

Absence in Naomi Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*

Gwendolyn N. Hale

*I've been tapping the walls listening for angels
I've been eyeing the halls spying for ghosts
And in a shadowy dream, I see her barefoot on the glider
I try to beg her for peace, but I'm just too vague and far away . . .
And I don't understand how a girl so much like rain could breathe
so much fire.*

—Jeff Holmes “So Much Fire”

Absence involves more than emptiness or void. Absence can be more defining and captivating than presence. Peggy Phelan's recollection of her family's annual vacation to Massachusetts illustrates the intensity of such absence:

In the years since I've spent a lot of time trying to understand what a captivating presence my sister's ghost was and is. There were nine of us in that car, but it was the one who was not with us that we worried about, thought about, remembered. In the clarity of her absence, we redefined ourselves. The real was the absence of her; we were representations of that loss.¹

Phelan's memory and experience demonstrates that absence need not refer to an impenetrable nothingness.

Naomi Wallace employs concepts of absence in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* to illuminate the ways in which the characters are absent and the ways in which this nonpresence affects their lives, their perceptions of themselves, and their views of others. In *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, absence overwhelms the characters in varying degrees and through various manifestations. Much of the action takes place in a dry river bed, which symbolizes the desperation of the characters' situations. The lack of vegetation signals the absence of opportunity for growth for the inhabitants of the nearby town. The train trestle, which is “[a]lmost a hundred feet up,” symbolizes the characters' unattainable aspirations and hopes.² For characters like Brett Weaver, Dalton Chance, and Pace Creagan, the only way to escape the futility of their lives is to take the risk of running the trestle, a symbolic gesture of

Gwendolyn N. Hale is an Assistant Professor of English and the Writing Center Director at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. She earned her Ph.D. in English at Middle Tennessee University. While her dissertation grapples with the drama of Naomi Wallace, Hale also specializes in Rhetoric and Composition as well as Twentieth Century American Literature.

defiance that results in the deaths of Brett and Pace, and in Dalton's imprisonment for suspicion of murdering Pace. These examples of absence are illustrated in the form of flashbacks as Dalton, from his prison cell, recalls what occurred when Pace died. All characters experience or embody absence, but Pace, the central figure and a ghost girl, evokes the circulation of power, intergenerational struggle, and the possibilities of change in Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*.

In this play, which deals with the dead, the critical characters are gone or unable to tell their own stories. Therefore, it is up to the audience and the present, living characters to perform and make meaning of the acts and memories depicted upon the stage. Dalton, who was close to Pace, takes the events of Pace's death and the memories of her and somehow attempts to make meaning of them. Dalton must deal with the confusion and anger he feels over Pace's death, and he must try to reconcile his life with her death. Pace has dominated him through sex, and she uses sex to taunt Dalton. Now, with her gone, Dalton struggles to redefine himself as well as what his relationship with Pace really was.

Wallace further blurs the boundaries of the actions and events in the characters' lives by making significant not only the events that happen in life but also the events and conversations that take place either in a character's memory or that involve an absent character. Memory is different from life, and memories may not be absolutely accurate. Furthermore, desire, emotion, will, and passion give meaning to memories and experiences. Even in the absence of the flesh, one can still harbor strong emotions. Dalton exemplifies this notion; although Pace Creagan is dead, Dalton feels her presence through memories of his passion and anger, and, as a result, he intensely feels desire. Desire, ironically, is indicative of life.

Pace and Dalton are held back by the memories of previous events that keep them from reaching their potential. As Pace prepares to run the trestle, she recounts what happened with Brett the night he died. She has no future because she cannot reconcile what happened in her past. She will continue to relive this traumatizing event until she has worked through it. Since she is unable to reconcile this event, she is destined to stagnate. The same dynamic prevents Dalton from escaping his trauma. In his cell, he must think about that day that Pace plunged to her death in the dried creek bed. Whether Pace actually visits Dalton from beyond the grave or his conscience conjures her up to help him deal with what occurred or to punish him, he still grapples with his trauma without having critical distance from it, rehearsing the memories and reliving the pain without understanding why she died. Reliving their trauma is an attempt to make sense of it all and lend meaning to their lives. As Claudia Barnett eloquently states regarding Pace and Dalton, "And in their world without hope, they need validation more than anything."³

Pace, although "absent," is a forceful character who exhibits control even in death, demonstrating Phelan's observations that absence becomes a permeating presence. The audience's introduction to Pace Creagan is in the first scene in which

the stage directions read, "Pace appears. She is there but not there."⁴ Before the audience is even aware of Pace's misdeeds and actions, it becomes apparent that Dalton feels deeply and passionately about Pace, when he cries out, "Is that you? You go to hell, Pace Creagan!"⁵ Here, the audience feels her presence as Dalton's words imply a history. When Dalton cries out to Pace, she says nothing, knocks over the candle, and invokes darkness.

Trauma has blurred important distinctions in Pace's life, as her absence and presence symbolically intermingle in Dalton's. Having endured apparent ridicule and even emotional neglect, Pace has become tough emotionally and physically, rejecting a feminine role of compliance. In one of her first encounters with Dalton, he points out her absence of stereotypical female characteristics. Not only does she bring a pair of her brother's pants to wear to run the trestle, but Dalton states, "You don't talk like a girl. Should."⁶ Ignoring the ridicule in Dalton's observation, Pace thanks him for it. With her short answer, Pace reverses Dalton's ridicule and flings it back at him. Along with her absence of femininity, we also find a profound lack of genuine connection with other females. She talks about their classmate Mary Ellen much like a male would with comments such as, "I'd say she was on the menu. Front, back, and in reverse," and when she pays Mary Ellen a compliment, she couples it with a memory of how she could exert control; Pace would instruct her to take off her clothes and Mary Ellen would comply.⁷ This is one of the first indications that Pace is relatively free from the confines of gender. Her world cannot harbor femininity or any other form of weakness. Gender is a luxury that would allow Pace a clearly defined role. However, Pace's world, while free from the fetters of such roles, is complicated by the fact that she must forge her own path. No one in her life can instruct her on how to be a strong, independent woman. She is in a purgatory of blurred gender roles because she is neither wholly male nor female, and she must define who she is independently of any available definitions and even in the face of brutal circumstances.

For Pace, her loss and frustration are embodied by trains, and like her trauma, the train is inescapable. The train is such an important part of the landscape and economics of the town as well as her memory that Pace cannot go a day without being reminded of its importance in her life. Pace tries to escape the train and accompanies Dalton to his house seemingly in an effort to further observe Dalton and gain a better understanding of him and his origins. Pace, meeting Dalton's mother, expertly fields Gin's questions without veering from her vagueness and morbid realism. As Dalton lacks strong familial bonds and resilient parental figures, so does Pace. Pace tells Gin that her own mother "isn't what she used to be."⁸ When Dalton's mother probes for an explanation of this comment, Pace offers none except for the bitter truth that her mother used to be hopeful. Finally, in this exchange between Pace and Gin, Pace, for Dalton's sake, attempts to win Gin over. In an emotionally naked but tender moment, Pace offers Gin a model beam engine.

Confused by such an awkward and nontraditional gift, Gin merely offers silence. Having no real possessions to speak of, Pace explains that this engine is the only thing that she can call her own and offer Gin as a gift. The engine also represents her obsessive knowledge of trains, which she has amassed in an effort to gain some understanding of the forces that deprive humans and create trauma.

Pace transfers her anger, curiosity, and emptiness onto trains by way of representing her trauma, but also in order to gain control over her trauma. Many believe that the psyche, like the body, is subject to wounds, tears, and traumas. Within this notion lies hope that the emotionally wounded can somehow be made healthy again.⁹ However, Wallace's play suggests that this process is not always possible. Pace attempts to gain control and manageability over her life, her fears, and her guilt by acquiring knowledge about trains and eventually trying to outrun the train. Pace attempts to exorcise her trauma by reenacting Brett's death and her part in it. She wishes to undo all the ugliness and hurt heaped onto her and those around her. The train, because of its part in Brett's death as well as its action of taking away, comes to symbolize all the absence and pain Pace experiences. However, her trauma is far too much for the symbolic to carry.¹⁰ This episode in Pace's life reflects Phelan's explanation that people believe trauma must be relived or reenacted in order to conquer it. Once the train has passed, and once Brett has died attempting to outrun it, the tragedy and the aches of trauma still remain. The train as a symbol cannot relieve Pace of emptiness and hurt. For this reason, Pace is unwilling to live in a world devoid of hope, soul, and reason. For Pace, the action of taking on an unbeatable force carries far more weight than the faltering words with which she attempts to convey her disappointment. Furthermore, racing the train reveals that Pace still harbors hope. She tries to outrun death and hopelessness by outrunning the train. Then she meets death and the ultimate end of hope head on.

In Wallace's play, absence defines those present, their emotional states, their beliefs, and the actions they perform, as the dead dictate the actions of the living. Before her own horrific ending, Pace, in an effort to pay penance and free herself from the overwhelming guilt and anguish she feels regarding Brett's death, attempts to re-enact the event, casting herself as Brett and Dalton as herself.¹¹ Pace feels responsible for Brett's death because he slowed down to make sure she was okay. Had he not done this, he might have made it across the trestle before the train hit him. Pace thought he was making good time, so she ran past him.¹² The emptiness she feels due to Brett's death and the futility of her life are so daunting that they consume her and ordain her actions.

However, absence in *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* does not negate the meaningfulness of presence. A pervasive absence, felt throughout the play, becomes a character of sorts, which exceeds the boundaries of the play. Pace is dead and is, therefore, absent; Dalton retreats into his own world; Dalton's parents are emotionally vacant or shells of humans; Brett is dead; Pace's parents barely exist

within the context of the play. Absence is not just a part of every character, and neither does Pace's ghost embody (or disembody) it; rather, absence becomes its own powerful and sometimes overpowering force. Pace wrestles with this absence by casting it in the role of the train in an effort to make it somehow manageable. She confronts the train as an embodiment or stand-in for death, hopelessness, and loss. Foucault holds the belief that stand-ins are "a powerful decoy that can effectively substitute for the real."¹³ By re-enacting the moments of Brett's death, Pace enables herself to perhaps do and say the things she felt she ought to have done first time round. This re-enactment would allow her to grieve and be finished with the entire ordeal. Pace must attempt to make sense of the events that she has witnessed.

Vivian Patraka offers further insight on Wallace's treatment of presence and absence in a discussion of the Holocaust, particularly as the term involves the making of meaning. In "Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U. S. Holocaust Museums," Vivian Patraka discusses the negotiation of meaning in language, particularly the term "holocaust." Such terms derive their meaning from practices and cultural negotiations in the present. The term "holocaust" is different for Jews than it is for others in that it designates a specific attempt at genocide against them and their ancestors; the term is painful and personal. Although every genocide is defined in much the same way and by the same standards, each instance of genocide is horrible and yet unique. Patraka points out, "And while each genocide is known by this distinct history, it also is understood in the context of other genocides even though these relationships are not ones of simple analogy or equivalence."¹⁴ As time wears on, "holocaust" brings with it all the "protocols of the unspeakable, the incommensurate, and a sense of unlimited scope to the pain and injustice."¹⁵ The term "holocaust" connotes not just the violent moment of elimination of a whole people, but all that goes into it: "the beginning of terror and circulating discourses of oppression and the disinformation it produces, the incarcerations, the annihilation, and then the . . . denials and cleanups."¹⁶ The array of cultural and political forces that has amassed to produce or enact genocide is historically embedded in the term "holocaust." In her discussion of the ongoing ramifications of the Holocaust, Patraka states, "No historical referent is either stable, transparent in its meaning, agreed upon in its usage, or even engaged with in the same way by . . . people."¹⁷ However, Patraka also asserts that the absence and anger resulting from the Holocaust "need not make it an immobile, tomblike place nor create an inert body of knowledge intended only to conserve and preserve."¹⁸ She describes Holocaust museums as a way for people in the present to engage the past and define it for themselves. The places become "space for producing knowledge about the Holocaust—one that would construct its consumers as actively engaged in producing meanings—might be a powerful means to prolonging remembrance."¹⁹

Patraka's discussion of how meaning and history are embedded in words describes Wallace's use of absence in her play; while absence in and of itself holds no meaning, the characters in Wallace's play negotiate meaning from it and the suffering it causes. The Holocaust involved an astronomically large number of humans being persecuted, oppressed, and killed because of power, money, hatred, and fear. With such atrocities came dread, isolation, loss of identity, and loss of family, friends, and country for the victims. With the Holocaust came an overwhelming absence that redefined a race of people and a point in history. Certain parallels can be made between the loss experienced by Holocaust victims and survivors and the absence felt and created by the characters with *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, albeit on a much smaller scale. As visitors to the Holocaust museums and survivors of the Holocaust must dwell in absence and make meaning of their loss, Dalton does the same in his jail cell. Imprisonment, suffering, and emotional and physical isolation, like that experienced by Holocaust victims, requires those who experience(d) the aftermath to examine their lives and attempt to make sense of their pain.

Locked away from the rest of the world, Dalton finds in its absence a place for negotiation of meaning. In this regard, his prison resembles the Holocaust museums in which visitors must attempt to make meaning of the atrocities exhibited.²⁰ Dalton's memories as well as his dialogues with Pace's ghost parallel these exhibits. Dalton and the audience come to find that absence is not simply something that happens or exists; often, we create it or it is created for us by others.²¹ It is problematic to assume that those who are absent are the best guides to relate what their absence means to those who remain. Rather, those who are present often experience the absence of others in a profound way because the absence of another is juxtaposed onto the present and that void becomes very pronounced.

Nevertheless, Dalton refuses to be Pace's stand-in, signifying that the train does not finally allow her to redeem her past. Dalton will not watch as she crosses the trestle. He is profoundly angry with her, and he uses this opportunity to get back at her for exercising control over him. His is not a thought-out protest but rather an impulsive refusal, a small revenge for Pace making him long for so much and then denying him. The broken beam engine, and not the actual train, comes to symbolize Pace's life. The broken engine symbolizes all of Pace's comments on the futility of life and her inability to escape the same fate as Dalton. Her knowledge of trains and her model engine symbolize her life and longing. But the model engine is broken. No matter how much she attempts to know about trains and regardless of how much control she tries to gain through this obsessive knowledge, the futility and impotence of her life cannot be negated. This model engine, like the train that eventually takes Pace's life, embodies the futility that stifles her; her passions, like her knowledge of trains and engines, cannot elevate her above the emptiness and oppression.

Not only is running the trestle an attempt to make peace with her past, Pace's running of the train trestle also represents Pace's need to exist fully, if only briefly. Much of Pace's life has been consumed by poverty, hopelessness, resentment, and emptiness. With most of her life diminished, she attempts to exist more fully by having Dalton witness her racing the train. Without the presence of a perceiver, her actions hold little meaning. In one of the most telling and desperate scenes, but one of the few that demonstrates expectation, Pace expresses her hope and purpose:

Dalton Chance, when we're grown up, I want to stand here with you and not be afraid. I want to know it will be okay. Tonight, Tomorrow. That when it's time to work, I'll have work. That when I'm tired, I can rest. Just those things. Shouldn't they belong to us? . . . I want you to watch me, to tell me I'm here.²²

Here, Pace finally verbalizes her hope in spite of her fears. Her exasperation with fighting for what she believes should be hers comes through in her words. While Pace wants security and comfort, she also needs someone to acknowledge her existence as that really seems to be the only thing she might achieve. As she senses her own mortality, Dalton and Pace discover that what is truly tragic about death is that they survive it, at least once, "only to realize that having survived it once they will have to face it again."²³ Pace survived Brett's death and had to suffer the anguish and guilt that surrounded it. Unlike Brett, Pace could not escape these emotions; she simply had to endure and attempt to make sense of it. Then, once Pace re-enacts Brett's death, Dalton must survive her. He then experiences the same agonizing emotions and questions as the re-enactment becomes a never-ending cycle.

While some critics such as Claudia Barnett argue that the end of the play indicates that Dalton leaves at the end, that he's free to go, the ending remains ambiguous. Dalton has indeed found a more comforting place to reside emotionally through truth-telling in his confession to the audience. Dalton's confession indicates Pace has taught him something that she could not apply to her own life; truth can be the means of "working through" rather than the futile "acting out" that Pace engaged in.

Notes

1. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 12.
2. Naomi Wallace, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek. In the Heart of America and Other Plays*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001) 284.
3. Claudia Barnett, "Dialectic and the Drama of Naomi Wallace," *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism*, eds. Robert L. McDonald and Linda Rohrer Paige (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002) 154-68.
4. Wallace 320.

5. 320.
6. 285.
7. 288.
8. 297.
9. Phelan 5.
10. 5.
11. Barnett 164.
12. Wallace 314.
13. Qtd. in Phelan 25.
14. Vivian M. Patraha, "Spectacles of Suffering: Performing Presence, Absence, and Historical Memory at U. S. Holocaust Museums," *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (New York: Routledge, 1996) 89.
15. 89.
16. 89-90.
17. 90.
18. 90.
19. 90.
20. 94.
21. 96.
22. Wallace 326.
23. Phelan 13.