# GEM OF THE OCEAN

*by* AUGUST WILSON

*directed by* LOU BELLAMY

*presented at the* GUTHRIE THEATER

APRIL 25 THROUGH MAY 18, 2008

PREVIEWS APRIL 22, 23 & 24

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Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

## Educational Tools
***Penumbra Theatre Study Guide***

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

**Penumbra Theatre Company** occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

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**PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE**
***GEM OF THE OCEAN***

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## THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An Exploratory Essay by Sarah Bellamy

### The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

### Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or "mediums," to communicate meaning. The artist's effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture.

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His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist's "voice." Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist's perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as "artistic commentary." It conveys the artist's intent, or impetus for creating something.

**The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist**

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will "read" (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the

integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

**Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture**

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

**Summary**

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

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## A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the **African roots** of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was **The African Grove Theater** in New York City. It was founded by **William Henry Brown** and **James Hewlett**, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.[1]

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were **the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy** and **the Jezebel**. These

[1] For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts.* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

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racist depictions would be reflected over and again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, **William Wells Brown**, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. **Minstrelsy** was very popular in the 19th Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in **blackface** would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, **Jim Crow**, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to "perform" white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors' racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America's most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as **The Harlem Renaissance**. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by **Willis Richardson**.[2] Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. **Langston Hughes** and **Jean Toomer** were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes' famous poem "**Notes on Commercial Theater**":

[2] Ibid., 165.

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You've taken my blues and gone --
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
All kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me --
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me --
Black and beautiful --
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.[3]

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the **Black Arts Movement** of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as **LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka**, **Ed Bullins**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Harold Cruse**, **Ray Durem**, **Adrienne Kennedy**, **Larry Neal** and **Sonia Sanchez** all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 **Lorraine Hansberry**'s famous play ***A Raisin in the Sun*** opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (**Lloyd Richards**) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was **Penumbra Theatre Company** in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director **Lou Bellamy**, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright **August Wilson** said of Penumbra:

> It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years

[3] Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes.* (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

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> ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills.* I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of ***The Piano Lesson*** would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style an eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.[4]

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

[4] August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

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## INTRODUCTION

Penumbra Theatre Company is honored to dedicate the next five years exploring the 20th Century through the eyes of two time Pulitzer Prize-wining playwright August Wilson.

August Wilson is one of the most celebrated playwrights of the day. His accomplishments include a cycle of ten plays each devoted to a different decade in black American history through the 20th Century. He was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes, witnessed countless Broadway stagings of his work, procured film deals and the respect and admiration of artists, theorists and theatre-goers alike. His work offers students a special opportunity to deeply research the cultural nuance, specificity and experience of black Americans struggling for autonomy and a place within a country rent by its history of racialized slavery.

Because this playwright set himself about depicting African American life decade by decade through the 20th Century, August Wilson's cycle presents a unique opportunity to explore the social and historical context for the drama. Each play becomes a window into American history, told by the disenfranchised, those that were all too often written out of the history books. Contemporary audiences witness the reanimation of our uniquely American history, situated always against the legacy of slavery that built this great nation. Wilson portrays the dogged determination, the abiding hope, and the deafening disappointment experienced by black Americans who found the rules changing to exclude them. The message came home clearly each time: the wealth, prosperity and justice of this great nation is available to the racial and economic elite. Poor black people would always have a hard row to hoe, but it was made doubly hard by those who were determined to maintain the old regime of subservience and domination.

Wilson's plays share black American pain and frustration but also ingenuity and efforts toward success in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. What emerges is a richly nuanced visit with the American historical archive, a place to sit with old ghosts as well as old friends and both honor and reconcile the past.

The study guides produced for each of the plays over the next five years will offer deep historical contextualization of each decade, while knitting together the larger American story of the birth of our nation and its rise to global dominance.

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## THE 20TH CENTURY CYCLE – AUGUST WILSON, AN AMERICAN LEGEND

August Wilson dedicated his life to presenting authentic representations of black American life and culture for the stage. Over the next five years, Penumbra will produce the entire cycle, giving audiences an opportunity to witness his work as interpreted by the artists who brought these plays to life in a way that he had not experienced before.

Wilson said that Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* (1993) "would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." That work became a decade-by-decade depiction of the dreams, disappointments and determination of African Americans over the past hundred years. What he saw at Penumbra emboldened him to broaden his own expectations:

"We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of Penumbra Theatre enlarged that possibility."

Wilson's profound project, the 20th Century Cycle, is a candid album depicting American history at its most tender, tough and triumphant.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1900s | Gem of the Ocean |
| 1910s | Joe Turner's Come and Gone |
| 1920s | Ma Rainey's Black Bottom |
| 1930s | The Piano Lesson* |
| 1940s | Seven Guitars |
| 1950s | Fences* |
| 1960s | Two Trains Running |
| 1970s | Jitney |
| 1980s | King Hedley II |
| 1990s | Radio Golf |

* denotes a Pulitzer Prize

**August Wilson** (April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005)

August Wilson grew up in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His childhood experiences in this predominately African American community informed his dramatic writing. Wilson's singular achievement and literary legacy is a cycle of ten plays dubbed "The Pittsburgh Cycle." Each is set in a different decade, depicting the comedy and tragedy of the African-American experience in the 20th century, " a device," Charles Whittaker (*Ebony*) wrote, "that has enabled Wilson to explore, often in very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery." Wilson's project became more than ten poetic plays. The cycle is a metronome of American culture, reflecting the buried heartbeat of an experience parallel to the mainstream. These are snapshots of life in a country that has both celebrated and scorned black people. The entire album is the story of our nation. "This cycle," notes *the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* theater critic Christopher Rawson, "is unprecedented in American theater for its concept, size, and cohesion."

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Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the *New York Times*, August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. For example, *Fences*, tells the story of a black baseball player who broke national records by leaps and bounds but was prevented from playing outside of the Negro Leagues. *Fences* opened on Broadway in the spring of 1987 to enormous critical acclaim and earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.

**Gem of the Ocean**
Regional Premier, Spring 2008

*Gem of the Ocean* begins the century-long cycle chronicling black American life. Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal. Aunt Ester makes room in the world for those cast aside. She examines and treats wounded souls. Her wisdom is ancient, timeless, connected to the source from which black Americans had been taken. *Gem of the Ocean* introduces audiences to Aunt Ester, keeper of the flame.

**Joe Turner's Come and Gone**
Produced by Penumbra in 1991 and 2002

Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, this play was inspired by **Romare Bearden's** painting **Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket**. Harold Loomis was modeled after the brooding, ominous figure in the center. Recently freed from bondage, Loomis has traveled north to Pittsburgh with his young daughter in tow. They are looking for his wife, estranged from him when Joe Turner arrested him for gambling. For seven years Joe Turner held Loomis hostage on his illegal plantation. The experience recreated the nightmare of slavery and Loomis lost his "song." *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is the haunting tale of a community of transient people who band together to heal one man and ultimately heal one another.

**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**
Produced by Penumbra in 1987 and 1996

The only play in the cycle that takes place outside of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delves into the sultry and dangerous 1920s blues scene in Chicago. Ma Rainey was a renowned vocalist, famous for her deep and forthright interpretation of the blues. Though undeniably talented, she was still subject to the racism pervasive in the American music industry. Held in check by white producers, she continually defied their limits to her talent, potential and authority. When Levee, a man deeply scarred from the harassment and dismissal of his worth by white society, strays from the group to reach for a solo career the magic of the band is broken. Levee's once golden trumpeting emerges from the pain and rage of his own personal anguish in a tragic, misguided cry for help.

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**The Piano Lesson***
Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2008

The piano that sits in the salon of the Charles home is very valuable. For Bernice, it holds the spirit of her grandparents, sold away in exchange for it during slavery. For her brother, Boy Willie, it holds the key to his freedom from the burden of sharecropping for a meager wage. The struggle between the siblings over the symbolic and literal value of the piano escalates into a conflict that threatens to tear the family apart. Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* represents Wilson's work at its definitive best, the playwright himself called it his "favorite staging [and] a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson* is the story of a family haunted by the living legacy of American slavery.

**Seven Guitars**
Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2003

The story of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, a blues guitarist on the cusp of stardom, unravels in flashback after his untimely death. We meet Floyd as he's talking his way back into Vera's heart, a woman who has given him everything until finally, she has given up. But Floyd won't be discouraged. His eye is focused on a clear light, a light that promises to bathe him in real success if he can carry his talent, his drive and his love toward a record deal waiting for him in Chicago. Floyd's charm and enthusiasm stirs up the hope in everyone. As Floyd's success beckons, it is with reservation that one by one they begin to believe in the possibility of dreams coming true. Finally, in a full chorus, while mourning the loss of their friend, each of these seven souls has a song to sing, its hope tinged with the kind of sadness only a blues guitar can cry.

**Fences***
Produced by Penumbra in 1990 and 1997

Baseball makes sense to Troy Maxson; a man gets three strikes and he's out. In this most American of pastimes, Troy has found an opportunity to play by the rules and win. When his rapid rise through the Negro leagues hits the ceiling of racial prejudice, however, Troy is forced to let go of his dream of major league success. Set in 1957, *Fences* is the story of a baseball player whose prime came before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier. A Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences* is the heartbreaking story of a man who by all rights should have been an American legend.

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**Two Trains Running**
Produced by Penumbra in 1994 and 2003

*Two Trains Running* is set in a modest diner frequented by the same group of folks. Memphis is hardly making a large profit with his small café, in fact, he's probably barely scraping by. But the place has sustained a small community of folks in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and it is his. It is 1969. The country is rapidly changing. The Civil Rights Movement has folks floored, reeling from its fervor and insistence. The Hill District, too, is seeing change as developers buy historic buildings with plans to tear them down to make way for new developments. They have come for Memphis' diner. He has vowed to make the city give him a fair price for his place and is willing to go through fire to get it. No one knows quite what Memphis has been through, but all soon realize that this is his most important stand. *Two Trains Running* illuminates the simple poetry in justice, that in trade one should be given what one is due. Too many times the people of the diner have been duped or shortchanged, and in the name of one man whose simple logic of fair trade has driven him literally to madness, this group of disenfranchised, depressed few finds the integrity on which they make a final stand.

**Jitney**
Produced by Penumbra in 1985 and 2000

Revisiting themes of urban renewal, *Jitney* is set in 1970 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Eager to gentrify the neighborhood, the city threatens to level a makeshift taxi dispatch office where neighbors gather that has served the community for years. As he tries to stave off the city, the owner of the cab company faces his own inner struggle. After a twenty-year stint in prison for murder, his son is returning home. Regarded as a lyrically symphonic play, *Jitney* tells the story of a generation recognizing its mortality while the next must face its responsibility.

**King Hedley II**
Produced by Penumbra in 2003

It was Hedley that young Ruby chose in *Seven Guitars* and she named their child King. We meet King as a grown man, fighting to survive a life that seems never to look bright. King carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. At times, he even seems strapped with a curse. Yet King imagines that he is crowned instead, adorned with a halo whose meaning he does not yet know. *King Hedley II* is a riveting play about the past revisiting a man struggling to free himself from the grip of his family's legacy while desperate to hold on to his loved ones.

**Radio Golf**
Penumbra Theatre Company has not yet produced this play.

*Radio Golf* is the story of a man whose path through life has been decreed by his father. Following in the footsteps of a well-respected but feared man, Harmond Wilks struggles to evade his shadow. He does what is expected of him in order to help his community, but it is ultimately his own journey and rejection of the grandeur which awaits him that brings him back to the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District.

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## CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

| | |
|---|---|
| **Eli:** | Aunt Ester's gatekeeper and longtime friend of Solly. |
| **Citizen Barlow:** | A young man from Alabama who is in spiritual turmoil. Late twenties/early thirties. |
| **Aunt Ester Tyler:** | A very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community. |
| **Black Mary:** | Aunt Ester's protégé and housekeeper. Late twenties. |
| **Rutherford Selig:** | A traveling peddler who is a frequent visitor of the house. |
| **Solly Two Kings:** | Suitor to Aunt Ester, former Underground Railroad conductor. Sixty-seven. |
| **Caesar Wilks:** | Black Mary's brother and local constable. About fifty-two. |

## SETTING AND SCENE BREAKDOWN

Prepared by August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth

**Setting** (as noted in the script)
1904, the Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the parlor of Eli, Aunt Ester and Black Mary's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue

**Synopsis** (from Penumbra's season brochure)
Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of freed black Americans are unprepared for the white backlash against their newly acquired freedom. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal. Aunt Ester makes room in the world for those cast aside. She examines and treats wounded souls. Her wisdom is ancient, timeless, connected to the source from which black Americans had been taken. She is a figure of mythic proportion, offering strength and hope to overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable. Gem of the Ocean introduces Aunt Ester, the 285-year-old fiery matriarch of Wilson's 20th Century Cycle – the keeper of the flame.

**Scene breakdown** (short version)
Prologue – Late Friday night
Act I
Scene 1 – Saturday morning, just after breakfast
Scene 2 – Saturday, a short time later
Scene 3 – Sunday morning
Scene 4 – Sunday, later in the day
Scene 5 – Sunday, evening
Act II
Scene 1 – Monday morning
Scene 2 – Monday, a short time later
Scene 3 – Monday, two hours later
Scene 4 – Later
Scene 5 – Later

**Scene breakdown** (long version)
**Prologue – Late Friday night**
Citizen Barlow, a young man from Alabama, arrives at 1839 Wylie, urgently requesting to see Aunt Ester. Eli, Aunt Ester's "gatekeeper," tells Citizen to come back on Tuesday, and when Citizen pleads, Aunt Ester appears and gently reinforces Eli's response.

**Act I**

**Scene 1 – Saturday morning, just after breakfast**
Citizen waits outside the house while Eli and Aunt Ester's protégé Black Mary go about their daily routines. The traveling peddler, Rutherford Selig makes a stop at the house, bringing goods to sell, as well as news that a local man drowned in the river after he sought refuge there when accused of stealing a bucket of nails. Solly Two Kings, suitor to Aunt Ester, arrives with his basket of "pure" (dog poop) to sell as fertilizer, and more news: the local mill workers have gone on strike. Eli asks Solly for help in building a rock wall to keep local constable, Caesar Wilks, out of their lives, and Solly agrees. Solly plans to make a trip south very shortly, to help his sister who is struggling amidst white attempts to bar blacks from leaving. Aunt Ester and Solly flirt and reminisce before he and Eli leave to attend the funeral of the man who died in the river.

**Scene 2 – Saturday, a short time later**
Hungry, tired, and no longer able to wait, Citizen breaks into the house through a window and finds food in the kitchen. Aunt Ester finds him in the kitchen, and unfazed, offers him food and money, compares him to her late son, and shares the news about the man who died claiming his innocence. Citizen divulges his recent past to Aunt Ester, including a short stint at a mill where unfair wages and treatment caused him to flee. He falls asleep as Aunt Ester comforts him with a lullaby.

**Scene 3 – Sunday morning**
While Citizen works on the rock wall for Eli, Solly arrives and reports a riot at the mill. Black Mary writes a letter to Solly's sister as he dictates, furthering his plans to bring her out of the south. Aunt Ester introduces Citizen to Solly, and the two discuss the importance of names and self-protection, and contemplate their realities during and after slavery in a capitalistic society. As Black Mary and Eli join them, the discussion turns to a debate on ethics and religion. Caesar, Black Mary's older brother, makes his first appearance, relating the events of the mill riots, and expressing his disdain for the chaos instigated by the workers. Caesar interrogates Citizen about his motives, trying to sniff out any potential illegal leanings. He offers Citizen a quarter as a means to make something of himself, and when Citizen refuses, not wanting to accept handouts, Caesar declares him to have gotten on his bad side. In an argument with Solly, Caesar articulates his belief in the power of law and order, and the capitalist American dream, and the foolishness of the workers who would destroy the mill and their only means of rising above their current status. Before he leaves he asks Black Mary to come back and work for him at his bakery, but she refuses, claiming that Caesar's ethics have changed for the worse.

**Scene 4 – Sunday, later in the day**
When Citizen and Black Mary finally get the chance to be alone, Citizen asks her to come to his room tonight. He hopes he can fulfill the needs she has as a woman, but Black Mary challenges him, citing how men seem primarily interested in their needs and leave once they are fulfilled, not knowing or truly caring about the woman they are with.

**Scene 5 – Sunday, evening**
As Black Mary washes Aunt Ester's feet, Aunt Ester reveals her age (285 years) and her vocation as memory carrier. She questions Mary as to whether or not she will accept this job as the next in a long line, but Mary's answer is not definitive. She leaves Aunt Ester to be alone with Citizen for a symbolic confessional – Citizen revealing the acts that have led him here to have her wash his soul. She listens, counsels him, and gives him the task of going upriver to find two pennies laying side by side and a man named Jilson Grant. Once he accomplishes this, he will be ready to go to the City of Bones. The act ends as Eli bursts in with the news that the mill is on fire.

**Act II**

**Scene 1 – Monday morning**
Selig returns and reports that news of the mill fire has reached Philadelphia. Citizen returns with his two pennies, but without having met Jilson Grant. Aunt Ester prepares Citizen for his journey to the City of Bones by showing him a quilt that contains a map, and conveying its meaning and the history of the Middle Passage – both on a personal and epic level. She also displays the paper boat that will convey him to the City, noting that it is magic, and that he must believe in order for the journey to happen. She tells Citizen to take a bath in preparation, and then leaves to prepare herself.

**Scene 2 – Monday, a short time later**
As preparations wrap up, Solly stops in to say goodbye before his trip down south. He shows Citizen a chain link that used to be around his ankle during slavery, and tells the story of his escape to Canada and subsequent joining of the Underground Railroad. He and Eli offer Citizen life lessons, gained from experience, making clear that nothing, not Emancipation, freedom, white people, or the north, are as simple as the way they are portrayed. Aunt Ester enters and asks Solly to stay for the journey to the City of Bones with them, and he agrees, giving Citizen the chain link for luck and protection. The journey begins with song, ritual, and guidance from each of those present. Citizen faces, among myriad wonders, a sea of people chained to the boat, all with his face, twelve gates, and a gatekeeper in the person of Garret Brown, the man who died in the river, accused of stealing the bucket of nails that Citizen stole.
Once he tells Brown his name and his crime, he is allowed into the City of Bones, and then returns renewed to Aunt Ester's house. Celebratory singing ensues, but is disrupted when Caesar enters and tries to put Solly under arrest for setting fire to the mill. Solly whacks Caesar on the knee with his stick and flees the house. Caesar vows to catch him.

**Scene 3 – Monday, two hours later**
Black Mary frets over Solly, while Citizen reassures her he will not get caught. They share a tender moment, contemplating loneliness, but realizing that each of them must be right with themselves before they can be with anyone else. Aunt Ester asks Citizen to find Rutherford Selig and tell him to come to the house. When she asks Black Mary to turn down the stove, Mary erupts, claiming that they each have different ways of doing things, and that she needs to do things her own way, even if Aunt Ester doesn't like it. Aunt Ester asks Mary what took her so long to stand up for herself.

**Scene 4 – Monday, Later**
Rutherford arrives and Aunt Ester asks him to take Solly down the river, a task which will be difficult given that the roads have been blocked off, and dangerous, given Caesar's vow to catch Solly, who reveals that it was indeed he who set the mill on fire. Selig agrees, and Citizen says he'll join them. Solly says goodbye to Aunt Ester, and Citizen to Mary. Citizen and Solly escape out the back just before Caesar enters. Selig stays to cover, pretending to be in the house solely to sell goods, then leaves to join Solly and Citizen. Caesar presents a warrant for Aunt Ester's arrest for aiding and abetting. She counters with her bill of sale from slavery, asking how much these pieces of paper are worth. Despite Eli and Mary's protests, Aunt Ester goes along with Caesar.

**Scene 5 – Monday, Later**
Eli escorts a tired Aunt Ester back from jail. Citizen returns, saying that Caesar shot Solly, who is now out back with Selig. Citizen and Selig support Solly, barely alive, into the house. As he slips in and out of consciousness, Ester and Mary tend to his wound. Selig reveals that they were caught when Solly decided to head back to town to break the mill workers out of jail, their new bondage. During their singing, talking, and cleaning of the wound, Solly dies. Eli delivers a eulogy. Once again a solemn moment is broken by Caesar, who comes this time to arrest Citizen, who has hidden in Aunt Ester's room. When Caesar says "good riddance" over Solly's body, Black Mary disowns him as her brother. They return to singing over Solly. Citizen takes off Solly's coat and hat and puts them on, takes his stick, finds the letter from Solly's sister, and exits without a word.

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## CHART OF MAJOR NEW WORLD ORISHA

The following contextual essay will examine how August Wilson incorporates elements of both West African and Christian spirituality into the play. In order to better understand the complex system of West African spirituality, please review the chart provided below. For more information on West African spirituality, philosophy, art and ethos, see the reference list below.

Orisha are West African gods and goddesses of remarkable power. They are "messengers and embodiments of *àshe*."[5] Àshe is the will or commands of Olurun the supreme deity in many West African spiritual systems. Those who aid the orisha in their task to satisfy the àshe of Olorun are looked upon favorably and given special protection and insight. These people are often known as healers, seers or medicine men and women.

| **Orisha** | **English Glossary** | **Symbols** | **Known For** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Eshu-Elegba | Trickster God | Laterite cones or pillars | The embodiment of the Crossroads; Change |
| Ifá | God of Wisdom | Beads, Palm nuts | Predictive powers; Divination |
| Nana Bukúu | Goddess of Medicinal Warfare | Staff | Mother of Obaluaiye; she can bring glory or annihilation upon a city |
| Obaluaiye | Smallpox God | Needle like arrows, lances, whisk brooms, beaded or raffia veils | Bringer or Healer of Plagues |
| Ogún* | God of War | Iron | Creation, Destruction |
| Olorun* | God Almighty | The sky | Neither male nor female but vital force |
| Osanyin | Healing God | Beads, Staff with bird(s) | Herbalistic Medicine; Colorful beads represent the myraid of leavs and roots in nature that can heal or destroy |
| Oshoosi | Hunter God | Metal bows and arrows | Archer, Ogún's brother |
| Oshun* | River Goddess | Brass, Fans made from precious metals | Deep wisdom, predictive powers, equilibrium, moral reckoning and retribution |
| Shàngó | Thunder God | Polished brass, red-hot stones, pillars | A warrior and a lover, Shango is eternal moral presence, he plagues those who have committed impure acts |
| Yemoja* | Sea Goddess | Round fans made from precious metals or cowrie shells | Vengeance, moral reckoning and retribution |

** denotes orisha discussed in contextual essay*

[5] Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 5. This chart is an extension of a chart created by Thompson, see pp. 166-7.

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**For Further Reading See:**

Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of the Myth.* First Anchor Books Edition, July 1991

Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
*Art, Dialogue & Outrage* 1988
*The Open Sore of a Continent* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.* (New York: Vintage, 1984)

## THE BIRTH OF A PEOPLE: SPIRIT, SELF AND GOD IN AUGUST WILSON'S *GEM OF THE OCEAN*

an essay by Sarah Bellamy

*"In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry."*[6]

### INTRODUCTION

August Wilson begins his century-long cycle chronicling black American life with *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s). Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at the mercy of family and kin who are barely making ends meet themselves. Some, those most desperately in need of healing, end up at Aunt Ester's door. *Gem of the Ocean* opens with Citizen Barlow doing just that.

It takes a while before Citizen's burden is clear. He has stolen something; a small thing, just a bucket of nails. He was not caught, but another man was accused of the crime. Citizen watched, silent and awestruck, as the wrongfully accused man chose death instead of admitting to a crime he did not commit. He comes to Aunt Ester eager to lay his burden down, to find forgiveness, and to rediscover his humanity. Aunt Ester sends him on a journey to the "City of Bones" where Citizen will encounter the lost souls, those who died on the way from Africa aboard slave ships in the Middle Passage, and those who died after toiling their lives away to build a country that showed more concern for cattle or horses than for the wellbeing of a slave.

*Gem of the Ocean* is arguably one of Wilson's most masterfully written plays. Written toward the end of his life, *Gem of the Ocean* is an indication of Wilson's evolution as a writer, displaying confidence in technique as well as content. Comparatively speaking it is sparsely written, unencumbered by much of the expository writing evident in his earlier plays. The play represents the knitting together of Wilson's many aesthetic themes. It highlights the power of his poetry, his appreciation for myth and metaphor, and his skill at depicting complicated issues with eloquence and ease that makes it impossible to deny the humanity inherent in each of his characters. It sets the stage for deep exploration into the history of African Americans in this country, and provides audiences with a richly nuanced and culturally specific tapestry that fills in the emotional and spiritual gaps left out of the history books.

Many of the themes Wilson explored throughout his career merge together in *Gem of the Ocean*. His examination of morality and ethics within the context of American slavery

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[6] Okri, Ben. *The Famished Road.* (New York and London: Anchor Books, 1992) 3.

resurfaces in a bucket of nails. His emphasis on legacy and cultural continuity is beautifully portrayed in the relationship between Aunt Ester and her apprentice Black Mary. Perhaps the most powerful though, is the resolution of Wilson's long struggle between the black American experience and the use of Christianity to justify slavery. It begins with the eruption of a city under the sea.

**PORTRAIT OF A CITY**

*Gem of the Ocean* takes audiences back to the beginning of the 20th century, to a time and place when black people were struggling to "navigate the variable rules which excluded them from full participation in society."[7] In the North, cities were beginning to industrialize. Perhaps no one more eloquently describes Pittsburgh in the early part of the century as Wilson did in the prologue of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910s):

> It is August in Pittsburgh, 1911. The sun falls out of heaven like a stone. The fires of the steel mill rage with a combined sense of industry and progress. Barges loaded with coal and iron ore trudge up the river to the mill towns that dot the Monongahela and return with fresh, hard, gleaming steel. The city flexes its muscles. Men throw countless bridges across the rivers, lay roads and carve tunnels through the hills sprouting with houses.
>
> From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. …Foreigners in a strange land, they carry a part and parcel of their baggage along lines of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and whelp of joy.[8]

This is the city in which Citizen Barlow, a young man from Alabama, finds himself. Like those sons and daughters Wilson describes, Citizen has wandered into Pittsburgh, "still wearing clodhoppers."[9] He is dazed, isolated, and cut off from his cultural memory. Indeed, he seems to have forgotten the names of the gods. He ends up at 1839 Wylie Avenue, knocking on Aunt Ester's door.

The city that houses this spiritual healer is more than a land of opportunity. In Wilson's treatment, Pittsburgh can be read as a place of pilgrimage where the force of America's escalating industry clashes with the potency of *orisha*, West African gods and goddesses of remarkable power.

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[7] Bellamy, Lou. "Director's Statement." Excerpted from the playbill for *Gem of the Ocean*, produced by Penumbra Theatre Company in 2008.
[8] Wilson, August. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* (New York: Plume, 1988).
[9] Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean.* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006) 9.

**AFRICA BEFORE THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

Long before the trans-Atlantic slave trade began and well before the Berlin Conference divided Africa up into countries named and owned by Europeans, West Africa was populated by diverse groups of people ruled by dynasties.[10] Each dynasty was expansive, incorporating tens of thousands of people. Cosmologist Robert Farris Thompson describes the cultural life of one of the largest West African civilizations in the region, the Yoruba, as "one of the most urban of the traditional civilizations of black Africa."[11] This civilization "consisted of self-sufficient states characterized by artistic and poetic richness."[12] An American missionary described his visit to a Yoruban city in the mid-nineteenth century as follows:

> What I saw disabused my mind of many errors in regard to … Africa. The city extends along the bank of the Ogun for nearly six miles and has a population of approximately 200,000…instead of beings lazy, naked savages, living on the spontaneous productions of the earth, they were dressed and were industrious…[providing] everything that their physical comfort required. The men are builders, blacksmiths, iron-smelters, carpenters, calabash-carvers, weavers, basket-makers, hat-makers, mat-makers, traders, barbers, tanners, tailors, farmers, and workers in leather and morocco…they make razors, swords, knives, hoes, bill-hooks, axes, arrow-heads, stirrups…women…most diligently follow the pursuits which custom has allotted to them. They spin, weave, trade, cook, and dye cotton fabrics. They also make soap, dyes, palm oil, nut oil, all the native earthenware, and many other things used in the country.[13]

Thompson explains that in the medieval period the Yoruba holy city of Ile-Ife was "flourishing with an artistic force that later provoked the astonishment of the West. At a time, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, when nothing of comparable quality was being produced in Europe, the master sculptors of Ile-Ife were shaping splendid art."[14] This art was most often created in honor of the orisha. The Yoruban people were an aesthetically advanced people, representing both their philosophy and spirituality in sculpture, metal work and oral poetry. The cultural and spiritual systems of the great Yoruba civilization had a tremendous impact on the other West African civilizations in the area.

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[10] From November 1884 to February 1885, European countries met in Berlin to divide Africa among themselves to colonize the continent. The map of Africa as we know it today still preserves many of the boundaries outlined by the Berlin Conference. The lines were arbitrary, paying no mind to the organization of African societies based on kin, clan, culture or religion. Much of the ethnic strife in Africa today is a direct result of the boundaries outlined by this conference.

[11] Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 3.

[12] Ibid., 5.

[13] Ibid., 1. Thompson quotes Reverend R.H. Stone from his book *In Africa's Forest and Jungle: Or Six Years Among the Yorubans.* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), pp. 20-1, 23.

[14] Ibid., 4.

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The spirituality of the people was relevant to their experiences, and often dynasties living near to one another shared similar beliefs. Some dynasties lived peaceably, others warred one another. While the Yoruba societies were thriving during the medieval period, the rise in Islamic empires such as the "Mali, Great Fulo, Kokoli, Mane, and Songhai," meant that raiding armies crossed into West Africa and "undertook wars and expeditions in which large numbers of captives were taken."[15] Captives would either be incorporated into the conquering societies as servant classes or sold to "Muslim merchants who organized long-distance trade."[16]

Historian Robin Blackburn explains "the peoples of West Africa had practiced settled agriculture and metalworking for well over a millennium" before Portuguese slave expeditions breached the Saharan trade networks in the mid 1400s.[17] As Blackburn points out, according to the logic of the slave traders, this made the people of this region very valuable because they were skilled laborers. The first European expeditions into Africa in the early 15th century introduced northern merchants to an array of new goods. Spices, dyes, salt, silks, beads and gold were traded alongside slaves in a vast and long-established network of trade connecting Asia to the coastal region of West Africa.

In the early 1600s the demand for slaves increased exponentially due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade that was carrying Africans to the New World. West Africa was the primary source from which Africans drew captives to trade with the European slavers. Slaves would then be transported to the slave castles along the western coast of Africa where they would wait to board ships that would carry them to the Americas. In the New World these laborers fed sugar plantations, silver and salt mines and other agricultural expeditions in North and South America and the Caribbean islands. Having come largely from the same region in West Africa, the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the people inhabiting these regions was also imported to the New World. Their gods and goddesses, called *orisha*, came with them. Thus the reincarnation of the orisha in the New World became a mixture of those deities worshiped throughout the regions in West Africa from where the slaves were taken. While African slaves were stripped of their families, clothes and freedom, their spirituality and ethics lived on in the stories and songs they shared *en route* to the New World and resurfaced in the art they produced there.

[15] Blackburn, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492 to 1800.* (London and New York: Verso, 1997) 102.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

**ORISHA IN THE NEW WORLD**

In the New World orisha appeared in objects and places that they may not have in Africa. This is in part due to the influence that bondage had on black people in the Americas, but it also signals an important adaptation and translation of the ethos.

The New World was a mélange of various cultures. The principle Europeans involved in the slave trade were French, Dutch, English, Spanish and Portuguese.[18] People were exported from what we know today as Congo, Cameroon, Gabon, Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar, Senegambia, Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. The cultural blend of ethnicity, philosophy, religion and aesthetics as people intermingled once assigned to a plantation was unparalleled. These populations interacted with indigenous presences in the region, and new forms of communication, culture, cuisine, religious practice and artistic expression were born. In addition to the Native American, African and European peoples inhabiting the New World, indentured servitude brought Asian and East Indian populations as well.[19] By the eighteenth century, the Americas were populated by a creole people that included mixed races and varied ethnic genealogies. These are the cultural roots of contemporary black Americans and the legacy to which all Americans are heir.

In this New World, publicly honoring African deities was forbidden. Many Christians thought of the Africans as cannibalistic devil worshipers and believed that their gods and rituals were intended to bring misfortune. This was a superstitious interpretation of West African religiosity, however. More often slaves were not allowed to practice their spirituality because plantation owners realized that common religious beliefs might create alliances between the people. Allowing slaves to meet and share in rituals and conversation to which whites were not privy could result in an uprising.

Rather than abandon the old spiritual systems entirely, slaves masked their orisha with more "acceptable" religious figures. Africans in the New World adopted Catholicism as a guise in which an assortment of saints became vessels for the orisha. Out of this mixture *Santería* was born in Cuba and *vodun* in Haiti. Both religions incorporate important aspects of West African spirituality and Catholicism. As Robert Farris Thompson points out,

> …visual representations of the Roman Catholic Church were viewed with informed sympathy by the blacks. In such imagery they perceived—unbeknownst to the whites—ties to truths they already knew. They noted striking parallels to the lives and attributes of the saints, the vodun of Dahomey, and the orisha of Yorubaland.[20]

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[18] In later years the Italians and Germans made use of old trading pathways through North Africa to establish a foothold in the region for the exportation of raw materials to European and American processing plants.
[19] The Irish were also a prominent group assigned to British plantations as indentured servants.
[20] Thompson, 169.

New World African and African American culture and philosophy was a complex system that integrated aspects of many cultures creating something the world had not yet seen before.

In addition to incorporating elements of other religions, in the New World certain orisha were more popularly evoked because their praise language seemed more clearly aligned with the experience of the people. Ogún rose to great prominence amongst the Africans in Brazil,[21] as did Yemoja, to whom a New Year's Eve festival is dedicated that many thousands of people from Rio de Janeiro, both black and white, annually attend.[22] Shàngó was a powerful deity in Cuba,[23] while Eshu-Elegba and Oshumare were more popularly evoked in Haiti.[24]

Praise language is richly poetic language that imparts the wisdom and actions of the orisha. It is disseminated mostly through songs and stories about each deity that describe his or her power, purpose and responsibility to protect devotees. New World interpretations of the orisha also reflected the history of how the people came to be in the Americas. For example, the experience of the Middle Passage and the idea of a homeland across the water would recast the prominence and symbolism surrounding deities belonging to the water, expanding their reign beyond the rivers in which they were said to dwell in Africa, to include the ocean as well.

## THE ORISHA AT HOME IN PITTSBURGH

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson uses the cultural and industrial landscape of Pittsburgh to explore two major orisha: Ogún, the god of war, and Oshun, a female water deity whose prowess is as powerful as a man's. Just as the African slaves did over five centuries ago, Wilson takes cues from the environment in which his play is set to establish their presence in the New World. A careful reading of the text finds the orisha busy at work in Wilson's cycle.

Many orisha are signified through the use of precious and semi-precious metals and these metals alert believers to the presence of the orisha. Ogún, the god associated with war, is reflected most thoroughly in his strength and ability through iron. According to West African praise language, "he lives in the flames of the blacksmith's forge, on the battlefield, and more particularly on the cutting edge of iron."[25] Ogún is one of the more virile deities; his nature is described as a "hard god."[26]

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[21] Ibid., 55.
[22] Ibid., 78.
[23] Ibid., 89-93.
[24] Ibid., 176-178.
[25] Ibid., 52.
[26] Ibid.

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Hoe is the child of Ogún
Axe is the child of Ogún
Gun is the child of Ogún
Ogún, salute of iron on stone
The blacksmith of all heaven.[27]

Artistic expressions made of iron, some incorporating very common objects, were created in honor of Ogún. He "lives in the piercing or slashing action of all iron. Lord of the cutting edge, he is present even in the speeding bullet or railway locomotive."[28] He is revered for his power to create as well as destroy.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Pittsburgh was one of the major receiving points for iron ore. Most of this ore was mined in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan and shipped on barges through the rivers connecting the Great Lakes eastward toward Detroit, Gary and Pittsburgh. During the Civil War, Pittsburgh supplied much of the weaponry that armed the Union and Confederate soldiers. The steel industry made Pittsburgh into one of the industrial giants, employing thousands of laborers fashioning iron ore into steel products for the railroad and shipping industry. At the turn of the century, in a city like Pittsburgh that was constantly exhaling the fire and smoke of the steel mills, Ogún would be tremendously potent.

Pittsburgh is also unique for its rivers. Within the city limits three rivers intersect; the northeast flowage of the Allegheny River meets the Monongahela River from the southeast and the two form the massive Ohio River, known in the nineteenth century as the Mason-Dixon Line or the boundary between free states of the North and slave states of the South.[29] These rivers were critical to the infrastructure of the city. Rivers and oceans became the main arteries for expansion and commerce. They were the lubricant of modern day capitalism and trade.

According to West African philosophy, rivers house goddesses of great power. Oshun, one of the more popular orisha in the New World, is symbolized in both the stillness and movement of water. Believers marvel at the coolness of her waters, which can heal and protect. However, as Thompson explains, "the coolness of the riverain goddesses is problematic. Vengeance, doom and danger also lurk within the holy depths of the rivers where the goddesses are believed to dwell."[30] Hence, Oshun's presence often symbolizes a reckoning. She is "supreme in the arts of mystic retribution and protection against all evil."[31]

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[27] Ibid., 53.
[28] Ibid.
29 One reading of this territory could be the meeting place of two riverain deities, perhaps signaling the presence of both Oshun and her sister Yemoja.
[30] Thompson, 73.
[31] Ibid., 74.

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Like Ogún, devotees also honor Oshun with a symbolic metal—traditionally brass, the metal most precious to the Yoruban people.[32] In Africa, to honor Oshun and her sisters, artisans fashioned round fans to cool their tempestuous spirits using ornate brass metallurgy. This practice changed in transit, however. In the Americas, metals that were more readily available such as silver, tin and copper were associated with the river goddesses. Thompson finds that in the New World "all that remains of the originating tradition is the characteristic shaping of the fan in the round manner of the ancients and the use of polished metal as the medium."[33]

For a people who interpret water and iron as marks of the orisha—the Monongahela River, so frequently referenced in Wilson's oeuvre, would become an incredibly powerful place. As Wilson wrote, "barges loaded with coal and *iron ore* trudge up the *river* to the mill towns that dot the Monongahela and return with *fresh, hard, gleaming steel.* The city *flexes its muscles. Men* throw countless *bridges* across the *rivers*…."[34] At the industrial heart of American commerce, the river becomes a ritualistic meeting place for Ogún and Oshun, striking an interesting balance between the masculine and feminine deities. The hardness of the iron and steel, the action of men encapsulated in the flexing of muscles and erection of bridges is calmed by the flow of the rivers, the main channels of industry.

### EMBODYING THE ORISHA

The orisha are "messengers and embodiments of *àshe*."[35] Àshe is the will of Olurun, "master of the skies," and it is the orisha who carry out the commands of this supreme deity. "Olorun is neither male nor female but a vital force."[36] Those who aid the orisha in their task to satisfy the àshe of Olorun are looked upon favorably and given special protection and insight.

Believers often carry a token symbolizing their faith in the protective deity that acts as an amulet to ward off trouble. The link of chain that Solly Two Kings carries is an example. Ogún is symbolized in the power and potential of iron, found not just in swords and blades, but also in farming tools, hammers, nails and even links of chain. Thompson explains that Ogún "addresses the forest with a sharpened machete; his spirit moves in the clearing of the bush, in the hoes and knives of cultivators."[37] In the Caribbean islands machetes were a necessary tool for cutting cane and in the American South, hoes, axes and plows aided black slaves in their work to develop thousands of acres of plantation land out of rugged forest and prairie.

[32] Ibid., 79.
[33] Ibid., 83.
[34] Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, ibid, emphasis mine.
[35] Thompson, 5.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 52.

It is important to realize that it is not just the tools themselves that signify Ogún, but the action that empowers the people wielding the tools in which this deity demonstrates his power. In the New World, chains and shackles were as common as the bank notes that changed hands for the sale of human slaves. These tools of bondage would also be incorporated into praise language. Claiming the material that keeps one in bondage as something that belongs to a deity as powerful as Ogún resituates strength and purpose in important ways. With Ogún present, a shackle worn on the ankle, wrist or neck can fill the bound believer with patience, strength and courage to endure his or her suffering. Carrying iron close to the body, using the force of iron for destruction or creation, is an incantation to a mighty deity.

Born Alfred Jackson, a slave, Solly made an escape for freedom, carrying a link of chain with him as he traveled. Under Ogún's powerful protection, he followed the secret paths of the Underground Railroad and he and seven others made their way to the north.[38] His body was free, but his spirit was still bound by slavery:

> Ain't nothing worse than slavery! I know. I was there. Dark was the night and cold was the ground. Look at that…(*He hands Citizen a chain link*). That's my good luck piece. That piece of chain used to be around my ankle. They tried to chain me down but I beat them on that one. I say, I'm gonna keep this to remember by. I been lucky ever since. I beat them on a lot of things. I beat them when I got away. I had some people who helped me. They helped show me the way and looked out for me. I got all the way to Canada. There was eight of us. I was in Canada in 1857. I stood right there in Freedomland. That's what they called it. Freedomland. I asked myself, "What I'm gonna do?" I looked around. I didn't see nothing for me. I tried to feel different but I couldn't. I started crying. I hadn't cried since my daddy knocked me down for crying when I was ten years old. I breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn't taste no different. The man what brought us over the border tried to talk with me. I just sat right down on the ground and started crying. I told him say, "I don't feel right." It didn't feel right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage. Told him, "I'm going back with you." I stopped crying as soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad…[39]

It was not until Solly found his purpose as a conductor on the Underground Railroad that he was able to shed his slave name and make a name for himself in the world, a name that reflected his purpose and his manhood: Solly Two Kings.

Another person reborn in service of her people is Aunt Ester. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson explains that Aunt Ester is not one woman but many—a title passed down through the generations. The woman we encounter in *Gem* was not born Ester Tyler, but has vowed never to repeat her given name. Instead she steps into the responsibility of Aunt Ester with a focused determination:

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[38] Ogún's number is seven. See Thompson, ibid., 57.

[39] Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*, 57.

> I'm on an adventure. I been on one since I was nine years old. That's how old I was when my mama sent me to live with Miss Tyler. Miss Tyler gave me her name. Ester Tyler. I don't tell nobody what I was called before that. The only one know that is my mama. I stayed right on there with her till she died. Miss Tyler passed it on to me. If you ever make up your mind I'm gonna pass it on to you. People say it's too much to carry. But I told myself somebody got to carry it. Miss Ester carried it. Carried it right up till the day she died. I didn't run from it. I picked it up and walked with it.[40]

Aunt Ester is a spiritualist, a sage, a quirky old lady. She points out irony in life as she sifts through the pain of living it. She rebuilds the broken and brings together the estranged. Through her strong connection to the past, Aunt Ester is both the moral compass and keeper of ancestral wisdom. As she says, "I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud."[41] As she remembers aloud, she heals those who have gone astray. She reminds the dazed, lost souls that they are not alone. She shows them the faces of the gods they have forgotten. She sets seekers out on a journey to reunite with their ancestral roots, giving them amulets and tokens to beckon the attention of the orisha.

Aunt Ester's calling is to make people right with themselves again. Most often some ethical or cultural infraction has set visitors on the path to her door. In this way, she is closely aligned with the river goddesses, who are revered for their righteous forces of moral retribution. Indeed, Aunt Ester calls upon the powers of Oshun and her sisters for help in healing the walking wounded. As Solly says, "there's a lot of one-armed men walking around."[42] These wronged souls need repair and Aunt Ester brings them back into the ancestral fold, her words become a healing balm that washes over them. She accepts no money for her service. Instead she tells her patrons to throw money into the river, that it will come back to her. In Wilson's play *Two Trains Running* (1960s), for example, when Memphis visits Aunt Ester to sort out the troubles with his diner, she tells him to throw twenty dollars in the river. Memphis thinks this is ludicrous, a waste of hard-earned money. According to West African philosophy, however, this gesture would honor the riverain goddesses who are very protective of their people:

[40] Ibid., 43.
[41] Ibid., 43.
[42] Ibid., 60.

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> [Oshun] greets the most important word within the water
> She is the orisha you see healing by means of water that is cool…
> Tilted woman who heals the children…
> Witness of a person's ecstasy renewed
> She says: bad head—become good!
> Mistress of *àshe*, of full predictive power,
> She greets the most important matter in the water…
> She cures without fee, gives honey to children
> Has lots of money, speaks sweetly to the multitude…[43]

The river goddesses collect what is precious and sacred to them, hence the waters hold great wealth. This praise language describing the majestic Oshun is reminiscent of Aunt Ester, suggesting that it is she who aids Oshun in her duty to enact àshe, the will of the supreme deity. Each time one of the walking wounded throws money into the river, the goddesses amass the great cultural wealth of lessons learned. In the 285 years since Aunt Ester has been serving the people, theirs has become a house of vast wisdom. The next generation need only look to where the people have been to find the path toward a more triumphant future.[44]

The underwater orisha are known for their cunning skill in witchcraft. In West African tradition witchcraft is not meddlesome magic. Instead, it "militates against not only total male dominance but the threat of class formation and drastically unequal distribution of wealth."[45] These "powerful underwater women" are known for their acts of generosity as well as retribution. For many Africans living in the New World, Oshun and her sisters were likely revered for their ability to restore an ethical equilibrium to the morally toxic environment that slavery created.

## THE CHANGING OF THE GUARDS

Like Aunt Ester and Solly Two Kings, in *Gem of the Ocean* both Black Mary and Citizen Barlow are to be born again. They are renamed to embody titles that are epic in scope and in service of the people. Black Mary, living under the trying tutelage of Aunt Ester, will soon be subsumed by the name Ester Tyler. Similarly, before Citizen can journey to the City of Bones, Aunt Ester and Black Mary rename him. The change is slight, but important.

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[43] Thompson, 79.
[44] If Aunt Ester is 285 years old in 1904, her legacy would have been born in 1619. Stephanie Lein Walseth, Penumbra Theatre's August Wilson Fellow points out in her dramaturgical notes that, "though African slaves and servants had been in contact with the New World via Spanish and French expeditions, this year marks their presence in English America, with the landing of twenty slaves at Jamestown, Virginia in August [of that year]." See Bennett, Lerone, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America, 1619-1962*, 4th edition, (New York and Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1969). One will also note that 1619 is the year that Bennett Jr., begins his study of African American history.
[45] Ibid., 74.

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Citizen's name bespeaks the challenge he has ahead of him, named by his mother to be called Citizen first, he is reborn in Aunt Ester's house. Instead of calling him Mr. Barlow, when they meet him both women refer to him as "Mr. Citizen." In this way he could be any man, anonymous but one who is free, who participates in society as a full person, a man who can stand up and be counted. In turn, he calls Aunt Ester, Miss Tyler as her teacher was so-called—recognizing that she is the teacher of Black Mary. By calling Aunt Ester Miss Tyler to her face, not only does he demonstrate respect for an elder, his coming signals the commencement of her retirement from service. Citizen articulates the transfer of power and responsibility to Black Mary.

Citizen Barlow's trip to the City of Bones is a purification ritual in preparation for a life of service as well. He must atone for his sin before gaining entrance. The city is a place of reverence; it is sacred, holy. One must be washed before entering its doors. Water is often a lubricant for travel between the earthly and spiritual realms—thus the Middle Passage becomes infused with much power. The fact that the City of Bones has risen up out of the water means that there is a living place for those who are not of either world. In several West African cultures there are words for transient beings that live between the worlds of the living and the dead. They are known as "spirit-children," timeless beings that are born to die and die to be reborn. They connect the two realms together but torment their loved ones in both. Thus for those that journey to the City of Bones, the seas are baptismal waters through which tens of thousands found passage to a shining city of their own creation. It is not an ethereal heaven but an oceanic one. It is of the earth, subterranean, grounded in the watery tombs. But this resting place is also symbolic for the place from which the people are sprung and why it is the female gods who inhabit the waters. The rivers and oceans are transitory places between being and nonbeing; they are wombs in which one can be claimed or reborn.

For Citizen, entrance into the water is both an adult recognition of the power and potentiality of life as symbolized by his burgeoning relationship with Black Mary, and a quest for his own rebirth. He is looking for his path in the world, his purpose. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, this is embodied in the notion of "song." Harold Loomis is lost in the world because he cannot find his song. When Citizen returns from the City of Bones he offers to join Solly on his quest to rescue his sister in Alabama, Solly warns him, "you on the battlefield now." His service is now to lead the others toward being full citizens like he is. Like the spirit-children who inhabit two worlds, so Citizen will be a citizen of both the imperial City of Bones and the United States of America. As two people, embodying a dual consciousness similar to Solly Two Kings, he is finally whole. As he tells Black Mary, he feels "right with himself," and not driven by the

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need to fill her up or be filled up with her. Instead he wants them to "be right with each other."[46] With a clear purpose, Citizen has been swept up into the song of the people, and will be carried on it, like a great river that will become a road to freedom. Eli proudly recognizes that he has found his song in the chorus of voices emanating from the City of Bones and tells him "you belong to the band."[47]

With the appointment of these two new guardians, the elder generations can move on, but there are important rituals and realizations that each must have before they can assume their new responsibilities. The orisha set a course of action to prepare for the changing of the guards. This drives the action of the whole play. First, Citizen landed at Aunt Ester's house because he stole a bucket of nails. He had no use for the nails rather he stole them because the mill refused to pay him for his work. Then another man is wrongly accused and jumps into the river, refusing to come out. This whole scenario seems ridiculous, as it certainly does to Caesar, unless it is read as work of the orisha.

Ogún is first to appear, his signature is everywhere—the god of war compels a newcomer to steal a bucket of nails, strong expressions of Ogún's power to build. The orisha work together to enact balance so as Ogún gains strength, Oshun compels Garret Brown to leap into the river and remain there until he perishes. This chain of events forces Citizen Barlow to Aunt Ester's door at 1839 Wylie Avenue.

In 1839 "the black schooner," The Amistad, came aground.[48] The Amistad was a Spanish ship carrying African slaves from Sierra Leone when several aboard the vessel revolted and took control of the ship. The schooner sailed northeast through the Caribbean and along the coastal waters of North America until it reached the territory of the United States where it came ashore. The fate of those aboard the Amistad including forty-nine men and four children (three of whom were girls) hung in the balance of the United States judiciary process for almost three years. In the end, the US Supreme Court ruled that the Africans aboard the Amistad were indeed free. [49] Thirty-five survivors set sail to return to Sierra Leone, a landmark in trans-Atlantic history.[50] Indeed, arriving at 1839 Wylie Avenue will require a journey back to a point of origin. For an African American people, those born in the New World, Wilson locates this point in the City of Bones.

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[46] Wilson, ibid., 76.
[47] Ibid.
[48] *Amistad* means "friendship" in Spanish.
[49] For a comprehensive timeline of the events of The Amistad, see The Mystic Seaport Museum's website at http://amistad.mysticseaport.org/timeline/amistad.html
[50] The ship that carried the surviving Africans back to Sierra Leon was *The Gentleman.*

On the dangerous journey, Citizen must travel with the protection of Ogún. Aunt Ester tells him to retrieve a piece of iron from Jilson Grant. He fails to do so, but does return with two pennies as she instructed. Ogún has laid his plan well. Solly steps up and gives Citizen his link of chain, relinquishing the protective amulet that lead him through so many close calls along the Underground Railroad. On his way to the City of Bones, Citizen calls out for water. It is a call for life, for the potential of life as embodied by the female orisha. It may even be interpreted as a call for the mother. Aunt Ester tells him, "there is no water, Mr. Citizen. All you have is your chain link. The boat got into trouble. The water was lost overboard."[51] If water is read as life then we are to understand that the slave ships were void of life, or the potential of life as embodied by Oshun. The one-way journey through the Middle Passage was not a birthing place but a dying place. The people were not without protection, however, as Aunt Ester indicates. Ogún was there. He was there in the chain links and shackles that held the people.

Aunt Ester tells Citizen that he must travel to the City of Bones so that he can "find out why it was important for Garret Brown to die rather than to take his thirty days."[52] She explains that Garret Brown believed his life was worth more than a bucket of nails, alluding to a time when black people were seen as commodities to be traded for items of equal or lesser value. The lesson read at this level of interpretation is powerful, yet West African spirituality takes the event to a deeper plane. Garret Brown's death and the circumstances leading up to it may actually be read as a conduit for the changing of the guards.

With a link of chain in his hand, Citizen travels safely to the City of Bones. He then encounters a gatekeeper who will not let him pass until he admits his crime. Citizen says, "it was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails."[53] At this point in the play, Wilson's stage directions suggest that the actor playing Solly be the gatekeeper Citizen encounters. Aunt Ester asks Citizen if he recognizes the gatekeeper. Citizen "recoils in horror" as he realizes he has come face to face with Garret Brown. It is another subtle but very important moment. In this otherworldly place, the actor no longer represents Solly, but Ogún himself, who has taken on the mask of Garret Brown. Ogún is looking for Solly's successor. Citizen must travel to the City of Bones and meet Ogún as Solly did before him:

[51] Wilson, ibid., 68.
[52] Ibid., 44.
[53] Ibid., 69.

> SOLLY: Hey Citizen Barlow. So you going to the City of Bones. I been to the City of Bones. It's something like you ain't never seen. A white city a half mile by a half mile made of bones. All kind of bones. Leg bones. Arm bones. Head bones. It's a beautiful city. That's where I'm going when I die. I know where I'm going. Got Twelve Gates and it's got Twelve Gatekeepers. That's what I always wanted to be. A Keeper of the Gate![54]

While on his journey, Aunt Ester tells Citizen that the captain of a boat called Gem of the Ocean abandoned both crew and cargo to flee in a dinghy. She explains that the people survived because "they followed the law of the sea, [that] life is above all." Read through the lens of the black Africans aboard the slave ships, life was actually begotten through death. Slavery was nonbeing, no-life. When Aunt Ester tells Citizen that "God raised [life] to a great height," she is describing a purpose bigger than mere existence. In this way, he must die to be resurrected and reborn in service of the people. While the Middle Passage was a dying place, the City of Bones is a birthing ground. She commands Citizen to "Live, Mr. Citizen. Live to the fullest. You got a duty to life. So live, Mr. Citizen! Live!"[55] With this incantation Aunt Ester raises the City of Bones and makes way for Citizen to claim his rightful place.

Shortly after Solly gives the link of chain to Citizen, Caesar comes looking for him, claiming he has witnesses that it was him who set fire to the mill. He arrests Aunt Ester for "interfering with the administration of justice and aiding and abetting Alfred Jackson, a fugitive of the law."[56] The mortal law that Caesar sanctions is presented in direct conflict with the moral retribution that Aunt Ester puts into practice. The justice of the orisha is not only opposed to the "justice" cited by Caesar, it is meant to undermine the law that oppresses the people, evident in Caesar's determination to call Solly by his slave name.

Black Mary and Eli are ready to fight Caesar, appalled that he would dare take Aunt Ester from the home she has not left in twenty years. Aunt Ester remains calm and cool as Oshun. Even as Caesar makes his pistol apparent, she is unafraid of the gun. "You think you a strong man, Mr. Caesar. But you got that gun. That tell me all I need to know."[57] On one level Aunt Ester is calling Caesar a coward. On another level, she recognizes a grander plan. Full of predictive power, she knows the power and potentiality of the speeding bullet. She realizes in this moment that the way will be paved for both Black Mary and Citizen to step up. Aunt Ester saw Solly give Citizen his link of chain, surrendering the protection of Ogún in the earthly realm. The path is clear. She leaves the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue and symbolically relinquishes her appointment as Aunt Ester.

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[54] Ibid., 56.
[55] Ibid., 68.
[56] Ibid., 79-80.
[57] Ibid., 79.

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Without the link of chain, Solly's safe passage along the old Railroad trails is not assured. Instead, the journey back to Alabama to retrieve his sister seems to be about something else. He is taking Citizen along with him. Before going, he says once more that he cannot leave with his people still in bondage. He goes back to free those who were arrested during the riot caused after the mill burned. His life in service of Ogún comes full circle. This will be his last attempt at emancipating his people. Caesar catches up with Solly and shoots him in the chest. Ogún claims his devoted servant. For Solly, the war is over and it is time for another to take up the fight. The bullet that claims Solly's life is not a demonstration of Caesar's power, it is the liberation of a soul devoted to Ogún. As Solly dies he repeats the same incantation Aunt Ester used to empower Citizen, "so live."[58] Solly Two Kings will be reborn to claim his royal right in the City of Bones.

Before embarking on his journey, Aunt Ester asked Citizen to find two pennies, side by side. Aunt Ester says this is only to distract him, so that he will have something to do and feel as though he is a participant in his own salvation, an achiever. Yet this is merely an earthly interpretation of Aunt Ester's command. As an embodiment of Oshun, these coins made of copper may be a New World incarnation of the brass tokens used to appease the underwater orisha. They represent something of value, and value, as Solly explains, is relevant to the people: "A lot of things shine like gold ain't gold. A lot of brass shine like gold."[59] The pennies gain final significance upon Solly's death. He will need them to pay his passage to the boatman, a custom that reaches back at least as far as the ancient Greek civilizations. Coins are placed over the eyes of the fallen to pay the boatman for passage into the other realm. By way of water, Solly will travel to the other side to a resting place he has earned.

**ALL RIVERS LEAD TO THE SEA**

In the middle of the ocean, two orisha come together to make a killing ground sacred. The two orisha that followed the slaves on the ships—dressed in Ogún's iron and rocked on Oshun's waters—wait to reclaim their children. Wilson imagines the City of Bones as a beautiful city, gleaming and grand. Its inhabitants reside in luster and light. They sing with their tongues on fire, burning with the bright light of their songs. Their songs are remembrance songs. They remember out loud with a force so powerful, the flames of their tongues are not extinguished by the waters engulfing the city.

Oshun reigns over the watery world. The praise language created in celebration of her tells us that the City of Bones is clearly her dominion. It is Oshun who "greets the most

[58] Ibid., 81.
[59] Ibid., 15.

important matter in the water," the unsung gravesites of millions lost.[60] Her waters are healing. She brings devastated, dazed, crazed people solace. As she heals, she is the "witness of a person's ecstasy renewed."[61] She is female grace and generosity, dancing fertility, brimming with promise and potential. She "speaks sweetly to the multitude," remembering out loud. Oshun is a force to be reckoned with. Her powers extend beyond the boundaries of her womanhood. West African praise language salutes her as "King of the holy depths" where "she dances [and] takes the crown."[62] In the City of Bones Oshun is an all-encompassing life force, the beginning and the end. The city over which she presides is precious and she moves the waters to make room for its formation: "woman…you hollow out sands beneath the sea, you're putting money in there."[63] All the lessons learned, all the trials and tribulations through which her children have suffered, they come to her through the rivers where believers throw money. The waters speak back as they move, "the water sounds, *wanran-wanran-wanran*, like the bracelets of Oshun."[64]

Oshun did not erect the city alone. Ogún, the blacksmith of all heaven, forged the way. Praise language states that Ogún was the force that enabled the creator in the making of the world. He cleared "the primordial forests with his iron, making the first sixteen roads that radiate from the ancient holy capital, the roads upon which the original sixteen sons of the first king traveled forth to found the sixteen originating kingships."[65] People descended from these original kingships were captured and taken to the New World, extending the reach of the royal dynasties across the ocean. In *Gem of the Ocean*, the City of Bones has twelve gates, meaning twelve roads lead to the city. Wilson's City of Bones could be read as a resurrection of the original African dynasties, the source from which all people sprang. If the kingships were relocated and refashioned under the ocean, then four roads are missing, meaning four kings are unaccounted for. In Wilson's 20$^{th}$ Century Cycle, we learn that these four were survivors of the Middle Passage. They appear in several of Wilson's plays: King Hedley, King Hedley II and Solly Two Kings (David and Solomon). These are the descendents of those original kings, lost to their brothers. When they return to the City of Bones, the original foundation of the people will be rebuilt.

The City of Bones, a meeting place between the original kings of Africa as protected by Ogún housed in the powerful watery womb of Oshun, is fertile ground for the creation of a new people. It is not a dying place anymore, but has been resurrected as the birthplace of a new

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[60] Thompson, 79.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 79-80.
[63] In this passage we see the slippage of Oshun's sovereignty from the river to the sea.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 52.

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ethos, a new story of origin. This creation story runs in direct conflict to the Western, Christian conception of self and soul as set forth by the Cartesian model.

When Descartes uttered his famous words, *I think therefore I am* he posited his own existence based on his ability to think. His conception of self had nothing to do with his physical presence. Existence, the articulation of self in the words "I am," was located in the mind, not in the body. It is not unlike the concept of a soul, a life force that is not confined to the body but does animate it and will eventually rise from it and continue after mortal death. Indeed, this conception of self was greatly influenced by Christianity that promised a life after death or more literally life *outside* or *beyond* the body. The Christian concept of a soul is one that is free and that will transcend the body to live on forever. Thus the modern European sense of *self* and *freedom* was a disembodied experience.

When racial slavery was established, the Europeans justified the enslavement of black Africans based on their race, a physical feature that pertains *only* to the body. It was believed that by divine intervention certain people were born with a mark that indicated the limited purview of their earthly rights. According to Christian religious doctrine, dark skin was read as a moral stain. This interpretation of religious doctrine justified African enslavement and cast white slave-owners and traders as the enforcers of religious law. Salvation was not open to black Africans. To recognize the soul of a slave, that thing which animates the self and makes it free, would be to recognize a Christian brother or sister, making enslavement impossible. Race was thus a bodily mark that imprisoned Africans in their own flesh. Confined to their bodies, black Africans were objects to be owned, not subjects whose right to freedom was established based on the ability to think and like white men, escape the confines of their bodies. One French ethnologist mused that black Africans exhibited "the most limited intellectual scope.…[their] thinking faculties are poor or even null…[the African] is possessed by his desire and also by his will, of an often terrible intensity."[66] Black Africans were incapable of thinking; instead they were subject to lust and hunger, the basest mortal impulses. Taking into consideration this use of Christian edict, "I think therefore I am," was the first articulation of the white male's right to freedom that would lay a philosophical groundwork justifying the enslavement of millions based on race, a totally corporeally defined identity.

The religious thought that supported this posited that those who had souls, i.e. those who were saved, would leave their mortal bodies on earth and ascend into the heavens where they would reunite once again with the eternal Father of all mankind. According to the

[66] Christopher Miller quotes from Josef de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55) in *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 17.

Christian creation story, the power of God was imbued to the earth through an immaculate conception and woman was merely a vessel for the coming of the King, the earthly embodiment and Son of God. When a soul departs the earth after the vessel of the body dies, the soul ascends heavenward. Like the City of Bones, there are gates to God's heavenly kingdom as well, protected by St. Peter, and one must be pure of soul and deed to enter and pass through. If judged favorably, the soul will be allowed admittance into the kingdom of heaven where it will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This ascent from the body was not allowed for black Africans—they were judged at birth, in a violent merging of soul and flesh, to be kept from this kingdom. Christianity, the moral underpinning of the New World, was used to justify the capture, transport, sale and enslavement of millions of Africans. The trans-Atlantic slave trade was one of the largest migratory projects the world has seen. Between the 15th and 19th centuries an estimated nine to twenty-eight million African peoples were forcibly relocated to the New World. Ships from Europe traveled with goods to be traded to African and European slavers in exchange for captive people. The ships were then loaded to capacity—and often far beyond—setting sail for the New World, coming to port in Brazil, the Caribbean and in various cities along the Eastern shore of America. Here slaves were deposited in exchange for commodities and goods produced in the colonies that were then exported to Europe. [67]

It was slavery that first "created and then relied on a large support network of shipping services, ports, and finance and insurance companies."[68] This triangle of trade was the foundation for global capitalism as we know it today. It is estimated that approximately eight million people were killed in what is known as the Middle Passage—the journey from African slave ports across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Sailors' logs recount schools of sharks that would follow the slave ships feeding on discarded cadavers or, if a ship had illegally overloaded its human cargo (as was often the case), live captives who were thrown overboard as patrolling ships approached. These horrendous acts would go unpunished in heaven, Christian edict promised, because black Africans were the sons of Ham and bore the stain of sin upon their skin.[69] "From a Christian point of view," V.Y. Mudimbe explains, "to oppose the process of colonization or that of slavery could only be morally wrong."[70] Thus the Europeans were not only justified, they were enacting God's will.

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[67] Online resource: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1523100.stm#map
[68] Excerpted from article "Focus on the Slave Trade," (Monday, 3 September, 2001) Online resource: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1523100.stm#map
[69] Miller, 151.
[70] Mudimbe, V.Y. *The Idea of Africa.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 37. Mudimbe locates what he calls "two fundamental concepts that were to guide colonization" in the *Romanus Pontifex*: "First, it affirmed the primacy of the papacy over the Christian kings, going back in its

In the name of God and of manifest destiny Europeans settled the Americas, changing the cultural landscape of the New World forever. Millions of indigenous peoples would die from plagues, thousands more from war and deliberate extermination. Settlers rejoiced and claimed that God was clearing the land for its rightful owners. While some religious groups in the New World, most notably the Jesuit missionaries, did strive to convince plantation owners that both indigenous natives and Africans were worthy of salvation, the general mentality went something like this:

> The [plantation owner] who owned a hundred or so slaves tended to look on them as a species of domestic animal, to be inventoried and named like horses, oxen or cattle. The biblical doctrine, enunciated in Genesis, that animals were there simply for the convenience of mankind, or the formulas of Roman Law concerning the slave as a form of living property and speaking tool, to be compared with inert property and dumb animals, furnished the cultural background to such thinking…[and would] exclude animals from the exercise of the rights which were enjoyed by rational beings.[71]

By and large, for over two centuries there was no salvation for Africans inside Christianity. For white Christians to admit that an African had a soul was to recognize a fellow human being. No longer would the slave be a commodity with market value. The recognition of a slave's soul would undermine a project worth billions of dollars—and indeed it did. When the abolitionist movement gained momentum amongst white Christians, in defense of the slaves they asked, 'are they not men and women? When hurt, do they not bleed?' As these questions rose in fervor, the distance between slave and slave-owner grew more and more thin.

## A New Paradigm

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson creates an alternate realm that resituates salvation to account for the experience of the body. For Africans and their descendants in the world of man the body is more than just a vessel for the soul, it is a prison. This is the foundation upon which Wilson examines morality and ethics. The City of Bones is a reckoning place where black people control their own spiritual destinies. It is ruled by deities that love and protect their people, African gods and goddesses with powers that run contrary to, alongside and away from the Christianity that serviced a project so vast and unrelenting as slavery in the New World.

Solly is the primary vehicle through which Wilson explores what he casts as incongruent aspects of Christianity. "I try to do the right thing," he says. "I always want to be

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most explicit and extreme expression to Boniface VIII's bull, *Unam Sanctam* of November 1, 1302. In the mid-fifteenth century, the spiritual primacy and rights were…objects of political negotiations. Second, it provided the basis for the "*terra mullius*" concept—that is, the concept of the European right of sovereignty outside of Europe, and ultimately the right of colonization and the practice of slavery."

[71] Blackburn, 180.

on the right side. But sometimes I don't know what side that is."[72] He critiques the illogical nature of God's messages as written in the Christian Bible: "God say different things. Say 'I will smite my enemies.' Then he tell you to 'turn the other cheek.' That don't get you nothing but two broke jaws."[73] But Solly is most skeptical of how Christianity has been used in service of the law that keeps his people oppressed:

> They never made Emancipation what they say it was. People say, "Jesus turn the water into wine what you look like telling him it was the wrong kind?" Hell, maybe it is the wrong kind! If you gonna do it…do it right! They wave the law on one end and hit you with a billy club on the other.[74]

The jump from the Bible to the law happens easily for Solly. His logic states that an unholy union has been struck. The Bible and the law have been used in service of one another in abominable ways. He refuses to abide by either.

In the end, Solly seems to resolve his conflict with Christianity. When Caesar comes to Aunt Ester's house looking for him, he tells Solly "you under arrest." Solly replies with "I'm under God's sky, motherfucker! That's what I'm under!"[75] It seems at first glance that Solly has found his Christian faith. However, another reading which takes into account the presence of the orisha could find that Solly was not claiming the Christian God, but instead calling upon Olurun, master of the skies, the supreme West African deity. As a conductor on the Underground Railroad Solly carried out the will of Olurun, acting in service of his people.

One of the most obvious ways in which Wilson's conception of a heavenly palace under the water runs contrary to the notion of a Christian heaven is that traditionally heaven is depicted as an ethereal place where souls dwell and all remnants of the body are sacrificed to the earth. In this watery realm, however, the palace is actually made *from* the remnants of the body—it is, quite literally, a City of Bones. In this way, the spiritual journey to this place requires a reckoning with the body, a reunion to it, not an escape from it. It is a celebration of the strength of the body, the marrow of the culture. Flesh, the vehicle that caused so much pain, is stripped away. Those who travel to the City of Bones return feeling whole. No longer are they fragmented by the difference between moral speech and action. They are reborn to a righteous purpose in the world of the living, imbued with the strength of their bodies and what it has meant for them to be born with black skin.

[72] Wilson, ibid., 29.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid., 60.
[75] Ibid., 70.

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Another important difference is that the underwater world is ruled not by men but by women, meaning that the feminine orisha inhabiting the water are closest to the supreme being, Earth, the place from which all life is sprung.

> Imperially presiding in the palaces beneath the sands at the bottom of the river, the riverain goddesses are peculiarly close to Earth. In the positive breeze of their fans, the ripple of their water, there is coolness. In the darkness of their depths and in the flashing of their swords, there is witchcraft. And within the shell-strewn floor of their underwater province there is bounteous wealth.[76]

In Yoruban philosophy, like the highest deity Olurun, Earth is neither male nor female but surpasses both.[77] In Christian philosophy, the earth is a waiting place and is often described as a Mother that births life but does not originate it. Like the Virgin Mary, Mother Earth is merely a vessel for the life it contains which is born to die and be reunited with the mighty Father who conceived of everything including the earth itself. Women, whose bodies bear the sin of their sex, are also confined to a corporeal prison. The earth is bound to the mortal world as woman is bound to her body, thus woman will not transcend the confines of her body nor the earth to be free in mind and soul as men.

Descriptions of Oshun in praise literature conflate masculine power and feminine grace into one impressive female deity:

> She greets the most important word within the water
> She is the orisha you see healing by means of water that is cool…
> Kare, King of the holy depths
> She dances, she takes the crown…
> The chiming bracelets of her dance.
> Woman wearing manly crown, oh so rare…
> The water sounds, *wanran-wanran-wanran*, like the bracelets of Oshun.[78]

In this praise literature not only does Oshun wear a manly crown she is referred to as a king. Yet the praise language is not burdened by a need to explain the slippage between male and female descriptions. Instead it exacts a harmony that flies in the face of Christian theology in which God is male and all powerful and woman is not only a vessel for his seed but a criminal whose curiosity resulted in the eviction of humankind from the Garden of Eden. Black Mary,

[76] Thompson, 74.
[77] Thompson explains that for the Yoruba Earth is neither male nor female but all powerful: "At the core of the all-powerful council of male elders, the Ogboni Society, lies the awesome image of their deity, Earth, all-devouring, all-seeing. It is believed that man as such and woman as such asked themselves, "Who is supreme?" And out of the earth came the white-hot message: I AM SUPREME! And Earth was, in a manner, beyond sex or class or any consideration contaminated by singleness of expectation." Thompson, 74.
[78] Ibid., 79-80. Thompson is quoting praise language collected by Pierre Verger in *Notes sur le culture des orisa et vodun* (Dakar: IFAN, 1957). Thompson explains that Verger "collected this praise-verse in Ketu," see Thompson page 275.

the next in line to take up the responsibility of Aunt Ester, is an African American incarnation of the Christian virgin whose body is undeniable and yet strong. In this revisionist incarnation she acts as a lubricant between the spiritual and earthly worlds. She maintains control over her own sexuality, choosing to ally herself with Citizen, the embodiment of Ogún's force. She is undying, yet mortal. She is a spirit with a race that attaches her to the people in an everlasting chain that is both a shackle and an umbilical cord.

## CONCLUSION

*Gem of the Ocean* represents a massive restructuring of ancient theology to include the experience of race and slavery. Through the City of Bones, Wilson conceives of a spirituality which loves the body, honors its potentiality, heals its wounds, bows down to the power of a woman to carry and give life, and where the only way to truly live is to die. Resurrection is a miracle made in service of the people, to liberate them and lead them home. There is no life without love and as Wilson's 20th Century Cycle proves, there are many walking wounded still. There is only this, as Eli says in the last words, *so live.*[79]

[79] Wilson, ibid., 85.

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## DRAMATURGICAL STATEMENT

Penumbra Theatre's August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth served as Dramaturge for this production.

Aunt Ester: "I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they'd eat me up."[80]

"In Wilson's dramas characters repeatedly return to their history in order to move on with their lives and into the future. Wilson delves into and rewrites the African American past, addressing and righting the wrongs of historical amnesia and social oppression, ritualistically reconnecting African Americans to the blood memories and cultural rites of the African past. For him, black people are not tangential to the central motion of history. He places them at the centre of his attention."[81]

### Remember, Restore, Redeem

a dramaturgical essay by Stephanie Lein Walseth

We are a country with amnesia. When faced with the choice of examining the past, living in the present, and driving towards the future, Americans inevitably and overwhelmingly choose the last of these three options. We are comfortable with this decision and the forgetting it enables. Our history textbooks glance backwards only briefly enough to highlight dates of wars, and to celebrate the victors' accomplishments, allowing us to create grand narratives of an America of glittering goodness, hope, and possibilities.

Wilson's work proposes another choice. He materializes what theater artist Anne Bogart calls a 'changing of the time register,' a slowing down, a living in that double moment that theater can create - both present and past simultaneously. His plays call us to revisit some of the more painful moments of our collective American past, and to dwell there and listen to the stories his characters have to tell. Not for the purpose of instilling guilt in non-African American audiences, but for the possibility of redemption through an act of restorative justice much like the one Citizen Barlow encounters in his meeting with Aunt Ester.

This dwelling is not an easy task. The time of the play, 1904, was witness to a tremendous amount of strife. It had been 41 years since the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and yet Jim Crow laws perpetuated fear and segregation. Efforts to stem the tide of black migration to northern cities for industrial jobs led to a rise in lynchings, race riots, and horrific acts on the part of the Ku Klux Klan. For those blacks who were able to move north, their options for employment were few, and often consisted of low wage, menial jobs under the

[80] Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean.* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006)
[81] Quote from Harry J. Elam, Jr. in his essay "*Gem of the Ocean* and the Redemptive Power of History," from *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson.* Ed. Christopher Bigsby. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

supervision of unscrupulous leadership. Despite the adoption of the 15th amendment to the Constitution, black voter disenfranchisement was enforced by means such as the Mississippi Plan, which required the payment of polling taxes and literacy tests. While the end of slavery had been written into law, hearts and minds were still reeling, trying to reconfigure power structures that had been in place for nearly 250 years. This transition to "freedom" was complex, multi-layered, and by no means easy.

Wilson's entire 20th Century Cycle, in which he wrote a play for each decade, remembers and reanimates this transition and its lasting effects throughout the 1900s. In *Gem*, written in 2003, but chronologically the first in the series, he transports us back to the heart of this transition. In this space he allows his characters to embody and vocalize the epic and the specific, the shared experiences of a people, and the nuance of individual lives. Their perspectives implicitly echo those of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, prominent and influential black leaders of their time, and their actions materialize competing views about the best way to live in this tumultuous time and place.

Wilson's work, in this cycle and in this play, embodies the wisdom of the Sankofa bird, a symbol of the Adinkra people of West Africa. This bird, whose body faces forward and whose head looks back, reminds us that in order to know who we are and where we are going, we must know where we have come from. *Gem* allows us that opportunity to look back. It calls us not only to recall what our national amnesia has caused us to overlook, but even more importantly, it offers us the opportunity to re-member ourselves as a collective of people who share this history, to put back together our bodies, our hearts, and our minds. By bringing us face to face with this painful moment of our past, Wilson offers us a moment, not of punitive punishment, but of remembering, redemption, and restoration. The choice to dwell in this moment, to go on this journey is ours, as Black Mary notes, "Aunt Ester can help you if you willing to help yourself."

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## THE STORY OF A QUILT…

For Penumbra Theatre's production of *Gem of the Ocean* Director Lou Bellamy and Costume Designer Matt Lefebvre sat down with Penumbra's Education Director Sarah Bellamy to discuss the making of an original art piece that would become a central prop piece for the production.

Below you can read a bit about the importance of African American quilting and an interview with the quilt designer, Cecile Margaret Lewis.

### WEAVING HISTORY

an essay by Sarah Bellamy

One of the enduring links between the Old World of Africa and the New World in the Americas is visible through textiles. Rhythmic patterns specific to various regions in Africa have shown up from Brazil to Birmingham by way of quilts, cloths, embroidery, weaving and eventually also surfaced in painting and jazz music. Because it was illegal for slaves to read or write, quilting became a way of preserving history and personal story. Historians are still researching the ways in which quilts may have been used to mark safe houses along the Underground Railroad, or contained maps and messages that would direct travelers to freedom.

The quilt in *Gem of the Ocean* is quite literally a map. Like many maps that hide secrets, only the trained eye can decipher its meaning. Aunt Ester, the keeper of ancestral wisdom, knows the powerful secrets of this quilt. She explains that it shows the way to the City of Bones, a spiritual place under the ocean made entirely of human bones. The city was raised in remembrance of those Africans who died *en route* to the New World.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade was one of the largest migratory projects the world has ever seen. Between the $15^{th}$ and $19^{th}$ centuries an estimated nine to twenty-eight million African peoples were forcibly relocated. It is estimated that eight million people were killed in the Middle Passage. Sailors' logs recount schools of sharks that would follow the slave ships feeding on discarded cadavers or, if a ship had illegally overloaded its human cargo (as was often the case), live captives who were thrown overboard as patrolling ships approached.

The quilt in *Gem of the Ocean* represents this journey. In the center the color fades from the quilt. Stitched into the cloth is an innumerable amount of bones, representing the city of which Aunt Ester speaks. Cradling this city is a large Sankofa bird, a West African symbol that embodies the belief that a step forward begins with a glance back. The Sankofa bird is a keeper of memory and legacy. As the elders say, before moving forward, you must settle with the past. This city is a place of reckoning and resurrection.

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The more one examines this quilt, the more complicated the story becomes. The artist Cecile Margaret Lewis used a piecing technique that would have been common in slave cabins where women saved every scrap of cloth until a quilt could be sewn. The block pattern she selected is aptly named "Storm at Sea" and is authentic to the period. As one gazes upon the quilt, myriads of people begin to appear, surrounding the City of Bones with the living and the dead.

The contribution of African American slave women to textile production and patterning is a history that is written largely though the pieces they sewed. Through expert use of plant dyes such as bark from Hickory, Walnut or Beechnut trees, cedar moss, pine straw and wild indigo, artisans worked with an impressive color palate. The majority of quilts that survived were meant for use in the plantation house by the slave-owning family. But slave women also sewed quilts for themselves. In the precious few hours intended for rest and recuperation after a day's work, women gathered pieces of scrap and sewed. Largely utilitarian, these quilts were put to rigorous use and many did not survive. A quilt like Aunt Ester's signals a generational passing down of knowledge, induction into symbolic language, and womanhood as a rite of passage for young slave girls.

After working in the fields or plantation homes, after parenting their own children and those children of the mistress of the house, after tending to the needs of their very basic households including cleaning, cooking, mending, butchering, shucking, nursing, midwifery, and loving, these spectacular women found time to create nothing short of patterned miracles that transcribe the history of a people. With this quilt we honor their courage, tenacity and ability to keep their hearts open enough to care for others when the world would not take care of them.

Take a closer look! Join us in the Dowling Studio on Sunday May 4, 2008 for a gallery presentation of Penumbra's *Gem of the Ocean* quilt. Meet the artist and learn more about the rich tradition of African American quilting. For more information visit Penumbra's website at www.penumbratheatre.org.

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**AN INTERVIEW WITH THE QUILT ARTIST**

This Interview with Cecile Margaret Lewis was conducted by Penumbra Theatre's Education Director Sarah by telephone on March 13, 2008. This interview has been formatted for the Study Guide.

SB: How are you feeling about the quilt?

CML: I feel good about it. It's expressing what I was trying to express. Which is what I read in that script.

SB: Your process you started with reading the script?

CML: I read the script. I read the script twice and I put it in the corner. I thought about how I would portray a people's journey across the ocean, where a lot of them die in transit and a lot of them die when they get to where they're going. I chose a block that's called Storm at Sea because I could see where that block would become a person—just with the way the colors are fixed in the block. All the blocks in the quilt are the same, they're all Storm at Sea blocks.

My concept is leaving the continent of Africa. I took a National Geographic atlas and turned it upside down. I wanted to see where I would be if I turned my back to the sunrise. If I turned my back to the sunrise and I headed into night, if I headed into a darkening sky, which would be sunset. So that's the orientation of the quilt, when you make the trip that way…when Europe is no longer pointing to what is up to us on a map but is in fact the bottom of the world. It's not to read the quilt like a book, it's because I'm reading the map upside down.

SB: In addition to the perspective of the people who are leaving one place and going to another, it's actually flipping the traditional orientation of the European concept of the globe.

CML: That's right. The globe is upside down.

SB: So the intent of locating Africa at the top of the globe does what Ceci?

CML: I don't think people who lived a long time ago were Eurocentric in how they were looking. They were very local…in how they looked at their lives. It's just my orientation. The slaves are heading into the sunset, which is a really important thing for me. Their backs are turned to the sun that rises in the morning. And they are heading pretty much into night—into uncertainty. Night is where people get scared—darkness. And I think this was a very dark trip. Certainly it was dark in the hold of the ship. It was dark with confusion. They were going someplace just stripped of everything: language, custom, religion, family, possessions. It's just such a dark journey that…um… (sighs)…

This was a depressing quilt to make because as I constructed the blocks I had to strip away the cloth that I started with on the African side, which is hand dyed that I had—indigo and some fabric that came from West Africa. It is modern fabric…(chuckles)…because I don't think any of us can really afford any of the ancient fabric. That would probably be raffia cloth and other things—bast fibers. But, um, I used some West African fabrics there. And those fabrics begin falling off of the people as they journey westward. They are replaced with reproduction prints.

The people also lose their color as they travel. The Storm at Sea block has a small square on one side of it. One of the things I used to indicate a living person is that it's consistently dark, dark brown on all the living people. I changed that square to gray to indicate death. I also used some red coloration in different parts of these blocks to indicate bloodshed and pain.

SB: As they journey the blocks that look like people fade. Can you talk a little bit about that?

CML: I can. I can. They are journeying into the ocean. And the…the *Gem of the Ocean* is a slave ship. It's a metaphor not for that particular ship alone but for the journey in general. On the quilt you will find there's one unbroken line of people that goes across the top. And that indicates the survival of somebody; so that we can hold this conversation right now. I am a product of the American slave trade so certainly I am a descendent of some survivors. So there is one unbroken line of people that have made it to the western hemisphere without drowning.

A lot of the people's parts start turning bluer and bluer as you get toward the middle of the quilt and eventually they get stripped away to white. I used linen for the center of the quilt. It's the same block but it's completely uncolored. I chose linen to indicate a winding sheet, which would be a proper burial garment in many cultures. And that's what it means to me. That indicates the City of Bones. It's a burial ground. And what I quilted as a motif is bones that are there. And Sarah I think you'll be real happy when you see what encircles the city of bones. It's the sankofa bird.

SB: Oh wow.

CML: That's the center of the quilt. The sankofa is also in the four corners. But it encircles the bones in the City of Bones. They needed to be held. They needed to be held and comforted and remembered. (long pause) After I had all of the bones there in the middle…I'm looking at them and they were so bereft and so abandoned that I put that bird around them. And she is looking back toward Africa. All of the sankofa birds' faces are turning to the continent of Africa.

I told you this was a depressing quilt to make. The City of Bones is—I don't know. They're there and there are just so many of 'em. And as I'm quilting this, it's tight like embroidery. And it just got worse and worse and worse. I thought about…millions of people perished in this thing. I mean, it's unreal. I'm certain that the Atlantic Ocean is a big burial ground of our ancestors. Not just the ones that were dying *en route*, but the ones that chose to end their lives.

I like pretty quilts. I would say there is a beauty to this but I wouldn't call it pretty. It is not joyful. It should never be forgotten. And for us in particular, um, those of us that are New World products… I think it has taken us a long time—and I'm speaking of the masses, the majority of us—to really…and I don't know if we're there yet…but we have to find pride in who we come from. We really are products of the American slave trade. For so long it's been a shameful topic of conversation. But that's who we are. And I'm very proud of the people that I have descended from. Their strength is unimaginable to me. (pause) It's the…see, this is hard for me to talk about. I can't quite wrap my mind around this concept. I can't imagine living that life. It's so unthinkable to me.

It's more than just a footnote in a history book. More than once I've really exasperated people as they tell the story of their family's arrival here. That typical story about great-great grandpa showing up here at Ellis Island with twenty-five cents in his pocket and he did thus and such. What I've noticed is that nobody seems to want to hear my story 'cause it's like, "Oh, that's just such a long time ago. I think we need to put all that behind us and move forward." But I take them with me. Not that that is a point in shame…and that's not something to stay upset and hurt about twenty-four hours a day. But that is the reality of what I'm made of. So working on this quilt was kind of rough for me because I do think about those people a lot, probably think about it more than I should. But for me it's a quest to figure out: who am I? I mean how did I get here? I know the general story. And it's just, it's unthinkable. The more I think about it I try to figure out what kind of tough stuff were these people made of? So mine are made of cloth and thread. That's the way I speak. I use cloth. I don't draw. So, I can't quite tell you how these people leapt into my imagination out of a Storm at Sea block. But, as I looked at the block it disappeared on me and was replaced by people. And I've never seen this block set as people.

SB: I was just going to ask that.

CML: I have never seen it. But that's what I saw immediately. And again, I am speaking in metaphor here, because it certainly was a storm at sea. Not just for the *Gem of the Ocean*, but for the birth of a whole people. We come out of a storm at sea.

SB: Can you talk a little bit about that one thread that is the connecting tissue between West Africa and the New World?

CML: Well, the unbroken line of Africans that left that west coast are all oriented the same way—they are all moving forward into the Western hemisphere. This line is watched and followed and guided by angels that are in the quilt [the angels are indicated by a gold fabric that is introduced into the block]. Those are angels are supporting us from behind and also leading us into this strange new world. These people are not bleached out. They haven't lost any of their colors. They're in tact. All through the rest of the quilt you see that people got problems. They're either dying or next to somebody that's dying or…or their orientation changes. 'Cause these blocks kinda flip around in different parts of the quilt.

SB: Can you talk a little bit about how the blocks change from the left side of the quilt to the right side?

CML: It's a map. So when they leave West Africa it's very orderly. They all cued up quite nicely like packing cargo into a boat. The way any good merchandiser would do. They're all facing the west and their heads are up toward the top of the quilt. As they start going toward the middle their clothing changes. They start losing this West African fabric and it starts being replaced by these reproduction prints. They start losing their way 'cause their heads aren't all pointed up after a while and they're starting to flip around a little bit. There's a vortex in the middle of the quilt. It's just…its… (sighs) People were probably called to jump out of those ships if they got a chance. It just it seems to me that the experience would be so frightful that a person would want to end their life. So as they get toward the middle you start seeing not only their faces turn grey where they're dying but you see them kinda losing their equilibrium where they're not all pointed the very same way. There is a couple of 'em flipping around. You can see in the New World people are coming back where their orientation is going

back toward the middle again. Where they had this face going into the sunset they're now leaving and going back toward the ocean. And…there's just a couple of 'em that are…you can count 'em…they're dead…

SB: And they have gray faces?

CML: They have gray faces.

SB: You talked a little bit about the reproduction prints that you used. What was your intent with that? Why replace the West African fabrics with reproduction prints?

CML: It's again the stripping away of identity and the things that people are accustomed to. It's a metaphor. The stripping away of the culture, the language, the clothing—everything.

On the back of the quilt I have a lovely paisley…it's actually upholstery fabric. I looked at that and I fell in love with it because I imagine myself leaving one of these houses on fire like when the Union army arrives and people are fleeing and stuff. And I got my chance…I ripped the drapes and ran off. So the back of it is what I would have done—stolen myself a piece of material and ran on into the bushes with it. This fabric is really innocuous looking. It's a brown paisley print. It's richer and sturdier because this is a scrap quilt on the face. But the back is one big piece of fabric, which would have been a luxury during this time period. So, it would have fallen into somebody's hands. How, I don't know. The only way I can imagine getting something like this at that point and time would be to make off with it from somewhere. And so that's what that is.

Also on the back of the quilt is another piece that's pieced into the middle of it. That's the legend for the map itself.

SB: Can you describe that a little bit?

CML: It's one block isolated in a field of blue. And that's so that you can isolate that block and see that it is a person so that you can read the map on the other side and see that they are all people there. Not just colors, people. And so that person on the back is floating in there in a blue sea.

Banded along the [perimeter of the blue area] are the colors that represent what has happened: dark blue of that violent ocean going into night; the clay color I used in the living faces. And finally it finishes with gray. And again that gray is indicative of death. The quilt is also bound in grey. The grey is pieced. The reason that I used grey binding is not so much for cosmetic purposes. It's the perimeter of this story. It's what this is about. In the script they talk about that sky that's a grey color where it shouldn't have been grey like that. It's really scary to me. Even the blue that I've used here for the border of the quilt is a pretty tampered blue. It's not as straight forward…it's dyed with indigo but it's what you call an off-cast blue. 'Cause it's been over-dyed with another color to take some of that…knock some of the pretty out of it. It's almost grayed the way it looks. The quilting motif around the edge of the border is a wave pattern.

SB: Okay. Let's talk a little bit about that. About the quilting and what you chose. Can you walk me through that?

CML: Yeah. For the center of the quilt, the part that covers the people, I used the pattern of chicken wire as a motif. Chicken wire is the flimsiest of barricades to hem up your poultry, your stuff in the yard. Stuff you own. It's not sturdy like a horse fence. It's just a flimsy thing. It represents this whole proposition of slavery. The way they got on with this plan—the whole plan was flimsy to me. It couldn't…they could not possibly have thought this was gonna continue or work anymore than you can keep a people hemmed up with poultry netting. So that's the background quilting that holds this quilt together. It's just…it's poultry netting. Chicken wire. And it goes across the whole face of the quilt except it does not cross over the city of bones nor does it cross over the sankofa. And the waves also do not cross over those handcuffs that are in the border nor do they cross over the sankofa bird.

SB: Okay. And what are the…what are the handcuffs and the waves then?

CML: The handcuffs are a dual sign. It's an Adinkra symbol. It stands for slavery and the law. So those are in the middle of the um…quilt border. There are four of those. There are also four sankofa birds quilted into the corners of the borders. And all around that is waves going around the quilt.

SB: And the waves represent?

CML: The waves represent that trip.

SB: Okay. And the sankofa bird in your mind represents what?

CML: Looking back. Looking back on this. Going back and getting it to see who we are and where we've come from. Take a look at our people. Think about how many of our folks have perished. But at the same time think about how many of our folks have survived so that we can tell the story.

SB: You said that this was, as an artist, it was a depressing quilt to make. What made you want to do the quilt?

CML: Because I know that story well. And I know that story outside of a history book because I can feel it. Um, when I tell you that I know that story I'm not talking about I was paying sharp attention in a history class or I've read every book on slavery I can get my hands on and listened to all the recorded narratives of the old folk. But I know that story because I can feel it. And I knew I could put it into cloth because that's…with some thread and a piece of cloth I can tell a story. And I absolutely knew that I could. I did not know it would hurt as much as it has.

SB: What will it mean for you, as an artist, to see this quilt onstage framed by the story that August Wilson wrote? The play and for Penumbra's actors to be touching it and using it and treating it with such reverence ?

CML: First of all, as an artist living in the twenty first century, it's a marvelous opportunity to get my work seen. I think we all want to get our work out there and get people to look at it. But more than that, I feel compelled to do things like this because I'm an Aunt Ester too.

SB: What does that mean?

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CML: What that means is I feel stories. I feel stories and I spend a lot of time… (small laugh) Boy they gonna lock me up in the nuthouse… I spend a lot of time in communion with what I call the grandmothers. That's where I get my nurturing from. And that's where I get a lot of my education from. Because they, they make sure that I look at and pay attention to certain things that are all around me. I have an internalized story, it's almost like a stolen birthright being reclaimed. I imagine myself somehow a long time ago being a child in the village and getting snatched awake in the middle of the night. Being torn away from my grandmother, who would have been a dyer in the village that I came from. (long pause) And them rejecting her and leaving her behind because they felt she was too old and decrepit. Not realizing that they had absolutely left the most polished gem in the village there with all the knowledge she had. But they just looked at her as some old lady. And as I'm being snatched away she managed to reach out and put into my hands some okra seeds. And all she could tell me was, "Don't forget." So we come here to the New World. And just like everybody else, we come here with a few of our foodstuffs. It's well know how Africans came here and cultivated things that came from the continent. So some generations later I find myself out in the garden. Putting my okra in the ground. And that voice comes back all these generations later. It says, "Don't forget." So that's where I get my lessons from. I go out and I work in the dirt. And the okra again is a prize for me. It is very, very beautiful. And whenever I plant it I think of my ancestors. And I think that when you take everything away from a people you can't take the things that are internalized and you certainly can't tamper with the spiritual world. So that's why I call them my grandmothers. They show up in my kitchen and talk to me. And they certainly sit out and watch me dig in the dirt. They laugh and they sing and they watch with a critical and loving eye. And they tell me that they like the show that I've been putting on for them. And they tell me that they appreciate the fact that I have remembered something that was almost forgotten. I think that has to do with not knowing so much about my relatives, but knowing about my ancestors, knowing that I do come from some people. So much got lost in the Middle Passage that it's up to me, being a person straddling two centuries, to gather up as much as I can out of my heart's imagination and rebuild this. And pass it right on to my grandkids. So in that, I feel like I'm Aunt Ester too. And the reason I happily accepted this, besides the fact that I'm a quilter, is that I know I can tell Aunt Ester's story because there's a lot of Aunt Ester's and I'm one of 'em. And I know that I am.

SB: Wow…yeah. Well, I'm really looking forward to having this quilt join the cast. I think it's going to be an incredible addition to the play.

CML: The quilt is a cast member. It really is because there's so many people stitched into that thing. And the hopeful part and why this hasn't been completely depressing, although pretty depressing, is that there's life there. There's an unbroken lineage that we have that goes way back. We're tied to some very tough people. We're survivors and we're creative and we can take bits and pieces of stuff and shake it up. Here in the twenty first century it's time for us to stand up as we've always done and we continue to reinvent ourselves. Because we are New World people. I acknowledge where I came from but I embrace where I am. And I'm happy to be a New World person but… Hey, we come out of a lot of noise and pain. That's where we come from. And it's not…it's not a story to be hushed up. It's a story that…this is a celebration of life. Despite all of this perishing we're here to tell the story and that's what's significant for me. And that's why I'm so honored to be allowed to make this quilt. Because it's a celebration of a birth of a people.

SB: I think that's a wonderful note to end on.

## DESIGN STATEMENTS

The creative design team is responsible for making the text on the page into a literal reality onstage. By using sound, lighting, set and costumes elements, the designers create an atmosphere inside which the actors play. Designers use methods such as color, temperature, or volume to help them as they work. Each of these methods can create a feeling onstage based on which tools the designer chooses to use.

In production, the design elements come together with the text, the actors and the direction, to create a three dimensional world. Penumbra Theatre is guided by an ensemble aesthetic, which means that no element is more important than another. This is Penumbra's ethical approach to art, in which every voice is unique, necessary and communally rooted. This approach also creates artistic balance and excellence. The audience often does not realize that any of the elements were at one time separate. They are totally bound; the result is something greater than the sum of each of its parts. Patrons of Penumbra Theatre Company often say the work looks effortless because the end result feels magical, feels surreal. This is one way the creative team, including the director, designers, cast and crew, can evaluate the success of their endeavor.

It is not magic, though. A lot of work goes into creating a production. Here you can see some of the concepts they used to make their part of the play come to life. (For information on production internships, please visit our website at www.penumbratheatre.org, or call 651-288-6791)

## SCENE DESIGN
## MATHEW LEFEBVRE

See photos of the set design below!

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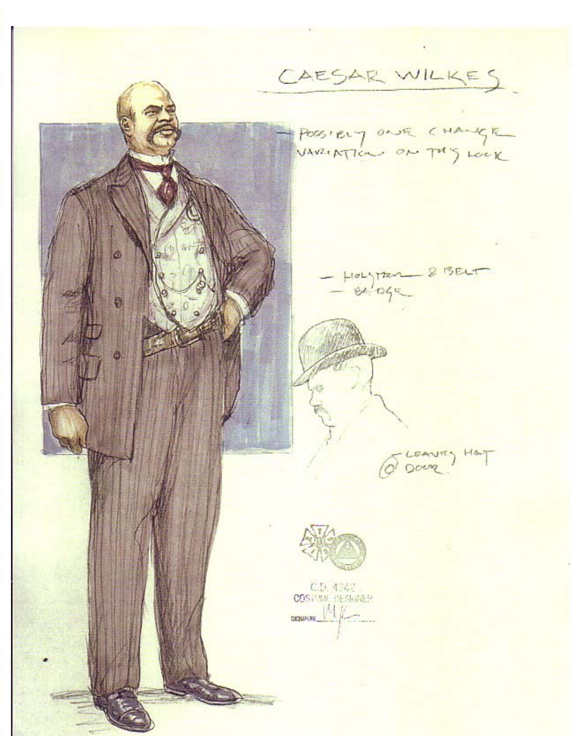
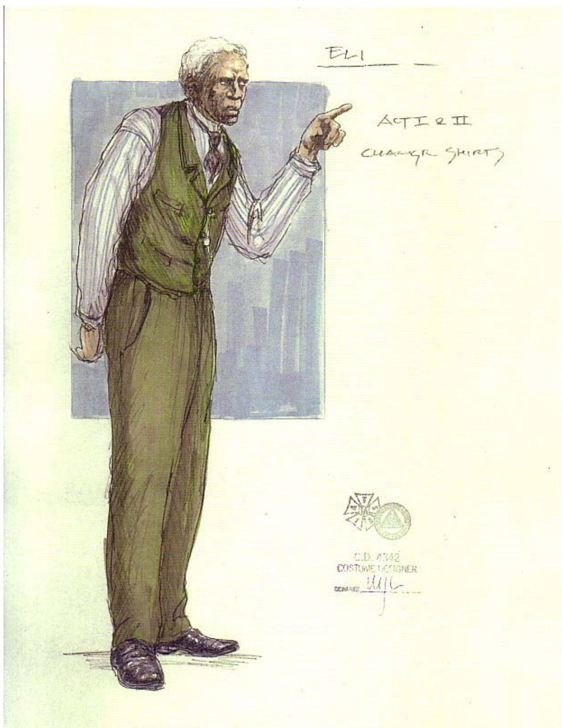
**COSTUME DESIGN**
**MATHEW LEFEBVRE**

See sketches of the costumes below!





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## ***Gem of the Ocean*: An Annotated Bibliography of Select Works**

Prepared by August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth

Elam, Harry Justin. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Theater scholar and critic Harry J. Elam examines Wilson's published plays within the context of contemporary African American literature and in relation to the concepts of memory and history, culture and resistance, race and representation. Elam finds that each of Wilson's plays recaptures narratives lost, ignored, or avoided to create a new experience of the past that questions the historical categories of race and meanings of blackness.

Williams, Dana A. and Sandra G. Shannon, eds. *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

August Wilson and Black Aesthetics offers new essays that address issues raised in Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech. Essays and interviews range from examinations of the presence of Wilson's politics in his plays to the limitations of these politics on contemporary interpretations of Black aesthetics.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2004.

Provides the reader with a source of basic data and analysis of characters, dates, events, allusions, staging strategies, and themes from the work on one of America's finest playwrights. The text opens with an annotated chronology of Wilson's life and works, followed by his family tree. Each of the 166 encyclopedic entries that make up the body of the work combines insights from a variety of sources along with generous citations; each concludes with a selected bibliography on relevant subjects. Charts elucidate the genealogies of Wilson's characters, the Charles, Hedley, and Maxson families, and account for weaknesses in Wilson's female characters. Two appendices complete the generously cross-referenced work: a timeline of events in Wilson's life and those of his characters, and a list of forty topics for projects, composition, and oral analysis.

Elkins, Marilyn. *August Wilson: A Casebook.* New York: Garland, 2000.

A comprehensive casebook that covers the political and cultural contexts of Wilson's plays; the conjunction of secular and spiritual traditions; Wilson's creative process; Wilson's collaboration with Lloyd Richards; the influence of Bearden, Baraka, Borges, and the blues upon Wilson's work; and an interview with the playwright.

Bogumil, Mary. *Understanding August Wilson.* Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

The book opens with a chapter on August Wilson as an African American playwright, discussing his life as well as what distinguishes his plays from those of other African American playwrights. Bogumil contextualizes Wilson's plays within societal factors, and has crafted a scholarly work that makes August Wilson's writing approachable and understandable to anyone from students to casual readers.

**Additional Sources for Further Reference…**


Bennett, Jr. Lerone. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America, 1619-1962*, (1969)

Blackburn, Robin. *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492 to 1800*, (1997)

Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (1989)

Humez, Jean. *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories.* (2003)

Larson, Kate Clifford. *Bound For the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero.* (2004)

Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991)

Painter, Nell I. *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (1988)

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.* (1984)

Tuttle, Jr., William M. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (1970)


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## SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

Penumbra Theatre's August Wilson Fellow Stephanie Lein Walseth conducted this interview on March 27, 2008 at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota

**Lein Walseth:** Why this play? Why now? I know that it is a part of Wilson's 20th Century Cycle that Penumbra is engaged in producing over the next five years. *The Piano Lesson* was first, and that holds special significance for the company in light of Wilson's comments on Penumbra's earlier production in 1993. What, specifically, about this play put it into the second slot for you?

**Bellamy:** There are two of his plays that we have not yet produced, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf,* and so we wanted to do those in this first two years, and I felt that it was important to do them, perhaps, in the order that he wrote them. So, we've got *Gem* now, and next season we're doing *Radio Golf.* That's mainly the reason, Stephanie. I mean, I could draw some other strenuous connections and so forth, but that's simply it.

**Lein Walseth:** In rehearsals you talked about the fact that you've been dying to direct this…

**Bellamy:** I am.

**Lein Walseth:** …and that you hadn't seen it done exactly the way you would do it. So tell me about that. Tell me why you're dying to do it, and what you think will be different about this production.

**Bellamy:** I've had a lifetime of dealing with these plays, and so I have some ideas about the ways I want to do them.

I think that with a playwright like August Wilson, you are awed by his stature and so that brings a certain kind of venerability to the piece. So, the tendency, especially with a play like *Gem of the Ocean*, where you have icons and archetypes on stage, is to give them the kind of worship, if you will, the adoration that they demand. And that isn't *playable.* That's boring. It doesn't tell these real stories.

There are two assumptions I've made. One is my own, and one is something that I heard August say. In a discussion with a woman who was cast as Black Mary when they were first working on the piece, she told him she wanted to be *special* - this choice that was made for *her* to carry on this mantle from Aunt Ester –the same one that Aunt Ester took and is carrying forward. She wanted to be something *special* – a mark at birth, the placenta being significant, or some kind of something special that made her, *the choice,* do you know what I mean? And August really flew in the face of that. He said, "There's nothing special about you. You're just another little black girl, and there are tons of them." What makes all these things special is the way average everyday people react to these circumstances, these trying, frightening times where you're in Reconstruction, the Klan is trying to keep you from moving north to fill your spot in the Industrial Revolution, you know, and it's dangerous and so forth. Here you are, it's scary, and all the European immigrants view you as a threat to their existence. All these things are being fought and contested. It's very existential – you are exactly what you *do.* It's this critical moment. But you're nothing special. And so I took that, and made that important. These are just everyday people in extraordinary circumstances, and what they *do* is all-important. All right. So that is dramatic now, when you make that kind of assumption.

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The other assumption I made, is about Aunt Ester. I've seen a few productions of this play. All of them assumed that Aunt Ester was 285 years old, and I think that's a terrible mistake. Nobody's 285 years old, okay? Let's get that straight right now. (*laughter*) So, you know, once you make that assumption that allows for a kind of an interaction on the stage which the other productions haven't allowed. With a 285 year-old woman walking around, her love affair with Solly can't happen, you know, there's a ton of things that can't happen. So, we make the assumption that she is older, you know, 70, 80, I don't know what. She's older, but she's spry. She's involved in life. She knows that she's coming to those winter years, and that the mantle has to be passed on, but she's not 285 years old. When she says it in the text, the way I've directed it, she and Black Mary laugh about it. She says, "You know I'm 285 years old," and they both fall out laughing, and then right after that she says, "Well, that's what Ester Tyler told me," and they laugh, you know. So, you can have that textual reference in a body that isn't *that*, and once you free yourself of that I think the play begins to sing and live in a different kind of way. And so, that's what I've done.

Whenever I deal with Wilson's spirituality—and this play is steeped in it—I try to find a real basis for some of the things that happen. There's a spiritual reason, but there's also another *chemical* reason why, a *real* reason why these things happen. That's true in Santeria, and it's true in all that Yoruba cosmology. There is this sort spiritual presence that's there, but it's based many times on some real *chemistry* as well. It's true in Carlos Castaneda, and it's true in all of the Native rituals, where people go off on a quest and look for a vision. They put themselves in a place where there are physiological kinds of reasons that that vision happens. You fast, and if you fast long enough, you're going to see some visions, you know what I mean? (*laughter*) If you smoke tobacco, you take peyote, you do things that place you in a world where these things can happen. It's the interaction *between* those two worlds where visions and beautiful things and scary things happen. So, I've put those things in this play. And August has as well. Before Citizen goes to the City of Bones he takes a drink. And there's a number of drinks taken in there. Well, I have had Aunt Ester, from the moment she sees Citizen, going out, getting certain kinds of herbs, outside and bringing those in, and grinding those things, and you see her put those in the drink that he's going to take before he goes on his trip.

So, it doesn't make it any less spiritual, but it grounds it in something – an interaction between the people and the earth and their world, that I think gives depth and power to the play. If you take it simply on that spiritual side, you only get part of the story. I mean, you got this guy coming in here bringing in dog poop, you know? They're doing things with that. They understand. My grandmother used to talk about cow pie tea. Now that's pretty sickening to think about, but that's where penicillin comes from, see? It's that mold, that mushroom that grows on a cow pie (*laughs*). So, these old folks are doing stuff that we're not quite aware of.

Those two assumptions, that there's nothing special about 'em, and that that woman is not 285 years-old, frees this play and just makes it sing, you know? It's a *lot* of fun. So, now that she's not 285, and she and Solly have a loving, real relationship, I have her come and touch him and discover the place on him that's going to be wounded in a little while. When she tells that story of the dream she has about him, and then she touches him, she's predicting what's going to happen to him. It's *really* poignant.

**Lein Walseth:** Hearing you say all of that makes me wonder if other productions have missed these dual or multiple levels that this play operates on, because a lot of the reviews I've read see the 'magical realism,' as they call it, as being sort of tacked on to this realistic play, and they claim that it doesn't work.

**Bellamy:** Of course not, because it's not part of it. When it becomes part of the existence of the people, and you see her mixing this stuff up saying, "We gonna send you to the City of Bones soon as I finish putting all this together in here, and when you drink it, you're going on a trip," we all sit up and watch her. It's like seeing someone build a fire. You watch 'em break up the sticks, and get the tender, and you go, "Yep, there she's building a fire, now watch her, there she goes, she lights the match, and boy, it's a fire!"

Now, Stephanie, you and I don't know that this is going to work. I don't have a clue! We're going to the City of Bones in about an hour for the first time, so I don't have a clue. I know that I don't want to use masks, because I think that's an external thing that these people don't need to make this journey. I think that their bodies are inscribed and marked to make this journey and they don't need anything special or different to do it. We might use ceremonial robes – that's still being studied right now, and I don't know whether we'll land on that or not. But, they can do take this journey to the City of Bones with the combination of the drugs and movement and song.

**Lein Walseth:** That's interesting that you're going to be working on that section of the play today, because that's one of the things I've been thinking a lot about. It seems to be a moment, similar to the "O'Berta" moment in *The Piano Lesson*, where a song is sung but the spectacle of suffering on the chain gang is not replayed for us. We know what it is, and through the song we get a sense of the emotion, but we're not subjected to seeing the same image that we've probably seen many times in many places, the repetition of which could serve to make us numb to the suffering it tries to represent. So, I'm wondering how you're thinking about that in relation to the City of Bones scene in *Gem*, where the other characters are supposed to symbolically chain and whip Citizen?

**Bellamy:** Again, what is interesting for me is not necessarily the suffering of being on the chain gang, or being in the prison. We *know* it's bad, okay? We know all that. There was a point at which black theater *had* to go there and show that pain and deal in that reality, because that had to be stood up for. You *had* to do that. Now the question is, "What are you going to do about it?" So, it isn't the chain gang, it's the psychological scars and so forth that these people are dealing with. It isn't that existence, that pain, anymore. So, I get impatient with just showing the pain. I don't think we have to show that here. I don't think that he has to be whipped. We'll have some sound where that happens. But, it's about him tripping out and feeling it rather than it happening externally to him.

**Lein Walseth:** You've talked in rehearsal about the kitchen of Aunt Ester's house being a chemistry lab. Can you talk a little bit about the set, the kitchen, and the house in general? I know when I first saw the model of the set, I was really surprised because reading the text I thought, "Oh, it's this small house that Aunt Ester would have had in 1904." And then here she's put in this *very* large space. Set Designer Matt LeFebvre spoke about it in terms like 'retrofit,' 'patchwork,' and 'collage'— putting together a space that wasn't originally yours. So, I'm curious to hear you talk more about the concept behind those decisions.

**Bellamy:** Somehow we want the feeling that there's an opening to heaven through this house. So, we've done that with the ceiling and sort of this feeling of going on forever, steps that go up forever, that kind of thing. I wanted, again believing that there are some very real reasons why all of these things happen, for the kitchen and the table and all of those things, to act like a place where you're fed, but also as a lab. I mean, these ladies know secrets about herbs. And they can make those things, in a very real way. Take Haiti, and the existence of zombies, or the manifestation of the Yoruban religion in this New World. Now, you can say that there's no such thing, and that people who are dead are dead. We know that them brothers take that essence of

that puff fish, and they'll put that on you, and it'll put you in a zombie-like state where you look like you're dead, and you will get up and move and so forth. It's chemical. Now, there are some other things that ritualistically surround all that, but there's a real chemical reason for the creation of that zombie-like state. And so, that's what I'm moving toward here, and that's what those women do up there in this house. That's why I wanted that kitchen to be all that stuff all at once. When she makes up the stuff that goes in the bottle that he drinks and sends him on a trip, I mean you're gonna see a real chemical experiment going on, and then at the end, she'll take the essence of it in an eyedropper and just drop a drop in the bottle. Now, maybe for the purist, they're gonna go, "Ugh, that's just a drug trip!" Well, yeah, you can take it there if you want. Or, you can think about that sort of like a sweat in Native cultures.

**Lein Walseth:** Right. The mind and the body aren't separate. I mean, all of Wilson's work is operating on these multiple levels.

**Bellamy:** I think so. I think so. I just didn't make all this up. I mean, I think there's stuff in the text that allows it to happen. He's the one that put them in there saying, "Anybody going to the City of Bones needs a drink." I'm just carrying it a little farther.

**Lein Walseth:** How, if at all, is all of this made different by bringing it to the Guthrie?

**Bellamy:** I don't know, Stephanie. I do believe, I *know*, that context makes a difference. It does. These black bodies are important, though. We will bring our context with us, and we will not allow it to be changed. We will try to minimize the influence of that context on those bodies. Something special will be created by being there in that space that will be different than being in this space. But, we'll try to hold this thing sacred, if you will. But, it's going to have to change it.

**Lein Walseth:** Can you tell me about how the partnership came about to begin with?

**Bellamy:** I wanted to stay artistically pure with this and she [Managing Director Chris Widdess] has allowed me the luxury of that. What we want to do is share the art on the largest canvas possible, open it up to as many people as we can. That's what's driving it. I think that, with the marketing machine they have, and so forth, we might be able to do that. Still though, we want to let that affect it as little as possible. That's the deal that you want to make. The size of that house and the relationship of the house to the audience is going to be different than it is here. That it's not inside the black community makes it different, makes it a different thing. And we realize that. But, hopefully there's enough of who we are there that's going to hold it. Make it different.

I remember when we toured and brought a drum on stage with *Grandchildren of the Buffalo Soldiers* [by William S. Yellow Robe, Jr.]. That was the first time that audience had ever seen a drum on stage. It's the first time those people ever saw a traditional dance as part of a play. And it tripped them out. The context of it was different. And they were hootin' and hollerin' and carryin' on, you know. There are issues that we have to deal with. But hopefully we'll be sensitive to them.

**Lein Walseth:** Does Penumbra maintain artistic control over the production?

**Bellamy:** Oh yeah. It's our production. Everything says it's Penumbra's production at the Guthrie. So, it is our production. We could never *not* do that.

**Lein Walseth:** What do you hope, given what you've just said, will be the outcome? What do you hope audiences there will take away from this experience?

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**Bellamy:** I think what they'll see is an unfiltered statement. This is a black aesthetic, dealing with a black play, done by black people, with black leadership. It's just pure, and that's what they're going to see. Now, whether or not they embrace that has yet to be seen. But this play, as all the plays that Penumbra produces, is done for black people. Everything is. That gives it a kind of a power and truth and depth that everyone, of course, can appreciate, but we won't be drawing lines for the white people in the audience, explaining what this means. They have to come up to it. And I think that's what we bring – a purity, an authenticity. I think that beginning rehearsal here at Penumbra is an important thing, it's a good deal.

**Lein Walseth:** I think this is a good place to end. Thank you very much.

## TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

These questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12).

For more information please contact the Education and Outreach Director for more details: sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org

### **A Feel for the Times** -- *Comprehension Questions*

1. Name three events in American history in which migration was a central theme.
2. Why were racial tensions high in the 1900s? What political factors played a role in relations between black and white people?
3. What does it mean that Solly Two Kings was a conductor on the Underground Railroad? What did he do that made him so important for his people?

### **Critical Thinking and Analysis** -- *Short Essay Questions*

1. How is it possible that Aunt Ester is 285 years old?
2. Why is her address, 1839 Wylie Avenue, significant?
3. Why do you think Aunt Ester is so hard on Black Mary? What is the lesson that Black Mary is supposed to learn?
4. The boat that Citizen takes on his journey to the City of Bones is made of paper. What is the significance of this paper and why do you think the playwright thought it was important to include in his play?
5. Many of the characters in *Gem of the Ocean* have been to the City of Bones. What happens to people after they visit the City of Bones? How do they change? Who do you think has not been? Why or why not?

### **Language Arts and Theatre** – *Reflection*

1. What are three ways in which *Gem of the Ocean* blurs the boundaries between real time and the past or future?
2. How do sound, lighting and set design elements impact the telling of this story? What elements did you notice and why do you think they were important?
3. What do the costumes tell you about the period and the characters in the play?

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**Exercises**

1. What do you think the City of Bones looks like? Draw a picture or write a poem describing how you see the City of Bones. Share your poem or picture with the class.
2. Aunt Ester is very hard on Black Mary. Sometimes it is hard for older generations to let go of their children. Think of a time when a parent/guardian or teacher has been hard on you. What was the lesson you were supposed to learn? Find a partner and read the last pages of Scene 3 (pages 73 and 74) between Black Mary and Aunt Ester. Write your own scene in which one person plays the student/child and the other plays the teacher/parent.

**Vocabulary** – *Important Terms*

**Abolition** – the act of formally repealing an existing practice through legal means, either by making it illegal, or simply no longer allowing it to exist in any form. In the United States, The Abolition Movement refers to the project to end racial slavery and liberate black Americans. The movement gained momentum after the British Parliament outlawed the African slave trade in 1807 and incorporated people from various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds including but not limited to free blacks and liberal whites such as the Quakers. In 1863 slavery was outlawed in the United States with the formal declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation.

**Antebellum** – the period of time before or existing before the American Civil War during which slavery, the slave trade and the sale and purchase of slaves was legal and protected by local and federal governments.

**Àshe** – a West African term for the will of the supreme deity, Olorun. Àshe is enacted in the earthly and spiritual realms by the orisha, who put into practice the will of Olorun.

**Civil War** -- (1861–1865) was a sectional conflict in the United States of America between the federal government (the "Union") and eleven Southern slave states that declared their secession and formed the Confederate States of America led by President Jefferson Davis. The Union led by President Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party opposed the expansion of slavery and rejected any right of secession. In the spring of 1865 the stars and stripes raised over Fort Sumter, signaling the fall of the Confederacy. After four years of Civil War, the Southern stronghold of eleven states opposed to the abolition of slavery fell under the jurisdiction of the Union, freeing black people throughout the South.

**Colloquial and Collective memory** – "the memory of the people" that may be passed down through the generations through song, oral history, folklore or through other artistic mediums but is very rarely included (and is often contrary to) the dominant historical record.

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**Colonization** – the systematic expansion of European control of foreign territories. The region colonized is typically known as the Third or Developing World today, though at one point America, today a superpower, was contested colonial territory of the British, French and Spanish. The enforcement of colonial rule includes oppression, racism, forced religious conversion and language acquisition, efforts to undermine cultural continuity through education and the prohibition of students to speak their native languages.

**Corporeality** – bodily, material, of or pertaining to the flesh. Individuals who are socially and politically "marked" are done so through their bodies via gender, race, sexuality, etc.

**Cosmology** – the study of the universe using science, philosophy, art and religion. The roots of the word come from Greek; in translation it means *the order of the cosmos.*

**Creole** – the merging of cultural, ontological and spiritual systems into a new, blended articulation of culture in the New World. Creole tradition incorporates European, African and indigenous American traditions into emergent expressions of culture and identity. It is often most easily identifiable in terms of cuisine, music and art, though language and religion are vital to understanding the process.

**Great Migration** – The rapid relocation of masses of black Americans from the traditional South to the northern states that coincided with the industrialization of major cities at the early part of the 20th Century.

**Historiography** – studies the processes by which historical knowledge is obtained and transmitted. Broadly speaking, historiography examines the writing of history and the use of historical methods, drawing upon such elements such as authorship, sourcing, interpretation, style, bias, and audience. The word historiography can also refer to a body of historical work.

**Middle Passage** – refers to the portion of the Atlantic Slave trade that transported enslaved people from Africa to markets in North and South America and the Caribbean. It was called the Middle Passage because the slave trade was a form of Triangular Trade; it left Europe for African markets, sailed to Africa where the goods were sold or traded for people in the African slave markets, then sailed to the Americas and Caribbean (West Indies) where the Africans were sold or traded for goods for European markets, and then returned to Europe. About 18 million Africans were transported from Africa with 3 million dying during the journey. Disease, abuse and starvation due to the length of the passage were the main contributors to the death toll.

**Miscegenation** -- is the mixing of different ethnicities or races, especially in marriage, cohabitation, or sexual relations. *Interracial marriage* or *interracial dating* may be more common in contemporary usage. While the English word has a history of ethnocentrism and racial superiority, the Spanish, Portuguese and French words, *mestizaje*, *miscigenação* and *métissage*, connote a positive ethno-cultural melting pot. It was outlawed in the United States until the landmark civil rights decision was enacted in 1967 by the US Supreme Court and declared Virginia's anti-miscegenation statute, the "The Racial Integrity Act of 1954", unconstitutional, thereby ending all race-based legal restriction on marriage in the United States.

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**New World** – describes the territory explored by the Europeans after Christopher Columbus landed ashore in the Caribbean. Thinking momentarily that he had discovered a new oceanic path to India, he declared that the people inhabiting this land were Indians. They were in fact, Native Americans, more than likely Taino and Carib peoples. Upon realizing that the land discovered was not India, the European explorers declared this vast stretch of land in the Western Hemisphere the "New World," and set about exploring, claiming and cultivating the land.

**Orisha** – Gods and goddesses from West African cosmology or spiritual systems. They are the messengers and actors of *àshe*, the will of the supreme deity.

**Patriarchy** – describes a society that is structured around the notion of men as breadwinners, leaders and representatives of the society. This kind of society is marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family and the legal dependence of wives and children. Additionally, a patriarchal model traces birth lineage back through the father's bloodlines, which often determines inheritance. In more broad terms, patriarchy describes the control by men of a disproportionately large share of power over the rest of society.

**Plantation Slavery** – the use of slave labor to promote the intentional planting of a crop, on a large-scale production or pasture. Crops may be called plantation crops because of their association with a specific type of farming economy. Most of these involve a large landowner, raising crops with economic value rather than for subsistence, with a number of employees carrying out the work. Often it referred to crops newly introduced to a region. In past times it has been associated with slavery, indentured labor, and other economic models of high inequity. However, arable and dairy farming are both usually (but not always) excluded from such definitions.

**Post-bellum** – the period of time after or existing after the American Civil War during which slavery, the slave trade and the sale and purchase of slaves was illegal. Local and federal governments struggled to enforce the new laws and many white Americans were opposed to the ruling. During this period, nostalgia for the old slave regime became prevalent.

**Praise Language** – the richly poetic language that imparts the wisdom and actions of the orisha. It is disseminated mostly through songs and stories about each deity that describe his or her power, purpose and responsibility to protect devotees. New World interpretations of the orisha also reflected the history of how the people came to be in the Americas.

**Purgatory** – according to Roman Catholic doctrine, purgatory is a stopping place for souls that have not yet been completely purged of earthly sin and need time for further purification before gaining entry into Heaven. The word "purgatory" is also used, in a non-religious sense, to mean any place or condition of suffering or torment, especially one that is temporary.

**Seasoning** -- the forced acclimation of newly arrived slaves. The goals of seasoning were twofold: the first was to acclimate new slaves to their surroundings including basic language acquisition, lay of the land and laws to abide; the second goal was to break any rebellious spirit that would encourage newcomers to incite trouble amongst the senior populations. Seasoning was a brutal, confusing and critical feature of the slave system.

**Segregation** (or "Jim Crow law") – the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurned the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.

**Slave Castles** – along the coast of West Africa, prisons were erected that looked like castles. Inside were hundreds of holding cells where slaves were kept in captivity before being loaded onto ships sailing West to the New World. There are still several standing today, the most popularly visited is Elmina, located in Ghana, where tourists annually go to bear witness to the horrific beginnings of the slave trade.

**Underground Railroad** -- a network of clandestine routes by which African slaves in the 19th Century United States attempted to escape to free states, or as far north as Canada, with the aid of abolitionists. Other routes led to Mexico or overseas. It's estimated that at its height between 1810 and 1850, between 30,000 and 100,000 people escaped enslavement via the Underground Railroad, though U.S. Census figures only account for 6,000. The Underground Railroad has captured public imagination as a symbol of freedom, and figures prominently in Black American history.

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