

13. Randy Gener, 'Salvation in the City of Bones', *American Theatre* (May/June) 2003, p. 21.
14. Wilson, *Preface King Hedley II*, p. x.
15. August Wilson, 'How to Write a Play Like August Wilson', *New York Times*, 10 March 1991, Section 2.5, p. 17.
16. August Wilson, *Two Trains Running*, p. 40.
17. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 144.
18. Although the character was not created in Wilson's first four plays, her presence can certainly be read into them all and she is similarly manifest in the characters of Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986) and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* (1987).
19. August Wilson quoted in Gener, 'Salvation in the City of Bones', p. 21.
20. Molefi Kete Asante, 'The Future of African Gods: The Clash of Civilizations', published by the author at [www.asante.net/news/ptare-accra-speech.html](http://www.asante.net/news/ptare-accra-speech.html).
21. George Brandon, 'Sacrificial Practice in Santeria, an Africa-Cuban Religion in the United States', *Africanisms in American Culture* (1990), p. 120.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Pemberton, 'Eshm-Elegba', p. 127.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 67.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
27. Brandon, 'Sacrificial Practice', p. 126.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 144.
30. A. Bryant, 'The Storyteller', *New Crisis* 108:3 (May/June 2001), p. 46.
31. B. E. Kipkorir. *The Marakwet of Kenya* (Nairobi: Esater African Literature Bureau, 1973), p. 42.
32. Bill Moyers, 'August Wilson', in Betty Sue Flowers, ed., *A World of Ideas: Conversations with Thoughtful Men and Women about American Life Today and Ideas Shaping our Future* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 179.
33. Wilson, *Two Trains Running*, p. 100.
34. Carla McDonough quoted in Wolfe, *August Wilson*, p. 38.
35. Harry J. Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 58.
36. Wilson quoted in *ibid.*, p. 86.
37. Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero With an African Face* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999) p. 49.
38. Ladrica Menson-Furr, 'Booker T. Washington, August Wilson, and the Shadows of the Garden', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 38:4 (December 2005), p. 176.
39. August Wilson, *Seven Guitars* (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 24.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.
41. Menson-Furr, 'Booker T. Washington', p. 178.
42. Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', pp. 68, 70.
43. Bondo Wyszpolski, 'Guns of August', at [www.easyreader.info/archive/news2000/0921/coverstory.php](http://www.easyreader.info/archive/news2000/0921/coverstory.php).
44. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, p. 145.
45. Bryant, 'The Storyteller', p. 43.

## I4

MARGARET BOOKER

## Radio Golf: the courage of his convictions – survival, success and spirituality

Hey, you have to go forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I figure we could go forward united . . . I'm talking about the black Americans who share that 400-year history of being here in America. One of the things with *Radio Golf* is that I realized I had to in some way deal with the black middle class, which for the most part is not in the other nine plays. My idea was that the black middle class seems to be divorcing themselves from that community, making their fortune on their own without recognizing or acknowledging their connection to the larger community. And I thought: We have gained a lot of sophistication and expertise and resources, and we should be helping that community, which is completely devastated by drugs and crime and the social practices of the past hundred years of the country . . .

If you don't recognize that you have a duty and a responsibility, then obviously you won't do that. Some people don't feel that responsibility, but I do, so I thought I would express that in the work. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can go forward together. That was my idea behind the play.<sup>1</sup>

*Radio Golf* (2005) is both August Wilson's Old Testament to the past and his New Testament to the future. Never one to mince words, even in the last few months of his life, he sounds his challenge to the black middle class to engage in the battle for the black man's soul.

Wilson selects a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history to illustrate a 'state of emergency' which Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations* (1969) calls the rule rather than the exception for those who subscribe to the tradition of the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> *Radio Golf* depicts Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1997, a year which marks the critical moment of its possible extinction in the name of progress. As the city proceeds to rid itself of blight, it also creates a 'moment of danger' which affects both the historical content of the African American tradition and its receivers. The Hill's current desolation and impending demolition could lead to a redevelopment of black culture and community or to the erasure of African American memory and history when faced with the appeal of material success, wealth and status promised by the

American Dream. Wilson presents the dilemma but leaves us to contemplate the solutions.

In his entire ten-play chronicle, Wilson teaches his own community and the diverse American audience to recognize and respect the role African Americans have played in both an ethnic and a national historical context. Simultaneously proud of his cultural roots and his American citizenship, he wants to support and celebrate both. To do so, he has wisely chosen his old neighbourhood, the Hill District of Pittsburgh, as the location for all but one of his plays. Containing many landmarks, with Aunt Ester's house as its red-doored heart, it was once a lively hub made up of houses with yards, numerous businesses (Miss Harriet's fried chicken place, Hop's Construction, Sam Green's grocery, Mr Redwood's Orphanage, Wilks Realty), schools (St Richard's, Connolly Trade), hospitals, churches, entertainment and sports centres (the Crawford Grill or Kennard Field). Poverty, crime and unemployment now walk its once busy streets. Poor blacks and street gangs, pawnshops, the mission, Hill House, and busy undertakers populate the district. Even TV trucks, as Mame Wilks points out, will not drive up to the Hill unless there is a shooting. Socially mobile blacks have moved out of the inner city to Shadyside and other suburban neighbourhoods. The Hill District is the cycle's overriding "*lieu de mémoire*" to use Pierre Nora's term, the setting

where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.<sup>3</sup>

What happens when the local handyman paints the front door of an old house slated for demolition and decides to invite the neighbourhood to a party? All hell breaks loose. 1839 Wylie Avenue is sacred ground, the home of the now-deceased Mother of the Race, the 'most significant persona'<sup>4</sup> of Wilson's ten-play chronicle of the African American experience. She is none other than the ultimate ancestor, Aunt Ester. Aptly named after the woman who saved her people in the Old Testament and as old as slavery itself, she signifies the presence of the black man in America and bears witness to his history and worth. The impending destruction of her home serves as the catalyst for the play's dramatic action.

Significantly, the stage setting for *Radio Golf* is the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Company construction office and *not* Aunt Ester's home. One is visible and the other invisible; one concrete, the other spiritual. One points to the future, the other connects to the past. Decorated with posters of

contemporary international golf champion Tiger Woods and the 1960s icon of the civil rights movement Martin Luther King, Jr., it is a site of memory that exists within the larger one of the Hill District. The old building, a former Centre Avenue storefront, complete with antique embossed tin ceiling, belongs to Wilks Realty, the black business with a history which reaches back to Caesar Wilks, the first black constable on the Hill and the man who invaded Aunt Ester's sanctuary in 1918 (*Gem of the Ocean* (2003)). This location becomes the arena in which the drama's spiritual conflict takes place.

The play's protagonist, Harmond Wilks, is representative of the black middle class, which moved out of the Hill District years earlier to a more affluent part of the city (Shadyside) and lost touch with those left behind. He is a real estate developer, wealthy owner of Wilks Realty, local leader and potential mayoral candidate. His Cornell roommate, and the drama's antagonist, Roosevelt Hicks, is an avid golfer, soon-to-be Mellon Bank Vice-President and part owner of and golf talkshow host on WBTZ radio. The two friends have long played golf together and have just become partners in a new, black enterprise – the Bedford Hills Redevelopment, Inc. Funded by a combination of their own and government (Model Cities) money, the pair plan to revive the Hill District and make a tidy profit on their \$200,000 investment in the process. The author uses their shared interest in the game of golf to contrast their personal histories, ethics and relationship to African American history and values.

Titles are always keys to an understanding of Wilson's dramas, and *Radio Golf* is no exception. The title metaphorically alludes to the aspirations of the black middle class towards the accumulation of wealth and social status, including celebrity, within the larger American context. Golf is, after all, an upper-class individual sport played on manicured greens as opposed to team baseball played on backlots in urban neighbourhoods (*Fences*) (1985). Wilson chooses golf – a professional sport once inaccessible to blacks – to examine the erosion of African American cultural values in the pursuit of success as defined by the dominant white society. Ever since '22 noblemen and gentlemen' at St Andrews, Fife, Scotland set up the Society of St Andrews Golfers in 1754 and adopted its present name of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews by permission of William IV in 1834, the game of golf has been associated with upper-class society both in Great Britain and later in America. Historically, African Americans were the caddies, not the players, on American courses. The Professional Golf Association did not admit blacks until Charlie Sifford, first black in the World Golf Hall of Fame and author of *Just Let Me Play* (1992), pioneered the way in 1961. Wilson issues a warning: 'We're all trying to imitate the British to become lords and aristocrats, have a

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bunch of servants and a gardener . . . We were founded as a British colony.' Wilson is a typical Pittsburgh sports fan who admires the athletic excellence of Tiger Woods, Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis and others who pioneered the way for blacks in professional sports. Simultaneously, he criticizes the conversion of their talent and heritage into mass-marketable products, such as the Nike endorsement or, much earlier, Ma Rainey's recorded songs. This commodification<sup>6</sup> is tantamount to stealing their heritage, like Aunt Ester's house, in the name of progress.

The play's language and music capture this commodification and shattering of history. Harmond and Mame speak with near-perfect grammar about marketing and business deals and their relationship. Harmond, like a true politician, can adjust his speech pattern to his constituency. Roosevelt retains the poor grammar and colourful swearing of his youth in addition to the vocabularies he learnt in college. Ben Brantley, in his *New York Times* review of *Radio Golf*, describes what Wilson is doing as an artist:

The inspiring antiseptic slang of much of the dialogue in 'Radio Golf' is deliberate . . . Mr Wilson intends that at least three of his characters sound as out of place as they do. They may be transacting business in that section of Pittsburgh known as the Hill, . . . but they have forgotten its language, an organic poetry shaped by decades of hard living. They are people who've lost their natural voices. In Mr Wilson's world, that's the same thing as losing their souls.<sup>7</sup>

Old Joe and Sterling possess the 'Shakespearean richness that Mr Wilson has devised for residents of the hill . . . the wayward anecdotal vigor that is Mr Wilson's blissful specialty'.<sup>8</sup>

Wilson signifies a break in the African American tradition with the noticeable absence of the blues, a 'way of remembering, a congenital instinctive force that reaches back through the centuries to the first slave ships'.<sup>9</sup> Old Joe Barlow pawned his guitar in 1970. The two developers sing white man's music: 'Hail, Hail the Gang's All Here' and 'Blue Skies'. Harmond, who has lost the way to 'leave his mark on life'<sup>10</sup> in a unique song of his own, will eventually transform the notion of 'gang' into a new alliance with Sterling, the war-painted Cochise of the play's close, in a last-ditch effort to celebrate the history contained in Aunt Ester's house.

Wilson utilizes contrasting attitudes towards the game of golf in the drama's five characters to explore the dilemma of entrepreneurial self-interest versus community welfare. The five characters are living embodiments of chronological history ranging from 1918 through 1997, and reference back to the founding of America as a nation. Wilson includes allusions to the Indian Wars, African ancestry in Ethiopia, the Middle Passage, slavery, the underground railroad, abolition and reconstruction, black northward

migrations, the industrial revolution, the Depression, World War II, middle-class black flight from the inner cities and the residue of poverty and crime left behind, the demise of the steel mills and small businesses, the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the consequent advancement of blacks into positions of prominence in entertainment, sports, business and politics.

Both Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks are beneficiaries of the expanding opportunities for blacks made available through the civil rights movement and affirmative action policies of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Both are graduates of one of the nation's finest private universities, Cornell. While Harmond inherited wealth, Roosevelt is still scrambling to amass it. Harmond's monogrammed golf set, bought 'before taxes' twelve years earlier, is now a part of him. He is comfortable with government officials (both city and federal) and experienced in urban politics. His hero and champion of the community is Martin Luther King, Jr. At the play's beginning, Roosevelt is hungry for financial success and recognition and is comparatively naïve, as is evident by his elation over an invitation to play golf with a set of white Pittsburgh businessmen for the first time. His hero is Tiger Woods. Aided by the notion that golf has taught them how to succeed in life, both men believe that a world of opportunity lies before them. They are excited by the possibility of erecting a driving range at Kennard Field and a golf camp for kids which could give young, poor blacks a head start.

Wilson delineates three other nongolfing *dramatis personae* to fill out the spectrum of characters inside his geographical Hill District/*lieux de mémoire*. He brings us Harmond's wife Mame, a public relations professional and future spokesperson for the governor's office as well as loyal, loving spouse. She prefers the posh neighbourhood of Shadyside to the downtrodden Hill and views Harmond's golf clubs as 'stuff', easily replaceable if you have insurance and file a police report. The two Hill denizens – Elder 'Old Joe' Barlow (World War II veteran, divorced father of eight children, vagrant with a criminal record, the son of Caesar Wilks's sister Black Mary and Citizen Barlow of *Gem of the Ocean* and the current owner of Aunt Ester's house) and Sterling Johnson (local handyman, Aunt Ester protégé, ex-con and warrior spirit who first appeared in *Two Trains Running* (1990)) – can view golf clubs only as useless weapons or stolen goods for sale, especially in a neighbourhood which cannot boast the necessary grass to play on. They carry the history of the neighbourhood through personal memories in vigorous anecdotal voices, speaking a language lost to the three strangers – Harmond, Mame and Roosevelt. History, however, conflicts with the process of gentrification.

Wilson focuses on the two black business partners to build the conflict which powers the drama. The real estate developers are, by definition, erasers

of history and memory. And there is not much of the old Hill District left to preserve, as Sterling points out: 'How you gonna bring it back? It's dead. 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.'<sup>11</sup> Harmond tells him about the plan to rebuild the whole neighbourhood with shops, houses and stores (later revealed to be a 180-unit apartment building and chain businesses like Starbuck's, Barnes and Noble, and Whole Foods (one exists in Shadyside today)). He tempts Sterling with potential construction work. Wilson, however, has other plans for his central character. As he begins a journey to acknowledge the importance of African American history, Harmond will discover the real meaning of that 1960s anthem 'We shall overcome', and what inclusive civic leadership really demands.

As the grandson of Caesar Wilks, the Hill's first black policeman, Harmond inherits his ancestor's belief in the structure provided by the rule of law. He sees golf as a game of honour, concentrated individual effort and skill governed by an international, uniform set of rules. He declares, 'You teach the kids how to play golf and they have all the rules they need to win at life.' (93). A man of integrity, Harmond has played by the rules. He follows his father into the business, remains loyal to his wife, and believes some things are not replaceable or for sale, like the embossed tin roof, the decorations in Aunt Ester's house, or a family bloodline. Citizens' rights and responsibilities are very important to this man. He views the law as a means to set standards for everyone (black and white), curb violence, protect individual rights and ensure social order and wellbeing. He protests about police brutality in his candidacy speech in the face of his wife's resistance and promises to attract future employers, such as Wilson Sporting Goods, to provide jobs and a means to combat poverty. He wants to be the mayor for all Americans. He holds to the notion that 'The law protects you when you own your house and pay the taxes. But the law also protects the city when a property's left abandoned' (96).

The currently controversial concept of 'eminent domain', which permits the state to seize private property for the 'public good' or a city to remove someone's home and turn it over to a private developer, goes one step further. Ironically, Harmond's one illegal act, buying derelict houses from the city before public auction, hoists him on his own petard in a way he could not have predicted at the outset. He discovers his own complicity in buying stolen property, whether it be the club set from Sterling or the house belonging to his cousin, Old Joe Barlow. Wilson puts Harmond to the test; he must make a choice between hiding his fraudulent activity, thereby ensuring huge financial success and social prominence if the development moves forward,

or eliminating the corruption by rescuing Aunt Ester's house from demolition and risking the ruin of his career. Ultimately, he confronts Mame and Roosevelt with his moral dilemma:

HARMOND: Bedford Hills acquired 1839 illegally. It bought it from me but I didn't own it. I bought the house before it went to auction. That's against the law. That's corruption. I'm going down to the courthouse and file an injunction to stop the demolition.

MAME: Harmond, if you do that you're throwing everything away. All your hard work. Your career. Your reputation.

HARMOND: All I'm trying to do is save Bedford Hills Redevelopment. You got to have rule of law. Otherwise it would be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos. (105)

While Harmond believes 'I've got the law on my side', it is Sterling who knows from experience that rules change, especially if you are not the one making them. Even Old Joe recognizes the uselessness of protest if you are 'invisible'. Sterling, who went to Black Power leader Malcolm X's rally in *Two Trains Running*, spells out the nature of the game:

You got too big too fast. They don't like that. If you hadn't did it to yourself they was laying for you. They don't mind you playing their game but you can't outplay them. If you score too many points they change the rules. That's what the problem was . . . you scored too many points. If things had kept on going like that you was gonna have to buy you a gun. Time this is over you ain't gonna be able to walk down the street without somebody pointing at you. If they point and whisper you in trouble. You'd have to move out the state. Start over again somewhere fresh. That is if you still wanna play the game. If you still wanna play the game you gonna have to relearn the rules. See . . . they done changed. If you relearn the rules they'll let you back on the playing field. But now you crippled. You ain't got but one leg. You be driving around looking for handicapped parking. Get back on the field and every time you walk by somebody they check their pockets. That enough to kill anybody right there. If you had to take a little hit like that all day every day how long you think you can last? I give you six months. (107)

Roosevelt, on the other hand, has to be 'in the game', no matter what the cost. He tells his partner:

I hit my first golf ball, I asked myself where have I been? How'd I miss this? I couldn't believe it. I felt free. Truly free. For the first time. I watched the ball soar down the driving range. I didn't think it could go so high. It just kept going higher and higher. 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 must have hit a hundred golf balls trying to get that feeling.

But that first time was worth everything. I felt like I had my dick in my hand and was waving it around like a club: 'I'm a man! Anybody want some of this come and get it!' That was the best feeling of my life . . . That's why I keep my golf clubs in the trunk of my car just in case I drive by a golf course. I keep looking for that feeling. 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. (90-1)

Sounding like Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* (1987), Roosevelt associates golf with freedom and self-respect, making money (Tiger Woods's Nike endorsement), achieving celebrity status, and playing the game with white heavy hitters. Because his need to belong is so strong, he believes that success in America comes through playing by the white man's rules, just as in golf. To transact business on the green, he prints his new business cards as Vice-President of Mellon Bank and partner in the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Company because 'Without them cards they'll think I'm the caddie' (92).

Roosevelt naively believes that the white businessmen included him at their table because of his great golf game:

I was the center of the table and the conversation was going as good as my game. There I was holding my own, breaking out ahead of the pack at a table of millionaires. Then I look up and it was just me and Bernie sitting there. Man to man. I thought to myself, This is where I've been trying to get to my whole life. And then it happened. Bernie Smith wants to partner with me to buy WBTZ radio . . . I'd be in charge. Bernie wants to be a silent partner . . . (97)

The more practised Harmond recognizes their manipulation of his partner's love for golf and need to belong. Bernie's payment of green fees, drinks, etc. is not much of an outlay when compared with the profit margin possible via media or urban redevelopment.

Roosevelt, however, is more than happy to trade on his 'black face' to garner government subsidy to buy the local radio station at a reduced price. Particularly when he can both make money and be the host of a programme about his favourite sport. As he says:

This is how you do it! This is how everybody does it. You don't think Mellon has ever been used? 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! Them motherfuckers who bought and traded them railroads . . . how do you think they did it? This is business. This is the way it's done in America . . . I get to walk away

with a piece of an asset worth eight million dollars. I don't care if somebody else makes some money 'cause of a tax break. I get mine and they get theirs . . . Harmond, I have to take this. This is not going to come along again. The window of opportunity is already starting to close. If I don't do this Bernie will get somebody else. (97-8)

As an old friend, Harmond supports him with advice about lawyers, deal percentages and a promise to watch his back. Roosevelt wants to celebrate with another round of golf, but, in a funny, ironic and prophetic twist, Harmond cannot play. His golf clubs have been stolen by members of his own African American community. At the play's close, Roosevelt will sacrifice his best friend to the lure of wealth and status promised by a new partnership with the same Bernie Smith in the Bedford Hills Redevelopment project. Roosevelt follows his own radio broadcast advice. He knows he is 'one hole from disaster' (101) if he sticks with Harmond and decides to eliminate the handicap (1839 Wylie) which threatens the entire redevelopment scheme. Ultimately, he does not care whose rules he plays by, if he wins the game and gets his cut. He is, as Sterling declares, a 'Negro':

Sterling: [to Roosevelt] . . . You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don't know like I know. I know the truth of it. I'm a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God's creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blind-eyetist. A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back. (107)

Unlike Roosevelt, Harmond discovers the value of history and memory contained within the community whereas Roosevelt threatens its very existence.

Harmond takes action testifying to his newly evolved community loyalty. He attempts to pay Old Joe for his house, recognizes the Wilks family role in supporting Aunt Ester, and tries to include 1839 Wylie in the new redevelopment plan. He learns that rules change when the court denies his temporary injunction against the demolition of Aunt Ester's house. When all else fails, he significantly gives Roosevelt his Tiger Woods poster in a painful goodbye and destroys his participation in a partnership that would later include Bernie Smith. At the end of the play, Harmond, paintbrush in hand, joins Sterling, war-painted like Cochise, the Apache chief who resisted white colonization of the tribe's homeland in the Southwest. Theirs is a grassroots uprising in the style of Malcolm X. Harmond's actions cost him his political career and Roosevelt's friendship, but redeem his soul. He is one of the gang, one of Aunt Ester's children, and the proud possessor of '[t]he wisdom and tradition she embodies which are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions,

over the decades, have grown more fierce, and for exposing all the places it is lacking in virtue'.<sup>12</sup>

Wilson's characters

still place their faith in America's willingness to live up to the meaning of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals. It is this belief in America's honor that allows them to pursue the American Dream even as it remains elusive. The conflicts with the larger society are cultural conflicts . . . in what has been a difficult and sometimes bitter relationship with a system of laws and practices that deny us access to the tools necessary for productive and industrious life.<sup>13</sup>

In the final analysis, the Hammond/Roosevelt conflict embodies and crystallizes in time (the turn of the century) the moment of danger in which the unique African American history and cultural values could disappear, if those in leadership positions do not assume responsibility for their continuance. It is time for the next generation of Aunt Ester's children to step up.

## NOTES

1. Suzan-Lori Parks, 'The Light in August', *American Theatre* (November 2005), pp. 22, 24.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 263.
3. Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire (Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past)*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), vol. 1, p. 284.
4. August Wilson, 'Aunt Ester's Children: A Century On Stage', *American Theatre* 22:9. (November 2005), p. 26.
5. Parks, 'The Light in August', p. 24.
6. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
7. Ben Brantley, 'Voices Warped by the Business Blues', *New York Times*, 30 April 2005, p. B11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. B15.
9. *Ibid.*, p. B11.
10. August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 10.
11. August Wilson, *Radio Golf*, in *American Theatre* (November 2005), p. 91. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.
12. Wilson, 'Aunt Ester's Children', p. 30.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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## Critics on August Wilson

The only research I do is to listen to the music. There's a lot of history of our people in the music. When I was writing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, I didn't want to know anything about Ma Rainey. I figured what I needed to know I'd get out of her music. Listening to her singing gave me a good sense of who she was. . . . When I did *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, I certainly did not think about anything that happened in 1911, but I had a sense that they didn't have cars but had horses. And I envisioned people coming into the cities, and there were boarding houses and people setting down roots. I believe if you do research, you're limited by it . . . It's like putting on a straitjacket. August Wilson'

It is not for nothing that Harry J. Elam, Jr.'s 2004 book is entitled *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, in that it acknowledges the extent to which Wilson's plays, set in the past, nonetheless address current concerns. Wilson may not have been interested in conducting historical research but he was concerned to trace the history of individual lives and the unfolding story of the African American community in such a way that present attitudes and values are seen in the context of past experiences.

Some critics have chosen to treat the plays as if they were written in the era in which they are set. So, for example, a number of articles approach *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) in terms of the history of the blues (Adell, Crawford, Gener, Mills, Plum, Smith, Snodgrass, Taylor),<sup>2</sup> or jazz (Hay, Werner, Wolfe); the Great Migration (Anderson, Bogumil, Gates, Pereira, Shannon 'Transplant'); the conflicting views of African spirituality versus African American Christianity (Richards, Shannon 'Good Christian'); patriarchal roles (Brewer, Clark, Hampton, Sterling); women's roles (Elam 'Women', Kubitschek, Marra); 'Southernness' (Gantt) or 'folk traditions' (Harris).

Elam, however, has warned of the dangers of ignoring the complexity of works which resist too programmatic a response, observing, for example, that 'The ending of *Ma Rainey*, in which one of the band members murders another, is a complex and confounding blues moment' ('August Wilson' 324),