

P E N U M B R A



This Bitter Earth

By Harrison David Rivers

Directed by Talvin Wilks

A Penumbra Theatre Company production

April 26 through May 20, 2018

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

“We are in this business not just to move audiences with great art, but to support justice, to use the unique power of theatre to open hearts and minds.”

—Sarah Bellamy, Artistic Director

ABOUT PENUMBRA THEATRE COMPANY

Conceived in the Black Arts Movement and Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Emeritus Lou Bellamy, Penumbra Theatre Company has long served as a nurturing space for the artistic exploration of the African American experience. As the sole professional African American theatre in Minnesota, Penumbra carries forth a long, proud tradition of providing career-building opportunities to theatre practitioners of color, both on and off-stage. Penumbra has produced all ten of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson’s Century Cycle plays, cementing his renown as one of the most important playwrights of modern time.

Penumbra Theatre’s production history spans the depth and breadth of the African American theatrical canon, illuminating pioneers such as Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*) and Charles Fuller (*A Soldier’s Play*, *Zooman and the Sign*), genre-bender Ntozake Shange (*Spell #7, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*), late 20th century stalwarts August Wilson and Pearl Cleage (*Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*), and emerging stars such as Katori Hall (*The Mountaintop*) and Dominique Morisseau (*Sunset Baby*, *Detroit ’67*). Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity* signifies the cornerstone of Penumbra’s contribution to the black musical theatre tradition. Each year 40,000 people see a play or musical at Penumbra Theatre and experience the variety of lenses through which African Americans view and engage with the world. In its 41-year history, Penumbra Theatre has produced 37 premieres of new work by African American artists.

THE MISSION

Penumbra Theatre creates professional productions that are artistically excellent, thought provoking, and relevant and illuminates the human condition through the prism of the African American experience.

Penumbra’s goals are:

- To increase public awareness of the significant contributions of African Americans in creating a diversified American theatrical tradition.
- To encourage and facilitate a culturally diverse and all-inclusive America by using theatre to teach, criticize, comment and model.
- To use theatre to create an American mythology that includes African Americans and other peoples of color in every thread of the fabric of our society.
- To continue to maintain and stabilize a black performing arts community.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Penumbra's Educational and Outreach initiatives provide opportunities for audiences to explore the synthesis of theatre with social engagement. The observer is able to experience storytelling on the visual, audial, and aesthetic levels, while also engaging with the ideas of a play at their own pace, and through their most effective methods of understanding.

Strong educational and outreach programming makes the theatre a safe space for individuals to process personal, local, national, and worldwide events in cooperation with theatre practitioners, scholars, community leaders, and teaching artists. Penumbra provides audiences with a broad range of educational tools for analysis and reflection, increasing the possibility for life to follow art from idea to action.

Each year, Penumbra exposes 5,000 students to nurturing opportunities that range from summer internships to a multi-year leadership development program for teenagers. These programs allow young people to use theatre as a tool to experiment with their ideas of creating a more just and peaceful world. While some of these young people may go on to become theatre professionals, many more will emerge with increased capacity in the areas of critical thinking, creative problem-solving, self-expression, and community leadership. These skills will serve young people in their lives as entrepreneurs, service members, employees, and citizens.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About *This Bitter Earth*

- Characters
- Setting
- Time
- Synopsis
- Scenes
- Style of the Play

About the Writer

Essay: When My Brother Fell, I Picked Up His Weapons

- Introduction
- The World of the Play
- Race and Class in an Interracial Relationship
- The Complexities of White Allyship in the Fight for Racial Justice
- Music as Cultural Currency
- LGBTQ+ Intimacy in Private and Public Spaces
- Finding his Way to the Fight: Jesse's decision to join the movement
- Conclusion

About the Producer and Artists

- A conversation with Sarah Bellamy, Artistic Director
- A conversation with Talvin Wilks, Director
- A conversation with Harrison David Rivers, Playwright
- About the Playwright

Teaching the Play

- Group Discussion
- Writing and Performance Exercises
- Glossary of Terms

CHARACTERS

JESSE HOWARD

Late 20s-early 30s
Hyper-aware of his body – not in a productive way. Serious, passionate, black. He wields his wit like a weapon. A playwright.

NEIL FINLEY-DARDEN

Late 20s-early 30s
Disarmingly beautiful and completely unaware. Compassionate, privileged, white. He means well. An enthusiast.

SETTING

New York City, NY and St. Paul, MN

TIME

March 21, 2012 — December 15, 2015

SYNOPSIS

Neil is a passionate white activist and advocate for the Black Lives Matter movement. Jesse is an introspective black playwright coming to terms with his own activism, or the lack thereof. As racial tensions mount with the extrajudicial killings of black men throughout the country, the young gay couple is forced to contend with the politics of their love in these turbulent times. Wrestling with issues of race and class, this poetic and timely story is a haunting reminder of the strength it takes to love out loud.

SCENES

1:1 — Jesse Speaks; St. Paul, early December 2015; St. Paul, mid December 2015
1:2 — West Village, April 2012
1:3 — St. Paul, August, 2014
1:4 — Harlem/Tribeca, 2012
1:5 — St. Paul, Late July 2014
1:6 — Neil Speaks
1:7 — Brooklyn Heights, June 2012
1:8 — Tribeca, April 2012
1:9 — Tribeca, April 2013
1:10 — St. Paul, September 2014
1:11 — Jesse Speaks
1:12 — Tribeca, February 2013
1:13 — Tribeca, April 2012

2:1 — Jesse Speaks; St. Paul, early December 2015; St. Paul, mid December 2015
2:2 — Union Square, March 2012
2:3 — St. Paul, October 2014
2:4 — West Village, April 2012
2:5 — St. Paul, April 2015
2:6 — Harlem, September 2012
2:7 — St. Paul, April 2015
2:8 — West Village, April 2012
2:9 — St. Paul, November 2015
2:10 — St. Paul, July 2014
2:11 — St. Paul, November 24, 2014
2:12 — St. Paul, May 2015
2:13 — Jesse Speaks; St. Paul, early December 2015; St. Paul, mid December 2015

STYLE OF THE PLAY

This Bitter Earth is a memory play that transports the audience through time and space. Each scene in this non-linear narrative represents a key moment in the evolving relationship between the two characters, Jesse and Neil. This storytelling style provides an opportunity for the audience to have a moment-to-moment experience of the play, mirroring the fleeting nature of time and memory.

This two-character play, colloquially known as a *two-hander*, features two actors who each play one character. Other characters in the story are implied, described, and discussed, but do not appear in the play as additional actors. Sometimes an actor speaks out to the audience, in what is called *direct address*. Theatre practitioners also refer to this as “breaking the fourth wall,” which is a metaphorical term for when an actor acknowledges the presence of the audience in the theatre. Through direct address, the playwright signals to the audience that a particular speech or moment is either especially important, outside of the world of the play, or both.

A deadly act of violence toward Neil resonates in Jesse’s consciousness throughout the play. The playwright repeats the violent scene at the beginning, middle, and end of the play, seeking to intensify its emotional impact. This is called *motif*, which is any frequently repeated sight, sound, or moment in a play. This motif is enhanced by technical elements such as the sound of breaking glass, which is called for in the script. The playwright uses motif to approximate Jesse’s post-traumatic memories, adding sensory depth to the theatrical experience and emphasizing the visceral and lasting effects of violence on its survivors.

ABOUT THE WRITER



Thembi Duncan is an arts administrator, facilitator, and teaching artist with a nearly 20-year history of theatre experience in the greater Washington, DC area. Past positions include Creative Programs Director of Young Playwrights’ Theater, Producing Artistic Director of African Continuum Theatre Company, and Lead Teaching Artist at Ford’s Theatre. Her intellectual and artistic interests include gender, race, and sexuality. For more information, visit thembiduncan.com.

When My Brother Fell, I Picked up his Weapons:

Complexities of Love and the Fight for Social Justice in *This Bitter Earth*

INTRODUCTION

This Bitter Earth by Harrison David Rivers is a requiem for a loved one lost to an act of violence, told through the lens of a black gay man on his journey toward joining the fight for racial justice. Jesse, a black graduate student, falls for Neil, a white civil rights activist, when he sees him take center stage during a Black Lives Matter rally. As their love grows, their relationship is defined by their respective proximity to the epicenter of social justice activism. The two men's racial identities, economic backgrounds, personalities, and engagement in the fight for social justice all become frequent points of contention, with sex and intimacy serving as the glue that holds them together. Over the course of their relationship, they must grapple with not only other people's responses to their identity as a couple, but to their own internalized biases, stereotypes, and assumptions.

The two men initially hold opposing perceptions of the proper expression of civic responsibility and the ways that citizens can leverage their privilege to show up for marginalized community members. Rivers calls forth the memories of a mourning man on his journey of self-awareness and social responsibility.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

The events of *This Bitter Earth* take place in various parts of New York City and St. Paul, Minnesota between Spring 2012 and Winter 2015. This four-year period spans the majority of Barack Obama's second presidential term, signifying a time when millions of youth were

matriculating at high schools across the country, having only known an African American president. The debate about a “post-racial America” had first emerged in the early 1970’s, as institutions and corporations were beginning to implement affirmative action policies¹ in education and employment. The election of Obama in 2008 enlivened this debate among scholars, lawmakers, and journalists.

Some heralded the first African American President of the United States as visible proof that America had finally moved beyond the racial transgressions of its past, and was in a position to lead the world into a future where racism no longer exists. Around the world, people filled the streets and the Internet in celebration of the man who had broken through the American color barrier. University of California Merced scholar Ignacio López-Calvo notes his experience being in the African country of Cameroon after Obama was first elected:

...I had the opportunity to witness the reaction of Cameroonians to Obama’s victory in the presidential elections, and I believe that it would be naive to think that it only had to do with the fact that his father was a Kenyan from the Luo tribe and that his paternal grandmother still lives in Kenya: there is no question that the perception of “race,” that is, seeing a black man occupying the most powerful office in the world, was behind all those smiles in Cameroon that night ... I noticed that Obama’s name and photograph were in every computer screen in internet cafes, on T-shirts, in the stores ... and I must confess that I did not expect Cameroonians to identify so strongly with a candidate in the presidential elections of a country on the other side of the world. “It’s our President!” “It’s our President!” screamed some Cameroonians on their national television channels. The streets were covered with American flags and an interviewee on one of these channels actually declared Obama “The savior of humankind.”²

Not everyone was convinced that the age of Obama would bring equity to the racial landscape of the United States. Conservative African American writer Shelby Steele suggested that merely

¹ Affirmative action is a group of policies across the country that were created after the Civil Rights Movement to increase opportunities for women, people of color, and disabled citizens in higher education and the workplace. These policies gave organizations and institutions a way to deliberately and specifically create a balance of personnel in order to counteract the existing inequities due to historic, systemic racism and sexism. These policies have been the subject of much debate since they were put in place, as they require a transfer of opportunities to marginalized people. *National Conference of State Legislators Website* “Affirmative Action” February 7, 2014. Online resource: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/affirmative-action-overview.aspx>

² Lopez-Calvo, Ignacio, Ph.D. "Obama's Autobiographical Writing, Critical Race Theory, and the Racializing Gaze." Edited by Melvin B. Rahming. In *Critical Essays on Barack Obama: Re-affirming the Hope, Re-vitalizing the Dream*, 70. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012.

electing a black president was not enough to change race relations in America. His assessment was definitive: “There is nothing to suggest that Obama will lead America into true post-racialism. His campaign style revealed a tweaker of the status quo, not a revolutionary. Culturally and racially, he is likely to leave America pretty much where he found her.”³

By the time of Obama’s second election in 2012, voters in New York State had leaned heavily Democratic in presidential elections for twenty-four years,⁴ with Minnesota consistently voting “blue” since 1976. One may find it interesting to contemplate the voting behaviors of the characters who inhabit this play. Perhaps Jesse, intelligent and skeptical, voted for Mr. Obama twice, though one imagines that he might have had initial doubts about Obama’s chances of being elected during his first run for the highest office in the land. Neil, well-read and liberal, may have been aware of the President’s bestselling autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*,⁵ and eventually might have read *Dreams from My Father*,⁶ the memoir that Obama penned years before he was elected to the United States Senate. Though his activist leanings might have steered him toward a third party vote, perhaps Neil voted twice for Obama both as a strategic move (to avoid throwing away his vote) and also as a way of laying claim to America’s first black president.

While the public debate of a post-racial America continued, there was mounting evidence that racism was still active in many facets of society. The racial justice that was the promise of the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement remained elusive to the majority of the black populace, as wealth and education gaps continued to widen. At every level, black people lacked access to the

³ Steele, Shelby. “Obama’s post-racial promise.” *Los Angeles Times*. November 05, 2008. Online Resource: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-oe-steele5-2008nov05-story.html>

⁴ Online resource: https://www.270towin.com/states/New_York

⁵ Obama, Barack. “The audacity of hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream.” New York: Random House, 2006.

⁶ Obama, Barack. “Dreams from my father: a story of race and inheritance.” New York, NY: Crown, 2004.

American dream. In 2013, the median income for a black household was \$34,598, compared to the national median income of \$51,939. Hispanics and whites have fared better than African Americans since 1967, when median household income was first recorded. Asians have consistently had a higher median household income than any other ethnic group, reaching \$67,065 by 2013.⁷ This data suggests that there may be more complex and targeted societal forces at work beyond the negative stereotype that African Americans are an inherently underachieving minority of the population. In addition to being economically disenfranchised, black citizens continued to suffer from aggressive, racially biased policing. Though violent crime in the country had generally been on the decline since the mid-1990's,⁸ people of color remained the most likely to be arrested for and convicted of violent crimes.

The increased popularity and speed of social media between 2005-2015 democratized the spread of information and gave the masses access to channels of cultural and intellectual discourse that had been previously confined within the walls of academia. According to the Pew Research Center, in January of 2015, 59% of the population owned a smartphone, and 89% owned a cellphone.⁹ Millions of people spent their days with a high-definition camera in their hands, which gave non-journalists the historically unprecedented ability to transform local events into viral news sensations within minutes. It was with these devices that people would begin to independently document video evidence of the disproportionate and particularly inhumane treatment of black and brown people by the police. The murder of a black teenager named Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri was a bittersweet watershed moment for black people, who had witnessed the dichotomy of black progress and black

⁷ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1968 to 2014 Annual Social and Economic Supplements

⁸ Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993–2014.

⁹ "Mobile Fact Sheet." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. January 12, 2017.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

suppression for generations since the fall of Jim Crow in the 1960's.¹⁰ In 2014, three queer black women — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — launched the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager from Florida. These extrajudicial killings were not on the rise due to any recent phenomenon. What had changed was that citizens were capturing videos of police brutality and its effects on black bodies and posting those videos on social media, stoking the strength and influence of the court of public opinion.

Anti-lynching pioneers Fannie Lou Hamer¹¹ and Mary Burnett Talbert¹² laid the groundwork for fighting the racialized violence met on black bodies in the early decades of the 20th Century; yet their essays and public oratory were bound by the technology of the time and limited number of people who could be reached and influenced to join the fight for social justice. During the Civil Rights movement, it was clear that the imagery on television of people being sprayed with fire hoses and attacked by dogs led to international outrage and concrete action — the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The message was clear: images have the power to spark widespread change. It was through image-sharing that activists of all stripes began to illuminate the ongoing brutality suffered by black people at the hands of police officers and racist vigilantes. Social media proved integral to the international impact of the Black Lives Matter movement and the fight for justice in a country and a world that was proving to be anything but post-racial. One could imagine that these types of images would have been instrumental in Neil's evolution as a front-line advocate for racial justice.

¹⁰ The Jim Crow laws that immediately followed Reconstruction were finally overturned with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

¹¹ Fannie Lou Hamer served as the vice chair of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party and was an active anti-lynching crusader.

¹² Mary Burnett Talbert was an anti-lynching activist and president of the National Association of Colored Women from 1916 to 1920.

Adding complexity to the racial implications of public violence, a different phenomenon was becoming increasingly frequent in the United States. Lone men, armed with multiple high-powered firearms and stacks of ammunition, were ambushing public spaces and killing unarmed people. The Sandy Hook massacre on December 14, 2012, and other mass shootings reflected an unchecked element of public violence that impacted citizens of all backgrounds. One of these events is visited in the play, where Jesse expresses his anger and frustration about a mass killing of black congregants at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015:

JESSE
Did you hear about the guy in Charleston?

NEIL
In...? What—?

JESSE
He shot up a church. A black church. It's all over Facebook.

NEIL
Um—

JESSE
Motherfucker killed nine people last night. Nine black people at a fucking prayer meeting.

NEIL
Is that why you...? You asked me here / to talk about Charleston—?

JESSE
They let him in. I can't get over that. They welcomed him into their space. They embraced him. Loved him in that Christian way. They were fucking concerned for his fucking soul and he shot them! He shot them. I mean, what the fuck? And you know the other thing I can't... The other thing that makes absolutely no sense to me... The photos. All the fucking... Have you seen them? They're still praying. The congregants. Heads bowed. Hands clasped. Standing. Circled... They invite this man into their church. He kills them. Feels justified in killing them. And what do they do? They fucking pray—¹³

The details of this particular shooting affect Jesse in a way that other events do not. Perhaps he is thinking of his Baptist parents, who are of the same generation as half the people who were

¹³ *This Bitter Earth*, 75

killed in Charleston. Certainly not lost on him is the fact that people were shot while worshipping in their own church, as opposed to protesting in the streets or engaging in activities that could be labeled as illegal, incendiary, or even mildly troublesome. If law-abiding citizens could be murdered in cold blood, then no amount of respectability could prevent Jesse from meeting a similar fate. This realization resonates with Jesse and likely contributes to his movement toward public activism.

Advocates of marriage equality found broad support as rising numbers of citizens backed equal rights for members of the American LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual) community. In 2012, Barack Obama became the first sitting president to announce his support for same-sex marriage.¹⁴ In June of 2015, the Supreme Court declared that it was unconstitutional for businesses to discriminate against customers because of their sexual orientation. Enforcement and respect of the ruling was a challenge across the country, and people made national news when they refused to provide services to LGBTQ+ citizens. High-profile entertainment figures were being publicly shamed on the Internet and began losing opportunities as a consequence of anti-gay slurs. The discussion about sexuality was a hot-button issue. It was a time of growing general acceptance of same-sex affection and the instantaneous effect of social media, which provided a broad platform for anyone with Internet access to weigh in on the debate.

Though the 21st century brings a number of progressive technological, ideological, and social shifts to American society, interracial gay couples like Jesse and Neil nevertheless continue to confront the deep-seated vestiges of heteronormative thinking and racial bigotry.

¹⁴ On May 9, 2012, President Barack Obama told ABC News anchor Robin Roberts, "I think same-sex couples should be able to get married." News, ABC. "Transcript: Robin Roberts ABC News Interview With President Obama." ABC News. May 09, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-robin-roberts-abc-news-interview-president-obama/story?id=16316043>.

While they unpack each other's presuppositions borne of differences in race and class, they also must turn a careful gaze to the surrounding world's varied responses to their identity as a couple.

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, CLASS, AND SEXUALITY IN AN INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIP

The interplay of race and class is a living, breathing, ever-shifting entity in Jesse and Neil's relationship as they seek common ground upon which to establish mutual connections and build trust. Because there is more space between them with regards to race, that is often the ground upon which they stand when facing challenges in communication and empathy.

Jesse's enamored regard for *The Cosby Show* underlines the challenges of being a black person in America, and the crisis of media representation for black people who do not subscribe to negative racial stereotypes:

JESSE

The thing is... The Huxtables? They looked like us. Like me. Like my family. I mean, my parents weren't doctors or lawyers, but they believed in education. They stressed the importance of discipline and hard work and fucking... goodness, you know? In striving to be good. I saw my parents in Cliff and Claire. I saw myself in their kids. And I don't know... Somehow it became such a polarizing show. I mean, there were people who hated it. Said it was inauthentic. And white-washed... And maybe the show didn't liberate us. Maybe it wasn't the revolution we needed at the time, but for me... for me... It was the first time I saw black people who I could relate to in the mainstream media.¹⁵

Jesse is secure in his African American identity, but validation by society and representation outside his own family are still important. Though he was able to make that connection to the black family by watching *The Cosby Show*, there was no programming to help him sort out his identity as a queer black man. Having been raised around whites in rural Kansas, Jesse lacks meaningful relationships with other black men and tends to more comfortably identify with the experiences of white men. Considering the fact that his father is still resistant to his sexuality,

¹⁵ Ibid., 31

Jesse may have no black men to connect with, except for his roommate in New York. He contends with the out-of-body experience that many black people feel when they know that they're black, but lack access to a black community. Rivers utilizes direct address to create space for Jesse to share his interior conflict with the audience. Jesse begins by reflecting on the fact that all of his experiences as a queer black man have been with white men:

JESSE
My first serious boyfriend was white.
The first boy I moved in with was white.
My first meet the parents' moment
My first knock down drag out fight
My first HIV scare
All white.
White white white white white. (*beat*)
And then there's Neil...
(*beat*)
And it's not that I don't like black men or non-white men for that matter. I do.
I mean, I like men.
Period.

As he states his case for his apparent preference for the company of white men, he takes a defensive stance by declaring that he is not desirable to black men:

...But—
See the thing is
It's not even a preference really
White men over—
It's that black men just don't like me.
They don't get me.

He argues that though he is fully present in his black body, he is mainly accustomed to “white experiences” of which most black men lack understanding. He continues to distance himself from other black male bodies and minds:

...And frankly—
Frankly, I don't get them either.
All the posturing.
And the posing.
And the hyper-masculinity.
And yes, I realize that I'm that dipping into some pretty dangerous territory here.
Lumping an entire group of people together based on my experiences with a select few so... But I mean we all do it, right?

In this moment, Jesse is speaking outside of his own black body and referring to black men as if he is not a member of that group. The posturing, posing, and hyper-masculinity that he mentions in the passage are borne of the complexities of having to traverse public spaces where their manhood is constantly challenged. The performance of “toughness” is arguably a useful survival strategy for many black men, particularly those who live in racially and economically marginalized communities. Jesse attempts to acknowledge this reality:

...And maybe it's that white men are allowed to be soft
Well, softer than—
That they're encouraged by their mothers or their grandmothers or whomever to
be artistic And self-aware
And gentle.
And maybe black men aren't given that opportunity
(Not with the same frequency anyway)
Because maybe gentle gets you killed.¹⁶

He completes his thought with a questioning of his own black male identity, noting that his own survival tactic is to make himself as non-threatening to whites as possible. Though he does not mention it here, this scene hints at a bigger question about Jesse's lack of interest in front-line activism: Might he have been an activist if he wasn't concerned about being considered a threat to white people? Jesse seems to be on a journey toward the understanding that wherever they are raised, black men often must perform whichever reactive identity that keeps them from being killed. This is the space that Jesse occupies when he falls in love with Neil.

Neil is aware that his identity as an upper-class white male creates a gap of experience and perspective between Jesse and himself. When Jesse pushes him to acknowledge his privilege, Neil attempts to shorten that distance by normalizing the experiences that his family's wealth provides for him:

JESSE
Once upon a time you climbed some mountain. I think it was in California—?

¹⁶ Ibid., 36

NEIL

I took a year off after high school and hiked from Mexico to Canada. Loads of people do it—

JESSE

Loads of people aren't profiled in the *New York Times*. Just how big is yr trust fund?

Jesse continues to challenge Neil about his wealth, revealing Jesse's own assumptions of how wealthy people should "perform" their privilege. Neil continues to deflect:

NEIL

My grandfather owned a construction company in the fifties. He made a little money—

JESSE

A little / money—?

NEIL

It's not a big deal—

JESSE

Are you serious right now? Are you seriously insisting that this *isn't* a big deal cause *GIRL*—¹⁷

Both men know that Neil's wealth affords him the time and resources to travel around the country, fighting for racial justice. He does not suffer from the limitations of most others in the struggle — the persistent need to provide a living for themselves. Neil testifies that he is not a leisurely heir who simply lives off his family's wealth, but Jesse dismisses that argument out of hand:

JESSE

You don't have to work, Neil. / You have a trust—

NEIL

I work / I do—

JESSE

You volunteer. Which... don't get me wrong. I think it's amazing. The good you do. How good you are. But it's not the same thing.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

Possessing an acute awareness of the potential for their disparate identities to create space between them, the couple often resolves emerging conflicts with intimacy. Many scenes of the play occur in their bedroom, before or after sexual engagement. This exposed space is where the most revealing, emotionally vulnerable conversations take place. In what can be considered a radical approach, Rivers invites audiences to witness the sexual energy of two men in close quarters, whose love exists outside the heteronormative perspective. The watcher must confront any internal assumptions or biases with regards to the sexual intimacy of two men.

The racial dynamics in the relationship have the potential to complicate the most banal of exchanges. When the couple decides to move in together, Neil reports a comment from his mother that she is excited that Jesse will keep the couple's living space tidy. Though she may not have intended it, the subtext of her statement is that the black partner will clean up behind the white partner. Neil is using the comment to signify his mother's comfort with the two of them living together, but in this case the racial implications are not lost on him:

NEIL

My mom's exact words were, "Maybe now when we come to visit we'll be able to see the floor." She's counting on you—

JESSE

To clean up after yr messy ass? Please! I ain't yr maid.

NEIL

That's what I told her you would say.

JESSE

You know me so well.

NEIL

I do, in fact.

Neil's white parents appear, on the surface, to be cheerfully accepting of his black boyfriend. They gush over Jesse, admiring his taste in flowers and his demonstrated exposure to literature that they admire. Yet, beneath the surface of their glowing approval are racial and

class-based assumptions that suggest that Jesse passes muster only because he fits prescribed norms of respectability. Neil mentions that his father was impressed by Jesse because he was the "first boyfriend I brought to the house whose face hasn't glazed over at the mention of Billy Collins or Joan Didion."¹⁹ As the first black man that Neil has brought to meet his parents, Jesse is subjected to the juxtaposition of who he is — educated, cultured, intelligent — against Neil's parents' racialized assumptions about who he *may* be. One might presume that, though Neil's white boyfriends lacked Jesse's intellectual and cultural prowess, the bar for their acceptance was lower, as they'd still been taken home to meet the family.

Jesse's parents seem more overtly disapproving of his gay relationship, evidenced by his father's passive-aggressive act of openly praying that God bring Jesse a woman. One cannot discern Jesse's mother's perspective from the text, but a safe assumption is that she loves and values her son enough to continue engaging with him, irrespective of her feelings about his sexuality. After a surprise overnight visit from Jesse's parents, who engage in a number of uncomfortable exchanges with Neil, Jesse attempts to diffuse the situation with humor:

JESSE
HOLY SHIT. Eamon and Sheryl Howard, ladies and gentlemen. Eamon and Sheryl Howard. Making things awkward—

NEIL
Awkward as fuck—

JESSE
Awkward as fuck since 1983.²⁰

Neil meets Jesse's discomfort with understanding, jokingly asking if Jesse's parents were in the room when he came out to them.

The translations that are required for any healthy relationship are multiplied for Jesse and Neil, due to their distance across lines of race and class. They use humor, empathy, and intimacy

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

to strengthen their bond and fortify themselves for the battle that is their existence in the outer world.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF WHITE ALLYSHIP IN THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Jesse and Neil's love story begins in a space of white allyship and black racial fatigue. Neil, a white man, is holding a bullhorn in the middle of a Black Lives Matter rally, and Jesse, a black man, has been dragged unwillingly to the rally by his black roommate. Once the two have met and are getting to know each other, Jesse accuses Neil of holding the identity of *activist*, a word which Jesse seems to regard with derision. Neil is approaching his niche in life, having attempted and rejected a corporate career, but he is not yet ready to call himself an activist. The fact that the first time he shows up to a rally, he's handed a bullhorn, may not be lost on him, which might be the reason for his reluctance to call himself an activist at that stage in his development. Nonetheless, he cares deeply about racial justice and finds it problematic that Jesse does not share his approach to the fight:

NEIL
Why do you have to say it like that—?

JESSE
What? Like what? / Like—?

NEIL
Activist. Like you just put something disgusting in yr mouth—

JESSE
I didn't say it like that. (*NEIL gives JESSE a look.*) What? I didn't—

NEIL Fine—

JESSE
I don't even sound like that—

NEIL
You do actually, but whatever.

Neil then attempts to diminish the fact that he, a white man, held a space of leadership in a cause for black lives:

NEIL
To answer yr question, no, I'm not some kind of *activist*—

JESSE
You were hanging off a statue! Waving a bullhorn—!

NEIL
My first time—!

JESSE
Whatever you say.²¹

At this early stage in their relationship, Neil is walking his own path to discovery of his identity as an activist, and is not yet comfortable taking full ownership of that mantle. Yet in their private space, Neil often pushes Jesse away from what he sees as complacency. It is clear that Neil has the expectation that Jesse, as a black man, should be railing in the streets about the injustices that are met upon people like him. Neil enjoys incredible privilege in the racial and financial realms, but this privilege can create blind spots and limit his ability to understand the complexities of black resistance in America. For Jesse, his everyday survival is an act of resistance. This creates moments of contention as they reach for common understandings, since Neil does not recognize that his identity as a white ally for black lives is mutable, whereas Jesse's identity as a black man is not. The inherently problematic nature of white allyship emerges in the wake of Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri:

NEIL
We are going to help—

JESSE
How? How are you / going to help—?

NEIL
By being there / By being available. By doing whatever needs doing—

JESSE
Bullshit / BULLSHIT—

NEIL
No, helping people isn't bullshit—!

²¹ Ibid., 8.

JESSE
A busload of guilty white people—

NEIL
OK / O-K—!

JESSE
White people trekking nine hours to Missouri to provide *general* assistance to hurting black people? That, in my opinion, is some bullshit.

NEIL
That's not fair.

JESSE
Maybe not, but it's accurate.²²

Neil strikes out or retreats when Jesse confronts him about white people holding space at the center of black pain. He continues to grapple with the placement of his own privilege in spaces where he is eager to lend value to the cause of racial justice:

NEIL
I don't even remember how I ended up with the megaphone in the first place. Honestly, I was as surprised as... I mean, there were *so* many people. *So* many... bodies, you know? I'm talking knees and elbows and arms and legs. And everyone was pressing in like—
(*NEIL demonstrates.*)
And at one point I looked down. Just like—
(*NEIL demonstrates.*)
You know?
I looked down and there it was in my hand—
...
And it wasn't like I had any intention of using it. I mean, number one: It wasn't mine, right? The megaphone. Not mine. And number two: I was just there to support, you know? In solidarity. But then the guy next to me noticed that I had it, that I was holding this megaphone, and he was like, "Why the fuck aren't you using that thing?" And I was like... that's a good fucking question—²³

He holds an awareness of his whiteness in a racially charged environment and decides to hold space only after he is given permission. Neil then carries this validation forward and uses it as a shield whenever Jesse challenges him on his intentions in the movement.

Neil interprets Jesse's lack of active protesting as apathetic. He doesn't recognize that Jesse's very survival in a white supremacist society has been a revolutionary act of resistance. In

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Ibid., 48.

an attempt to engage Jesse with the local chapter of Black Lives Matter, Neil holds a meeting at their apartment. One may also surmise that there are also elements of virtue signaling²⁴ in his act of bringing the group to his home so that they can meet his African American boyfriend. When Jesse declines to attend the meeting, Neil pushes at Jesse to acknowledge his intersectionality and take to the streets:

NEIL
You do realize that yr under siege right?

JESSE
Under siege? / Excuse me—?

NEIL
Yr a fucking double minority in 2014, Jesse. Yr black and yr gay and yr just standing there. Doing nothing.

(beat)

JESSE
I'm not... I'm not doing nothing—

NEIL
Yr educated. And yr passionate. And yr talented as fuck. And yr not doing a fucking thing.

JESSE
I am living my life, Neil. I'm— What else do you want from me? What else do you want me to do?

NEIL
More, OK? Fucking more.

As a white ally, Neil wants to prove useful to the fight for racial equity and perhaps to also assuage his own privilege-driven guilt. Such a feeling needs a certain type of oxygen to survive, and the air was thick in Ferguson, a place with a deep history of racial imbalance and injustice. Neil's simplification and romanticization of the struggle for racial justice widens the

²⁴ Virtue signaling is when a person makes overt declarations of their values in order to gain favor with the members of a particular group, of which they are not a part. It is often used as a strategy for building trust and credibility. British author James Bartholomew invented the term in 2015.

gap of empathy between the two lovers and facilitates an environment in which Neil is able to become enraptured in the adrenaline of protest and sleep with another activist.

After returning from Ferguson, Neil is confronted with feelings of helplessness, questioning what he had initially felt was a noble and secure identity as an activist and ally. In Ferguson, Neil found himself in an unfamiliar place where he wasn't particularly welcome or influential. He was not in the majority, and he did not have the advantage of a power imbalance. As he works through the unfamiliar feeling of being a minority, he misses an opportunity to exchange empathy with Jesse because he is lost in his own thoughts:

NEIL

It was weird. Being there. On the "ride." Observing. Volunteering. It was good, obviously. Obviously, it was good but also... weird. Or not weird exactly just... It's just I've never—

JESSE

What? You've never / what—?

NEIL

Felt so white.
(*JESSE laughs.*)
It's not funny.

JESSE

Babe, you *are* so white—

NEIL

I know, OK. I know, I just... I've just never felt like... like I had to prove myself, you know? Somehow work to dispel the thought that I'm some kind of interloper. Some kind of spy.

JESSE

Welcome to *my* world.

NEIL

It's like... I know that on paper I have more in common with – well, you know – with those officers. But that's not who I am. That's not who I am.

JESSE, *empathetic*

Yeah. I know.

Neil seeks to reconcile his identity as a white ally with the fact that the world sees him as a white man and will not always take his activism into account. There is also the desire of white allies to never be accused of racism and to always be seen as a "friend" of black people — a provider of

safe spaces for weathered black bodies and souls. Neil spends a great deal of time virtue signaling his liberal credentials, even referring to the liberal leanings of past generations of his family. As the partner of a white ally, Jesse finds himself having the out-of-body experience of comforting a white person in despair about the vicious mechanisms of white supremacy.

MUSIC AS CULTURAL CURRENCY

Much of American music is steeped in a particular racial identity, shaped by who created it, the geographic region where it originated, and who claims it as their own. These indicators have been used for decades to market music to various ethnic groups in the country. Though the identifiers of music can change over time, (jazz and rock music were born in African American circles, but are now more popular with white musicians and audiences), most musical styles and artists remain strongly racialized, with such terms as “white music” and “black music” still in circulation. For generations, African Americans have adopted their songs as anthems and tools of survival, through which to commiserate, uplift, and subvert popular culture. This is also true with the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized groups, where certain artists and songs are taken under the group’s ownership and considered part of that group’s identity. Such songs play the multiple roles of seducer, provocateur, and healer in Jesse and Neil’s relationship.

In the beginning of the play, Rivers introduces the audience to the moment of violence that shatters the lives of Jesse and Neil. They have been drinking and they are leaving a bar, happily singing “The Fifty Nifty United States” a benign children’s song that illustrates the normalcy of their relationship. As the two men become lost in their own personal world, they are forced to reckon with the challenges of being marginalized people in a public space, when Neil is fatally struck in the head with a beer bottle. The song they are singing just before the incident is a treasured memory from Jesse’s childhood:

NEIL

Wait wait wait—how does it go again—?

JESSE

How do you not know this song? It's like essential—

NEIL

Essentially what? / And essential to whom—?

JESSE

What do you mean essentially what? / A proper education. A *basic* education—

NEIL

“Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas...” / What comes after Arkansas—?

JESSE

I can't believe you went to private school—

NEIL

California! / “*California—*”

JESSE

Celia and Markus paid like forty thousand dollars a year for twelve years and you don't know what comes after Arkansas—?

Jesse expresses that the song represents innocence, history, and a potential common ground for the two lovers. The idea of the “good old” United States as being “nifty” certainly must hold some irony for Jesse, having been a black child in the American heartland. Still, his reverence for the song and attempt to use it to connect with Neil are clear. This is particularly significant because the tragic act of violence brutally robs the moment of its childlike innocence and plunges them back into the much less forgiving adult world. Rivers employs this motif three times in the play, underscoring the repetition of traumatic memory and the fleeting, temporary nature of life.

Early in their relationship, the couple hears Gloria Gaynor's disco hit “I Will Survive” in a bar. This song is a popular anthem of the LGBTQ+ community, given its powerful message of resilience that has resonated for decades since it was first released in 1978. Upon hearing the song, Jesse and Neil are able to deepen their connection by singing the song together in the bar at

the top of their lungs, creating a positive memory of joy, infatuation, and growing affection. This also serves as a precursor to Jesse's choice to join the front lines of the racial justice struggle.

Rivers demonstrates the complexities of navigating a gay, interracial relationship through the song "Lot's Wife" from the musical *Caroline or Change*. The exchange begins with Neil questioning Jesse's commitment to fighting for racial justice in the form of public protest:

NEIL

But honestly... yr really not bothered by what you see when you look around—?

JESSE

It's not that I don't understand the importance of protest or whatever, the importance of speaking up and speaking out. I know my history. I've seen *Eyes on the Prize*—

Each new piece of information offered in the exchange provides an opportunity for one person to validate their identities and build credibility with the other. As a civil rights activist, Neil enters the conversation holding a great deal of honorary African American in-group credibility. Jesse plants his flag by indicating that he's viewed *Eyes on the Prize*, an award-winning documentary about the Civil Rights Movement, and thus is perfectly aware of the history and value of protesting against racism in America. Jesse then shifts the currency to the realm of theatre, an area where he holds authority as an MFA student in playwriting. He begins by questioning if Neil is familiar with the title character from *Caroline or Change*:

JESSE

But it's like Caroline Thibodeaux says... You do know Caroline Thibodeaux, right?

NEIL

What kind of homo do you think I am?

(JESSE smiles)

Jesse can't help but smile at Neil's counter to his challenge, a lighthearted reference to the stereotype of gay men having extensive knowledge of musicals and show tunes. An additional connecting cord is the fact that *Caroline or Change* was written by Tony Kushner, a gay Jewish

playwright who also wrote the award-winning HIV-AIDS awareness play, *Angels in America*.

Jesse goes on to use lyrics from “Lot’s Wife” to emphasize his reluctance to take to the front lines of civil rights protest:

JESSE
Well, she says--
(*JESSE sings.*)
*"Some folks goes to school at nights,
Some folks march for civil rights.
I don't.
I don't got the heart.
I can't hardly read.
Some folks do all kinds of things and
Black folks someday live like kings
And someday sunshine shine all day
Oh sure it true
It be that way
But not for me"*

Neil doubles up in his response by continuing the song and shifting the intent of the character to push the challenge back to Jesse:

NEIL
Yeah well she also says--
*"Y'all can't do what I can do
Y'all strong but you ain't strong like me"*
So... just imagine if she'd been on the front lines.
(*beat*)
I love Tony Kushner, by the way.

JESSE
Me too.²⁵

Here, Rivers’ masterfully uses music as a tool in a quick-paced exchange of ethos, seduction, and persuasion.

When Jesse finds that words are insufficient in times of conflict, he engages with Neil through music. He plays the brooding, sorrowful “Black is the Color of my True Love’s Hair” by Nina Simone as Neil prepares to leave for Ferguson, Missouri to fight for justice in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder. The couple had previously held a conversation about Jesse’s resistance

²⁵ Ibid., p.9

to Neil's decision to leave. Unsatisfied with the results of the discussion, Jesse channeled his feelings through the song, sparking resentment in Neil:

NEIL
Seriously, Jesse? This song—?

JESSE
It's a beautiful song—

NEIL
Unquestionably. It is an unquestionably beautiful song, but it's also a dirge—

JESSE
It's a beautiful dirge.

(And then—)

NEIL
My hair's not black, by the way. The lyric? "Black is the color of my true love's hair—"

JESSE
Yeah well maybe it's not about you.

NEIL
Jesse.
(NEIL turns off the music.)
We talked about this—

JESSE
YOU talked—

NEIL
NO.
WE, Jesse.
WE talked.
WE dialogued.
WE discussed.
You said it was OK—

JESSE
I've changed my mind—

NEIL
Yeah well it's a bit late for that. Charlotte'll be here with the van in five minutes—

(JESSE turns the music back on.)

NEIL
Seriously? Yr being a child.

Their argument escalates and Neil ends up leaving for Ferguson without the couple having resolved their feelings about the trip. Jesse then turns up the volume on the music, perhaps in an attempt to assuage his fears for Neil's safety. Here, music functions as both a love language and a provocation toward further conflict. Jesse also plays music as a salve for his broken heart after Neil is unfaithful to him. Dinah Washington's haunting voice in "This Bitter Earth" is filled with the pain and longing that Jesse is experiencing as he attempts to heal his broken trust.

In his desire to connect to Jesse, Neil also uses cultural currency. He wants Jesse to know that he has been exposed to African American icons and black culture. The *Cosby Show* theme song is important to Jesse, in how it represents the normalization of black middle class families on television. Neil uses this as a way of connecting to Jesse in a specifically "black" space:

JESSE

My parents gave me a box set of *The Cosby Show* before I left home. I wore that shit out.

NEIL

I fucking loved that show.

JESSE

Really?

NEIL

Yes, really. White people watched *The Cosby Show*—

JESSE

Yeah, I know that white people... That— I wasn't saying—

(*NEIL chuckles at JESSE'S inability to form a sentence.*)

JESSE

Shut up.²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., 31

Neil also leverages Sam Cooke's "Twistin' the Night Away," as an opportunity to share with Jesse the history of liberalism in his family, opining on how his grandmother was a Sam Cooke fan. He repeats his grandmother's description of Cooke as "raw and raucous and loud and crazy," and reports that it was "the best concert she ever went to."²⁷ Though Neil may not be conscious of its full implications, such a statement is rife with racial markers that harken back to the Harlem Renaissance, when white people entered black spaces to experience what they determined to be the innate sexual freedom and openness of black people. This hyper-sexualization of black bodies was first established during slavery, when black people were forcibly bred and raped to fulfill the financial and sexual needs of white owners. This is the racial history that complicates the interactions of a black and white interracial couple. While the couple is listening to Sam Cooke, an artist known for his magnetic sexuality, Neil is encouraging Jesse to move his hips and yell with abandon. If both men were of the same race, this conversation would likely be grounded in temperament and personality. Yet because Neil is white, he already presumably occupies a safer, freer space to perform his emotions and identities. Neil cannot relate to the experiences of a black man who has had to survive in white spaces for his entire life, and may still be sorting out his own identities, independent of whiteness. Though Neil is aware of racism and the need to fight for racial justice related to police brutality, here he misses a more nuanced implication of his behavior and that of his ancestors. These behaviors are built upon the premise that black culture is available for white consumption at white people's pleasure.

LGBTQ+ INTIMACY IN PUBLIC SPACES

²⁷ Ibid., 37

When Jesse and Neil move through public spaces as a couple, they have three significant exchanges that demonstrate the difficulties of navigating other peoples' responses to their individual and collective identities.

The couple encounters an elderly white woman on the subway, who is staring at them as they hold hands and kiss. As two relatively young men, they do not see the elderly woman as a physical threat and respond to her disapproval by increasing their public displays of affection. Though the society they live in is generally kinder to members of the LGBTQ+ community than in the past, there remains resistance to seeing non-heterosexual couples openly sharing loving gestures. It is significant that, in a patriarchal and youth-obsessed culture, that the two men seek to taunt the seemingly helpless woman with more displays of their love.

Neil recounts a separate confrontation when the couple had been walking down a New York street and a strange man called Jesse racial and homophobic slurs. Jesse, accustomed to minimizing aggression in order to keep himself safe, insisted that they not respond to the public act of verbal violence. Present in Jesse's historical memory was likely the knowledge that there was a time when black people were forced to cross the street if whites were headed toward them on the sidewalk. Neil was not weighed down by such racialized historical memory, nor did he have to consider the very real possibility that if Jesse had responded to the man's slurs with violence, he would likely be met by an unsympathetic and potentially abusive police officer. Neil possessed the freedom, privilege, and gumption to confront the offender — at least anecdotally — and wanted to approach him in a more concrete fashion. Each man knows that had he been walking alone in the same streets, the offender likely would not have said a word. It was their presence together and their obvious connection that emboldened people to express their bigotry — and on this occasion, the bigotry was directed only at Jesse. Couples that do not fit

heteronormative or racial norms often find themselves weighing the practicality and safety of public confrontation. These quandaries are compounded for an interracial gay couple, for whom their public displays of affection remain a revolutionary act. Neil intimates that "Ever since that day I've felt like fucking shit up."²⁸

One of the unfortunate disadvantages of existing in a society of increasing public acceptance of members of the LGBTQ+ community is the unknown number of people who continue to harbor ill will towards those same community members. The most impactful and tragic public encounter that the couple has is the one that takes Neil's life. The couple has been drinking and is likely less attentive to potential threats than they might usually be. They are living their truth as two men in love, embracing each other and singing happily. They are not trying to peel apart which element of their coupledness offends others, and whose reactions they are safe enough to respond to. They are having a private moment in a public space, and they do not see the beer bottle hurling toward them. The audience never sees the offender, and no satisfactory explanation is given of why the bottle was thrown. Rivers only provides the moment and its immediate aftermath: the loss of a loved one to a random, deadly act of violence — which is how black people experience what the nation calls "racial violence." This randomness is compounded by the fact that Neil, as a white ally for black justice, turned out to be safer in racialized spaces than he was while existing with his boyfriend as a gay man.

JOINING THE FIGHT: JESSE'S JOURNEY TOWARD THE FRONT LINES OF THE FIGHT FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

²⁸ Ibid., 64.

Rivers provides us with a glimpse into Jesse's consciousness through his description of the dream sequence that he has written into his own play. The dream is abundant with African American figures of music, literature, and culture. One can interpret that the dream of a costume party is a metaphor for the code-switching that black people must often employ in white spaces so that they may survive with their humanity intact. Upon Neil's insistence, Jesse reads the text of the dream scene aloud, filling the room with the names of black luminaries of arts and culture, through space and time — all of whom have compelling stories of confronting racism. There is a cautious freedom to the dream; a place where there are no white people nor children, but where no one is able to be present as their full selves. In the dream, the protagonist engages with the openly queer black poet Essex Hemphill, wearing a mask of Tupac, a rapper known for publicly exploring the dichotomy of black male toughness and vulnerability.

Hemphill says to the protagonist:

“I have yet to understand why emotional expression by men must be understated or under control when the process of living requires the capacity to feel and express.”
I looked over at him and I fell into his eyes.
I wanted to kiss his lips.
“I don't get it either,” I said.²⁹

This idea recalls Du Bois' double-consciousness — the multiple masks of identities that black people wear for others, so that they are not burdened with having to accept their full selves and so that they may not be killed by them. But when do African Americans have the opportunity to explore what is underneath the mask for themselves? The protagonist of the dream serves as an avatar for Jesse's subconscious mind, which yearns to express and emote with the freedom that a racist world will not allow a black man to enjoy. Throughout the play, Jesse reflects on the possibility to escape the box that society built for him several generations before he was born.

²⁹ Ibid., 42.

After Neil's death, Jesse is asked to speak at his funeral. He expresses hesitation to take on the task, and then there is a visitation from Neil, reading Essex Hemphill's poem "When My Brother Fell." This call-to-action arouses in Jesse the courage to eulogize Neil and fight on with Neil's weapons of choice. Jesse finds his voice and begins his steps toward the front lines of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

CONCLUSION

Harrison David Rivers crafts a memory play that centers an interracial, gay relationship and challenges prevailing assumptions about race, gender and class. It is a play bound with radical acts of romantic love, love of humanity, and self-love.

The narrative of *This Bitter Earth* unfolds in moments; flashes of poetic memory that illuminate the complexities of human empathy, the emotional fatigue of oppression, and the damaging effects of privilege on those who exist both within and outside its reach. Neil lives the truest life that he is able, and dies fully present in his truth. After Neil's tragic death, Jesse is forced to take account of his own engagement with the fight for racial justice. He finds his outside voice and picks up Neil's weapons to join the front lines of the struggle for racial equity. The audience is left with the story of a couple who did their best to love themselves, each other, and humanity while navigating a complicated world:

NEIL

I think... I think you should be you. And I should be me. And we'll just...
fill in the gaps for each other. We'll fill in the gaps. I think that's the only way
this is gonna work.

JESSE

Deal.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

TEACHING THE PLAY

General Discussion (Grades 7-12)

Text-to-Self Connections: Reflecting on personal experiences that connect to events in the play

Many of the issues in this play require an educator or facilitator trained in trauma-informed care to provide a safe, structured environment for productive and enlightening discussion. In some cases, particularly with regard to LGBTQ+ students, discussions are advised only in well-established safe spaces such as LGBTQ+ friendly organizations, clubs, and student groups.

- Falling in love/being in a relationship
- Interracial relationships
- LGBTQ+ relationships
- Student activism around Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ issues, and/or other marginalized groups
- Allyship and activism of non-marginalized people
- Infidelity/betrayed trust
- Random violence

Text-to-Text Connections: Exploring and comparing similar works of theatre in style and content

- Analyze other two-character plays
- Read and compare other plays that feature LGBTQ+ characters and/or interracial relationships
- Examine other forms of literature such as novels and poetry collections that examine LGBTQ+ and interracial relationships

Text-to-World Connections: Connecting the play with real-life events in society

- Research and discuss the murders of Philando Castile, Jamar Clark, and other African Americans profiled in the Black Lives Matter movement
- Explore and discuss the worldwide Black Lives Matter movement
- Discuss marriage equality and the history of LGBTQ+ rights in the United States
- Watch *Eyes on the Prize*, the civil rights documentary mentioned in the play

Writing & Performance Exercises

- Non-fiction response prompt (Level 1)
 - Write a summary of the play in the form of
 - Tweet
 - Blog
 - Press Release
 - Elevator Pitch
 - Engage with one of the characters in the play or historical figures in the dream via
 - Letter/email
 - Tweet
- Creative Writing (Level 2)
 - Write and/or perform a monologue from the perspective of one of the characters
 - If I had my way...
 - The problem is...
 - I wish that...
 - Write and/or perform a 5-minute play using
 - Reinterpretation of the characters
 - What happened before or after events in the play
 - Response to the play
 - Compose a text message conversation between the two characters reflecting some part of the play

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND FIGURES

Abagnale, Frank	Frank Abagnale is the name of a con man played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2002 film <i>Catch Me If You Can</i> .
Ailey, Alvin	(1931-1989) Alvin Ailey was an African American dancer, choreographer and civil rights activist who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York in 1958.
Anacostia	Anacostia is a community in Washington, D.C. that lies east of the Potomac River and holds the majority of the city's underserved African American population.
Baker, Josephine	(1906-1975) Josephine Baker was an African American singer and dancer, famous for performing in her iconic "banana skirt." She is one of a number of black performers who fled racism in the United States and moved to France to find great success and notoriety.
Baldwin, Jimmy (James)	(1924-1987) James Baldwin was a novelist, playwright, and public intellectual who wrote several revered books on race, sexuality and identity, including the novel "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and "Notes of a Native Son," an essay collection. He was known for his directness in speaking about race with white people, and he was among many African American public figures who fled the racism of the U.S. to find popularity in Europe.
Basquiat, (Jean-Michel)	(1960-1988) Jean-Michel Basquiat was a well-known visual artist of the Neo-Expressionism art movement who began his career as a graffiti artist until being pulled into the commercial art scene by art celebrity Andy Warhol. His visually arresting work often addressed race and class.
Catch Me If You Can	(2002) <i>Catch Me If You Can</i> is a film featuring Leonardo DiCaprio as a young con man on the run from a determined detective (played by Tom Hanks).
Collins, Billy	(1941-) Billy Collins is a white American poet whose writing is known for examining everyday suburban American life.
conkaline	"Conkaline" or "congolene" is a hair straightener made with potatoes, eggs, and lye.
cultural appropriation	Cultural appropriation is a sociological term indicating the act of a member or entity of one culture exoticizing or "othering" elements of another culture through the usage of the exoticized culture's symbols.
Davis, Ossie	(1917-2005) Ossie Davis was an African American actor, writer, director, and civil rights activist who was married to Ruby Dee, also a famous actor and activist.
Dee, Ruby	(1922-2014) Ruby Dee was an influential African American actor, playwright, and civil rights activist who was married to Ossie Davis.
Didion, Joan	(1934-) Joan Didion is an award-winning journalist, novelist, and playwright who is best known for her sophisticated treatment of American individual and group psyche.
dirge	A sad song or poem.
Ellison, Ralph	(1914-1944) Ralph Ellison was an award-winning novelist, best known for his seminal novel on African American identity, <i>The Invisible Man</i> .
Eyes on the Prize	(1987) A documentary film series that chronicles the events and figures of the United States Civil Rights Movement.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND FIGURES

Ferguson, MO	Ferguson is a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, in which African American teenager Michael Brown was shot by a white police officer and left uncovered on the street for hours. The circumstances and aftermath of his death lead to a community uprising that was met with a military-level response from local and regional law enforcement.
Garner, Eric	Eric Garner is a black man who was choked to death by police officers on July 17, 2014 in New York City while selling loose cigarettes. A video of him saying “I can’t breathe,” while inside an illegal chokehold by officers went viral on the Internet and became a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement.
Gibson, Althea	(1927-2003) Althea Gibson was a groundbreaking African American tennis and golf player who integrated those sports at a number of major events. She was the first African American Grand Slam title holder, among numerous other sports victories.
Ginsberg, Allen	(1926-1997) Allen Ginsberg was a poet who is regarded as one of the architects of the “Beat Generation.”
Haley, Alex	(1921-1992) Alex Haley was an African American writer who is best known for the books “Roots” and “The Autobiography of Malcolm X.”
Hemphill, Essex	(1957-1995) Essex Hemphill was an openly gay poet, author, and performer who published several works addressing sexuality and race in the 1980’s and 1990’s.
Heritage Foundation	The Heritage Foundation is a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C.
Hines, Gregory	(1946-2003) Gregory Hines is one of the most well-known tap dancers of American history, whose Broadway, television, and film career include the famous film <i>The Cotton Club</i> .
Jabberwocky	The jabberwocky or jabberwock is an imaginary creature and the subject of a poem by Lewis Carroll. The dangerous beast is killed over the course of the poem by the narrator’s son.
L’ouverture, Toussaint	(1743-1803) General Toussaint L’ouverture was the leader of the Haitian Revolution that overthrew French rule on the island of Saint-Domingue, which was later re-named Haiti.
Langston (Hughes)	(1902-1967) Langston Hughes was an African American icon of the Harlem Renaissance movement of the 1920’s. He wrote poetry, novels, essays, and plays that examined race and class in the United States.
Louie (Armstrong)	(1901-1971) Louis Armstrong was an influential jazz trumpeter who is most famous for his gravelly singing voice and his song, “What A Wonderful World.”
Marian (Anderson)	(1897-1993) Marian Anderson was a classical vocalist and the first African American to join the Metropolitan Opera. She was famously refused the opportunity to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, DC in 1939, but later that year was able to sing at the Lincoln Memorial for over 75,000 people.
Martin, Trayvon	Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old African American boy shot to death by George Zimmerman in Florida on February 26, 2012.
McQueen, Butterfly	(1911-1995) Butterfly McQueen was an African American actress who is known for her role as Prissy in the 1939 film <i>Gone With the Wind</i> .
philly	A “philly” is a haircut popular with African American men of the “hip-hop generation” in the 1990’s (currently making a resurgence) that is tapered around the edges and long on the top of the head. It originated in Philadelphia.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND FIGURES

Romare (Bearden)	(1911-1988) Romare Bearden was an African American visual artist, author, and songwriter known for his paintings depicting black interior and exterior life.
Tamir (Rice)	Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old boy who was shot by police on November 22, 2014 in a park in Cleveland, Ohio, while holding a toy gun.
Thibodeaux, Caroline	Caroline Thibodeaux is the title character in Tony Kushner's 2003 musical <i>Caroline or Change</i> , the story of a black woman who works as a domestic for a Jewish family.
We Are the World	(1985) Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie wrote this award-winning, chart-topping song that raised millions of dollars toward humanitarian aid in several African countries. The song was performed by a cohort of dozens of popular musicians of the 1980's.
Wilson, Darrin	Darrin Wilson is the white police officer who shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014.
Zora (Neale Hurston)	(1891-1960) Zora Neale Hurston was an African American anthropologist, playwright and novelist whose most famous work is the novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

A conversation with Sarah Bellamy, Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre Company

How do the events in *This Bitter Earth* reflect our country's current social justice conversation?

So, I think in some ways at the center of this play is a conversation about how black people are surviving the violence exacted against us. Jesse is withdrawn, introspective, protective. He doesn't have more to give to the fight because as a young black, gay man it's a fight just to stay alive. In the Twin Cities, Jamar Clark and Philando Castile were recently killed, and it was amazing to see how diverse those protesting these murders were. A great number of white allies showed up to hold space, which is powerful, but if they're not on their own racial justice journey, their advocacy can be taxing for people of color. There is a visible labor and weight that a person of color can end up shouldering to help white folks on their journey to becoming a good ally, and in times of emergency that is not where we need to be investing our precious and already depleted resources. I think that Neil and Jesse's relationship is challenged by some of the same burdens and this is reflective of a larger trend in the US today.



Why is it significant to produce *This Bitter Earth* now?

I respect Harrison as an artist and I want to support his work. I read the script and saw a reading of it in his home with his husband and family, and I thought, 'This is fascinating — all these meta-layers...I want this play.' I think it's a lovely way to commemorate *Loving v. State of Virginia*³¹ and *Obergefell v. Hodges*,³² and how LGBT folks of color are sandwiched between these two pieces of legislation. We have seen that just because you legislate something doesn't make it true, and it doesn't change people's hearts overnight. For me, deciding to produce *This Bitter Earth* was commemorating *Wedding Band*,³³ too.

Talvin Wilks [Director] is going to hold a space that is so honest and true to these characters. Talvin and Harrison are brilliant, rigorous thinkers. I want to learn from and with them, and add institutional weight and community accountability to their work. That's the mission of Penumbra.

What will audiences experience when they see this play?

I expect a lot from our audiences at Penumbra. Those who have been with us for a long time know that there's work to be done. Seeing intimacy between two men on stage, black and white, is political. A lot of people are surprised that interracial couples grapple with the same things we grappled with years ago. A lot of people think we should be farther along.

I hope that audiences see a lot of tenderness and a lot of grace, and real people loving each other and messing things up for each other and themselves. That's life. And most importantly, I hope the play stays with them and moves them to use whatever resources they have to drive change toward social progress and equity. Everyone deserves to feel safe, to love and be loved, and to express our identities authentically and without fear of violence or prejudice.

³¹ *Loving v. State of Virginia* was a case that began in Virginia and was eventually elevated to the Supreme Court, where it was ruled that state statutes outlawing interracial couples were unconstitutional.

³² *Obergefell v. Hodges* was a lawsuit that originated in Ohio and rose to the Supreme Court, which ruled that it was unconstitutional for states to ban same-sex marriage.

³³ *Wedding Band* by Alice Childress is a play about an interracial couple in the 1960's, inspired by the case *Loving v. State of Virginia*. Penumbra Theatre Company produced this play in the fall of 2017.

A conversation with Talvin Wilks, Director of *This Bitter Earth*

What excites you about directing *This Bitter Earth*?



The main excitement is an opportunity to work with Harrison. I've followed his career from very early on in New York City. Harrison is a new, black, queer voice speaking of a generation, so that excited me a great deal.

I know the kind of play that I'm best suited for. My students have a term that they use for work that suits me: *Talvinesque*. I look for choral work, ritual work, plays with multiple layers, plays that have a musicality to them. *This Bitter Earth* is very Talvinesque.

How did you develop your vision for staging the play?

This Bitter Earth is a dream play, a memory play. We know the end at the very beginning. The first challenge of this play was to conceive of a world that could contain time travel. I like the sparseness of the way Harrison's described the world, so it means that I can *make* the world. The play needs a strong interpretive place, otherwise you get lost with where you are in the story. I decided to set everything in the bedroom. The bedroom is magical. If it's a disco, they're dancing on the bed. It's meant to be suggestive. I'm also enhancing the use of projection as a storytelling device. There's this wonderful dream where Jesse meets Essex Hemphill and others. I'm representing them with words and projected text. Zora Neale Hurston's quote "I feel most colored against a harsh white background" — that's how Jesse would think of these artists. Through their words, and not just images.

What is distinctive about the storytelling of this play?

I really love Harrison's unique sense of dialogue. I love the quick exchanges, I love the scene structure. I've also always admired the way he can capture unique visceral language, intimacy, sensuality and sex. He's witty, clever, and lyrical. This play has short scenes that pack a strong emotional punch.

How will this play challenge audiences?

We're challenged by what Harrison has put before us — this interracial, gay relationship in which the politics of what we may expect do not necessary fall in line with the realities of the two characters. This play challenges the notion of liberal politics, and black nationalism, and all of those issues that have been present for a long time. We're seeing it through the lens of these two characters and the challenges of race in their lives.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about this process?

An acknowledgment about Penumbra and the importance of doing this season and this particular play: I appreciate their commitment to writers and the importance of writing about the plays, where that work lives, and how it is shared with the audiences. Penumbra holds a unique cultural place in the American theatre landscape and their emphasis on the importance of new works really supports the continuum of our culture and our history. This work is a vibrant part of that.

A conversation with Harrison David Rivers, Playwright of *This Bitter Earth*

What is special to you about Penumbra Theatre producing *This Bitter Earth* at this time?

I was a theatre kid, so Penumbra was always a part of my understanding of the theatre. There is something special about a black writer, and a black director and audience in a theatre. Sarah Bellamy is pushing the company in a really exciting way. It feels like the windows are being opened. This *Bitter Earth* feels situated in that growth moment. We believe in the work and each other, so we're going to take that step together.



We as people need to engage with what is going on with our world. I think that the theatre can be a venue for that engagement, and this particular play, which touches on quite a few looming issues going on today, will hopefully provide a beginning of a conversation. That's what theatre has the potential to do. If the work is good, then that dialogue can be deep. You want people leaving the theatre feeling changed and curious.

As a playwright living in the Twin Cities area, how do you envision your involvement in helping Penumbra's audiences unpack and process the events and ideas in the play?

As an artist and as the creator of the piece, I show up to listen. It means something when the person who created the thing that you are now responding to is present. I feel like people should know where art comes from, because that's part of the process. I want people to know how the thing came to be. I want them to understand what the artist goes through to bring this to life on stage. But I do love it when audiences leave and they're having their own conversations, and I'm walking behind them and they have no idea I'm the playwright. It's exciting that they are taking the play with them beyond the walls of the theatre. I think one can learn and grow from both of those interactions with the audience.

What is your writing process when you're working on a new play?

When I look at my plays, there's a consistent "Harrison" spirit. My plays come from my heart and my body. I write what I know. Everything comes from something that means something to me. When you stop making work that way, that's when you lose yourself creatively. I am committed to making work that is way too confessional in an artful poetic way ... things I'm passionate about that are part of my everyday or my neighbor's everyday, so that I have access to it.

How do you see your voice engaging with other emerging playwrights of this generation?

There are so many other playwrights who are writing now. Beautiful playwrights. We each have our own way of moving. We're all contributing, whether we know each other well or not. There's a real warmth with black playwrights. Even if we don't know each other well, we're saying good things about each other. It feels like a really powerful moment to me right now. Something needs to happen and it feels to me that there are some rumblings, and I think those rumblings are exciting. Winter is coming! It's going to shake things up.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

*“If you could — I’m not sure how this would be achieved
By magic?
But I’d banish the long-held assumption that characters in plays
(Unless specifically noted otherwise in the dramatis personae)
Are white.”*

-Harrison David Rivers

Harrison David Rivers resides in St. Paul, Minnesota. His plays have been performed and developed at The Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, Lincoln Center, P73, LABYrinth Theatre Company, The Drama League, New York Stage & Film, The National Black Theatre, Classical Theatre of Harlem, Harlem Stage, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Diversionary Theatre (San Diego), About Face (Chicago), TheatreLAB (Richmond), The Playwrights' Center, Theatre Latte Da, Pillsbury House, and The American Airlines Theatre on Broadway.

Rivers has also written *Heartland*, a play with music inspired by Jacqui Banaszynski's Pulitzer Prize-winning article “AIDS in the Heartland;” *And She Would Stand Like This*, a ball culture scene set adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* for The Movement Theatre Company in New York; An untitled adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestris* for the University of Minnesota/Guthrie Theater BFA Actor Training Program; *Only You Can Prevent Wildfires*, a commission for Ricochet Collective in New York about the woman who set the largest forest fire in Colorado history; *Five Points*, a musical (with Douglas Lyons and Ethan Pakchar) about the birth of modern tap in Lower Manhattan in the 1860s; *Where Storms are Born*, *When Last We Flew*, *The Sea & The Stars*, *The Salvagers*, *The Bandaged Place*, *Look Upon Our Lowliness*, *And All the Dead Lie Down*, *The Last Queen of Canaan*, a musical (with Jacob Yandura and Rebekah Melocik) about a young black woman fighting for independence in the Jim Crow South; And *Sweet*, a play about two sisters vying for the affection of the boy next door.

Awards include the McKnight Fellowship for Playwrights, the Many Voices Jerome Fellowship, New Dramatists' Van Lier Fellowship, New York Theatre Workshop's Emerging Artist of Color Fellowship, New York Stage and Film's Founders Award, Aurora Theatre's Global Age Project Prize for *the bandaged place*, an Edgerton Foundation New Play Award for *Where Storms Are Born*, and a GLAAD Media Award for *When Last We Flew*. He has twice been named a finalist for the O'Neill National Playwrights' Conference and the Jonathan Larson Grant. He was a Kleban Prize finalist in 2016. His main influences are James Baldwin & Essex Hemphill.