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RADIO GOLF

By August Wilson

Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

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Never to Forget: Legacy, Culture and Continuity in August Wilson's *Radio Golf*

"That was yesterday. Today's today. Tomorrow's been following me a long time.
Everywhere I go it follows me. It ain't caught me yet. Today's faster than tomorrow."
Elder Joseph Barlow, *Radio Golf*

Introduction

In 2005, August Wilson finished *Radio Golf*, completing his project to chronicle the African American experience decade by decade throughout the 20th century. In April of that year the play premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre. Six months later, on October 2, 2005, the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright died. He had finished the ten-play cycle he set out to write, leaving his legacy—unparalleled in history—intact.

It is no coincidence that Wilson wrote the two plays that begin and end the cycle last. *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s) and *Radio Golf* (1990s) bookend the cycle, illuminating threads of cause and effect, generational conflicts, and questions of inheritance—central themes Wilson explored throughout his life. Wilson saw race as the principle channel through which to examine these elements of human life. He called himself a "**race man**," one who believed "that race matters—that [it] is the largest, most identifiable and the most important part of our personality."¹ Family is essential to the question of race. In America, where codes of color are deeply inscribed in the fabric of our society, race determines more than one's family of origin. In very real ways it determines your path through life, the way you view things, the way others view you. It shapes your participation, mediates your power and defines your challenges. The experience of race in America is epic, inexhaustible and as Wilson proved through ten plays examining the African American experience, still significantly relevant to our contemporary lives.

In his own life, he found it "difficult to disassociate my concerns with theatre from the concerns of my life as a black man."² As such, he became a powerful voice advocating awareness. He was uncompromising in regard to authenticity and hypercritical of attempts to blur history into a **colorblind** experiment toward utopia. In Wilson's eyes, an ideal society was wherein color *is* taken into account, along with the experience of living in a body marked by race—both white and black. He wanted to divulge the complexities of this experience, the privileges of whiteness, the gifts and unique challenges of blackness. He did not see the claim to colorblindness as politically correct; he saw it as a dangerous threat to the integrity of history:

In an effort to spare us the burden of being "affected by an undesirable condition" and as a gesture of benevolence, many whites (like the proponents of colorblind casting) say,

¹ Wilson, August. *The Ground on Which I Stand*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 14. A speech given before the Theatre Communications Group conferees on June 26, 1996.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

“Oh, I don’t see color.” We want you to see us. We are black and beautiful. ... We are not ashamed. We have an honorable history in the world of men. We come from a long line of honorable people with complex codes of ethnic and social discourse, people who devised myths and systems of cosmology and systems of economics. We are not ashamed, and do not need you to be ashamed for us. ... We are unique, and we are specific.³

While almost exclusively fixed into an **oppositional binary**, Wilson’s investigation of relations between black and white Americans proved that claims toward multiculturalism often hide our inability as a nation to deal with our peculiar history, and the unique situation of race in relation to slavery. Wilson saw his project of chronicling African American life as combating the “cultural imperialists who seek to empower and propagate their ideas about the world as the only valid ideas, and see blacks as woefully deficient not only in arts and letters but in the abundant gifts of humanity.”⁴ With vigilance and determination, Wilson ensured that African Americans were authentically represented in theatre and literature. Through his specific quest into black American life, this gifted playwright mined universal truths. His cycle offers audiences and artists alike a wellspring from which to draw both intimate and familiar glimpses into the human condition. Ambitious in scope, each play is deeply rooted in the African American experience, bringing to life archetypal yet wholly three-dimensional characters often saddled with tragic human flaws, whose passion for life matches their quest for justice.

In *Radio Golf*, Wilson turned his eyes toward the 1990s, a decade in which the gap between generations of black Americans was more evident than ever. The central characters of *Radio Golf* seem far away from their ancestors depicted in earlier plays. Still, as Wilson deftly illustrates, they are heir to a very particular history, and many represent themes in this play that sprang up first in *Gem of the Ocean*.

American Inheritance: Race, Legacy and Family

Harmond Wilks, the ambitious young politician in *Radio Golf*, is the grandson of Caesar Wilks, the gun-toting, stalwart law enforcement official in *Gem of the Ocean*. Like his grandfather, Harmond is determined to foist his misguided notion of progress on the residents of the Hill District, the cultural black heart of Pittsburgh. In order to weed out the criminal element he despised in the burgeoning African American community, Caesar, was willing to sacrifice the cultural integrity of his people to assimilate into white life. Nine decades later, his grandson is less apt to do so, but still cannot see the error of his ways.

³ Ibid., 32.

⁴ Ibid., 21-2.

Harmond is tied to the Hill District through real estate; his father made a fortune buying and selling properties, just as *his* father made a living renting the buildings he owned to tenants in need of shelter after emancipation. The success Harmond embodies took generations to build, but he is not completely privy to the means by which the family's wealth was made. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Black Mary criticized her brother Caesar for evicting tenants who could not keep up with their rent. Caesar was known as a hardliner. He placed himself in a position in which he was necessary but also ruthless; because of his inflexibility in regard to the law, the people regarded him as a tyrant. His grandson seems more compassionately aligned with fellow residents of the Hill District than Caesar, but along with the inherited success comes its' history. There are still elders alive who remember.

In *Radio Golf*, Joseph Barlow reveals how the neighborhood viewed the Wilks family. He recalls,

OLD JOE: ...I used to know your daddy. I ain't gonna say nothing about him. My mama told me if you can't say something nice about somebody don't say nothing. Your daddy was a big man like you. He didn't have no truck with the little man. He always drew a line like that. He put the little man on one side and the big man on the other. My mama say everybody on the bed or everybody on the floor. ...I remember you when you was a boy. Used to see you riding in the car eating ice cream. Everybody else was walking.⁵

The real tragedy of this circumstance of class hierarchy is that the two men are intimately related. Black Mary and Caesar Wilks were brother and sister, making Joseph Barlow and Harmond Wilks cousins, family. It was because of divergent beliefs that the families split, leaving one wealthy but void of cultural connection and the other rich in heritage but poor.

It is this legacy that keeps Harmond in a state of limbo; he exists both within and outside of the Hill District and his black culture. This is precisely what makes him a probable candidate for mayor. With black skin and family ties to the Hill District, he provides cultural diversity to the state government, but if he is too close to the people he will present a problem, a threat. Harmond and his wife Mame walk a fine line between being black, but not too black, yet somehow still stay black enough to claim cultural camaraderie. In reality the racial waltz this well-positioned couple negotiates comes down to a question everyone has but few are willing to ask. Sterling Johnson—the neighborhood handyman—comes right out with it: “You get to be

⁵ Wilson, August. *Radio Golf*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007) p. 36.

mayor is you gonna be the mayor of the black folks or the white folks?”⁶ Harmond responds carefully, “I’m gonna be mayor of all the people.”⁷

Physically Harmond’s roots are in the neighborhood but somehow he does not quite fit. He chooses to purchase office space on Centre Avenue, yet one gets the sense that he and his family were merely tolerated, and never let into the intimate dealings of cultural preservation and warfare in the Hill District. In *Gem of the Ocean*, things stopped when Caesar came around—conversation, laughter, stories, truth. Harmond is similarly suspended outside the interiority of community life, yet he is running for mayor on a ticket that proudly claims a connection to the Hill District. As members of the community interact with Harmond, it becomes clear that they are not quite sure how to take him.

Like his grandfather, Harmond subscribes to the supremacy of the law as evidenced by the speech he gives, later reprinted in the *Post-Gazette*:

STERLING: [reading HARMOND’s *speech*] Police misconduct should never be rewarded. Everyone should be called into account for their actions. The police are public servants bound by an oath of duty to protect its citizenry by abiding and upholding the laws of the commonwealth. No one is above the law.⁸

The speech is eerily reminiscent of Caesar’s rant against “criminal behavior” in *Gem of the Ocean*. Between generations, however, something has changed. Instead of using his dedication to the law against the people, Harmond uses it to keep law enforcement officials from abusing their power.

Upon investigating the house scheduled for demolition at 1839 Wylie Avenue, Harmond discovers that his father had been paying taxes on the property, preventing it from seizure. What he does not understand is why; his father did not own the property, and Harmond cannot recognize any hidden value in it that would have motivated his father who he describes as a “hard businessman” to keep up with the taxes.

It is perhaps a remnant of Caesar’s sentiment that “family is the most important thing,” that inspired Harmond’s father to support Aunt Ester and her kin at 1839 Wylie. Despite differences, Caesar paid for Black Mary’s mother’s funeral himself (the siblings shared only a father). What is evident in Wilson’s plays is that at some point nearly everyone goes to visit Aunt Ester. Their survival as black people depends on it. It is likely that upon his visit to the oracle, Harmond’s father learned of his relation to her—that she was in point affect his aunt. Supporting her meant upholding his oath to place family above all else. But in Harmond’s

⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ Ibid., 42.

time—in 1997—Aunt Ester is gone. Even though she is badly needed, something is impeding her return.

The world Wilson introduces through Harmond and Roosevelt Hicks is one of individual concern, where folks are willing to sacrifice cultural and communal health to secure individual wealth. The community is displaced. People are not looking out for one another. They do not fully value their own lives because they devalue the lives of their brothers and sisters. In order to bring the people together, something significant must happen, something to bind them all up with a common interest, a common goal. They must all find value in one thing. The Hill District needs a prophet, as Sterling asserts, and throughout most of *Radio Golf*, one wonders whether Harmond Wilks might be that man—thusly redeeming his grandfather’s crimes against the people. Instead it becomes clear that, unlike the prophet Sterling lightheartedly suggests (Jesus Christ) only Aunt Ester can do the job. The painting party that Sterling organizes will demonstrate the people’s investment in a sacred space. To prompt her resurrection the house must be rebuilt; people must take pride in the Hill District as the cultural epicenter of the North—a beacon for freedom and spiritual renewal. The renovation of Aunt Ester’s house unites the people under a common banner of shared history. Together, they will make 1839 Wylie livable again so that Aunt Ester can return.

Sterling is also a reincarnation of an earlier character, a community organizer—wayward, in some ways criminal, but with a “sterling” heart. Like the charismatic newcomer in *Two Trains Running* (1960s), Sterling Johnson believes in his people. Ushered into knowledge via the neighborhood eccentric, his purpose is finally revealed as he who sets into motion the thing that brings the community together. His predecessor went through a similar revelatory process. In *Two Trains Running*, set during the tumultuous atmosphere of the **Civil Rights’ Movement**, Sterling is easily swept up in the push for equality. Like his successor, he posts signs for a party to organize the people. Both characters come with some baggage. In *Two Trains Running* Sterling is a recently freed convict, with his eyes on Risa, the waitress at the café where the action of the play takes place. In the café Sterling encounters Hambone, a man almost everyone disregards as crazy. Like Joseph Barlow, Hambone is not crazy, he just knows a truth that is too big to deal with by himself. Hambone has fixated on the thing that gave him his nickname, a ham that was promised to him by a white man for whom he did some handiwork. When the time came for the man to pay Hambone for his work, the man gave him a couple of chickens instead. This was not what he had promised and Hambone was determined to hold him to it; he wanted a fair deal—he had kept his end of the bargain and felt betrayed by the unfulfilled promise. The ham thus came to symbolize a larger betrayal of black Americans by their country, a promise for freedom, equality, justice and an unimpeded pursuit of happiness

that has yet to be fulfilled. Upon his death, the promise was still unmet, and Sterling could not stand the injustice of it. He broke into the man's butcher shop and stole a ham, bringing the community together around an issue bigger than all of them.

In *Radio Golf*, an eccentric man has also schooled Sterling Johnson. Evident in their familiar rapport, the relationship between Joseph Barlow and Sterling Johnson as one of teacher and student is illuminated in the respect Sterling shows Elder Barlow by referring to him as Mr. Barlow instead of Old Joe, as the others call him. According to Roosevelt, Joseph Barlow is stark raving mad, with his charges against the US government for crimes of kidnapping, and his claim of having traveled to an underwater holy place called the City of Bones. Unbeknownst to Roosevelt, Joseph Barlow's mother Black Mary used to help Aunt Ester take people to that holy, healing place. A salty baptismal ground, recently freed slaves found a new beginning when Aunt Ester showed them the survival of their spirit in spite of the concerted effort to destroy it during slavery.

In some ways Roosevelt's inability to recognize intelligence, integrity and value in Joseph Barlow is similar to Caesar's inability to make sense of the decisions people made in his time. Caesar could not wrap his mind around why anyone would jump in the river and drowned rather than be tagged a criminal as Garret Brown did in *Gem of the Ocean*. He could not understand why anyone would burn down the steel mill, retarding the production of Pittsburgh's chief manufacturing industry. Nor did he understand the importance of Aunt Ester to the people, the significance of her legacy throughout the generations, and he arrested her for charges of aiding and abetting a known criminal. This is the crux of his inability to understand—the “common sense” to which Caesar (and Roosevelt, later) ascribes is common not to his people, but to those in power, it belongs to white society. Aunt Ester and her kin maintain a different kind of common sense, one that says ‘if we live as they say we should, we will surely all die.’ So they take matters into their own hands. They break the law when necessary because the same people who made them slaves wrote the laws. They take in vagrants because they understand the importance of family and recognize that a wandering person has a broken soul. They use but do not value money; Aunt Ester's famous directive to “take twenty dollars and throw it in the river,” would seem ludicrous to the likes of Caesar, Roosevelt and even Memphis in *Two Trains Running*. In the end, many of the nonbelievers find their way to Aunt Ester's door, where she gently redirects their frustrated ambition for wealth toward a celebration of what they already possess. She reminds them of the value of their lives.

Joseph Barlow is also heir to ideology from yesteryear. “Old Joe” acts as the arbiter of the philosophy embodied by Citizen Barlow, who in *Gem of the Ocean* took up the mantle set by

Solly Two Kings, Aunt Ester's great love, who spent his life secreting slaves out from the depths of bondage North toward freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Elder Joseph Barlow is seventy-nine years old, and is the child of Citizen and Black Mary, born in 1918, fourteen years after their predestined meeting in *Gem of the Ocean*. As the child of the man who replaced Solly Two Kings and the woman who replaced Aunt Ester, Joseph Barlow shoulders a great responsibility. An alternate kind of royalty, his bloodline binds him to a life of servitude, guardianship and preservation of history, culture and spirituality. More clearly, Joseph is also the name of the father of the prophet Jesus Christ. Yet in Wilson's restructuring of religious ideology in *Gem of the Ocean*, he fashioned an amalgamation of Christianity and **Yoruban** theology to reflect a twin spirituality of African Americans, resurrecting an alternate female prophet—Ester Tyler—and created an alternate heaven under the ocean—the City of Bones.⁹ Following this new cosmological order, Joseph Barlow remains the father of the prophet, but unlike the Biblical story that recounts the birth of a prophet, Joseph Barlow fathers a girlchild whose name is Black Mary—the woman who takes up the mantle for Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean*. The **matrilineal** situation of prophecy and power that Wilson depicts is more closely aligned with the Old World, than that of Christianity's **patriarchy** which was employed to enslave black Africans as the sons of **Ham**, born with a stain upon their skin determining their interminable lot as servants to white, male, property-owning Christians in the New World.

Wilson spoke often of his mother, who raised he and his siblings alone. It was through her that the playwright found his sense of self and cultural identity. She gave him a place in the world:

Growing up in my mother's house at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the response to pleasure and pain, that my mother had learned from her mother, and which could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands solidly on these shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African-American spirit.¹⁰

In some ways Aunt Ester is an amalgamation of Wilson's own mother and the African American identity he embraced and studied. In his own life, without the presence of a father, his lineage and culture was sprung from the blood of his mother and her kin. For the playwright who had a difficult time separating his art and his life, it makes sense that he reordered the world of his

⁹ For further analysis, see Penumbra Theatre Company's study guide written for *Gem of the Ocean*, available at www.penumbra-theatre.org

¹⁰ Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*. pp. 15-6.

characters to honor the power of the woman to sustain life, preserve history and maintain culture.

At the close of the century these forces meet; divergent life philosophies, opposing understandings of value and progress, reincarnated from the mire that was emancipation from four centuries of slavery. In 1997 a young woman by the name of Black Mary waits to move into her rightful home, and claim her place in the line of women who have kept the spirit of black people alive.

Progress in Pittsburgh: Gentrification, Development and the Blight

Time has advanced considerably from the dawn of the 20th century. A black man is running for mayor in Pittsburgh and has a shot at winning the election. Harmond Wilks has big plans for Pittsburgh, and more specifically the Hill District. While he appreciates his family's legacy in the neighborhood, he believes the Hill District has stagnated. He wants to cultivate it into a more commercial sector, something about which he feels the people could be proud. To this end, he and his business partner Roosevelt Hicks have devised a plan to develop the area, erecting a large condominium complex complete with a Starbucks, Barnes and Nobel bookstore, and a Whole Foods grocery store. Gone are the days of Bella's, the grocery store Troy Maxon (*Fences*, 1950s) loyally supported in favor of the larger A & P. Even though Bella's market was more expensive than the A & P grocery store, Troy told his wife Rose "you shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me."¹¹ In 1997 there is no allegiance to black-owned businesses. In contemporary America, the historically black Hill District falls under the shadow of corporate commercialism. Harmond even has plans to rename the Hill District, calling it Bedford Hills instead.

In order to see their plan through, Harmond and Roosevelt must wait for the city to declare the neighborhood "**blighted**," at which point they will be awarded federal funding to raze everything falling within the circumference of the redevelopment project. When Roosevelt expresses concern that the declaration of ruin will not come through, Harmond reassures him that "any fool can look around here and see that the Hill District's blighted."¹² The word "blight" has very specific connotations of depressed value and is ascribed to urban areas in particular. By definition a neighborhood that is "blighted" is identified as one that is in a severely spoiled or ruined state. The interesting point to note about the definition of the word is the gesture toward the *action* of spoiling or ruining something; *someone* or *something* must have *done* it. In a botanical sense, blight is also used to describe a disease that afflicts plants with

¹¹ Wilson, August. *Fences*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007) p. 7.

¹² Wilson, *Radio Golf*; p. 12.

brownish blotches, causing the entire plant to wither away without rotting completely. If one imagines America as a healthy plant in which each region is represented by a different leaf or frond, the “brownish blotches” that are symptomatic of disease could be represented by black people, whose culturally homogenous neighborhoods are generally economically deprived. The interesting thing about the term in this regard is that the cause of blight is a bacteria or virus that spoils the plant. When used to describe a neighborhood, however, the term inherently carries an ascription of blame toward the people inhabiting it for its condition. This is a racist interpretation of the condition of poverty. Conflating the two definitions, both geographic and botanic, in practical, modern usage the poverty afflicting black neighborhoods is in fact a symptom of a viral presence threatening the health of the country. That virus might be identified as American capitalism; an economic order built on racialized slavery. The deep irony of the scene in which Harmond and Roosevelt rather contemptibly celebrate the declaration of blight in the Hill District is that by American societal standards, as black people with ties to the neighborhood they are part of the problem. Rather than recognize codified stratification of race and class in America as infection, dominant society targets black people as a virus that diseases an otherwise healthy country, when in fact their poverty is merely symptomatic of the disease which plagues the nation.

In *Radio Golf* Wilson keenly illustrated the interlocking systems of race and class in determining access to resources and privileges. As well to do businessmen, Harmond and Roosevelt celebrate the blight, but they are still subject to the power of racism. The class distinctions that seem so important between Harmond, Roosevelt and Mame versus Sterling and Joseph Barlow end up meaning little in the eyes of the white establishment. As soon as Harmond recognizes value in the Hill District, his political career is shattered.

The class discrepancies between the characters are most obviously illustrated in the exchanges between Sterling and Roosevelt. When Roosevelt first meets Sterling he assumes he is a small man, a non-threatening peon, and treats him condescendingly. “How you doing my man?” Roosevelt says. “We could use someone like you. We can put you to work. We can make an opportunity for you. I know it’s a hard world. It’s hard for everybody. But if we stick together we can do it. We can make use of a man like you.”¹³ Superficially Roosevelt comes off as an ally, but when Sterling pushes he and Harmond to walk the walk they talk, Roosevelt’s elitism billows to its full volume. Sterling calls him on it:

STERLING: What? You think I’m a stray dog? I’m homeless? I ain’t got no friends? I ain’t got no purpose in life? You the big man. You got everything. You got more reason to live than I do. What you got I

¹³ Ibid., 16.

ain't got? I got good manners and everything. What you got? What makes you special? I got a house. I got everything you got. Plus a little more. I got common sense. I know riddles. I can sing. And I used to have a pretty good hoop game. What you got I ain't got? I got a dick. I got a fist. I got a knife. What you got?

ROOSEVELT: For one, I got some money.

STERLING: I got money too. You think you the only one got money. Money make you special?

(STERLING goes into his pocket and takes out some bills.)

There. Now what? Show me your money? Come on. Show me your money. I ain't sure you got none. There's mine. Where's yours?

ROOSEVELT: I said money. You don't know what money is. When I go to the bank I need a wheelbarrow. They send me straight to the weighing station. Say they weigh it up now and count it later.¹⁴

At first glance this scene might seem to demonstrate Sterling's financial ignorance by juxtaposing his comprehension of what it means to have money with Roosevelt's literal wealth. Yet Wilson uses Sterling's cunning challenge to Roosevelt to reveal his greater understanding of the way money works for black people in America. He does not rely on a bank, but instead keeps his money with him. Sterling's challenge contradicts Roosevelt's power in relation to the immediacy of access to his wealth and control over one's property—Sterling may not have a lot of money, but he always has access to it. If Roosevelt should ever find himself in a compromising situation, there are forces that could freeze his bank accounts, collect on outstanding debt without his permission, or simply erase the money that is supposed to exist in theory. Indeed Roosevelt is willing to trust the scales to “weigh it now and count it later,” indicating an investment in a different kind of gradient to measure the worth of an individual.

Sterling's language in this exchange is strikingly similar to Harold Loomis' rage against God in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910s) in which he calls the religious people of the house fools for believing that God is such a big man, bigger than him.. Later Roosevelt reveals himself as one who thinks he is superior to Sterling. When Sterling tells him that it's “Negroes like [him] who hold us back,” Roosevelt responds with “Who's 'us'? Roosevelt Hicks is not part of any 'us'.”¹⁵ He tells Sterling that it's not his fault that his father is a criminal and that his mother is an addict, qualities he assigns to Sterling's family, assumptions about him based on his class status. “Get up off your ass...quit stealing...quit using drugs...go to school...get a

¹⁴ Ibid., 76.

¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

job...pay your taxes," Roosevelt tells him. "You niggers kill me blaming somebody else for your troubles."¹⁶

Ultimately Sterling underscores the difference between he and Roosevelt by aligning race, class and personal ideology in such a way as to demonstrate his comprehension of two racially specific terms assigned to black Americans throughout history: Negro and nigger.

STERLING: You know what you are? It took me a while to figure it out. You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don't know like I know. I know the truth of it. I'm a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God's creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blindyitis. A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back. ...You make things hard for me. You go around kissing the white man's ass then when they see me they think I'm supposed to kiss it too.¹⁷

The need to disassociate oneself from people of the Hill District community such as Sterling and Joseph Barlow is evident not just in how Roosevelt treats them, but in the exchanges between the two men and Mame, Harmond's wife. While she is polite, she remains reserved, is all business and quickly leaves upon their entrance into her husband's office. Mame, has taken up responsibility for Harmond's image—and by extension the African American image—during the campaign. She herself is up for a promotion to serve as the governor's press representative. Yet her directives are often times questionable. While phonetically her name is pronounced *may-mee*, on the page it more closely resembles the word *maim*, meaning to disfigure, mutilate, injure or hurt. It is she who suggests that Harmond situate his office outside of the cultural Hill District, she who sends his speech and photo to the press, she who advises him on his campaign slogan. Her position is summed up in the first few lines of the play when Harmond brings Mame to see his new office:

MAME: This is it? This isn't anything like the way you described it. This ceiling's what you were so excited about?

HARMOND: Look close. See the embossing on the tin.

MAME: Harmond, it looks raggedy.

HARMOND: See those marks. It's all hand tooled. That's the only way you get pattern detail like that. That tin ceiling's worth some money.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 76.

MAME: Then take it down and sell it. At least put some new paint on it. I wouldn't want to do business here.

HARMOND: This is a construction office. It's not to impress anybody.

MAME: Your campaign office cannot look like this.¹⁸

Harmond's request for Mame to "look close" is not something she can afford to do in her position as the "press representative." Instead, it is her job—in her mind—to prevent greater society from looking closely at African Americans and their culture, lest something negative be revealed. Often, those things about which some African Americans are ashamed are grounded in practical terms of survival, like the "criminal" conduct of Sterling Johnson and Elder Joseph Barlow. Aunt Ester's brand of common sense would have recognized that. However, because the stories behind these circumstances are either flatly denied or discredited by white society, in Mame's eyes, they become shameful examples of why African Americans are relegated to the sidelines of contemporary American society and she will avoid divulging them at all cost.

Still, Mame is not entirely divorced from her culture. In fact, in a scene between she and Joseph Barlow, we realize that Mame has not forgotten who she is; she just covers it up for convenience as best she can. In the presence of an elder black man who she likely believes has more than one screw loose, she feels comfortable showing her cultural competency:

OLD JOE: ...I seen the people call God down. They don't do that much no more. But I seen it happen. Over on the Northside. The 14th day of November, 1937. The people called him down and God came in a blaze of Glory. I seen him. Had a pot of water say he could make it boil without fire. The people want to bet against God. You can't bet against God and win. The people put up their money. God walked over and stuck his hand in the pot and stirred it around. Told one of the fellows, "Now you do it." Man walked over and tried to stick his hand in the pot and had to draw it back. The pot was boiling! If you had thrown some beans in there you could have cooked your supper. He asked the people if they wondered how he could do that. He said, "I am He." He didn't say he was God. He just say, "I am He." But who else could he have been? Made a pot boil without fire. Can you do it? If you can't do it you ain't got nothing to say.

MAME: You say the people put up their money? They was betting against God? Well tell me, did God walk out the door with the money? If he

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

walked out the door with the money he wasn't nothing but a Negro from Mississippi with some dry ice.¹⁹

On a superficial level this exchange may demonstrate Joseph Barlow's naïveté as to the ways of the world. On another level, he may have been testing Mame to find out who she really is. Her insight to the culture could be read as the kind of currency used in Joseph Barlow's world—one not based on money, but on cultural awareness and common sense. Yet in the public sphere Mame cannot afford to let this part of herself show. Her calculated plan to get Harmond elected is in service of her career as much as it is his. Ever conscious of his image, Mame wants Harmond to set up his office in Shadyside, a neighborhood unmarked by the cultural specificity of the historically black Hill District. She claims she does not want Harmond to “start [his] campaign excluding people.”²⁰ In her mind, locating his campaign office on Centre Avenue in the Hill District will mean that he is “a black candidate,” which carries an implication that worries Mame. Her concern is that white voters will feel ostracized, nervous that Wilks is running “for black people.” She wants him to represent a broader constituency, one that situates his candidacy in relation to his ideals, not his race.

As a press representative, Mame is also an historical revisionist, something Wilson regards as exceedingly dangerous. Another invocation of the dual meaning of her name, it is evidenced in the christening of the Hill District Health Center. While she claims to want to preserve the history of the neighborhood, she is willing to sacrifice the cultural meaning of honoring the first black registered nurse in Pittsburgh, Sarah Degree. Instead Mame advocates for a title that will prove the Hill District is a respectable neighborhood, a “model city.”

MAME: Model Cities Health Center has been around for twenty-two years. The organization has some history in the neighborhood. Nobody knows who Sarah Degree was.

HARMOND: That's why the Health Center needs to be named after her. So we remember.

MAME: I mean that's nice and I understand the sentiment but it's just not practical to throw all that history away.²¹

Not only will her falsification of culturally relevant history erase Sarah Degree's memory, it will resituate the Hill District as racially benign, removing the specificity of its character from its public (that is exterior) persona. A model city is one that is not real, something plasticized and intangible.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30-1.

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 10.

The site of major contention, however, is a familiar address in the Wilsonian cycle: 1839 Wylie Avenue, the craftily hidden historical safe house for black folks in Pittsburgh. The real symptoms of blight are most profoundly located here, at Aunt Ester's house. The home of the oracle and keeper of the flame has been abandoned. To Harmond and Roosevelt, the house is an eyesore, unkempt and poverty-stricken to the outside eye. Once Harmond enters the house, however, the interior is quite unnaturally preserved and alive.

HARMOND: It's a Federalist brick house with a good double-base foundation. I couldn't believe it. It has beveled glass on every floor. There's a huge stained-glass window leading up to the landing. And the staircase is made of Brazilian wood with a hand-carved balustrade. You don't see that too often.

ROOSEVELT: That's 'cause people don't like that kind of shit anymore. All that's listed in the demolition contract. They have salvage rights. That's why we got a good price on the demolition.

HARMOND: You should feel the woodwork. If you run your hand slow over some of the wood you can make out these carvings. There's faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there's this smell in the air.

ROOSEVELT: That's them mothballs. People used to throw mothballs all through their old shit. They'll stink up the air like that.

HARMOND: No...the air in the house smells sweet like a new day.²²

The interior of the house illustrates more than the regality of Aunt Ester reflected in the quality of her domicile. It signals an investment in the space made by the numerous people with whom she came in contact over the centuries. Its handcrafted quality speaks to the talent of those craftspeople whose bodies and skills were owned by slaveholders. The investment in this site is by, for and of black people, their resources, skills and cultural breadth pooled into one vast safe-zone where wounded souls could come to heal, reconnect and rediscover their purpose in life.

Wilson's description of the house is particular. First, Harmond describes 1839 Wylie as a "Federalist" house, also another way to describe Union sentiments during the Civil War. Soldiers fighting on behalf of the Union were known as "Feds" or "Federalists." This description of the house does two things: it signals the age of the house and the situation of it as a safe house located in the North, in Union territory, where abolitionists stressed the need to end slavery in the South. Dating the house's erection describes a need for it after emancipation, a place where newly freed black people, bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, could go to find their loved ones, repair their wounded spirits and set a course for survival in a new era.

²² Wilson, *Radio Golf*, p. 61-2.

The house is built upon a strong “double-based” foundation, which could be emblematic of the dual origins of African American people as both Old World and New World people, both African and American. This unique foundation describes the birth of a new people in the world—not wholly African, not wholly American, but always and constantly both. The foundation has lasted through the century and Harmond describes it as “good.”

It is also likely not a coincidence that the staircase in the house is made of Brazilian wood. Brazil is the region to which most Africans were imported—the sugar plantations continually replenished by new shipments of slaves by owners who believed it was fiscally more prudent to work a slave to death and purchase a new one than to let the population reproduce itself naturally.²³ The artistry of the Yoruba, Mande, Wolof and Fon people, regions from which the majority of captives were taken, is renowned—particularly their metallurgy, sculpture and carvings. A staircase handcrafted such as this signals an inheritance of birthplace and talent from the merging of the New and Old Worlds.

Like Mame’s suggestion to strip and sell the tin ceilings in Harmond’s office, the special qualities of Aunt Ester’s house will be stripped away piece by piece, the sum of its parts never equating the full value of the house preserved intact as a sacred cultural space. But Harmond does what he suggested that Mame do; look close at what is before him. What he sees is history preserved and protected. He may not be able to read the words inscribed in the woodwork, but he reveres it as an old language, something that stirs his blood and seduces him to restructure his development plans to defend the house against demolition. Recognizing cultural value in the house situates Harmond firmly on the spiritual ground of his ancestry. It strengthens him and once revealed, he cannot turn away.

America the Casino: The Game of Life

Throughout his cycle, Wilson often described the quality of life in America as a capitalist gamble, one that in theory meant everyone had the opportunity to strike it big. In practice, however, Wilson repeatedly demonstrated that African Americans were situated in such a way as to make their participation in this game nearly impossible. To that end, many of his characters break the rules; there is a “criminal” element to them because in order to survive they have had to live on the fringes of polite society. Yet within this order, “right is right and right don’t wrong nobody,” as Sterling says.²⁴ Interestingly, as the century progressed, the game-like quality to life became more evident in Wilson’s plays. In *King Hedley II* (1980s), for

²³ See Robin Blackburn’s *The Making of New World Slavery: From 1492-1800* (London and New York: Verso, 1997). See especially Chapter 4, “The Rise of Brazilian Sugar.” pp. 161-181.

²⁴ Wilson, *Radio Golf*, p. 51.

example, craps became a metaphor for the difficult balance between luck and strategy that was life for King and his family. Nowhere in the cycle is life painted more like a game than in *Radio Golf*. As time progressed Wilson's portrayal of American society became more complex, slicker, with different rules and different strategies to restrict black people from gaining access to "the table."

The title of the play, *Radio Golf*, is also the title of Roosevelt's WBTZ radio show in which he gives game advice to listeners. Golf is important to Roosevelt Hicks. He and Harmond describe it as the game with "all the rules [you] need to win at life."²⁵ Throughout the play, the nature of the game—as well as the metaphor of golf—becomes more complicated.

Not surprisingly, it is Joseph Barlow and Sterling Johnson who most clearly illustrate the American game as unevenly devised to prevent their success. Given their class status and dedication to preserving the Hill District as it is, Harmond and Roosevelt see them as throwbacks, lacking in the skill and aptitude to seriously compete for the American dream. They are also painted as somewhat cynical. When Joseph Barlow asks Harmond if he is running for mayor he tells him, "they ain't gonna let you be mayor." Harmond responds optimistically:

HARMOND: This is 1997. Things have changed. This is America. This is the land of opportunity. I can be mayor. I can be anything I want.

OLD JOE: But you got to have the right quarter. America is a giant slot machine. You walk up and put in your coin and it spits it back out. You look at your coin. You think maybe it's a Canadian quarter. It's the only coin you got. If this coin ain't no good then you out of luck. You look at it and sure enough it's an American quarter. But it don't spend for you. It spend for everybody else but it don't spend for you. The machine spits it right back out. Is the problem with the quarter or with the machine?²⁶

By identifying the coin as an American quarter Old Joe hints at the claim that black slaves were made Americans upon emancipation, with equal claim to citizen's rights that would be protected under the law. In his poetic simplicity he tells Harmond that the spirit of the law is different in practice than the letters that make it up, in America "it don't spend" for black people.

While Joseph Barlow is situated almost exclusively outside the game, the younger Sterling has found a way to manipulate it from the inside. Sterling says, "they don't mind you playing their game but you can't outplay them."²⁷ He realizes that the name of the game will change whenever black people use their talent and determination to enter and win.

²⁵ Ibid., 23.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

²⁷ Ibid., 75.

STERLING: ...If you score too many points they change the rules. That's what the problem was...you scored too many points. If things had kept on going like that you was gonna have buy you a gun. Time this is over you ain't gonna be able to walk down the street without somebody pointing at you. If they point *and* whisper you in trouble. You'd have to move out the state. Start over again somewhere fresh. That is if you still wanna play the game. If you still wanna play the game you gonna have to relearn the rules. See...they done changed. If you relearn the rules they'll let you back on the playing field. But now you crippled. You ain't got but one leg. You be driving around looking for handicapped parking. Get back on the field and every time you walk by somebody they check their pockets. That's enough to kill anybody right there. If you had to take a little hit like that all day how long you think you can last? I give you six months.

HARMOND: I know how the game is played. I know the rules.

STERLING: But do you know when the game is over? When you in an argument the best thing to do is stop arguing. ...That's what you got to do...Like that man stole three hundred million dollars. He say, "You right." They fined him thirty million dollars and give him a year in jail. The way I figure that leave him two hundred and seventy million dollars profit. Unless my math is wrong. Giving in is good for your blood pressure too. Your heart and everything else.²⁸

Giving in is not giving up—it is opting out, making your own set of rules and standards by which you live your life. In this passage, Sterling uses the notion of a handicap literally, echoing the punishment for trying to escape the American game when slavery was the order of the day. Captured runaways were rewarded with amputation of various limbs—sometimes an ear, sometimes a foot, sometimes a hand, depending on the whim of the master. It also bespeaks the fact that African Americans have started behind in the game that is the American dream. Born with the “handicap” of darker skin, black people have been competing in the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” game of American economics since the nation’s founding. America has still not accounted for the advantage given to white citizens who profited from four hundred years of slave labor. While **affirmative action**, an attempt to close the achievement gap, has opened the door for some black Americans to gain access to higher education and better paying jobs, it has not done much for the majority of black folks struggling to make ends meet in the US. Today, white Americans angry about the “unfair advantage” of affirmative action

²⁸ Ibid.

conveniently forget the inheritance to which they were privy by virtue of being born to families who determined their race superior upon the founding of this nation.

In his own way, Sterling has opted out of the rat race. He lives according to his own rules in as many ways as he can. His “resume” is the work he’s done already—when Harmond asks to see it, he tells him to “go up on Bedford and look where I fixed that porch. I fixed up a house around Webster. 1615. Go look at that. Almost everything you see fixed up around here I did it. I do good work. Go around to Bedford and look at that porch.”²⁹ When Harmond calls the local union to get Sterling hired, they tell him that he is not actually a member. “I’m my own union,” Sterling replies.

STERLING: I got my own everything. Except my own bank. But I got my own truck. I got my own tools. I got my own rules and I got my own union. I don’t play no games. I have to have my own. That’s the only way I got anything.

Sterling is unwilling to play the game without making his own rules, but he does play—and rather masterfully. When he explains his way of life, it resounds with the sheer audacity of common sense typical of Wilson’s characters:

STERLING: I been going in the back door all my life. See, people get confused about me. They did that ever since we was in school. But I know how to row the boat. I been on the water a long time. I know what it takes to plug the holes. I ain’t dumb. Even though some people think I am. That give me an advantage. I found that out when I was in the orphanage. Mr. Redwood taught me that. He told me, “You ain’t dumb, you just faster than everybody else.” I was so fast it made me look slow. I was waiting for them to catch up...that made it look like I was standing around doing nothing. They kept me behind in the fourth grade ‘cause I wouldn’t add twelve and twelve. I thought it was stupid. Everybody know there’s twelve to a dozen and twenty-four to two dozen. I don’t care if it’s donuts or oranges. They handed me the test and I turned it in blank. If you had seventeen dollars and you bought a parrot for twelve dollars how many dollars would you have left. Who the hell gonna spend twelve dollars on a parrot? What the hell you gonna do with it? Do you know how many chickens you could buy for twelve dollars? They though I didn’t know the answer. Every time somebody come to adopt me they say, “Well, Sterling’s a little slow.” That stuck with me. I started to believe it myself. Maybe they knew something I didn’t know. That’s when Mr. Redwood told

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

me, “You ain’t dumb. You just faster than everybody else.” I’ve been going in the back doors all my life ‘cause they don’t never let me in the front.³⁰

The assumption that Sterling is slow echoes the importance of cultural relevancy to education. His life experience has taught him math—“a dozen” is an experiential way of describing “twelve.” But this same experiential learning has showed Sterling that a parrot is a farcical purchase for anyone for whom money is scarce. Sterling is right to regard the test question as irrelevant, because in his life it is. It is not an adequate measure of his own life experience, so he refuses to be measured by it.

Though Roosevelt is concerned about young people, he would regard Sterling’s rejection of culturally immaterial schooling as ridiculous, even irresponsible. It is precisely this kind of thinking that Roosevelt hopes to alleviate amongst black youth in Pittsburgh. He wants to show them how to “have a chance at life.”³¹ To that end, Roosevelt created a camp in which he takes urban children golfing. “I just want these kids to know what it feels like to hit a golf ball,” Roosevelt explains. He believes that they will find the exhilaration he felt upon his first game as intoxicating and motivational as he did.

ROOSEVELT: I hit my first golf ball I asked myself where have I been? How’d I miss this? I couldn’t believe it. I felt free. Truly free. For the first time. I watched the ball soar down the driving range. I didn’t think it could go so high. It just kept going higher and higher. I felt something lift off of me. Some weight I was carrying around and didn’t know it. I felt like the world was open to me. Everything and everybody. I never did feel exactly like that anymore. I must have hit a hundred golf balls trying to get that feeling. But that first time was worth everything. I felt like I had my dick in my hand and was waving it around like a club. “I’m a man! Anybody want some of this come and get it!” That was the best feeling in my life.³²

The irony of Roosevelt wanting to use golf to teach eighteen black children “the path to life where everything is open to you,” is that access to the game requires quite a risk. While Roosevelt believes that golf will help the children feel as though they “don’t have to hide and crawl under a rock just ‘cause you’re black,” and that it will prevent them from feeling “like you don’t belong in the world,” he is afraid to play without his business cards for fear someone will

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Ibid., 13.

mistake him—the vice president of Mellon Bank—for a caddy.³³ In reality, the lessons the kids enrolled in his golf camp can learn accidentally might in the end prove more useful than any feeling of inclusion Roosevelt treasures.

Still, the relief Roosevelt describes is real. Like Troy Maxon, the legendary **Negro League** baseball player in *Fences* (1950s), Roosevelt believes in the rules of the game. With baseball, Troy thought he had found an opportunity to play by the rules and win. The game made sense to him; a man gets three strikes and he's out. When his rapid rise through the Negro leagues hit the ceiling of racial prejudice, however, Troy was forced to let go of his dream of major league success. The rules of the game had changed; life was different for black folks. Roosevelt experiences golf similarly. Not only is he good at the game, playing it affords him the opportunity to rub shoulders with powerful and wealthy people. When he stepped onto the driving range for the first time, he gained access to one of the most racially elite games in the world. By demonstrating his ability to hit the ball as high and far as he did, he felt worthy of a place in that game in spite of his skin. The feeling he describes is hope, unbridled potential; it is an invitation to be measured by his own merit. He felt as though he had an opportunity to stand up as a man on his own two feet. He felt the freedom of believing that he was the only thing standing in his way.

Wilson points out that this freedom comes with a price. As Roosevelt hangs a photograph of his idol **Tiger Woods** on the wall he asks, “How much you think Tiger makes a swing? I wish Nike would buy a piece of me.”³⁴ There is a cost to play the games from which black people are excluded, both on the green and in life. Something must be sacrificed. Indeed after playing for some time, Roosevelt realized that golf did not change much about the quality of his life. He was still a black man, still burdened by the limitations placed upon black life in American society. Reality set in; the blush had come off the rose. Try as he might, he could not rekindle that feeling of unbridled hope and optimism. As long as he placed the value of his life outside of his culture, he would never find peace.

Eventually, *Radio Golf* reveals the price of entry to the game as Bernie Smith, a wealthy white businessman to whom Roosevelt is eager to get close, lays down a deal. Harmond warns Roosevelt that Smith is shady and understands how to play his hand. At the modern American table, Roosevelt turns out to be Smith's most precious card, the “race card.” Wilson reveals the truest and most practical usage of this insidious modern American term.

Roosevelt is convinced he can play to win:

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

ROOSEVELT: This is how you do it! This is how everybody does it. You don't think Mellon has ever been used? We're talking about an eight-million dollar radio station! This is the game! I'm at the table! There was a time they didn't let any blacks at the table. You opened the door. You shined the shoes. You served the drinks. And they went in the room and made the deal. I'm in the room! Them motherfuckers who bought and traded them railroads...how do you think they did it? This is business. This is the way it's done in America. I get to walk away with a piece of an asset worth eight million dollars. I don't care if somebody else makes money 'cause of a [minority] tax break. I get mine and they get theirs. I pull this off and next time I'm on the other side of the deal, sitting at the head of the table. Right now I'm sitting here. I'd rather that than to be sitting on the other side of the door. Harmond, I have to take this. This is not going to come along again. The window of opportunity is already starting to close. If I don't do this Bernie will get somebody else.³⁵

Roosevelt does not yet realize that the rules of the game will not be the same for him. By equating himself with Mellon, the owner of the bank, he divulges his naïve belief that the game is situated on a level playing field. But Harmond understands that Roosevelt is merely the black face in a new game, a game in which white businessmen realize the value of “diversity,” and will play *him* to gain access to opportunities reserved for black Americans under the affirmative action project they decry as unfair. In a new world it is no longer acceptable to restrict African Americans to roles of service, but there are no rules yet about using a man like Roosevelt to your own advantage by offering him a strategically placed position in what will become a billion dollar deal.

In the end Roosevelt proves to be Smith's way into the redevelopment project slated for the Hill District. When Harmond tries to stop the demolition of 1839 Wylie Avenue, Roosevelt tells him that he is buying him out. Smith will front the money. Not only has Roosevelt been used, as he himself points out, had he not played along he would have been easily replaced. One black face is as good as the next. Harmond understands quickly what is going on:

HARMOND: Bernie's calling in his chips. He used you for the radio station. Now he's using you to get half a stake in a prime redevelopment site that's being funded by the federal government. But he still needs minority involvement. He still needs a black face on the enterprise. Like he needed minority involvement to buy the radio station. Enter

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

Roosevelt Hicks. The shuffling, grinning nigger in the woodpile. How much he pay for something like that? After he rolls over and puts his pants back on, what you got? A hundred dollars? Three hundred dollars? Or are you one of them high-class thousand-dollar whores?³⁶

His political career over, Harmond finally subscribes to a different kind of common sense. His last words to Roosevelt (but perhaps more to himself) are “don’t take any wooden nickels.” With a paintbrush in his hand, he heads off to join the painting party at 1839 Wylie. In the end, Roosevelt will buy him out using Smith’s money and the development project will likely go ahead as planned. For a moment though, Harmond fulfills the prophecy of his own name and restores temporary harmony to the neighborhood. Joseph Barlow already has plans to move his daughter’s things back into the house at 1839 Wylie. Since Aunt Ester died he has been living there alone, guarding the house for the return of the oracle. Perhaps because his parents did not have a girlchild (Joseph Barlow never speaks of siblings), it explains Aunt Ester’s absence from the Hill District and the chaos in which the people find themselves living. With the restoration of Black Mary, Joseph Barlow’s daughter, to her place in the line of prophetic and powerful women, perhaps the Hill District will be saved after all. Aunt Ester always did have a strange way of healing people.

August Wilson: Keeper of the Black Flame

In 1996 August Wilson delivered an address entitled *The Ground on Which I Stand* to the Theatre Communications Group National Conference. In it he drew a proverbial line in the sand; after three decades of working in theatre, Wilson had grown weary of the traditional American theatre. Speaking forthrightly, he called for change, for the recognition of the presence and talent of black artists. He expressed caution about the melting-pot notion of America, one that stripped black Americans (and others) of their cultural specificity, their history and their contributions to the nation. He warned against revisionist portrayals of American history that would seek to disassociate the relevance of slavery from the social and economic currents of today. He refused terminology that made the black resistance to oppression more palatable for contemporary audiences. He called himself a “race man,” one who put race at the center of every exploration into human life. He called for authenticity, recognition and celebration of the African American experience.

The term black or African-American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory. That this abuse of opportunity and truncation of possibility is

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

continuing and is so pervasive in our society in 1996 says much about who we are and much about the work that is necessary to alter our perceptions of each other and to effect meaningful prosperity for all.³⁷

Wilson saw himself as heir to a cultural resistance in which everyday men and women were faced with extraordinary challenges, and in surviving were raised to Herculean proportions. He wrote about common people, and through his authentic and unforgiving portrayal, he raised up the spirits of black people across the country. Though he did not write with white audiences in mind, he gave white Americans the opportunity to see the complexity of the African American experience, to understand the inheritance of race and racist ideology, to contemplate their own roles in dismantling the remnants of the slave system still present in modern times. He gave Americans the opportunity to bear witness, to listen, to forgive and to heal.

The problematic nature of the relationship between white and black for too long led us astray from the fulfillment of our possibilities as a society. We stare at each other across a divide of economics and privilege that has become an encumbrance on black Americans' ability to prosper and on the collective will and spirit of our national purpose.³⁸

While the playwright believed in the power of theatre to address and suture old wounds, he did not see it as a utopic space in which race could be transcended. "We can meet on the common ground of theatre as a field of work and endeavor," Wilson wrote, "but we cannot meet on the common ground of experience." That experience and the differences between them mattered to Wilson—and it mattered to audiences and artists as well.

Wilson was wary of art that pandered or commercialized the wealth of black culture for audiences eager for the talent, the humor, the songs, but not the strength, the sorrow and the anger. Most American audiences were exposed to a kind of black art that was "conceived and design to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black American by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity."³⁹ He sought to celebrate and participate in the creation of a different kind of art. He situated himself "squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters," he wrote; ground he saw as "hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and woman who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth."⁴⁰ Situating himself and his art within this kind of ancestry made Wilson a force that took American theatre by storm. The eloquence of his

³⁷ Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

writing and the epic humanity of his characters made his plays at once culturally specific and universal. A night of theatre like that could change lives, and it did.

It could be argued that perhaps no American playwright has dedicated himself so thoroughly to creating a place for black Americans in the theatre. Perhaps because of the time in which he was writing, he was successful. His plays have employed hundreds of African American actors, directors, producers, designers and technicians nationwide. He revolutionized the theatre canon, bringing the black experience to the center of the American theatre landscape. Today August Wilson is the most produced playwright in the country, with nine of his plays produced on Broadway stages, his work memorialized by the Theatre Communications Group in a ten-play hardbound set with each play introduced by his friends and the contemporary literati who continue to mine Wilson's complex opus for precious gems that bring light to the human condition, the black experience, and American history.

In his speech he hailed the blood-soaked soil that his ancestors tirelessly toiled as hallowed. In the 20th century he saw himself as an artist who "labored to bring forth its fruits, its daring and its sometimes lacerating, and often healing, truths."⁴¹ For Wilson it was not difficult; he embraced black culture, black people, music and myth. He became a man inside of it. He believed that the contents of his mother's cabinet were worthy of the highest art and often said, "there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life."⁴² Some people were uncomfortable with Wilson's insistence on bringing slavery to bear on every play in the 20th century cycle. There were whites who felt black people should be "over it by now," and blacks who were ashamed of their ancestors plight as slaves. Wilson remained steadfast. Decade by decade he demonstrated how African Americans daily shoulder the weight of our American history, a history that is shaped, colored and even defined by slavery. He would not allow history to be rewritten without the enormity of the African American contribution because it is inconvenient for contemporary Americans to consider slavery.

We did not sit on the sidelines while the immigrants of Europe, through hard work, skill, cunning, guile and opportunity, built America into an industrial giant of the 20th century. It was our labor that provided the capital. It was our labor in the shipyards and the stockyards and the coalmines and the steel mills. Our labor built the roads and the railroads. And when America was challenged, we strode on the battlefield, our boots strapped on and our blood left to soak into the soil of places whose names we could not pronounce, against an enemy whose only crime was ideology. We left our blood in

⁴¹ Ibid.,10.

⁴² Ibid., 20.

France and Korea and the Philippines and Vietnam, and our only reward has been the deprivation of possibility and the denial of our moral personality.⁴³

Wilson sought to restore the African American spirit. “From the hull of a ship to self-determining, self-respecting people,” he wrote. “That is the journey we are making.”⁴⁴

Conclusion

Lou Bellamy, Founder and Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre Company—the theatre that gave Wilson his first professional production—once said, “never underestimate the power of one life lived well.” August Wilson dedicated his life to illuminating the African American experience. “We have only one life to develop our talent, to fulfill our potential as artists. One life, and it is short.”⁴⁵ In his life, Wilson set about writing ten plays that would chronicle the African American experience throughout the 20th century. He completed that cycle with *Radio Golf*, a play in which the future is yet uncertain, but shot through with hope for the return of the oracle and keeper of the black flame, Aunt Ester, the ancestor.

Before his death in 2005 Wilson wrote,

I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, its power to heal, its power to hold the mirror as 'twere up to nature, its power to uncover the truths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities. All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully. We who are capable of those noble pursuits should challenge the melancholy and barbaric, to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we all stand.

Constanza Romero, the late playwright’s wife, is consoled by the continued resonance of Wilson’s plays. “I can walk into a theatre with our daughter, Azula, and his words are alive. She can still hear her father. She’ll always have that.”⁴⁶ Thankfully, so will we.

⁴³ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁶ Romero, Constanza. Personal interview. March 6, 2008, St. Paul, Minnesota.