approaches the above considerations of a material object as a “cultural biography” of a thing. “In doing the biography of a thing,” he says, “one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its ‘status’ and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized?” ([18]) Kopytoff is working within an anthropological framework, however, this paper is not an anthropological treatment of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While the characters and events of the play are based on ethnographic testimony from real women from the DRC, *Ruined* is ultimately a theatrical script, and the material objects in this play exist within the larger given circumstances that Nottage has created for the stage. In this material culture reading, anthropology is replaced with script analysis and dramaturgical research, although the same questions that Kopytoff asks are used.

Consider the opening stage directions of the play: “*A small mining town. The sounds of the tropical Ituri rain forest. The Democratic Republic of Congo. A bar, makeshift furniture and a rundown pool table. A lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful. A stack of plastic washtubs rests in the corner. An old car battery powers the audio system, a covered birdcage sits conspicuously in the corner of the room.*” ([19]) These stage directions establish the immediate location of the play: a small mining town in the Ituri rain forest. But they also emphasize that the owner of the bar/brothel, who is about to be introduced as “*Mama Nadi, early forties, an attractive woman with an arrogant stride and majestic air,*” has recycled and repurposed items beyond their original functions. ([20]) She has put “a lot of effort” into curating these objects in a way that produces pleasure for her and her customers. The cultural biographies of the “*makeshift furniture,*” “*washtubs,*” and “*car battery*” have changed with time and with a new owner, and their positioning in this space speaks to Mama Nadi's larger given circumstances as well as the ways that she uses objects to create her own space within those circumstances.

Before Nottage mentions the Kalashnikov, she notes that Christian is drinking a Fanta soda. ([21]) Like the Kalashnikov, Fanta has a collective cultural meaning in “first world” material culture. While it would be difficult to impossible to track each individual audience member's knowledge, recognition, and response to these objects in the script, Fanta's massive American marketing campaign in the early 2000s offers clues to the audience's possible associations. The 2001 Fanta television commercial, featuring the tropically themed female group of four, the Fantanas, and their catchy, Latinx-inspired, double-entendre jingle “Fanta, Don't You Wanna” branded the soda as a fun and sexy party drink, associated with the Global South, where it was already incredibly popular. ([22]) At first glance, Christian's choice to order a soda in a bar, specifically a Fanta, may evoke such cultural associations with fun and pleasure. The cultural biography of Fanta can serve to connect the image of the smiling African salesman character to the “first world” audience and help us understand the relationship between our material culture and the characters'.

Because Fanta is specific, its biography is easier to trace as a first example. ([23]) The first question that Kopytoff would ask about a bottle of Fanta is, “Where does the thing come from and who made it?” A quick Google search can tell me that “Fanta is a brand of fruit-flavored carbonated drinks created by The Coca-Cola Company and marketed globally.” ([24]) However, Kopytoff's question forces one to search deeper for the unseen labor and processes which created the beverage and brought it to Christian's hands in Mama Nadi's bar. Fanta's presence in this space is evidence of globalization. The Coca-Cola Company is an American corporation, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, which works with local bottling partners all over the world. ([25]) In Africa, at the time that the play was written, the largest partner was SABMiller, a British brewing company based in London. ([26]) The bottling and brewing plants would be in African countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, Comoros, Mayotte, Swaziland, Botswana and Zambia—but not the Democratic Republic of Congo. ([27]) In the DRC, the Coca-Cola bottling company is the Barlima Brewery, founded by Belgian businessmen during colonial occupation and owned, since 1986, by the Dutch Heineken Corporation. ([28]) The list of Coca-Cola products bottled at Barlima does not include Fanta, nor is it listed as being distributed in the DRC. Thus, the Fanta was made by African workers in plants owned by the Dutch, in partnership with an American company, and brought to Mama Nadi's bar by the black market. ([29]) Like the exchange of the Kalashnikov rifles outside of conventional forces, Mama Nadi's business exists outside of the standard market. She is simultaneously an avid capitalist and a disruptor of capitalist markets, defying simple or clean categories. By asking one simple question of a stage direction on the first page of the script, this methodology has yielded valuable information on the given circumstances of the play and the post-colonial, racial, and capitalist power dynamics of which the characters find themselves.

Material Culture as Survival

A strictly materialist reading of these circumstances related to Fanta would highlight the role that these systems play in oppressing characters like Mama Nadi. For example, the dialogue of the first scene explains that the movement of goods such as Fanta is difficult due to rebel checkpoints and taxes. A few lines after discussing the joys of his soda, Christian exclaims the quote from earlier about the Kalashnikov and pockets that need filling: “Toll, tax, tariff. They invent reasons to lighten your load.” ([30]) The material objects cannot be separated from the larger given circumstances of the piece. For example, Mama pours herself a Primus beer while Christian drinks his Fanta. Primus beer is brewed in the same Barlima Brewry which partners with Coca-Cola and is owned by the Dutch Heineken Group. Unlike Fanta, which does not distribute in the DRC, Primus has exclusivity deals with bars all over the country, and Heineken pays roughly one million dollars to the rebels to pass their checkpoints so that the beer can be distributed. ([31]) The connections between Heineken and the armed conflict in the DRC has yet to be explored in its entirety. Olivier van Beemen's explosive book *Heineken in Africa: A Multinational Unleashed* exposes the company's ties to corruption, sexual violence, human rights violations, and even genocide in the 1990s. ([32]) A material culture reading acknowledges these systems of oppression, but also asks what the object means for the characters themselves, thus centering them in the narrative, and not the multinational corporations.

Here, for example, Primus beer is a significant portion of Mama's revenue. When Mr. Harari discusses the interlocking oppressions of coltan mining and armed “two-bit militias battling for the keys to hell,” Mama responds to these factors by declaring, “True, chérie, but someone must provide them with beer and distractions.” ([33]) Primus is such a large part of Mama's business that the parrot she keeps in the bar ends the play by squawking, “Mama! Primus! Mama! Primus!” ([34]) For Mama, her bar is more than a business, it is survival for her and the girls in her employment as prostitutes. Mama's bar is established as a safe zone in the first scene when Christian brings his niece Sophie to work there: “I told my family I'd find a place for her . . . And here at least I know she'll be safe. Fed.” ([35]) This fact is stated again in the second act when

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Mama asserts, "My girls, Emilene, Mazima, Josephine, ask them, they'd rather be here, than back out there in their villages where they are taken without regard. They're safer with me than in their own homes." ([36]) She describes how the interlocking oppressions which connect natural resources, multinational corporations, beer, and armed conflict also protect her: beer makes the soldiers happy and they protect her business. "Who would protect my business if [the Commander] turned on me?" she says. ([37]) This is emphasized when Mr. Harari exclaims to Mama, "Just, be careful, where will I drink if anything happens to you?" ([38]) The line emphasizes the fact that her bar is the only one in the area. By selling beer in the rainforest, she meets supply and demand for pleasure in their bleak circumstances. In this way, her business is useful to forces that would otherwise destroy her and the women she protects. Her usefulness, and therefore her financial and physical security, is symbiotically tied to Primus beer.

A reading which only focuses on the means by which Primus is produced, distributed, and tied to rebel groups misses the complex material circumstances which tie it to the characters' survival. Kopytoff asserts that a "cultural biography" of an object must consider the perspective by which one assesses an object. ([39]) Does one read the value of Primus beer based on how much Heineken profits from it, how much rebels profit from it, or how much Mama profits from it? The answer is to consider all of them, but to center Mama's perspective to determine how the object is culturally marked within the world of Nottage's script. What does her world look like without Fanta or Primus?

Thanks to a report by *The Economist* in 2018, there is little need for speculation. In between 2009—when *Ruined* was researched and written—and 2018, Heineken was forced to close two of its breweries in the DRC due to international pressures over their ties to Barlima Brewing Co. and business practices in those regions. The article explains that since 2016, "In western Congo, Angolan beer in cans—less tasty but cheaper than Primus or Tembo—has flooded the market. It is not sold at cost since the smugglers' main aim is to acquire dollars to trade on the black market in Angola." ([40]) The article also reports that "violence is worsening." Imagining that this happened while Mama is trying to run her business, she would have to pay more money for beer, which is described as being lower quality. Furthermore, the commercial branding of Primus within the script, and in reality, is of the utmost importance. Kopytoff's final question asks, "What has been [the object's] career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them?" ([41]) Both *The Economist* and Olivier van Beeman discuss how Primus is ingrained in Congolese culture as large sponsors of the music industry, and how Heineken sponsors campus fashion shows at universities, free nights in dance clubs, and music and sporting events. ([42]) This gendered meaning of the beer, and its connection to the music industry, is evident in Mama Nadi's bar where she and Sophie sing songs about beer and about warriors. ([43]) In the script, when soldiers enter her bar, they immediately ask for one or two bottles of Primus, and at other times refer to themselves as "warriors" or perform hyper-masculinity. ([44]) What would happen if Mama told them that she does not have Primus beer in her stock? Because so much of her survival depends on the happiness of her customers, a negation of the culturally significant pleasure of drinking Primus beer could potentially result in the bar's value decreasing. Again, the connection between Primus beer, the countries commercial and cultural institutions, and cultural markers for masculinity "sustains the complexity" of the material conditions of the characters' lives as it also raises the stakes for what would happen if Primus were unavailable to Mama's bar.

The same can be said for mentions of the mineral coltan in the script, which is the one material object that has dominated many discourses in dramaturgy packets. From the first scene, Nottage establishes the importance of this object when Christian says, "All along the road people are talking about how this red dirt is rich with coltan." ([45]) As the scenes progress, the audience is informed of the impact that coltan mining has had on the Congo, and the human rights violations which are connected to the mining and selling of this mineral for electronic devices. In fact, much of the first two scenes is dedicated to explaining this exposition, signaling that this material object is the lynchpin which connects the local economy, the armed conflict, and the sexual violence perpetrated against women.

Nottage has positioned the action of the play a few months after coltan had been discovered in the rainforest. Mama says, "Six months ago it was just more black dirt," ([46]) Mr. Harari informs Mama that, "in this damnable age of the mobile phone it's become quite the precious ore..." ([47]) Christian establishes that there are large groups of miners coming to the area: "Suddenly everyone has a shovel, and wants to stake a claim since that boastful pygmy dug up his fortune in the reserve. I guarantee there will be twice as many miners here by September." ([48]) This makes Mama Nadi happy, because it means that she will have more customers, however, the character Salima connects the coltan mining to the armed conflict and atrocities, recounting how "fifteen Hema men were shot dead and buried in their own mining pit, in mud so thick it swallow them right into the ground without mercy. He say one man stuff the coltan into his mouth to keep the soldiers from stealing his hard work, and they split his belly open with a machete. 'It'll show him for stealing,' he say, bragging like I should be congratulating him." ([49]) Like Primus, the interlocking oppressions of coltan mining are clear, but so is the fact that Mama's business depends on it. "Me, I thank God for deep dirty holes like Yaka-yaka," Mama says of the local mine. ([50])

Since *Ruined* premiered in 2009, dramaturgy packets, study guides, and program notes have addressed the issue of conflict minerals, as they appear in the play, but most fail to address their importance to the characters' survival. In a way, these dramaturgs have performed the first part of Kopytoff's methodology on cell phones and other electronic devices that the audience might own, but do not complete the "cultural biography." For example, Charlie Payne of the Almeida Theatre in London suggests a practical exercise for teachers and students titled "There's no blood on my mobile!" He instructs his audience to read the context articles he has provided and "Brainstorm the supply chain, or 'conveyor belt', of coltan—how does it reach the consumer and what are the consequences of mobile phone consumerism in the West? Now think about this physically. Create six, eightbeat phrases—three relating to the use of coltan and three highlighting its impact in the DRC. Now try playing these all together—a literal conveyer belt from the mines to the consumer." ([51]) Connected to a 2011 production, *Berkely Rep Magazine* featured a section entitled, "Coltan: From the Congo to you," reporting that "In the 1990s and early 2000s, coltan emerged as a globally significant commodity essential to the production of digital technology. As world demand for mobile phones, laptops, PlayStations, and digital cameras exploded, tech industries came to increasingly rely on coltan from the Congo, which has an estimated 80% of the world's reserves." ([52]) A 2011 study guide from Arena Stage cites a United Nations study which reports that, "all parties involved in the conflict have been involved in the mining and sale of coltan. The money rebels and militias receive from these sales helps them buy more weapons and supplies for the war." ([53]) These studies position the audience in relation to the events in the play, but in focusing on making the interlocking oppressions of coltan, cell phones, rebel militias, and sexual violence the sole narrative of the dramaturgy, it centers the victim narrative without adding the nuances of how coltan mining has become a means of survival for women in the DRC.

As with Primus beer, the importance of coltan to survival in the DRC was highlighted in the real-world aftermath of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act, section 1502, which required "companies trading on U.S. securities exchanges to determine through supply-chain due diligence whether or not their products contain conflict minerals from DRC or neighboring countries, and report their findings annually to the SEC [Securities Exchange Commission]." ([54]) *The Washington Post* reported that, "In the fall of 2010, two months after the law's signing, Congo's government halted mining for six months—even at facilities not controlled by armed groups. The move had tremendous repercussions in a country where, by some estimates, a sixth of the 70 million inhabitants depend on artisanal mining." ([55]) By 2014, the negative effects were felt in the Congo, where out of the nation's hundreds of mines, only a handful were "tagged" as "conflict free." ([56]) While the law was passed in an effort to curtail the stimulant role of the mining in armed conflicts, a follow up article from 2018 reports that "militias in eastern Congo have only proliferated. Miners are still working in pitiful conditions with little investment into tools and infrastructure. Much evidence points to the reality that minerals coming from mines controlled by militias are still making their way into the global market." ([57]) While *Ruined* and the aforementioned dramaturgical packets were written without the hindsight of post-Dodd-Frank legislation, Mama Nadi's lines suggest the immediate importance of the mine to

her own survival. When Christian informs her that the violence is intensifying with the disappearance of a white pastor, her first instinctual response is to ask, “What about Yaka-yaka mine? Has the fighting scared off the miners?” ([58]) She is more worried about the mine closing than she is about the missing pastor. This is an example of how knowing the material circumstances, and having the hindsight of what happens when those circumstances are changed by external forces, can help contextualize and inform character objectives and value systems. Mama is putting her survival and the survival of the women in her care first in her priorities by caring about the mine’s closure. In “sustaining the complexity” of these objects in the characters’ lives, Nottage withholds the catharsis of an easy solution to the interplay of multinational corporations and violence in “third world” countries. Instead, she chooses to focus on the way that her characters not only survive, but find joy in their circumstances, and this endeavor is closely tied to material objects.

Material Culture as Pleasure

The importance of objects like Primus and coltan to the immediate survival of the women in the play informs the way that the characters interact with these objects and others which are listed like cigarettes and soap. ([59]) However, character interactions with objects are also informed by pleasure as well, and it is important to note that the beer drinking soldiers are not the only characters who derive pleasure from material objects in the script. While the men in the script enjoy a large amount of dominance and power over female pleasure in the context of this play, they do not have a monopoly on it, and they are not able to have full control over it. Unlike the archetypal victims that Mohanty describes, Nottage’s characters share joy and pleasure with male characters and enjoy pleasures of their own.

The play’s opening line chooses to focus on Christian’s pleasure as he drinks his soda: “Ah. Cold. The only cold Fanta in twenty-five kilometers. You don’t know how good this tastes.” ([60]) The stage directions follow with, “Mama flashes a warm flirtatious smile, then pours herself a Primus beer.” ([61]) Knowing the complex relationship between their circumstances, the Fanta, and the Primus, it is worth noting that these characters not only profit from the sale of these objects, but they share in the pleasure of them as well. If a bottle of Fanta, for example, has made its way to Mama Nadi’s bar through a more complicated route, due to the fact that it is not distributed in the DRC, it might be considered something rare or special for the characters – signifying moments that are worth noting to the reader, viewer, in a character analysis by an actor, or in direction of the play. Christian’s line emphasizes the scarcity of Fanta, Mama’s own innovation in finding a way to refrigerate the soda in the middle of the rainforest, and Christian’s sensory enjoyment of the object. Her flirtatiousness is a recognition of Christian’s satisfaction with the Fanta before she pours herself a beverage so that she can share in the same kind of joy. “You sure you don’t want a beer?” Mama asks. “You know me better than that, chérie, I haven’t had a drop of liquor in four years,” Christian replies. The stage directions emphasize that Mama’s next line “It’s cold” is delivered “teasing.” ([62]) The objects become part of an improvised language of pleasure, desire, seduction, and satisfaction. This dynamic manifests itself with lipstick a few pages later:

MAMA
And my lipstick?
CHRISTIAN
Your lipstick? Aye! Did you ask me for lipstick?
MAMA
Of course, I did, you idiot!... Leave me alone, you’re too predictable. (*Turns away, dismissive*)
CHRISTIAN
Where are you going? Hey, hey what are you doing? (*Teasingly*) Chérie, I know you wanted me to forget, so you could yell at me, but you won’t get the pleasure this time. (*Christian taunts her with the lipstick. Mama resists the urge to smile.*)
MAMA
Oh shut up and give it to me. (*He passes her the lipstick.*)([63])

Not only do Christian and Mama enjoy the objects individually, but the Fanta, the beer, and the lipstick are incorporated into their dynamic of pleasure. Harkening back to Kopytoff’s final questions, (“What has been [the object’s] career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized ‘ages’ or periods in the thing’s ‘life,’ and what are the cultural markers for them?”), Fanta’s ideal career is to provide such sensory joy. The connection between beverages and flirtation is a common theme in Fanta marketing, when considering the way that the object’s career is culturally marked—or *marketed*. ([64]) Therefore, its erotic meaning in the encounter between Christian and Mama Nadi is not necessarily contrary to its original meaning; but the raised stakes of the object’s presence in Mama Nadi’s bar signals that this encounter with the two characters is more than a reproduction of a Coca-Cola commercial. Their shared moment over two drinks indicates an early connection between the two, which will ultimately culminate in the controversial romantic ending where the two characters agree to a courtship. This ending was met with disdain from critics who believed that the romantic ending undercut the tragedy of sexual violence and war present in the rest of the play, or worse, disrupted its realism.

Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* called the ending “well shaped” and “sentimental,” ultimately deciding that “because of its artistic caution, ‘Ruined’ is likely to reach audiences averse to more adventurous, confrontational theater.” ([65]) Brantley’s back-handed compliment implies that Nottage’s ending is not risky enough for the subject of “third world” war. He says, “The play isn’t a form-shattering, soul-jolting shocker like Sarah Kane’s ‘Blasted,’ another and more innovative study in wartime atrocities.” His strong implication is that sentimentality appeals to the lowest common denominator of audiences, who appreciate conventional happy endings. Robert Feldberg of *The Herald News* asserts that “Nottage succumbs to a desire to project hope and happiness both of which she’s established as extremely unlikely by having Christian playfully woo the reluctant Mama Nadi in a scene set out of an old-fashioned romantic comedy. It’s too trivial, a cuddly ending to an otherwise resonant, deeply felt evening of theatre.” ([66]) Jill Dolan, on her blog *The Feminist Spectator*, critiques the ending similarly by stating “Suddenly, the play becomes a heterosexual romance, in which Mama and her girls are redeemed by the love of a good man.” For Dolan, the heteronormativity of their relationship and the “reintegrating the nuclear family...compromises the rigorous, clear-eyed story *Ruined* otherwise tells.” ([67]) However, something that may seem “conventional” in the context of Western drama (i.e. a romantic ending) takes on new meaning in the circumstances of the play: a Fanta isn’t just a regular soda, and flirting over it is more than a reproduction of commercial images. What does a romantic ending mean in the material context of the characters?

To speak directly to Dolan’s point, the circumstances of the play complicate the sexual component of the “heterosexual romance” between Mama Nadi and Christian. Mama reveals in the final scene that she is “ruined,” which means that she has been sexually abused to the point where she can no longer have children. ([68]) The specific details of this are left out of the play. It is unclear as to whether this factor limits her ability to have children or her ability to have penetrative sex entirely. The other “ruined” character, Sophie, has been raped with a bayonet—another stark reference to the Kalashnikov—leaving her unable to walk without pain, let alone have intercourse. ([69]) Despite the vague implications for Mama’s status as “ruined”, at the very least, it disrupts the “conventional” correlation between heterosexuality and procreation. Mama Nadi and Christian may be a male/female couple, but there is very little that is “normative” about their relationship. The happiness of this ending does not erase the circumstances which complicate it. Nor is it out of place, as these reviews imply. The connection between these two characters has been established since their first page encounter with the Fanta.

A reading that centers what the objects mean to the characters suggests that Mama Nadi and Christian's relationship is "erotic," but not necessarily sexual—drawing from Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," which cites the erotic as "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." ([70]) From the beginning of the play, Mama Nadi and Christian are joined by their love of material objects. Christian sells objects, Mama buys them, and this shared passion for things provides them with an improvised language of pleasure, desire, seduction, and satisfaction. As Lorde says, "Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives." ([71]) Throughout the play, Mama Nadi carefully weighs each situation in favor of her own joy and pleasure.

For Mama, material objects are extensions of herself. She says, "There must always be a part of you this war can't touch." ([72]) In this moment, she is talking about a raw diamond that a miner traded to her for four beers and one of her sex workers. Although the audience does not yet know that Mama Nadi is "ruined," the fact that she equates a material object with the one part of herself that the war cannot touch is significant given the fact that her body has been violated. For Mama, the objects are extensions of her "self" as described by psychologist and material culture theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's essay "Why We Need Things." According to him, the human psyche and sense of identity is vague, and material things help ground people by acting as touchstones. For Csikszentmihalyi, the objects perform: "They do so first by demonstrating the owner's power, vital erotic energy and place in the social hierarchy." ([73]) For Mama Nadi, the material objects around her represent the power that she has gained within the "interlocking" systems of oppression. She exclaims, "I didn't come here as Mama Nadi, I found her the same way miners find their wealth in the muck. I stumbled off of that road without two twigs to start a fire. I turned a basket of sweets and soggy biscuits into a business. I don't give a damn what any of you think. This is my place, Mama Nadi's." ([74]) Thus, everything in the bar is an extension of herself and plays a role in her self-definition—or re-definition. Therefore, the stage direction in the beginning that says that "a lot of effort" has gone into making the bar look cheerful suggests that pleasure is important for the character as well, and that these objects that she surrounds herself with speak to more than survival.

Lorde describes the "erotic" in a similar way; that it is something internal [read: psychological and spiritual] and not physical. Although she and Csikszentmihalyi are writing from different disciplines, and are separated by age, gender, race, and nationality, both write about the erotic, and Lorde uses material objects to describe what happens inside her "self":

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. . . I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience. ([75])

Thus, she, like Mama Nadi equates a material object with her own internal vital energy. Mama's raw diamond can be taken away, but no one can take away what it represents: the fact that she has not only survived being "ruined" but has also prospered, thrived, and found joy.

Decolonizing Efforts in American Theatre

As American theatre, in both academia and the industry, commits itself to anti-racism and decolonization practices, let us not forget Patricia Hill Collins's foundational text "The Politics of Black Feminist Thought," in which she pays homage to the long tradition of resisting negative images of Black women and moving towards self-definition as independence, self-determination, self-reliance, and survival. ([76]) A material culture theory reading of *Ruined* yields significant information on the character's material circumstances, interlocking oppressions, survival tactics, and pleasures. Each of these forces is connected to the other, and material objects are deeply interwoven into these dynamics. However, discussions of survival and pleasure are often left out of Western assessments of "third world" women, including those surrounding works of theatre like *Ruined*, as shown by dramaturgical and critical academic archives. In doing so, these conversations run the risk of reinforcing victim archetypes as discussed by Mohanty's work, which can be potentially counter-productive to anti-racist and anti-colonial efforts.

Material culture theory is a methodology that can be applied to both scholarly and practical theatrical projects and evidences the ways that scholarly methods are useful and relevant to the production process. In this case, material culture theory can be used not only for the props list, but also for the places where material objects intersect with scenic dressing, costuming, practical lighting instruments, sound effect and music choices, and, of course, directing and acting choices. What kind of objects decorate the set described in the opening stage directions? Where do they come from and who made them? What do they mean to the characters? What are the characters wearing and how did those clothes come into their possession? What kind of lights did Mama Nadi use to make her bar look "cheerful"? What would be available to her? How would sound be distorted if the equipment was powered by a car battery that was also powering the lights? These are many questions that designers already ask themselves based on the design processes. These are already the kinds of conversations that take place at production meetings. Material culture theory can help ensure that the answers to these questions are culturally specific, accurate, and precise.

This is especially true when engaging with marginalized groups who are often omitted from or misrepresented written archives. What story do the objects tell? How do people in these groups use objects in everyday life towards self-definition? The importance of self-definition is also articulated by Mohanty's work on decolonizing images of the "third world" woman in white, Western feminist hegemonies, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, which critiques the role of the Western imagination in the formation of the Other. Smith says, "I say that because like many other writers I would argue that 'we', indigenous peoples, people 'of color', the Other, however we are named, have a presence in the Western imagination, in its fiber and texture, in its sense of itself, in its language, in its silences and shadows, its margins and intersections." ([77]) While Mohanty's work is primarily a critique against academic constructions of the "third world," Smith's is an indictment of Western imagination for the role that it played in justifying the imperial exploitation of the "third world," indigenous people, and people of the African diaspora for centuries. In the case of *Ruined*, and other theatrical representations of Black women, particularly those who live in what is considered the "third world," material culture theory avoids the assumptions that are made in the Western imagination—and the historical baggage that comes with it – and allows one to study how the characters use material objects to define themselves. Both are vital decolonizing processes for the portrayal, or "re-presentation", as Mohanty calls it, of Black, "third world" women on the American stage.

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