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**ALICE CHILDRESS'**  
*Wedding*  
**BAND**

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**A Love/Hate Story in Black and White**  
**Directed by Lou Bellamy**

**A Penumbra Theatre Company Production**  
**October 19 – November 12, 2017**

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide



## **Penumbra's 2017-2018 Season: Crossing Lines A Letter from the Artistic Director, Sarah Bellamy**

Fifty years ago a young couple was thrust into the national spotlight because they fought for their love to be recognized. Richard and Mildred Loving, aptly named, didn't intend to change history—they just wanted to protect their family. They took their fight to the highest court and with *Loving v. The State of Virginia*, the Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation law unconstitutional. The year was 1967.

We're not far from that fight. Even today interracial couples and families are met with curiosity, scrutiny, and in this racially tense time, contempt. They represent an anxiety about a breakdown of racial hierarchy in the U.S. that goes back centuries. In 2017 we find ourselves defending progress we never imagined would be imperiled, but we also find that we are capable of reaching beyond ourselves to imagine our worlds anew.

This season we explore what happens when the boundlessness of love meets the boundaries of our identities. Powerful drama and provocative conversations will inspire us to move beyond the barriers of our skin toward the beating of our hearts. Join us to celebrate the courage of those who love outside the lines, who fight to be all of who they are, and in doing so, urge us to manifest a more loving, inclusive America.

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## EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

### Welcome and How to Use this Tool

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.

## 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.

## HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

### An overview of the African American contribution to 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. Minstrelsy was very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.



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.<sup>2</sup> 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”:

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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 165.

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

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 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 and 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.<sup>4</sup>

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. 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. 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.

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<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

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.

## WEDDING BAND

By Alice Childress

Directed by Lou Bellamy

### About the Play

In a small South Carolina town by the sea, Julia keeps to herself. Her love, Herman, arrives after dark with a wedding cake—a symbol of their decade long commitment and secret vows to one another. Unable to legally marry, these star-crossed lovers—one black, one white—live in constant fear of arrest or worse. The rules that govern society don't govern the heart, and Julia and Herman risk safety and security for love. Will the price be more than they can bear? Written in 1962, this passionate classic stirs the heart and proves searingly relevant as race takes center stage in American politics.

### Setting

Summer 1918. A city by the sea. South Carolina, USA.

### Characters

**JULIA AUGUSTINE:** “An attractive brown woman about 35 years old,” the newest tenant on Fanny’s property. She works as a seamstress. She is Herman’s love.

**HERMAN:** “A strong, 40 year old working [white] man. His light brown hair is sprinkled with gray.” He is a baker in town and owns his own shop. He is Julia’s love.

**FANNY JOHNSON:** The “landlady of the property, 50 years old, and the self-appointed representative of her race.” She claims black and Seminole heritage.

**LULA GREEN:** One of the tenants on Fanny’s property, 45, a widow, and Nelson’s mother. She is working on starting a new faith, and makes and sells paper flowers.

**NELSON GREEN:** Lula’s adopted son, on leave from the army and a worker in the coal-yard, “a rather rough-looking muscly fellow with a soft voice and a bittersweet sense of humor.”

**MATTIE:** One of the tenants on Fanny’s property, a young mother, married unofficially to October, who is away serving in the Merchant Marine. She sells candy and nannies for a white child.

**TEETA:** “A girl about eight years old,” Mattie’s daughter

**PRINCESS:** The little white girl, six years old, whom Mattie looks after

**THE BELL MAN:** “A poor white [man], about 30 years old but time has dealt him some hard blows.” He is a salesman, selling everyday wares to the locals in town.

**ANNABELLE:** Herman’s sister, a concert pianist and a war-time volunteer at the naval hospital. She is “a woman in her 30s. She assumes a slightly mincing air of fashionable delicacy.”

**HERMAN’S MOTHER:** “A ‘poor white’ about 57 years old. She has risen above her poor farm background and tries to assume the airs of ‘quality.’”

## SCENE BREAKDOWN

**ACT ONE, Scene 1: Saturday morning.** Julia, the newest tenant on Fanny's property, meets the neighbors who share the backyard space. Secrets of each person's past are revealed amidst the commotion of children playing, lost money, a postman's letter, and the local salesman's visit. Though at first guarded about her forbidden love, Julia eventually confesses that Herman, her committed beau of ten years, is white. When neighbors Lula and Mattie cannot convince her to let him go, they make excuses to leave, and Julia reproaches herself for daring to share her story.

**ACT ONE, Scene 2: Saturday evening.** Herman arrives with goods from his bakery, including a wedding cake to celebrate their 10-year anniversary. After an awkward encounter with the curious neighbors, the couple reunites in the privacy of Julia's new cottage and he presents her with a gold wedding band. News of the war looming, family and racial tensions, and a possible buy-out of Herman's bakery – at a severe loss – cloud their happy evening. But they make plans to send Julia to New York to begin their new life together, with Herman to follow shortly thereafter. As the evening winds to an end, however, Herman suddenly collapses on Julia's porch, and their future hangs in limbo.

**ACT TWO, Scene 1: Sunday morning.** Julia and her neighbors tend to Herman, who has been struck by the influenza virus. Though Julia is desperate for a doctor, they cannot bring one onto the property for fear of alerting the police and suffering dire consequences. Herman's mother and sister arrive to take him home, but as night falls and his sickness rises, a vitriolic battle between the white and black women in Herman's life rages. He joins the fray, and a decade worth of anger and racial resentment comes spilling out from all sides.

**ACT TWO, Scene 2: Monday, early afternoon.** There is a festive mood in the yard, as the tenants prepare for the army parade and for Nelson's send-off back to war. A slightly drunken Julia dons her wedding dress, and she and Nelson take turns delivering hopeful speeches about future possibilities for black Americans. Herman returns, and in a battle with no winners, he and Julia fight over their histories of race, class, labor, and inheritance. Yet, they soon soften and remember their love, their own, imperfect truth. When Herman's mother and sister return to take him home to die, Julia refuses, throwing off anyone who would dictate her life. She cradles Herman in her arms, and as he takes his last breaths, they imagine their journey to the north, to freedom, to their wedding.



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT Alice Childress (1916-1994)<sup>5</sup>

Alice Childress was a prolific playwright, novelist, actor, and theater artist whose works and life never shied away from controversy. Born Alice Herndon in Charleston, South Carolina, Childress moved to Harlem at the age of five to live with her grandmother, Eliza Campbell White. Under her grandmother's guidance, she developed a love of the arts and writing. Her formal high school career ended after two years when she dove into the Harlem theater scene.

From 1940-1948 Childress was a member of the groundbreaking American Negro Theatre in Harlem, where she worked as an actor, technician, director, designer, and teacher. Her politics and artistry always intertwined, she fought for off-Broadway union contracts for actors,<sup>6</sup> and became one of the core members of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts (CAN) along with Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and other acclaimed artists, working to gain mainstream theater employment for minority artists.<sup>7</sup>

As an actress and a writer, Childress was a trailblazer. Her performance in *Anna Lucasta* (1944), the longest running all-black play on Broadway, earned her a Tony nomination. She became the first professionally produced black female playwright with her off-Broadway productions of *Just a Little Simple* (1950) and *Gold through the Trees* (1952).<sup>8</sup> And in 1956 she won an Obie Award for Best Original Play for *Trouble in Mind*; the first black female in American history to receive the honor.

At the heart of all of Childress' writing is an honest reflection of the struggles of everyday black people. She bore witness to these epic and mundane challenges during her early churchgoing experiences, and found her storytelling in the heartache and resilience of black lives. She brought this authenticity onto the stage in her plays, expanding the American canon and the kinds of stories that were deemed worthy of artistic portrayal. "I always deal with those who know the condition they're in, who don't like it, but who cope on a day-to-day basis," Childress noted. "These people have been missing from drama."<sup>9</sup> Part of the complexity of people's lives included the harsh realities of racism, the politics of interracial relationships, the nuance of black women's experiences, working-class strife, and the fight against stereotypes of black people.

Because she focused on these topics, especially interracial love, some television networks refused to show her screenplays, and libraries and school districts banned some of her novels. But her commitment to the cause of truth and justice was unwavering. In her essay, "For a Negro Theatre," she boldly claimed: "We need a Negro people's theatre, but it must be powerful enough to inspire, lift, and eventually create a complete desire for the liberation of all oppressed peoples."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Full references for this article can be found in the Works Cited list following the contextual essay.

<sup>6</sup> Granshaw

<sup>7</sup> Hill and Hatch 359-360

<sup>8</sup> Granshaw

<sup>9</sup> Hill and Hatch 344

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Hill and Hatch 361

Childress fought hard to maintain the integrity of her pieces as well as the conditions under which they were produced. Though her plays were set to go to Broadway eleven times, they were never performed on the Great White Way because she would not compromise her standards, or make changes to her scripts that she felt were unethical or misrepresentative of her intent. She adamantly refused to take contracts under the table, or to go against union guidelines. *Wedding Band* was one of those plays. Producers requested changes because some found the interracial relationship at its core to be “offensive.” Her reply was that “If a racist society cannot stand what its playwrights have to say, it will suffer for it.”<sup>11</sup> *Wedding Band* was first produced at the University of Michigan in 1966, and received its first professional production at the New York Shakespeare Festival of the Public Theater in 1972. It went on to become one of her most produced plays.

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<sup>11</sup> Hatch and Shine 344

## Spotlight Interview with Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy on *Wedding Band*

June 21, 2017

By Stephanie Lein Walseth

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**Sarah Bellamy** is Artistic Director for Penumbra Theatre Company. She has designed several programs that engage patrons in critical thinking, dialogue, and action around issues of race and social justice. Select programs include Penumbra's RACE Workshop and the Summer Institute, a leadership development program for teens to practice art for social change. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, Ms. Bellamy also holds an M.A. in the Humanities from the University of Chicago. She has taught at Macalester College, the University of Minnesota, and served as Visiting Professor of Theatre and Culture at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Bellamy is a leading facilitator around issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion and has led coalition building efforts to address inequities in philanthropy and theatre. Her lectures on the power of race and representation have been presented across the country illuminating the ways in which images, narratives, and media influence perception and ultimately shape lives. She serves on the Board of Directors for Theatre Communications Group and is a 2015 Bush Fellow.

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** This is your first time selecting a season as sole Artistic Director of Penumbra – congratulations! What was the selection process like, and what does this next step in your journey and the journey of the company mean for you?

**Sarah Bellamy:** You are the first person to ask me that question! I like to think about themes, and I was really intrigued by the anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia* and all of the rhetoric that I was noticing in the world about interracial relationships. Though we may think it's kind of passé now, it's really not in many ways. So, I was trying to think about how we address that issue, and also how we address the way people fashion identity across borders. Not just racial borders, but class and gender and sexuality and religious and cultural borders as well. I wanted the theme to be broad and expansive enough to allow us to mine it throughout the year, but also for it to be focused in on this moment in which we find ourselves, in the Trump era.

**SLW:** You've already begun answering my second question, but can you talk more about the season theme of "Crossing Lines"? Was the political anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia* the primary driver for the season theme and/or were there other, personal resonances for you?

**SB:** Yes, you know, I'm a mixed race person. I identify as black, but also as mixed race. My parents have an interracial relationship, I'm in an interracial relationship, and especially now, as a mom of an interracial child, there are definitely personal resonances there. You want to be very mindful about how you represent all of those elements, all of these stories.

I was recently thinking about the kids at St. Paul Academy that have gone through the Penumbra training, and this young girl who described herself as "white-passing." That's language that wasn't available to me when I was



growing up. Not that I am [white-passing], but it wasn't even a thing that I could see at the time: people of color going through a racial coming-out process, and then choosing to not pass. Even when I was a child there was that want to fit in, especially in Minnesota, which wasn't very diverse in many different areas. I am fascinated by how people navigate identity, and how it's changed over time, and where that conversation is going right now. I am interested to see how this play lives in this moment, and I don't know that we'll know the answer until it's happening. I have some senses about it, but I think that is part of the magic of theater.

**SLW:** Yes, totally! In this current political moment, things are changing day to day, so you never know exactly how a piece like this will land with an audience. What might have worked yesterday might not today, depending on the latest headline or Tweet.

So, my next couple of questions tie together, and they're about Alice Childress. What do you see as her particular strengths and her significance in the larger African American and American canons? And on a related note, the past few seasons at Penumbra have been very female-centric, with women playwrights and leading female characters. How is (or isn't) this production a continuation of that emphasis?

**SB:** I think Lou [Bellamy, Founder and Artistic Director, Emeritus] has always made space for strong female voices here at Penumbra, whether that's onstage in plays as characters, or whether that's as directors, or playwrights. He very much respects that space because he had strong women in his life, and he's raised me that way. I also think that when we started working together in 2012 I encouraged a more dedicated focus to women and women's writing. So that feels good and that feels like something I'll be committed to going forward.

With regard to Alice Childress, I think she is a troublemaker in some ways. Her work is both fresh and evocative of a particular time and place. I think she was, in a lot of ways, fearless in regard to talking about the complexities of race and of interracial relationships. There is a reason why this is subtitled "A Love/Hate Story." She is negotiating that relationship in a strikingly real way. Something that female writers are often very aware of is this idea of sentimentality. What I really like about her is that she doesn't let go of the tenderness in the relationship, but she nuances it in a way that's very smart. I appreciate those qualities about her work.

**SLW:** Yes, it's certainly a love story, but there are so many political and cultural layers within the script.

**SB:** Yes, there are moments where you can tell that Julia has got this anger inside her that still recognizes the love, but it has to come out, because it will destroy her if it doesn't. I was reading a really great, very short essay from Audre Lorde the other day called, "The Uses of Anger," and you can see the themes she talks about in this piece. You can see the need to let that pressure valve go at certain points in your life. Lorde also talks about how anger is instructive, and how there is insight to be gleaned there. It can be very destructive, but it can also be generative if you're mindful of anger as a passing energy. It's really cool.

**SLW:** Interesting! Especially because I think Julia gets to articulate her anger in this play in ways that you don't often see in literature. I read somewhere that if Julia had actually said the things that she does in that time period, there could have been really dire consequences. But within the world of the play, allowing her to say those things is very powerful and cathartic.

**SB:** Yes, that's another interesting thing that Childress does. She creates and negotiates these worlds. Julia and Herman have this world that they've created that's inside and separate from these other worlds. Julia lives in the black part of town, and how do things shift and change when the white family comes around? How do they change depending on who's where and in what space? There are a lot of layers there.

**SLW:** Absolutely. So, let's talk about the main theme of the play: the societal fear of and laws against miscegenation. This is primarily a function of white supremacy, and was violently defended by the Ku Klux Klan. When Childress wrote the play in 1962, laws against interracial marriage were still on the books, which is why some speculate that it wasn't professionally staged until a decade later in 1972. Can you talk about that history, its significance for people's lives, and its still lingering impact?

**SB:** It's a really good question, and I appreciate all of the nuance there. When I think about the seat of racial anxiety, it is about racial mixing because segregation was built into the very fabric of this country: its economic structure, and its social and political structure. If they - the state and the citizens who benefitted from those policies - didn't monitor those separations, it started to get murky and very easily you could see how the whole system of segregation could crumble. But the reality is that people intermixed and intermingled all the time. So it's fascinating.

The person I always think of is Strom Thurmond, who was a raging racist publicly, and all of the policies that he protected and advocated for around segregation. He was really vocal about it. And then you come to find out after he passed, that he has a black daughter who he took care of financially and saw from time to time. And of course there are black and white folks all throughout the south that are like "Well, my black family..., well my white family..." because of all of the interracial mixing.

It's tricky because there's a way in which the heart understands longing, and the head then reminds us of structure. There's a way in which the head and the body understands violence in terms of rape and in terms of the encouragement of white boys to go into black areas to sow their oats, or whatever, but they didn't do that with the nice white girls because "that's not what you do with them." So, there are just all of these layers. And then you think of the children that are born of all of these different kinds of unions, whether they are consensual or not, they exist, and they are proof of that act.

That's another fascinating thing about biracial and multiracial people: we read in a way that says that two people did this thing, so we make people uncomfortable. That goes all the way back to light skinned children being on plantations and the politics and punishment of that; white men owning their own children. It's wild when you think about it. It's this epic theme that courses through American history, through our very founding, and we're not done with it by any means.

I try to stay mindful of those politics, but I also try to make space for the moments when there was love, because I think there was a lot of times. And look at the Lovings! Those two, I mean, just look at their name! Seriously? If somebody wrote that you'd be like, "No. That's too over-the-top. Nobody would believe that." From what I understand and what I have read, they never intended to be activists. But they loved each other. He didn't have a lot of language about it, but he was firm. "I'm not giving in." He was stubborn. And she was like "I'm going to do this."

You think about their case and then you think about the fight for marriage amongst LGBTQ families and adoption, and trying to keep families together in spite of societal demands to pull them apart. It's really a fascinating thing. I think about it personally. There are some kids that, depending on which parent they're with, people will either recognize that that's a familial relationship, or they won't. They'll say "Are you nannying these kids?" It's like, "Whoa!" I keep thinking about that.

**SLW:** Yes, it's very intersectional when you start to think about it in the bigger picture. Certainly with marriage equality for LGBTQ people in the past couple of years. I was telling Lou this too, I don't know if it's because of the *Loving v. Virginia* anniversary that all of these stories about marriage across boundaries are popping up, but I saw this story come up in my feed the other day, about a Down Syndrome couple who married 20 or 25 years ago, and everyone said "You can't do this, you'll never make it." They both have Down Syndrome, so it's not crossing a boundary in that way, but people thought they couldn't make it, that they wouldn't be able to take care of themselves, and they received all of this pressure. And yet they have, and they're celebrating their anniversary, and there are all of these beautiful pictures of them. So, just thinking about how these rules and codes impact people across lines of race and sexuality and disability, and the ways in which society, as you said, tries to tear people apart if they're breaking those rules about who gets to love each other or who gets to be together.

**SB:** Yes, and the assumptions that people make. And then the Klan is a whole other thing.

**SLW:** Yes, which in the play is talked about as the Gold Carnations...

**SB:** Yeah, yeah. They're a trip.

**SLW:** Like the Strom Thurmond example, I think so much of the rhetoric around these issues is what leaders think needs to be publicly said in order to cover up the reality of what's happening...

**SB:** That's what I was just thinking!

**SLW:** ...they have to state it publicly so they can appear to be fighting it.

**SB:** Yeah, from underneath their sheets. It's ironic that they're bed sheets! (*They laugh*)

**SLW:** That segues into the relationship in this play about Julia and Herman. It is loving, fractured, and complicated, and it comes to a tragic end. Not only that, but you'll have two outstanding actors – Jasmine Hughes and Peter Christian Hansen – playing these roles. So, overall what are your thoughts about that relationship and how you'd like to see it play out?

**SB:** One of the things I was challenged by this season and the budget was, you only have so much money, so you can only do so many plays. Both *Wedding Band* and *This Bitter Earth* are tragic, interracial love stories. And I worried, "Am I falling into the 'doomed interracial love' trope?" But at the same time I do think that there are very real pressures that interracial couples experience, and some weather them, and some don't.

I think it's an interesting thing to think about a piece that's set when *Wedding Band* is [in 1918] versus a piece that's set when *This Bitter Earth* is [2012-2015]. These couples are grappling with similar issues. If I had a million more dollars I would do more plays that showed different kinds of love. With *Joy Rebel* and Khanisha [Foster], I think we'll see some of that. Being an interracial person and experiencing joy... The name of it, *Joy Rebel*, reveals the idea that "I'm going to be happy anyway," and that is beautiful. So, I hope that those kinds of things are balancing each other out within the season.

With regard to these characters and what I hope will manifest on stage, this cast is brilliant and I'm so excited that we've got Jasmine and Peter in these roles. Jasmine is so strong as an actress: she's fearless. Peter is somebody who has incredible confidence onstage. He can embody this tremendous masculinity and power. But

Herman, in spite of the ways in which he's privileged, is also broken in a kind of a way, so that'll be an interesting thing to negotiate with Peter. I hope they'll push each other, I hope they'll enjoy working together. I think if the chemistry is there it'll be really, really powerful. And if anybody can manage all that, it's Lou. So I'm excited about that. I think their story is beautiful and honest and heartbreaking. One of the most touching things is that Herman, as a baker, brings her a wedding cake, because they can't get married. They have married each other in their hearts and minds, and they weather that... It's beautiful. It's really beautiful.

**SLW:** He's given a lot of complexity. He's not just any white man without his own history or feelings or complications in terms of ethnic identity and class identity.

**SB:** The class identity is really interestingly portrayed, especially how his mother and sister complicate the understanding of who he is. And he has a trade... It's smart!

**SLW:** I read that Childress was writing the play in part about her own ancestors.

**SB:** I didn't know that.

**SLW:** I don't know that it is specifically autobiographical, but the idea is that at one point she had black and white families that mixed within her lineage.

A minute ago you said something about Lou being able to manage all of the complex relationship and staging and such. How do you see your role, as the Artistic Director in the process? In what ways will you be intersecting with the production? How do you negotiate and navigate the artistic process and outcome with the director?

**SB:** Casting was something that we talked about together. But I think, in general, what I've been doing for this first year as sole Artistic Director, is going to directors I trust with work I want to see produced. I will be in the rehearsal space as much as I can be, because I want to watch and learn. I love watching things come to life, and I love watching Lou direct. It's so easy and effortless. Things are crafted and you're like, "Whoa! You just did that. You're pushing them, but they don't feel like it."

**SLW:** It doesn't look like that in the process.

**SB:** Exactly, it's not like he has to force anything or throw his weight around. For me, as an Artistic Director, I wanted to come in to the season and the position not swinging my arms. I am not interested in staking a space and telling people what to do. I want good will and trust, and I want to let them do what they do best and empower them as best I can with the resources that we have. So that's what I'm going to do. I like to be in the room, and I will give advice if it's solicited or if I feel like something's a really big concern. But for the most part, I think this year will really be about letting the art bloom as it will, because I really trust these people. They've worked here enough, they know our aesthetic, so we don't have to worry.

**SLW:** Yeah, this Lou guy has been around for a little bit (*laughs*)... You know, I was also struck, in this play, by the four black female characters. Childress has crafted rich, nuanced, strong, and contradictory figures. Much like August Wilson does with the men in his plays, and though you don't want to compare everything to August Wilson, there is a parallel with what she's done with female characters. So I am curious about your take on these characters.

**SB:** I think it was something that was appealing to me. One concern was that they could become caricatures, but I think Lou will make sure that doesn't happen. But you said it, I mean, the value there is that you're looking at four different ways of coping in the world, and it's not saying which one is right. Julia is not necessarily making the right choices, even though she's the main character. I think you understand why Herman's mother is the way that she is, and why Herman's sister is the way that she is, and why Fanny gets in everybody's business. The other thing that you're seeing, is the way that they manage the image of themselves in this larger context. So, like an August Wilson, it's a little bit different because we see white actors come into this world, but the antagonist is the society around them rather than a specific person who comes onstage. It's a little different with the mother and sister who show up in the end. But they bring a lot with them.

**SLW:** Other issues that bubble to the fore in this piece are the backdrop of war and society's stratification of patriotism; the ways in which legal documentation is required for status, identity, and protection; and the ways in which racial privilege advantages poor whites. Any thoughts on these themes, or anything else in the play that is vital for you that we haven't touched on?

**SB:** Well, I mean, I think with regard to the war and the documents, you've named it already. That's something that I appreciate about *Childress*: while the love story is at the center, there is still all of this other stuff that is happening. You also see this other couple that can't be recognized [Mattie and October]. I think through them you realize that there are things that you *get* when you are officially recognized as a couple. I don't think you see that with Julia and Herman in the same way. Which again, leads me back to the marriage argument more recently, with same sex couples being able to marry and have access to the same kinds of privileges that heterosexual couples are enjoying. It's so fascinating, because for me when I think about papers and documentation, I go to [South African] apartheid, I go to Freedmen's Papers, just the idea that you have to prove...

**SLW:** And "undocumented" immigrants...

**SB:** Yes! That you have to prove who you are, that somebody has to verify you. That's just an insane thing to think about. And how we police those borders.

**SLW:** That is one of the things that Lou said in terms of the personal connection. He said that he and your mother were in a car accident, and when they took her to the hospital, the doctors said what they were going to do and told him to get out of the room, they told him he had no authority there. That was the instigator for him realizing they needed to get married. He realized it needed to be legal, so they could be recognized in that way, because he didn't want anyone to be able to do that to him and to them again. Those are the life and death stakes we're talking about!

**SB:** Yeah, and that's why there is the violence that can come from this, because we're talking about people's families. You can't mess with that and expect people not to become crazy or rageful.

**SLW:** Two last questions. The first I always ask, and I don't think you can dictate it, but what do you hope audiences leave with? How do you see the play's significance in our current political and cultural moment? What might witnessing this production help to shift or change?

**SB:** One thing that I'm committed to, going forward, is that I want to always honor the breadth and depth and diversity of the black theater canon, and so committing to doing what we call "our classics" is valuable. I hope

that people will see a black woman writer making work that is powerful and muscular and evocative and relevant in a time period when they probably didn't even think that black theater existed. That's valuable to me.

I hope they leave feeling tremendously moved. I hope they feel the power of this love story. I hope they feel and recognize connections to the pressures this couple was under and what people are experiencing now. I have a feeling it won't only present itself racially, but a lot of families have been really challenged and split up by politics right now. I've had a lot of conversations with people who are like "I'm not talking to my father in law," or "My mom and I just can't talk right now." It's heartbreaking. Those are the things that I think are right there, today.

**SLW:** That's beautiful. You've already begun to answer my last question, which is, what is the significance of *Penumbra* – an African American company with a 40-year history – producing this piece?

**SB:** Within the context of our larger season, it's interesting for a black company to look at interracial relationships as a theme, because we haven't explicitly done that in our history. It's come up here and there, but it hasn't been a focus. So, I think that's interesting. Black culture and African Americans, black Americans are just as affected and determined and co-creative of these connections and bonds and entanglements that we find ourselves in. We are just as much a part of it, whether we went through it consensually or not. So I think it's fascinating for us to look at it. And I think it'll be a really interesting thing to have a conversation from our side of things and see what comes out.

## Spotlight Interview with Director Lou Bellamy on *Wedding Band*

June 20, 2017

By Stephanie Lein Walseth

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**Lou Bellamy** is founder and artistic director emeritus of Penumbra Theatre and an Obie Award-winning stage director. He taught for 35 years as an associate professor at the University of Minnesota. Select Penumbra credits: *Two Trains Running*, *I Wish You Love* (The Kennedy Center), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking* (National Black Theatre Festival), *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Gem of the Ocean*. Other: *Radio Golf* (Indiana Repertory Theatre and Cleveland Play House); *Two Trains Running* (Signature Theatre Company and Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Jitney* (Kansas City Repertory Theatre and Arizona Theatre Company); *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (The Kennedy Center).

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth:** This is your first time directing a play for Penumbra as the Artistic Director Emeritus. How does that feel? Will the process, the perspective, or anything else be different as a result? What does this next step in your personal artistic journey and the journey of the company mean for you?

**Lou Bellamy:** I've been very careful to get out of the way. What I always try to do is give Sarah a history that she may or may not be aware of, show her how we got to where we are, and offer a number of choices. Then I step out of it.

In terms of selecting a season, we talk about it. She's much more intentional about season planning than ever I was. I would choose the best plays that I could find, and try to draw a string through them. She really starts out with a theme and sticks to it. It's more intentional; you can see it, and it's born out in her programming.

When she decided to focus on interracial relationships as this season's theme, I suggested *Wedding Band*. It's a difficult piece because it's older. But once you get underneath the sometimes-dated language, I think it's going to crackle. We'll find out. I mean, that's what a director does, isn't it? You make a play relevant and immediate and vital. That's art. That's the challenge.

As I direct this piece, Sarah will come into the room as the producer. I deal with a lot of producers, because I direct around. They will come in and say, "I think that so and so should happen here." There's some tenseness when that happens, because when you direct, as you well know, everything is related. And so when someone outside the process comes in and says, "I don't like *that* piece," you know, that ripples through the entire production. Because if you know how to direct you've done foreshadowing, you've prepared. So, that will happen, and I will listen to her. It's her decision.

One of the strongest things about having a company is that the company members are still around, and they come in and tell me what they see. Usually if they correct me in something, it's always something that I thought

about and then didn't follow up on. And I go "Oh, I knew it!" because it was tugging on me, but I hadn't done anything about it.

**SLW:** This may now be more a question for Sarah, but I am curious on your take on it as well. Why this play? Why now? Penumbra is clearly marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the *Loving v. Virginia* decision regarding interracial marriage. Was that the primary driver, and/or are there other, personal resonances?

**LB:** I don't typically like to talk about my life and the way in which that may or may not relate to the art and my artistic choices, because it's nobody's business. But, I will say that Minnesota was chosen years ago, in a *Life* or *Time Magazine* article, as the capital of interracial dating in the United States.

There have always been people who have fallen in love across racial lines. Sometimes interracial relationships have been unfair, sometimes there was rape involved. But there have also been loving relationships across racial lines, and both races have publicly taken stances against it. You look at the literature and it's there: "Don't do this! This is a taboo." And people just go back and forth across the lines anyway. They won't stay in line for it. I think you can't dictate love. Have you ever been talking with someone and your stomach does that thing (*indicates a flip with his hands*), and you go "Oh! I didn't know I felt that way!" It's there. I think that the people who enter into these kinds of relationships are brave.

*Wedding Band* is a story about love across racial lines. The love is there and the societal prohibition is there, and both of the partners are aware of all of it. Herman, the white guy, tries to run from it at times. He'll tell Julia, "You're always bringing that up." But they're aware of their situation and the taboos that they're violating. But they are in love, and I really like that. And what a cast we've got!

**SLW:** You've cast Jasmine Hughes as Julia and Peter Christian Hansen as Herman, right?

**LB:** That's fire! (*laughs*)

**SLW:** That's going to be steamy!

**LB:** See, what I mean? That's just fire! It should be really hot. There's something that's always sort of titillating about interracial relationships. Perhaps that has something to do with why we get into them, you know, because it's a little taboo.

But the piece is going to be, I think, really, really challenging for audiences. This is the second time I'll be directing it. I directed it at the University of Minnesota with graduate students, and it was difficult for me because I came into it with a certain perspective. I didn't want them to be in love. I wanted it to be "master coming in to visit the slave quarters." But that isn't what it is. Those two people are truly in love. It was a journey. I kept trying to turn it and make it be that [master/slave dynamic] and it wouldn't be that. (*laughs*) Because they really are in love.

**SLW:** And yet, they have it out with each other and tell each other some pretty horrible things. They're true things, but they are pretty intense.

**LB:** When Julia says to Herman, "It's about your people killing my people" ...Well, look at what we're going through today! In the news, the Philando Castile case, it's still about the same thing. Mmm. One of the reasons we cast it the way we did, and Sarah was in on the casting too, was I didn't want Herman to be wimpy. He



doesn't make a strong decision until it's too late, but I think that's more out of a sense of responsibility and duty than it is out of weakness. That's going to be the challenge of building his character.

**SLW:** Yes, he is surprising. It seems like every time you expect him to go one way he makes a different decision.

**LB:** Another challenge in the script is the racism against Chinese Americans.

**SLW:** I wondered about that, about the approach you'd take with it.

**LB:** I thought about taking out the little white girl, Princess, who has those racist lines. I just can't have that language in the production. Even though it's a white girl saying it, and Childress included it deliberately to show the way a young white girl might look at Chinese people, I can't countenance someone on the Penumbra stage saying, "Ching, chong, Chinaman...eat dead rat..." I can't say it!

**SLW:** You and Sarah and I have had many conversations about this – the problem of racist language. As you've both said, on the one hand you don't want to whitewash history and remove problematic language from literature because that language was a product of that time. You can't erase it, you can't claim racism didn't exist; you have to address it head-on. But it's one thing to read it on a page, like in *Huck Finn*, and it's another thing to have someone stand on a stage and say the words aloud. What kind of damage and trauma might that re-inflict?

**LB:** In *Huck Finn* that language is woven into the relationship. In *Wedding Band*, it's sort of an author comment that just hangs out there. If we were going to go on and interrogate those comments within the world of the play, then it would perhaps be worth it. But I can't do it without context. I wouldn't be able to look my friends in the eye.

**SLW:** Yes, as local Asian American artists and activists like Bao Phi discuss, there's so much violence against Asian Americans, and often it goes unnoticed and unreported. It gets subsumed under dominant narratives of Asians as the "model minority" who have "made it," and against whom atrocities supposedly don't happen. That perspective was ringing in my ears as I read those racist lines, and I wondered what you planned to do with them.

**LB:** That's why those lines won't be in the play. There will be a constant children's presence, and the "auntie" role that one of the black female characters plays for the young white girl is still represented. Did you ever see the film *Sugar Cane Alley*? You should check it out. It's in French. The people are not slaves any longer, but they're indentured people. Well, what you always see is that the kids are left alone when the adults have to go out and work, and so I want to try and re-create that.

**SLW:** Oh interesting! That speaks to the way in which you always try to create community on stage.

**LB:** I hope so. I hope so.

**SLW:** So, getting back to the primary relationship, it sounds like the last time you directed this play you tried to steer Julia and Herman away from being in love...

**LB:** Yes, but I lost. The text wouldn't allow me. Playwrights put those words in their mouth, and like you said, when you put people on stage with these words in their mouth, they have a power that they don't have on the page. So, it was obvious that they did love each other. They have that wonderful moment where they see life as

it could have been, and it's just so lovely you want them to have it. But both sides of the racial spectrum don't want it.

**LB (cont):** One of the things that made the Lovings so transgressive is that they were actually a family. They were in *love*. This guy *loved* this woman and vice versa. And both sides did not necessarily want to see that. What's striking is how recent that was.

**SLW:** 50 years is nothing! You've brought us back to the *Loving v. Virginia* case, and the theme of anti-miscegenation that's at the heart of the play. The play was set in 1918, right around the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan, which emerged in large part to violently defend anti-miscegenation and to keep people separated by race. Childress wrote the play in 1962, when laws against interracial marriage were still on the books, which is why some speculate that it wasn't professionally staged until a decade later in 1972. Can you talk about that history, its significance for people's lives, and its still lingering impact?

**LB:** Well, I think that any interracial couple still gets a special kind of notice in society when they walk through public spaces. Sometimes it can be hostile, but at the very least it's noticed. I can see a white female, for instance, walking with a darker-skinned child, and I notice that. I look and think, "Oh, his dad is black."

There's a commercial out right now that pisses me off. I think it's for a cellular phone company. It's an older white couple, grandparents, and they've got their granddaughter there, who is obviously an interracial child. They start out saying, "We're learning to accept a lot of things in this world that we didn't think we'd have to..." And this beautiful, mixed race girl is playing this loving relationship with her grandfather, and I thought, "My god, how can you do this?" It's horrifying. But, it draws our attention, our eye catches those perceived differences.

I think that if people are honest about it when they enter into these relationships, there are all kinds of baggage that come along with it, and this play exposes that. And the risks seem to be higher at this time in the world of the play, during WWI. Anti-miscegenation laws are still in force. But still today there are societal reactions to it. Sarah is dealing with it in another play we're doing this season, *This Bitter Earth*. It's about an interracial gay couple. It still comes into play. That taboo is still alive and well.

**SLW:** Yes, and with the anniversary of *Loving v. Virginia*, there seem to be all sorts of articles popping up recently about relationships across all different kinds of lines. Interracial marriage, gay marriage, and then I saw an article just the other day about a marriage between a couple who both have Down Syndrome. They were married 20 years ago. Everyone said they couldn't do it, that it couldn't possibly work. Yet here they are, 20 years later, sharing their story with the world and defying expectations. These stories speak to all of the myriad ways we've told people that they can't be in love. As a society we've imposed so many laws, rules, and expectations around relationships in terms of race, sexuality, disability, and so many other factors.

**LB:** I think that Childress, in more ways than just Julia and Herman's relationship, addresses the way in which Americans with a capital A, approach identity. Look at the German Americans in the play, for instance. They're not safe either, because of the first World War. I didn't know it, but there were Germans who were dispossessed in the same sort of way that the Japanese were during the war. I didn't know that! They were put into camps in the United States. So, Childress gets at that. She's not afraid to. In many ways that makes Herman's family even more virulent in their reaction, because they're trying so hard to fit in and be white. They are dealing with what they think whiteness is, and what it means to be American, which makes it even more difficult. Their family's status is up for grabs. But you just can't control that love; it surprises you.

**SLW:** Yes, absolutely. It's interesting that you say that both sides are against it. Certainly in the play all of the black characters are against it. You get the sense that that's out of fear for their safety and the law and what the consequences of that relationship might be...

**LB:** But they are even against it intellectually and philosophically. I think it's this play where they talk about "filling our race with bastards." So, they're aware of what this comes down to and who's going to be saddled with raising these children and all that. In all the literature, the scholars on both sides will say, "Don't do this." But their precautions never work.

**SLW:** You said you've directed this play before at the University of Minnesota. Has Penumbra produced Alice Childress' work before? What do you see as her significance in the larger African American and American canons?

**LB:** I don't think we have. I wanted to do *Trouble in Mind*. I like Childress. I used to teach a lot of her work. She was very light-skinned herself. She looked white. So you can see why she was concerned with the places those races meet. Her husband [Alvin Childress] played Amos on *Amos and Andy*. He was the cab driver. They were all members of the American Negro Theater. I like her work a lot. I think she's very, very smart.

**SLW:** So, that leads into my next question: the past few seasons at Penumbra have been very female-centric, with women playwrights and leading female characters. How is (or isn't) *Wedding Band* a continuation of that emphasis?

**LB:** Well, look at who's in charge! (*Laughs broadly*) That's Sarah. That's what we do. What Artistic Directors do is *feel* the world, and then somehow it comes out artistically. And that's her feeling the world, you know?

Personally, I like dealing with women on stage and giving them power. I like to see them strong. Many times I have to be careful, because I let them run away with the play. Like, you look at *Dutchman* [which Penumbra produced in 2015-2016], and that girl [Kate Guentzel, who played Lula] almost ran off with that damn play! But it was so much fun setting her loose, that you just want more.

So, I think this is going to really be something. When, for instance, Julia confronts Herman's family, that should be knock down, drag out. There shouldn't be any joke about that.

**SLW:** I read one piece that said if Julia would have said what she says in the play to Herman's mother in real life, that she would not have gotten out of the situation alive. But I wonder if there's a kind of catharsis in the fact that she gets to speak her mind within the world of the play?

**LB:** Well, there have always been "bad negroes," bad men and bad women that nobody fucked with. And others learned that. There was that one boxer....he raced cars...Jack Johnson! They passed that law that says you can't bring women across state lines for immoral purposes about him, because he was going with a white woman and driving all through the south, and speeding. He got a ticket and the cop said, "That's going to be \$50." And Johnson said, "Here's \$100, cause I'm coming back the same way!" (*Laughs*) There have always been tough black people. Bessie Smith faced down the Klan and ran them out of a tent meeting. There have always been people who defied those rules and lived to tell about it. So, I don't have any problem with her being strong enough to do that. Because there are some people that just nobody fucks with. You know?

**SLW:** Yeah. I was struck by the fact that there is not one, but four strong black female characters in this play. Much like August Wilson does with the men in his plays, Childress has crafted rich, nuanced, strong, and contradictory figures who are everyday people trying to survive in an unjust society. That there are four black women in one piece is a rarity in dramatic literature! In some ways I see them as boundary-crossers, each in their own way. They each have their own philosophy of how they're going to get over or get through, you know? They each have a different take on what strategies and tactics they need to use within this system.

**LB:** Partly their tactics are related to the war and the fact that the men are away. But, black females have always had a kind of power and stature inside of the community that I think Alice Childress understands and you see it in this play. There's that cliché, "If you want something done, go to men, they'll talk about it. If you *really* want something done, go to women, they'll do it." These women are managing life and the terrible violence that is just around every corner without males around to save them, and they're doing quite well. Julia is vulnerable because she's got this secret, and the Bell Man tries to use it against her. But she stands up for herself quite well. If I do it right, I won't tip my hand too soon. I'll make you sort of like the guy, and then later I'll reveal how creepy he truly is.

**SLW:** At first I thought he was a really likeable character, and then I realized, oh, he's dangerous! It makes you think about the role of black women in society at that moment in history, and it still resonates today. Their power and their vulnerability within racial and gender hierarchies.

**LB:** And at any time he can pull that card out, no matter how low he is on the social ladder, he can bring that out whenever he wants: I am a white male. He's living off these black people, setting up timed payments with them, and at the same time he can stand up and say, "I'm white, and I'll get you killed."

And yet for black men, it's the opposite. One of the most telling things in the play is when Lula, Nelson's mother tells him, "I'll be so glad when you go back into the service and go into a war zone, where you're safe." It's safer in a *war zone* than it is in the American south for a black male. That's astounding!

**SLW:** Yes, and having taken your African American theater history class, we read so many plays about black soldiers – how they're expected to serve their country, and the absolute disdain, disrespect, and violence they face when they return to the U.S. There is a huge double standard. They are spit on, told to their face that they don't have a right to wear the uniform.

**LB:** Yes, they are perceived as uppity if they do.

**SLW:** Right. "It's okay for you to go and die somewhere else for your country, but don't expect to wear the uniform and deserve respect when you are home." I call it "patriotic stratification."

**LB:** But you see those females, who have a different kind of worth in the society, strive to protect those black males. You see Lula say, "Don't go out!" Richard Wright called that a certain kind of emasculation that his mother was doing. She took away his manhood to keep him alive, because if he acts like a man out there, he'll be killed. (*sighs, pauses*)

**SLW:** Another issue that the play raises is the way in which legal documentation is required for marital status, identity, and legal protections. Can you speak to that?

**LB:** Yes. It's totally outside of their control. That's why I got married, Stephanie. My wife and I got in a car accident and we went to the hospital because Colleen was hurt. She hurt her back. And they started doing all this stuff, and saying "we're going to fuse this, and..." and I said "Oh no you're not!" and they said "You. Get out. You have no legal standing here. I don't care who you say you are. Get out." And I went, "Well, shit!" We'd been living together for 3 or 4 years, but I said, "I won't let that happen again." Inside of the play and in real life, people are trapped and limited by these laws.

**SLW:** Finally, what do you hope audiences leave with? How do you see the play's significance in our current cultural moment? What might witnessing this production help to shift or change?

**LB:** It's a *tragedy*. A tragedy. A total tragedy. I mean, these racial codes have placed all these people in these positions that do not allow them to be human. The codes dictate: this is your role, this is what you do. You see them fighting against the codes in every kind of way, trying to be fully human, and the codes stop them. It's sad, because you can see the way it could be so much more. But they come up against these definitions that society has, that nobody is really living by. You know, Strom Thurmond had a black daughter [Essie Mae Washington-Williams] despite his racist views. Within the play, Mattie can't get her husband's pension because of a rule, Julia and Herman can't marry because of a rule, it's just... it alienates and separates us, even though humans try to get together. You see these laws come in and just draw lines. Even inside black society, the people are scared shitless that Julia and her relationship will bring something bad on them. So, again, it separates them. They can't have the power and the strength that they could. It should break your heart that good people can't love who they want to.

## Loving Against All Odds: Interracial Relationships on the Front Lines of Justice

A dramaturgical essay by Stephanie Lein Walseth

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**Stephanie Lein Walseth** is a theater scholar, artist, educator, and administrator whose work with Penumbra Theatre Company has spanned the past decade. She has also served tenures with Mu Performing Arts, Mixed Blood, and Sod House Theater, among many others, and she is a core artistic group member of the recently formed Full Circle Theater Company. Stephanie received her Ph.D. in Theatre Historiography from the University of Minnesota in 2014 after completing her doctoral thesis, “Staging Race in a ‘Post-Racial’ Age: Contemporary Collaborations Between Mainstream and Culturally Specific Theatres in the United States.” Her research interests include the cultural poetics and politics of Native American, African American, and Asian American theatre, as well as theatre historiography, performance ethnography, critical and feminist pedagogies, theatre for social change, and the impact of empathy and compassion on theater’s efficacy. She has served as an adjunct instructor in the theater department at Augsburg College, and her writing has appeared in *HowlRound*, *Theatre Topics*, *e-misférica*, *The Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance*, and a forthcoming anthology from Palgrave Macmillan entitled *Theater, Performance and Change*.

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Alice Childress’ past is palpably, viscerally present in 2017 America. *Wedding Band*, her epic “love/hate story” set in 1918 finds uncanny resonance nearly a century later, beautifully rendering the explosive borderlines of interracial love, and revealing how distant the goal of racial equity remains. Just a decade ago, in the midst of the Obama era and the rise of “post-racial” rhetoric, *Wedding Band* may have invoked nostalgia more than dire immediacy. The first African American president, the son of an interracial couple, held the most powerful office in the land. Yet, in our current political moment, with black men and women the ongoing victims of public and state-sanctioned violence; with neo-Nazi, KKK, and other white supremacist groups marching on cities like Charlottesville, Virginia; and with a U.S. President who refuses to unequivocally condemn such hatred, going so far as to repeatedly declare that those fighting against their own annihilation are equally to blame for violent clashes, Childress’ play is both haunting and timely.

Set in 1918 in a South Carolina town by the sea, *Wedding Band* illuminates the place where Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy notes, “the boundlessness of love meets the boundaries of our identities.”<sup>12</sup> Julia, a black seamstress, and Herman, a white baker, have lived separately and unofficially as husband and wife for ten years as the action of the play begins. The laws of the state forbid their union. And so, despite their deep commitment and love for one another, they must live their relationship in secret, trying desperately to hang on despite the social and legal forces that seek to tear them apart. When he brings her a masterfully crafted wedding cake and a simple, engraved gold band on a chain to celebrate their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, both the depth of their love and the impossibility of its public recognition are painfully clear. Julia’s black neighbors and Herman’s white family all fear and oppose the couple’s relationship, yet, within Childress’ layered dramaturgy, no character’s perspective is ever one-dimensional. Her portrayal reveals the intersectional complications of race, class, gender, and national identity on the matter of interracial love, from the influences of white supremacist ideology, to the hearts and minds of everyday people struggling to survive unjust conditions. Her characters’ arguments, echoed across the spectrum of public rhetoric today, are a powerful reminder of the work we have yet to do to dismantle racism.

With *Wedding Band*, we are transported to three precise historical moments: 1918 when the play was set, amidst the final throes of WWI, and shortly after the second emergence of the Ku Klux Klan; 1962-1972 when the play was first written and produced, and when it received its first professional production at the New York Shakespeare Public Theater during the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements; and 2017, when Penumbra will stage Childress’ work for the first time, in a new and tumultuous era of racial unrest.

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<sup>12</sup> “Crossing Lines: Letter from the Artistic Director” 2



This image, entitled "No. 2, Miscegenation or the Millennium of Abolitionism," was submitted for copyright in July 1864. A satiric cartoon by Bromley & Co., it was used to warn of the dangers of miscegenation and racial equality by anti-Lincoln forces. (<http://wordsfrom.us/2015/12/miscegenation-and-america/>)

## Miscegenation and its Discontents: A Brief History

One of the insidious and unresolved threads weaving together these three moments is our country's particular racial hierarchy, designed to buttress and enforce white supremacy. One of its greatest threats: miscegenation. As Paul Adolphsen describes,

The word miscegenation was coined in 1863 by the abolitionist authors of a pamphlet titled: "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro." A Latin portmanteau of *miscere* ("to mix") and *genus* ("race"), miscegenation soon replaced "amalgamation" as the popular term referring to romantic, sexual, and marriage relationships between two individuals of different races. Anti-miscegenation sentiment and legislation was fueled by spurious racial science made popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which claimed the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon "race" and preached against its "mongrelization." This "science" collaborated with racist theological interpretations of the Bible to provide a seemingly-solid intellectual basis for slavery, and later, Jim Crow legislation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Crossing Borders, Igniting Revolution" 53



The problems of miscegenation, as interpreted by those opposed to racial mixing, were manifold. It dangerously blurred lines of white superiority and black inferiority, false but carefully constructed concepts that were reinforced through legal and religious mechanisms. It sullied the supposed “purity” of whiteness, especially “fragile” white femininity and sexuality, and it posed a direct challenge to the supremacy of white masculinity. It threatened economic structures built upon centuries of free black slave labor, and it raised the prospect of revolt against the ruling classes if indentured peoples could unite across color lines. Even in the infancy of our nation, cross-racial love and solidarity presented a threat to the dominant social and economic order.

It was in large part the anxiety over racial mixing, and all of its potential consequences, that caused the Ku Klux Klan to re-emerge in 1915, shortly before *Wedding Band* begins. The resurgence was aided by D. W. Griffith’s incendiary film *Birth of a Nation*, which depicted, among other controversial scenarios, a white woman leaping off a cliff’s edge to her death to escape the supposed rabid sexual savagery of a black man. The film was fictional, and the black characters played by white actors in blackface, revealing far more about the fears of whites than the reality of black lives. In the post-Civil War era, with the chattel slavery system legally abolished, anti-miscegenationists needed new weapons to guard against racial mixing, and the film played an important role in their arsenal. In form and content it reflected a racial ideology that had been brewing for over 250 years, and it played a pivotal role in shaping the psyche of white Americans.

But the racial logic of the post-Civil War era had not always been the reigning paradigm. Since the arrival of Africans in America in the early 1600s, the races had mixed, and in those first decades the clearly delineated racial categories of “white” and “black” were not yet constructed. Indeed, as racial formation theory suggests, the categories themselves were continually becoming, continually contested. Thus, the role of romantic and sexual mixing of different groups, known as “English,” “Negro,” “Mulatto,” and “Indian,” among others, has a complicated and non-linear history in the United States. And as these categories indicate, the racial designations

went beyond the black and white binary, and the reasoning that shaped them was often complex and explicitly political.

Early in the Colonial period, anxieties about miscegenation revolved as much around one's status within the economic system as they did across color lines. Many early European immigrants to the New World paid for their passage by becoming indentured servants, and though their skin was white, they were held in equal contempt as their black-skinned counterparts by the reigning aristocratic powers. These white servants worked alongside blacks in the fields, lived in the same quarters, and were even subject to the same punishments and penalties. White skin alone was not enough to garner the privileges of wealth and rank in this particular historical moment. Whiteness as we think of it today – a crystalized social construct that incorporates Euro-American peoples across lines of class, region-of-origin, ethnicity, and religion – did not yet exist. The lack of an all-encompassing category of whiteness, and the lack of an “organized system of racism to define and focus the fears and anxieties of Whites,”<sup>14</sup> meant that blacks and whites intermixed and intermingled, married and had children at surprising rates during the early 1600s.

Especially prevalent were pairings between white women and black men, a trend that so threatened white masculinity that it gave rise to a “century-long campaign of terror and intimidation” by early planters, to the point that white women participating in cross-racial affairs were whipped and even sold into slavery,<sup>15</sup> and black men were ordered not to meddle with white women “upon pain of their lives.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite Puritanical sermons, physical punishment, and the threat of slavery and death, no consequence could prevent couples from pairing across color lines, and even, at times, lines of status and rank. A growing population of “mulatto” children and even mixed-race settlements such as New Jersey's Gouldtown, attested to their tenacity.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bennett 274

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 274

<sup>16</sup> Ibid 275

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth examination of interracial relationships from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Lerone Bennett Jr.'s chapter “Red, White and Black: Race and Sex” in *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*.

A new racial formation emerged when the institution of black chattel slavery was written into colony law, beginning in Massachusetts in 1641. Servitude was now defined by the color of one's skin and continent of origin, and a new set of racial narratives was needed to justify and defend the new economic system. To protect Puritan morality and Puritan economics, and to prevent the possibility of cross-racial solidarity and uprisings, State Assemblies legally codified bans on interracial relationships. Maryland instituted the first "antiamalgamation statute" in 1664, and at least six states, including South Carolina (the setting of *Wedding Band*) followed suit between the mid-1660s and the early 1700s.<sup>18</sup> As whiteness emerged across socioeconomic lines, the threat to racial purity and white supremacy was clear, and "sensing a deterioration of slavery, if the barriers between master and slaves were dissolved in the equalitarian crucible of sexual intimacy, they [early Puritans] sought to stop racial crossing by statute."<sup>19</sup> Embedded in the new laws were punishments for those who crossed the color line, ranging from fines to jail time to servitude (for whites), and slavery or banishment from the colonies (for free Blacks), and they were enforced through government, church, and other official institutions, as well as by vigilante groups.<sup>20</sup> Clearly the conditions for interracial relationships were inhospitable at best, and violent and fear inducing at worst. And yet, love across racial lines persevered.

Mutual attraction, it is worth noting, was difficult to define under the centuries-long institution of slavery. As Susan Altman comments, white Euro-Americans virtually always held the upper hand, noting the access that they had to sexual encounters with African slaves aboard ships in the Middle Passage,<sup>21</sup> and historian Lerone Bennett Jr. remarks that by virtue of the unequal power differential embedded in the institutionalized system, any mixing between slaveholders and slaves was de facto rape, given the impossibility of slaves' free choice.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bennett 276-279

<sup>19</sup> Ibid 276-277, quoting Dr. Lorenzo J. Greene

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 278

<sup>21</sup> Altman

<sup>22</sup> Bennett 283

It was also under the system of slavery that the fulcrum of miscegenation politics shifted away from the white woman (though the protection of her supposed “purity” still propelled anti-miscegenation efforts), to focus on relationships between white male planters, aristocrats, and slaveholders; and black female slaves. Across the spectrum from mutual attraction to the threat of force, prominent historical figures were imbricated in interracial relationships, despite the laws and social codes designed to prevent them. Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings is just one example, and Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, and Daniel Boone joined his ranks as men who loved across racial lines. Publicly, many of these figures preached against the perilous risks of “amalgamation,” and the inferiority of blacks, while in their own beds, they engaged in the very practice they condemned.<sup>23</sup> On the other side of the racial divide, movement leaders Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington had white fathers, though they received no paternal support, and founding father Alexander Hamilton is thought to have had black lineage.<sup>24</sup> For each of these famous figures, there were thousands of everyday people whose lives were bound up in the unspoken reality of interracial relationships and mixed heritage. It is, perhaps, one of the oldest and most intricately woven threads of our shared American history, implicitly defining the fabric of the nation. In this light, *Wedding Band*’s Julia and Herman are not the exception, but a single story in a complicated and common practice dating back to the inception of the country itself.

Nearly as soon as anti-miscegenation laws were enacted, people publicly protested, presenting the courts with petitions for repeal. In 1699, over 250 years before the Lovings would bring their court battle to the highest judicial body in the land, a group known as “George Ivie and others” petitioned the Council of Virginia to overturn their anti-miscegenation statute.<sup>25</sup> Though it seems their request was unsuccessful, a similar

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<sup>23</sup> For more on this, see Sheryll Cashin’s article, which details Thomas Jefferson’s writing in his “Notes of the State of Virginia.”

<sup>24</sup> Bennett 280-285

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 278

Pennsylvania law was repealed in 1760, during “Revolutionary agitation,”<sup>26</sup> demonstrating the ways in which keeping racial groups separated was a priority that ebbed and flowed, intensified and diminished in relationship to the broader political tides that shaped national attention. The suits also reveal interracial couples’ tenacious resistance to persecution that is often subsumed under narratives of their oppression.

The battlefield over interracial marriage raged on through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, with proponents and opponents promoting their ideological perspectives in the courts, public discourse, and literature and the arts. And like any battlefield, the lines were not always clearly delineated. Abolitionist Lydia Marie Child’s 1842 short story *The Quadroons*, was meant as an anti-slavery missive. Yet, with its focus on the newly emerging trope of the tragic mulatto – a dramatically doomed, often young, mixed-race person – it inadvertently provided fuel for the anti-miscegenationist fire by heaping shame upon the interracial unions that would bring such offspring into the world.<sup>27</sup> Just a few minutes into the first act of *Wedding Band*, Childress acknowledges this complicated historical and literary history. Julia’s quick rebuttal to Teeta’s request about whether or not she has children, “No...Grace-a Gawd,”<sup>28</sup> reveals her awareness of the stigma against mixed race children, and the difficult life they faced in the segregated Jim Crow south. But other literature, such as a pro-miscegenation pamphlet written and disseminated by northern Democrats in 1863, was adamant in its promotion of the “blending of the races.”<sup>29</sup>

In legislative bodies and the courts, the battle also continued to rage. Though many bans on interracial marriage were repealed in the 1870s during the Reconstruction period, they were later reinstated.<sup>30</sup> Under Jim Crow, new laws were necessary to police the boundaries of sexual and marital relations. Critical moments in this new era of anti-miscegenation law included the 1883 *Pace v. the State of Alabama* case, and the 1924 Racial Integrity Act in Virginia. *Pace* was settled in favor of continuing to uphold the criminalization of interracial sex,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 278-279

<sup>27</sup> Riley

<sup>28</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 10

<sup>29</sup> Altman

<sup>30</sup> “Anti-Amalgamation Law Passed”

citing the fact that such a law did not violate the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment because it punished blacks and whites equally for such offenses. The Racial Integrity Act, written into law during a period of extreme nativism following WWI,<sup>31</sup> aimed to maintain the “purity” of the races by preventing intermarriage between whites and non-whites. Both of these rulings, each a legal mechanism to protect and promote white supremacy, would be overturned by the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967.

The notion of “pure blood” served as the epicenter of segregation, supremacist, and eugenic ideologies. But, as this brief history illustrates, the idea was a falsehood. Since people of different tribes, ethnicities, and cultures had inhabited this land thousands of years ago, they had forged relationships with one another, creating complex webs of identity. In order to erase this complexity and consolidate power, however, whiteness needed codes to define itself and its “others.” Thus white lawmakers created “One Drop” rules to dictate who was black and therefore subject to slavery (anyone with at least one ancestor of African descent), and blood quantum statutes to determine who was federally recognized as Native American, and therefore a potential recipient of land and tribal affiliation. More blacks meant more free slave labor, and fewer Indians meant more land for the federal government, and the laws were shaped to ensure those ends.

When it came to interracial marriages, the laws around racial identity were just as complicated and contradictory. While most states explicitly named “blacks” as one of the groups with whom whites could not intermarry, some designated all “non-whites” in that category, and still others listed one or more of the following groups – Indians, Native Americans, Asians, Filipinos, Malays, Hindus, and Hawaiians – as those forbidden to marry whites.<sup>32</sup> From state to state the laws varied, creating a patchwork of legal doctrine that would have been difficult to navigate, not unlike the recent bans on same-sex marriage across the country. Each state had its specific predilections, designed to serve those in power. In Virginia, for instance, the ruling-class elites lobbied the writers of the Racial Integrity Act to include a “Pocahontas exception,” thereby declaring that

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<sup>31</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*. Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute

<sup>32</sup> See this University of Idaho site for details of anti-miscegenation laws by state and year:  
[http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl\\_258/Lecture%20Notes/american\\_antimiscegenation.htm](http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/engl_258/Lecture%20Notes/american_antimiscegenation.htm)

anyone with 1/16 or less American Indian heritage would be classified as “white” and allowed to intermarry. Their reasoning rested on the fact that they wanted to honor the descendants of John Rolfe and Pocahontas, whom they claimed to be.<sup>33</sup> Yet, across the board, anti-miscegenation laws were all predicated on preventing marriage between whites and non-whites: many were silent on matter of interracial marriage between two people of color. This crucial distinction would serve as a key factor in the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision to strike down all bans on interracial marriage. The lynchpin of white supremacy would be its own undoing.

### ***Loving v. Virginia: A Landmark Victory for Interracial Love***



*These images of Mildred and Richard Loving and their children were taken in their living room in Virginia in 1965. © Estate of Grey Villet. (<http://time.com/3731628/richard-and-mildred-loving-reluctant-civil-rights-heroes/>)*

When the Supreme Court ruling came down in *Loving v. Virginia*, it not only abolished anti-miscegenation laws across the country, it marked a significant victory over 300 years in the making. Its plaintiffs, Mildred (Jeter) Loving and Richard Loving never intended to be activists or history-makers. But propelled by

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<sup>33</sup> See Arica L. Coleman’s article “What You Didn’t Know about Loving v. Virginia” for further details of complex racial classification system for Native ancestry at this time.

their love for each other, and their determined desire to live as a family with their three children in their home state of Virginia, that is precisely what they would become.

The road to their groundbreaking court triumph in 1967 began nine years earlier, shortly after their 1958 wedding. After marrying legally in Washington D.C., the couple returned to Virginia where their bedroom was raided in the middle of the night, and they were indicted on felony charges for violating the state's Racial Integrity Act. They plead guilty to the charges, and were sentenced to one year in prison. However, the trial judge offered a deal: the sentence would be suspended if they would leave the state of Virginia and not return together for 25 years. As a defense of his ruling, the judge cited a racially spurious ideology:

Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And, but for the interference with his arrangement, there would be no cause for such marriage. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.<sup>34</sup>

But mix they did, and Mildred's own heritage was evidence of this fact. A "homemaker of indigenous and black heritage, cast as a Negro by Jim Crow,"<sup>35</sup> her identity was more complex than is often detailed in historical accounts. She read the legal systems that would define her and her marriage, and tactically navigated them in order to best protect her love. Her marriage certificate read "Indian," appealing to the "Pochahontas exception," and foregrounding her Rappahannock ancestry. Though it was a smart tactic, it was not enough to prevent the couple's arrest and sentencing in Virginia.

Reluctantly, the Lovings relocated to D.C.. But when they traveled to Virginia five years later to visit family, they were once again arrested. Frustrated by these injustices, and recognizing that they might have powerful allies in the fight for civil rights, Mildred Loving appealed to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy for assistance. He referred them to the ACLU, who assigned Bernard S. Cohen and Philip K. Hirschkop to fight pro-bono on the couples' behalf. They filed a motion in state court in 1963, requesting the sentence be set aside due to its violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment: their right to be protected from irrational race-based discrimination.

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<sup>34</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*. Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute

<sup>35</sup> Cashin



When their motion went unanswered for nearly a year, they took the fight to the next level, filing a class action suit in U.S. district court to declare Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. Up through the court of appeals their case went, until it reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967.<sup>36</sup> Though the couple did not attend the Supreme Court case in person, Richard Loving penned this simple and poignant message to the justices: "Tell the Court I love my wife and it is just not fair that I cannot live with her in Virginia."<sup>37</sup>

At stake in their battle were two powerfully divisive ideas: The first was the racist logic of anti-miscegenation law, which claimed as its goals the need "'to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens,' to prevent 'the corruption of blood,' 'a mongrel breed of citizens,' and 'the obliteration of racial pride.'"<sup>38</sup> Established by the Racial Integrity Act, and upheld in the 1965 *Naim v. Naim* Virginia Supreme Court decision, this eugenic ideology was clearly a holdover from centuries of racist thought and practice. The second was the fight over which legal entity would hold the highest power to police social relations – the state or federal government. Since Reconstruction, southern states fought bitterly for their right to have primary jurisdiction in myriad legal matters, especially those pertaining to racialized systems and structures, as a way to maintain white supremacy and pre-abolition segregation. The Loving decision leveled significant blows to both. In the unanimous decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren issued this opinion:

There is patently no legitimate overriding purpose independent of invidious racial discrimination which justifies this classification. The fact that Virginia prohibits only interracial marriages involving white persons demonstrates that the racial classifications must stand on their own justification, as measures designed to maintain White Supremacy.<sup>39</sup>

The monumental decision made anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, overturning statutes in Virginia and the sixteen states across the country that still had such laws in place in 1967. It also marked a crucial moment in the country's racial rhetoric: it was "the first time the Supreme Court used those words [White Supremacy] to

<sup>36</sup> "Loving: Looking back at the landmark case Loving v. Virginia"

<sup>37</sup> Coleman

<sup>38</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*. Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute, quoting from the *Naim v. Naim* case

<sup>39</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*. Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute

name what the Civil War and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment should have defeated.”<sup>40</sup> While legal bodies had often used the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment as a justification for colorblind reasoning, thereby erasing the impact of racist practices such as segregation, Justice Warren’s choice to name the country’s racialized power dynamic was both necessary and daring.

The Lovings’ time together after their court victory was cut heartbreakingly short when Richard Loving died in a car accident in 1975, but their legacy has had a lasting impact. Their actions paved the way for marriage access for hundreds of thousands of couples, and the legal precedent in their case helped propel the recent fight for same-sex marriage at the federal level. On June 12, 2017 – the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their groundbreaking victory – the Lovings’ efforts were memorialized in a marker on the former site of the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals. As statues celebrating the Confederacy and its legacy of racism are pulled down across the south, it seems only fitting that the Lovings’ victory, and the power of love to break down barriers, be memorialized in this way. That their name exemplifies the act of caring for another human being at the deepest level is truly poetic justice.

### **Julia and Herman in Context: *Wedding Band*’s Interracial Affair**

Alice Childress penned *Wedding Band* in 1962, during the midst of the Lovings’ ascendancy to the Supreme Court, in the thick of the Civil Rights Movement. Though it is uncertain whether or not Childress knew about the Lovings’ specific case when she wrote the play, there is no doubt she would have been well aware of the highly charged politics of interracial relationships at that moment, and their dangerous legal and extralegal consequences. For, in the tumult of black protestors sitting down at white lunch counters, Freedom Riders traversing state and color lines, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee catalyzing a youth revolution to extend human rights to black Americans, the boundaries of love continued to be shaped by segregationist ideals. At the time *Wedding Band* was written, the Lovings’ marriage was still deemed illegal by a

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<sup>40</sup> Cashin

third of the states in the union. If blacks sitting next to whites on a bus or at a restaurant table engendered brutal violence, then loving across racial lines posed an even greater symbolic and literal threat to white supremacy.

But rather than setting her tale amidst the swirling cacophony of current political events, Childress chose the early 1900s for her self-described “love/hate story.” Intentional or not, this was an activist gesture. Like Arthur Miller’s use of the Salem witch trials to examine McCarthyism a decade prior, Childress refracted and heightened the contemporary moment through the lens of history. And the choice of 1918 could not have been accidental. Not only was interracial love on the line in both eras, but the U.S. was engaged in major international wars, as well as racial uprisings on the homefront which incited martial law and the resurgence of the KKK. The very definition of Americanness and democracy were thrown into question as the face of the nation dramatically shifted. The parallels between the two historical timeframes were remarkable. Childress had found her vehicle to illuminate one of the major injustices of her age.

When the action of the play begins in 1918, two centuries had already passed since South Carolina’s first anti-miscegenation law was written. Both the prevalent reality of interracial relationships, and the legal doctrines aimed at preventing them were familiar territory for the characters in this world. And as the dramatic arc reveals, everyone touched by Julia and Herman’s relationship was attuned to its consequences. Both white and black folks caution against the pairing, betraying fears and biases on both sides of the color line. But their concerns arise from different places. For Herman’s white family, his relationship with Julia lessens his status, sullies his purity. His love of Julia is an especially egregious choice for his mother, who is desperate to eschew her family’s German ethnicity and lower-class status in order to climb the social hierarchy of white supremacy. So deep is her desire to join the ranks of the powerful and to evade being the target of hate herself, that she and

her family become members of the Knights of the Gold Carnation, a fraternal society and surrogate KKK group.<sup>41</sup> In accordance with her supremacist logic, she considers Julia sub-human, and believes Herman is dangerously de-humanizing himself by loving across the color line. Among other terrible epithets, she calls Julia a “black thing” (italics mine), and reminds her that, “I’m as high over you as Mount Everest over the sea. White reigns supreme.”<sup>42</sup> Her claim to whiteness is, in her mind, inalienable, and will forever be the thing that separates her white son from Julia.

Julia’s black neighbors also carry deep concerns about the pairing, but their reasoning stems from the weight of a racist past and its current impact on their bodies, livelihoods, and communities. Their dignity and their lives are at stake. When Julia finally reveals that her beau is white to her new neighbors Lula and Mattie, Lula’s no-nonsense attitude reflects her acute awareness of the historical power dynamics of such pairings: “A white man is somethin’ else. Everybody knows how that low-down slave master sent for a different black woman every night...for his pleasure. That’s why none of us is the same color.”<sup>43</sup> Julia adamantly insists that she and Herman’s relationship is different, and in a simplicity prescient of Richard Loving’s statement to the court, she says, “He loves me...We love each other, that’s all, we just love each other.” Then referencing current-day law, she earnestly proclaims “And someday, as soon as we’re able, we have to leave here and go where it’s right...Where it’s legal to be man and wife.”<sup>44</sup> Despite her heartfelt attempts to persuade the women that she and Herman’s love is mutually sincere, neither is willing or able to accept it. Rather than stew in the uncomfortable conflict of values that’s clouded the moment, they quickly find excuses to leave. Like so many times in the past, Julia finds herself alone, socially ostracized for the primary joy in her life. Even without the pressure of legal justice bearing down, exchanges like these strike at her soul, and prevent her from the

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<sup>41</sup> Childress likely based The Gold Carnations on The Knights of the Golden Circle, founded by George Washington Lafayette Bickley in the 1850s. For more on this supremacist organization, see <<http://www.historynet.com/home-grown-terrorists.htm>>.

<sup>42</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 50-51

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 21

<sup>44</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 21

necessary support network of friendship. As a black woman disconnected from community in a racially stratified society, this is a high price to pay. In this brief encounter and many more throughout the play, we witness her hopes for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness imperiled.

The couple's situation takes a dire turn when Herman suddenly falls ill and collapses on Julia's porch. Beyond the social mores and challenges facing their relationship, the incident could alert the reigning authorities. When Julia desperately pleads to her landlord Fanny that they call a doctor, both homeowner and the other tenants vehemently protest:

FANNY: Over my dead body. It's against the damn law for him to be layin' up in a black woman's bed.

MATTIE: A doctor will call the police.

FANNY: They'll say I run a bad house.

JULIA: I'll tell 'em the truth.

MATTIE: We don't tell things to the police.

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JULIA: I'll hire a hack and take him to a doctor.

FANNY: He might die on you. That's police. That's the work-house.

JULIA: I'll say I found him on the street!

FANNY: Walk into the jaws of the law—they'll chew you up.

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JULIA: ...I'm gonna call a doctor.

FANNY: Do it, we'll have a yellow quarantine sign on the front door... "INFLUENZA".

Doctor'll fill out papers for the law...address...race...

JULIA: I...I guess I'll wait until his sister gets here.

FANNY: No, you call a doctor, Nelson won't march in the parade tomorrow or go back

to the army, Mattie'll be outta work, Lula can't deliver flowers...

JULIA: I'm sorry, so very sorry. I'm the one breakin' laws, doin' wrong.

FANNY: I'm not judgin' you. High or low, nobody's against this if it's kept quiet...<sup>45</sup>

The dangers that Fanny and Mattie explicate are multilayered, both explicit and subtextual. Neither the law nor the neighbors seem to mind the relationship as long as it remains in the shadows, but if the police find a white man on a black property, in the bed of a black woman, it could mean jail time and physical labor for Julia and a social and economic stigma for Fanny. As the self-elected "representative of her race," Fanny highly values the elevated esteem in which the local white community holds her, and she says "I can't afford to mess that up on account-a you or any-a the rest-a these hard-luck, better-off-dead, triflin' niggers."<sup>46</sup> Both her social dignity and her stream of rental income are at stake, just by being associated with an interracial scandal. Guilt by association would also extend to Lula's son Nelson, whose army status could be revoked, depriving him of a paycheck and a means to temporarily escape the emasculating and racist conditions shaping the lives of black men in the Jim Crow south. Mattie's business of selling candy and Lula's flower delivery service are also threatened. In short, the community's entire economic structure would be at risk in addition to Julia's freedom. It was, no doubt, not only the threat of legal penalties, but this loss of even a subsistence form of living that held racial groups in check, especially poor black communities like Mattie's and Lula's which simply couldn't afford such a setback. Thus, even as Herman's life hangs in the balance, Julia has very little recourse to save him.

The police, the enforcement arm of government meant to serve and protect, are no help to Julia and this small, backyard community. Indeed, they are part of the threat. When Mattie says "We don't tell things to the police," and when Fanny warns, "Walk into the jaws of the law—they'll chew you up," they reveal personal experience with an unjust legal system that disadvantages and criminalizes blacks. Countless contemporary examples support their claims, from the wrongful arrest of esteemed Harvard University Professor Henry Louis

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<sup>45</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 34-36

<sup>46</sup> Ibid 35

Gates, Jr. in his own home in 2009, to the ongoing shootings of unarmed black men across the country, to the not-guilty verdict of the police officer tried in the Philando Castile case here in the Twin Cities just this year. This centuries-long pattern under white supremacy has meant that the law, in all of its braches, has often been more of a burden in the lives of black communities than a beacon of justice. Julia and Herman cannot count them amongst their allies.

While Childress depicts this as a mutually consensual love/relationship, the couple is still subject to historical resonances that belie significant and perceived power differentials. Lula's remarks about the slave master sending for a different black woman each night reflects this logic, as does Herman's mother's vitriolic tirades against their love. The legacy of that dynamic also surfaces in the white Bell Man's unwanted sexual advances on Julia. Crossing the threshold of her bedroom, and having just met her moments earlier, he bluntly propositions her: "Sister, Um [sic] in need for it like I never been before. Will you 'comodate me? Straighten me, fix me up, will you? Wouldn't take but five minutes. Um quick like a jack rabbit. Wouldn't nobody know but you and me."<sup>47</sup> Like the slave master, his mindset reveals the entrenched ideology that black women should be perpetually sexually available to white men, no matter their status, and no matter the woman's desire or will. When Julia manages to successfully chase him off, he mutters "She must be goin' crazy. Unfriendly, sick-minded bitch!"<sup>48</sup> For the Bell Man, the fact that she dared to fight the white patriarchal order cannot go unanswered. Childress brilliantly illuminates the razor-thin border between respectful and predatory intentions by depicting white men like Herman and the Bell Man in the world of this South Carolina seaside town. For those navigating interracial relationships, and for those witness to their outward appearance, distinguishing between the two sets of intentions may not always have been a clear matter.

On the reverse side of this equation, the young soldier, Nelson, cuts to the core of the gendered double standard in the anti-miscegenation campaign. While neither the white nor black community is pleased with

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<sup>47</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 15

<sup>48</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 16

Herman and Julia's relationship, they allow it to continue. The same cannot be said for pairings between black men and white women. He tells Julia,

NELSON: They set us on fire 'bout their women. String us up, pour on kerosene and  
light a match. Wouldn't I make a bright flame in my new uniform?

JULIA: Don't be thinkin' that way.

NELSON: I'm thinkin' 'bout black boys hanging from trees in Little Mountain, Elloree,  
Winnesboro.

JULIA: Herman never killed anybody. I couldn't care 'bout that kind-a man.

NELSON: How can you account for carin' 'bout him a-tall?

JULIA: In that place where I worked, he was the only one who cared...who really  
cared. So gentle, such a gentle man... "Yes, Ma'am," ... "No, Ma'am," "Thank  
you, Ma'am..." ...Most folks don't have to account for why they love.

NELSON: You ain't most folks. You're down on the bottom with us, under his foot. A  
black man got nothin' to offer you...<sup>49</sup>

Nelson's truth-telling puts Julia on the defensive. While she understands his fear of vigilante terrorism, she bristles at the implication that, as a white man, Herman could be amongst his potential lynchers. Though she tries to defend Herman's character as well as her love for him, Nelson continues to shift tactics. Pointing to both class and racial differences, he reminds her of her place in the social hierarchy. His complaints, spurred in large part by a recent marriage proposal rejection by his (black) girlfriend, nevertheless illuminate the advantages that white men have over black men of similar socioeconomic status. Rejected by a woman of his own race because he has "nothin' to offer,"<sup>50</sup> and threatened by punishment of death if he so much as flirtingly admires a white woman, Nelson's justified rage bubbles to the surface. Within the anti-miscegenation codes, at the intersection

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid 41-42

<sup>50</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 33



of race and gender, black men have a distinct and unjust disadvantage. At the same time, Julia is constantly put on trial for what her heart wants and what the law cannot account for. In a segregated system that dictates the love of the land, it seems that neither gender wins. But all is not lost. Through their dialogue, Childress gives voice to equally valid and complex perspectives, and ultimately the exchange strengthens both characters. Nelson's insistence that a fight is trouble, stays with Julia, and by the end of the play it gives her the strength to stand up for herself, Herman, and their right to love.

Throughout the play, we become witness to the duality embodied in Childress' subtitle: Julia and Herman's is a paradoxical love/hate relationship. Both elements are ever present, held always in dialectic tension, and propelled by external stressors. The duality is embodied in the specificity of the couple's love, and on a larger allegorical level, the vexed and inseparable history of our country. We watch the delicate tendrils of Julia and Herman's love unfurl as they share wine and inside jokes, make passionate love, exchange achingly personalized gifts, remind each other of the mundane necessities of life, and sing quietly together over twinkling wedding cake candles. In each other's company they remember their history, dream of their future, and imagine growing old together. The depth of their attraction and concern for one other is undeniable.

They also find a glimmer of solidarity in their similar class status. Here, their relationship resonates with pre-slavery mixing between whites and blacks; they share a sense of having labored at the lowest ranks of society, only to have their efforts unrecognized. There is an inequality in this dynamic, though, in that the efforts of Herman's forbearers do finally pay off for his family. Within a system of white supremacy, they garner enough money to buy a bakery. The free labor of Julia's ancestors within a slavery and then Jim Crow system, on the other hand, disallowed her the possibility of owning property or having financial assets to rely on. It is a pivotal sticking point she insistently makes clear, but Herman cannot or will not hear it.

HERMAN: My father labored in the street...liftin' and layin' down cobblestone...liftin'  
and layin' down stone 'til there was enough money to open a shop...

JULIA: My people...relatives, friends and strangers...they worked and slaved free for

nothin' for some-a the biggest name families down here...

HERMAN: Great honor, working for the biggest name families. That's who you slaved for. Not me. The big names.

JULIA: ...the rich and the poor...we know you...all of you...the rich and the poor... where you came from...where you goin'...

HERMAN: What's my privilege...Good mornin', good afternoon...pies are ten cents today...

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JULIA: ...My father was somebody. He helped put up Roper Hospital and Webster Rice Mills after the earthquake wiped the face-a this Gawd-forsaken city clean...a fine brick mason he was...paid him one-third-a what they paid the white ones...

HERMAN: We were poor...No big name, no quality.

JULIA: Poor! My Gramma was a slave wash-woman bustin' suds for free! Can't get poorer than that.

HERMAN: Not for me, she didn't!

JULIA: We the ones built the pretty white mansions...for free...the fishin' boats...for free...made your clothers, raised your food...for free...and I loved you—for free.

HERMAN: A Gawd-damn lie...nobody did for me...you know it...you know how hard I worked—<sup>51</sup>

Herman's line of reasoning foreshadows contemporary colorblind and anti-affirmative action logics, themselves built upon the protestant work ethic of 'pulling oneself up by the bootstraps.' Nothing was handed to him, he says. His predecessors worked, scraped, and slowly clawed their way out of poverty into the working class. He

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<sup>51</sup> Childress, *Wedding Band*, 60-62

and his family were not the direct recipients of Julia's family's labor, he argues, so he cannot be held accountable. Though he seems to understand that he and Julia's different outcomes were the result of racialized inequities, he cannot bring himself to admit the fact that he holds a racial advantage. Similarly, their colorblind/color conscious dichotomy emerges in the smallest of exchanges. When Julia mentions that a woman she worked for was a mean white woman, Herman wonders why she can't just omit the "white" in her description. Julia argues that it's just fact. Her insistence on the unflinching truth –that race matters – and his failing to face it, is a crossroads that nearly severs their relationship. While he may truly love Julia, he will never fully understand, empathize with, and therefore have a stake in changing her experience or fighting for equity. His class position, which could form the basis of a cross-racial allegiance with Julia and her community, has instead blinded him to racial injustice. Those who aim to uphold white supremacy understand this dynamic, and use it again and again to exploit the same divides. Our contemporary moment is no exception, with political leaders pitting working class whites against the immigrants and working class people of color who could be their greatest allies. Whether in 1918 or 2017, the personal is political in interracial relationships. For Julia and Herman, it cuts to the heart of the ties that bind them.

Yet despite Julia and Herman's best efforts, and pressures from all sides, despite the harsh truths they hurl at one another in the heat of battle, and a past that tries in every way to destroy their bond, they refuse to let go of each other or their love. Their tender vision of their shared future does not materialize in the world of the play.<sup>52</sup> But it serves as a powerful allegorical beacon of the persistence we too, might find to remain connected, to remain loving, to remain together in the struggle for racial justice in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

### ***Loving v. Virginia, 50 Years Later***

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<sup>52</sup> Like so many tales of star-crossed lovers and tropes of the "tragic mulatto," their love is threatened by forces outside their control, doomed by a society divided by racial constructs. Yet, with Herman's death, Childress upends the typical victim narrative, allowing her black, female protagonist to go on living and loving another day, despite societal norms.



As we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Loving v. Virginia* decision this year, it seems that interracial pairings have gained increasing public recognition and broader support than ever before. Interracial couples appear everywhere, from the halls of Congress and the Capitol – with Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, to the cover of a recent People Magazine – where Rachel Lindsay, the first African American female star in the longtime reality series “The Bachelorette,” embraces her white fiancé, Bryan Abasolo. In Hollywood, film star couples like Ryan Gosling and Eva Mendes quietly live their romantic lives, while supermodel Chrissy Teigen and music superstar John Legend find themselves at the center of glamorous photo shoots for designer labels, seemingly unafraid of the public eye.

On screen pairings have been shifting in recent years as well, with interracial couples showing up with increasing frequency in TV series, aided in large part by the Shonda Rhimes empire. Across her three major series, the coupling of African American power attorney and professional “fixer” Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington) and white president Fitzgerald Thomas Grant III (played by Tony Goldwyn) is perhaps the most “Scandal”-ous. Cognizant of the pairing’s historical antecedents, Rhimes has Olivia explicitly reference Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings’ affair in one poignant episode. Without a doubt, these public and on-screen couples are changing the American psyche; contesting centuries-old stereotypes, desires, and fears; upending narratives disseminated in *Birth of a Nation* and like-minded literature; and paving the way for a more accepting populace.

The rise in both fictional and famed real-life interracial relationships mirrors the country's shifting demographic trends. In 1967, only 3% of marriages were interracial. In 2015, nearly 50 years later, 17% of new marriages are paired across racial lines. And when you add up all those currently in interracial marriages in the U.S., according to a recent Pew Research Center analysis of census data, it comes out at 11 million.<sup>53</sup> This increase has ripple effects beyond the couples themselves: approximately one-fourth of the population now has a close relative in an interracial or interethnic relationship.<sup>54</sup>

This demographic reality has translated into far greater and widespread acceptance of interracial relationships in the five decades since *Loving*. One of the couples' lawyers, Philip K. Hirschkop, now 81 and still living in Virginia, reflects on the microcosmic ways this changed reality manifests in everyday life: "I was sitting in a restaurant and there was a mixed couple sitting at the next table and they were kissing and they were holding hands...They'd have gotten hung for something like 50 years ago and no one cared - just two people could pursue their lives. That's the best part of it, those quiet moments."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, another Pew Research analysis bears out the change in public attitude: 91 percent of survey respondents indicated that "interracial marriage was a change for the better or made no difference at all."<sup>56</sup> The freedom to love in public, unfettered from discrimination is surely one of the greatest legacies left by the Lovings and all those who fought for the rights of interracial couples.

Of course, conscientious students of U.S. history are well aware that every step towards social and racial equity has been met with fierce resistance. Advances for interracial relationships have been no exception. Despite their gains in public acceptance, interracial couples still face the wrath of those threatened by the dismantling of clear racial borders. The ignorance, disapproval, and outright hostility and violence that interracial couples must confront challenge our conceptions of linear progress and belie Pew's 91% self-reported

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<sup>53</sup> Holland

<sup>54</sup> Cashin

<sup>55</sup> Holland

<sup>56</sup> Cashin

acceptance rate. These resistant attitudes and actions arise from friends, family, and strangers alike. Rev.

Kimberly D. Lucas of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. notes how this hits close to home for many couples:

I have not yet counseled an interracial wedding where someone didn't have a problem on the bride's or the groom's side. I think for a lot of people it's OK if it's 'out there' and it's other people but when it comes home and it's something that forces them to confront their own internal demons and their own prejudices and assumptions, it's still really hard for people.<sup>57</sup>

On a broader front, reports of discrimination and violence against interracial couples are cropping up more and more in the past few years. From the smallest micro-aggressions, such as turned heads and stony glares, to discriminatory acts of being turned away from a restaurant or turned down for rental housing, to horrific attacks like the assaults and stabbings that have been reported from New York City to Olympia, Washington, interracial couples often face imminent danger.<sup>58</sup> Allison Skinner, a social psychology researcher at the University of Washington, attributes these reactions to unconscious bias. Her research confirms people's biases, despite their self-reporting to the contrary. In this case, implicit prejudice arises as a sense of disgust toward interracial couples, which can in turn lead people to dehumanize them.<sup>59</sup> Her study tracked brain wave activity to measure attitudes, and her results illuminate the persistence of deeply entrenched belief systems, born out of centuries of strategic anti-miscegenation efforts. Penumbra Theatre's Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy sums this process up with a tool she calls "The Four D's": differentiate, de-value, dehumanize, destroy; these unconscious biases, if left unchecked, can circumvent empathy, leading to violence and greater chasms across lines of difference.

On a national scale, Donald Trump's rise to the presidency has exacerbated and accelerated this kind of bias and de-humanization. From the podium to the Twitter-sphere, to the boldly emblazoned red baseball caps with the call to "Make America Great Again," his rhetoric, actions, and inaction have emboldened the latest uprising of white supremacist terrorism. Ironically, the parallels to the historical moment of play are

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<sup>57</sup> Holland

<sup>58</sup> See the following articles for details on hate crimes perpetrated against interracial couples: Calhan, Evans, Holland, Skinner.

<sup>59</sup> Skinner

overwhelming. A century ago, in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson entered the country into WWI, telling Congress that “the world must be made safe for democracy,”<sup>60</sup> while simultaneously imposing segregation policies in the Capitol bathrooms and cafeterias, and screening *Birth of a Nation* at the White House, making it the very first film in American history to receive that debut.<sup>61</sup> Both leaders’ actions demonstrate the culpability of a federal office in bolstering and disseminating racism.

Luckily, those under fire and their allies have risen up – in consciousness and protest – in both historical moments. Wilson’s pronouncements were met with uprisings and a Silent Parade of nearly 10,000 black men, women, and children through the streets of New York City in July 1917. One of the most prominent mottos on the marchers’ picket signs read, “Make *America* Safe for Democracy” (italics mine), publicly calling out Wilson’s racialized hypocrisy. And today, notes Georgetown Law Professor Sheryll Cashin, “Donald Trump has accelerated political engagement by Latinos, Muslim Americans and other groups offended by his scapegoating, and he has also accelerated the ability of many whites to see and name racism.” Just as progress for racial equity has been met with resistance, racial injustice has never gone unanswered by those whom it impacts. Cashin predicts that the smaller-scale and rhizomatic efforts of what she terms “culturally dexterous” people – those invested in romantic or platonic interracial relationships – will have a major impact on American perceptions and beliefs about race, immigration, and other culturally charged issues. Because of a person’s increased intimacy with someone racially or ethnically different from them, they can develop the skill to eschew colorblindness, reduce prejudice, ease anxiety, increase perspective-taking, and deepen empathy. This transformation of attitudes, alongside the transformation of the American populace, poses a hopeful way forward towards a more welcome, accepting, and equitable environment for couples loving across every kind of line. Like Mildred and Richard Loving, and *Wedding Band*’s Julia and Herman, intimately honest and heartfelt connections have the power to make the world a more just, more humane, more loving place, one couple at a time.

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<sup>60</sup> Bennett 552

<sup>61</sup> Stokes





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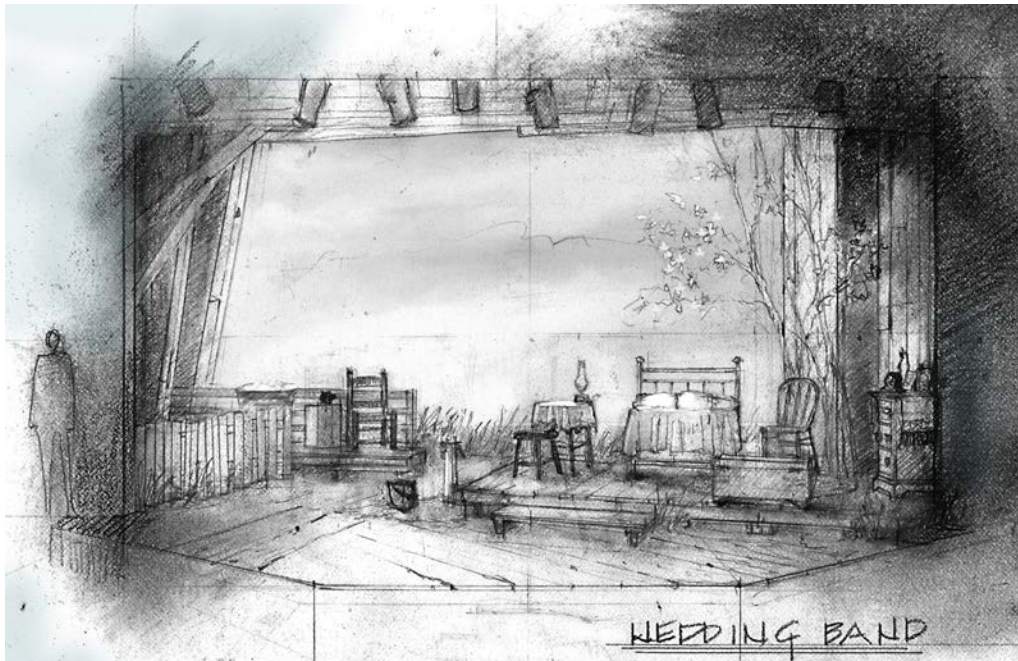
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## Set Design Models by Vicki Smith

"In the flying underbelly of the city. Steaming hot, and summer on top, outside. Underground. The subway heaped in modern myth." – *Amiri Baraka*



## Costume Design Renderings by Mathew LeFebvre

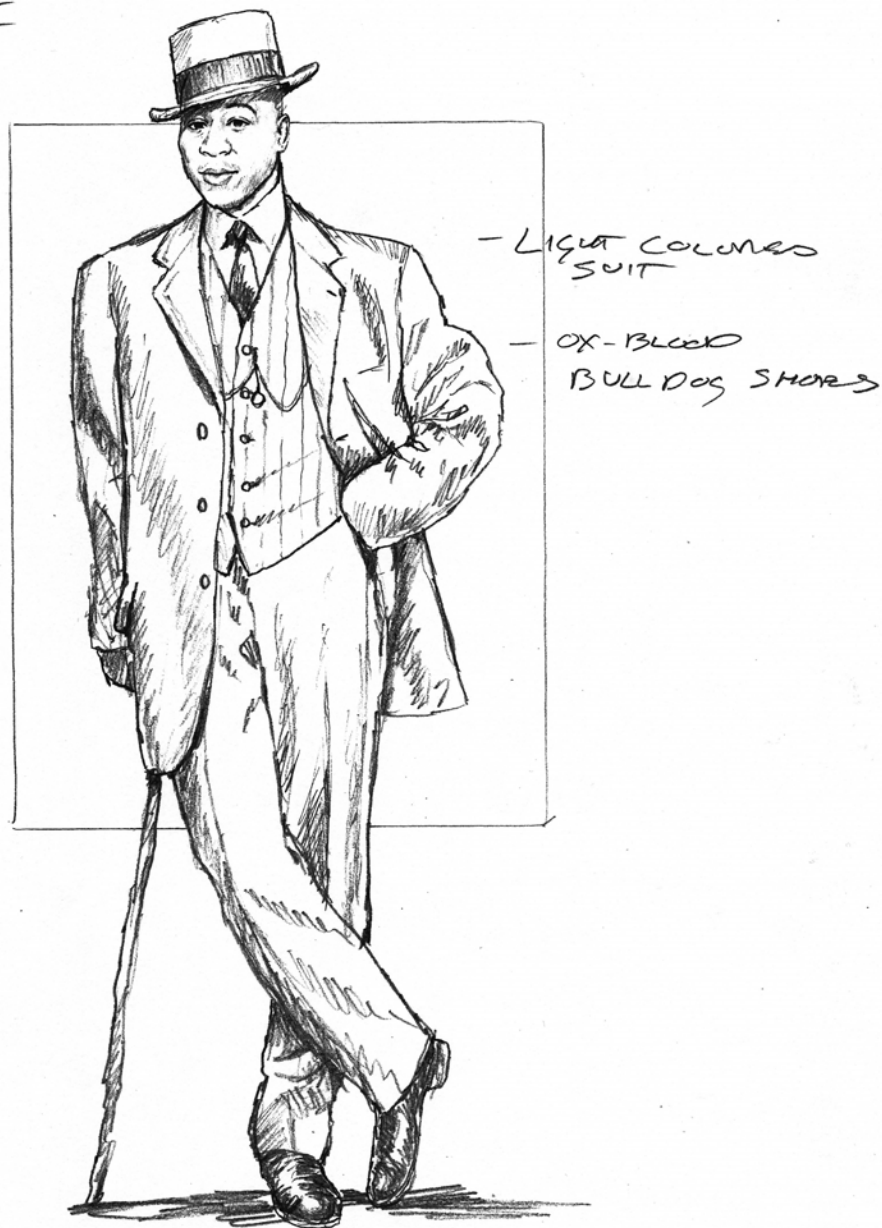
*"The characters change slowly back and forth into and out of themselves, leaving some garment from the previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl." – Adrienne Kennedy*





NELSON GREEN

ACT I





HERIMAN

ACT I







FANNY JOHNSON -





LULA GREEN



- VERY LIVELY IN

- ADD SHAWL  
FOR WORSHIP  
SERVICE

ANNABELLE  
ACT II



HERMAN'S MOTHER

ACT II

