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# *Fences*

By August Wilson  
Directed by Lou Bellamy  
Presented by Cargill

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## AN AMERICAN LEGEND

an Essay by Sarah Bellamy

“My greatest thrill? Well, everyone has his own favorite day. But I’ve got to say my biggest thrill was when they opened the door to the Negro. When they said we couldn’t play and we proved that we could, that was the biggest thrill to me. There were more guys before me who didn’t have a chance, and I wanted us to prove it to ‘em all, black and white alike.”

— James “Cool Papa” Bell, St. Louis 1970

### Introduction

A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Fences* is arguably August Wilson’s masterpiece. Set in 1957, it is the story of Troy Maxon, a legendary baseball player whose dreams and legacy died with the **Negro Leagues**.

The Negro Leagues tell the story of American segregation through the lens of the country’s most cherished pastime: baseball. It was an era in which black Americans daily faced the injustice and humiliation of sanctioned racism. Whether it meant that black people had to use separate washrooms or watering fountains, or as many of the black baseball teams that traveled about the country did, sleep in fields when no hotels would allow them room and board, white America ensured that black people knew they were second-class citizens with limited rights and little respect. Still, in this era of hardship, black Americans banded together to create worlds in which they would have to interact with whites as little as possible. Black businesses, papers and schools sprung up to serve black patrons with dignity and fairness, black doctors and tradesmen kept both the people and their blossoming economy healthy and prevented from playing alongside whites, black folks created their own sports teams too.

For nearly seventy years after the **abolition of slavery**, African Americans lived as second-class citizens in the nation built largely by their labor. By the 1950s, this pressure had brought resentment and anger close to the surface. Already the last bastions of **segregation** were beginning to give way. It would be only a few short years before one of the most significant sociopolitical shifts in the world, the **American Civil Rights Movement**, launched into full swing.

**August Wilson**, who set all but one of his plays in Pittsburgh, contextualized the fifties within the mighty push of the **Industrial Revolution**. In the preface, Wilson exposes the roots of the American dream—and who had access to it—setting the stage for his epic tale of baseball legend Troy Maxon:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled in its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers’ ovens, a thousand churches and banks and hospitals and funeral parlors. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership

limited only by his talent, his guile and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream: that they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.

By 1957, the hard-won victories of European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

1957 is remembered for many reasons. Some might recall the opening of two movies starring the dark-haired, blue-eyed crooner Elvis Presley—"Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock." Wham-O produced the first Frisbee in 1957. Dr. Seuss published the much-loved children's story *The Cat in the Hat*. Jimmy Hoffa was arrested on charges of bribery by the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Beloved actor Humphrey Bogart died that year. But perhaps what shook the nation most deeply was the day nine black children went to school.

Three years prior, the U.S. Supreme Court declared state-sponsored segregation unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ninety-six American congressmen would support a document called the **Southern Manifesto** that ridiculed the court for "a clear abuse of judicial power," when it delivered a ruling that public schools could no longer practice or enforce segregation. The backlash by whites in **Little Rock, Arkansas** in response to the admittance of nine black schoolchildren to the local public high school threw the country into racial crisis. These children, selected by the NAACP based on the merit of their outstanding achievements in school, bore the brunt of white America's resentment at mandatory integration. Orville Faubus, Arkansas' governor, called the National Guard to Little Rock in an attempt to prevent the students from enrolling. In the midst of massive protest, the children did enter the school after President Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort them. What these children endured as the harbingers of integration is unimaginable. At just sixteen and seventeen years old they were called upon to serve a higher duty, to make room for African American people across the country to have equal access to the education that white Americans enjoyed.

At the same time in Washington, U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond raved for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes in rejoinder to a civil rights bill that would lay the groundwork for African American voting rights. This tirade is known to this day as the nation's longest filibuster of a bill. Two years prior, **Rosa Parks** had been arrested for refusing to comply with the segregationist laws that required her to give up her seat to a white man. Her stance had sparked the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**. The boycott lasted for 385 days. During that time, one of its prominent leaders **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** was arrested and his house firebombed.<sup>1</sup> The district court finally ruled to end racial segregation on all **Montgomery** public buses.<sup>2</sup> The seven-decade struggle to cordon black Americans off into a subordinate existence was weakening. In the middle of the century, the nation was on the verge of a giant growth-spurt.

### **Jim Crow and the Limits to American Freedom**

In practice, segregation law in the United States was known as **Jim Crow**. Surviving Jim Crow meant more than enduring the daily assaults on human dignity imparted through signs directing “colored” to separate and often paltry services than those offered to whites. It also meant that black Americans had no protection and no recourse within the law for racially motivated crimes. Intimidation, terrorism, unfair job practices, rape, beatings, murder, lynching, these crimes were rarely punished when black people were the victims. On the other hand, the mere accusation of a crime committed by a black person was taken very seriously. More frequently than not, such accusations never made it before a real court; white communities were sanctioned by Jim Crow law to act as both judge and jury in these situations. All too often black people were convicted and punished for crimes in which no substantial evidence was demonstrated and due process was nowhere in sight. Jim Crow, which lasted effectively from 1867 to the 1960s, is the story of our American caste system. As historian Ronald Davis writes, Jim Crow represents “an epic tale of endurance and survival that ranks among the great, tragic feats of heroism in American and world history.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though there are many Americans alive today who remember segregation, it is hard for young people to understand the extent to which Jim Crow was experienced, particularly because of the amnesia with which Americans tend to reflect on the darker elements of our shared history. The “freedom” promised after the abolition of slavery was quite limited:

Blacks avoided looking whites in the eyes; and black males and youths knew not to look, even indirectly, at white women or to touch them accidentally. Blacks were

<sup>1</sup> While Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the protest, the boycott was urged and planned by E.D. Nixon, head of the Montgomery NAACP.

<sup>2</sup> The case was known as *Browder v. Gayle*.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, Ronald. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm>

expected to stare at the ground when addressing whites of both sexes. Black customers usually were not served first in stores when white customers were present. They usually were not allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, as it was commonly believed that white customers would not purchase clothes that black customers had tried on. Black shoppers almost always were expected to wait patiently for white clerks to address them before speaking. Adult African Americans were seldom afforded titles of respect by whites, such as the terms "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." They were instead referred to by their first names or by the words "boy," "girl," "auntie," "uncle," and, frequently, "nigger."<sup>4</sup>

Most of these rules, though not written into law in specific terms, were customary and colloquially enforced. Jim Crow laws created two distinctly separate social worlds that were at odds yet dependent upon one another. Essentially, segregation divided America with what was known as "the color line." Based purely on race, this tacit agreement amongst whites kept black people in a kind of identity limbo. They were Americans yet not fully, denied basic civil rights and the freedoms that white citizens enjoyed. **W.E.B. DuBois** is famous for explaining this experience as a "dual consciousness," an awareness of oneself as a human being that includes but is not limited to one's experience as a black person living under siege in America.

Black people understood with pristine clarity the situation with which they were faced and both individually and as a community developed tools and skills for survival. **Paul Laurence Dunbar** captured a feigned acquiescence in the presence of whites in his 1895 poem entitled "We Wear the Mask":

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes--  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To Thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream other wise,  
We wear the mask.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Joanne M. Braxton, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

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For over sixty years black people found ways to endure Jim Crow. Still, the daily humiliations planted a seed of resentment deep in the hearts of many black Americans. While many presented a smooth veneer of contentment and submission, amongst one another black people were living wholly different lives. The survival history of this period is written largely in folkloric texts, songs and adages that come from the dark era of American segregation.

Whether in song, in letters, in legend or in prayer, African Americans strived to remember their history. One of those great periods of African American history, passed down largely through legendary tales of the remarkable days gone by, is the story of the American Negro Leagues. Indeed many of these stories have been passed down through the generations similar to the way the legendary baseball player Troy Maxon and his best friend Jim Bono speak in *Fences*—the story begins with a declaration, a challenge and then out comes an incredible tale.

### **Life in the Negro Leagues**

As historian John Holway writes, “the world of black baseball history was not a mere footnote to baseball history—it was fully *half* of baseball history!”<sup>6</sup> Nor does it start with Jackie Robinson, as many Americans believe. Black Americans were playing baseball, and outperforming white players, long before **Jackie Robinson** broke the color line. In 1872, a black man by the name of Bud Fowler became the first man to play in organized baseball, and twelve years later two brothers from Ohio, Welday and Moses Fleetwood Walker played briefly in the major leagues before the “**gentleman’s agreement**” forced black Americans out of major league baseball for the next six decades.

The history of the American Negro Leagues is still being uncovered. Thanks to a handful of dedicated historians and writers who poured through years of microfilm for statistics and anecdotal stories about the great ballplayers, the rich history is methodically being pieced together. One such contributor is John Holway, who in addition to researching the archives interviewed more than seventy black baseball veterans. Commenting on his research of the American Negro Leagues, Holway writes, “in terms of time, the journey took me through five decades, from players who had begun their careers in 1914 or before, to men who were still playing baseball in the fifties. They ranged in age from forty-five to eighty.”<sup>7</sup> Where he found these men says much about what would have happened to their legacy had he and a few others not mined for it: “I traveled from the worst, most soul-destroying ghettos, where former players ushered me into tenements swarming with roaches, to beautifully landscaped split-levels in the

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<sup>6</sup> Holway, John. *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992) p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

suburbs.”<sup>8</sup> Holway’s contribution to the Negro League baseball record is vital. What he found was that “blacks were playing probably the most exciting—yes, and very possibly the best—baseball seen in America before 1947.”<sup>9</sup>

Negro League baseball was created out of necessity—white ball clubs would not allow blacks to play so they created their own teams. With names like the Cuban Stars, the Homestead Grays, the Hilldales, the Birmingham Black Barons, the Chicago American Giants, the Kansas City Monarchs, the St. Louis Stars, the Indianapolis ABC’s, and the Dayton Marcos, these teams recruited the best of black ballplayers from across the country. They played where they could, in dirt fields, local parks and high school auditoriums. “In cases where black ball clubs could rent out the major league ball parks, they would pay for play time on the field but weren’t allowed to use the locker rooms so they had to suit up somewhere nearby like the local YMCA.”<sup>10</sup> Fans filled the stands to watch the exciting performances. Still, black baseball was not a particularly lucrative investment. “Most owners didn’t make much money from their teams. Baseball was just a hobby for them, and sometimes a way to make their illegal money look good. To save money, each team would only carry fifteen or sixteen players. The major league teams each carried about twenty-five. Average salary for each player started at roughly \$125 per month back in ’34, and went up to \$500-\$800 during the forties, though there were some who made much more than that, like **Satchel Paige** and **Josh Gibson**. The average major league player’s salary back then was \$7,000 per month.”<sup>11</sup> The numbers racket, an illegal community lottery, had made some people quite wealthy, particularly in New York City and Pittsburgh where black people played a penny or a nickel and bet as to the number that would show up in a newspaper. When the number hit, winners collected a portion of the raffle. Folks from all walks of life played the numbers, from bar-crawlers to housewives. In *Fences*, when Rose says, “that 642 hit yesterday” she is talking about the numbers business.<sup>12</sup> Today this business started by African Americans has been legalized and is known as the lottery. In the baseball world, two of black baseball’s notable owners were tied to the numbers, **Rube Foster** and **Gus Greenlee**. Frustrated with the fact that white major-leaguers in the area refused to play black teams, Foster decided in 1920 to organize black baseball. Foster is considered the founder of the Negro Leagues.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xviii, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, Kadir. *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*. (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2008) p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, August. *Fences*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007) p. 21.

He called a meeting amongst club owners in Kansas City, and pitched the idea of a Negro National League. The owners “agreed to a set of rules that the league would follow. ...[and] named the league the Negro National League. It had eight teams—the Cuban Stars, the Detroit Stars, the Chicago American Giants, the Chicago Giants, the Kansas City Monarchs, the St. Louis Stars, the Indianapolis ABC’s, and the Dayton Marcos.”<sup>13</sup> This meeting changed the face of baseball in America. “At last a professional black player could enjoy a measure of security. Without Rube Foster’s historic achievement, it is fair to say, black baseball might not have survived for another quarter century, and the nation might never have heard of Jackie Robinson.”<sup>14</sup> A short while later, Ed Bolden from Philadelphia organized an Eastern league that he figured could compete against Foster’s Negro National League. The “Hilldales, Atlantic City Bacharach’s, Baltimore Black Sox, New York Lincoln Giants, Brooklyn Royals, and the Harrisburg Giants” were the first teams to make up what would be known as the Eastern Colored League.<sup>15</sup> Foster was not as enthusiastic as Bolden would have liked and refused a World Series competition. Holway explains that the Eastern Colored League contented itself to play big league white teams, frequently outplaying them. The losses did not bode well for the major leagues. The challenge against the East Colored League “was the last time a big-league club could play the blacks while wearing its own uniform. The new commissioner, perhaps embarrassed by the scores, issued orders against it. Henceforth, the big leaguers would have to call themselves “all-stars” if they wanted to **barnstorm**.”<sup>16</sup> As feared, black teams beat barnstorming white big leaguers more often than they lost. Between 1886 and 1948 [Holway] uncovered newspaper box scores of 445 games between them. The blacks won 269, lost 172 and tied 4.”<sup>17</sup>

By 1923 black baseball players from cities throughout the country had the opportunity to play and if they made a team, to chase after an exciting pennant race in one of two first-rate leagues. Life was not necessarily easy in the Negro Leagues, though. They “played 80 to 120 game a season while the major leaguers played 154.”<sup>18</sup> It was intense and tiring but for men who loved the game, a dream come true. When traveling the players often encountered white protest to their presence. They usually ate and slept on the buses, as few restaurants, grocery stores or hotels served black patrons.<sup>19</sup> To keep their spirits up, Kadir Nelson explains that “most of the Negro League baseball teams had a quartet of men that would sing on the bus rides

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Holway, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xviii, xix.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

from town to town, keeping the rest of the team entertained.”<sup>20</sup> They would recruit other players as they traveled to small towns, some of which had black colleges.<sup>21</sup> Black ball teams would roll through town and recruit young players. Indeed, Nelson found that “there were several players in the Negro Leagues who were college educated.”<sup>22</sup>

On the field, these were tremendous but scrappy athletes. Nelson explains that the baseball used in the Negro Leagues was a Wilson ball, “not as lively as the expensive ball they used in the majors,” and wonders what “Josh Gibson or Norman “Turkey” Stearnes would have hit [with] that kind of ball.”<sup>23</sup> Nelson also explains that the bats were bought off the shelf, not custom made as they were for the major leagues. Nelson paints the Negro Leagues as a tough, hard-hitting environment fierce with competition:

We would do whatever it took to win. Pitchers threw anything and everything. Spitters, shine-balls, emery balls, cut balls—you name it. They cut that ball to pieces and had curveballs breaking about six feet! Throw a new white ball to the pitcher, and it would come back brown from all the tobacco juice and what-have-you. ... And throwing at the batter was common. The pitcher would knock you down just to mess with your head. Look up at the umpire and he’d just say, “get up and play ball, son.” That’s why the batting helmet was invented. When Willie Wells was just a rookie, he found the ball was making its way toward his head a little more often than he liked, so he decided to wear an old miner’s helmet when he stepped up to the plate. Boy did they laugh at him! But today, you won’t find a ballgame played without batting helmets....Base runners would spike you in a minute...get in the runner’s way and he’d step on the catcher’s foot or run him right over, knock all his gear clear off. Come sliding in with his cleats high. Runners could tear your uniform off with those spikes. Some of those guys would sit in the dugout before the game filing their spikes, look at you and say, “this is for you.”<sup>24</sup>

Even with such fierce competition, sportsmanship in the Negro Leagues was customary. Shortstop Jake Stephens recalled “By *God!* You’d be committing hara-kiri to get in the way of Crush Holloway or Jimmy Lyons. They’d cut you to death. I mean, they’d sharpen their spikes before they went out onto the ball field.” In reference to Crush Holloway, “the roughest base runner in the old Negro leagues,” pitcher Bill Foster remembers, “Crush Holloway was fast. He was rough too. He’d put his spikes right here, in your mouth, if you opened it. But he was always nice. He’d hurt you, then jump up and say, ‘Man, I’m sorry.’ I’d say, ‘Get out of here,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *ibid.* By 1890, the nation had established 17 black colleges; within a decade another 64 were added for a total of 81 by 1899. The South held 75 of these African-American schools. These colleges usually were one of four types: public or state-supported, land grant supported, church affiliated, and non-church-related private schools. The increased number after 1890 was partly due to the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Acts in 1862 and 1890. These laws provided federal support to those black colleges offering courses in agriculture, engineering, and home economics, or the industrial or vocational arts

<sup>22</sup> Nelson, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18.

Holloway’.”<sup>25</sup> Assuming kindness for weakness was a grave mistake. These men were unafraid. They had fought to get to where they could play baseball and they were some of the best ballplayers in history. They were confrontational and fought to win both on and off the field. Oscar Charleston, another legendary ballplayer, was known for fighting. Once, he walked right up to a **Ku Klux Klansman** and pulled his hood clear off, exposing the man underneath the costume.<sup>26</sup> Even facing racism, playing with second-hand equipment and not being able to afford off-season training, Negro League ballplayers stood as some of the greatest baseball players in the country, and white ballplayers and sportswriters knew it.

In 1924 Rube Foster agreed to send his best team out east to play Ed Bolden’s best. The Kansas City Monarchs traveled to Philadelphia to play the Hilldales. Foster met Bolden on the field and the two men shook hands over home plate, kicking off the first modern black World Series.<sup>27</sup> Holway called it a spectacular series of ten games in which the Monarchs were named the victors. Still, the reminder that black baseball, increasingly offering the most exciting games in the country, did not command the respect of larger America. As many accounts demonstrate, it was not for lack of skill that these players and their efforts went unnoted, but rather because of their color. For example, Holway points out that during the World Series event between the Monarchs and the Hilldales, one of the valuable Saturday games had to be rescheduled because the Kansas City stadium was hosting a high school football game.<sup>28</sup> Still, by the end of the decade, black ballplayers boasted “a final record for the decade of seventy-four victories and forty-one defeats against major league competition.”<sup>29</sup>

In the mid-1920s, Holway explains that “**Booker T. Washington**’s paper, the *New York Age*, clamored for a four-way series among the Giants, Yankees, Lincolns and Royals for the championship of New York.” The Giants and the Yankees, both all-white teams, ignored the challenge. Holway uncovered an article circulating about the proposed championship: “At least one white paper,” he found “the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, took up the cry. ‘There is some doubt,’ it wrote, ‘if baseball, after all, is the great American game. We play it, to be sure, but the colored people play it so much better that the time is apparently coming when it shall be known as the great African game...It requires some courage to predict that colored baseball, like colored pugilism, is to supersede the white brand, but someone has to think ahead and indicate whither we drift, and we therefore go on record as having said that it will’.”<sup>30</sup> What is interesting about

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<sup>25</sup> Holway, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Holway, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

this quote is not how readily this white sportswriter was willing to admit the expertise of black ballplayers, but that admitting their skill meant surrendering the “Americanness” of the game. While free and legal US citizens, black people were not considered Americans, even where whites acknowledged their talent or mere presence as part of American life.

“National League president Ford Frick said the league [had not used black players] because the public “has not been educated to the point where they will accept them.” The public was not necessarily the driving force behind keeping black ballplayers out of the big leagues. White major-leaguers were none too eager to open their ranks to men who had trounced them in barnstorm games. Masking their fear of fierce competition behind good old-fashioned racism, some white players riled up white fans deliberately. “Yankee outfielder Jake Powell blurted out in a radio interview that he was a policeman in the off-season and “enjoyed cracking niggers’ heads.”<sup>31</sup> But as Holway points out, “Powell had often barnstormed with blacks, who said they thought he was a fine fellow.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Powell was less concerned with skin color than he was the inevitable threat to his security as a major league player. Including black ballplayers in the big leagues would sharpen the game to a point with which many white players simply could not keep up. Indeed, between 1930 and 1939 black ballplayers had played 167 games against the white major league teams; they won 112, lost 52 and tied 3.<sup>33</sup>

Just as black baseball was beginning to take off, however, the country plunged into **The Depression**, stripping the Negro League ball clubs of any security or mobility for almost five years. That did not stop the rookies from encroaching on the ranks. Their skill was serious and their dreams big. When the opportunity to play professional baseball presented itself, no matter how meager the wages and modest the accommodations, they sprang at it.

So it was that in 1930 “nineteen-year-old Josh Gibson walked into the spotlight and began bashing eye-popping homers over every fence he saw.”<sup>34</sup>

### **A Legend Before His Time**

Troy Maxon embodies many of the men who played in the Negro Leagues but perhaps none more so than Josh Gibson, who died the same year Jackie Robinson stepped on the field for the Dodgers. Like Troy, Gibson was a big man whose strength intimidated people both on and off the field. When playing, Gibson was known for rolling up the sleeves of his jersey to show off his large biceps. He was 6’1” and weighed in over two hundred pounds at the peak of his career. Gibson had the record to prove it, but was never allowed to test his metal on a major

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 8.

league field. Holway explains that almost all of the men he interviewed were “confident that they could have been big-league stars.”

‘You just *knew* you were better than the major leaguers,’ says peppery little Jake Stephens, a shortstop on the old Philadelphia Hilldales—“you just *knew* it. Why, Chick Galloway of the Athletics didn’t have anywhere near the range I had at shortstop. He couldn’t carry my glove.”<sup>35</sup>

This kind of frustration was harder on some than others. Gibson, perhaps because his talent was so astronomical, had a particularly difficult time with the “gentleman’s agreement” that kept black athletes from playing in the major leagues. At the time of his death, when Gibson was merely thirty-five years old, Holway describes him as a “broken, frustrated man, just too old to make the majors after so long a wait.”<sup>31</sup> It is rumored that Josh Gibson suffered a depressive mental state and that he would occasionally fly into fits of rage or ramble on for some time hoping to purge his frustration. He reportedly suffered from debilitating headaches. In 1943 he slipped into a coma and was diagnosed with a brain tumor. In *Fences*, Troy is also hospitalized. He was thirty-seven at the time which would have landed him in Mercy Hospital in 1941 just two years before Josh Gibson’s hospitalization. His metaphorical tussle with Death as he endured the effects of pneumonia call to mind Gibson’s coma from which he would periodically wake and talk deliriously. As he came to, Gibson refused the surgical removal of the tumor in his brain. He lived another four years before succumbing to a stroke.

Born in a small town in Georgia in 1911, Gibson spent fifteen years playing in the Negro Leagues and garnered a reputation as the best player in baseball history. He grew up poor, his father having abandoned his mother, which is a notable difference between Troy and Gibson. Troy’s father supported eleven children; “he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain’t treated us the way I felt he should have, but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us, made his own way.”<sup>36</sup> Like Troy, Gibson made his way north and landed in Pittsburgh. Alternating between the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Gibson became a true hometown hero. His lifetime batting average fell between .354 and .384, with some accounts putting him at .426. He would regularly hit balls nearly 500 feet from home plate.<sup>37</sup> He was known as the best catcher and power batter in baseball and is noted in the Hall of Fame for almost 800 home runs during his career. Today many know of Gibson as “the black Babe Ruth,” although given his stats there are those who would say that Babe was actually “the white Josh Gibson.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 49.

<sup>37</sup> *The Sporting News* of June 3, 1967 credits Gibson with a home run in a Negro League game at Yankee Stadium that struck two feet from the top of the wall circling the center field bleachers, about 580 feet from home plate. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josh\\_Gibson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josh_Gibson)

It is largely through historical research that Gibson's story has emerged. John Holway's massive oral history project went a long way in supporting Gibson's reputation. As Holway describes his project to document life in the Negro Leagues, his excitement at the preservation of this unique aspect of American history is contagious, and one can imagine men long-since retired from the game proudly reliving their days as giants of American baseball. "The language is direct. Sentences are declarative and short. Adjectives are few. Smiles abound. Humor is droll. The language is gentlemanly in contrast to much modern-day sports reporting. No expletives were deleted because few if any were used."<sup>38</sup> Corroborating the stories was challenging but not impossible. "Many of the stories are confirmed—more drily, to be sure—in the microfilm files of old Negro newspapers (and in some white papers) in the Library of Congress," where Holway spent time researching the annals for snatches and glimmers of the untold story.<sup>39</sup>

With the same jocular yarn-spinning evidenced in *Fences*, stories of the great and rough days of Negro League baseball still circulate. Two other Negro League giants Satchel Paige and **Cool Papa Bell** spent some time rooming with one another on the road and Paige remembered, "that man was so fast he could turn out the light and jump into bed before the room got dark." When John Holway interviewed Bell, he found out that, "while [Paige] was out galavanting, Cool Papa discovered that the light switch was defective; there was a delay of a few seconds before the lights went out. When Satch came back, Bell instructed him, 'sit down, I want to show you something.' He flicked the switch, strolled over to bed, and pulled up the covers. Bing! The lights went out. 'See Satchel,' he said, 'you been tellin' people that story 'bout me for years, and even *you* didn't know it was true'."<sup>40</sup>

Rumors about men playing with guns in their uniforms made the league seem pretty rough and tumble. Some of the stories were verified by newspaper articles, such as the one that made Wilber "Bullet" Rogan one of the most feared and respected umpires in the league.

According to Kadir Nelson,

at one game in Kansas City, there were three umpires. Rogan was behind home plate, and the other two were at first and third. A play took place at third base, and Rogan ran down the line. He called the man out and the base umpire called him safe. They started to argue and got into a fight. Bullet Rogan pulled out a knife, and the other guy panicked and took off running toward the center-field fence and climbed over it. The next day it was in the papers. Rogan had a bad temper. We wouldn't argue too much with him about balls and strikes. Whatever he called you, you would just let that go. He was old, but he'd fight you anyway.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Holway, xviii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>41</sup> Nelson, 21.

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Unlike Troy, Gibson never did see a black man play in the major leagues, but for those that did, it was a long-awaited victory. Perhaps had he lived, Gibson would have similarly struggled with the mixed blessing of the Dodgers signing Jackie Robinson after his time had come and gone. More frequently though, the love of the game kept the giants from yesteryear rooting for the rookies who were steadily breaking the all-white ranks that had punished their forefathers so callously. “Cool Papa Bell, Mule Suttles, George Scales, Willie Wells and many others gave everything they had to helping the youngsters coming up.”<sup>1</sup>

It was a long time coming. It was not until the National League had seated a new commissioner that things in the major leagues began to change. Even though representatives from white ball clubs swore up one side and down the other that there was no law, formal or otherwise, preventing black players from entering the league, manager’s hands were tied. Several teams took a look at the startlingly talented rookie Jackie Robinson but none made a move to sign him. One manager, Leo Durocher of the Dodgers, even went so far as to say he wished he could sign a black ballplayer, but quickly recanted claiming that he had been misquoted in the New York *Daily Worker* when upper-level management realized he had let the cat out of the bag about the unspoken “gentlemen’s agreement.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, in the spring of 1945 a new commissioner was assigned to the major leagues. According to Ric Roberts of the Pittsburgh *Courier*, A B “Happy” Chandler said, “I’m for the Four Freedoms. If a black boy can make it on Okinawa and Guadalcanal, he can make it in baseball.” The quote made it into the headlines of the Pittsburgh paper and the gates were finally opened to black ballplayers. By winter of that year, Branch Rickey had signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers.

While the integration of baseball did create opportunities for African Americans to play in the big leagues, it rendered the Negro Leagues all but obsolete. Holway recounts the last of the Negro League competitions:

In October of 1948 Satchel Paige got together one more club of youngsters to barnstorm against his world champion Cleveland Indian mates, Bob Lemon and Gene Bearden, plus Murray Dickson, Al Zarilla, Roy Partee, and others. To bolster the youngsters’ morale, he added forty-five-year-old Cool Papa Bell to the squad to play a few innings and lend his experience. In the final game, with Lemon on the mound, Bell walked and Paige laid down a neat sacrifice that pulled the third baseman off the bag, a classic example of the hit-and-run bunt that Rube Foster had perfected almost half a century earlier. Bell was almost to second when the ball hit and almost on third when the third baseman picked the ball up. When the startled catcher, Partee, ran down the line to cover third, Bell brushed right past him and raced across the wide-open plate. He had scored from first on a bunt!

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<sup>42</sup> Holway, 11.

Rube Foster's ghost must have looked down and smiled. It was to be the last play in the history of the black ball days. A chapter of Americana had closed—forever.<sup>43</sup>

When word got out about the Dodgers signing Robinson, it became apparent that “the Sol Whites and Charley Grants, the Rube Fosters and the Josh Gibsons had come at last to the end of a long dark trail. The door had been opened, but it would not be they who would step inside.”<sup>44</sup>

### **One Day You Will Overstand: Language and Resistance in Black Culture**

Like sorting through the tales from the glory days of the Negro Leagues, many things in African American culture have meaning beyond the superficial and must be read on multiple levels. The American blues is a great example. Full of metaphor and double entendre what sounds innocent can actually be quite racy. In everyday vernacular, bad means good, being “down” for something is the equivalent of being “up” for something. The black American translation of language has created a remarkably vast and rich lexicon. It comes out of a strong tradition of resistance that turned even the most common elements of everyday life into small victories against oppression.

This tradition also kept alive the experiences that larger America would rather have forgotten: slavery, the slave trade, the lynchings and murders of innocent people, the daily assaults on the humanity of black people, segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, the racism rampant in the US Congress and judicial system evidenced by bills that were never ratified, verdicts which flew in the face of the founding tenets of the nation, and the concealment of the real source of wealth for America's elected officials many of whom were slave owners.

It is no wonder then, that the accomplishments of African Americans would not be remembered nor recorded if it were not for the efforts of the people themselves to preserve it. Whether in song, in letters, in legend or in prayer, African Americans strived to remember their history.

Wit, story and lies are a major part of African American culture and provide an important connection to the African roots of a people. In addition to an oral tradition that helped maintain history, storytelling has played an important role in preserving culturally specific myths, lessons and legacies. The need to mask the true meaning of conversations from an oppressive population added yet another level of nuance and metaphor to black American storytelling. From the monkey and lion tales of Africa to the Br'er Rabbit and Fox tales in the US, black people have a rich history of exploring life and conflict through stories.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 14.

Perhaps no other American writer so eloquently captures this tradition of telling stories, tall-tales or lies, than August Wilson who depicts it most frequently amongst men in the black American community. Whether in diners, recording studios, on porches or in jitney cab offices, Wilson brings these rituals amongst men to full color. The tales they tell are at once funny and prophetic, implausible yet true. Through these stories Wilson's characters connect with one another, revisit the past, console each other and corroborate a history that was written out of the textbooks. It happens naturally, with the jocularity and familiarity of family. By sharing their experiences with one another, these men create a space for themselves in the world.

With *Fences*, Wilson deftly walks the fine line between fact, fiction and the black response to racism. The play is rich with reflection and storytelling. Troy loves to tell stories. As his best friend Bono says, "I know you got some of that **Uncle Remus** in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners."<sup>45</sup> Indeed this is how the play begins, not with a traditional story, but with a *lie*:

BONO: Troy, you ought to stop that lying!

TROY: I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. Talking about... "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" And it sitting there big as life.

BONO: What Mr. Rand say?

TROY: Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't going to get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home.<sup>46</sup>

In this context a "lie" is a yarn or a tall tale that blurs the line between fact and fiction. Usually embedded within lies is some kind of lesson, moral or adage. Aware of the insidious use of watermelons as prop pieces in many white depictions of black people, Troy recalibrates the story to mean that the black man was afraid of being "caught" with a watermelon by a white man. In this situation, the man could have been literally hiding the watermelon under his coat, or perhaps standing near it but unwilling to pick it up in front of a white man. By placing it within the context of racial stereotypes, Troy imparts a lesson within the "lie." Whatever the scenario, if the effort was to keep the white man from cracking a joke about a black man with a watermelon, it worked. Denying something that is obvious alters the rules of engagement. The

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

white man, Mr. Rand, went on about his business and left the man in peace, assuming as Troy suggests that the man was either dumb or plumb out of his mind.

In the call and response pattern, the ritual phrasing, “Stop that lying!” and “I ain’t lying,” makes room for the story to come forth. These are the words that begin the play. It is akin to the Haitian tradition of beginning a story with the call “Krik?” and the response by listeners, “Kraak!” Similarly, these phrases can be used to punctuate the story, allowing for audience participation and to encourage the narrator to continue.

*Fences* is largely about negotiating the real from the legendary, the fact from the fiction, “how to tell where the shit lies, [and] how to tell it from the alfalfa.”<sup>47</sup> Throughout the play Troy dances between two kinds of lies, the ones that impart lessons and preserve his experiences and culture, and the lie he is living by engaging in an affair with another woman. The difference between them is discernable largely in his reaction to the listener’s response. Throughout the play Bono responds to Troy with “you lying.” In the presence of others, Rose responds to Troy’s tales with, “Troy lying.” Even his son, Lyons, tells his father “you too much, Pops.” Through these slight changes in rapport, Troy’s loved ones establish their relationship with him, pulling stories out of him. Rose never uses this phrase when the two are alone, for in that situation it would be considered an accusation. Lyons does not tell his father that he’s lying, but does gesture toward disbelief with respect. These gentle challenges actually make room for Troy to continue and even exaggerate his stories.

A wonderful example of this is the scene when Troy talks about meeting the devil:

TROY: Look here, Bono...I went down to see Hertzberger about some furniture. Got three rooms for two-ninety-eight. That’s what it say on the radio. Three rooms...two-ninety-eight. Even made up a little song about it. Go down there...man tell me I can’t get no credit. I’m working everyday and can’t get no credit. What to do? I got an empty house with some raggedy furniture in it. Cory ain’t got no bed. He’s sleeping on a pile of rags on the floor. Working every day and can’t get no credit. Come back home—Rose’ll tell you—madder than hell. Sit down, try to figure out what I’m gonna do. Come a knock on the door. Ain’t been living here but three days. Who know I’m here? Open the door...devil standing there bigger than life. White fellow....got on good clothes and everything. Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. I ain’t had to say nothing. First words out of his mouth was “I understand you need some furniture and can’t get no credit.” I liked to fell over. He say I’ll give you all the credit you want, but you got to pay the interest on it. I told him give me three rooms worth and charge whatever you want. Next day a truck pulled up here and two men unloaded them three rooms. Man what drove the truck give me a book. Say send ten dollars a month to the address in the book and everything will be all right. Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it’ll be hell to pay.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 60.

That was fifteen years ago. To this day, the first of the month I send my ten dollars, Rose'll tell you.

ROSE: Troy lying.<sup>48</sup>

Read on a superficial level, this is just another one of Troy's stories. In actuality, he is talking very wisely about American capitalism and the trap that awaits poor people. Troy's ultimate point is that if you are not earning the money for yourself, whatever you borrow will come to collect eventually. By relating it to the devil, he uncovers the situation for the immoral enterprise that it is. "Look here," Troy says, "I'll tell you this...it don't matter to me if he was the devil. It don't matter if the devil give credit. Somebody has got to give it."<sup>49</sup>

The lesson is informed by Troy's experience sharecropping as a child. "The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That's the only thing that mattered to him. Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living...Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin and find out he owe him money."<sup>50</sup> While the conversation is directed at Bono, Troy is actually counseling his own son about his irresponsibility with money. When Rose chides Troy for getting on his son Troy says, "I ain't bothering Lyons. Here...get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know."<sup>51</sup> Troy is careful not to directly criticize his son who is, at thirty-four years old, a grown man.

LYONS: Yeah, well, look here, Pop...let me have that ten dollars. I'll give it back to you. Bonnie got a job working at the hospital.

TROY: What I tell you, Bono? The only time I see this nigger is when he wants something. That's the only time I see him.

LYONS: Come on, Pop, Mr. Bono don't want to hear all that. Let me have the ten dollars. I told you Bonnie working.

TROY: What that mean to me? "Bonnie working." I don't care if she working. Go ask her for the ten dollars if she working. Talking about Bonnie working...why ain't you working?

LYONS: Aw, Pop, you know I can't find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can't get no job.

TROY: I told you I know some people down there. I can get you on the rubbish if you want to work. I told you the last time you came by here asking me for something.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 13.

LYONS: Naw, Pop...thanks. That ain't for me. I don't wanna be carrying nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock.

TROY: What's the matter? You too good to carry rubbish? Where you think that ten dollars you talking about come from? I'm just supposed to haul people's rubbish and give my money to you 'cause you too lazy to work. You too lazy to work and wanna know why you ain't got what I got.<sup>52</sup>

Troy is perhaps less appalled by Lyons' sentiments about trash collection because he realizes his son is lost. Troy is much harder on Cory, for example, whose future is still being shaped. Troy maintains a sense of propriety about black culture, business and American capitalism. Evident in the scene in which Rose and Troy argue about where to do their grocery shopping, Troy is concerned with community solidarity. His relationship with Bella is decidedly different from his relationship with white lenders:

BONO: ...I didn't know I could do better. I thought only white folks had inside toilets and things.

ROSE: There's a lot of people don't know they can do better than they doing now. That's just something you got to learn. A lot of folks still shop at Bella's.

TROY: Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food.

ROSE: I ain't said nothing about if she got fresh food. I'm talking about what she charge. She charge ten cents more than the A&P.

TROY: The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I'm treated right. I go down to Bella, say. "I need a loaf of bread, I'll pay you on Friday," she give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me? That ain't in the Bible.

ROSE: We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?

TROY: You shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me.<sup>53</sup>

Loyalty to black owned businesses and pride in one's labor—no matter how menial—seem at times archaic in *Fences*. Like Lyons' refusal to work alongside his father, these are themes that Wilson will explore again in later years. In both *King Hedley II* and *Radio Golf* the younger generations seem less and less grateful for the sacrifices that their elders have made. In this case, Lyons has no problem with his dad—a legendary baseball player—collecting trash, but he refuses to do it—and yet he borrows money from his father and feels no shame in that. Lyons

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7.

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rationalizes this ask by saying “I ain’t asked you to give me nothing, I asked you to loan me ten dollars.” Indeed when Lyons comes around again it is to repay his father for the money he has borrowed. Troy refuses—believing that it is more important for his son to save his money than to borrow it from someone else to repay him.

### **Living With a Full Count: Loving Troy Maxon**

A common sense of entitlement runs deep within the Maxon men, though it manifests itself in different ways. Just as Troy’s father felt perfectly justified in trying to have his way with Troy’s girlfriend, Troy feels justified in his extramarital affair with Alberta, Lyons feels justified being unemployed and living off his girlfriend because his music is what matters most to him, and Cory feels justified in disrespecting and lying to his father because he is good at football. Ultimately each of these men is thinking primarily about himself. Each has his own philosophy that explains his actions, often grounded in what the world dictates. They also each justify their choices with a sense of duty they try to fulfill. Even as each struggles to be his own man, they are more alike than they are different.

It is no secret that Troy Maxon is a difficult man. His loved ones have learned to negotiate with him to keep his temper from bubbling over, to help him feel secure and loved, to guide him when life begins to pull him off track. It is a skill, one learned by a family that feels simultaneously blessed and burdened by him.

Like many men who reached the apex of their manhood in poverty and during segregation, Troy has his own moral compass. At fourteen years old he left the tyranny of his father’s house in Alabama and headed north to Pittsburgh where he found black people living under bridges and in tar paper shacks. Without a place to live and no prospects of a job available to him, Troy stole food to survive. His logic told him that he had no other options and he “figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too.”<sup>54</sup> Alone in the world, he found comfort in the arms of a woman. She became pregnant and Troy’s moral compass told him he had to provide for his child—something his father had always done—but he had nothing to give. He began robbing people, holding them up for money. One day he tussled with the wrong man, got shot, mortally knifed the man and landed himself in jail. Fifteen years of his life went by in the penitentiary where ironically he was safe, given steady meals, and made a lifelong friend—Jim Bono. It was in prison that Troy learned to play baseball, to develop a skill that would provide a living for him once he got out.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

In the Negro Leagues Troy was finally good at something—great at something, one of the best. On the baseball field a man was judged by his talent. The rules of the game were clear and if he played by the rules and won, no one could take that from him. He had come up hard but found a way to make his life mean something. Even though many of the black ballplayers would have relished in an opportunity to compete against or alongside the white major league ball clubs, they resolved themselves to the fact that it was not going to happen. In this realm, inside the comforts and confines of his own culture, Troy was a legend. He met Rose, got married and a year later had a son. For six years they lived together happily until the world as Troy had known it changed forever. In the winter of 1945 Jackie Robinson crossed the color line, becoming the first black man to play for a major league baseball team in over sixty years.

It takes a long time for a man to come to a place where he is comfortable with himself, with his accomplishments and limitations. Since the day that Robinson stepped out onto the field suited up in a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform Troy had fought to do that. He convinced himself that he could be satisfied with living “a clean, hard, useful life.”<sup>55</sup> Yet he had never quite gotten over the fact that had it been for five years, Troy may have been able to play in the major leagues. He could have swung and hit the baseball further than almost any white man in the league. Race would not have mattered then—Troy would have stood there at home plate on his own merit.

That time never did come for Troy Maxon and it is an injustice he cannot let go. The recent accomplishments of young black players are cheapened because of the history and the fact that the rookies are most often sitting on the bench.

ROSE: They got a lot of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

BONO: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed. Troy just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! Now, you take that fellow....What’s that fellow they had playing left field for the Yankees back then? You know who I’m talking about, Bono. Used to play left field for the Yankees?

ROSE: Selkirk?

TROY: Selkirk! That’s it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing left field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson’s daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk’s daughter ain’t walking around with raggedy shoes. I bet you that!

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

ROSE: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball, then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play, then they ought to have let you play.<sup>56</sup>

Almost worse than never seeing a black man play in the major leagues was seeing it happen just a few short years after he was eligible to be that man. Rose tries to put Troy's experience in perspective for him, help him see that their son has an opportunity to do something that Troy could not do. She is at once consoling and optimistic. Troy reads her tone as argumentative, but in truth it is not Rose who Troy argues against. It is the years gone, the words unsaid, the thanks never given, the opportunity missed. This is what Troy argues against, like ghosts he is haunted by things he cannot change and is yet too hurt to imagine that hope could lie somewhere ahead, even in the talent and passion of his own son. This conflict is visible in their exchanges.

The same personalized sense of right and wrong that has helped Troy cope with the racism that poisoned his experience with baseball is what justifies his affair with Alberta. Just like baseball, with his marriage Troy feels he has done all he was supposed to, all that was necessary out of the deal. After eighteen years of going to work as a garbage man—when in another world he was a legend—after eighteen years of coming home and giving Rose the money he was able to earn by virtue of his strength to lift trash bins day in and day out, after seeing that his son had a roof over his head, food in his belly, clothes on his back, was in school and respectful of his mother, after eighteen years of living “right” drinking only once a week with his friend Bono, Troy felt justified in indulging that place inside him he had ignored for so long. The place that basked in adoration, the part of himself that was more than and different from a garbage man, a husband and a father, a part of him he had enjoyed only a short while before he realized his time in the spotlight had come and gone. As long as he was a dutiful husband and father, he was entitled to his life with Alberta. “Rose,” Troy explains, “I don't mess up my pay. You know that now. I take my pay and I give it to you. I don't have no money but what you give me back. I just want to have a little time to myself...a little time to enjoy life.”<sup>57</sup>

Rather than embrace the quiet of his life, Troy saw his life with Rose as dutiful living, a penance. He put the accountability for that life on Rose, without her asking for it, as though it

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

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was her who kept him from recognizing the potential for enjoyment and peace. But as Troy said, he opted not to do that. He saw his choice to settle down and get married as a “bunt,” never feeling as if he had gone out with that power swing.

TROY: When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job, I was safe. Couldn't nothing touch me. I wasn't going to strike out no more. I wasn't going back to the penitentiary. I wasn't going to lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn't gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home. ... It's not easy for me to admit that I been standing in the same place for eighteen years.<sup>58</sup>

Troy was waiting for something, as he said, waiting for the hit that could bring him home. What he did not realize was that he was no longer standing on the same field—that in this game, he was already home, already safe.

Many of the stars of the Negro Leagues saw a place for themselves in integrated baseball, even if it was not on the field. They coached the rookies and helped them sharpen their skills so that they could play the best baseball possible and represent African Americans with pride and dignity. Their hard-earned glory came in the faces of the young ones coming up:

Should the black stars have raised black fists and demanded integration? Would such a tactic have worked? Probably not—not given the world of thirty to forty years ago.... Instead of speeding integration, they might have set it back by decades. So they bit their lips and waited, and when the door was finally opened, they stepped back like Moses on Pisgah and watched the rookie, Jackie Robinson, walk through, while they remained outside, cheering him on.<sup>59</sup>

It was not just Troy's experience with baseball that informed his understanding of right and wrong. He learned hard lessons at a young age, came up struggling for everything he had. In his mind, to work in service of someone else was the highest testament to commitment, but given his failed dreams, he also saw himself as a martyr. So caught up in himself, what Troy never fully realized was that Rose had made concessions to live with him as well.

Like many of the Negro League players, Troy likely had scores of women following him during his career. Bono says it himself:

BONO: Troy, I done known you seem like damn near all my life. You and Rose both. I done known both of you for a long time. I remember when you met Rose. When you was hitting them baseballs out the park. A lot of them old gals was after you then. You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That was the first time I knew you had any sense.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>59</sup> Holway, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson, 60.

Given that Troy is famous for “eyeing the women,” to have caught his eye apart from the rest of the women, Rose is likely attractive. This is the element that Troy misses—he does not consider the other options Rose had. When she insinuates that she had wants and needs that had gone unanswered for years of living with him he becomes furious with her. She chose Troy because she loves him, not because of what he could provide her with. The life of a garbage man is not a glamorous one—a smart woman, Rose knew that Troy would not be able to play baseball forever. She also knew that he was uneducated, almost illiterate. With him, prospects were slim.

Not unlike Troy, Rose bore down against that realization too, yet she never felt entitled to private time or the option to go outside their marriage to search for consolation. Instead, Rose felt she was entitled to reciprocity; the same love and commitment she offered Troy, she expected in return. His commitment to his life as a laborer, husband and father prompted him to look outside that life for solace; her commitment to her life as homemaker, wife and mother prompted her to look inside that life for comfort. Ultimately, neither found what they were looking for. Each talks about “latching on” to the other, Rose tells Troy that in times of doubt he should have done what she did, held on tighter. Eventually, each so hungry for security and family in this world, both suffocated. Troy says, “You ain’t the blame Rose. A man couldn’t ask for no woman to be a better wife than you’ve been. I’m responsible for it. I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself.”<sup>61</sup> Rose echoes a similar sentiment, “When [he] walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me, for my part in the matter.”<sup>62</sup> The tragedy of the relationship between Troy and Rose is that each was looking to the other to fill up the emptiness deep inside; personal failings and disappointments, insecurities that went unchecked, hopes never fully realized. In the end, they lived like lonely planets, each orbiting the same sun, but too wounded to find their way back to one another.

*Fences*, which premiered in 1987, was in a way a precursor to the wisdom Wilson would explore later when he wrote *Gem of the Ocean*. In this play, set at the turn of the century, blossoming love between people was based on being right with oneself first; a man could not come to a woman looking to fill her up and be filled up by her. The physical act of lovemaking was not enough to ground a man inside himself, or usher a woman into the full breadth of her capacity to receive and shape those she chose to love. In Wilson’s oeuvre, this wisdom belonged to the elders. The younger generations seem to have lost track of it. Wilson’s keen understanding of the experience of blackness as bodily, of the flesh, provided fertile territory for him to explore the ways in which black men and women experienced their bodies, used their

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 93.

bodies, sold their bodies, to survive and live through the fact of being born black. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Troy Maxon, who fumbles so with love and his own sense of self-worth was born in the same year that *Gem of the Ocean* was set, 1904. He is heir to a legacy of wisdom from which he has cut himself off because he cannot let go of his major league dreams and the wrong that was done to him at the hands of the white establishment.

Rose understands this. Her capacity for tolerance and forgiveness are sprung from the wounds Troy still harbors. It is in part for this reason that she understands what is happening with Troy before he admits to the affair. For example, after Gabriel's visit, Troy reflects upon the fact that if it were not for the meager compensation awarded to his brother after his injury, Troy would not have his home and what small security it affords his family. Desperate for some measure of his own worth and masculinity as the breadwinner in the household, Troy leaves to console himself with the one dream he seems to think will not fail him, another woman. Rose calls upon him to remember where his real strength lies, "Where you going off to? You been running out of here every Saturday for weeks. I thought you was going to work on this fence?"

The fence, Troy's weekly project, is Rose's attempt to refocus Troy's attention and dedication to his own family.

CORY: I don't see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.

TROY: Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain't got nothing nobody want.

BONO: Some people build fences to keep people out...and some people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you.<sup>63</sup>

Troy means to say that *he* has nothing worth value to outsiders. He does not consider his wife and son in this equation, he is thinking primarily about objects—things that can be stolen. But Rose does have something that someone else wants. Alberta wants Troy. Perhaps Rose suggested that Troy take up this project because she knew the only time he would have to complete it was on the weekends, a way to keep him around the house. She also likely hoped that it would be time for Cory to spend with his father, perhaps repairing some of the animosity between them and helping them to bond. While Troy seems either blind or willfully ignorant of Rose's gentle corrections, Bono understands clearly. "Rose'll keep you straight," he tells his friend. "You get off the track, she'll straighten you up."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 54.

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**Families Made and Found: Friendship Amongst Men**

Troy's lifelong friend Bono largely mediates the relationship between he and Rose. Without Bono, conversations between Troy and Rose are not as playful, focusing more on issues with their son Cory or Troy's brother Gabriel. By virtue of his presence, Bono facilitates Troy's mischievous flirtation with Rose, making room for Troy to tease his wife, compliment her, and demonstrate that he loves her in his own way. The story of their meeting, for example, changes a bit with Bono listening—Troy embellishes the story or alters pieces of it to make room for Rose to participate in the telling of it, allowing her some ownership of the story too.

- TROY: ...Saw Rose and latched on to her. I latched onto her and told her—I'm gonna tell you the truth—I told her, "Baby, I don't wanna marry, I just wanna be your man." Rose told me...tell him what you told me, Rose.
- ROSE: I told him if he wasn't the marrying kind, then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me.
- TROY: That's what she told me. "Nigger, you in my way. You blocking the view! Move out the way so I can find me a husband." I thought it over two or three days. Come back—
- ROSE: Ain't no two or three days nothing. You was back the same night.
- TROY: Come back, told her "Okay, baby...but I'm gonna by me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard, and when he see a stranger come, he'll flap his wings and crown..." Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself; it was that backdoor I was worried about.
- ROSE: Troy you ought not talk like that. Troy ain't doing nothing but telling a lie.
- TROY: Only thing is, when we first got married, forget the rooster—we ain't had no yard!<sup>65</sup>

Without Bono there, this kind of rapport between Rose and Troy would not be possible. Bono also allows Troy to voice some of his own concerns. According to this passage, it seems that Troy was concerned about committing to marriage because he was afraid his wife might be adulterous. Likely Troy would not even broach the subject if he believed there was a remote possibility that she were. However, with Bono listening Troy is communicating on multiple levels. On the one hand he is acknowledging the thoughts of adultery in his own mind and projecting his fears of getting caught toward Rose on the other. There are important insights to be found even in this jovial exchange.

Just before Rose enters this scene Bono cautiously broaches the subject of Troy's interest in another woman. Alberta, fresh up from Tallahassee, Florida, is a newcomer to

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

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Pittsburgh and has caught the interest of most of the men with her tendency to hang out at the local watering hole. Bono has watched Troy entertain his fancy for Alberta, and has even seen his friend walking nearby the place where she rooms. His warning is cordial—cautious so as not to spark Troy’s famous temper—but serious nonetheless.

- BONO: How you figure he making out with that gal be up at Taylor’s all the time...that Alberta gal?
- TROY: Same as you and me. Getting just as much as we is. Which is to say nothing.
- BONO: It is, huh? I figure you doing a little better than me...and I ain’t saying what I’m doing.
- TROY: Aw nigger, look here...I know you. If you had got anywhere near that gal, twenty minutes later you gonna be looking to tell somebody. And the first one you gonna tell...that you gonna want to brag to...is gonna be me.
- BONO: I ain’t saying that. I see where you be eyeing her.
- TROY: I eye all the women. I don’t miss nothing. Don’t never let nobody tell you Troy Maxon don’t eye the women.
- BONO: You been doing more than eyeing her. You done bought her a drink or two.
- TROY: Hell yea, I bought her a drink! What that mean? I bought you one, too. What that mean ‘cause I buy her a drink? I’m just being polite.
- BONO: It’s all right to buy her one drink. That’s what you call being polite. But when you wanna be buying two or three...that’s what you call eyeing her.<sup>66</sup>

In this clever exchange between friends, the language slips slightly but importantly. Bono uses the term “eyeing” to mean two things; on the one hand it means that Troy has taken an interest in Alberta, on the other hand it means that he has begun to act on his desire for her. The way that Bono describes it demonstrates that the budding connection between his friend and this woman is a slippery slope in which Troy might find himself entangled enough to lose what Bono sees as a precious relationship with Rose.

It happens again later,

- BONO: I see you and that Tallahassee gal—that Alberta—I see you all done got tight.
- TROY: What you mean “got tight?”
- BONO: I see where you be laughing and joking with her all the time.
- TROY: I laughs and jokes with all of them, Bono. You know me.

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

BONO: That ain't the kind of laughing and joking I'm talking about.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, Bono spends most of the play warning Troy against consummating his interest in Alberta at the expense of his relationship with Rose. By talking indirectly about the situation, Bono wards off Troy's anger but still gets his point home.

BONO: Troy, I done known you seem like damn near all my life. You and Rose both. I done known both of you for a long time. I remember when you met Rose. When you was hitting them baseballs out the park. A lot of them old gals was after you then. You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That was the first time I knew you had any sense. I said, "My man Troy knows what he's doing; I'm gonna follow this nigger, he might take me somewhere." I been following you too. I done learned a heap of things about life watching you. I done learned how to tell where the shit lies, how to tell it from the alfalfa. You done learned me a lot of things. You showed me how not to make the same mistakes, to take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

(Pause.)

Rose a good woman, Troy.<sup>68</sup>

While Bono's track is rather circuitous, there is intention behind his delivery. His point is sound, but it arrives in a round-about kind of way, edged with compliments so as not to run full-force into a man who will fight at the drop of a hat. It echoes the West African wisdom that said it was better to circle around toward something than head at it directly. This is represented in many textile patterns; the interruption of lines are said to ward off evil or malicious intent. Robert Farris Thompson has found correlative themes in American slave cabins wherein slaves decorated the walls with newsprint so that the lines of text met and changed direction in a repetitive manner to ward off evil spirits from a resting place.<sup>69</sup> While an outsider might find this reasoning illogical, in fact it is an effort to anticipate the response of external forces and quite deft indeed.

Bono also has his own line and he is trying as best he can to keep Troy from crossing it. After he broaches the subject of Alberta for the last time, Bono says, "Well, that's all I got to say. I just say that because I love you both."<sup>70</sup> Bono's patience for Troy's mischief has worn thin. He can foresee the outcome and in a rather resigned manner, he makes one last attempt to correct his friend before it is too late. As Bono recalls the lessons he has learned from Troy, he is sharing one of his own—don't let history repeat itself, learn from your mistakes, be grateful for what you have. He knows it is only a matter of time before Troy's affair is out in the open.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1983) 221-2.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, 61.

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### In the Shadow of Greatness: Waiting to Bloom

While Rose never directly acknowledges it, it is clear that she is paying attention to her husband's errant behavior. As Wilson explains, Rose understands that Troy has his faults. Wilson's description of Rose reveals less about Rose's character and more about the agreement she and her husband have tacitly struck:

She is ten years younger than Troy, and her devotion to him stems from her recognition of her life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration. She recognizes Troy's spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognizes.<sup>71</sup>

Even taking into account the time period and the limited opportunity for black people in America, Wilson's depiction of Rose's choices is reductive. Historically, black women have taken care of one another in ways that would afford a woman like Rose other options than resigning herself to spinsterhood or becoming swept up in the street life. What is missing in Wilson's early description of Rose is her own agency, her ability to choose Troy because of her desire for him. It is out of this, not the bleak lifestyle open to her without him, that she stays with him. As if he had to pass in order for Rose to articulate of her own desire, is not until after Troy's death she speaks with agency about her choices:

ROSE: When I first met your daddy I thought, here's a man I can lay down with and make a baby. That's the first thing I thought when I seen him. I was thirty years old and had done seen my share of men. But when he walked up to me and said, "I can dance a waltz that'll make you dizzy," I thought, Rose Lee, here is a man that you can open yourself up to and be filled to bursting. Here is a man that can fill all them empty spaces you been tipping around the edges of. One of them empty spaces was being somebody's mother. I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house, he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me, for my part in the matter. But at the time I wanted that. I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. *I did that*. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore. *It was my choice*. It was my life and I didn't have to live it like that.<sup>72</sup>

It is clear throughout the play that Rose understands Troy. The concessions she makes for him are frustrating for others to see, but she has a sense of her own commitment to him. She has seen Troy through his sadness, stayed by his side through the maddening hours when he relived his glory days and been there in the quiet of his resignation too. She shored him up, kept him focused on something other than the past—for eighteen years Rose and her son Cory were

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 93-4. Emphasis mine.

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the present and the future for Troy. They were stability and strength. Troy's experience in the Negro Leagues made a legend out of the man he tried to be. When Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in his lifetime, he was too broken to celebrate. Far from his glory days to play but not far enough to recognize his window was closed, Troy was a walking wounded. He had not found the thing inside him he needed to heal and imagined that Alberta could fill up the emptiness he felt inside for the recognition he never received.

On the surface it seems that because he never received recognition for his immense talent, Troy has a difficult time recognizing the talent in his own son, Cory. Cory is treated differently than others because his father has grander expectations for him than he does for himself, his brother, his best friend or eldest son. Cory represents the untarnished dream, and when Troy realizes that Cory's heart's desire is to play football, he feels betrayed at the deepest level. Not only is his son ignoring the lessons Troy had to learn, as Troy feared, the blood coursing through Cory's veins is beginning to dictate his future.

In the following scene, Cory is likely trying to play with his father in the way he has seen Lyons and Bono do, jostling each other with challenges. But Cory does not have the intuitive qualities that Rose, Bono and Lyons have—whether it is his age, or his desperation to be recognized by his father as his own person—Cory cannot seem to connect with Troy. In juxtaposition to the good-natured challenges posed by the others that encourage Troy to share his opinions, experiences and feelings, Troy is silenced when his son Cory disrespectfully defies him. What begins as a son's attempt to bond with his father turns into a sad exchange in which the reality of a forgotten history hits home. Cory gets excited about the local major league team, the Pittsburgh Pirates. Troy is unimpressed:

CORY:     The Pirates done won five in a row.

TROY:     I ain't thinking about the Pirates. Got an all-white team. Got that boy...that Puerto Rican boy...Clemente. Don't even half-play him. That boy could be something if they give him a chance. Play him one day and sit him on the bench the next.

CORY:     He gets a lot of chances to play.

TROY:     I'm talking about playing regular. Playing everyday so you can get your timing. That's what I'm talking about.

CORY:     They got some white guys on the team that don't play every day. You can't play everybody at the same time.

TROY:     If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench, you can bet your last dollar he can't play! The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you all tied up in them sports. Man on the

team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't play them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.

CORY: The Braves got Hank Aaron and Wes Covington. Hank Aaron hit two home runs today. That makes forty-three.

TROY: Hank Aaron ain't nobody. That's the way you supposed to do. That's how you supposed to play the game. Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing....getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!

CORY: Not off no major-league pitching you couldn't.

TROY: We had better pitchers in the Negro League. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!

CORY: Sandy Koufax. He's leading the league in strikeouts.

TROY: I ain't thinking of no Sandy Koufax nothing.

CORY: You got Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. I bet you couldn't hit no home runs off of Warren Spahn.

TROY: I'm through with it now.<sup>73</sup>

In his eagerness to challenge his father, he places him in a situation in which Troy has nothing but his words to prove himself—he was never allowed, nor ever will be at this point in his life, to best a major league pitcher. Cory goes quickly and decisively to the deepest pain Troy carries. Ultimately Troy's response is to turn the focus away from himself and onto his son—not to wallow in the past but to think about the future. The first child that Troy has actually fathered (Lyons was born while Troy was locked up in the penitentiary) Cory has experienced the brunt of his father's long struggle with the past and the confusion of the quickly advancing future. In his son he sees potential, the possibility to have opportunities, respect, that Troy never had, but his way of guiding Cory is to control him, and his inability to see that his son needs recognition as much as he did is ultimately what keeps them from reaching one another.

Rather than realizing that it was men like Troy who made it possible for Cory to even consider playing ball, or to go to college on an athletic scholarship, Cory imagines that his father is afraid his son will best him. "You ain't never gave me nothing. You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid was gonna be better than you."<sup>74</sup> In reality, Troy does not want his son to have his heart broken as his was.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

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- ROSE: Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports.
- TROY: I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.
- ROSE: Troy, why don't you just admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once...why don't you admit that?
- TROY: What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and I can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!
- ROSE: How was you gonna play ball when you was over forty? Sometimes I can't get no sense out of you.
- TROY: I got good sense, woman. I got sense enough not to let my boy get hurt over playing no sports. You been mothering that boy too much. Worried about if people like him.
- ROSE: Everything that boy do he do for you. He wants you to say "Good job, son." That's all.
- TROY: Rose, I ain't got time for all that. He's alive. He's healthy. He's got to make his own way. I made mine. Ain't nobody gonna hold his hand when he get out there in that world.
- ROSE: Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it.<sup>75</sup>

Cory thinks that in order to establish himself as a man he has to diminish his father's greatness. Knowing that Troy is deeply wounded from not being recognized as one of the greats and a major league baseball player, Cory misconstrues his father's tough love for jealousy at the opportunities he has. In the end, they are more alike than they are different. Each struggles with his father's legacy and power:

- CORY: The whole time I was growing up, living in this house, Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging into your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you...

Troy echoes a similar sentiment as he talks about his father, but with the advantage of age, he realizes that he can make choices—he can respect his father for what he was and criticize him for what he was not, but ultimately Troy is responsible for his own life.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36-7.

TROY: Right there is where I become a man...at fourteen years of age.  
(Pause.)  
Now it was my turn to run him off. I picked up the same reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him. The gal jumped up and run off, and when my daddy turned to face me, I could see why the devil had never come to get him: 'cause he was the devil himself. I don't know what happened. When I woke up I was laying right there by the creek and Blue—this old dog we had—was licking my face. I thought I was blind. I couldn't see nothing. Both my eyes were swollen shut. I layed there and cried. I didn't know what I was gonna do. The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house. And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it. Part of that cutting down was when I got to the place where I could feel him kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years.<sup>76</sup>

Eventually Rose warns Cory that “disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You got to find a way to come to that on your own.”<sup>77</sup> It is unfortunate that this lesson comes after his father has passed.

ROSE: You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't...and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong, but I know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm.<sup>78</sup>

In the end, both Rose and Cory seem to have made peace with Troy. Rose finds solace in Raynell, the little girl Troy brought home from the hospital after Alberta died. She says to Cory, “I'm going to do her just like your daddy did you...I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me.”<sup>79</sup>

In the end, Troy exists in a world outside of everyone he has loved. Alberta, the woman he risked everything for, died in childbirth. Rose agrees to raise the child but has separated herself from her husband—even though they share the same household, Troy has little bearing on her choices any longer. Bono, who tried to warn Troy time and again finally tired of him and no longer visits. Lyons is locked up in jail, Gabriel hospitalized because of his apparent madness, and Troy ran Cory off after he challenged his father and told him “you don't count around here no more.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 84.

In the end, it is clear that the respect Troy has lost was not for his legendary baseball prowess. His family and friends loved and respected him rather for his ordinariness, for his ability to make it through each day, knowing that he had been so much more at one time and still able to persevere. This element of Troy's life was what gave people hope—gave Bono, Rose, Lyons and even Cory permission to love him in spite of his faults. When he succumbed to his desire for Alberta, imagining he was entitled to something in exchange for the dutiful life he lived, the blush came off the rose so to speak. His fall from grace was quiet and slow, like the bitterness that ate away at him year after year. Unable to fight the real forces that oppress him, Troy projected his frustrations and anger onto those who are closest to him. Ultimately this is his downfall.

Ironically it is Raynell who helps Cory to the other side of his anger about his father. She asks him if he knew Blue, the dog that Troy used to sing about.

TROY: You hear this, Bono? I had me an old dog used to get uppity like that. You say, comere, Blue...and he just lay there and look at you. End up getting a stick and chasing him away trying to make him come.

ROSE: I ain't studying you and your dog. I remember you used to sing that old song.

TROY: (He sings)  
I had a dog his name was Blue  
You know Blue was mighty true  
You know Blue was a good old dog  
Blue treed a possum in a hollow log

ROSE: Don't nobody wanna hear you sing that old song. Used to have Cory running around here singing that song.

BONO: Hell I remember that myself.

TROY: That was my daddy's song. My daddy made up that song.<sup>81</sup>

As Cory remembers the song and finds the strength to sing it, he finally honors the legacy of his father and joins the line of Maxon men, for better or for worse, "the crooked with the straights."

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 41-2.