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Editor’s Introduction

August Wilson

This issue celebrates the life and work of Pittsburgh-born poet and playwright, August Wilson. Wilson is important to the world for his honest and heart-wrenching cries for social justice and equality. Although he died in 2005, his work stands as evidence of a life dedicated to telling the stories of both individuals and places in the life of African-Americans from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (with the exclusion of Ma Rainey). For Wilson, Pittsburgh’s Hill District provided dramatic settings for his stories of lives profoundly affected by the pernicious forces of racism and poverty.

In this special issue of Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity, the Editors have assembled a polymath collection of artists and scholars to celebrate Wilson’s artistic contributions. As with Frederick Douglass, the renowned abolitionist and feminist we honor with Pennsylvania’s Frederick Douglass Collaborative, Wilson is an icon in the history of courageous and creative forces who fought for freedom and equality by raging against modern forms of mental and economic slavery. Wilson brought ‘the blues’ to the world of literature, and he sang of the lives of those who struggled to overcome oppression.

This themed issue, dedicated to Wilson, is significant for Making Connections insofar as Wilson’s work resonates with everyone who is interested in drama, art, scholarship, and social justice. Wilson demonstrated the perezhivanie (Vygotsky’s term for ‘lived experience’) of Pittsburgh’s black community, and those who bear witness to Wilson’s work can viscerally connect to the pain his protagonists portray. Because of Wilson’s Pennsylvania roots and his eternal influence on the Pittsburgh Hill District, as proxies for the Pennsylvania Frederick
Douglass Collaborative, we are excited to present this issue’s art, poems and critical essays celebrating Wilson’s work.

This issue opens with the art of John Sokol. John was born in Canton, Ohio and completed an MFA at Kent State in 1973. His word portrait, “August Wilson as Fences,” beautifully reflects the depth and creativity of Wilson’s work, particularly emphasizing the connection between language and character.

Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon’s essay, “No One Size Fits: Womanhood, Feminism, and Female Archetypes in August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” tests Wilson scholar Harry Elam’s hypothesis that the Black women that people August Wilson’s plays are “memorable and powerful because they challenge notions of social rules of behavior and depict Black women who fight (even though they sometimes lose) against their own historical and gendered limitations.”

Nathan Oliver’s “Poem for August” captures the soul and rhythm of August Wilson. From his herringbone, British tweed jackets to his 78 records, Oliver elegantly depicts this “poet turned playwright” who prowled Bedford Avenue and the Crawford Grill, incessantly questioning and occasionally finding answers.

In his essay, “Property, Person, Piano: Ownership in August Wilson’s The Piano Lesson,” Anthony Pennino explores the complications of ownership and property for African Americans in The Piano Lesson. He argues that, “The ownership of property [for African Americans] can be a salvation or a curse; a character may open a new door to the future or be haunted relentlessly by the past.”

Brian Roberts has been closely connected to the Pittsburgh Hill District, as well as the Western Pennsylvania region’s larger arts community. His interviews with Mark Clayton Southers, Monn Washington, Elizabeth Pendleton, and Linda Jean Kittel help us to better understand Wilson’s artistic legacy, politics, and sense of place.

In his poem “Light, If,” Patrick Bizarro describes the “August light radiating on the Hill,” and in doing so illuminates Wilson’s vision and artistic psychological undertaking.

Elizabeth White Pittman examines Gem of the Ocean and Radio Golf, challenging the reader to consider how Wilson “critiques value, valuation, and evaluation.” In doing so, Pittman examines how African Americans in Wilson’s plays attempt to create a sense of cultural values and how they struggle against a corrupt and racist hegemony. Ultimately, she argues that the theatre, for Wilson, “is a gathering space that protects and ensures the continuation of cultural memories and the values they espouse.”

The final piece is a collaboration between Clarion University librarian and scholar Basil Martin and Kutztown University’s Wilson scholar Michael Downing. It takes the shape of a detailed biographical sketch and annotated bibliography as a contribution to the world of Wilson scholarship.

I am pleased to welcome Guest Editor Michael Downing to the Making Connections’ family. Downing is Associate Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. He has studied the life and work of August Wilson since 1992. His professional work on Wilson includes a dissertation, teaching/lecturing, publishing scholarly essays, and various online projects, including the August Wilson website and the August Wilson blog. He also initiated the August Wilson Society through the American Literature Association in 2012 and coordinates that effort each year. He can be reached at downing@kutztown.edu.

Greg S. Goodman
Editor-in-Chief
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Call for Papers

Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity


Please send electronic submissions in Word format to M_C_Journal@clarion.edu. Manuscripts should conform to citation methods as described in the current MLA Handbook, Turabian, or APA guidelines. Manuscripts will be peer-reviewed, and authors will be notified in timely fashion.

For more information about submissions email M_C_Journal@clarion.edu or Editors-in-Chief, Uraina Pack at UPack@clarion.edu or Greg S. Goodman at gregandandy@comcast.net.
The August Wilson Society of the American Literature Association announces its
CALL FOR PAPERS
for the 26th Annual Conference May 21-24, 2015
The Westin Copley Place 10 Huntington Avenue Boston, MA 02116-5798

Details:
Fifteen-minute papers are invited for a panel session on any aspect of August Wilson's work.

Please send one-page proposals, including name, academic affiliation, paper title, and email address to Michael Downing downing@kutztown.edu. Three papers will be selected.


Conference Director: Olivia Carr Edenfield, Georgia Southern University

Conference Fee: For those who pre-register before April 15, 2015: $90 ($60 for Graduate Students, Independent Scholars, and Retired Faculty).

After April 15, the fees are $100 and $75. Additional details about the conference are available on the American Literature Association Website, available here: http://alaconf.org/
August Wilson as Fences

John Sokol is a visual artist based in Ohio. He is a graduate of Kent State University.
ABSTRACT:
Any review of his text reveals that August Wilson greatly prescribed to the notion of the ideal Black woman. Tied to cultural competency no doubt (and despite a more positive portrayal than usual depictions in both American (to be read Western) and African American Theater (AAT), I contend that August Wilson’s ideas about the ideal Black woman still conformed to traditional gendered roles and expectations. However, in his plays, the non-traditional Black woman or good-time gals were often diametrically opposed to depictions of the ideal.
These Black female characters are, instead, independent, proto-feminist, and yet troubled. This paper seeks to test Harry Elam’s hypothesis that the Black women that people August Wilson’s plays challenge Western notions of gendered social rules of behavior and fight against their own historical limitations (165).
INTRODUCTION:

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was the winner of the New York Drama Critics Award for 1987-8. In that play, Bertha Holly is the consummate *good Black woman*. However, every other female in the Holly boarding house (other than little Zonia, perhaps) can best be critiqued as the iconic *good-time girl*.

Although Wilson acknowledged that the women in his plays were “neither as visible nor as vocal as the men,” like so many Black writers who must grapple with a predominately white-dominated system of arts production, August Wilson’s work does replicate some of the same stereotypes of Black womanhood that American theater and AAT are so often plagued with (Shannon 150). However, when Wilson does employ recognizable stock characters, his use of *stereotype* is nuanced and he would help to redefine others.

Some of the female characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* are sadder or more sexualized than others. But, in the end, while exhibiting various degrees of “selfishness” and “selflessness,” Mattie, Molly, and Martha have no *staying power*. Perhaps, without meaning to, they are nevertheless constructed like the *good-time girl* replicated again and again in African American Theater (AAT). These women in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* are not just your typical *tragic Mulatto* and *Sapphire* stereotypes. Rather, Mattie, Molly, and Martha each depict a different, yet credible, view of the various outcomes that Black women’s *choices* can lead to.

This paper seeks to test Harry Elam’s hypothesis that the Black women that people August Wilson’s plays are memorable and powerful because they challenge notions of social rules of behavior and depict Black women who fight (even though they sometimes lose) against their own historical and gendered limitations (165).

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THE HISTORY OF BLACK STEREOTYPE DECONSTRUCTION:

As history records, most of the stereotypes of African American life and culture were created by White authors in theater, literature, and popular culture. Scholars have spent a great deal of time listing and deconstructing the *stereotypes of Blackness*. Long before Donald Bogle would coin the phrase *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* to comment on stereotypes created in American art and literature and used to *romanticize* (and demonize) Black life and culture, W. E. B Du Bois and Sterling Brown had already published considerable examinations into the dramatic and literary depictions of Black men and women (Bogle).

In 1933, Sterling Brown postulated that there were in fact, “seven categories of popular stereotypes of African-American characters” that had helped to shape the perception (and in many cases) misconception of “real time” African American life (Gates; Williams-Witherspoon, “From ‘Wretched Freeman’”; Brown, “Negro Characters”). Sterling Brown critiqued the prevalence and power of negative stereotypes of Blackness that came down to us on the American stage as a direct consequence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

In 1920, before Sterling Brown, W. E. B. Du Bois “wrote publically about the negro’s potential for serious theatrical artistry, both as performers and [as] subjects worthy of serious dramatic treatment” (Pinkney 17). Contextualizing Du Bois, Brown, and Bogle—particularly with regard to Black women stereotypes—is critical to any discussion of the women in August Wilson’s plays.

CONTEXTUALIZATION:

In 1920, Du Bois published his essay “The Damnation of Women” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* and suggested that women of color have been categorized into four iconic types.
From Du Bois’ time to the present, the Black woman characterization as *maiden* is often sexualized and hardened by tragedy. Historically, this character becomes the prototype for what would later be called the *tragic mulatto*. Du Bois even goes so far as to suggest that phenotypically, this character is “yellow with brown freckles” (110).

In August Wilson’s work, these female characters are often depicted as the *good-time gals*—sexually aware, materialistic, and capable of going from one man to the next. Occupying the full range of phenotypic variation, Du Bois writes that the *maiden* categorization is “Darkly flushed with the passion of youth; but her life was a wild awful struggle to crush the natural fierce joy of love… [when] [s]he crushed it… [she] became a cold, calculating mockery” (110).

Too poor to marry young and too poor to have children, *maidens* often became either *betrayed girl-mothers* or *outcasts* because of poor choices and wrong men. Black women’s *poor choices* would become a theme that both Black and White writers would exhaust on the American stage.

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Du Boisian Categories of Black Female Characters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) widow</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) wife</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) maiden and</td>
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<td>4) outcast. (110)</td>
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**Outcast**

For Du Bois, the outcast of the 1920s was, allegedly, White, and of lower-to-working class. Historically, however, we recognize that the outcast character is, more likely, not White; but fair enough to perhaps have once “passed”—the outgrowth of the tragic mulatto alienated from her community.

**From Du Bois to Sterling Brown: The Exotic Primitive**

In 1933 Sterling Brown (1901-1989) offered a broader list of stereotypes of Blackness. Of Brown’s categories, Black women’s stereotypes included the exotic primitive, women who were said to have been “uglied up and yet beautiful” when their typically negatively valuated “Negroid features” appeared in excess to make the individual grotesquely unique. “[T]hrough some unwritten special racial dispensation, the individual possessing such traits becomes ‘a kind of exotic beauty’” (Hernton 84; Williams-Witherspoon, “From ‘Coons’ to ‘Croons’” 196).

In the minstrelsy era in America, the Topsy character, made popular in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, combined prepubescent sexuality with physical awkwardness, and became the personification of the exotic primitive on one end of the spectrum. The story of Saartjie Baartman’s (a.k.a. Sarah Baartman) exhibition while alive, and then, after her death, public displays of her mutilated body, became a more tragic representation of the exotic primitive narrative (Williams-Witherspoon, “From ‘Coons’ to ‘Croons’” 196; “Hottentot Venus’ Goes Home”).

**The Tragic Mulatto**

The other stereotype of Black womanhood that Sterling Brown critiqued in 1933 was the tragic mulatto. “The sad progeny of (often times, coerced) inter-racial coupling,” neither wholly Black nor White, the tragic mulatto is often exotic and sexually commodified precisely because of her beauty (Williams Witherspoon, “From ‘Coons’ to ‘Croons’” 196-97). Made popular by antislavery crusaders hoping to show the dangers of miscegenation, the “near-white characters are the intransigent, the resentful [and] the mentally alert” only because of biology (Brown 570). According to Brown, “the mixed blood characters are victims of a divided inheritance and proof of the disastrous results of amalgamation” (570-1).

While Brown admits that the “mixed blood” male character (or Wretched Freeman) is often the villain in Reconstruction literature, in novels and dramas the mulatto, quadroon, or octoroon heroines garner far more empathy from their audiences. More pitied than despised, the “whole desire of her life is to find a white lover” (Brown 571). For these women, when those relationships are rejected by the larger society and the character is subsequently abandoned—with few resources, modes of production and use-value—she spirals downward, usually culminating in a tragic end.

**Mammy**

The mammy is one of the enduring stereotypes of Black womanhood that we are all-too-nauseatingly familiar with, and it has become worn-weary in American literature and popular culture even today. According to Henry Louis Gates, the mammy caricature is never mentioned in Sterling Brown’s original list of African American female stereotypes (Williams-Witherspoon, “From ‘Coons’ to ‘Croons’” 197). However, in his essay, “A Century of Negro Portraiture in American Literature” (first printed in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1966), Brown did offer up a critique of the mammy character—“proud of her quality white-folks, the wise up-bringer of their children [with]...little mention of her own” (Brown 567).

These Black women characters are good-natured, motherly, yet sometimes sassy and oftentimes physically intimidating, robust, and bosomy. These women were able to work,
though they often complained about that work and, as domestics, embodied a defensive posture in response to the social stigma attached to those modes of discourse (Williams-Witherspoon, “From ‘Coons’ to ‘Croons’” 196; Boshkin 149-58; Parenti 128).

From Du Bois to Sterling Brown right on down to Donald Bogle, each of the aforementioned scholars sought to turn the focus away from replicating the stereotypes of Blackness; and, instead, attempted to encourage Black writers and Black audiences to redefine and reassert new images of the Black experience in the transformation of AAT.

“One principal task was to protest and revolt against a constructed image of Negro character and persona as established by a White hegemonic theatrical structure and to assert a “New Negro” image of creative beings with spiritual depth and prophetic potential” (Pinkney 18). Du Bois encouraged Black writers to “focus on [a] self-expressive Negro stage image” (18). To him, “[t]he exploration and creation of new characters, new themes and new definitions were far more important” (25).

AUGUST WILSON’S WOMEN:

On the American stage, then, Black female identity has been problematized ad nauseam. In The Ground on Which I Stand, Wilson called for Black writers to self-define their culture. Calling for a kind of voice ownership, Tara Green wrote that “ownership of voice is ownership of the culture’s expression.” Green suggests that Wilson charged others, and took responsibility himself for, “not only male but female characters whose voices express the ideas of the culture’s people” (149). The range of those voices and those characters in African American culture are tied to cultural competency, and span the spectrum.

Creating new images of Black life, Wilson’s plays are typically very male-centric. “Though Wilson primarily centers on the plight of male characters in his dramas, these men are usually nuanced or surrounded by women] and not unaffected by the relationships they have with women who are their mothers, lovers, or friends” (Green 149). According to Sandra Shannon, Wilson’s female “portrayals cover as wide a range as do those of his men” (151).

Just like his male characters, female characters in August Wilson’s plays, as mentioned, tend to oscillate along the spectrum from the ideal Black woman to the good-time or bad girl. Interestingly enough, however, even when the women in August Wilson’s plays are less than ideal, they are never totally bad, and thankfully they never reach the stage of demeaning stereotypes.

“In Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (named for a song that Wilson heard by W. C. Handy), the female characters attempt to function not outside but within the patriarchy and traditional gender roles” (Elam 173). Each of the women in Wilson’s plays, are defined by their relationships with men. “Victimized in the past…[they look] for solutions in the present” (173).

As Sandra Shannon writes, “although their motives are not always made clear and each of their victories amounts to a compromise (as with the case of Martha Pentecost Loomis in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone)...it is important to note that Daisy Wilson, the playwright’s mother, is the model on which he bases the majority of his women” (151).

“Growing up in my mother’s home…I learned the language that my mother had learned from her mother” (Wilson “The Ground” 3; Green 149). “I am cautious in writing women characters [and] I am respectful of them as I would be of my mother” (August Wilson to Vera Stoppard 109).

Harkening back to the Du Boisian model creating a new image of Black life, in male-dominated spaces, the women in August Wilson’s plays struggle to make a place for themselves. “As a result, the women’s act of speaking—what they say, how they say it, and how their words affect their male associates—is
vital when assessing the characterization of Wilson’s women and the role they play in plot development” (Green 150).

Greatly affected by playwrights from the Black Arts Movement (BAM), August Wilson’s work would help recognize “how Black people maintain their humanity and dignity and cope with their situation in the midst of oppression” (Weathers). In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson unpacks the status of the mother and the father, their function, along with the ability, or lack thereof, in defining values that their children should have. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson resists the temptation to just rely on stereotypes and one-dimensional characters; but rather, addresses the potential categories of Black female identity and uses those characters to unpack Du Bois’ notions of lifework, economic independence and motherhood (Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women” 111).

THE BLACK FAMILY:

“In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson examines the factors leading to the disintegration of the black family” (Shannon 156). Playing out Nancy Schepher-Hughes’ nature versus nurturer arguments, “Wilson presents a collage of African American women widely varied in the way they nurture” (Shannon 156).

At the turn of the century, because of Northern Migration, throngs of Black women, alone or with family, made their way north to escape rural poverty, threats of violence, rape, and forced-miscegenation as racialized sexual terrorism indiscriminately at the hands of White men. According to Sandra Shannon, for many of those women, marriage, family, motherhood and nurturing were often put aside and delayed in the hopes of acquiring jobs and economic opportunity (156).

For those who brought children with them, moving north, finding a place to live, and providing for their families once they arrived, often proved to be a harrowing experience. “Poverty and squalor often awaited such women in an already heavily populated steel town”—like Pittsburgh (Shannon 156). Single-parenting, relying on men (for financial and sexual favors), domestic labor, or laborious work taking in washing to support themselves and their children, the consequence of Northern Migration was the beginning of the dismantling of the Black family.

NO ONE SIZE:

Bertha Holly in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is what Rose might have been in *Fences* (1983) (if Troy Maxson had been more like Seth Holly and hadn’t betrayed her and fathered a child by another woman). Set in 1911, the play features Seth and Bertha Holly, an older Black couple that have weathered the storms of racism, youth and its distractions. In an interview with Kim Powers in 1984, Wilson talked about the characterization of Seth as a Black man that was very different from many of his other male characters.

Seth is a Northern free man. His father was not a slave. His grandfather was not a slave. He was born in the North. So his experiences are totally different from the rest of the characters who have come up from the South, whose parents have been slaves. The fact that he owns the boarding house and that he is a craftsman, that he has a skill other than farming, sets him apart from the other characters. [But] that was also a part of the black experience. (Powers 7)

According to Shannon, “Bertha Holly, has not had the hard lives that her female tenants have endured” (157). Allegedly, with age comes wisdom. For women—particularly women past the age of menses, Black women acquiring elder-status gain the right to speak their mind.

A Northerner by birth, as an older Black woman, Bertha has voice. Although she is not credited with having had babies—and thereby proving herself as a mother—as the head of the Holly boarding house, she clearly mothers her tenants. When given the opportunity, Bertha also tries to be a good woman to Herold Loomis’s daughter, Zonia.
Of the three other female characters, in Wilson’s mind, Mattie seemingly has some redeeming value. According to Sandra Shannon, Mattie Campbell is obsessed with becoming a wife and mother (157). Living with Jack Cooper for well over 3 years before he walked off and left her precisely because of her inability to keep one of his two babies alive past infancy, Mattie’s life becomes intertwined with the Holly household because she seeks Bynum out to bind Jack’s spirit to her own.

Bynum, a long-time resident of the Holly boarding house, is said to have the power of song (the use of musicality and word incantation to weave spells). In the world of the play, people pay Bynum to bind their loved ones to them and to cause “lost or runaway love’s” to return. When Bynum refuses to bind the missing Jack Cooper to Mattie, he instead gives her a satchel of herbs to sleep with under her pillow to help get over him. While visiting Bynum, Jeremy, another Holly house boarder who has just come north in search of work with his guitar from North Carolina, hears Mattie’s story of heartbreak and quickly offers to fill Jack’s shoes—and Jack’s side of her bed.

Jeremy: “I’m from North Carolina. Down round Raleigh where they got all that tobacco. Been up here about two weeks. I got it fine except I still got to find me a woman. You got a nice look to you. Look like you have men’s standing in your door. Is you got men’s standing in your door to get a look at you?”

Mattie: “I ain’t got nobody since Jack left.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 25)

Much like Reverend Avery tells Sister Bernice in The Piano Lesson (1987), August Wilson’s work suggests that young Black women of childbearing age have little value when and if they have no Black man to call their own.

Jeremy: “A woman like you need a man. Maybe you let me be your man. I got a nice way with the women. That’s what they tell me.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 25)

For the men in August Wilson’s plays, such as Troy Maxson with Alberta (Fences), or Boy Willie with Grace (Piano Lesson), confessions of love or any semblance of it are strictly avoided. According to Harry Elam, Jeremy’s involvement with two women points to “the principles of need, desire and privilege in male and female relationships” (174). Their ideas of relationship are instead seemingly tied to the sexual commodification of Black women in exchange for a fun time and, perhaps, a little extra money on the side.

Mattie: “I don’t know. Maybe Jack’s coming back.

Jeremy: “I’ll be your man till he come. A woman can’t be by her lonesome. Let me be your man till he come.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 25)

Twenty-six-year-old Molly Cunningham is described as “a woman that could break in on a dollar anywhere she goes” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 47). For our purposes, Molly Cunningham is the proto-feminist in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. No doubt pretty and curvaceous—another bid to the tragic mulatto stereotype—Molly knows full well the potential value of her looks coupled with sexuality, and is seemingly resigned to doing whatever it is she has to do in order to get where she wants to go before it’s too late.

As Sandra Shannon writes, “Molly Cunningham is the most liberated” of the women in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (157). Disinterested in domesticity altogether, she outright rejects any possibility of being relegated to the usual gendered roles for women as wife, “homemaker, child-bearer and potential victim of men” (Shannon 157).

If all women—both good Black women and good-time gals alike—perform some measure of sexual labor or bed work to keep a man or a roof over their heads, then Molly is determined to control the nature of that work, and with whom.

Molly: “Mister, you got any rooms? I see that sign say you got rooms.
Seth: “How long you plan to stay?
Molly: “I ain’t gonna be here long. I ain’t looking
for no home or nothing. I’d be in Cincinnati if I
hadn’t missed my train.
Seth: “Rooms cost two dollars a week…
Molly: “Two dollars!...Look here, Mr. Holly. I
forgot to tell you. I likes me some company from
time to time. I don’t like being by myself.
Seth: “Your business is your business. I don’t meddling
in nobody’s business. But this is a respectable
house. I don’t have no riffraff around here. And I
don’t have no women hauling no men up to their
rooms to be making their living.” (Wilson, Joe
Turner’s Come and Gone 47-8)

Of course, as these things go, the first chance they get, Jeremy runs off with Molly, leaving poor Mattie behind.

Jeremy: “You sure look pretty today…”
Molly: “Don’t come telling me all that pretty stuff. Beauty wanna come in and sit down at
your table asking to be fed. I ain’t hardly got
enough for me.
Jeremy: “Why don’t you come on and go away with me?
Molly: “You tied up with that Mattie Campbell,
Now you talking about running away with me.
Jeremy: “I was just keeping her company cause she
lonely. You ain’t the lonely kind. You the kind
that know what she want and how to get it. I
need a woman like you….With a woman like
you beside me, a man can make it nice in the
world.
Molly: “Moll can make it nice by herself too. Molly
don’t need nobody leave her cold in hand. The
world rough as it is.
Jeremy: “We can make it better together. I got my
guitar and I can play. Won me another dollar last
night playing guitar…
Molly: “A dollar a day ain’t hardly what Molly got
in mind.
Jeremy: “I gambles real good. I got a hand for it.
Molly: “Molly don’t work. And Molly ain’t up for
sale.
Jeremy: “Sure baby. You ain’t got to work with
Jeremy.
Molly: “Molly ain’t going South.” (Wilson, Joe
Turner’s Come and Gone 65-6)

FORCED LABOR:
In the early days of the prison industrial
complex, “Joe Turner” was a euphemism for
the convict lease system put in place all over
the south following reconstruction. As a form
of legalized re-enslavement, the convict/lease
system forced Blacks to replicate the same
kind of free labor that they had done during
the enslavement period. “Men and women
alike were arrested and imprisoned at the
slightest pretext-in order to be leased out by the
authorities as convict laborers” (Davis 89).

When the big, brooding Herold Loomis
comes to the Holly boarding house with his
young daughter Zonia, Joe Turner’s Come
and Gone becomes an examination of tragic
consequences, lost love, and found redemption.
In the play, Herold is searching for his long-
lost wife Martha, who left him after he was
arrested, detained for vagrancy, and then
sentenced to 7 years hard labor in the southern
work camps.

In his interview with Kim Powers in 1984,
August Wilson unpacks the symbolism behind
Loomis’ tragedy. Tied to Jim Crow and the
incarceration and re-enslavement of Black men
in the South following Reconstruction, Loomis
has, in effect, been abducted and incarcerated
in a chain gang on trumped-up charges, losing 7
years of his life to a void.

Because the seven years Loomis is with Joe Turner,
seven years in which his world is torn asunder, and
his life is turned upside down, can in fact, represent
the four hundred years of slavery….At some point
someone says, “Ok, you’re free.” What do you do?
Who are you…and what do you do now that you’re
free, which is Loomis’ question. He says, “I must
reconnect and reassemble myself.” But when he goes
to the place where he lived, his life is no longer there.
His wife and daughter aren’t there. He is, in effect, a
foreigner to the place. So he goes off on a search. He
searches for a woman to say goodbye to and to find a
world that contains his image. (Powers 9)

The years spent in incarceration have left
Loomis bitter and volatile. As Herold Loomis’
tragedy is revealed, Seth Holly quickly puts two
and two together, recognizing a woman over
in another county (going now by the name
of Martha Pentecost) as Zonia’s mother and
Loomis’ runaway bride.
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Zonia: “I don’t know. My daddy say some man named Joe Turner did something bad to him once and that made her run away.
Reuben: “Maybe she come back and you don’t have to go looking for her.
Zonia: “We ain’t there no more.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 28)

Although we know that August Wilson’s grandmother was named Zonia, still depicted as the precursor to Black womanhood, later in the play as Reuben and Zonia begin to bond as friends, the audience is left to wonder what kind of Black woman will Zonia grow into—a good Black woman or a good-time gal?

Reuben: “You look like a spider!
Zonia: “I ain’t no spider!
Reuben: “Got them long skinny arms and legs. You look like one of them Black Widows!
Zonia: “I ain’t no Black Widow nothing! My name is Zonia!
Reuben: “That’s what I’m gonna call you…Spider.
Zonia: “You can call me that, but I don’t have to answer….
Reuben: “I think maybe I be your husband when I grow up.
Zonia: “How you know?
Reuben: “I ask my grandpop how you know and he say when the moon falls into a girl’s eyes that how you know.
Zonia: “Did it fall into my eyes?
Reuben: “Maybe I ain’t old enough. Maybe you ain’t old enough.
Zonia: “So there…. Reuben: “That don’t mean nothing ‘cause I can’t see it. I know it’s there. Just the way you look at me sometimes look like the moon might have been in your eyes….you ever let anybody kiss you?
Zonia: “Just my daddy. He kissed me on the cheek.
Reuben: “It’s better on the lips. Can I kiss you on the lips?
Zonia: “I don’t know. You ever kiss anybody before?
Reuben: “I had a cousin let me kiss her on the lips one time. Can I kiss you?
Zonia: “Okay….
Reuben: “Now you mine, Spider. You my girl, okay?” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 82-3)

Martha finally makes her appearance at the end of the play, with the people-finding man, Mr. Selig. The audience learns that even though
Martha was considered a good Christian woman according to Seth Holly’s standards, seemingly, according to the playwright, she too had no sticking power and therefore had no real value as a Black woman.

Martha: “Herald, I didn’t know if you was ever coming back. They told me Joe Turner had you and my whole world split half in two. My whole life shattered. It was like I had poured it in a cracked jar and it all leaked out the bottom. When it go like that there ain’t nothing you can do put it back together….You wasn’t gone but two months and Henry Thompson kicked me off his land and I ain’t had no place to go but to my mama’s. I stayed and waited there for five years before I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren’t, you was dead to me. I wasn’t gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 90)

For Herald Loomis, like August Wilson (or vice versa), no sticking power—even when justified—seems to be the cardinal sin for a Black woman. No matter whether tortured and damaged by racism or oppression, not waiting and standing by her Black man is the one unforgivable fault that can seemingly rob good Black women of their goodness. Following Loomis’s capture and imprisonment in the work camps of the south, even though Martha had no place to go except to accept her fate and live alone with her mother, it would seem, according to the author, that Martha fails to live up to the expectations of ideal Black femininity.

As for her daughter, Sandra Shannon suggests in her article “On the Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson’s Perspective on African American Women” that Martha “decides that rather than risk her daughter’s safety, she would leave her in her own mother’s care” (158). However, by re-examining the text, it is also quite probable that Martha simply selfishly chose to leave her daughter behind to make her own journey easier. After all, her daughter would have been a constant reminder of an old life that she was desperately trying to leave behind.

Rather than waiting and existing on staying power in the odd hope that her husband would return, by abandoning Loomis and their daughter Zonia to go off and “make a life without you,” Martha is demoted and her status as a good Black woman is negated. Subsequently, Martha wed herself instead to the Black Church (hence taking on the last name Pentecost). As a final indignity, tying herself to the church and a preacher, Reverend Tolliver, with a spell on a whole host of other lonely Black women like herself, Martha may have maintained some status as a “good Christian woman” (as Seth Holly calls her), but even that still didn’t mean that she had value as an “honest-to-gosh,” flesh-and-blood, real ideal Black woman.

In the end, Loomis finds the potential of a real Black woman in Mattie Campbell. Again, as in Wilson’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning play Fences, Wilson employs the same metaphors of fullness and emptiness to describe a real, flesh-and-blood woman. We are left to wonder whether August Wilson finds in Mattie the archetype for Black womanhood that we should all endorse?

Loomis: “I been watching you. I been watching you watch me.
Mattie: “I was just trying to figure out if you seen things like you said.
Loomis: (Getting up) “Come here and let me touch you. I been watching you. You a full woman. A man needs a full woman. Come on and be with me.
Mattie: “I ain’t got enough for you. You’d use me up too fast.
Loomis: “Herald Loomis got a mind seem like you a part of it since I first seen you. It’s been a long time since I seen a full woman. I can smell you from here. I know you got Herald Loomis on your mind, can’t keep him apart from it. Come on and be with Herald Loomis. (…He touches her awkwardly, gently, tenderly….He goes to touch her but finds he cannot.) I done forgot how to touch.” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone 76-7)
By the end of the play, as Loomis slashes his chest in a symbolic gesture to bleed himself and free himself, both, from Joe Turner and his link to Martha once and for all, he finds his strength and power—his manhood—again and turns to exit with Mattie rushing after him.

Hilary DeVries points out: “Loomis’s search for his own past symbolizes the quest of an entire race” (25). As both DeVries and Elam suggest, through Loomis’s character, August Wilson is encouraging all African Americans to regain their epic memory and find their own song (DeVries 23; Elam 175). In the end, as Elam writes, “Loomis scars himself, exorcises his past, stands alone and is liberated” (175).

Other than Bertha, as the ideal Black woman, the other women in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone—Mattie, Molly, Martha, and Zonia—are not necessarily made whole. The African retention and spiritual transcendence that Herold Loomis experiences as he re-discovers self does not appear to be an option for these Black women. Despite some proto-feminist leanings, they are too tied to Christianity, traditional gendered expectations, and notions of appropriateness (Elam 176).

CONCLUSION:

“Molly Cunningham, Mattie Campbell, and Martha Loomis are survivors. Each has withstood the perils of traveling alone, yet each carries with her a different story of survival” (Shannon 156). In August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, he examines the legacy of enslavement and the historical forces at work that conspire to keep Black families apart (158). “Wilson’s black female characters…challenge orthodoxy and press against historical limitations, recognizing and confronting the additional burdens placed upon them by gender” (Elam 165).

As we’ve discussed, Wilson’s ideal Black women, like Bertha Holly and Mattie Campbell, conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. His good-time gals, however, like Molly Cunningham, are often diametrically opposed—indepenent, proto-feminist, and yet troubled.

In Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, August Wilson crafts still other female characters, such as little Zonia and Martha Pentecost, who fall short of archetype, but come nowhere close to stereotype. Although oftentimes “poor choices” plague them, “[l]imited by their subordinate position within the patriarchy, the women in Wilson’s dramas attempt to establish relationships with men on their own terms” (Elam 165).

August Wilson’s plays contain the breadth and history of the African American experience along with a poetic quality in the African American language that he captures. However, in the scholarly literature, few people critique Wilson’s true gift of taking the stereotypes of blackness so often replicated on the American stage and re-imagining them in tune to the cultural ethos of the Black community.

Sterling Brown admonished us all in 1968. Theatergoers and African American playwrights no longer need to rely on the “allegorical, simplistic [and] the superficial characterization of the past” handed down to us from the American Stage (“A Century of Negro Portraiture” 586). While Brown admitted that “some of the best attacks upon stereotyping have come from White authors…just as some of the strongest upholding of the stereotypes have come from Negroes,” he admonished writers to forge new definitions, and August Wilson must have heard his call (Brown, “Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors” 200). “[T]here is an obvious ‘unfairness’,” Dubois writes, “of hardening stereotype into fixed moulds (sic)” (201).

By now, the persistent use of stereotyping in AAT should be on its way out; and yet, nevertheless, judging from the proliferation of comedic and iconic caricatures of Blackness that are continuously replicated in media, popular culture, and on the American Stage, there is seemingly still more critique to be done. As Sterling Brown once predicted, unchecked,
“clichés and stereotypes linger and even burgeon” (“A Century of Negro Portraiture” 589).

[The sincere, sensitive artist, willing to go beneath the clichés of popular belief to get at an underlying reality will be wary of confining a race’s entire character to a half-dozen narrow grooves….He will hesitate to do this, even though he had a Negro mammy, or spent a night in Harlem, or has been a Negro all his life….such an artist is the only one worth listening to, although the rest are legion. (Brown, “Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors” 203)

Arguably, “Wilson’s desire to preserve and celebrate his African American culture stems from the influences of his mother” (Green 149). The son of a White, German father, Frederick Kittel, and an African American woman with southern roots (Daisy Wilson), as Tara Green suggests, “observing the early cultural performances of his mother” greatly influenced Wilson (149). Thus, even though Wilson’s plays are male-centric, “[w]omen have played a significant role in molding his perception…and his art” (150).

“Growing up in my mother’s home…I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain that my mother had learned from her mother….“ (Wilson, 3). [H]is observations of the daily cultural “performances” of his mother informed his point of view. (Green 149)

This paper attempted to test Harry Elam’s hypothesis that the Black women that people August Wilson’s plays all typically challenge western notions of gendered social rules of behavior and fight against their own historical limitations (165). Looking specifically at August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, this paper further analyzes the notion of the *ideal Black woman*, and suggests that even in those more positive portrayals of Black womanhood, those characters typically conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. Even though Wilson’s plays represent different generations and different social moments in time, in representations of the *good Black woman* as in Bertha Holly in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson’s vision of the *ideal good Black woman* are more alike than they are different.

Most of his plays usually have at least one iconic representation of the *ideal good Black woman* (as in Rose Maxson (*Fences*), Bernice Charles (*Piano Lesson*), and Bertha Holly (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*). In each instance, Wilson’s *good Black woman* characters are, seemingly, the purveyor of the Black family, and each Black woman character, even with their subtle variation, is cut from the same cloth.

In August Wilson’s work, the *good-time gals*, however, are often diametrically opposed to so-called *rules of appropriateness*. These Black women are depicted as independent, proto-feminist, and yet unsettled. As Wilson told Vera Stoppard in 1990, “I am cautious in writing women characters; I am respectful of them as I would be of my mother. That is, I try to write honest women” (109).

Whether *ideal Black woman, good-time gal*, or somewhere in-between, clearly, judging from the Black women that appear in each of his plays, Wilson’s mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel Bedford (d. 1983), was the real-life pattern from which that cloth was cut. Here’s to August Wilson’s women!
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Notes

1 “Stowe's novel put into combination a series of cultural elements (including religion, slavery, melodrama, and family crisis) but those elements then became available for reinterpretation and re-articulation” (O’Loughlin 2).

2 According to Brown, some African American writers are now turning that paradigm around, enabling those mixed race or biracial characters to “return to their own people” and finally find peace (“A Century of Negro Portraiture” 571).

3 Wilson said in a conversation with Dinah Livingston in 1987 that the original title of the short story that preceded the play was “The Matter of Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket,” which was the title of a Romare Bearden painting. “After about twelve pages I abandoned it and began to write a play. I did not quite understand what the play was about until I was listening to a song by W. C. Handy called ‘Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,’ in which Handy said the story of the blues could not be told without the story of Joe Turner”…the brother of Governor Pete Turner of Tennessee, who routinely pressed Southern Black men into peonage (Livingston 54).

4 A so-called “authentic creation” of Harriet Beecher Stowe from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, according to Jim O’Loughlin, the Topsy character was a combination of minstrel elements, the trope of the wild-child and an increasing sense of anxiety and urgency about the growing numbers of children separated from their parents and living on the streets (O’Loughlin 3). When George Aiken adopted Stowe’s novel for the stage, Topsy’s character was made more comedic. Her “social” wildness was transformed to physical wildness (bordering on deformity). Along with greater attempts to denigrate “Ebonics” in her songs and dialogue, her minstrel antics were given greater emphasis. Then, at the Columbian World’s Fair in 1893, in performances called “Little Egypt,” Topsy’s minstrel dances and acrobatics were given sexually explicit connotations (O’Loughlin 8).

5 In this instance, W. E. B. Du Bois defined goodness as all aspects of justice, honor and right (“Criteria of a Negro Art”).

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A Poem for August

Nathan Oliver

Oliver is a Pittsburgher who knew August Wilson and was familiar with The Hill District.

He spit and sputtered his way through second-hand, crooked-neck, hand-carved pipes, and stale tobacco
Thrashed around Fifth Avenue and crawled forward on predestined streets
He preferred herringbone (he did) and sported British tweed with its rough woolen texture
To match his often abrasive manner

With omnipresent scepter and notebook he wandered the avenues
From Bedford to Five in vertical reconnaissance Crisscrossed Crawford, Robert, Hillman, Dinwiddie, DeVillier and Kirkpatrick Jigging on multi-layered hip Hill folk under sizzling summer suns

Yet he was August like the pale dried leaves: crimson, gold, and yellow
His tweed cap cocked: A deuce to a trey
He moved over the land like a Shakespearean apparition
Recognized by Bach, Debussy, Sun Ra, and Coltrane
Stranger in a grand land of hazardous hills defined by asphalt dreams
He could be annoying but brilliant
A spark plug igniting questions about what it meant to Be Black
What it took to become fully a man
He questioned incessantly and occasionally
found a few answers

He was Anthropologist and Poet
Poet turned Playwright
Tryin’ to get it right

His head haunted with mixed allegiances and
Memorex memories
He recorded our inexorable quest for meaning
and cultural identity

He became embedded in a coterie of characters
He applauded the insights drawn from deeper
excursions into
C’esair’s nigratude

His deportment fashioned from other Hills of Fern qualified by the nature of the landscape
Compelled by the fundamental
His percussive heart a composition of intentional beats

Measured by the market place of the Black experience
With practiced distinction he asserted his claim to agency

He played 78 black-waxed classical records on pawn-shop players and
Never batted an eye over sacraments exercised for your listening pleasure

He taunted you with his compulsivity where all value apprehended in the exchange
Became impelled in the moment

He could be really intense
Yet he was August: crimson, gold, and yellow
and occasionally even mellow
What an iambic twist of youthful daze when you, when I, when we, were “happy as the grass was green”
And your Welsh hero roamed
Your vagrant heart seeking refuge
And now, you ARE, August: crimson, gold, and yellow
John Locke writes in *The Second Treatise of Government* (published in 1699), *Every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.* (28)

Lockean ideals of property would be the very brick-and-mortar of the American Experiment, for it is easy to understand the appeal when Locke himself imagines the children of Adam or Noah planting “in some inland, vacant places of America” (32).

For obvious reasons, the African American experience with these Lockean principles of property has been a complicated—nay, tortured—history. Though every individual indeed has property of his or her own person, the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow attempted to erase any idea of such a right for those held in chains. Following the Civil War, former slaves became extremely intent on owning land. Eric Foner, in his *The Story of American Freedom*, notes the analysis of Garrison Frazier, a black Baptist minister during Reconstruction, in his call for property: “Genuine economic freedom, Frazier insisted, could only be attained through ownership of land, for without land, blacks’ labor would continue to be exploited by their former owners” (102). Ownership of land, therefore, becomes essential in escaping the horrors and history of slavery.
The need for protection would become a foundational element in African American literature across genres. Toni Morrison, for instance, in her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), draws a clear distinction between the MacTeers, who own their own home, and the Breedloves, who rent. One of the worst things that can happen to an individual in this work—set in 1940’s Lorain, Ohio—is to be “put outdoors,” or to be deprived of a home, of a place to live, of a place to call your own (17). It should come as no surprise, then, that this idea of property—which, in general, is central to twentieth-century American drama—should hold such a pivotal role on the African American stage.

Indeed, we can trace how the Lockean paradigm of property informs twentieth-century African American drama. The spectrum of responses is quite broad. The ownership of property can be a salvation or a curse; a character may open a new door to the future or be haunted relentlessly by the past. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) dramatizes the driving need for ownership despite the obstacles created from within the family and from without. The two plays—Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park* (2010) and Kirsten Greenidge’s *Luck of the Irish* (2012)—that are in conversation with Hansberry’s play attempt to do the same, but neither succeeds in engaging fully with its complex vision. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Younger clan, of course, struggles with how to spend the $10,000 insurance check; should it be used for a business venture or the purchase of a home in the suburbs? Conversely, we have James Baldwin’s perspective in *Amen Corner*. Here, Sister Margaret and her son must both seek new paths apart from the attachments of property. Baldwin eschews property and demonstrates through his narrative that ownership of the self needs no tangible ownership of property as an anchor. In so doing, Baldwin is not demanding a place at the table of American society, not surprising from a writer who chose an expatriate life in Paris. He finds through David—and touching on the autobiographical—another avenue to a sense of self-fulfillment, in the very specific and individual needs of the soul that can only be answered through art.

August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* occupies a central place in such an investigation. This work remains one of Wilson’s strongest because of the intricate history he crafts of the Charles family. The recent revival at New York’s Signature Theatre brought that history achingly alive. Set during the Great Depression, *The Piano Lesson* serves as an excellent crucible by which issues of property, as conceived by Locke and inculcated by the African American community, can be assessed. With this play in particular, we can determine that assessment through the lens of gender relations within the context of family. Certainly, gender in such a context plays a significant function in *A Raisin in the Sun*—the more domesticated space of the house favored by the Younger women ultimately has greater value than the commercial space of the liquor store favored by Walter—but with Wilson’s opus, gender lines define and illustrate the Manichean opposition on the subject of property. The two chief contenders in that opposition are Boy Willie and his sister Berniece.

Much like Frazier, as reported by Foner, Boy Willie associates property with freedom, not just economic freedom but personal freedom as well. Wilson renders Boy Willie’s drive to purchase land all the more poignant because it is owned by the Sutters, the former masters of the Charles family. Wilson has fully invested a Lockean notion of property in Boy Willie, who understandably believes that such ownership will help erase the bleak history of his family. He enters the play in the middle of the night like a hurricane, announcing the death of Sutter by the Ghost of the Yellow Dog (though Wilson leaves open the possibility that Boy Willie is himself responsible). Interestingly, Sutter has died by falling (or by being pushed)
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down his well and drowning; now his ghost, according to Marc Robinson, “haunts those who would themselves emerge from an airless too-enclosing legacy of oppression” (315). In drowning by water, Sutter is separated bodily from his land. Sutter’s death and symbolic separation provides Boy Willie with an opportunity to purchase Sutter’s land, an opportunity he can only pursue if he sells the family piano, currently in Berniece’s possession (but of which they each own half). Boy Willie tells his Uncle Doaker,

That’s why I come up here. Sell them watermelons. Get Berniece to sell that piano. Put them two parts with the part I done saved. Walk in there. Tip my hat. Lay my money down on the table. Get my deed and walk out. This time I get to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. And I’ll see you again next year. (10-1)

Boy Willie’s objective clearly fits within a Lockean paradigm. From his point of view, he and his family have been mixing their labor with the state of nature that is Sutter’s land since the era of slavery, and have thus joined something that is their own, thereby making it his (Boy Willie’s) property. There is something of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer in Boy Willie’s ambition here, because he does not wish just to possess the land but to work it as well, or, in other words, to continue to mix his labor with the earth. Indeed, he refuses to join the migration north but instead decides to remain on the farm. As Boy Willie explains, “Land the only thing God ain’t making no more of. You can always get you another piano” (50). Boy Willie will not abandon this finite resource, one to which his family has been attached across the generations, because, in a sense, they are a part of it, mixed in with it. In order to achieve this dream, the character demonstrates a certain ruthlessness throughout, from his entrepreneurial efforts in negotiating with Sutter’s brother (given the time, no small feat) to his rather material view of the piano as just an object of barter: one piece of property to be exchanged for an even greater one.

Berniece’s position is diametrically opposed to that of her brother. She states during one of their frequent arguments, “Money can’t buy what that piano cost. You can’t sell your soul for money. It won’t go with the buyer. It’ll shrivel and shrink to know that you ain’t take on to it. But it won’t go with the buyer” (50). Clearly, Berniece’s perspective with regard to the piano is outside of the material concerns of Boy Willie. Money and land—the means of transaction that inform a Lockean ideal and the American Dream—have no value for Berniece. And here, ownership of the self, the soul, is divorced from the physical, as Baldwin touches upon in _Amen Corner_. Both plays utilize the traditional theatrical storytelling tool of music, which, in these works, becomes the language of epiphany, conveying the emotional resonance of centuries of suffering coupled with the possibility of emancipation that the material world simply cannot communicate.

The piano is more than just a musical instrument; it is a family heirloom, a work of art and history, which depicts, through carvings, previous generations of the Charles family. These carvings recall the trauma of the family separated because of an exchange between Robert Sutter and Joel Nolander (42-3). From its beginnings, the piano is currency in a barter. The Sutter family will get the piano, but in exchange, the Nolander family gets two slaves, thus separating the Charles family. Boy Willie, in selling the piano, is selling Willie Boy’s artistry expressing his anguish at this loss as well as the history of the generations that preceded him. Clearly, the piano holds a prominent place in the psyche of the Charles family, yet it also touches on transformative events in the African American experience that transcend any one individual or family. As Michael Morales notes in “Ghosts on the Piano,” the piano has strong similarities to “devices used to preserve the oral history
of several African civilizations, such as the memory boards (lukasa) of the Luba and the brass plaques of Benin” (106). To sell the piano is to sell a piece of history on both the personal and communal level. Here, Wilson demonstrates the strength of the theatre as a medium to convey the richness, complexity, and devastation of African American experience. As a set piece, and therefore physically central on stage, the piano becomes invested with the past that Berniece and other characters describe. The audience begins to have empathy with the piano as a character and finds its selling a violation on an emotional level—whereas on the page, we might reject the selling of the instrument purely from an intellectual position. The piano, thereof, has a more powerful hold on the audience because of its very physical presence, while Sutter’s land remains an abstraction, but, as I hope to demonstrate, still retains a powerful and necessary hold.

The detail that Wilson attaches to the Charles family’s back-story surely has to be one of the richest and most nuanced of the American stage. It is subject to multiple interpretations because the characters themselves cannot agree on that history or which telling of that history has the greater priority. For instance, Wining Boy provides a critical perspective when he speaks of the piano as a burden: “I give that piano up. That was the best thing ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I’m carrying it around on my back. I don’t wish that on nobody” (41). Now Wining Boy speaks of the profession of piano playing, but his use of “that” as a demonstrative adjective cannot help but direct the audience’s attention to the piano present on stage. Wilson here points to the overwhelming pressure that this piano brings to bear on the Charles family.

It is interesting to note that Wilson set his play in 1936, a year after W. E. B. Du Bois published his Black Reconstruction, as both broadly share a similar mission. Du Bois—like the Federal Writers’ Project at the time—set about to find, record, and disseminate slave narratives so that these oral histories would not be lost. The spirit of Du Bois’s work pervades the play. Wilson certainly was an admirer of Du Bois; his position in the famed 1997 debate with Robert Brustein that a black theatre must be divorced from white cultural institutions is very much grounded in Du Bois’s principles (Lyons and Plimpton). Du Bois forged a historical study outside the hegemonic confines of history. His tools were that of the social scientist and, yes, historian. From that research, stories of families at a crucible of crisis, but also of hope, were brought to light. Wilson, using the tools of poetry and of theatre, takes those stories and composes a work of emotional complexity and epic grandeur. The DNA of The Piano Lesson is that of families and communities torn asunder but that still remain families and communities through the sharing of oral histories, music, art, or, in other words, the media of culture; within this tradition, The Piano Lesson, a play—though written, a work presented on stage in performance—also assumes the role of cultural artifact. Du Bois asks, “Was the rule of the mass of Americans to be unlimited, and the right to rule extended to all men regardless of race and color, or, if not, what power of dictatorship and control; and how would property and privilege be protected?” (13). The activist rightly bemoans lost opportunities and how property and privilege would be used to separate those in power from those without. Boy Willie’s struggles for land may be an effort to right those scales. Berniece, though, seeks something less tangible (and perhaps closer to Du Bois’s vision) because, for her, what is “owned” is what is held in a commonly shared culture that the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow could not destroy.

There is something quite Hegelian in the opposition, a tragedy formed from the clash of two rights. “Through the Charles’s relationship with the piano,” states Sandy
Alexandre, “Wilson creates a metaphysic of art rooted in both the preservation and the creative manipulation of history. Because the piano is simultaneously an heirloom and a musical instrument, it becomes involved in vexing conversations about everything from its aesthetic to its historic, spiritual, pedagogical, and economic value” (78). The multiple meanings the Charles family members bestow upon the musical instrument speak of their own uncertain status within a society slowly transitioning from Jim Crow to Civil Rights. Alexandre also argues that the fact that Boy Willie and Berniece feel that they can argue for control of the piano points to a transition where “inheritance and legacy” are no longer the sole domain of white America (74). It is from that inheritance and legacy that identity can be forged.

Boy Willie presents his position first:

The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That’s what make it worth something. That was my great-grandaddy. Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. Now, I’m supposed to build on what they left me. You can’t do nothing with that piano sitting up here in that house. That’s just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot. I’d be a fool. Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I’m using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. I’d have go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She’s building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter’s land. (51)

Note how Boy Willie expresses his worldview here. He claims ownership of his male forbearer. He only understands the piano in tangible, materialistic terms. It is something to be built on. It is to be weighed on the scales of commerce with Sutter’s land. And, since Berniece has chosen not to utilize it in a material sense, then its worth is going to waste.

Now, let us consider Berniece’s response.

Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in...mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. “Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece.” Every day. “I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.” You always talking about your daddy but you ain’t never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years’ worth of cold nights and an empty bed. (52)

Like Boy Willie, Berniece attempts to wrest control of the family narrative. Their divide is, of course, also one of gender. Where Boy Willie sees only his male forbearers, Berniece demands that attention be paid to their mother. Note too the description she employs: how Mama Ola’s blood mixed with the wood of the instrument. Indeed, a great deal of blood is associated with the piano. When her father, Doaker, and Wining Boy stole the piano, a lynch mob burned down a boxcar and all those inside—from this horrific event the Ghost of the Yellow Dog was born. Intentionally or not, Wilson invokes Locke’s language, of mixing one’s labor with nature. Though she eschews ownership of the physical, Berniece here is very much utilizing a Lockeian image of mixing one’s labor with nature. Though she eschews ownership of the physical, Berniece here is very much utilizing a Lockeian image in laying claim to ownership of Charles family history and, by extension, she argues that women have a different claim to such ownership.

Dramatically, Wilson lends his support to this claim. Sutter’s Ghost appears; this spirit, a phantasm from the past, serves as a cruel reminder of the horrors of slavery as well. Boy Willie attempts to fight the spirit physically, but to no avail. Avery attempts a Christian exorcism, again to no avail; perhaps the exorcism agitates the spirit and draws it out, but it does not accomplish its prime purpose of removing it from the Charles home, their
That two generations of the family are returning to the land indicates a shift away from capitalist calculation and toward a concept of home as a place for family and kin.

Berniece has also grown over the course of the play. She treated the piano almost as a museum piece—something not to be sold—but also something to keep distant and untouched. Boy Willie wanted her to use the piano, but, of course, for him, use could only be as currency in an exchange or as something to build upon. She does come to use the piano, but in a way that connects her more fully and viscerally with all those who came before her. Her repetition of “thank you” at the drama’s conclusion speaks of relief but also of understanding: the power and grace that the piano contains. The past and present come to inform one another, protect one another, and share with one another. This thought is a particularly heartening one as Wilson himself would craft his cycle of plays—building one decade upon another—as each work adds texture, support, and emotional resonance to its siblings.

Throughout this cycle, Wilson explores, among other themes, what ownership means for the African American community. In The Piano Lesson, though, he untangles the thread of Lockean ideals of property as expressed within the American hegemonic idiom. The purely material aspects of that political philosophy are found wanting. Through the conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece, the playwright has uncovered new, more spiritual possibilities for Locke’s terms that both elevate the principles and help move his characters to action. In one sense, then, Wilson has taken ownership of Locke and reimagined it for the specific African American historical experience. As such, The Piano Lesson must occupy a prominent space in an investigation of the role of property in the twentieth-century African American drama.

The historians Joel T. Williamson and William S. McFeeley find a close connection between post-emancipation land use and familial and kin beliefs…. Williamson’s research left him with “the distinct impression that even as most freedmen left the slave villages they spent their lives on farms carved out of plantations within a few miles of the place of their previous servitude.” (209)
Works Cited


As an August Wilson scholar and a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I am constantly doing research on the rich cultural, historical, and social legacy that is etched in Wilson’s plays. I view August Wilson as a hometown son who has made great literary and dramatic contributions, not only to Broadway, but also directly to Pittsburgh, where all of his 10 major plays have been performed by the local theatre community over the last 35 years. For this article, I conducted interviews over a two-year period in which I interviewed a prominent Pittsburgh playwright and director, a prominent Pittsburgh actor and writer, a prominent costume designer, and a very close member of Wilson’s family. They shared their insights and observations about the late, great August Wilson and his creative genius. In addition, they discussed the effects that Wilson’s legacy has had on the Pittsburgh theatre community.

Brian Roberts

Roberts is an associate professor of English at Clarion University, and he lives in Pittsburgh.
**Interview with Mr. Mark Southers (June 22, 2007). Mr. Southers is a Pittsburgh playwright, director, and actor who is the Artistic Director and Founder of the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company.**

Brian: Hello, Mark. Thank you for taking time in your busy schedule to grant me an interview.

Mark: No problem.

Brian: Mark, when did you first encounter an August Wilson play?

Mark: Back in 1987, I saw the Kuntu Repertory Theatre's production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Brian: What did you think of the play?

Mark: Man, I loved it. It was a great production.

Brian: You also have worked with the Kuntu Repertory Theater.

Mark: I used to work as a photographer for the *New Pittsburgh Courier*. And then in the early ‘90s, I was a photographer for the Kuntu. Eventually, I got into acting with the Kuntu.

Brian: How did you end up studying with August Wilson?

Mark: In 1998, I got the opportunity to go over to South Africa with Derrick Sanders, who also worked with the Kuntu. August was teaching a Master’s class over there at a theatre workshop, and Derrick and I attended the class.

Brian: That must have been an awesome experience.

Mark: Yes, I learned a lot from him. And then I had the opportunity to go to a theatre workshop in Alaska shortly after the South Africa trip. August was there. Derrick Sanders and Javon Johnson, who also worked with the Kuntu, and I did stage readings of scenes from some of August’s plays. A very cool experience.

Brian: I remember reading somewhere that a number of years back, you started a monthly workshop at your house called “the August Wilson Readings Roundtable” where you read scenes from August Wilson’s plays, preparing actors for August Wilson plays. I am guessing you were influenced by the times you spent studying with August in South Africa and Alaska?

Mark: You certainly can say that.

Brian: Mark, how has August Wilson’s work influenced you as a director?

Mark: I am still growing as a director. I have a long way to go as a director. His work has a rhythm. I have acted in scenes, not full plays. When you act in his plays, you have to acquire that rhythm that he is placing in the words. Meaning, just say the words that he writes. Say the words and it will come. So as far as how it has influenced me as a director, it has made me want to do my research and know where these things are coming from in the stories. You have got to know the characters. It helps you when you do your casting. To know the depth of these characters that is necessary for certain actors. Then sometimes you got to have actors who can bring certain amounts of experience, not just on stage but in life. They can pull these guttural things out of them. Stuff will come out of them and you get real tears. And when they tell these real stories it was as if it was them. August is a master storyteller, a master storyteller.
Mark: He told me one time, “Man, write your best play. Write your best play.” I think that applies to anything you do. Do your best because you are out to expose. Dr. Vernell Lillie (founder and artistic director of the Kuntu Repertory Theatre) did not have to say this. I learned this from observing her. She always put the best out there. She always has the best possible materials, the best possible things. She does not cut any corners. And you see the quality in the sets, in the costumes. You know what I mean? And what it all comes down to is that the audience deserves no less but the best. Whether they are paying five dollars a ticket or 50 dollars a ticket. You know? So the influence is to study, sit down and do your homework.

Brian: Mark, so do you sit down before you choose certain actors to perform in an August Wilson play or another play that focuses on Black culture and the Black experience, do you sit down and look at the characters carefully? In other words, how do you get a feel for the characters and how you want to cast people to play those characters?

Mark: Well, there are several ways to approach it. I am a visual person. I am lazy when it comes to reading. Our culture went in that direction. However, I am learning to read more and more repetitively, read the script more. I used to like to operate by reading the script a couple of times. And then get in there because I was so anxious to roll up my sleeves and get in there. But the research is key. And I learned that by watching Eileen Morris work (former managing director of the Kuntu Repertory Theater), and Ron O. J. Parson (a nationally noted director and actor). And watching Derrick Sanders, who has also directed for Kuntu. You know you pick up those things. Eventually, you can see a person who looks that part, but I have made the mistake in the past of casting someone who looks that part…

Brian: Looks like the character?
Mark: Right. Looks like the character.

Brian: Oh.

Mark: But he could not pull the weight of that character on stage. And it can sink a production. But that was a lesson I learned. A very costly lesson with a Pulitzer play that I directed.

Brian: I see.

Mark: But I will not make that mistake again. So, I am still learning.

Brian: So I guess it goes back to what August Wilson says, “Write your best play.”

Mark: Right.

Brian: It is the rhythm of the words.

Mark: Yes. It is there. It is there.

Brian: Even if the person looks like a character in an August Wilson play, but if the words don’t flow…

Mark: If the words don’t flow, it doesn’t matter what the person looks like, I can’t deliver it. I abandoned that. I don’t operate like that anymore. It was a mistake I learned from. You know?

Brian: Mark, what do you find challenging in directing an August Wilson play? As you know, August Wilson’s characters have those long monologues. His characters have witty comments. They have quick responses. As you said, it is about the rhythm of the words.
Anything challenging when you are doing an August Wilson play or scenes from an August Wilson play?

Mark: I think one thing that is demanding is for the actors to do it verbatim, as it is written, without paraphrasing. It is very easy to paraphrase, very easy to paraphrase. It happens and, you know, you know that you have spent an inordinate amount of time working on that rhythm. But it is not just you up on stage. You have other characters and they are like components, pieces of a symphony, and if one character is in a certain key and range, and he is doing his thing, and then it is time for you to chime in...and you are like (discordant sound), you are not saying the words with the rhythm...It is not just about what you are saying. It is what you are saying as an ensemble. And there is a rhythm. And when you get hooked into that rhythm, the audience feels that rhythm. And the story comes alive and it takes on a whole other dimension. You know what I mean? So you have to tap into it. When the audience leaves, they are light on their feet. The actors are also light on their feet and it is a joy to do the work.

Brian: The actors have got to get the words? They have got to get it down.

Mark: Right. It is a rhythm. It is written a certain, specific way to flow. It is like going into brain surgery and you have your team of surgeons around. And one person is handling the blood flow. And one person is handling the oxygen. And one is there with the sutures. And one is there with the towels and the rags. And one is checking the pulse. And if someone is off, you are going to get that flat-line sound. You know what I am saying?

Brian: Yes (Laughing).

Mark: (Laughing while explaining) Or you are going to wind up sewing someone up with some rags inside them or a scalpel.

Brian: That is true. I hear what you are saying.

Mark: It is delicate. It is delicate, man.

Brian: Makes sense. Mark, what other August Wilson play would you like to direct that you have not directed yet? And why?

Mark: I would like to direct all of his plays. But here is the thing. We (Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company) decided at the onset that we are going to do his plays in the order that they were produced on Broadway. We started with Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. Keep in mind that I was not the director. I was the assistant director. Eileen Morris was the director. I was shadowing her. I was learning from her. In fact, she did the first three plays. She directed Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. She then directed Fences. And then she directed Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. Then, I directed The Piano Lesson, which is the fourth one. And in February, I will be directing Two Trains Running. That will be the fifth one. And then Eileen will probably come back and direct two more and we will do all 10 plays. In other words, Eileen will have directed five and I will have directed five of August Wilson’s plays.

Brian: Mark, what made you decide to direct the plays in the order they were done on Broadway?

Mark: Because we started the theatre company as the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theatre Company. August Wilson is basically our anchor. He is someone we can claim as a Pittsburgh playwright. He and Rob Penny. So, I decided, let’s not jump into this haphazardly. Keep in mind, this was four years ago before we knew August was ill, before he passed. And
we decided at that time that we were going to honor him by doing his work, in order. And he came and saw *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Brian: August came and saw *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*?

Mark: Yes, he came. We have a picture of him here at the theater.

Brian: What did he say to you that evening after he saw your production of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*?

Mark: Well, he got mobbed by all the actors and different folks (Mark laughs).

Brian: Did you ever get the chance, the two of you, to sit down and talk about what he liked about your production of his play?

Mark: Yes. I think he was a little pissed because the woman who did our program left out his bio.

Brian: What? How do you leave out a Pittsburgh legend’s bio from the program?

Mark: He was a little perturbed about it. He said, “You know, man. I did not see my bio in the program?” So that was a problem. I think, during the show, I was on the phone getting it done. And we had it in there the next night. We had inserts. I was a little embarrassed about it but it was my first production. Although there was no excuse for it. The woman who did the program was there and apologized to him. And all the actors were talking to him and took pictures with him. But he liked the production and enjoyed it.

Brian: It had to be incredible. For you as an up-and-coming director to have August Wilson see your production of his play and the fact that you have worked with him in Alaska, and you got to study with him in South Africa. And then for him to see you do a production of his play, it had to be incredible.

Mark: Yes, the only downside beside the mistake in the program was that he was also in town for Rob Penny’s funeral. So that was the downside of it.

Brian: Yes, I understand your point.

Mark: And we did one of Rob’s plays, *Bopping with the Ancestors*, a few months later, which I believe you also saw.

Brian: Yes.

Mark: It might have been too soon because his family was still mourning. Theatrically, it went well.

Brian: If you could have one of August Wilson’s plays turned into a film, would there be a particular play? As you know, *The Piano Lesson* has already been turned into a film. It was shot here in Pittsburgh. Is there another August Wilson play that you would like to see be turned into a film?

Mark: For myself, I would love to see *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (pause), but that is not my first choice. And the reason being, there are so many films out here, really good films that do not get national exposure that deal with subject matter that uplifts Black folks. But Hollywood is not interested in them. I would also like to see *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* made into a film, because with August’s name behind it, it would have the opportunity to be on a platform. And when people see that one scene with the bones rising out of the water, if they could understand that, if they could feel that, I think that would bring them closer to the souls of their ancestors. You know. If they could feel that. You know what I mean?
Brian: That would be a great visual scene.

Mark: Yes, I think those types of moments could heal some of the ills that we have in the community. It is a pipe dream I guess.

Brian: Wow! That is a very powerful August Wilson play. Maybe they would ask you to be a producer for the film if it was shot here in Pittsburgh.

Mark: (Laughing) I am not on that level but I certainly don't mind trying anything.

Brian: Mark, can I ask you a couple more questions? I appreciate your time.

Mark: Sure, take your time.

Brian: With the loss of August Wilson a few years ago, what affect has his absence had on the Pittsburgh theater community?

Mark: Well, he is not absent. He is not absent. I am sure not to those close to him….Yes it is painful. As far as the theater community, he has insured us that he is going to be around. You know? He has certainly left an indelible mark on us….he has left roles for actors who aren’t even born yet, to have a lifetime to prepare themselves….So, he will live forever in the theatre community.

Brian: Do you think his absence is felt on a national level?

Mark: Oh yes. Certainly, certainly. You have to understand, when August Wilson came on the scene, with his powerful monologues, and his great roles for actors, there are people who have made their living off of performing August Wilson plays. On a regional level, and on Broadway, and they continue to get roles and get called to do stuff, and it has lead to films, it has lead to television shows. He has been the catalyst for many careers. Look at Charles Dutton. Look at his career. Look at what Charles Dutton has spawned, the television show Roc. Look at Ella Joyce, Rocky Carroll, these folks.

Brian: Yes, All August Wilson veterans.

Mark: Right. So, he has left his imprint on folks. These folks are carrying on his tradition and making things available for other folks. It is like what we are doing with the August Wilson Center, an evening of scenes. We are going to do scenes by playwrights who were inspired by August Wilson.

Brian: So when the August Wilson Center opens in the fall of 2008, your theatre company and a few other local theatre companies will be doing scenes from August Wilson plays?

Mark: Oh no, no. This is an event that we are going to be doing in October of this year. We are going to do this event at the Hazlett Theater. It is going to be an August Wilson celebration all week long. Ten days actually. We are going to be a part of the theater part of it.

Brian: Will you be directing any scenes as well as acting?

Mark: Well, I am going to produce it. One of my scenes is included. I was in charge of picking them (laughing). We are going to bring in some directors who were inspired by August Wilson also. And we are going to bring in three or four playwrights, so I am going to produce it as far as getting the set ready and getting the actors together, making sure everything goes together. I may end up directing a scene.

Brian: Would you say that you have come full circle? The same young director who almost 10 years ago took a Master’s class that August Wilson was teaching in South Africa?
And almost 10 years later, you are producing scenes from his plays when these directors and playwrights come to Pittsburgh to celebrate him? In other words, do you feel as a director, and an actor, and a playwright, you have come full circle?

Mark: I don’t know. I mean man, what does that mean, “full circle”?

Brian: I am fascinated with the fact that you were interested in August Wilson’s plays going back to the ’80s, and almost 20 years later, you are working with a very big, big project in conjunction with the August Wilson Cultural Center. I am also fascinated with the fact that the playwrights and directors are coming from different parts of the country and you folks are going to do different things with scenes from August Wilson’s plays.

Mark: Well as far as that goes, we have done this before with the August Wilson series in February. However, that was the Pittsburgh Playwright Theatre Company, in conjunction with the August Wilson Cultural Center. This particular thing here is being coordinated by Neal Barclay from the August Wilson Cultural Center. The AWCC is supporting individual artists. So, this is not a Pittsburgh Playwrights’ thing. This is basically me as an individual, pulling together friends and acquaintances and colleagues….So I guess the answer to your question would be, yes (laughing). I have come full circle.

Brian: And my final question to you, Mark, is, do you consider yourself, and fellow playwrights Derrick Sanders and Javon Johnson, as playwrights who, for a lack of better words, are trying to fill August Wilson’s shoes? And do you feel that you can accomplish this task? Or is this not your mission? To go one step further? How do you see yourself

filling these big shoes that August Wilson has left?

Mark: Theater has saved my life. I had some dark days in the past, family-wise, and theater has brought me out of that. My inspirations are Dr. Vernell Lillie, Javon Johnson, Rob Penny, and August Wilson. Those are the people who propelled me into theater. You know? Dr. Vernell Lillie placed me in front of folks. Javon Johnson is someone who, although we are not close in age, he is someone who I can look at and say, this guy is putting energy behind things. Let me see what will happen if I can do the same. And we talk back and forth about different things. You know what I mean? Rob Penny, his words taught me to appreciate his poetry, and just seeing him do his thing on stage, his words. And I learned a lot as a performer, performing his works. I was in several of his plays. So that was powerful. And I learned a lot from August Wilson, as far as on a national level, as far as doing his thing, and saying this is possible. I don’t think there is any playwright who wants to fill August’s shoes. I think that playwrights want to tell their stories. Where they end up is where their stories have taken them.

Brian: I understand what you mean.

Mark: What August has done is amazing. He has had some great plays. I can’t speak for any other playwrights but I certainly don’t aspire to go anywhere near filling his shoes. But, I am appreciative of the fact that I was around him and got to talk with him, and break bread with him, and learn from him. You know?

Brian: So you are going to take the lessons you learned from August Wilson and fulfill whatever visions you see yourself as a playwright doing?
Mark: My vision is to heal the world racially. My vision is to get different cultures to appreciate each other. And understand each other through theater. I want to bridge racial gaps and help people to get opportunities to come together. I am writing plays to place Black and White folks on stage together. So the work is there. So when the theatre company decides to do the work, they have no choice but to hire Black and White folks together.

Brian: Yes, that was a pivotal year for you.

Mark: As I mentioned to you earlier, I also went to Alaska. Although I lost my father, I grew as a man and I was able to express myself in words, which I never did before. You know? And not that I did not think he would not have approved of it. But I never thought of writing and expressing myself that way. But I found myself writing the week after my father passed. So, it was a pivotal year for me.

Brian: Wow! This has been a great interview. I really, really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you. Thank you, Mark.

Mark: You are welcome.

Telephone Interview with Mr. Monn Washington (July 17, 2009). Mr. Washington is a Pittsburgh born-and-bred actor who currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia, where he continues to act, perform spoken-word and poetry, and direct.

Brian: Good afternoon, Monn. Thank you for granting me an interview.

Monn: Good afternoon Brian. Thanks for talking to me.

Brian: I would like to begin our interview with the following two-part question: When did you first encounter August Wilson’s work and what was your initial reaction?

Monn: My first brush with August’s work was the movie The Piano Lesson. Initially I thought
You have to find the rhythm of the character in order to play on the same beats the others in the scene.

Brian: How has August Wilson’s work influenced you as an actor? As a writer? A director?

Monn: I would have to just sum all of those up in one basket. He made me appreciate the craft skills that I have and reaffirmed the notion that “If you don’t use it, you’ll lose it.” So I got serious about the artistry of the craft.

Brian: Do you have a favorite August Wilson play? If so, why?

Monn: My favorite is *Fences*. I just fell in love with it from the first time I read it. Then after I saw it, I was hooked.

Brian: What about a favorite character? Do you have a favorite character you really connect with?

Monn: Definitely Levee. I just understood his pains. The desire to be on top when you know you’ve got what it takes. The only thing separating you from reaching your goal is… somebody else’s decision.

Brian: What are some other August Wilson plays that you would like to act in? Or direct?

Monn: *Seven Guitars* or *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Brian: Monn, some critics argue that there is not enough dramatic action in Wilson’s plays? Some say characters do a little too much talking? As an actor, what do you think?

Monn: Keep it simple. Let the writers write and the critics critique. My job is to bring the story to life.
Brian: As an actor who is originally from Pittsburgh, what influence do you think August Wilson’s work has had on the Pittsburgh theatre community?

Monn: It raised my Burgh pride level. Especially considering his plays are based out of my home roots, Pittsburgh’s Hill District. Marketing wise, it gave the Pittsburgh theater a place to hang its hat. It was a revenue-generating cash cow. Anything associated with the August Wilson name brand suddenly had more clout. Other artists were copying his style. It gave fellow actors/actresses more support in their spines. One of ours had made the international stage. As such, we wanted to carry on the legacy of fine craftsman coming out of Pittsburgh. So it affected more than just the Pittsburgh community.

Brian: With the loss of August Wilson four years ago, what effect do you think his absence has had on the Pittsburgh theater community? What about the national theatre community?

Monn: Locally, we had already lost another great playwright in Rob Penny. Now we lost the Shakespeare of our time. The way he brought the people to life; right before your eyes. When the lights were up you knew nothing about these people. When the lights come back up again you’ve just got swept up in the people’s lives and you actually care about it.

Brian: Monn, I really appreciate you taking the time to let me interview you. Just a few more questions if you don’t mind. As an actor, writer, and director who is originally from Pittsburgh, do you see yourself continuing August Wilson’s legacy by paying homage to Pittsburgh in any of your works?

Monn: Yes, I do. I have a piece that talks about the issues from my childhood in the neighborhood. Some of those same things still continue on today. As long as the issues go along, I’ll keep talking about them.

Brian: Monn, finally, how can the Pittsburgh theatre community, and, in fact, the national theatre community, for that matter, continue on the traditions that come out of August Wilson’s works?

Monn: Keep telling those stories. There are a lot of brilliant ideas out there, yet many of them are not being told. The theatre needs those stories.

Brian: Right on. Thank you for your time, Monn.

Monn: Sure.

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Interview with Ms. Elizabeth Pendleton (July 27, 2009). Ms. Pendleton is a veteran costume designer and actress from Pittsburgh, who has worked with the Kuntu Repertory Theatre, New Horizon Theater (formerly Black Horizon Theater), and Prime Stage.

Brian: Thank you, Ms. Pendleton, for taking the time in your busy schedule to grant me an interview.

Ms. Pendleton: You are quite welcome. Please call me Ms. Betty. All of my friends in the theatre community call me Ms. Betty.

Brian: Sure. Ms. Betty, I want to start our interview with the following two-part question: What is the first August Wilson play you remember seeing and what was your reaction to it?

Ms. Betty: Oh, I believe the first August Wilson play I saw was *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, back in 1987, which the Kuntu Repertory Theatre performed. I also saw Mark Souther’s production in 2004. Also that year,
I saw the revival on Broadway with Whoopi Goldberg. I absolutely loved it. I rank the Pittsburgh productions up there with the New York one.

Brian: As a costume designer, what caught your eye when you saw the characters’ clothing? Any particular observations?

Ms. Betty: Well, I am from that age where men wore straight-leg pants, and big ties and big collars, short jackets and low jackets, and actually, the old, you know, is coming around again. Some of those things are still very good at this time, especially the coats that have the patches on the elbow. Some of these things are old, but they are coming back new again. The clothes were not always matching but they were always warm, sturdy items. They have lots of texture to them, a layered look to them.

Brian: I see. That makes sense. I understand that you are an actress also, but I will get to those questions a little later. What I would like to know is, when you are working behind the scenes, working those long rehearsals, putting those clothes together as a seamstress, and making sure actors and actresses look their best in your costumes, what goes through your mind?

Ms. Betty: I try to have pretty much everything in order. Or, I have an idea of what I want to do and how I want to do it. Sometimes, I have help, and sometimes I don’t. I always keep a notepad.
Brian: Really?

Ms. Betty: Because the director will always give you notes. Or sometimes it is the stage manager. He will say, we are going to change this, or change that. Or maybe it looks a little too tight or a little too loose. There may be some adjustments that need to be done. So usually, I will always have a notepad handy. So with that notepad, between the stage manager and the director, we can go over and make any changes that are necessary. Or if they say, “Can we possibly change something or change the scene”? Sometimes, it means cutting something out. So, what we do is basically work together and follow up on our notes. It is important to have a lot of notepaper handy for any changes, and if I have any suggestions or thoughts, the director and stage manager are open to listening. A lot of times I will check the script. It may give a description of something. We can always cross reference it with other plays, other films, or even talk with someone else who has designed costumes for that play. So there may be an easier way to get a certain look or change in. Communication, lots of communication, is very important.

Brian: Do you ever look out into the audience to gauge their reactions to the clothing the characters are wearing that you designed?

Ms. Betty: Yes. Because you have people who have been there and may have seen it, and they have seen how they liked it. For example, there is a scene in a play—which I designed costumes for, although I can’t remember the name of the play at the moment—but there is a scene where a lady comes out in a housedress and someone in the audience will say, “Wow, I had a housedress on like that.” Or you may see someone in the audience nudge another person and say, “Remember, mom had a housedress like that one, or a robe or a pair of shoes.” You know? Or even just with the hairstyle. There may be a pompadour hairstyle that women wore back in the day, a bit of a roar, a type of curl that we wore. And someone in the audience will say, “Remember that curl that mom use to have? Or do you remember Ms. So and so? She still gets her hair done like that with those little waves and bunch of curls in the back.” So yes, it is amazing to see people’s reaction in the audience. It is something they remember growing up and seeing. You know they are paying attention to everything, not just the words that the characters are saying on stage, but the time period, the place, the clothing…you know that they are really looking and thinking, “Hey, this is back when.”

Brian: Yes, I see your point.

Ms. Betty: It makes you kinda feel good. It makes you think, I think I hit it this time.

Brian: Has there ever been an August Wilson play where you designed the costumes and thought afterwards, “If I could change things, I would have done something different with the costumes, or the next time I do this particular play, I would like to try such and such?”

Ms. Betty: Unfortunately, I have not been able to work directly with the costuming on any of the plays performed here in Pittsburgh. However, I have been asked comments about them and so on and so forth. And each costumer is different. Usually for me, I have a habit where I will critique the plays, whether it is a Broadway production I have seen or one of the Pittsburgh theatre productions. I really like to have the hems pristine and I really like to make sure things look in order. So things don’t look too baggy or too tight. It is the little things. Because a hem being crooked doesn’t look too good. If the hem is not ironed, as you know, it just doesn’t look too good.

Brian: As a costume designer, I can see how you would pick up on those things. It is a craft for
you. Even if it is not a play you have designed costumes for, I can see how you would pick up on those little things. I can imagine that August Wilson wanted his characters to not only speak the words, but look the part.

Ms. Betty: Yes, that’s part of it. You know how they say, “The man makes the clothes, and the clothes make the man?” It is a combination, dear.

Brian: Ms. Betty, you pay attention to a lot of detail. I can see why you are a well-respected costume designer here in Pittsburgh. Have you had the opportunity to see the film version of *The Piano Lesson*, which was shot here in Pittsburgh? If so, what did you think of the costuming?

Ms. Betty: I have not had the opportunity to see the film. However, I saw a theatre production of it here in Pittsburgh, and the costuming was on point.

Brian: Can we now talk a little about your acting background. I know you have been a costume designer for many years and you are of the same generation as August Wilson. What made you decide to get into acting?

Ms. Betty: You know what. That’s a bit of a joke (laughing). One of my friends was doing a play with the Kuntu Theatre and she told me they needed extras. She said that all I had to do was walk on and off stage. You don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to dress anything special. And I said okay. It was a play by the late Rob Penny. As you know, he and August were friends and came up together in the ’60s. Anyway, the play was called *Black Pittsburghers*. And I said okay, I will do it. The director, Dr. Vernell Lillie, asked me to play a receptionist who works at Lavelle’s Bank and Loan in the Hill District. I thought that would be easy because I have worked in banks, and Dr. Lillie said to me to do what I would normally do at a bank, which is type a little, answer the phone, and organize paperwork. So, it was fun playing that part.

Brian: Again, there is the Hill District connection.

Ms. Betty: And what was nice about the play is how it talked about not only Lavelle’s Bank and Loan. There was Steven’s Flowers, West’s Funeral Home, Turner’s Funeral Home, Mr. Porter’s Bakery, and I remember his sugar doughnuts and fresh bread.

Brian: I loved his sugar cookies.

Ms. Betty: Yes, you had all that. And there was Hick’s Grocery Store. There was the Goode’s Pharmacy. And these were people who worked there and lived there. They did not just come in 9-5.

Brian: Yes.

Ms. Betty: They were there to help open up. They made sure things got set up. They may have gone home for a couple of hours to get some rest. But they would come back to make sure their staff was okay and everything was going well. And like I said, they lived in the community. Joe Moss was one of the first Black police officers and he and his family lived up on Sugar Top in the Hill District. Uncle Joe and Aunt Rebecca, they were like family. These were people who were in the community and helped in the community. And the churches also.

Brian: So in your first major acting gig, if you will, besides your many years of designing costumes, you got to play yourself. You got to play someone who grew up in the Hill District.

Ms. Betty: Basically, yes.
District. Do you see any similarities between their works in terms of what they want their characters to visually look like on stage?

Ms. Betty: Each playwright carries his play true to form. I believe August and Rob wanted their characters to look like people from the Hill District whom we could relate to. For example, in Rob's play *Little Willie Armstrong Jones*, I appeared in that play, and I love it (she laughs). I was a bar lady, a patron. But anyway, it is a play about a character named Little Willie who leads a double life. He is a businessman who owns a bar. He has a wife at home, and a baby on the way. But, he also deals with women of the night. Throughout the play, he keeps his family business separate from his street business. In his family life there was controversy and in his street life there was controversy. But it was a matter of respecting on all different levels. In designing his clothing, I wanted to make sure I showed how he carried himself with a bit of a flair. You know he is about something. He is a man about town. He carries himself with respect. And at home, he is a husband, a father-to-be. But he keeps his two lives separate.

Brian: At home, is his clothing any different from his public persona?

Ms. Betty: Just a little more casual. But he is still a businessman. And his wife is aware that he is a businessman and owns a bar, but she is not aware of the other type of business he is in.

Brian: Right.

Ms. Betty: In this play, the clothing really helped tell the story.
Ms. Betty: Oh, let me think a minute. I think it was set in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Anyway, the clothing that the ladies of the night wear is different than the clothing that the bar ladies such as myself wear. Their clothing was appropriate but you were aware that they were ladies of the night. You know? The ladies of the night showed a little bit more leg, a little bit of arm, a little bit more low-cut on the dresses. I and the other ladies at the bar, we were sort of between. We were dressed up, but it was a different look. We wore pencil skirts, they were kind of straight and they had deep pleats in them and a slit. We had some nice, bright colors. I remember the one lady has a bright lime green dress. One of my outfits, I had on a yellow orange top and a printed bottom with two can shoes and straw bag. And when Little Willie gives his own birthday party at the bar, I had on a sequin dress, with a slit skirt, and I wore some platforms. And another lady had on a nice dress. It was a little loud, it had a scooped neck, she had a little bit of arm showing, and she had on some platforms. And of course the ladies of the night came to the party and they were dressed very nice, but you still knew they were ladies of the night.

Brian: I see what you mean.

Ms. Betty: Little Willie’s wife was covered. And that was because of her religious beliefs. And she wanted her husband to be more of a Black activist type.

Brian: It sounds to me that in designing those costumes for Rob Penny’s play, you made it a point to show how each of the characters represented something, represented a certain persona, and how the characters on stage come to life, not only with the dialogue that they say, but with the clothing that they wear. The clothing accentuates that character. And that is very important.
in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, or you can be that little girl playing the piano in *The Piano Lesson*, or you can be Ma Rainey who speaks her mind in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. It is just a matter of doing what you can do, and do the best at what you can do. That’s basically it.

Brian: Wonderful. Thank you for this interview, Ms. Betty.

Ms. Betty: You’re welcome. And if you need more information, give me a call.

Brian: Will do.

**Interview with Ms. Linda Jean Kittel** (July 30, 2009). Ms. Kittel is a retired executive secretary, and she had a very close relationship with her brother August Wilson from childhood right up until his death.

Brian: Linda Jean. You are so gracious in granting me an interview. I want to thank you again.

Linda Jean: You are quite welcome. And I just want to let you know ahead of time that my brother and I were extremely close and I called him Freddy. As you probably know, his birth-name is Frederick August Kittel. So, when I refer to him as Freddy, you will know why.

Brian: Okay, that’s cool with me. Linda Jean, I want to begin our interview with a question that I know you can really give personal insight on as August Wilson’s sister. Your brother has been quoted in past interviews as saying that around 1965, he decided that he wanted to be a poet. What do you think drew him to wanting to write poetry?

Linda Jean: I believe that my brother August always knew that he was a poet. From an early age, August always had a fascination and interest in the lyrical quality of speech. I can vividly remember that when August was a teenager, he would frequent the Carnegie Library. I remember him bringing home books of poetry. Two of his favorite poets at the time were Langston Hughes and Dylan Thomas. Also, I think August wrote poetry because he was endowed with a depth of feeling and sensitivity, and from a few words, a phrase or stanza of a poem, he could delve deep into what he was feeling and experiencing. He could express volumes on an issue or topic through poetry. And there certainly was a hell of a lot inside of him!!

Brian: Linda Jean, when your brother August and his friend Rob Penny started Black Horizon Theater in 1968, here in Pittsburgh, what do you think their purpose was?

Linda Jean: The Black Horizon Theater was started in 1968 the same year that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated (on April 4). We all know that the anger of Blacks exploded and was subsequently channeled into positive chants of self-acceptance: “I’m Black and I’m Proud—and Black is Beautiful!”—In other words, “I AM HERE WORLD!”—Black is on the Horizon! I think their purpose, first and foremost, was actually addressing and affirming themselves as brilliant young Black men and young Black artists. I believe the theatre was to be a vehicle for the development and exposure of Black intelligence, beauty, creativity, individuality, and the expression of Black talent in the community.

Brian: Yes, the Black Arts Movement, especially through theatre in the 1960s, was a powerful vehicle of expression for young Black talent. Linda Jean, what was your reaction to seeing your brother’s first play, *The Homecoming*, being performed in 1976 by the Kuntu Repertory Theatre? What impact do you think his play...
had on the audience at the time? And more specifically, what impact did it have on you, Linda Jean?

Linda Jean: I was ill during the time the Kuntu Repertory Theatre performed Homecoming, and I was very disappointed that I was unable to see it. However, August brought me a copy of a review that was written up in the newspaper and featured a picture of Dr. Vernell Lillie. I still have that article.

Brian: In 1982, when the Allegheny Repertory Theatre staged your brother’s play Jitney, what was your reaction? What impact do you think it had on the audience? And more specifically, you?

Linda Jean: When the play began, I was instantly transported back in time to the early 1950s—and literally frozen in memory of a jitney station in the Hill. I was seeing peaceful Black men sitting outside the jitney station on wooden crates—old beat-up chairs—chatting and waiting for the telephone to ring. The telephone was located inside a small, enclosed wooden shanty. It is warm weather and the door to the shanty is open. The phone rings and one of the men quickly gets up, saying “It’s my turn,” and he answers the phone. The memory was so “real” I could feel the warmth of the weather, sounds, and a great sphere of peace over the entire scene. That sphere was tangible. It was a living presence throughout the neighborhood. It was always there. I was literally transfixed, unable to comprehend the play’s dialogue that had begun. I could hear the man who answered the phone saying, “What’s the address—okay I’ll be right there—and that will be 50 cents.” I could feel the man’s eagerness go through my own frail body as he rushed to his car—a community helping its neighbors—a car service—each and every dime so important to survival. I was deaf to the dialogue of the play’s actors. All I could think, when I was able to, was that Freddy had captured life from our past—and he brought it to life 30 years later—and it was so real—It was surreal—It was HOME. I was home again that evening in that little theatre. And I did not want the play to end. “Freddy, you did this.” That’s all I could think. I was so happy for him as he smiled sweetly at me after the play ended. I was proud of my brother’s ability and this achievement. As for the audience, the audience loved it! A man in the audience asked if he and a friend would be permitted to ask a few questions about the play before they left. August and the actors granted the request. The audience seemed to have enjoyed the play very much! And you know what, Brian? A few nights later, I went to the play with our mother. She died 6 months later. Mother enjoyed the play immensely. She could not stop smiling. Her presence was acknowledged at the end of the play. She literally was shining with pride and joy at her son’s accomplishment. She was enveloped in the spirit of humility. And she was happy! For Freddy, and for herself as his mother. She was a woman of few words that evening. Her countenance said it all—peace—joy—and pride.

Brian: Linda Jean, it sounds like the Pittsburgh community and your family really enjoyed your brother’s work. Tell me, Linda Jean, what was your reaction when you saw your brother’s play Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom being performed on Broadway in 1984?

Linda Jean: Initially, the sight of the crowd outside the theatre was awesome. I could not stop saying in my head—“Freddy, you’re responsible for this!” The other thought was, “This is Broadway. We’re in New York City!” “Freddy, these people have come here to see what you did.” I was very excited to see the play. Our mother was blessed to see this play at
the Eugene O’Neil in Connecticut during the summer of 1982—8 months before her death. When I asked her about the play, all she would say was: “Oh God! All because he stepped on his shoes. All because he stepped on his shoes.” She would not say anything else about the play. So, for 16 months, I had been wondering what happened when he stepped on his shoes! When the play began, I was extremely eager to see this scene. Little did I know how long the wait would be. My overall reaction to my brother’s play was: Freddy is a genius. You have to be a genius to write a story like this about a time and about a people with this much power, depth, and insight. And you have to be a genius to condense this type of quality work into a two-to-two-and-a-half-hour stage production.

Brian: I totally agree. What was your reaction when the Kuntu Repertory Theatre performed Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom here in Pittsburgh in 1987? How did Pittsburgh audiences respond to it? Because it was a Pittsburgh production, do you think the vibe was different? And if so, how?

Linda Jean: Pride! Overflowing pride! I was experiencing overflowing pride with the realization that Freddy was truly standing on the threshold of fame! On April 16, that year, August had won the Pulitzer Prize for Fences. As for the Pittsburgh audiences, I think the Pittsburgh audiences responded extremely well. I saw the Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom production three times. The second and third times that I saw the play, it was pretty much a full house. During the opening night production, August and family were acknowledged. A Black woman who was seated two rows behind me stated very disappointedly, “Awww, he’s a White man.” A woman in the row behind her said, “No he’s not.” And the woman then responded back, “What?” Then the other woman said, “He’s a Black man.” The woman then said, “Ohh”—

still very disappointed! I think the audiences of the Pittsburgh productions of any of August’s plays always have a stronger personal and more intimate feel to them. I also think the main component for this is that home-town pride feeling that permeates through the audience.

Brian: You are right, Linda Jean. Pittsburghers are big on home-town pride. Linda Jean, let me ask you another question. With the exception of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, which is set in Chicago, your brother’s other nine major plays are set in Pittsburgh’s Hill District where you and your family grew up. Why do you think August chose to set his plays in the Hill District?

Linda Jean: Nine of August’s plays were set in the Hill District because the Hill District is his HOME! The plays are set here as an honor to our home, our mother, our childhood, our neighbors, the people, businesses, and all that the Hill District encompasses and all that the Hill District was to August. It was his WORLD!—and the site of his learning and experiences which would ultimately lift him into fulfilling his God-ordained purpose. Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom was set in Chicago as an honor to the many Black musicians who went there in search of opportunity.

Brian: Makes sense. Linda Jean, when I have spoken with you in the past, you told me that in your brother’s play Seven Guitars, which is set in 1948, the backyard and porch of the house are designed to look like the house you grew up in on Bedford Avenue. What was your initial reaction to seeing this set design when you saw Seven Guitars for the first time? What stage effect do you think your brother was going for? And why?

Linda Jean: I burst into tears! My brother wanted us to go to the theatre together a little
early for the last preview of the play, which was the evening before opening night. We were at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in January 1995. It was just he and I in the theatre. For those initial moments, I was back in time and standing in the backyard of our childhood home at 1727 Bedford Avenue in the Hill District. I was overwhelmed by the emotions that surged through me! You asked me, “What stage effect do I feel my brother was going for?” We were so close in childhood. I know that my brother achieved the stage effect that he was going for—my reaction! And you know what, I was so honored when August told me that he wanted me seated at his right side. And when the character Floyd Barton began singing the song “Our Father,” I burst into tears again! The emotion that I was experiencing was so intense, August reached over the arm rest, took my hand, and held it tightly long after the song had ended.

Brian: Linda Jean, I imagine that you have seen probably almost every production of your brother’s plays here in Pittsburgh by various theatre groups. Why do you think the Pittsburgh theatre community is so fond of performing your brother’s plays over the years?

Linda Jean: I think this is because they love August and his work. I also think it is because they are filled with pride because he is a hometown playwright, and more pride because he is a world-renowned playwright. Doors were opened for Black actors and playwrights because of his work. And I believe it is also because they can relate to characters, language, and locations mentioned in the plays. You can see a play several times and each time you can get something new from it.

Brian: Linda Jean, do you have a favorite play of your brother’s work? If so, why?

Linda Jean: Seven Guitars was my favorite play ever since the first time that I saw it at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in January 1995. To date, I have seen it 17 times. Now Gem of the Ocean is right up there in first place beside it. As I mentioned earlier, in Seven Guitars, August draws upon so much from our childhood years, the neighborhood, activities, and the people in the community and things that many people would not know. And the play’s setting is a reproduction of our childhood backyard. In Gem of the Ocean, August explores spirituality as demonstrated by Aunt Ester helping Citizen Barlow getting right with himself after committing a grievous sin against another man. The man who is accused of stealing the bucket of nails would rather die in truth and light rather than live in darkness of a lie because people would always believe that he was a thief. In Gem of the Ocean, August also explores the roots of our African American ancestry when Citizen Barlow is taken to the City of Bones in order to get his soul cleansed.

Brian: Wow, Linda Jean. You make a powerful point. My final question to you is what type of legacy do you think your brother August Wilson has left the Pittsburgh theatre community?

Linda Jean: I think August has inspired a lot of talent. He has inspired many artists, not only in the theatre, but artists who work in other media as well. For example, he inspired the multi-talented Vanessa German, who created a sculpture of the character Aunt Ester from Gem of the Ocean. You know what? I think my brother August has left not only the theatre community but the city of Pittsburgh itself with a lasting legacy, and to quote the character Troy Maxson from his play Fences, he “ain’t sorry for nothing he done.”

Brian: I hear you, Linda Jean.
From my interviews with Mr. Mark Southers, Mr. Monn Washington, Ms. Elizabeth Pendleton, and Ms. Linda Jean Kittel, I was able to get a better understanding of the influence and impact the late, great August Wilson had on the Pittsburgh theatre community. His influence and impact are enormous. Mr. Mark Southers, a playwright and director, had the opportunity to study with, and be mentored by, August Wilson for many years. Mark pointed out how he learned from August Wilson the importance of rhythm in dialogue. Mark said, “His work has a rhythm. When you act in his plays, I have acted in scenes, not full plays, you have to acquire that rhythm that he is placing in the words. Meaning, just say the words that he writes. Say the words and it will come.” Thus, when Mark directs plays, especially August Wilson plays, he expects his actors and actresses to get the rhythm of the words, the rhythm of the flow, as August envisioned the words to be spoken in his plays. I was also struck by a comment that Mr. Monn Washington, an actor and writer, made. A number of years back, Monn had an opportunity to meet August at the monthly August Wilson Readings Roundtable at Mark’s house. Monn stated, “When he spoke, it was more teacher than orator. He spoke of the time we invest in ourselves. He spoke of treasuring our stories. He spoke of being open to let the voices (of the characters) come through us. In the end, he reminded us that there is so much more that needs to be addressed, fought for, and needed. “The struggle Continues.”’

Ms. Elizabeth Pendleton, who people in the theatre community affectionately call Ms. Betty, did not get the opportunity to work directly with August Wilson or one of his plays, but being of the same generation as him, and also growing up in the Hill District, she tries to capture his legacy in her costume designs. Ms. Betty pointed out,

And each costumer is different. Usually for me, I have a habit where I will critique the plays whether it is a Broadway production I have seen or one of the Pittsburgh theatre productions. I really like to have the hems pristine and I really like to make sure things look in order. So things don’t look too baggy or too tight. It is the little things. Because, a hem, being crooked, doesn’t look too good. If the hem is not ironed, as you know, it just doesn’t look too good.

And finally, Ms. Linda Jean Kittel, August Wilson’s sister, gave me so much personal insight on his contributions to Pittsburgh. She explained,

I think this is because they love August and his work. I also think it is because they are filled with pride because he is a home-town playwright, and more pride because he is a world renowned playwright. Doors were opened for Black actors and playwrights because of his work. I believe it is also because they can relate to characters, language and locations, mentioned in the plays. You can see a play several times and each time you can get something new from it.

Linda Jean quite nicely summed up her brother’s legacy when she stated, “I think my brother August has left not only the theatre community but the city of Pittsburgh itself with a lasting legacy, and to quote the character Troy Maxson from his play *Fences*, he ‘ain’t sorry for nothing he done.’”

Based upon these interviews, I have learned a great deal about August Wilson’s lasting legacy on the city of Pittsburgh. Especially important are the first-hand accounts of the Pittsburgh theatre community and how its theatre practitioners were inspired to keep his legacy alive. I hope these interviews will be of value to other Wilson scholars as they try to trace the history of this Pittsburgh legend.
Light, if anything at all, is “the radiation visible to the human eye.” We don’t see anything except light when we look from here to whatever’s out there within the spectrum of what we can know.

If color is light, it is also sight. But it is not vision. We know because light and the spectrum are science’s admission that it might be wrong.
Light has wavelengths
which are not absolute
but science treats spectrum
as universal,
as all we need
if we want to know
the deep universe,
the colors of different planets,
the elements on Saturn
the chemicals of its rings
and stones of its moons.

Light moves us
toward August
who moved us toward
light, both particle and wave,
light we were blind to
in July.

There are bodies in the universe,
physicists say, that absorb
all light. But the August
light radiating

on the Hill
seems to be the vision
knowledge makes possible,
once we look beyond the spectrum.
Vision permits us
to see all things
we can know and even those
we can't.
It is the light that fills gaps
between the decades, separations
in our knowledge filled
dramatically by light,
the theatrical successes
and failures of our time
on this planet, safe
and content in the knowledge
we can only know what enters
our spectrum
and what art understands
to be true for now
on this planet
and the next one.
Suzan-Lori Park’s interview with August Wilson, “The Light in August,” published in *American Theatre*, begins with a discussion of his final play, *Radio Golf*, which Parks has recently seen in performance. Wilson tells Parks that this play grew out of a concern that middle class African Americans were becoming too politically separate from poor African Americans. The conversation quickly turns to the definition of success, with Parks wondering if achievement is measured by class mobility. Wilson contends, “Because that’s the way society defines success now. In other words, they have adopted the values of the dominant society and have in the process given up some of their cultural values, so in essence they have different cultural clothing” (22). *Radio Golf*, Wilson’s final play, dramatizes a cultural reckoning in which the central character, Harmond Wilks, must face the losses his rise to public and financial success has incurred. Wilson stages this process through a family reunion that occurs in the Hill District, where Hammond is reunited with a distant relative, Elder Joseph Barlow, “Old Joe.” At the conclusion of *Radio Golf*, Harmond Wilks rejects a set of business, political, and economic principles that contributed to his success and
to his decision to run for mayor of Pittsburgh. Wilks closes the door on his political career to immerse himself in a communal activity—a painting party to save Aunt Ester Tyler’s home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in the economically depressed Hill District. Why might Wilson explore the question of changing cultural values and political allegiances for twenty-first century African Americans through the plot device of the family reunion and real estate? At the heart of Wilson’s final two plays exists a connection to the remembrance of slavery, particularly of the Diaspora and the Middle Passage. If, as he tells Parks, Wilson wants to show black Americans “go[ing] forward united,” what can be gained from deconstructing the logic of value and success in the present with a gaze ever turned to the past?

By attending to the dialogic and familial relationships that are explored through *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf* we can learn a great deal about the ways Wilson critiques value, valuation, and evaluation. As audiences bear witness to characters’ individual struggles and personal transformations, audience members learn how and what to value in each play. This process of learning how to change perceptions of value becomes especially urgent around the ways that space is radicalized in Wilson plays through speech, music, and work. Set as they are in the first and the last decade of the twentieth century—*Gem of the Ocean* takes place in 1904 and *Radio Golf* in 1997—these plays frame the others, and, as such, their connections are instructive. As preeminent Wilson scholar Sandra G. Shannon reveals, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf* are bound thematically and genealogically as the “bookend” plays of the twentieth-century cycle (26).

As the last plays Wilson wrote, their proximity not only reveals his philosophical approach to temporality—that the past is always present, to use Harry J. Elam’s formulation—but also audiences witness the establishment of revolutionary space and the ongoing struggle to protect it. How might Aunt Ester’s home be understood, not just as the site for revolutionary historical consciousness and the collectivity it brings about, but also as an analog to the work of the theater itself, in a time of increasing disenfranchisement for black and poor Americans, as a thematic pushback against what Lisa Duggan terms the “cultural politics of neoliberalism” or the “culture wars” (11)? For Wilson, the theatrical sphere, the performances he envisions that use the counterculture of the blues and propose Black Atlantic temporality to commemorate loss and provide alternative modes of spiritual sustenance, is a realm of dissent, of contending with the imbrication of cultural values and democracy with the increasing shrinkage of the possibilities of life under neoliberalism to the dominance of wealth as the sign of viable life. Through explorations of freedom and (un)ethical applications of the law, Wilson dramatizes, through certain characters, the transformation from individual self-protection to an outward communal consciousness within the Hill District, as epitomized by Aunt Ester and Solly Two Kings, Elder Joe Barlow, Sterling Johnson, and experienced by Citizen Barlow and Hamond Wilks.

*Gem* and *Radio Golf* might be understood as a critique of what Duggan sees as “neoliberalism’s key terms: privatization and personal responsibility,” which “define the central intersections between the culture of neoliberalism and its economic vision, in the U.S. and abroad” (12). The ethical and moral quandaries facing the characters in these two plays illuminate the complicated possibility of freedom in late-capitalism and under neoliberal institutional structures in which the individual is caught between the accrued history of value and the desire for individual success. Given Wilson’s intellectual coming of age in the Black Arts period it is no wonder, then, that he continues to explore modes of black
revolutionary masculinity. Revolution can take a variety of meanings and possibilities for the twenty-first-century audience. For example, the quotidian is given revolutionary meaning through resource to ancestral spirituality and diasporic consciousness.

In *The Twilight of Equality?* Duggan explains that neoliberalism emerged as an economic and political system in the 1970s, becoming more entrenched during the Reagan administration as a form of conservative backlash against civil rights and anti-poverty legislation in favor of business and corporate interests. She writes,

> This pro-business activism, the foundation for late twentieth century neoliberalism, was built out of earlier “conservative” activism. Neoliberalism developed over many decades as a mode of polemic aimed at dismantling the limited U.S. welfare state, in order to enhance corporate profit rates required that money be diverted from other social uses, thus increasing overall economic inequality. And such diversions required a supporting political culture, compliant constituencies, and amenable social relations. Thus, pro-business activism in the 1970s was built on, and further developed, a wide-ranging political and cultural project—the reconstruction of the everyday life of capitalism, in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds. (x-xi)

Duggan elaborates on the ways that economic policy became inseparable from politics and culture. She explains, “Opposition to material inequality is maligned as ‘class warfare,’ while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial” (xiv). As the inheritor of a form of theatrical activism grounded in communities of color, Wilson uses cultural expression and representation to work against monolithic and homogenizing representations of racialized gender. His plays tell stories that work against U.S. cultural discursive hegemony that claims black American inequality stems from cultural pathologies and anti-statist attitudes rather than the result of a century of structural racism following emancipation.¹ *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf* illuminate these histories of structural and institutional racism.

Black masculinity functioned as a sign for larger national anxieties about race as well as the focus for racist and classist social and economic policies during the 1980s and 1990s. These discourses misapplied culpability and criminality predominantly to black men, so that blackness could be both publically homogenized and demonstrated to be invaluable to the *public good*, and individuals who did not fit the conservative ethos of industrial, exceptional citizens were perceived to be outliers to the national order. In *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*, Robin D. G. Kelley explores the history of these policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s in a pattern of dismantling Civil Rights legislation, the deregulation of corporations and financial institutions, as well as new attitudes toward public space. Kelley explains that the, “Economic restructuring leading to permanent unemployment; the shrinking of city services, the rising number of abandoned buildings; the militarization of inner city streets; and the decline of parks, youth programs, and public schools altered the terrain of play and creative expression for black youth” have lead to the creation of strategies of play to operate within capitalism in which the body can be a source of profit (46). In his plays,  

1 Wilson was an outspoken advocate for the protection of autonomous local black theaters. As the co-founder of Black Horizons in Pittsburgh, he was artistically and practically invested in black theatrical autonomy as a political expression of the continued artistic development of the Black Aesthetic. In this way, he championed local black theaters as institutions where African American artistic voices could flourish outside of the umbrella of multiculturalism and production integration, which he viewed as forms of tokenism that persisted into the 1990s and 2000s, having the effect of silencing black artistry when black actors were cast in parts or plays written by white playwrights.
Wilson proffers strategies of resistance that defy the categorical definition of the individual in terms of how he might participate in capitalism or even in a national framework. I suggest that by thematically exploring the imbrication of personal aspiration and individual power as masculine values and claims with successful assimilation in the United States, Wilson’s plays offer audiences narratives of struggle that are critical of neoliberalism’s monetization of the individual and the individual body’s ability to produce capital and wealth.

One such site of resistance in Wilson’s plays is the physical house as property. The house can be read as a sign for the nation in which home ownership represents not only a financial boon but also, increasingly, an imperative of civic responsibility. 1839 Wylie Avenue—whose address recalls the year of the Amistad revolt—becomes the focus of a radical shift in ethos for male characters from individualist survival to communal leadership (Zaytoun 716). However, the home not only focuses our attention on property ownership, but also on family, identity, and love. Gem and Radio Golf enact the individual transformation of the central characters, men for whom self-protection has been a matter of course. Citizen Barlow arrives at Aunt Ester’s house because his self-protecting lie has caused another man’s death (a death that happens to be another form of self-protection, but sprung from integrity). Whereas Harmond Wilks, who has a patrilineal connection to 1839 Wylie Avenue, works to carry on a business he inherited from his father and great-grandfather before him that ensures prosperity rather than communal engagement. Through the dramatization of Citizen Barlow’s imaginative journey to the City of Bones, through Solly’s mission to rescue his sister and destroy the mill that has exploited black workers, through Harmond’s crisis over ownership of 1839 Wylie Avenue and the injustice of property law, Wilson stages black revolution.

1. “What is your life worth, Mr. Citizen?”
Personal value in Gem of the Ocean

Money is both a dream and a burden for the characters in Gem of the Ocean. As Citizen discovers, it too often sets the terms for freedom in early-twentieth-century industrial Pittsburgh. Set during the Great Migration, when African Americans moved from rural locations and agricultural labor to cities and factory labor, across the country, but predominately from South to North, the play enacts the struggles of acquiring and protecting capital. This capital can exist in many forms: real estate, one’s own physical strengths, financial independence gained through entrepreneurship, and in the reputation accumulated through individual integrity and solidarity in communal struggle. Furthermore, as Alan Nadel illuminates, in Gem, money and national identity or belonging are thoroughly entangled (“Beginning Again, Again” 21). Citizen Barlow’s name marks him as someone at the precipice of national belonging after having escaped the oppressive and murderous disenfranchisement of the South only to be betrayed by similar conditions in the North. Yet the wall that Eli is building around Aunt Ester’s house at the beginning of the action demonstrates the degree to which 1839 Wylie Avenue is becoming a bastion of security for its inhabitants and those who seek shelter there. The play considers the relationship between national belonging and access to participation in the Republic through the right to property by rejecting Caesar Wilks’s way of doing business. The community at 1839 Wylie enacts forms of salvation that are chosen modes to recover a traumatic and shameful history in order to become renewed and revolutionary in the present, thereby giving value to the soul where once it was only assigned to the laboring body.

2 Aunt Ester 45.
Gem of the Ocean’s critique of the concept of value is introduced early through Solly’s plan to make money. Solly collects dog excrement to sell to local tradesmen. He calls his product “pure,” convinced that the right buyer will recognize its value even if his friends cannot. This choice of descriptive signifier is, of course, somewhat facetious. Calling fecal matter “pure” is an oxymoron employed to make audiences chuckle, but the question of purity is one that haunts Citizen’s quest for salvation. The adjective has several meanings, including unadulterated, or free of additives; it can colloquially be used as a reference to lineage; it can refer to character that is free of blemishes; or sexual morality; but “pure” is also used in an economic sense, as in “pure profits,” to indicate “a surplus or deficit” (“Pure” OED). When Solly brings his basket of pure inside, Black Mary admonishes him to leave it outdoors. Displaying a stash of money, he tells Black Mary, “People will kill people over money. You know if they kill somebody over money they will steal anything that ain’t nailed down” (Wilson, Gem of the Ocean 13). Although his claims for its uses are unconvincing, Solly’s transformation of the abject object to a use value for craftsmen, and finally a profit for himself, is not just a mercenary act of scavenging. Rather, as we are to learn later in the play, this collection is part of a process of healing a history of trauma. In a conversation about his experiences as a “dragman” “guard[ing] the rear” on the Underground Railroad, Solly confesses to Citizen that he sells dog excrement in order to keep from killing every dog he meets (58). Solly’s encounters with the dogs used to brutally detect and apprehend fugitive enslaved persons left him with physical “battle scars” that he shows Citizen (58). Thus, in order to ease his fury, he exploits dogs as a survival strategy. Caesar’s reaction to this occupation is, “There must be five hundred thousand different jobs a man can have. Now you tell me how somebody come to picking dog shit up off the street” (35). Caesar’s rebuke reveals a misapprehension of the ways labor is often steeped in history and the power that Solly can assert by resignifying his relationship to the dog, a symbol of white brutality.

As Solly’s interpretation of excrement as “pure” demonstrates, Wilson riffs on value. Wilson’s plays demand audiences consider cultural values, the value attributed to an object or a principle, the accrual of value, and so on. Through the use of metaphysical elements and visionary characters, though, Wilson counters these mundane values with spiritual ones. His characters offer sophisticated readings of the nature of false values in late-twentieth-century America and shift perceptions of worth juxtaposed with assignations of monetary amounts. In his book, Blackness and Value, Lindon Barrett argues that value is a mode of enforcing borders. His reading of the concept of value in post-Marxian Western philosophy elucidates the revolutionary readings of value Gem of the Ocean proffers. He writes, “Understood at its simplest, value is an arbiter among disparate entities—however, an arbiter seeking to naturalize its very processes of arbitration to the point of sublimation and fetishization” (12). Elsewhere, Barrett claims, “Value denotes domination and endurance in a space of multiplicity. Its presence and performance entail the altering, resituating, and refiguring of the Other, or many Others, in margins, in recesses…that nonetheless aspires to be everywhere” (19). In Wilson’s plays, hearing the right voice speak, or sing, transforms the terrain of value and valuation. While value can function to make ideology visible, in Gem of the Ocean the opposite occurs, through Aunt Ester’s spiritual guidance in her role as a memory-bearer for her community.

The references to the slave trade and slavery, two histories that share the stage with the performers, are most clearly manifested
through ship symbolism. However, the ship is not just a vehicle of captivity, it also operates as a sign of freedom. “The boat” is a colloquialism that represents social or systemic and economic structures that maintain power relations and racial hierarchies in everyday life and in politics. “Rocking the boat,” for Citizen and Solly, equates to a heroic disruption of the ways in which black men’s labor is perceived and policed. Yet the character who consistently rocks the boat, or leads the way toward revolutionary consciousness in *Gem*, is Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester assigns three objects to Citizen to aid the process of spiritual cleansing; the play asks audiences to reconsider cultural texts or signs of value. The first is the house itself, which Citizen helps Eli to maintain as he works to regain his integrity. Secondly, Aunt Ester tasks Citizen with locating two pennies that he must find “lying side by side” (46). The third is the documentation of her enslavement to a white slave owner. These three objects of monetary value are instead reinterpreted in the service of Citizen’s spiritual journey to the City of Bones. Citizen will become the owner of 1839 Wylie Avenue, while the coins are proven useless and meaningless (46). This third object she folds into a “small boat” according to Wilson’s stage direction (53). As a symbolic vessel, this object will bind Citizen to a past he must face, but through Ester’s rejection of its power to hold her in bondage, the piece of paper becomes worthless.

So that audiences may attend to the ways *Gem* re-signifies value, Wilson has Caesar, the capitalist, read Aunt Ester’s Bill of Sale out loud at her bidding. After Black Mary hands her brother the paper boat, he reads the legal document that sanctions the transfer of Aunt Ester’s person from one master, “William J. Ogburn of the County of Guilford . . . State of North Carolina,” to “Isaac Thatcher” (*Gem of the Ocean* 78). When he is done reading, Ester affirms that the “Negro slave girl” it records is her: “That’s a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That’s me,” but she turns the appraisal of both the document and her person over to Caesar, demanding, “Now you tell me how much it’s worth, Mr. Caesar.” His response demonstrates his failure to understand the import of this trial: “I wouldn’t give you ten cents for it,” he says. Still misrecognizing that the application of a monetary value to human life is fundamentally a corruption of that life and that the system that gave birth to this paper boat continues to perpetuate this false logic, Caesar demonstrates that as a “custodian of the law,” he fails to understand the necessity of radically rethinking his understanding of the law and his protection of it as well as the “legal” modes for wealth accumulation (78).

As the scene continues, Ester defends her home against Caesar’s false god in upholding Pennsylvania law, urging him to see that 1839 Wylie Avenue is a “house of sanctuary,” and therefore a sacred place (79). However, Caesar’s “Bible” is the Pennsylvania Penal Code, which he proceeds to read from as his protection and justification to arrest Solly for arson and Ester Tyler for “interfering with the administration of justice and aiding and abetting” the fugitive (79-80).

In this final scene, private law clashes with public or state law. *Gem of the Ocean* powerfully dramatizes the intersection of blackness and value in the twenty-first century as read through the struggles over property and its protection in the Great Migration. I interpret the climactic dialogue, in which Ester bears her most intimate history for Caesar, as an intervention in contemporary discourses of domestic economic policy and the worth of black life under neoliberalism, which reserves and utilizes “multiculturalism” and “diversity” as signs of an institution or corporation’s capaciousness in the twenty-first century. The remedy that Aunt Ester offers, historical consciousness, needs further interrogation as it is dispersed through her own body, which is a vessel for memory and investment. Yet
Wilson's play proffers the history of black folk and the history of slavery as a counter-narrative that reveals neoliberalism's dehumanizing organization of citizens into vectors of labor and profit even as it functions as an ideology to obscure this outcome, which is made even more a reality through the global and political domination of multi-national corporate interests (Duggan XII). Thus, the gains achieved through social dissent to re-engineer the social contract in favor of a state that decenters profit from its national project were short lived and failed in favor of economic and social policies that twinned free market capitalism with the very function of US democracy.

Caesar Wilks applies criminality as a false label to those characters who are most heroic. Moreover, the rhetoric Wilks employs to defend his rationale, such as protecting investments or the mill's and the state's interests, echoes the public discourses used by the right. Furthermore, Ester's Bill of Sale translates the human into monetary value and simultaneously that monetary value into cultural value, or a representation of cultural values. By transferring the value of the legal document to a spiritual object for Citizen, Ester negates the system of values developed through the monetization of black bodies. Barrett explains, “If the material economic transaction produces racial blackness as a phenotypical and commodifiable essence, the related transaction aims at producing blackness as a negative discursive, cultural, and psychological essence” (56). As a directive vehicle and a mode of counter ontological significance, Aunt Ester's voice denotes value in the play, as it reverses the history of transaction.

The relationship between property, black masculinity, value, and social uplift reveals a revolutionary consciousness that resists complete acceptance of the definition of “wealth” motivated by a capitalist worldview. Alan Nadel explains that these are prevalent themes in Wilson's final two plays (Introduction 1). Nadel continues to succinctly summarize the stakes of property in each of the play's plots: “In Gem, a black man has died in order to prove that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails, and in Radio Golf, another black man abandons his mayoral aspirations to affirm the property rights of a Pittsburgh home once owned by his great aunt that legitimately belongs to his cousin” (1). He argues, moreover, that Wilson's critique of capital is also a critique of the history of value within the US national context. “Gem of the Ocean is an initiation written in retrospect and also a retrospective condensation of the properties of capitalism that produced the unresolved confusion of human rights and property rights, a confusion all too extensively—albeit not exclusively—operating in the interest of racial privilege” (“Beginning Again, Again” 19). As a mill employee, Citizen Barlow discovers his humanity is only valued insofar as his labor produces a profit. Finding himself in sanctioned debt-peonage after his migration north, Citizen remarks to Eli and Solly, his compatriots, that “Making people owe is worse than slavery” (Wilson, Gem of the Ocean 56).

2. “Big boats turn slow but they turn nonetheless.” Disrupting Neoliberalism in Radio Golf

In Radio Golf, set in 1997, 1839 Wylie Avenue has lost its value, so much so that it is scheduled for demolition. Harmond Wilks, candidate for mayor and real estate developer, as well as great-great grandson of Caesar Wilks, has recently purchased the house at city auction because its owner, Elder Joseph Barlow, lost the home to the city over a misunderstanding about property taxes. This plot engine not only brings the distant relatives together—Joe is the son of Citizen and Black Mary, 3 Old Joe 64.
Caesar’s sister—it also reveals the spiritually and socially bankrupt ways in which a city’s leaders and officials prioritize investment in its past and future. 1839 Wylie Avenue will be razed in order to be replaced with condos, a Whole Foods, a Barnes & Noble, and, finally, a Starbucks, by Harmond Wilks’s Bedford Hills Redevelopment firm. When Old Joe enters Harmond’s office seeking intervention in the sale, Harmond stands by the legality of his ownership, and thus feels justified in the house’s destruction, because its market value overshadows any intrinsic, cultural, or historical significance. As a candidate for Mayor, Harmond Wilks fulfills his paternal ancestor’s desire for legitimacy under the laws that shape the nation. As the owner of a development firm, Wilks continues the entrepreneurial tradition started in the Hill District by his grandfather, Caesar. That the monies raised by his development firm fund his campaign for mayor underscores the continued integration of black capitalists into the corrupt law of the land, which devalues black life and community. As Elam notes, “Wilson has Harmond’s discourse on the power of law replicate with a difference that of his ancestor, Caesar” (“Radio Golf” 205).

In the opening scene, audiences are introduced to Harmond and Mame through a brief representative dialog in which Harmond shows off his new campaign office to his wife. Their differing reactions to the older building foreshadow their attitudes toward Wilks’s future as a politician. This building in the Hill District underwhelms Mame, while Wilks recognizes its historical value. She confesses, “Harmond, it looks raggedy” (Wilson, Radio Golf 7). Yet her husband takes pleasure in showing off its design features that require careful attention and knowledge to recognize. He urges her: “See those marks. It’s all hand tooled. That’s the only way you get pattern detail like that. That tin ceiling’s worth some money” (7). Harmond recognizes the “worth,” or value, of the handicraft, but he immediately translates aesthetic value and human labor to future profit. Mame’s response verbalizes this desire to profit from the artistry: “Then take it down and sell it” (7). The humor in this dialogue, of course, resides in the fact that extracting the valuable portion, this design detail, from the building would render the building less valuable. Mame not only challenges Harmond’s aesthetics, she also holds him to an upper-middle class, aspirational understanding of success and leadership.

However, her plans for their future are disrupted by Sterling Johnson, the sole member of his own union, an independent contractor who instructs Harmond in an ethical code that undermines the profit motive. Sterling is a survivor of poverty and incarceration who works as an independent contractor. His labor provides the infrastructure for the economically struggling black neighborhood. In contrast to Harmond, who has inherited his business and public position, Sterling states, “I’ve been going through the back door all my life” (42). Sterling uses the metaphor of survival at sea to emphasize his ability to be aware of, and work, the system to stay afloat: “But I know how to row the boat. I been on the water a long time. I know what it takes to plug the holes. I ain’t dumb” (42). This metaphor illustrates both his independence and his understanding of a communal ethos as well as his ability to survive when the system attempts to swamp his boat.

Johnson teaches Harmond about fulfillment and worth versus cost. When they first meet, Johnson explains that his desire to know what it is like to be rich influenced the theft he committed for which he was incarcerated. He concludes, “I had some money. It didn’t make me smarter. It didn’t make me better than anybody else. You can’t do nothing with money but spend it. . . . I found out I was looking for something that you couldn’t spend. . . . I’d take something you couldn’t spend over money any day” (15). Sterling reveals systemic
rightful ownership, or the legal right to possess 1839 Wylie Avenue. Through an elaborate back story involving property taxes and a subsequent off-the-books property acquisition deal that Bedford Hills Redevelopment made with the city to acquire several properties that were auctioned off below market value due to unpaid taxes once the city took possession of the properties, the home no longer belongs to Elder Joseph Barlow, but to Harmond’s firm. However, Harmond learns that the property owner was not given enough notice prior to his acquisition of the property, thus Bedford Hills is in illegal possession. The quandary over ownership becomes a personal crisis for Harmond in which his personal honor and integrity are at stake. In order to redeem himself, then, he must, as Citizen did, make peace with 1839 Wylie Avenue.

Harmond’s ethical crisis involves a choice between riding the tide of the increasing imbrication of the civic administration of the city with the real-estate developer’s power, or choosing to abandon the privileges of wealth and class for a separate set of values. The tax scheme is representative of the convoluted enmeshment of property, state, individual, and nation with which *Radio Golf* contends. The representation of taxation demonstrates the ways that the individual can be bilked by a system in which the rights of the wealthy are more protected so as to ensure the continued dispensation of future wealth to developers by the city government rather than ensuring the social good. Harmond and Roosevelt Hicks are savvy enough to protect their wealth from taxation, whereas Elder Barlow is not. For example, Harmond’s prized, irreplaceable golf clubs are a purchase made “Right before taxes when I needed to spend some money before the government took it” (31). It takes meeting Sterling Johnson and Elder Joseph Barlow for him to realize that this form of individual protection is a way of shirking civic and communal engagement that ultimately
contributes to the decline of the Hill District that is purportedly his home and where he identifies his familial roots.

Audiences are provided with an inkling of the kind of politician Harmon Wilks plans to be through the battle over a speech that will be printed in the city newspaper. Mame urges him to edit out the more politically dangerous content, while Harmon resolves that the speech will be printed in its entirety or not printed at all. Wilson's dramaturgical choice to not have Harmon deliver his speech in the play could be somewhat frustrating and disappointing for audience members who want to believe in Wilks's candidacy within the tradition of a superstar politician as savior in representative democracy. It is alluring to want to test Wilks's mettle, no matter where one falls on the political, ideological, or economic spectrum as a witness. As Elam notes, there is a great deal at stake in terms of clarifying an ethical path for the black middle class. He writes, “The question for Wilson—one he poses for Harmon Wilks in Radio Golf—is whether one can remain committed to a liberal paradigm of black empowerment and at the same time achieve economic or political success within the more conservative, white-dominated American mainstream,” a public that Mame hopes her husband might reach through the newspaper (“Radio Golf in the Age of Obama” 189). Through his conversations with Sterling and Old Joe, Wilks reveals his belief that if he is elected, he can effect change from inside the system, a belief each of these characters debunks.

Wilson provides the audience with an inkling of what is so controversial about Wilks’s speech by having Sterling read Harmon’s campaign promises. When Sterling Johnson, the character who references Malcolm X’s “By Any Means Necessary” speech, speaks, Wilson solidifies what might be read as Harmon’s more radical political aspirations. Sterling reads: “The wealth of a city is its people. People who need job opportunities that last longer than nine months of stadium building. People who need a city willing to invest in them with long-term jobs, enabling them to invest back in Pittsburgh the wealth of their work” (41). The sonic richness of this excerpt is created by the repetition of “wealth,” which, when spoken, demands audiences to pause over the application of the term to the products of labor rather than bank accounts. Although there may be scant sign of social justice in this excerpt, it indicates that Wilks is rethinking his career as a real estate developer to a vision of local empowerment through longer lasting financial opportunities.

This speech indicates the personal commitment to black solidarity that will terminate a friendship and business partnership. Harmon and Roosevelt part ways because Roosevelt refuses to rock the boat. His goal to continue as vice president of Mellon Bank and co-owner of WBTZ despite the corporations’ exploitation of him do not correspond with Harmond’s new value system. As Wilks rejects Hicks’s choice to become the quota-filling hire of a local radio station and bank, he provides poetic language for the condition of marginality. He proclaims:

> No matter what you always on the edge. If you go to the center you look up and find everything done shifted and the center is now the edge. The rules change every day. You got to change with them. After a while the edge starts to get worn. You don’t notice it at first but you’re fraying with it. Oh, no, look . . . . We got a black mayor. We got a black CEO. The head of our department is black. We couldn’t possibly be prejudiced . . . . Twenty-four million blacks living in poverty but it’s their fault. Look, we got a black astronaut. I just love Oprah . . . . Then you realize you’re never going to get to that center. It’s all a house of cards. Everything resting on a slim edge. (78-9)

In a stunning read against the grain of the catch phrases popular in neoliberal corporate-speak that tout diversity as a business boon to attract employees and repel criticism, Wilks
cuts through any aspirational illusion Hicks may hold about this chosen path to success. Instead, he argues that this promotion, and the promotion of African Americans, even of his own candidacy for mayor, continue to be exploitative as a highly visible sign of progress. Elam examines the dilemma represented by the conflict between Roosevelt Hicks and Wilks, “to argue that black empowerment and economic advancement are not necessarily synonymous” (“Radio Golf” 196). Wilks’s new value system is revealed in the final scene as he picks up a paintbrush to work on Aunt Ester’s home. This act symbolizes a revolutionary departure for Harmont and the hope for renewal. Harmont Wilks is representative of black capitalism and assimilation, yet he, unlike his grandfather Caesar, is receptive to the radical revision of value that so completely rocks the boat of contemporary US perceptions of success and personal worth. Yet at the play’s climax, during an argument between best friends, Wilks lays bare the uneven distribution of resources, wealth, and power among citizens of Pittsburgh and residents of the Hill District in a system he has worked to uphold throughout his life, beginning with the inheritance of a real-estate development firm from his father. Thus, Wilks’s choice at the play’s conclusion, which might be read by many as a regressive disavowal of his professional and public achievements, his once-upon-a-time dream to be the first black mayor of Pittsburgh, instead seeks to redefine the “center” and realign the balance between individual worth and ascribed value.

At the beginning of Radio Golf, Harmont hangs two portraits in the office that will house both his development firm and his campaign for Mayor—portraits of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of Tiger Woods. Upon his painful break with Roosevelt, Harmont relinquishes the portrait of Woods, suggesting not only that the athlete is no longer an idol, but also that Wilks rejects Woods as an example of success now that he is a convert to an alternative value system, one that attributes more to black leadership than wealth and fame. Elam explains that with this gesture we are to understand that “Radio Golf militates against emulating Woods or adopting—like Hicks—an individualist posture that facilitates forgetting the past and forging destructive alliances in the name of self-interest” (“Radio Golf” 198). Roosevelt explicitly equates masculinity with his entré into golf, so much so that he has created a camp for Hill District youth to learn the sport. Early in the play he recalls his first experience hitting a golf ball: “I felt free. Truly free. For the first time” (13). His love of the game enables him to declare: “How much you think Tiger makes a swing? I wish Nike would buy a piece of me.” When Harmont sends the portrait of Woods off stage with Roosevelt, Radio Golf enacts a rejection of Hicks’s way of thinking about the body as a source of capital as well as the association of freedom with wealth and status.

Gem of the Ocean and Radio Golf enter the field of popular culture during the period of the Culture Wars that Lisa Duggan and Robin D.G. Kelley argue use gender, class, and racial stereotypes to mask growing wealth inequality, decline of wage labor, and the increased imbrication of corporate or moneyed interests with public policy that characterize neoliberalism. These two plays ask audiences to reconsider cultural values that became increasingly normative throughout the 1990s, which define success as wealth accumulation within the specific context of African American history and the historical processes—the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Slave Trade, chattel slavery, mass incarceration, labor exploitation, and housing discrimination—that contributed to the twentieth-century US economy. Harry Elam, Jr., eloquently argues that Wilson’s depictions of black men counter stereotypes of black masculinity in American popular culture. Elam contends, “Wilson
marshals representation to promote a view of black men that operates in contradistinction to the mainstream perception of black men as a problem. Part of Wilson’s project is to re-present black masculinity so that it becomes a site of self-determination, pride, self-respect, and historical consciousness” (The Past as Present 128). Through the construction of narratives and performances of the individual and imbricated lives of black men, lives that are deeply associated in each play with historical moments and historical processes, Wilson demonstrates how quotidian strategies to resist discursive evaluations of blackness can be revolutionary. Wilson’s century cycle constructs and perpetuates tenets of Black Cultural Nationalism formulated in the 1960s and 1970s. Elam explains, “Reimagining the paradigms of cultural nationalism, Wilson links the ground of the American theater with the ancestral ground of African American labor. It is these past, unprepared efforts of his black forebears that foster his current claims and shape his rhetoric” (217). Gem and Radio Golf exist in a dialogic relationship with each other in their discussion of the ways monetary and social value have been attributed to the products of this labor, its invisibility, and the spaces of labor, as well as spiritual sustenance. Radio Golf leaves audiences with a glimpse of a possible future of solidarity for Harmond, with Sterling Johnson and his family member, Elder Joseph Barlow, and spiritual recovery for the community of the Hill District, a community with whose struggles and joys audiences have traveled through time. However, Wilson himself admits that the possibility of a future for 1839 Wylie Avenue in a twenty-first-century American city would be less secure. When Suzan-Lori Parks asks Wilson if Aunt Ester’s house will remain standing in the future envisioned in the afterlife of the century cycle, Wilson gives her two answers. He responds, “Probably not. . . . I think that the bulldozer might come and the police will come to move all the people that are painting the house and tear it down. That’s usually the way it goes” (77). However, Wilson’s second answer demonstrates his faith in the realm of theater to disrupt this realism: “But, symbolically, 1839 will always be standing, as part of our repository of all our wisdom and knowledge that we as an African people have collected over the hundreds of years that we’ve been on the planet Earth.” The theater for Wilson is a gathering space that protects and ensures the continuation of cultural memories and the values they espouse.
Works Cited


Wilson’s Life

Frederick August Kittel, whom we now know as August Wilson, was born on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the fourth of six children and changed his surname to Wilson when he was 20, which was his mother’s surname. His mother was Daisy Wilson, a black cleaning lady raised in North Carolina, and his father was Frederick Kittel, a white baker who had emigrated in childhood from Germany (Herrington). His mother divorced his father and married David Bedford, who was the inspiration for the character Troy Maxson, the father in the play *Fences*. Wilson was also inspired by the poetry and plays of Amiri Baraka, the paintings of Romare Bearden, and the music of Bessie Smith. Wilson once said in an interview with Sandra G. Shannon for the *African American Review*, “It’s like our culture is in the music.” He also said in the same interview, “and the musicians are way ahead of the writers I see, so I’m trying to close the gap.”
Wilson considered himself to be a “cultural nationalist.” Samuel G. Freedman, in his article “A Voice from the Streets,” said: “He is one part Dylan Thomas and one part Malcolm X, a lyric poet fired in the kiln of Black Nationalism.”

Wilson ended his formal education in 1960 by dropping out of high school when his teacher accused him of plagiarizing a class paper on Napoleon, suggesting it was too good for a black boy to have written (Herrington). After he dropped out of school in the ninth grade at the age of 15, Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Library became his new classroom, where he studied the works of Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and other African American writers (“Wilson, August,” 1987). In a 1987 interview, Wilson said, “These books were a comfort. Just the idea black people would write books. I wanted my book up there, too, I used to dream about being part of the Harlem Renaissance” (Bogumil).

Wilson enlisted in the United States Army in 1962 but only served the first year of his three-year assignment before returning home to Pittsburgh (Herrington). Once back in Pittsburgh he worked various odd-jobs, such as gardener, short-order cook, porter, and sheet-metal worker. In 1965, aged 20, he bought his first typewriter, a second-hand Royal manual, earned by writing a term paper titled “Two Violent Poets—Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg,” comparing the poetry of Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg (Herrington). Wilson’s first writings were poems, some of which were eventually published in the magazines Black Lines, Black World, Negro Digest and Antaeus. He also produced some unpublished short stories written in authentic vernacular dialogue, which he would eventually bring to life in his plays throughout the years (“Wilson, August,” 2006).

In 1965 Wilson helped to start Pittsburgh’s Centre Avenue Poets’ Theater Workshop (Bogumil). In 1968 he founded Black Horizons in the Hill District with playwright and teacher Rob Penny. It was a combined art gallery and theatrical troupe, which produced his early plays as well as various cultural programs (“Wilson, August,” 2006). At this time the purpose of his plays was to “politicize the community and raise consciousness.” In The Christian Science Monitor, Wilson is quoted as saying, “I think black theater of the ‘60s was angry, didactic, and a pushing outward. What I try to do is an inward examination….I think Black Americans have the most dramatic story of all mankind to tell” (DeVries). Wilson’s first theatrical success was in 1976, when his stage piece The Homecoming was produced at the Kuntu Repertory Theatre at the University of Pittsburgh. Later, a short dramatic effort, Fullerton Street, was produced at the Allegheny Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh (“Wilson, August,” 2006).

In 1969 Wilson married his first wife, Brenda Burton, a Black Muslim, and a year later his first child, Sakina Ansari, was born (Herrington). In 1972, he divorced Brenda Burton because of political and religious differences (Herrington). In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where his friend Claude Purdy had become the director of a black theatre troupe called Penumbra. In 1980, Wilson was granted a $200-a-month fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwright Center, and he met his second wife, Judy Oliver, who was a social worker (“Wilson, August,” 1987). This helped to provide the necessary financial support needed to give him the time to perfect his professional writing skills. While in St. Paul, his friend Claude Purdy directed a production called Black Bart and the Scared Hills, which was adapted from some of Wilson’s poems (Herrington).

In 1978 and 1980 Wilson submitted the plays Jitney and Fullerton Street to the prestigious Eugene O’Neill Theater Center’s National Playwrights Conference. Both were rejected and he was disappointed (Herrington).
In 1981 Wilson decided that he would once again submit a play to the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, which was his new script, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. The following spring, Wilson received a telegram telling him that his new script had been accepted for the 1982 summer conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center.

This was to launch Wilson’s career on a national level. In 1984 *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opened on Broadway and was directed by Lloyd Richards. By then, Wilson’s next play, *Fences*, was almost complete, and in 1985 it opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre, and was also directed by Richards (Herrington). *Fences* was produced in Chicago, Seattle, and San Francisco, and in 1987 it opened on Broadway. Wilson’s next play, *The Piano Lesson*, appeared on Broadway in 1990 and at the same time another one of his works, *Two Trains Running*, opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre (Herrington).

In 1991 Wilson married his third wife, costume designer Constanza Romero, and in 1997 his second daughter, Carmen Wilson, was born (Herrington). In 1996, Wilson’s new work, *Seven Guitars*, played on Broadway, and was then followed by *King Hedley II*. Wilson’s last two plays, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*, which are considered his bookend plays, reached Broadway in 2004 and 2007 respectively (Herrington). Wilson had become the predominant African American playwright in the country and had completed works on the bookends of his group of plays now known as *The Pittsburgh Cycle* or *The Century Cycle*, a series of 10 plays that includes a play for each decade of the century, nine of which occur in Pittsburgh (with *Ma Rainey* set in Chicago). These plays represent a historical documentation of the struggles of African Americans in the United States, and are regarded as some of the finest literary achievements in contemporary drama.

Wilson died on October 2, 2005, in Seattle, Washington, where he had moved in 1990 (“Wilson, August,” 2006). Eight of his plays reached Broadway during his lifetime and six of them were directed by Lloyd Richards, including: *Ma Rainey’s Bottom* (1984-85), *Fences* (1987-88), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1988), *The Piano Lesson* (1990-91), *Two Trains Running* (1992), and *Seven Guitars* (1996). The two other plays to reach Broadway during his lifetime were *King Hedley II*, directed by Marion McClinton, in 2001, and *Gem of the Ocean*, directed by Kenny Lion, in 2004-05. Wilson’s ninth play on Broadway was *Radio Golf*, in 2007, after his death. Wilson’s plays also won two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, a Tony Award for Best Play, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Rockefeller Fellowship, and the 2003 Heinz Award in Humanities Medal (Madhubuti). He also received 24 honorary doctorates and was inducted into the Black Writers Hall of Fame (Madhubuti).

**Wilson’s Works**

**DRAMATIC WORKS**

Recycle
The Janitor
The Homecoming
Coldest Day of the Year
Fullerton Street
Black Bart and the Sacred Hills
Jimby
Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
Fences
Joe Turner’s Come and Gone
The Piano Lesson
Two Trains Running
Seven Guitars
King Hedley II
Gem of the Ocean
Radio Golf
POETRY
“Bessie.” In Black Lines (Summer 1971): 68.
“Morning Song.” Black Lines I (Summer 1971): 68.

ESSAYS AND ARTICLES


Annotated Bibliography on Wilson’s Works

This selected annotated bibliography focuses on works about Wilson’s 10 plays included in his works known as The Pittsburgh Cycle.


Adell begins by citing Houston Baker’s notion of the “blues matrix” and relates that notion to August Wilson’s drama. She further applies the Nietzschean concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian to Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.


Austin reviews the Huntington Theater Company’s performance of Two Trains Running, a play written by August Wilson and directed by Lloyd Richards.

---”Experiencing Black Culture Key to Putting it on Stage.” The Christian Science Monitor 21 Nov. 1990: 10.

Austin interviews playwright August Wilson discussing recent developments in black American culture and his attempts to portray the culture in the theater.

Barnes argues that Wilson explores a world where “Black people, black life, [and] black themes” prevail. Central to Wilson’s plays, according to Barnes, is the notion of separation: “Separation from roots, separation from kith and kin, separation from one’s own psychic self.”


Bogumil’s book provides readers with a comprehensive account of the thematic structure of Wilson’s plays. She describes the placement of his works within the context of American theater. She exposes the distinctively African American experiences and traditions that Wilson’s plays contain. Bogumil argues that Wilson gives a voice to “disfranchised and marginalized African Americans who have been promised a place and a stake in the American dream but find their access blocked to the rights and freedoms promised to all Americans.” Bogumil suggests that Wilson wants not only to portray African Americans and their predicaments but also to shed light on the connection African Americans have to their African ancestors. Bogumil asserts that the playwright both “perpetuates and subverts the tradition of American drama in order to expose the distinct differences between the white American and the African American experiences.”


Booker reviews a Mark Taper Forum performance of August Wilson’s play *Radio Golf*, which was directed by Kenny Leon and produced at the Music Center in Los Angeles, California.
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MAKING CONNECTIONS


Brustein initiates his critique of Wilson’s work with an attack upon Wilson’s most frequent director and mentor, Lloyd Richards. Labeling Richards’ use of “non-profit institutions as launching pads...for the development of Broadway products” as “McTheater,” Brustein identifies The Piano Lesson as an “overwritten exercise in a conventional style...the most poorly composed of Wilson’s four produced works.” Ultimately, Brustein believes that this “piano is made unplayable” by the ending, which “tacks a supernatural resolution onto an essentially naturalistic anecdote.”


Burbank’s analytical essay is an examination of August Wilson’s history cycle and a multi-racial actor’s account of his current career in American theater. Burbank argues that Wilson’s dramatic genius will be more fully appreciated when “the audience for his plays is less restricted by outdated racial thinking than audiences today.” Burbank combines personal anecdotes with quotations from August Wilson’s plays and interviews. Burbank argues that Wilson’s plays last the test of time, and says, “his works will be better received and more profoundly understood in a generation’s time than they are now; this is because we are too close to the trauma Wilson outlined to fully appreciate its dimensions.


Crawford examines how music and racial identity are bound together in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. By examining each character in the play, Crawford illustrates how each character’s identity is directly revealed through his or her approach to music. This coincides, she argues, with Wilson’s own belief that each person needs to learn to sing his or her own “song.”


Downing considers how Wilson follows a pattern of depicting pejorative, racist stereotypes and converting those stereotypes into archetypes. The process has four basic parts: First, Wilson presents characters as flat stereotypes. This, typically, is overtly blatant and involves such tropes as watermelon jokes, references to fried chicken, witch doctors, and other established racist stereotypes. Second, the detailed background of the character—which had previously been hidden—is presented to the audience. Third, the characters go through stages of growth, typically marked by some kind of difficult mythic encounter, such as a near-death experience, complex dream sequence,
sometimes overlooked, ways in which Wilson includes African mythology in his plays.


Fanger, Iris. “August Wilson Speaks Softly (for a Revolutionary); His ‘Gem of the Ocean’ Delves into the Struggle to Move Forward in the Face of Racism.” The Christian Science Monitor 8 Oct. 2004: 11. Fanger reviews Wilson’s play, Gem of the Ocean, which is set in 1904. The date is important because at that time many blacks that were in their 40s had been born into slavery, which means that the play links the years before Emancipation to the 20th century. Fanger describes Wilson’s characters as or harrowing physical encounter. Fourth, the character achieves archetypal status as he or she comes to embody communal concerns, universal human struggles, and/or collective cultural achievements.


Elam examines the dialectics of Wilson’s play The Piano Lesson. He discusses the play in terms of how the legacies of Africa and African chattel slavery in America enter the narrative. Elam suggests that “history functions not as a static source of objective truth but as a constructed and constructive agent that must be mediated, negotiated, and interrogated.”


Elam’s book attempts to interpret Wilson’s plays in relation to concepts of memory and history, culture and resistance, and race and representation. Elam insists that Wilson “seeks to reevaluate the past in order to understand the present.” Elam believes that Wilson’s plays “recapture narratives lost, ignored, or avoided to create a new experience of the past that questions the historical categories of race and the meanings of blackness.” Elam also places Wilson’s dramatic work in the context of contemporary African American literature, and looks at the function of music in Wilson’s plays and in African American history. Elam explores the important, but
MAKING CONNECTIONS

This irony, she posits, creates an anachronism that does not provide a solution to the problem of his “history” as a conscious a posteriori.


Freedman considers Fences, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, and Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, focusing primarily upon “Wilson’s concern with legacy.” Freedman moves through Wilson’s life, marking the influences, while identifying Wilson as the “bard” of the “ghetto,” a “lyric poet fired in the kiln of black nationalism.”


Gantt argues that Wilson’s plays are “replete” with references to the South. Southern food and music, as well as references to sharecropping, suffering, slavery, the forced dissolution of family, and “restricted happiness” all combine to remind the characters and the audience of the “vestiges of the past within ourselves.”


Gordon connects the plays of August Wilson to the plays of Athol Fugard, focusing upon how each playwright treats similar themes of race, the past, and how human suffering is brought about by oppression. Pointing

“robust and exuberant, filled with a life force that gives them courage to hope and believe in better times ahead.” The play takes place in Aunt Ester’s house, at 1839 Wylie Avenue, in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. Fanger explains that the area where the play takes place was settled when blacks came flooding north for jobs before the turn of the 20th century. This setting is important to Wilson because he was born in the area in 1945 and spent his first 30 years there.


Fleche examines the use of the term “history” within the context of Wilson’s plays. She identifies a “calculated historical displacement” as an ironic feature of Wilson’s project.


Fishman traces the development of Fences through its collaborative journey, citing biographical influences upon Wilson as well as how various changes were made to particular characters in order to create certain effects. For example, the character of Lyons became gradually more “responsible” so as to construct a black male character who is following his artistic impulse but yet is not “lazy and shiftless.”


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primarily to *Fences*, Gordon argues that playwrights “work essentially within the tradition of the well-made play; a gradually evolving conflict is ultimately resolved in the final moments of the drama.”


Herrington’s book takes a careful analysis of Wilson, who she feels is the most successful African American playwright of his time. Herrington traces the roots of Wilson’s drama back to the visual arts and jazz music and reveals who inspired the award-winning playwright. Herrington accomplishes this task by evaluating his works and interviewing Wilson along with the theater professional who have worked most often with him.


Kester develops her thesis that Wilson brings “the past into the present as a vivid and active component of people’s daily lives.” In so doing, she argues, Wilson constructs his characters in such a way as to highlight their abilities to experience life not only through the static metaphors of geography and spatial relations, but also through the more dynamic metaphors of the black body as a “vehicle for each person’s song and a metaphor for change.”


Harris examines the “patterns in lore [which] reflect patterns in African American history” and how those patterns are presented and expanded upon in the plays of August Wilson. By pointing to such evidence as the “shiny man” and Bynum, Harris argues that Wilson uses folklore to merge the “secular and the sacred in ways that few African American authors have attempted.”


Heard interviews playwright August Wilson, discussing the technique of how he works and how he views his revision strategy of the play *Jitney*. In the interview, Wilson reveals that during his writing process he sees himself as focusing on creating a piece of art and not a text primarily designed to entertain an audience.


Henry considers *The Piano Lesson* as praiseworthy, noting “[Already] the musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Winfield’s glass menagerie.”

King begins by taking *The Piano Lesson* to task, writing: “In *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson writes speeches of exposition and hangs out symbols as if he were a neophyte rather than a prize-winning dramatist whose first three plays have gone from Yale to runs on Broadway.” In conclusion, however, King admits that—overt symbols and speeches aside—*The Piano Lesson* is a “cultural and dramatic achievement.”


Kroll traces Wilson’s development in light of the recent arrival of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* on Broadway. Focusing upon Wilson’s language, Kroll writes, “Wilson’s gift of verbal music reflects his love of the blues.”


Marra offers a feminist critique of the work of August Wilson, whose narrative structures, she argues, posit “a male protagonist and constructs female characters as other.” For Marra, the implications are significant, as such products “reinforce the sexist values of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”


Monaco examines how Wilson develops the “wondrous possibilities that come from establishing bonds with one’s ancestry.” Monaco argues that by focusing upon highly specific instances in his plays, Wilson is able to chronicle powerfully human experiences, and thus “earns the title of mythmaker.”


Morales considers the “mystical elements” in several August Wilson plays. These elements, he believes, enable Wilson to blend “cosmological perspective” with “historical experience” as he writes of black experience.


Morehouse reviews the play *King Hedley II*. He suggests what he feels are the short-comings of Wilson’s work and compares it to Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night*. However, Morehouse concedes that *King Hedley II* still towers above most other Broadway dramas in recent decades.

Nadel argues that Wilson’s drama investigates what lies on “the other side of the fence...by creating conflicts whose resolution requires inverting the traditional designations of ‘literal’ and ‘figurative.’” He then moves to consider where the boundaries exist for several characters in Wilson’s plays and how the identities of those characters are determined by those boundaries.


Nadel’s work is a collection of essays that are grouped loosely around the order of August Wilson’s Broadway production. Alan Nadel and his contributors took up the task of evaluating the playwright’s 10 plays included in the “Pittsburgh Cycle.” This work is a companion to Nadel’s edited collection of critical essays, May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson (1994).


Oliver considers Seth Holly’s boardinghouse [in Joe Turner] as “a kind of way station,” where people rest as they journey through life. Oliver also writes, “Joe Turner is the most mystical, most remote and dispersed of Mr. Wilson’s plays.”
Rich accentuates the “metaphysical cat-and-mouse game” played by Loomis and Bynum in _Joe Turner’s Come and Gone_, a play filled with characters who are each “looking... either a lost relative or a secret life, or both.” Frank calls Wilson “An American writer in the deepest sense,” who shows us how to find our own freedom in the freedom of others.


Shannon’s book follows Wilson path throughout each decade, focusing on his use of poetry, jazz music, the art of Romare Bearden and other cultural artifacts that lead him to develop his dramatic vision. Shannon insists that Wilson creates drama, as he “excavates, examines and reclaims the past.” She demonstrates how Wilson’s plays are grounded in credible historical contexts. Shannon examines each of his plays in terms of the African American experience.


Shannon uses various interviews and “examines the intertextual relationships within and among five of August Wilson’s cycle plays but pay particularly close attention to two of Wilson’s plays that are strategically positioned within his ninety-six-year-year time line as bookends: _Gem of the Ocean_ (1904) and _Radio Golf_ (1997).” Shannon reveals that August Wilson admitted that a “special relationship” exists between his so-called bookends. Shannon surmises that in writing both, Wilson’s mission was to “… build an umbrella under which the rest of the plays can sit ... a bridge. The subject matter of these two plays is going to be very similar and connected thematically,” Wilson explained.


Rocha applies the Gatesian notion of “loud talking”—where one person talks just loud enough to a second person for a third person to hear—to _Two Trains Running_. Such allegorical loud-talking, according to Rocha, is “doing what black people call ‘schooling’ [Wilson’s] audience in signifyin(g).”


Rocha identifies artist Romare Bearden, playwright Amiri Baraka, writer Jorge Luis Borges, and Blues music as the four major influences upon August Wilson’s dramatic art. Rocha argues that when taken together, “the four Bs are much more than discrete influences whose traces are to be sifted out of Wilson’s plays, but together form the sign system from which Wilson’s plays are written.”


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works of August Wilson. The work contains 166 encyclopedic-type entries that make up the body of the book, which combines insights from a variety of other sources. Snodgrass includes a chronology of Wilson's life and work, along with his genealogy. The author also includes suggestions for further reading.


Timpane asserts that Wilson’s notion of history can be understood by examining the perspectives of the characters in Wilson’s plays. Focusing largely upon Troy Maxson and Ma Rainey, Timpane argues that “Dramatic irony [in Wilson’s plays] issues from the audiences’ ability to mark the historical shift that the protagonist insists on denying.”


Wattley discusses Wilson’s visibly scarred characters and acknowledges that in almost all of his plays, at least one character possesses physical scars on the body. Wattley maintains that Wilson sets each of these characters apart in some way. She concludes that each is viewed by others in the play as peculiar, eccentric, or unusual. Whatley suggests that the scars that Wilson’s characters carry can be viewed as visible reminders of the individual and the collective history of African American people.

Werner posits that Wilson “revoices both African American and Euro-American expressive traditions in a heroic attempt to heal the wounds that devastate individuals and communities as we near the end of the twentieth century.” From there, Werner moves to the issue of neoclassical “universalism,” particularly Wilson’s “nuanced treatment of ‘universal’ themes.”


Wilson communicates his desire for a black director for his play, *Fences*, which was—at press time—in the hands of Paramount Pictures. Although Wilson has sold the rights to the play for $500,000, he believes that the play requires a black director who will bring certain black “sensitivities” to the work.

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**Works Cited**


