"This Is Me Right Here": August Wilson and Pittsburgh's Hill District

Betina Jones
“THIS IS ME RIGHT HERE”:
AUGUST WILSON AND PITTSBURGH’S HILL DISTRICT

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Betina Jones

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Betina Jones

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ABSTRACT

“THIS IS ME RIGHT HERE”:
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By
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May 2011

Dissertation supervised by Linda Kinnahan, Ph.D.

This project highlights the connections between August Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle and the history of property, ownership, and housing in the real world Hill District where Wilson was raised and set almost all his plays. The project examines seven of Wilson’s plays in relation to the history that provides important context to these texts. He avoids most of the iconic markers associated with 20th century black American history and instead emphasizes the local, offering a decade-by-decade snapshot of a single African American neighborhood. Culturally, the Hill District’s heyday ran from the 1930s to mid 50s, when many of the greatest contemporary black jazz musicians, athletes, and other performers traveled to and through the Hill. Wilson, however, slides
past these glory days and focuses on two eras in Hill District history: the Great Migration and Urban Renewal.

This project is divided into six chapters, each focused on a specific historical context relevant to at least one of the plays. This context is based on the characters’ own history rather than the era depicted in the play. *Fences*, for example, is set in 1957 but the protagonist (and Wilson himself) points back to his southern youth in the 1920s and experiences as a migrant in the 1930s. *King Hedley II* is set in 1985 but the underlying historical event is 1950s urban renewal. At the end of the cycle, *Radio Golf* – set in 1995 – mimics the city’s new redevelopment programs. The protagonist’s discussion of property and neighborhood worth, however, echoes a decades-old debate over definitions of “blight.”

Wilson’s theme of ownership becomes vital in the process of establishing identity and he focuses on the link between character and location, the individual and home. I also argue that Wilson’s increasing specificity of place corresponds to a growing emphasis in his work on the necessity of joining individual activism to collective identity and community support. As characters try to establish homes and businesses during these two eras of upheaval, Wilson examines the ways African Americans create and sustain identity and community when the social and economic context offers only fragmentation.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family. Quite simply, none of it would have been possible without you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you first and foremost to my dissertation committee. It was only appropriate that I should finish my graduate education with three people who have been my role models, who have each taught me so much both in and outside class. I never would have made it through without all of you. Linda Kinnahan, my dissertation director, offered patience and guidance I valued more than she knows. Dr. Michael’s editorial eye was equaled by her advice. She has always been concerned with what was best for me, not simply what was the common path. Dr. Brannen gave insight, humor, empathy, and tea. All were gratefully consumed.

A special thanks to the English Department, where collegiality has always made it a welcoming place. In particular, I wish to express my gratitude to Greg Barnhisel and Kathy Glass for numerous expressions of kindness and support. Craig Bernier, my officemate and friend: our discussions transformed my outlook towards teaching and life. No mention of the English Department, or of Duquesne, would be complete without my thanks to the late “Dr. Al” Labriola. His generosity of both heart and intellect set a very high bar for all in the academic life.

Finally, thanks to my friends and family whose support -- emotional and financial -- have been the foundation of my degree. Peter Rooney and I started out at Duquesne together. It is fitting that we receive our doctorates at the same time (though on different continents). His humor is a true gift. From my family, the “smaller” things have meant the world: Granny, who always encourages me, sent boxes of oranges that offered vitamin C and sunshine to keep me going through the winter. The care packages with
New England cheese or and southern grits and biscuit mix offered the comfort of memories of home. Papa not only edited most of the chapters, he also read Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle just so we could brainstorm together. Uncle Bob entertained, fixed the plumbing, and bought the bags of seed that attracted the birds and wildlife that so cheered me while I was writing. My husband Bill… I can’t begin to list all the things you’ve done to clear the path for this project: the meals, the hand-holding (literal and figurative), the talking-me-down, the building me up. And above all, my daughter, Keely, who tolerated dissertation-related work and conversation that dominated every vacation, weekend, and dinner conversation since she was seven. Yes, now we can see a play by someone other than August Wilson.
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INTRODUCTION  “This is Me Right Here”: August Wilson and Pittsburgh’s Hill District

Of August Wilson’s ten published plays, nine take place by explicit statement or clear implication in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Some drama critics, most notably *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*’s Christopher Rawson, even refer to them as “the Pittsburgh Cycle.” The Chicago-based *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is the only play set elsewhere. According to Rawson, this was basically “because Mr. Wilson said he hadn’t yet realized that the Hill could so completely epitomize black America” (Rawson, “August Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle”). Yet in the critical analyses of Wilson’s plays the city – or the Hill – is rarely if ever examined. “I set them in Pittsburgh, I guess, because that is what I know best” (Shannon, “Blues” 554), Wilson says, and most critics seem to take him at his word, relegating the significance of the city and the District to the role of general backdrop, as if its omnipresence were merely coincidence.

The specificity of place in the plays (and the specificity of that place being Pittsburgh’s Hill District) corresponds to a growing emphasis in Wilson’s work on the necessity of joining individual activism to collective identity and community support. As this emphasis evolved, Wilson also geographically anchored the cycle more and more firmly in his hometown. In the first of the works, *Fences*, references to the Crawford Grill and the Pirates baseball team clearly identify the setting as Pittsburgh but prefatory stage notes only designate it as “a big-city neighborhood” (xv). *The Piano Lesson* contains no such description but Boy Willie identifies the location when he scoffs at the idea of a ghost coming north: “How he gonna find his way all the way up here to Pittsburgh? Sutter ain’t never even heard of Pittsburgh” (14). The published version of
August Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* identifies the setting of the play as “Pittsburgh, 1969.” *King Hedley II* references “Pittsburgh, the Hill District, 1985.” In *Jitney*, “The setting is a gypsy cab station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania” in 1977. By *Gem of the Ocean*, August Wilson’s penultimate work, the location becomes even more specific: “1904, the Hill District, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania […] at 1839 Wylie Avenue.” In case the audience has missed the significance or has not read the production notes, Wilson reinforces the location within seconds of the play’s opening. “This 1839 Wylie ain’t it?” Citizen Barlow demands, identifying the house as not simply an address but as an icon, a sanctuary, and a pivotal character.

Beyond establishing the city or neighborhood as a backdrop, the emphasis on setting helps join the historical with the literary. One of the earliest settlements outside the protective walls of Fort Pitt, the area that became known as the Hill District has a history as long as the city’s. By the middle of the 19th century it was home to immigrant groups coming to the region to work in the mills, followed by African Americans migrating from the South in the 20th century. Culturally the Hill District’s heyday ran from the 1930s to mid 50s, when many of the greatest contemporary black jazz musicians, athletes, and other performers traveled to and through the Hill. Despite his inclusion of several musician characters, the August Wilson canon focuses not on the Hill’s all-too-brief glory days but instead roughly aligns with two pivotal “moments” in Hill District history: the Great Migration and Urban Renewal.

The earlier plays fit more closely with the Great Migration, which is referenced -- either explicitly or implicitly -- as a plot point throughout *Fences, The Piano Lesson,* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (as well as the later play, *Gem of the Ocean*). The traumas
of the Great Migration are reflected in the behavior and anxieties of the characters. Questions about “why are we here?” and “who are we?” and “what is MINE?” dominate. Oppressive forces helped propel the Great Migration, but the promise of new opportunities also drew people north. Pittsburgh offered limited options, since there were restrictions on where African Americans could live, where they could work, where they could shop; but migration in general involves personal and direct action. An individual or family packing up to move north is making a choice, therefore indicating some control. The early plays are about people flexing that control, trying to find, create, and defend a home in Pittsburgh.

Later in the cycle a different historic force dominates and, while the Great Migration and a life left behind in the South are still certainly evident, the questions change. The query becomes, “What do we have left?” and the limited opportunities of the earlier works become even more closed. The late 1950s and 1960s real-world Hill District is forever associated with the demolitions and forced relocations of urban renewal programs, followed by the 1968 race riots that destroyed most of the remaining businesses. Then in the 1990s, urban renewal returned to the Hill, this time in an attempt to replace some of the life and community that had been torn away – both literally and figuratively – decades earlier.¹ With the slow, bureaucratic, and monolithic process of urban renewal, Wilson’s characters -- like the real world people of the Hill District -- are allowed few choices. The threat is not only external but also faceless. Property is taken

¹ A recent article advocating the development of a slots casino in the lower Hill even described it as, “50 years ago, the city tore down a neighborhood to build the Civic Arena. Today, the Penguins, Isle of Capri and Nationwide could tear down the Civic Arena and build a new neighborhood” (slotsformario.com). Protests of Isle of Capris’ Hill District site were particularly vocal, both from the neighboring Duquesne University and especially from residents and leaders from the Hill District itself. The bid for the license was rejected and awarded to the proposed site on a largely non-residential section of the North Side.
not with a gun and a torch but with a certified letter. Through urban renewal programs, displaced residents were either relocated to a dwelling of the government’s choosing (and often of the government’s construction), or they were evicted and left to their own devices. Because of horrific housing conditions and severe restrictions, black residents found the chance to control even the most basic aspects of life curtailed. Wilson’s characters -- already manifesting insular, defensive behavior in the early part of the cycle -- become even more defensive and insular. By his 7th play (6th in the Pittsburgh cycle) he even has a character proclaim, not to an individual but to the world at large, “Everybody better back the fuck up off me!” (King Hedley II 58).

The theme of home ownership becomes vitally important in this process. A black-owned home or business, one almost always owned by a central character, serves as the setting for each of the Pittsburgh plays. Wilson populates his works almost exclusively with blacks from the working and lower classes, consistently groups with the lowest rates of home ownership. Aunt Ester’s house on Wylie Avenue becomes the anchoring location of the Pittsburgh cycle, playing its most significant roles in the two plays that bookend the century: Gem of the Ocean and Radio Golf. Although Berniece orders her brother to leave her home in The Piano Lesson, both siblings know that their uncle, Doaker, owns the house. The setting of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is a boarding house, but it is owned by one of the characters, Seth Holly. Troy and Rose Maxson own their own home, and their competing motivations for erecting a fence around it become a central metaphor in Fences. Another, smaller fence appears in King Hedley II, where the title character strings barbed wire around his meager garden. The tiny plot of dirt behind his row house (the same setting as for Seven Guitars) carries special significance by the
end of the play to the entire cycle. Urban renewal plans shadow the remaining pair of works, where Memphis Lee demands just compensation for the restaurant he owns in Two Trains Running, and the Jitney drivers come together in the end to retain physical – if not legal – possession of the building from which their business operates.

The significance characters place first on owning property, and then keeping and protecting that property, is linked to social and economic contexts outside the plays. The impossibility of ownership under slavery is obvious but post-Civil War opportunities were nearly as bleak. For emancipated slaves, one of the most painful and disillusioning aspects of the Reconstruction Era was the unfulfilled promise of property rights and ownership. “To blacks, economic autonomy rested on ownership of land” (Reader’s Companion 922), and the symbolic importance of property and ownership cannot be overstated. The freedmen assumed that the end of slavery would mean the end of their subjugation to white landowners and that opportunity for economic advancement and independence would now be open to them, and many even dreamed of reparations.² On all three fronts, hopes were crushed.

Considering the population of the Hill District, and the overcrowding, poverty, and devastation to that population through the 20th century, the number of homeowners in Wilson’s plays contrasts sharply with reality and is therefore all the more remarkable. In Pittsburgh, rates of black homeownership were, and are, far below those of almost all other racial and ethnic groups. Abraham Epstein reported that, of the “over five hundred Negro migrants” (7) he surveyed in 1917, “Almost ninety-eight percent of the people

² President Andrew Johnson ordered the return of federally-seized lands to their pre-war white owners in mid-1865 (Reader’s Companion 922). William Tecumseh Sherman’s Special Field Orders. No. 15 turned 400,000 acres of confiscated land over to 40,000 black refugees at the end of the war, but this was also overridden by the fall (988).
investigated live either in rooming houses or in tenements containing more than three families” (11). A 1934 study by the Tuberculosis League of Pittsburgh reported that only 6% of those blacks residents surveyed owned their own homes and a quarter of them were in imminent danger of foreclosure (Witchen 56). By 1946 the Pittsburgh Housing Association reported that 34.1% of white Pittsburghers owned their own homes but only 12.7% of black Pittsburghers did (Bunzel 7-8). Expanded to include “the Metropolitan District proper,” the gap increased to 40.1% versus 15.6% (8). By 1996, poverty levels in the Hill were so high, and affordable private housing so scarce, that subsidized public housing accounted for close to half of all residences there (Hill District Community Plan viii). The 2000 census saw a 3% increase in black homeowners citywide, but the disparity was still enormous: 72% of whites owned their homes versus 39% of blacks (Bello).\(^3\)

In the plays, each character’s attachment to property goes far beyond economic implications. Wilson focuses on a link between the character and location, the individual and home. Housing has an impact on nearly every aspect of existence and can both reflect and determine social status. Exposure to crime and community; proximity to shopping, employment, social services, and institutions of education and culture; and quality of sanitation are all based on the housing opportunities and options. A home is an external marker of permanency, belonging, and place, and evidence of rights, including legal rights. By the very physicality of buildings, homeownership encourages – or at least has connotations of – permanence, community, and stability. Across economic lines in America, property has long been one of the primary ways for individuals to sustain

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\(^3\) The percentages were higher for Pennsylvania as a whole. “Statewide, 50 percent of blacks own homes compared to 75 percent of whites, the figures show” (Bello).
their immediate family and often elevate successive generations. Homeownership therefore both offers and symbolizes at least some degree of financial, social, and emotional security.

Wilson’s characters certainly recognize the role of housing in their lives and, to many of them, home and property become potent metaphors for their lived realities. By serving as settings and backdrops, these properties also add visual reminders and weight for the audience as well as physical representations of the characters’ tenacity, values, and success. Without the economic or political power enjoyed by other groups, these characters focus on the little plot of earth they do have. Yet it is not the buildings themselves that are significant to understanding Wilson’s plays. Rather, it is the characters’ attitudes towards their homes and property that are important. Although Aunt Ester’s house on Wylie Avenue stands as unique and iconic, each home or business that serves as a setting for a play holds its own significance to its owner.

Individuality, identity, and autonomy are all important to the characters of Wilson’s Hill District but they are not things that come easily. Characters describe their situations in ways that convey feelings of being caught, misunderstood, alienated, exploited, and singled out. Again, these feelings are often conveyed via dialogue related to property and housing. For example, Wilson incorporates frequent references to the logistics of ownership. Some characters talk about how the home was acquired; others focus on how the property can be retained. In many of the plays, characters even discuss their specific method of payment. Individually these details evoke curiosity; collectively, they become an overarching theme. They emphasize the relative rarity of ownership, illustrate the overwhelming influence of institutionalized and internalized racism, and
help to explain why some key characters place so much emphasis on their homes.

These dialogues underline the scarcity of opportunity and the extreme lengths African Americans have to go to in order to claim the most fundamental components of the contemporary American Dream. In *Two Trains Running*, Memphis Lee is able to buy his restaurant only after winning big in a numbers game. The Maxsons in *Fences* reference a second restaurant owner -- Pope -- who likewise bought his business with numbers’ winnings. King Hedley II, about to have his home sold out from beneath him by his mother, hustles to save money to buy a video store, hawking stolen refrigerators and committing an armed robbery to raise the rest of the funds. Boy Willie's plan for ownership in *The Piano Lesson* is predicated on the sale of an irreplaceable family heirloom.

Whether the dialogue focuses on how a character acquired his property or on how he manages to retain it, Wilson implicitly acknowledges the rarity of that ownership. He also points to the ways the characters are outside the norm of both their neighbors and a mainstream culture that assumes ownership by conventional means: banks, inheritance, or steady employment and income. Indeed, of the characters that discuss the origins of their ownership, only a handful fit into a perceived social norm. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*'s Seth Holly inherited his home and *Jitney*'s Youngblood and Becker each buy a house with money from a full-time job. Even these examples deviate from convention, however. Seth is a rarity because his father was a rarity: a northern black freeman with property. Becker’s role and influence in the white world is remarkable to (and often remarked upon by) the other characters, and Becker himself points to his unusual social and economic stability as the source of his remaining pride. Youngblood does save
enough for a down-payment through countless hours of extra work. While struggling to scrounge together the money for a home in the declining Pittsburgh suburb of Penn Hills, however, his marriage is almost destroyed by the strain, his family goes hungry, and the sustainability of the mortgage is seriously in doubt with the pending closing of the jitney station.

Both urban renewal and the Great Migration are inextricably interwoven with the history of housing in the Hill District and linked with the role and portrayal of housing in the Pittsburgh cycle. As characters try to establish and sustain homes and businesses during these two eras of upheaval, Wilson examines the ways African Americans create and sustain identity and community when the social and economic context encourages fragmentation. But Wilson does not simply diagnose social woes. In his later works, particularly those involving Aunt Ester, he advocates for individuals to recapture that lost control through some form of collective activism and through a strengthened sense of community. Regardless of the outcome, Wilson’s most successful characters learn to come together, to gain strength through community, and to fight -- together, as a community -- whatever the threat.

By focusing so heavily on ownership, Wilson’s characters (and by extension, Wilson himself) are “claiming” the Hill District. Within each play, the racism, violence, inequality, and simple disregard from the white world are assumed. The characters know the deck is stacked against them well before the curtain goes up. Although trauma, oppression, and racism are omnipresent, however, they are not the focus of the Pittsburgh cycle. Instead, discovery or revelation lies in the characters learning how to deal with this context of race and class on their way to becoming “whole.”
This dissertation project will trace some of the overarching histories, trends, and events that illustrate the role and importance of property on the Hill District. I offer an overview of the link between the playwright and his literal and literary hometown. The focus will be on housing, identity (of individuals and of the neighborhoods of the Hill), and general themes of ownership. By looking at this limited subject -- the history of housing in the Hill District and Wilson’s use of property ownership within his plays -- I hope to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between the historical and the literary.

My first goal is to use the history to illuminate the literature. An awareness of some of the complex history of the Hill District enriches a reading of Wilson's plays and adds depth and clarity to some of the themes running through his work. Audiences do not need the specificity that comes from, say, comparing the numbers of immigrant versus black households in 1930 in order to understand the role of the ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* (set in 1937). Indeed, the overview of housing in this chapter only occasionally corresponds to specific events or references within the text. But the historic overview reveals the central role housing plays to a population facing both real hardships and successes. In the same vein, King Hedley’s impending death in *Seven Guitars* reflects the staggering number of cases of tuberculosis within the city in general and the Hill District in particular. Yet far more relevant is the link between his obsession over his garden and the low rates of property ownership in 1948, the year the play takes place, or the fading connection between city dwellers and their rural backgrounds and generations of agricultural heritage. Also relevant, certainly, is why TB rates in the Hill District were so high in the first place: horrific overcrowding, sanitation, poverty, malnutrition, and lack of health care.
My second goal is to use the literature to uncover the history. There are problems with extrapolating the meaning of a work from the author’s biography (or an author’s biography from a literary work). Likewise, the ‘reality’ of a location should not be confused with its literary representation. The fidelity of James Joyce’s literary Dublin to existing streets and landmarks would do a cartographer proud. The volume of formal plaques and commercial tours marking the settings referenced throughout Joyce’s works show just how marketable such a travelogue can be. Despite this exactitude, however, the city in *Dubliners* or *Ulysses* is fictional: a literary interpretation of Joyce’s hometown, of Irish culture, of Catholic repression, and all the other themes included in the author’s works. Despite this acknowledgment, Joyce’s writings can help one come to understand something essential about the Dublin he grew up in, and even something of the Dublin that exists now. The same can be said of Wilson’s Hill District. August Wilson was an artist, not a surveyor. The Hill District in his plays, like the landscapes in any great artist’s work, is at most a representation or interpretation and should not be confused with the place itself. But the history of the “real” Hill appears within the plays and therefore justifies examination for a fuller understanding of some of Wilson’s connections. As with Joyce, Wilson can also help us understand something essential about the District, or at least understand something of those who have lived there.

Related to this, the representation of the fictional Hill reflects back on and influences audiences’ perceptions of the real Hill District. With Wilson’s death, with work progressing on a new hockey arena and the other revitalization efforts in and around the Hill District, and with renewed attempts at preserving key cultural landmarks (including Wilson’s boyhood home), the Hill’s evolution continues. This study attempts
to capture something of the historical moment of the Hill as it stands now and as it was when Wilson wrote of it, before the current form, like the former versions of the District, is lost.

I. Existing Scholarship

Considering the increasing prominence of the Hill District in his plays, the lack of literary analyses of Wilson’s use of this setting is surprising. Critics have observed Wilson’s repeated use of the Hill, and Pittsburgh is sometimes even “credited” as the source of his racial and artistic foundations. Harold Bloom, in a single short biographic sketch, references the racism Wilson experienced in school, cites the Post-Gazette’s recognition of Wilson as “the ‘top Pittsburgh cultural power broker’ in 1999” (12) and twice praises Wilson’s ability to capture “his native Pittsburgh dialect” (11, 13).

Reviewers, literary critics, audience members and certainly August Wilson himself have pointed to the importance of “demonstrating the historical significance of his subject” (Scott, Daniel 165) and recognizing the role events long past play in African-America’s present. The grand themes of slavery and the Great Migration are both pervasive in Wilson’s work and likewise pervasive in the scholarship. Images of prison (and the justice system in general) and of familial dynamics run through several studies. There are references to Negro League baseball (for *Fences*) or generic discussions of Urban Renewal (applicable to multiple plays, particularly *Two Trains Running* and *Radio Golf*), yet little relates to items of particular significance to Pittsburgh or the Hill. Except

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4 Keith Byerman’s “America’s Passed Time: Baseball and Race in August Wilson’s *Fences*” and James Robert Saunders’ “I Done Seen a Hundred Niggers Play Baseball Better than Jackie Robinson’; Troy Maxson’s Pleas in August Wilson’s *Fences*” are two notable examples. Both are collected in *Baseball/Literature/Culture 1995-2001*. 
as an example of yet another black ghetto, the Hill and its history are never investigated or even acknowledged in most scholarly examinations.

Yet the link between Wilson’s literature and the real Hill District offers many opportunities for research. In a city full of fascinating and often hidden histories, Pittsburgh’s Hill District offers particular richness. A collection of interlinked smaller neighborhoods, it was, and is, one of the most important areas for the city’s black communities and, before that, for the Jewish, Irish, and Italian immigrants who worked in the developing steel industry. Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Art Blakey, and Billy Eckstein all performed in the Hill’s jazz clubs. The jazz guitarist George Benson was born and raised in the Hill. Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell all played for the Negro League’s Pittsburgh Crawfords at Greenlee Field. The Pittsburgh Courier, once the most important black newspaper in the nation, was distributed (often by Pullman Porters) around the country. “The Hill” thus played a significant role in the nation’s jazz, sports, and journalistic history.

The tragedies of African-American life are also reflected there. The District experienced its own devastating version of the redevelopment programs that forever changed the texture of urban America, and it witnessed its own riots following Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. It saw the drug and crime epidemics of the 1980s and the ongoing poverty and racial segregation that define a typical American ghetto. The Pittsburgh Public Theater’s education director, Rob Zellers, commented, “I sometimes wonder, ‘Why Pittsburgh?’ But then I think, ‘Why not Pittsburgh?’”

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5 William G. Nunn, editor of The Pittsburgh Courier, covered the opening of Greenlee Field in 1933: “Pittsburgh has a new ball park, erected by a Negro [Crawfords’ owner Gus Greenlee], for Negroes, and with Negroes as participating factors. It is one of the finest independent ball parks in the country” (qtd. in Santa Maria, 23).
playwright who has written regional literature, Zellers notes both the universality and the appropriateness of the Hill as a sustained setting.

They’re not plays about Pittsburgh; they’re plays about America that happen to be set in Pittsburgh. But you can tell the whole story right here. You had industrialization. You had segregated neighborhoods. You had Negro League baseball and two of the best teams there were, the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords. You had other immigrant groups. The civil rights struggle took place here as much as anywhere. It could be any Northern industrial city, but then maybe not. Maybe all the proper ingredients were here. In the specifics of Pittsburgh, Wilson found the great universal things. (Fleming)

The story of a so-called Black America played out in all its forms in the Hill District of the 20th century, and the ongoing attempts at claiming a voice, particularly a political one, continue to play out there now as resident groups demand input on contemporary renewal plans.

Instead of analysis of Wilson’s literary use of his birthplace, the limited critical attention focuses far more commonly on the biographical detail of Wilson’s childhood there. Wilson’s relationship with Pittsburgh was a complex one. His standard biography, repeated by numerous scholars and critics (and Wilson himself), points to the racism he endured here as well as to the support and inspiration he received. The son of an absentee white father and a hardworking black mother, and later an influential black step-father, at twenty he rejected his father’s name of Frederick Kittel and combined his own middle name, August, with his mother’s maiden name, Wilson. His family moved from the Hill
District when was a teenager, but at the almost exclusively white high school he faced continual racism. There, he was unjustly questioned about plagiarism (by a black teacher), the implication being that since he was a black male, he could not have written such a strong essay. This accusation triggered his disgusted rejection of school and led to a self-directed education: reading at the local Carnegie Library and listening to the landscape of black life at barbershops, diners, and pool halls in the Hill District. The racism he faced, particularly in school, where he was ostracized, bullied, and stereotyped, certainly shaped the young writer. But Pittsburgh was also the source of his other education, the one Wilson sought himself, in the stacks of the Oakland branch of the Carnegie Public Library, and in the restaurants, bars, and the Hill’s legendary cigar store, Pat’s Place.

It was in these establishments that Wilson listened to the stories (and internalized the voices) of the Hill District, black America, and humanity. He wrote almost all his major works after leaving the region but he also spoke about his need to come back to Pittsburgh while in the process of writing each of his plays, as if he were returning to a well to refill his memories, or even to reconnect with his muse. He explained, “It was very important for me to have The Piano Lesson filmed in Pittsburgh. For Pittsburgh has provided the fuel and the father [sic] for all of my work. And wherever I travel, I carry Pittsburgh, in the vibrant life and experiences of the Hill, with me” (Rawson, “Power”). “I still have family there. So I go back as often as I can,” he told Bill Moyers: “I go and I stand on a corner, and say, ‘Yeah, this is me’” (Moyers, “August Wilson: A Playwright” 67).
The most in-depth biographical focus has been not on his birthplace, but on his key artistic influences, what Wilson has repeatedly called “the four B’s” (Jorge Luis Borges, Romare Bearden, Amiri Baraka, and the Blues), and how they have influenced not just his art but also his worldview. A chapter of Joan Herrington’s “I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done”: August Wilson’s Process of Playwriting focuses on “The Four ‘B’s’: August Wilson’s Inspiration.” Mark William Kocha likewise writes of “August Wilson and the Four B’s.” Some of the most interesting discussions of Wilson’s influences are those that focus on the link between collage-artist Romare Bearden and the playwright. Herrington, for example, compares their similar layering techniques. Bearden’s collages take the form of a “juxtaposition” of culturally iconic African American images, “thus illuminating the process of African Americans trying to meld past and future, to find their place in time, their identity” (23). Herrington suggests that Wilson’s emphasis on this [theme] is based on what Wilson observed in Bearden, but more significant is the parallel she points out between Bearden’s collages – layers of discrete items blended into a literally different, bigger picture – and Wilson’s use of layered “bits of history” and his technique of layering “small pieces drawn from a wide variety of sources” (24). Peter Wolfe also points to the influence of Bearden’s themes, titles, images, honesty, and humor on the playwright. Wolfe argues that “Bearden portrays the limits of logic, justice, and reason in a white-dominated society” – again, themes evident throughout Wilson’s works – “by relying on discontinuity and distortion” (37). All of these arguments are relevant, significant, and interesting. By observing Wilson’s influences and tracing parallels of technique, style, and worldview, the critics shed light on Wilson’s

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6 In a 1999 interview with George Plimpton he added two Ed Bullins and James Baldwin to his list of B’s.
background and the road to becoming a playwright, and offer insight into his techniques, references, and ideals.

Just as an examination of Wilson’s artistic influences provides depth to an understanding of Wilson’s work, an examination of Wilson’s use of place – his repeated use of Pittsburgh and of the Hill District as a setting (and, cumulatively, as motif) – likewise deepens the plays. The “discontinuity and distortion” Wolfe sees in Bearden is reflected in Wilson through several techniques, but one of them is via the use of a single setting through the plays and through the generations of characters. In this case, “the limits of logic, justice, and reason in a white-dominated society” are reflected in both the changes and the continuity of the literary version of Pittsburgh. The physical changes were not usually good ones. While each play is set in a single location, and while that location is invariably linked to a single-family home or business (no tenements or housing projects), the economic outlook trends down. Civil rights, an increasing black population, opening of doors in education, finance, opportunity – all are subjects in the various plays, but they are rarely evident in the physical locations Wilson chooses. He implies that this is an environment where citizens continually have to fight and struggle to get by, where with the exception of a few rare characters in Radio Golf middle-class stability and opportunities are no more available to the characters than they had been at the start of the century.

Further, although understanding the Hill itself was never one of Wilson’s stated goals, an examination of the way in which Wilson tells the story of the Hill both sheds light on the District and is a fruitful and important analytical exercise. Phylicia Rashad, the actress who played both Aunt Ester and Ma Rainey in Broadway productions of
Wilson’s plays, wrote in her remembrance of him that, “Had he not written the cycle of plays, the people of Pittsburgh’s Hill District, the community in which he grew up, would have been forgotten” (Rashad). It is impossible to separate Wilson’s role from other cultural shifts in establishing the voices that are increasingly being heard from the Hill, but Rashad’s observation certainly might apply to those in the Hill itself. “Had he not written the cycle of plays, the people of Pittsburgh’s Hill District” might themselves have forgotten their heritage. Although there has at last been at least some limited national recognition of the area’s history, identity, and validity, of equal significance are the potential changes in the District’s people, as pride in Wilson and a recognition of themselves in his works becomes internalized.

When the twenty year-old August bought his first Bessie Smith record, an old 78 of “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Jelly Roll Like Mine,” his world, at least as he described it later in his life, changed:

It is difficult to describe what happened to me… For the first time someone was speaking directly to me about myself and the cultural environment of my life. I was stunned. By its beauty. By its honesty. And most important by the fact that it was mine. An affirmation of my presence in the world that would hold me up and give me ground to stand on. I began to look at the occupants of my [rooming] house in a different light. I saw behind the seeming despair and emptiness of their lives a force of life, and an indomitable will that linked to their historical precedents became noble in a place where nobility wasn’t supposed to exist.
Wilson describes his reaction to Romare Bearden’s art in a similar way: "When I saw his work, it was the first time that I had seen black life presented in all its richness, and I said, 'I want to do that—I want my plays to be the equal of his canvases'" (qtd. in Gale Group). Wilson’s descriptions of the impact of Smith’s music and Bearden’s collages offer an appropriate parallel to what powerful regional literature can achieve for a local community, and what Wilson’s drama might reasonably be expected to have done for certain audience members. Former Pittsburgh councilman Sala Udin, a close friend of Wilson’s and a former member of Wilson’s Black Horizon Theater, explained that “August’s work put us on stage the way we are and the way we talk” (Muniain). The rest of the city has finally started paying attention to the Hill’s residents, and those louder voices from the Hill have helped shape the city’s future.

With the near-simultaneous completion of the Pittsburgh cycle and August Wilson’s death, more popular attention has already been paid to the significance of the region in his works. When Wilson died in 2005, almost every obituary and retrospective – whether published in Entertainment Weekly or The New York Times – referenced Pittsburgh as Wilson’s birthplace and as his literary focus. Many went further, painting Wilson as the Hill District’s spokesman, or the Hill as Wilson’s muse. “The Hill was to Wilson what Dublin was to Joyce,” Mike Littwin wrote in the Rocky Mountain News in 2008. “Wilson wasn’t just from the Hill. He was of the Hill.” Predictably, the most extensive examinations of Wilson and his Hill District are being generated locally, and for a presumably regional audience. Laurence Glasco, the University of Pittsburgh

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7 In one recent example, the complaints from citizens undoubtedly helped influence the decision to keep the city's lone casino license out of the Hill District, despite the strong lobbying from powerful local interests.
History professor who has long studied the history of the Hill, and Christopher Rawson, the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* drama critic, are co-writing *August Wilson’s Pittsburgh*. Director Jose Muniaín, in the 9 minute-documentary *August Wilson’s Pittsburgh: The Ground on Which He Stood*, likewise addresses the connection. Local newspapers, particularly *The Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, have covered the factual history that links Wilson to the Hill District and produced a map blending literary and real-world locations.⁸

The lack of attention to Pittsburgh within Wilson scholarship may also be because literary works that emphasize specific places to such a degree are categorized as “regional literature,” and regional literature is largely dismissed. There are notable literary exceptions (and Joyce’s Dublin is certainly one of the most obvious of them). Tennessee Williams’ plays are routinely examined within a southern context and John Steinbeck’s fictionalized California is examined within the context of the real events he describes, all with fruitful results. These authors each developed a specificity of place that is understandably and justifiably the focus of countless analyses. The case with August Wilson and the Hill District is much more slippery. Beyond the general setting, Wilson’s textual references to the neighborhood are often lightly made, easily overlooked by those who do not know, for instance, that a West Funeral Home really exists.⁹ The Crawford Grill might be familiar to some, and Wylie Avenue may be recalled by an

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⁸ The *Post-Gazette* website has a special August Wilson Index to its coverage of the playwright. Various reviews, articles, photos, and the literary map are available at postgazette.com by searching the title “An August Heritage: The Pittsburgh Cycle.”

⁹ The West family certainly noticed, however, as did many of their neighbors, and they complained about an unflattering portrayal of their father in *Two Trains Running*. Wilson’s response, that there are Wests everywhere, and that the character was not based on the real Mr. West, not only sounds naïve, but the daughters’ reaction shows just what weight these regional references can carry to a local audience.
attentive viewer from one play to the next, but it is almost impossible for an outsider (a deliberately open-ended term here) to know why Aunt Ester had to live on Wylie.

Much of the reason for the absence of analysis involving the use of Pittsburgh is just how well the plays work on the larger level, and how the ‘micro’ helps Wilson portray the ‘macro.’ Alison Sealy-Smith, the director of a Toronto production of The Piano Lesson, spoke of having initial difficulty identifying with the characters and the play. Things finally clicked, however, when she recognized the link to her native Barbados: “Instead of hearing the voices of Pittsburgh in the 1930s, I started hearing the voices of people I had heard in rum hops, that I had heard in family gatherings. I realized that I was part of this tradition” (qtd. in Hood). Sandra Shannon, the author of August Wilson’s Fences: A Reader’s Guide – a text “[a]imed specifically at an audience more in tune to practical rather than theoretical issues of the text,” and “[…] a cognitively friendly companion piece for the introductory-level reader or spectator” (xi) – emphasizes just such a sustained awareness of the specifics for understanding Wilson’s prize-winning play. She quotes Raisin in the Sun playwright Lorraine Hansberry as stressing, “One of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create a universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific” (3). Wilson himself has said that it was from one of his four B’s – Argentine writer Jorge Luios Borges and his “wonderful gaucho stories” – that he “learned that you can be specific as to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, et cetera” (Plimpton 74).

The most compelling reason for the lack of attention to the Hill in Wilson’s plays is probably that Wilson himself has not encouraged such a reading. He has
acknowledged his personal need to stay true to the setting, however. In a 1993 interview he explained that the significance of the city was in part based on sheer familiarity, but he also stressed that the specificity did not damage the plays’ universality. He also made an allusion to the specificity he connected to within the city’s history:

I think that a lot of what was going on in Pittsburgh was going on in Detroit, Cleveland, or anywhere else black Americans were. So the plays actually could be set anywhere there is a black urban community. But there are also some peculiar kinds of things in relation to Pittsburgh. I couldn’t set the plays in Cleveland because I don’t know Cleveland, but you could transfer them to Cleveland and they would play just as well.

(Shannon, “Blues” 554)

Like so many other “ex pats,” Wilson seemed better able to deal with his ambivalent relationship with his former home from a distance – not from another nation but from another region of the country. With his move to St. Paul, he says, “I had gone from the Hill District, a community with 55,000 Black people, to Minnesota, a state with about 19,000 Black people. And being there is what finally enabled me to hear the voices and to recognize and respect them. And that freed me up” (Whitaker 86). Working in St. Louis and then Seattle, Wilson’s use of the Hill grew ever more central to his plays so that the location itself seemed synonymous with the playwright. Although he referenced the specificity of the Hill in interviews as well as in his plays, Wilson himself never called for the examination of the context of a specific history of a specific neighborhood, further insuring that most audience members or readers would be unaware of the history underlying some of Wilson’s plays. In an interview he explained, “The old adage is,
‘You write what you know,’ and even though you’re writing about the 1930s, that’s not what you’re really writing about. You’re only writing about love, honor, duty, betrayal. Those are the things which the play is made out of, and you’re using 1936 Pittsburgh and that milieu to tell the story and to address those themes” (Heard 94).

Why, then, bother with an analysis of August Wilson’s representation of the Hill, and, further, incorporate the history of the District and even raise it to the level of the literature? If one takes the old adage Wilson referenced and flips it on its head, the result is a compelling reason for examining a real-world version of the literary setting: If “you write what you know,” then perhaps “knowing” that which Wilson wrote about will in turn help understand the literature itself. There are shelves of books about the Great Migration and the topic has been frequently examined in terms of Wilson’s early plays. They do not discuss the Great Migration as it manifested itself in Pittsburgh, however, and they make only passing reference to the differing experiences of black southern migrants and white European immigrants. Yet for two of Wilson’s characters -- Seth Holly and Troy Maxson -- the unequal treatment shapes their opportunities and experiences and influences their worldviews. While Wilson scholars also reference ongoing examples of inequality found in the real world, they do not make an explicit link between the contemporary oppression reflected in individual plays and the foundations of inequality established at the start the Pittsburgh Cycle. Wilson does.

For the historian or urban policy scholar, particularly one from the region, the information included here will be familiar. The history of the Hill District, the migrant vs. immigrant experience in southwestern Pennsylvania, and the history -- and controversy -- over urban renewal in the city’s poor neighborhoods have collectively
been the subject of dozens of other local dissertations. The histories included here are not
comprehensive, and are not intended to be; the reason for including them is to offer a
narrative that many Wilson scholars may intuitively guess at, but not have the specifics to
support. The inclusion of extended histories of urban renewal and of designations of
blight, both in Pittsburgh and the nation as a whole, is to fill gaps in understanding and
knowledge that are vividly apparent in the existing Wilson scholarship.

Few would dispute the claim that August Wilson was the nation’s most significant
African American playwright, and many view him as simply one of the most significant
American playwrights. The winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, one Tony Award, an additional
Pulitzer nomination, seven other Tony nominations (one of them posthumously), and
numerous other accolades, Wilson draws audiences that cross all racial and ethnic
categories and even national boundaries. His plays, each set in a different decade, span
the 20th century and the varied experiences of African-American life. But at the same
time August Wilson was chronicling both American history and African American
history, he was also telling the story of his former home in Pittsburgh. It is also not that
“universal focus” analyses are wrong; but rather that the study of regional histories can
also be beneficial. An examination of Wilson’s plays within the context of the specificity
of place, which he increasingly developed, can be as important and rewarding as an
acknowledgement of the history of the real Cannery Row or of Dublin or of southern
family dynamics. Using the specific to reach a universal does not exclude the role and
significance of the local; comprehending the local context broadens the relevance of the
works.
II. The Structure

Two pivotal “moments” -- each lasting decades -- define the story of property and housing for African Americans on the Hill: the Great Migration and Urban Renewal. They are likewise the two central events of the Pittsburgh Cycle, serving as backdrops that not only add historical veracity and relevance but also provide the political context for the turmoil in the plays and the characters’ behaviors and decisions. In the second half of the cycle the city’s devastating attempts at redevelopment dominate and Wilson became more forceful in his critique of the system and more adamant about the need for community activism. This emphasis is evident in *Gem of the Ocean*, for example, in the growth of the play’s pivotal characters, Citizen Barlow. Black Mary rejects Citizen’s advances with the observation that “Now here you come. You don’t even know what you need all you see is a woman. You can’t see nothing else.” A little later he tells her, “I got me. That’s all there is.” “That ain’t never gonna be enough,” she replies (42), implying that he needs to look beyond his own self. Near the end of the play, Aunt Ester tells Citizen about what he is seeing in his cleansing ritual: “God don’t answer to no one man. God answer to the all. All the people. They need all the people. [...] When we get to the City of Bones I’m gonna show you what happened when all the people call on God with the one voice. God got beautiful splendors” (66). Although as the chronological opening of the cycle *Gem* likewise opens the Great Migration, it was Wilson’s next-to-last-written play and thematically fits with those incorporating urban renewal. The central message is thus the need for solidarity. With the help of the other characters, Citizen finds a way to be “right” with himself and, significantly, to find a way to help others in turn.
In his earlier works, though community is important, Wilson focuses more on individual characters coming to terms with themselves, their history, and their place in the world. In the first three plays in the Pittsburgh Cycle -- *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* -- Wilson emphasizes the search and especially how each character is separated and how each is a stranger (including sometimes to themselves). There are ways key characters connect to a larger community and their actions certainly have an impact on those around them, but the early plays center on extended character studies of individuals uprooted, the “foreigners in a strange land” as Wilson references them as in the opening of *Joe Turner’s*. Although early plays include examples of deep and long-lasting friendships and family ties, the more overt theme reveals individuals set apart, of characters trying to establish or reestablish a centered self in a world where the very foundations of identity have been left behind, often habitually.

The conversation Citizen and Black Mary have in *Gem* echoes one between Mattie and Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, set in 1911 and written early in the cycle. Herald tells her, “You a full woman. A man needs a full woman. Come on and be with me.” Mattie, alone and longing for a dependable companion, nevertheless accurately responds: “I ain’t got enough for you. You’d use me up too fast” (77).

The Great Migration, the massive internal movement of African Americans, meant a new life in an unfamiliar world. In the shift from rural to urban, southern to northern, everything was altered: there were changes in foods, climate, houses, neighbors, jobs, customs, and rules. Black migrants faced rough transitions and housing situations that were often worse than what they had left behind. The scarcity of ownership therefore works to sustain or even increase the significance of property. For Wilson’s
characters, as for actual families, the complicated mix of alienation, increased freedoms, and property issues lasted for generations.

The social dynamic of the migrant vs. immigrant experience also came into play. Densely populated urban environments, particularly in heavily industrialized cities like Pittsburgh, were difficult for all poor residents. The Great Migration overlapped with an enormous European immigration cycle that had been going on for over a generation. In terms of cultural adjustment many of the black newcomers had an easier time than their white immigrant counterparts. There were notable differences, however, in their opportunities for personal and collective advancement, and consequently in the diverging trajectories of their respective descendants. Wilson addresses this contrast as well, using it within his plays to expand the alienation and emotional damage characters face. In the first two chapters, I will look at the role of the Great Migration in both the Pittsburgh Cycle and the real world Hill District, particularly as it relates to housing and the theme of property ownership. The history is of central importance to an understanding of just what African Americans in the early 20th century were up against, and why Wilson’s characters would cling so fiercely to any plot of earth they could claim as their own.

Chapter One will include a brief overview of the reasons for the Great Migration and a discussion of the Wilson scholarship related to the Great Migration. I will analyze The Piano Lesson in terms of the dichotomy between those who stay in the South, represented by Boy Willie, and those who trek north, represented by Berniece. Chapter Two will focus on what the migrants experienced in the north and how this contrasted with the experiences of their European immigrant counterparts. August Wilson brings up this contrast in his preface to Fences and his characters talk about the contrast in both
Fences and Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. The analysis in this chapter will therefore offer a discussion of the history of the migrant/immigrant experience and how the differing opportunities inform their behavior and their lives.

In the remainder of the dissertation my focus will be on the origins and history of the urban renewal programs in Pittsburgh and how they inform and are reflected in August Wilson’s later plays. By tracing the history of the city’s redevelopment I also hope to explain the complexities of those programs and highlight the effects on and response from the Hill District. Chapter Three will focus on Two Trains Running, the first of the works to incorporate urban renewal, the first to refer to Aunt Ester, and the first to openly advocate for community-directed activism. The play is also the first to raise the specter of eminent domain and the ongoing process of demolition that both destroyed the physical landscape and damaged the social fabric of Pittsburgh’s largest African American community. I will also discuss the importance of the play’s setting, a soul food diner owned by a former Mississippian, Memphis Lee, and the importance of food in defining a community and a culture.

Chapter Four will examine King Hedley II in the context of a long history of social control and urban planning that eventually led to urban renewal. Set in 1985, the play includes no talk of urban redevelopment. Instead, the residents of the Hill are surrounded by the aftermath of the earlier renewal plans and the riots hinted at in Two Trains Running. My discussion will therefore focus on the ways the programs eclipsed the needs and voices of the Hill’s poor, black residents and how that silencing has become internalized and self-directed by a population cut-off from their southern and northern heritage. In the first part of the analysis I will lay out the evidence Wilson
constructs of this breakdown as well as some of its sources. In the second part I will turn to Wilson’s resolution and how King’s epiphany -- occurring moments before his death and minutes before the end of the play -- fits in with Wilson’s evolving argument for the need for unity and collective action.

Chapter Five will revolve around the general theme of blight, a major component of the urban renewal process and an important plot point in *Radio Golf*, Wilson’s final play. “Blight” relates to both economic and aesthetic value. The history section of the chapter traces some of the slippery definitions used by city planners, developers, politicians, and social welfare agencies and examines the underlying biases and assumptions the word reveals regarding the property in poor, crowded, urban and minority neighborhoods. Wilson’s use of the word within *Radio Golf* calls attention to the differing perceptions of the Hill District and the dismissive attitude of various outsiders who fail to recognize any beauty or validity in the property (or often the people) of the Hill.

Finally, I conclude with an homage to three specific women closely associated with both urban renewal and the vibrancy of life on the Hill. Two of these women are real people. Gloria Fuller Smith grew up in two different neighborhoods of the Hill District. Smith was also witness to the later urban renewal projects, and her history of the Hill District -- *A Hill District Renaissance* -- is both an attempt to remember what was lost and a condemnation of the short-sighted and even callous thinking that destroyed so much of her beloved community. Psychologist Mindy Thompson Fullilove’s experience in the Hill District came much later, and as an outsider. She was hired and came to Pittsburgh to help residents face the emotional trauma of another round of upheaval as the
city prepared for HOPE IV (a redevelopment program specifically designed to undo some of the damage caused by earlier urban renewal projects). In the process of working with residents Dr. Fullilove fell in love with the Hill District and found the psychological devastation that results from displacement is greater than she (or government officials) realized. Her subsequent study of the problem, including a chapter devoted to her experiences in Pittsburgh, is named after the/her diagnosis: *Root Shock*.

The third woman of the Hill is fictional, August Wilson’s most important single character. Aunt Ester is a culmination of the playwright’s vision, the character that binds the people of the Hill together even when she -- like so much of the Hill District itself -- is physically gone. She, like Smith and Fullilove, deeply connects audiences with both the Hill District and the urban renewal programs that ripped away so much of what was familiar and vital to the residents. The coping techniques used by Smith and advocated by Fullilove are also ones Ester teaches. Aunt Ester’s healing methodology reflects the beliefs of the mature August Wilson and resonates in both *Gem of the Ocean* with vibrant presence, and in *Radio Golf* as her enduring legacy.
CHAPTER ONE  Rub the Blood In: Home and Ancestry in The Piano Lesson

Introduction

August Wilson told Bill Moyers in a 1988 television interview,

I find it criminal in fact that we, after hundreds of years in bondage, do not celebrate our Emancipation Proclamation; that we do not have a thing like the Passover where we sit down and we remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves. Because we try to run away, we try to hide that part of our past. We don’t have that. If we did something like that, it would say, “this is who we are.” We would recognize the fact that we are Africans, we would recognize the fact that we were slaves, and we would recognize that since we have a common past, that we have a common future also. (Moyers, transcript 6)

Wilson’s words echo Boy Willie’s passionate speech in The Piano Lesson where he tells his sister, “You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it... and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. [...] I’m talking about a big party! Invite everybody! Mark that day down with a special meaning” (91). Berniece does not. She intentionally withholds the history of the family and of the piano from her daughter, Maretha, in an attempt to insulate the child from what she mistakenly views as a restrictive, limiting, psychologically damaging knowledge of a painful history. The girl is at a remove from the South and intentionally separated by her mother from the family story. As a result, Maretha represents a generation adrift from
the past and thus -- in the eyes of both August Wilson and Boy Willie -- cut off from a sustaining identity.

On the surface, *The Piano Lesson* does not fit the patterns this study explores. Unlike with his two preceding works, *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson does not include a preface or any contextualizing comments. The play incorporates few references to historical contexts in the world outside the front door. The dialogue establishes the setting – characters mention Pittsburgh and recognizable locations around the Hill District -- but the pivotal moments of conversation revolve around events and places in the South. The play thus has the least to do with Pittsburgh and the Hill District of any of Wilson’s works aside from the Chicago-based *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. At the same time, however, the play’s treatment of the Great Migration fuses *The Piano Lesson* to the core themes of the Pittsburgh Cycle: identity, place, and ownership.

For Wilson, the terrible mistake of the Great Migration – which shifted millions of black Americans from a southern, rural environment and culture to a northern, urban way of life – reverberates in today’s chronic troubles. The migration ruptured established social connections and created emotional and cultural upheaval. Equally devastating was the concurrent repression of a shared southern past: as Wilson stressed in the Moyers interview, the collective history of millions of enslaved Americans underpins black culture and identity. Enduring racism means that social equality in the North remains as false a promise as economic equality, and Wilson defined the abandonment of the South as a self-inflicted tragedy of modern African American culture.

As Wilson’s fourth major work, *The Piano Lesson* shows him solidifying the themes that would carry through the rest of the cycle. Of these the most powerful is the
interplay between the individual, heritage, community, and activism. The play’s core conflict occurs between Berniece and Boy Willie, siblings who are trying to deal with a painful history and spend much of the play arguing about how to integrate it into the present and future. Through these characters, Wilson links the idea of a cultural break to a fractured culture that resulted from the Great Migration. Boy Willie remains firmly anchored to the South. Confident in his identity, heritage, and ability to determine his own future, he believes that this identity, heritage, and future lie in Mississippi. Berniece relocates in the North but her vision of the future remains amorphous. She defines her heritage much differently than her brother. Although she remains well aware of her past, she fears perpetuating it.

The siblings wrestle with their conflicting interpretations and goals as they argue over the fate of the piano, an instrument that represents a painful and complicated past: upheaval and permanent separation intermix with rebellion, pride, and family legacy. Originally, Mr. Sutter – slave-rich but cash-poor – traded away Berniece and Boy Willie’s great-grandmother and grandfather in exchange for the piano. Sutter considered their great-grandfather, Willie Boy, too valuable an asset and so kept him behind. Willie Boy never saw his family again. The Sutters soon regretted the loss of their “beloved” slaves and so had Willie Boy carve images of his lost wife and son into the piano. He went much further, carving out the history of his entire family into the wood. Eventually emancipation freed the slaves but the piano remained with the Sutter family, the former slave owners who apparently found carved representations of a mother and child a bearable substitute for the real thing.

Two generations later the pain of that separation remained fresh. Berniece and
Boy Willie’s father, Papa Boy Charles, decided to reunite the family by claiming the piano. On Independence Day in 1911, Boy Charles -- with the help of his brothers Doaker and Wining Boy -- took the piano from the Sutter home. Boy Charles felt “it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it… he had us. Say we was still in slavery” (45), Doaker explains. Boy Charles was later killed because of his actions and his wife, Mama Ola, spent the rest of her life simultaneously grieving and cherishing the piano.

Wilson builds the narrative around the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie but the story is far larger than just their own. Each character in the play offers a different vision of the piano and while the siblings share a history, they differ in their interpretations of, and responses to, that history. Further, Wilson deliberately complicates the narrative by assigning so many characters with similar names: Berniece is named for her great-grandmother, the Berniece originally traded away from her husband, and Boy Willie shares a name with his father (Boy Charles) and great-grandfather (Willie Boy). Wilson uses the siblings’ argument to illustrate a rupture in African American culture. Berniece and Boy Willie initially offer two distinct paths to heal that rupture: sell the piano and use the money to buy farmland or keep the piano and honor the past. Each option offers its own strengths and weaknesses.

Eventually, however, Berniece forges a third path, one that marks The Piano Lesson as a vital transition in the Pittsburgh Cycle. Her choice also signals Wilson’s thematic shift in emphasis from the individual to the establishment of community. While the dominant focus of the play remains the importance of the South and the problems with moving to the North, the final scene transcends a North-South binary. Boy Willie
returns alone to Mississippi to continue his solitary fight for the family’s southern heritage. Berniece remains in Pittsburgh with her daughter, uncle, and other former southerners and finally honors a southern heritage by summoning their African and American ancestors to her northern home. She transforms from a southern refugee to a woman who will fully live in the North.

I will first provide a brief overview of the Great Migration as it applies to the Pittsburgh Cycle and the fragmentation Wilson often attributed to the abandonment of the South. This section will also survey some of the Wilson scholarship concerning the Great Migration. Building in part on this scholarship, the remaining sections will each look at how each of the siblings experienced their shared history and how this shaped his or her interpretation of the piano. Boy Willie shines a light on the problems of migration and encapsulates the Wilson methodology: maintain a southern connection, claim an economic base, and thereby reclaim the past, present, and future. As numerous scholars have discussed, Wilson lamented the dislocation and cultural rupture that resulted from the Great Migration. Boy Willie counters this break by maintaining his roots in the South and striving to deepen those roots through property ownership and economic autonomy. He repeatedly marks the connection between land and identity (cultural and especially familial), between ownership and economic autonomy.

The remainder of the chapter will focus on Berniece, the character who does make the move North and, parallel to her brother’s actions in the South, finds a way to establish roots in Pittsburgh. Wilson’s plays contain other prominent female characters, including Aunt Ester, the anchoring figure of the cycle and of the Hill District. Ester -- introduced in Two Trains Running, the work that followed The Piano Lesson -- becomes the cycle’s
most powerful and influential figure. She is so central and larger-than-life, however, that she serves more as an icon than a person. Berniece is also a dynamic character, the only female in the cycle to undergo such a dramatic change. As central as female characters can be in Wilson’s plays, Berniece is his lone female protagonist. For the majority of the play she epitomizes the dislocation and fragmentation Wilson attributes to the Great Migration. In the final scene, however, she offers an alternative. Berniece’s actions not only save her family but they also suggest the need for community that becomes more prominent in the later plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle.

I. The Great Migration

Soon after the turn of the 20th century a combination of forces impelled masses of Southern black laborers to leave their homes, their communities, and sometimes their families and head to the northern industrial cities. These forces were varied and powerful: a lack of new immigrant labor in the North; increases in Jim Crow tactics in the South; the labor needs of expanding northern factories and mills (and recruiting campaigns – seductive and usually deceptive); a series of droughts and floods and a widespread boll weevil infestation; new agricultural technologies, especially the development of a mechanical cotton picker; and a nascent civil rights movement following the war.

The momentum sustained itself through the First World War and into the Great Depression. Dates and numbers are not precise, but ‘Most historians agree that roughly 450,000 to 500,000 black southerners relocated to the North between 1915 and 1918, and […] at least another 700,000 […] during the 1920s’ (Arnesen 1). Pittsburgh’s black population increased from 3431 in 1850 to 34,217 in 1910 (Epstein 20), then jumped
93% between 1910 and 1930 (Darden 6). By the 1940 census there were 62,250 blacks living in the city (Alexander 361). Through the decades the majority of these new residents moved into – or through – the Hill District.

In 1919 the U.S. Department of Labor examined the causes and effects of the Great Migration. Speaking of the situations southern migrants were leaving, the report’s authors made a link between property ownership and community. In the South, the authors wrote, “The worst conditions obtain in the communities in which most of the land is held by the absentee owners of large estates […] In these communities, there is a notable lack of leadership as well as of pride of home and community spirit” (68-69). This lack of leadership and pride that the Department of Labor report pointed to was a result of people without control over their own homes or their own circumstances. Although the abolishment of slavery fundamentally changed the nation -- and even the most restrictive legal and social constraints of subsequent years have never approached the inclusive strictures of slavery -- the gap between the promise and dream of emancipation and the reality of ongoing oppression is reflected in the anger, frustration, and desperation that eventually fueled the Great Migration.

Throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle, Wilson connects the individual to a larger cultural history while pointing to breaks in that link. The Great Migration transformed the nation and shifted the rural-urban balance. It also brought about a change in national culture, as ‘Negro culture’ profoundly influenced national music, literature, fashion, and even identity itself. The establishment of large black urban enclaves and the achievements of the “new Negro” both individually and collectively served as a further potent draw to frustrated southern blacks. Black Americans -- predominantly those in
the urban North -- attained unprecedented levels of economic, educational, cultural, and creative success. Widespread propaganda from industries recruiting the desperate and frustrated promised high wages and limitless prospects. Family members and former neighbors likewise offered tales, almost always exaggerated or fictionalized, of wealth and opportunity.

Instead of a population fleeing persecution and striving for fresh opportunities, Wilson sees a people ruptured from their birthright: their past, their identity, and their culture. Devastating losses countered any gains. The southern exodus separated black America from its geographic base and societal touchstone. Because the slave trade had involved peoples from throughout western Africa, the result was not just a story of American assimilation but also a blending of different African cultures into something new. To Wilson the lost Motherland is therefore not Africa, but the American South. While the North offered new (if still restricted) opportunities, centuries of black life were centered almost exclusively in the South. In moving away, many left behind extended families, complex links with the land, and countless reminders and reassurances of direct connections to a larger history and a larger community. Because of the concentrated populations and centuries of history in the American South, the move to the North, Wilson felt, was a damaging break. It cut the population off from its past, creating individuals who, like Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’s Herald Loomis, “lost their song.” Until they rediscovered that song they would be adrift no matter where their location. Berniece literally loses her song, or at least deeply suppresses it, avoiding the piano and only allowing others to use it to create music.

Attempts at shearing off painful histories are not unique to Berniece and the
isolating results are not limited to her daughter, Maretha. The behavior and motivation Wilson investigates with *The Piano Lesson* are reflections of what he sees across black society. The trauma and conflict that advance several of Wilson’s plots stem from the Great Migration in multiple ways, all eventually coming back to this crisis of identity and corresponding to the deliberate repression of painful experiences and histories in the South. Through the character of Berniece, Wilson shows that the move was so huge and so encompassing that it resulted in a widespread loss of history, culture, and community, a loss which continues to have profound influence on a contemporary black American sense of self. Berniece also illustrates how partitioning off part of one’s heritage erases the complexity and minimizes the power of that heritage. African American history encompasses slavery, emancipation, oppression, resilience, defiance, survival, and sacrifice; Wilson calls for claiming the whole of it. Despite unfathomable tragedies and upheavals, the connection to one’s heritage remains essential, and in this respect a tragedy becomes a source of strength. Death is prominent within Wilson’s work because, as he observed, “death is such an integral part of life; you can’t have one without the other” (Shannon, “Blues” 543). The Middle Passage, with its millions of lost lives, transforms into the City of Bones in two of his plays, the source of redemption for both Herald Loomis and Citizen Barlow. Individuals must understand their place in history, Wilson urges, and embrace their heritage in its entirety is something that Berniece must learn.

The Great Migration is one of the most commonly discussed events within Wilson scholarship, particularly in the early studies. Many of these works respond to Wilson’s own emphasis on the importance of the Great Migration. In his interviews and writings,
Wilson repeatedly discussed a crisis of identity in black America. One of his early major interviews was with Bill Moyers for PBS’ *World of Ideas*. It was 1988 and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was enjoying financial and critical success on Broadway. Herald Loomis, the pivotal character who discovers his song and the ability to “stand up” at the end of the play, finds strength by connecting with the African identity he had forgotten. Moyers and Wilson discussed how this message extended to the masses outside the play. “You mean, these people in Pittsburgh must find the African that’s in them, or in their past, before they know who they are?” (transcript 4) Moyers asked. “Oh, of course,” Wilson replied. “We are Africans who have been in America since the 17th century. We are Americans, but we are -- first of all we are Africans. [...] Africans who have been removed from Africa” (5). To thrive, he argued, black Americans must first recognize that their sensibilities are culturally distinct from other ethnic and racial groups.

The concept of a unified identity for any racial group is problematic. Throughout his career Wilson repeatedly referenced black culture as having a value system and set of behaviors distinct from other racial and ethnic groups. The distinction, according to Wilson, was important to maintain and embrace in protecting a separate identity against a larger culture pushing for assimilation and homogenization. He discussed the differences between ethnic and racial groups as a way of illustrating the vitality of diverse, multiple cultures and embracing the uniqueness and vibrancy of an African American culture. Wilson did not dismiss or deride the concept of a black middle class (of which he was by then a member) but rather the adoption of values, mannerisms, and trappings of European -- rather than African -- traditions. He also defended the legitimacy of black culture:

“[...] I can participate in a society as an African, I don’t have to become -- I don’t have to

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adopt European values, European esthetics, European ways of doing things in order to live in the world” (5).

Nearly a decade later he identified the southern origins of African American history in his famous (or infamous) 1996 talk, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” at the national convention of the Theatre Communications Group: “All blacks in America, with very few exceptions, originated from the same place: the slave plantation of the South” (7). Three years after that, in an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Wilson more emphatically placed the black American experience in North America, not Africa. “I have no fascination with Africa itself. I’ve never been to Africa and have no desire to go” (7), he told her: “Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States, which is our ancestral homeland. I don’t need to make that leap across the ocean. When the first African died on the continent of North America, that was the beginning of my history” (8). In his George Plimpton interview the same year Wilson further stressed, "You don't have to go to Africa to be an African. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States. It's our ancestral homeland. You don't need to make that leap across the ocean" (76). But you may have to make the leap across the Mason-Dixon line. In his New York Times essay "How to Write Like August Wilson," he explained, “[…] I think that we as black Americans need to go back and make the connection that we allowed to be severed when we moved from the South to the North, the great migration starting in 1915. For the most part, the culture that was growing and developing in the Southern part of the United States for 200 and some years, we more or less abandoned” (Wilson, “How to Write”).

The upheavals of the Great Migration are even more potent because of the
correspondence to existing traditions of rupture. In the prefatory set-up to *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson describes the mass of humanity moving north as “Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and disbursement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy.” The “long line of separation and disbursement” most obviously stems from slavery. That institution incorporated family disruptions at every level and every stage, from Africa to the Middle Passage to the slave markets to the individual owner and beyond. The family legacy in *The Piano Lesson* is founded on just such a heritage, with the repercussions of a single devastating sale lasting for generations.

But the saga of separation and disbursement continued and in some respects intensified after emancipation. Sharecropping encouraged transience as workers moved from farm to farm, looking for a better contract or fleeing from oppressive debts. Unrelenting economic pressures also took a toll as husbands or wives took the transience one step further and abandoned their families in the process. In *Fences*, Troy tells his sons about their grandfather, a man so flawed Troy refers to him as “just as evil as he could be,” but who stuck around to support his eleven children. His wives all left him, including Troy’s own mother, but Troy’s father “felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain’t treated us the way I felt he should have... but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us... made his own way.” Bono, Troy’s friend and contemporary, verifies the account with his own examples and points out that such desertion was so common it had its own name: “the walking blues” (51).

As Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* prefatory comments alluded, the
transience and upheaval that resulted from the Great Migration thus reinforced existing patterns and exacerbated family pressures. At the same time, the exodus to the North damaged the cultural and economic solidary Wilson saw as so important in the South:

We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent over 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think that if we had stayed in the South, we would have been stronger people. And because the connection between the South of the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s has been broken, it’s very difficult to understand who we are. In all my plays [...] I always point toward making that connection, toward reconnecting with the past. You have to know who you are, and understand your history in America over more than 300 years, in order to know what your relation is to your society. (Rothstein 8)

Sandra G. Shannon finds evidence of Wilson’s thesis that the Great Migration was “an enormous mistake” (Shannon, “Transplant” 660) throughout the cycle and traces Wilson’s representations of the aftermath of the migration’s displacement. She analyzes the ways in which Wilson “foregrounds his dramatic principle that the transplant simply did not take” (665). The trauma stems as much from the realities the characters find in the North as from their break with the South. Describing Levee, one of the musicians in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Shannon links his behavior and cynicism with the contradictions black migrants encountered:

Abrasive, conniving, insecure, bitter, blatantly anti-Christian, and
ultimately homicidal, Levee epitomizes the transplant that did not take. 

[...] As Wilson does in Seven Guitars, here he teases us with images of a possible good life looming within reach of these sons of the South, yet, as if awakening from a pleasant dream to a nightmarish reality of the North, only death, doom, and self-destruction greet him. (663)

Kim Pereira’s excellent August Wilson and the African American Odyssey analyzes the intersection between a history of movement, the Great Migration, and Wilson’s dramaturgic themes. His study in part examines the contradictory impulses of freedom and rootlessness within the Great Migration and how Wilson’s characters try to navigate, if not reconcile, these two opposing forces. “Ironically, as illustrated in Fences, freedom meant rootlessness, even being cut off from their new roots in the South” (62), Pereira notes, highlighting the terrible conflict the characters faced and the lasting effects on themselves and their families.

At the end of The Piano Lesson Berniece and Boy Willie unite to combat Sutter’s ghost. Boy Willie challenges him physically, wrestling with him offstage. Berniece battles by calling forth their ancestors through an impassioned plea as she plays the piano. While Berniece’s transformation – her decision to play the piano, to embrace her ancestors and the pain that comes with it – is key to the conclusion, it takes the actions of the two characters working together to excise the ghost and bring about the play’s resolution. In the contrast between Boy Willie’s decision to return home in the South and Berniece’s eventual summons of the spirits of their ancestors in the North, the play enacts Wilson’s argument about the importance of a southern African American heritage and identity. Brother and sister, male and female, North and South are thus temporarily
II. Where Is Home?

The Civil War left the South economically devastated and a great many southerners -- including many former slaves -- psychologically traumatized. Reconstruction offered hope for a stabilized economy and expanded rights, freedoms and opportunities for the newly-freed black Americans. The landmark Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing “equal protection under the law” reflected the potential for meaningful and lasting change. The Ku Klux Klan, after enjoying brief success and limited popularity, temporarily retreated in the face of a strong federal response. While blacks did not establish a national political block, “some sixteen served in Congress during Reconstruction, over six hundred in state legislatures, and hundreds more in local offices, from sheriff to justice of the peace, scattered across the South” (Reader’s Companion 919).

Unfortunately, Reconstruction was essentially ceded back to the south; racism, cultural and social resentments, and a crippled economy overwhelmed idealism. The delicate balances Abraham Lincoln had hoped to establish between states’ rights, individual freedoms, and federal protections were not pursued after his death, so that, while slavery ended, oppression continued. At the close of the 19th century, Jim Crow laws replaced the Black Codes; the Supreme Court Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) decision sanctioned separate but equal policies; institutionalized levels of segregation reached levels higher than many in the rural South had ever experienced; and lynchings and white-on-black violence increased dramatically.

Similarly, sharecropping replaced the far more brutal practice of slavery but it
replicated many of the oppressive, destructive patterns of plantation farming. Sharecropping as a system entailed “letting out” a piece of farmland to a (typically black) family in exchange for the proceeds from a portion of the year’s crops. In the aftermath of the Civil War and with the seismic economic and societal shifts that stemmed from emancipation, southern landowners had limited capital (and limited interest) to hire workers outright. The former slaves had no savings and no collateral for bank loans (and there were few banks in the rural south in any case). Farming families were thus forced to turn to the white landowners who would allot them a section of land and provide them loans or seed, equipment, and sometimes food, shelter, and small plots for personal gardens. Larger landowners might set up “stores” on their property where the ex-slaves would go to redeem their loans and get provisions. At the end of the year the workers would then get the proceeds from a portion of the resulting crops, minus any loans, supplies, or other expenses. For the landowner this typically meant the benefits of the agricultural work without the previous investments in slaves or the responsibility for those slaves if they grew sick, or as they aged.

The Freedmen’s Bureau was established by Congress in 1865 to help ease the transition from slavery. One of its roles was to write, review, and sometimes negotiate the sharecropping contracts, and their archives reveal former slave owners trying to salvage as much of the old roles and hierarchies as possible. A Dyer County, Tennessee contract between Joel A. Light and “Gibson & his wife Leann (freedmen),” was dated December 29, 1865, and lasted for a year: “The said Light agrees to furnish the land tools & horses to cultivate the same and to furnish the said parities [sic] & their family their provisions & give them one third of the crop they may cultivate-the said freedmen furnish
their own clothing & pay their own doctors bills. Leann to do cooking washing and all necessary house work & she is to spin & work for herself when not employed in house work. The said Gibson is to attend to the stock & to do all necessary work in keeping up the farm.” Both Gibson and Leann signed by making their mark and essentially took up the same positions they had held as slaves only a few months before.

The Great Migration was about economics, with vast numbers of blacks trying to find better paying jobs and opportunities, but it was for many also a way of establishing autonomy, something in short supply for blacks in the South. Workers were docked “pay” for days they were sick, women and children were expected to work full days as well, and laws were enacted to ensure that all blacks were required to work. Sharecropping meant freedmen were continually in debt to the white landowners, establishing a debt peonage that did not even offer the same protections as slavery. As one former slave put it in 1904, “In other words, we had sold ourselves into slavery—and what could we do about it? The white folks had all the courts, all the guns, all the hounds, all the railroads, all the telegraph wires, all the newspapers, all the money, and nearly all the land—and we had only our ignorance, our poverty and our empty hands” (“Georgia Sharecropper’s Story”). The impermanence of tenant farming combined with the transience that resulted from corrupt accounting practices: one of the few methods of resistance open to sharecroppers was to simply move from one farm to another. Since the landowners controlled all the bookkeeping, sales, and loans, in cases of dispute the tenant farmers had no recourse except to leave the farm and try again elsewhere. While leaving behind the remaining debt from one year’s settling day, the sharecroppers immediately incurred new debt, following the same system year after year with little if any gains.
Wilson introduced the topic in *Fences*, where Troy Maxson talks about how his father’s entire existence revolved around that yearly crop. “The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That’s the only thing that mattered to him,” Troy says: “Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living. Wonder why the devil hadn’t come and got him. ‘Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin’ and find out he owe him money...” (51). King Hedley describes his own father’s experiences as a sharecropper in *Seven Guitars*, and Hedley’s own mental fragility appears linked to its legacy.

Wilson most potently displays the painful legacy of sharecropping in *The Piano Lesson*, where Boy Willie describes the ways he was shaped by his father’s life as a sharecropper. Boy Willie frames his own actions in terms of the way his father was trapped:

> Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring off at his hands. I got a little older I know what he was thinking. He sitting there saying, “I got these big old hands but what I’m gonna do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall. Got these big old hands capable of doing anything. [...] Unless I go out here and kill me somebody and take what they got... it’s a long row to hoe for me to get something of my own. [...]” (91)

Much of Boy Willie’s focus on the farm is tied to his father’s legacy, “building on” the past by using what his father left behind – the piano -- to sustain himself. Boy Willie sees economic independence as the best way to maintain the family’s heritage and the piano is key to achieving that independence. Just as his father claimed the piano by
taking it from the Sutters’ home, Boy Willie plans to claim the land where his ancestors
worked and lived. Instead of punishing the Sutters for his father’s death, Boy Willie
speaks of vindicating his father’s life by achieving what Papa Boy Charles could not:
“See now... if he had his own land he wouldn’t have felt that way. If he had something
under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller. That’s what I’m talking
about” (92). In buying property, Boy Willie will not only declare his own worth, but also
reclaim his ancestors and honor his father’s sacrifice:

He spent his whole life farming on somebody else’s land. I ain’t gonna do
that. See, he couldn’t do no better. When he come along he ain’t had
nothing he could build on. His daddy ain’t had nothing to give him. The
only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over
giving me that. I ain’t gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do
something with it. (46)

Both Berniece’s and Boy Willie’s actions and decisions derive from their response to the
legacy of enslavement. Because of his focus on his father’s experiences, Boy Willie’s
actions, decisions, and goals in the play are founded on the restrictions and servitude of
sharecropping, not slavery. Unlike Berniece’s attempt to escape the past by running
away, Boy Willie determines to defiantly buy the property so long denied his family.
Like his father, Boy Willie sees the liberation of the piano as the liberation of the family.
He is anchored in the south and argues for “building on” the sacrifices and gains of their
father. To use the money from the sale of the piano to buy a farm would give the family
autonomy and thus complete the process Boy Charles began. By farming his own fields
Boy Willie believes he will therefore honor his father more than Berniece does by
clinging to the piano. Boy Willie’s decision to remain in the South and find a way to buy his own land therefore runs counter to, and counters, the historical realities of sharecropping, the Great Migration, and the actions of his family and friends.

Whether Boy Willie’s attempts will be successful is left unsettled; his willingness to try (and fight to do so) is the key focus. As Wilson commented, “My work benefits from looking back because we can look and see -- for instance, in The Piano Lesson, you can see the actor, the character going down the road that, given the benefit of a fifty-year historical perspective, we can see whether that is the correct road or not because we’ve learned. We know how all this turned out” (Shannon, “August Wilson Explains” 119). The meaning of his statement is not as self-evident as Wilson apparently assumed. Certainly the rates of black-owned farms were (and remain) extremely low, in part because of institutionalized racism within the federal farm loan and farm subsidy programs. Black farmers almost never achieved independence, financial stability, or property ownership. With no economic or legal support, the few who did manage to build up property were in constant danger from white greed or even minor agricultural setbacks (dangers Boy Willie will have to repeatedly face if his plan succeeds). Difficulties are not the same as impossibilities, however, and Wilson repeatedly advocated the willingness to stand up no matter the outcome or consequence. W.E.B. DuBois, in a 1901 essay for The Atlantic about the Freedman’s Bureau, wrote, “Yet, with help and striving, the Negro gained some land, and by 1874, in the one state of Georgia, owned near 350,000 acres.” Indeed, the 100 acre plot of land where Boy Willie and Lymon work cutting timber is owned by a black man: Lymon’s cousin.

More important than the limited examples of others’ success, Boy Willie
embodies a radical response to the problem of racial inequality. First, he denies the superiority of a white world, the inferiority of his position within it, or an inherent legitimacy of the courts, railroads, authority, and ownership that were stacked against him. “If you got a piece of land you’ll find everything else falls right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton... the weather, and anything else you want to talk about” (92), he tells Berniece, explaining what his own land would allow him. Wilson himself praised Boy Willie’s decision in 1993, using language that duplicated his character’s:

Boy Willie empowers himself. He has a very good clear plan, the best plan of anyone I know that was presented in 1936 about his future. He understood that if you had a piece of land, everything else fall right up into place. You could stand up right next to the white man and talk about the economics, politics, whatever it is. Then you can stand and look around. Land is the basis of independence. People all over the world fight about what? They fight about land. [...] It’s just a question. Maybe he was right, maybe he was wrong, but I think the play stated the question clearly.”

(170)

When Wining Boy warns Boy Willie that white men will never let him keep his farm if he ever manages to get it in the first place, he points to the analogy of the berry patch and the white man’s perpetual control of that patch through legal wrangling. For the ever-transient Wining Boy, individual rights – as reflected in an absence of fixed property rights – cannot exist for the black man so it is safer to avoid the issue by finding pleasure and support away from the white society’s system. Wining Boy is arguing that,
while both blacks and whites clearly deserve the same treatment, the law rests with – and therefore invariably sides with – the white man. His parable is based on the ever-shifting boundaries of something seemingly inconsequential, the ownership of a berry patch:

Alright. Now you take and eat some berries. They taste real good to you. […] But you ain’t looked to see them berries is sitting in the white fellow’s yard. Ain’t got no fence around them. You figure anybody want something they’d fence it in. Alright. Now the white man come along and say that’s my land. Therefore everything that grow on it belong to me.

Wining Boy continues with the story:

Alright. Now Mr. So and So, he sell the land to you. And he come to you and say, “John, you own the land. It’s all yours now. But them is my berries. And come time to pick them I’m gonna send my boys over. You got the land… but them berries, I’m gonna keep them. They mine.” And he go and fix it with the law that them is his berries.

Wining Boy divides the analogy into stages, he repeatedly uses the word “alright” to signal acknowledgement of a change in the ‘rules,’ and he bases his argument on an example that emphasizes not survival but a simple pleasure. Further, the black berry-picker in the first half of the story is thrown in jail for theft as a deterrent to others, not because the berry patch is particularly prized or significant but because the white man’s ownership must be recognized as absolute: “Otherwise first thing you know these niggers have everything that belong to us” (38). The berries are taken strictly out of spite. There is no violence and, at best, a shaky legal claim. The white man’s authority essentially comes from the power afforded his race.
The other characters do not deny Boy Willie’s abilities; rather, they challenge the possibility of a white society allowing a black man to actually enjoy the fruits of his own labor. Boy Willie in turn rejects their skepticism. Wining Boy argues that the white man continually has control because he has the power and authority to change the rules to suit his own desires. Boy Willie rejects his uncle’s skepticism because he refuses to recognize a white-controlled rulebook. He does not argue against their laws; he simply ignores what he deems unjust. He refutes the underlying assumptions of Wining Boy’s argument: “I don’t go by what the law say. The law’s liable to say anything. I go by if it’s right or not. It don’t matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself” (38-9). He is thereby announcing a belief in his own awareness of right and wrong, of rights and freedoms. This method is as radical as the actions of his father and great great grandfather. Boy Willie is not seeking to undermine the racist system; he disregards it outright. As a black farmer he would be meeting the white farmers on their own level, not on their own terms. Instead of responding to and negotiating within white social, economic, and political systems, he intends to maintain an internal set of values.

The characters in Wilson’s plays that make a stand are the ones who succeed in the end. Even if they die, even if they lose their economic foundations, they are presented as admirable. Wilson repeatedly referred to -- and praised -- this “willingness to do battle.” As he told Bonnie Lyons, “It doesn’t matter if you win or lose, it’s just the willingness like Boy Willie grappling with the ghost [...]” (10). Only Boy Willie’s fortitude can make this work; he is willing to deal with whatever consequences result from his decisions and actions. Like Two Trains Running’s Memphis Lee, he stands ready to walk through fire to claim what is his. Like King Hedley II, he announces his
willingness to take on the world to protect what is his. Like Herald Loomis, he needs no one to bleed for him; he can bleed for himself. In short, Boy Willie claims authority over his own life. He does not accept shifting and arbitrary rules designed only to maintain white hegemony. His uncles point out that the ‘choice’ of accepting the rules may not be up to him, but Boy Willie – like his father – remains willing to pay the consequences.

There are those Wilson characters who are willing to kill to keep or attain what they see as their integrity or need. King Hedley, King Hedley II, Booster, and Troy all serve time in prison for murder. But Wilson also creates characters who are willing to die. Garret Brown in *Gem of the Ocean* drowns rather than face an unjust accusation of theft. Citizen Barlow, the real thief, cannot comprehend Brown’s decision, particularly over something as trivial as a bucket of nails, but he is tormented by guilt that he did not have the courage to confess and thereby save him: “I told myself to tell them I did it but every time I started to tell them something got in the way. I thought he was gonna come out the water but he never did. I looked up and he had drowned” (44). “He did it for himself,” Aunt Ester tells Citizen: “He say I’d rather die in truth than to live a lie. That way he can say that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails. What is your life worth, Mr. Citizen? That what you got to find out. You got to find a way to live in truth. If you live right you die right” (45). Brown’s decision is what forces Citizen to confront his own decisions, culpability, and responsibility, to himself and his community.

Boy Willie is not foolhardy and neither does he have a death wish. When he, Lymon, and Crawley are confronted retrieving pilfered lumber, Lymon and Boy Willie immediately surrender. They are not confronted by the man they stole it from; two other white men see them hiding it and come back to presumably steal it themselves, and they
bring the sheriff with them. Crawley, Boy Willie’s brother-in-law, brings a gun, attempts to fight back, and is himself killed. Crawley knows the wood is stolen, has only been brought in to help haul it for a portion of the lumber, and has no other stake in defending it. While Boy Willie does not acknowledge that skimming a portion of each load off the top is theft -- “We ain’t stole no wood. Me and Lymon was hauling wood for Jim Miller and keeping us a little bit on the side” (53) -- he does not claim actual ownership it. If stolen lumber, hidden on the side of the road, is about to be stolen again, he will let it go. He never even complains about either the sheriff or the two white men coming to retrieve it themselves.

But when something is unjust, Boy Willie will act. The decision to go beyond the rules is one of the most important steps many of Wilson’s most dynamic characters take. Boy Willie refuses to accept the inherent authority of “white” society or laws; he rejects any perspective that puts him – and his fate – at the mercy of chance: “Hell, I ain’t scared of dying. I look around and see people dying every day. You got to die to make room for somebody else” (89). And in that acceptance comes a great strength:

That’s when I discovered the power of death. See, a nigger that ain’t afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for the white man. He can’t hold that power of you. [...] I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don’t like to see that. He don’t like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, “I got it too.”

Then he got to deal with you square up. (88)

Boy Willie’s refusal to bow to any authority he does not see as legitimate means he will likely come into conflict with that authority in the future (as he has already in the past).
When confronted by armed white men out to steal the lumber he and Lymon had “set aside” from their job hauling wood, Boy Willie is quick to concede. Lumber you have only a tangential stake in is not worth dying for. A piano carved by your great great grandfather and held by his owner’s descendants is.

While Boy Willie speaks of the sacrifices of their father, Berniece focuses on those of their mother. The siblings’ experiences as adults further reinforce the patterns each associates with the respective parent. Berniece tries to escape the painful legacy by moving north and, more dramatically, by trying to deny its existence. She does not think about or speak of the pain in her life (and in her family’s history). She does not touch or tell the story of the piano that was linked to that history. Berniece avoids both in an attempt to protect herself, her home, and her daughter.

Located in the North, she does not have the ties to place that Boy Willie displays. At the same time as she binds herself to the piano, she remains in limbo in her Pittsburgh home. The stage directions describe the setting as “sparsely furnished, and although there is evidence of a woman’s touch, there is a lack of warmth and vigor.” Maretha shares a room with her mother upstairs but there is no sign from the stage directions that a child lives there. Berniece has lived in the house for three years. Her uncle Doaker, the home’s owner, has presumably lived there for much longer. A railroad man, his work continually has him moving about the country. The lack of an anchored setting corresponds with the pervading sense of rootlessness for several members of the family. Wilson leaves the stage, and their home, intentionally blank, as if the household were incomplete, still in the process of moving in.

In contrast, Berniece’s boyfriend Avery sees himself at home in Pittsburgh, and
his work to establish a new church there is evidence of his willingness to shape (and claim) his new environment. Lymon, the friend from Mississippi who comes with Boy Willie to sell watermelons and the piano, likewise plans to find his place in Pittsburgh. He sees a city that offers him a chance to find a woman with whom to settle down, the opportunity to make his own way without as much worry about a white man’s power over him and his destiny.

Berniece refuses to anchor her present within the past. Like many other migrants, Berniece is attempting to escape experiences in the South (memories of Mama Ola and Crawley) and seeking peace and new opportunity in the North. In particular, she seeks to shield her daughter from the past. “Black America is a tremendous triumph,” Wilson said (Dezell 256), and that triumph is based on surviving centuries of slavery and oppression. Berniece, refusing to play the piano, refusing to allow her daughter access to her heritage, clearly contradicts Wilson’s argument that black Americans must embrace their history. But she does not simply function as a metaphor for a broken tradition. Her refusal to play the piano is not because she has forgotten the past (she has not) or because she disbelieves the power of her ancestors (she fears awakening them). Instead, Berniece’s perspective is shaped by her three most powerful experiences as a woman: as daughter, wife, and mother. The pain she wants to protect herself and her daughter from are framed according to issues of gender. In this way, Berniece intertwines the dislocation of the Great Migration with a self-insulation that appears more heavily influenced by her perception of sexism than racism.

Gender is not only important to Berniece but plays a key role in how both siblings see themselves. It also guides how they respond to their present and future. The
descriptions of the piano that link it back to the era of slavery come not from its current stakeholders but from their uncles. When Doaker relates the history of the piano to Lymon, he emphasizes origins: how his family was traded, his great grandfather’s carvings, the three brothers’ theft of the piano and Boy Charles’ death. Neither Berniece nor Boy Willie speak of these events: “All that’s in the past,” Boy Willie responds (46). Both point to their parents, not the great great grandparents who were first separated because of the piano. For them, the relevant history is much nearer, and their interpretations are based on the future as well as the past. When they argue, the lines are redrawn according to gender rather than generation.

Boy Willie speaks of his father’s suffering and frustration over having nothing on which to build a future. Papa Boy Charles worked someone else’s land and, as part of the first generation in his family born after emancipation, he saw himself as still enslaved by a system of tenant farming. Like his own father, he had no hope for any material legacy to pass along to his children. Wilson’s male characters tend to try to control their external environment as a way of controlling their economic status or social standing. Harry J. Elam, Jr., looking at the parallels between The Piano Lesson and Lorraine Hensley’s A Raisin in the Sun, writes that both Boy Willie and Raisin’s Walter Lee “associate the acquisition of wealth and property with manhood and masculinity” (Elam, “Dialectics” 365). Elam’s statement may put too much weight on an external representation of property ownership; Boy Willie does not focus on what ownership will ‘prove’ to others but on the economic benefits of ownership. He claims (perhaps mistakenly) that owning his own farmland will allow him to shape his own destiny, stand on equal footing with white landowners, and enjoy a financial stability never before open to any men in his
family. “He is a ruffian,” Devon Boan writes of Boy Willie, “and feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano offer him his best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery” (263).

Lymon is moving north with many of the same goals as his friend. Whereas Boy Willie sees the ownership of farmland as the way for him to free himself from white oppression, perpetual economic serfdom, and a kind of metaphorical emasculation, however, Lymon sees the increased opportunities and lessened racial barriers in the north as the way he can claim his own path. “They never get me back down there,” he tells Berniece, “The sheriff looking for me. All because they gonna try and make me work for somebody when I don’t want to” 76-77). Lymon speaks of controlling his own future -- “It ain’t like that up here. Up here you more or less do what you want to” (77) -- just as Boy Willie speaks of controlling his future by owning and working his own farm.

Understanding their father’s pain, Boy Willie fits their father’s fatal claiming of the piano within the broader issue of liberation. Both men therefore stand alongside other central male characters who exhibit what Wilson often called “the warrior spirit.” Aggressive, self-confident, willing to sacrifice themselves, these characters -- including (among others) Sterling Johnson, Troy Maxson, Herald Loomis, and King Hedley II -- are focused on claiming their rights and what is rightfully theirs.

Berniece counters her brother by pointing to their mother and the suffering she endured because she had lost her husband: "You always talking about your daddy but you ain't never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years’ worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody else?" (52). Where Wilson’s male characters focus on the
external world, his female characters are typically directed on the internal. As tenacious and passionate as their male counterparts, they focus on defense rather than offense. Before Wilson penned *The Piano Lesson* this was evident in his portrayal of Rose Maxson in *Fences*. Rose wants her husband to build a fence around their yard because, in the words of their friend Bono, “Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you” (61). Yet Rose is also acting defensively and is interested in keeping out unstated dangers. The stage directions in *Fences* describe the Maxson house with a porch that serves as another defensive barrier: “The entrance to the house is gained by two or three steps leading to a wooden porch.” More suggestive is the “old-fashioned icebox” that “stands silent guard at the opposite end” (xv). These directions hint at guarded positions.

Rose, like many other Wilson women, uses her cooking to support, sustain, and comfort her family and friends. The rectangular lines of the porch literally frame Rose’s realm: “A relatively recent addition to the house and running its full width, the porch lacks congruence. It is a sturdy porch with a flat roof.” On one end “the kitchen window opens onto the porch” (xv). Rose tries (at times tragically unsuccessfully) to mitigate the dangers her family faces in the world by providing a safe haven at home, offering comfort and security in the domestic. This is primarily accomplished by focusing on the emotional world the male characters tend to ignore, particularly her family’s happiness and her husband’s faltering ego.

Berniece similarly acts defensively, shielding her daughter from both the past and the present. Like Rose, she does this by controlling means of access but, unlike Rose, Berniece tries to control information rather than physical space. At the same time, Berniece tries to defend her mother’s legacy by taking sole control over the fate -- and
both memories and meaning -- of the piano. Her attempts on both fronts are unsuccessful for most of the play. Her determination to keep the history of slavery, violence, and broken families removed from her current existence actually enables that negative history to define her own. After her mother’s death Berniece refuses to play the piano and instead channels all her feelings of loss, betrayal, and wasted opportunity into the instrument. Even the death of her husband, shot by white men trying to claim the same stolen lumber as Crawley, Boy Willie, and Lymon, gets folded into the grief she buries in the piano. But, along with these powerful emotions, she layers an equally potent sense of ancestry, history, and love. She tries to compartmentalize her history to allow herself to move forward, but she remains shackled with perpetual grief and fear. She clings obsessively to the ownership of the piano, ostensibly to honor the memory of her mother and their ancestors, but she refuses to play the piano for fear that the ghosts of those ancestors may be awakened. Despite her intentions, Berniece has not maintained her family heritage. Rather, she has redirected all that pain into the family piano.

Berniece does not see oppression and tragedy as an obstacle to her womanhood but rather as almost the definition of it. She sees nothing but a tradition of double standards, loneliness, sorrow, grief, and loss. Berniece’s refusal to put down roots is also evident in her behavior towards Avery: she never accepts his marriage proposals, but she never completely rejects them either. When Avery voices frustration over her continued reticence to marry him, Berniece explodes:

You trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me -- without a woman -- and still be a man. That’s alright. [...] But everybody gonna be
worried about Berniece. “How Berniece gonna take care of herself without a man? How she gonna raise that child without a man?” [...] Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can’t be a woman unless I got a man. (67)

She also lashes out at Boy Willie and her uncles: “You’re all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain’t never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don’t never stop” (52). Men are the ones who make the decisions that take them away; women are the ones bearing the brunt of the lasting consequences. Berniece associates the piano with her mother, left alone with memories and the ghosts of the past. She does not associate the piano with liberation; she sees it as an obligation and Boy Charles’ actions as an inadvertent punishment for her mother.

Neither she nor Boy Willie want to fit into the roles they see themselves being pushed into, and Berniece fits into the line of Wilson women who try to avoid the trajectories associated with their sex. Beyond their stated allegiance to their parents’ memories, the pair also acts defensively, trying to avoid the repetition of the past. The siblings are two sides of the same coin; they each reject a world that is continually trying to limit their future by defining their past. Boy Willie speaks of what a farm will do for him as an individual but the majority of his dialogue incorporates his family, their heritage, and their history.

The meaning of the piano is intertwined with what Berniece sees as her duty as a daughter but even more important is what she sees as her obligation as a mother. The lot
and status of women remains the focus of her dialogue. Her vision is focused on how to help her daughter overcome the limitations and patterns of tragedy she sees as embedded in the female role, not just an African American one. “Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can’t do,” Doaker explains (10). Berniece later explains to Avery why she has kept Maretha in the dark about the origins of the piano: “I got Maretha playing on it. She don’t know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don’t have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn’t have. I ain’t gonna burden her with that piano” (70).

*The Piano Lesson* is unique in the Pittsburgh Cycle because of Berniece’s role as protagonist. Even more remarkable, Berniece is the play’s dynamic character; Boy Willie, while complex and fully-developed, remains static. He is the same man at the end of the play as he was in the beginning. Berniece changes markedly, if reluctantly: she transcends the traditional protective role common to most of Wilson’s female characters and embraces a broader world. In doing so, she marks the important transition in the Pittsburgh Cycle from a focus on the individual to one on community. As the title of the play implies, the source of Berniece’s own growth involves the piano. The title is *The Piano Lesson*, however, and not simply *The Piano*. What matters is not a fixed definition of the piano but how its meaning is continually contested. At the start of the play, (almost) all the characters have fixed definitions of the instrument. The questioning and arguments offer the characters as confronting each other but also as having to acknowledge the basis of their ‘interpretation’ of the piano (and, in doing so, revealing how they see themselves and the world).

In *Fences*, at least two characters -- Troy and Rose Maxson -- have different
interpretations of the titular fence. The characters do not argue over or even discuss the fence’s meaning, however. Indeed, they may not consciously recognize the significance of the barrier at all. In *The Piano Lesson*, in contrast, the plot itself centers on the fate of the family piano, and the significance of the piano lies not in its physical form nor in the meaning individual characters assign it but rather in its role within a process of ongoing redefinition. Wilson ends the conflict between multiple opposing views by reconciling the siblings without actually taking sides. “Ain’t nobody said nothing about who’s right and who’s wrong,” Doaker declares, as he relates the piano’s origins to Lymon (and the audience): “I was just telling the man about the piano” (46). The character seems to speak for Wilson, who appears interested in examining contested definitions of the past rather than dictating behavior. By actively contesting the meaning of the piano, individual characters can experience growth and, perhaps more importantly, the vitality of the family’s history and heritage is reconfirmed.

Will Boy Willie sell the piano and use his share of the proceeds to buy land? Will Berniece retain possession of the piano and, if so, will she relent and tell her daughter the painful history of the piano? In his original staged version of the play, Wilson raised the questions without answering them. The final scene ended with the theater lights going to black while Berniece and Boy Willie stood facing each other, the resolution perpetually deferred. Audience frustration and demands for a clearer resolution encouraged Wilson to add on the play’s current ending. Wilson explained the revision in a 1993 interview:

I always knew what happened: it was just a question of keeping the lights on for another two minutes at the end. Then we could see Boy Willie come down and say that he was leaving because Berniece had found a use
for the piano: to exorcise Sutter’s ghost. Then there was no way Boy Willie could take that piano. Up until that moment it was his piano, he had every right to take it until Berniece found a use for it. I always knew that, but I just didn’t tell the audience. (Pettingill 169)

The revised ending is far more satisfying for audiences and also provides the thematic transition from a focus on the individual to one on community that began to dominate Wilson’s work. The original absence of a resolution, however, illustrates how the questions were more important to Wilson than the answers.

Wilson said in a 1987 interview with David Savran, “I generally start with an idea, something that I want to say. In *The Piano Lesson* the question was, ‘Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one’s past?’” (25). He expanded and tempered this in a 1993 interview. Speaking of what he felt he had accomplished with the play, he responded, “I don’t know if we’ve achieved anything beyond raising questions: What should we do with our legacy? What would you do if this was your piano? What is our future? Why do we stay up here and let Boy Willie go back down and get some land, something under his feet?” (Pettingill 170). Finally, in 1999, he emphasized the exploration of the controlling theme:

I started with the idea from one of Romare Bearden’s paintings – *The Piano Lesson*, the subtitle of which was *Homage to Mary Lou Williams*, who was a jazz pianist in Pittsburgh. I started with the question: Can you acquire a sense of self worth by denying your past, or is implicit in that denial a repudiation of the worth of the self? Once deciding that, I had to construct a series of events that posed that question and illustrated some
possible answers. [...] And then I got the idea of the brother coming into the house like a tornado, bringing in the past that his sister is trying to deny. (Plimpton 82)

In the later interviews Wilson emphasizes the open-ended nature of his initial question, an investigation of the characters’ motivations rather than a judgment or a directive on how to act. His comments also reveal a possible mellowing of tone, at least, about the move away from the South. If Boy Willie managed to ‘get some land under his feet,’ then is the solution in the North to do the same? Certainly the numerous homeowners throughout Wilson’s plays share this same value. But the phrase means more than physical land (though Wilson is adamant about the importance of that literal meaning). He repeatedly referred to black culture as providing him “the ground on which I stand,” and Boy Willie’s return to the South allowed him both the property that would help him in the present and the connection to a place that offered support from the past.

The primary differences in interpretation of the piano occur between Berniece and Boy Willie. While Boy Willie and Berniece share a common ancestral history and parental loss, and while both have equal claims on the piano, each has very different experiences and interpretations of the past. Wilson stages the debate as apparently mutually exclusive options: North or South, stay or leave. Wilson’s personal sympathies clearly lie with Boy Willie, the character who stays in the South, who has the “warrior spirit” Wilson so admired, and who wants to put their legacy to work. “We should have stayed in the South,” he told Bill Moyers in their discussion of *The Piano Lesson* (167), siding with Boy Willie. This bias is not as blatant in the play, however, where both siblings fiercely present arguments that are not just valid but noble. The play offers two
‘solutions’ to the problem of cultural disconnect and the Great Migration. Berniece and Boy Willie each has a different approach. Although the pair are in opposition, Wilson does not ultimately present them as polar opposites; despite such seemingly polarized dichotomies as male-female or North-South, neither side’s arguments are inherently “wrong.” Though only one of them can maintain possession of the physical piano, the success of one viewpoint does not require the failure of the other. Berniece and Boy Willie simply represent two very different life experiences, though most pivotal events have been shared. Boy Willie ultimately leaves the piano with Berniece who embraces the ghosts of the past, but the piano’s meaning encompasses all the characters’ interpretations; they are not contradictory but rather indicate the complexity of that meaning. For the future of the piano to be decided, Berniece and Boy Willie must come to terms with each other and with a past charged with both tragedy and defiance. History is not static, Wilson seems to say, and its relevance depends on how it is carried over and applied to successive generations.

Uncle Doaker ensures that Berniece and Boy Willie confront each other about the future of the piano and, by extension, their relationship with each other. When Boy Willie tries to remove the piano while Berniece is away, Doaker is there to defend the instrument: “This is my house, nigger! I ain’t gonna let you or nobody else carry nothing out of it. You ain’t gonna carry nothing out of here without my permission!” (84). In the television adaptation, Doaker underlines his words by emerging from his room with a shotgun but, in the original version, he stops Boy Willie and Lymon with his words and a look. He stands in the doorway to his bedroom and simply speaks, according to the stage directions, “Quietly with authority” (84): “Leave that piano set over there till Berniece
come back. I don't care what you do with it then. But you gonna leave it sit over there right now” (84-85). When Berniece tries to send Boy Willie away, Doaker -- the homeowner -- counters her as well: “Boy Willie ain't done nothing for me to put him out of the house. I told you if you can't get along just go on and don't have nothing to do with each other.” And later Doaker says, “I got to stay around here and keep you all from killing one another” (90).

Almost every character has his or her own story and connection to the piano. The uncles point back to their ancestors; Berniece and Boy Willie both point back to their parents. Doaker is the source of most of the exposition about the piano’s history. A second Charles uncle, Wining Boy, likewise recounts their tragic family link to the piano. A vagabond musician, he also speaks of a piano player’s burden where what once gave joy soon becomes a kind of penance: “You look up one day and you hate the whiskey, and you hate the women, and you hate the piano. But that’s all you got. You can’t do nothing else. All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me? Or am I the piano player?” (41). Even Lymon, a friend who comes North with Boy Willie with the intention of settling in Pittsburgh, must chose a side in the argument over the piano. And the ghost of Sutter, implicated in the murder of Boy Charles and a descendant of the white family who originally owned the piano, and the Charles family, comes to Pittsburgh to lay claim on the instrument.

The only member of the Charles family for whom the piano seems to have no real significance is Berniece’s 11 year-old daughter Maretha. Berniece’s attempts to shield the girl are well-intentioned but clearly presented as misguided, even destructive. She evades her daughter’s questions by telling her simply that the carvings had been there as
long as she had had the piano, and she refuses to play the piano after her mother’s death. To protect Maretta and free her from the past, Berniece denies the girl the story of her family. “She don’t know nothing about it,” she tells Avery (70). Doaker admits to Boy Willie that Berniece does not play the instrument herself but “She got Meretha playing on it though. Say Maretta can go on and do everything she can’t do” (10). From Wilson’s perspective the two goals are incompatible. Maretta cannot surpass Berniece’s limited opportunities without the cultural foundation Berniece is withholding from her. Without this foundation she will be no more anchored in Pittsburgh -- or anywhere else -- than her mother. Instead of protecting later generations by shielding children from ancestral tragedies, the repression of the complex histories of African Americans -- often by African Americans themselves -- has instead resulted in a breakdown of a culturally-sustaining identity. “And we have a situation where [today] kids do not know who they are because they cannot make the connection with their grandparents – and therefore the connection with their political history in America,” Wilson lamented (Wilson, “How to Write”).

Following the pattern of so many other Wilson plays, *The Piano Lesson* shows Berniece to be someone who must cope with the past and actively claim her heritage. She cannot escape confronting the past; if she will not embrace it, the past will engulf her. Her *obligation*, however, is to her daughter. She must make sure the girl is prepared for life and the key to this preparation is a larger community on which to stand. “She is fragmented and dislocated from her southern roots and wants to maintain this dislocation. As a result, she neglects her duties as cultural progenitor,” Harry J. Elam writes of Berniece. Only once she “reconnects with the past” (Elam, “Dialectics” 367) --
a past that is anchored in slavery, pain, resistance, and perseverance in the South -- can Berniece restore her family and claim a place in the North.

Wilson’s plays contain few young children and they have limited lines and minimal character development. Troy’s love-child Raynell makes two brief appearances in *Fences* and eleven year old Zonia Loomis’ role in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is to spark her father’s quest for personal resolution. Both children serve primarily as plot devices. Maretha, in contrast, is unnecessary in terms of plot. Berniece and Boy Willie would still be at odds without her. Boy Willie would still find fault with Berniece’s words and actions without her parenting decisions to respond to, and Berniece would still blame Boy Willie for her husband’s death. Boy Willie would still fight to sell the piano so as to buy land and Berniece would still defend the piano while refusing to play it. What makes Maretha unique is her significance as a symbol for the next generation and her role in Wilson’s transition from an emphasis on the individual to his concern with the community. While given as few lines and scenes as Raynell or Zonia, Maretha is integral to the meaning of the play in a way that neither of the other child characters are.

Wilson often spoke of the need to retell and retain an African American history. In several of his interviews he referred specifically to young people, including one interview in which he discusses his oldest child:

When my daughter went to college, she called me all excited that she was studying about Timbuktu. I told her, “You study your grandma and her grandmother before you go back to Timbuktu.” People don’t want to do that because soon you wind up with slavery, and that’s a condition people want to run away from. It’s much easier to go back to the glory days of
Timbuktu, but to do that is falsely romantic. It doesn’t get you anywhere.

(Lyons 8)

In King Hedley II, Wilson puts this idea into dialogue. “What them kids gonna do now?” Stool Pigeon demands when he is robbed and his newspaper ‘archive’ destroyed: “They burned up their history. They ain’t gonna know what happened. They ain’t gonna know how they got from tit to tat. You got to know that” (69). In the bleak environment of the 1980s-era Hill District, the history is missing not because it is forgotten or lost in a transition or withheld out of fear, but because it is actively destroyed, like Stool Pigeon’s newspapers, or neglected.

Boy Willie voices this same argument in The Piano Lesson. As Berniece is fixing Maretha’s hair, she scolds the fidgety girl, “Be still, Maretha. If you was a boy I wouldn’t be going through this” (90). Enraged over what is largely a throw-away comment from a frustrated mother, Boy Willie warns her about ramifications of cutting the girl off from her history:

What kind of a thing is that to tell a child? If you want to tell her something tell her about that piano. You ain’t even told her about that piano. Like that’s something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano. You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it… and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn’t have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. I’m talking about a big party! Invite everybody!
Mark that day down with a special meaning. That way she know where she at in the world. You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain’t no part of it belong to her. (91)

Boy Willie injects his own issues into Berniece’s words. His response ties together the piano, their father’s taking of the piano, and his own reasons for wanting a farm so badly. Berniece loves her daughter and sounds like a tired mother struggling with her child’s hair. The force of her brother’s explosive speech is not directed toward himself, nor on Berniece, but on the supreme importance of his niece’s heritage.

Possession of the piano does not equate to ownership in *The Piano Lesson*. Willie Boy forced Miss Ophelia and Mr. Sutter to literally see (if not accept) a different meaning of the piano when he carves his family’s history into the wood, an act that declared a form of ownership over that history. The process occurred again when Boy Charles took the piano from the Sutter home. The act resulted in his death and it is unlikely the Sutters recognized the “theft” as a liberation, but by claiming the piano Boy Charles again changed its meaning. As Berniece and Boy Willie confront each other, the audience sees the piano as having multiple interpretations. The confrontation is useful to both characters, however, as well as to the audience. Neither backs down throughout the play but, because the siblings confront each other, Berniece is forced to admit something she has been trying to hide from in the first place: her husband’s responsibility for his own death.

The recognition of the piano as a family icon that *needs* to be continually reinvented and contested advances existing scholarly conversations about the importance of the Great Migration in the Wilson canon. Just as Berniece sees herself as giving
Maretha an opportunity she herself did not have, Boy Willie sees himself as fulfilling the future their father could never achieve for himself. Boy Willie wants to own the land his family suffered on and suffered for, to own the land that had owned his family. The piano is his means to that end. For Berniece, the piano is a symbol of family history and sacrifice, but she protects that heritage with an intensity that may destroy the family she has left. In her ferocity over keeping the piano from being sold, she comes close to shooting Boy Willie and Lymon. By giving her young daughter music lessons on the piano while ignoring the deeper meaning of the piano itself, she has not so much buffered Maretha from a painful family saga but rather alienated Maretha from her heritage; she is raising the girl to be rootless. Boy Willie is frustrated by Berniece’s refusal to either let the instrument go or put it to good use. As he tells her,

> Alright now, if you say to me, Boy Willie, I’m using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else. I’d have to go on and say, well, Berniece using that piano. She building on it. Let her go on and use it. I got to find another way to get Sutter’s land. But Doaker say you ain’t touched that piano the whole time it’s been up here. So why you wanna stand in my way? (51)

What infuriates Boy Willie, however, is Berniece’s refusal to teach Maretha the history of the piano.

> At stake is not only Maretha’s future but the future of the entire Charles family. Boy Willie speaks of his ability to elevate the family though property ownership and an opportunity to build economic wealth. He also talks of redeeming his father’s life as a sharecropper through buying land. Berniece, in contrast, may destroy her ancestors
through her intentional avoidance of the piano. Michael Morales does not discuss the Great Migration in “Ghosts on the Piano: August Wilson and the Representation of Black American History.” Instead he discusses the piano as a way of connecting with ancestors through music and through ritualized behaviors: “First it functions as a mnemonic devise for the transmission of oral history; and second, it functions as a sacred ancestral altar, bringing the world of the living to that of the dead” (106). Mama Ola, Berniece and Boy Willie’s mother, tends to the piano daily and thereby maintains a bond with her murdered husband. She anoints the instrument with her tears and with blood from her hands, rubbed raw from constantly polishing the piano. Because the actions are linked to older traditions, Mama Ola is also maintaining a family bond with the family’s ancestors. For Morales, the removal of the piano (and most of the Charles family) from the South is not as relevant as Berniece’s refusal to maintain an “African ritual practice” and “African ancestral worship” (109). While he deviates from the specifics of Wilson’s own statements, the overarching premise appears the same: maintain African -- however defined -- traditions and cultural connections. Morales’ essay is particularly interesting because of his discussion of the ways in which African ancestor worship is based on the conception that the living and the dead need each other:

The kinship between the living and the dead is a symbiotic relation -- mutually beneficial or self-destructive -- and it must be carried on in order to guarantee the continuation of the lineage. The ancestors are still members of the lineage, an active part of the clan, and after a period of time most of the ancestors will reenter the world of the living by reincarnation back into the lineage, thus completing a cycle of life and
death that ensures the continuity and survival of their own kinship line.

Any break in this cycle has potentially catastrophic effects. (109)

The loss of cultural and ancestral connection becomes not simply a tragedy for the living members of the Charles family but also threatens a kind of second death for the dead. If Berniece does not actively maintain the connection with the piano, her daughter will be cut off from her heritage and the light of the family line will be extinguished.

The play ends with Boy Willie leaving, Sutter’s ghost vanquished, the piano still in the parlor, and Boy Willie’s warning to keep playing the piano or “me and Sutter both liable to be back” (108). In the broadcast television version, which Wilson himself adapted, he ended with the image of Berniece and Maretha at the piano. Both are playing as the mother teaches the daughter her music lesson. A tender image, it also reinforces the idea that the transition to the North can indeed be successful as long as the heritage in the South is actively brought along and sustained. *The Piano Lesson* both fits and deviates from the pattern Wilson had established with his earlier works. *Fences* is primarily a character study of a man caught between worlds, locked in the trauma of the past while trying to cope with a changing present and future. The play ends hopefully because Troy Maxson’s family is temporarily united onstage to honor his life. His youngest children sing a song they had heard their father sing, carrying over in at least this one example and in this one moment a shared heritage. But Troy had driven Cory away and spent the last decade of his life isolated from his wife, his brother, his best friend, and at least one of his sons. *Fences* ends where it began, focused on Troy and not on the children or the future.

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis realizes that the only solution to
his personal fragmentation is to aggressively claim his own body, identity, and self and thereby retrieve his inner song. That play also ends hopefully, with Loomis freed from the pain of his past and the implied potential for a new future with Mattie. But again, he is a father isolated from his family. The only reunion is between Martha and their daughter Zonia, whom Loomis delivers to his estranged wife with the admonition, “Zonia, you go live with your mama. She a good woman. You go on with her and listen to her good” (90). The emphasis is on Loomis as an individual, on his success as a newly-whole man.

Wilson’s later plays never end with this inward focus but instead point to the protagonist’s responsibility to his community, his role in helping others achieve their own songs. Protagonists almost always have some type of epiphany that allows them to metaphorically stand up like Herald Loomis, but -- to paraphrase Wilson -- the lights stay on for a few more minutes. Once a pivotal character has experienced whatever realization was necessary for that character, he immediately directs his focus outwards to the rest of the community. Citizen helps southerners escape to the North, Sterling steals Hambone his ham, Booster organizes the jitney drivers to fight the demolition of the business, and Harmond Wilks puts on war paint and joins the neighborhood to paint Aunt Ester’s house in front of the bulldozers.

The Piano Lesson offers a transition between these two approaches. The Piano Lesson does not include the comprehensive emphasis on community evident in Wilson’s remaining plays. Boy Willie is returning to the South where, assuming he manages to purchase his own land, he will be physically separated from much of the surrounding community. Because of the scarcity of black-owned farms, he will also be removed from
the black community; Boy Willie himself refers to a black farmer’s ability to “stand up next to the white man” rather than stand alongside other black farmers. Boy Willie’s decision to return South is one the playwright repeatedly and whole-heartedly endorsed, and Wilson does not create a scenario where the character is isolated; his emphasis, as with Loomis, is on a man who is aware of who he is and has the strength to stand on his own.

In later works, however, Wilson did not end with characters who are able to “stand up” only to stand alone. Whether they die in the process (King Hedley II in the play of the same name), face possible death (Memphis in Two Trains Running), or have experienced the death of another (Booster in Jitney, Sterling in Two Trains Running, Citizen in Gem of the Ocean), Wilson’s later protagonists all extend their new-found strength to the larger community. There is no community in The Piano Lesson. By the play’s end, Berniece does not establish a church with Avery and she does not open her doors to teach the neighborhood children to play the piano (and how to embrace their heritage). The play is transitional just as the process of settling in the North at this juncture remains transitional.

Because Berniece has opened up a conduit between Maretha and her past, however, she nevertheless extends her own epiphany beyond herself. She has saved her brother from Sutter’s ghost and she has brought the family North in the form of ancestral spirits. In so doing she is a step closer to the message Wilson later incorporated into the Cycle: the need to find one’s song and then extend it out to the larger community.

In this way The Piano Lesson functions as a bridge between the two segments of the Pittsburgh Cycle. Although the decisions and actions of the main characters ripple
out to their immediate family, there is no discussion of a possible impact on the larger community. Berniece must first come to terms with her own past and identity; and, while this acceptance has tremendous implications for her daughter, she does not go beyond this very important action. In the later works the pattern would involve some type of extension of her decisions and actions to the surrounding neighborhood, similar to Memphis Lee’s determination in *Two Trains Running* to open a new restaurant in the Hill or Booster’s decision in *Jitney* to lead the jitney drivers in protest against the demolitions.

On the other hand, Berniece is far more settled at the end of the play than the characters in Wilson’s early plays. Troy Maxson is seemingly “settled” for the majority of the Act I, confident in his identity and firmly established in his Pittsburgh community and home. His behavior and decisions reveal he is less secure than he initially appears, however, and by Act II he is clinging to anything that would give permanence to his life. While he maintains his home, he is far from anchored and remains adrift until his family redeems him through their unity after his death. Herald Loomis, the pivotal character of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, declares ownership of his body and spirit in the final moments of the play, and because of his actions he will finally be able to settle in his own skin and, possibly, Pittsburgh. But he has resolved the relationship with his wife, not reunited with her, and he returned their daughter to Martha. Mattie, forever abandoned by the men in her life, runs after him as he leaves the stage and the implication is that the pair may finally bring each other a more lasting relationship.

Berniece goes beyond the actions of Troy or Herald and brings that legacy to her Northern home. By the end of the play Berniece must embrace the ghosts (literal and metaphorical) of her past so she can save her brother from Sutter’s ghost. The decision
will also save her daughter by acknowledging Maretha’s heritage. That this hopeful future will be in the North makes the play of singular importance to the cycle. When Berniece calls on her ancestors, those ghosts are transported to Pittsburgh and touch the piano, her home, and the North. Her actions do not simply resolve her own identity, or even just her daughter’s. Because she summons forth her ancestors, Berniece has transcended the fragmentation Wilson repeatedly identified as the result of the Great Migration and the source of so much social turmoil; she has brought that history with her to anchor her -- and her family -- in the North.

Sociologists, cultural anthropologists, psychologists, and historians have examined the emotional and symbolic resonance of the concept of “home” to displaced populations. Whether that population is made up of refugees, migrants, immigrants, or the enslaved, housing – and the myriad connotations associated with it – can have a powerful impact on identity and definitions of home. In many respects, settling in a neighborhood -- forming a new community, and not simply living there -- was instrumental in helping reestablish the connection Wilson saw as lost with the move out of the southern Homeland. As historian Joyce Jaycox relates in an anecdote about a black migrant, the Great Migration offered opportunities for advancement: “A migrant to Philadelphia told a Survey investigator, ‘Miss, if I had the money I would go South and dig up my fathers’ and my mothers’ [sic] bones and bring them up… I am forty-nine years old and these six weeks I have spent here are the first weeks in my life of peace and comfort’” (Jaycox 475). In a way, Berniece and Boy Willie enact that migrant’s wish to free his (dead) parents from a tragic past. Berniece summons the spirits of their family to her Pittsburgh home while Boy Willie literally wrestles with a ghost of the family who
repeatedly devastated and destroyed them. By bringing them North, Berniece has freed herself. By bringing them North she has created the possibility for her daughter -- and others -- to understand the ghosts of the past alongside the freedoms of the North.

All of Wilson’s plays are about ownership and the anchoring of that property – however defined – to the community. Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* links the two elements – permanence of place and economic stability – when he describes the economic stability of the property he wants to buy by using language of physical stability: “Get something under your feet. Land the only thing God ain’t making no more of. [...] I’m talking about some land. What you get something out the ground from. That’s what I’m talking about” (50). As Wilson explains, “The idea of selling the piano to acquire land would mean to come full circle from property to ownership, which is what Boy Willie wants to do” (qtd. in Tibbetts 239). Although the irony of owning the land of the family that had once owned his family would have been sweet, the irony is left unstated. Boy Willie’s dialogue focuses not on this inversion but on the opportunities that will come with ownership of the land – *any* land. Again, Boy Willie sees property as a chance to control his own destiny, not enact revenge. As he explains, “I get Sutter’s land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then I’m alright” (51). His confidence in the power of land is revealed in his language and in his passion. By owning his own farm, he believes he will have sure footing and his future will depend on his own abilities and hard work.

The fight over the piano is resolved at the end of *The Piano Lesson*. But, while Berniece must concede and summon her ancestors into her home, her definition of the piano itself -- as a kind of physical memory of their mother’s sacrifice, devotion, and love
-- remains the same. Boy Willie concedes that the piano will stay with Berniece but his
definition too remains the same. For him, the instrument is a tool that must be actively
used. If his sister will play the piano and sustain the memory of their family then he is
content leaving it with her in Pittsburgh. Once Berniece summons the courage to call up
the ghosts of her ancestors to save her surviving family, she brings together the two
worlds: southern and northern, past and present. Her history is now in Pittsburgh; her
family is now united rather than divided through the piano. Once she defeats the ghosts
of her oppressed heritage by exorcising the ghost of Sutter, Boy Willie sees that she has
finally staked a legitimate claim on the piano. The play ends with him returning home,
presumably to find a way to raise the money to buy Sutter’s land and leaving Berniece
with a new anchor and a much stronger sense of place, identity, and home. She has faced
her worst fears and is able to move forward. Boy Willie will maintain the family
connection in Mississippi. Berniece stays in Pittsburgh to finally create a home for
herself and Maretha, a home that is now finally anchored in both place and time.
CHAPTER TWO  “Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses...”
Migrants and Immigrants in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *Fences*

“When the center of American interests is transferred from considerations of race to the recognition of those surer standards of birth, education and ideals, by which alone citizenship is to be adjudged, racial prejudice against the Negro and Negroid will become as insignificant in Anglo-Saxon America as it is rare in Latin-America. Toward this end the Negro and the immigrant should strive by removing the barriers of color and of mutual fear or distrust which separate them, in order to make possible the realization of the new and really United States of North America, without which there can be no union of all America.”

*James B. Clarke, “The Negro and the Immigrant in the Two Americas: An International Aspect of the Color Problem,” 1913*

“We did not sit on the sidelines while the immigrants of Europe through hard work, skill, cunning, guile, and opportunity built America into an industrial giant of the 20th century. It was our labor that provided the capital. It was our labor in the shipyards and the stockyards and the coal mines and the steel mills. Our labor built the roads and the railroads. And when America was challenged, we strode onto the battlefield, our boots strapped on and our blood left to soak into the soil of places whose names we could not pronounce [...] and our only reward has been the deprivation of possibility and the denial of our moral personality.

It cannot continue. The ground together. The American ground on which I stand and which my ancestors purchased with their perseverance, with their survival, with their manners, and with their faith.

It cannot continue... as well other assaults upon our presence and our history cannot continue.”

*August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand.” 1997*

**Introduction**

*Fences*, which won August Wilson a Tony Award and his first Pulitzer Prize, is the story of a garbage man living in the 1957 Hill District. Yet Wilson, in the preface, writes of an earlier era:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. [...] The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome.
or participation. […] They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar-paper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. […] (xvii)

Why does Wilson’s preface discuss a Pittsburgh some fifty years removed from the play’s setting? The answer may be in large part logistical or accidental. *Fences* was only Wilson’s second Broadway play and he had not yet decided to develop an entire century series. If he had known what would come after perhaps he would have decided to wait until a different work to raise the point. Intentionality aside, however, Wilson’s commentary sheds light on protagonist Troy Maxson’s decisions within the play and points to the source of anxieties and burdens that influence Troy’s eventual behavior. Conversely, Troy’s story and his sometimes self-defeating actions illustrate why the overlapping histories of the migrant/immigrant experience deserve more attention.

Troy’s children find his tales of his youth alien, startling, and ultimately irrelevant to their own lives and experiences. To the characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson’s next work, the contrast between the southern black migrant and the white European immigrant is immediate, and stark. The play is set in 1911 against the backdrop of the Great Migration. Seth Holly, owner of the boarding house that serves as the play’s setting, points to the contrasting opportunities in an outburst about naive blacks coming north looking for work:
Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads… and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. They don’t know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellows come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. […] they got a rude awakening. (6)

The language is pitying at best, contemptuous at worst. As a property owner Seth has a distinct advantage, and he has lived in Pittsburgh his entire life. Kim Pereira attributes Seth's attitudes in part to his character's northern isolation: "His disdain springs from the fact that, as a child of free northern parents, he has no firsthand knowledge of the life on the plantation and cannot sympathize with the special need to get away from the roots and locale of slavery" (57). But, while Seth may be isolated from the oppression and painful memories of the south, he has his own oppression to deal with in the north.

Throughout the cycle Wilson looks at a people divided from their past. They are physically distanced from their home and emotionally and spiritually removed from their cultural history. In these early works Wilson’s focus is on the individual trying to cope in a changing world. The history of the migrant versus immigrant experience sheds light on how the two characters -- Seth and Troy -- see themselves in relation to the rest of that world. With *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, set at the start of the largest internal migration in the nation’s history, characters struggle to find themselves, a loved one, or a home.

Seth, though already settled in the north, exhibits an obsession over his property that stems from the limited opportunities he (and those new residents) must face. In *Fences*, set nearly half a century later, Troy is a tragic hero whose keen awareness of the uneven
playing field exacerbates his insecurities as he battles with his past, his own failings, and his own mortality.

Wilson’s depiction in *Fences* of the embrace with which “the city” greeted “the destitute of Europe” glosses over the despair and death these immigrants faced but the contrast he describes in his preface is not exaggerated. Seth’s depiction of the differences between the “white fellows” arriving alongside the naive black southerners is unfortunately also accurate. The experiences of the masses that immigrated to the U.S. in the 19th century and settled in Pittsburgh at points run parallel to those of the blacks who migrated there in the early 20th century. Their paths soon diverged, however, despite many similarities (including, in the case of the Hill District, a shared neighborhood). The two populations -- white European immigrants and black southern migrants -- ultimately had very different trajectories. This chapter will focus on the history of that core disparity between the two groups, how Wilson’s two early plays depict that reality in the characters of Seth and Troy, and how the pair illuminates the reality. The history of the migrant versus immigrant experience also adds depth to Wilson’s claim about a fundamental difference in opportunity and therefore reflects on later opportunities for not only fictional characters but real people.

I. **The Migrant vs. Immigrant Experience**

For a short period, the ‘Negro population’ in the urban North faced less strident resentment than that directed toward the far more populous ethnic groups. In New York, the city with the highest percentage of immigrants, nearly half of the inhabitants in 1860 were foreign-born (Still 118). Pittsburgh had a smaller, though still substantial, percentage with approximately 37% born outside the country, a rate on par with the
nation’s other major cities (117). In contrast, few African Americans lived in the northern cities. Philadelphia’s black population of 22,000 represented just 4% of the city’s total population and yet constituted the largest block of African Americans outside the South (Still 118). New York’s numbers were around 12,500, or 1.5% of the total population, while only around 1,100 African Americans lived in Pittsburgh (118).

The ratio of foreign- to native-born shifted in favor of the native at the close of the century but immigrants remained a dominant force. In 1890, 1st or 2nd generation immigrants made up 65.9% of Pittsburgh’s population. In 1910 they represented 62.2%. By 1930, well into the Great Migration, they still constituted 54.1% of the city’s population (Faires 9). Hardly surprisingly, “[t]he reaction of some of […] native-born Americans was to deprecate the customs of immigrant newcomers and to use the arm of the state to enforce social norms they believed more fitting” (Faires 12-13). A. F. Southwick, in “Ethnic Elements of Colonial Pennsylvania and the Population of To-Day” (published in 1923), found an unfavorable comparison between the state’s early ethnic groups (Quakers, Germans, Scotch-Irish, Welsh, and others) and the groups – largely Eastern European -- that were part of the “New Immigration.” In his conclusion, Southwick questions, “What will be the results of this large foreign element upon our ideals and institutions? For the present the question is indeterminable. We are not yet far enough removed from even the beginning of the New Immigration. We started a century and more ago with immigrants from the best stock in Europe; our New Immigration has been from the worst” (246). Without question, institutionalized discrimination severely restricted black northerners’ opportunities and lifestyles. Because European immigrants so dominated the landscape, however, and because blacks were completely shut out of
most industries and professions, in the 19th and very early 20th centuries they were not seen as a major economic threat and therefore accorded less hostility than might be assumed. A front-page story in an 1867 issue of *The New York World*, “Our Negro Population,” even favorably compared the new negro inhabitants against many other immigrant populations and “the lower grades of whites” who were native-born (qtd. in Still 138). Bayrd Still has acknowledged the “note of condescension […] and evidence of the traditional racial discrimination” (136) but highlights how the account favorably compares the black migrants to the more familiar immigrant groups.

The level of racial violence evident in some other cities never materialized in Pittsburgh, though there were some incidents. The largest was following the notorious Homestead Strike of 1892. A few weeks after the deadly July 6th conflict between the Pinkertons and workers, blacks were used as scabs. Paul Krause, in *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892*, describes the tension:

Racial unrest simmered throughout the summer and fall and finally exploded in a massive antiblack riot on 13 November that saw two-thousand whites, many of them East European immigrants, attack the fifty black families who were by then living in Shantytown. “Let’s lynch the nigger black sheep. Let’s hang ‘em,” they cried. Although gunfire was exchanged and several people were badly wounded, there were no fatalities. Two days later, however, Mack Schudy, a Hungarian Jew who worked in the mill, shot and instantly killed Pat Coyne, an Irish co-worker. Though racism and ethnic tension had always been a part of Homestead, through July 1892 the workers had effectively contained the more virulent
expressions of these ugly forces. Thus, in addition to permanently altering the career trajectories of thousands of individual workers, the Homestead Lockout modified the overall quality of race and ethnic relations in -- and beyond -- the town. (346)

In 1917 a race riot, involving an estimated 100 whites and 50 blacks, erupted on Smithfield Street, Downtown (“Two Are Beaten”). In 1919 a group claiming to be the Ku Klux Klan posted threatening signs outside Pittsburgh homes and churches, proclaiming, “The War is Over Negroes. Stay in Your Place, If You Don’t, We’ll Put You There” (“Klu Klux Klan”). By 1925 Allegheny County had 33 chapters of the klan, the largest number in the state. Historian John M. Craig ties the popularity of the organization to resentment over the job competition from the Catholic immigrants. The region’s largest klan riot occurred in 1923 and targeted not African Americans but Irish immigrants. Craig claims that the riot had something to do with a broader neighborhood territoriality and the excitement of klan propaganda breaking the boredom of summer rather than simply genuine xenophobic animosity.

Portrayals in the press and popular culture also frequently depicted immigrants in a harsher light than the northern blacks. Late 19th and early 20th century Pittsburgh newspapers caricatured negroes as simian and essentially the same as those drawn in southern newspapers. But the caricatures of Irish immigrants – a far larger population in the city – were in many ways worse. Taking the lead from national styles (which themselves were based on British stereotypes), the Irish were presented as shiftless, violent, alcoholic thugs. Black Americans were portrayed as backwards, childlike, and buffoonish; the apelike features in the Irish-American portrayal, however, present them
as not only backwards but also physically threatening.

The prejudice against Hungarians was also institutionalized and particularly virulent. In a literary representation, Thomas Bell incorporates the pervasive level of ethnic prejudice in his 1941 novel *Out of this Furnace*. The book follows three generations of a immigrant Slovakian family in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in southwestern Pennsylvania. As Bell depicts it, of the major European immigrant groups to come to the region’s steel mills, those from Slovakia faced some of the worst – and most enduring – prejudice. Mike Dobrejckak, the protagonist of a middle section of the novel, pours out his frustrations to his wife shortly before he is killed in an accident at the mill:

“I work hard. I work like a horse sometimes. And I have less every payday. What good is all my work if they won’t pay me enough to keep my family? What in God’s name must a man do to make a living in this world? […] There was a time when I thought I’d surely get a good job sometime. I worked hard. I did what I was told and more. And I’ve seen them hire Irish, Johnny Bulls, Scotties, just off the boat and knowing no more about a steel mill than Mikie there, and in a year they’re giving me orders. Not once or twice but many times. And I’ve been working in those furnaces over twenty years. I know my job, Marcha. I could take over that furnace tomorrow and make as good iron as Keogh ever did. But I’m a Hunkie and they don’t give good jobs to Hunkies. God damn their souls to hell.” (184-85)

Speaking as the narrator Bell also comments on the context for Mike’s situation and
expands it to include the generalized racial and ethnic divisions:

That the company openly preferred foreigners as laborers, that immigration from Western Europe had fallen off, that the hours were long, the work hard and the opportunities for advancement rare, helped explain why the unskilled labor force was predominantly foreign by the beginning of the new century. For the English-speaking peoples’ unconcealed racial prejudice, their attitude that it was a disgrace to work on a level with Hunkies, there was no rational excuse. But it was a fact, a large and not pretty fact which marked, stunted and embittered whole generations. (123-24)

As successive waves of immigrant groups moved into Pittsburgh and the Hill District, the tone and focus of prejudice evolved to greet them. The Jews -- with their “strange tongue and lower standard of living” (qtd. in School of Social Work 4) -- replaced the Irish and “The Italians gradually supplanted large numbers of Jews. The newspapers of 1900 reported that ‘throngs of greasy, unkept Italians stand around in front of little grocery stores jabbering or smoking while slovenly women with filthy youngsters sit on the steps or parade up and down the streets strewn with old rags, filthy water, and rubbish of all kinds.’ The newspapers have characterized each successive immigrant group in a similar manner” (4). As more and more blacks moved from the rural south to the urban north, and as black workers finally started to make significant inroads into the steel industry during the First World War, resentment towards these workers correspondingly intensified. Newspapers similarly reflected increased negative portrayals and depictions.
In the early years of the Great Migration, southern blacks met with a contradictory environment no matter where their final destination. On the one hand, the war meant that manpower needs of the industrial expansion exceeded available workers and employers were desperate. Pay was rising in the north even as agricultural disasters lowered economic possibilities in the south. On the other hand, racism did not cease at the Mason-Dixon line; it continued to pervade the lives of the new migrants throughout the north, and those in Pittsburgh faced the same – or stronger – contradictions as in other major cities. They earned higher wages but paid outrageous rents for inferior housing. Industry often welcomed them, but only for the lowest-paying and most menial jobs.

In 1909, Helen A. Tucker – one of two African Americans whose work was included in *The Pittsburgh Survey* – estimated that two-thirds of Clark Mill’s 120 black workers and half of Homestead’s 126 black workers were in skilled or semi-skilled positions. This ratio was actually better than that of the region’s steel workers as a whole. A 1907 survey showed that, “nearly 75% of the men employed in basic steel in Pittsburgh held semiskilled or unskilled jobs” (Bodnar et al 16). But while Tucker’s percentages are highly significant (particularly for the blacks fortunate enough to be employed), the overall number of blacks in the city’s steel mills were low. Tucker stated that, as late as 1910, just “507 blacks were found among 19,686 men working in Pittsburgh’s blast furnaces and rolling mills” (qtd. in Bodnar et al 555). If both surveys were correct, then over half the city’s black steel workers were located at just two plants. Charles S. Johnson’s numbers were even lower than Tucker’s; in 1928 he estimated that the number of Pittsburgh black steel workers as “less than 100 in five plants in 1910” (131).
Abraham Epstein, a University of Pittsburgh graduate economics student and the first of many local students to study the city’s African American population, compiled a study of Pittsburgh migrants in 1917. He writes of a dispersed population desperate for both housing and jobs. While there are certain numbers of the latter, there is a tremendous lack of the former. Due to war shortages, high prices, and an outmoded tax system, “there have been almost no new houses added and few vacated by whites within the last two years” in the so-called “Negro-sections” (8), he notes. While explaining why individuals facing overwhelming bigotry, limited employment, and a huge cultural transition might indeed drink, gamble, and ‘carouse,’ Epstein also rejects the idea that these recent migrants were either loners, transients, or automatically privileged to have been able to leave their southern home. “The married Negro comes to the North to stay,” he writes (11):

[...] Although such a man is glad to receive the better treatment, enlarged privileges and higher wages, which are accorded him here, he cannot adjust himself to the Pittsburgh housing situation. He meets his first insuperable difficulty when he attempts to get a house in which to live. Back South, he may have been oppressed, but his home was often in a more comfortable place, where he had light and space. At least he did not have to live in one room in a congested slum and pay excessive rents. (10-11)

Epstein’s analysis of northern negro stereotypes additionally counters the supposed glory of northern freedoms as opposed to southern oppressions. He quotes “one intelligent and hard working woman” preparing to return to her old life in Georgia as complaining,
“I never lived in such houses in my life. We had four rooms in my home.”

This woman was earning ten dollars per week and her husband was profitably employed, yet they chose to relinquish the comparatively large rewards of the North, rather than do without the decencies of life which they had known in the South. (18)

Terrible living conditions combined with the scarcity of available property and Pittsburgh’s housing situation quickly turned desperate. Compared to their chances in the north, ownership in the south was not only more desirable but also more likely. As a result, and quite against the stereotypes and assumptions held by the general population (and city officials), black Southern migrants regularly found themselves in worse conditions than those they had left behind. In the South, blacks had faced crushing poverty and institutionalized oppression. A 1919 U.S. Dept. of Labor report describes the typical environment in the southern “black-belt counties” as a contributing factor of the Great Migration:

> The houses in which the vast majority of Negroes live contain no modern conveniences and are little better than rudely constructed shanties. Large families quite commonly live in one small room, in which there is little window space. Too often the houses have been placed in a bleak spot of ground which is barren of grass or trees, and the environment of the home is such that cleanliness and sanitation are impossible of attainment. (68-9)

Yet the description sounds almost identical – if less graphic – to what the black migrant faced in the industrial north, including a horrific housing situation that was well-established before the Great Migration. Like the rest of the city, state, and nation, the
Hill District saw dramatic demographic shifts through the decades that closed the 19th and opened the 20th centuries. By 1890 it was one of Pittsburgh’s solidly blue-collar neighborhoods (Bodnar et al 23). As new immigrants and new immigrant groups succeeded earlier ones, older families and groups pooled their economic and political clout and gradually moved further away from the mills and the pollution that surrounded them. The Hill’s existing housing stock was solidly built compared to many other low income areas in Pittsburgh, but the continual flow of poor inhabitants into and out of the area (even if this was only a few blocks away) meant that the houses that remained were often neglected through generations of overuse. Landlords squeezed as many people as possible into each building, charged them as much as possible, and spent as little as possible on upkeep and usually nothing on improvements.

One migrant noted of his move from the south, “If I were half as well treated home as here, I would rather stay there, as I had family there and had a better home and better health” (qtd. in Epstein 27). As only the most recent group to vie for the jobs and the housing in the increasingly crowded, demanding northern cities, black migrants faced all the economic hardships of the ethnic groups who were competing for the same jobs and housing. The buildings were already heavily worn from previous generations of tenants who had themselves faced horrible overcrowding, poverty, and already dilapidated housing. Those who were dividing and dividing again their rental properties into smaller segments with larger numbers of tenants and higher rents were not likely to spend the money to update these properties.

Hundreds and then thousands of new inhabitants arrived in only a few years. An April 1918 Cleveland Advocate article titled “Housing Needs Acute in Pittsburgh”
warned that “housing conditions, even with alleged greatly inflated rents, have practically broken down,” with the number of blacks who had come to the city for the war-era employment opportunities estimated to have increased 18,000-20,000 (5). Overcrowding, ethnic and racial segregation, and slums were already entrenched in the Hill before the start of the Great Migration, and no one in power seemed to recognize the need to control, act, or plan. The authors of the U.S. Dept. of Labor report, *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, lamented the utter lack of external support systems/structures:

> That the present economic stability of the Negro worker is low is evident; but consideration must be given to the fact that these newcomers are handicapped, as were the foreign immigrants, by an almost universal attitude of ‘laissez faire’ and individualism in the northern cities. The communities have assumed almost no control of his living conditions, and the burden of his success or failure in establishing himself has rested on his own weak shoulders. He has lacked almost entirely the training for industry that alone would insure success in the new environment. The casuals who drift about are often underfed, devitalized, and lodged in congested and indecent quarters that could not but interfere with their health and working efficiency. (149-50)

Various immigrant groups had been enduring these conditions for decades. Thomas Bell describes the situation the European immigrants faced in *Out of the Furnace*, speaking not of the Hill District but of the entire collection of neighborhoods the industrial workers formed and flocked to:

Real estate speculators put up the houses that became so characteristic of
the steel towns, long, ugly rows like cell blocks, two rooms high and two deep, without water, gas or conveniences of any kind, nothing but walls and the roofs [...] . They were filled as soon as they were finished and made no apparent impression on the housing shortage or the rent level.

(122-23)

The exploitation and often dangerous living conditions black Pittsburhers faced, particularly in the early years, therefore sounds identical to those of their earlier European immigrant counterparts and contemporaries. Indeed, the houses were often the very same, as the African Americans moving into or through Pittsburgh typically found housing either alongside the poorest European immigrants or in the houses earlier immigrants had just vacated.

As new immigrants and new immigrant groups succeeded earlier ones, older families and groups pooled their economic and political clout and gradually moved further away from the mills and the pollution that surrounded them, but this upward mobility was a slow process. With more Southern blacks migrating in search of new opportunities, existing black neighborhoods throughout Northern cities exploded in population with little increase in land or housing. The numbers of people coming into the Hill therefore far exceeded those moving out, and the housing situation throughout the working class sections of the city went from strained to critical. An urban housing situation that was already a very significant problem at the turn of the 20th century quickly got far worse.

When Abraham Epstein wrote about the problem in 1917, he described a housing situation already bursting at the seams:
The sections formerly designated as Negro quarters, have been long since congested beyond capacity by the influx of newcomers, and a score of new colonies have sprung up in hollows and ravines, on hill slopes and along river banks, by railroad tracks and in mill-yards. In many instances the dwellings are those which have been abandoned by foreign white people since the beginning of the present war. In some cases they are structures once condemned by the City Bureau of Sanitation, but opened again only to accommodate the influx from the South. (Epstein 16)

As had happened with earlier European populations, homes were divided into apartments, apartments into individual rooms, individual rooms into multi-tenant – even multi-family – housing: “Attics and cellars, store-rooms and basements, churches, sheds and warehouses had to be employed for the accommodation of these new-comers. Whenever a Negro had space which he could possibly spare, it was converted into it, and the maximum number of men per bed were lodged” (8). Sometimes this was a matter of greed on the part of the (often white, absent) property owner, but it was also a result of earlier arrivals opening their doors to later-arriving family and friends. Tenement housing was make-shift, renters sleeping in rotation according to their work schedules (13). At the time Epstein was compiling his research, it was still early in the migration – “little longer than one year” after what he points to as Pittsburgh’s beginning (10) – but housing was a central issue for the migrants and for his study. With social conditions already under such severe stress and living conditions in such dire straits, it is hard to fathom that things could get much worse. His descriptions, however, are of the situation before the height of the influx. In 1919 an anonymous donor awarded the Pittsburgh
Urban League $10,000 for the “proper care for more than 20,000 Negroes from the south, here by large concerns to work in mills and other plants,” so that “provisions will be made for caring for these negroes, obtaining better housing conditions and keeping them in work” (“Aid Race in Pittsburgh”). There exists little other evidence in later labor history to suggest that the industrial giants heeded Epstein’s advice, but the workers -- and their families – kept coming anyway.

As a second generation Pittsburgher, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’s Seth Holly has a jumpstart on the new migrants, but he perpetually lags behind any white worker. There is ample evidence to support his claim in both contemporary testimony and in statistics. University of Pittsburgh graduate student Ralph Lemuel Hill would include evidence of this discrepancy in his doctoral dissertation, A View of the Hill. Himself a native of that area, Hill interviewed numerous longtime residents regarding their attitudes and memories of the neighborhood, its people, and its downfall. He includes in his dissertation two interviews with men who had first come to the Hill District in 1901 that highlight the different experiences of black migrant and white immigrant workers. The first, Mr. Wollens, was a second-generation carpenter who came with his parents from Richmond, Virginia. While his father did find work as a carpenter, the pay was so little that he soon “quit carpentry and went to work in the Black Diamond Mill down on Smallman Street. That was the Negroes mill. All Niggers. He made $1.50 a day for eight or ten hours of work. […] He was considered a big paid man for a Black man” (36-37). Wollens also describes his father’s work delivering ice, a job he himself helped with.

The second interviewee, Mr. Lebovitz, was also a carpenter. A cabinet-maker
who defected from the Armenian army, he arrived first in a New York City overflowing with other immigrants. Hill transcribes the interview in which Lebovitz speaks first:

“So they sent the white people all over. They sent immigrants out to different places so they sent me and about ten people to Pittsburgh.”

“In other words, it wasn’t your choice to come to Pittsburgh, they sent you?”

“Yes, they sent me. In fact I tell you why. I had a friend of mine in New York. He was a carpenter too. He had sent away people before me to Pittsburgh. So he ordered me a letter to come there to work in the union at $5.00 a day. Good money.”

“There was a carpenter’s union then?”

“Oh yes. $5.00 a day in 1901.”

“During your early years in Pittsburgh, how did Jews get along with Negroes?”

“There was no difference. We were all one. America, everyone was free.”

“Of course, when you were in the carpenter’s union there were no Negroes in the union at that time.”

“No, no, I don’t think so. […] In 1907 I went to work for Westinghouse for 25¢ an hour. This was along with my carpentry work.”

Hill spends a single paragraph highlighting the contrasts between the two interviewees, letting the dichotomy largely speak for itself. Wollens, he writes, “sought a better life
only a few miles from his birthplace. There were no inherent hardships in terms of need or availability for his trade in Pittsburgh. He spoke the language, required no ‘breaks,’ and broke no laws save that of being Black” (39). These two interviews reveal the stark contrast in opportunities to immigrants that were denied to black workers. The contrast also illustrates probably the key difference between the opportunities open to new black and European workers in Pittsburgh: the ability to pool resources and influence.

Immigration and assimilation processes follow predictable patterns. A city which experiences mass immigration of diverse populations will also witness the development of individual enclaves, neighborhoods, or sections based around those individual groups. The contributing factors of external and internal segregation are so familiar as to be considered “natural” – divisions based around class, race, religion, language, region, family ties, and so forth. Pittsburgh’s physical boundaries and the specialization of the steel production process intensified the common cultural divisions. The push for assimilation was constant but the unique topography enclosed neighborhoods within borders of rivers, hills, and bluffs. Ethnic strongholds within the various major industries helped maintain strong cultural and familial ties. Unlike Wollens, Lebovitz was therefore able to secure good employment essentially before even setting foot in the city. His situation was not exceptional. Early Pittsburgh immigrants paved the way for the relatives, friends, and countrymen who followed. In the steel mills, owners were in this way typically insured a reliable, stable workforce, and workers – despite countless hardships – were often able to secure employment for family members (immediate and distant) and those from the same towns and villages. Plants, lines, and even entire job sectors of certain industries were associated with specific ethnic groups,
creating a clan-like work environment. This internal system thus strengthened both identity and, at least to a certain degree, power. It also offered increasing opportunity for successive generations.

As a consequence of the ability of established workers of European-descent to maintain a kind of ethnic monopoly on certain jobs, mills, or branches of industry, they were able to keep other groups out. This was most evident in the exclusion of black workers. Because of extremely limited access to the more specialized and highly paid jobs, individual black mill workers could not duplicate the collective (and generational) security many European immigrant groups had been able to develop, so they were unable to aid those coming up behind. Employment largely depended upon established connections but so did employment within certain higher paying fields: “The difference between a machinist and a metal grinder, a train conductor and a carpenter, represents the difference in occupational status between the second and first generation foreign born” (Johnson 132). The compounding access enjoyed by, for example, the German, Irish, or Polish immigrants was therefore not open to the typical black worker and his descendants. The residual effects of these divergent conditions cannot be overstated.

The disparity in opportunity was not limited to such head-to-head competition. During World War I blacks started to make significant inroads into the all-important steel industry. With restrictions on foreign-born workers in war-related industries and closed immigration during and following the war, combined with huge numbers of eligible males leaving for military service, the balance of these ‘newcomer’ groups shifted for the first time towards the black American worker. Aside from those who were serving in the military, all first generation peoples from the Austro-Hungarian Empire were barred
from working in war-related industries. Since Pittsburgh had a large number of first
generation Austrio-Hungarian immigrants, prohibiting them from working in the steel
mills resulted in a drastic shortage of workers. Logically, black workers should have been
able to gain footing in the industrial workplace since in 1915 “there were more
employable blacks than white” (Darden 302) in the city, though they were still a small
proportion of the total population. But with their increased profile came a corresponding
increased resentment. Rather than catching up with the earlier immigrants, they still
lagged behind.

Pittsburgh politicians, like the mills, welcomed the new mass of eligible voters as
a means to an end. But, again, the right to vote contrasted with the strength of their voice
in local government. According to a U.S. Dept. of Labor report,

> It is a well-known fact to Pittsburhers that the Negro vote may be a
> deciding factor in the results of municipal elections. [...] there is never
> an issue made on some particular Negro problem. All candidates seem to
> assume that there is no special issue that concerns the Negro more than
> any other group in the city, and Negro politicians do not seem to be much
> concerned about it, either. [...] Although the Negro vote was a great
> factor in deciding this campaign, not one of the candidates made an issue
> of the housing and other problems which are confronting the Negroes at
> present. (124-25)

In *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, the authors point to intensifying social, political, and
economic blockades against the black migrant despite an increasing need for the new
industrial workers. “Pittsburgh, as the workshop of the world, is naturally playing a more
important part than ever in the present crisis and has felt a proportionate interest in the increase of the labor supply,” Francis D. Tyson wrote in the study. “The Negro migrant in Pittsburgh, it can be safely stated, has not usurped the place of the white worker. Every man is needed, as there are now more jobs than men to fill them. Pittsburgh’s industrial life is now partly dependent upon the Negro-labor supply” (119).

Even after the war, black workers rarely enjoyed the same job opportunities. Joe T. Darden, conducting a statistical analysis of types and levels of employment and housing statistics before and after the First World War, concluded that “a type of color caste system existed for blacks in Pittsburgh that made the black experience significantly different from the European immigrant experience. It was apparently racial discrimination rather than recent migrant status that forced blacks into separate occupations and neighborhoods, and the war apparently did not alter this fact to any significant degree” (Darden, “Effect of World War I” 310). As the U.S. Dept. of Labor reported, “in the great steel industry, where the labor force is 60 to 70 per cent unskilled, although the industry is nonunion and little effective prejudice against employment of colored men has developed, nearly the whole number of Negroes employed were common laborers” (US Dept of Labor 128). As the century progressed the ranks of black steelworkers increased, in part because of their role as strikebreakers and ongoing pay disparities and in part because of the war-related population swing from immigration to migration. Johnson counted an increase to 16,900, spread across 23 mills, by 1923. They represented “21 per cent of all steel workers in the district” (131). Yet, because of their predominance in the unskilled sector, because of union resistance -- at least in part due to “the not infrequent employment of Negroes to break strikes” (133) -- and because “the
last employed [...] become the first released when reduction is necessary” (133), and almost certainly because of a multitude of race-based decisions and barriers both large and small, the economic gap between black and white never closed.

In the Urban League’s 1930 study, Social Conditions of the Negroes in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Ira Reid glosses over the racial barriers when he notes that “The Pittsburgh Negro Industrial Worker began his work as a strike breaker.  He was assigned unskilled jobs partly because of his unfamiliarity in industry” (52). But Reid’s assessment makes no sense when the black migrants are compared to the European immigrants. As Ralph Lemuel Hill has noted, the transition from rural to urban environment is a dramatic one, particularly for those “Black pioneers” who faced in the north “the same prejudices he learned to live with and expect in the South” (42). For the southern African American transplant, “[…] his lack of education, copeability, and Blackness, were to be his chief enemies. The plow was poor training for the unceasing, ten hour machine. A payment in corn gave him no knowledge or value of the wage system or the discipline and use of those wages” (42). But the rural European immigrant who came not from across the country but across the sea faced a transition at least equally as dramatic.

While Black Pittsburghers saw their incomes increase substantially after the Depression, particularly with expanding growth following World War II, it was not until the early 1970s, immediately before the large-scale mill closings with the death of American steel production, that black steelworkers’ positions finally started to improve.

10 There is some dispute over the prevalence of the use of African Americans as strike breakers. There had been some recruitment of southern black workers to serve as strike breakers starting in the 1870s. Mill owners and managers would continue to use the threat of black scabs well into the 20th century, encouraging a stereotype that would remain entrenched. The stigma would intensify among white workers and have lasting impact so that the compounding racial conflict led to further exclusion in the all-important industrial workforce. For a detailed examination of the issue, including evidence that the stereotype had a clear foundation in reality, see Warren C. Whatley’s “African American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal.”
In 1974, in response to hundreds of job discrimination lawsuits, nine American steel companies signed a Consent Decree that at least theoretically equalized employment opportunities for women and minorities and established hiring and promotion guidelines. There was also a reparations component that awarded a payment in exchange for a waiver against lawsuits for past discrimination. According to Ruth Needleman, in her *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel*,

> It was a pitiful compensation in the eyes of most African Americans, who, unlike their white counterparts, had not been able to buy homes in the suburbs, send their children to college, or support their families on one income between the end of World War II and 1974. Although millions of dollars were distributed to some fifty-five thousand women and minority workers, the checks averaged three hundred dollars, a sum that many African Americans considered yet another insult. (207)

The decree did have some initial positive results. Casey Ichniowski, analyzing its effects, found a brief spike in the industry’s employment trends following its implementation. The rates had leveled off within a year, however, and although “improvement has occurred in the racial composition of the blue-collar work force in the steel industry [...] the racial distribution in 1978 was still one of inequality” (193).

Unfortunately, this was also precisely the time at which the American steel industry was heading into free-fall. The largest company, Pittsburgh-headquartered U.S. Steel, dropped 18,000 workers between 1959 and 1984 (Needleman 210) but it was in 1979 that the layoffs began in earnest. On November 27, the company announced cuts of

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11 An additional settlement applied to female employees hired after 1968. When these numbers are excluded the average payment to minority employees averaged a still ‘insulting’ $660 (Ichniowski, Table 4).
13,500 jobs, including the first significant losses in the Pittsburgh region. By 1986 the Homestead Works closed for good. Rates of unemployment were high across the board but the industry’s black workers suffered the greatest and earliest losses: “Even though many African American workers had longevity in the mills, they often worked in the first departments to be shuttered” (Needleman 210). By the end of the decade, half the region’s black manufacturing jobs were gone and Pittsburgh had the fourth-highest black unemployment rate in the country (Hinshaw 245). The race-based hierarchies that had been in place since the 19th century were still having their effect: “It was not uncommon to find black workers with over twenty-five years of seniority on layoff at the same mill that still employed workers with less than five years, frequently white skilled tradesmen” (Needleman 211). The mill closings touched everyone. In Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh, John H. Hinshaw looks at the bleak numbers and recounts numerous tales from a variety of former steelworkers. All are tragic. “Black workers confronted even bleaker prospects,” he stresses. On into and “[t]hroughout the 1990s, Pittsburgh’s white poverty and unemployed rates were among the worst in the country, but black poverty rates were higher and overall income levels half that of whites” (245).

August Wilson does not ‘blame’ the white worker for faring better than the black worker. Neither does he present his characters as victims – each is responsible for his or her actions. Throughout his plays, Wilson instead shines a light on the systemic racism or societal barriers his characters face, critiquing the political structures that allow for the enduring racism, poverty, and inequality. More importantly, however, Wilson focuses on understanding people: how a character acts, the decision he or she makes, the
relationships within the family or community. For characters in two of his plays, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *Fences*, those actions, decisions, and relationships relate to the unequal opportunities open to black and white populations struggling to establish a home and a life in Pittsburgh.

II. (Im)Migrant Song

Set in 1911, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* predates the peak years of the Great Migration. When Albert Epstein interviewed 465 recent black migrants from the south for his 1919 study, he found that “Almost 98% of the people investigated live either in rooming houses or in tenements containing more than three families. […] Only about two and a half percent live in what may be termed single private family residences” (11). Audiences meet some of that 98% at Seth and Bertha Holly’s boardinghouse, including the Hollys themselves. But many rental properties had white owners, many of them absentee, and the conditions of those rentals were often strained at best. According to Epstein, “The rooming houses with one exception are conducted by colored people, who act either as janitors or as hosts. […] Many of the houses are in reality run by Whites, who keep a colored janitor or manager in the House. Several of the big rooming houses on lower Wylie Avenue, for instance, are conducted for a local white merchant…” (14).

Seth is therefore outside the norm in Pittsburgh because of ownership as well as the quality of his boardinghouse, which is both clean and well run (this latter point likely related to the longevity of his family’s ownership). In part because his position is so unusual, Seth exhibits a set of anxieties entirely different from that of his new tenant, the wandering Herald Loomis. He does not have the emotional baggage of a direct link to

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12 Epstein does note that, “In many instances, however, houses are operated by colored people, who either run or lease them. Most of these lessees or owners are Pittsburgers, but a few are newcomers, who […] have opened rooming houses as investments” (15).
slavery and, because he has the buffer of an entire generation of home ownership, Seth does not have a crisis of identity; he does not display insecurity over who he is or what he wants. His property is not simply an investment and a livelihood; it is a manifestation of his identity.

The play opens with a description of his character that touches on multiple defining components of Seth’s character: “Born of Northern free parents, a skilled craftsman, and owner of the boardinghouse, he has a stability that none of the other characters have” (1). This description immediately contrasts Seth’s settled situation with the continual references to travel and movement in the play. It also presents Seth as a kind of outsider in his own hometown, even if he is as trapped in his circumstances as the migrants he ridicules. They have come north in search of a better life and better jobs. Without leaving the city, Seth is trying for the exact same thing. He has a marketable skill, he has property, and he has both a feasible plan and the tenacity and talent to succeed in a small craftsman business. He approaches people he knows -- white men presumably in the financial position to easily loan him the money to set up shop -- but is denied because he places the only collateral he owns off-limits.

He has plenty of first-hand experience of these racial barriers. Well before the influx during the First World War, black Pittsburghers had been following patterns of exclusion, isolation, and limitation but these patterns only anticipated the more extensive versions evident during and after the Great Migration. Established workers and populations tend to see any newcomers as a threat. Even with the severe social and economic limitations black Pittsburghers faced, the influx meant that racial tensions rapidly intensified between this massive new labor source and the existing European
immigrant groups who were still struggling to establish themselves. Seth would also have been acutely aware of the additional strains or limitations placed on him as a lifelong black resident as the neighborhood absorbed more blacks. “The niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It’s hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting” (5-6), he complains to his wife. Seth realizes he will be stereotyped according to the behavior of the new migrants. The shift in populations meant that northern blacks would no longer fly under the radar, as widespread xenophobia combined with increasing racism.

Pittsburgh historian Laurence Glasco identifies a pattern of internal racism in the city’s black population: “social lines hardened after the Civil War as longer-term residents and property owners held themselves aloof from Southern migrants, cultivated genteel manners, and accepted into their ‘social set’ only those who could say they were ‘old families’ with ‘character’” (Glasco, “Double Burden” 74). To a certain degree Glasco’s comments apply to Seth. He is certainly aloof for much of the play, he repeatedly speaks of his father’s freedom, and his comments about the new migrants (including some of his own tenants) are vitriolic. The play only shows Seth’s reaction to the incoming black migrants, however. Given Seth’s strong sense of decorum he (or even his father) probably had a similar sense of elevated quality in relation to the large numbers of white immigrants around him. Seth is like The Piano Lesson’s Berniece, who warns her daughter not to “show your color.” More importantly, he knows that his tenants and their behavior reflect on his boardinghouse. Similarly, because of their shared skin color, the black southern migrants reflect on him. He therefore resents them because, economic status aside, they are from largely rural backgrounds and thus have
customs and behaviors that seem out-of-place and backwards to established urban northerners.

On the one hand, Seth is able to benefit from the needs of those moving into and through the city. Newcomers needed a place to stay and, in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, his home is never at a shortage for tenants. When ready to establish households of their own, the new migrants would also need supplies, and Seth benefited here as well. Rutherford Selig, one of Wilson’s few white characters, sells household utensils across the region and Seth, a skilled craftsman, is a steady supplier. Selig’s instructions to “Go on and make some dustpans. I can use all you can make” (39) is probably in response to increased demand from those -- whether black or white -- moving into the area.

Kim Pereira points to Seth's never-ending workday and describes him as "a little intolerant towards those of his race who are less enterprising" (57). But, as Pereira also points out, Seth's often-obsessive behavior stems from his anxieties over his rare stability. The play is set in 1911: "At a time when most urban blacks live in shanties and slums, this house is a unique symbol of his stability. It is his home and his business asset. It belonged to his father and stands as an emblem of the success and security of his position as a family man and entrepreneur." Seth therefore fully "realizes this security is tenuous: it has to be reaffirmed every day" (Pereira 58). Not at ease with his position, aware of how easily it could be lost, he clearly sees his future – and his present – tied into the security of his property. The recognition of this precariousness is one factor that seems to bring out the worst in some of the characters, behavior that is perhaps based on personality flaws but that also seems to stem from a sometimes pathological fear of losing such a rare item as property. While Seth’s attempts to control all that touches his
home thus reflect his basic personality, his behavior is also greatly influenced by his anxiety over this property and the autonomy that comes with ownership. At one point in the play, Seth tells his wife, “You know me, Bertha. I don’t get mixed up in nobody’s business” (37). The line adds humor; Seth is clearly deluding himself as both Bertha and the audience are well-aware. But Seth’s involvement in anyone else’s business is actually limited to their associations with his own business: his boardinghouse.

Wilson’s stage directions assign Seth an “apparent orneriness” (1). The phrase calls attention to his behavior while warning against taking it at face value. Seth’s criticisms of the other characters are almost always framed as a defensive position to protect his property. He repeats his claim to Molly, a new boarder. As he finishes his introduction to the rules of the house, he tells her: “Your business is your business. I don’t meddle in nobody’s business. But this is a respectable house. I don’t have no riffraff around here. […] As long as we understand each other then we’ll be alright with each other” (48). He yells at another boarder, the rootworker Bynum Walker, for performing his morning sacrifice too close to his vegetable garden. “I don’t care how much he be dancing around… just don’t be stepping in my vegetables. Man got my garden all messed up now…planting them weeds out there…burying them pigeons and whatnot” (2). On one level, Seth’s frustration with Bynum falls along regional lines: Bynum is the character most in touch with southern history and African customs. Bertha, who defends Bynum and tells her husband to “leave that man alone” (2), later expresses anxiety and fear over the mysticism. Seth’s response – [“I don’t pay it no mind – it don’t bother me”] – can also evoke audience laughter. Yet Seth’s view of himself is actually technically accurate. He has not complained about the purpose of Bynum’s actions but
rather about their effect on and disregard for his own property:

BERTHA: Bynum don’t bother nobody. He ain’t even thinking about your vegetables.

SETH: I know he ain’t! That’s why he out there stepping on them. (2)

He later says to her about Bynum, “You know I don’t put up with that. I told him when he came…” (4) and “This is a respectable house. I don’t have no drunkards or fools around here” (5).

Seth is careful about who his tenants are in terms not only of their ability to pay but also of their behavior and how they reflect back upon his own home. No quarter is given to any of the renters. As he says to Jeremy, “I told you when you come on here everybody know my house. Know these is respectable quarters. I don’t put up with no foolishness. Everybody know Seth Holly keep a good house. Was my daddy’s house. This house been a decent house for a long time” (13). He similarly tells Zonia, “You can go out there and play. Just don’t get in my garden. And don’t go messing around in my workshed” (20). Later he describes how he “had to chase her and Reuben off the front porch” (37). He warns Molly, “Everybody get their own key. If you come in late just don’t be making no whole lot of noise and carrying on. Don’t allow no fussing and fighting around here” (49). And, finally, he admonishes Bynum and Loomis, “Don’t have no squabbling around here. Don’t have no disturbance. You gonna have to take that someplace else” (69).

The control Seth exercises is a necessary one to protect his home and property not only from careless tenants and neighbors but also from the larger forces within the city. When he tries to get a loan to open a shop, the terms Mr. Johnson gives him are too high.
“He wanted me to sign over the house to him. You know what I thought of that idea,” he tells his wife (3). He is more explicit when he mentions it again later to Bynum, after unsuccessfully approaching two other white men for loans. He is unable to leverage his own labor, reputation, and promising business strategy. He is unwilling to sacrifice his house, however, because he knows how quickly things can go wrong: “Want me to sign over the house to borrow five hundred dollars. I ain’t that big a fool. That’s all I got. Sign it over to them and then I won’t have nothing” (44). The failed proposal is evidence of the little advantage he has as a long-term business owner. It also reflects a very real pattern of compounding advantage available to the European immigrant but generally open only to the earliest of the black Pittsburghers. Seth will undoubtedly maintain his 3-job schedule until someone finally gives him a loan or, more likely, until he can no longer keep up the pace. The play includes a brief exchange between Seth and Bertha Holly regarding his work schedule:

BERTHA: When they gonna put you back working daytime? Told me two months ago he was gonna put you back working daytime.

SETH: That’s what Mr. Olowski told me. I got to wait till he say when.

He tell me what to do. I don’t tell him. Drive me crazy to speculate on the man’s wishes when he don’t know what he want to do himself. (4)

The dialogue reveals Seth’s attitude towards work and his lack of power there. He spends far more time complaining about his tenants’ behavior than he does his own unreasonable schedule. Seth can at least pretend to exert some control over what his boarders do around his property (though it should be noted that he never successfully alters a single characters’ behavior), but Seth does not even try to influence his supervisor
or the external world he represents.

The dialogue also reveals the capriciousness of the white world. The randomness this introduces is more lightly touched on in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* than in several of the other plays but it is another source of Seth’s anxiety. What are Mr. Olowski’s motivations? Perhaps Mr. Olowski is deliberately racist, cruel, or exploitative. Perhaps he represents a white world that is oblivious to the realities, needs, desires, and humanity of other groups (or at times, it seems, the very existence of those other groups). Seth does not even try to understand his employer’s motivations; he focuses almost obsessively on his boardinghouse instead. Mr. Cohen and Sam Green are active and decisive when they reject Seth’s request for a loan. Mr. Johnson is actively interested in exploiting him (and in getting the property). At least from his depiction, Mr. Olowski is not actively trying to hurt Seth; he is not even considering Seth’s needs or preferences in the first place. There may be legitimate reason for Olowski to maintain an irregular evening schedule but if so, the Hollys are not aware of it. “This working all hours of the night don’t make no sense,” Bertha complains. Whether or not Seth agrees with her, he does not challenge his boss. Instead, his response is to turn the conversation back to his own territory:

SETH: It don’t make no sense for that boy to run out of here and get drunk so they lock him up either.”

BERTHA: Who? Who they got locked up for being drunk?

SETH: That boy that’s staying upstairs… Jeremy. (4)

Even a story about workplace injustice gets turned back to Seth’s concern over housing. When Jeremy is fired for not kicking in fifty cents graft being collected from all
the black workers, his language conveys indignation by questioning what universe could possibly allow such illogic: “It didn’t make no sense to me. I don’t make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it? He go around to all the colored and he got ten dollars extra. That’s more than I make for a whole week.” Seth’s response is that Jeremy should have paid the money and kept his job: “[W]ithout the job, you ain’t got nothing. What you gonna do when you can’t keep a roof over your head?” (64). The comment incorporates and reflects Seth’s beliefs about both work and housing: more than anything else, they must be retained. Unlike Jeremy, Seth does not even try to make sense of the situation; his concern is solely with personal survival. Boy Willie’s obsession in The Piano Lesson reflects the scarcity of ownership opportunities but Seth’s obsession underscores just how fragile that ownership, once attained, still is.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is, like most of August Wilson’s plays, an ensemble piece. Seth Holly’s character offers an important snapshot of the effects of the Great Migration and serves as a counterpoint to the opportunities afforded the European immigrant. In Fences, one of his most famous and popular plays, Wilson focuses on a central character: Troy Maxson, a 53 year-old man facing the back end of his life and the inevitable changes aging brings. Fences was August Wilson’s second Broadway play and the first of what would become the Pittsburgh Cycle. The play follows Troy’s downward trajectory. At the start of the play Troy is strong, respected, and admired. He rejects the long-standing racism at work: at the risk of losing his job at the Sanitation Department he requests, and eventually receives, a promotion from garbage collector to driver. He supports his family, is openly affectionate to his wife Rose, and displays gruff tenderness to his son, Cory, as they build a fence around their yard. Troy’s two sons and
his close friend, Bono, see Troy as their role model and strive to live up to his standards and example.

By the time of his death near the end of the play, however, Troy has devastated his wife by committing adultery and bringing home the resulting baby daughter; estranged Cory after preventing him from attending college on a football scholarship; alienated Bono with his behavior and aloofness; and had his brother institutionalized, collecting half of Gabriel’s military benefits for the betrayal. This final action is a sign of how far Troy has fallen from his initial place of authority, but it is also a reflection of his desperation to maintain at least one item from his earlier life: his home. Troy is one of Wilson’s homeowners for whom ownership of property carries particular weight, and the real cost of that property is conflated with the sense of injustice that gnaws at him.

The injustice is both cumulative and current. The majority of the play takes place in 1957, an important transitional era: civil rights was developing into a Movement, Hank Aaron was early in his brilliant major league career, the Klu Klux Klan was undergoing a revival in the South. Troy Maxson is likewise a transitional figure: the son of a sharecropper and the father of a teenager offered an athletic scholarship. The transition for Troy and for the nation is neither smooth nor complete. Troy speaks of the racism in 1950s America, but his dialogue points backwards, to his youth in the South, to his father, to his early years in the North. Wilson too points backwards. He opens the play not with references to the 1950s but with the Great Migration, more specifically with the contrast between “the destitute of Europe” with their “dream dared and won true” and those “descendants of African slaves” who “came strong, eager, searching” but were rejected by the city. In Fences, Wilson has narrowed the context. He is not looking at
how African Americans were treated differently than a generic white America but rather at how newly-arrived black migrants were treated differently than newly-arrived ethnic groups who were themselves exploited and oppressed.

Home ownership is yet again a dominant image in the play. Because of changes in the family income, and because he is building a fence around his property at the request of his wife Rose, much of Troy’s dialogue centers around his home. As with Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’s Seth Holly, property is a potent metaphor for Troy because of its importance in the survival of the family and because he is well-aware of the costs (both financial and emotional) involved in its retention. In a way that was never broached in the later play, however, Troy further associates his property with his own masculinity and vitality. Financial threats therefore move from the already charged world of economic survival to the emotional realm. While Troy sometimes frames his discussions in humor and hyperbole, the amount of time he spends talking about his home identifies it as both a source of pride and of anxiety. When he is able to directly acknowledge his own insecurities as a man, Troy pours his attention into building the fence or frames his current anxieties in terms of past experiences with property. The experiences he repeatedly speaks of are in turn laden with references to inequality or insecurity.

Troy is a man who likes to imagine himself in control of his fate but is continually reminded of his precarious economic status. His ownership of the property is more tenuous than he usually cares to admit, and that instability is linked to his position as a black man in a white world. The aftermath of earlier oppression has so tainted his perception of the world that Troy cannot recognize the changes that have occurred either
while he was incarcerated or in the nearly twenty years after his release. The tenacity and stubbornness that allow Troy to survive also prevent him from seeing the changes in his world or the devastating consequences of his actions. Although he jokes that the fence is to keep out Death, Troy is also defending himself against more than ‘mere’ mortality; he also tries to defend and protect his own ego. The two forces of pride and devotion to his family propel him. Because of his pride, Troy stands up for himself against decades of inequality, and yet pride is also what leads to destructive behavior when he fears age will render him obsolete. Similarly, his belief in the importance of family makes him a dependable provider, but he defines his role in the family almost entirely in monetary terms, leaving him vulnerable when economic pressures threaten the limited financial security he has attained.

My analysis will look at two overlapping areas where the context of the migrant/immigrant experience and Wilson’s use of property are crucial: in understanding Troy’s behavior and motivation and in recognizing the relevance of early 20th century urban history to later 20th (and early 21st) century socio-economic realities. By looking at the contrast between the migrant and the immigrant experience in the early part of the 20th century I am not trying to shift the emphasis away from the lives and community Wilson showcases in *Fences*. Rather, the contrast is important because Troy finds it important, and because Wilson himself proclaims it to be -- a historical factor both inherently relevant and, for the most part, ignored in discussions of current economic inequities. The historic roots of Troy’s current anxiety come from two sources: formative experiences with poverty, housing, and autonomy; and a recognition that earlier injustices have a lasting impact, further diminishing his ability to control his fate. While Wilson
looks at African American life in and of itself, rather than through a dominant lens of Anglo Americans, this does not mean that the two groups exist independently of each other. In *Fences*, Wilson illustrates the ways economic and social hierarchies determined by white America have a lasting impact on black America. While this is not Wilson’s *only* intention in the play, or even the dominant theme, it is worthy of further examination, however, not merely because it has been largely ignored within the Wilson scholarship but because it imparts further depth to this work.

The gap between migrant and immigrant groups is important in *Fences* because Wilson uses Troy to show that the gap never closed. This failure derives in part from the sustained racism in American culture and in part from the different economic paths of the two groups as a consequence of racism. As has already been discussed, housing and property ownership are fundamental markers of (and factors in) those diverging paths. The migrant-immigrant experience also illuminates Troy’s tragic choices, themselves linked to his house, property, and sense of self. Reflecting both his desire for stability and fear of instability, much of Troy’s dialogue revolves around his home. The house encompasses both Troy’s pride in his ability as a provider and his fear of financial failure.

There is some notable scholarship on the role of history in the play but little on the historic context to which Wilson specifically points in the preface. Some Wilson scholars have looked at history in *Fences* in a generalized sense while others have examined specific histories referenced within the body of the play, such as sharecropping, Negro League Baseball, and the treatment of African Americans in the military. While they may acknowledge Wilson’s preface, few place much emphasis on the particular topic of the migrant versus immigrant experience on which Wilson dwells in the opening.
Harry Elam, for example, discusses history in the context of family influence. He looks at the play’s various paternal relationships and how Wilson illustrates the impact of ingrained family roles: “The repetition of behavior patterns by father and son underscores Wilson’s conviction that history plays an important role in determining contemporary identity. Only by literally confronting the embodiment of the past, one’s father or ‘forefathers,’ can one gain entrance into the future or ascend into adulthood” (Elam 847). Sandra Shannon expands Elam’s premise by examining how Wilson presents the history of three generations in one family. Wilson, she argues, is able to both show the “indirect causal link between three generations of Maxson men, and” simultaneously incorporate a much larger context, “the historical circumstances responsible for shaping each of them” (Shannon, *August Wilson’s Fences* 65). These contexts stretch from the end of slavery to the cusp of the mid-1960s’ civil rights era.

Shannon provides examples of how an audience would read Wilson’s play not only in the context of the time periods the play depicts but also within the context of an extended history. Troy speaks of past segregation in the sports world, even though the play is set at a time when African American athletes were finally starting to break the color barrier. But, as Shannon points out, the audience would also be aware of the later roles black athletes would play in sports, the wider acceptance of racial minorities in higher education, and even the dramatic rise in infidelity and divorce rates and a breakdown of “the nuclear family that Rose Maxson so cherished in the 1950s” (Shannon, *August Wilson’s Fences* 68-69). As part of this expansion of historical contexts, Shannon argues, “Wilson laid events in African American history end-to-end to better analyze the causal relationships between them, he demonstrates how certain
aspects of the culture metamorphosed and survived the Middle Passage as well as the South-to-North trek of African Americans after official decrees of their freedom” (72). The ‘causal relationship’ Wilson incorporates in this case involves the emotional and psychological traumas of oppression and their lasting effect on one of his strongest characters.

Both Shannon and Elam acknowledge white America as an important outside force but their studies focus on the changes in African American culture (and in a single African American family). Wilson’s plays generally encourage such insular examinations because they intentionally emphasize black American life as complex, unique, and, as such, worthy of such a focus; Wilson looks at black communities as distinct entities, not through the conventions of white society or standards. Throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle Wilson takes the institutionalized racism of American society as a given. His purpose is not to didactically point out its existence but to showcase the complex lives of characters who must deal with that racism. Troy’s is one of the most complex of these lives, and his behavior is rooted in both cruel social realities and his own inner demons. Most of Wilson’s central characters must deal with the trauma of earlier injustices. Wealthy white property owners are typically the off-stage antagonists, whether they own plantations, banks, or businesses, or even if they are city officials wielding the power of eminent domain. Troy stands apart in the specificity of his trauma. Beset by timing, circumstance, and racism, his worldview has been shaped by the things continuously denied him. His anger is directed not at how an individual treated him but at the inequities he sees between himself (and by extension black Americans) and those who were allowed opportunities because they did not have brown skin.
The generational focus of Harry Elam and Sandra Shannon complements my emphasis on property ownership and identity so important throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle. Many of the experiences Troy describes in the play revolve around housing and ownership and the foundation of these experiences are in his childhood, uniting his definition of masculinity with his insecurity over property. The historical context of sharecropping heightened Troy’s belief in property and ownership from his earliest memories; Troy has struggled his entire life and watched his father struggle merely to survive. As a child, his overriding image of his father was of a man who forever worked someone else’s land, forever subject to a white landowner’s demands. “The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton to Mr. Lubin,” he recalls. “That’s the only thing that mattered to him. Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living. Wonder why the devil hadn't come and got him. ‘Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin’ and find out he owe him money ... (51). Like so many other black sharecroppers, Troy’s father was consumed by the system and swindled by a white landowner.

Near the end of the first act, Troy tells Bono and his older son, Lyons, the history of his father. Unlike many of his other stories, this is not one he has often (if ever) told. His father had been a poor parent and an even worse husband, eventually driving away those nearest him. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t known my daddy,” Troy admits. “He ain’t cared anything about no kids. A kid to him wasn’t nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. When it come time for eating... he ate first. If there was anything left over, that’s what you got. Man would sit down and eat two chickens and give you the wing” (50). While Troy speaks of his father’s cruelty, he nonetheless speaks with admiration of the man’s willingness to stay
with his children: “He ain’t knew how to do nothing but farm. No, he was trapped and I think he knew it. But I’ll say this for him… he felt a responsibility toward us. […] Without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us… made his own way” (51). Troy’s father was held by his obligations and Troy’s own vision of masculinity is heavily influenced by this legacy.

Countless others (including Troy’s mother) abandoned their families and the farms. Many sharecroppers fled as an economic necessity; contracting for another year on the same farm would leave them even further in debt. The often yearly cycle of movement reflected desperation and diminishing hope for improved circumstances. But leaving was also the only method of protest most of these sharecroppers saw open to them. The tally on Settling Day was almost certainly illegitimate. Farm owners experienced only a temporary (and often anticipated) inconvenience from the fleeing sharecroppers. Yet, for the farm workers, rejecting the final contract was at least some form of resistance and signing on with another farm owner a gesture toward independence.

Families -- not just farms -- were sometimes left behind. As Bono points out, the abandonment of family was frequent, and not limited to sharecroppers. The action was common enough to have its own name: “Ain’t you never heard of nobody having the walking blues? Well, that's what you call it when you just take off like that. [...] A lot of them did. Back in those days what you talking about ... they walk out their front door and just take on down one road or another and keep on walking” (52). As the cycle of debt circles around on itself, Troy’s father nonetheless sticks to his work, sticks to the farm, and sticks by his family. Troy’s father never expressed any satisfaction or pleasure in
upholding his responsibilities; he never showed his family any affection and eventually he drove his wife away with his meanness. Lyons, hearing the story of his grandfather, cannot comprehend the decision to stay put. “He should have just went on and left when he saw he couldn’t get nowhere. That’s what I would have done” (51), he says and then adds, “There you go! That's what I'm talking about” (52) in approval of Bono’s description of “the walking blues.” Troy admires his father’s tenacity in the same breath as he acknowledges the man’s violence. He indignantly tells Bono and Lyons, “My daddy ain't had them walking blues! What you talking about? He stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be. [...] All his women run off and left him. He wasn't good for nobody” (52).

Wilson’s subsequent plays would incorporate discussions of land ownership, pride, and autonomy more directly. *The Piano Lesson*’s Boy Willie’s explicit reason for wanting to buy a farm is to honor his father’s legacy and establish self-reliance. *Fences* correlates autonomy and property ownership, even if the link is less explicitly expressed than in some of Wilson’s other plays. Troy Maxson has no apparent urge to redeem his father via his own actions. Owning his own farm would have changed his level of power but would not have automatically made Troy’s father a better person. Troy’s own destructive behavior ties him more closely to his father than he had likely ever wanted, however. At the same time as his self-worth is linked to his property, so too is his sense of increasingly oppressive familial responsibility. Just as his own father was trapped, so is Troy. He does not have an affair because he is lonely or because he has fallen out of love with his wife. He has an affair because he has built up an image of himself – and especially for himself – that is fixed and unforgiving. His attitude and behavior towards
his home reflects his identity and the titular fence he is building is an extension of the house, an external representation of his insecurities and guilt. Stability is integral to his definition of himself. Just as he covers expressions of affection for Rose with tales of sexual prowess, Troy also tries to cover his anxieties about his home, financial insecurities, and painful past with levity. In the first scene of the play the dialogue between Troy and his friend Bono includes lighthearted references to their former situations. Troy jokes of his plan to buy a rooster to act as sentry: “Only thing is… when we first got married… forget the rooster… we ain’t had no yard!” (6-7). This levity is undercut and Troy reveals at the end of the next scene that the only way he could afford to buy his home was by exploiting his brother’s veteran’s benefits.

That early scene -- Act One, Scene Two -- begins with Rose and Troy talking about playing the numbers, a type of gambling that was a part of daily life in the real world Hill District and earned local heroes “Gus” Greenlee and “Woogie” Harris their fortunes. Playing the numbers is referenced throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle and accounts for how Two Trains Running’s Memphis Lee was able to buy his restaurant. Rose admits she likes to “play a nickel here and a nickel there.” Troy does not complain about her habit but tells her, “You ain’t doing nothing but throwing your money away.” Rose responds that she has occasionally won back her money and that “some good things come from playing numbers. Look where Pope done bought him that restaurant off numbers.” Troy’s response is to criticize Pope for depending on luck. He later complains about how the man treats his white customers better than his black customers, but Troy’s original comments are especially pertinent: “I can’t stand niggers like that. Man ain’t had two dimes to rub together. He walking around with his shoes all run over
bumming money for cigarettes. Alright. Got lucky there and hit the numbers ...” (22). Within moments of the exchange, however, Troy’s brother visits and Troy is reminded that ‘luck’ -- not hard work or talent -- allowed Troy to finally buy his own home. “That’s the only way I got a roof over my head... cause of that metal plate” (28), Troy complains bitterly, speaking of the war injury Gabriel suffered that then gave them the settlement money that Troy used to purchase the house.

Troy is sometimes able to drop the persona of the confident provider when he speaks alone to Rose, but the honesty he is able to express to her focuses on his existing fears and pain. These fears almost always revolve around his property. The guilt over taking his brother’s money and his anger over a system that forces him to do so in order to have his own home is reflected in a brief exchange between Troy and his wife:

TROY: [...] Man go over there and fight the war… messin’ around with them Japs, get half his head blown off… and they give him a lousy three thousand dollars. And I had to swoop down on that.

ROSE: Is you fixing to go into that again?

TROY: That’s the only way I got a roof over my head… cause of that metal plate.

ROSE: Ain’t no sense you blaming yourself for nothing. Gabe wasn’t in no condition to manage that money. You done what was right by him. Can’t nobody say you ain’t done what was right by him. Look how long you took care of him… till he wanted to have his own place and moved over there with Miss Pearl.

TROY: That ain’t what I’m saying, woman! I’m just stating the facts. If
my brother didn’t have that metal plate in his head… I wouldn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I’m fifty-three years old. Now see if you can understand that! (28)

It is obviously a topic Troy has repeatedly come back to. Despite his protests, he feels guilt over exploiting his brother to be able to afford a home. Throughout the play he sees his role as offering support and not being the recipient of it. Beyond this guilt, however, is anger and frustration. Although he is indignant over his country’s minimal assistance for Gabriel, the brunt of anger is directed at his own situation and the injury sounds as random as the numbers game Rose plays. More importantly, the settlement and pension that allowed Troy to buy his home is described as equally random: Gabe’s money is a ‘windfall.’ Immediately following this exchange Troy leaves to visit his lover, implying the link between his frustration and his desire to escape the responsibilities (and the reminders) of his situation.

He references his house more than the fence, though he is repeatedly shown working on, or preparing to work on, the fence. The fence offers him a way of dealing with his guilt: he leaves to see his mistress after talking about problems related to the house; when he returns home he immediately starts working on the fence. This transference of emotion links the physical property and Troy’s fears. Troy is ostensibly building the fence at Rose’s request. He is also perhaps atoning for his infidelity by complying with Rose’s wishes. What he is in effect constructing, however, is a visible marker of his presence at home and a way of warding off an external world that continually threatens his security. His bantering about their early years together turns to the threat of infidelity -- his wife’s, not his own -- and how a house would allow him to
defend against possible usurpers to his bed. Troy jokes to Bono, “Come back, told her...‘Okay, baby... but I’m gonna buy me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard... and when he see a stranger come, he’ll flap his wings and crow...” Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself... it was the back door I was worried about” (6).

Troy is not the only one who recognizes the symbolic and literal importance of property in staking a claim. Rose’s own desire for a fence follows similar thinking. At least according to Bono, Rose’s motivation is straightforward: to keep the family intact within. (This presumably includes a desire to keep Troy in her bed and out of someone else’s.) “Some people build fences to keep people out...,” Bono tells Troy and Cory, “and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you” (61). Troy’s joking reference to a rooster lightly acknowledges the ultimate futility of trying to stop infidelity through external control. Troy and Rose now have a house of their own, a yard, and a fence in progress. Neither a rooster nor a fence will prevent Troy’s infidelity. When he tries to explain his infidelity to Rose, Troy insists it is not because his lover is a better woman or because he loves Alberta more: “It’s just... She gives me a different idea... a different understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems... be a different man. I ain’t got to wonder how I’m gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a part of myself that I ain’t never been” (68-69). His language equates his responsibilities to his family with the financial obligations of their house, and he also links those responsibilities and obligations with his own sense of being trapped. With his lover Alberta, Troy allows himself to leave the history and responsibility behind; he not only
does not have to be invincible but he does not even have to be in battle.

Troy is a man who wants to be in control of his life, his family, his home. The preface adds depth to what was already Wilson’s most developed character and intensifies the political element in a play that might otherwise be seen as primarily a character study. The stress from his responsibilities triggers Troy’s most irresponsible behavior. Even though Troy does not say so directly, and even though what he has gained may at first appear secure, he is constantly dwelling on how little control he actually has and how tenuous and arbitrary that control is. Despite all the horrible things Troy’s father had done, he was at least able to provide something for his children. He did not own his own land or house but the children had a roof over their heads. If, after a lifetime of working, Troy cannot afford a house on his own, then he is hardly better off than his sharecropper father.

Despite the intervening decades and the dramatic change in the characters’ lives from the first World War to post-World War II Pittsburgh, the patterns established in the early part of the 20th century are very much evident in the middle years of the century (and on through the start of the 21st century). With his brother’s recent departure from the house, Troy must now cope with a dramatically-reduced income. When Gabriel moves to a rooming house, he takes his monthly stipend with him. The change causes Troy enough anxiety over the lost money that he references it twice. Since “Gabe done moved […]” he tells his older son, “things done got tight around here” (17). It likewise causes Gabriel enough concern that he greets his brother twice with the comment “Troy mad at me.” Gabriel’s happiness and satisfaction over having his own home -- “That’s my own key! Ain’t nobody else got a key like that. That’s my key! My two rooms!”
he proudly announces -- reminds Troy of how precarious his own home is and how dependent he was upon Gabriel.

Troy’s relationship with his father ended when the older man caught the 14 year-old Troy having sex with a 13 year-old neighbor. The old man attacked Troy and then tried to take over. After Troy in turn pulled his father off the girl, his father beat him to unconsciousness. Troy left his home and a few years later left the South. Hoping to find more opportunities than were open to his father and almost certainly expecting to find better living conditions, he first came North around 1918 or 1919. He was shocked by what he found. Troy was used to hard work, hard living conditions, and poverty but now found himself in an even worse situation. He discovered himself hemmed in by the sparse opportunities open to him to make a living and unable to support his new wife and son. Homeownership in Pittsburgh was virtually unattainable and the living conditions even more stark. As Troy recalls, “Got up here and found out... not only couldn’t you get a job... you couldn’t find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper” (54). Troy’s description is, if anything, understated. As discussed in the previous chapter, the migrants found overpriced rentals that were often worse than the shacks they had left behind in the South. With northern racism and economic pressures not only in place, but intensifying, few other options existed for those scrambling to find shelter. While the black migrants had the advantage of knowing the language, racism kept the workers segregated more thoroughly than most immigrant groups. Thus, whereas successive native-born generations of white immigrants were able to move to a
wider range of neighborhoods and areas of the city, blacks were limited to specific areas. While the housing conditions European immigrants faced were desperate, the black migrants rented the hovels the immigrants had left behind.

Troy comes North at an economic low point. Desperate to support his family, he kills a man in a botched robbery. Sentenced to prison for fifteen years, he is introduced to Bono and baseball. While he is in prison, Pittsburgh experiences both boom and bust. For much of the 1920s, Pittsburgh enjoyed rapid expansion and even African Americans experienced a trickle-down of economic growth. In The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward, part of the series Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law from Columbia University’s Political Science program, Louise Venable Kennedy wrote in 1930 about the possible evaporation of these limited gains:

> The 1930 census figures on occupations are eagerly awaited by students of the Negro’s economic status in the North. The last census was taken at a time of prosperity and marked business activity; since then there have been periods of depression in which white men have been looking for work and in which employers have tried to reduce the cost of production at every turn. Are the Negroes losing the opportunities which were opened up to them during the war and are they being displaced by other nationality groups? (94-5)

The answer to both questions was yes. When Troy returns from prison his wife has moved on with her life, his son is mostly grown, and the city’s boom cycle is well over.

Wilson has removed Troy from society during key years of (at least limited) prosperity; he returns Troy to Pittsburgh after the worst of the Depression, right at the
time the city was turning its attention to control over the Hill District in a new way: redevelopment. Indeed, the first national Housing Redevelopment Act was passed in 1937. Troy’s experiences shape his attitude and, in this case, Troy’s lack of experience is important too. In an extended period of economic stability in 1957, Troy distrusts its reality. As will be discussed later, his skepticism is unfortunately not unfounded. In part, this distrust is because Troy had never experienced anything like it in his youth. Troy’s most formative years as a Pittsburgh resident begin after his release from prison in the mid 1930s. Evidence of the Depression was apparent all over the city but the recovery was slow to reach the poorest neighborhoods, and slowest yet in black neighborhoods. When he returned to Pittsburgh, Troy would have found the contrast between white and black worlds stark. The housing crisis created conditions that were life-threatening and the hygiene problems in the neighborhoods with large black populations were horrific.

_Fences_ does not directly confront the connection between Troy and Bono -- themselves southern migrants -- and their European immigrant contemporaries. Neither does the plot have the direct link to the migrant/immigrant experience evident in _Joe Turner’s Come and Gone_, set in 1911. Yet Wilson does not dwell on the different receptions of the two groups in the preface simply to provide legitimacy or explanation for the older characters’ reminiscences. The time period does not match those discussed in the dialogue; Troy comes north sometime after 1918, well after the years “near the turn of the century” to which the preface refers. It is therefore necessary to look at the narrative blanks Wilson constructs, the things not said; the gap between what the playwright includes and what he leaves unsaid is itself a potent means of commentary.

The first notable omission occurs at the end of the preface. In his previous
paragraphs Wilson contrasted the welcome given the European immigrants with that offered the black southern migrants. Faced with a harsh reception, the migrants coped as best they could. Wilson describes the “quiet desperation and vengeful pride” with which “they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream.” The preface’s conclusion, however, describes an idyllic image of 1950s prosperity and the American Dream:

By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

The paragraph matches neither the description immediately preceding it nor the play that immediately follows. The romantic vision describes a life denied to the African American migrants. This is history as written by the winners. The use of the passive voice mimics a tendency to speak in ways that both essentializes history and diminishes or excludes non-whites. European immigrants were indeed vital to the economic growth of the United States, allowing it to become an international superpower. It is equally true, however, that the sweat and toil of millions of African American migrants in fields, factories, and mines made an equally valid contribution. (This is of course beyond the undeniable role slaves played in the development of the nation.) But the migrants, like their slave ancestors, were denied the fruits of that effort.

African American soldiers are also absent from Wilson’s preface. Although
limited in the roles (and ranks) they were permitted to hold in the military, African Americans remained an important component of the nation’s war efforts. Wilson reminds the audience of their sacrifices through Gabriel, Troy’s brother who is a permanently disabled veteran. There were also the many black workers who stepped in to fill the vacancies in the war-related industries on the homefront. These were men who were often displaced at the end of the war when restrictions on European immigrant workers eased and native-born white soldiers returned for their jobs. Finally, Hank Aaron’s essential role is eclipsed in the reference to the Milwaukee Braves’ World Series win. History, like baseball, may be a team effort but the recap often ignores key players. As the team MVP, Aaron’s performance in the pennant race is undisputed, even if deliberately omitted from Wilson’s gloss. Bono raises his name and Troy bitterly responds that Aaron’s fame masked many other talented black ballplayers denied the opportunity to compete in the major leagues.

The “hot winds of change” to which Wilson attributes the social upheavals of the “turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative” 1960s appear inevitable because of the supposed evolution of American society. The active struggle of people fighting for change is muted in the language by indistinct forces of nature. The final passage of the preface also mimics the tendency to create a tidy timeline where civil rights starts with Rosa Parks and racism ends with the creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday or the election of the first African-American president. Several Fences characters either believe or pretend to believe in the inevitability of improving race relations and therefore in the equalization of opportunity. Troy is the only character to complain about the effects of discrimination, and both Rose and Bono work to appease him when he
becomes particularly angry. Perhaps they appear optimistic only in comparison to Troy, and Rose’s pattern of contradicting her husband’s more extreme stories reflects her personality: straight-forward, grounded, and focused on what she can attain, not on what she might desire. “I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams… and I buried them inside you,” she tells Troy upon learning of his infidelity. The nearly twenty-year marriage was not what she had hoped for but it was what she had long ago decided to stick with: “But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give you” (71). While Rose may very well recognize continued inequality in their world, it fits with her personality that she remains silent and keeps her dissatisfaction hidden. Her continual ‘corrections’ of Troy’s claims of ongoing racism may also reflect her desire to maintain a peaceful home.

Troy is the only character in the play who explicitly challenges racist policies and the only character who rails against the inequality he still sees around him. When he describes approaching his supervisor, Troy does not talk about asking for a promotion but about challenging the man’s assumptions: “I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, ‘Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?’ Told him, ‘What’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?’” (3). There is evidence that traditions of oppression have left their mark on several other characters in the play, however. When Troy files his complaint with the union, his co-workers do not rally around him. One co-worker, Brownie, fears for his own position. As Bono tells Troy, “He come to me talking about...
‘Maxson gonna get us fired.’ I told him to get away from me with that. He walked away from me calling you a troublemaker’ (2). Even Bono, who admires Troy’s bravery, is nervous enough about repercussions that he speaks about it to others. He assures Troy (who has not asked for reassurance), “Well, as long as you got your complaint filed, they can’t fire you. That’s what one of them white fellows tell me” (2). A random white co-worker is familiar with how the system works; Bono and the other black workers are not.

This brief exchange reveals two points that tie directly in to the migrant/immigrant experience. First is the external manifestation: the fact that Troy has to file a formal complaint in order to get a promotion at the Sanitation Department underlines the ongoing barriers black workers faced well past the height of the Great Migration. Throughout the play, Troy’s perception of oppression appears out-of-touch with a changing world but the play opens with an example of how relevant racism remains. The white co-workers, the children of immigrants, understand the system (and can explain it to Bono) and do not have to petition to climb the hierarchal rung from the back of the garbage truck to the driver’s seat. Second is the internal manifestation: Brownie’s and Bono’s responses to Troy’s straightforward request for the driver position reveal the self-induced limitations that generations of racism have brought about. Their response also reveals a pattern of self-censoring based on anxiety and fear. Instilling fear of retribution into the workers is a tactic still in use as a means of management and control. There is no evidence in the play that the Department of Public Works (or the city government in general) intends for the black employees to fear the repercussions of asking for worker’s rights. Instead, the African American workers are presumably familiar with what can happen when someone tries to move up the ranks because they
have seen what has happened in the past to those who challenged the status quo. Thus
the history of racism makes racism self-perpetuating through the fears of its victims. No
additional action is necessary.

An even more insidious process of self-censoring behavior stems from the lack of
alternative models. Individuals do not demand or seek out ‘more’ because they do not
recognize that the option even exists. An illustration of this phenomenon occurs early in
the play when Bono commiserates with Troy and describes a former home:

I hear you tell it. Me and Lucille was staying down there on Logan Street.
Had two rooms with the outhouse in the back. I ain’t mind the outhouse
none. But when that goddamn wind blow through there in the winter...
that’s what I’m talking about! To this day I wonder why in the hell I ever
stayed down there for six long years. But see, I didn’t know I could do no
better. I thought only white folks had inside toilets and things‖ (7).

Rose agrees: “There’s a lot of people don’t know they can do no better than they doing
now. That’s just something you got to learn” (7). With few examples and role models to
emulate, members of a community can restrict their position as effectively as any
deliberate social engineering. Again, no additional action from an amorphous white
power structure is required to maintain the status quo.

Rose’s conclusion that people must learn that they can do better than their present
situation implies that there are individuals in a position to teach the lessons of what is
possible. Troy in the first section of *Fences* plays this role. Troy frames his action as
righting a wrong rather than pursuing personal gain. His motivation is to close the gap
between the descendants of migrants and immigrants. “All I want them to do is change
the job description,” Troy explains. “Give everybody a chance to drive the truck. Brownie can’t see that. He ain’t got that much sense” (3). When Bono and Rose try unsuccessfully to appease Troy, their efforts make him appear alone in his perceptions of continued racism. Yet Bono and Brownie have both expressed anxiety about even contemplating a challenge to the established order. Long-established hierarchies and systems replicate themselves. Troy may be a tragic hero, but he is a hero nonetheless because of his willingness to stand up and fight when no one else will.

Not only is Troy alone in calling attention to the ongoing effects of racism but Fences is also the only Wilson play with no contemporary examples of blatant racist behavior on the part of the white world. The contrast that Wilson points to in the play’s preface is largely one Troy himself points to as being in the past. Examples of blatant discrimination and the most vivid depictions of racism appear not in the treatment of individual characters in the contemporary world of the play but rather in the stories Bono and Troy tell of their youth and their early years in Pittsburgh. Color lines obviously exist -- there are no black garbage truck drivers, for example -- but they appear to be crumbling. When Troy requests to be moved to the front of the truck he is promoted after all.

Unfortunately, Troy has a limited vision of what is possible and he ironically limits the possibilities for his son Cory. Rose’s comment about those who “don’t know they can do no better than they doing now” can also apply to Troy’s vision of Cory’s future. Troy is in most respects much better off than he had been as a youth or even in his middle-age, and the barriers his younger son faces are likely less than those his older son faced. The obstacles he himself still confronts at age 53 are frustrating, perhaps
daunting, but they should be surmountable. What makes Troy tragic is indeed his own hubris. Despite his own successes he cannot get past his rage -- justifiable as it is -- over current injuries and opportunities lost. Despite Cory’s potential for success, Troy cannot allow his son to succeed where he himself was not even allowed to compete. He destroys his son’s opportunity for a football scholarship (and simultaneously destroys their relationship) precisely because he fails to recognize historical changes. When Rose or Bono try to point out the breaking down of the color barrier in sports, Troy points back to segregation and the opportunities denied him and other black athletes. “Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then,” Rose tries to soothe her husband. Bono echoes her: “You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.” Troy is incensed: “There ought not never have been no time called too early!” (9). While Troy’s statement is absolutely correct, by refusing to move beyond his own dream deferred, he denies his son’s opportunity to move beyond the same barriers. Troy in this way shows the dangers of both ignoring historical moments and being trapped in them.

The other characters all point to how things have changed in the intervening years, and things have indeed changed by the play’s setting of 1957. Troy’s inability or unwillingness to recognize the changes in the world in which his younger son is growing up stems from the injustices in the past and therefore make the historical context central to an understanding of his character. Like several other Wilson characters, Troy remains wounded by the emotional scars that racism has left on him. Hambone in Two Trains Running never concedes the quest for what is justly his, but he is also rendered a one-note character whose repeated line -- “I want my ham. He’s gonna give me my ham” --
reflects his obsession with a single act of injustice years before that he cannot move beyond. King Hedley in *Seven Guitars* murders another character at the end of the play because of his obsession with an injustice decades earlier. This is not to equate Troy’s refusal to sign Cory’s permission form to meet a college recruiter with murder or insanity. What is similar between Troy’s behavior and that of Hedley and Hambone is how Troy internalizes the oppression so completely that it renders him irrational in relation to the area in which he felt most directly damaged.

Many readers and audiences often attribute Troy’s behavior -- especially his treatment of Cory -- to this insular view of the world, his refusal or failure to recognize that the world is changing around him. In a 1987 interview Wilson himself offered a straightforward explanation for the character’s downfall: “Troy’s flaw is that he does not recognize that the world was changing. That’s because he spent fifteen years in a penitentiary” (Savran 31). Physically removed from a society undergoing dramatic, rapid changes, Troy does not experience this transformation and fails to recognize it when he is released. But the effects of past inequities linger in Troy’s life as more than a painful memory. Crumbling color lines are not the same thing as the absence of color lines and, most relevant to this discussion, crumbling color lines do not erase the divergent economic trajectories established at the start of the century. Troy is the only black garbage man promoted to driver. Unlike Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball and opened the door for other black athletes (including Hank Aaron) to follow, Troy is alone, isolated.

Troy’s frustration stems not just from anger over stunted opportunities but also from his recognition that the advances he has made in life are tenuous and
disproportionate. Later in the same interview, Wilson added on to his explanation of *Fences* by making an implicit connection between his plays, the past, and a contemporary reality:

What I’m saying is that 85 or 90 percent of blacks in America are living in abject poverty and, for the most part, are crowded into what amounts to concentration camps. The situation for blacks in America is worse than it was forty years ago. Some sociologists will tell you about the tremendous progress we’ve made. [...] But they don’t count in the larger scheme of things. (Savran 31)

Troy may be blind to the ways that he is denying his son the opportunities that have opened up since his own youth, but he is also the only character in the play who is able to recognize what has not changed.

The statistics bear out Troy’s view. Robert A. Liston reported that the 1964 national unemployment rate for nonwhite males was nearly 30%, “and this figure has been fairly constant since 1940. The income of nonwhite families is slightly more than half that of white families” (58). Decades later the disparity in Pittsburgh remains nearly the same. The 2004 “Black-White Benchmarks for the City of Pittsburgh,” funded by The Pittsburgh Foundation and based on the 2000 census, found that “African American and white workers in the city of Pittsburgh have some of the lowest earnings in urban America” (Bangs et al 21) but that the median income for black families -- $24,002 -- was just over half that for white families -- $45,656 (16). *City Paper*’s Chris Potter summed up the report with the wry observation that

Life in Pittsburgh sucks. It sucks for part-time and full-time workers
alike. It sucks for white men, black women and just about everyone else. [...] About the only constant in all this is that life in Pittsburgh is worse for African Americans... and for African Americans, life in Pittsburgh is worse than in many other places. [...] Still, compared to earlier installments of Bangs’ research, these numbers are downright sunny. Conditions for the city and the region have improved since 1990, which gives you a sense of just how lousy things have been around here. (Potter)

The point is not that one racial or ethnic group had it worse or suffered more than another. Immigrants faced extensive ethnic and xenophobic prejudice. What matters is how the divergent trajectories of European immigrants and black migrants inform the contemporary Hill District and provide the historic context around which August Wilson framed his plays. The distinction between black Mississippians and white Poles in Pittsburgh lies in each group’s economic mobility and the mobility of each group’s descendants. Black migrants faced a combination of racism and, to a surprising extent, regionalism that was both more restrictive and longer lived than the limitations European immigrants bore.

In 1957, the distance between white and black opportunities and living situations was still large but, because the nation as a whole was enjoying economic prosperity, the gap was not as evident to the other characters in Fences, particularly the youngest characters: Troy’s sons. Troy’s conversations with his sons highlight a generational divide in how the characters view race and opportunity. There is nothing in Cory or Lyon’s dialogue that implies they even register the relevance of racism in their lives. To them, their father’s stories of past oppression are strictly tales about the ‘bad old times.’
To Troy, the limitations he faces on a daily basis are evidence that his children need to focus on financial stability before what he considers frivolous interests. Troy may not always be aware of societal changes but he is not simply being paranoid about the divide between black and white. Unfortunately, the characters do not know how to bridge that generational divide, perhaps because they do not recognize any possible legitimacy with another’s experiences.

Lyons is a musician who plays at Hill District nightclubs. He expresses satisfaction in his chosen path but relies on his wife for support, with a weekly supplement from his father’s paycheck. In the stage directions, Wilson introduces Lyons with the explanation that, “[t]hough he fancies himself a musician, he is more caught up in the rituals and ‘idea’ of being a musician than in the actual practice of the music” (13). Artistic creativity may not drive Lyons, but the identity it provides him is legitimate. He appears genuine when he tells his father how his music helps him feel alive and a part of something: “Make me feel like I belong in the world. I don’t bother nobody. I just stay with my music cause that’s the only way I can find to live in the world” (18). These words are not far distant from Troy’s own explanation of his infidelity. And, as Bono accurately points out in defense of Lyons’ skill, “You got to be good to play down at the Grill” (55).

Troy may ignore Lyons’ repeated invitations to see him play because he is ashamed of his elder son’s profession. What he is clearly angry and possibly ashamed of, however, is Lyons’ reliance on his family for support. Since Troy left home at the age of 14 and was trying to support a wife and a baby by the age of 17, he is intolerant of his own sons’ behavior at 16 and 34. “You ain’t gonna find me going and asking nobody for nothing. I
done spent too many years without” (18), he chides his son. That Lyons relies on his wife for support, rather than the other way around, is particularly irritating to Troy. “Talking about ‘Bonnie working.’ Why ain’t you working?” he demands (17). Once Lyons leaves, he comments again, “I don’t know why he don’t go and get him a decent job and take care of that woman he got” (19). His derisive and belittling comments to his elder son are therefore infused with his belief that a man is defined by his ability to support his family.

Troy’s reaction to both his sons also implies an unhealthy level of jealousy or envy. At the age of 53 comes the realization that his manhood will soon decay. Jitney’s Becker and Seven Guitars’ Hedley looked to their sons to go further in life than they had, to break through the barriers that they themselves had reached, but Troy seems unable to let his position of authority go. This includes acknowledging that his children may have different goals, priorities, and dreams than his own. Troy’s behavior never descends to the reprehensible behavior of his father, a man whom Troy describes as “just as evil as he could be” (51). His father took his place with his son’s lover and so, perhaps, does Troy covet the opportunities available to his children that he himself did not experience. He does not present or acknowledge his feelings as jealousy but rather as frustration and exhaustion. His attempts at pursuing his dream of a career in professional baseball were frustrated; working in the Sanitation Department offers him security if not autonomy, satisfaction in being able to support his family if not fulfillment in his work. It is possible that Troy cannot bear to see his own son pursue a dream when he himself feels trapped

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13 He also mimics part of the defining battle he had with his father. When an argument between Troy and Rose starts to turn physical, Cory pulls his father away from his mother and hits him, knocking Troy down. Troy is about to turn on Cory but, as the stage directions explain, “Rose pulls on TROY to hold him back. TROY stops himself” (72).
and constantly reminded of the dreams he could not pursue. Also likely, however, is that he does not want to admit that Lyons -- like he himself in baseball -- has talent in something that will never pay the rent. At the same time he wants to be proud of his children, he is also aware of just how much they are up against.

Troy’s expectations for Cory are higher than for Lyons and his response to what he sees as the boy’s poor choices therefore become more violent and extreme than he ever exhibits to Lyons. He tells Rose, “I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football. [...] He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living” (8). Bono offers assurance of the boy’s athletic future, based on Troy’s abilities. Troy acknowledges his own talents as a ballplayer but points to his current situation and expands it to a broader commentary about different opportunities for black and white players: “Ain’t got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. Take that fellow playing right field for the Yankees back then Selkirk. Man batting .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with 37 home runs. Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson’s daughter yesterday, she walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk’s daughter ain’t walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that!” (9). If Troy is to live on in his son, Cory must do better than he did.

One of the longest exchanges in the play is a seemingly lighthearted conversation between Troy and his younger son about financial priorities. Cory is pushing Troy to buy

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14 Lyons also plays along with Troy’s ego in a way that Cory eventually refuses to do. As the stage directions explain when Lyons first enters the play, “he has come to borrow money from Troy, and while he knows he will be successful, he is uncertain as to what extent his lifestyle will be held up to scrutiny and ridicule” (13). He tolerates both because he understands the need to submit and endure them if he is to get his $10. Cory defies his father, standing up to him physically and also verbally. Thus the strength and bravery that Troy admires in his son is also what drives a wedge between the maturing young man and the proud, stubborn father.
a television; all his friends have one and they cost $200, a price Cory says “ain’t that much, Pop.” Troy explains to his son why the family will not be buying a television in the near future but he is also trying to tell Cory something more: protect yourself and your family; to do so is paramount but often requires difficult choices. Imbedded, though unspoken, is Troy’s assumption that a black man’s life is financially fragile and Cory’s assumption that things will naturally work themselves out in the end:

TROY: Naw it’s just two hundred dollars. See that roof you got over your head at night? Let me tell you something about that roof. It’s been over ten years since that roof was last tarred. See now… the snow come this winter and sit up there on that roof like it is… and it’s gonna seep inside. It’s just gonna be a little bit… ain’t gonna hardly notice it. Then the next thing you know, it’s gonna be leaking all over the house. Then the wood rot from all that water and you gonna need a whole new roof.” (32)

The danger is insidious, seemingly minor but ultimately devastating. Cory must be diligent, must pay attention to protect what is his. Things can be eroded drop by drop and damage is caused by what is unseen, not simply by direct attacks. Troy continues with the comparison, Cory continuing to miss the significance of the analogy:

TROY: Now, how much you think it cost to get that roof tarred?
CORY: I don’t know.

TROY: Two hundred and sixty-four dollars… cash money. While you thinking about a TV, I got to be thinking about the roof… and whatever else go wrong around here. Now if you have two hundred
dollars, what would you do… fix the roof or buy a TV?

CORY: I’d buy a TV. Then when the roof started to leak… when it needed fixing… I’d fix it.

TROY: Where you gonna get the money from? You done spent it for a TV. You gonna sit up and watch the water run all over your brand new TV. (32)

After a short back-and-forth Cory urges, “You ain’t got to pay for it all at one time. You can put a down payment on it and carry it home with you.” Troy responds, “Not me. I ain’t gonna owe nobody nothing if I can help it. Miss a payment and they come and snatch it right out your house. Then what you got? Now, soon as I get two hundred dollars clear, then I’ll buy a TV. Right now, as soon as I get two hundred and sixty-four dollars, I’m gonna have this roof tarred” (33). The scene humorously illuminates a generation gap common to countless parent-child exchanges. Whereas a sports metaphor would have been more effective for an athletic teen (and would have been expected for someone as interested in baseball as Troy), Troy instead shapes his lesson around the analogy of a house. His choice of example reflects Troy’s understandable obsession with the importance -- and responsibilities -- of ownership. The dialogue also highlights the gaps between the pair in experience, age, and responsibility. Rather than simply refuse the purchase, Troy tries to make Cory understand the difference between short term pleasures and long-term security (advice Troy himself does not abide when it comes to his extra-marital affair). Cory’s inability to grasp the importance of something as fundamental to stability as a roof parallels Troy’s inability to grasp just why his son would miss the significance of the example.
To a certain degree, Troy refuses to see the world differently than the one he fought against for so many years and to recognize that his own opportunities are different than they once were, let alone the opportunities available to his younger son. As a man who cannot let go of the injustices in his past, Troy’s slide from a position of authority to one of isolation is ultimately his own fault. Troy is responsible for his own decisions and must face the repercussions of his actions. Not only is Troy unable to make his son understand the value of a safe and secure foundation, but he is also unable to understand his son’s need to go beyond the safe and secure future and instead deal with a (sports) world that has changed since Troy first tried to battle it. Ultimately, Troy is being just as short-sighted as the teenage Cory. Troy unfortunately cannot see the parallels between his roof and his family so he is unable to change his behavior – to fix the emotional roof over his family – before it is too late. He is so astute and conscientious about maintaining his property (and therefore his identity) but he unfortunately chooses to diffuse his pressures outside the home rather than showing any “weakness” to anyone in his family. The damage in Troy’s marriage, if caught early and made the priority, could have been repaired. Bono twice tries to warn Troy about the consequences of his actions. At first Troy denies the affair but eventually he acknowledges it and eventually says, “Yeah, I hear what you saying, Bono. I been trying to figure a way to work it out” (63). With the roof he has a plan; with his family he hopes the rain will hold off.

Troy is not seduced; he is a willing participant and is not only aware of the consequences but acknowledges the accuracy and legitimacy of Bono’s warnings about his behavior early in the play. Rose declares him “a womanless man” (79) not because of his age or external circumstances but as the repercussions of his own actions and
decisions. Wilson is not interested in redeeming those actions. Instead, *Fences* offers audiences one of contemporary American theater’s most complex characters and lays out the multiple factors in his life and experience that influenced his tragic decisions. To protect his son from the pain he himself felt when denied a chance to play in the major leagues, he in turn denies the young man the opportunity to accept a football scholarship. “Hank Aaron ain’t nobody” (34), he says, and the statement reflects both jealousy and frustration. Despite his own promotion at work Troy fails to see that opportunities may be opening up for black Americans. The historical contexts that have influenced the father and son are only a few decades apart but their worlds are in many ways entirely different. As the youngest in the family, the racism Cory faces (and will face) takes a different form than what his father’s generation endured. Troy similarly experienced racism in a different way than his own father. This change in the way racism manifests itself can make it appear that racism is somehow “naturally” disappearing with the evolution of American society, an assumption that can camouflage the tenacity and long-term effects of social inequities.

A further context to Troy’s rejection of Cory’s suggestion of television-on-installment plan comes in a conversation where he jokes about the furniture he purchased on installment. He tells Bono and Lyons that, after he was refused credit at a local store, the devil showed up at his doorstep to sell him furniture on credit. “Now you tell me who else that could have been but the devil?” Troy asks his small audience. Fifteen years later, he says, he is still making his $10 monthly payment. When Bono questions how much longer he has left to pay, Troy says, “Aw, hell, I done paid for it. I done paid for it ten times over! The fact is I’m scared to stop paying it” (16). Troy commonly uses
hyperbole in his stories for dramatic effect but that hyperbole also reveals some of Troy’s real anxieties. He uses symbolic language, for example, when he tells Bono about the time he wrestled with Death: “I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like Soldiers on Parade! The Army of Death was marching straight at me” (11). Rose explains the event at its literal level: Troy almost died from pneumonia “right down there in Mercy hospital [...] with a fever talking plumb out of his head” (11). In Troy’s version, the contest is almost biblical. He and Death “wrestled for three days and three nights. I can’t say where I got the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I’d reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better” (12). In addition to illustrating his strength and heroics, the story conveys his attitude towards dying. In Troy’s mind, death becomes a figure he can battle, though he knows he cannot win in the end: “Death ain’t nothing to play with. And I know he’s gonna get me. [...] But as long as I keep my strength and see him coming... as long as I keep up my vigilance... he’s gonna have to fight to get me. I ain’t going easy” (12).

The story of a furniture-selling Devil similarly adds grandeur to something over which Troy has limited control. The business models of predatory pay-day loan and rent-to-own businesses that proliferate in minority neighborhoods are based on keeping customers in debt. Fees and markups alone pay for the service many times over and the interest rates charged ensure steady revenues for the company. Because customers are continually making payments, they are also more likely to need more pay-day loans and more rent-to-own items. Rose takes Troy’s story at face value and immediately contradicts almost every component of his tale. She stops him with the admonition, “Troy lying. We got that furniture from Mr. Glickman. We ain’t paying no ten dollars a
month to nobody‖ (16). Troy is irritated because she does not grasp the larger point he is trying to make. Troy is really talking about the way even a small debt can extend into perpetuity and the important psychological effects of being trapped in such a cycle. The dialogue about the television and the roof is mimicked in King Hedley II where the title character must make a similar decision and face similar wheedling, this from a parent rather than a child: his mother nags him to spend $200 to have his telephone service restored while King decides to keep the money to use towards opening his own business. For the poor, and especially for a poor person of color, the choices individuals must make in order to get ahead (and sometimes even to survive) are painful ones, often involving a level of sacrifice not recognized or familiar to the rest of the population. In Fences, Troy is trying to impart this lesson to his son in an environment where the popular culture is pushing for short-term pleasures that will maintain the status quo.

This lesson is repeated in another scene in Fences, this time in one of the most painful exchanges of the play. Cory -- frustrated and confused by his father’s behavior -- asks, “How come you ain’t never liked me?” Though bluntly stated, the boy’s intention is likely to elicit reassurance rather than an explanation. Troy is furious. “Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you?” he demands. After a brief exchange he roars that he supports the boy not because of emotion or affection but because “It’s my job. It’s my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. [...] Mr. Rand don’t give me money come payday cause he likes me. He give me cause he owe me. [...] Don’t you try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you” (38). His approach is ultimately destructive but Troy’s intentions are to teach his son to be economically self-sufficient. This self-
sufficiency entails both demanding one’s rights and often enduring great sacrifices to maintain autonomy. Since Troy sees any outward signs of vulnerability as a liability, he cannot admit his love for Cory, especially to the boy himself, but his equating Cory’s emotional insecurity with his job shows the lesson he is trying to impress upon the boy (a lesson that clearly misses its mark).

Despite his attempts at denying or covering up his vulnerabilities, Troy’s armor sometimes cracks and reveals the source of his behavior. In his closing speech of the first act, in the same scene where he has rejected Cory’s emotions, he conveys exhaustion and a sense of being picked away, piece by piece, by the members of his family and the responsibilities of his household. Rose, defending Cory’s behavior, tries to get Troy to see the boy’s perspective: “Everything that boy do, he do for you. He wants you to say ‘Good job, son.’ That’s all.” Troy does not reflect on Cory’s needs but on his own:

Woman… I do the best I can do. I come here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain’t got no tears. I done spent them. […] I get up Monday morning… find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. […] That’s all I got, Rose. That’s all I got to give. I can’t give nothing else. (40)

This last line – “I can’t give nothing else” – includes giving approval and affection. The speech also shows him as being alone and drained, the weekend entirely missing from the picture except for his arrival home with the week’s paycheck and grocery staples.
Yet this depiction has more to do with what Troy has brought on himself than what his family actually demands of him. Troy’s portrayal of his stolen opportunities are countered by Rose, who brings his talk about opportunities denied and rejected back down to earth. In the first scene of the play Troy hands Rose his pay. Bono and Lyons are there in the yard as well. Troy announces, “There it is. Seventy-six dollars and forty-two cents. You see this, Bono? Now, I ain't gonna get but six of that back.” Rose, continually calling attention to Troy’s exaggerations and stories, says “You ought to stop telling that lie. […]” (16). The exchange is lighthearted but does suggest Troy’s perception of himself as being sucked dry is not accurate. His identity is based so firmly on a perception of himself as the Provider that he cannot cede any of the power or authority that he connects with his position. When Lyons comes to borrow $10 on Friday, he puts on a display of disapproval. Yet, knowing full well what the man is there for, he also greets him by sharing his bottle: “Here… get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know.” After Rose intervenes and acts as the mediator in the exchange – Troy hands all his money to Rose and she in turn hands the $10 to his son – Lyons thanks Rose and starts to leave. Troy is upset: “Wait a minute. You gonna say, ‘thanks, Rose’ and ain't gonna look to see where she got that ten dollars from? See how they do me, Bono?” He wants his son to depend on him but does not want to be a man whose son is dependent. He wants to help his son but does not want to be seen as compassionate. When Lyons comes to repay the money, Troy’s response is hardly more gracious. Again Rose has to act as mediator and accept the money on Troy’s behalf.

Troy is already under stress because of the transitions in his life. Fears about his
economic situation both feed into and stem from a diminished sense of self-worth. Rose, as the emotional heart of the family, enables Troy to maintain the persona that has become so important to him. Because Troy cannot bear to be perceived as weak -- either a pushover when it comes to loaning money or in need of money when it comes time to repay a loan -- he ‘allows’ Rose to perform the tasks, make the decisions, be seen as tender or generous. When Lyons comes to borrow money Troy only loans the $10 by working through Rose. When Lyons returns, again it is Rose who accepts the money, allowing Troy to save face both while giving out the money and accepting it.

On the other side of middle-age, Troy’s need to be recognized as the breadwinner is based on his fear of obsolescence within his family. His sexual bravado is likewise at least partially an attempt at declaring his continued vitality and his relevance to Rose as a husband and a man. As his youngest son approaches adulthood, Troy must also deal with a very different role as a father. Troy’s fear of inadequacy, including fear of failing as the head of household, contributes to his actions. In addition, the social and economic pressures Troy faces and endures explain -- though do not mitigate -- some of his behavior. The connection between Troy’s current financial anxiety and the unequal opportunities of the immigrant and migrant groups generations earlier is less overt, secondary in importance to his age. Without the added financial pressures he is now facing, however, pressures intensified because of past traumas, it is likely that Troy would have been able to survive the transitional stage of his life without the psychological ego boost that came from taking a lover.

Wilson references the disparity of opportunity between the European immigrant and the southern black migrant in his prefatory comments (those which opened this
chapter) of both *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Regardless of the more obvious affiliation between the theme and the era of *Joe Turner’s*, he is more explicit about the disparity of opportunity in the preface to *Fences*. The connection between Troy and Seth Holly, the boardinghouse owner of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, is worth noting because of the eras involved and the similarities between their two positions, despite the differences between their individual circumstances. By presenting the disparity between the southern black migrant and the European immigrant as an historical context for *Fences*, Wilson implicitly links the inequality at the beginning of the century to the still-limited options available to African Americans decades later. Equally important, Troy Maxson puts tremendous import on the disparity of opportunities. Wilson himself does not simply emphasize what was denied African American migrants, but how otherwise comparable contemporaries -- the black southern migrant and European immigrant -- received very different treatment.

Although this manifests itself in different ways, their awareness of the fragility of their status shapes their behavior towards those around them, and their relationship with their respective properties. Seth has been raised in Pittsburgh by free northern parents. The Hollys have no children to worry about and Seth’s current situation is far better than that of Troy’s southern father, who would have been approximately the same age at the time of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. By the time audiences are introduced to Troy, he is middle-aged and has experienced racism and oppression as a child, as a young man, and as an adult, in experiences that run from the Deep South to the industrial north. He has seen the impact on his father and he is worried about the impact on his youngest son. Despite different experiences, backgrounds, and personalities, both Troy and Seth are
linked to the Great Migration and more importantly, linked by the effects of enduring racism. The plays therefore counter the limited view of history in which African American poverty is either seen in a strictly contemporary context or, more disturbing, as eternal and therefore inevitable.

Troy and Seth are separated by forty-six years of American history. Despite changes in opportunity in the work force, education, the military, and popular culture, Troy’s financial situation in 1957 is no more secure than Seth’s in 1911. Indeed, it may be even less secure, and Troy’s anxieties may be more intense. Seth Holly, although familiar with the housing situation in the Hill District, was buffered while growing up because his parents owned their home and buffered as an adult through the inheritance of that home. The era of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone was also one where housing conditions were poor but, as the Great Migration dramatically expanded the black population and the Great Depression lowered the housing conditions across the entire region, many of the worst housing years in the Hill took place after Joe Turner’s. These ‘worse years’ were instead the ones borne by Troy Maxson and Jim Bono. The gap between Troy and Bono’s status and that of a white worker’s remain relatively stable through the men’s lives; it is essentially the same distance between the groups when the curtain rises on Fences. This is not to say that the two migrants are not in a far better situation than in those early years. Their quality of life has improved dramatically from when they lived in shacks with outhouses. The progress from “Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks” (54) to a “two-story brick house” (xv) obscures the ways their status has remained constant. Their situation has improved because America’s situation has improved, not because Troy and Bono have made any headway relative to their white
co-workers. The differences between his options and those open to a white blue-collar contemporary remain stark. The recognition of this economic insecurity and sustained inequality is as important to understanding Troy’s actions as much as any personal flaw.
CHAPTER THREE  “Hungry Man Blues”: Foodways and Urban Renewal in *Two Trains Running*

Introduction

While the encompassing transience of the Great Migration is a dominant topic for Wilson, it is only one source of upheaval in the plays. African American culture has multiple traditions of rootlessness including, at its core, the loss of identity, family, culture, language, and heritage that came with slavery. In the Pittsburgh Cycle, characters can be lost spiritually (Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean*), literally (the wandering Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*), or emotionally, unable or unwilling to stop moving from place to place (Elmore in *King Hedley II*). Nevertheless, this movement, this restlessness, is generally not linked to any romanticized tradition of itinerant ‘wanderlust.’ It stems, rather, from adversity, extenuating circumstances, or personal weakness that prevents the characters from putting down roots.

But the theme of transience is balanced with the twinned theme of settling. Just as the plays contain characters who are rootless, they also contain characters who -- no matter the odds -- put down deep roots. Throughout the cycle, Wilson emphasizes characters who stake a claim on a piece of property or even on their own bodies. As he moved further into the cycle, he began to emphasize characters who stake a claim on their community. In the previous two chapters I examined the role of housing in the Pittsburgh Cycle, the connection between the Great Migration and a collective loss of cultural continuity, and how the contrast between the migrant and immigrant experience was a source of frustration. Characters in Wilson’s early plays are generally coping with the transition to the North. This means dealing with the disparities and contradictions they experience there, attempting to establish an identity and a life, and creating a new community when the traditions and personal
connections of the past have been left behind. In the second half of the cycle, something else begins to dominate: urban renewal looms over the characters and the community.

Urban renewal was pervasive in city planning after WWII. The programs were designed, at least initially, to address the national housing crisis and bring suburbanites back into city centers. Both were significant problems for cities fighting to maintain relevance, fiscal sustainability, and safe living conditions. As implemented, however, urban renewal programs -- enormous in scope and financing, and involving a variety of powerful and well-financed vested interests -- largely responded to the housing crisis in poor communities by removing the houses. The residents were displaced or warehoused in high-density housing projects that isolated the very poor from the rest of the neighborhood as well as from the shopping, employment, and established social networks they had in their old communities.

As Wilson developed the Pittsburgh Cycle, urban renewal became more clearly the central issue; ordered chronologically, it is the defining backdrop of the final four plays. Urban renewal drives the plot in Two Trains Running and Jitney, its aftermath is clear in King Hedley II, and its most recent manifestations serve as the controlling focus of Wilson’s final play, Radio Golf. All four works revolve around characters trying to salvage what is theirs and, just as importantly, maintain the community on which to anchor their property. Economic and social limitations make it difficult for characters to accomplish this in any of the plays; urban renewal makes it almost impossible.

Throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle, housing is used as a metaphor both for individual characters and in the plays as a whole. Property ownership allows many of Wilson’s characters to establish – and proclaim – identity and individual power. A home or business is also an effective marker, establishing a physical manifestation of those characters’ values,
goals, and histories. These characters can also move beyond the aftermath of the abandonment of the South by anchoring property to a community. Because of the rarity of property ownership, however, it is increasingly difficult for one of these characters to find a community on which to anchor. As the process of urban renewal removes more of the businesses, institutions, and individuals that serve as the foundation of any community, the rootlessness that was a byproduct of migration is replaced by the rootlessness of an urban ghost town.

With the threat and implementation of large-scale redevelopment, the importance of house and home carries even more dramatic weight in the Pittsburgh Cycle. The obsessive behavior evident from some property owners in the early plays remains evident in later characters as well. Yet the shift in Wilson’s later works is away from only finding, declaring, or even defending a home. Instead, characters must also reclaim or defend the community that surrounds their property and, even more importantly, includes them. The plays thus reflect a thematic shift from an emphasis on the individual to the collective. The only way to save a community, Wilson seems to be saying, is to work together.

That there is anything resembling an inherent community to save or a neighborhood worth saving would have been a surprise to many of those making the decisions that would so devastate the Hill District and other largely poor, largely black communities across the city and the nation. In 1943, Pittsburgh City Councilman George E. Evans announced, “Here Is a Postwar Job for Pittsburgh... Transforming the Hill District.” In his proposal he called for the total demolition and redevelopment of 500 of the area’s 650 acres. The article appeared in the magazine Greater Pittsburgh and speaks to both the political mindset of the era and expresses the rationale used for redevelopment programs, whether in Pittsburgh or
across the nation:

The Hill District of Pittsburgh is probably one of the most outstanding examples in Pittsburgh of neighborhood deterioration […]. There are 7,000 separate property owners; more than 10,000 dwelling units and in all more than 10,000 buildings. Approximately 90 percent of the buildings in that area are substandard and have long out lived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if they were all destroyed. […]

This whole area lies so close to the downtown triangle that if it were properly planned and landscaped it should make one of the most desirable residential sections in the City of Pittsburgh. […] Probably no other city in the country has an area so well adapted for such an improvement. There would be no displacement of manufacturing plants or important industries; practically the whole being residential. […]

The value of the elimination of these disease ridden slums, where practically half of the crime, juvenile delinquency, tuberculosis, police cases, syphilis […] would be impossible to estimate in dollars and cents. (n.pag.)

At this time the Hill District was one of the nation’s most socially and culturally significant African American communities. It was also the most important black neighborhood in the city. According to Elsie Witchen, director of The Negro Health Survey, “By the turn of the [20th] century Wylie Avenue had already become the principal Negro thoroughfare; half of the city’s total colored population lived in the Hill District; and a new center of congestion
was forming in East Liberty” (1). This only intensified as the century progressed. A 1946 map of the estimated 17,890 “Negro Inhabited Dwellings in Pittsburgh” (Bunzel) shows the city with smatterings of black dots, each representing “ten dwelling units,” on all sides of the city. The Northside has its fair share, Homewood-Brushton even more, but the Hill District looks as if an inkbottle had spilled across the page.

Also in 1946, newly elected Mayor David Lawrence and Richard K. Mellon, an heir to the enormous Mellon fortune, led the Pittsburgh Renaissance, a large-scale private and local government-funded redevelopment program that reshaped multiple sections of the city. The ambitious program addressed the city’s horrific air pollution, established Gateway Plaza and a defined cultural district, and reshaped Point State Park. Ten years later, the city pursued a different kind of redevelopment, one with far more limited success: federally-funded urban renewal, known more notoriously as “slum clearance,” and widely nicknamed by many of those effected as “Negro clearance.”

Councilman Evans’ claim that “there would be no social loss” if the Hill’s housing (and therefore the Hill District itself) were demolished was proven wrong; the social loss was acute. The impact on the remaining neighborhoods open to black residents was also dramatic, exacerbating existing housing, employment, and social problems in those areas. Although the large-scale migration from the South to the North extended until the 1970s, by the time of urban renewal, black communities were well-established throughout the urban North. Overcrowding and substandard housing were as much a problem as ever, but people had succeeded in putting down roots. Whether Councilman Evans understood the full implications of his words, and whether Mayor Lawrence and other social planners agreed with those implications, the methods and implementation of the Lower Hill’s ‘renewal’
reflects little regard for the thousands of people living there.

Aside from reflecting reality, the prominence of urban renewal within Wilson’s canon accomplishes multiple things, some happening within the play and some outside of it. On stage, characters are forced to directly confront external forces (the city and eminent domain) and personal choices. Offstage, the implications are more complicated. John Lahr comments in his essay “Been Here and Gone” that, “To the black world, Wilson’s plays are witness; to the white world, they are news” (53). The New York Times’ Frank Rich says that Wilson’s “glorious storytelling” offers “a penetrating revelation of a world hidden from view to those outside it” (“August Wilson Reaches”). For those audience members who have faced urban renewal, then, the plays both validate the experience and offer encouragement to move forward. For audiences without that experience, the plays humanize those caught in a process of upheaval, bureaucracy, and institutionalized alienation.

The chapter will begin with a discussion of the absence of this topic in most studies of Wilson. The history of the Great Migration has received substantial coverage in the August Wilson scholarship and is common and familiar in American and African American literary fields of study. Urban renewal is not. Its prominence within the Pittsburgh Cycle certainly warrants further discussion. The absence of discussions of urban renewal can influence literary interpretation; it can also unintentionally replicate neutral depictions of redevelopment and perpetuate a general misunderstanding of urban renewal. In the second part of this chapter I will also look at the significance of the specific setting of the play Two Trains Running, namely a diner featuring soul food. The restaurant offers an important link to southern tradition and serves as one of the last remaining gathering places for a community plowed under for ephemeral gains and burned out in self-destructive riots. Just
as scholars and critics overlook the significance of urban renewal within the cycle, so too do they tend to overlook the thematic centrality of the diner and the importance of food in maintaining and extending cultural identity.

As the example of *Two Trains Running* will show, there are some important ramifications to literary analysis as a result of the lack of understanding of urban renewal. This chapter will look at the play from two related directions. First, noting some of the issues that scholars do examine in terms of the play, as well as what they do not examine, illustrates the need for a clearer understanding of urban renewal itself. Extra layers of the play are revealed when it is considered in connection with urban renewal. Second, I will examine how the play fits into Wilson’s evolving focus on community activism. The setting is especially important. As a neighborhood restaurant serving soul food, Lee’s Diner both provides the community with an important meeting place and serves the traditional foods that link northern populations with their southern roots.

### I. The Existing (and Non-Existing) Scholarship

While historical contexts such as the Great Migration or the blues tradition are commonly examined in Wilson scholarship, little work exists on urban renewal. Typically redevelopment it is only lightly – if ever – addressed by either academics or critics, even in relationship to those plays that deal directly with it. In *Jitney*, the closing of the jitney station that serves as the play’s setting is often discussed more as a plot device to develop tension than a reflection of a common dilemma. In *King Hedley II*, where the neighborhood has become a wasteland in no small part because of urban renewal, reviews and essays instead talk about the rates of poverty, crime, and drug abuse in the 1980s and the repressive drug laws of Reagan America that eventually resulted in the extremely high rates of imprisonment.
for young black males. Literary analyses that do include discussions of urban renewal focus primarily on the general trend towards suburbanization and the flight of middle class blacks to more affluent city neighborhoods. At best, scholars acknowledge the frustrations and controversies associated with eminent domain policies. As with local historical contextualization, little in Wilson’s works or interviews overtly demands attention to the specifics of what happened (and continues to happen) with urban renewal in the Hill District. Yet the very existence of so many references to the continual destruction makes the absence of more in-depth scholarship surprising.

The specific historical context for this major theme of urban renewal is significant because it is rarely investigated and, apparently so little understood. This gap can have significant implications, one of which is reflected in the understanding of the plays. The issue of Goodman Theatre’s OnStage dedicated to Wilson’s cycle (and produced in connection with the theater’s staging of Radio Golf) includes a chronology of the ten plays. In Radio Golf, Leah Batt writes, “Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks are about to begin the redevelopment of the Hill District that was first threatened in Two Trains” (6). Such a reading of the characters’ position in the history of urban renewal (as the culmination rather than yet another destructive, albeit well-intentioned plan for the Hill coming from men who grew up there) both changes the meaning of Radio Golf and distorts the history of urban renewal. Laura Hitchcock’s review of Radio Golf for the online theater magazine CurtainUp goes a step further: she never mentions urban renewal but does remark that the plot and themes are “reminiscent of the pending evacuation of the Gaza Strip.”

Set in 1969 and first performed in 1990, Two Trains Running takes place in Memphis Lee’s restaurant, one of the few remaining businesses in the Hill. It is about to be closed due
to eminent domain and much of the dialogue and dramatic tension in the play revolve around whether Memphis will get a fair price from the city. Despite the time devoted in the play to discussions of urban renewal (Memphis’ court case, other closures, past glories and Memphis’ plans to rebuild), most discussions of the text glide past this central issue. The renewal plans referenced in the play are almost never linked to the historical significance of redevelopment plans for urban America. In a 1991 interview with Wilson, Sandra G. Shannon said, “I’ve noticed that Pittsburgh locales in two of your plays in particular – Two Trains Running and Jitney – are about to be demolished. What does the imminent wrecking ball suggest in these two works? What does the city mean to your plays?” (Dramatic 226). The “imminent wrecking ball” that Shannon perhaps sees primarily as a metaphor is part of very real things that were happening in Pittsburgh, and on at least one level Wilson is telling the story of a specific place and time, one that allows him to address some universals but also comes out of the very local.

With the exception of a brief reference to the era’s assassinations and repeated references to an impending rally in honor of Malcolm X’s birthday, the play largely ignores the mainstays of a civil rights setting. Wilson scholar Alan Nadel identifies the competing values and methodologies of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements as “the play’s primary historical theme” (117). The New York Times’ Frank Rich, in his review of the Broadway production, focuses on the noticeable absence of the dominant images and icons of the 1960s protests. The play “never speaks of Watts or Vietnam or a march on Washington. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is mentioned only once.” For Rich this is one of the play’s strengths, “easily Mr. Wilson’s most adventurous and honest attempt to reveal the intimate heart of history,” bypassing the well-worn tropes in lieu of ‘smaller’ stories (n.pag.).
Variety’s David Rooney, in his review of an off-Broadway revival of the play, echoes Rich. Speaking of the lack of on-stage “narrative incident,” Rooney says. “The tragedy comes quietly from elsewhere. Wilson papers the flavorful drama with social history, civil unrest and racial conflict, the echoes of slavery and battle for economic freedom” (n.pag.). Rich does make passing reference to the impending destruction of Memphis’ restaurant and makes the ominous comment that “a larger, national tragedy is spreading underfoot,” but he is not speaking of urban renewal. Instead, he argues that “Two Trains Running captures a racially divided country as it came apart.” For David Krasner, “Wilson has shaped an impressionistic play, one different in many respects from his previous works. He is concerned with an Afrocentric world view, where funerals, protest, love, eating, politics, and story-telling set the tone. The play is less about conflict and more a slice-of-black-life” (166).

Given that most of these examples come from reviews of performances of the single play, rather than from academic analyses of the play (or the cycle), such omissions are understandable. They are not necessarily a reflection of the critics’ understanding of the broader context, and August Wilson’s avoidance of historic touchstones throughout the cycle is significant and intentional; he situates the plays in the everyday rather than the iconic. But while Two Trains Running avoids dwelling on the icons of the civil rights movement and instead focuses on the importance and influence of Aunt Ester, Wilson does incorporate references to local history: the ongoing destruction from urban renewal and the riots following Dr. King’s assassination. These two events, with their lasting impact on the region and the nation, are arguably more directly relevant to the people living in the black ghettos of 1969 Pittsburgh (and New York City).

Reading the play with an eye to the implied references to Pittsburgh history suggests
a backdrop that is certainly compassionate but also carries strong undertones of anger and militancy. In regards to a planned neighborhood rally to commemorate Malcom X’s birthday, Sterling says that “They rallying for black power” (41). Memphis responds that a rally will get them nowhere: “Talking about black power with their hands and their pockets empty. You can’t do nothing without a gun. […] That’s the only kind of power the white man understand. […] In order to talk your way you got to have something under the table” (42). The two men may disagree on the meaning or efficacy of the rally, but both point to claiming rights. Wilson has explained that “Originally I thought the rally was going to be a more important part of the play than it is – this Malcolm X rally that looms over the play. Somehow it stayed in the background […]. So Aunt Ester has more impact on the play. […] So she has more of an impact than Malcolm” (Shannon, “Blues” 544). Whatever Wilson’s original intentions, in the finished version that ‘looming’ rally recalls the potential violence and fury of the 1968 riot that destroyed so much of the Hill. Risa even explicitly references a link, when she turns down Sterling’s invitation by saying, “I don’t want to go down there with them niggers. There might be a riot or something” (47). Sterling does not reject the idea, though he promises to protect Risa if one does develop.

Ignoring Watts, but alluding to the contemporaneous riots in the Hill District, Wilson builds tension through references to fire, firebombs, and Memphis’ lack of insurance. In 1968, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., black rioters – particularly in the Hill District – destroyed homes and businesses within the black neighborhoods themselves. Many buildings burned to the ground. Laurence Glasco, a University of Pittsburgh professor and preeminent historian of the city, links the riots to long-building anger over urban renewal, economic oppression, and continued endemic and institutionalized
racism. He notes the remarkable efforts of key leaders to limit destruction to a level far below that reached in many other cities, and Glasco cites only one death in the city due to the riots. Despite these successes, however, “Over five hundred fires destroyed much of the business district and drove most merchants out of business or out of the Hill. Ironically, the riots completed the destruction that urban renewal had begun” (Glasco, “Civil Rights Movement” 11). Since Two Trains Running is set just nine months after these riots, intense foreboding comes from the references to fires and, as Sterling describes it, “a regulation United States Army gas can. Made with good metal and everything. Bullets probably bounce right off it” (65-66). Combined, these suggest that Memphis’ comments about his willingness to “walk through fire” will turn out to be more literal than figurative. Act One closes with Sterling making a suggestion that likewise helps establish the threat of fire. “You got insurance? If you got insurance you could burn it down” (58), Sterling offers as a way to circumvent the fight with the city over restitution. Memphis’ response identifies the biggest threat to his livelihood:

“Nigger, is you crazy! Insurance cost five times what the building is worth. That’s why I keep me some good tenants upstairs. I don’t put none of them fools up there that’s liable to get drunk and burn down the place. […] Look back in the kitchen … ask Risa … I got four or five fire extinguishers back there … and you talking about burning down the place. That’s the one thing I am scared of. If it burn down I don’t get nothing. I don’t even get the fifteen thousand. See, they don’t know. The half ain’t never been told. I’m ready to walk through fire. (59)

Act Two opens with Sterling entering the restaurant carrying a gas can. “I found it in
back of the alley down there off of Centre. In the back of that drugstore. It was just sitting there … wasn’t nobody around … so I picked it up. It got five gallon of gas in it” (63). He sells the gasoline to Memphis for his car, goes to put the fuel in, returns and hands the empty gas can to Risa to hold onto, shortly returns to take the gas can again, and leaves. Immediately after he exits the restaurant, Memphis realizes that there is food burning in the kitchen. “What’s that burning? Risa? […] Risa, watch you don’t burn these short ribs. You got the fire way up high” (69).

Although these lines prove innocuous and no fire erupts, the placement and repeated appearance of the gas can, the burning food, and the image of a stovetop with “the fire way up high” within the same scene creates a tension about the restaurant. This is reinforced a few moments later when West enters and explains, “I’m fighting with the insurance company now about my two places that burned down” (71). Again in the same scene, Memphis relates the story of how he lost legal ownership of his farm in Mississippi because of a racist legal system: “Got home and they had set fire to my crop. To get to my house I’d have to walk through fire. I wasn’t ready to do that. […] Called it a draw. Said I was going back one of these days” (73). His readiness to “walk through fire” at the end of the play means he is willing to stand up for what is rightfully his no matter what the consequences. This applies to both his restaurant (demanding a price he deems fair, not what the city deems the price to be) and his southern farmland. Though there is no threat of physical violence from the city officials, the seizure of both of Memphis’ properties -- again, both involving the legal system -- are likewise correlated. Whether the building is destroyed through arson or demolished by a wrecking ball, the end result is the same.

A more developed analysis of the play is incorporated in Charles Patrick Tyndall’s
dissertation on August Wilson, which devotes a chapter to *Two Trains Running*. His focus is on conflicting methods of protest and black identity in the 1960s and their manifestation in the play. The only reference to urban renewal (in both the chapter and the dissertation) comes in a block quote from another source, a quote emphasizing the community significance of the character Hambone. Tyndall himself uses language that evokes a straightforward business transaction: “The city wants to buy Memphis’s property; Memphis is willing to sell it to them, but he will not take less than $25,000” (168-69). Michael Feingold does acknowledge urban renewal in his review for *The Village Voice*, but there is a strange tone of acceptance about the neighborhood’s ongoing losses: “Even the diner itself is about to disappear, since Pittsburgh is planning an urban-renewal project for this once bustling and now run-down street in the Hill District” (n.pag.). But “bustling” and “run-down” are not mutually-exclusive, and at its cultural height the Hill was still rife with overcrowded, substandard housing.

Taken individually, the critics’ comments (or lack of comments) about mean little. Collectively, however, they reveal an ignorance of the importance of the nation’s urban renewal plans to these characters. The examples from the criticism highlight a generalized misunderstanding of both the role of urban renewal in the plays as well as a misunderstanding of urban renewal itself. Wilson puts the values, goals, and arguments of the civil rights movement into concrete terms: Memphis, Sterling, Risa, and Hambone are, each in their own way, struggling for equality, equal representation under the law, and the right to the pursuit of happiness. Memphis carries out this fight by claiming the property that is rightfully his, refusing to let others define his future, and ultimately rebuilding a larger and more prominent version of the restaurant that is being cleared away by the city.
Mary L. Bogumil’s description of *Two Trains Running* in *Understanding August Wilson* is worth an extended examination here precisely because she does address urban renewal at some length. Bogumil’s discussion of urban renewal and her analysis of its role in the play is for the most part illuminative and accurate but there are sections which, like Feingold’s review, display a lack of understanding of the complexities of urban renewal (particularly specific to the Hill) and assume the necessity, or at least the legitimacy, of these programs. In her chapter on *Two Trains Running*, Bogumil first offers a summation of Daniel M. Johnson and Rex R. Campbell’s discussion of the 1960’s white flight to the suburbs and the subsequent economic downward spiral of inner-city, minority-heavy areas:

> Such metropolitan areas [in the North] were marked by a decline in wealth because both the industry located in urban areas and the whites who lived there relocated to the suburbs, leaving poor urban blacks to fend for themselves any way they could. […] Thus, as the tax base declined so did the standard of living and social services in these metropolitan areas. (95)

She then emphasizes the importance of migration and regionalism (an issue Johnson and Campbell raise), pointing to James H. Cone’s *Martin & Malcolm & America*. The disillusionment and devastation -- psychological as well as economic -- of southern black émigrés was not simply a result of their “disfranchisement in the North” (96) but, as she quotes Cone, resulted from “[t]he contrast between what blacks expected to find in the ‘promised land’ of the North and what they actually found there…” (96). She then turns to what appears to be a straight plot summary of the play, an overview that at first glance would appear to be innocuous.

But the tone of both Bogumil’s application of Johnson and Campbell and her
overview of the play’s plot suggest a certain inevitability to the state of the neighborhood outside the restaurant’s doors:

Although his restaurant was once a necessary commodity, a thriving business within the community, it is now barely profitable. Originally purchased at $5,500, Memphis’s establishment is scheduled for demolition along with nearly a dozen surrounding city blocks. As the play begins, Memphis wants $25,000 from the city to compensate him for the loss of his livelihood. No amount of money can really compensate him for the sense of his place during its heyday, as well as his sense of place within the community: “At one time you couldn’t get a seat in here” (9). Currently Memphis’s neighborhood is a virtual ghost town: the doctor, the dentist, the supermarket, the five and ten, the staples of any community, are gone. (97)

There are several problems with Bogumil's assumptions. First, although she hardly presents the city as benign in the play, she also does not point to its role in the loss of those supporting businesses and the subsequent decline of the restaurant’s patronage. Combined with the information from Cone, Johnson, and Campbell, the implication is that the businesses are gone because of a combination of white flight, the growth of the suburbs, and a declining quality-of-life. The neighborhood break-down thus corresponds to a loss of the tax base and therefore various social services, resulting in the urban renewal programs. Yet the play is set in 1969 and Memphis has only owned his restaurant for eight years. The "heyday" of his establishment is therefore well past the widely-recognized heyday of the Hill District itself – the 1930's through mid-1950's, immediately preceding the implementation of urban renewal programs.
The lines about the loss of businesses in the neighborhood that Bogumil references gain extra resonance when considered in terms of Sterling’s comment soon after, a comment ostensibly about a watch but which seems to point directly to the impact of urban renewal: “You take something apart you should know how to put it back together” (20-21).

Thankfully Sterling never dismantles his watch to find the mysterious jewels that are hidden inside, as their value and function are only realized when carefully assembled as part of the larger mechanism. Unfortunately, city planners clearly did not understand this concept and did far more than ‘tinker’ with neighborhoods like those in the Hill District. With the loss of what Bogumil quite rightly terms "the staples of any community," those citizens who remained and those who marked a line in the sand (or through a placard posted on a church) were unable to reassemble what was broken since so many of the original pieces were now permanently lost. The Hill District neighborhood was indeed a ghost of its former self by 1969, but this was largely because of specific events: the destruction of the Lower Hill through urban renewal and the riots of 1968 that destroyed so many of the remaining businesses.

Bogumil’s description of Memphis’ motivation also focuses on what the restaurant owner wants in his own life. Memphis does indeed demand “$25,000 from the city to compensate him for the loss of his livelihood” (Bogumil 97), but he clearly wants to maintain that “sense of place within the community” and seems to feel an obligation to that community. When he first talks about his demands from the city the loss he speaks of is not his own but that of his regulars. These customers are from all walks of life, but many of them are poor. Despite his manner, Memphis is not coldhearted or avaricious. He references how inexpensive his food was, further implying that his clientele could not afford to pay
much, but Memphis wants only his share: “You couldn’t charge but a dollar. But then you didn’t have to. It don’t cost you but a quarter” (10).

When critics and scholars ignore the process of urban renewal or describe it in neutral terms, they likewise ignore both the broader context of Wilson’s plays and the reality from which those plays stem. The reviews and analyses therefore reflect and feed into widespread ignorance of social policies and actions that have perpetuated the poverty depicted in Wilson’s plays. Although a huge shift in population from urban to suburban had an impact on the area, Memphis’ customers are gone because they have been (at best) relocated or, more likely, removed and displaced by the city; they have not willingly moved out of the area. The supermarket, five and ten, doctor, and dentist have likewise "gone" because the majority of the businesses were in the Lower Hill, the "heart of the Hill" that was demolished through urban renewal and then finished off by the week-long riots following Dr. King’s assassination.

The authors of the 1969 study *The Impact of Urban Renewal on Small Business* provide quantifiable evidence of the connection between urban renewal and the decline of black-owned businesses. Their research focused on three Chicago neighborhoods but their findings reflect broader patterns applicable to the Hill District. With greatly increased rents, limited availability for establishments requiring low square footage, and the large delay between demolition and completed construction, the impact was profound and the chances for a small business’ survival were pretty bleak. Nationally, “one in every three businesses displaced by an urban renewal project in the United States liquidates upon displacement” (Berry et al 4). In the Hill District the numbers were even higher as so many of the establishments were small black-owned stores with almost no options for relocation even if
they had had the means.

The residents of the Hill District were commonly ‘blamed’ for the state of their housing and their economic status by those who saw demolition as a solution to a range of the city’s housing, health, traffic, and crime problems. What some city leaders assumed or categorized as evidence of the moral laxity, inherent inferiority, or at least unsalvageable lives stemmed in part from complex, interconnected racist policies from a range of sources, ones that had been in place for decades, if not longer. Writing in 1913, George Edmund Hayes exclaimed:

Crowded into segregated districts; living in poor houses for the most part for which they pay high rentals; often untaught and without teachers in the requirements of town life; walled in by inefficiency, lack of training and the chance to get the training; usually restricted from well-paid occupations by the prejudice of fellow-employees and frequently by the prejudice of employers; with a small income and the resulting low standard of living, the wonder is not that Negroes have a uniformly higher death-rate than whites in the cities and towns, but that the mortality is as small as it is and shows signs of decrease. [...] The marvel is not that the criminal records outrun other elements of our urban population, but that impartial observers both North and South testify to the large law-abiding Negro citizenship, and to the thousands of pure individuals, Christian homes and communities.” (Haynes 115)

In their 1979 multi-disciplinary examination of the migrant vs. immigrant experience, “A Tale of Three Cities,” Hershberg et al pointed to the sustained inequity of opportunity in housing and residential mobility. Their study documented the trajectories of various racial
and ethnic groups in Philadelphia throughout the century: “As ethnic occupational segregation decreased over time -- that is, as white immigrant groups gained access to a broad range of occupations -- their residential segregation decreased. Quite the opposite was true for blacks; despite the occupational desegregation produced in recent decades by the opening of new job opportunities for blacks, their residential segregation has increased over time” (75). Some of this stemmed from individual or community racism on the part of white landlords, home sellers, or potential neighbors. Much of it has been the result -- sometimes explicit and intentional -- of 20th century housing policies, including urban renewal and decades-long, widespread, and racially-motivated/influenced lending practices. Redlining (refusing to issue loans for properties within minority neighborhoods) prevents or deters homeownership; reverse-redlining (targeting minority neighborhoods with predatory loans) dramatically raises the likelihood of widespread foreclosure. The Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975 opens with the blunt assessment: “The Congress finds that some depository institutions have sometimes contributed to the decline of certain geographic areas by their failure pursuant to their chartering responsibilities to provide adequate home financing to qualified applicants on reasonable terms and conditions” (sec. 302).

One of the requirements of the Act was for lenders to maintain records of their rates of acceptance, denials, and no-decisions for home loans, including information on the race and gender of applicants. Congress did not require the lenders, or anyone else, to actually do anything with the information, however, and so for over a decade no one did. In 1988 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution used the files to examine the racial disparity of loans issued by Atlanta lenders in the 1980s. The series, “The Color of Money,” won a Pulitzer Prize and refocused attention on the practice of redlining. In 1989 the paper expanded the series to
include national statistics. “The records of 10 millions applications from every savings and loan in the country reveal a lending gap so pervasive and so wide that in much of the country high-income blacks are rejected at the same rate as low-income whites,” Bill Dedman reported. The pattern extended to integrated neighborhoods and not just those with predominantly minority populations: “Homebuyers of any race in upper-income areas that are at least 25 percent minority were rejected at the same rate as homebuyers in poor white neighborhoods” (Dedman, “Blacks Turned Down.”). Pittsburgh’s numbers were especially bad. As Len Barcousky of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette reported, “Applications from blacks were turned down 3.8 times as often as those from whites between 1983 and mid-1988 [...]. That rejection rate is the second-highest among the 50 areas studied” (15).

In their 1997 examination of the files, Andrew Holmes, Paul M. Horvitz, and Joe F. James, all professors at American business schools, analyzed the percentage of mortgage loans to non-occupants of properties in black and Hispanic neighborhoods in five cities as a way of inferring incidents of ongoing redlining. The policy, they determined, was still likely widespread. In addition to low minority homeowner rates, they reported that racially-biased loan policies also lead to increased numbers of absentee landlords. Larger and distant investors are often the only ones able to secure financing for property within redlined areas: “Where racial redlining exists, potential homeowners find it difficult or impossible to obtain financing and potential sellers have difficulty selling” (Holmes et al 95).

In 2005 the Federal Reserve reported on the sustained disparity between mortgages for white and black homeowners. For those with low incomes, 12.9 percent of white homebuyers had a subprime mortgage versus 39.2 percent of the black homebuyers. For those with higher incomes, the discrepancy of rates between those with high-cost mortgages
was even more dramatic: 5.8 percent of white versus 23.9 percent of blacks (Andrews). A 1998 analysis by the joint HUD and U.S. Dept. of Treasury Task Force on Predatory Lending revealed yet a bigger gap, this time between wealthy blacks and poor whites: “borrowers in upper-income black neighborhoods were twice as likely as homeowners in low-income white neighborhoods to refinance with a subprime loan. In 1998, 18 percent of borrowers living in low-income white neighborhoods relied upon a subprime loan, compared with 39 percent of borrowers living in upper-income black neighborhoods” (HUD-Treasury 48, emphasis in original). Numbers like the ones in these two reports imply that, when the current housing market and sub-prime mortgage crash dust settles, African Americans may again be disproportionately affected.

Despite the apparent assumptions and tone of the various Wilson scholars and critics, the exodus from the increasingly segregated black inner-city neighborhoods and the disappearance of vital businesses was neither inevitable nor natural. The information the reporters gleaned from the records of mortgage applications in the 1980s was not a new phenomenon. As Dedman wrote, “Credit discrimination also perpetuates differences in income and wealth between the races from generation to generation. Homeownership is the main way that American families accumulate and hold wealth. Americans borrow against their homes for education, for vacations, for emergencies, for retirement. For most parents, a home is the most valuable part of the estate they will leave to their children” (Dedman, “Blacks Turned Down”). The environment in which Wilson’s characters are increasingly struggling to survive is one where those in power have made decisions that have had sustained impact on the characters, whether or not those decisions are explicit in the plays.

Urban renewal was, and remains, a significant but often misunderstood factor in the
history of segregation and integration. It is therefore vital to understand its origins, history, and influence (whether as reflected in the Wilson canon or in the lives of the people he writes about), just as it is vital to understand the Great Migration and slavery itself. Urban renewal often caused more problems than it solved: despite any good intentions, it was frequently devastating to the neighborhoods affected. Whether because of paternalism, greed, or faith in capitalism and the social science of city planning, scores of vibrant, viable, or at the very least renewable city neighborhoods were lost through demolition or dissection. The needs of new highway systems or highrises made city planners oblivious to the validity of a neighborhood. The ‘greater good’ for a struggling city was defined by replacing the old with the new, imposing large-scale systems over smaller, distinctive segments, and isolating poor (largely black) populations into massive housing projects, divorced from the rest of the city.

The historic context of urban renewal is important because it is not simply historic; it is contemporary and relevant. Current debates, proposals, and implementations of different redevelopment plans replicate those in Wilson’s plays and show the issue to be immediate. For a local Pittsburgh audience the theme might be one of Wilson’s most potent. In the words of Pittsburgh Post Gazette drama critic Christopher Rawson, in his review of the Yale Repertory Theatre production of Radio Golf, “It’s as current as newspaper headlines […]. The story behind ‘Radio Golf’ started in 1904 and before that with the 1619 arrival of black slaves in Virginia, but it also harks back to the ravaging of the Hill by the ‘urban renewal’ of the 1950s. And staged right now in Pittsburgh, we would see indirect parallels in the careers of Robert Lavelle, Bob O’Connor, Sala Udin and various unnamed developers and city agencies” (Rawson, “Coming Full Circle” C-4). The Yale production highlights the parallel for the New Haven audience in its program booklet: a 1950s Teenie Harris photo of the Hill
at its pre-renewal height is juxtaposed with one of New Crawford Square (Rawson, “Coming Full Circle” C-4), the middle and upper-middle class housing development at the current edge of the Hill, built starting in 1993. The situations that Wilson’s characters face are happening still, the policy decisions based on some of the same flawed justifications evident in policies from the middle of last century. The urgency with which communities and individuals must act and the lengths they must go to to have their voices heard is the same as in the 1960s and 70s, when the Jitney drivers chose to make their stand and the real-life residents of the Hill District erected a sign proclaiming “no development past this point.”

August Wilson’s work is also recognized for its transformative potential. “Plays about history in turn become historical facts with the power to alter consciousness, and if consciousness then actions, assumptions, ambitions, values,” Christopher Bigsby wrote of Wilson’s influence (13-14). The history of urban renewal to which the playwright repeatedly alludes is sweeping, faceless, arbitrary, and unfailingly destructive and unjust. It is implicated in the apathy of characters, the bleak present, and the uncertain future of the district and its people. By shining a light on the destructive and demoralizing practices of the past, the plays have the potential to counter a similar apathy in the audience and argue against the continued sweeping, faceless, and arbitrary destruction of the remaining structures in the Hill.

II. Two Trains Running’s Memphis Lee

The loss of any property, whether through eminent domain, foreclosure, or disaster, is traumatic. By the time of the 1969-based Two Trains Running, the play Wilson wrote immediately after The Piano Lesson, urban renewal programs had come to define everything from the physical landscape to the economic world of the Hill District and his characters. Memphis Lee, the play’s focal character, is being forced via eminent domain to sell his once-
thriving business to the city as part of an extensive urban renewal program. He is not the first to face this loss in his neighborhood, and he will not be the last. The characters comment on the on-going process that is forever seizing, occasionally demolishing, but apparently never constructing buildings:

WOLF: When they gonna tear it down?

HOLLOWAY: You know how the city is. They been gonna tear this whole block down for the last twenty years.

MEMPHIS: They told me to be downtown Tuesday. They liable to wait another twenty years before they tear it down, but I’m supposed to be down there Tuesday and find out how much they gonna give me. (9)

In this respect Memphis is therefore just one in the long string of property owners forced to give up a viable Hill District property for the city’s amorphous plans for “redevelopment.” He even ends the play financially ahead, receiving $10,000 more than he had been demanding, making him far more fortunate than most of his fellow residents. Yet the closing of the diner is more devastating than these facts might imply and than most scholars and critics acknowledge. An examination of the importance of Memphis’ restaurant as a setting illuminates why the loss of local businesses to urban renewal is such a devastating blow.

One crucial aspect of the diner is its role as a meeting place. Lovell Estell III coyly remarks in his review for L.A. Weekly that “The setting is a Pittsburgh diner, circa 1969, that conveniently serves as a neighborhood hangout” (n.pag.). But the choice of setting serves not merely to expedite the plot. On a very human scale, the restaurant fills a fundamental need. As Memphis points out, “Everybody got to eat and everybody got to sleep. Some people don’t have stoves. Some people don’t have nobody to cook for them. […] Who’s
gonna cook for them now?” (10). (Since “Everybody got to eat and everybody got to sleep” he could have also asked where some of the displaced or down-on-their-luck residents were going to lay their heads at night).

Lee’s Restaurant provides a service that will be difficult for many of his customers to live without, but it also provides a more ephemeral -- though no less important -- sustenance to the Hill District, one related to identity. The pending demolition is therefore an assault on the community itself and not simply its buildings. In the fascinating comparison of three different American ethnic immigrant groups, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, the appropriately named Hasia R. Diner argues for a more complicated understanding of the profound and fundamental significance of foodways:

Food, like sex, intensifies group identity. The overly quoted statement of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, “tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are,” works. Sex is not the only kind of human interaction connected to and refracted in the world of food. In its literal definition, a “companion” means one with whom bread is shared. Preparing and consuming food together solidifies social bonds within families, between households, and among individuals who consider themselves friends. The notion of the common table connecting people exists in many cultures as an embodiment of communal trust. We might define a community as a group of people who eat with each other. (4)

In Wilson’s play, with few other establishments or meeting places left, more will be missing from the community than a local eatery. The community is already suffering because so
many households have been moved out or shifted into different areas. The daily routines have been disrupted and important connections between individuals permanently altered or likely lost.

Although the play only presents the interactions of a handful of regular customers, they represent an eclectic mix of personalities and backgrounds. Both the setting of the Holly’s boardinghouse in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and of Becker’s jitney station in *Jitney* allow for characters with relatively diverse backgrounds and perspectives to interact. The diner in *Two Trains Running*, however, brings together the widest range of characters. None are related. (*Gem of the Ocean* is the only other work in the Pittsburgh Cycle to not feature any characters who are members of the same family.) Aside from Memphis and Risa, his lone employee, none work together. Because everybody does indeed “got to eat,” Lee’s Diner brings together people from various walks of life on a daily basis; consequently, characters who would likely have limited social contact with each other in any other context enjoy extended conversations.

It is a situation Wilson spoke of as being pivotal in his own life: “When I left my mother’s house, I went out into the world, into that community, to learn what it meant to be a man, to learn whatever it is that the community had to teach me. And it was there I met lifelong friends who taught me and raised me, so to speak” (Moyers, “August Wilson: A Playwright” 67). He heard the voices of the Hill in the barbershops and in Pope’s restaurant. Outside clubs he listened with others and learned the power of music. At Pat’s Place, the legendary pool hall and cigar store, the young Wilson learned history and heard the stories that would become so important in his works. He describes his first visit in 1968 or 1969, during the same time period *Two Trains Running* is set:
I went to Pat’s Place and, sure enough, there were these elders of the community standing around, and at that time I was twenty-three years old and it was a time when life had to be continually negotiated. I was really curious as to how they had lived as long as they did. So I stood around in Pat’s Place and listened to them. They talked philosophy, history; they discussed whatever the topic of the day was -- the newspapers, the politics of the city, the baseball games, and invariably they would talk about themselves and their lives when they were young men. And so a lot of what I know of the history of blacks in a very personal sense I picked up standing there in Pat’s Place.

(Sheppard 101)

Until the end of his life he did much of his writing in coffee shops, restaurants, or bars. Memphis’ diner also serves as a regular meeting place for customers from different backgrounds and with often very different perspectives on life. With no place in which to sit and drink coffee, no place to argue or gossip while enjoying a piece of pie or a newspaper, those patrons will lose their interactions and thus a sense of community.

Another important aspect of the restaurant is the food it serves. The southern black migrants coming to the north during the Great Migration had a variety of often-traumatic cultural shifts to deal with and adaptations to make. These included changes in climate, dialects and languages, clothing, housing, and topography as well as the tremendous difference between agricultural and industrial work, or rural and urban lifestyles. Just as captured African slaves adapted their food traditions and customs to the foods available to them in North America, southern African Americans brought their food culture North. Speaking of Italian immigrants and the American communities they formed, Hasia R. Diner...
examines the ways “foods played a considerable role in the formation of communities and in shaping the identities of those who lived in them” (54). The same concept applies across immigrant groups as well as the black migrants from the American South.

The menu board at Lee’s restaurant, prominently displayed as one of only four specified props in the set design, lists familiar southern foods: beans and corn muffins, chicken (fried or served as chicken and dumplings), meat loaf, collards, mashed potatoes, green beans, macaroni and cheese, and potato salad (1). Memphis also later references Risa cooking short ribs. Wilson is always sparse with his stage direction; sets only include items with thematic significance. Memphis offers no diner staples of hamburgers, hotdogs, or french fries, no generic breakfast items aside from coffee and (depending on one’s definition of breakfast food) pie. Instead, Lee’s Restaurant serves homestyle cooking, the comforting and familiar fare for those looking for the familiar and comfortable: “Men whose wives done died and left them” or people with little money (10). Moreover, the dishes are traditional soul food, a link to a southern heritage and a potent way of maintaining cultural identity. The phrase “soulfood” stemmed from 1960s activism and the Black Pride Movement. It was a claiming of food traditions often overlooked or dismissed. The significance of foodways is the subject of numerous studies and analyses, including studies and discussions of the importance of both food preparation and gathering places in maintaining identities and links to a cultural history. “Soulfood was the perfect symbol for a black cultural revolution,” William Frank Mitchell writes in *African American Food Culture*: “The magic of the foods and the memories they evoke were mystical enough to make strict definitions difficult. Soulfood was another cultural product, possibly the most symbolic, with a strong historical lineage. People knew it had southern roots and that workers, if not enslaved blacks, had
eaten something like it. That sense of history was an affirmation of community as its members prepared for the changes to come” (19).

The most vivid explanations of the often-complicated link between food, identity, race, and southern heritage come from literature. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the narrator buys a baked Carolina yam from a Harlem street vendor “and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control” (264). John Edgar Wideman, a Wilson contemporary raised in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, referred to watermelons as letters from home. “The melon is a letter addressed to us,” Wideman writes. “A story for us from down home. Down Home being everywhere we’ve never been, the rural South, the old days, slavery, Africa. That juicy, striped message with red meat and seeds, which always looked like roaches to me, was blackness as cross and celebration, a history we could taste and chew. And it was meant for us. Addressed to us. We were meant to slit it open and take care of business” (“To Robby”). In both examples the joy that comes from the intense familiarity of the food is tempered with shame. The yam-eating is followed by a description of a social taboo many educated blacks hold against the foods most associated with poor southern black cooking. “Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked” (264), Ellison’s protagonist observes. This in turn is echoed by Wideman, who laments his own anxieties about eating watermelon while at the same time admiring his brother’s complete disregard of stereotypes.

I never liked watermelon as a kid. I think I remember you did. You weren’t afraid of becoming instant nigger, of sitting barefoot and goggle-eyed and Day-Glo black and drippy-lipped on massa’s fence if you took one bite of the
forbidden fruit. I was too afraid to enjoy watermelon. Too self-conscious. I
let people rob me of a simple pleasure. Watermelon’s still tainted for me. But
I know better now. I can play with the idea even if I can’t get down and have
a natural ball eating a real one. (Wideman “To Robby”)

Both Ellison and Widemen refer to anxiety with the white stereotypes held by white
observers. In contrast, Wilson sees a rural southern tradition as the foundation of African
American culture rather than as a reminder of a negative legacy of slavery. Wilson sees the
foods not through the prism of white interpretation but as a connection to a black culture.
Like Wideman’s brother, Wilson removes the stigmas Wideman and Ellison present largely
by aggressively ignoring them. Charles Dutton, the actor who originated the role of The
Piano Lesson’s Boy Willie, said he was originally skeptical about Wilson’s initial description
of a black man who travels North driving a truck full of watermelon; his skepticism
evaporated when he read the script.

Given the restaurant’s ties to cultural continuity and daily life, the plot’s focus on the
decline and forced closing of the restaurant is especially significant in terms of community
and cultural loss. Mary Ellen Snodgrass in August Wilson: A Literary Companion refers to
Memphis’ restaurant as “dilapidated” (203) when ‘run-down’ seems more fair and accurate.
The restaurant is not being taken over by the city because it is substandard but because the
entire block is being demolished. The distinction is important because it removes any clear
motivation and the seizure instead remains, within the context of the play, arbitrary,
inevitable, inscrutable, and irrelevant. Snodgrass, however, is one of the few who accurately
attributes the pending sale and demolition to external interests (the city) rather than internal
defects -- some innate flaw in the Hill District or the inevitable neighborhood decline of a
poor black community. She refers to “the impermanence of life in the Hill District, which is rapidly vanishing as more lucrative uses of the land displace small businesses in the black community” (204). Snodgrass is also one of the few to touch on the significance of the play’s specific setting and Memphis’ menu. Referring to the death of Hambone, one of the regular visitors to Lee’s Diner, she shifts the focus away from the individual tragedy and towards the community’s tragedy: “More significant than a human death is the demise of an African American institution, in this case, an everyday diner serving soul food” (204).

The closure will cause hardship, but the reduction in patrons has already had an impact on Memphis’ business and the link the restaurant offers. In his litany of the Hill District businesses that are gone, Memphis includes a description of the business his restaurant once enjoyed. The details emphasize both the former popularity of the diner and the fundamental role of an inexpensive restaurant to a population whose members do not all have the ability to cook for themselves. The needs of the residents are presumably the same but the patronage is gone: “It ain’t nothing like that now. I’m lucky if I go through a case a chicken a week. That’s alright. I’ll take that. I ain’t greedy. But if they wanna tear it down they gonna have to meet my price” (10). Although it is not directly stated, Memphis implies a correlation between the reduction in business and the city’s actions.

Because business is so slow, the dishes actually available at the time the audience is introduced to the restaurant are far more limited than even the short menu promises: beans, corn bread, and coffee. Sterling Johnson complains about the lack of items advertised: “You got all that sign out there say home-style cooking. Where the food at?” and “You out to put a sign out there. Say ‘Gone shopping’” (17). But Sterling has another reason for complaint: “I don’t want no beans. I been eating beans for five years” in prison (17). The diner’s lack of
its staple menu items illustrates a break from its important cultural link to a black southern tradition; the closing of Memphis Lee’s diner will make the Hill’s symbolic loss of this link complete. That the one dish Sterling can order when he returns to the neighborhood from the penitentiary is the same food he has had for five years in prison is both ironic and a sign of the community’s downward trajectory. Risa is cooking fried chicken, grits, biscuits, and short ribs at later stages of the play but, aside from pie and coffee, the only item any of the characters ever eat during the play are those beans.

The urban renewal programs destroyed the lower Hill; they removed the business district that provided the services, economy, and identity of the entire district; they cut the Hill off not only from its livelihood, culture, and identity but also from the rest of the city itself, as the footprint of the Civic Arena -- the only major structure that came out of the redevelopment -- stood in the very path that had once triggered Claude McKay to famously call the Hill ‘the crossroads of the world.’ Just as thousands lost their homes and businesses in the Pittsburgh Renaissance, so Memphis Lee in Two Trains Running loses his restaurant to the city. The closing of the diner is a forgone conclusion from the start of the play; it is beyond his control and he never tries to stop the loss.

Yet Wilson never allows his characters to become victims. The focus of the play, as with all of the plays, is on what the characters can do. In an interview Wilson pointed to a revision he made to the script:

I try not to portray any of my characters as victims. There was a line in Two Trains Running when they’re tearing down the building and Memphis is talking about what his business used to be and how he used to sell four cases of chickens a week, but now he’s down to one case. “But that’s all right,” he
said. “I ain’t greedy. I’ll take that. Only they don’t want me to have that.” I took that line “They don’t want me to have that” out of the script because it makes him a victim of someone else. They are not doing anything to him personally. It’s not like they don’t want him to have the business. They’re just tearing down the building. (Shannon, “Blues” 550)

Memphis is not able to stop the destruction of his building but he can force the city to acknowledge that the restaurant has a greater economic value than they had originally assumed. He is not able to save his existing business but he does have the ability to rebuild, to create a new business that can be an anchor in the Hill District, even more of an economic force. *Two Trains Running* identifies those things that are beyond Memphis’ control but emphasizes the two things Memphis can influence. The initial fight is between Memphis and the city, over what constitutes just compensation. The larger fight occurs within Memphis himself: how he will deal with his personal history and whether he will finally claim ownership over both that history and what is his. Early in the play Memphis focuses on the options that are closed to him: “Ain’t nothing to do. […] I can’t go out there in Squirrel Hill and open up a restaurant. Ain’t nothing gonna be left around here” (9).

As Wilson moved further into the cycle, he began shifting his emphasis from the individual to the communal, essentially ‘arguing’ the necessity of community activism as a way to heal the break with a cultural heritage. The theme develops incrementally. *The Piano Lesson* resembles *Fences* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* in that key characters are still in the process of moving north, settling, and trying to stake a claim on something permanent, attainable, and theirs. But the play also reveals the start of a shift in emphasis, and *The Piano Lesson* thus serves as a kind of bridge between Wilson’s focus on the individual and his
emphasis on the need for communal support and action. He is not as interested in diagnosing behavior or sources as in advocating possible responses. Individuals still need to come to terms with their own pasts and situations, but community activism becomes increasingly important in Wilson’s later works. The specific setting of *Two Trains Running*, namely a diner serving soul food, is vital to the larger message of the play. Because of the essential importance of the restaurant, its closing will have a profound impact on the neighborhood, not just its owner. Memphis Lee recognizes this fact, but it is his acceptance of his *obligation* to the rest of his community that marks a transition in his character and signals a benchmark in the Pittsburgh Cycle. Memphis is not just standing up for himself but also vowing to help his neighborhood and community.

At the end of *Two Trains Running*, Memphis has found a solution to his own needs and those of the Hill District. Returning from his court appearance, a now-triumphant Memphis plans to start over in a new location. This will not be in the white, more affluent neighborhood of Squirrel Hill because, as he has referenced before, that area is closed to him, a black man (9). Instead, his new restaurant will be built in the economic heart of what remains of the Hill District. The play closes with him first heading back down south to reclaim – by force, if necessary -- the land that was stolen from him. Significantly, Memphis is also demanding that those who have been involved or complicit in exploitation recognize their roles: “I’m going back to Jackson and see Stovall. If he ain’t there, then I’m gonna see his son. He enjoying his daddy’s benefits he got to carry his daddy’s weight” (109). Memphis’ decision to confront his past actions will thereby compel the Stovall family to confront their past actions as well. Memphis likewise forces the city to look more carefully at his property and understand value in a broader scope. By raising their settlement offer, the
city acknowledges the property has value beyond its likely resale price.

Starting with *Two Trains Running*, the protagonists extend their own growth out to the community, standing up for a collective unity and activism. Hambone has continually stood up for himself by demanding his ham and, more importantly, by not settling for a chicken. He has become insulated in his quest and in his identity, however. Risa feeds him, Memphis tolerates him, and Sterling tries to reach him and teach him to chant “Black is beautiful.” It is only through death that Hambone has a tangible influence on his small community, however. His death triggers Memphis to voice sympathy and exhibit empathy towards him, and makes Sterling break into Lutz’s market and forcefully claim the ham that Lutz would never surrender.

In the final scene, tensions that have been building through the play are diffused when multiple characters successfully stand up for themselves. Sterling returns from his confrontation with the white number runners with a small moral victory; Wolf describes the rally as three thousand people in a place with five hundred chairs but “Wasn’t no fight or nothing. It was real nice” (104); the gas can is linked to what Holloway identifies as self-directed arson on the part of the drugstore owner to collect insurance money rather than URA money; and Memphis returns from his court hearing with the stunning news that the city is paying him $10,000 more than what he had requested. This bounty is in turn linked to Memphis’ visit to Aunt Ester who shifts the fire imagery from the literal and back into the figurative. As Memphis explains, “She told me, ‘If you can’t fight the fire, don’t mess with it.’ Only I’m ready to fight it now” (108). Fire is a double-edged sword for Memphis. He can cook with it, but it can also destroy his business, as it had destroyed his former Mississippi home. When he walks through the fire he can come out transformed or never
come out at all. Knowing this, Memphis ends the play willing to take the risk. He has already fought in Pittsburgh for what is rightfully his; now he will return South to fight for the land that was taken from him. Hambone’s is the one storyline that does not resolve itself in direct victory. He is found dead, apparently of natural causes, never having gotten the ham from Lutz for a job well done.

Wilson himself spoke of Hambone as the catalyst that sparked Sterling’s action: upon hearing of Hambone’s death, he leaves the stage and the audience hears breaking glass and an alarm, after which Sterling re-enters the restaurant with a large ham. He drops it on the counter with the statement, “that’s for Hambone’s casket” (110). As the one who finally acts, Sterling is the character described as having “the warrior spirit” Wilson so admired.

Years earlier Hambone had painted the large fence around Lutz’s Meat Market. The bargain was that the job would earn him a chicken; a good job would earn him a ham. After completing what he saw as a job well done, Hambone has appeared daily, for 9 1/2 years, to get his ham. He is turned aside each time by Lutz with “Take a chicken.” Hambone’s response, day after day and year after year, is to say “I want my ham.” He says it not only to Lutz but to the world. “I want my ham” or the more confident “He gonna give me my ham” are virtually the only phrases he utters, and he says them at seemingly random moments and in place of conversation alike. Wilson spoke of the centrality of Hambone as an impetus for other characters:

Memphis can see himself in Hambone: ‘Man been ‘round here saying the same thing for ten years.’ Well, Memphis has been around for ten years, too. He has to come to see that. Hambone’s presence and his death affect the whole play. Sterling can resurrect and redeem Hambone’s life by taking the
ham. This produces the man of action. Without Hambone, you don’t have a Sterling. (Shannon, “Blues” 552-53)

But Hambone also represents an ineffectual form of self-obsessive individualism. While he is admirable for standing up for what is his, his actions are self-focused. He has an impact on the community primarily by being a catalyst for others’ decisions. Yet Hambone is also apart from the rest of the community in many ways. He may draw others characters out, but his own behavior (and dialogue) points only to a closed circuit. When Hambone dies, West discovers old scars covering his body. The story of their origins are as much a mystery as Hambone’s real name. The character therefore remains an enigma without the power to teach about his complicated past.

Wilson critiques racial and social norms in all the plays. His characters occasionally use these restrictive and typically oppressive norms in their attempts to subvert them or ignore the validity of the norms as a way of removing their power and supposed authority. “I go by if it’s right or not. It don’t matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself,” The Piano Lesson’s Boy Willie states (39), and King Hedley II echoes him. Troy Maxson uses one institution against another to demand, and receive, a promotion at work (despite his lack of actual qualifications), for example. But in each of these cases, the actions stop at the individual characters’ own advancement. Jackie Robinson’s athletic skills were not the defining factor in his being the first black ballplayer in the major leagues; his willingness to bear the weight of the role as a way to open the door to other black players is what set him apart. Troy does not break through in the same way as Robinson, the fellow ballplayer he derides. No other black trashmen are promoted to drivers, and Troy actually becomes alienated from his co-workers at the literal back of the truck. In contrast to Troy,
when Memphis Lee wins a lawsuit against the city (hiring a white lawyer in place of his ineffective black one), he does not stop. While he may not open the door for other property owners to win larger buy-outs, and he certainly does not stop the process of eminent domain, his plans to use the money to open a bigger restaurant will directly benefit the community.

While *The Piano Lesson* ends with one protagonist returning to Mississippi and a solid personal and cultural identity anchored in the South, the most dynamic character settles in the North. Berniece has not only summoned the spirits of her ancestors to Pittsburgh and re-embraced her ancestral heritage, but she is raising her daughter in Pittsburgh while giving her a future that incorporates her family’s complex southern past. In *Two Trains Running*, Wilson extends the process further through the character of Memphis. While he will return to the South to claim the land that is rightly his, he does not intend to remain there to work the farm as Boy Willie strove to do. Instead, his intention is to return to Pittsburgh, to the Hill District, to open another restaurant.

Just as Hambone’s death spurs Sterling into action (stealing a ham and redeeming Hambone’s life), so does Aunt Ester’s words spur Memphis into action. Holloway explains that Aunt Ester “make you right with yourself” (*Two Trains* 22). The most successful of Aunt Ester’s visitors take this a step further and extend this to their community. Memphis’ grief over Hambone’s death is the only one mentioned in the stage directions: “He is in pain, wounded by all the cruel and cold ironies of life” (110). The flowers he orders will have a message to Hambone that embraces a world. As he tells Risa, “Put on there where it say who it’s from… say it’s from everybody… everybody who ever dropped the ball and went back to pick it up” (110). This recognition of the connection between himself and the neighborhood and his *obligation* to the neighborhood finally gives Memphis the courage to walk through
Memphis has spoken of the needs of the community at earlier points in the play. However, from early in the play, Memphis links the special meaning of his restaurant to both the personal and the community. Memphis explains that first buying the diner finally offered him a chance to again make his way through his labor, not through fighting: “I could hang up my gun.” But he does not recognize his role in helping that neighborhood until he decides to take the gun back off the wall, not to fight to survive anymore but to fight for what is his and then extend his victory to the community. If he survives the trip back to reclaim his property, he will help the Hill District reclaim its own heritage and return to providing its citizens with a basic need. The menu would change only to expand to include more soul food based on southern black cooking: “I’m gonna open me up a big restaurant right down there on Centre Avenue. I’m gonna need two or three cooks and seven or eight waitresses. I’m gonna fix it up real nice. Gonna put me in a jukebox […]. Put little chandeliers… get me a neon sign. I’m talking about a big neon. You’ll be able to see it from Herron Avenue. I’m gonna put everything on the menu. Short ribs. Bar-B-Que…” (110). The language takes the popularity and success of his current diner’s heyday and proclaims an even grander future. As one of the few restaurants in the area he would likely not need the large neon sign, but its existence would announce life throughout the Hill. Like Berniece and her ancestral spirits, Memphis will help bring even more of the southern culture, the African American tradition, to northern Pittsburgh.

It is left to be determined whether Memphis will make it back to open his new restaurant; the characters are left waiting for their meals and the Hill is left waiting for the soul food that will help link them back to their southern heritage and thereby help nourish
their culture in the North. Gerald Weales, in his 1992 *Commonweal* review, points out that the Malcolm X rally “is a peaceful one” and describes the pivotal acts of defiance that end the play as “a final benign moment in which everyone joins forces to see that Hambone gets a suitable funeral” (n.pag.). That the characters of Lee’s Restaurant are united in emotion and action at the end gives hope for a future on the Hill and of the Hill. That Memphis is willing to fight for his property, and a future in the Hill District, also helps make the ending on *Two Trains Running* one of Wilson’s most optimistic works.
CHAPTER FOUR  

On the Killing Floor: *King Hedley II*

“Zoning places restrictions on individual choices and substitutes in large measure the judgement and opinion of public authority. This transfer of the power of decision is accompanied by a transfer of responsibility. The assumption is that public authority can make decisions as to land uses which are more consonant with the interests of all than can the individual land owner. The power to control the use of urban land is the power not only to place a limit upon its value but also to affect radically, if not to determine, the principal characteristics of urban living.”

_Ernest M. Fisher, American Bankers Association, March 1942 (Fisher 340)._ 

Introduction

The characters in August Wilson’s plays face an ominous, intruding world. Throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle, property, place, and family are linked in attempts – often desperate and futile – to keep away the dangers and pain of the outside world and control even a small plot of earth. But the residents in Wilson’s *King Hedley II* face a world unlike anything in the plays that came before it. The play, set in 1985, portrays brutality and crime as ubiquitous. Human life is almost valueless, whether in terms of employment or murder. “I used to be worth twelve hundred dollars during slavery,” King tells Mister as they voice their frustrations over a lack of secure employment. “Now I’m worth $3.35 an hour. I’m going backwards. Everybody else moving forward” (55). Moreover, violence is random, senseless, and self-perpetuating. The level of powerlessness, sense of futility, and lack of community in *King Hedley II* makes it Wilson’s bleakest play. What is rarely acknowledged by scholars, and never by the characters themselves, is the link between the state of the 1985 Hill District and the redevelopment programs of the previous generation.

Vacant lots are a visible reminder of the initial stages of urban renewal. Less tangible are the effects on the individual and community psyche. In addition to the economic benefits that can come from ownership, an absence of autonomy and control
over something as fundamental as where and how one lives can lead to apathy and community disconnection. In 1919 the U.S. Department of Labor examined the causes and effects of the Great Migration. Speaking of the situations southern migrants were leaving, the report’s authors made a link between property ownership and community. In the South, the authors wrote, “The worst conditions obtain in the communities in which most of the land is held by the absentee owners of large estates […] In these communities, there is a notable lack of leadership as well as of pride of home and community spirit” (68-69). As inferred by the study’s authors, the lack of leadership and pride was a result of people without control over their own homes or their own circumstances. The Great Migration was about economics and millions trying to find better paying jobs and opportunities, but it was also a way of establishing control.

Although the report was written in the second decade of the 20th century, the premise applies today and throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle: the characters who erect barriers (physical or emotional) or cling perhaps obsessively to a piece of property are simply trying to exert control. It is, for example, why Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’s Seth Holly redirects all discussions about things he cannot control (banks, his employer, the white world in general) towards something he feels he can exert some control over: his boardinghouse. It is similarly why Two Trains Running’s Risa scars her legs. By altering her physical appearance she hopes to ward off the men who are interested only in her looks.

The world King Hedley II and his family and friends inhabit is one where they lack control over almost everything. As a result, many of the characters display apathy or despair. The most dramatic of these moments comes from Tonya, King’s wife, who is
contemplating aborting their baby to avoid the seemingly inevitable grief of motherhood. She is not Risa; abortion is not primarily an attempt to establish control over her own body and future. She is also not a distorted version of *The Piano Lesson*’s Berniece, cutting off a child’s future in an attempt to protect the child from pain. Tonya is simply giving up trying to fight for life, tired of daring to hope.

The emotional isolation of individual characters is a reflection of the community as a whole. There is no Aunt Ester to offer solace or urge solidarity. At the end of the first scene, Stool Pigeon bursts onto the stage with the terrible proclamation of her death: “Lock your doors! Close your windows! Turn you lamp down low! We in trouble now. Aunt Ester died! She died! She died! She died!” (19). The old woman who embodied the Hill’s heritage and bore the collective memory of African America is not immortal after all. Also gone, however, are the less mythic characters who hold a community together. There is no Becker to act as mediator between black and white worlds, no Memphis or Troy to fight the system, no West with enough clout to get a replacement plate-glass window installed within hours. The absence of these characters is evidence of a community devoid of the leadership and community spirit the Department of Labor referenced some sixty-six years earlier. This time, however, there is no talk of migration; there is nowhere to go.

Wilson’s characters must continually navigate the difficult passage between agency, lack of agency, and apathy. The history of urban renewal is central when looking at the level of autonomy real Hill District residents have historically had or not had over their neighborhood, businesses, and homes. This history is also quite useful when looking at the way Wilson utilizes urban renewal within his plays, even in cases where he
does not directly point to eminent domain, demolition, or questions of blight. Why did poor black neighborhoods like the Hill District have so little influence on the policies that so directly and profoundly influenced its citizens’ lives, livelihoods, and futures? It is a question that Wilson pointedly does not ask. The motivations of the city’s leaders and planners hardly matter in the end. What does matter is that his characters must deal with the profound consequences of those policies, just as did the actual residents of the Hill and many other neighborhoods and communities.

The history section of this chapter will look at some of the competing voices about urban renewal and how they fit into patterns established at the turn of the 19th century. An overview of the debates from city officials, business leaders, academics, and social reformers reiterate what Wilson’s characters already know: decisions that take place outside a community rarely consider those within the community. The literary analysis will focus on how the physical destruction, economic devastation, and comprehensive loss of inform the behavior and outlook of *King Hedley II*’s key characters and the neighborhood as a whole. Wilson’s references (overt or oblique) to urban renewal programs, and specifically the demolitions that were a part of these programs, reflects the landscape or demolition projects that did indeed last decades and all too rarely resulted in any new structures for the people of the Hill District. “The men of the Renaissance have been unable to produce anything but a crop of weeds on 9.2 acres of prime public land next to the Civic Arena,” a *Pittsburgh Press* editorial complained in 1968 (qtd. in Fitzpatrick). But the plans – and the bulldozers – become a potent metaphor for a faceless, unthinking force that is always threatening to pull the community apart.
Not only are characters familiar with the “plans” for urban renewal (not a single new structure is ever built or referenced in any of the plays) but many of the characters are apathetic about them, not so much resigned but blind to any possible prevention or response. In *Two Trains Running*, the loss of Memphis Lee’s restaurant is a given from the opening, as omnipresent as white racism and oppression. It is Aunt Ester who teaches those who come to her how to discover themselves and how to reconnect with their heritage and their community. In the Pittsburgh Cycle, it is up to the characters to act first individually and then collectively to stand up to urban renewal and either face it down or reclaim what has already been lost. With *King Hedley II*, the Hill District has a long path to travel on this count; the majority of characters do not even know to look for the path in the first place. Wilson presents a community turned inward, not for support but in conflict. The people are not looking for a way to a better future. Like Tonya, they are on their way to cutting off the future because they are cut off from their past and have surrendered hope.

*King Hedley II* is light on plot. Legacy and ownership, themes familiar throughout the Wilson canon and central to the American Dream, are all the title character desires and strives for; the dramatic conflicts of the play revolve around other characters’ actions that threaten to take ownership and legacy away from him. Tonya, King’s wife, plans to have an abortion. Ruby, King’s mother, plans to sell the house out from under him. Mister, King’s best friend and business partner, plans to spend his share of their savings on furniture rather than the long-planned for and almost-in-reach video store. Elmore, Ruby’s recently-returned boyfriend and the killer of King’s biological father, plans to reveal the devastating truth about King’s paternity. Through it all, King --
the murderer, the ex-con, the embodiment of the stereotypical “angry black man” white America seemed to fear most in the 1980s -- tries to find a job, support his family, protect his property, and save for a better future. He sacrifices comfort and bears incessant discouragement while maintaining his goals. Through King, the play most overtly intersects with this study’s focus on housing; he is the only character to exhibit a strong interest in ownership, attachment to property, or willingness to defend that property. As for another focus of this study, urban renewal, the intersections are central but far less obvious. Indeed, the play contains none of the references to redevelopment or eminent domain so prominently referenced in *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, or *Radio Golf*.

While *King Hedley II* appears removed from the context of urban renewal, however, the setting, characters, and meaning of the play are all actually rooted in the city’s earlier redevelopment programs. Urban renewal has not only influenced King’s attachment to his property but it has also shaped his attitude towards the world. The effects of urban renewal are likewise evident in the fragmentation of the community, the family, and the physical landscape. This chapter’s discussion of its impact will largely be one that looks at absence, including the absence of references to urban renewal; this is appropriate since the nation’s redevelopment programs all too often involved the demolition of existing poor and minority communities. The examples of “absence” within the play echo the literal and symbolic gaps created by urban renewal.

I. **Off the Hill: The Origins of Urban Renewal**

The urban renewal programs that reshaped America in the second half of the 20th century grew out of the social and economic upheavals in the first half. Dramatic changes in how and where people lived (urban versus rural, industrial versus agricultural)
and who was now American meant changes in national identity and economies. For many people, housing changed as well. With the geographic and racial population shifts of the Great Migration, the overcrowded slum housing of poor ethnic neighborhoods became the even more crowded slum housing for poor blacks.

At the same time, city governance was evolving as local governments sought to shape their future through broader and stronger land management and public policy. Describing the rapid progression of “American city planning and the new profession it was creating,” historian Faith Jaycox maps its expanding influence. In 1909 alone, “Wisconsin passed the first state law authorizing cities to create permanent planning commissions, Harvard introduced the first university course on Principles of City Planning, and prominent Bostonians organized a movement called Boston 1915 to provide a comprehensive plan for city growth. In Los Angeles, the city council passed the first zoning ordinance in America” (Jaycox 317). The same year, “the City Beautiful Movement also reached its zenith, when World’s Fair architect Daniel Burnham unveiled his comprehensive and influential design for Chicago” and Benjamin Marsh “organized the first national conference on city planning, held in Washington” (318).

There were debates -- and sometimes battles -- over what to do about the growing housing problem. The views held by those in this new urban planning discipline reflect a diversity of influence and an infusion of morality. There were arguments over the source of the housing problems and over the solution; over who would pay for the reforms and who would benefit from them; whether affordable housing should be achieved by government subsidies and, if so, whether those subsidies should be directed towards the builders or the residents; if the goal of reform should be affordable rental units or
expanded home ownership and, if a mix, what ratio; and, ultimately, what a “home” should look like in the first place.

The debates also exhibit some consistent themes. The most prevalent, evident throughout the myriad camps of this city planning ‘movement,’ is the conception of housing reform as a primary means of social reform. This impulse was a carryover from the start of the Progressive Movement. The last years of the 19th century had brought expanded social policies and the development of a new interest in (and need for) city planning.\(^{15}\) Civic leagues, health and social welfare agencies, regional church groups and the like had been engaged in, and working for, various types of intervention and control for a generation. One tenet of the Progressive Movement was a reevaluation of poverty and a society’s responsibility to its poor. American Settlement Houses, including Pittsburgh’s Kingsley House and Irene Kauffman House, were important manifestations of this belief. The initial goals revolved around American values of cleanliness, education, and self-sufficiency. Settlement Houses were an important means of providing both educational support and social services and ultimately sought the assimilation of its clientele into American culture and civic life. Through the development of Kingsley House in 1897, for example, the Reverend Dr. George Hodges (with the financing of supporters and parishers like Henry Clay Frick) sought to offer physical, social, and spiritual guidance to the poor caught up by the industrial world (Bauman and Muller 39).\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) For an early overview see Frederick Law Olmsted’s “The Town-Planning Movement in America.” Olmsted, who wrote under the same name as his father, the planner of Central Park and other major urban parks, was also brought in by the Pittsburgh Civic Commission and the Committee on City Planning to offer a comprehensive overview and suggestions for a unified district plan. Olmsted’s report was published in 1911.

\(^{16}\) At its founding the Kingsley House’s clientele was primarily white immigrants but by 1910 Kingsley House was also serving ever-increasing numbers of black migrants through a separate facility.
These houses were an important means of providing educational support and social services and ultimately contributed to the assimilation of their patrons into American cultural and civic life. The institutions were also an important means of reform, with their emphasis on eradicating the sources of social and economic evils they encountered. Instead of relying on pathos, the Settlement Houses built up quantifiable evidence: “Settlement workers [...] undertook countless investigations, collecting and compiling solid data on conditions in the neighborhoods -- partly to understand the problem and partly to spur the public and government into action” (Jaycox 11). Issues such as child labor laws, women’s right to vote, and alleviating the misery of slum housing entered the political arena. Urban slums were often the subject of Progressive Era interest because of the high levels of congestion, disease, poverty, political corruption, and crime; housing was the target of services, surveys, and reform.

For some Progressives, the goal was to control the environment in order to “uplift” the largely urban, largely immigrant masses and assimilate them into American society. This was often viewed as a religious (typically Christian) obligation. For others, the goal was less humanitarian and more defensive: to contain the largely urban, largely immigrant masses by controlling the environment. In 1909 William Z. Ripley, an economics professor at Harvard University, was hopeful about the future of the new immigrant groups, in part because of their innate “excellent physical qualities” (130), but described the contrast between early-arriving ethnic groups and contemporary ethnic immigrant groups in negative terms:

Most of the pioneers in early days were untutored but intelligent, rude but virile, lawless, perhaps, but independent freemen. They were largely of
one ethnic stock or, at all events, a combination of the best strains. The horde now descending upon our shores is densely ignorant, yet dull and superstitious withal; lawless, with a disposition to criminality; servile for generations, without conception of political rights. (130)

Ripley’s argument exhibits multiple motivations, all of them emblematic of his era and the values and rhetoric familiar to certain strains of Progressivism. “Uplifting influences of these sorts to meet the needs of the women and children of the immigrant classes are imperative as a safeguard for our own political existence” (136), he argued in support of settlement houses. He also advocated increased access to school, child protection and work laws, expanded parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities, safer housing, and some kind of social safety net for the sick, elderly, or those injured on the job. Each of these proposals was vital, as “the very existence of the republic as a political and social unit is threatened by any deterioration of the mental and moral character of the lower classes” (136). He further argued that “It is of the utmost importance that the fullest allegiance of our immigrant population to the state should be awakened and maintained” (138). Whatever the motivation -- whether anxiety and fear or sympathy and social justice -- control is a dominant feature of progressivism.

By the start of the 20th century, progressive methods and ideals were becoming an institutionalized and bureaucratized part of American political life. The paternalism and desire to determine social behavior through a structured environment carried over to attitudes towards housing. Ripley explicitly linked the social and moral uplift of the lower, immigrant classes to increased national security. Of the major necessities this population needed, “first is that of decent housing at a reasonable price. The family as a
social unit is absolutely dependent upon this condition” (137). Some of those studying the
staggering problems of the nation’s heavily-industrialized cities noted a correlation
between over-crowding, moral laxity, and the distortion of the idealized American family
unit. The new immigrants and migrants were used to living in poor conditions back
home and were often used to multi-generational living arrangements. In the squalor of
the ghetto, overcrowding too easily led to, or allowed for, promiscuity, children born out-
of-wedlock, incest, and rape. By pushing for expanded tenement housing, carefully
mandating who might live there, and instilling American values, reformers would be able
to help those who had no other choice but to live in squalor while simultaneously
mitigating the impact on larger cultural values and reducing the strain on charitable
resources. Others stressed that incidents of communicable disease multiplied because of
overcrowding and poor housing conditions but also because of the absence of natural
light, fresh air, and opportunities for relaxation or play. Physical health was the primary
focus (Pittsburgh’s rates of typhoid cases were the worst in the country before the city
built a filtering system in 1907\textsuperscript{17} and the tuberculosis rates in 1933 were among the
worst), but there was also concern about mental health and social conditions.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} According to a 1921 survey by the American Medical Association, Pittsburgh had the greatest drop in
typhoid cases in the country. “The average annual death rate from typhoid for Pittsburgh from 1906 to
1910 was 65.0 per 100,000. The rate for Pittsburgh for 1920 was 2.7” (“Typhoid Vanishing”).
\textsuperscript{18} A tendency to blame the residents, rather than poverty and environment, is unfortunately tenacious. As
late as 1966, black Pittsburghers were dying from tuberculosis at four times the rate as their white fellow
citizens. Earle Belle Smith, a physician and Health Committee chairman of Pittsburgh’s Urban League,
still found it necessary to stress that disparate disease rates were because of environment, not some innate
flaw in the population. At a City Council meeting he made a presentation on “Health Hazards of the
Slums” that repeatedly warned members of the Council against blaming the poverty-stricken for their
frequency of illness. Tuberculosis was common among certain populations because of poverty,
overcrowded housing, poor medical care, and low education: “The incidence of venereal diseases [...] is
more common in slum neighborhoods -- not because of race or color, but because of overcrowding and
human deterioration in environmental filth and decay, inadequate education in sex hygiene and inadequate
medical care” (141).
A related refrain that extends from the Progressive Era to the middle of the century was a faith in the ability of technology and science to solve America’s various ills. Studies focused on the optimum city design and particularly tenant housing design. By carefully and scientifically plotting city neighborhoods, city planners, social scientists, and sometimes politicians believed they would be able to dramatically improve the quality of life for those living there and reduce the incidence of disease and crime that drained government resources and spread beyond the confines of these ghettos. From the perspective of urban reformers, the application of new scientific methods to land use and building construction would solve a range of housing problems and thus social problems. J.C. Nichols, for example, in the 1914 essay “Housing and the Real Estate Problem,” calls for the same principles used “to study the scientific layout and landscape treatment of the streets, the designing of lots for building tracks” (132) to be applied to low-income housing. Philadelphia’s Suburban Planning General Secretary, Carol Aronovici, criticizes a blind devotion to building codes in “Cost Factors in Housing Reform” and she points to the “frequently obnoxious difficulty encountered” because of “building regulations which are generally prepared by men [...] guided by false notions of safety” (Aronovici, “Cost Factors” 27). Since the codes make it more expensive to build in urban than in rural or suburban areas, Aronovici calls for standardization and a strictly scientific basis for all regulations (27-8). She reiterates this perspective in a second essay published in the same journal issue:

If housing is of sufficient importance to demand regulation, it is also of sufficient importance to demand that these regulations be based upon scientific facts that cannot be questioned and do not allow of
compromises. Scores of scientists abroad have found inquiries along these lines pregnant with principles which lend themselves to the most accurate formulation and are well suited for legislative enactment.

(Aronovici, “Housing” 4)

There were countless studies focused on optimum city design, particularly in terms of traffic and housing. What were the minimum number of windows a tenement house must have? What was the best placement of those windows? How much distance did there need to be between buildings to insure proper light and air could enter those windows? What was the best grass-to-sidewalk or street ratio? What was the maximum density per square foot for a family to thrive? How many rooms did a family of particular size require, and what should be the uses and dimensions of those rooms? And where should those all-important windows be in the apartment?

A handful of philanthropic business interests subsidized model tenement companies as experiments in these approaches. In the early 1930s, Pittsburgh’s Buhl Foundation helped fund the design and construction of Chatham Village, which was itself influenced by Garden City Movement concepts. The Buhl Foundation was determined to illustrate the feasibility of private, for-profit construction as a solution for the housing crisis. Intended for the managerial class, for teachers, professors, professionals and other white collar workers, the housing development -- located in Pittsburgh’s Mt. Washington neighborhood -- followed precise formulas for layout, building-to-greenspace ratios, and tenants. It was an important and successful example of for-profit, affordable housing construction.19 The late University of Pittsburgh social historian Roy Lubove looked at

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19 Charles Rubion, a Senior Fellow at the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, mentions Chatham Village as a brief bright spot in what is, as evident by his article title, “The Dismal Record of Public Housing in
the development of this faith in the ability to dictate behavior by shaping the environment in “Housing Reform and City Planning in Progressive America.” He starts with the excitement and confidence coming out of the 1893 Chicago’s World’s Fair and ends with New York City’s development of a zoning code in 1916.20 Such building and zoning codes were a popular response to the urban housing problem since they were a means to control both the housing situation and those who lived in slum areas. “Indeed,” Lubove wrote, “American municipal reformers commonly assumed that if we imposed zoning regulation to prevent overcrowding, we would ply the fountain from which many of the physical and social evils of urban life flowed” (Lubove, “Housing Reform” 352).

Thus, in 1911, Mildred Chadsey, from the Cleveland Department of Health, identified “the old house” as the source of everything from communal diseases and other health issues to moral laxity. The best response, she argued, was to use the legal process and evict, condemn, and demolish offending structures in all cases that local ordinances allow. To illustrate the effectiveness of this approach she lauded the results seen by her own department. Through the enforcement of city building codes, twenty families were forced to move out of their “miserable shacks” and the structures demolished. She notes that “[t]he year has passed and not one of the families has applied to the associated charities for aid and every family has moved into better housing [...] and every family is

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20 New York had first launched a widespread investigation of the city’s slums in 1837 and in 1901 first enacted a more limited set of requirements, the New Tenement House Code.
paying more than twice the rent it had paid except one, which built a new and comfortable home” (86). Clearly, then, families can afford better housing if they are simply forced to. She concluded with an explanation of how some of the families were able to afford the transition:

In this change several families cast off some unnecessary impedimenta, such as an insane grandfather of eighty years whom one family had refused to commit to an asylum; a tubercular friend who was sent to a sanitarium and two defective children who were sent to an orphan asylum and one drunken husband who was forced to make a longer sojourn at the workhouse than he had done before. Many neighborhoods, like many closets, are the better off for such a clearing out and no doubt a family that has lost such a charge as some of these that had dragged it down for years, can the more readily rehabilitate itself. (86-87)

Chadsey was following the lead of Tom Johnson, Cleveland’s Progressive mayor from 1901-1908 and an early and influential proponent of the change-through-codes approach. Following a study from the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce on the social ills stemming from slum housing, the city passed a restrictive, heavily-enforced building code. Referring to Cleveland’s policies, historian Thomas F. Campbell notes that “Codes, however, did not house people” (n.pag.). But this was not necessarily the prime objective. As Chadsey so bluntly illustrates, one of the implicit tenets of some of the codes’ supporters was a combination of social Darwinism and government-mandated self-sufficiency.
A similar emphasis on the importance of the controlled environment is evident in *Housing for the Machine Age*, written by Clarence Arthur Perry, who was most influential for developing the Neighborhood Unit theory of housing development. Written in 1939, the book displays a familiar paternalism but does not include Chadsey’s punitive approach. “To cure the present housing evils,” Perry argues, “it is necessary to provide not only new dwellings set in the environment that is required for the proper development of human life. The essential constituents of that environment and how they should be arranged are a fundamental concern of a national housing program” (24). In other words, the problem with poor housing – and housing for the poor – was not simply a matter of supplying newer housing but of shaping the entire environment so as to influence, aid, or control the experiences of the inhabitants. This premise remains a central tenet of a range of reformers. It was still echoing in 1950, on the eve of the implementation of the city’s urban redevelopment programs, when the Technical Director of Pittsburgh’s Housing Authority said that “[c]reating better citizens is not an unnatural aim of a democratic government. All citizens who brush together in the highly concentrated and complex civilization we have today benefit by the uplifting of the lowest economic groups to a more decent way of life” (“Housing Hubbub” 14).

Various independent groups also set up studies of the poor themselves: blacks, women, children, men, immigrants, or combinations of all these. Pittsburgh became the host to -- and subject of -- one of the earliest and probably the most important of these studies. For decades Pittsburgh had been an industrial powerhouse. Increasingly it had become an icon for the negative effects of industrialism: air pollution, political corruption, exploitation, horrifying and often deadly working environments, and housing
conditions that were sometimes not much safer. As Roy Lubove notes, “Few communities were so frequently compared to hell” (Lubove, Twentieth 1). Starting in 1907 the Russell Sage Foundation-sponsored ‘Pittsburgh Survey’ began a two-year field study of the human component of industrialism. The Survey was expanded with further topic studies in 1909 and 1910. Pittsburgh was an appropriate subject because it was a quintessentially troubled modern American city:

heavily industrial, environmentally degraded, and politically corrupt; it had a history of labor troubles and was home to both mighty industrialists and many new immigrants. The city raised ‘a great, grimed question mark as to whether this is the type of community which the leading industrial center of the country is set,’ wrote [Survey head Paul] Kellogg. “What are American standards anyway?” (Jaycox 324)

The resulting series of books -- six volumes, each written by a different researcher and focusing on a distinct aspect of the region -- brought even more national attention to the city’s widespread, wide-reaching problems. The study was “on such a large scale as to dwarf anything that had come before it” (Glaab and Brown 244), “a unique experiment in American social and community analysis” and “distinctive in its efforts to explore a wide range of social, industrial, and civic issues, and relate them to each other” (Lubove, Twentieth 8). It was influential in the developing social welfare profession and often cited in calls for large-scale economic and social reform.

The origins of the study, however, were rooted in the needs of business as much as the culpability of business. Roy Lubove stressed in Twentieth Century Pittsburgh: Government, Business and Environmental Change that the approaches of various
reformers were ultimately about maintaining control and thus not ceding control to the masses who were the focus of the study. The formation of the Survey involved a combination of local “business, professional, and welfare leaders.” Yet, Lubove notes, “The Pittsburgh Survey was not the product of widespread local demand for social criticism and reform” (6). Instead, as throughout the nation, the Survey was about alleviating the worst miseries while maintaining the underlying economic and political structures:

The reform process in such disparate areas as politics, welfare, and environmental melioration had little to do with revitalizing democracy. It was an elite rather than a mass movement and was designed to centralize rather than diffuse power. [...] Even the Pittsburgh Survey, which criticized business as the source of many community pathologies, adopted the corporation as the model for the centralization, coordination, and planning that would modernize governmental and social institutions. (20)

Similarly, Abraham Epstein’s focus is as much on the economic impact to the region as it is on humanitarian needs. His research in *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* (published in 1919) is sympathetic towards the plight of the black migrants, but his study is geared towards the utilitarian business problems with disaffected workers: “The Pittsburgh manufacturer will never keep an efficient labor supply of Negroes until he learns to compete with the employers of the other cities in a housing programme as well as in wages” (11). His goal was largely to identify issues employers should be aware of, including how to retain this valuable new workforce. This was especially important because, unlike most of the foreign-born immigrant groups preceding them, the Negro
“knows the language of the country” and would therefore be far less reluctant (or unable) to leave (11). Epstein also speaks of those migrating to the area from the South in terms of economic assets:

For the industrial concerns, it means that these migrants are the most desirable laborers, men at the height of their wealth producing capacity. They satisfy the pressing need which has confronted the local manufacturers since the foreign supply of labor was cut off by the war. From the standpoint of the community, it is important to know that the influx lays few immediate burdens upon the city. There are few minors to be educated and few aged or dependent ones likely to become a public charge. (18-19)

State and local officials, industrial giants, and social progressives were anxious to address some of the same problems identified in the Survey, particularly pollution and slums. The state legislature in 1911 approved the rights of Pittsburgh and Scranton to establish city-planning commissions (Shurtleff 240), thereby allowing the municipalities more control over land-use and acquirement. As Machine Age values increasingly influenced city planning, the emphasis shifted from an ‘old fashioned’ emphasis on single-unit housing to high-density structures following contemporary Modernist form. Switzerland-born Le Corbusier was the most influential architect of this idea, as reflected in his famous definition: “a house is a machine for living in.” By the end of the 1930s the language of social scientists, architects, city planners, reformers, and politicians tended to
center around urban planning methodologies that were the most “efficient,” “effective,” and “scientific,” and occasionally “aesthetic.”

Despite the increased attention to a variety of approaches, America’s low-cost housing situation worsened throughout the first half of the 20th century. Between the wars, immigration rebounded and the Great Migration maintained its momentum. The strains on American housing, particularly the cheapest housing, intensified during the Great Depression. Foreclosure rates skyrocketed. In 1932 Pittsburgh a third of the adult population “was on charity rolls” (Mowry and Blaine 69). By 1934 a third of the city’s workforce was unemployed (Economou 3). African American workers were displaced when white workers lost better-paying jobs and instead claimed the positions traditionally held by blacks: “Government figures, for instance, show that 82 per cent of employed workers receiving urban relief in 1934 were working at jobs below their usual occupational level. Ninety per cent of Negro workers in industry fall into the marginal class. This explains the terrific amount of unemployment among Negroes, which is out of all proportion to their actual numbers in the population” (T. Arnold Hill 41).

Across the nation individuals and families lost their livelihoods and their homes and took to the road. Shantytowns developed across the country, including several in Pittsburgh. By 1933, the nation’s itinerant population had reached an estimated 1 million people (67). As the Depression progressed, the housing industry itself needed assistance. There were increasing numbers of voices arguing that the free market was not going to alleviate the housing problem. New Deal policies shifted the source of government

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21 Conviction in the power of city planning was certainly nothing new; Glaad and Brown, in *A History of Urban America*, trace such optimism back to “[t]he Puritan doctrine of soul-liberty in the ‘city on a hill’” (251) as exemplified by two of the nation’s most historic cities: “William Penn’s careful planning for Philadelphia, and James Oglethorpe’s commodious design for Savannah, reflected the view that the good life can be achieved in a properly laid-out city” (251).
planning from the local and regional to the federal level. In 1939, Clarence Arthur Perry called for the use of pre-fabricated, mass-produced dwellings as a way to lower overall costs, maintain standardized quality, and shift control away from individual whims and preferences and towards a more ‘pure’ scientific community planning. Perry’s approach and his specific proposals in *Housing for the Machine Age* required a radical shift in the role of government. Jumping beyond some contemporary proposals for federal funding to rebuild, repair, or construct improved housing in existing neighborhoods, he suggested government-run or over-sighted mass ‘machine-age’ constructions. The large-scale redevelopments planned (and sometimes carried out) were precursors to the more pervasive renewal programs of the following decades. In 1937, Pittsburgh City Councilman George Evans called for a combination of low-interest loans and standardized building practices to address the city’s housing crisis (Evans, “Is Low Cost Housing” 2). Like Perry, Evans looked to mass production to ease the housing crunch. Where as Perry was notable for making an early break from private sector to government-sponsored construction, however, Evans’ proposal was strictly free market. He called upon “the financial interests of Pittsburgh” to underwrite construction in the Hill District: “I am sure the securities would be as marketable and safe as any investment they could make bringing similar returns [...]” (3).

Evans was responding to major pending legislation, at that time known as the Wagner-Steagall Act but eventually to become the Federal Housing Act of 1937. The struggle to define the parameters of the nation’s first federal housing legislation was heated. Catherine Bauer, a member of the Regional Planning Association of America and the executive secretary of the Labor Housing Conference, emphasized affordable
homes for workers struggling to find safe housing and neighborhood-centered multi-
family subsidized public housing. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, real estate and
construction constituencies (among others) opposed Bauer’s proposals and emphasized
slum clearance and high density, isolated construction. The 1937 Housing Act that
Congress ultimately passed emphasized the rehabilitation and construction of low-income
housing and provided housing subsidies. It also sanctioned the use of eminent domain to
acquire property for low-income house development. A fundamental problem with the
housing redevelopment programs was the conflict between competing values and
conflicting goals. For the most part the act reflected the Bauer position but there were
amendments that made key concessions to various interests. Of these amendments, as
laid out by D. Bradford Hunt in his 2005 reassessment of the effects of the Housing Act,
three have particular significance to the later redevelopment in Pittsburgh. Income
guidelines restricted public housing to the very poor; slum clearance became as
prominent a feature as building new housing, which “negated any potential expansion of
the housing supply”; and, while the program was federally-funded, the planning and
execution were done strictly at the local level (Hunt 204).

The implications of the first two of these are self-evident; the ramifications of the
third amendment was debated before passage in the Congressional hearing of 1938.
When Robert Luce, a Massachusetts Representative, asked about the fate of the displaced
residents, the head of the newly-created U.S. Housing Authority, Nathan Straus, replied:

I want to answer you just as directly as I know how that the management
and determination of the policies and operation of what is to become of
the slums and the slum dwellers is, according to the terms of this program
which you have written into the act, entirely and completely a matter of local concern. I would be interfering with something which I neither have the legal nor the moral right to interfere with, to find out what was to become of and what was to be done with these families, other than the specific one provision of the statute, that I must assure myself that there will be demolition of an equivalent number of slum units, and I do nothing more. (United States Cong. 144)

Nathan Straus was a firm advocate for humane housing reform and an opponent of broad slum clearance. He “forcefully advocated scattered-site housing for the poor and argued that slum clearance would benefit developers without providing sufficient low-cost housing. He accurately forecast the nightmare of displaced tenants, who were left worse off after housing ‘reform.’ He correctly warned that the evolving policy would not solve the national housing needs of the poor” (Biles 45). Despite his compassion and obvious sympathy for those displaced, however, Straus opposed direct intervention that superseded the rights of state and local governments. As he told the committee, his role was to implement existing legislation and not rewrite it. He continued in his response, “I am not in favor of a lot of Federal interference and Federal management of such a strictly local problem, a problem as to what is to become of particular units of this population or particular parts of the city” (United States Cong. 144).

The refrain was a common one. Many reformers and most politicians “followed the pattern already established by experts [...] who opposed municipally built housing as socialistic” (Campbell). By defining it a “local problem” and leaving all levels of implementation up to individual cities and local Housing Authorities to solve, the
redevelopment and later renewal programs essentially insured the perpetuation of the housing crises. Pittsburgh’s own demolition rate exceeded that required by the act, and the number of housing units for the poor actually dropped. The decline in housing was also the result of another round of local building codes; the city implemented a new housing code in March of 1955, making demolition easier (Housing and Home Finance Agency 4). With little public sector interest in the construction of low-income housing, municipalities established and enforced new building codes as a way of combating the ongoing problems with substandard housing.

As the example of Nathan Straus illustrates, sincere attempts at fixing housing, a genuine desire to help low-income residents, and an apparent understanding of the underlying issues and foresight of potential side-effects did not outweigh competing values of the free market and state and regional autonomy. The interest in maintaining state and municipal rights is laudable, but it also had at least two significant implications for the Hill District: the emphasis shifted from housing the poor to reshaping the identity of the city and district; and, if there had been any doubt before, local politics and the needs of business interests -- rather than the needs of the poor populations originally intended as the focus of the legislation -- became a determining factor in the redevelopment plans. The intention of the law may have been to prioritize the building of affordable housing, but different city governments did not necessarily abide by the same priorities or did not have the ability to effectively implement redevelopment to accomplish this without also destroying the social fabric of the communities being helped.
There were adjacent interests in the bill, including a job stimulus component. The American Federation of Labor and the Committee for Industrial Organization each sent a representative to read statements and testify in support of the amendments. Straus, explaining the increased costs of the program, pointed out that “the bill specifically provides that the houses be built at the prevailing wage rate. Much of the building done today is done [...] not at the prevailing wage rate. That is certainly a factor in increasing costs” (95). The importance of these factors was not that there was anything wrong with combining ambitious social goals (improved low-income housing, slum clearance, job works) but that what was originally envisioned as a way of alleviating the housing crisis was shaped by amended goals that sometimes ran counter to the original intentions, exasperating the low-income housing shortage, for example.

Further, there were typically no significant attempts to support those displaced by the process or to confront the conditions that led to the slums in the first place – fundamentally, inadequate affordable housing and underemployment, a pattern that remains remarkably consistent. As Catherine Bauer warned, “you cannot get rid of slums just by tearing them down, or fixing them up. Somewhere, in a reasonably suitable location, there must be better homes available to the slum occupants, at prices they can afford to pay” (52). In Pittsburgh, as in many other cities, this was not the case. According to a 1946 report from the Pittsburgh Housing Association, African Americans accounted for “only 10% of an underhoused total population of 800,000” (Bunzel 30). Regardless of their percentage, however, the black residents faced particularly dire situations because they were limited to only a few pockets of housing in the city. The study’s authors pointed to a lack of economic incentives for private housing
development, problems with zoning, and problems with the rapidly increasing cost of construction as chief obstacles to easing the housing shortage for black Pittsburghers (Bunzel). Despite the best intentions of many government and other public officials to help those in “blighted areas” like the Hill District, the people in these neighborhoods were still without the political voice to lobby for their needs as forcefully as the business interests.

With U.S. involvement in the Second World War, the large numbers of new workers in the nation’s war industries necessitated even more housing. The need for government intervention became more apparent and urgent; shortages were becoming a threat to national security. Yet another shift in housing policies came at the end of the war and the simultaneous return of the soldiers and the expansion of suburbia. Suburbs were initially seen as a way to expand urban life while maintaining healthy home environments. Scientific reports were devoted to identifying precise levels of space, light, fresh air, and green space necessary for health, and these commodities were hard to come by in the cramped city environment.

Post-war American culture was undergoing profound changes in lifestyle and habits. The development of a large, distinct middle-class combined with the ever-increasing popularity and affordability of the automobile. Nationwide, central business districts – Downtowns – were losing relevance. Many saw suburbia not only as a natural extension of the urban center but as the best method of improving quality of life and the only method of pursuing progress. For the Philadelphia Public Ledger’s Andrew Wright Crawford, for example, the very future of cities depended on constant expansion, and he framed this expansion in ethical terms in his 1914 article, “The Interrelation of Housing
and City Planning.” To allow for this expansion and the diffusion of housing, “[t]he duty of the housing expert and of the city planner alike” is to extend the urban into the suburban, particularly through transportation: “It is our duty, and our great opportunity of service, to secure expansion” (171). He uses the word “duty” twice in the single paragraph. The car both helped expand the suburbs and convinced city planners of the necessity of catering to the needs of the automobile rather than of people, or of the driver rather than the neighborhood. Those living in the city center -- typically those who could not afford to live outside the city, and who were far more likely to rely on public transportation rather than private automobiles, and heavily depend on close proximity to work and shopping -- were again largely ignored.

The suburbs became a distinct entity rather than an extension of the central city, however. Instead of living in the suburbs and continuing to work and shop in the city, an increasing number of people were able to live, work, and shop within their own suburban communities. Fewer shoppers in the city center correspond to reduced tax revenue. “This accelerating march to the periphery of urban areas has greatly accentuated the problems of the areas lying near the center of cities,” Ernest M. Fisher of the American Bankers Association wrote in 1942 (334). It eventually became clear that “the suburban trek was tending to create a population and purchasing-power vacuum at or near the center of the city” (334-35). With an exodus of the middle class and sustained influx of poor migrants and immigrants, the demographics of city populations shifted dramatically. As the city populations fluctuated, city budgets were maintaining a steady trajectory into the red. Even if the social and public service needs of such a population remains static, with a falling tax base these expenditures automatically represent a higher percentage out
of a region’s outlay. And the social and public service needs of the Hill District did not remain static through the 1930s. Poor communities obviously have less money to directly feed into the economy, but their purchasing power is further distorted because the effect is filtered: most of the products and services Hill District residents spent money on were located in the Hill, so the spread of money from on the Hill to off the Hill was indirect, primarily filtered through landlords.

The federal government again stepped in and signaled that government involvement was now to be much more wide-reaching, including financing and even direct construction (Tyler 9-10). Robert E. Lang and Rebecca R. Sohmer, editors of a special issue of Housing Policy Debate devoted to the 50th anniversary of the Housing Act of 1949, summarize part of what made it landmark legislation:

Direct federal involvement in physically shaping cities was unknown before 1949. The act changed all that. No longer was slum removal solely a local matter. The federal government now funded and managed city-building projects. Despite controversy, one of the act’s legacies is the fact that most Americans now accept the idea that the federal government has some legitimate role in local housing and development issues. (292)

The Federal Housing Act of 1949 was also known as the Slum Clearance-Urban Renewal Act. It turned to the growing problem of substandard housing in rural areas but the act was also supposed to encourage the construction of urban public housing and urge residential integration. One of the most important components of the act was Title I, which directly funded the acquisition and demolition of slum areas: “The public purpose was that clearance of a slum was important to public health, welfare, and safety, and
averted a crisis” (Economou 11). The cleared property was then sold to private
developers for the construction of an essentially new neighborhood, one now following
strict building codes and land-use guidelines and also presumably substantially raising
the property values and tax base. However, Title I resulted in the unintended reduction in
low-income housing. The language of Title I was vague and, while it was intended to
focus on largely residential projects, neither city governments nor developers were bound
to construct any low-income housing. Local URAs used the funding and legal authority
granted in the act to purchase swaths of land in “blighted” communities (overwhelmingly
poor minority neighborhoods near expensive downtown property) and demolish the
neighborhood to make way for downtown expansion and upscale residential
development.

Two years before the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, a letter from the
architectural firm of James Mitchell and Dahlen Ritchey illustrated just how fundamental
this shift in housing policy was and how slippery the numbers game could be. Mitchell
and Ritchey were the architects who designed what would eventually become the
Pittsburgh Civic Arena. The Chamber of Commerce would later distribute a pamphlet
titled “The Pittsburgh Center,” based on Mitchell and Ritchey proposal and assessment.
A draft of the letter introducing the proposal to the Pittsburgh Regional Planning
Association (PRPA) had several minor corrections and some statistical information filled
in. One sentence read, “Whereas at present, there are housed 1995 families in the total
site, the redevelopment provides for approximately 2,000 families in higher class park
apartment housing.” The phrase “higher class” was crossed out with blue pen (Mitchell,
James).
The numbers also appeared later that year when they were included in the announcement of the proposed redevelopment. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* covered the news in three separate parts of the paper on October 30, 1947: a front-page article, an editorial, and a feature (with illustrations) in the Daily Magazine. The title of the editorial was “Miracle on the Hill” and offered the newspaper’s support of the plans. It stressed the need for a multi-use center, lauded a project that would remove “70 blighted acres,” and praised the choice of sites. It also referenced the improvement in housing that might also result from the Center’s construction: “The project also contemplates construction of new and modern park apartment homes for 2,000 families to replace the present housing of 1,995 families. There would be planted open areas, recreational facilities, and community center and schools” (“Miracle”). The front-page article also included the information and framed it in almost altruistic terms: “At present 1,995 families are housed on the site; the redevelopment plans will take care of 2,000 families, with considerable planted and open space for schools and playgrounds” (“Pittsburgh Plans Municipal” 4). What is perhaps more significant are the questions not addressed in either the announcement or the newspaper articles. Would the housing be affordable for the people displaced by the renewal project? Would the people displaced by the project receive special consideration in getting this housing? Finally, had any provisions had been made for housing for these residents if they were not able to get into the new development?

The Daily Magazine piece, “A City of the Future -- All Within a City of Today,” had to convince readers that the images were possible and that they should “Forget for a few moments the appearance of the section as you know it, and visualize it as it can be, as
seen in the survey of the Planning Association” (27). Whatever the motivation, the deletion of the phrase “higher class” in the original draft also removed the explicitness of the trade-off and was emblematic of lack of interest in the needs of the Hill District’s residents. What was semantically left after the omission was the net gain of five family dwelling units. What was deleted was the implied acknowledgement that there were 1995 low-rent dwelling units lost in a city already suffering from a severe shortage of low-rent housing.

In this early application of urban redevelopment planning, Pittsburgh was a precursor to what would become a national pattern. “Under Title III, the Housing Act of 1949 promised 810,000 public housing units by 1955, a target date that was famously missed by more than two decades,” Lang and Sohmer wryly commented (295). They continued:

By steamrolling people and places and replacing them with office buildings, convention centers, high-rise housing, and (all too often) empty lots, urban renewal typically worsened the conditions it sought to relieve by spreading the problem to other parts of the city. But out of this failed legacy have emerged key redevelopment insights that inform current urban policy. Urban renewal dramatically demonstrated the limits of physical solutions to social problems. (296)

The Housing Act of 1954 introduced the full-scale urban renewal programs that literally remapped America’s cities. The earlier acts’ emphasis on housing was replaced with an emphasis on economic revitalization and allowed for an even bigger shift away from low-income housing to private development of upscale residential, commercial, and cultural
structures. Despite this shift in focus away from policies designed for aiding the poor, the language of those involved with redevelopment retains a promise of social uplift. In March 1955, Pittsburgh put into place a new housing code to make demolition easier (HHFA, Untitled Report, 4). In September of the same year, the Housing and Home Finance Agency announced, with startling optimism, that “The City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, today had received assurance that the federal Government stands ready to help it rid itself of all slums, rehabilitate existing run-down areas, and prevent slums and blight spreading to parts of the city that are now healthy and sound” (HHFA, Untitled Report 1). It is unclear where this blanket optimism came from. First, almost all the same problems facing those displaced because of the Housing Acts of 1934, 1937, and 1949 remained. Second, the federal government was now funding the relocation process, but it was still up to individual states and localities to execute the process, and the job usually fell far short. Displaced residents had no option but to move into the already crowded areas with low-cost housing, exacerbating existing problems in those neighborhoods. Instead of preventing further blight or the expansion of slums the renewal process therefore often intensified them.

In the years and decades following the late 1950s demolition of the Hill District in Pittsburgh, public criticism called attention to the flaws in the planning and execution of the city’s urban renewal projects. With renewed focus on community-centered redevelopment of the Hill in the 1990s and 2000s the criticism reached a broader population through mainstream media coverage. The URA of Pittsburgh’s Forging the Pittsburgh Renaissance, a 1997 overview of the association’s work on the redevelopment programs during Renaissance I, seems a defensive response to this coverage without ever
bringing up specific criticisms. Regarding the city’s often controversial use of eminent domain, the booklet’s author, Bessie Economou, assured readers that the seizures were not taken lightly: “Certain checks or safeguards were built in. The area in which the project was proposed had to be declared blighted by the City Planning Commission, and the redevelopment plan and contract had to be reviewed by the Commission and approved by City Council. Only then could the project move ahead. Once the contract was signed and approved, the developer had to build in accordance with the agreed upon plan” (Economou 6). In the same document, however, Economou references an example that counters this claim: the Hill District. The area was declared blighted, there was a Master Plan, but the Civic Arena -- or the “Acropolis on the Hill” (11) -- was inexplicably exempt from those “certain checks and safeguards.” The Lower Hill redevelopment plan was

the largest in terms of land area, total redevelopment costs, resident population, and in the number of agencies, both public and private, whose cooperation had to be obtained.

It was the first federally aided redevelopment project submitted to Council, the first Pittsburgh project to require a write-down to be paid from public funds, and the first project in which all the redevelopers were not contractually committed at the time of submission of the proposal. (11)

The Civic Arena was the only major structure completed at the site.

The 1955 HHFA observed that “Pittsburgh reports that the relocation of displaced nonwhite families in private housing will be difficult. However, recent developments in expanding the housing supply for this market have been encouraging and accelerated
progress is anticipated‖ (4). The URA of Pittsburgh likewise acknowledged the problems with relocation and likewise expressed optimism that the displaced residents would eventually work through the system. In the Land Disposition Documents of 1959 for the Lower Hill Redevelopment Project, the URA was confident that the displaced families would eventually be successfully relocated. Although the existing public housing was already filled to capacity, more units would be built and the yearly turnover rate of 9% would eventually allow the displaced families to work through the system (18). Of those not eligible for public housing, “It is apparent that the relocation of non-white families will be difficult.” Again, though, there was the promise -- or hope -- of expanded housing options in the future: “Officials estimate that at least a minimum of 160 units will be constructed during each of the next five years. Of these, 150 units will be for sale and 10 units for rent. The Redevelopment Authority is also seeking the cooperation of redevelopers in opening new developments for non-white occupancy” (19). The key word in all these assessments is “eventually.” A timeline of five years (or twenty) is likely felt differently by planners or bureaucrats who deal with long-term projects than it is for the people struggling with day-to-day survival after being shifted from their homes with the promise of another option coming “eventually.”

This was not a relatively minor relocation project; the confidence of the HHFA, the URA, and so many others turned out to be misplaced. The private sector was never attracted to the construction of low-rent housing and the work that was done by the government was slow and insufficient. In 1957 Dan W. Dodson, Director of the Center for Human Relations and Community Studies at NYU, met with one of the organizers involved with the clearance in the Lower Hill District. “It was going to displace 7,000
people,” Dodson writes of the project. “When asked what was to become of them the authority said they had places in new public housing for 400 families. He said the middle income people could go to the suburbs, or rent elsewhere. He has no idea what was to become of the ‘hard core’ cases” (187). Dodson’s assumption that “they went to other places and created about as many other slums as were torn down” (188) is accurate. They went to Homewood, the North Side, Lincoln-Larimer, and the Middle Hill District. In other words, they filled in the already over-crowded neighborhoods of the city where African Americans were allowed to live.

The full-scale demolitions began in 1956. At least 8,000 residents were forced from the Lower Hill District to make way, though some estimates go much higher. The Pittsburgh Civic Arena opened in 1961 but the additional development never materialized, so for decades the space around the Civic Arena was left a giant parking lot. The residents of the Hill, realizing too late what was lost, fought to prevent more from being taken. An even larger renewal plan that would have taken down the rest of the Hill District was blocked. Anger and frustration simmered until the assassination of Dr. King, when the Hill exploded in riots, fires, violence, essentially destroying what remained of the neighborhood’s business district.

Competing voices are evident from the very start of urban planning. Most of the arguments looked at a comprehensive range of problems in urban America, typically revolving around the connection between environment (prominently including housing) and numerous social ills. The factions that fought to address the housing problems at the start of the 20th century can still be heard in the arguments of the Hill District by mid-century, and the already overlapping viewpoints seem to converge in the redevelopment
and renewal plans involving the Hill District. There was a real concern about the people on the Hill and how to help them; there was suspicion of and contempt for the poor, the unassimilated, the non-white and non-Anglo; there was the push to recapture the suburban white population by luring them back with a “revitalized” Hill District and expanded Downtown; there was the lure of large demolition and construction projects for local companies and business; there was the confidence in the ability of a scientific approach, of city planning, or of the Pittsburgh elite to successfully “solve” the city’s problems just as effectively as they had “solved” pollution and earned national recognition for the redevelopment of the Point and Gateway Center. All of these competing voices and perspectives debated what the problems, merits, and solutions were in terms of the Hill District, much as similar voices were arguing over the fate of other poor urban central city neighborhoods across the nation.

Some voices overlapped, some were in opposition with each other, but the number involved is impressive. Largely absent, however, are voices coming from within the targeted neighborhoods. Certainly there were those who actively studied these communities and interviewed residents. The people of the Hill District received attention in the decades leading up to urban renewal from a variety of researchers: those connected to the Pittsburgh Survey, 1907-1909; Abraham Epstein while researching 1918’s *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh*; Ira Reid and the National Urban League, with *Social Conditions of the Negro in the Hill District of Pittsburgh* in 1930; the compilers of the *Tuberculosis and the Negro in Pittsburgh* report in 1934; and the members of the Federal Writers Project assigned to interview African American Pittsburghers. Many of these authors and studies offer specific suggestions for how city government, business and
industry leaders, and society in general could alleviate the overcrowding and unhealthy living conditions. For the most part, however, those who were in a political position to execute specific housing reform or influence (or determine) actual redevelopment did not incorporate similar voices. Slum housing was the focus of a tremendous amount of research, planning, legislation, and intervention. It offered reformers from all backgrounds and interests an opportunity to voice their agenda or carry out their experiments. The agendas were often inter-related and sometimes competing: paternalism (especially carried over from the Progressive Era); faith in the scientific method as applied to poverty, housing, and architecture; sympathy for the poor and continued suspicion of non-whites and immigrants; devotion to the free market and, if not the free market, then at least adherence to business needs and private enterprise. Only rarely were the individuals, families, and businesses most directly affected by these plans directly consulted. In some cases they seem to have been barely considered.

The 1960s saw a very different response to urban renewal as well as to the relationships between the individual, the community, and government. The impact of reform on ‘real people’ and the desire and views of the residents became incorporated into the popular, public discussions of urban life, housing reform, and urban planning. This corresponded to the expanding Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Pride movements. The establishment of ‘highrise ghettos’ and the many failures of urban redevelopment or renewal also resulted in a growing distrust of large government-controlled programs and housing projects. The optimism and the highly-scientific language and methodology of earlier urban planning texts were replaced with ones with an angry, pathos-laden activist focus. Some of the titles reflect the change in direction:
The forced distinctions in many of the titles are based on hyperbole but reflect the tone of the works. Whereas many earlier depictions of urban growth, planning, and development were paternal, one might judge the new breed of urban critic as stereotypically maternal: protective, defensive, and emotional. The mood was no longer “Father knows best” and the vision no longer one of carving worlds out of the urban landscape in a well-defined, highly-controlled process. Instead, the emphasis was on organic messiness and infused with more than a tinge of guilt.

Even a cursory examination of the changing attitudes towards urban planning illustrates the degree to which the inner city residents were being brought to the forefront. There are two strange characteristics of many of the texts, however. First, the emphasis is often not as much on improving conditions in the slums but on validating the lives of those who live there. Second, perhaps because the audience of most of the works is obviously not the people living in urban poverty areas, the targets of anger tend to be those city, business, and government leaders who made the urban renewal decisions in the first place. “The politicians in City Hall found the prospects of a two-thirds Federal grant to be irresistible,” Henry S. Churchill wrote in 1962’s *The City is the People*: “They were not quite sure how it could be manipulated, but they were plenty sure they could find out, and the patronage prospects were enormous. The public too was receptive. Who could be against slum clearance, particularly if the slum dwellers were to be cleared away too?” (193-94). In other words, the texts are not so much interested in (or at least

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22 On the other side is the irony-free title of *Urban Renewal, Bonanza of the Real Estate Business*. The 1969 guidebook offers strategies to large-scale developers and investors on how to maximize profits from the nation’s urban renewal programs.
focused on) moving forward as in fighting against what had already been done and who had done it. Solutions sometimes seemed to be based largely in a direct opposition to earlier housing movements. The academic discussions tended to focus on the aftermath of urban renewal and the inherent racism and anti-poor sentiment of the programs (the political agendas of the writers) rather than ways to address the worsening problems.

For those living in the way of redevelopment, the physical, social, and economic upheaval of displacement was exacerbated by being left out of the conversation. When Pittsburgh finally began the procurement process leading up to the construction of the Civic Arena, individual residents were not even notified until after the fact. As Dan Fitzpatrick, writing about the ongoing history of urban renewal for a five-part Post Gazette series in 2000, explained,

The federal government, at the time, did not provide displaced homeowners with relocation money, as it does today. Also, homeowners had no contact with the city until the acquisition had been made. They got a notice in the mail. "Chaos. It was absolute chaos," URA official Irving Rubinstein told an interviewer in 1974. "We didn't know what to do." (n.pag.)

At each stage of the process, choices were made. Rarely were choices offered to the residents facing upheaval and displacement; to many of those involved with city planning, the targeted population was apparently invisible except as a problem. The aftermath of these choices is evident still. Wilson’s King Hedley II, set in the economic and sociological wasteland of failed urban renewal attempts and a riot-decimated landscape, shows audiences a protagonist struggling to maintain a voice and identity in a community that has lost its moorings and its song as a consequence of those choices.
made from off the Hill a generation earlier.

II. On the Hill: King Hedley II and the Aftermath of Urban Renewal

“These gangs out here are shooting crap every Sunday... When the riots came these youngsters were upset... no jobs. So in order to deal with this uprising, I think somebody pumped dope in them to keep ‘em quiet, that’s what I think. I see a lot of kids with $100 bills out there. How can people on welfare get $100? Somebody quieted ‘em down, put ‘em to sleep. I’ll tell you one thing, you don’t see no uprising now, I’ll tell you that.”

Frank Ellis, owner of the Ellis Hotel, Centre Ave., May 27, 1980
(David Guo “Hope, Despair” 2)

The preface of the TCG paperback edition of King Hedley II consists of an August Wilson essay first published in The New York Times after the completion of the play. “I often remark that I am a struggling playwright,” Wilson commented. “I’m struggling to get the next play on the page. Eight down and counting. The struggle continues” (xi). According to Pittsburgh Post Gazette’s drama critic Christopher Rawson, King Hedley II was a particularly difficult struggle for Wilson. In an interview with the St. Petersburg Times Rawson said that “Hedley is also by far the darkest of the plays. August kept putting it off. He said, ‘I don’t want to write about the ‘80s, the ‘80s were an awful time.’ It was the one he kept putting off, because he knew it would be painful” (Fleming). Wilson’s reticence may appear surprising considering how many of the eras depicted in his earlier plays could be similarly labelled “an awful time” for black Americans. Poverty, oppression, and violence run throughout the cycle and characters in all the plays tell of horrific personal experiences. Yet King Hedley II does depict a level of pain more profound than anything that comes before it. It is one of Wilson’s least popular plays and its darkness likely influences its lesser appeal.23 “The concluding

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23 King Hedley II had several Tony Awards nominations, including Best Play, and it was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Nevertheless, the play closed after a remarkably short 72 performances on Broadway (and a remarkably long twenty-four previews). Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, the Wilson play
scene of accidental murder and messianic biblical incantation leaves us devastated and helpless, as if we were watching ritual human sacrifice,” wrote John Heilpern in his 2007 *The New York Observer* review. Christopher Rawson’s review of the Pittsburgh premiere was full of praise but emphasized the play’s tone: “This is his darkest play so far. A tragedy without the final uplift of ‘Fences’ or ‘Jitney,’ it is grimmer even than ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,’ which had more humor, or ‘Seven Guitars,’ which bookends tragedy with hopeful apotheosis.” Elsewhere in the review he referred to the play’s “central darkness” and urged audiences to remember “that ‘Long Day’s Journey into Night’ is no picnic, either, or ‘King Lear.’ These are the company ‘King Hedley’ keeps . . .” (Rawson, “Wilson’s Hedley”).

Part of what makes the play so grim is thematic. Numerous scholars and critics describe the title character and the play as Shakespearean; fate seems to play a role not seen elsewhere in the cycle. King dies a martyr, accidentally shot by the mother who had finally decided to put her son’s future before her own, ironically killed at the moment King and his father’s killer have decided life is more important than vengeance. The darkness also stems from the play’s historic context. Like many other heavily-poor and minority urban neighborhoods, the once-vibrant Hill District was decimated by urban redevelopment in the 1950s and the riots at the end of the 1960s. Pittsburgh was not hit as hard by the crack epidemic as many other urban areas in the 1980s (Fuoco), but heroin, crack, and powder cocaine -- the region’s most common hard-core drugs -- had profound

with the next shortest Broadway run, had 105 performances in 1988 (ITDb). In his review of the 2007 Signature Theatre Company off-Broadway revival, David Finkle wrote, “It's something of a mystery why the Signature deciders chose to bring back the lesser King Hedley II when they might have shown off, say, the magnificent Joe Turner's Come and Gone. Perhaps the thought was that the critical and commercial dismissal the play suffered in its previous two-month Broadway run could be rectified. More likely, that unfortunate response will be confirmed.”

24 The play opened in December 1999 as Pittsburgh Public Theater’s debut production in the O’Reilly Theater.
effects on Pittsburgh and on the residents of the Hill. High density, socially-isolated housing encourages both the popularity and the easy distribution of illegal drugs and in the Hill drugs were relatively cheap and certainly plentiful. Guns, easy to obtain, were synonymous with the illicit drug trade and the proliferation of both drugs and weapons meant even more violence, often gang-related. The Post-Gazette’s David Guo reported that “Police figures for 1978 show that the Hill’s violent crime index is double that of the city’s. For every 1,000 people, 18 violent crimes were reported on the Hill, compared with the citywide average of 9” (2). In 1982, with a population of approximately 30,000, the Hill’s crime rates were second only to East Liberty/Homewood: “12% of all the city’s murders, 15% of the rapes, 13% of the assaults and 11% of the robberies occurred there” (“The ‘Real’ Hill Street”).

On the broader economic front, in 1984 the non-partisan and non-profit Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) reported on the status of African Americans and the impact of sweeping policy changes of the past four years. Their findings were summed up in their title, “Falling Behind: A Report on How Blacks Have Fared Under Reagan.” At its core, the research showed that the administration’s policies had an overwhelmingly positive effect on America’s wealthy and an overwhelmingly negative effect on America’s poor. Because of disproportionate poverty rates for blacks, they were the hardest hit by cuts in funding for low- and moderate-income programs: “The researchers found that the 1981 cuts cost the average black family three times as much in lost income and benefits as they cost the average white family. This occurred primarily because the deepest cuts were made in programs in which blacks participate in the largest numbers” (163). The funding cuts spread across all aspects of life. The successful CETA
(Comprehensive Employment Training Assistance) program, an important means of moving the poor and chronically-unemployed into stable jobs and providing urban youths with summer employment, was shuttered within weeks of Reagan taking office.

Residents of public and government-subsidized housing saw their rents increased.

School lunch programs were slashed. Money for Pell grants and other funding for higher education were reduced and had an immediate impact on the numbers of college-bound African American high school seniors. “In 1981, before the cuts, 43% of black high school graduates went on to college,” the CBPP reported, but, “[b]y 1982, after the cuts, the percentage of black graduates going on to college had (according to Labor Department data) fallen to 36%” (167). Taxes, cut for the wealthiest Americans, shot up for the poorest Americans. “Today, a family of four at the poverty line must pay $1,076 in federal taxes,” the researchers wrote, versus the $460 the working family would have paid just four years earlier: “This family’s real tax burden has more than doubled, rising from 4% of income in 1978 -- and 5.5% in 1980 -- to 10.1% of income in 1984” (168).

In Pittsburgh the contrast between white and black worlds was as painfully stark as anywhere else in the country. For many parts of the city, things were starting to look up after the long, brutal years following the loss of the steel industry. After a decade of widespread economic and social suffering, Pittsburgh was on the rebound. In 1985, the same year Wilson set King Hedley II, Rand McNally named Pittsburgh the nation’s Most Livable City. In 1989 The New York Times published Vince Rause’s feature story “Pittsburgh Cleans Up its Act.” In addition to noting the influx of some new high tech industry, Downtown development, and below-average housing costs, Rause also included comments from those who pointed out the limited scope of the city’s improved situation:
“Pittsburgh is not a healthy environment for blacks,” says Harvey Adams Jr., president of the Pittsburgh branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "We are being destroyed here. We are an endangered species."

"The unemployment rate in black communities is catastrophic," says Byrd Brown, who recently became the first black to mount a serious campaign for Mayor of Pittsburgh. "We have areas that have been devastated by crime and drugs and the city's neglect." Pittsburgh has one of the highest black infant-mortality rates in the country and blacks face one of the nation's highest mortgage-rejection rates. (n.pag.)

As bleak as the Hill District may appear in King Hedley II, for those Pittsburghers who watched local news coverage in the late 1970s through early 1990s, or who lived in the Hill or other black neighborhoods during those years, the setting is very familiar.

In his early works focused around the Great Migration, Wilson linked the move away from an ancestral and cultural homeland in the American South to a corresponding loss of identity. Characters are described as wandering or searching. In interviews, Wilson spoke of multiple levels of loss; critics and scholars followed his lead and analyzed the texts in terms of crises stemming from the Great Migration. The characters themselves describe quests -- sometimes fulfilled, sometimes not -- that determine or inform their actions and movement. “Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces,” Wilson introduces the wandering masses of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone as “Foreigners in a strange land [...]” Alongside the upheaval, migration offers opportunities for new lives, new relationships: “They
arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, [...] shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth.” The masses “search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy” (n.pag.). By the play’s end, most of the migrant characters have attained closure, peace, and some semblance of whatever they had been seeking. Despite the upheaval and despite Wilson’s stated belief that “We should have stayed in the South” (Moyers, World 167), he validates his characters’ decisions to move to the North.

Urban renewal is as prominent and important a context for Wilson’s later works as the Great Migration was for the earlier ones, but it was not a topic Wilson often spoke of nor a topic often investigated by Wilson scholars. In three plays urban renewal is the overt context; eminent domain offers the primary external conflict that informs the internal conflict between characters and within themselves. *King Hedley II* deals with what is left *after* a neighborhood has gone through urban renewal. As Wilson illustrates in the play, the effects may not be recognized by the characters but they are stamped all over the characters’ lives. The bulldozers are no longer visible parts of the neighborhood backdrop but their handiwork is evident onstage and in the stories told.

Wilson so deliberately withholds information about the source of the devastation depicted in the play that the absence of information in and of itself becomes an important component of *King Hedley II*. Stage directions reveal that “[t]he setting is the backyards of a row of three houses. One of the houses is missing and the vacant lot provides access to the rear of the house where Ruby lives with King and Tonya” (5). The play is set in the same location as *Seven Guitars*, the 1940s-based play that introduced several of the
characters, including King’s mother and the first King Hedley, though in the earlier play the setting is limited to the exterior and backyard of the tenement house that King now occupies as a single family home. The difference in staging calls attention to an absence not included in the earlier play. No reason is given for the vacant lot. The building that once stood there could have been demolished by the city, it could have burned to the ground, or it could have fallen in upon itself from neglect: “Buildings across the street in the front of the house are visible through the vacant lot and an old advertisement for Alaga Syrup featuring a fading portrait of Willie Mays is painted on one of the buildings” (6).

In an article for Live Design Magazine, David Barbour wrote about the striking set design for the Broadway production, which further emphasized the vacancy already identified in Wilson’s stage directions: “The curtain rises at the Virginia Theatre on David Gallo’s setting, which more resembles a war zone than an urban neighborhood.” Images of the set reveals an angular, dark, fragmented, and rubble-filled stage that is indeed reminiscent of England after an air raid or the Bronx in the 1970s. Gallo, the set designer, accentuated the emptiness Wilson had identified in the stage directions. The gap between the two row houses is framed by the jagged line of bricks left in place after the middle building’s removal; the adjoining bricks were not smoothed out. The effect is more reminiscent of a bombing than a demolition and emphasizes both what is missing

25 Alaga is a southern table syrup. The company’s website promises that “There is nothing like ALAGA, so when you want to savor the ‘Sweetness of the South’ and the feeling of family, we hope you will reach for ALAGA, and let us add a little love to your life!” Alaga had several African American spokesmen in the 1960s, including Mays and Hank Aaron (who appeared in a print ad together) and Nat King Cole. An Alaga billboard featuring Mays from 1961 had the tagline, “Alaga Syrup takes me back to my boyhood” (ROAD).
and structural violence (Penn). As Barbour explains, “There are other buildings at stage left and right in a state of mid-collapse, with fully furnished rooms exposed by missing walls. The ground in the backyards is parched. Junk proliferates everywhere.”

Gallo’s language in his interview with Barbour also stresses the ways in which the set is designed to look like a war zone: “The buildings on the sides have their tops blown off, even though their inhabitants never moved out—there’s a baby’s crib on the second floor of one building.”

Wilson’s revision process, maintained until the end of his life, involved reworking the script as each of his plays moved through performances from city to city. The finished versions Broadway audiences saw on opening night were often noticeably different, and almost always significantly shorter, than performances in earlier productions. As King Hedley II went through this process before reaching Broadway, David Gallo also adapted the set design to fit each individual theater and tweak the mood. When the production moved from Pittsburgh to Seattle, “the buildings onstage were more whole, and we started tearing things to pieces, chopping them up. That’s when I added the child’s nursery at stage right and the devastated kitchen at stage left.” Urban flotsam that litters the stage reflects a “Wilsonian universe -- a trumpet, a destroyed piano, and other things that nobody sees -- crack vials, bullet casings. There was a much greater degree of rubble at one point, but we got rid of it.” By the time the play reached Broadway, the visual effect was so severe that some criticized Gallo’s set design for the

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26 In contrast, the Philadelphia Theatre Company production depicts wooden houses and a far cleaner set. A fence is missing boards but the effect is of neighboring houses which simply share a yard (Scenery First). J. Cooper Robb singled out the set as a highlight of production in his review for Philadelphia Weekly: “Yael Pardess’ painterly scenic design and the soft hues of Michael Gilliam’s lighting masterfully evoke the play's sense of poetic realism [...]” Gallo describes his design similarly: “If I had to describe the style, I’d call it poetic realism, I didn’t intend to be completely naturalistic” (qtd. in Barbour).
extremes it depicts. However, Barbour writes,

having designed *Jitney*, Wilson’s last staged work […], he was armed with plenty of research about the Hill District, the Pittsburgh neighborhood where these plays take place. “I’ve been called to task on occasion,” he says about the Hedley design, “by some who say the degree of destruction is exaggerated. It isn’t. There are things there that would shock you, although it’s a different neighborhood than it was in the 80s. In recent years, some people have built extraordinarily beautiful homes there, although with gigantic security fences around them.”

The lack of a didactic context for the setting makes the reality depicted appear surreal, grotesquely fantastic. The same could be said for the play itself.

Unrelenting and oppressive, *King Hedley II* almost appears a distortion of the Wilson universe, where oppression from the white world off the Hill is normally tempered by community and family support from the black world on the Hill. In *King Hedley II*, the most hostile and belittling acts comes from within the neighborhood. There is some of Wilson’s trademark humor and levity, but it is minimal and -- like everything else in the play -- darker.

Urban renewal kills communities via multiple wounds. Part of the damage is economic; early federal legislation did not pay for relocation or subsidize new housing for those not moving to public housing. Even today, most businesses facing urban renewal are never able to reopen in other locations. As a result, residents must travel farther and often spend more. Money leaves the community. The loss of the Lower Hill, the section with the district’s densest population as well as the majority of businesses and cultural establishments, lost over 400
businesses to urban renewal (O’Neill). The destruction in effect killed off the rest of the area and reshaped the city’s remaining African American neighborhoods.

Far less quantifiable is the damage done to countless relationships that make up a community. Just as Pittsburgh’s geographic boundaries intensified neighborhood divisions that in turn emphasized ethnic identity, segregation insulated black communities and led to significant levels of self-sustainability, pride, unity, and protection. Redevelopment destroyed the social fabric of the Hill District by disrupting the residents’ established connections. These myriad connections included those linking individuals to each other and those linking people to place.

Mindy Fullilove, a professor of psychiatry and public health, used her experiences in the 1990s Hill District to crystallize her ideas about the abrupt physical and social displacement of urban renewal. She theorizes that such events create lasting traumas to the population, arguing that urban renewal ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all the directions of the compass. Even if they manage to regroup, they are not sure what to do with one another. […] The elegance of the neighborhood – each person in his social and geographic slot – is destroyed, and even if the neighborhood is rebuilt exactly as it was, it won’t work. The restored geography is not enough to repair the many injuries to the mazeway. (Fullilove, Root Shock 14)

Fullilove’s language emphasizes the importance of both physical place and social geography. Individuals not only establish connections to their neighborhood but they also play important roles in maintaining the community itself; the daily interactions
within a neighborhood -- a combination of interactions with people and with place -- are what allow a community to thrive.

With the disruptions from urban renewal, geographic and interpersonal anchors are destroyed. The eventual demolition of Memphis Lee’s restaurant in *Two Trains Running*, for example, will disrupt the community on multiple levels. Logistically, the neighborhood will lose a vital resource: an affordable eatery for individuals with no means to prepare their own meals. Geographically, the residents will lose an important remnant of their old neighborhood and a touchstone in the remaining neighborhood. Fullilove focuses on the “root shock” that comes when the core support systems are abruptly removed. Her terminology points to the organic and fundamental nature of community and identity development. When Lee’s Restaurant eventually closes, individuals will have a gap in their daily ritual, a void that will diminish the patrons’ connection to the Hill. The demolition will also disrupt the patrons’ social connections, detracting from the myriad small relationships that add depth and complexity to a community. Characters from a range of backgrounds and experiences interact in the restaurant. With its destruction they will likely lose those relationships. When relationships are segmented and isolated, the things that define “community” fall aside; the cumulative effect on the neighborhood is devastating.

The aftermath of root shock is abundantly clear in terms of *King Hedley II*. The play features a breakdown on two related fronts: family and community. Urban renewal permanently alters the patterns of everyday life by fragmenting existing communities and artificially limiting the structures that allow new communities to develop. Long-term friendships fall away. Extended families are broken up. The effect can be particularly
devastating for children as the community connections that are so important in child-
rearing are damaged through haphazard housing placement and the loss of stable
neighborhoods. This extended network is arguably most important for populations with
fewer two-parent households and where parental contact is often limited because of
economics.

For Jane Jacobs, urban redevelopment therefore had the opposite effect on child
safety and arenas for play than planners usually intended. In her seminal 1961 text, The
Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jacobs paints a glowing picture of the
communal childcare that occurs when urban neighborhoods are functioning. She
describes her own Greenwich Village neighborhood as a kind of extended daycare in
which everyone has a vested interest in every child within its boundaries. Individuals on
stoops, leaning out of windows, running errands, or traveling to and from work provide
constant adult interaction. These children are, in general terms, outside of isolated,
designated playgrounds and are inside a communal ‘play ground;' they can be safe
playing on sidewalks or even in streets because of the presence of perpetual adult
oversight, where adult authority is spread throughout the entire neighborhood.

Jacobs’ depiction of inner-city communities contrasts with earlier prevailing
assumptions about children and urban play space and her description is directed at
structured park-oriented visions of ideal play. Her advocacy of a kind of village child-
rearing is one explicitly rejected by many urban planners. Clarence Arthur Perry, for
example, saw the precise behaviors and conditions Jacobs touted as one of the problems
of urban living that redevelopment was intended to “solve.” An advocate of a
scientifically-determined mixed-use urban structure he called the Neighborhood Unit,
Perry warned that the existing high-density form of urban society was economically unsustainable, socially detrimental, and a threat to safety, civic-mindedness, and modernization. Instead of being an effective communal childcare, Perry argued in 1939’s *Housing for the Machine Age* that the builder who allows for such interaction creates a community that “is not unlike that of the cuckoo which lays eggs in other birds’ nest, for strangers to hatch” (18). The idyllic urban village of Jacobs’ own neighborhood (or at least her depiction of it) is for Perry one that encourages child neglect and threatens the safety of children without a designated play area safe from traffic. He instead advocated a carefully structured diverse neighborhood revolving around a centrally located school and mathematically determined ratio of business, residence, and open-air space. Such a layout would limit the automobile traffic that threatened safety and discouraged pedestrians. Residents would know each other and have a stake in a tight-knit community. A business district ringing the residential area would create a buffer and allow for both local shopping and a localized, pedestrian lifestyle.

While in direct opposition on the form of an urban neighborhood, both argue for environments that promote community; both also focus on the importance of environment and community in nurturing children.\(^{27}\) Unfortunately, the demolitions in the Hill District allowed for neither Jacobs’ nor Perry’s visions. The planned development never materialized, but it would not have helped to ease the housing shortage for existing Hill District residents anyway. From the upscale apartments and shopping to the Opera House, the proposed neighborhood was envisioned for an entirely different population. In *On the Street Where I Lived* (1981), the result of Melvin D. Williams’ three year “anthropological observation” (vii) of a largely black, largely poor population.

\(^{27}\) Perry first proposed the Neighborhood Unit approach in 1925.
Belmar neighborhood in Pittsburgh’s Homewood area, Williams describes Belmar (and Homewood in general) as “the site for locating the undesirable in Pittsburgh” and those in Belmar as “victims of a dumping ethos and phenomena in Pittsburgh” (4). The most current “dumping” had been thousands of low-income residents pushed from the Hill District, pushed out of their communities and homes. Urban renewal in Pittsburgh, as in many other cities, left neighborhoods barren and social networks stripped.

The breakdown of family is one of the most painful manifestations of the damage within the community of King Hedley II. Wilson has incorporated many broken or damaged homes into his plays. Characters throughout the cycle speak of marriages or relationships that have dissolved. The only young character raised in a household with both biological parents intact is Cory Maxson, in high school at the start of Fences. Initially the problems within King Hedley II therefore may seem unusual only in degree. Despite a pattern of family fragmentation, however, child characters in the Pittsburgh Cycle are protected by at least one parent and often two. The Piano Lesson’s Maretha has her mother and uncles. Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’s Herald Loomis raises his daughter until he can reunite her with her mother. Fences’ Lyons suffers from having an absentee father (Troy is in jail for much of his childhood) and even challenges Troy’s criticisms with a reminder of that absence. As an adult he can rely on Troy, however, and, though there are few references to her within the play, Lyons did have a mother growing up. Even Raynell, Troy’s illegitimate daughter, is immediately accepted and raised by his wife, Rose, when the child’s biological mother dies.

In King Hedley II, parental protection and responsibility no longer apply. Fathers are absent and mothers turn their children over to others to raise. King’s mother criticizes

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28 After his father’s infidelity and betrayal, it is Cory who leaves rather than Troy.
almost everything he does. Offstage, a teenager robs his own grandmother and a mother can only defend her son’s memory, not the young man himself, as she searches the streets for his killer. Tonya Hedley, King’s wife, is the clearest sign of how damaged the idea of family has become in the “awful time” of black America in the 1980s. Already a grandmother, the hope she had placed in motherhood has been beaten down. She is pregnant with King’s child, his first. While he sees in the baby hope for the future, however, Tonya can only see pending heartache. Loving, supportive, and strong, she nonetheless declares her intention to have an abortion. She links her intention with her failings as a parent and she expresses fear and frustration over a self-perpetuating cycle of family destruction she sees throughout the Hill. Identified as thirty-five years old at the time of the play, Tonya’s age locates her birth at the start of the city’s urban redevelopment: the demolitions of what was to become known as the Golden Triangle started in 1950. Tonya’s childhood likewise corresponds to the start of redevelopment in the Hill District: the demolitions of the Lower Hill began in 1956. She has no negative words for her own mother’s parenting and she does not point to upheaval in the city’s black neighborhoods. Her words are instead directed inward, oblivious to the external factors that likely contributed to her own childhood experiences.

Aunt Ester, the quintessential icon of continuity, community, and strength in the Hill, is also gone. Introduced midway through the cycle, she became the essential maternal figure of the series. “The characters, after all, are her children,” Wilson explains in the King Hedley II preface (x). Yet Ester is not given the title of “Mama Ester,” but “Aunt.” The word connotes family support, but an extra family support. Both a mother and an aunt are protective, authoritative, supportive. An “aunt” implies
someone who is close, someone who will help when a parent cannot. Slavery divided families. The Great Migration divided families. In the years preceding urban redevelopment, migrants saw those divisions start to heal as families and communities took root.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, the play that followed *King Hedley II* but chronologically opened the 20th century, Aunt Ester is shown to be the cultural anchor that sustains the entire legacy of African America, from the captured African slave to the Pittsburgh millworker. She thereby bridges North and South, slavery and freedom, the individual and the communal. The death of this central symbol of continuity and strength is both evidence of the community’s breakdown and a source of its problems. Changes both physical and demographic removed the diverse adult structure. The additional support -- the “extra” that an aunt, or a long-time neighbor, or a local shopkeeper offered -- was removed or greatly diminished. Control over ones’ life, family, and home shifted further away from the individual and the local to the bureaucratic.

When Aunt Ester dies, she leaves behind fear, confusion, and unanswered questions. In *Two Trains Running* she was an important source of advice and wisdom. In *King Hedley II*, Ruby, King’s mother, tells Tonya about her own visit to Aunt Ester: “I thought she did abortions. It didn’t take me long to find out I was in the wrong place” (41). It is Aunt Ester who convinces her to carry the baby -- King -- to term: “‘God got three hands. Two for that baby and one for the rest of us. You got your time coming.’ I will never forget that” (42). Ruby, relating the advice to Tonya in an apparent attempt to similarly dissuade her daughter-in-law from an abortion, is a poor substitute for Aunt Ester. While she took the old woman’s words to heart, she never understood their true
meaning. “I used to look at King and try and figure it out. But I ain’t seen nothing to make her say that. I thought maybe she was just telling me that but she ain’t supposed to lie about nothing like that. I just ain’t never seen nothing that would make him that special,” she says of her son (42).

Unlike Tonya, Ruby is not a child of urban renewal. Her character is introduced in *Seven Guitars* where she comes to Pittsburgh from Alabama in 1948. She is pregnant and an immature twenty-five. Fortunately for Ruby, and possibly for King, she has her own aunt to help raise the boy; while she loves her son, she does not know how to be a mother to him. Louise, the aunt who takes Ruby in when she first arrives in Pittsburgh, and who takes on the role of mother to King when Ruby leaves with her fickle boyfriend Elmore (the man, it is revealed, who killed King’s biological father), dies before the start of *King Hedley II*. The home in which they lived, the home where King and Tonya still live, was willed to Ruby who now has plans to sell. Cumulatively, the presentation of motherhood in *King Hedley II* offers another important, yet ironic, absence: the maternal anchors traditionally found in the Wilson canon are lacking.

The Pittsburgh Cycle includes (even focuses on) several important fathers but the paternal relationships are typically strained or in some way subordinated to the maternal ones. Father and son are estranged in *Jitney*: Becker blames his son’s trial and imprisonment for his wife’s death, while Booster blames his father for not standing by his mother during the trial. Cory’s anger at his father in *Fences* stems from Troy’s refusal to allow Cory to apply for a college football scholarship, but, of equal importance, he loses respect for his father when Troy forsakes his mother for another woman. Herald Loomis, after raising Zonia for almost all of her 11 years, abruptly turns the girl over to her
mother in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The absence of maternal strength in *King Hedley II* is therefore all the more striking because of the overriding focus on maternal strength elsewhere in the cycle.

Tonya and Ruby, *King Hedley II*’s two female characters, sharply deviate from the traditional pattern of Wilson women. While both are mothers, each in some way rejects motherhood. The importance of their actions is clearest when considered in light of the typical pattern: Wilson’s women offer the emotional support and unconditional love necessary for the survival of the family and, by extension, the community. When their respective husbands are killed in *The Piano Lesson*, Mama Ola and then Berniece carry on raising the children. Rose Maxson in *Fences* acts as mediator in the complicated give-and-take between her grown step-son and Troy, and she helps comfort her husband’s disabled brother, Gabriel. Wilson’s depiction of female characters as supportive, perpetually nurturing, and often conciliatory was so common that he has been criticized for portraying his women as maternal stereotypes. As Miles Marsall Lewis pointed out to Wilson in an interview for *The Believer* magazine, “Essayist Sandra Shannon has criticized the women in your plays, saying, ‘His feminine portrayals tend to slip into comfort zones of what seem to be male-fantasized roles.’ Feminist critic bell hooks said of *Fences* that ‘patriarchy is not critiqued’ and ‘sexist values are re-inscribed.’”

Wilson responded by contextualizing his depictions within his own familial experiences: “My mother was a feminist, though she wouldn’t express it that way. I can’t approach them any different than I have, man, ‘cause all my women are independent. People can say anything they want, that’s valid, they’re liable to say anything they want. I don’t agree with that. [...] Even though I’m aware of all that, you gotta be very careful if you’re trying to create a character like that, that they don’t come up with any greater understanding of themselves and their relationship to the world than women had at that time. As a matter of fact, all my characters are at the edge of that, they pushing them boundaries, they have more understanding. [...]” (Lewis)
way. She don’t know nothing about no feminist woman and whatnot but she didn’t accept her place. She raised three daughters, and my sisters are the same way. So that’s where I get my women from. I grew up in a household with four women.”

Even female characters who are not biologically mothers enact the maternal role in other Wilson plays. Memphis Lee owns the restaurant in *Two Trains Running* but it is the young waitress Risa who joins the tradition of Wilson women who use soul food to offer both physical and emotional sustenance: Rose (*Fences*), Bertha (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*), Black Mary (*Gem of the Ocean*), Louise (*Seven Guitars*), and Berniece (*The Piano Lesson*) all use cooking as a way to welcome, comfort, or appease and in so doing sustain the family. In contrast, King’s mother, Ruby, only cooks as a way of ingratiating herself to her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Elmore. When he comments “I’m traveling light” immediately after arriving in town, Ruby exerts her domesticity as a way of coaxing him to stay settled: “Come on in the house, let me fix you something to eat. I know you hungry. Come on, I’ll fry you some chicken” (30). The offer is not extended to any of the other characters, including her son.

The three remaining references to food preparation in the play are all conflated with examples of death, exploitation, and abandonment. Tonya, King’s wife, recognizes the traditions of motherhood and understands the power it is supposed to have in supporting the family. She also recognizes that motherhood is no defense against the seemingly inevitable violence that surrounds them. They live in a world, she believes, that no longer makes sense, so why bother trying anymore? In her justification for an abortion, she references the nurturing components of domesticity to accentuate the inevitable loss she associates with motherhood:
Little Buddy Will’s mother up on Bryn Mawr Road. What she got? A heartache that don’t never go away. [...] Trying to figure out what happened. One minute her house is full of life. The next minute it’s full of death. She was waiting for him to come home and they bring her a corpse. Say, “Come down and make the identification. Is this your son?” Got a tag on his toe say “John Doe.” They got to put a number on it. John Doe number four. She got the dinner on the table. Say, “Junior like string beans.” She got some of that. She don’t know Junior ain’t eating no more. He got a pile a clothes she washing up. She don’t know Junior don’t need no more clothes. (39)

The trajectory of motherhood is one which invariably ends in grief. Tonya’s prediction is a reflection of the death referenced elsewhere in the play, deaths usually borne by surviving mothers. Even Elmore raises his own example in an argument about the power of God: “Myrtle Johnson. 1522 Stemrod Street down in Montgomery, Alabama. Had eight kids get burned up in a fire. Where was God at then?” When Stool Pigeon offers biblical examples of suffering and redemption, Elmore repeatedly refers back to the pain of the mother left behind, suddenly childless: “I don’t want to hear nothing about Job. I’m talking about Myrtle Johnson,” he says, and then counters another platitude with, “Go tell that to Myrtle Johnson” (35). Combined, the references remove the joys and rewards of motherhood and replace them with unrelenting examples of loss.

Two other instances conflate the domestic and particularly cooking with pending violence rather than nurturing. Both examples link Ruby’s offer to make Elmore breakfast with the gun that will eventually be used to kill King. As the scene opens,
Ruby enters from the house.

RUBY: I’m gonna put on a pot of grits and fry some bacon and eggs.

(She notices the gun.) Why don’t you put that gun up? You know I don’t like to see it.

(Elmore puts the gun back into his pocket.) (42-43)

The conversation then turns to Elmore’s murder of King’s biological father, Ruby’s decision to run off with Elmore rather than stay and raise King, and Elmore’s subsequent abandonment of Ruby. A few minutes later, when Ruby is inside, Elmore sells the gun to Mister and fires the weapon into the ground as evidence of its quality. Ruby comes back to investigate the noise and Elmore is able to use food to distract her and send her back inside. “Well, where the biscuits? I know you got some biscuits. Go on back in the house and make some biscuits” (51). Tonya, usually on her way to or from work, never cooks or eats.

Natasha, Tonya’s daughter from a previous relationship, is herself a mother and Tonya speaks of a kind of generational confusion: “I don’t want to have a baby that younger than my grandchild. Who turned the world around like that? What sense that make?” (39). Motherhood, for the first time in the cycle, is limited to a biological fact. Beyond the pain of losing a child to violence, Tonya fears bringing another life into a world when she herself does not know how to prevent the sorrow that befell her daughter: “I couldn’t give her what she needed. Why I wanna go back and do it again? I ain’t got nothing else to give. I can’t give myself. How I’m gonna give her? I don’t understand what to do... how to be a mother. You either love too much or don’t love enough. Don’t seem like there’s no middle ground” (38). She links her daughter’s inability to raise a
child with her own failings as a mother and she sees no end to the cycle: “She’s a baby! She don’t know nothing about life. What she know? Who taught her? I’m trying to figure it out myself. [...] I got to watch her being thrown down a hole it’s gonna take her a lifetime to crawl out and I can’t do nothing to help her. I got to stand by and watch her” (39).

Natasha never appears onstage. If she has a different interpretation of her life or perspective on motherhood, the audience never sees it. Tonya, bewildered about the state of families in her world and with no source of the breakdown visible, admits defeat. Ruby’s behavior oscillates between her desire to finally act like King’s mother and her aggressive criticism of both her son and his dreams, impulses that seem at odds but may in fact be closely related. In Fences, Troy Maxson’s refusal to sign the permission slip allowing his son to play college football is arguably at least in part because of genuine concern for the boy’s future. Ruby’s discouragement may be something similar: an attempt to protect her son from disappointment. Ruby speaks of her love of King and the words ring true: “King don’t believe I love him,” she tells Tonya, “It’s a mother’s love. It don’t never go away. I love me but I love King more. Sometimes I might not love me but there don’t never come a time I don’t love him. He don’t understand that” (41). Regardless of her intention, however, Ruby is a character who simply does not know how to nurture her son.

The breakdown of family, as manifested by the loss of the traditional Wilson protective maternal figures, is an extension of a breakdown evident within the larger community. In a heart-felt speech that extends for nearly two full, uninterrupted pages, Tonya attributes her personal despair as a mother to an environment where children are
no longer safe anywhere. Girls give birth before they themselves are grown and boys
grow up to be killed on the streets. She defends her decision to have an abortion by
framing it as self-preservation:

I’m thirty-five years old. Don’t seem like there’s nothing left. I’m
through with babies. I ain’t raising no more. I’m looking out for Tonya. I
ain’t raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends
shoot him. To have the police shoot him. Why I want to bring another
life into this world that don’t respect life? I don’t want to raise no more
babies when you got to fight to keep them alive. (39)

Police brutality has been referenced several times in the cycle and her reference to it is
unsurprising. But Tonya’s list of potential dangers also includes a threat that is
particularly disturbing: “To have his friends shoot him.” Black-on-black violence
certainly has been present in Wilson’s other works; characters either kill or die onstage
(Ma Rainey, Gem of the Ocean, Seven Guitars), discuss their time in prison for murder or
violence (Fences, Jitney), or talk about those who have been killed (The Piano Lesson,
Seven Guitars). In King Hedley II, however, the violence is turned even further inward.
The neighborhood is attacking itself; those who should be closest are no longer a reliable
source of support and protection. Like the distortion to the family structure, Wilson’s
version of the Hill District of the 1980s is disturbing and unfamiliar. A man no longer
has the safety of a community, the surety that a friend will support him, or even the
assurance that his friend will not also be his killer.

It is easy to blame the residents for their collective self-destructive behavior, and
Wilson does not excuse his characters’ decisions. Throughout the cycle, his protagonists
display complex motivations but they must also deal with the implications and ramifications of their choices. But how the characters of King Hedley II reach what appears to be a societal breaking point is tied to history, including the psychological aftermath of urban renewal and the compounding effects of internal despair.

Redevelopment increased the physical and economic isolation of black urban America; this isolation has its own ramifications. Social scientists, urban scholars, and activists speak of African Americans being warehoused in the new high-density public housing. The purpose of warehousing is to remove something from everyday life, to set it aside. The term is appropriate because it connotes objects rather than people. African Americans were being set aside in large-scale, high-density housing. A 1988 survey of the county’s African American population conducted by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that 22% of black teen-age males lived in the projects (McKinnon). In King Hedley II’s 1985 Hill District, the people in King’s neighborhood are almost entirely cut off geographically and economically from anything beyond their increasingly limited world. Wilson repeatedly praised what he called the “warrior spirit” of black Americans who are willing to fight to survive. Instead of broad concepts of injustice, racism, or oppression, or the specific faces of the exploitative mill owner or cruel sheriff, the only opponent the residents of Wilson’s King Hedley II Hill District confront is a neighbor.

Whereas earlier plays reference violence, including murder, the violence in King Hedley II is so pervasive and so random that it becomes part of everyday life. Fences relates how a young Troy Maxson killed a man in a botched robbery when he was desperately trying to feed his family. In Seven Guitars, Hedley kills Floyd but it is a sign of his physical and mental illness and the culmination of a lifetime of oppression. In
King Hedley II such incidents are no longer isolated occurrences. The social and cultural breakdown apparent throughout the play is more extreme than in any previous work in the cycle. Violence is compounding and its perpetrators are remorseless. The neighborhood is full of grief-stricken mothers and vengeful relatives. Pernell slashes King’s face and a month later King kills him: “He turned and looked and froze right there. The first bullet hit him in the mouth. I don’t know where the other fourteen went” (75). The utter brutality of the violence is startling as is the premeditation and King’s disregard for innocent bystanders: he fires those fifteen rounds into a Hill District bar. Just as disturbing is the motivation to which King keeps pointing. He tells Elmore, who has been trying to explain his murder of Leroy three decades earlier, “I don’t know about you and Leroy but Pernell made me kill him. Pernell called me ‘champ’” (73). This is well after King has already acknowledged that the many killings no longer make sense: “It used to be you get killed over something. Now you get killed over nothing” (34).

The violence is also self-perpetuating; it does not end with Pernell’s death or with King’s prison sentence. As King tells Mister, “Pernell’s cousin talking about he looking for me. Naw, I’m looking for him. I want to see him tell me that shit about cheating Pernell out of a chance at life” (19). This too points to a culture based on saving face rather than establishing a future. The violence is used to maintain pride and establish credibility not available from other methods. When Mister mentions that his ex’s mother is threatening him for allegedly hitting her daughter, King defends her actions. “That’s what mothers is supposed to do,” he says. “Mothers look out for their kids. That’s why Little Buddy Will’s mother is out there in the street with her nine-millimeter looking for

30 Stool Pigeon responds with the example of a man who was killed because of a mix-up over an order for a fish sandwich (73). Mister earlier identified Pernell’s cousin, the one seeking revenge against King, as the one who shot two men during a fight about football (15).
whoever killed her son. Mothers supposed to threaten you” (25). He equates the protective component of motherhood with the violence of revenge killing. Billy Will’s mother’s actions fit into a familiar pattern for both King and Mister. There are no equivalent lines endorsing nurturing behavior; the opportunity simply does not exist in the play.

The breakdown of the family in *King Hedley II* is an extension of the breakdown of the community. Wilson continually came back to the traditions of upheaval and displacement in African American culture. The desire to reconnect was the pivotal theme of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, situated in the midst of one of these periods of upheaval, the Great Migration. Set in 1911, the play is a reflection of people trying to find the family and friends they lost track of in that great, ongoing transition. One of Wilson’s few white characters, Rutherford Selig, is a “people finder” who reunites those who have been separated through oppression, segregation, migration; his clientele is a population trying to reconnect. The theme of “people finding” in *King Hedley II* echoes *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, as several characters are out looking for someone. These attempts are not to reconnect, however. Like Billy Will’s mother, they all seek to retaliate or strike preemptively -- to kill.

Urban renewal is again a silent culprit, unrecognized as a factor by the characters or most audience members because it has either been forgotten or is considered ancient history. Swaths of land are no longer being seized through eminent domain; America’s redevelopment programs of the 1950s and 1960s had long since stalled out or imploded. There is not the discussion of urban renewal in *King Hedley II* as in either *Two Trains Running* or *Jitney*. The characters in those earlier plays have an obvious opponent, a
system to fight against and an arena in which to fight. Much of the plot of Two Trains revolves around the pending closure of the restaurant that serves as the play’s setting and its owner’s fight with the city for what he considers just compensation for the seizure. The demolitions due to urban renewal are familiar occurrences and Memphis’ legal battle is a topic of ongoing conversation. Urban renewal has progressed even further in Jitney and this time multiple characters are facing the loss of their livelihood. Instead of a single man protesting the seizure there will be five: the drivers of the jitney station and Booster, Becker’s estranged son. The battle remains with the city but the site has moved from the courtroom to the streets. The battle is to save the jitney station rather than to win extra compensation and accept its inevitable loss, and the battle arena has shifted to their home turf.

In contrast, King Hedley II addresses not the process of urban renewal but rather its aftermath. The characters have to fight to survive but they do not know what they are fighting. This lack of a defined enemy contributes to the inwardly-focused anger and retaliation. Whereas the characters in Two Trains Running and Jitney were aware of what the battle entailed and around which entities the conflict revolved, there is no obvious opponent for the residents who remained in the 1980’s era Hill District. The city is not trying to take King’s home for an amorphous plan to build something new; it is his own mother who is selling the property to the city so she may have the money to move away. “You know what I’m waiting on,” she tells King when he asks when she will leave. “As soon as I get the money from the city for the house, I’m leaving” (12).

King never acknowledges the implications of Ruby’s actions, perhaps because he does not want her to see him influenced by her actions and perhaps because he does not
recognize any legitimacy in the city taking the house (or in Ruby selling it out from under him). It is never explained whether the URA has threatened eminent domain or she has found a way to sell the property to the city on her own. The building will likely be demolished but it is also possible that it will be left to rot. Either way, it will be vacant and King and Tonya -- and possibly their baby -- will be without the home in which King grew up.

A home offers continuity. Ownership becomes a concrete, identifiable representation of survival and endurance. Wilson’s characters use property and ownership to establish new lives, validate their identities, and anchor themselves in the community. Those characters who are fortunate enough to claim ownership are similarly declaring their own stability, even if economic stability does not actually exist. Part of the significance of homeownership in Wilson’s plays is based on the sheer rarity of it in 20th century urban African America. The characters’ behavior also reflects an intense anxiety over the demoralizing fact that ownership is not only rare but tenuous. The recognition of this precariousness sometimes brings out the worst in the characters, triggering behavior that stems from a pathological fear of losing their property (and what that property represents). With so much at stake it is little wonder that men like Seth (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone), Memphis (Two Trains Running), and Troy (Fences) sometimes appear obsessive, even manic, about protecting what is theirs. King Hedley II is likewise ready to protect even the smallest part of his own home, with a ferocity that exceeds anything portrayed in any of the other plays, and yet he will presumably be forced to move once the sale goes through. Adding to the futility of the likely pending eviction, the building will be left vacant to collapse on its own or quickly demolished.
The city is not going to fix up the property and rent it back to King or anyone else in the neighborhood.

King’s attitude towards his home is inseparable from how he feels about himself. He defends his identity and his property as fiercely as anyone, and he repeatedly and forcefully links himself to his land. Wilson opens the body of the play with King planting a few flower seeds and through the play audiences witness the lengths King will go to in order to protect them. The seeds are a link to King’s past (the first King Hedley raised a vegetable garden there), present (King plants the flower seeds as a gift to his wife), and future (he later equates the seeds to his unborn child). Establishing a garden is an effort to put down roots both proverbial and literal. Unfortunately, audiences also witness the other characters repeatedly undermine the value of King’s garden. Early in the play, the arguments over the seeds begin, and King must endure both careless behavior from other characters and ridicule and discouragement from his mother:

RUBY: You need some good dirt. Them seeds ain’t gonna grow in that dirt.

KING: Ain’t nothing wrong with this dirt.

RUBY: Get you some good dirt and put them seeds in it if you want them to grow. Your daddy knew what dirt was. He’d tell you you need some good dirt.

KING: This the only dirt I got. This is me right here. (10)

The setting is badly damaged, especially in the production design by David Gallo, who emphasized the lifeless through lighting and color palette. “The show is quite drained of color,” Gallo said. “Everything is painted much the same and it’s all faded out”
(Barbour). Thus the audience is encouraged to side with Ruby concerning the dirt.

The only thing King can do is ignore the derisive comments and apathetic attitudes of the other characters. And despite the poor environment – the dirt that is both hard and over used – the seeds grow. They may not thrive, their appearance may be ragged, but they grow nevertheless, and this growth is explicitly linked to King’s faith in his property. Indeed, the next day, the seeds have sprouted into a small plant. Wilson himself recognized that the rapidity of the growth called for a suspension of disbelief on the part of audience. Moreover, the sprout would shock the audience into the realization that this land could support and sustain life, that this barren environment could have enough power left in it to support new growth, despite the odds, if someone fights and cares enough and perhaps most importantly has the faith to keep trying. For the other characters, the garden does not hold a different meaning; it is devoid of meaning. King “points to a small, barely discernible spot of green growing where he planted the seeds” (22):

KING: Look at that. See that growing. See that!

MISTER: Yeah, I see.

KING: Ruby tell me my dirt ain’t worth nothing. It’s mine. It’s worth it to have. I ain’t gonna let nobody take it. Talking about I need some good dirt. Like my dirt ain’t worth nothing. A seed is a seed. A seed will grow in dirt. Look at that!

MISTER: Yeah, I see. (22)

Although Mister acknowledges King’s words, he does not understand the significance of what he is seeing.
King also echoes Seth Holly, the boardinghouse owner who complains when a tenant steps in his garden in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, a moment depicted as humorous. Bynum is in the midst of his daily sacrificial ritual of slaughtering a pigeon and spilling the blood on Seth’s garden:

BERTHA: Bynum don’t bother nobody. He ain’t even thinking about your vegetables.

SETH: I know he ain’t! That’s why he out there stepping on them. (2)

In *King Hedley II* the event is similar but the humor is entirely absent. Elmore carelessly steps on the seedlings and King explodes in anger:

KING: Hey, Elmore! What you doing? Stepping on my seeds! See!

That’s what I’m talking about! Everybody always fucking with me. Why you wanna step on my seeds?

ELMORE: I ain’t seen them there. How the hell I’m supposed to know there was seeds there.

*(King gets on his knees and smoothes over the ground.)*

KING: Open your eyes and look. That’s what’s wrong with niggers now. They can’t see past their nose. Look at that! They were growing. Everybody telling me I need some good dirt! This is good dirt! Look at that! This is good dirt! A seed supposed to grow in dirt! Look at this. Look at that dirt! That’s good dirt. There were growing and you stepped on them! This is good dirt! It is! Look! Look! This is good dirt! It’s good dirt! Everybody better back the fuck up off me! (57-58)

King’s diatribe follows an interesting progression. Clearly he identifies with the dirt, his
‘garden,’ and sees its inherent value. He also realizes that no one else does. When he tries to convince Tonya to keep their baby, he is able to provide an articulate argument. When he talks about his realization that his murder of Pernell was not justified, he exhibits insight and analysis. When it comes to defending the seeds he planted in his yard, however, his language falters. He can only point to the claim that the dirt, and by extension the Hill and himself, are all worthy, are all good -- a claim he repeats seven times in only a few moments. From indignation to insistence, he ends with a threat that shows he is firmly making his stand, and against the entire world if necessary. His response is to encircle the seedlings with barbed wire.

Like the wooden fence in *Fences*, King’s barbed wire fence has multiple meanings. For King it functions as a protective barrier to keep the world out and a method of staking claim to his plot of earth (and, by extension, his pride, heritage, and future). For the audience, the image of the seedling surrounding by barbed wire is visually disturbing, calling attention to the extremes to which King must go in order to defend the seedling. It also ensures that the audience is fully aware of just how important his small garden is to King and how dismissive the other characters are towards it. Further, the fence is visually reminiscent of the barbed wire around a prison (and around some public housing sites).

That King does does not even legally own the property makes his actions seem even more futile. He apparently has no influence over the sale of the property. Whereas someone like *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*’s Seth will yell at characters who get too close to or damage his garden, or *Two Trains Running*’s Memphis says he is “ready to walk through fire” to protect what is his, King has fewer real options and yet threatens
more. He starts out already backed up against the wall. With nowhere else to navigate, he becomes predictably vicious in defending what he does have. The language he uses as he links himself to the dirt, to his yard, to the Hill, imply that he is not just protecting what is his; he has anchored himself in the Hill.

Seth’s property is recognized by his tenants and the neighborhood. Bynum conducts his morning sacrifice at the edge of Seth’s garden not because he disregards the property but because he recognizes its importance. Stool Pigeon does the same in King Hedley II, burying Aunt Ester’s dead cat in King’s garden because he recognizes the spot’s potential for resurrection. When Elmore steps on the seedlings King has growing in his yard, King’s response -- which closes out the first act of the play -- goes on for over half the page. His anger is not directed solely at Elmore but at the world at large: “Everybody better back the fuck up off me! See… ‘cause people don’t know. I got some announcements to make too. That’s why I killed Pernell. If you get to the bottom line... I want everybody to know that King Hedley II is here. And I want everybody to know, just like my daddy, that you can’t fuck with me” (58). The proclamation collapses his property, his identity, his persona, and his murder of Pernell into a single entity.

Stool Pigeon understands a different symbolic importance of the patch of land, the same place where King’s namesake killed a man over three decades earlier. Stool Pigeon, the character known as Canewell in Seven Guitars (his unfortunate nickname stems from his decision to turn Hedley into the police for the murder), buries Aunt Ester’s cat alongside the seedlings in an attempt to bring the cat (and, by extension, Aunt Ester) back from the dead. Presumably the garden is sacred both because of the earlier sacrifice and because King himself bestows meaning on it through his belief. Because
King has faith in its viability, he elevates it from the worthless dirt everyone from his mother to his best friend view it as to a representation of his own worth and validity. When King is talking with his wife Tonya, herself trying to determine the viability of the environment so as to decide whether to carry their child to term, King points out the patch of green. It is a commentary on not only his own piece of earth but on the possibility of hope and faith in bringing new life to the world and on the role of the individual in the life cycle: “Look at that. That dirt’s hard. That dirt’s rocky. But it still growing. It’s gonna open up and its gonna be beautiful.” He adds, “Ruby told me they wasn’t gonna grow. Made me feel like I should have left them there at the drugstore. But then they grew. Elmore stepped on them and they still growing. That’s what made me think of Pernell. Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It doesn’t make me a big man” (83). What would make him a big man is leaving his mark on the world through their unborn child, just as the first King Hedley had wanted to leave his mark by having a son. “That’s why I need this baby,” King explains to Tonya, “not ‘cause I took something out the world but because I wanna put something in it” (84). King contrasts his killing of Pernell with bringing forth life. He does not offer the baby as a form of redemption for what he has done. Instead, King presents constructive -- rather than destructive -- behavior as a way of making a mark.

The violence in the play King Hedley II stems from poverty, hopelessness, and scattershot rage; the violence of King Hedley II the man is intertwined with his determination to be seen as a human being and as a man. He lashes out at those who would impugn his name, his reputation, or his property. Above all, his fight for economic opportunity is a fight for credibility and recognition from a world that barely
registers his existence. That the disparaging and dismissive responses primarily come from family and neighbors, rather than from the faceless white universe outside his neighborhood, makes the play all the more disturbing.

King’s violent and destructive behavior in *King Hedley II* stems largely from this lack of control. He attempts to protect what is his in the same ways as earlier Wilson characters and some of his lines seem to be intentional links to the words or actions of those characters. Like Troy, he builds a fence in his yard, and it too is tied to his family: he encloses the tiny garden he has planted for his wife. Unlike Troy, the fence is not made of wood, but barbed wire. In *Fences* the structure stood as a visual metaphor whose meaning shifted according to the individual character. In *King Hedley II* the meaning is both blatant and monolithic. It is a visual marker of King’s announcement that “Everybody better back the fuck up off of me!” After Elmore steps on the seedling, King concludes the scene by saying, “I want you to get the picture. Each and every one of you! And I want you to hold me to it. When you see me coming, that’s who you better see. Now they done had World War I... and World War II... the next motherfucker that fucks with me it’s gonna be World War III” (58). The scene emphasizes King’s anger and bubbling violence and the complete disregard of the garden by his mother, Elmore, and even Mister, the one person who is supposedly King’s close friend.

Finally, the garden King plants is in the same location as the one planted by his namesake, the man he has been told was his father. Again, the differences in the two examples are what make the parallels so meaningful. Whereas in *Seven Guitars* Hedley grows a vegetable garden that both connects him to his heritage and experience in the South and provides him with the food and income to survive, King is a generation
removed from the South and at least a generation removed from the land itself.

Nevertheless, King is aware of who he is, what he is, and what he wants in life. How to get to that goal may be disturbing to the audience (selling stolen refrigerators and robbery) but is to King simply a means to an end, and Wilson never seems to critique these choices. 31 What King does actively respond to is any attack on his name, his legitimacy, both of which are certainly attacked in the play.

In her discussion of Fences, Patricia M. Gantt writes, “Wilson’s main consideration in this play is the fences society builds around us and those we construct, willingly or unwillingly, around ourselves” (10). Wilson’s characters tried to come to terms with their changing worlds by erecting barriers. Troy and Rose Maxson have that physical barrier -- their fence -- to represent their individual insecurities and fears. Gantts’ comment applies to more than just the one play; as Wilson’s characters try to come to terms with their changing worlds, many of them respond by erecting barriers. Risa in Two Trains Running scars her legs as a defensive measure, warding off the men who otherwise see her only as a sexual being. Berniece avoids touching the family piano in The Piano Lesson and shields her daughter from the family’s past, erecting a barrier -- she hopes-- between the girl’s future and what Berniece sees as a debilitating past. Tonya Hedley debates aborting her child as a way of protecting herself from the pain of the later, seemingly inevitable grief of motherhood, preemptively killing the fetus before someone can kill the man it may grow into. King Hedley II places barbed wire around the lone seedling growing in his yard and thereby tries to seal it off from the destruction of

31 In the preface to Fences he describes similar behavior where black migrants, “in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dreams” (xvii). This nonchalant acceptance which doesn’t acknowledge the suffering of the crimes’ victims fits in with Wilson’s emphasis on identifying and explaining behavior, not judging it, though Wilson’s words do seem to implicitly endorse the legitimacy of the criminal response.
the rest of the neighborhood. King kills, robs, and hawks stolen refrigerators throughout the neighborhood, but these actions are presented as the only options open to him.

In Two Trains Running, Memphis Lee is a respectable business owner who offers an important service to the community. When he explains why he is refusing to sell his restaurant to the city for the amount they have offered, he shows that the only thing separating him from King is opportunity. Indeed, the only thing separating him from a daily threat of violence is the opportunity the restaurant affords him. In describing what ownership of Lee’s Restaurant gives him, Memphis Lee references a way to step out of a cycle of perpetually-looming violence: “I had a way for me to take off my pistol. I got my deed and went right home... took off my pistol and hung it up in the closet” (9). By taking away his restaurant, his livelihood, the city was taking away Memphis’ path that led to the pistol hanging safely in the closet. It was not only a loss for Memphis and for the community but also an action that threatened repercussions -- reverberations -- for the larger community and the city itself. If he followed the rules but the rules kept changing, he would have to break the rules to survive. He therefore promises to return to his native Mississippi and take back the farmland that was stolen from him by a white landowner with the blessing (and violence) of the local legal system that had twisted the rules against him.32

In King Hedley II, King’s drive to own his own business -- a video store -- is no different from Memphis’ determination to own a restaurant, in that it would offer him a similar ability to hang up his gun. King sacrifices personal comforts and family requests:

32 “When I left out of Jackson [Mississippi] I said I was gonna buy me a V-8 Ford and drive by Mr. Ford’s house and honk the horn. If anybody come to the window I was gonna wave. Then I was going out and buy me a 30.06, come on back to Jackson and drive up to Mr. Stovall’s house and honk the horn. Only this time I wasn’t waving” (31).
he delays the telephone his mother asks for just as Memphis says it “took a while” for him to be able to afford to buy his wife a dishwasher. For each man, the dream of owning his own business is linked to what it offers beyond basic economic stability. King plans a heist to finance the business, not to pay for a telephone (or, like Mister, to pay for furniture). He also presents it as a last ‘job.’ Memphis explains that owning his own business finally offered him a new life where he could hang up his pistol. Although King does not expressly state a similar motivation for owning a video store, his intention seems to be the same.

In previous plays, Wilson more explicitly points to slavery, the Great Migration, and urban renewal as the sources of traumatic upheavals. These upheavals in turn were something various characters recognized and were actively trying to cope with. In The Piano Lesson, characters are trying to start a new life -- whether in the North or the South -- by claiming ownership of their lives and their future. Seven Guitars, the play that intertwines with King Hedley II (it features the same property and includes several of the same key characters), contains characters who are in many ways divided from each other but who interact and come together to play as inter-connecting instruments in a shared story. The plots of Jitney and Two Trains Running center around pending demolitions but the characters in both plays have solidarity, identity, opportunity, and heritage. All of these components are missing for almost all of King Hedley II.

The very absence of awareness or any type of outcry over the lingering effects of ill-planned housing reform is both evidence and a source of the widespread apathy, fragmentation, and violence of a population cut off from its past and seeing no alternative in the future. This absence can also influence how audiences see the play or read the
characters. Charles Isherwood, in his review for *Variety*, described a different kind of “absence” in the play:

Significantly, this is the first play in the cycle that does not feel strongly informed by the specifics of its time. The year is 1985 [...]. But aside from a preponderance of guns and references to contemporary urban symbols like video stores, the world of “King Hedley” feels insular, timeless and unmoored from the real currents of the era -- a notable flaw, since one of Wilson’s aims has been to depict the changing contours of black experience across the country.

Isherwood’s description implies that the absence is either unintentional or unrealistic, but the world Wilson depicts in *King Hedley II* is indeed “insular, timeless, and unmoored” both from history and from the rest of American society.

Those “specifics” Isherwood references as informing the other Wilson plays and tying them to their respective eras are themselves linked to events that extend beyond the timeline included in an individual play’s targeted decade. For example, Wilson scholarship that focuses on the impact of the Great Migration heavily depends on information and evidence outside the body of the plays. This is because the centrality of the Great Migration extends far beyond the years of actual movement. The former migrants in *Fences* -- Troy and Bono -- have been living in Pittsburgh for decades, their families are northern, and the reverberation of the Great Migration appears muted at best. Nevertheless, Troy’s early formative experiences in the North and the residual effect of racism -- in the North and the South -- are crucial to understanding his character.

Further, one of the defining characteristics of the Pittsburgh Cycle is the way the plays “talk” to each other. This process breaks down strictly linear visions of history or traditional American interpretations of the trajectory of race relations.
Similarly, Berniece in *The Piano Lesson* has lived in Pittsburgh for three years; her uncle Doaker has lived there for much longer. Lymon has come north to sell a truck full of watermelons and to help Boy Willie sell the family piano, but the emphasis is on the two siblings and their battle over the meaning and the fate of the titular piano. The Great Migration is relevant, even key to the family dynamic and the arguments over the definition of “heritage,” but it is not the overt context. Until *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson’s penultimate work, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is the only play where the Great Migration is an overt presence.

In the same way, *King Hedley II* is a play about the aftermath of urban renewal even though eminent domain is no longer a plot point and references to redevelopment are fleeting. The urban renewal programs of the 1950s and early 1960s fundamentally changed the neighborhoods of urban America, especially black urban America. The upheaval of the populations and rupture of established daily patterns and lifestyles also fundamentally changed these communities. As the history section of this chapter has illustrated, the policies, goals, and decisions surrounding urban renewal ignored the voices of the people living in the targeted neighborhoods. In *King Hedley II* audiences see the result of the urban renewal programs. These results include economic isolation, fractured communities and families, and a population where individuals use ever more violent measures to establish a voice and a space. Neither the characters nor most audience members recognize the relationship between the fractured setting and the urban renewal program of previous years. This very lack of awareness is shown within the play to be one of the most insidious effects of urban renewal. The divisions evident in the Hill District are therefore physical but also temporal.
There are revealing parallels and distinctions between *King Hedley II* and Wilson’s third play in the Pittsburgh Cycle, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Characters in the earlier play are described in the preface as “Isolated, cut off from memory,” as “foreigners in a strange land” who “search for ways to reconnect” after moving North. Substantial portions of the play discuss the pain of disconnection, the importance of reestablishing old connections or establishing new ones, and finding a way to live in a new environment, a new culture, in the North. Rutherford Selig has a side business as a “People Finder,” someone who helps reunite families divided through circumstance or migration. Bynum, a migrant who makes a living as a medicine man, comments that “Seems like everybody looking for something” (70) and preaches the need for the individual to find his or her own song.

Herald Loomis, the play’s pivotal character, is in desperate need of discovering what that song is. He is tormented by the past and has no clear vision for the future. Bynum tells him, “Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he’s supposed to mark down life.” Bynum’s discovery of his own song came after much searching, although “I didn’t know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn’t making my heart smooth and easy.” The song he finally realizes is his own “had come from way deep inside me. I looked back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. And that song helped me on the road. Made it smooth to where my footsteps didn’t bite back at me” (71). The metaphor is intentionally slippery and hard to define, but Loomis does indeed find his song -- and
peace -- when he rejects the expectations and history that is being forced on him from outside forces and instead claims a right to his own history, his own expectations, and his own body. The stage directions announce the epiphany:

*Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bounds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contradictions.* (93-94)

The people in *King Hedley II* have clearly lost their songs; most tragic, however, is that the Hill District’s members seem unaware of the loss. They feel a dissatisfaction similar to the one described by Bynum, but King is the only character to try to find a way to “soar above the environs” that weigh down upon him. The trajectory of the Pittsburgh Cycle is one in which Wilson emphasized more and more the importance of community in the creation of a strong African America. With Aunt Ester gone, Stool Pigeon is the only character left to urge community support, activism, and perspective. Even King, the most unrelentingly hope-filled character in the play, is reduced to insular behavior as he tries to defend an ever-smaller and more defined part of his identity and his future. It is again through absence that Wilson makes his forceful point. That the Hill District is no longer functioning as a community in the play is vividly clear, but the loss of unity and identity is just as clearly set up to be the neighborhood’s fundamental flaw. Wilson therefore uses *King Hedley II* to advocate the importance of community by showing the devastating effects of a population that has forgotten who they are and what it means to
work and come together.

The inward-turning destruction evident in *King Hedley II* is not isolated to the 1980s and is not solely a result of urban renewal. Redevelopment did, however, intensify and solidify this inward turn. The removal of the business district and the scattering of the population reinforced existing societal problems. Those with the financial wherewithal established themselves in more affluent neighborhoods, placing even more economic pressure on those who remained on the Hill. The Hill District’s population was always volatile, as families or entire ethnic groups moved out or in depending on their economic abilities at the time. But the Hill also offered remarkable stability. For African Americans, this stability was particularly important following the Great Migration and the economic upturn after the Second World War. At the same time that whites were establishing clear boundaries that determined where blacks could (and could not) live, shop, work, or even be, blacks were using these restrictions to try to establish their own boundaries: ‘owning’ their homes, businesses, and communities even when the legal ownership of the building or land lay elsewhere – typically with an absentee white property owner. Urban renewal removed this identity and autonomy as it removed the buildings and scattered the residents across the city.

Wilson does not include public housing in his plays; the setting in the Pittsburgh Cycle is invariably a home or business privately-owned by one of the African American characters. In every previous play of the Pittsburgh Cycle, characters reference neighborhood black-owned businesses. For three of the seven plays -- *Two Trains Running, Jitney*, and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* -- the setting is one of those businesses. King Hedley in *Seven Guitars* is able to support himself by raising a garden.
and selling produce and fresh chicken to his neighbors. There are no such examples in *King Hedley II*. When King takes Tonya for a family portrait, they travel to a suburban Sears; there is no Harris Studio or other locally-owned portrait studio. Even the store King and Mister rob is a Jewish-owned jewelry store.

Stool Pigeon, one of the carryover characters from *Seven Guitars* (where he was known by his real name, Canewell), describes a neighborhood very different from the one of that earlier era. *King Hedley II* opens with him speaking to Aunt Ester’s cat, which meows offstage. He promises to buy her a treat and simultaneously establishes what has changed in the neighborhood in the intervening years:

> I’m gonna get you some fish heads tomorrow. I got to go down to the Strip District. Used to have the live fish market right down there on Center. Times ain’t nothing like they used to be. Everything done got broke up. Pieces flying everywhere. Look like it’s gonna be broke up some more before it get whole again. If it ever do. Ain’t no telling. The half ain’t never been told. [...] (7)

The Prologue thus points if not directly to urban renewal then at least to a process in which urban renewal is an important factor.

In the play’s prefatory essay, Wilson focuses on *King Hedley II*’s optimism by lumping it in with his description of the rest of his cycle, work he describes as consistently one of hope: “The characters are all continually negotiating for a position, the high ground of the battlefield, from where they might best shout an affirmation of the value and worth of their being in the face of a many-million voice chorus that seeks to deafen and obliterate it” (ix). Against economic and societal inequities, “In all the plays,
the characters remain pointed to the future, their pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and their own heroics” (x). The description certainly applies to the play’s protagonist; King maintains hope and a vision for the future despite constant setbacks and little encouragement. Wilson’s words do not describe the rest of the community, however. King stands in contrast to almost all the other characters -- both those who appear onstage and those who are referenced in dialogue. Unlike Wilson’s previous works, where multiple characters exhibited confidence, faith, and hope, in *King Hedley II* the absence of such optimism contributes to a bleakness uncharacteristic of the cycle. The various characters’ attempts at getting ahead, at starting legitimate businesses or maintaining families and home, are continually thwarted because of two fundamentals: they live in an inherently racist world and they have lost their sense of responsibility, heritage, place; in traditional Wilson parlance, they have lost their song. His familiar dramaturgic patterns of depicting alienation and dislocation are in *King Hedley II* even more pervasive and even more destructive.

What ultimately sets King apart is his self-confidence, a vision of himself and his world. King sees a real value to his world. Like *The Piano Lesson*’s Boy Willie, King refuses to accept the assumption that he has less rights or unequal value. Both men can therefore see themselves overcoming racist limitations. “But I got honor and dignity even though some people don’t think that,” King says. “I was born with it. Mama Louise told me don’t let nobody take it from me” (57). In all the earlier plays the desire for property ownership was respected; in contrast, most of the characters ridicule or undercut the concept of ownership itself in *King Hedley II*. In all the earlier plays multiple characters were fighting to succeed and willing to sacrifice for a better future, but there is
no future in *King Hedley II*. King is one of the few to exhibit any awareness that any future even exists or that the heritage of African Americans is something to maintain and seek out. The other characters are instead focused on the present.

The past is likewise eclipsed. King is the only character in the play who is trying to put down roots. Almost everyone else acts in ways that reveal them to be rootless and sometimes actively combating King’s attempts. Ruby, the token property owner, is actively trying to sell the building so as to move away again (12). Stool Pigeon and Aunt Ester, the two oldest characters in *King Hedley II*, are both either neglected or attacked in the play. Aunt Ester, the centuries-old sage central to four of Wilson’s plays, represents the spiritual and emotional touchstone of the Hill. As she tells her protégé, Black Mary, in *Gem of the Ocean*, “I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain’t afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. [...] I got memories go way back. I’m carrying them for a lot of folk” (43). She is the carrier of African American oral history and lived experience, the community’s source of advice and wisdom, the advocate of self-awareness and community solidarity. Stool Pigeon’s interpretation of her death at the start of the play is that “God got a plan” for another biblical cleansing and that “He had to get her out of the way before he bring the fire” (20). But another possibility is that Aunt Ester had lost her purpose and therefore her will to live. She does not venture out of her house; those in need of Aunt Ester’s guidance must come to her, must make the effort to connect with that past. Shortly before her death, Stool Pigeon laments that “The people wandering all over the place. They got lost. [...]he path to her house is all grown over with weeds, you can’t hardly find the door no more” (8). Aunt Ester offers those who seek her advice a
guide to living. “Mr. Eli [Aunt Ester’s assistant] say she died from grief” (21), King says. She may have died at the start of the play because of the apparent utter lack of any community support or interest in the memories she carried.

Aunt Ester provides advice and wisdom based on personal experience and oral tradition. Stool Pigeon, described as “The Hill’s spiritual and practical truthsayer” (5), tries to sustain the community by maintaining a different type of historical record: he collects newspapers. Without such an archive, he warns, “them kids” -- the supposed future of the Hill District -- “ain’t gonna know what happened. They ain’t gonna know how they got from tit to tat. You got to know that” (69). Stool Pigeon does not give advice; he conveys information. His mission appears to be to record the events of the past to ensure the community’s survival in the future. “See I know what went on. I ain’t saying what goes on… what went on. You got to know that. How you gonna get on the other side of the valley if you don’t know that? You can’t guess on it… you got to know” (27), he explains, expressing the idea Wilson advocated in all of his previous works. The lesson falls on deaf ears. “You need to throw them papers out,” Ruby scolds and then threatens to go further: “I’m going down to Pat’s Place and tell them to stop saving them papers for you. [...] I’m gonna tell your landlord you got all them papers stored in there. If he don’t do nothing I’m gonna call right down there to the city. They gonna send the fire inspector” (27). Near the end of the play Stool Pigeon is robbed, kicked, and his newspapers set on fire by local youths. “I wasn’t gonna fight them on that sixty-three dollars but I tried to fight them on my newspapers,” he explains (68):

What them kids gonna do now? They burned up their history. . . .They ain’t gonna know nothing. I ask myself, “Why they do that?” I have to tell
myself the truth. I don’t know. If somebody know and they tell me then
I’ll know. But the truth is I don’t know. I can’t figure it out. (69)

Instead of support, the community offers senseless violence and random cruelty. King
threatens to “go up there and put my foot in their ass,” but the only constructive help
Stool Pigeon receives is from outside the black community: “Had to get six stitches.
Right down there at Mercy Hospital. [...] If it wasn’t for the white man, what would I
do? Nigger bust you up and the white man fix you up. If he wasn’t there, what would I
do?” (68).

Stool Pigeon does not offer analysis, just the ‘artifacts’ -- the documents by which
one can ‘know’ the past. As he asserts, “[i]f you want to know, just ask me and I’ll go
look it up” (27). There is a gap to his approach that, previously, Aunt Ester was able to
fill. The pair are not contradictory but, rather, complementary. With the death of Aunt
Ester in the first act of King Hedley II and the vandalism and destruction of Stool
Pigeon’s newspapers in the second act, Wilson joins the loss of history and heritage with
the horrible personal, social, and economic devastation common to a 1980s American
ghetto. The two losses mark a break with a cultural tradition and history. What is lost is
not just an individual’s link to the past but a collective rupture and the adoption of a
worldview that isolates the individual in a material world and in a fixed time. “Board the
windows and lock the doors; she’s dead, she’s dead, she’s dead,” as Stool Pigeon in
essence proclaims the death of the Hill District itself and not just Aunt Ester. Heritage is
no longer in danger of being cut off; it is gone. The future too seems to have vanished,
pushing the characters to focus on what is possible in the now. Since King recognizes his
innate value, however, he can envision himself achieving something in the future and is
therefore willing to sacrifice short-term comforts for long-term goals. By setting up these contrasts between his protagonist and the other characters, Wilson demonstrates the ways in which financial depravation has become normalized, external oppression now becoming internal repression.

*Fences* offers a similar illuminative contrast in a conversation between Troy Maxson and his youngest son, Cory. Troy, in his fifties, is experiencing a degree of economic stability -- though not affluence -- after a lifetime of hard work and want. His approach is to look to long-term needs. When Cory asks him to buy a television, Troy points to the roof that will soon need repair: “Now, soon as I get two hundred dollars clear, then I’ll buy a TV. Right now, as soon as I get two hundred and sixty-four dollars, I’m gonna have this roof tarred.” Cory, still in high school, is a child of America’s burgeoning consumer culture. His philosophy sounds like that of a typical teenager: “I’d buy a TV. Then when the roof started to leak… when it needed fixing… I’d fix it.” The dialogue reveals the pair’s worldviews; the divisions between them because of the difference in age and experiences; Troy’s attempt at teaching his son a valuable lesson about priorities; and Cory’s inability to accept the lesson.

The exchange is replicated in *King Hedley II* with a significant reversal of roles. This time it is the parent who focuses on the immediate gratification and the son who is looking to the long-term. Rose needles King about not having telephone service:

RUBY: When you gonna get the phone back on? You need a telephone.

KING: Soon as I get two hundred twenty-five dollars.

RUBY: I told Tonya I can go down and put it in my name.

KING: You ain’t gonna get my phone on in your name. I’ll wait till I get
the two hundred and twenty-five dollars. What that look like, having my phone in your name?

RUBY: At least you would have a phone. You can’t be without a phone.

KING: I don’t need no phone, woman.

The scene is not simply important because it reveals their separate values or the tension between the mother and son. Instead, fiscal responsibility seems to be viewed as abnormal and the source of irritation by characters who are well beyond their teenage years.

Mister Carter too is in opposition to King, focused on current comfort rather than future stability. The pair has pooled their savings to eventually open a video store. After Mister’s girlfriend walks out and takes their furnishings with her, King must try to convince his partner to keep his share in their savings instead of using the money to buy furniture. “I need someplace to sleep. I just want my money. We can start another pot later” (24), Mister tells him:

KING: ... I ain’t gonna be poor all my life. See, you don’t believe it.

MISTER: I believe it. I just need me some furniture.

KING: I need too! I need two hundred and twenty-five dollars to get my phone back on. Natasha talked to some nigger from Baltimore for six hours. I need, too, but you don’t hear me talking about dipping in the pot. See, ‘cause I believe. I look at that sign say “Miller Auto Parts.” Niggers don’t believe it can say “Hedley Auto Parts.” Or “Carter Auto Parts.” Or you can have one say “Royal Videos.” How you think Miller got that auto-parts store? ‘Cause he didn’t dip in the pot.
MISTER: I need to get me some money. We can get the video store later.

I just want my money.[...] (23)

Mister’s complaints at first seems legitimate; it is difficult to live in an empty house. Later in the play, however, Mister specifies the “furniture” he intends to buy: “Get me a TV. Get me a VCR. Get me a bed” (71). Even the bed appears to be necessary for sexual conquests and not simply for sleeping: “I got these two women fighting over me. With one of them I can get it anytime I want. I’m working on the other one” (71).

Like King, Tonya recognizes that there is a problem with being unable to see a different future but she herself suffers from the same inability. She links her daughter’s promiscuity to such myopia:

She seventeen and got a baby, she don’t even know who the father is. She moving so fast she can’t stop and look in the mirror. She can’t see herself. All anybody got to do is look at her good and she run off and lay down with them. She don’t think no further than that. Ain’t got no future ‘cause she don’t know how to make one. Don’t nobody care nothing about that. All they care about is getting a bigger TV. All she care about is the next time somebody gonna look at her and want to lay down with her. (37-38)

Yet Tonya cites the grief of motherhood -- her own fear that there is no other future possible -- as the reason for her planned abortion. Natasha may not think ahead enough to allow for a different future, but Tonya is too afraid to allow for the possibility of a new future. King can only offer the minimal hope that comes from the attempt, the honest fight for life. Earlier, when speaking of his garden, he equates the land to his identity and pride. Later in the play he pleads for simple opportunity and conflates his property, the
Hill District, his unborn son, Pernell, and his legacy in a mixing of referents for the pronoun “it”: “That’s why I need this baby, not ‘cause I took something out the world but because I wanna put something in it,” he tries to explain. “Got rocky dirt. Got glass and bottles. But it still deserve to live. Even if you have to call the undertaker. Even if somebody come along and pull it out by the root. It still deserve to live. It still deserve that chance” (84).

King’s world is one not of migratory or societal transition but of stagnancy. The community is static, the people seeing no way out of their situation, no alternative to their present circumstances. King is nearly alone in his faith in the earth’s fertility and, by extension, its legitimacy. The second part of Wilson’s description in the preface -- “characters remain pointed to the future, their pockets lined with fresh hope and an abiding faith in their own abilities and their own heroics” (x) -- therefore seems at odds with the content of the play. More than in any of his previous works, the people of King Hedley II are cut off from larger American society. Wilson’s fictional Hill -- poor, black, urban -- represents an alternate American culture alternatively demonized or entirely ignored in the 1980s. His characters have certainly dealt with oppression and shifting rules imposed by the white world before. What makes King Hedley II stand apart is the totality of that oppression and randomness. “They got different rules for different people,” Mister notes (53), echoing characters from throughout the cycle. Just as the residents of the Hill District were referenced in city planning documents only as the source of problems, so is Mister “remembered” only when he is arrested.

For the characters in King Hedley II, the proof of Mister’s words is evident in their everyday lives. Even the most basic, mundane rules and promises work against the
poor and black within the play. King, for example, buys Tonya a portrait session at Sears as an anniversary gift but, when he goes to pick up their order, receipt in hand, the photos are missing, his receipt dismissed. The incident is reminiscent of one in *The Piano Lesson* when Wining Boy describes the shifting property rights that always favor the white man. Significantly, Wining Boy’s extended example does not involve valuable farmland (as was stolen from Memphis in *Two Trains Running*) or an irreplaceable heirloom (which resulted in the murder of Boy Charles in *The Piano Lesson*). Instead, Wining Boy’s example revolves around a berry patch, and the white man ultimately lays claim to it because “Otherwise first thing you know these niggers have everything that belong to us” (38).

Wilson’s use of the family portrait in *King Hedley II* similarly uses the mundane to stress the extent of white disregard. The Hedleys’ trip to Sears is iconically domestic, the family photograph both common and relatable. It is also unusual enough to warrant extended discussion amongst the characters. Mister references his own experience, when he was actually thrilled to have his photo taken when he is arrested:

I always wanted to have my picture taken. You know how you have your picture taken when you pose for it. I thought that would make you somebody. I posed for the police. They told me I wasn’t nothing but a sorry-ass criminal. I say, “okay, just take my picture.” They took my picture and I asked the man could I order some for my family and that was the beginning of all the trouble. They put me in the hole for trying to be smart. He don’t know I was serious. (13-14)
A photo, even a mugshot, is physical evidence that someone existed. Even the murdered are not afforded this final image. “Dead nigger on Bryn Mawr Road,” Tonya rails, as she describes police apathy and relates the experience of Little Buddy Will’s mother: “They got to quit playing cards and come and pick him up. They used to take pictures. They don’t even take pictures no more. They pull him out of the freezer and she look at him. She don’t want to look. They make her look” (40).

The play will end without Mister, King, or Tonya having their own photos. Society, Wilson seems to be saying, does not want these people to exist and is actively erasing all traces. Yet the misplaced photo order is not what upsets King; he is furious that the normal rules of society and business do not apply: the implied meaning of the receipt is not apparently based on anything when *he* is the customer. Elmore misreads his frustration and anger: “I understand. The motherfuckers got your pictures and can’t find them.” Wilson is careful to stress to his audience why the incident is so important to King, who angrily counters Elmore’s interpretation: “Naw, that ain’t what the problem is. Ask Mister. The problem is they tell me my receipt don’t count. That’s what the problem is. They don’t tell you it don’t count when they give it to you. They even tell you, ‘Don’t forget your receipt.’ Then they gonna tell you it don’t count” (53).

As always, however, Wilson’s focus is on the internal breakdown of the community rather than the attitudes or behavior of the white world outside it. The residents of the real world Hill District had no voice in the debates over the city’s housing problems, no representatives at the table when city leaders and developers drew up plans for redeveloping the Lower Hill District. In the 1980s world *King Hedley II* reflects, the residents of the Hill are left to deal with the repercussions of earlier policies and have no
external identity beyond the area’s crime rates and poverty levels. At the same time, welfare became a familiar lifestyle and generations knew nothing else. The people of the Hill in Wilson’s play clearly had internalized the disregard apparent from the larger American society as well as the apathy of generations in poverty, of political powerlessness. Regardless of the causes, the main issue in *King Hedley II* is one familiar in the Wilson canon: the people have forgotten their song, their power, their history. Even more troubling, they are alienated from neighbors, family, and even themselves on a daily basis.

Within the Pittsburgh Cycle, things are never as hopeless as they are near the end of *King Hedley II*. The penultimate scene initially promises a happy ending. Ruby dances and then sings while, as the stage directions explain, “for a brief moment, all the possibilities of life are shining” (89): the possibility of the video store, the possibility of a King Hedley III, and the promise of the long-delayed wedding between Ruby and Elmore. In the final scene those possibilities are senselessly and tragically cut short. Elmore, apparently tired of hiding the truth, tells King that he killed King’s biological father before King was born. Used to a code of manhood based on defending one’s honor, the men square off, ready to shoot each other. But King has changed; through the promise of a legacy and a recognition that the world is bigger than himself, he no longer defines himself according to a violent code of retribution. Both King and Elmore choose to fire into the ground rather than into each other. It is at this moment, unfortunately, after misinterpreting the fight, that Ruby finally decides to act. Elmore had killed King’s father and she is unwilling to see this replicated with the son, so she fires in an attempt to save King. She does not realize that both men have themselves come to a new
understanding and a new peace. Ruby, however, is a poor shot, and she shoots her son who instantly bleeds to death in the dirt. To the end, then, grief is omnipresent, poverty systemic, violence everywhere.

Nothing minimizes the incredible misery of King’s family in that final moment. Ruby has finally seen her son as something not just special but more important than anything else. She was willing to kill the man she kept coming back to -- the man she had chosen over King when he was a child, the man she had forgiven for killing King’s biological father. Immediately after that moment, with that realization of his worth, she must then face the pain of losing her son by her own hand. Tonya had predicted such an agony with her earlier speech, never knowing that the grief she would have to face would be from the loss of her husband and the maternal grief one bourn by Ruby instead of herself. In her speech about maternal grief she had listed sources of violent death coming from all fronts -- police, friends, strangers -- but she had not anticipated death coming from a mother.

Remarkably, with all this as a prominent backdrop, Wilson is able to bring optimism out of tragedy. When he is mortally wounded in the final moments of the play, King’s blood nourishes the earth where it spills and where Aunt Ester’s cat was buried. Even as King lays bleeding and already lifeless on the hard earth at the end of the play, this death is reframed as the sacrifice necessary for the community’s salvation. Likewise, King – the “conquering Lion of Judea” as he refers to himself at several points in the play – is identified in Stool Pigeon’s final closing jubilant song as like Abraham’s son Isaac; as the fatted calf; as their collective sacrifice of the very best they had to offer: “See Him coming! We give you our Glory. We give you our Glory. We give you our Glory.” In
the final seconds, Stool Pigeon is described as “joyous” (102) with the possibilities from King’s sacrifice. As the lights go to black, Aunt Ester’s cat, brought to life because of King’s death, meows offstage. Since her cat returns, there is the possibility that Aunt Ester herself can be resurrected. King’s death also opens the door for the neighborhood activism that will awaken in *Radio Golf*, the 90s-era play featuring a community willing to battle against the final destruction of their heritage. This is true renewal in the Hill District: a revitalization of the existing population, not a dramatic alteration of the landscape.
CHAPTER FIVE “Not Fit to Live In”: Blight and Radio Golf

Introduction

Urban renewal remains significant throughout the second half of the cycle, both in how it appears and in how it does not. In Two Trains Running, Jitney, and King Hedley II, urban renewal drives the action and forces some characters to confront their personal histories but defines neither the plays nor the characters. None concern themselves with white flight, a declining tax base, or the reasons for redevelopment. August Wilson reveals the effect of urban renewal rather than its sources or those involved with its implementation. This changes with Radio Golf, Wilson’s final work and the chronological cap to the Pittsburgh Cycle. The setting at the end of the twentieth century is a barely-recognizable Hill District. Only two characters with links to earlier eras evince the rich stories, lyrical voices, and attachment to place that typically define the Wilson canon: Sterling Johnson (introduced in Two Trains Running) and Elder “Old Joe” Barlow, the son of Gem of the Ocean’s Black Mary and Citizen Barlow. For most of the play, however, audiences remain jarred by the intentionally flat dialogue of the middle-class, upwardly-mobile Harmond and Mame Wilks and the often callous, self-centered focus of their materialistic partner, Roosevelt Hicks. The trio comprises Bedford Hills Redevelopment, Inc., an organization set up to convert the Hill District into an upscale shopping district much like what was actually being developed in Pittsburgh’s East Liberty neighborhood at the time Wilson was writing.

At the end of the first act, the previously staid mayoral candidate Harmond joins Roosevelt in singing “The Gangs All Here,” blended with the gleeful chant of “Blight! Blight!” The image is startling, disturbing, and strange; the stage directions note that
Sterling, who enters in the midst of their celebration, “is bewildered by what he sees” (50) and audience members likely experience a similar emotion. In anticipation of the city’s designation of the Hill as blighted, Bedford Hills Redevelopment -- as led and funded by Wilks and Hicks -- spends $200,000 in fees and preparation for their comprehensive urban renewal plan. With their own money at stake, the pair’s financial future hangs on the blight declaration. Beyond this plot point, however, the emphasis on the word “blight” symbolizes the differing perceptions of the Hill District, the division between those who call the area home and those who see it as the laboratory for yet another experiment in city planning.

Urban renewal programs stem from two distinct and often separate imperatives: to deal with the myriad problems associated with ghettos and slum housing and to wipe the slate clean for a regional Master Plan. The latter is commonly a large-scale, long-term redevelopment plan based on increased efficiencies and a reimagined perception and identity for the region. These visions typically involve expanding business and financial districts, developing freeway and expressway systems, and often recapturing prized real estate for expanded private or civic development. Redevelopment therefore typically changes the use – and often the users -- of the land.

Despite a proposed name change and the demolition of much of what remains of the existing Hill District, Harmond Wilks does not conceive of Bedford Hills as a comprehensive sweep of the population. Instead, Harmond considers himself altruistic, interested in bringing in a grocery store and Health Center that the residents desperately need. But Harmond’s vision of “some houses and some stores and shops” (16) -- like those envisioned by planners in the 1950s -- are not ones either affordable or targeted to
the residents struggling to find jobs. He apparently genuinely believes he will somehow “save” the Hill District through a redevelopment process that will again shove aside the very people who make the neighborhood a definable community.

Harmond’s political and economic goals overlap. A mayoral candidate, he sees himself as a worthy representative of the people of Pittsburgh, including the people of the Hill District. When his wife warns him that voters may perceive him as angry, Harmond responds with genuine passion:

Yeah, I’m angry! Aren’t you? I care about this city. It’s almost bankrupt.
It’s ill managed. The infrastructure is falling apart. Everything’s ground down by bureaucratic bullshit. The whole goddamn city should be angry.
We got a do-nothing mayor who’s beholden to the money interests.
Probably can’t even name his department heads. (30)

The exclamation is interrupted by the entrance of Old Joe Barlow, the local citizen who earlier came to Harmond for assistance and who will eventually teach him the importance of legacy and community, how “worth” means more than economic value. At this point in the play, however, Old Joe’s entrance calls attention to the division between Harmond and the people of the Hill he wants to represent. Joe comments, “That’s a nice car you got out there in the lot. How many miles you got on it? I bet these shoes got more miles on them. That gold-on-black lettering’s nice too. Good thing they didn’t scratch it when they broke in your trunk” (30). Despite Harmond’s flawed self-perception, Bedford Hills Redevelopment represents those from off the Hill, regardless of Harmond and Roosevelt’s Hill District birthplace. Origins and geography, Wilson shows, do not trump actions and decisions.
The history section of this chapter will revolve around a similar theme of internal value vs. external valuation. I will first look at some definitions and applications of the designation of “blight,” which is fundamental to the redevelopment process because it is the first step for receiving federal funding. This leads to the broader concept of value: what a neighborhood is “worth,” to whom, and how the use of the term “redevelop” often appeared alongside -- or could be replaced with -- the term “reclaim” in discussions of blighted and slum neighborhoods.

The literary analysis will look at the diverging interpretations of value as they manifest themselves in Radio Golf. The plot revolves around the fate of Aunt Ester’s house, vacant for a decade and in the middle of the area slated for redevelopment. Old Joe -- the legal owner and figure around which the neighborhood rallies -- steps forward to claim and protect the house. Of primary importance is the shift in Harmond Wilkes’ conception of value and worth. At the start of the play he bases his definition largely on personal advancement, personal history, and an identifiably Anglo American middle class lifestyle. By the play’s end, he abandons the redevelopment project, abandons a worldview defined by economic goals, and embraces a connection to the Hill District, Old Joe, a heritage on the Hill, and, perhaps most importantly, the community still living there. Other residents soon join Old Joe’s fight to save his home and, when Harmond Wilks leaves the stage for the final time, he heads for a Painting Party organized in defiance of the city’s demolition order. The residents make their decision and Harmond follows their lead. By uniting with Old Joe Barlow and the legacy of Aunt Ester, the people of the Hill District become men and women of action like those for whom Wilson repeatedly expressed admiration. Thus, although Aunt Ester died a decade earlier, the
residents are living the lessons she advocated.

I. Economic Blight

Many assume blight is clearly defined but the legal distinctions of what constitutes ‘blighted’ areas are vague, elastic, and surprisingly arbitrary:

A blighted area, as a Philadelphia planner proposed cryptically in 1918, “is a district which is not what it should be,” and it is woven through recent history, economic development and urban redevelopment policies. The goals of such policies have always been to eradicate blight; however, as one California state legislator lamented in 1995, “Somewhere along the way... defining blight became an art form.” (Gordon n.pag.)

The Housing Division of the FEA (Federal Emergency Administration) opened their first bulletin, published in 1935, with an epigraph comprised of definitions: “A slum is most simply defined as housing (on whatever scale) so inadequate or so deteriorated as to endanger the health, safety, or morals of its inhabitants.” The distinction between blight and slum becomes merely a matter of degree: “A blighted residential area is one on the down grade, which has not reached the slum stage” (Wood 3). The Architects Club of Chicago, in a 1932 report of their Committee on Blighted Area Housing, offered an even more nebulous definition: “Any area of deteriorated housing in which there is poor upkeep of houses and premises is a blighted district and a potential slum” (qtd. in Walker 5). These are not the detailed guidelines of city building codes nor the minimum housing standards dictated by a Department of Health. Instead, the definitions assume apparently universal conceptions of “upkeep,” quality, and lifestyle.

Such universals do not exist, however. Predictably, norms shift across class and
ethnic lines, across regions, and with time. The Pittsburgh Housing Authority stressed this fact early in their 1946 study, *Negro Housing Needs in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County*:

Standards -- in housing as anywhere else -- are relative; they depend upon the locale in which they are valid, the social group which has set them up, the economic means to uphold them. Substandardness, therefore, is no less relative; it depends upon such things as topography, the mores of the community, and the means of its citizens. (Bunzel 11)

With the meaning of the term a perpetually moving target, a designation of “blighted” can therefore eclipse long-standing conflicts between the interests of poor residents, city leaders, developers, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, and various local institutions. As I discussed in the previous chapter, many involved with urban planning also tend to make a correlation between poor housing, public health, and morality and to exhibit an interest in controlling the physical space as a means of protecting -- or controlling -- a population.

Definitions of blight get most slippery when they go beyond the physical attributes of buildings and instead focus on the economic value of the properties and neighborhood as a whole. In this vein, Mabel L. Walker, in her 1938 *Urban Blight and Slums*, focused on an area’s economic potential instead of its physical condition: “A blighted area is a once prosperous section which is on the down grade. The term ‘blight’ connotes deterioration. It will still be a blighted area even though the housing in it may be relatively good or even if it may happen to be non-residential” (5). This last sentence projects a trajectory of continual decline, rather than the potential for the housing to be repaired or brought up to a higher standard.
Blight connotes a virus: city leaders and planners fear that isolated instances of neglect will spread, that small segments of decay will grow into larger segments, and that “relatively good” housing will succumb to the influence of surrounding deterioration. In their *Housing Yearbook, 1939*, the National Association of Housing Officials (NAHO) pointed to the pressing need to address housing decline as a neighborhood or city issue rather than an individual one: “And each year, essentially sound residential areas in every major community are threatened with blight from within their own borders or by encroaching slums. Year after year, communities bear a staggering loss from the obsolescence of once sound neighborhoods [...]” (136). Blight can be stopped, they promise, only when “every property owner exercises a proper vigilance” (137).

Mabel Walker also reflects a second common, often concurrent, definition of blight: a focus on revenue rather than physical conditions. An expert on property assessment and taxation, Walker, like many others, advocated stricter zoning codes as a preventative for slums and blight. She also stressed the value (and potential value) of land rather than housing, emphasizing assessments based on location rather than the state of any buildings. Under this approach, blight has as much to do with an area’s economic potential as it does with the condition of specific existing structures. The Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority in the 1930s, for example, simply stated that, “A blighted area is an area that economically is not self-supporting” (qtd. in Walker 4), meaning that an area’s tax revenues do not meet the city’s expenditures. C. Louis Knight, a University of Pennsylvania economics instructor, gave confusing definitions in his 1930 article, “Blighted Areas and Their Effects Upon Urban Land Utilization”:

We may define the term “blighted area,” therefore, as *any area in which*
economic development has been considerably retarded, as compared with the development in the larger area, of which the area under consideration is a part. The term “blight,” as used here, is synonymous with deterioration or decadence. A blighted area is one of economic retardation, physical deterioration, and economic decay. (134, emphasis in original)

As for what causes “economic retardation” or “economic decay,” the sources are varied but it is worth noting that Knight includes the presence of non-whites on the list of what he terms “a nuisance”

Perhaps an industry locates in or near a residence community, or heavy traffic monopolizes the streets, or undesirable racial elements move in -- all of these have the same effects. [...] In the course of time the old residents will move away and those who take their places will be of a lower economic status. It becomes clearly apparent that the community as a place of residence has declined in desirability. (133-34)

The only solution for an area “where the blight results from the proximity of a nuisance” is to address the problem at its source: blight “will probably exist until the nuisance is removed” (134).

Most people do not recognize the correlation between an area’s economic potential and a designation of blight. The Brookings Institute’s Jerome Rothenberg identified a gap between how the general population perceives the definition of blight and how city planners and politicians apply it. For the general population, “blight” and “slum” are conflated, so that “the two have been dealt with as near synonyms and in
recognizably physical terms” (Rothenberg 42). In his 1967 analysis he wrote that, within urban planning circles, the terms had developed into distinct categories: “Slums are characterized by physical attributes, blight is a process of suboptimal land use.” Rothenberg’s observations therefore point to another important facet of urban renewal and the one most relevant to this chapter: a monolithic definition of “value.”

The use of eminent domain in economic development, rather than the more narrowly-defined civic need, became a central tenet of much 1950s urban planning and governance. The philosophy was already taking hold much earlier in the 20th century, however; the link between the “blighted” designation and planned economic development goes back at least to Progressive Era reforms. Clarence Arthur Perry, an important advocate of eminent domain for the sake of development, interwove his 1939 call for optimizing land use with an open-ended description of economic blight:

One of the most flagrant losses which city taxpayers have suffered, and are continuing to suffer, has resulted from the decline in productivity of property in central slum areas.[…] The irony of the situation lies in the fact that these districts generally have an intrinsically high land value. Since they are usually close to a downtown business and financial center their owners are alive to the possibility that these plots may be wanted for an extension of the main business district.[…] But this intrinsic value is only potential. It can be lost if it is not earned. A plot next door to a splendid bank building would be largely sacrificed if it were devoted to a laundry. (175)

The “intrinsic value” is strictly monetary; Perry’s definition does not incorporate factors
such as need, usefulness, historic or architectural significance, or personal value. Second, the monetary value is evaluated strictly in terms of tax revenue or the economic potential for the city. For a poor working family, and particularly for a poor black working family in 1939, that “splendid bank” to which Perry refers is of limited relevance. A laundry, however, can have very real impact on a community: it offers a utilitarian economic value (hiring neighborhood workers, allowing local residents the clean clothes necessary to go to work themselves without traveling extended distances for another laundry). The single business also has importance in terms of neighborhood continuity, becoming part of a journey through the neighborhood for groceries, supplies, or entertainment. With a new use (a lawyer’s office or a business building) the benefit to the financial or business district -- and those who work there -- may in strict financial terms outweigh the benefit to the residents who use the laundry. The disparity between the true value of a single real dollar to the members of these two groups can be enormous. Beyond this, the shift is not simply one of land use, but of who uses, is served by, or benefits from the land and the structure on that land.

Prejudice and bias frequently shape assignments of value. For some the problem did not revolve around the houses themselves but those residents seen as responsible for their decline. Congressman Robert Luce, a Massachusetts Representative and a member of the committee hearing proposed amendments to the 1937 Housing Act, described poverty as essentially predestined. The poor, he said, “are living in shacks and hovels because God made them unable to earn more” (United States Cong. 92). This assessment was within an expression of concern for the well-being of the poor. (Luce’s argument was vehemently countered by Nathan Straus, head of the U.S. Housing Authority.)
More disturbing comments come from Mildred Chadsey, Cleveland’s housing commissioner, who proudly claimed to have “caused over 200 tenements to be demolished or vacated” her first year in office (“Chasey, Mildred”). Echoing Ebenezer Scrooge, she wrote in 1914 that

There are those that argue that the miserable conditions that we find in these old homes do not make these people, but that they, because they are subnormal, will inevitably fall down the social ladder to the pit at its bottom. But why have the pit? Why not let the social waste go to the institutions that are designed to care for it, and so remove the possibility of its breeding more of its kind and spreading its infections throughout the community? (Chasey 86)

Pittsburgh had its share of suspicion, contempt, or at least disregard for residents of slum or blighted neighborhoods as well. Charles F. Lewis, director of Pittsburgh’s Buhl Foundation and a member of the city’s Planning Commission, advocated a housing “philosophy that is not socialistic but frankly capitalistic” (20). In 1937 he suggested the demolition of houses “or even of whole areas in which housing is dominantly insanitary and unsafe” (23), freeing up large blocks of land for private developers. The construction would be for the use and benefit “of new communities, not for slum dwellers, but for persons who can afford to rent present-day low-cost housing” (23). Those displaced by redevelopment could then move into the buildings vacated by those with the money to move up to the new properties. To build subsidized housing for the poor would be “defeatist” (18), anti-capitalistic, and blatantly unfair: “One effect of this grandiose scheme would be a serious social maladjustment. Millions of families who do not live in
slums and who manage to pay their way would find themselves not nearly so well housed as the dependent families in the lowest third of the population, who would enjoy life in new subsidized housing” (19). While Lewis does not endorse the use of public funds to construct new houses for the poor -- or, again, “the lowest third of the population” -- he does allow, “if necessary,” for “cash payments from public funds for rent relief” (23).

The most openly hostile words surprisingly came from the Pittsburgh Housing Association. On the first page of their *Housing in Pittsburgh* Three Year Report for 1931-33, the authors target the poverty and social problems of the Hill. They focus not on the buildings or even the physical neighborhood but on the population:

> Here is Pittsburgh’s greatest liability area. It has other liability areas but they are smaller. Here, in these obsolete dwellings, are housed the greatest number of those who make demands upon the community for relief. Here is the greatest center of crime and immorality. Here are massed the “controlled” voters. Here, then, is an area that is ripe and rotten ripe for reconstruction. (1)

The passage reflects abhorrence for the district and, it appears, for its residents. Moral judgment infuses the language and tone. The issues are not rates of disease, poverty, unemployment, or substandard housing, but immoral or morally deficient residents. The authors use language that connotes corrupted (and corrupting) parasites. The passage also exudes the familiar xenophobic perception and depiction of African Americans and poor ethnic groups as lazy, shiftless, and accustomed to living in squalor that manifested itself in the implied creeping menace.

The accompanying photograph, title, and caption encapsulate numerous ironies.
The ‘targeted area’ blends seamlessly into the rest of the city, its neighborhoods indistinguishable at that vantage point from those of Oakland (itself to undergo a dramatic transformation as the universities and cultural institutions displaced more of the residential areas in the photograph). The houses of the Hill District also extend forward in the photo, directly connecting to the Downtown area. Wylie Avenue is prominent, running beyond the frame on each side. A final irony of that opening photograph of the Three Year Report is hidden in the title and vantage point: “The Hill District (from the Gulf Building).” The Gulf Building was the headquarters of Gulf Oil and, until the construction of the U.S. Steel building in 1970, the tallest building in the city. William Larimer Mellon was Gulf Oil’s founder and largest investor and it was his cousin, Richard K. Mellon, who would be so instrumental in the Pittsburgh Renaissance that leveled the Lower Hill. The PHA report therefore literally opens with the money and power of Pittsburgh looking down upon some of its poorest and least powerful residents.

At the time the Pittsburgh Housing Association was compiling its report, the living conditions in the Hill could indeed be horrible. Employment was low, the cost of living high (rents remained higher than comparable living quarters in most other parts of the city), and crime was prevalent. The Tuberculosis League of Pittsburgh reported that

The authors provide no statistics to support their claims about crime levels in the Hill being the city’s worst. Just over a decade earlier Abraham Epstein had disproven a similar assumption about the district’s crime rates. See his *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* for an analysis of the discrepancy between the Hill District’s perceived crime rates and actual crime rates. See Sellin’s “The Negro Criminal: A Statistical Note,” written in 1928, for evidence that the crime statistics are faulty and reveal the prejudice of the law enforcement more than the criminality of African Americans. There were, for example, “occasions when murders were committed in the Negro districts of Pittsburgh, the police proceeded to make wholesale arrests of Negroes, only to free them in a few days because they had no evidence against them” (55). The arrests nonetheless became part of the area’s statistical records. See also Scott et al pgs.8-10 for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in the 1960s. As they note, “a Negro adolescent in the Hill District will be picked up and booked for the slightest misdemeanor such as turning over a garbage can on Halloween. But a youth of the same age in [the predominantly white and well-to-do boro of] Mt. Lebanon will not become a statistic, for an even more serious act will go without legal punishment” (8). Of adult vices, such as prostitution and gambling, the researchers stress that the black
in 1930 Pittsburgh suffered the highest infant mortality rate of any American city (Witches 2-3); the number of black infant deaths was 103.1 per 1000 (6). The secretary of the National Housing Conference, Helen Alfred, said conditions she witnessed in her 1933 visit to the Hill were “as bad as anything I have ever seen -- London included” (qtd. in “Slum Clearance Outlook Brighter”). But the 1930s were also when the Hill District was starting to enter its cultural and social prime. The district labeled “ripe and rotten ripe for reconstruction” was one of the most culturally important African American communities outside of Harlem.

The Pittsburgh Housing Association was involved with widespread and important efforts at making life easier, more sanitary, and safer in the Hill District during the three years covered by the report. PHA employees donated and collected funds for emergency repairs at individual apartments (13, 18), and the Housing Association found safer housing for a family being evicted from a condemned building (14). Executive Director John Ihder, describing the philosophy of the PHA during the Depression, voiced a belief in the moral responsibility of aiding the poor: “Filth, wretchedness, squalor it believed to be inexcusable in a country that has superabundant wealth, whose economic difficulties are due chiefly to lack of wisdom in distributing its wealth” (10). Whatever actions the PHA took or endorsed in the Hill from 1931-1933, however, the only policies referenced in the report involved demolition.

The review marks what the association “hopes and believes” is “the end of the depression” and they point explicitly to widespread, comprehensive “housing work” as a

residents of the Hill District bear an unfair degree of blame. The authors point to the large numbers of police officers “on the take” and the “white nonresidents” who actually own the illegal establishments (10) but are typically not associated with the Hill’s rampant crime, and therefore not held responsible by the courts or commentators such as the authors of the 1931-1933 PHA report.
core method of escaping the depression: “What was once the concern of social reformers and the sport of speculators, has become the principal hope of economic recovery” (9).

The PHA saw redevelopment as an excellent means of generating construction jobs. At the very least, demolition work -- tearing down the worst and most dangerous structures -- was offering much-needed and relatively steady employment. A larger-scale demolition would bring more opportunity to the financially-troubled city and area.

This was the other part of the “economic blight” equation: whether redevelopment would stimulate the broader regional economy. Summarizing the work of Otto A. Davis and Andrew B. Whinston, Jerome Rothenberg wrote, “Under their analysis some slums need not reflect blight -- they may represent optimal resource use. On the other hand, areas that are not slums may be blighted. To eradicate slums that are not blighted produces no benefit in terms of aggregate national product” (42), a view which seems to remove residents from the formula almost entirely. The authors of the PHA report warn of the social but particularly economic consequences of ignoring current housing conditions: “Vigorous enforcement of housing and sanitary laws is always in order to protect the public health and welfare. New significance now attaches to it because law enforcement will tend to hasten the wholesome conversion of slums and liability areas into assets” (8).

Situated between Downtown and Oakland, the Hill District offered unique redevelopment potential. In 1942, George Evans referred to the Hill as “an area of sub-standard housing through which we must pass on our way to and from the business district and our residential section” (Evans, “Is Low Cost” 1), framing his statement in the familiar language of “us” and “them.” The initial phase of the Pittsburgh Renaissance
focused on the Point and Downtown area, extending from the water’s edge to the border of the existing business district; the adjacent Hill District would be a logical part of a revitalized city center. “Rising in a magnificent slope along the Triangle,” the URA wrote in 1957, “this area is strategically situated within easy walking distance of the highly developed and concentrated mid-town business district” (URA, *Lower Hill...Residential 1*). “The rebuilt Lower Hill with its ideal location will add new beauty, new vitality and new working, living and recreational space to Pittsburgh -- a city renowned for redevelopment” (2).

The city had far more at stake than aesthetics. Suburban life is popularly associated with the 1950s but by 1933 the Pittsburgh Housing Association warned that “The rivalry between suburb and center has entered a new phase which, unless controlled and wisely guided, may bring ruin to both” (PHA, *Housing, 1931-33*, 19). By 1942 suburbia was taking hold and cities were starting to see the economic losses as a result; George Evans’ hope was that redeveloping the land would remove the sub-standard housing (and its inhabitants), increase tax revenues, and hopefully lure people back from the suburbs.

Robert M. Fogelson examines the downward trajectory of the central business district in *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950*. His chapter “Inventing Blight” focuses on the compounding factors leading to the nation’s urban redevelopment programs. The loss of shoppers corresponded to reduced tax revenue, while many expenditures remained constant or even increased:

> The other development was that the movement outward was highly selective. The upper and middle classes were moving to the periphery and
the suburbs. But the lower class, many of whose members belonged to one or another of the nation’s ethnic and racial minorities, were staying put – some because they did not want to move, others because they could not afford to. More often than not, these people lived within a long walk or short ride of the central business district. But they had little money to spend in downtown stores and specialty shops, little reason to retain downtown lawyers and accountants, and little cause to deal with downtown banks and insurance companies. (318)

As city populations declined, city budgets headed into the red. From the perspective of city and business leaders, demolishing the offending neighborhoods solved both problems: a dire housing situation and a desire to bring the upper and middle classes back into the city. According to Fogelson, “Underlying this position was an assumption that, in the words of a leading consulting firm, ‘if we can again make the city an attractive place in which to live we can lure back many of the higher-income families from the suburbs’” (318). City leaders saw slum clearance, rather than reliance on inefficient house-by-house building and health code enforcement, as the best way to alleviate the overcrowding, pollution, and traffic congestion that encouraged suburban flight in the first place. Replacing slum neighborhoods with wealthier residents and expanded business districts would stimulate the downtown economy and city tax base. Targeting blight and redeveloping peripheral neighborhoods that had not yet reached slum levels would forestall what was seen as inevitable decline and would open large swaths of land up to high revenue-producing uses.

The pattern of the suburban exodus and the resulting impact on the local economy
was very much in evidence in Pittsburgh. By the time the Allegheny Conference officially formed in 1944, the city was already experiencing the loss of population that would accelerate in the following decades with the collapse of the American steel industry. The largest losses were in the white population: “Many white workers responded to the retrenchment in steel by leaving the city. During the 1920s the city’s white population grew by only 12 percent, and it declined absolutely from 1930 to the 1980s. Blacks, with fewer options elsewhere, saw their population grow by 46 percent during the 1920s and increase in each subsequent decade” (Glasco, “Double Burden”).

The urban renewal plans instituted in Pittsburgh, as in cities across the nation, focused on ways of making the targeted areas more appealing and relevant to those with expendable income, to draw those citizens back into the city to again shop, dine, attend a cultural event, or reside.

The City Planning Association, chaired by Richard K. Mellon, released an initial plan for the Hill District’s redevelopment that was described by The Charette as “the transformation of 70 blighted acres into a cultural, residential, recreational, and educational community on a scope unparalleled in modern metropolitan areas” (“Pittsburgh Center”). Mellon advocated the use of the Redevelopment Authority to obtain the land with the development itself relying on private rather than public funding. The initial map shows the Pittsburgh Center (the structure later developed as the Civic Arena) located adjacent to Fullerton Street, flanked by what appear to be intact Wylie and Bedford Avenues. The plan fit a modern land-use model, it made economic sense as laid out in Evans’ 1942 article, and it worked geographically to ease the city’s stifling traffic congestion. Mayor Lawrence said in 1951 that the redevelopment would include “a new
Crosstown boulevard, a sports arena and auditorium, parking that will serve both the area and the business district, and walk-to-work-in-the-city housing” (qtd. in “Mayor”). The plan referred to a different population, a different business district, and a different neighborhood than the ones already in the current Hill District; after all, many of the current residents were already walking to work and enjoying the Hill’s own flourishing business district.

The brochure the Chamber of Commerce of Pittsburgh distributed announcing the plan was breathless in its description of a multi-use facility that would include a convention hall, sports arena, concert hall, and restaurants. “What are the Precedents for the Pittsburgh Center?” the authors rhetorically asked: “None. In no place have all the facilities planned for the center been brought together in one building. [...] The nearest approach to the Pittsburgh Center idea is the very successful Rockefeller Center in New York City” (Pittsburgh Center 2). The Post Gazette article “A City of the Future -- All Within a City of Today” gave readers an image that was “Fantastic [...]. But certainly not impossible,” where

A hovering helicopter poises for seconds, then gently lands on the flat roof of the striking circular structure [...]. Alighting passengers find a spacious modern hotel just across the broad landscaped street. Moving stairways connect the hotel with the railroad station below, and generous loading ramps provide access to public transportation which connects by wide, open streets with the super-modern apartment houses in the area. The future is defined in a very specific light, looks a very specific way, and is reminiscent of Disney’s “World of Tomorrow” exhibit. As noted in the previous chapter, the
language and policies of city leaders and developers elided the voices and needs of those living in the neighborhoods being redeveloped, particularly those who were poor and particularly those who were black. City Councilman George Evans in 1943 therefore looked to the “500 acres [that] could be reclaimed” and “the elimination of cancerous areas in the cities” (Evans, “Here Is a Postwar”). The needs of those living in the Hill District are eclipsed but, as in Disney’s vision of the future, poverty and slums are not relevant to the discussion because they would, somehow, no longer exist.

While the economic impact suburbanization was having on city finances was becoming clear, the efficacy of targeting blighted and slum neighborhoods as a way of luring in the wealthy was far less certain. Writing in the American Economic Review, Ernest M. Fisher of the American Bankers Association warned that such optimism was not always well-founded. Those pursuing redevelopment, he wrote, also apparently believed that a blighted area’s “rehabilitation must also accomplish the recapture of population and the purchasing power -- taxpaying capacity -- if it is to be successful. The implicit assumption appears to be that the physical changes proposed would so improve the appearance of these areas that they would become attractive to the population and purchasing power that have escaped them or are about to do so” (337). Fisher warned that the exodus was likely far more complicated than “dissatisfaction with the appearance” (337). More fundamentally, “from the economic point of view one of the first questions to be asked about rehabilitation of any area is: For what income group is it proposed to utilize the area after rehabilitation?” (338). Those originally living in the redeveloped area would not be able to afford to remain there, and those with the money to make a meaningful impact on the local and municipal economy were unlikely to
Nevertheless, the Housing Act of 1949, which introduced federal funding for large-scale renewal projects, promised to halt urban blight through the process of slum clearance and economic expansion. Legislators removed a requirement linking the numbers of demolitions to the construction of low-income housing. At the same time, many of the nation’s cities turned their focus away from finding ways to improve the living conditions of current slum residents. While many still held increased low-income housing as a secondary goal, cities struggled with the compounding financial strain of increasingly poor populations and declining coffers as more residents and businesses moved away. Renewal projects leaned towards replacing poor and working class residents with ones better equipped to financially sustain not just themselves but the larger community. Redevelopment also spread to areas not characterized by slum housing, and to stable communities on the edge of city centers.

Whereas Congress’ initial intention with the Housing Act of 1937 was to address the nation’s housing shortage, especially affordable and safe housing, the focus in later legislation shifted towards strengthening the American city center. There was far more public funding available for the demolition of slum housing and the development of upscale residential, shopping, and business districts than for the construction of low-income housing. The succession of federal Housing Acts established large grants for cities to combat blight and expand economic revitalization plans; blight declarations based on ‘inefficient land use’ increased dramatically. The National Housing Act of 1954 allowed for federal subsidies of the procurement and redevelopment process. In advance of this legislation, Illinois passed its own sweeping legislation allowing for a return.
declaration of blight even before blight exists. If blight is the stage before slum, their target was the even more amorphous stage before blight.

The depictions and representations of physical blight repeatedly reveal prejudice and bias. The correlation between depictions of physical blight and development based on economic blight raises suspicions about political manipulation. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Gail Sansbury, at the time professor and doctoral student respectively at the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research, offer a disturbing and familiar example of urban renewal that erased a vibrant historical neighborhood for the sake of modernized lifestyles and higher tax revenues. They provide a fascinating short history of the transition of Los Angeles’ Bunker Hill. In the late 19th century it was a “fashionable” (395), upper-class neighborhood. Early in the following century it shifted: “Bunker Hill was still a good residential environment, but for a different segment of the population” (396). The community now included the poor, the elderly, ethnic and immigrant groups, and homosexuals. The mansions were divided into tenements; small businesses catering to the needs of the residents proliferated. It was, in short, a diverse, naturally occurring mixed-use neighborhood.

Bunker Hill was declared blighted in 1951 to make way for redevelopment that would dramatically change the land-use and the residents. The mansions, businesses, and residents were replaced with parking lots. Present-day Bunker Hill is “the premier office district of downtown Los Angeles” and “a corporate landscape of high-rise office towers and modernist plazas” (395). Because most people outside urban planning interpret blight according to physical deterioration, not economic potential, arguments claiming blight predictably focus on evidence of deterioration. This was certainly the case with
Bunker Hill. The authors’ description of the propaganda surrounding the area’s
declaration of blight is worth quoting at length because it illustrates an apparently
deliberate attempt to reshape the public perception of the neighborhood and thereby
justify the designation of the area as blighted:

Unlike the evidence from earlier periods, the photographs and accounts of
Bunker Hill streets in the 1950s are dominated by “negative” images. A
series of photos commissioned by the City Housing Authority sought to
document “substandard housing” and “blight” in Bunker Hill. Unlike the
earlier images of well-tended front yards and entry ways, these
photographs frequently show the backs of poorly maintained wooden
multi-story residential buildings. Children play in these back yards and
alleys, often next to incinerators. Drying laundry hangs above, and parked
cars crowd for space. These photographs stand in stark contrast to the
image of vibrant streets and the accounts of a neighborly way of life
conveyed in a documentary about Bunker Hill filmed by USC students in
1956. The still images, used by both the Housing Authority and the
Community Redevelopment Agency, became symbols of decay and
neglect associated with a failing social order in a period that championed
urban renewal as a means of promoting economic efficiency. They acted
as rhetorical devices meant to call forth material conditions and to
persuade public opinion of the meanings attached to these conditions. The
means of “correction” and the perceived “unfavorable environment” of
Bunker Hill involved the razing of all of its 396 buildings and the
displacement of its 11,000 mostly low-income residents. (399)

In the public sector,

[t]he police department depicted the hill as a high crime area; the fire department stressed the difficulty of having to fight fires on top of the hill; the department of health classes only eighteen percent of the residential units as acceptable habitations; the planning department complained about the cost of services to Bunker Hill residents in combination with the loss of tax revenues; and the Community Redevelopment Agency, established in 1948 to oversee redevelopment efforts in downtown Los Angeles, painted a picture of blight and dereliction in Bunker Hill. (400)

This is not to say that substandard housing did not exist in Bunker Hill; the photographs were not staged. The depictions were, however, certainly selective. The most generous interpretation of the discrepancy between representations which Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury present is that the various agencies and city officials simply did not recognize the validity of a neighborhood that included houses with antiquated plumbing or street layouts based on an irregular, hilly terrain and the needs of pedestrians, horses, and wagons instead of automobiles. Regardless of the city’s motivations, the designation of the area as blighted was not one with which the residents agreed.

Conditions in the Hill District were harsher for most of the 20th century than they ever were in Bunker Hill, but the conflicting representations and interpretations Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury point to in the L.A. neighborhood are still relevant to Pittsburgh. Similarities exist in an urban redevelopment program that took place in East Liberty, a mixed neighborhood across town from the Hill District. In their 1957 annual
report, the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association -- working under the slogan “Gateway to the Future” -- announced the start of the “comprehensive renewal study” of approximately 250 acres in and immediately surrounding East Liberty (17). The authors include a photo of what appears to be a thriving neighborhood business district, an impression borne out by their description of its importance to the surrounding areas. In the 1957 report they combine descriptions of success and blight: “The residential areas adjacent to it are among the most convenient and best serviced in the Pittsburgh Area. And yet, because of its age and the shortcomings in its original and subsequent development, this section is plagued by all the usual problems of similar areas -- traffic congestion, lack of sufficient parking, haphazard and conflicting mixture of land uses, blighted residences and stores, competition from suburban shopping centers, etc” (17). In their 1958 annual report the association identified the neighborhood as “the second busiest shopping area in the City of Pittsburgh and the third most active area in the County” (15). They also announced the federal approval of the Eligibility and Relocation Report for the renewal of East Liberty.

The caption of the photograph in the initial 1957 report reads, “View along Frankstown Avenue in East Liberty shows one of the blighted parts of this major shopping district” (17). The caption (or report) does not identify what makes the street “blighted,” though the 1958 report uses the term in another overview of the agency’s renewal study: “the shopping district of East Liberty has been afflicted with almost all the problems of in-city shopping areas -- a haphazard and conflicting mixture of land uses, blighted residences and stores, traffic bottlenecks and inadequate parking” (15). The congestion and “inadequate parking” was presumably at least in part a result of the
neighborhood’s popularity with shoppers. The area never recovered from renewal.

The same fate befell the city’s lower North Side, including the popular Allegheny Market House. Present day North Side and East Liberty both feature traffic loops that were supposed to ease traffic congestion but are in reality confusing and difficult to navigate, despite being designed for the commuter driver rather than the resident pedestrian. The mall at the heart of the North Side development, Allegheny Center Mall -- the one which replaced Allegheny Market House -- is currently serving as an office building after struggling as a shopping mall for decades. The administration of Pittsburgh’s current mayor, Luke Ravenstahl’s, plans to restore the original street grid on the North Side that redevelopment erased (Semmes). East Liberty is at last seeing a renewed business district, as the redevelopment that divided the area is also itself again redeveloped, but the growth comes, once again, at the expense of many long-time residents.

An earlier study of Pittsburgh’s housing, the PHA’s three year study, reveals another example of contrasts, this time within a single document, and this time in the presentation of two different housing populations. The PHA’s report was the one that opened with a photo of the Hill and the commentary that referenced the area as “ripe and rotten ripe for reconstruction.” Because of poverty and a lack of effective government action, the sizable problems in the Hill District were intensified versions of what was occurring throughout the city. The Depression years covered by the PHA report were the ones which struck most deeply at the region’s various populations. In addition to slum housing areas, Pittsburgh had several major shantytowns, the largest of which was in the Strip District. Here lived not just unemployed, itinerant men but families
struggling to survive. Pittsburgh photojournalist Ed Salamony’s photographs of the area show individuals surviving amidst astounding squalor, but maintaining dignity. One of the most remarkable photos, on permanent display at the Photo Antiquities Museum on the North Side, shows a man shaving in the street, a pan of water at his feet and a mirror hung on the outside of a wall. Another is of a black family -- mother, father, and young child -- standing between makeshift housing.

The photographs in *Housing in Pittsburgh* feature the houses, not the people, but the PHA writers are clearly sympathetic towards those living in the shantytowns. The association worked hard to stay the demolition order from the Bureau of Building Inspection and was successful in part because “its inhabitants were self respecting men whose chief lack was a job” (24). But their admiration for the residents of the shantytowns exists in strange contrast to the contempt expressed in the opening caption for the residents of the Hill. An image of the Alpine Village shantytown, located on the South Side Slopes, was described in language that is hard to reconcile with the photograph: “The site is picturesque, the cabins, built of stones, turf, odds and ends of lumber, are themselves more picturesque than those in the other colonies. But the sanitation and the water supply are both unsatisfactory” (27). Again, the language is even harder to reconcile with the opening description of the Hill.

By definition a shantytown would involve more squalor and less opportunity for sanitation than a permanent neighborhood like the Hill District. Those in the shantytowns experienced the same troubles with employment and hunger as people elsewhere in the city, including the Hill. The PHA pushed for the acknowledgement that the men in the shantytowns travelled to the region looking for work, not handouts.
Although the city demolished some of the shantytowns and forced their residents out, the PHA urged a different approach:

The remedy, however, is not mere suppression, nor is it transference of the inhabitants to public or private institutions where they may be herded and regimented. Many are men who have occupied responsible positions, whose desire is to become again self-supporting and who meanwhile wish to be as nearly self-supporting as they can, to provide something they can call their own. Poor as the “colonies” are in some ways, they do minister to self respect more than does an institutional type of care where everything is provided. The way out is by providing facilities for more effective self help. (27)

Yet those immigrants and black migrants who crowded in to the Hill District typically faced far longer journeys looking for precisely the same things.

While the PHA repeatedly stressed the need for additional low-income housing, they nonetheless advocated the demolition of buildings in a way that contrasts with the pleas made on behalf of those living in the shantytowns:

In past times of prosperity, when unfit houses were crowded with workers attracted to the city by opportunities for employment, the question was, shall we put people out on the street? In times of depression, the question was, shall we throw people out when they have no money to pay rent, or force the landlord to repair broken down or filthy toilets when he is getting no revenue? Strange as it may seem to the uninformed, the answer in both cases is “Yes.” The result would be a frank facing of the situation and a
The “frank facing of the situation and the remedy” referenced in the passage stems from a conviction that existing methods of relief were woefully inadequate, that something must be done to combat the inertia of bureaucracy and politics, and that “relief alone meant slow starvation, ruinous draining of our resources” (21).

Further, the extensive work the PHA accomplished in the shantytowns stemmed in part from the structures’ temporary status. Pennsylvania Railroad owned the land in the Strip District housing the largest shantytown, meaning the PHA was able to secure permission to maintain and regulate the structures there from a single entity, not a multitude of landlords. It could install and monitor toilets and bathing facilities because there were no conflicts of interest or charges of unfairness; when the PHA elsewhere proposed a sewer line installation plan using work relief provisions, “it was disapproved on the score that other house owners had had to pay for their sewers.” An attempt to combine the work of several agencies and charities in the rehabilitation of properties inhabited by families on relief was likewise blocked “because this meant a benefit to individual owners” (16).

The report runs thirty-two pages. It includes other photographs, primarily the various shantytowns across the city. (Two of the pictures show toilets with the title, “City Officials Shown Conditions.”) Yet the presentation of the Hill District at the opening of the report sets up the Hill in a particular light. No other photos are set off from the rest of the text. No other group is described with such aggression. As discussed in the chapter dealing with the migrant vs. immigrant experience, both populations faced obstacles and dealt with innumerable hardships; the obstacles and hardships faced by most immigrant
groups, however, were ultimately more easily surmounted.

The authors of the PHA report do not distinguish between the racial, ethnic, and economic groups living in the Hill District, but it is hard to ignore the fact that the area they target with hostility had the city’s largest African American population and was a neighborhood over which the city had been struggling to gain control. In contrast, the shantytowns they sympathize with and praise -- while integrated -- were predominantly white and, particularly in the case of the Strip District, were more easily controlled by city agencies. In relation to the Hill District, in contrast, Mayor Lawrence spoke of “an obligation” in 1951 when he spoke of the need “to clean out an area where the tuberculosis rate is three times the city-wide average, where 9,000 people live on 105.5 acres, where our American society is not living anywhere near its boasts and its promises” (“qtd. in Mayor”). The language also points to the demolition -- or ‘cleaning out’ -- and not the placement of those 9,000 residents. Mayor Lawrence does not specify just who has an obligation to whom.

A designation of blight has clear ramifications to property rights. It legally opens an area or property up to seizure and redevelopment for a variety of purposes. The Federal Housing Act of 1937 allocated federal funding for low-income housing and required the demolition of an equal number of blighted units. Every subsequent Housing Act pointed to the prevention of the spread of blight as a primary goal. Backed by this federal authority and, eventually, federal funds, municipalities have used both the public misperception and the looseness of the legal definition of blight to their advantage. Colin Gordon in “Blighting the Way: Urban Renewal, Economic Development, and the Elusive Definition of Blight” writes about the consequences of such shifting standards where
“‘blight’ is rarely defined with any precision” and “the courts have granted local interests almost carte blanche in their creative search for ‘blighted’ areas eligible for federal funds or local tax breaks” (n.pag.). The definitions offered by Davis and Whinston and, earlier, Mabel L. Walker, also emphasize an interpretation of blight as it is more commonly being used today in eminent domain cases. The landmark 2005 Supreme Court case *Kelo vs. City of New London* upheld the controversial yet long-standing municipal practice of taking property from a private owner for development by another private entity; this was the process used throughout Pittsburgh’s 1950s urban renewal programs. The Court ruled that economic development alone is a sufficient reason for the designation of blight and the subsequent use of eminent domain to seize a property or area that might bring more revenue through another use. The court, validating practices already in place, left the definition of blight largely to the states to determine.

Shortly after the court’s decision, Ilya Somin, a professor at George Mason University’s School of Law, called for states to enforce more narrow definitions of blight and curtail the applications of eminent domain. In “Blight Sweet Blight,” Somin argued against the expanding use of economic development as a sufficient reason for the designation of blight:

> Early blight cases upheld takings in areas that closely fit the intuitive notion of blight: dilapidated, dangerous, or disease-ridden neighborhoods. In *Berman v. Parker*, the 1954 decision in which the Supreme Court first upheld the constitutionality of blight condemnation, the D.C. neighborhood in question was characterized by “[m]iserable and disreputable housing conditions.”
Today’s legal definitions of blight are far more expansive. In 2001, a New York appellate court decided that the Times Square area of downtown Manhattan was sufficiently blighted to justify the condemnation of land to build a new headquarters for The New York Times.

The Nevada Supreme Court recently upheld a determination that downtown Las Vegas was blighted, thereby permitting condemnation of property for the purpose of building a parking lot for casinos. [...] If Times Square and downtown Las Vegas are blighted, it is difficult to find any place that isn’t. (n.pag.)

Whatever value the blight designation may have held for cities and communities, it was sometimes a tool for enriching planners and developers, often at the expense of local, state and federal agencies, and always at a high cost for the citizens affected.

The Hill District of Radio Golf is neither Las Vegas nor New York. Whether blight is defined by sub-optimum land-use or the existence of slum housing, the Hill that Bedford Hills Redevelopment plans to develop fits the definition of “blighted.” As Harmond Wilks learns by the end of the play, however, a neighborhood’s worth is not determined by financial guidelines; true renewal can mean fixing up an old community ballfield rather than building a new Starbucks; and a painting party can make an old house look better, but real meaning stems from a community ready to work together again. Radio Golf calls attention to contemporary issues of redevelopment and designations of blight, but Wilson moves the conversation from theoretical definitions to lives lived. He places the emphasis back on the people so often displaced or ignored in
the redevelopment process.

II. The Play

*Radio Golf* addresses urban renewal more didactically than any of Wilson’s other works; it is also his most overtly political play. This is not because a central character is a political hopeful but because the play so clearly echoes ongoing arguments in Pittsburgh as it closes out the century and the cycle. Unlike the other plays, which so effectively illustrate a vibrant culture and history that existed all along, *Radio Golf* overtly points to ways to fight for the neighborhood’s immediate future – Pittsburgh’s “now.” “Hey, you have to go forward into the 21st century,” Wilson said in his last interview. “I figure we could go forward united” (Parks 22). *Radio Golf* offers the moment when the people of the Hill must decide as a community whether they will claim the right to define the “something else” the Hill will become, or whether the decision will once again be made by, and for, those off the Hill.

The play presents some analytical challenges. Many critics acknowledged it as a lesser play, as flawed or unfinished. Ben Brantley of *The New York Times* called it “Mr. Wilson’s weakest play” (Brantley, “Voices”). Robert Cahill emphasized semantics in his review for *Live Design* when he wrote that the play completed the cycle: “I say completed,’ rather than ‘finished,’ as Wilson vigorously rewrote his pieces, and I suspect he would have taken a sharper pen to *Radio Golf* had he not died in 2005.” Hilton Als was the most disparaging, writing in *The New Yorker* that “*Radio Golf* is a formulaic work that illustrates why Wilson was not, in the end, a great artist: his approach to examining the lives of black Americans was traditional, often cliché-ridden, and comfortably middlebrow.” Despite flaws, however, *Radio Golf* stands as an important
moment in the Pittsburgh Cycle. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* drama critic Christopher Rawson pointed out the significance of the play as the conclusion to the cycle and the end of Wilson’s career: “Completed as Wilson was dying of liver cancer in 2005, it was his final work, but, as his ‘90s play, it also completes the century. ‘The Final Chapter’ say the Public Theater ads. ‘Full Circle’ said the ads at Atlanta’s Alliance Theater [...]” (Rawson, “Closing the Circle” W-18). In a review of a later production, Rawson pointed again to the play’s position in the cycle: “The bottom line is that *Radio Golf* is a very good play, not necessarily great -- although it might be, if it didn't have to suffer comparison with the best of Wilson's other plays. And that's my point: *Radio Golf* is the capstone to the whole Pittsburgh Cycle. So whatever it is in itself, as the climax of the cycle, it's better than very good: It's indispensable” (Rawson, “Today’s Pittsburgh”).

More important than a symbolic closure is the play’s relevance to a contemporary audience, perhaps particularly a Pittsburgh audience. When the Hill District branch of the Carnegie Library reopened in October 2008, the community chose to honor the play as a way of honoring their new library. The listing for the opening in the local papers’ events calendars referenced the book’s journey from the temporary library site to its new home, one of the city’s most impressive branches:

At 9:30 a.m. a processional delivers August Wilson’s “Radio Golf,” the last book housed at the former Dinwiddle Street Library at Phoenix Hill Mall. Drummers are to signal the arrival of the book as it reaches its new Centre Avenue home. The event includes an opening ceremony and balloon drop at 10 a.m., followed by family activities and entertainment. (City Calender)
Director Ted Pappas, discussing the Pittsburgh Public Theater production of *Radio Golf*, stated that “there’s no audience in the world that will understand the play better than the Public Theater audience, with all the other Wilson plays having been here over 20 years, and with all this one’s local references” (Rawson, “Closing the Circle” W-36).

The play conveys an immediacy due not merely to the period portrayed but also to this specificity and relevance. Completed in 2005 but set in 1997, the play anticipates present-day, ongoing struggles over eminent domain and corporate-driven plans for the re-reshaping of poor but centrally located urban neighborhoods. “*Radio Golf* is set in 1997, which in Pittsburgh terms is barely yesterday,” Rawson wrote in a 2008 review, and after a brief summary of the plot’s conflicts he concluded by saying, “All that’s missing is a battle over a new casino or arena” (Rawson, “Closing the Circle” W-18). East Liberty, a neighborhood Pittsburgh officials transformed and destroyed by misguided urban renewal plans in the 1950s, is currently undergoing just such a reshaping. Even the name has been co-opted, as the newly-upscale sections have been rebranded as the less stigmatized East End. East Liberty, geographically amputated as developers propose additional redevelopment, remains largely a working and lower class neighborhood with large numbers of minorities, primarily African Americans. The gentrified section formerly-known-as-East Liberty draws its shoppers and new residents from affluent neighborhoods, including Shadyside and Squirrel Hill. The vision presented

35 Many parties, including Pittsburgh’s mayor, Luke Ravenstahl, and the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey franchise, wanted the city’s sole casino license awarded to the Isle of Capri Casinos, Inc., The organization proposed building the casino in the Hill District and funding close to $300 of a new hockey arena to replace the outdated Mellon Arena. Isle of Capri’s failure to win their bid was in large part due to the vocal protests of various Hill District residents groups and the nearby Duquesne University. North Shore Gaming eventually won the license and constructed The Rivers Casino along the riverfront in a largely non-residential section of the North Side. The plan to construct a new hockey arena was also contentious. Various neighborhood groups demanded the Penguins agree to an economic stimulus plan for the community and a voice at the planning table.
within the play of a ‘revitalized’ Hill District – featuring Starbucks, Whole Foods, and Barnes & Noble – has actually been realized across town in the real world East End, with a Trader Joe’s added, and a Borders replacing the Barnes & Noble.

*Radio Golf* closes the 20th century but it also points to the 21st. *Gem of the Ocean* looked back to slavery and emancipation and forward to a new life in the Hill District; *Radio Golf* is a transition between the desolation of the 1980s and the hope for a new era. The play emerges from the bleak despair of *King Hedley II*. That work, set in 1985, features one of the most brutal and disturbing images in a cycle with its share of both: at the end of the play, the title character is accidentally shot and killed by his mother. King’s blood spills onto the ground he had so vigorously defended, the same ground where Aunt Ester’s cat is buried. Stool Pigeon, the stage directions explain, “suddenly recognizes that the sacrifice has been made. There is blood on the cat’s grave! He is joyous!” (102). King is the sacrificial lamb, the best the Hill District had to offer, the man equated in the play to Isaac, the fatted calf, the Conquering Lion of Judea, and the Redeemer. King’s death will allow for the rebirth of Aunt Ester.

Yet the sacrifice of his death is not enough. For Aunt Ester to return, the Hill will need to be reborn as well. The question posed throughout *Radio Golf* is what the new Hill will look like, what will be “born.” Will it be a reincarnation of the old Hill District, one based on the poor black residents Aunt Ester work so long to sustain? Or will it be a new Hill altogether, rebranded as Bedford Hills and offering the existing residents little more than a health clinic? When Old Joe first visits the Bedford Hills Redevelopment office, Harmond combines his goals as mayor with his plans for redevelopment. Extending Old Joe’s analogy that “America is a giant slot machine” (21)
that does not accept everyone’s quarter, Harmond launches into a speech that clearly mimics the language of redevelopment:

HARMOND: If it don’t take all the quarters you fix it. Anybody with common sense will agree to that. What they don’t agree on is how to fix it. Some people say you got to tear it down to fix it. Some people say you got to build it up to fix it. Some people say they don’t know how to fix it. Some people say they don’t want to be bothered with fixing it. You mix them all in a pot and stir it up and you got America. That’s what makes this country great.

OLD JOE: I say get a new machine. What you say?

HARMOND: We fixing it. We’re going to redevelop this whole area. We’ll get the Hill District growing so fast people from all over will start moving back. (22)

A more accurate phrasing would be “people from all over will start moving in” as the populations that moved out -- or were forced out – differ from the ones who will be able to afford the new housing in Bedford Hills.

Harmond assumes he can “bring back” the Hill District by removing the existing structures and replacing them with new ones. He seems to miss the point that the redevelopment will replace current residents of the Hill as well, that the loss of a remaining community structure will damage the social fabric of the Hill. The problem, Old Joe tries to show him, is not with the buildings (or the inhabitants) but with the larger political and social system that perpetuates poverty. America-as-slot-machine pays off for the House, but the poor black man’s quarter will not even work in a game where the
odds are already stacked against him. “Is the problem with the quarter or with the machine? Do you know? Somebody running for mayor ought to know that” (21-22), Old Joe insists. He leaves the question open-ended not because he himself does not know the answer, but because he wants to see if Harmond does. Harmond unfortunately does not: he shifts the analogy and equates the faulty machine to the Hill District. Old Joe equates the slot machine to an American economic and power structure and therefore rejects the entire premise of Harmond’s plan, advocating that solving the problem means starting over -- “get a new machine” -- rather than tinkering with one that is inherently flawed.

Further, Wilson shows audiences throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle that death is not simply an ending point. In Fences, Troy Maxson’s family reunites for his funeral and remembers his life. His children, Cory and Raynell, join together to share one of Troy’s old songs; as they sing “Old Blue” -- what Raynell refers to as “Papa’s dog what he sing about all the time” (99) -- Troy’s legacy clearly lives on, mitigating the finality of death. Hambone’s death triggers Sterling’s defiant action at the end of Two Trains Running. Becker’s death at the end of Jitney similarly coincides with his son’s decision to carry on Becker’s work and unite the jitney drivers in their protest against the city’s use of eminent domain.

In response to an interviewer’s comment about the numerous instances of death in his plays, Wilson rejected the pessimism that the pattern might imply, saying, “Death is such an integral part of life; you can’t have one without the other” (Shannon, Dramatic 208). The final tragic scene of King Hedley II compresses emotions that link life and death, tragedy and romance. King’s mother, Ruby, dances at the end of the play in celebration of her engagement to Elmore. Moments later she will fatefuly intervene in a
dispute that has unbeknownst to her already been peacefully resolved. In that rare moment of hope, however, Ruby sings, waltzes, and, according to the stage directions, “for one brief moment, all the possibilities of life are shining” (88). While this unexpected expression of happiness accentuates the pathos of King’s death, the possibility of happiness in the future is itself also tied to his death.

Audiences familiar with The Piano Lesson also know that death does not even mean that someone is gone; the dead can come back to connect with the living. An extended exchange between the children in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone similarly revolves around Reuben’s insistence that he was scolded by the ghost of Miss Mabel, Seth Holly’s mother. Throughout the cycle, this challenge to the finality of death corresponds to an ongoing debate about how the past fits into the present and future. As with The Piano Lesson, where Bernice and Boy Willie each have competing claims on the family piano as well as competing ideas about how to honor their ancestors, Radio Golf includes opposing voices – each valid in its own way – about how best to revive the Hill, and thus its people. Here the focus is not a family but a community trying to heal itself, trying to recapture some of its past glory and establish a viable economic future.

There may not even be enough life left in the old Hill District to resuscitate. That manifestation died long ago, whether with Aunt Ester or the riots of 1968 or the removal of the Lower Hill during urban renewal. When Harmond tries to explain his plan to “bring back” the neighborhood in Radio Golf, Sterling Johnson rejects his vision. “How you gonna bring it back? It’s dead,” he says: “It take Jesus Christ to bring it back. What you mean is you gonna put something else in its place. Say that. But don’t talk about bringing the Hill back. The Hill District’s dead” (15). Sterling’s assessment may appear
bleak but death for Wilson remains a necessary part of the life cycle, whether for people or communities. This explains Stool Pigeon’s joy at King’s blood on the ground in *King Hedley II*. Something will grow on the grave of the Hill; the question is what. Unlike the ‘clean slate’ approach of urban renewal in *Radio Golf*, however, Wilson calls for changing the damaged political and cultural structures rather than the actual buildings themselves.

The move to an uncharted future ties in to a fundamental change in *Radio Golf*, the inclusion of a different set of characters: “I knew I had to write about the black middle class. For the most part, they are missing from the rest of my plays” (Kuchwara), Wilson said of the play, and scholars and critics have investigated the characters in terms of their association with materialism and elitism. Wilson had spoken disparagingly of this population earlier in his career. In a 1988 Bill Moyer’s interview, for example, he dismissed *The Cosby Show* as unrealistic and, by implication, inauthentic: “Most of black America is in housing projects, without jobs, and living on welfare. And this is not the case in *The Cosby Show*, because all the values in that household are strictly what I would call white American values” (4). His contrasting descriptions of the fictional characters and the real-life black Americans are disturbingly proscriptive. His claims about “Most of black America” are hopefully intended as hyperbole but he does seem to define black authenticity by economic guidelines.

Wilson’s depiction of the break between African American middle and lower classes in *Radio Golf* is more complicated, however, and the implications of the divisions are far more nuanced in the play. For the first time in the cycle, *Radio Golf* is not primarily focused on the population living within the Hill District but rather on those
outside of it. The play introduces the ramifications of a community where those with money and political influence are separated, isolated, and alienated from those larger populations left in the ghetto. More overtly, the play considers the obligations of those with wealth and power to those without them. This obligation stems not from guilt (Harmond’s guilt-induced attempts to help Old Joe Barlow fall flat) but from the recognition that the middle-class is part of and shares a heritage and culture with the rest of black America.

It must be noted, however, that -- regardless of Wilson’s claim -- he had incorporated characters of the black middle class before, and indeed many times before. The term is flexible, but it is hard not to identify Wilson’s various homeowners as members of the middle class, or at least the middle class on the Hill. West stands as the most overt example; he is the spend-thrift funeral home director of *Two Trains Running* who owns his own business, several hearses, and home. Memphis, while his position comes under threat because of eminent domain, also fits into the same loose category. Uncle Doaker in *The Piano Lesson* may not technically qualify as middle class but, as a railway cook, he has the financial stability to own his own home and apparently help out his niece and grand-niece. Seth Holly struggles to maintain his status in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, yet he has not only a trade but also a boarding house he inherited from his father. Becker in *Jitney* not only owns his own jitney station and his own home but he has established at least a limited authority and respect in the white world.

What Wilson really focuses on in *Radio Golf*, therefore, links to attitude, identification, and cultural alignment rather than class. *The New York Times’* Ben Brantley observed that, like its protagonist, the work “falls prey to an addling
preoccupation with the mechanics of business. This gives it the strange distinction of being Mr. Wilson’s first work that might appeal to someone whose sole reading matter is Barron’s or The Wall Street Journal” (Brantley, “Voices”). Beyond including such dialogue because his characters are involved in high-stakes business dealings, Wilson is also calling attention to valuations based on economics rather than the personal and emotional connections of earlier Wilson characters to their property and surroundings. The portrayal of the characters he develops -- Roosevelt, Harmond, and Mame -- is often unflattering. While Roosevelt ends the play with his economic future bright, his moral future is far less so. As for the Wilkses, Harmond’s adherence to his new values and his support of an African American Hill District (rather than a corporate and white Bedford Hills redevelopment) will likely move him dramatically lower on the economic ladder. At the end of the play he apparently abandons his dreams of becoming the city’s first black mayor. Because of her husband’s decisions and behavior, Mame likewise loses her opportunity to join the governor’s staff. Combined with comments about the upper-middle class portrayals in The Cosby Show, Wilson’s depictions of the black middle class border on the stereotypical. African Americans with educations, middle class incomes and lifestyles, and homes anywhere but the ghetto are sometimes depicted within the black community as somehow inauthentic.

As Noogle points out, however, “Wilson is not opposed to black success in business, of course, but rather the fact that such success often dictates a rejection of the history that holds the community together” (69). John Lahr, writing for The New Yorker, likewise points to the characters as evidence that Wilson instead critiques “the failure of the black middle class to return its expertise and sophistication to the impoverished
community that it rose from -- and which, in *Radio Golf*, appears to be on the verge of extinction” (Lahr, “Hill Street Blues”). Within the play, Sterling Johnson also identifies behavior, not lifestyle or income, as the problem. For Roosevelt, however, nothing else besides money and status matter:

ROOSEVELT: [. . . ] You got to go somewhere else.


ROOSEVELT: For one, I got some money.

STERLING: I got money too. You think you the only one got money.

Money make you special? [. . . ]

ROOSEVELT: I said money. You don’t know what money is. When I go to the bank I need a wheelbarrow. [. . . ] (76)

Commonly, blight relates to economic value, but *Radio Golf* reveals the complexity of the concept of value itself: the play challenges ideas and assumptions about what a neighborhood is worth, and to whom. For the three middle-class characters, the meaning of the Hill is defined by how others perceive it. They all take their cues regarding its worth through what it signifies to the white world. Perhaps even
more importantly, they also define themselves according to the values, attitudes, and external markers of white society -- and specifically an affluent white society. Their naked desires are not to maintain their current status but to move well beyond the middle class. The characterizations of all three revolve around discussions of power and status; for both Mame and Roosevelt, they further describe themselves in contrast to the residents of the Hill District.

Mame Wilks, Harmond’s wife, clearly values political power. When Harmond insists on locating his campaign headquarters in the Hill District, Mame sees the decision as a threat to the campaign. “I’m not wasting my time on your campaign if you’re not committed to winning this,” she scolds him. “I’m sacrificing my business. Giving up my clients. Harmond, we’ve worked too hard” (29). Two things determine the worth she places on the Hill: the political liability she attributes to it and the stereotyping she herself has been fighting to elude. “I can't move back here, Roosevelt” (67), she complains, after Harmond talks about returning to live on the Hill. “I don't want to go backward. I wasn't born backward. You'd be surprised how many white people think all black people live in the Hill” (68).

Roosevelt Hicks, Harmond’s friend and business partner, values money and a title. The redevelopment of the Hill offers enormous profit potential, but his emphasis throughout is the power and respect money brings. Hicks uses his connection to Bedford Redevelopment and even exploits his race as a means of establishing recognition and respect within the white elite. Hicks drives expensive foreign cars. He presents his business card as evidence of his own worth and position. “Roosevelt Hicks. Vice President. Mellon Bank” (28), the card reads. He later quits the bank job for one with
more money and prestige and immediately orders replacement cards: “My new office is getting painted today. Light money green. [. . .] And my new business cards are on rush order” (61). Like Mame, he wraps himself up in white tokens of wealth to avoid the stigma of black poverty. The business cards are essentially his passport, a method of conferring status: “Without them cards they'll think I'm the caddie” (18).

Hicks’ passion for golf seems to stem from its associations with power and abandoning something behind. The first time he hit a golf ball, “I felt something lift off of me. Some weight I was carrying around and didn't know it. I felt like the world was open to me. Everything and everybody. I never did feel exactly like that anymore.” He starts up a golf camp so as to offer the same feeling to the next generation: “That's what I want these kids to have. That'll give them a chance at life. I wish somebody had come along and taught me how to play golf when I was ten. That'll set you on a path to life where everything is open to you. You don't have to hide and crawl under a rock just 'cause you black. Feel like you don't belong in the world” (13).

As for Harmond himself, in the course of the play he comes to recognize the importance and real value of a neighborhood many had seen as worthless. He starts the play in the mold of David Lawrence, the mayor through the city’s first Renaissance in the 1950s. A “blighted” neighborhood means one ready to be demolished; renewal begins with removal; and geography, not population, defines a community. Part of Harmond’s transformation comes from the recognition that he has had such a limited definition of “worth” in the first place. The opening moments of Radio Golf reveal the conflicting values he initially encompasses. While Harmond envisions himself as valuing a real working-class reality, that supposed authenticity is based in the same materialistic world
in which Mame and Roosevelt dwell. The setting of *Radio Golf* is the Bedford Hills Redevelopment storefront, also the temporary headquarters of his mayoral campaign. The dialogue between Mame and Harmond quickly establishes the play’s focus on competing interpretations of worth and Harmond’s self-deluded populism. The pair are outsiders; they have a new office in the Hill District, but their home is elsewhere.

Aside from identifying the address, Wilson leaves the stage’s canvas blank. The stage directions refer to boxes waiting to be unpacked but the key design elements of many of his previous works are absent. Mame, however, calls attention to a level of disrepair or lack of polish that Wilson does not. “This is it?” she asks her husband, and her question and derision of the setting are the first words of the play: “This isn’t anything like the way you described it. This ceiling’s what you were so excited about?”

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

MAME: Harmond, it looks raggedy.

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

(7)

Harmond’s defense of the ceiling at first references the physical quality of the material. It also alludes to the worker who made it, the care and precision of an artisan instead of the generic stamp of a mechanical press. The description initially presents Harmond as a man who understands true value, a man unlike the city leaders and developers who dismissed the cultural significance of the mid-century Hill District or were blind to the beauty and vitality of an eclectic Los Angeles neighborhood. This perception is undercut, however, when he finishes the defense by pointing right back to economic value.
Mame’s response heightens the point even more: “Then take it down and sell it. [...]” (7).

The pattern is repeated again when Mame criticizes his choice of location: “We decided to open your office in Shadyside.\textsuperscript{36} What’s wrong with Shadyside? Right there on Ellsworth where that old bookstore used to be. That’s got a lot of windows too. What’s wrong with Shadyside?” “I’m from the Hill District,” Harmond responds simply. The words would seem to reflect pride, surety of identity, and respect for his origins. As with the tin ceiling, however, Harmond’s subsequent statements undermine the positive meaning:

MAME: The population of the Hill isn’t but thirty-five hundred people.

And it’s hard to get them to vote.

HARMOND: You don’t understand. Politics is about symbolism. Black people don’t vote but they have symbolic weight. (8)

His statements therefore raise the possibility of innate worth but again instantly shift the definition, this time to political rather than economic value, symbols rather than reality.

These exchanges also reveal an internal bias Harmond fails to recognize. When he speaks of revitalizing the Hill District, his words seem genuine. At the heart of his belief in redevelopment lies the conviction that the Hill neither offers its residents anything of import nor holds any value for the city. His perspective in essence replicates that of Pittsburgh City Councilman George Evans, referenced in the previous chapter, who blithely asserted that the houses in the Hill District were so dilapidated that there would be “no social loss if they were all destroyed” (Evans, “Here is a Job”). In Scene 1, Harmond assures Roosevelt that their business plan is viable: “City council has to go through all that bureaucracy. But the blight will come through. Any fool can look

\textsuperscript{36} Shadyside is a predominantly white neighborhood with an average income far above the city’s average.
around here and see that the Hill District’s not fit to live in” (12). He has no reason to
dissemble in his conversation with his friend and business partner; he does not need to
justify the renewal plans. His words therefore lays bare his belief. It is not until Harmon
meets two residents of the Hill that his assumption is challenged: Old Joe and Sterling,
the only two current residents to appear onstage, disagree with his assessment. “I like my
house. Don’t you like your house?” (58) Old Joe challenges Harmon, bringing the
attachment to place, memory, and history down to the level of the personal, removed
from economic disparity or building quality. As with so many well-intentioned but
culturally-myopic city leaders and redevelopment planners before him, Harmon cannot
see past the surface appearance, the physical manifestation of poverty, to recognize the
validity of a neighborhood in need of rejuvenation rather than demolition.

Following the pattern of Harmon’s description of the black residents of the Hill
as having “symbolic weight,” his conception of history and heritage is likewise based on
the symbolic rather then a living connection. He and Mame debate the name of the
planned health center: will it be kept as the Model Cities Health Center or will it be
renamed as the Sarah Degree Health Center?

MAME: I’m voting it should stay Model Cities Health Center.

HARMOND: Sarah Degree was the first black registered nurse in the
city. Naming it after her fits perfectly.

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

HARMOND: That’s why the Health Center needs to be named after her.

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So we remember.

MAME: I mean that’s nice and I understand the sentiment but it’s just not practical to throw all that history away. (10)

Degree in fact was one of August Wilson’s neighbors, not a nurse in real life but a caring woman and an integral part of his childhood community. She was a devout Catholic who took the neighborhood children to church on Sundays and taught them Bible stories every evening. “If there was ever a saint, it was Miss Sarah,” Wilson told interviewer Dinah Livingston in 1987 (Livingston 45):

I’ve been threatening to write the bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh because we need to honor her in some way: Miss Sarah Degree Gymnasium, or Miss Sarah Degree House for Wayward Women. She was a wonderful woman. There’s no question: If she was white, they’d have a Miss Sarah Degree Child Center or something. I swear I believe that; maybe I’m wrong, but I believe that wholeheartedly. God, she probably didn’t even have a decent burial. But that’s the way it goes. (46)

Wilson inserts her as a passing reference in Seven Guitars but raises the possibility of the long-deserved honor in his final work. Referring to Harmond’s desire to name the health center after her, Richard Noogle notes that, “While his goal is noble, his attitude reflects the modern mentality that cultural memory only exists if it is clearly marked and labeled as such” (69). Based on Wilson’s desire to honor Miss Degree, however, Harmond’s push to have the clinic named after her is a legitimate way to pay tribute to an important individual and encourage a memory that has faded or been lost.

Model Cities, in contrast, was the name of a major program from President
Johnson’s War on Poverty that was intended to consolidate government support and ease tensions in the mid-1960s, including unrest stemming from anger over urban redevelopment. While Model Cities provided support and much-needed funds for local programs, it was also criticized for undercutting the power and voice of community organizations. That the history Mame wants to keep from throwing away is the legacy of a government program with a record of (at best) mixed results does not so much show her priorities as reveal her inability to understand the meaning of history and her assumption that history equates to mere longevity.

Significantly, Harmond does not reject the legitimacy of the Model Cities title; he simply endorses the Sarah Degree name instead. Later in the play when Old Joe Barlow comes in the office, Harmond uses the clinic’s name to assign value to their intended work rather than to the health center itself. “We’re going to build up everything,” he says confidently, avoiding reference to all that will first have to be torn down: “We finally get a supermarket in the Hill District. New apartments. The Sarah Degree Health Center. Do you know Sarah Degree was the first black registered nurse in Pittsburgh? This is just the beginning” (22). Harmond’s emphasis on the proposed name of the new health center calls attention to his omission of the name of the supermarket. By sliding past the name of the upscale grocery, Harmond replicates the process of linguistic erasure discussed in the previous chapter. The architectural firm charged with drafting the civic arena redevelopment proposal edited out a reference that would have made explicit the change in population. Newspaper coverage perpetuated the language with glowing praise for a plan that would increase available housing units (though not for the displaced poor). The real world Hill District has desperately needed a grocery store for years; safe and
affordable housing has always been in short supply. Neither Whole Foods nor the new apartments will be within the reach of those displaced by the redevelopment or pushed out through the resulting gentrification.

Noogle argues that “[t]he problem with Harmond, early on, is that, while he may have a healthy respect for the past and future, he is too caught up in mayoral platitudes -- ‘We need to find our way back to the time when Americans respected each other’ -- that he is blind to both the real truth behind his sentiments and the effects of his actions on the present moment” (168). Harmond is so removed from life outside his privileged existence that he does not even recognize the chasm. His good intentions again appear genuine, but Harmond does not know how to move beyond the symbolic. In fact, he conflates symbolism and reality.

Old Joe ignores Harmond’s list of development plans and interjects reality. “You gonna put some lights up on Kennard Field?” he asks. Harmond replies that the field will be replaced with a public driving range. The idea of transforming the use from football to golf would undoubtedly transform the users of the field and, perhaps from Old Joe’s perspective, therefore does not deserve a response. Instead, he reminds Harmond of a long-standing tradition of everyday need on the Hill and the equally long tradition of imbalanced treatment and political apathy from off the Hill. “You need some lights,” Old Joe says, “Kennard Field’s the only football field in the city ain’t got no lights. The city say they run out of electricity. That’s what they say in 1952. I could still run up and down the field then. You gonna put some lights up there?” (22). After hearing yet another platitude, Joe insists, “The people been waiting fifty years for some lights. Why can’t we have some lights? Everybody else got them. [. . .] The people been trying to get
some lights up there since 1952 and they ain’t got them yet. I’m gonna die and they still ain’t gonna have no lights up there” (22-23). When Harmond still resists, Old Joe comes back yet again to community, a community that yearns to celebrate, to come together, to find the music and collective song that has been silent for decades. “If you put some lights up there the people will come. They ain’t gonna come for nothing. But you put some lights up there and watch the people come from all over. They’ll come dancing. They gonna throw a big party. You put some lights up there and the people will hang a picture of you in their living rooms” (23). Harmond hears the words but not their meaning. Old Joe’s version of “building up the Hill District” would involve adding to what is already there rather than tearing it down. Shedding light on the field would allow for a true gathering.

Harmond is slow to come around. He is not closed in the way of Roosevelt and, to a lesser degree, Mame, but he also clings to his worldview. Two factors finally change his perceptions: realizing he has a familial connection to Old Joe and recognizing a hidden value to Aunt Ester’s house. The two are intertwined. Harmond initially investigates 1839 Wylie because of a paperwork error. Harmond purchased the house from the city in a tax sale but the obligatory notice of impending sale never ran in the newspaper. Since the house was bundled with many other properties, he transferred the title from Wilks Realty to Bedford Redevelopment before the property was legally his. Although an honest mistake and essentially a technicality, the ethical Harmond nevertheless recognizes that he has a financial and ethical obligation to Old Joe, the legal owner.

Harmond’s reliance on paperwork to find facts reflects his education and his
devotion to the rule of law. Instead of facts, however, his research leads to larger realizations: the difference between a moral and a legal right, the ways in which everyone is connected in some way, and how a house can be worth far more than the sum of its sellable parts. The difference between Harmond’s intention to find factual truth and the profound truth he uncovers instead echoes a similar pattern identified in *King Hedley II*. In that text, Stool Pigeon maintained a collection of newspapers that he viewed as a vital resource for the younger generations of the Hill. He spoke, or often rambled, about news of the day and events of the past but could not articulate the unified narrative he recognized in Aunt Ester’s lessons. Instead of relying on an oral tradition he was unable to convey, the newspapers were Stool Pigeon’s way of locating the past and how he, and everyone else, fit into it: “How you gonna get on the other side of the valley if you don’t know that? You can’t guess on it... you got to know. [...] Some people don’t mind guessing... but I got to know. If you want to know, you can ask me and I’ll go look it up. The valley’s got a lot of twists and turns. You can get lost in the daytime!” (27).

Stool Pigeon clearly sees the information included in the newspapers as more significant than the mere facts conveyed. This theory is borne out by Harmond’s experience in *Radio Golf*. His research into the legal history of 1839 Wylie Avenue reveals more than tax records and rights of title; it reveals a deeper connection to the property and the people around him. When Harmond searches the records he discovers his father -- and grandfather before him -- had always paid the property taxes for 1839 Wylie Avenue. The existing tax lean therefore dated from his father’s death. While investigating why his father had paid the taxes, Harmond discovers that Old Joe is his first cousin and Aunt Ester his great-aunt. Instead of just uncovering facts, Harmond
therefore begins to see himself as connected to a larger story.

He spent his childhood socially isolated, perhaps even alienated, from most of the people around him in the Hill District. With his father now dead and his brother killed decades earlier in Vietnam, Harmond’s newfound family connection to Old Joe begins to change how he views himself in relation to the community. Harmond’s visit to 1839 Wylie completes this change. Even though Aunt Ester is no longer there, and has been forgotten by the community at large, his visit to her home transforms him as previous characters had been transformed by Aunt Ester herself. Harmond’s evolution is connected to his evolving definition of worth, one that no longer sees the Hill in terms of suboptimal land-use value. Mame and Roosevelt not only find his evolution unfathomable, they find it disturbing:

ROOSEVELT: I never seen him this way before. He's been talking a lot about his father and his brother. He's got to let that go.

MAME: All Harmond talked about last night was that old man being some cousin of his. He stayed up all night. I don't know what time he came to bed.

ROOSEVELT: He's lost sight of what's important. I'm worried. He's working too hard.

MAME: He wants to move to the Hill. Wants to move back in the house he grew up in. Harmond hasn't lived in the Hill in twenty-five years. I can't move back here, Roosevelt. [...] (66)

Roosevelt maintains his view of blight based on a sustained vision of material worth. Mame eventually stands alongside Harmond because of her love for him rather than
because of any shifting values on her part.

In contrast, Harmond represents the importance of retaining a connection to a shared past, a shared culture and community, and a broader definition of worth, one not reflective of material worth or of traditional Anglo-American values. Place becomes not only the trigger for his character’s development but also a physical marker that unites him to his past and a shared future. When he praises the tin ceiling in the redevelopment office at the start of the play he comments on the quality but is not yet able to understand the larger significance of a piece of craftsmanship that connects him to the past and to the worker. When he visits Aunt Ester’s house, however, the building has a fundamental impact on what he truly values. He describes the home to Roosevelt, who remains distant and unimpressed. Initially Harmond focuses on the physical appearance, and the description is presented in the same way as his defense of the tin ceiling at the start of the play. He also sounds incredulous that such quality could still exist in such a seemingly worthless structure. Roosevelt, predictably, dismisses his friend’s shift in description:

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

ROOSEVELT: That’s ‘cause people don’t like that kind of shit anymore. All that’s listed in the demolition contract. They have salvage rights. That’s why we got a good price on the demolition. (61) The dialogue offers a defining moment for Harmond. The crassness of the house being
disassembled for salvage and Roosevelt’s blunt reference to demolition finally force him to recognize the profundity of the destruction in redevelopment.

When Mame responded to her husband’s laudatory comments about the tin ceiling with the quip, “Then take it down and sell it” (7), Harmond did not continue to defend its value. This time, however, he moves beyond a description of the material value of the home’s worth. He speaks of how the house makes him feel and how he feels connected to the cultural memory Aunt Ester maintained and represented. It is possible that, like the piano in *The Piano Lesson*, the ghosts of the past reside in the stairwell, the woodwork, the house itself. It is also possible that the connection reminds Harmond of a link to something larger. The recognition that the building holds something truly remarkable despite its shabby exterior (and dilapidated interior) forces Harmond to consider the work of the carver. He also contemplates what other treasures the Hill might hold. He was not able to appreciate the toolwork of the tin ceiling except as a sign of monetary value. With Aunt Ester’s house, however, Harmond rejects market value and begins to understand its true worth. He also comes to recognize the depths of “social loss” he had not associated with the redevelopment of the Hill.

His connection to the physical form of the building illustrates the importance of retaining the historic structures, the link between the material and memory. This reclamation process underlies Harmond’s desire to name the health center after Sarah Degree. He must visit 1839 Wylie Avenue and fully experience the house in order to understand the necessity of saving Aunt Ester’s home. Unlike the naming of the health center, which would be merely a token nod to history, 1839 Wylie encompasses past, present, and future. Wilson’s audience, after all, not Harmond, thinks of it as Aunt
Ester’s. For Harmond, it is simply “that house on Wylie” (61). With Aunt Ester long
gone the significance of the woman is lost to Harmond, and presumably to many others in
the neighborhood. (Again, audiences familiar with even a handful of Wilson’s earlier
plays recognize her significance even when Harmond does not.) But the presence of
history, legacy, and heritage are figuratively and literally carved into the building. The
living ancestor may be dead but her spirit remains.

The exchange between the two business partners reflects Harmond’s incredulity
over the building’s structural integrity -- the fact that the house is worth saving --
followed by admiration and eventually awe over the quality. The awe transcends the
market emphasis Roosevelt keeps coming back to, the same emphasis Harmond himself
applied before his moment of clarity.

HARMOND: You should feel the woodwork. If you run your hand
slowly over some of the wood you can make out these carvings.

There’s faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there’s
this smell in the air.

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

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

(61-62)

For the first time, Harmond rejects a monetary definition of worth.

Still struggling to maintain his previous plans, Harmond comes up with a solution
that allows for redevelopment as well as the retention of the house at 1839 Wylie
Avenue: he devises a layout incorporating the house into the larger plan. Ultimately the
City -- as an entity and as a metaphor for faceless bureaucracy -- forces Harmond into an all-or-nothing situation. Wilson demands the same thing. In earlier works he allowed characters to be more pragmatic. Memphis Lee risks everything in order stand up for what he sees as a fair price for Lee’s Restaurant, the diner he never wanted to sell in the first place. With fires springing up around the Hill District, Memphis acknowledges, “That’s the one thing I am scared of. If it burn down I don’t get nothing” (Wilson, Two Trains 59). He nevertheless willingly risks everything to stand up for himself, despite the odds being stacked against him. But Memphis accepts a large payment from the city for his restaurant. The money was more than he had originally been offered, more than Memphis had even been demanding, and far more than he had paid less than a decade before. The city will still demolish the building, however. Although there is no discussion of what protests Memphis may have made before the start of the play, within the body of Two Trains Running he only complains about the city’s repeated use of eminent domain; he does not challenge the city’s right or ability.

Wilson does not afforded Harmond the same flexibility. He must decide, with no room for compromise, whether to pursue wealth and his political career, or to defend Aunt Ester’s home and what he firmly believes is right. The play ends with Harmond literally rolling up his sleeves and going to work, a cliched campaign slogan transformed into a different kind of political action. “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here” plays in the background as he leaves and the stage lights dim, echoing Harmond and Roosevelt’s earlier camaraderie. Instead of being a song associated with colleges and fraternities, it is transformed, signaling a Harmond united with the people of the Hill trying to save Aunt Ester’s house. At the end, the song injects hope and optimism.
More than the growth and humanity of a single character, *Radio Golf* is about the growth and humanity of a people. The shift from individual to community in the play serves as the culmination of an ongoing process Wilson developed throughout his works. As the cycle came to a close Wilson moved to a more community-oriented resolution instead of the individual epiphanies promoted in his early works. This evolution is brought into relief by looking at the final moments of three plays, each incorporating a transformative moment, from the middle and end of Wilson’s career. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, his third Broadway play, the epiphany comes for Herald Loomis, the husband and father searching for his lost wife and more importantly, searching for a way to ease the trauma of a great injustice. Loomis finds peace by finally re-staking a claim on his own body and his own spirit. He leaves the stage alone, confident and content in his own skin for the first time in over a decade. His realization has an important effect on some of the other characters, but Loomis’ recognition of his own self-worth is primarily of importance to himself.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester teaches others how to stand up for themselves and ultimately how to stand together to claim and define their neighborhood. Two characters enjoy pivotal moments of self-realization, but in both cases, the newly-found recognition of their value and importance as individuals leads to their ability to help others. Black Mary proves herself ready to take on the mantle of Aunt Ester and take over the responsibility from her mentor, the elderly woman currently filling the role; and Citizen Barlow, finally at peace with the consequences of a fateful decision made before the start of the play, takes up the staff of the fallen Solly Two Kings. Like Herald Loomis, at the very end of the play Citizen leaves the stage alone. Unlike Herald,
however, he leaves to help others.

*Radio Golf* likewise ends with yet another character striding offstage, also after an epiphany. Herald Loomis was followed by another character (Mattie, recognizing that he is finally a whole man, now free from emotional entanglements, and therefore capable of sustaining a relationship, runs after Herald); Citizen will lead migrants North to a new life; Harmond Wilks strides from the stage to *join* others, not to lead them. Harmond is also significant because of the social class he represents; his inclusion as a protagonist in the cycle essentially argues for the need for a broader definition of community. For most of the play he does not recognize the innate value of the Hill District; *Radio Golf* is about Harmond learning the community’s true worth. Beyond recognition, however, he must also join that community rather than merely admire it in the abstract, from a distance.

In *Radio Golf*, more clearly than in any of Wilson’s other plays, the bones of the real world Hill District show through the literary skin. The fate of the old Civic Arena (as well as what will replace it) remains undecided and still the stuff of political opportunism. It is telling that, six years after his death, August Wilson’s work still reflects the soul of the Hill District; it is sadly ironic that his work still reflects the often myopic definitions of worth held by those from off the Hill.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION  Three Women of the Hill and the City of Bones

“We do not propose that Andrew Carnegie’s representatives shall bulldoze us. We have our homes in this town, we have our churches here, our societies and our cemeteries. We are bound to Homestead by all the ties that men hold dearest and most sacred.”

*John McLuckie, Mayor of Homestead and a Homestead striker.*
*(Jaycox 33)*

**Introduction**

As has been seen throughout this study, place matters. August Wilson’s increasing specificity in his use of the Hill District as setting is founded on this premise. In the Pittsburgh Cycle, Wilson conjures up a living representation of a place that exists both in a collective, active memory and a definable location. He is not nostalgic. Whereas much sympathetic media coverage of the area offers poignancy, some history, and occasionally a dose of hope, Wilson remains more aggressive towards the audience and more aggressive towards the Hill. He does not muse over what might have been had urban renewal and riots not forever changed the landscape. Wilson instead stakes a claim on a history, people, and place that has too often either been ignored or regarded only as tragic. In a 1984 interview, Wilson linked identity, history, and autonomy: “The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you’ve been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history. I think blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people” (Powers 5). By including a history that had only been told internally, he not only shows outsiders what matters about the Hill District, but also preserves and honors it for those who lived and continue to live there.

Wilson likewise claims his own roots: the reality of his plays does not reflect the literalness of the Hill District but, through his art, declares the Hill as his. As is illustrated
in the previous chapter’s discussion of the history of “blight,” an appreciation of the shabby, the dilapidated, or the poor has little political power. The ramifications are not merely academic: residents may have an attachment to their homes but it is the city leaders, influential market forces, and well-financed developers who have the political clout. The battle, for some of Wilson’s characters and sometimes for Wilson himself, lies in convincing others of the beauty, strength, and worth of a world where the people are usually poor, the buildings shabby, and the surroundings dilapidated. For most audiences this entails seeing a world that is largely unfamiliar, but Wilson also validates and commemorates the experiences of a black audience for whom the depiction is more familiar. In Pittsburgh, that audience includes residents of the Hill who had fought, and continue to fight, for their community.

In this, the concluding chapter, I offer an abridged discussion of the voices coming from the Hill in a limited context: the process of mapping as a means of coping, claiming, and resistance. Cartography is associated with control: to map something traditionally proclaims a kind of dominance. The type of mapping to be discussed here, however, is of a different sort. Memory intertwines with the physical environment; mapping becomes a way of understanding one’s world rather than announcing mastery. Wilson’s plays are about the South and the North and characters knowing (or discovering) where they come from, where they are, and what is theirs. Mapping in this manifestation becomes a way of anchoring oneself to a place, even when that place has been partially -- or fully -- erased.

The specific history and topography of Southwestern Pennsylvania helps influence the internal mapping methods in which the region’s residents engage. In
communities throughout Pittsburgh, economic and social upheavals have left their mark on the people. In a funhouse mirror of urban redevelopment, the people left but the houses remained, and pockets of some communities were left virtual ghost towns within a few years. The severe topography of the city also creates a unique relationship between the individual and place. Buildings are built into cliffs; doors at basement and 6th floors of the same building are both street level, disorienting the uninitiated. Navigating unfamiliar sections of the city means taking official maps with a grain of salt; the road that appears to be a drivable thoroughfare is really a paper alley or set of city steps. It also takes an insider to know the nuances; streets that are narrow and winding require a dance of driving etiquette. Those from outside the neighborhood are immediately identified because they are out-of-step: they ignore the established pattern of right-of-way on a road that allows two-way traffic but is only one car in width.

Pittsburghers who grew up here, particularly ones whose parents and grandparents lived here, tend to anchor themselves in a geography of the past. Directions are sprinkled with references to things long gone: “go up to where Chiodos was, then turn left” substitutes for “go up to the Walgreens and turn left.” The chronology of a place can also work its way in, an urban litany that has nothing to do with the straightforward goal of conveying clear directions: “It’s right by the parking lot where George’s used to be before it was an Exxon.” The cumulative effect is a kind of mapping based not on control but rather on experience, history, loss, and continuity.

The specific history of black America also emphasizes internal mapping. In his recent *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*, Ira Berlin looks at the forms and effects of a history of upheavals. He points to an apparent incongruity in
the pattern of movement: a strong attachment to place.

Between the great migrations stood periods of deep rootedness. Movement might be omnipresent in the African American experience between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries, but so too has been a sense of place. Indeed, one of the greatest ironies of migrator history is that diasporas rooted people in place . . . . The church, Masonic hall, beauty parlor, barbershop, storefront, and even the street corner and stoop were just as significant to the African American experience as the slave coffle and the Chicken Bone Special, for they were points of sociability where bonds of trust and collaboration were established and maintained. More than an attachment to landscape, the concept of place spoke to relationships, often deeply personal, and the institutions that emerged from those relationships. (25)

Rather than a paradox, the attachment to place is an effect of movement: “The notion of rootedness instead speaks to attachments--personal and material--within a defined geographic frame” (26). Berlin also references Frederick Douglass, who himself used an agricultural metaphor: “Free people, declared Douglass, developed no ‘extravagant attachment to any one place,’ while the slave ‘had no choice, no goal but was pegged down to one single spot, and must take root there or die’” (25).

In his early works, Wilson focuses on the ways his characters were uprooted during the Great Migration. In his later works he extends the theme to those uprooted through urban renewal. The need to connect, to attach to place and to others, becomes paramount in the displaced and disconnected lives of those from damaged urban
landscapes. Aunt Ester is the constant that continually reminds characters of the importance of taking root and of maintaining those roots. She is there at the start of the century in *Gem of the Ocean* when an African American community is just starting to take hold, and she is on the verge of returning at the end of the century in *Radio Golf* when the same community is fighting to keep from being pushed out. Aunt Ester enables the community to navigate the past and integrate that past into the present. Her house, 1839 Wylie Avenue, anchors her in the community and for decades serves as a reminder of what that community is and where the people come from.

This idea of “rootedness” is one central to two other women associated with the Hill District, neither of them fictional: Gloria Fuller Smith and Mindy Thompson Fullilove. Home and property, the reference point for Wilson’s ongoing exploration of identity and the characters’ connection to their world, unites these three women. Smith grew up on the Hill and, returning for a visit decades later, was saddened to find her old home plowed under, the 2800 block of Breckinridge turned into a practice field for the University of Pittsburgh football team. As she researched her family’s history she uncovers the intimate connection between that history and the Hill. Who she is, who her children are, become intertwined with the demolished home where she was raised by her grandparents; though the street is now gone, her descriptions and informal maps of Breckinridge served as the same kind of anchor as 1839 Wylie. This process is in turn expanded by Fullilove, a psychiatrist brought to the city to help residents of the Hill District face more displacement; she similarly recognized the importance of place in identity and community. As she grew to know the people of the Hill District and the Hill itself, she also came to recognize the importance of claiming memory as a way of
This study examines the ways August Wilson creates a conduit between a real Pittsburgh and Hill District and a literary representation that spans the African American experience of the twentieth century. He consistently advocates an awareness of the past, activism in the present, and unity of community going into the future. By focusing on three very different figures with connections to the Hill District, I will show how each approaches the same problems of individuals uprooted from their homes, their pasts, and cut off from their futures. These three women are treated in separate sections because they do not interact; they represent different facets of August Wilson’s ongoing discussion in his play cycle about community, place, and self-worth. More significantly, I will juxtapose the three women of the Hill -- Fullilove, Smith, and Aunt Ester -- to show not their contrasts but their similar approaches: all three navigate the present and the future by claiming the past and anchoring herself in a physical community.

I. **The Academic**

In 1992, Congress enacted a new urban redevelopment program designed to correct some of the problems with the nation’s public housing system. Because the majority of those living in the target housing complexes were extremely poor minority women and children, and because this stratification along class and racial lines was acknowledged to be self-perpetuating, one of the program’s primary goals was to reduce the economic and racial segregation that the worst of the housing projects had intensified. Section 8 housing – allotting rent vouchers to qualified low-income households – had already shifted some poor residents out of the Projects, but the new plan, HOPE VI, also involved distributing grants for regional redevelopment. Poorly maintained, high-
occupancy, government-owned ‘problem’ properties would be converted to mixed-income, lower-density housing and government-subsidized private housing.

Unfortunately, the conversion process meant the leveling of existing public housing and therefore the removal of the residents, many of whom had lived there for years. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) recognized the damage earlier attempts at redevelopment had caused. Errors in building and in urban planning were significant factors but they were by no means the only ones. The authors of a 2004 Urban Institute study on the results of HOPE VI acknowledged displaced residents “have not always benefited from redevelopment, even in some sites that were otherwise successful. This can be partly attributed to a lack of meaningful resident participation in planning and insufficient attention to relocation strategies and services” (3). The authors’ dry acknowledgement of the problems arising from redevelopment and displacement are precisely those that August Wilson repeatedly comes back to.

In Pittsburgh, and in the Hill District, this absence of the community’s voice was plain in the city’s massive urban renewal plans of the late 1950’s, the process that had so devastated the Hill District. At the time of the initial redevelopment, blacks were still excluded from most of the city’s specialized industrial jobs. Resistance to expanded residential integration was extremely high. The Lower Hill, an area where blacks had successfully established at least limited economic power and extensive cultural presence, was demolished with nothing offered (or available) as a replacement. In the 1940s and 50s, the Allegheny Conference and Mayor David Lawrence envisioned a centralized cultural district that would lure suburbanites and simultaneously proclaim Pittsburgh’s position as a cultural force, not simply an industrial one. None of the city leaders
recognized that the proposed location already housed a nationally-significant cultural district: the Hill District made Pittsburgh an important incubator for music, particularly jazz. This vibrant music scene was largely destroyed along with the clubs and connected neighborhoods of the Lower Hill District. The world-class opera house and arts community the Allegheny Conference envisioned never materialized, the Civic Arena never attained the diversity of use intended. The Renaissance that was in so many ways the successful result of the Allegheny Conference and Mayor Lawrence’s shared vision and push was never to make its way to the Hill except as slum clearance.

Forty years later, the areas targeted for removal in the 1990’s included Bedford Dwellings and Aliquippa Terrace, two of the original public housing developments in the Hill District. At the time of their construction, they were fairly successful because of their limited scale and integration into the existing neighborhood. Although the residents in and around the two housing projects would be displaced, this time there were attempts to minimize the psychological impact. At the start of 1997, Dr. Mindy Thompson Fullilove, a Columbia University professor of psychiatry and public health, was invited to Pittsburgh to talk with those residents about to face another upheaval through HOPE VI. During an 18 month period, she developed a series of meetings, events, and exercises designed to help those targeted for displacement confront and deal with the emotional and psychological impact of the pending change. Economics and building quality are considered fundamental to redevelopment programs and declarations of blight; emotions are not. Yet, as August Wilson’s characters illustrate throughout the Pittsburgh Cycle, it is the individual’s connection to his or her home and community that determine the true value of any neighborhood. In the very neighborhood that provided the setting for nine
plays centered on the value of home and community, Dr. Fullilove attempted to impart this same message to the disillusioned residents.

The central component of Dr. Fullilove’s transition program was the acknowledgement of the psychological importance of place. She stressed the need for residents to acknowledge both the physical and emotional reality of their neighborhood. Fullilove also encouraged the residents to express themselves and identify what was meaningful to them about their environment. One of the most effective tasks she assigned was a street level, house-by-house mapping of the areas scheduled for redevelopment. Dubbed a “burn index,” it was named for the trauma-mapping that doctors do when treating a severely burned patient. Fullilove’s index was originally intended to more accurately assess how much of the targeted area was damaged, destroyed, or intact. Yet the project was not designed to determine whether the existing housing could be salvaged; its fate had already been determined. Instead, Fullilove explains, “I saw my job as protecting the emotional health of the residents by asking them to remember and preserve all the good that had happened in those buildings” (178).

Unexpectedly, the burn-index also revealed a means of coping, claiming, and even fighting back against a system that declared their homes blighted all over again. By mapping the neighborhoods, noting what was once there and recognizing what remained, the inhabitants were able to lay claim to a physical space and an emotional memory many had not experienced in years.

Novelist John Edgar Wideman, a native of the largely black Pittsburgh neighborhood of Homewood, incorporates issues of place into his works as frequently as Wilson. Also like Wilson (and Fullilove), Wideman spoke of such mapping -- in
literature or in life -- as an important means of maintaining identity and establishing control. His description of the use of street names as a way of communicating and establishing a connection adds context to Fullilove’s experiences:

The street names are there, I think, because they have a magic. They have an evocative quality, and that’s something that can be shared when you speak. There are streets, and when I say them to you and you walk down them, that’s the opening. It’s no coincidence that some of the great catalogues that occur in classical literature have to do with the names of the ships, the names of the places. For sailors or voyagers or travelers, naming is a way, literally, of grounding themselves. (Lustig 454)

Fullilove recognized the importance of such “grounding” but she also realized that the residents’ connection to their neighborhood was complicated by a very different kind of traveling: forced relocation. A voyage away from a still-existing location can offer some comfort in the solidity of place. This solidity is damaged when the place itself is vastly altered. Yet, although the process of anchoring oneself in a location becomes much more painful and complicated when many of the streets are erased, the need itself is not erased by redevelopment.

In preparing for the burn-index project, Fullilove and her group of volunteers had to first address a fundamental aspect of human behavior:

People who are insiders to a place stop seeing it. It is a handy part of human consciousness that many things – including the scenery we look at every day – slip out of awareness into the vast pool of rote activities and knowledge.
People who are outsiders to a place see it as a landscape. They are inhibited from seeing what they’re really seeing, but in their case it’s not because it’s new. Rather, we have another handy mental device for decoding places we’ve never been to before and that is stereotyping. (185)

The ‘surveyors’ were academics (like herself) and community leaders as well as volunteer residents. Fullilove’s solution was to create teams, each composed of both residents and visitors, and to send them out to evaluate every building, landmark, street, alley, and vacant lot. Afterwards their findings were discussed and the information compiled and mapped.

The walks revealed places forgotten, lost, and sometimes hidden. There were roads that had been almost entirely erased over time. Fullilove writes that the most poignant example of this was an abrupt realization on the part of one of the members of her group: “As we walked a little ways down the street, she stopped and said, ‘My aunt used to live here,’ in a tone of half surprise that made me think it was not something she had thought about in a long time. Writing this four years later I have vivid images of the grass on that ruelle, and of a sign for a long-gone street half hidden among some trees” (183). By systematically examining a familiar landscape, and by doing this with outsiders, the resident survey teams brought back a clearer, more realistic portrait of the contemporary Hill District. They also discovered unrecognized art, joy, pride, history, and life. Those involved were surprised by some of the information uncovered, ranging from the remnants of a lost past to the existence of an unrecognized sustaining present. Fullilove herself was surprised by what they discovered, both at a physical and an intellectual level:
The mapping exercise forced all of us – insiders and outsiders – to look carefully, not from rote, not from stereotypes, but in the real moment, now and together, jointly decoding what we were seeing. A seemingly abandoned building that is really a working factory – that is only decoded with the help of an insider. The beauty in a vista – that is brought out by an outsider who is still aware enough to be looking in the distance. (185)

Her work in Pittsburgh helped Fullilove solidify her conception of the trauma caused by the large-scale relocation and dislocation of populations. Her main thesis is that the psychological impact from the poorly-handled urban redevelopment programs works in the same manner as the impact from natural disasters, wars, or even such events as the 9/11 attack on New York City. The loss of security to bulldozers and urban renewal is what Dr. Fullilove terms ‘root shock.’ In her book of the same name, Fullilove describes root shock as long-term damage to an individual’s fundamental human social connections, “an emotional ecosystem that attaches us to the environment, not just as our individual selves, but as beings caught in a single, universal net of consciousness anchored in small niches we call neighborhoods or hamlets or villages. Because of the interconnectedness of the net, if your place is destroyed today, I will feel it hereafter” (17). It is essentially the psychological version of the butterfly effect.37

The importance of Mindy Thompson Fullilove’s Pittsburgh project lies in the ways she helped the residents cope with their upheaval and lay claim to both the land and their own memories. The importance of Fullilove’s book Root Shock lies in her insistence

37 A horrific African-American tradition has been the continual series of root shocks, as African slaves were uprooted from their homes (and their continent); faced generations of upheavals through sales, trades, and family removals; were shifted again after emancipation, and finally left – generally with at least some sense of agency – the rural South.
that worth and meaning are not defined by economics or the physical. These are values audiences are exposed to in every August Wilson play, as characters display attachment to places, which often appear run down, that others may label “blighted.”

II. *The Archivist*

In 1992, the same year Congress enacted HOPE VI, former Hill District resident Gloria Fuller Smith started actively researching her family. Whether because it had been painful or ‘unseemly,’ the adults had sheltered her from the story of her parents’ divorce and she was only now investigating her own history, attempting to fill in some blanks in her memory and to finally understand the domestic turmoil of her parents’ divorce. It had been decades since she had lived in her hometown but she had returned each year, maintaining close connections to the city and the family still living there. “After searching around the country for personal history, I turned toward Pittsburgh […]”, she explains of her quest (41). As she sought to piece the story of her past together and to understand where she truly came from, she visited the place where she had been born some sixty years earlier. Or, rather, she visited the University of Pittsburgh practice field where her first home had once stood. All of Breckinridge Street, like many others, had been erased by bulldozers and replaced with a structure built for those from off the Hill. She also visited Webster Avenue, where her family had relocated when she was eight. Her house at 2241 was gone, but at least much of the rest of the street remained.38

Anger over the loss of such an important part of her life combined with her desire to understand and uncover her family background; she expanded her purpose and added a political edge to what had apparently started as self-discovery. Edward Relph, in *Place*

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38 A current drive along Webster Avenue features intact homes scattered between abandoned buildings and empty lots.
and Placelessness, defines home as “the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being. Home is not just the house you happen to live in, it is not something that can be anywhere, that can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance” (39). But what does one do when that “center of significance” is taken away? What happens to one’s identity when the physical artifacts and emotional landmarks are missing and family, friends, and former neighbors have been removed?

Mindy Thompson Fullilove’s visits were five years in the future but Smith instinctively followed some coping processes similar to those Dr. Fullilove advocated. To use the language of popular psychology, Smith needed to “own” her own past by taking control of both her personal history and the history of the Hill. Through a methodical process of discovery, and in order to exert some type of influence over a situation long out of her control, Smith collected what she could and passed it on to others, including her children. She learned how to search the National Archives; she begged and pestered reluctant relatives to fill in the story of her parents’ broken marriage; she collected memories and memorabilia from family and friends to piece together a history of the two Hill District neighborhoods where she grew up. Finally, in 1993, Smith compiled the information she had gleaned from all her pleading, cajoling, and wearing down of relatives, combined with her own memories and documents, into a short book she titled Hill District Renaissance.

Despite all the earmarks of a self-published book, Renaissance is nonetheless a remarkable piece of Hill District history. Smith shows the vitality of the Hill that once was, at the same time pointing out how things had changed. She speaks of dances and
roller-skating, music and movie houses, and physical evidence of the area as a thriving community. This vitality contrasts to the devastated neighborhood to which she returns. Her most telling comment regarding her return visits is the simple phrase, “it was very difficult to get a Yellow Taxi to bring me through the Hill” (1). There had been three movie theaters, each with its own special appeal: The New Granada (“a good snack counter”), The Roosevelt Theatre (“had stage shows”), and The Past Time (“passed out comic books and dishes” to customers). Wylie Avenue featured a market where “[t]hey would kill and clean the chickens for you.” Center Avenue offered bakeries and a butcher shop, Kirkpatrick had the grocery store, and “Frazier’s Cleaners or Lee’s Florist were places were [sic] went to, when necessary” (22).

And the list goes on. Through her collection of photos, poetry, and what are essentially narrative lists of memories, families, and businesses, she is able to give a face to a situation that is in so many other cases ignored, or examined only with pity and as a tragedy. The last section of the book covers information about the region as a whole and the role of African Americans and American Indians in Western Pennsylvania, material that further helped Smith understand her history and place in the world and show a richer context to an already fascinating history of the region.39

Smith’s Hill District was a de facto segregated community. Segregation often results in surprising contradictions. Isolation and insulation within a predominantly – sometimes exclusively – African American neighborhood can mean unemployment, overcrowding, higher costs of living, higher crime, and poorer sanitation. But isolation can also result in solidarity, opportunity, and certain kinds of freedom, as inhabitants of

39 Indeed, Smith mentioned in an email that one history professor, University of Pittsburgh’s Lawrence Glasco, used Hill District Renaissance in one of his classes.
black neighborhoods have often relied upon their insular communities for everything that surrounding districts ignored or denied them. As Frank Bolden, former writer for *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *New York Times*, described it,

> Everywhere you’re segregated, you find your own way. Wylie Avenue did jump, but it jumped in a segregated way. It was the only place that whites and blacks could meet without having a riot. That’s where Billy Eckstine and all of them started. That’s where the digitarians ran the numbers. That’s where the churches were. That’s where the synagogues were. As I said, all this existed while out in Oakland you couldn’t sleep or eat there and you couldn’t play football at the University of Pittsburgh.

(“Frank Bolden”)

With few integrated neighborhoods for migrants to choose between, the Hill became Pittsburgh’s center of black life. Downtown businesses, if open to blacks at all, limited access and typically treated their Hill District clientele as second (or third) class citizens:

In restaurants, blacks found salt in their coffee, pepper in their milk, and overcharges on their bills; in department stores, they couldn’t try on clothes and encountered impolite service; in downtown theaters, they either were refused admission or were sent to the balcony. Forbes Field, where the Pirates played baseball, confined them to certain sections of the stands. Despite the 1887 public accommodations law, downtown hotels regularly turned away black guests. (Glasco, “Civil Rights Movement” 2)

Shopping within the Hill District therefore filled most of the needs of the inhabitants.
Fences’ Troy Maxson even chides his wife for shopping outside the neighborhood. Number-runners like “Woogie” Harris and Gus Greenlee also served as ad hoc bankers, offering loans unavailable from white banks. Sports organizations, most notably baseball’s Negro League, developed independently of the segregated Major Leagues, and Pittsburgh had two preeminent teams: the Homestead Grays and the Hill’s own Pittsburgh Crawfords.40

The Hill’s most recognizable claim to national fame was its thriving music scene. Even this asset was in part a result of segregation and racism.41 "You see, in the 1930s, Negroes could not go Downtown to the nightclubs,” Frank Bolden explained. “You couldn't try on clothes and you couldn't eat. Yet whites could come up to Wylie Avenue to hear Billy Eckstine” (Rouvalis). Eckstine himself spoke of the inspiration he received from hearing Paul Robeson sing in Pittsburgh (Southern 188) and his experiences as a young man working in the Hill District nightclubs.42

Well-to-do whites may have spent limited funds on the Hill, but the monies of poor ethnic and especially black residents did not generally get spent Downtown. Black performers like Cab Calloway and Lena Horne were welcome attractions at Downtown establishments, but black audiences were not. Hill District establishments became the after-gig stops for musical luminaries that passed through town. After headlining at a

40 The Crawford team approached Gus Greenlee to convince him to buy the club instead of a prospective white buyer, Steve Cox. Greenlee eventually relented but his first response was no. As one of the former players related it, Greenlee told them, “Well, fellas, I appreciate you thinking of me like this, but I don’t know anything about any sports. No sports at all. There’s nothing I can do. But if it’s money you kids want, I’ll give you all the money you want. If it’s transportation, I’ll buy you all the transportation you want” (Ruck 65).
41 WDUQ disc jockey and jazz historian Bob Studebaker also attributes the thriving jazz scene to the large level of funding Pittsburgh devoted to musical education in its public schools in the 1930s and 40s.
42 “All the nightclubs and things were in the Hill District, which was down in the black area. [...] I started working in a little club called Derby Dan’s, then in another club called Harlem Bar, and then in a place called Jabow’s Jungle. At the Harlem Bar I was the emcee, I produced the shows, and I checked out the waitresses [...]” (Southern 187).
segregated venue Downtown, they moved to the Crawford Grill or the Flamingo Lounge to jam with local musicians and perform for black audiences (Thomas 206). August Wilson himself talked about how he “came to jazz late” after hearing John Coltrane play at the Crawford Grill when he was twenty (Lewis 44). Although the population was struggling to achieve that which previous groups, such as Irish or Poles, had attained, the ability to make do and to work around a repressive racist system helped many survive and even prosper in the Hill.

The history of the Hill District includes many such contradictions. The rates of home and business ownership may have been low but a strong sense of pride (in self, family, and neighborhood) is evident in contemporary interviews and in later protests against renewal plans. Poverty was pervasive but quality of life is not, of course, synonymous with economic prosperity. Sala Udin, an actor and a friend of August Wilson and a former city councilman representing the Hill District, spoke to this in 2001 as he described growing up in the Lower Hill:

I think that the sense of community and the buildings were related within an old area. The buildings were old, the streets were cobblestone and old, there [were] many small alleyways and people lived in those alleyways. The houses were very close together. There were small walkways that ran in between the alleyways that was really a playground. So, the physical condition of the buildings helped to create a sense of community. We all

43 Wilson stood with dozens of others, listening on the sidewalk: “And the people inside the Crawford Grill—’cause the drinks cost ninety cents, in ’66 that’s a lot of money—the people inside, they don’t even know how to spell John Coltrane’s name. [. . .]John Coltrane ain’t playing to them, man, he playing to the brothers out on the street, ’cause the music’s coming straight out over their heads and out on the street. And the brothers outside, they prayin. This is their music. This is what has enabled them to survive these outrageous insults that American society has forced on them” (Lewis 44-45).
lived in similar conditions and had similar complaints about the wind
whipping through the gaps between the frame and the window, and the
hole in the walls and the leaking fixtures, the toilet fixtures that work
sometimes and don’t work sometimes. But that kind of common condition
bound us together. (Wallace and Fullilove 5)

When Fullilove came to Pittsburgh she found that much of the Hill District
residents’ pain stemmed from an awareness of what once had been (and therefore an
awareness of what had been lost), as well as the lingering resentment over a perceived
corrupt political system and an explicitly-stated disregard for the people – in this case, of
course, the largely poor and largely brown-skinned people – who stood in the way of
supposed progress. Part of her methodology was to shift that bitterness and pain into
political action and broad public awareness of the voices still left in the Hill. Smith
learned this lesson on her own. Sprinkled throughout Renaissance are Smith’s own
biting comments about the political and planning decisions that had such a devastating
impact on beloved neighborhoods. She writes,

My feelings about the disappearance of the block of Breckinridge Street
forced me into recording information about a street and a small population
of the Hill District of Pittsburgh. I morne [sic] the physical loss of this old
neighborhood and was determined not to let it be lost entirely. We
celebrate the existence of such a neighborhood. It was a place of safety
and happiness for two cousins, deeply involved in the Divorce Wars of the
parents.[…] Grandma and Grandpa provided the home that I so badly
needed. Our stories of migration, hard times, and reshuffling was repeated
among many in Pittsburgh as parents tried to function as parents during hard times and personal growth. (41)

Her passage, with its merging of family and place, is typical of Smith’s work: her statements unify personal experience, family troubles, neighborhood trauma, and humanity. She is simultaneously outraged, determined, and political. Regarding the example of what happened to her block, torn down to make way for a University of Pittsburgh practice field, she is blunt. Smith prefaced her text by explaining, “it makes us face reality as to what can happen to neighborhoods when they get in the way of growth. I don’t consider this progress, because destroying a fine neighborhood like that is hardly progress” (1).

One of Smith’s goals seems to be to use the historical as a way of addressing the psychological. Her section titled “Shopping Adventures Uptown and Downtown,” for example, integrates personal memory, family history, and physical environment into a hodge-podge narrative of fragmented memories. Her grandmother, she writes,

would send me to shore’s store [on Breckenridge Street] for fat back. […] Next came the shopping trip to Herron Avenue. We would often visit Sach’s Drugstore on Centre Avenue and Herron for medicional [sic] items. He was like this neighborhood doctor. […] Next was the confection store, but my visits there were limited to my special walks with grandpa after work. Further up the avenue came the bakery that sold round bread, with rings in it. […] A visit to the German butcher was a must.[…] A visit to Thornton’s Produce on Herron yielded vegetables. (14)
Her description of shopping then turns to the downtown businesses they frequented, illustrating just how much the Downtown and Lower Hill were linked and flowed directly into each other.

Smith’s list is a kind of travelogue of the blocks she routinely walked as a girl and reflects the seamless integration of location into memory. Her day as a child was defined by the places she went and the places she went shaped her family’s experiences. The options are quite different for contemporary inhabitants. The options have shifted for all sections of the city, and her references to so many independent businesses highlights how different her world was from today’s Walmart era. The contrast is particularly dramatic for the Hill District, however, where the large population is now forced outside—typically far outside—the community for even the basics. The opening of a Hill District pharmacy sponsored by Duquesne University fills a decade-long void. The construction of a Shop n’ Save, scheduled to open in 2011, will be the first grocery store the Hill has had in nearly thirty years. In the meantime, the rituals of daily life take place largely outside the district.

Smith’s descriptions of her weekly routine also plot her childhood paths and link her routes, her adventures, and her identity to her own little part of the world, a world largely defined by the friendships and especially the family that anchored her to her landscape. Rather than composing a traditional history, Smith records raw memories that reflect an individual trying to come to terms with what is not there anymore, what is lost, in a way that almost tries to rebuild that location. John Edgar Wideman explains that the “litany, or incantation, is a way of possessing the turf. You name it, you claim it. […] It’s mostly the inner geography, and the street names are the most concrete manifestation
of that geography” (Lustig 454). Although Wideman is referencing a literary representation, the description matches the real-world examples both Smith and Fullilove discuss. By collecting her fragments, by “naming,” Smith is indeed possessing her old neighborhood. In this sense, she is not merely telling the history of the neighborhoods she lived in or telling the history of her family; she is reclaiming both.

Also included in Hill District Renaissance are maps – seven in total. Several refer to histories and locations far more broadly familiar than the Hill, including maps of Fort Pitt, the Battle of Monongahela, and the original distribution of American Indian tribes throughout the state. In all cases Smith’s focus is on highlighting the role of African Americans in regional history. But also included are maps of various neighborhoods of the Hill, and these maps are highly personal. Two are hand-drawn. “The view from 2821 Breckinridge Street as Cousin Nora Remembers” is the caption to one map (10). Her cousin’s “Work Area” is another, this map including “Beatrice’s Beauty Shop where cousin Nora lived” and “Our House” and “Pittsburgh Courier Newspaper” as key landmarks (9). The vitality of the former Hill, as well as Smith’s references to the empty lots or dangerous environment that now characterize the area, emphasize the contrast between the past and the present that is well-documented, but all-too-rarely recognized by most Pittsburghers, even those who live within the Hill’s parameters.

Gloria Smith’s book as a whole presents family history as inseparable from the community, and the community as inseparable from the neighborhoods. Her attempts at discovering her past involve understanding the heritage both of her family and from her neighborhood. She includes poems written by her father about the loss of place as a way
of echoing the loss of the Hill, reflecting her pride in her father (and an acknowledgement that she did not understand the material in her youth), and as an archive of her family. She includes a reproduction of such random artifacts as her grandfather’s Duquesne Light employee identification card, driving home the widespread sense of loss that equates the longing for a close relative with the longing for the place where she grew up.

But, unlike so many of the histories of regions, families, or neighborhoods, (and ultimately unlike the majority of John Edgar Wideman’s fiction), Smith’s narrative is throughout infused with a tone of desperation – desperate to convey as much a sense of urgency as nostalgia; she seems frantic to get things down on paper before these memories, like so many of the people and places mentioned, are gone forever. Although she does not explicitly say so here, her shopping narrative highlights how American culture has changed -- the specialized neighborhood business have been replaced. She also illustrates just how dramatically different daily life, community, and opportunity have changed for a neighborhood like the Hill District.

August Wilson uses a similar process. The use of real place names, and occasionally real people, serves to anchor the plays in the Hill District. Many of the locations are regionally and personally iconic, but they are also places transformed since the time of the play (and the time of Wilson’s youth). Wylie Avenue, the location of Aunt Ester’s house and several other settings (Lee’s Diner, West’s Funeral Home), still exists in a truncated form: it runs for approximately twenty-seven blocks through the remains of the Hill District from Crawford Street to Herron Avenue. Wilson’s repeated “invocation” not only points to history but claims the spot. The Civic Arena currently lies on the path of the lost section of Wylie Avenue; Wilson’s representation of the street
in its pre-destruction form erases the Civic Arena and replaces it with the memory of the people who once lived and worked there.

III.  *The Torch-Bearer*

In 1992, the same year as HOPE VI and Gloria Smith’s decision to start her Hill District narrative, Broadway was introduced to August Wilson’s most significant character: Aunt Ester. *Two Trains Running*, Wilson’s ‘sixties play,’ had premiered two years earlier at the Yale Reparatory Theatre but opened in New York in April. Aunt Ester – the centuries-old keeper of ancestral knowledge, experience, and wisdom – never appeared on-stage. She dominated the play nonetheless: characters reported their visits to her home, relayed her advice, and, when they heeded that advice, reveled in their successes. *Two Trains*, set in “Pittsburgh, 1969,” bears the weight of the waning Civil Rights Era, including the aftermath of assassinations and riots. With the representations of competing paths (passive resistance, militant action, religious fervor), Wilson’s study in the many divergent iconic voices could have easily fallen into a pattern of 1960’s stereotypes and traditional depictions of Civil Rights activism. Instead, Aunt Ester – the voice of the ancestors – quietly takes over the play and helps remove *Two Trains* from the realm of comfortable sixties tropes.

Even Wilson was surprised by her impact. Speaking of the character, the role of history, and his writing method in an interview with Sandra Shannon, he explained,

> in *Two Trains Running*, there are three ways in which you can change your life. You have Prophet Samuel, Malcolm X, and Aunt Ester. […] Originally I thought the rally was going to be a more important part of the play than it is – this Malcolm X rally that looms over the play. Somehow
it stayed in the background as other stories of the characters moved. So actually Aunt Ester has more impact on the play. […] She has more of an impact than Malcolm. (Shannon, “Blues” 544)

The character of Aunt Ester became integral not only to the play but to the entire Pittsburgh Cycle. She reinforces themes, characters, history, property, identity, and place; she helps define the cycle by uniting its eras. Her memories stretch the length of her supposed age: she encompasses a history that dates back to the origins of Africans’ enslavement in America and helps counter a western sense of linearity. The use of the apparent supernatural, and her ability to so fully understand human nature, helps incorporate African spirituality and practices into a continually developing African American culture.

Although she would appear on-stage in only one of the plays, the cycle’s century-opening Gem of the Ocean, Ester plays a key role in two additional works: King Hedley II, and Radio Golf.44 In her initial text, Two Trains Running, Ester begins her role as sage and history-bearer. She is not a prophet; that role is reserved for Prophet Samuel, a neighborhood fixture whose funeral serves as one of the play’s textual backdrops. Aunt Ester is instead a healer: she helps characters uncover inner selves by recognizing their personal and cultural heritage and find inner peace by facing their responsibilities. Characters willing to follow her council sometimes risk everything – occasionally even their lives – to make a stand and stake a claim (on land, on history, on self). In the case of Memphis Lee, one of the primary characters of Two Trains Running, this stand revolves around getting just compensation for property about to be taken over for an urban renewal program and retracing the steps of his own personal ‘great migration’ to

44 Of Wilson’s last five plays, Seven Guitars is the only one not incorporating the pivotal Aunt Ester.
claim the farmland in Mississippi that was stolen from him.

Wilson consistently challenges monolithic or dominant value systems by defying established versions of history, time, and place. In his examination of *The Piano Lesson*, Harry J. Elam explains that, for Wilson, “History functions not as a static source of objective truth but as a constructed and constructive agent that must be mediated, negotiated, and interrogated” (Elam, “The Dialectics” 363). Wilson changes or inverts the broadly-recognized markers of the decades. This, combined with his rejection of a linear history, helps him rewrite complacent representations of American history.

Through Memphis’ actions and Aunt Ester’s teachings, Wilson unites in *Two Trains Running* two of the dominant themes of his Pittsburgh plays: the Great Migration of the first half of the century and the devastating urban renewal schemes of the second half of the century.

Simultaneously, Aunt Ester enacts a blending of time that anchors the present by connecting it with both past and future. *Gem of the Ocean* reveals that Aunt Ester is not one woman but an ongoing series of women. As each new woman takes on the identity of Aunt Ester, she also absorbing the stories and identities of those who came before. Each also brings her own personality, techniques, and experiences to the persona. The Ester Tyler of *Gem of the Ocean* does not divide the tales of the different Esters; they bleed into her own story while she infuses her own story into the larger shared narrative. Using this blurring method of history, she is simultaneously a migrant from the South, a captive from Africa, and an escapee from slavery. This technique is key to her role as the living ancestor: she spans the African American experience.

Along with absorbing the personal lives of all the Esters who came before her, she
bears the memories of all who come to see an Aunt Ester. All three Women of the Hill — Aunt Ester, Gloria Smith, and Mindy Fullilove -- use a process of mapping as a way of linking the individual to place and the past to the present. By encompassing the collective memory of the people of the Hill District and the African in America, Aunt Ester becomes the emotional core of the Pittsburgh Cycle and a vital touchstone for a repeatedly displaced population. She aids those who come to her door by helping them recognize their own power and showing how this power is intimately connected to their past. Even a painful past can be a source of strength. Aunt Ester speaks of taking on the burdens of that painful history: “I’m carrying the memories of a lot of people” she explains in *Gem of the Ocean* (43). In this phrasing she presents herself as both a buffer and a repository: the memories are maintained for eventual use and, by accepting others’ “burdens,” she allows individuals to put the traumas aside until they are ready to confront or even incorporate those experiences into their lives. She therefore tries to encourage others to embrace their heritage and their history and to deal with what they can, when they can. Just as the contradictions of life on the Hill led to both oppression and uplift, so does Aunt Ester show the strength that comes from surviving, enduring, and living. Millions were lost to slavery. They died, were killed, or took their own lives during the brutal process of the slave trade, or through the hardships, griefs, and abuses of slave life. But millions more survived to carry on old traditions and forge new ones. Aunt Ester does not glorify slavery; she redefines it, claims it, and teaches the importance of history, whether good or bad.

Similarly, both Smith and Fullilove embrace a process within which the individual uncovers his or her place in the world. Gloria Smith describes trying to
salvage some of the memories of her childhood home while simultaneously trying to discover her heritage. In the longing of a woman seeking her past, *Hill District Renaissance* replicates the pain and the pride of Hill residents that Mindy Thompson Fullilove describes in *Root Shock*. Both texts show how potent history is in helping ground one’s identity – even if that identity is based on places long destroyed and people long displaced. Wilson deals with a similar theme. He presents individuals that are divided, removed from their heritage, community, families, and ultimately themselves. One of the most consistent “morals” of his work is the need for people to know where they come from, whether those origins are defined by family, race, geography, or culture. Wilson’s protagonists must therefore come to understand who they are and embrace that history, a state both Smith and Fullilove endorse.

All three Women of the Hill also use this process as a way of linking the metaphorical with the literal; even Fullilove, who initially saw her role limited to helping soon-to-be-displaced residents cope with scheduled upheaval, soon found that her Burn Index was important in revealing a hidden reality of the Hill District and in influencing the behavior of both residents and city planners. Mapping thus transcends the realm of the symbolic or literal and becomes something else, something with both personal and political import. In Wilson’s version of Fullilove’s burn index, he is not interested in what is lost or beyond saving -- popular perceptions and media reports offer enough of this judgment. Instead, Wilson shows his audiences what is left, what was there all along, and what has sprung up unnoticed. By presenting a Hill District both familiar and unrecognized, Wilson himself maps the area – and more importantly its people and their community – in a way that incorporates both the insider and the outsider view. Through
the character of Aunt Ester Wilson brings to literary life the experiences of Fullilove (the observer, the outsider, the academic) and Smith (the resident, the historian, the insider).

One of the most important ways Aunt Ester accomplishes this is by leading her charges to the City of Bones, what Wilson himself repeatedly referred to as “the largest unmarked graveyard in the world.” Black Mary, Solly Two Kings, and Eli have all been there and helped many others in their own voyages. Joe Barlow, the “Old Joe” of Radio Golf (and the son of Black Mary and Citizen), went there too. In Gem of the Ocean, Citizen Barlow is the one to travel to the City of Bones. Citizen is described in the character list as “a young man from Alabama who is in spiritual turmoil. Late twenties/early thirties” (5). This spiritual turmoil stems most directly from his role in the death of Garret Brown, a man accused of stealing the bucket of nails that Citizen had actually stolen. Brown jumped into the river to escape Caesar Wilks, the violent black constable. Rather than submit to Caesar’s accusation, rather than endure a thirty-day sentence for something he did not do, Brown adamantly refused to come out of the water. Surrounded by a crowd of observers, Citizen among them, Garrett Brown eventually drowned.

Citizen comes to Aunt Ester at the start of the play in a state of desperation: “[...] You said to come back Tuesday,” he says after sneaking into her home. “I can’t wait till Tuesday. I can’t wait. I have to see you now. They say you can help me. They say you can wash people’s souls” (20). Aunt Ester rejects this claim, saying “God the only one can wash people’s souls” (20). He uses the same phrasing with Black Mary, who likewise undercut Aunt Ester’s role in the cleansing:

CITIZEN: The people sent me to see Aunt Ester. One man say he came to
see Aunt Ester and all his problems went away. Say she can help anybody.

BLACK MARY: You got to help yourself. Aunt Ester can help you if you willing to help yourself. She ain’t got no magic power.

CITIZEN: The people say, “Go see Aunt Ester and get your soul washed.”

BLACK MARY: The people say a lot of things. (40)

That Aunt Ester is the subject of so much talk in *Gem*, that she is credited with mystical powers, points as much to the population’s overwhelming needs as to her abilities.

When Wilson called for African Americans “to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people,” the decisions made were both good and bad. As he told Kim Powers, “I'm not certain the right choices have always been made. That's part of my interest in history--to say ‘Let's look at this again and see where we've come from and how we've gotten where we are now.’ I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed in the future” (52). Aunt Ester is a cultural repository and the stories she carries are not static. In *Two Trains Running* the characters still refer to her ability to “make you right with yourself,” but Holloway credits this to her age and experience: “Aunt Ester got a power cause she got an understanding. Anybody live as long as she has is bound to have an understanding” (22). The understanding to which Holloway refers comes from having lived life, from understanding the lives of others and not from memorizing narratives.

Neither Wilson nor Aunt Ester dictate behavior or offer a specific pathway for the future. Wilson’s Aunt Ester instead coaches self-awareness, individual responsibility,
and standing up for what is right, regardless of the outcome. “The truth has to stand in the light. You got to get your soul washed” (70), she tells Citizen. “It all will come to stand in the light, Mr. Citizen. Everything and everybody got to stand in the light” (23). Black Mary, at last recognizing that she can no longer ignore her brother’s behavior, similarly speaks of truth being the light: “Caesar, I gave you everything. Even when I didn't have to give you. I made every way for you. I turned my eyes away. I figured if I didn't see it I couldn't hold fault. If I held fault I couldn't hold on to my love for you. But now you standing in the light and I can't turn away no more” (85). Faced with clear evidence of his cruelty, Black Mary must acknowledge that Caesar’s actions are no longer something she can avoid. For his own peace, Citizen must confess his involvement in Garrett Brown’s death.

Instead of dispensing advice, Aunt Ester uses a socratic method to lead others to where they need to be. Smith and Fullilove use mapping techniques to reveal the inherent worth in a contemporary Hill District. Aunt Ester does something similar with the Hill’s residents: her “lessons” are based on drawing out whatever it is inside the individual. As she tells Black Mary, her disciple,

The people will come and tell you anything. They got all kinds of problems. They tell you this and they tell you that. You’ll come to find out most of the time they looking for love. Love will go a long way toward making you right with yourself. They looking for love and don’t know what it is. If you tell them they still don’t know. You got to show them how to find it for themselves. (46)

Although both Smith and Fullilove were dealing with physical space, the most important
mapping they were involved with was internal, helping residents recognize the complexity of their neighborhood. “Place” expands to more than a physical landscape. It is instead the intersection of the physical and the social. For Aunt Ester, the importance of place relates to the individual’s ability to anchor him or herself in a home and a community, to find a way to come to peace with who one is and claim ownership of where one has settled.

Movement in many ways defines Aunt Ester’s past. In Pittsburgh, however, she settles on a single address: 1839 Wylie, the house she leaves only when compelled and the home that becomes a neighborhood icon of solidity, strength, and hope. The people of Gem of the Ocean need a similar anchor and Aunt Ester emphasizes the physical in her techniques. The physical is not important because of any innate talismanic properties; it is important because it serves as a touchstone. “The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you’ve been,” Wilson explained. “It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history” (qtd in Londre 114). The physical links to memories in Gem of the Ocean therefore remind characters of the positives that come out of experiences that are commonly viewed as exclusively negative or even repressed. Solly Two Kings, for example, formerly a runaway slave, carries a link of the chain that had bound him. The chain does not serves as a reminder of his slavery; “That’s my good luck piece,” he says, inverting the chain’s meaning and claiming the right to define his own history.

Aunt Ester similarly carries her bill of sale. Solly’s link of chain and Ester’s bill of sale are physical markers on the characters’ own maps of identity. The audience first see the bill of sale when Aunt Ester uses it as a prop in her cleansing of the troubled
Citizen. She folds it into a small boat, the Gem of the Ocean, there to transport the young man to the City of Bones. To reach his destination, Citizen must symbolically enact the Middle Passage. He experiences the boat ride as a lived event, not a metaphorical one. Solly and Eli don “European masks,” “symbolically chain him to the boat” (66), and “symbolically brand and symbolically whip Citizen, then throw him into the hull of the boat. The hatch slams shut. Citizen finds himself alone” (67). To be admitted to the city he must confront his own culpability in the death of Garrett Brown. Once admitted, Citizen thus becomes a “citizen” of this City of Bones, an ephemeral place Wilson also now has mapped. This is the middle of the ocean, a place Aunt Ester fixes on a map sewn into a quilt. Citizen is made to see and experience the horrific pain and suffering that are a part of his birthright. The “voyage” takes a history that has been about lack of control and changes the meaning to one of strength. Aunt Ester’s bill of sale is not paperwork for property that could be bought and sold; it is a “gem” that allows a fantastical voyage. The Middle Passage is not just a brutal leg of the slave trade: it is the start of African America itself. Those millions who died in transport -- through disease, storm, violence, or defiant suicide -- rise out of the ocean and literally stand in Gem of the Ocean as the ancestors who offer Citizen inner peace and cultural strength.

Aunt Ester does not deny the horrible history of slavery, racism, poverty and exploitation. Indeed, the chain and bill of sale are transformative in part precisely because they do represent alternate histories. Rather than run from the reality of slavery, however, Aunt Ester advocates focusing on the process of overcoming and survival. When Citizen, dazed inside the symbolic hull, asks for water, Aunt Ester intercuts pain with pride:
There is no water, Mr. Citizen. All you have is your chain link. The boat got into trouble. The water was lost overboard. The captain took what was left and set out in a small boat. He was a mean man. He was a selfish man. The captain of the *Gem of the Ocean*. He took all the water and left the crew to die. But they survived. They followed the law of the sea. Life is above all. God raised it to a great height. Live, Mr. Citizen. Live to the fullest. You got a duty to life. So live, Mr. Citizen! Live! (67-68)

Wilson’s audiences see characters frozen by their attempts to buffer themselves from the past. Berniece, for example, denies history by ignoring it and keeping her daughter Maretha isolated from any tales of her heritage. In contrast, Ester does not deny that past; she claims it, refusing to let herself be defined as a slave or as a victim. By embracing those lost millions, Aunt Ester likewise redeems them, removing them from the realm of victimhood, of perpetual slavery. The entire basis of her character is the vibrancy and ongoing relevance of history and ancestry and both are based on constant reinterpretation, re-vitalization, re-use. The City of Bones as a positive image can be confounding until read in this light. The Middle Passage of the slave trade is the unmarked burial ground of millions of captured Africans who died at sea. That this unmarked graveyard is described in the play as a beautiful place, as one entirely devoid of the tragedy of those lost lives, is because Aunt Ester and her disciples are reframing the history. Those dead millions in turn give strength and support to Citizen Barlow and all those descendants who need to reconnect with lost ancestors.

Most audience members do not realize the significance of the paper the boat is fashioned from until two scenes after the cleansing ritual. While the stage directions

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several times identify the paper as a bill of sale, nothing in the dialogue announces its origins until Aunt Ester explicitly rejects the validity of its intended meaning. When Caesar comes to arrest Aunt Ester for aiding and abetting a suspected arsonist, Solly Two Kings, he produces a warrant as evidence of his right to remove her from her home. Aunt Ester responds by producing her own document. “Tell me how much that piece of paper’s worth, Mr. Caesar,” she says, unfolding the little boat that had been the Gem of the Ocean. Caesar reads the bill of sale out loud.

AUNT ESTER: It say on there Ester. That’s a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That’s me. Now you tell me how much it’s worth, Mr. Caesar.

CAESAR: I wouldn’t give you ten cents for it.

AUNT ESTER: Then how much you think your paper’s worth? You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don’t make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn’t need no piece of paper to tell me that. Do you need a piece of paper, Mr. Caesar?

The bill of sale never had a right to control her and now it no longer carries any legal authority. Instead, she controls it and transforms it into a ship that carries Citizen to the freedom of self-knowledge.

Although not all the characters in Wilson’s plays recognize her message, Aunt Ester also teaches the necessity of community and not simply individual identity.

Because of its placement at the start of the cycle and its setting at the start of the century, *Gem of the Ocean* introduces the theme of migration and the search for identity that will
so inform the plays following chronologically after it. Because Gem was written late in
the cycle, however, the play also reflects Wilson’s increasing focus on community action
and solidarity. Aunt Ester recognizes that Citizen’s spiritual turmoil is not simply because
of guilt over Garrett Brown’s death; it is also a result of not knowing where he fits in the
world. As is revealed in several conversations, Citizen does not know his legacy or
understand how the past fits into his life. He feels alone, adrift, isolated.

Trapped by an economic system that essentially guarantees perpetual servitude
and debt, Citizen complains that the mill seems as much interested in perpetuating
servitude as in producing tin. “Making the people owe is worse than slavery,” he tells
Solly and Eli, both former slaves, and the men are quick to reject his claim. “Ain't
nothing worse than slavery!” Solly counters. “I know. I was there. Dark was the night and
cold was the ground” (56). Rather than focus on the oppression and pain of slavery,
however, the pair describe their own experiences as active members of the Underground
Railroad. After escaping to Canada, Solly realized that he had to go back: “It didn’t feel
right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage” (57).
Rather than focus on how he is oppressed, Solly implies, Citizen should change his
situation and help others escape their own oppression.

Both Solly and Eli also contrast the situation in Canada, where they led runaway
slaves, to the situation in pre-emancipation and contemporary America. Their language
again directs Citizen away from frustration and self-pity to activism and obligation. Solly
says, “Don't never let nobody tell you there ain't no good white people. They got some
good white people down here but they got to fight the law. In Canada they ain't got to
fight the law. Down here it's a war”: 

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ELI: It's a war and you always on the battlefield.

SOLLY: And the battlefield's bloody! The field of battle is always bloody. It can't be no other way.

ELI: The only thing you don't want to end up being the corpse. You don't want it to be your blood.

SOLLY: Ain't no sense in you getting mad 'cause it's rough out here. It's supposed to be rough. You ain't supposed to complain when you see some blood. I found out you could bleed and you didn't have to die. I said this is too good to be true! Since then I ain't never been afraid of losing some blood. I said they gonna have to kill me. I can give up some blood all day long if it'll keep coming back. Your blood is like a river it don't never stop till you dead. Life's got lots of comeback but death ain't got no comeback. That's the only way life have any meaning. Otherwise don't nothing count.

The pair brings history into the present and frames it in terms of Citizen’s active participation. When Citizen explains that his mother gave him his name “after freedom came” (26), Solly takes it from a passive action to an active one, from a sign of freedoms won to the obligation to claim those freedoms: “Your mama’s trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It’s hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. And time you get it you be surprised how heavy it is” (27). Citizen’s name marks him as both one person and a part of a larger community. A citizen implies a kind of anonymity, but it also implies a place in the world.

One of Ralph Lemuel Hill’s interviewees at Kelly’s 630 Bar in the Hill District
claimed, “You can’t do nothing by yourself. If you don’t pull together, you’ll never get no damn where” (27). The lines, profound in meaning but simply and directly stated, could have been lifted right out of an August Wilson play. This division, lack of political power, lack of cultural voice, and increasing loss of individual and group identity is one of August Wilson’s dominant themes and the source of one of Aunt Ester’s most important lessons: stand up for yourself, fight for what is rightfully yours, and above all, know who you are. Then help your community understand itself.

The dialogue throughout Gem of the Ocean is peppered with the phrase “the people.” Two Trains Running and Radio Golf also feature the phrase but the number of references in the two plays combined -- fifty-five -- equals that of Gem alone. The people are trapped in the South; they are trapped in debt in the North. They are exploited by the white industrialists and white plantation owners, but they are also exploited by Caesar Wilks, the black constable who evicts families from his boarding house the moment they cannot pay their rent and who sells “magic bread.”45 Whereas in the other texts “the people” have been defined in limited terms, referring to the neighborhood residents, in Gem of the Ocean the term encompasses essentially all of black America. This includes those millions lost during the middle passage who never reached American soil and those trying to discover what freedom means under Jim Crow, robber barons, and Plessy v. Ferguson. When Black Mary wryly notes that “The people say a lot of things,” the line can be read as a sardonic commentary on gossip. The line is more complex, however.

Solly Two Kings, a former runaway slave and guide of the Underground Railroad

45 “Got a big sign say you only have to eat half as much to get twice as full. And I charge one and a half times for it,” Caesar freely acknowledges to his sister (36-37). “You don’t understand I give the people hope when they ain’t got nothing else. They take that loaf of bread and make it last twice as long. They wouldn't do that if they didn't pay one and a half times for it. I'm helping the people” (37).
and now an aide to Aunt Ester, is killed by Caesar Wilks. His death is the catalyst for the next generation to literally take up his staff and help with a new exodus out of the South. There is none of the lament for a lost southern heritage found in Wilson’s early works. There is no Boy Willie, the farmer from *The Piano Lesson* who announces his intentions to buy the farm his ancestors had worked as slaves. Instead, as Citizen Barlow leaves to rescue Solly’s sister from an oppressive South and Black Mary prepares to step into the role of Aunt Ester, *Gem of the Ocean* points to a powerful future, a sustained heritage, and a true community.

Wilson also conflates the figure of Aunt Ester with the Hill District home that appears in the cycle as prominently as she does. Eli faces Caesar Wilks’ attempts to enter into Aunt Ester’s home in *Gem of the Ocean* with the warning, “This is a peaceful house, Caesar. It’s right there on the door. 1839 Wylie” (77). Black Mary is incredulous at her brother’s behavior and likewise admonishes, “This house is sanctuary! It’s been sanctuary for a long time. You know that. Everybody know that. This is 1839 Wylie Avenue!” (79). They do not reference Aunt Ester; they do not reference why the location is important. The house and what it stands for are so fundamental, Aunt Ester is so much a part of the developing black community on the Hill, that no explanation is needed. Caesar is well aware of the special status of the address and the other characters’ reactions are clear evidence that Caesar has broken a covenant.

The City of Bones offers a specific place where the dead unite and help the living. It is a place where Aunt Ester can take those who are suffering and in need of soul cleansing. The process of cleansing depicted in *Gem of the Ocean* involves a ritual that is laden with references to place, not simply action. When Citizen is brought out of the
trance, the dialogue emphasizes a physical journey rather than a spiritual one. Place is also linked to a spiritual landscape, one that defines the soul cleansing ritual enacted near the end of the play. In preparation, Aunt Ester sends Citizen out on an unusual quest. She is specific about where he will go and what he will find:

I'm gonna send you upriver. When you get there I want you to look around and find two pennies lying on the ground. They got to be lying side by side. You can't find one on one street and another on another street. They got to be lying side by side. If you see one laying by itself just let it lay there. When you find them two pennies I want you to put them in your handkerchief and bring them straight back to me. (46)

After he leaves, Black Mary questions her mentor about the mission and Aunt Ester explains that people need something to believe in:

That's only to give him something to do. He think there a power in them two pennies. He think when he find them all his trouble will be over. But he need to think that before he can come face to face with himself. Ain't nothing special about the two pennies. Only thing special about them is he think they special. He find them two pennies then he think he done something. But, he ain't done nothing but find two pennies. (48)

When Citizen returns with the two pennies -- ”They was laying there. Side by side. I picked them up” (51) -- Aunt Ester expresses no surprise. Perhaps, just as Citizen needed something to do, the coins were there simply because he needed them to be. The significance of Citizen’s quest was in the journey and the meaning Aunt Ester -- and therefore Citizen -- imparted to the physical location.
Gloria Smith also found meaning in location. As she closes out her history of her family and the street and neighborhood where she once lived, Gloria Smith writes a lament for the Hill District that once was: “I morne [sic] the physical loss of this old neighborhood and was determined not to let it be lost entirely. We celebrate the existence of such a neighborhood. [...] Our stories of migration, hard times, and reshuffling was repeated among many in Pittsburgh as parents tried to function as parents during hard times and personal growth” (41). *Hill District Renaissance*, her collection of memories, photos, and proposals for the future, points to the importance of maintaining a connection to the past, a connection made more difficult by the physical removal of the places on which memories are built. This concluding chapter serves to illustrate the connection between August Wilson’s art and the ‘real’ world Smith and Fullilove encountered. Aunt Ester’s mapping and insistence on roots is replicated in the memory piece of the former resident Smith and the healing methodology of Dr. Fullilove. In this dissertation I have made clear some of the connections between the Hill District where Wilson lived and the Hill District he created. His work is not about a generic ghetto; the Pittsburgh Cycle was created from a vibrant, troubled, and living neighborhood, and that vibrancy powers his plays. Moreover, his evolving sense of self, place, and community, epitomized by Aunt Ester, argues for a real solution to problems still faced by those living on the Hill, or anyone lost or displaced. The intertwining sense of self, worth, and place found in Smith and Fullilove are at the heart of August Wilson’s plays.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester and Solly Two Kings invert the negative meanings associated with a slave bill of sale or length of chain from a leg iron and turn them into declarations of self, power, survival, and freedom. Like his characters, Wilson
takes the established history of the Hill District -- that area the Pittsburgh Housing
Association in 1934 called “ripe and rotten ripe for redevelopment” (1) -- and similarly
inverts the negative meanings and interpretations imposed from off the Hill or forgotten
by those still living there. While many others have written of the Hill District, Wilson’s
Pittsburgh Cycle opens up the voices of the area and offers his audience – perhaps
evenly a Pittsburgh-based audience – something they have likely rarely recognized
before.

Before sending Citizen Barlow on a voyage on the Gem of the Ocean, Aunt Ester
shows him a map of the journey.

(Black Mary enters with a quilt on which there is a map.)

Take a look at this map, Mr. Citizen. See that right there ... that's a city. It's
only a half mile by a half mile but that's a city. It's made of bones. Pearly
white bones. All the buildings and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I
been there, Mr. Citizen. My mother live there. I got an aunt and three
uncles live down there in that city made of bones. You want to go there,
Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go. That's the center of the
world. In time it will all come to light. The people made a kingdom out of
nothing. They were the people that didn't make it across the water. They
sat down right there. They say, "Let's make a kingdom. Let's make a city
of bones.” […] (52-53)

That city of bones, half mile by half mile, parallels Wilson’s Hill District. At first glance
it is a graveyard. By claiming it, however, Wilson reveals the bones to be the distilled
essence of history, self, and community. It becomes the central meaning of his work and
the voyage he offers his audience.
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