

THE THEATRE OF NAOMI WALLACE

Embodied Dialogues

Edited by Scott T. Cummings
& Erica Stevens Abbitt



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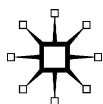
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For Leon Katz, my teacher.

—Scott T. Cummings

For Jerry W. Abbitt, Renée Felice Paley Stevens, and
C. F. B. Stevens (*fons et origo*).

—Erica Stevens Abbitt

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Preface: Embodied Dialogues

Erica Stevens Abbitt

This book came out of a series of conversations between Scott and me that began in 2008 at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in Denver. We shared a fascination for Naomi Wallace's drama and a desire to create a book that takes full account of the scope and importance of her work. We both agreed that the first book-length publication on the theatre of Naomi Wallace should reflect a wide range of perspectives and approaches. We imagined what we called "a symposium on paper" and set to work.

We came to the project with different orientations and backgrounds. Scott has a particular interest in Wallace's work in the context of contemporary American playwriting. I am interested in the way her plays advance feminist theatre in the twenty-first century and excited about their use as a powerful (even transformational) force for intercultural exchange and progressive theatre pedagogy. Our original exchange expanded into a dialogue with colleagues from a range of countries and disciplines, which has finally resulted in this book, designed to be accessible as well as collaborative: a joint venture providing resources for those producing Wallace's work, teaching her plays, and exploring their significance in contemporary performance.

We have divided the anthology into three sections:

- Writings on Wallace. The first section is a collection of essays on Wallace's plays. Many of these are new, but a few key articles and reprints of important publications have been included. These writings examine aspects of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as aesthetic innovations in the plays and their practical application to the classroom and rehearsal studio.

- **Collaborators.** The second section is a collection of statements by theatre practitioners from North America, Europe, and the Middle East who have worked with Naomi Wallace in some way to bring her work from the page to the stage. The focus here is on praxis as well as vision: the challenges and opportunities of producing Wallace's work from the perspective of those engaged in it.
- **Wallace in Her Own Words.** The third section includes a sampling of Wallace's writing over the past two decades: poems, polemics, essays on theatre, and occasional scripts, which illuminate both her process and her agenda as artist and activist.

At the end of the book, we have provided a selected production history and a selected bibliography, which includes all works cited in the various essays.

We hope that this volume encourages further dialogue between those who have been exploring Wallace's work—and embodying it in performance—and emerging scholars and practitioners who are just discovering the richness of her innovative, provocative, and inspiring theatre.

Acknowledgments

A book of this nature, drawing on a wide range of perspectives and based in large part on performance research, would not be possible without the work, ideas, and support of many others.

First, we thank our many contributors for taking precious time away from their busy professional and academic careers to join the project. Some of them led us to others, and the book is the richer for their suggestions. For the gift of their knowledge, insight, and experience—and for their patience with the vagaries of the editing process—we are grateful.

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We thank our families for encouragement, particularly our spouses, Jerry Abbitt and Janet Morrison, who provided boundless hospitality and support throughout years of working sessions in Boston and Windsor. To Jerry, thanks for true partnership, vision, *caritas*, love, and support. To Janet, I love you.

Finally, to Naomi Wallace, we feel a gratitude that defies articulation. For your generosity, trust, and unstinting cooperation in the face of one request after another for a script, a contact, a clarification. For permission to include your writing in this book. And most of all, for a body of work that inspires and challenges us with its integrity, tenacity, and creativity.

Introduction: The Discourse of the Body

Scott T. Cummings

Over the past 25 years, Naomi Wallace has established herself as a major contemporary dramatist whose work combines political engagement, stylistic innovation, and erotically charged lyricism in a unique and compelling manner. She has garnered international attention, won prestigious awards, and received numerous commissions from major theatres. Her plays have been produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre, the Public Theater and New York Theatre Workshop, the Comédie-Française and the Festival d'Avignon, and by regional and provincial theatres on three continents. They have also found favor with fringe theatre groups looking to make their mark and university theatre departments interested in challenging their students with work that examines the relationship between identity and power. Her plays are taught in college drama courses and analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives by theatre scholars. She is an original and provocative voice in the theatre of our time.

The Theatre of Naomi Wallace: Embodied Dialogues seeks to advance the examination of her work by presenting a collection of scholarship, criticism, and commentary that constitutes a thorough analysis and a prospectus for further investigation. By way of introduction to Wallace's drama and the essays in this book, this overview falls into two parts: a biographical overview that traces in brief the arc of her career to date and a critical overview that outlines some of the basic elements of her playwriting.

Biographical Overview

Born in 1960, Naomi Wallace learned about the contradictions of life from an early age. She is the fourth of six children born to

Sonja de Vries, a Dutch journalist and activist from a working-class background, and Henry F. Wallace (1915–2006), an international-correspondent-turned-gentleman-farmer and member of the wealthy newspaper family associated with the *Louisville Times*. Legendary in Louisville for his outspoken editorials, Henry was a lifelong activist vocal in his support of Castro's Cuba, the civil rights movement, and gay rights and his opposition to the arms race and the Vietnam War. Naomi grew up with her four sisters and one brother outside of Louisville on a 600-acre farm in Prospect, Kentucky, which remains the family homestead today, protected from development by a conservation agreement. As a child, she attended left-wing demonstrations with family members and went to progressive schools, where her position of relative privilege was highlighted by her friendships with children whose parents earned a living doing manual labor in local factories and farms. As a teenager, she learned to negotiate between languages and countries, as she alternated between Holland and the United States, before and after the divorce of her parents.



Figure I.1 Naomi Wallace in Ashland, Oregon, 2013. Photo: Jenny Graham. Courtesy of Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

During undergraduate and graduate school, Wallace developed a highly individualistic poetic vision and an ongoing commitment to social and political activism. She received a BA in Women's Literature at progressive Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts and entered the MFA program in poetry at the University of Iowa. As she completed this degree, her writing interests gravitated towards playwriting as a less solitary, less isolating form, and so she took an MFA in playwriting at Iowa as well. Her involvement in theatre up to that point had been minimal. As a graduate student, Wallace came into contact with two teaching artists who supported her professional development. The first was playwright Tony Kushner, who encouraged her to keep writing explicitly political theatre and recommended her to his agent in New York. The second was British director and producer David Gothard, one-time artistic director of Riverside Studios, who provided Wallace with valuable links to the professional theatre community in London. At Iowa, she also met a Scottish-born PhD candidate in English Literature named Bruce McLeod, who became her life partner and collaborator on many plays, screenplays, and other projects. Together, they moved to England in 1997, where they settled in rural North Yorkshire and raised three daughters. The Yorkshire Dales remains her home base today, although she spends time back home in Kentucky on a regular basis.

In the 1990s, Wallace came to enjoy a measure of recognition and success in Britain—rare for an American playwright. Her professional debut came in 1993 when the Finborough Theatre produced *The War Boys*, an exploration of violence and homophobia on the Mexican–US border. That same year, the London New Play Festival produced *In the Fields of Aceldama*, which uses flashbacks and jump cuts to tell the story of a Kentucky farm family defined by poverty, abuse, xenophobia, and despair. Dominic Dromgoole staged two Wallace premieres during his tenure as artistic director of London's Bush Theatre, another venue noted for supporting new plays. First, in 1994, came Wallace's hard-hitting Gulf War drama *In the Heart of America*, with its sharp critique of American foreign policy and its unexpected erotic encounter between two young soldiers. Then, in 1995, came *One Flea Spare*, inspired by the recent Los Angeles riots over the Rodney King verdict as well as the seventeenth-century plague writings of Daniel Defoe. Each play went on to receive the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for women writing plays of "outstanding quality in the English-speaking world." Also in 1995, Peterloo Press in Cornwall published *To Dance a Stony Field*, a collection of her poems.

Wallace soon found her way onto major London stages. In 1996, Ron Daniels directed the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Slaughter City*, a neo-Brechtian historical drama about labor, sexuality, and social exploitation set in an American meatpacking plant. Around that time, Wallace was tapped to write a stage version of *Birdy*, the 1979 William Wharton novel about a young American soldier who thinks he can fly, already adapted into a popular 1984 film directed by Alan Parker and starring Matthew Modine. Wallace's adaptation of *Birdy* first played at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1996 and then in the West End at the Comedy Theatre in 1997. That same year, her play for young people, *In the Sweat* (co-authored with McLeod), received a workshop production at the Royal National Theatre. Within just a few years, Wallace was established as a writer of interest and merit.

The American theatre was slower and more ambivalent in its embrace of Wallace's heightened, sensual, and frank political work. Tony Kushner introduced *In the Heart of America* to US audiences by directing a 1994 workshop production at Long Wharf Theatre. The Actors Theatre of Louisville began an effort to repatriate Wallace when it brought Dominic Dromgoole from London to direct *One Flea Spare* at the 1996 Humana Festival of New American Plays. Three Humana world-premiere commissions followed: *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998), a Depression-era drama about two Kentucky teens flirting with danger by trying to outrun a train; *Standard Time* (2000), a monologue about a working-class teen who shot his girlfriend because he wanted her car and she threw the keys in the river; and *The Hard Weather Boating Party* (2009), a play about three men who meet in a Motel 6 in Louisville's industrial Rubbertown district to plan a vengeful murder.

From early on, mainstream New York critics were hostile to Wallace's work. When *One Flea Spare* opened at New York's Public Theatre in 1996 in a production featuring Dianne Wiest and child-star Mischa Barton, Ben Brantley, the influential critic of the *New York Times*, described the writing as "stiff, schematic and surprisingly unaffected" and derided the play as "carved in stone" (1997, 11). All the same, the play received an Obie for Best Play from the *Village Voice*, and Wallace began to receive grants and other awards, including the Fellowship of Southern Writers Drama Award, the Joseph Kesselring Prize for up-and-coming playwrights, and an NEA poetry grant. Vivian Gornick, in a sympathetic 1997 profile for the *New York Times* Sunday magazine (included in this volume), described Wallace

as “An American Exile in America.” Then, in 1999, her status in the United States received a major boost when at age 38 she was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship (the so-called genius grant in the amount of \$285,000) for a growing body of work described as “provocative and full of haunting images, startling metaphors, and rich language used to comment on issues of class, gender, age, sensuality, and desire.” In the fall of 2001, most of that work—including plays for children, poetry, her prize-winning dramas, scripts in progress, and the quirky 1997 independent film *Lawn Dogs*, for which she wrote the screenplay—was showcased in Atlanta, Georgia as part of a city-wide Naomi Wallace Festival spearheaded by Vincent Murphy, artistic director of Theatre Emory.

With widening acceptance in America and continued attention in Britain, Wallace turned her focus more and more to the geopolitical issues of the Middle East. In 2001, at Cooper Union in New York, she produced “Imagine: Iraq” (an evening of staged readings of related plays) with the Artists Network of Refuse & Resist! Wallace’s contribution to the program was *The Retreating World*, a monologue commissioned by McCarter Theatre and inspired by a March 2000 article by John Pilger in *The Guardian* (“Squeezed to Death”) about the debilitating impact on ordinary Iraqi citizens of economic sanctions. In 2002, she organized a goodwill visit to Palestine by a group of US playwrights, including Robert O’Hara, Kia Corthron, Betty Shamieh, Lisa Schlesinger, and Tony Kushner, to meet with Palestinian theatre artists, including Abdelfattah Abusrour of the Al-Rowwad Center in the Aida Camp. (Their trip is described in the July/August 2003 edition of *American Theatre* magazine.) Wallace used a commission from the Guthrie Theatre to recruit Schlesinger and Abusrour to collaborate with her in writing *Twenty-One Positions: A Cartographic Dream of the Middle East*, a theatrical response to the 430-mile security wall dividing Israel and the Palestinian West Bank that Wallace described in 2006 as “a play with songs, sort of *West Side Story* meets *Mother Courage*” (MacDonald 2006, 100).

Wallace went on by herself to write two short plays set in Palestine. *A State of Innocence* takes place in a ruined zoo in Rafah, where an Arab woman confronts a dying Israeli soldier over the death of her daughter. *Between This Breath and You* presents a surreal encounter between a Palestinian man and an Israeli nurse whose life has been saved by his son’s transplanted lung. Developed and workshopped independently, these two plays were eventually bundled with *The Retreating World* to comprise *The Fever Chart: Three Visions of*

the Middle East, which premiered in the United States at the Public Theater in New York in 2008 under the direction of Jo Bonney. By then, Wallace had written two more short pieces rooted in the region: *One Short Sleeper*, a monologue for a Lebanese university student with a fondness for spiders who turns out to be already dead from an Israeli air raid; and *No Such Cold Thing*, a one-act about two teenage Afghan sisters and their encounter on the edge of the desert near Kabul with a young Chicano soldier in the US army. Wallace has returned to Palestine numerous times since her first visit to promote solidarity with theatre artists there; in 2011, she visited the Freedom Theater in the Jenin refugee camp just weeks before co-founder and director Juliano Mer Khamis was gunned down by an unknown assassin. In an obituary tribute, she called him “a radical’s radical” who “believed in active, continual resistance, through a ‘cultural intifada’” (Mee 2011, 15). In a broader context, Wallace’s mission might be described in similar terms.

Wallace’s writings set in the Middle East tend to be occasional pieces, monologues, or short plays written for inclusion in an anthology project or a new play festival. As her career advanced into the twenty first century, she continued to write full-length plays deeply rooted in other historical contexts and events. In 2002, for the Oxford Stage Company, Dominic Dromgoole directed the world premiere in London of *The Inland Sea*, an epic drama inspired by the eighteenth-century landscape architect Lancelot “Capability” Brown and his movement to redesign the English countryside. In 2004, Pittsburgh Public Theatre premiered *Things of Dry Hours*, a taut three-character drama based on Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. The play went on to notable productions at Baltimore’s Center Stage, directed by Kwame Kwei-Armah; the Royal Exchange Manchester and the Gate Theatre in London, directed by Raz Shaw; and New York Theatre Workshop, directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson. One Wallace history play without a track record is *To Perish Twice* (originally titled *Rawalpindi*), a play that takes place in the British War Graves Memorial in Rawalpindi, Pakistan and that lambastes many of the pieties of the British Empire. Commissioned by the Royal National Theatre, the play received a reading there staged by Raz Shaw in 2005, not long after the July 7 terrorist bombings in London. The National declined to pursue the play, and it has yet to be fully produced elsewhere.

Wallace’s most recent history play is *The Liquid Plain*, written for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and its ambitious ten-year

commissioning program, “American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle.” *The Liquid Plain* takes place in 1791 (Act 1) and 1836 (Act 2) on and around the docks of Bristol, Rhode Island, where two runaway slaves awaiting passage to Africa rescue and revive a drowned white man. They share a troubled past linked to the historical figure of James De Woolf, sea captain, slave trader, and eventual US Senator from Rhode Island. Drawing inspiration and information from Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, the play joins the broader effort to give an identity and even a name to otherwise anonymous figures once bought and sold as property and thereby write them into cultural memory. The mystery at the heart of the play is inscribed in a water-soaked copy of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*; in a fantastic sequence in Act 2, the spirit of Blake appears to Bristol Waters, “an educated free black woman” come from England to America looking for De Woolf and seeking justice. Speaking of his poem “The Chimney Sweeper,” Wallace’s Blake says,

Words are merely what come after love, to placate the emptiness. (*Beat.*) I never was happy with that last line either. Irony is a cheap ejaculation. I prefer its whorish neighbors: polemic, expostulation, mockery, hyperbole, provocation, abuse, which polite society so often misreads in my verse. I’ll change that line.¹

As the writing of this introduction was in process, lines were still being changed during rehearsals for the world premiere of *The Liquid Plain* in July 2013. Even before its opening, the play was awarded the 2012 Horton Foote Prize for Promising New American Play, just one of several accolades in recent years that have reinforced Wallace’s importance as a contemporary playwright. Two decades after launching her career with *The War Boys*, Finborough Theatre produced the 2011 world premiere of *And I and Silence*, a play about two American women in the 1950s, one black and one white, who meet in prison and form a close bond that they find difficult to maintain once they return to society. Also in 2011, two small US theatres—Forum Theatre in Washington DC and Chicago’s Eclipse Theatre—presented festivals or seasons of her work.

Then, when *One Flea Spare* opened in Paris in the spring of 2012, Wallace became only the second American playwright (after Tennessee Williams) to have a play enter the permanent repertoire of La Comédie-Française, the national theatre of France. In spring

2013, Katarzyna Klimkiewicz's *Flying Blind*, with a screenplay by Wallace, Bruce McLeod, and Caroline Harrington, was released, a suspense film starring Helen McCrory as an aerospace engineer who designs drones for the military and has a passionate affair with a French-Algerian student. Also in the spring of 2013, Wallace became one of nine writers (including two other playwrights, Stephen Adly Guirgis and Tarell Alvin McCraney) to receive an inaugural Windham Campbell Prize for literary achievement from Yale University. The unrestricted \$150,000 award makes it one of the largest literary prizes in the world; the citation credited Wallace with mining "historical situations in plays that are muscular, devastating, and unwavering."²

Wallace's widely circulated 2008 *American Theatre* article "On Writing as Transgression" issued an unapologetic mandate for the arts in general—and theatre in particular—to empower young artists to challenge the status quo. She echoed the call in her 2013 *American Theatre* article "Let the Right One In" when she wrote:

Writing that does not actually violate boundaries, that does not enter into the process of trespass, is often a writing that is safe, consumable and shallow. A theatre that does not challenge its own assumptions, its own ignorance, with curiosity and humility is a contracted theatre, a diminished theatre. (Wallace 2013, 88)

Wallace backs up this rhetoric with her ongoing engagement in activist, educational, and artistic collaborations. With Erin Mee and Ismail Khalidi, she is editing an anthology of plays by Palestinian playwrights to be published by Theatre Communications Group. Her plays continue to attract attention in France, where *The Fever Chart* played at the 2013 Festival d'Avignon and a new play, *Night Is a Room*, is slated to premiere in 2014. And there is a co-commission in the works from Actors Theatre of Louisville and Berkeley Repertory Theatre. While the provocative nature of her work seems to disqualify her for success on Broadway, she is at this moment a celebrated playwright whose work is widely produced in the English-speaking world and beyond and studied more and more by students and scholars of contemporary theatre. She continues to work on projects that combine political critique with poetic humanism, creating plays in which, as she said in an interview with her friend Tony Kushner, "the structure of power suddenly becomes visible" and change becomes possible (Kushner 1998, 258).

Critical Overview

To dissect the body politic, Naomi Wallace writes plays about the politics of the body. “I want to challenge the smug notion that there is political and non-political theater,” Wallace said early in her career. “One usually gets called a ‘political’ writer when one’s politics do not coincide with the mainstream. When we think of political theatre, we think of something dry about ideas. I love ideas, but I like trying to put issues of the heart onstage and seeing how those issues are affected by the world around us” (Mootz 1994). While the intersection of the personal and the political has been a focus for two generations of women playwrights (and a number of men, as well), Wallace’s approach is unusually penetrating and imaginative.

From the very beginning, she has demonstrated a sustained commitment to examining the relationship between identity and power as it is manifest in the corporal experience and physical well-being of her characters. In this regard, her oeuvre needs to be seen as a series of embodied dialogues in which personal desire is negotiated within the structures of race, class, gender, age, nationality, and sexual preference. As one essay after another in this volume points out, her characters are defined in large part by these basic traits. To those who would criticize this approach to character as materialist or schematic, Wallace might well reply, “Yes! Exactly!” An individual Wallace character needs to be seen as the embodiment of his maleness or her femaleness, his wealth or her poverty, his blackness or her whiteness, and so on. But they are more than this. Wallace also endows her characters with an imagination that goes beyond the confines of social identity and that often reveals itself in lyrical stage gestures that express a world of possibility. She portrays her characters as resistant to demographic determinism by having them figuratively or metaphorically cross the border—or violate the boundary—between one social identity and its opposite. This dialectical crossing can take theatrical form, with a character putting on the clothes/costume of the ‘Other’ or taking on the role of another and ‘acting it out.’

Alternatively, it can take the form of an intimate physical encounter that closes the gap between two social opposites. This contact, often graphic in its violence or its sexuality, foregrounds the corporal presence of the actor in performance and demonstrates how the exercise of power is played out—or resisted—through the human body. The action of a Wallace play often pivots on these moments. Writing in

The Guardian, Lyn Gardner (1996a) described one of them in the production of *Birdy* at the Lyric Hammersmith:

There is an extraordinary scene in Naomi Wallace's adaptation of William Wharton's novel. Sergeant Al sucks up some porridge, cups his lips over the open, greedy chick-like mouth of his boyhood friend Birdy and feeds him like a mother bird. It is a moment of almost obscene intimacy, so naked and tender that you want to avert your prying eyes. It is like watching someone make love or give birth.

This "almost obscene intimacy" is fundamental to Wallace's dramaturgy. Again and again, she presents characters who come to erotically charged moments when they make themselves vulnerable, risk physical injury, relinquish power, and submit to the will of another. This discourse of the body is the lifeblood of her theatre.

There are other recurring strategies, techniques, and motifs that can be seen to define Wallace's body of work. As further context for the discussions ahead, here are a few of them.

Historical Materialism and Work

Wallace's theatre offers a version of historiography based on the notion that we can—and should—re-examine the assumptions we make about our national and cultural narratives of conflict and triumph. The most obvious reflection of this is its historical settings: 1665 London at the time of the plague (*One Flea Spare*); 1760s England in the middle of the landscape movement (*The Inland Sea*); the late-eighteenth century slave trade in Bristol, Rhode Island (*The Liquid Plain*); the steel industry of 1930s Birmingham, Alabama (*Things of Dry Hours*); the Gulf War of the early 1990s (*In the Heart of America*). But Wallace's plays are more than costume dramas. They are inquiries into history, both how it is made and how it is written. Influenced by Howard Zinn and other radical social historians, they offer a robust corrective to the outworn Great Man theory, focusing instead on everyday men and women caught up in the gears of Capital and War and Empire.

This means that they are always about work and the wear and tear it takes on the body of workers. Her characters are soldiers, sailors, shipbuilders, steelworkers, meatpackers, and factory workers: in short, wage earners whose daily lives are defined by long hours of

manual labor, repetitive movement, and threat of physical injury. As Wallace sees it:

How the body is damaged through labor intimately affects how you function in the rest of your life. Whether you can lift your children, and you can't because your back has gone out from work, or if you have carpal tunnel syndrome and you can't cut out little paper dolls with your grandson... Whether you even feel enough energy to have sex after working fourteen hours, those things affect your personal relations. It's interconnected, what happens in the world, how we labor, and what happens inside us and in our relationships with others. (Julian 2004)

Wallace's populist reworking of history involves a painstaking and focused dramaturgical process. "It is my own ignorance that often leads me to choose to write about a certain era or event in history," she has said. "I do research, interviews; sometimes, if possible, I travel to the area I am writing about. And I attempt to learn" (Svich 2009, 92). Wallace is well-known for the thorough historical research that goes into her plays, often spending years, off and on, reading, gathering materials, making notes on a subject, and then "usually a few weeks before I write I try to forget everything. I read poetry or look at paintings so that I think in a different way" (Istel 1995, 25). Her published scripts often include an extended bibliography of works consulted, and the dialogue of her characters often includes arcane details pulled from her research, such as the technical list of Gulf War bombs recited by Craver in *In the Heart of America*, the architectural elements of the Homa Umigdal (Wall-and-Tower) houses built by Zionist settlers described in *A State of Innocence*, or the anatomy of the common mole included in *The Tal Pidae Lehrstücke*. *A Hard Weather Boating Party* was inspired by a series of interviews that Wallace did with working-class residents of Louisville's industrial Rubbertown area. It is not an oral history or a docu-drama or a history play in the strictest sense—none of her plays is—but it is a work of the imagination steeped in historical research into the lives of the marginalized, the exiled, and the dispossessed.

Over time Wallace has developed relationships with a cadre of progressive historians—Robin D. G. Kelley, Rashid Khalidi, Peter Rachleff, Marcus Rediker, David R. Roediger, among others—whose scholarship has grounded her work and with whom she maintains an active dialogue as she develops a new play. While the scripts that

emerge from this process are uniquely her own, the element of collaboration here is essential: in her words, “these writers give me fire” (MacDonald 2006, 98). This spirit of collaboration goes beyond historians to include directors, designers, dramaturgs, actors, and the occasional co-authors who work with her to make a play. Theatre is labor, too, she reminds us, and needs to be seen as choosing to acknowledge its own means of production and its own history or to ignore it.

Danger Zones

Wallace’s plays often take place in danger zones, settings that by their very nature pose a threat to the human body. *The War Boys* takes place at a checkpoint on the Mexico–Texas border where three young men gather to help authorities spot and catch illegal aliens sneaking through holes in a barbed-wire fence. *In the Heart of America* is set during Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf and includes an extended dialogue that details the destructive capacity of a number of high-tech weapons. *One Flea Spare* takes place in London during the Great Plague of 1665, which forces a wealthy trader and his wife into quarantine with a debased merchant seaman and a street urchin. *The Inland Sea* centers on the threatened removal of a group of villagers as the English countryside around them is being torn up as part of a massive reconfiguration of the landscape. Inspired by a strike at the Fischer Packing Company in Louisville, Wallace set *Slaughter City* on the assembly line of a meatpacking plant, where workers trim animal carcasses with sharp knives and show off their scars from on-the-job accidents.

In a similar fashion, *The Hard Weather Boating Party* takes place in a motel room in Louisville’s Rubbertown, home to nearly a dozen large chemical plants infamous for toxic emissions and related public health issues. The eponymous setting of *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* is a place where Depression-era teens race the 7:10 freight train across a bridge for sport. “The engine herself’s one hundred and fifty-three tons,” says tomboy Pace Creagan. “Just cold, lip-smackin’ steel. Imagine a kiss like that. Just imagine it” (Wallace 2001, 285). The places of Wallace’s Middle East plays—a bombed-out zoo in Rafah, a hospital clinic in West Jerusalem, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan—bear witness to the uncounted human costs of perpetual conflict there. In one way or another, Wallace situates her characters in places where by definition the body is especially vulnerable to injury or illness and

where the workings of capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism are indelibly marked on human flesh. Where they live is life threatening; where they work can kill them.

Ghost Girls, Time Travelers, and the Living Dead

No wonder then that so many Wallace characters are dead. Or somehow already dead and alive all at once. The plays are populated with characters who are not bound by time or mortality, giving them an affinity with Noh plays, traditional fairy tales, and Latin American magic realism. Sometimes they take the form of time-travelers, figures tied to a historical event who slip forward in time to join or haunt the present-tense action of the play. *In the Heart of America* includes two such characters from 1968: Lue Ming, a Vietnamese woman killed in the massacre at My Lai, and Lieutenant Boxler, the ageless soul of Lt. William Calley, the US Army officer found guilty for his role in the atrocity. *Slaughter City* has a similar duo: a young female textile worker who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 and a spectral figure called the Sausage Man, a nineteenth-century German émigré whose hand-cranked sausage grinder paved the way for the modern-day meatpacking industry. One of the three characters in *A State of Innocence* is the architect Shlomo, an incarnation of Shlomo Gur-Gervosky (1913–2000), inventor of the wall-and-tower concept for Zionist settlements in the British Mandate of Palestine in the late-1930s.

Sometimes the already dead take the form of what Claudia Barnett, Erica Stevens Abbitt, and others have theorized as “ghost girls.” This is Wallace’s variation on a contemporary archetype of liminality: emblems of female subjectivity between childhood and maturity, between naive vulnerability and determined agency, and by virtue of their ghostly status, between living presence and the absence of the dead. Wallace’s ghost girls—including Morse in *One Flea Spare*, Pace in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, Bliss in *The Inland Sea*, and the Afghan sisters Alya and Meena in *No Such Cold Thing*—are often precocious and alluring, gentle and tough, prescient and forlorn all at once, drawing the audience into a mystery that often reveals itself as tied to a fateful act of violence. Wallace’s first play, *In the Fields of Aceldama*, provides a prototype of this figure in the farm girl Annie, thrown by her horse and kicked to death at age 17. Two decades later, *And I and Silence* works a variation on the theme insofar as its action switches back and forth