

THE PIANO LESSON

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DIRECTED BY LOU BELLAMY

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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.

PENUMBRA THEATRE STUDY GUIDE
The Piano Lesson

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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.

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.

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.

racist depictions would be reflected over and over 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.

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 ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked

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

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.

INTRODUCTION

Penumbra Theatre Company is honored to dedicate the next five years exploring the 20th Century through the eyes of two time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson. We begin this year with *The Piano Lesson*. In 1993 Wilson called Penumbra's production his "favorite staging and a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work."⁵

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 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.

⁵ August Wilson, quote is excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1997.

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."

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.

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.

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.

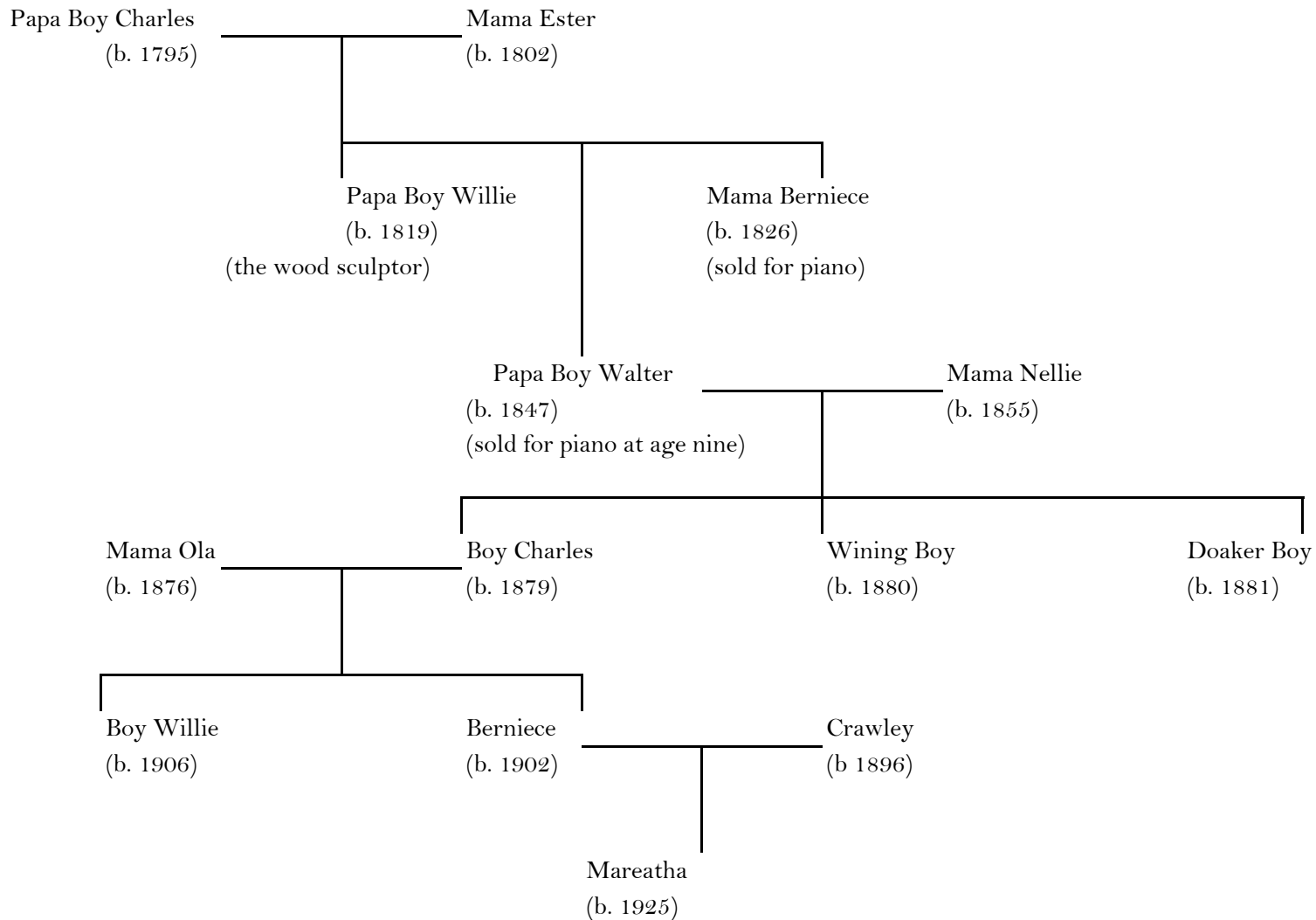
Radio Golf is the story of a man whose path through life has been decreed by his father. Following in the footsteps of a well-respected but feared man, Harmond Wilks struggles to evade his shadow. He does what is expected of him in order to help his community, but it is ultimately his own journey and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

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

- Doaker:** Late 40s. Boy Willie and Berniece's Uncle. Doaker is a cook for the railroad line that travels between Pittsburgh and his hometown in Mississippi. He lives in Pittsburgh and boards his niece and her daughter, as well as his brother Wining Boy on occasion.
- Boy Willie:** Early 30s. A sharecropper from Mississippi. He is Berniece's brother, Doaker and Wining Boy's nephew. His dream is to buy the land he now leases from the Sutter family. He has an infectious grin and a boyishness that is apt for his name. He is brash and impulsive, talkative and somewhat crude in speech and manner.
- Lymon:** Late 20s, early 30s. Boy Willie's partner or sidekick. He is quiet, thoughtful and speaks with a straightforwardness that is often disarming.
- Berniece:** Mid 30s. Boy Willie's sister, Doaker and Wining Boy's niece. She is grounded, stoic and still mourning the death of her husband. She has an eleven year old daughter.
- Maretha:** Eleven years old. Daughter of Berniece.
- Avery:** Late 30s, early 40s. Avery is a preacher and Berniece's companion. He is honest and ambitious and he has taken to the city like a fish to water, finding opportunities in it for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South.
- Wining Boy:** Mid 50s. Doaker's older brother, Wining Boy is a piano player. He tries to present the image of a successful musician and gambler, but his music, his clothes and even his manner of speaking are old. He is a man who, looking back over his life, continues to live it with an odd mixture of zest and sorrow.
- Grace:** Mid 20s. Beautiful and young, Grace knows what she wants and is not afraid to go for it. She laughs easily and both Lymon and Boy Willie are quickly smitten by her beauty.

Genealogy of the Charles Household, From the Playbill of the New York Production of *The Piano Lesson*, reprinted by permission of the playwright in Peter Wolfe's *August Wilson*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

**Genealogy
The Charles Household**



SYNOPSIS: A SCENE BY SCENE BREAKDOWN

Act I

- Scene 1: 5:00 am
- Scene 2: Three days later

Act II

- Scene 1: The following morning
- Scene 2: Late evening of the same day
- Scene 3: Several hours later
- Scene 4: Late next morning
- Scene 5: Later that evening

SYNOPSIS

When Boy Willie shows up at his sister's Pittsburgh home with a truck full of watermelons and a plan to sell the piano they inherited from their parents, he brings the ghosts of an unresolved past with him. The piano, over a century old, represents an unholy union between two Mississippi families. Years ago the Sutter family owned the Charles family, and their grandparents were sold away in exchange for the piano. Now, Boy Willie finds himself sharecropping the same land his grandparents worked as slaves. Wilson's eloquent play illustrates how these two families, one black and one white, are forever bound together. Each sibling wants to break the cycle in which they are bound up by blood and history, yet they cannot agree on how to do it. Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and buy a piece of the land he now works for a pittance. Berniece is determined to keep the piano in the family, a reminder of their pain and eventual triumph at having reacquired the instrument her grandfather carved by hand. 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. Haunted by the living legacy of slavery, *The Piano Lesson* is an American story of love, justice and redemption.

SETTING (as written by the playwright)

The action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of the house where Doaker Charles lives with his niece, Berniece, and her eleven-year-old daughter, Maretha. The house is sparsely furnished, and although there is evidence of a woman's touch, there is a lack of warmth and vigor. Berniece and Maretha occupy the upstairs rooms. Doaker's room is prominent and opens onto the kitchen. Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. At left is a staircase leading to the upstairs.

AN AMERICAN HAIN: THE LIVING LEGACY OF SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES

An Essay by Sarah Bellamy

Migrations: Moving Forward With Soil In Our Pockets

African Americans are a migratory people. Beginning with the first journey through the Middle Passage to those liberated peoples traveling northward from Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia in search of a better life, our story is one of movement. We have been both pioneers and refugees, been soldiers and been for sale, we have traveled America's highways and rivers, swamps and plains, on foot, on horseback, by train, by cart and carriage and car. Shipyards and railway stations show up in our poems, blues songs, paintings and plays. The idea of movement, of migration, is a common theme in our literature and our stories. Subsequently, our roots—vast and varied—are as much metaphorical as they are literal.

There are two major migrations that have deep cultural resonance for African Americans. The first, 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. ¹

It was slavery that first “created and then relied on a large support network of shipping services, ports, and finance and insurance companies.”² 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 overloaded its human cargo (as was often the case), live captives who were thrown overboard as patrolling ships approached.

¹ Online resource: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1523100.stm#map>

² 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>

The principle Europeans involved in the trade were French, Dutch, English, Spanish and Portuguese.³ People were exported from 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 mixed populations interacted with European presences in the region, and new forms of communication, culture, cuisine, religious practice and artistic expression were born. By the eighteenth century, the New World was 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.

The second epic migration paramount in African American history is known as the Underground Railroad, a network that mobilized hundreds of slaves along secret pathways toward freedom. Most of our information about the Underground Railroad begins through the documentation of abolitionist William Still, whose copious notes detail slave narratives that were later bound and published.⁴ Many people think of the Underground Railroad as a movement freeing southern slaves by smuggling them north toward New York, Pennsylvania or Ohio. In reality, the Underground Railroad began in Philadelphia where an anti-slavery society made up of free black and white abolitionists had organized. Nineteenth century slave narratives recount stories about the journey northward to the promise land, but as history proves, the demarcation of that land shifted considerably with the political temperature of the country. Harriet Tubman's journey took her far beyond the Northern states and well into Canada before she felt safe from capture and resale. The woman who became known as "Moses" smuggled her family members to safety as far north as Ontario. Travelers often had to proceed that far north because fugitive slave laws encouraged bounty hunters and federal law officers to pursue them to the national borders. For this reason, many black slaves fled to Canada or Mexico seeking asylum. After the Civil War, the country began to steadily discount slavery and its relevance to American history, as though its abolition in 1863 compensated for four hundred years of atrocious crimes and the millions of dollars it had grossed for the United States.

Today, black America is a far-flung net of folk who share common cultural elements yet significantly differ as well. Our history in this country is long; we are the brick and mortar, the

³ 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.

⁴ The title of Still's book was *The Underground Railroad: A Record Of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Narrating The Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes And Death Struggles Of The Slaves In Their Efforts For Freedom, As Related By Themselves And Others, Or Witnessed By The Author.*

salt and sweat, the foundation upon which an epic nation was built. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson dedicated the last two decades of his life to chronicling the black American experience throughout the twentieth century. Wilson depicts the 1900s as a turbulent period in which black Americans were held accountable for their participation in society while still interned by the racism that allowed for an institution so peculiar as slavery to exist in the first place. His ten-play cycle moves decade by decade, patiently chipping away at what can be called “the era of amnesia.”

Living in Limbo: Ethics and the African American Experience

For white Americans, acknowledging that the country was built by means of slavery meant facing the inevitable question of how to make it right. It was easier to forget. It was hard to forget, however, when black people were so deeply intertwined with the story of America. Instead of accounting for the fact of slavery, black people were written out of American history. Wilson’s cycle concerns itself with writing black people back into the birth of this nation from the perspective of those who literally labored to build it.

The erasure of American slavery began with the portrayal of the Old South as a bygone era of better times. Post-bellum representations of slavery in popular culture included idyllic pastoral scenes of fertile fields and quaint homes—nowhere a slave in sight. The fact that plantation owners whose slaves worked the land are called “planters,” is a prime example. It was not long before white families whose wealth had come from the slave economy were evading responsibility by claiming to have “pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps.” This was the birth of the myth that we know now as the American dream.

Managing slavery after its abolition developed into what Barbara Christian calls a “a two-pronged assault” on black people.⁵ On one hand, slaves were represented as happy and docile. When illustrated, their jovial attitude made the work they were doing seem natural and fulfilling. The erasure of the crimes inherent in the American slave system made it easy for whites to be nostalgic for the Old South. Some of the more lasting stereotypes born from this era are the mammy, the uncle, the pickaninny and the Sambo—all generally cheerful, content slave characters. Knick-knacks, postcards and paintings depicting these archetypal stereotypes became very popular. One can still find similar memorabilia in antique stores across the country. On the other hand, free blacks were depicted as marauding threats to civil society. Criminal behavior justified their enslavement and abolition was presented as a foolish mistake. Ultimately this latter representation betrays a fear of retribution rising in white America.

⁵ Barbara Christian is interviewed in *Ethnic Notions*. Dir. Marlon Riggs. KQED-TV (Television station : San Francisco, Calif.) 1986.

At the dawn of the 20th century, the country found itself in a bit of a quandary. The American dream proved to be a contagious and romantic account of the birth of the nation. It seemed to solve the problem of reconciling the past while also allowing wealthy whites to hoard their riches without guilt. It did not, however, solve the problem of a black presence in America. Most white Americans had moved beyond slavery, and expected black Americans to do so as well. However, for black folks it was not as simple as the old adage “forgive and forget,” suggests. Forgiving requires a sincere acknowledgement of wrongdoing—something white America was unlikely to admit, as recognition would leave them responsible for recompense. Forgetting meant not only ignoring slavery, it meant silencing the elders. For black Americans, this would sever the symbolic umbilical cord connecting us to our ancestors. The history (an oral tradition) lives in the people; to turn away from history would mean turning away from our families, from ourselves. Wilson’s cycle explores the difficulty of this situation for black Americans, a predicament that leaves us simultaneously at home and homeless in this country. Each play focuses on a different decade, commenting on the progress—or lack thereof—toward solving this uniquely American conflict.

Wilson’s plays depict black American efforts to live according to the rules of American society as many whites resent and go out of their way to prevent even meager success. His characters survive in a world where something is terribly wrong, yet the majority of people act as though everything is right as rain. The moral environment is toxic. As a result, many of his characters experience a burning need to relocate, leaving the South for the North, leaving Pittsburgh for Chicago, leaving their bodies to walk amongst the undead. The predicament persists. This conflict manifests itself in a common experience of purgatory.

Purgatory is more than a metaphorical state of being. It is also a place in which Wilson’s characters arrive. In the early plays, purgatory is represented by boarding houses, a naturally transient atmosphere. The ensemble, a mixture of traditional and progressive folk, are a hodgepodge of family, friends and kinfolk living under the same roof—each one contributing something for the betterment of all. The intent of boarders is always to move on, but many find themselves stuck and are forced to reconcile the past before continuing on their journeys. Each boarding house is a realm protected by a healer or spiritualist living amongst the others. For Wilson religiosity and spirituality is not the same thing and this person or presence is often juxtaposed with a religious person or presence. A man and a woman who are either married or kinfolk run the houses. The couple becomes provisional parents, guiding, advising and worrying their boarders. The notion of family is periodically redefined when boarders come and go. In this middle place unanswered questions merge in an epic battle for truth.

Wilson's early Pittsburgh plays (1900-1930) begin with the arrival of a traveler.⁶ In the first two plays of the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* (1900s) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1910), this character's intentions are unclear. The newcomer is taken into the makeshift family with caution but also with care, reflecting the empathetic cultural responsibility black people commonly expressed toward one another during such uncertain times. There is a sense of bewilderment common to the transient newcomers; Wilson's portrayal of freedom is a bit akin to having the floorboards give way; the fall is confusing, exhilarating but inevitably dangerous. The action of both plays follows the travelers in their search for grounding, roots and a moral compass that can make sense of the brutal world in which they find themselves "free."

The newcomer is agitated and his arrival typically upsets the balance to which the others have grown accustomed. At first, Wilson's travelers seem addled with wanderlust. Instead, we find that the character is mired in a moral limbo. He cannot walk blindly into the future without letting go of the past, and buying into the deceptive allure of the American dream requires a certain amount of blind faith. Yet the American dream represents the erasure of slavery, and for him the price of forgetting is grave. Inevitably, he crosses paths with an elder whose stories first frustrate, then seduce, then heal. Through stories, first those told and then those elicited from the possessed character, the elder reunites the past with the present and releases the impassioned character from his torment. Homelessness and wanderlust are revealed as symptoms of American amnesia.

The nation's slave market separated families quite frequently and for many freedmen and women, the primary order of business after abolition was finding kinfolk. *The Piano Lesson* (1930s) beautifully reflects the nomadic nature of people during this period. Doaker says "they got so many trains out there they have a hard time keeping them from running into each other. Got trains going every whichaway. Got people on all of them. Somebody going where somebody just left."⁷ *The Piano Lesson* is the first play in which generations of one family live under the same roof. The house belongs to Doaker Charles. He has boarded his brother, his niece and her daughter for some time before his nephew, Boy Willie, shows up looking to sell a family heirloom also stowed in Doaker's home. It is a piano that followed Berniece, Boy Willie's sister, north out of Mississippi to Pittsburgh. A grieving widow, she has been steadily working to provide for herself and her eleven-year-old daughter Maretha. While the piano may fetch a handsome price, she has not once considered selling it. This causes conflict between the siblings.

⁶ *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, set in Chicago during the blues era, is an exception.

⁷ Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. (New York: Penguin Books, PLUME, 1990) 19.

America on the Verge: Industrial Development and the Great Depression

Many of Wilson's plays are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Just as Harlem was for New York, the Hill District became the heart of black Pittsburgh:

Jazz greats such as Duke Ellington and Pittsburgh natives Billy Strayhorn and Earl Hines played [on Wylie Avenue]. Two of the Negro League's greatest rivals, the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays, often competed in the Hill District. The teams dominated the Negro National League in the 1930s and 1940s.⁸

By the 1930s, Pittsburgh had established itself as an industrial contender. Pennsylvania is rich with an array of natural resources, most notably coal. In the early part of the century, a cloud of coal dust often surrounded Pittsburgh where mining was heavy. The city began rapidly industrializing after the Civil War spurred an upsurge in demand for iron and weaponry, revitalizing and growing the economy. The outlying farming and lumber industries showed promise and processing plants buzzed with production. Steel manufacture steadily increased and by 1911, Pittsburgh was producing almost half of America's steel.⁹

The rapid development of the industrial north was exceeding the once financially lucrative South. In the north, industrial tycoons were busily building their empires. In fact, "Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, Andrew W. Mellon, and Charles M. Schwab built their fortunes in Pittsburgh."¹⁰ In the south, however, rolling floods and the infestation of boll weevil insects put severe strain on the local economy, still quite reliant on the cotton industry. While the twenties were known for prosperity and rapid growth, particularly in urban areas, the general population was living modestly, and by 1930, however, the national climate would take a drastic turn.

The Great Depression, a severe economic slump that lasted nearly ten years, left thousands of Americans desperate for work, shelter and food. The stock market crash in 1929 set off a series of economic collapses and both production and commerce ground slowly to a near halt. Severe drought in the heartland took rural families to the brink of starvation and hundreds traveled great distances to take advantage of what small aid could be offered. Migration became a key theme for the thirties.

The industrial boon in the twenties had brought laborers eager for work north to developing cities like Pittsburgh. At the turn of the century, thousands of African Americans had begun moving northward, leaving behind Jim Crow laws, unruly mobs, lynching, poverty

⁸ History of Pittsburgh, Miriam Meislik, Ed Galloway, Society of American Archivists Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999. Quoted by Wikipedia. Online resource: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Pittsburgh%2C_Pennsylvania

⁹ History of Pittsburgh, Miriam Meislik, Ed Galloway, Society of American Archivists Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999. Quoted by Wikipedia. Online resource: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Pittsburgh%2C_Pennsylvania

¹⁰ Online resource: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Pittsburgh

and the pain of the past. They landed in thriving urban centers such as Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, New York City and Pittsburgh. One study shows that by 1930 some two hundred thousand black people had made their way to Harlem alone.¹¹ Eager to take advantage of the promising American economy, European immigrants from overseas also flooded the cities along the East coast. As prices fell across the country, markets such as agriculture, mining and logging—all areas in which Pittsburgh had been growing—were now unstable. Wages decreased and unemployment even in the mills and mines was extensive. Competition for jobs was fierce. Laborers lined up day after day for work that could not accommodate their numbers. One report states that “more than 15 million Americans (one-quarter of the workforce) became unemployed.”¹² The country was in dire straits.

The Great Depression had an enormous cultural impact. Harrowing tales of survival and sacrifice abounded as patriots confronted the collapse of the American dream. Likely because of the abrupt end to the optimistic momentum of the twenties, American authors have written extensively about this era. John Steinbeck is perhaps most credited for depicting the poverty and desolation of the Depression era in his epic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* published in 1939. The Great Depression gave white writers cause to meditate on the contradiction of the American dream—some of these include William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury*, 1929), F. Scott Fitzgerald (*Tender is the Night*, 1934), James T. Farrell (*Studs Lonigan* 1932), Nathaneal West (*The Day of the Locust*, 1939) and Horace McCoy (*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* 1935). Most of these novels were considered profound because they acknowledged that whiteness—the entitlement and supposed superiority inherent in that identity—had done nothing to protect millions of white Americans. At the same time, the Harlem Renaissance during the twenties and thirties inspired an outpouring of black intellectual and creative writing. While black American writers like Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937) and Richard Wright (*Native Son*, 1940) were contemplating the black American experience, white writers were coming to terms with a sense of whiteness that did not necessarily include economic stability. As the gap between the very wealthy and the middle and lower classes grew, class was becoming an increasingly prominent issue for white America.

Throwing Bones: The Gamble of American Prosperity

Even though it is set in the 1930s, *The Piano Lesson* does not contend with the rampant disappointment of the Depression era, but with the political temperature of a country yet divided around the abolition of slavery. The American dream was alien propaganda in African

¹¹ Online resource: <http://www.harlemmtmorris.org/history.htm>.

¹² Online resource: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/peopleevents/pandeAMEX05.html>

American culture. Black people knew from experience that the wealth and success of white America had come at the disproportionate price of slavery. It would be another thirty years before the Civil Rights Movement gave black Americans a reason to earnestly forecast a dream of America that included their safety and security. Lorraine Hansberry's timely classic *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) illuminated the defiant optimism of one working-class black American family as they strove toward prosperity in a racist society. Racial intolerance was very prevalent during the thirties. The scarcity of jobs during the Depression era made the notion of white entitlement and superiority justifiable to some. Angry whites protested the employment of black laborers and called for their dismissal. The effect of the Depression on African Americans was quite harsh indeed.

With *The Piano Lesson*, however, Wilson seems more concerned with the burgeoning optimism rising in black America. Boy Willie and Berniece represent the first generations of black Americans born free. The siblings stand at the crossroads at which black Americans found themselves during the first half of the century. Each reflects the dual emotions common to that experience, faith on the one hand and doubt on the other. They struggle with the best way to atone for the past; is making a new life in another place, but never forgetting the past a way to honor your ancestors? Or does honor come from finally owning the land your ancestors worked as slaves?

At the start of the play, Boy Willie has just arrived from Mississippi and landed on the doorstep of his elder sister's Hill District home. He has come for the piano, a family relic that sits in her parlor, polished but never played. In his mind, the question is simple: What is the point of an instrument that makes no music? Tired of living like an indentured servant, Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and buy a parcel of land down South. Berniece will not think of selling the piano. In her eyes, it is more than a valuable heirloom; the piano has become the literal embodiment of her ancestors. Each sibling wants to break the cycle in which they are bound up by blood and history, yet they cannot agree on how to do it. Wilson's eloquent play illustrates how two families, one black and one white, are forever bound together.

An American Haint: The Living Legacy of Slavery

The struggle over the piano is actually a reckoning of the relationship between the Charles and Sutter families. Two generations before, the slave owner Robert Sutter traded a woman and her son for a piano that was to be an anniversary present for his wife. The father of the boy, a woodworker, was left behind on the plantation. The mistress of the house was pleased with her present and played the piano happily before she realized that she missed her lady's maid and the errand boy who had been her favorite slaves. She bade her husband to ask for their

return in exchange for the piano. Joel Nolander refused; he had, after all, gotten quite a deal. The piano was a fixed commodity; its value would accrue only as it became antiquated. The slaves on the other hand, were capable of working *and* producing new commodities, including other slaves if need be. The boy was just a child—once he grew into his full strength, he would be worth three times his value. Instead, Nolander offered to buy the boy's father, under the guise of keeping the family together, but Sutter refused. He was making a mint off of the goods that his woodworker fashioned; Nolander could not afford to buy this particular slave. The men were at an impasse.

To solve the problem, Sutter demanded that the woodworker decorate the piano with the likeness of the slaves his wife missed so much, so that she could look at them while she played. When he finished the pictures of his lost wife and son, the woodworker began to carve the rest of his family into the piano as well. He carved pictures of his parents, his wedding day, the birth of his son, his mother's funeral, and the fateful day when his family was sold off to a plantation owner in Georgia. The mistress of the house was happy, as Doaker said, "now she had her piano and her niggers too."¹³ Life went back to normal for the Sutter family, but the Charles family had been torn apart.

Years later, three boys were born to the child who was traded away for the piano. This next generation of children was named after their ancestors, and the legacy of the family and its connection with the piano was to be played out once more. Boy Charles was the firstborn, named for his grandfather. After him came Doaker and Wining Boy. Just as before, Boy Charles named his son Boy Willie, after his grandfather, the woodworker who had been left behind. When his daughter was born, he named the girl Berniece after Mama Berniece—his grandmother—the woman sold away. Some people say that when a child is born he or she grows into the name they carry, that their character is fashioned by its meaning in the world. In the Charles family, history was destined to repeat itself.

Boy Charles was plagued by the idea of the piano, Doaker explains that he

used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. Two or three months go by and he be talking about it again. He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us.¹⁴

He led his brothers back to the Sutter plantation to steal the piano that his grandfather had endowed with the family history. They took it and sent it into the next county to their mother's home. Boy Charles stayed behind, hoping to quell Sutter's inevitable suspicion as to the whereabouts of the piano. A mob came after Boy Charles and burned his house down. Boy

¹³ Wilson, *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ Wilson, *ibid.*, 44.

Charles had managed to hop on the 3:57 train heading out of town.¹⁵ Eventually, they caught up with him on the train and set fire to the boxcar in which he was hiding, killing him and four hobos as well.

Through the story of the Charles and Sutter families, *The Piano Lesson* eloquently unveils the deep, unique and lasting connections between black and white Americans. Doaker begins his story by saying “to understand about that piano. . .you got to go back to slavery time.”¹⁶ The piano sitting in the parlor of the Charles’ home is not played. It is an object full of potential and history that has been relegated to silence and therefore its purpose is stymied. It remains unfulfilled. Like Wilson’s boarding houses, the piano represents the purgatory of living in America; to understand that wretched state of being, you must go back to slavery. It was no accident that Boy Charles rescued the piano from the Sutter plantation on July 4th or Independence Day; it was an act of emancipation for the family. Ownership of the piano signified the Charles’ independence from the Sutter family. On a larger metaphorical level, the reclamation of the piano represents the efforts of black Americans to reclaim their own history from the Big House, which represents white America, and to tell it accurately. The price for such a blatant expression of liberty was quite costly indeed. When Boy Charles was murdered, his children inherited more than the names of their great grandparents—they inherited the graveyard of Sutter’s land and the legacy of that piano.

By 1937, all of the Charles but Boy Willie have left the South.¹⁷ Berniece, ignoring her husband’s violent death, is steadfastly dedicated to making a new life for herself and her daughter in Pittsburgh. Doaker and Wining Boy, an older generation, have left the South too, but still feel pulled between their old and new lives. Wining Boy travels constantly,

¹⁵ In Wilson’s plays, trains represent the journey between past and present. The 3:57 train may be more meaningful than expected. The year is 1911, if the train carries a traveler back three hundred and fifty-seven years he arrives at the death of the man credited with the first comprehensive description of Africa the Western world had seen. El-Hassan ben Mohammed el-Wazzan ez-Zayyati, known as Leo Africanus in posterity, was a Moorish traveler who traveled Africa extensively as a young man and published his papers in 1550. His *Description of Africa* “was immediately translated from Italian into French and English.”¹⁵ This highly popular text was one of the first documents that described the interior of Africa, including the author’s speculation as to the origin of the continent’s name. His explanation is that the name comes from “Faraca [which in] Arabic means “it has separated,” and has been cited as the root of “Ifrichia” or Africa.” Leo Africanus is quoted by Christopher Miller in *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) 11. Miller explores several etymological suggestions for the origin of the name. The first descriptions of black Africans were that of a noble, beautiful people. After finding gold and a slave market along the coast, however, Europeans began to describe Africans as brutal, cannibalistic people, capable of the most atrocious activities. The image of black people, and blackness, was henceforward similar and justified their enslavement throughout the European colonial empire.

¹⁶ Wilson, *ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷ According to the play, the year is 1937. Doaker says that Berniece and Boy Willie’s father would have been fifty-seven years old if he had lived. He died, however, when he was thirty-one years old in 1911. This means that Boy Charles would have been born in 1880.

disappearing and reappearing depending on his income. Doaker works the railroad and rides the line between Pittsburgh and his hometown in Mississippi. The eldest members of the Charles family, Doaker and Wining Boy straddle the distance between the country and the city, between the past and the present, with an equilibrium and fortitude that the younger generations have not yet managed. The balance is precarious, though, and both men have paid for their peripatetic lifestyles. Wining Boy has exhausted his talent as a piano player, sacrificing his love of the music for employment. Middle-aged and broke, he is a relic of the past; even a pawnshop does not recognize value in his once stylish silk suits. Doaker lives an austere lifestyle without the companionship of a woman. It is rumored that he has several women waiting in the South, but these visits are scattered and dependent upon the cyclical movement of the train. Instead, he relies on his niece to soften the austere rigidity of his home.

Through the itinerant nature of its characters, the play juxtaposes the vital hum of the North with the languishing state of the southern market. Avery, a character who has come from the South and “taken to the city like a fish to water,” describes the industrial development of the city.¹⁸ By placing Avery in dialogue with Lymon, a recent arrival to the city, Wilson illustrates the gap between the rural and urban experience:

AVERY: I’m working down there at the Gulf Building running an elevator. Got a pension and everything. They even give you a turkey on Thanksgiving.

LYMON: How you know the rope ain’t gonna break? Ain’t you scared the rope’s gonna break?

AVERY: That’s steel. They got steel cables hold it up. It take a whole lot of breaking to break that steel. Naw, I ain’t worried about nothing like that. It ain’t nothing but a little old elevator. Now, I wouldn’t get in none of them airplanes. You couldn’t pay me to do nothing like that.¹⁹

Lymon’s fear comes across as naïveté. However, this scene is followed shortly afterward by an exchange between Boy Willie and Avery in which the tables turn:

BOY WILLIE: How many of them watermelons you want to buy?

AVERY: I thought you was gonna give me one seeing as how you got a whole truck full.

BOY WILLIE: You can get one, get two. I’ll give you two for a dollar.

AVERY: I can’t eat but one. How much are they?

¹⁸ Wilson, *ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

BOY WILLIE: Aw, nigger, you know I'll give you a watermelon. Go on, take as many as you want. Just leave some for me and Lymon to sell.²⁰

In subtlety of these conversations Wilson dances the distance between the South and North, demonstrating the practicality, versatility and peculiarities in both. The conversations are patterned in a kind of call and response meter; as one character attempts to demonstrate acuity and intelligence through an easy assimilation to modernity, another relies on the intelligence garnered from a more pastoral, ancestral experience. The siblings embody this dance as well. Berniece lives in the city, but she acts as the symbolic guardian of the family's past and legacy. Boy Willie, sees opportunity in modernity for evolution and advancement even though he is rooted in the country.

Off-white: Honor and Integrity Outside of Capitalism

At the time during which the play is set, plantation agriculture in the South was reckoning not just with drought, but the exodus of much of its workforce to the North. An economy that had relied on free labor for over four hundred years was slowly adjusting to a paid labor force. To circumnavigate the shock of paying outright for agricultural work, plantation owners made use of sharecropping, a system in which laborers could use a portion of the land in return for a share of the crop produced. Boy Willie has been sharecropping on the Sutter plantation. He wants to sell the piano and buy a piece of the land he now works for a pittance. As he repeats his plan throughout the play, it becomes an incantation he uses to keep the likelihood of a fraudulent sale at bay. Over and over again he says, "Sutter's brother say he selling the land to me. I got one part. Sell them watermelons get me the second part. Then...soon as I get them watermelons out that truck I'm gonna take and sell that piano and get the third part."²¹

The sharecropping system catered to the interests of the plantation owners. Laborers were lucky to break even and many black sharecroppers actually found themselves in debt, even after fruitful harvests. The contract forced sharecroppers to buy planting materials (seeds, tools, work animals) as well as food and clothing from the owner of the plantation. These purchases were almost exclusively made on credit. As part of the lease agreement to the land, plantation owners were permitted to buy a portion (sometimes over half) of the crop at a fixed rate set much lower than market price. Plantation owners were responsible for maintaining the books and they commonly falsified the records to ensure that sharecropping farmers made little to no profit. The planters would then fetch double or triple what they paid the sharecroppers when

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Wilson, *ibid.*, 36.

they sold the harvested crop at market values. At the end of the season, sharecroppers were forced to pay back their debt to plantation owners for the materials purchased during planting. With the small amount garnered from the remainder of their year's harvest most could not pay and went into debt. As a result, many sharecroppers were essentially working for free—a system that undoubtedly felt much like slavery. Boy Willie understands that in order to turn a profit he must control the agricultural process from start to finish. He articulates his logic as he attempts to persuade Berniece to sell the piano:

See, you just looking at the sentimental value. See, that's good. That's alright. I take my hat off when somebody say my daddy's name. But I ain't gonna be no fool about no sentimental value. You can sit up here and look at that piano for the next hundred years and it's just gonna be a piano. You can't make more than that. Now I want to get Sutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long a I got the land and the seed then I'm alright. I can always get me a little something else. Cause that land give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. I still got the land and the seed. But that piano don't put out nothing else. You ain't got nothing working for you.²²

A capitalist mentality was increasingly more common in lower and middle-class America at this time. American optimism was cautiously returning as the economy recovered. The twenties had sparked a sense of opportunity in American culture that was highly contagious; making money was a gamble but if you struck, the returns were high. In the late thirties, the playing field seemed as level as it ever had been; even wealthy whites were financially stressed. Some, like Sutter's brother, were abandoning their inheritance in the South and focusing on the opportunities available in the northern manufacturing market. For poor folks in the South—both black and white—the promise of the American dream seemed more attainable than ever. This seems to be the break Boy Willie has been waiting for. Doaker, familiar with the dishonest dealings of white businessmen, smells a rat: “That land ain't worth nothing no more. The smart white man's up here in these cities. He cut the land loose and step back and watch you and the dumb white man argue over it.”²³

In this scene, Lymon and Boy Willie attempt to defy the wisdom of their elders Doaker and Wining Boy. Wilson illustrates the spiritually impoverished condition of new generations of blacks seduced by a fictitious guarantee of wealth. Boy Willie's logic closely mirrors Joel Noland's realization that in the American market economy, the value of the piano (fixed commodity) is considerably less than that of a slave (productive investment). Wining Boy cleverly points out the dangerous contract his nephew is entering. He asks Boy Willie, “How

²² Wilson, *ibid.*, 51.

²³ Wilson, *ibid.*, 36.

you know Sutter's brother ain't sold [the land] already? You talking about selling the piano and the man's liable to sold the land two or three times."²⁴

Wining Boy represents the antithesis to the logic that Joel Noland and Robert Sutter symbolize and exposes the duplicity of the system in which they operate. Boy Willie has fallen victim to the illusory logic of capitalism. Wining Boy's caution very subtly illustrates the danger of investing in this system. Just as valuing the American dream devalues the importance of slavery, by placing value on Sutter's land Boy Willie has devalued the piano. As if bound by shackles, the logic of product and profit ties him to a world governed by principles based on fiction. The piano represents another realm, ruled by an ethos that governs in opposition to a whitewashed system that keeps black people subordinate. Boy Willie is not willing to entirely surrender his family's legacy, he believes that owning the land his parents worked as slaves is somehow a reckoning. Yet he is still trying to operate within a system that will not allow for both. He is caught between two worlds, and investing in one means disrespecting the other. Purgatory is the place in which Boy Willie must decipher which world feels more authentic. Wilson's plays depict the black experience as one running constantly parallel to but separate from white America. By creating a metaphysical world in which black people govern by virtue of their own moral and ethical code, the "real" world is exposed as equally imaginative.

Ultimately the intergenerational conflict illustrated in this scene calls to light the discrepancy between the American conception of value, built upon a morally corrupt system, and the African American experience with that system that placed value elsewhere. The conflict between Boy Willie and his uncles arises in divergent conceptions of *freedom*.

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: America Out from Under the Shadow of Slavery

Freedom in a capitalist society means autonomy and agency over oneself. The antithesis to this idea of freedom would be a total lack of control over life and self. Hence in early American society, the definition of freedom was rooted in the experience of slavery—liberty is the opposite of bondage. As Americans began to erase the fact of slavery, liberty could no longer be defined in relation to bondage. However, the American dream had made the exorbitant wealth generated by the slave economy permissible, and herein lies the birth of a new concept of freedom. Slavery was omitted from the equation and American freedom was based instead on capitalism—liberty was now equated with wealth. Money, the ability to participate in market exchange, represented true autonomy.

²⁴ Wilson, *ibid.*, 36.

Black people were not participants in the American economy, for centuries they were commodities to be exchanged within that economy. Value for black people was not placed in money or goods; it was placed in family and kin, in nourishment—both spiritual and literal, in music and history and stories. Being free meant reuniting with family, or not enduring the threat of having your loved ones sold away. It meant that your labor, both what you produce (goods) and reproduce (children) were protected and safe from thievery. It meant that your culture, your religion, your literacy, your music and history could not be forbidden, distorted or traded for any amount of money.

It is no coincidence that at the same time that Sutter's brother is selling the family land, a white man is traveling about Pittsburgh buying all of the musical instruments he can find from black families. In *The Piano Lesson*, musical instruments like the piano embody the souls of the ancestors because music is an important carrier of black culture and history. As they surrender the land, whites can wipe their hands clean of slavery, but only if there are no stories left. Black music is resonant with stories. Music has kept record of family histories and the legacy of survival in this country. Not only has it sustained people in times of strife and struggle, it has hidden plans for rebellion and messages of freedom. In African American music there are rhythms that remember and recreate a homeland, and mourn the tragedy of the Middle Passage. In the improvisational creativity of jazz, the blending of many cultures reflects the blood of a creole people. As long as the music continued, the history and hence the people would survive. As Boy Charles pointed out, as long as Sutter owned the piano, he owned the Charles family, free or not. Liberating the history of the black experience from the white perspective meant freedom and autonomy for black people. Money could not buy that kind of sovereignty.

Boy Willie and Lymon represent the birth of a generation that was seduced by capitalism, the first to be pulled from the values that had sustained the culture for so long. They are bound up in a world in which freedom is defined by money. Their experience with this unfair system is that money means choice. Wilson eloquently captures their reasoning as the young men recount their unfortunate journey north:

WINING BOY: Doaker say they had you and Lymon down on the Parchman Farm. Had you on my old stomping grounds.

BOY WILLIE: Me and Lymon was down there hauling wood for Jim Miller and keeping us a little bit to sell. Some white fellows tried to run us off of it. That's when Crawley got killed. They put me and Lymon in the penitentiary.

LYMON: They ambushed us right there where that road dip down and around that bend in the creek. Crawley tried to fight them. Me and Boy Willie got away but the sheriff got us. Say we was stealing wood. They shot me in my stomach.

BOY WILLIE: They looking for Lymon down there now. They rounded him up and put him in jail for not working.

LYMON: Fined me a hundred dollars. Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that.

BOY WILLIE: As soon as Stovall turned his back, Lymon was gone. He down there living in that truck dodging the sheriff and Stovall. He got both of them looking for him. So I brought him up here.²⁵

Even when he stayed within the rules laid out by the law, Lymon did not have the freedom of choice. The option to refuse the white man's "charitable rescue" was not allowed. Had he acquiesced and returned to Stovall's plantation, he would then have to work not for money but for the debt paid on his "freedom," which was not freedom at all, but actually bondage. Under this calamitous contract, Lymon would not earn any money for his labor—pay would permit him choice, one can refuse pay. Stovall had money and was subsequently in the position to decide when Lymon's debt was met, and hence when he was free. According to the rules of this system, Lymon was for sale. He had been relegated to the status of a commodity. Boy Willie convinces Lymon that the only way to escape this trap was to run. Lymon's freedom has cost him his reputation. A fugitive, he was now a dangerous criminal in the eyes of the law.

Suspicion about Lymon's character is not limited to the world of the play; it extends into the audience as we question the reliability of Lymon's voice amongst the ensemble of characters. The playwright deftly places the audience on the defensive about the arrival of these two men. Wilson uses Berniece's suspicion about the truck in which Boy Willie and Lymon arrive to plant the seed that their intentions are likely suspect. She believes they have stolen the truck. Doaker suspects they have stolen the cargo they carry. The message becomes plain: any black man with property is suspect of a crime. However, as the audience comes to know the characters better, the reasons for their dilemma are revealed. In the end, it is the toxic moral environment of the South that has sent the young men on a journey. They are no longer recognized as people; they are fugitives from the law. What neither yet understands is that they were never recognized as people by the United States, they were commodities for sale to the highest bidder. As long as Lymon and Boy Willie continue to define their worth in relation to that system, they are in a no man's land. This trek through an indeterminate realm leads them to a boarding house in the north that symbolizes purgatory, a place to make a decision that will restrict them to one world or the other.

²⁵ Wilson, *ibid.*, 37.

Here Boy Willie begins his battle against the sickness with which American amnesia has infected him. He understands that in order to survive the system, he has to break the rules; the rules are there to block opportunity, disrepute his family's legacy, negate his existence. This is why he has brought Lymon to the Charles home. Their legacy is one of insurgent resistance. Criminal in one world, the Charles men have found respite and retribution in another. As Wining Boy points out, "the colored man can't fix nothing with the law."²⁶ Boy Willie is heir to this legacy. Rescuing Lymon is symbolic of his birthright. "I don't go by what the law say," Boy Willie explains. "The law's liable to say anything. I go by if it's right or not. It don't matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself."²⁷

Establishing a Black Market: Wealth in Another World

Aiding and abetting a fugitive may not be the only crime Boy Willie has committed. It is quite likely that he himself is a fugitive as well. It is not his crimes that have landed both he *and* Lymon in purgatory. His moral compass is askew. While he never admits it, Boy Willie is likely responsible for Sutter's death. Shortly after he arrives in Pittsburgh, Sutter's ghost shows up at the Charles' home. In Boy Willie's mind, Sutter's death frees up the land he wants to buy. The land represents an opportunity for him to make money, to have the things that will allow him to participate in the American economy, which in his eyes makes him free. Land, seed, and a crop to cash in—these things will buy him freedom. The fact that he will finally own the land his family worked as slaves is an added advantage. Boy Willie claims that Sutter fell down his well—he claims that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him.

This is a weighty moral claim and Boy Willie's uncles are hesitant to challenge him. They understand the delicate balance between right and wrong that this legend represents. The Yellow Dog is a train that travels the distance between justice and corruption, between freedom and slavery. Doaker laid much of the track himself and Wining Boy surrendered to its authority after his elder brother's death. Lymon and Boy Willie may have come north in a truck full of watermelons, but it was the Yellow Dog that brought them to purgatory and Sutter's ghost was stowaway cargo.

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are a force of retribution in Sunflower County Mississippi. After Boy Charles and the other four passengers were burnt in the boxcar fire, Doaker and Wining Boy were left as the heads of the Charles family. For generations, the Charles' had lived in the shadows of the Sutter plantation and were subject to the rules that

²⁶ Wilson, *ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ Wilson *ibid.*, 38-9.

catered to these interests. After their brother's murder, it seems that the Charles men took it upon themselves to establish justice:

WINING BOY: How many that make the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog done got?

BOY WILLIE: Must be about nine or ten, eleven or twelve. I don't know.

DOAKER: You got Ed Saunders. Howard Peterson. Charlie Webb.

WINING BOY: Robert Smith. That fellow that shot Becky's boy...say he was stealing peaches...

DOAKER: You talking about Bob Mallory.

BOY WILLIE: Berniece say she don't believe all that about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

WINING BOY: She ain't got to believe. You go as them white folks in Sunflower County if they believe. You go ask Sutter if he believe. I don't care if Berniece believe or not. I done been to where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog and called out their names. They talk back to you, too.²⁸

Many of the names they recite belong to the men that were believed to have been responsible for killing Boy Charles. It may be that Doaker and Wining Boy, acting as disciples of an alternate moral realm, were those responsible for these deaths. If so, they know that when their nephew claims the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed Sutter down his well that he has killed him. Rather than indict him immediately, the elder men are willing to wait for Boy Willie to tell the story of what happened. Suddenly it is clear that a tacit agreement exists in which use of the legend of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog is restricted to moral vengeance. Doaker and Wining Boy hope that their nephew understands it is not to be used lightly. As Wining Boy points out, white fear is a very, very precious commodity on the black market.

Setting the Record Straight: Myths and Moral Retribution

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog represent an attempt to make the world even. Its disciples took up arms against those that threatened their safety and security and did so without remorse or hesitation. This notion of retribution, of fairness, emboldens the people. As Wining Boy explains when he went to stand at the crossroads of the Yellow Dog and Southern railway lines, "it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. I didn't want to leave. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. . . I walked away from there feeling like a king."²⁹ The crossroads where the Southern and the Yellow Dog meet is an old-fashioned

²⁸ Wilson, *ibid.*, 34.

²⁹ Wilson, *ibid.*, 35.

shootout where those who enforce injustice and hide within the guise of a gallant Old South are finally forced out into the streets to meet the retaliatory forces of black defiance.

Not accidentally, Wilson decided that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog inhabit a train. A train is cyclical, rhythmic, and as Doaker says, dependable,

now what I done learned after twenty-seven years of railroading is this...if the train stays on the track...it's going to get where it's going. It might not be where you going. If it ain't, then all you got to do is sit and wait cause the train's coming back to get you. The train don't never stop. It'll come back every time.³⁰

In this passage many themes intersect, reflecting the hybridity of the African American experience. The most evident theme is progress, the unyielding push of industrial development and commerce in this country. The railroad represents American expansion, commerce and development. In tight juxtaposition with this runs the idea the Sankofa, a West African Adinkra symbol of a bird that means you must know where you have been to know where you are going. It is an important recognition of cultural roots, ancestry and a sense of identity. Finally, Doaker stresses the reliability of the train and the fact that inevitably it will carry its passengers where the track has been laid regardless of their intent. In this last interpretation, the train represents history; its cyclical, rhythmic nature ensures that what has been will be again in time. History will repeat itself *unless the train runs off track*. In the simple poetry of Doaker's explanation, the spirit of revolution rises up and quietly beckons. If you can break the track, upset the lines, then you can expect a different kind of outcome. On the page, Wilson takes time around the solution, bracketing it in ellipses so that the reader, and the actor, will give pause there and highlight that moment. The only way to change the future is to change the past. The only way to change the past is to tell the truth about what happened, and that truth must include American slavery.

One of the most important contributions Wilson's cycle makes to the American canon is how the playwright created an African American ethos that recalibrates morality through the lens of slavery. In his world, there is no way to know the American experience without knowing slavery. Since this perspective absolutely defies the myth of the American dream, it is supremely difficult for anyone swept up in the promise of American prosperity, like Boy Willie, to shoulder the weight of both. He understands the logic of capitalism, he understands the power of legacy, but he fails to have the faith necessary to see the real truth in either.

Instead, Boy Willie has been infected with two themes that will become increasingly more common in American culture after the 1930s. The first is supremacy of independence, the other is the right to inheritance; both are symptoms of American capitalism. When these contradictory forces are embodied in one individual, the cracks in the American dream show—

³⁰ Wilson, *ibid.*, 19.

how can one claim to have pulled himself up by his bootstraps when he acknowledges his inheritance? Yet how can one take advantage of American privilege if he denies his birthright? It is quite a quandary. Boy Willie imagines that he can escape this trap by doing both: he wants to use the power of his legacy to justify the value he places on the American idea of prosperity.

. . . . I discovered the power of death. See, a nigger that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for a white man. He can't hold that power over you. That's what I learned when I killed that cat. I got the power of death too. He don't like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, "I got it too." Then he got to deal with you square up.³¹

He understands the power that his uncles and others wield when they take matters of retribution into their own hands. However, Boy Willie has not employed the legend of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog honorably; Sutter's presence in the Charles home signifies the materialization of a moral burden that Boy Willie is carrying.

It is not until Berniece plays the piano and calls out the names of their ancestors that Sutter's ghost leaves. Before she called upon Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Chales and Mama Ola, Sutter stood alone in the Charles' home, able to plague them as he saw fit. When Berniece brought the elder spirits out of the piano, however, Sutter was surrounded by the legacy he had escaped for so long. The elder spirits, like the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, had the justification to hold Sutter and his family accountable for their crimes. In this light, the reckoning force of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog is righteous and distinctly different from the injudicious lynchings, beatings and burnings exacted upon black people in the South. This is why when Berniece finally plays the piano and calls on the names of her ancestors, the sound of a train is heard and Sutter disappears. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, representing moral retribution, have come to claim him.

Conclusion

What Wilson's purgatory ultimately demonstrates is that his characters have always had their freedom. As long as they could step outside of the morally toxic environment in which they were bound, they were free. It is only the American system of capitalism that abstracted their choice into bondage. Fugitive status within a corrupt system, leads to moral autonomy and this is absolute freedom.

³¹ Wilson, *ibid.*, 88.

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow
January 14, 2008 at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota

Lein Walseth: This production marks the beginning of Penumbra's commitment to producing Wilson's 10-play cycle over the next five years as a part of the Wilson Lab project. Of all ten plays, why do *The Piano Lesson* first? What is the significance of this piece for you?

Bellamy: It's a combination of the way each of the plays fit into our season, the significance of the plays to Penumbra, and August Wilson's estate plans for what they want to do, and what their objectives are.

Piano Lesson is particularly important because it's the only Wilson play that we have done just once. And there's a reason for that. We did this play in 1993. It was directed by Marion McClinton. I played Doaker and Rebecca Rice—a fabulous actress—played Berniece. This is the play that we've done that most affected the playwright. I mean he was absolutely blown away by our production, and there's some wonderful quotes that I'm sure you've come across, where he said [Penumbra's staging of] *The Piano Lesson* was not only his favorite staging, but a model of style and eloquence that influenced all of his next work. So, once you sort of make a mark like that you're, at least I am, a little reticent about going back to it, you know. But, it's so important that we focus this work and sort of lay down a line as to how the work might be produced, especially since the playwright has passed and is no longer able to represent himself. I think that it falls upon those of us who, perhaps, knew the work in its nascent stages and watched it grow, to help people in the interpretation of it. I'm sure that you're going to see dance interpretations of these plays and all sorts of expressionistic treatment of them (laughs) that may or may not have gotten the support of the playwright - I suspect not. So, that's why. I believe he won his second Pulitzer for *Piano Lesson*, and it is just a wonderful piece of work. It's a good thing to start with and it holds that special significance for Penumbra.

Lein Walseth: That's interesting that you bring that up, because one of my other questions was about August's comments about Penumbra's previous production of this piece. It seems like a high honor, but also a difficult legacy to live up to.

Bellamy: Well, why do you think we haven't done it? I just couldn't bring myself to do it, nor would I saddle another director with the responsibility. If it's going to be taken on, if we're going to, not challenge, but produce in the shadow of the definitive production of a piece (laughs) then you oughta try to represent it well, and that's what I'm trying to do.

Lein Walseth: So, do you imagine that this production will try to maintain elements of that production that Wilson commented on, or are you hoping to go a completely different way this time? Or will you try to hold some of the previous elements and some new elements in balance?

Bellamy: I think holding them in balance is the question. I'm not Marion McClinton, and I've got to approach the text in a way that is personal for me and that gets at the nuance and the truth that I see in it. But since we all were sort of—to use August's words—"fired in the same kiln," I would expect there to be several similar elements to it. I think that if I were to look at the styles, I would say that Marion is a touch more flamboyant than I might be. His symbolism is a little larger, I tend to be a little more subtle, sometimes so subtle that people wonder if it happened (both laugh). I have the benefit of several other productions and lots of scholarly input into this piece, a television production and all of those things. So it's a different time, and as you know, the interpretation of the piece and its success, I think, depends upon its vitality and the

vital way in which it reflects and addresses contemporary kinds of feelings and issues, and so that's what I'm saddled with more than relating to the old production.

Lein Walseth: Yes, that makes sense. So, speaking of holding the old in tension with the new or current, in a roundtable discussion about this play with college educators last week, professors commented that many of their students feel disconnected from the past, and that some even think that the primary means of transportation in the 1990s was horseback.

Bellamy: You mean the 1890s.

Lein Walseth: No, 1990s.

Bellamy: Wow. Oh, I see what you're saying. Lord, it's even worse than I suspected!

Lein Walseth: So, with their comments in mind, if young people are coming to see this, what might you say to them about the significance of the play, set in the 1930s, and its relevance to their lives? I know that's a big question.

Bellamy: Well, I think it's right on the head, because the way this play is structured, and the way many of the plays in the season are structured, they throw into contrast and relief a new view, a younger view and an older view of the same situations. Certainly in *Piano Lesson* you've got a more economic take on what the worth of an artifact is, versus its aesthetic and emotional kinds of value. In *Gem of the Ocean* you're again placing the generations against each other, so that what you have is a situation where one generation is faced with realizing their potential, their dream, based upon where they see themselves today. As they go forward knowing, or not knowing the past, they find that they confront the past even as they feel they're going forward.

I remember having a college professor in literature, Dr. Bolgish, and we were reading old plays, and I was saying, "I don't care about reading these old plays, all I care about is doing something new. Who cares what these old people do? I want to do new things." And he said to me, stopped me dead in my tracks, "Mr. Bellamy, how will you know? How will you know if you're doing anything new if you don't know what came before?"

So, in this particular play, although it is the 1930s, the same sort of forward momentum of one generation is thrown directly into contact with views from the past and the way they tend to inform the future. I would think that there should be all kinds of entry points for younger people. For instance, the relationship of all of that family to the little girl in there and the way she's treated. The way her parents want her, or her mother, wants her to face the future and she's straightening her hair, preparing her for the future that the mother understands. Well the little girl may or may not want to go into the world with straight hair. So, you're thrown into a conflict at every juncture of the play, and I think young people will recognize it.

Lein Walseth: There's definitely a lot of conflict in this play, and, as you mention, the generations fighting against each other is one of those conflicts. There's also the gender conflict, which has been written about extensively. It especially struck me the other day, in talking with you about the decision of whether to keep the piano or to sell it. You were talking about your understanding of why Boy Willie would want to sell it. But then reading Sarah's [Bellamy, Penumbra's Education Director] contextual essay for the study guide, it was clear that she was coming from a different perspective. These two views triggered in my mind the question of whether this is a gendered conflict in some ways. There are a lot of things going on in this play, but do you see gender playing a role?

Bellamy: Isn't it always, Stephanie? (both laugh) It always is – gender, sex, all that stuff is always present whether we want to talk about it, admit it, it's there. The way one sees it for instance, in this piece, is the way they both approach the same artifact, one might say, maybe wrongly, that the emotional connection to the artifact is more female than the economic, utilitarian sort of function that the male sees it as. But there are all sorts of buried and scabbed over feelings that surface during this play that may or may not be gender-bound. For instance, the female says "I am tired of you men all killing. That's all you do, you're all killing." (And I'm convinced that Boy Willie pushed Sutter in that well. I mean, I just know it, you know.) So, she says "I'm sick of this, I'm sick of this, that's all you do, you're all, you know..." and that is what is thought of as a male sort of way of approaching the world. Well, what happens when she's pushed to the limit? She goes and gets a pistol (he laughs) and says, "You're not taking that piano out of here," you know. So, perhaps the circumstance defines the ethical and realistic reaction. When you're pushed to the wall I think that a female as well as a male would go and get the pistol and protect their point of view.

Lein Walseth: Interesting. You talked about that too when we talked about *REDSHIRTS*, that 'situational ethics.'

Bellamy: Oh yeah, and I think they [the characters in *The Piano Lesson*] define it in many ways. These situations are not hypothetical. I mean, it's *real*. And if you don't do something real to react to that real situation, then you will be consumed by it.

Lein Walseth: You mentioned Sutter, and of course there is a lot of scholarly debate about the ghost presence in this piece, both the ghosts of the Yellow Dog and the ghost of Sutter appearing in the home. What's your take on that? Why do you think he's there?

Bellamy: Oh, I think that there's just so many reasons. I mean, Boy Willie, for instance, says he defines himself, you know. "I don't care what they think of me. I'm going to make my own mark in the world, la, la, la," yet he's still got this ghost following him around that he has to do battle with. He just must. And he's sort of running from that battle. The whole play is about shadows and about the way the past informs the future, ghosts and memories and the ancestors and all those sorts of things all sort of occupying the same space, thrown against one another where you're not free to make a move based on the facts directly in front of you. You've got to consider all of the past and so forth, and so I think all those things sort of come into play with it. That the ancestors are continually present is something that Western society doesn't necessarily want to acknowledge. However, even in Western society, Freud and others talk about the importance of dreams, the subconscious and all those sorts of things, so these shadows, these other sorts of things that define who we are and what reality we relate to are in the piece, carved in the piano and in the presence of this ghost.

There's a mental position that all of these individuals have to confront and get over and that mental position is their black cultural reaction to slavery and the way it has shaped them and there is a point where any African American who is issue of that system has to admit the way it defines the way you and I interact. I mean look at people walking by here. Pretty little white girl, here you are, you're sitting up here with me, we're talking over here in the corner, and they come and go "What kind of s**t is that?" Do you know what I mean? That's being shaped by all of that stuff, so that you're constantly having to address it and redefine it and so forth and until these people can move forward. They've got to take that on head-on –in this case the symbolism that's inherent in the piano and in the ghost itself – they've got to exorcise all of that stuff before they can move forward.

Lein Walseth: Yeah, you know, Harry Elam's book talks about the past as present in the plays of August Wilson, and Sarah's essay talks about this play being purgatory, that this house is purgatory...

Bellamy: I like that, yeah.

Lein Walseth: It does seem certainly that the past and the present and the future are all here in this moment in this house. What I've been thinking is that it's purgatory and it's also a crossroads, like how *Wining Boy* talks about the railroad crossing where the Southern crosses the Yellow Dog.

Bellamy: Those are all Yoruban cosmology kinds of things.

Lein Walseth: Very cool. Let's go back to August for a second. He had a long and fruitful relationship with both you and Penumbra. As background for those that might be reading this that don't know about that relationship, can you talk a bit about how it began?

Bellamy: Well, he showed up here at the personal invitation of a man that directed our first show, and that was Claude Purdy and they were very good friends. (They refer to that in the beginning of the *Bearden* book, in the introduction that August wrote.) Claude invited him here. Within 30 minutes of hitting the ground at the airport he was sitting in a production here at Penumbra. In his own words, I've heard him say (wondering if he would ever write a play that was good enough to be on that stage) that he'd never seen a black theater, one that is controlled and informed by the culture, and where the principle people running it are black. Not like say, the Classical Theatre of Harlem or something like that. This is black, the board, everything. So, he'd never seen a black theater with the kind of production standards that we have and it just blew him away. It gave him sort of a line to draw to say that there are, and these are his words again, when you hear them you'll know they're not mine, they're a little too poetic, but he was saying that "a group of men and women have dedicated their lives to elevating this art and this image," and he felt challenged to rise to that.

We've produced more of his plays than any theater in the world. Easily done for us because we've done some of the ones that no one else would do, like his first professional production, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, or a Malcolm X piece that he wrote specifically for me to perform. You know, no one's going to do those plays, I don't think, and so we will always sort of have a record because of that.

Besides the work itself, the plays, which are challenging to the company artistically, to the audiences, to the community engaging the issues and so forth, he's left us all that. But even more, a kind of a stewardship and a responsibility to stand up and follow one's heart and be who you are and that isn't always met with open arms. You know, "The Ground on Which I Stand," that essay, well speech, it was first, that he gave at TCG, placed him in a polemical stance that was not unlike where Harry Truman found himself when he sort of rebelled against all of the organized crime that might have put him in the Presidency when he said, "Uh oh, well I'm President now and I'm going to do it this way." August was accused of biting the hand that fed him and so forth, yet those of us who deal in this literature and this cultural perspective, viewed that as sort of a gauntlet to be throw down and a kind of leadership that we don't see enough of.

His work demands that you be true to the culturally specific nature of who you are, you can't understand it unless you know that stuff, and it's so tricky, he's so damn smart – there are even economic determinants that I find in understanding his work. For instance, if you wanna understand the role of Esther, and if you refer to her by her title that August gives her, and I'm

intentionally not saying what that is, in a more upper class sort of way, she is who? What's her name?

Lein Walseth: Aunt Esther? (pronounced Ahnt)

Bellamy: Aunt Esther – it's sort of high falutin'. If you're a little lower on that economic ladder you might call her...? Aunt Esther (pronounced Ant). If you call her Aunt Esther (pronounced Ahnt) you're never going to understand the role she plays. Aunt (Ahnt) Esther, you can say it till you die. Aunt (Ahnt) Esther, Aunt (Ahnt) Esther. But if you call her Aunt (Ant) Esther, and you start saying Aunt (Ant) Esther, Aunt (Ant) Esther, *ancestor*, Aunt (Ant) Esther, see? And he's got so many, Stephanie, of these things that pop up and grab you. The significance of numbers, he loved numbers...

Lein Walseth: The 3:57 train...

Bellamy: Yeah, yeah, or 1839 Wylie [Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District]. That's when the Amistad thing went down. You know there's all these things. I went to 1839 Wylie, 'cause I wanted to see if there was something there, and there's nothing particularly definitive about that spot, but the date *is* and he loved to play with that kind of stuff. Those are the kinds of things that allow you or force you to do significant kinds of real research, deep stuff, but not leave your culture, see? And almost all the time it's thought, for African Americans, you can't do that kind of deep work unless you study Ibsen or Chekhov or Shakespeare. Well that's bulls**t and he proves it.

Lein Walseth: I can attest to that! I have every book in the library on Wilson and it is taking me a *long* time to get through it all!

Bellamy: And that's so cool! For you it's wonderful, you're having a good time, you're learning a ton of stuff. But think of the kind of validation that that gives an African American who's been told that "All the stuff that you do doesn't matter," and you get in here and you start digging and you're going, "Wow!" You know, it feels good.

Lein Walseth: You mentioned August being here, and seeing a theater being run from the top down by black folks. So, what about a Penumbra production of *The Piano Lesson* do you think is distinct?

Bellamy: Stephanie, I'm not so sure that there's not something special about the hall that we're sitting in, about that room (points to the theater), about the memories that seep out of the chairs and all the stuff. You stand on that stage and there's just *so much*, you're just assaulted by so many things, it's heavy in that room. So many of these people have died now, and when you say these words you *see* them. Rebecca Rice in *Piano Lesson*, I mean I'll just never, ever forget her. I had the opportunity to play opposite her in *Fences* and I remember her, she had some roses in her hand when I came to tell her, as Troy, about the infidelity, and she started beating me with these roses, and these petals just flew, and it was like blood flying and, ahhhhh (laughs), you know, you just, you don't forget those things, they're part of who you are. This literature, and the experience of walking in these halls and being in that room changes people. I know it does. I've watched it too many times. So, being in there is not without influence, just *that*. There is a notion that the kind of work we do here is presented as though there are no one but African Americans in the audience. That makes for a special kind of experience. It doesn't leave anybody out, but what it does is it begins to get to a specificity, to a purity that deepens the experience for everyone, so I would expect that to be different.

Lein Walseth: To that effect, some of the original members were here for the Wilson Lab conference a couple of months ago. Did anything come up that you've been thinking about specifically in terms of this production, something that confirmed or changed what you were thinking about it? Just having those people there, having those stories and those memories come up?

Bellamy: Yeah, a lot of things are going to grow out of that. For instance, there is a company member designated for each of the shows that will attend rehearsals four times a week and record what they see going on and how they see that relating to an ethical, an aesthetic sort of company stance on a play and what is different about the way we work at it, what makes this thing different. And so we're addressing it that sort of way. The other thing that became really evident, and all the people weren't even here, is that, when you look at those people today, it's very clear that something very special was happening years ago in this space, because those people are the movers and shakers of American theater today, they're shaping American theater today, and they came right out of here, so I think that as we go on, and that's one of the reasons for the Wilson Lab, as we go on we will always seek to re-interpret and interpret the present production in the way it either deviates from, learns from, or returns to those tenants upon which the organization was built.

Lein Walseth: I think that's a wonderful place to wrap up. Thank you so much for your time.

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).

Penumbra Theatre Company also offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes. Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. 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 1930s? What political factors played a role in relations between black and white people?
3. In the 1930s the North began to surpass the South financially. What factors contributed to this?
4. Who was the woman nicknamed "Moses?" What did she do that made her so important for her people?
5. What are some of the jobs that the people in *The Piano Lesson* have? What do these jobs tell you about the Charles' family?
6. What is Creole?

Critical Thinking and Analysis -- *Short Essay Questions*

1. What do you think the lesson of the piano is? Who learns it?
2. Berniece and Boy Willie each have their own priorities. What are they? Are they opposite or similar? Why or why not?
3. The piano holds a significant amount of family history for the Charles. Does your family have a similar object or family heirloom? What object would you like to inherit from your family and why?
4. What would you do with the piano? Would you sell it and buy back the land, or would you keep it in the family?
5. *The Piano Lesson* merges two worlds—the world of reality as we know it and a supernatural world in which spirits and ghosts can harm or protect the living. What do you think August Wilson was trying to convey by having these two worlds meet in his play?

Language Arts and Theatre – Reflection

1. What are three ways in which *The Piano Lesson* blurs the boundaries between real time and the past or future?
2. How does sound design impact the telling of this story? What elements of sound did you notice and why do you think they were important?
3. What do the costumes tell you about the Charles family?

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.

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. Fighting commenced on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces attacked a federal military installation Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Peripatetic – travelling nature or roaming about. The word is born from Aristotle’s lectures—the philosopher used to walk about the Lyceum in Athens while he spoke.

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.

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 spurred the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.

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.

THE PIANO LESSON: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECT WORKS

Compiled 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.

This piece covers six of Wilson's plays including *The Piano Lesson*. 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.

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