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Honors Program First Prize Essay

ETHNOCENTRICITY AND ETHICAL AUTONOMY IN AUGUST WILSON'S *RADIO GOLF*

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Set in Pittsburgh's Hill District in the late 1990s, August Wilson's drama, *Radio Golf*, follows the story of Harmond Wilks, an African American man who is running for mayor. His major campaign strategy involves redeveloping the Hill District through an urban renewal project; he plans to build an apartment building as well as multiple chain-stores. However, problems arise when Harmond realizes that a home that is supposed to be demolished to make room for the apartment building was acquired illegally. Saving the house would set the project off-course, and Harmond disagrees with his wife, Mame, and closest friend, Roosevelt, about how to handle the situation. Both Roosevelt and Mame have made great investments in the project: Mame's involvement helps her to be chosen for a high-ranking governmental job and Roosevelt's participation requires a significant financial contribution. Because of this, the two are in support of demolishing the house, since only they and Harmond know that it was acquired illegally. Harmond, on the other hand, thinks that it should be saved, an unpopular judgement that loses Mame her job offer, severs his relationship with Roosevelt, and essentially ruins his chance at his run for mayor. At the end of the drama, Harmond goes to protest the demolition that Roosevelt has set back into motion. In *Radio Golf*, playwright August Wilson suggests that ethical autonomy is impossible for main character Harmond Wilks because of the systemic racism of the society in which he resides. This is evident through the challengers and reinforcers of ethnocentricity in the play.

In arguing that ethical autonomy is impossible for Harmond, one must outline what such a state of power consists of and what its associations are in the context of the play. In *Radio Golf*, Wilson suggests that one's autonomy is only ethical in the sense that it serves a social purpose, reconciling the needs of the individual with those of the community. In the context of Harmond's candidacy for mayor, an ethical autonomy would consist of both his success in gaining a governmental leadership position while simultaneously catering to the needs of the community he represents, namely, the Hill District. In accordance with this model, it becomes clear that an unethical autonomy could also potentially exist, where the leader would acquire the position of power but fail to use it for the communal good. However, it is unfeasible to lack autonomy completely while still significantly fulfilling the needs of the community, through sort of ethical subordination. With that said, it is important to note that the autonomy Wilson advocates for in *Radio Golf* is indeed an ethical one, even though it seems to be impossible because of systemic racism. Critic Harry Elam agrees, stating that Wilson urges people of color to exemplify an ethical autonomy through a type of "black pragmatism, or the belief that an ethical commitment to act against conditions of injustice and oppression should always trump political expediency," and self-interest (190). Wilson's advocacy for people of color's ethical autonomy is motivational; however, because of his main character's existence in a systemically racist society, it is impossible.

Race theory and ethnic studies each help to identify and explain the factors that contribute to the aforementioned systemically racist society which rejects the successful, ethical autonomy of blacks such as Harmond. One contributing feature of this type of society is ethnocentrism, a term defined by Julian

Wolfreys as the “cultural analytic by which other cultures are judged, read or interpreted according to the implicit or explicit assumption of the centrality, superiority, or primacy of one’s own culture” (40). Since *Radio Golf* takes place in a white-dominated society, black culture and initiatives are deemed acceptable so long as they do not threaten white centrality. This concept is illustrated through multiple characters who both do and do not threaten the ethnocentricity of the white-dominated society in which they reside. The characters who take up an ethical autonomy are seen as threats to white centrality and are consequentially rejected by the social order, while the characters who take up an unethical autonomy and reinforce white dominance are left alone. Because of ethnocentricity, Harmond fails to obtain the power to decentralize whiteness while supporting characters unknowingly reinforce white centrality, which makes it impossible for him to secure an ethical autonomy, or to improve the state of the community from a position of power.

Mame makes Harmond’s role as a character who does indeed challenge white centrality and superiority evident in multiple instances during his campaign. For example, in order to win the election, Harmond must secure a voting bloc that includes both whites and blacks in Pittsburgh. While he decides to open his campaign office in the “all-black, impoverished Hill District” in an attempt to affiliate himself with “black empowerment,” Mame tries to persuade him to instead choose a space in Shadyside, a predominantly white area (Elam 190, 189). She explains that “You don’t want to start out your campaign excluding people,” fearing that by merely associating himself with blackness and black positions through the placement of his office, Harmond will drive away potential white voters (Wilson 8). Mame’s fear arises out the awareness that the society in which she and Harmond reside in is an ethnocentric one that rejects any possible displacement of white centrality, even through minor adjustments such as the intentional designation of a black neighborhood as a potential place of power instead of a white one. Mame’s assertion is ironic, as it is vastly more likely that the residents of the Hill District are the ones currently being excluded from representation, which highlights the situation’s ethical dilemma. Nonetheless, her comment brings up an interesting point: because acting in accordance with his campaign’s objective, namely, the improvement of the community through black autonomy, will put him at a disadvantage in the election, it is impossible for Harmond to act authentically while also securing the votes needed to put his objective into action by winning the election. Thus, the ethical autonomy which he aspires to exemplify becomes impossible because of the ethnocentrism of the systemically racist society in which his campaign takes place.

In another instance that takes place during his campaign, Harmond must decide if he will run a section of a speech in the newspaper that criticizes the city’s police commissioner because of a recent case of police brutality—an additional action that could alienate potential voters—or if he will cut the seditious, but morally imperative part out. Mame begs him to cut the segment, fearing that it could cost him the election, and she clarifies her worry by stating that “Nobody’s going to vote for an angry mayor” (Wilson 30). Again, Mame’s worry is reasonable in this instance: ethnocentric voters who would reject a displacement of their dominate culture will likely reject the power of someone who is indeed trying to displace it. By imploring Harmond to focus on securing voters instead of acting ethically toward the black community, Mame illustrates the very real chance that any denial of white superiority will be rejected by the dominant culture and thus thwart his chance at winning the election and becoming mayor. In choosing to run the speech in its entirety, Harmond’s ethics make his autonomy impossible.

Characters who unknowingly reinforce ethnocentricity also contribute to the systemically racist society that is responsible for Harmond’s failure to realize an ethical autonomy. Functioning as a foil to the main character, Harmond’s friend Roosevelt fails to directly challenge white centrality and superiority and instead reinforces the model of an unethical autonomy, making his individual needs ones of top

priority while ignoring the needs of the community. For example, while talking to Sterling, a working-class man and Harmond's friend, Roosevelt separates himself from the black community as a whole, claiming that "It's not my fault if your daddy's in jail, your mama's on drugs, your little sister's pregnant and the kids don't have any food because the welfare cut off the money. Roosevelt Hicks ain't holding nobody back" (Wilson 77). In this instance, Roosevelt "obscures the historic conditions of neglect, job loss, and racism that contributed to the current crises' conditions," and thus fails to use his capitalistic autonomy in a way that is meaningful for the community, instead using it to justify his own self-serving interests (Elam 200). Critic Anthony Stewart agrees that loyalties toward certain interests tend to "justify behaving unacceptably toward individuals or groups whose loyalties reside with another club" (174). In this instance, Roosevelt's loyalty to his own power through capital justifies his unacceptable behavior toward those whose loyalties reside with the larger community. This unethical use of power erases black history and makes it harder for Harmond, a character who wishes to "be the mayor of all the people," to legitimize his position as an ethical one that supports black people and in doing so, threatens to displace whiteness from its established centrality (Wilson 56).

The most apparent example of Roosevelt's reinforcement of ethnocentricity through an unethical autonomy comes when he decides to force a buyout of the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Project in order to "protect the company's financing structure," by going through with the plan to raze the home that was purchased illegally (Wilson 79). In this decision, Roosevelt uses his unethical autonomy to re-center white dominance by giving his white business partner Bernie Smith control over the redevelopment plan that initially belonged to Harmond. Not only does Roosevelt use the capital he has gained in acting as a puppet for Smith to protect his financial stake in the project, but he also uses it to ignore the obvious illegality of moving forward with the destruction of the home. In this instance, Roosevelt uses his capitalistic autonomy to act in pure self-interest, which in turn hurts the community he should be serving. Critic Nathan Grant agrees that Roosevelt's actions are unethical, describing how "the demands of capital...are forever shackled to the severe human cost of acquiring and securing it" (161). In this case, the cost of capital is evident through the injustice of the situation. However, because Roosevelt acquires an autonomy through capital that Harmond seems to lack, the imbalance of power allows him to control Harmond and make the realization of an ethical autonomy impossible.

Ultimately, despite Harmond's profound concern for ethical autonomy and his best efforts in actualizing it through his mayoral campaign, the systemically racist society in which he resides makes the realization of such a power unfeasible. Wilson's portrayal of such a dilemma through *Radio Golf* illustrates an even more disturbing truth: the power to be autonomous in a systemically racist society comes at the cost of denouncing one's ethical responsibility toward the community in which he or she comes from.

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