Introduction

Anne Bogart, the prolific director and founding member of the SITI Company, writes about the phenomenon that she calls "eroticism" in her book, *A Director Prepares.* Bogart's definition of eroticism is not inherently or explicitly sexual, as the word is generally understood. Rather, she defines something erotic as:

1 Something or someone who stops you in your tracks.
2 You feel 'drawn' to it.
3 You sense its energy and power.
4 It disorients you.
5 You make first contact; it responds.
6 You experience extended intercourse.
7 You are changed irrevocably.[1]

This sensation, as Bogart describes it, occurs when one feels a magnetic attraction to a person or thing that cannot be easily understood. "I am rarely stopped by something or someone I can easily know," she says.[2] That which is easily comprehended can be amusing or palliative, but it does not encourage one to journey towards it, to find oneself in relationship to it. The kind of art that engenders this sensation of eroticism demands that one grapples with it and probe it over a period of time; indeed, one is not able to move on until one has struggled with it.

This sense of disorientation, of passion, of being stopped in my tracks, is exactly what I felt the first time that I read a play by Naomi Wallace. I felt dizzy as I pored over *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, her 2000 play about two poor, white children in the heart of the Great Depression. Except that's not what *Trestle* is about… or not entirely. *Trestle*, like many of Wallace's plays, spins a complex web of relationships and hopes and passions and fears – so much so that it is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint its main character or theme. It is deeply passionate, deeply political, deeply about class and race and gender, but maintains throughout a sense of intimacy and personality. The characters in *Trestle* felt muddy, visceral, and fleshy. I

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[1] Anne Bogart, *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2001), 62.
[2] *Ibid,* 62.

was immediately impressed by the need that I felt to read the script out loud; more than almost any play that I had ever encountered up to this point, this one felt that it would be totally incomplete if it were not embodied.

Embodied is a vital word when discussing Wallace's work. Though her plays are aggressively political, consistently attacking such issues as the occupation of the Palestinian territories and immigration from Mexico to the United States, Wallace explores these themes in a personal, embodied manner. She reminds the audience that politics are not amorphous and vague; they are the stories of our bodies and the ways in which they shape and are shaped by the societies around us. "What," she asks, "could be more intimate and personal than the history of our bodies and their relationship to the world?"[3] Wallace's obsession with the body as personal as well as political manifests itself in her plays as an intense and disorienting physical choreography. "In Naomi's work," says director Ron Daniels, "something is always being done to the body. It is always being touched, caressed, burned, perforated, poured on and spat on. It's standing in a river of life-and-death fluids: alive to blood, sweat, snot, running sores and oozing wounds. For Naomi, it has to do with making the body… burst its bounds. Now here's the catch: it's all in the name of change, hope, possibility."[4]

The idea that the body must be manipulated and its limits transgressed "in the name of change [and] hope" is central to Wallace's work. The physical manner in which the characters interact is, in many ways, the engine that drives the political messages of her plays, as the physical interaction between bodies and the politics of a society are, in her mind, intimately linked. Wallace viscerally represents the political weight placed on oppressed bodies; her characters are physically scarred by their labor, defiled by those more powerful than they. Carpal tunnel has ruined their hands, or they are missing fingers altogether. These bodies, which are often deemed "useless" by the societies in which they live, nevertheless make their power and their self-sufficiency known by claiming and using their own bodies in a transgressive – even revolutionary – manner. Those bodies that have been beaten down by power and capitalism,

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[3] Naomi Wallace, "On Writing as Transgression" in *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace: Embodied Dialogues* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 284.
[4] Vivian Gornick, "An American Exile in America," in *The Theatre of Naomi Wallace: Embodied Dialogues* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 60.

Wallace treats with care and compassion. Those that are at the top of the food chain are rebuked, touched, reminded that they too have bodies and can experience the same pain as the people who they subjugate.

If this sounds vague, it is because Wallace does not provide easy answers within her work. A touch between two characters – whether it is kind or violent – does not mean only one thing. In many cases, a single touch contains multitudes. Touch in Wallace's work is erotic, not necessarily in the conventional, sexual sense of the word but as Bogart defines it; it "embodies intense energy. It demands response… it contains attractive and complicated energy fields and a logic all its own."[5] It demands that the audience grapple with what they have seen and that they shift their understanding of the world outside the theater.

Bogart's definition of eroticism is especially pertinent to my journey to engage with Wallace's plays, as her description and advice is specifically attuned to the needs of the director. Though the director's job is to understand and interpret a play, they cannot flatten it in order to engage in this task. To simplify a play in this manner is to strip it of its eroticism and leave it, as a puzzle solved, unable to move the observer. A play, particularly a Naomi Wallace play, demands to be rendered in four dimensions. It demands the presence, the manipulation, and often the distortion of the human bodies on stage in order to erotically entice and impact the audience beyond the footlights. A director of a Wallace play, then, faces a daunting task when it comes to the bodies of the actors. Put simply, Wallace's work demands a huge amount from the ensemble. Not only is the language of her plays rich and complicated, but the touch that the work demands is transgressive – at times even dangerous. It is the director's duty to safely guide the actors through the process, pushing them to engage in the physical transgression that Wallace demands while making sure that they feel safe enough to simply be able to continue.

This thesis asks what kind of touch Wallace demands of the actors embodying her work, and how a director can most effectively cultivate that touch between actors. In Chapter One of this thesis I will first look closely at the sociological conception of touch as an unspoken language. I will discuss the manner in which this "language" is shaped culturally and how it, in turn, shapes culture. Though this interplay between touch and culture is necessarily present in

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[5] Bogart, 62.

cultures worldwide, I will focus on the American conception of touch and the power hierarchies that this language implicitly bolters. From there, I will examine the manner in which Wallace's plays dialogue with the American codes of touch. I will specifically focus my analysis on three plays in Wallace's oeuvre: *Slaughter City*, written in 1993; *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek,* written in 2000; and *And I and Silence,* written in 2013. I will examine the female characters in these plays, investigating the ways in which the American system of touch fosters their oppression along gendered, raced, and classed lines. Ultimately, I will argue that the ways in which these characters pervert and subvert the American mother touch in their lives is a strategy of resistance and revolution.

Plays do not exist solely as works of text to be analyzed; they assume a collaborative element, a realization through the voice and body of the actor. With this in mind, my second chapter will focus on the challenges that the non-normative and subversive touch in Wallace's work present to a director. I will begin by discussing the dramaturgical work necessary to situate an ensemble in the world of one of Wallace's plays, understanding that although the plays comment upon the political landscape of the real world, they operate in a mode of representation that is distinct from the real world. I will discuss the interplay between table work and embodied work in the rehearsal room, and the unique advantages that each gives to the director who attempts to fundamentally shift the manner in which their actors think about their bodies. I will deepen this discussion of directorial methods by discussing the interviews that I had with three contemporary directors of Wallace's plays – two who worked with undergraduate actors in a collegiate setting and one professional director, working in London's Finborough Theatre and New York's Signature Theatre.

This discussion of the directorial methods of others will lead me to Chapter Three: my reflections upon my own process of directing *And I and Silence* during the Reed Theater Department's 2015-16 season. In this chapter I will posit that the director's tools fall into two general categories when it comes to safely pushing the actors to engage in Wallacian touch: play and control. I will describe each of these categories in more depth, and discuss the reasons that I believe they are particularly useful in the rehearsal room. I will then examine a few specific rehearsals from my own rehearsal process, evaluating my own use of control and play with the

actors of *And I and Silence.* Finally, I will discuss which tool proved to be most effective during my own rehearsal process and postulate as to whether or not this conclusion rings true for all directors of Wallace's work.

Essentially, I hope to shed light on the oft-unspoken social codes of the body with which Wallace's plays grapple and discuss, specifically, the ways in which the touch in Wallace's work grapples with (and, ultimately) overturns the use of touch as an oppressive force. Rather than leaving this analysis a purely academic exercise, I will apply it to the embodied work of the rehearsal room. I do not expect that my production of *And I and Silence* will be the last time I work with one of Wallace's plays; though the rehearsal process for *And I and Silence* was often a frustrating process of trial and error, I believe that my work in the rehearsal room and my academic work in this thesis will deeply inform my directorial ventures in the future. I hope that this research will enable me to discuss and direct touch in Wallace's work more fruitfully, keeping the actors safe while pushing them to engage fully with what I believe is some of the most remarkable work from any contemporary playwright.