

“This is my place, Mama Nadi’s”: Feminine Spaces and Identity in Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*

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ABSTRACT

Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2009) takes place at Mama Nadi’s, a brothel in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the civil war. Female identities, both physical and psychological, are constantly threatened (about to crumble, about to be “in ruins”) by a masculine world of war and violence. The brothel as a business setting becomes a quasi-domestic setting and a sanctuary where identities can be, however feebly, defined and preserved within the unstable walls of feminine solidarity. The use and exploitation of the corporeal female space by clients of the brothel are described in spatial terms that replicate the exploitation of the rich mineral land in Congo. Ultimately, *Ruined* reminds us that the borders of one’s space, both in the physical world and when pertaining to one’s identity, are constantly subject to transgression, invasion, and ruin.

Keywords: space, identity, violence, women, Lynn Nottage.

"This is my place, Mama Nadi’s": espacios femeninos e identidad en *Ruined* de Lynn Nottage

RESUMEN

Ruined (2009), de Lynn Nottage, se desarrolla en el burdel de Mama Nadi, en la República Democrática del Congo durante la Guerra civil. Las identidades femeninas, tanto físicas como psicológicas, se ven constantemente amenazadas (a punto de derrumbarse, de convertirse en “ruinas”) por un mundo masculino de guerra y violencia. El prostíbulo, un negocio, se convierte en espacio semi-doméstico y santuario donde es posible definir y preservar una identidad, acaso mínima, dentro de los muros inestables de la solidaridad femenina. El uso y explotación del cuerpo femenino por parte de los clientes del prostíbulo se describe en términos espaciales que recuerdan a la explotación de la riqueza mineral de la tierra del Congo. *Ruined* nos recuerda, finalmente, que las fronteras del espacio propio, en lo que respecta al mundo físico y a nuestra identidad, están constantemente amenazadas por la transgresión, la invasión, y la ruina.

Palabras clave: espacio, identidad, violencia, mujeres, Lynn Nottage.

This paper is part of a larger project about women and domesticity, which started out as a study of domestic settings in the US as portrayed in contemporary United States literature¹. Recently I have been trying to identify works by US authors set

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outside the United States where problematized “semi-domestic” settings can be identified, to ascertain whether dichotomies such as private/public, domestic/business, and feminine/masculine can be universally applied. It is in this context that I will analyze Lynn Nottage’s play *Ruined* (Pulitzer Prize for drama, 2009), a re-writing of Bertol Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children* (1939), albeit set in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nottage had already shown her interest in the lives of women -- as seen in her first play, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* (1996), but also in two more recent plays, *Intimate Apparel* (2003) and *Fabulation, or the Re-Education of Undine* (2004) --, she extends this preoccupation in *Ruined* to such a problematic space as the social and politically turbulent contemporary Congo. Nottage, as a writer, seems to be interested in the portrayal of characters that seem to live on the verge of society, and in studying “what she calls ‘the space between the lines’, that is, the innermost thoughts of marginal characters whose voices remain muted and whose stories have been deemed irrelevant by those around them who wield more power” (Shannon, 2007a: 187).

Nottage herself has acknowledged that she initially took Bertol Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* as a model for her play: Brecht’s story of exploitation and loose moral codes in the times of war seemed to be the right framework for a story set in a small mining village in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country immersed in a civil war that has been raging for decades. However, as theater director Kate Whoriskey explains in her introduction to the play, this ended up being a “false frame” (Whoriskey, 2009: xi). When Nottage’s play was finally done, *Mother Courage*’s socialist critique of greed in the times of war had been turned into a portrayal of the abuse of the female body mostly unconcerned with politics, a “look at war from a woman’s point of view” (Greene, 2008), and what Gener calls a “humanist exposé” (Gener, 2009: 21). Nottage has described the war at DRC as:

“A slow simmering armed conflict that continues to be fought on several fronts, even though the war officially ended in 2002 . . . [there is] one war being fought for natural resources between militias funded by the government and industry . . . [there is also] the remnants of a civil war, which is the residue of the genocide in Rwanda that spilled over the border into Congo . . . [and then] the war being waged against women” (Payne, 2010: 26)².

² For a personal reflection on the situation in DRC pertinent to the study of *Ruined*, see Nottage’s contribution to the Study Pack released by the Almeida Theater for its 2010 production of *Ruined*, available online at <http://www.almeida.co.uk/Downloads/RuinedResourcePack.pdf>. Also, the program for the production includes an overview of the conflict in DRC (available at <http://www.almeida.co.uk/Downloads/Ruined/Ruined%20prog%20for%20web.pdf>). While in Nottage’s play political analysis is underplayed to focus on personal histories, some background knowledge may be desirable for viewers not familiar with the situation in RDC. A study of the effects of the conflict on women and the use of rape as a weapon of war, provided by Amnesty International and also included in that same programme, provides background information that will be of use for our argument.

In the summer of 2004, Nottage visited Uganda and Rwanda -- she was not, however, able to visit the Democratic Republic of Congo, precisely because of the war – she reflects on her visit in her piece “Out of East Africa” (2005). Her trip to Africa provided her with a series of personal stories of sexual abuse told by women from the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo in interviews organized by Amnesty International in Kampala. Nottage describes these stories as “heart-wrenching, horrifying and poignant [yet] . . . told with dignity and conviction”, and refers to these encounters as “one of the most emotionally taxing experiences of my life” (Nottage, 2005: 68). Even if Brecht’s play as an inspiration is still visible in her play, Nottage’s visit to Africa made her realize that her focus wouldn’t be so much on the flexible morality needed in times of war (of which *Mother Courage* is an example), but on the effect on women of fratricide war and the economic and sexual exploitation in these circumstances.

The play is concerned with the women who live and work at Mama Nadi’s, a bar and brothel in the turbulent region of Eastern Congo, and a space kept together by the impressive figure of its owner, Mama Nadi. A traveling salesman, Christian, who often visits the place, convinces Mama Nadi, who first claims that she is “running a business not a mission” (Nottage, 2009: 14), to take in two new girls, Salima and Sophie. As spectators, we are let on the stories of the girls at the place, what the meaning of being “ruined” is, we get glances of the political and economic situation that the long war is causing in the region, and we are also allowed to ascertain, through the depiction of bodies encountering other bodies in this problematic space, what the alternatives to helplessness and rape and the appropriation of the body in a war-stricken country may be.

Ruined as a text is keen on exploring feminine spaces and how external circumstances such as war and the exploitation of the land can both affect and reflect inner spaces, commenting on what the feminine experience of life in the margins of society is in those abject, not merely public, but not necessarily private (and therefore not completely safe) spaces. There is a clear move by Nottage towards naturalism in this play, a mode she had not used previously, claiming that while she was not entirely uninterested in “kitchen sink” dramas, most of her plays were “expressionistic” and not “entirely realistic” (Shannon, 2007b: 196). In this highly naturalistic, “well-made” play, however, a clear use of space as a symbol stands out, connecting two realities (land and women’s bodies) that are seen as similarly damaged and exploited, as we will expound later.

As part of her concern with feminine identities, in *Ruined* Nottage subverts the meaning of spaces traditionally considered to be domestic and the feminine stereotypes associated with them in Western cultural tradition. Stereotypes such as the “angel in the house” are shown as both ineffective and inefficient in the Democratic Republic of Congo: the traumatic experiences of the women who end up at Mama

Nadi's keep them from being innocent or angelic, just as after being abused or raped they have been expelled from both their houses and communities, i.e. their "natural" spaces, often by their own families or husbands. The bar/brothel, primarily a business setting (and a problematic one, since its economy is based on relationships of power and domination through sex and money), is ultimately, a safe haven for the girls, where "a lot of effort has gone into making the worn bar cheerful" (Nottage, 2009: 5), and turned into what Brantley calls a place of "hominess and familiarity" (Brantley, 2009: C1) especially for those who have already been "ruined", i.e. raped and mutilated with bayonets. Even Mama Nadi, an apparently egotistic, business-like figure who lives off the exploitation of young women, is more often than not discovered protecting, though grudgingly, her "girls". Nottage herself notices that "she's exploiting them, but in a twisted way she's able to nurture them and keep them alive" (Gener, 2009: 21). Mama Nadi is not, then, just the opportunistic, unethical figure that Mother Courage was, but rather an essentially contradictory figure who can be both compassionate and fierce, and who is able to define her space and business in her own terms, beyond the dominance of men, but still in a context open to them and therefore constantly in danger, as the war fields surrounding it can go through the porous walls in any moment.

Connected to the contestation of traditional female stereotypes such as the Brechtian abusive, dominant Madame and the angel in the house, the setting of the play itself also subverts dichotomies of domesticity, or private spheres, as equated to femininity and public spheres, or businesses, as equated to masculinity. Mama Nadi is a woman, but a business woman, and her place is both domestic to the girls (alliances are sealed, relations are created) and a business. Men (from both sides of the conflict) enter this problematic space leaving behind, at Mama Nadi's requests, obvious markers of power traditionally associated with masculinity such as guns, but nonetheless still hold power over the girls there by paying them for sex.

The brothel, the main location of the play, is thus a dualistic space that changes constantly: sometimes it looks much like a domestic space, described in the stage directions as "a refuge" (Nottage, 2009: 50), while in some other moments it is clearly opposed to the sleeping quarters or resembles a cheerful business that contrasts with the bleak public space outside of the front door, the other two locations in the play. Often, however, the bar takes on a menacing hue when men from both factions and miners enter it. Liminal, dual and complicated as this space is, it is one that Mama Nadi protects vehemently, thus turning it, ironically, into a neuter space, i.e. one where the unchecked aggressiveness of the outside world is not allowed and women can, if not thrive, at least survive. "Once you step through my door", Mama Nadi reminds a customer, "then you're in my house. And I make the rules here" (Nottage, 2009: 42). Mama Nadi is aware that the liminality and openness of her space ("the front door swings both ways", Nottage, 2009: 86) is, paradoxically, what makes it secure: "My doors are open to everybody. And that way trouble doesn't

settle there” (Nottage, 2009: 76). The immediate reading of this situation for most of us living in countries not involved in a civil war is that a brothel is, primarily, a place of sexual exploitation -- however, in the situation described in the play, the girls working there are much more respected and safe that they would be outside, where they would be constantly in danger of being raped, ruined, or even murdered. Ironically, in such settings, a place where women have sex in exchange of money provides them with safety and some kind of dignity that is not available outside that space. As Mama Nadi says, “There must always be a part of you that this war can’t touch” (Nottage, 2009: 53), and this need not be the body itself, but rather an identity that is dependent on how women feel in control of their own bodies.

I would like to argue that Nottage’s play lends itself to an analysis of the different meanings of spatiality partly, precisely, because its setting is the result of a post-colonial situation. Not only are the history of colonization and the garbled process of de-colonization responsible for the civil war itself (as the colonizers tended to favor one ethnic group over the other for centuries), but the warring between different factions is also the result of a new kind of colonization: technological colonization. The Democratic Republic of Congo is rich in coltan, a mineral that is used for the fabrication of cell phones: developed countries are, through their continuous use of newer and newer technology, highly dependent on it. While this natural resource, coveted by other countries, should lead to the well-being of developing nations where it is abounding, the result is, however, that different factions fight over the land that contains it, destroying said land in the process and thus in the long term destroying themselves. Nottage’s play refers to how the Congo wars were fueled, in part, by the mining of diamonds and coltan. As a result, as spectators we are not outside “the range of culpability for the vicious, often misogynistic violence depicted in the play” (Kuftinek, 2011: 104).

It is my contention that words used to refer to the mining of coltan can also be used when talking about sexuality and the female body: the miners plough, penetrate the earth, and, in the process, ruin it for agriculture. Gener explicitly identifies women’s bodies in the play with “the ruined body of the Congo herself” (Gener, 2009: 21). While Nottage has characters deliver lines about this that are on the verge of melodrama (“You will not fight your battles on my body anymore”, one of the characters cries out right before dying, Nottage, 2009: 94), the identification of land and womb is clear: one of the male characters reminisces about how “six months ago, it was a forest filled with noisy birds, now it looks like God spooned out heaping mouthfuls of earth, and every stupid bastard is trying to get a taste of it” (Nottage, 2009: 40). While the fertile and spooned out “it” in this utterance stands for the earth, it might as well stand for the female body, a sort of garden before the war, but constantly harmed and humiliated now. Political analysis of the situation in DRC is not detailed in the play (concerned as it is mainly with feminine experience ignored by politics), but one of the rebel soldiers, Kisembe, wonders “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 [it] were their own flesh" (Nottage, 2009: 78). It is, indeed, unfortunate that he cannot extend the metaphor of forest and flesh to the brutally carved up feminine bodies around him. In a more general way, the play invites the identification of both territories, land and body, as despoiled, something that would be in line with Friedman's observations of *Ruined* as a play that strives to "bring attention to sexual abuse, rape, survival sex, and psychological violence toward women in countries ravaged by conquest and conflict between government and insurgent forces" (Friedman, 2010: 594).

Ruined land cannot be used for agriculture and it is no longer fertile once it has been extensively plowed. The comparison between the land and the bodies of women is invited again: the earth is valuable and exploited, just as the feminine body is desired and used for pleasure or domination. Ruined women, no longer fertile due to sexual abuse, are also no longer "useful", since they cannot be used for economic trade, i.e. cannot be even used as prostitutes: as one character reminds one of the ruined girls, "you are something worse than a whore. So many men have had you that you're worthless" (Nottage, 2009: 37). Mama Nadi reluctantly accepts one ruined girl claiming that she has no space for "damaged goods" (Nottage, 2009: 16) and she will just be one more mouth to feed, unable to produce any gains. Similarly, the earth is ruined and barren, damaged, once all the ore has been extracted.

Body, as defined by the skin, is seen in Western society as the ultimate frontier of one's space. As something that "holds" our identity, it also defines the rest of reality as external: this conception of reality has remained constant throughout Western philosophy and can be found at the center of Western thought and culture. This idea of the body entails the notion that it is our right to decide who or what enters that body, in the terms that we individually decide. The intrusion, i.e. the unwelcome entrance of the outside is regarded as a violation not just in physical terms, but also a violation of what we find the innermost about ourselves: our identity. However, we cannot take for granted that the borders of one space, both in the physical world and when pertaining one's identity, are universally shared by all women, especially in circumstances where the social environment may not be as protective when it comes to unwelcome intrusions. As Friedman points out, women in circumstances such as the one portrayed in *Ruined* are "doubly victimized—sexually assaulted and impregnated or left unable to reproduce . . . they [also] must endure shaming by male members of their families and communities, who perceive the violation of 'their' women as another form of defeat" (Friedman, 2010: 598). Friedman also mentions Enloe's argument that "rapes of captured women by soldiers of one communal or national group [are] aimed principally at humiliating the men of an opposing group" (Enloe, 2000: 110): just as land is often raided while conquered from the other, the female body is used as a territory of shame and revenge on other men, who in turn often project this shame and humiliation into the victims themselves. First recognized

as genocide by the United Nations in 1998 (precisely after the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, one of the places that Nottage researched for her piece), rape is now only prosecuted accordingly. It has also been considered, after the adoption by the United Nations Security Council of Resolution 1820, as a war crime, as a crime against humanity, and as a “constitutive act with respect to genocide”³. However, in a context where rape is often considered a war crime only nominally, and where it is almost impossible to bring every case of rape to justice (raped women are a shame to their own families and often expelled from their own communities)⁴, we might want to reconsider a simplistic analysis of prostitution. It would not be simply akin to the appropriation, however consensual it may be argued to be, of this most intimate space, or an act of penetration that replicates schemes of patriarchal domination. Cahill describes how sexuality can be a means of political and social power, and how feminist theories often locate sexuality as “one means by which patriarchal culture maintained control over women” (Cahill, 2000: 44), also signaling the social sexing that underlies rape. However, Nottage’s intention lays not so much in denouncing prostitution itself (as shown by the ambivalent characterization of Mama Nadi and the two-fold definition of the space of the brothel as both refuge and business). She is, rather, denouncing the fate, worse than prostitution, that often awaits women, as passive as the land is, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This needs not mean that Nottage is justifying the existence or benignity of prostitution, of course: rather, she seems to be proposing that, in such dire situations, prostitution on female terms may be a much more viable exit for women that have been rejected by society due precisely to their ruined sexuality, such as Sophie in the play, or abandoned by their husbands after being raped, such as Salima. As Mama Nadi claims, “My girls . . . 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” (Nottage, 2009: 86). Women in this context are completely kept away from the public space (much as women up to the 20th c. were kept inside the house) and cannot enter the business model that is running the country: mining. As Mama Nadi says:

³ Resolution 1820 (2008), “Women and Peace and Security”, adopted by the Security Council at its 5916th meeting, on 19 June 2008 [S/RES/1820 (2008)]. The complete text for the resolution can be found at the UN Security Council website (http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions08.htm).

⁴ The article by Amnesty International for the Almeida Theatre incorrectly states that the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs provides the following numbers for 2009 in the Kivu Provinces: about 1600 women raped every week, mainly by armed men; with more than 8000 cases of rape reported in 2009. Comparing the second figure, in its enormity, to the first one would suggest that almost all of these rapes go unreported. The original report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), however, gives 160 as the figure per week – this would roughly add up to more than 8000 cases a year, and in fact the per week figure in the UN-OCHA report is a calculation from the yearly total. In any case, the operative word is still *reported*: even if 160 cases are reported a week (and thus over 8000 are reported a year), still many go unreported, and therefore are not acknowledged in this calculation, for fear of, in the most benign of cases, family shame. Sources: Payne, C. (2010): *Almeida Projects Resource Pack*, Amnesty International UK (2010), Humanitarian Information Group – OCHA (2010).

“I want a powerful slip of paper that says I can cut down forests and dig holes and build to the moon if I choose. I don’t want someone to turn up at my door, and take my life from me. Not ever again. But tell, how does a woman like me get a piece of land, without having to pick up a fucking gun?” (Nottage, 2009: 27).

The survival of these women cannot be connected, as is the case with other societies not immersed in a civil war, with their claiming and appropriating public and clearly masculine spaces. Rather, it has to be based on negotiating liminal spaces, such as Mama Nadi’s, where they can be in control and where, by using a false sense of submission, as is the case with the girls, they are allowed a certain agency and security.

It is in the crossroads between femininity and space, precisely, where the often criticized, sentimental and emotional end of the play (the confession by Mama Nadi as to why she would help ruined girls, and a semi-conventional happy-ending for the three most sympathetic characters, including the “salvation” or “rescue” of Mama Nadi through heterosexual, romantic love) can be explained. Minus, reviewing *Ruined*’s run in Manhattan during the 2008/2009 season, suggests that “dramatic accounts of brutalities cause a typical audience to gasp and recoil; and . . . certain incongruities tend to make the play more palatable for an average Broadway theatergoer” (Minus, 2010: 100). The deliberate sentimentality in parts of the play would, then, produce a certain distance from a horror which could have been portrayed much more crudely, but always considering that a cruder portrayal might have put audiences off. In her introduction to the play, Kate Whoriskey reflects on how “In the United States, we have the money to create weaponry that removes us from the violence we enact. By contrast, in the Congo . . . the human body becomes the weapon, the teenage boy the terror, and a woman’s womb ‘the battleground’” (Whoriskey, 2009: 11). Nottage chooses for her denouncement in the play to focus on women who inhabit the borders of what is considered the “big picture” problem, war, just as the space they marginally inhabit, the Democratic Republic of Congo, exists, as Minus says, “in the corner of the consciousness of the rest of the world” (Minus, 2010: 100). Friedman suggests that there need be places where “ethical encounters with distant ‘others’” exist, “in ways that avoid a kind of cultural imperialism in appropriating their stories and at the same time distancing them through a lens of ‘pure relativism’” (Friedman, 2010: 609). *Ruined* brings these stories out of the corners to a Western audience, a wider one than a more experimental play would have reached, and an audience which, in the end, is able to empathize with these women, even with Mama Nadi in all her complexity. After their wandering through violent spaces, Nottage seems not to be able to bring herself to leave her female characters (and the spectators) without a last glimpse of hope. She claims that, as a writer, “You can’t reconcile the incredible beauty and gentleness of the culture with the horror and the suffering. The play is about how they coexist. It’s the gentle balance I had to negotiate” (Gener, 2009: 21). Empathy is, of course, also easier to achieve with plays

written in the style of realism, with a conventional structure and sympathetic characters, something that may also account for the extreme naturalism and sentimentalism of the play, which has been defined as a “comfortable, old-fashioned drama about an un-comfortable of-the-moment subject” (Brantley, 2009: C1). The denouncement of the situations created by the irresponsibility and greed of both factions at war in Congo (with the West and former metropolises as accomplices) is evident, but the final dance of Mama Nadi suggests a certain hope - “possibility” is the word Nottage uses (Nottage, 2009: 102) - , for ruined women, and we could also claim for the land (the Congo) itself, similarly exploited and ruined, but maybe able to rise again from its ashes once the fight is over. Mama Nadi, earlier in the play, is offered a way out, once by Christian and once by Mr. Harari, but both times refuses to leave her brothel, first claiming that she has her own business (Nottage, 2009: 41) and then explaining that she has “ten girls here. What will I do with them? . . . I can’t go. Since I was young, people have found reasons to push me out of my home, men have laid claim to my possessions, but I am not running now. This is my place. Mama Nadi’s” (Nottage, 2009: 90). The brothel as a space for Mama Nadi ends up being not merely geographical, but also “moral”, a place where one belongs and where one should be. She claims to have “found herself” there after being pushed out of other spaces:

“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 . . . This is my place, Mama Nadi’s” (Nottage, 2009: 86).

She is willing to share this found space, in her own terms, with the girls, because “they are safer with me than in their own homes, because this country is picked clean . . . I give them something other than a beggar’s cup” (Nottage, 2009: 86). “This is your home now. Mama takes care of you” (Nottage, 2009: 66), she says to Salima: in accepting, appropriating and sharing this unique space, Mama Nadi moves towards a status that Nottage uses to describes real life Rebecca Lolosoli, the founder of the all-female village of Umoja, in Kenya: “an extremely articulate and passionate advocate for her community” (Gener, 2010: 122). Umoja (“unity” in Swahili) deeply impressed Nottage during her visit in 2005 as a sanctuary for “women who had all been shunned by their families or their husbands or had been forced out of their communities because they had been raped, or they rejected hysterectomy for a host of reasons” (Gener, 2010: 122). Umoja also takes young women trying to escape genital mutilation or running from a forced marriage.

At the end of the play, the suggestion of salvation for Mama Nadi through Christian’s love is also connected to this sense of community in a specific place. Christian suggests to Mama Nadi, in the last scene, that he should stay and “help you run things. Make this a legitimate business. A shop. Fix the door. Hang the mirror.

Protect you. Make love to you” (Nottage, 2009: 99). At this point, she has acquired a sense of responsibility towards the girls that may not be incompatible with Christian’s offer. From *Umoja* to *Mama Nadi*’s, Nottage’s hope for women in the play extends from the community to a nurturing relationship with a caring, atypical man, and transforms the stage, in Friedman’s words, into “an alternative space onstage that denaturalizes the gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed dynamics through which war operates for perpetrators and victims” (Friedman, 2010: 609-10). De Angelis proposes that *Mama Nadi*’s be read as “a deeply compromised haven [that] becomes a meeting ground for possibilities of renewal, a new male/female contract that . . . offers a fragile hope for a new order that loves, respects, and acknowledges dependence upon women/women’s sex” (De Angelis, 2010: 559).

The collective or group protagonist used by Nottage has been identified as recurrent in feminist theatre. (Friedman, 2010: 600). This collective protagonist, defined by the activities taking place in a given space, is also reinforced as a group precisely because they inhabit said space, and “share secrets and confer about how they will negotiate their survival” (Friedman, 2010: 600). Friedman documents how Janet Brown has analyzed bell hook’s concept of “merged ego” (Brown, 1999: 159) where the self exists “in relation, . . . dependent for its very being on the lives and experiences of everyone, the self not a signifier of ‘I’ but the coming together of many ‘I’s’, the self as embodying collective reality”, that is necessary for “psychic [and] physical survival” (Hooks, 1989: 31). The final dance at the brothel in *Ruined* would thus celebrate the possibility of this collectivity, this “merged ego” in a paradoxical space where women, in extreme circumstances, are still able to create an identity based on dignity, courage and a new found sense of community.

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