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Radio Golf in the Age of Obama

On first viewing, *Radio Golf* raises some unique challenges seemingly separating it from the rest of August Wilson's canon. We enter into analysis of this work knowing that unlike Wilson's other plays, this last play did not have the benefit of his nurturing guidance over time. *Radio Golf* made its way to Broadway and to publication without the advantage of Wilson's well-tuned process of playmaking, without his careful stewardship, without his molding and remolding of this play as it navigated the regional theater circuit byways; without Wilson in attendance at every production and rehearsal, rigorously writing and rewriting. After a successful run in Seattle, *Radio Golf* arrived in New York at the Cort Theatre on West 48th Street on May 8, 2007, instead of—more appropriately— at the August Wilson Theatre on West 52nd, named in his honor on October 16, 2005, some fourteen days after his death. The Wilson Theatre was then home to the long-running Broadway hit *Jersey Boys*, and even Wilson's own final work *Radio Golf*— which would go on to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of 2007, as did eight of his previous plays— could not supplant it.

Set in 1997, *Radio Golf* is of much closer proximity to the current moment and to recent events and circumstances than the other plays of Wilson's cycle. While it has immediacy, however, as historic subject matter it lacks, perhaps, that critical distance of time. But for Wilson there was another pressing matter of time and distance that infused this final work: the knowledge that Death was not far away, that he had months to live. Perhaps, like Troy Maxson in *Fences*, Wilson fought Death by hand and kept it at bay while he could. Perhaps he too shouted at Death, "Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you . . . but it ain't gonna be easy" (*Fences* 89). Given this urgent context, it is no wonder that this play

in its structure might seem, as *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones notes, “understandably, a little rushed” as Wilson hurried to complete his cycle; to tell this final story before his inevitable end.

Yet, even as we understand that the particular circumstance of *Radio Golf* differentiates it from the other works, we must also recognize that this work purposefully draws on all the previous plays. As he worked on *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*, Wilson stated in an interview with Chris Jones that with these plays he hoped to build an “umbrella under which the rest of the plays can sit” (Homeward Bound 16). *Radio Golf* directly reaches back to *Gem*, connecting the characters past and present and providing more threads to the genealogy uniting the cycle as a whole. Moreover, I would now argue that reading *Radio Golf* in relation to the rest of the cycle clarifies meanings within this cycle as a whole and reaffirms the power of Wilson’s intertextuality. *Radio Golf* revisits and reinforces earlier arguments as Wilson repeats and revises critical ideas from his earlier works: namely, the still-unfinished quest for freedom for African Americans and a pragmatic plan for African American ethical self-determination. In this play and throughout his cannon, Wilson asks that the question of freedom’s utility and viability continually be reconsidered. Early in *Gem*, Solly, a former conductor on the Underground Railroad, asks, “What good is freedom if you can’t do nothing with it?” (*Gem* 25). Within the decade of the 1990s — at a time when African Americans purportedly have more access to power; more resources at their disposal — Wilson argues in *Radio Golf* that the need for community, unity, connection to the past, and freedom are all the more urgent. Moreover, as I will argue in this essay, Wilson’s strategy in *Radio Golf* is in line with what philosophy and religious studies scholar Eddie Glaude outlines as a politics of “African American pragmatism,” within which the choices and strategies of action one takes are understood as critical to the structuring and formation of African American identity (3). At the end of the play, Harmond Wilks, the protagonist of *Radio Golf*, acts definitively in ways that torpedo his nascent political career and threaten his economic prosperity but that also provide him with a sense of liberty and a renewed spirit of commitment — and provide the audience with new hope in the communion of blackness.

The black politics proposed by *Radio Golf* speaks loudly to this water-

shed moment in the new millennium, which we might call the “Age of Obama.” For in the current moment, when we have a black president, race supposedly is of less meaning and value within American life. Some scholars and critics have declared that we live in a time that is post race, or beyond race. In such a time — as evidenced by the prominence of Obama (or, for that matter, Condoleezza Rice or Oprah Winfrey or Bob Johnson) — the restrictions on black access to power no longer have the same resonance: we have arrived. And yet, I think both the particular and the peculiar politics in the Age of Obama and in Wilson’s *Radio Golf* point to the fact that in America race very much still matters. Obama and Wilson, both sons of interracial unions, have publicly declared that they are black. Their self-designation — when juxtaposed with the exponential growth of mixed-race groups on college campuses and with the 2000 census, which marked the first occasion in American history in which respondents could check more than one ethnic category — underscores the constructedness of race. Obama and Wilson by their choice of blackness reinforce the notion that racial ascriptions are always political. Obama’s racial designation and its meanings have become all the more contested as black conservatives such as Alan Keyes and Stanley Crouch — as well as Debra Dickerson, author of *The End of Blackness* — have proclaimed that Obama’s blackness is suspect because he is the offspring of a Kenyan father and a white American mother; his blood quantum does not link him with the West African roots of North American slavery. Consequently, these critics — in a perverted invocation of racial biology and racial gatekeeping — argue that Obama is not black and cannot claim any connection to the legacy of African American struggle and survival. At the same time, conservative critics on such shamelessly biased national media platforms as FOX News — prodded by the incendiary racial claims made by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the African American pastor of Obama’s Chicago church — have proclaimed that Obama is too black; too partisan to be America’s president.

Here, the dynamics of Wilson’s *Radio Golf* are instructive. This play argues that black identity is not simply a biological trait nor the result of prescribed agendas, but an active choice — an engagement, a doing in a historically specific moment. Like Obama, Harmond Wilks is running for

public office. In his case, he wants to be the first black mayor of Pittsburgh. Harmond believes at first that politics is “about symbolism. Black people don’t vote but they have symbolic weight” (*Radio Golf* 88). The trajectory of the play moves Harmond beyond settling for the symbolic capital of blackness to a journey of self-discovery and reawakens a collective racial consciousness arising from his own determination to act.

If our current moment in the year 2009 is the Age of Obama, the decade of the 1990s might be construed as the Age of August Wilson, who at that time was the most produced playwright in the United States. Like Obama’s support and surprising victory with overwhelmingly white voters in the 2008 Iowa caucuses, Wilson’s cycle in the 1990s was not simply a black thing but a crossover hit: his non-African American audiences identified and empathized cross culturally with the trials and tribulations of his black characters. White spectators have come out in large numbers to see Wilson’s reflections on the black experience. Wilson, however, never imagined himself as a proprietary force in the American commercial theater; only as a visitor. In fact, Wilson felt compelled to resist and even speak out against the white patriarchal powers that controlled the theater industry. This position was not without contradiction and compromise. As I have written elsewhere, Wilson, as “a member of the bourgeoisie and as a recipient of two Tony Awards, is also committed if only unconsciously, to the continuation of the system that has granted him no small measure of success” (*Past as Present* 228).

The question for Wilson — one he poses for Harmond Wilks in *Radio Golf* — is whether one can remain committed to a liberal paradigm of black empowerment and at the same time achieve economic or political success within the more conservative, white-dominated American mainstream. Obama may have found himself in a similar position of needing to compromise, perhaps, as he sought to win over a portion of the all-too-valuable white male voting block and to gain funding from powerfully rich and predominantly white donors, while at the same time maintaining his overwhelming support within the black voting public. Conscious of her husband’s need to appeal to white voters, Mame, Harmond’s wife and campaign manager, wants him to open his campaign office in the predomi-

nantly white Shadyside area rather than the all-black, impoverished Hill District: “You don’t want to start out your campaign excluding people” (*Radio Golf*, 8).

Mame voices an argument echoed by critics and pundits observing the campaign strategies of Obama and other black politicians: that an overabundance of blackness — even the appearance of endorsing black positions — threatens white voters and their potential for allegiance. On April 4, 2008, the fortieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, white presidential candidates John McCain (who once apologized for voting against the King Holiday bill) and Hillary Rodham Clinton both spoke about King from the site of his assassination in Memphis, Tennessee. Obama, however — perhaps out of concern of being perceived as being too black — chose to commemorate King from a distance, campaigning in Indiana. In his now-historic acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention — delivered on the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech, Obama did not refer to King by name even as he quoted directly from his speech and referenced the King legacy. Mame Wilks, out of fear of alienating the support of powerful city labor forces such as the police, begs her husband to remove a segment of a soon-to-be published speech that condemns a particular incident of police brutality and racial profiling (reminiscent of the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo by New York police officers and the much-publicized trial that followed). Ultimately, Harmond does not capitulate to Mame’s request, and the speech goes to print with the offending passages included. Harmond’s stance serves as an early example in the play of Wilson’s assertion of black pragmatism, or the belief that an ethical commitment to act against conditions of injustice and oppression should always trump political expediency.

Yet, the history of white racism and black exclusion from mainstream American politics might lead some to conclude that the pursuit of a city-wide office (in Obama’s case a national office) by a black candidate is inherently doomed. Elder Joseph Barlow — the wizened old Hill District resident who comes to Harmond’s Bedford Hills Redevelopment Office (the site of the play) seeking legal counsel — balks at Harmond’s candidacy,

maintaining that the white hegemonic order has stacked the odds against any black candidate. He tells Harmond, “They ain’t gonna let no black man be mayor. Got too many keys. The mayor got more keys than the janitor. They ain’t gonna let you have that many keys” (*Radio Golf* 20). Old Joe equates “having keys” with the ability to open doors and move resources, and believes that they can never be wrested from white authority.

Yet Harmond’s aborted mayoral campaign — or, for that matter, Obama’s run for the presidency — challenges such pessimism and, if not disrupting white political authority, lays claims to the need for a more pluralistic system. Allowing for the possibility that Harmond could — as Obama did — actually win the election, Sterling Johnson, the wayward black utility man who also frequents the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Office, asks Harmond, “You get to be mayor is you gonna be mayor of the black folks or the white folks?” (*Radio Golf* 56). Sounding not unlike Obama’s — or any other politician’s, from Hillary Clinton’s to John McCain’s — rhetorical claims to represent not any one interest group but the American people as a whole, Harmond responds, “If I win I’m going to be mayor of the City of Pittsburgh. I’m gonna be mayor of all the people” (*Radio Golf* 56). Yet Sterling’s question does not come out of a belief in the antithetical nature of black-and-white politics; rather, Sterling seeks to critique the overwhelming power and privilege embedded in normative whiteness. He continues:

The mayor be the mayor for white folks. As soon as black folks start a club or something the first thing they say is it just ain’t gonna be for blacks. Why not? They got five hundred thousand things that be just for white folks. It they have fourteen hundred students out at Pitt eating lunch in the cafeteria and they have five black people eating lunch together they say “Look, see, they segregate themselves.” They ain’t said nothing about them thirteen hundred and ninety-five white folks eating lunch by themselves. What’s wrong with being the mayor for black folks? (*Radio Golf* 156)

Sterling is questioning why blackness can’t be normative and therefore understood as central rather than tangential to American political strategies. His critique of the whiteness here echoes the spirited defense of black

theater in his now-famous 1996 TCG speech, “The Ground on which I Stand.” In this speech — in the face of the white paternalism that limits the cultural capital of black arts — Wilson demands the separate and distinct development of black theater: “We are not separatists. . . . We are artists who seek to develop our talents and give expression to our personalities. We bring advantage to the common ground that is American theater” (*Ground* 41–42). Like his character Sterling, Wilson identifies championing blackness as a strategy for fulfilling the ideals of the American Dream, rather than an act of separatism.

Sterling also decries — for Harmond as well as for the viewing audience — the pervasive authority and concomitant invisibility of whiteness within the American social system. Sterling’s humorous challenge for Harmond to be the mayor of the black folks raises racial awareness by *racing* whiteness. As Richard Dyer points out in *White*, “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). Sterling prods Harmond to think not only about what it means to construct whites as a race, but also what it could mean for a black politician to make blackness an issue in an election where, as in Pittsburgh, African Americans are not the majority. Sterling argues that what is good for black people should not be antithetical to what is in America’s best interests.

In his now-famous talk on race delivered in Philadelphia, the “Cradle of Liberty,” on March 18, 2008, Obama — who throughout much of the campaign sought to minimize race — spoke out, attempting through the process of racing whiteness to make the country aware that the fight against racism must be a united American effort. He called on whites to recognize the unmarked issues of economics and class that construct the racial divide. Adapting or perhaps inverting the overused and problematic racial axiom of “the black community,” Obama asked the “white community” to acknowledge that “what ails the African American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination — and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past — are real and must be addressed” (*NY Times* 6).

Obama asked Americans to recognize the real consequences in the present of racial histories, just as Wilson's project as a whole, and *Radio Golf* most specifically, probes what the past means to contemporary African American identity. From the outset of *Radio Golf*, Harmond finds his sense of self—his fundamental beliefs and principles—tested by the resurfacing of history. Harmond's challenge is to give them meaning. Elder Joseph Barlow, who claims he is the rightful owner of Aunt Ester's house—a house that Harmond at first intends to destroy in the name of progress—frequently enters Harmond's office and interrupts his plans in ways that compel Harmond to reconsider his redevelopment strategy. Barlow is literally the presence of the past: he is the descendant of Citizen Barlow, the troubled traveler in *Gem of the Ocean*. As the play unfolds, Old Joe and Harmond discover that they are related, as Harmond is the descendant of Caesar Wilks and Caesar's half sister Black Mary eventually married Citizen Barlow. Thus, both Harmond Wilks and Joe Barlow are the living consequences of this history.

The Elder Joseph Barlow, however, is not simply the consequence of the intersection of history and memory. Barlow repeats history and memories from Wilson's earlier plays. In his first visit to the redevelopment office, Barlow humorously recounts to Harmond his arrest for being a “fake blind man”: “They tried to put me in jail for being a fake blind man. I didn't do nothing but walk the dog” (*Radio Golf* 21). In *Gem*, Caesar Wilks—Harmond's great grandfather—reminds his sister and Joe Barlow's mother, Black Mary, of their Uncle Jack, who deceived people by pretending to be a blind man. Caesar complains that Black Mary's mother would not visit Uncle Jack on his deathbed: “When Uncle Jack was dying she wouldn't even go see him. Say he was fooling people being a fake blind man. She was right. But that's her brother!” (*Gem* 38). Caesar Wilks in *Gem* foregrounds the value of family, and Joseph Barlow in *Radio Golf* both symbolically and materially reinforces the importance of family through his discovered familial ties to Harmond as well as his legal claim of ownership of Aunt Ester's house at 1839 Wylie Avenue.

Old Joe is obsessed with dates. In the list of characters, Wilson describes Barlow as “recently returned to the Hill District where he was born in

1918” (*Radio Golf* 6). While no dates are supplied in the descriptions for the other four characters in the play, Wilson foregrounds 1918 for Joe Barlow: the year of armistice in World War I, a year that witnessed racial riots in Philadelphia and sixty lynchings of African Americans in the South, and the year preceding the “Red Summer” of 1919, when racial conflagration lit up the country. The year 1918 was also when the flu pandemic reached Pittsburgh. More important for our purposes than these historic events, however, is what 1918 signifies within Wilson’s own canon and within this play. With his birth in 1918, Old Joe is seventy-nine years old, his life therefore spanning the decades of the cycle (save for *Gem*, set in 1904, in which the meeting between Citizen Barlow and Black Mary is shown; their child, Joseph, is born fourteen years later.) Old Joe’s memories of black life over the decades and his understanding of the past consolidate the passage of time that informs the cycle as a whole.

The particularity of the dates that Old Joe remembers organizes each memory for Barlow and situates it within a chronology. Old Joe recalls: “I seen Muhammad Ali in Louisville March 5, 1978” (*Radio Golf* 20). “They tore that down. June 28, 1974” (*Radio Golf* 43). “He got shot in the head on the second of November 1942. . . . December 4, 1945. The day I got out the Army and went and saw Joe Mott’s mother” (*Radio Golf* 44–45). Barlow may believe that his recollection of dates fixes these events in history, but, as we know, memories are situational and change over time. Rather, the retellings are moments of embodied cultural practice, for Barlow shares not simply the dates but the events of that time that shaped his black consciousness. Meeting Muhammad Ali in 1978, for example, marked a “perfect day” for Barlow — a day when somehow his forty-six dollars and eighty-four cents became a hundred-and-sixty-eight dollars: “I ain’t gonna tell you how that happened,” he tells Harmond (*Radio Golf* 20).

Barlow’s tale of the black soldier Joe Mott’s commitment to the American flag and of his unfortunate death in battle in 1942 — as well as Barlow’s own encounter with a white man, who ripped the flag lapel off of his uniform on his way to visit Mott’s mother — recalls the bitter and ironic encounter with racism that black soldiers found upon their return to the United States at the end of World War II — after their valiant participa-

tion in the struggle to protect American democracy abroad. It also reflects on the charges made against Obama by conservative factions who questioned his patriotism and accused him of never wearing a flag pin. Eddie Glaude argues that “what we have done and are doing, and stories we weave about these experiences are absolutely critical for a pragmatic view of black identity” (55).

With Old Joe’s stories of wariness about white racism and with his faith in black possibility, Wilson is thus crafting his vision of black pragmatism. Through Old Joe’s recollection of dates and recitation of cultural memory, Wilson fuses the personal and political, the real and the figurative. 1945, the year Old Joe “got out the Army,” was the year that August Wilson was born. 1978, when Old Joe saw living history (the iconic Muhammad Ali), was the year Wilson’s first daughter, Sakina Ansari, was born.

In *Radio Golf*, the function of these dates and the recalling of history are also subject to interpretation. When he finds Harmond willing to back Old Joe and save the house at 1839 Wylie Avenue, Roosevelt Hicks — Harmond’s erstwhile business partner and former college roommate — uses the dates he finds on Old Joe’s police rap sheet to discredit Joe:

He has a record that go all the way back to 1937. Stole a crate of chickens in 1938. Burglary. First-degree assault. Born 1918. . . . Discharged from the Army 1945. Two years for assault of a police officer, 1948. Three years Western State Penitentiary for hijacking, 1952.

Thirty days loitering 1957, sixty days vagrancy 1958. Spent four months in Mayview State Hospital. Sent for ninety-day observation. Was kept an additional thirty days for further observation. It wouldn’t take me thirty seconds to tell he’s not all there.” (*Radio Golf* 69)

This litany could lead one to conclude, as Hicks does, that Joe is “not all there.” Yet what Hicks’s recounting cannot record is the relationship between the dates, the histories found in the time between Joe’s arrests, and his interactions that provide the rationale for his purportedly crazy behavior. Wilson’s cycle is particularly attuned to the gaps and fissures in history into which the ordinary and idiosyncratic everyday lives of African Americans have too often fallen, consequently being left out of recorded history.

Barlow's rap sheet comprises an incomplete history, and the dates on it are subject to what in politics is known as "spin." Accordingly, politicians from Obama to Clinton and McCain must approach the dates within their personal histories — the written text — with a willingness to give them spin that will appeal to voters.

With Hicks, Wilson comparably gives black capitalists a specific spin. At first, Hicks, a vice president of Mellon Bank, appears to represent a justifiable race-based strategy for wealth accumulation. Dissatisfied with his treatment as the only black vice president at Mellon, he dreams of business opportunities previously restricted to white men. In the course of the first act of the play, he signs a deal with the rapacious white power broker Bernie Smith that enables Hicks to acquire a stake in the black urban radio station, WBTZ. With excitement, Hicks explains this deal to Harmond: "We're talking about an eight-million-dollar radio station! This is the game! I'm at the table! There was a time they didn't let any blacks at the table. You opened the door. You shined the shoes. You served the drinks. And they went in the room and made the deal. I'm in the room" (*Radio Golf* 36). In presenting his new partnership with Bernie, Hicks uses the rhetoric of black uplift that represents him as breaking the racial glass ceiling and his financial victory as collectively benefiting the race. Yet Wilson uses Hicks — as he does West in *Two Trains Running* — to argue that black empowerment and economic advancement are not necessarily synonymous. Like West, Hicks is interested in individual gain far more than any trickle-down impact on the rest of the black community. Eventually Hicks will use Bernie's money in the name of business to edge out his longtime friend, Harmond, and terminate their partnership in the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Project.

Hicks's victory, however, is pyrrhic in that Hicks is exploited even as he willingly exploits. Significantly, Hicks's proclamation of racial inclusion — that he is "in the room" and "at the table" — echoes, repeats, and revises that of Lorraine Hansberry's naïve Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*, who complains to his mother about his own exclusion from the world of high finance: "White boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things . . . sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars. . . . Sometimes I see

guys don't look much older than me" (60). Walter Lee, like Hicks, senses the racism of economic disparity and desires a place at the table. After he learns that the conniving Willy has absconded with the bulk of the family's fortune because of Walter's foolish miscalculation, Walter, in an ill-conceived attempt to recover the money, intends to make a self-denigrating deal with Mr. Linder of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Prior to so doing, he lashes out at his mother, sister, and wife in his own defense: "What's the matter with you all! I didn't make this world! It was give to me this way! Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tell me — tell me, who decides which women is supposed to wear pearls in this world" (126). Walter seems to interrogate the American Dream and its racial limits, questioning whether there is in fact an inalienable right to economic prosperity. But Hansberry asks at what costs — ultimately, Walter Lee decides he can go through with the deal by selling his family's soul; he cannot sacrifice family pride and collective history for money.

Hicks, on the other hand, pushes and eventually pushes Harmond out, even as Harmond berates him for prostituting himself: "The shuffling nigger in the woodpile: how much [Bernie Smith] pay you for something like that? After he rolls over and puts his pants back on, what you got?"¹ (*Radio Golf* 80) Hicks turning away Harmond's attacks bolsters his own position: "My name is Roosevelt Hicks. I am part owner of WBTZ radio and I am not anybody's whore" (*Radio Golf* 80). What is unremarked or remarkable in his recitation of his part ownership is the diminished capacity of this participation. Hicks's business partner enlists him only because he needs a black face to take advantage of: in order to issue an FCC Minority Tax Certificate the federal government requires minority participation in radio ownership, so, by enlisting Hicks for truly a minority share, Smith can purchase and control the majority of the WBTZ revenues. For Hicks, however, his part ownership does not denigrate his identity but rather constitutes his new identity, since materialism trounces social reasonability and eschews racial disparities. Ironically, Hicks, despite economic advancement, remains caught up within American racial hierarchies that neces-

sitate his running home to get his new business cards, lest — without the cards that announce his identity — the white businessmen at the country club mistake him for the caddie.

Golf in *Radio Golf* is critical to how Wilson differentiates between collective politics and the bankruptcy he finds in black individualism. Hicks imagines playing golf as a key to black mobility and possibility: “I wish somebody had come along and taught me how to play golf when I was ten. That’ll set you on a path where everything is open to you. You don’t have to hide under a rock ‘cause you’re black” (*Radio Golf* 13). Omitting the legacy of racial segregation in golf, Hicks maintains that golf skills can grant social and economic access. In fact, Smith offers Roosevelt the partnership on the golf course, as golf courses are the sites where such business deals are made daily. On the wall behind Hicks’s desk in the Bedford Hills Redevelopment office — not far from the poster of Martin Luther King Jr. hung up by Harmond — Hicks places a poster of Tiger Woods. With his wealth, status, and achievement, Woods in some eyes functions as the primary embodiment of post race possibilities. Like Wilson and Obama, Woods — another biracial son — has made a different choice in terms of identity politics. After his much-discussed public declaration of his racial identity as “cablinasian,” Woods now stands as an icon of mixed race. Certainly Woods has opened up the world of golf to a new, younger generation, and in so doing has broken age-old racial barriers. And yet, as symbolized by the two posters on the wall, his refusal to take positions publicly against racial injustices stands in stark contrast to Martin Luther King’s engagement of the public sphere in the fight against oppression. *Radio Golf* militates against emulating Woods or adopting — like Hicks — an individualist posture that facilitates forgetting the past and forging destructive alliances in the name of self-interest. At the end of the play, Harmond returns the Woods poster to Hicks and kicks Hicks out of their business office.

As part owner of WBTZ, Hicks airs an instructional golf show called “Radio Golf.” The very notion of radio golf is incongruous. Golf is not a game about the collective; it does not require teamwork but focuses on the virtuosity of the individual, like that of Tiger Woods — it further-

more lacks sustenance, as well as the ability to satisfy the community needs. Moreover, golf is not a game that lends itself to radio. It requires the visibility of the backswing; the flight of the ball. Golf is so much about visibility that the very conjoining of the words “radio” and “golf” seems incongruous.

Wilson plays on and with incongruity in how he positions not only his play’s title (originally suggested by his youngest daughter, Azula Carmen) but the entire redevelopment project at the center of the play. Ironically, the financing for the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Project managed by Hicks and Wilks depends on the Hill District being declared blighted. In order for them to build up the area (and to prosper personally), they must tear down what is there — such that their financial success depends on the community’s economic collapse. And so, when the city ultimately declares blight, Harmond and Hicks joyously sing, “Blight! Blight! The Gangs all here. Blight! Blight! The gangs all here” (*Radio Golf* 101). The notion that blight is not simply a material condition of urban poverty and neglect but something that city leaders can declare turns blight from a social reality into a political construction: behind such a veneer, blight does not appear to have an impact on real people. From our historic distance of the new millennium we have seen the actual blight that has hit urban centers like Pittsburgh and have experienced the failure of redevelopment efforts to improve the community and institute change, rather than just to fatten the pockets of developers.

The construction of Barack Obama as a political juggernaut has also been dependent on manipulations of reality and the play of incongruity. Politically Obama came of age in the old-style machine politics of Chicago. Despite these roots, his campaign slogans did not dwell much on this background and experience; rather, they played up his inexperience in Washington and argued that he was a fresh face — free of the bureaucratic beltway baggage that comes with a long Washington career. Moreover, even as Obama identified with blackness, others perhaps saw in his biraciality the ability to transcend race. He was able to capitalize on the perceptions that were simultaneously inside and outside of conventional racial paradigms and definitions. His opponents — first Clinton and then

McCain — sought to brand the Harvard-educated Democrat as an elitist removed from the masses, a strange designation, perhaps, for the son of a single mother raised in a lower-middle-class home.

In this play, more than any of the previous ones, Wilson explores the intersections of race and class. Like black scholar E. Franklin Frazier's classic, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1962), *Radio Golf* questions the allegiance of the black middle class to the black masses. Sounding not unlike Bill Cosby in his much-publicized rant against self-destructive behavior amongst the black masses — a theme taken up with gusto by conservatives of all colors in this Age of Obama — Hicks rails against Sterling and what he views as black victimization: "Roosevelt Hicks is not part of any us. It's not my fault if your daddy's in jail, your mama's on drugs, your little sister's pregnant and the kids don't have any food 'cause the welfare cut the money off. Roosevelt Hicks ain't holding nobody back. Roosevelt Hicks got money. Hicks got a job because Roosevelt Hicks wanted one. You niggers kill me blaming somebody else for your troubles. Get off your ass . . . quit stealing . . . quit using drugs . . . go to school . . . get a job . . . pay your taxes" (*Radio Golf* 107). Separating himself from the masses, Hicks is "not part of any us." Speaking in the third person, Hicks expresses himself not only as individual but also as representative: the Roosevelt Hicks-type of the black middle class who has money. Hicks compliments his self-presentation by addressing Sterling not as a black individual but as part of a collective blight — the embodiment of the black poor. Hicks further charges the black urban enclaves with complicity in the problems of drugs, crime, and high school dropout rates that have plagued them.

Hicks's pointing, like Cosby's, to the need for black self-help and for blacks to divorce themselves from the victim status has some legitimacy. Hicks provides no policy, however, aside from self-help for helping black people move beyond this position. More importantly, his attack on the black poor obscures the historic conditions of neglect, job loss, and racism that contributed to the current crises' conditions. Between 1974 and 1992, with a shift in the U.S. economy, manufacturing jobs in the inner city declined severely, and, as a result, black unemployment never dipped below ten percent during the period (Glaude, 146). The poverty gap and racial

stratification widened as the Reagan/Bush administration consistently cut funding to programs aimed at supporting inner cities.

Hicks pays no attention to this history, for he has lost his connection to the force of collective history — a force Wilson represents in his cycle through the figure of Aunt Ester, the ancestor who is as old as the black presence in America. Hicks is even ready to tear down Aunt Ester's house as part of his supposed urban-renewal project, a project that will enrich him and potentially Smith. As Wilson wrote *King Hedley II*, he talked about how the metaphysical was becoming increasingly important to him and how prominently Aunt Ester figured for this direction in his work. According to Wilson, "Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant person of the cycle. The characters after all, are her children" (*American Histories* 1). The idea of the characters all being children of Aunt Ester speaks to the inherent interconnectedness of black people and black lives which Wilson underscores with the genealogical connections he ties together in *Radio Golf*.

This idea, however, is seemingly eroded by the fact that Aunt Ester's house sits in ruins and is about to be destroyed by the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Project. In *King Hedley II*, Aunt Ester dies; in *Radio Golf*, her house is evacuated and demolished. Harmond tells Hicks early in the first act, "That house has been abandoned for the past twelve years" (*Radio Golf* 18). Counting twelve years back from 1997 brings us to the 1985 of *King Hedley II*, the play that recounts Aunt Ester's death from grief at the senseless devaluation of black life, the disconnection of the African American present to the past, and the epidemic of black-on-black violence. If the condition of black life is desperate in the 1985 of *King Hedley II*, the situation is even more severe in 1997 when Aunt Ester's house — the last vestige of any symbolic link to the African American legacy — is scheduled to be destroyed in the name of progress.

Hicks's indifference to this dire situation stands in sharp distinction with the attitudes of Sterling and Harmond. While Hicks refuses to enter the house he describes as "raggedy-ass" for fear that it might collapse, Harmond finds himself transfixed by its magic and majesty: "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. . . . If you run your hand slow 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" (*Radio Golf* 61–62). Even without the presence of Aunt Ester, the house embodies history. It has faces and stories etched into its wood. It speaks old language and has its own smell. Hicks sarcastically retorts that the smell is mothballs: "People used to throw mothballs all through their old shit." Harmond, on the other hand, describes the smell as "sweet like a new day" (*Radio Golf* 61–62). If the past is literally present in the house, the house also holds — significantly — the possibility of the future: a rebirth, a new day.

Wilson's dramaturgical past is also present in the description of the house and of Aunt Ester. The carvings of faces in the wood that Harmond details are reminiscent of those carved by Willie Boy into the piano that lies at the center of the conflict in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, the piano that serves as an altar and memorial to the struggles of the Charles family, and synecdoche for the African American history. The house at 1839 Wylie Avenue, with its stained glass and wood carvings is both cathedral and sepulcher. Sterling urges Harmond to go and see Aunt Ester's house, just as Holloway some twenty-eight years earlier, in *Two Trains Running*, had encouraged him to visit with Aunt Ester. In fact, when Sterling recounts the visit, his words come directly from the earlier play when Sterling describes his time with Aunt Ester to Risa: "Aunt Ester told me I got good understanding. She just looked at me and said that. I talked to her a long while. Told her my life story" (*Radio Golf* 54). Although Wilson changes the order of the sentences, he uses the same phrasing. Old Joe too revisits images seen earlier in Wilson's cycle, not simply through his familial connection to Citizen Barlow of *Gem* but through his correlation to figures such as Gabriel in *Fences* or Hambone in *Two Trains Running*. He is the last in the line of Wilson's "fools" — characters that share unique connection to the African American past as well as a singular bond with God. Barlow's rap sheet states that he not only wants to bring charges against the United States for kidnapping — his own form of legal reparations for slavery — but also that he claims to be a descendant of a lost tribe said to

have migrated from the Arabian peninsula (*Radio Golf* 69). Like Gabriel before him who believes he is the Archangel Gabriel, or Hambone whose body literally bears the deep scars of slavery, there is a heap of signifiyin' in Old Joe's assertion that he is tied to the lost tribes of Israel, which links the notion of being chosen people to blackness and to Africa.

Wilson's willingness to repeat and revise his own dramatic opus foregrounds the cycle of history within his history cycle, such that Wilson's dramaturgical history and his reliance on our memories of the earlier plays and characters — including Hambone, Sterling Johnson, Citizen Barlow, and Aunt Ester — significantly inform our reading of *Radio Golf*. In fact, artifacts from his earlier plays in the cycle and their productions function as what Pierre Nora terms *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory. Within *lieux de memoire*, according to Nora, history and memory intersect in “moments of history torn away from the moment of history.” Nora explains that *lieux de memoire* are “created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination.” Consequently *lieux de memoire* are “material, symbolic and functional.” In *Radio Golf*, the *lieux de memoire* — such as Aunt Ester's house, Harmond and Old Joe's shared lineage, and Sterling Johnson's repetition without reproduction — function as collective cultural memory. They symbolically link Harmond to forces beyond the immediate context of *Radio Golf* but contained within the cycle as a whole. As a result Harmond now determines a new course of action that is at once cultural, spiritual, and political.

Harmond's decision to fight the demolition of Aunt Ester's house is both pragmatic and spiritual. Notably, in *Radio Golf* — written as Wilson himself was feeling perhaps closer to God as his cancer progressed — the idea of spiritual and the metaphysical that we saw in earlier plays is not as immediately visible. On first glance, it is the most secular of the later plays. Where is Aunt Ester, after all? This is the question that, I think, this play wants us to demand in the Age of Obama. Where is the space of spirituality? A significant aspect of presidential politics in the Age of Obama — brought home by the rhetoric around the Reverend Jeremiah Wright and the fear that Obama might be a Muslim — is the place and space of religion and spirituality. The separation of church and state is mere hyperbole. Contem-

porary American presidential politics depend on the visibility of religion: Obama must go to church and appear to be a God-fearing man. Old Joe first enters the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Office in search of Christian people: “You know where I can find any Christian people,” he inquires of Harmond (*Radio Golf* 19). He then reports that he found none at the Mission. Given the history of unholy actions — even white supremacist endorsements of slavery and Jim Crow undertaken in the name of Christianity — Old Joe’s finding no Christians in the Mission is humorous but not strange. That he asks this question of Harmond, however, is telling. As a result of his continuing interaction with Old Joe, his discovery of his own family’s investment in surreptitiously paying the mortgage on 1839 Wylie, and his visit to Aunt Ester’s house, Harmond undergoes a spiritual awakening. Harmond’s attempt to rearrange the design of Bedford Hills around Aunt Ester’s house, to give up his chance at running for mayor, and to forego wealth for his redevelopment project in the name of principle all might be read as acts of “Christian charity” as well as an active assertion of renewed faith. Discussing slave Christianity, Eddie Glaude argues, “The conversion experience equipped the slaves with the resources to imagine themselves as agents in the world. That is to say, the reordering presence of God in the lives of Christian slaves made possible a sense of individual and communal value that rejected the dehumanizing effects of slavery” (109). Harmond undergoes a conversion of sorts — a reordering — and he finds new agency. “I can’t follow the plan this time, Mame,” he explains (*Radio Golf* 72). Wilson presents not only the collective politics of Harmond’s decision but also its spiritual implications.

Harmond’s reinvestment in the past also helps him to formulate a stance of ethical black pragmatism grounded in this new course of action. For Harmond, defending Aunt Ester’s house is a matter of right and wrong. When Hicks tells him that the Pittsburgh legal system would not uphold his injunction that would prevent Aunt Ester’s house from being torn down, Harmond replies, “Common sense says that ain’t right” (*Radio Golf* 74). Harmond bases his sense of right not merely on the fact that neither he nor the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Company legally own the house, but on the significance of the house to the community, to the legacy

of Aunt Ester, and to perpetuating the spirit of the African and African American past in the present.

Wilson invokes his own dramaturgical history as he critiques the social efficacy of legal codes and the rule of law. Purposefully, Wilson has Harmond's discourse on the power of law replicate with a difference that of his ancestor, Caesar Wilks in *Gem*. When Caesar comes to arrest Aunt Ester for harboring the fugitive Solly after his crime of burning down the mill, Caesar justifies his actions by saying: "Now you know Miss Tyler, you got to have rule of law otherwise there'd be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos" (*Gem of the Ocean* 79). Correspondingly, when Harmond is determined to defend Aunt Ester's house from demolition by appealing to the courts, he explains to Mame and Hicks that "You got to have rule of law. Otherwise it would be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos" (*Radio Golf* 70). Caesar upholds the law as a rationale for seizing Aunt Ester, while Harmond appeals to the law to stop the city from seizing Aunt Ester's house to destroy it. In both plays, Wilson shows that the law is not the final arbiter of justice, for the law fails to prevent the demolition in *Radio Golf* and contributes to the subjugation of blacks in *Gem*. The law serves white economic interests and not those of African American advancement. As Harmond comes to finally understand, moreover, the system is rigged against black subjects: "They keep changing the rules as you go along. They keep changing the maps" (*Radio Golf* 78).

Rather than relying on shifting legal codes or abstract moralities, Harmond's ethics in *Radio Golf* are ultimately grounded within this history. Glaude argues that a pragmatic understanding of black identity "shifts the way we think about our moral obligation to the race" (55). Harmond's moral obligations have shifted. Harmond has come to read the small incremental changes in racial hierarchy witnessed in this Age of Obama — "Look we got a black astronaut. I just love Oprah" — not as significant developments but as maddening diversions. As he explains to Hicks in his climactic speech, the idea of change is mere illusion: "It's all a house of cards. Everything resting on a slim edge. Looking back you can see it all. Wasn't nothing solid about it. Everything was an *if* and a *when* and a *maybe*" (*Radio Golf* 79). Wilson presents this, however, not as fatalism but as a pragmatic cue

for problem solving. Harmond now responds to a world that exacts new choices from him, understanding that his previous plan for redevelopment — naively aimed at revitalizing the destitute Hill community — will further damage the community by destroying its history as symbolized by Aunt Ester's house. At the end of the play, after saying goodbye to his old lifestyle and to Hicks, Harmond grabs a paintbrush and puts on war paint — symbols of his new identity and course of action — and then goes off to defend Aunt Ester's house by joining the paint party at 1839 Wylie Avenue. And in so doing, Harmond links himself with Wilson's other warrior spirits: Solly and Citizen Barlow of *Gem*, Levee of *Ma Rainey*, Boy Willie of *The Piano Lesson*, Floyd of *Seven Guitars*, Troy of *Fences*, Sterling of *Two Trains Running*, and King of *King Hedley II*.

Wilson's last play thus offers a prescient view of black politics as well as a retrospective review of his dramaturgy as a mobius strip, or, as he writes in *Fences*, "a song turning back on itself." Of President Obama and others working to define a new inclusive American politics for the new millennium, Wilson asks that they not lose sight of history; that they address the specific needs of the black urban masses without excuse and with moral obligation; that they understand how serving this constituency is not partisan politics but speaks to a greater good. August Wilson's ending of the cycle represents a new beginning, and with every performance or reading of *Radio Golf*, 1839 Wylie continues to stand as a *lieux de memoire* — as the address he feels should be as important in our consciousness as 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Notes

1. The line "After he rolls over and puts his pants on" is very similar to an earlier line of a Wilson character, Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, where Ma explains to her guitar player, Cutler: "As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on." Ma herself recognizes her value and utility within the economics of exploitation of race in the music industry and determines to find a way to negotiate this situation to her own advantage, given its restrictions.