Bringing the Past Back to Life:

August Wilson's Look at Three Decades of Twentieth-Century Black America

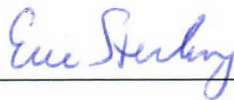
By Linda McCall House

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University at Montgomery
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Arts

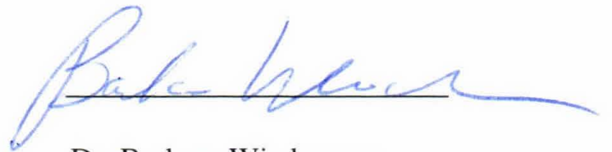
Montgomery, Alabama

5 April 2013

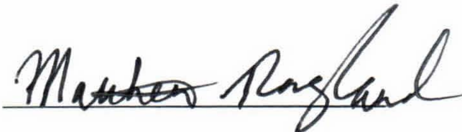
Approved by



Dr. Eric Sterling
Thesis Director



Dr. Barbara Wiedemann
Second Reader



Dr. Matthew Ragland
Associate Provost

COPYRIGHT
© 2013
Linda McCall House
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of Dr. Eric Sterling and Dr. Barbara Wiedemann.

I would also like to thank my family for their encouragement and patience.

Table of Contents

Introduction....1

Chapter 1: A New Life in the North in *Gem of the Ocean* 15

Chapter 2: Finding and Binding in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* 36

Chapter 3: Shiny Shoes and Death in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* 57

Conclusion: 80

Works Cited: 85

Introduction- History and Wilson's Twentieth-Century Cycle

Throughout time, literature both reveals and verifies history by depicting how people lived in the setting of the story. August Wilson wrote a play for each decade of the twentieth century, capturing not only the sights and sounds of each decade but, through the development of his characters, how African Americans lived. How they lived and their opportunities were frequently determined by choices they were compelled to make, choices based on circumstances that were frequently beyond their control. As the decades of the twentieth century passed, Wilson saw many of those circumstances first hand. In his ten plays, Wilson depicts the evolving identity of American blacks against a backdrop of their evolving culture.

Born in 1945, August Wilson was barely twenty years of age when the Civil Rights movement of the sixties began to force changes in society. Leaders of the Black Power movement reminded the world about the horrors of slavery, including that buffeting, frequently deadly, boat ride from Africa to the new world, and they demanded changes in contemporary America. Government responded in 1964 when the United States Congress passed The Civil Rights Act, legislation that forced integration in public places.

Although integration would mean that a tired black individual would now be able to get a room in the same hotel with his white companions, integration also meant that African Americans would ultimately become a part of the mainstream, the predominately Caucasian society accompanied by the possibility of attaining the American dream with all its trappings. Wilson witnessed those dynamic interactions of people, politics, and technology as the black and white societies grew together. He brought those observations

to life on the stage. And for the decades before, he drew on research and stories from people in his Pittsburgh neighborhood to bring that story to his audience. For each decade, he shows how African Americans managed their routine lives. Immersed in those routine experiences, Wilson reveals the dreams and basic needs of the heart that frequently were difficult to achieve as a black in the white world.

Except for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in a recording studio in Chicago, the plots take place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where Wilson grew up. Born on April 27, 1945, to a white German baker, Frederick Kittel, and a black cleaning lady, Daisy Wilson, he was named Frederick August Kittel. Mary Bogumil notes in *Understanding August Wilson* that his father never lived with the family and consequently Wilson never had a relationship with him. However, Wilson did have a strained relationship with his stepfather, an ex-convict named David Bedford. Therefore, with no heartfelt relationship to either father figure, Wilson legally changed his name to his mother's maiden name. With the combined influence of his immediate family life and the Hill District activities, Wilson saw the contemporary life of his own world, and he heard stories about the decades before. His Hill District neighborhood was representative of the cultural changes as they happened to African Americans dating back to America's earliest years when it was called Prospect Hill. Given his knowledge of the culture of the Hill District neighborhood, Wilson chose to examine the decades of the twentieth century by incorporating the atmosphere of the Hill District as the backdrop.

Ronald Reagan was president when Wilson began staging his plays in the 1980s. By the 1980s, Americans had experienced fifteen years of affirmative action and survived the economic blight of the seventies along with the combined influences of Viet Nam, the

Cold War, Korea, and World War II. In the 1987 introduction appended to *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethic Inequality and Public Policy*, first written in 1975, Nathan Glazer examines the quantitative impact as reported in the document prepared for the United States Department of Labor. In his analysis, Glazer notes the lasting results and substantive regard for the equal employment opportunity measures adopted by employers. He relates that the disparity in earnings over the forty years between whites and blacks was barely noticeable. What changed was their lifestyle based on their choices. Glazer summarizes in his introduction that regardless of the pros and cons of affirmative action, the actual progress of American blacks is attributed to their own efforts: "No American can be satisfied with the overall condition of black Americans, despite progress in recent decades; but none of the government actions discussed in this book offer great promise that they can do better to raise that condition than the work and efforts of blacks in an open and, it is to be hoped, growing society" (xxv). It is about this effort of blacks and their society, especially the changes in black society, that Wilson writes into his plays.

After the Civil War brought emancipation, blacks formed their own neighborhoods such as the Pittsburgh Hill District where they practiced a culture that evolved from a combined influence of their African roots and their time in bondage. As the decades, old neighborhoods were demolished in the name of progress. Wilson uses the physical neighborhood to represent that vanishing culture. He shows that as the younger generations blended with the predominately white society, that the rich cultural influence from their African roots and decades of slavery was fading away.

Over the course of the twentieth century, life changed rapidly with airplanes and automobiles, and finally computers and televisions. In the first decade of the twentieth century, many technological changes began to be part of a glorious new life for many people in America. However, in 1904 African Americans had been emancipated from slavery for only a scant forty years, and they had to find work in a predominately white world. While technology rapidly advanced, blacks in America struggled with basic survival. They migrated north to find jobs that required the service-based skills they knew from years as slaves. They also learned to survive together as a group, and thus their neighborhoods evolved.

Wilson depicts those black men and women dealing with the situations of the time, including their association with each other. In *Gem*, Wilson explores issues of petty theft, guilt, and mob psychology. Resolution comes with help from a little African magic. Wilson uses situations including blues music, African American magic, and the African American response to Christianity to build his characters.

Ma Rainey in Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was a character from real life, the First Woman of Blues in America. Set in 1927, the Great Depression is two years away, times are good and Ma Rainey is recording music. Wilson uses this genre of history for the setting in *Ma Rainey* to explore the African-American interaction with white people in that day and time. Today, comedians frequently joke about being caught driving while black in an upscale Los Angeles community. Just imagine what it was like in 1927, especially if it were a brand new car. Imagine hailing a cab in Chicago while black in 1927. By addressing universal needs such as transportation in *Ma Rainey*,

Wilson establishes a relationship between the audience and his characters, which helps to break down the cycle of prejudice.

Wilson delves into many, many issues throughout his plays, and metaphors are everywhere, with Aunt Ester being the most compelling. Wilson introduces her in *Two Trains Running* set in 1969. She is regarded as a person to seek for answers, as the character Holloway explains to Hambone in *Trains*, "She make you right with yourself. ... Aunt Ester got a power 'cause she got an understanding. Anybody live as long as she has is bound to have an understanding" (24). Referenced as a powerful mentor or sage in *Two Trains*, *King Headley II*, and *Radio Golf*, only in *Gem of the Ocean* is she a character on stage. In the preface to *King Headley II*, Wilson shares, "Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant persona of the cycle" (x). Wilson frames her with the coming of age of the African American transforming from a rudely treated second class citizen into an African American contending as an equal citizen for the American dream. She also represents the African heritage that Wilson so tenaciously wants African Americans to remember. Her age matches the number of years since 1619 when the first boat carrying Africans landed in America. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester is 285 years of age and 81 years later in *King Headley II*, Wilson's play set in 1985, she dies. Aunt Ester dies as African Americans become visible in every venue of society, a coming of age for a group of people.

In each of his plays, Wilson uses a subject of interest that is either the focus of the play or very important to a character to explore the plight of the black man in the society of a particular decade. He uses a bucket of nails to examine the value of life in *Gem of the Ocean*; pigeons to capture the value of home and family in *Joe Turner's Come and*

Gone; a pair of shoes to fuel a temper and death in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; a piano to evaluate what is important in life in *The Piano Lesson*; a guitar to focus on a man's worth in *Seven Guitars*; a fence comprised of planks to compare to life choices in *Fences*; a ham to represent demand for honest payment due in *Two Trains Running*; a phone response, "Cab service," to represent feelings of self-worth and dignity in *Jitney*; a death of the community elder, Aunt Ester, to define a coming of age for the black American in *King Hedley II*; and a demolition order that cannot be rescinded to show the reality or price of freedom in *Radio Golf*. Stories about the neighborhood of 1839 Wylie evolve from relating the development of the black individual's life from a bucket of building nails in *Gem of the Ocean* to a demolition order for the Wylie address in *Radio Golf*. In the 1997 setting of *Radio Golf*, it becomes obvious that the situation is never really about the cultural differences or the prejudices between and among black and white folks; it is about the money, always the perceived or blatant need for money. That ham in *Two Trains* and Citizen's bucket of nails in *Gem* show how unreasonable and rude a situation can become, pitting neighbors against each other.

As the plays proceed chronologically decade by decade, the subjects of interest change to reflect the day and time. The bucket of nails in 1904, a basic bucket of nails, represents building a home or business, and for Citizen it was an opportunity to steal to get some satisfaction. By the 1980s, the cab service in *Jitney* shows how successful the black American can be. With a proudly exclaimed, "Cab service," there is no doubt that the best service possible will be provided in the hopes that the customer returns. In each play throughout the decades, Wilson shows the changes in the relationship between blacks and American society by making his characters memorable and appealing to a

diverse audience with humor and people with common jobs such as Troy Maxson, the garbage man in *Fences*.

With these plots, Wilson brings black and white people together to live in harmony while still perpetuating their diversity. Race riots, not harmony, occurred repeatedly throughout the twentieth century, devastating many lives and destroying many thriving and beautiful neighborhoods. During the June 1, 1921 riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a white mob burned the lucrative, predominately black populated Greenwood neighborhood to the ground. Both whites and blacks missed their favorite black barbershop, cleaners, or restaurant. As late as 1996, while operating Hammer's Chili Palace in downtown Tulsa, located less than a mile from Greenwood, I heard stories from both black and white customers lamenting the loss. During the 1990s, the state of Oklahoma commissioned a study of the riot, so the riot was being recalled in the news. Scott Ellsworth contributed to those findings in his report, "The Tulsa Race Riot" where he shares that interaction in an elevator between two teenagers, a white girl and young black man incited the riot, but it was the fear, resentment, and jealousy between the races that provoked at least 300 whites to demolish Greenwood.

Ellsworth prefaces his research findings with a thought that puts the event in historical perspective: "Historical events, be they great or small, do not exist in isolation, but are a product of the age during which they occurred. Often times, the reasons why a particular historical incident turned out the way it did can be readily located, while for others, the causes may be more difficult to locate. In both cases, one rule still holds true: that the events of the past cannot be separated from the era when they occurred" (37). In his plays, Wilson preserves the memory of those neighborhoods as they were in the

decade of the play replete with the everyday nuances of the time. He also portrays the sentiment of the decade in which he actually wrote the play.

In an introduction to the 2000 Overlook publication of Wilson's first play, *Jitney,* about a taxi company in the Pittsburgh Hill District, Marion Isaac McClinton, one of Wilson's directors, shares reflections about the play that furthers the point of how genuine Wilson's plots are. Remarks include not only how much people in the audience loved the play but even hoped for a sequel. One individual delved into the essence of the play relating that his father was a retired jitney driver and that he had supported himself through high school and college with the same profession. When he arrived in St. Paul from Omaha there were no driving jobs available, so he supported himself with other work. But he missed driving for people because when he drove for people, he provided a service for them and thus was an integral part of the community. Wilson's characters in *Jitney*, which debuted in 1982, portray that feeling of community involvement, that everyday reality accompanied by the pride of ownership of business that enhances the life of the people in the community.

When Wilson wrote the play, blacks were beginning to establish themselves more in the mainstream of American society. Ellis Cose in *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (1995) relates the stories of black individuals who succeeded in the predominantly white society following affirmative action. He examines the feeling of blacks who sensed that whites were promoted ahead of them in spite of their better qualifications as well as blacks who believed they were promoted simply because they were black. He relates the raw, angry rage that persisted among successful blacks such as Spike Lee and relates a comment from a psychiatrist who pointed out that the rage of blacks will continue as long

as the affronts of everyday life persist. To emphasize the effect that the alienation had on the daily life of a black American, he shares that some of his doctor friends would "dress up to go shopping, simply to avoid being taken for shoplifters" (35).

This was the world of blacks in America when Wilson began writing in the early eighties. Cose discusses the working environment of the successful black and the accompanying frustrations. Wilson shares the problems of the working class blacks in their community. McClinton relates a poignant comment from the former jitney driver in St. Paul: "he said, 'It *is* who we are. It's not our *story*, it's our truth, the facts of the matter concerning our life in the land of the free and home of the brave... Who is going to tell it? Who is going to tell the story so that we can feel it? That's important man, because once you feel it, then it's *yours*.' I assured him that the story would not be lost" (8). Realizing how important Wilson's efforts are to his audience, McClinton shares that Wilson is to the American black what Shakespeare is to their white counterparts, that his stories "help define who we have been and who we are, so we might wonder at the possibilities of who we can be. This is our place to stand upon, so that we can snatch the future and claim it forever, never to lose it again" (8). On June 26, 1996, in his keynote address, entitled *The Ground on Which I Stand,* to the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University, Wilson stated the intent of his life's work in the theatre. He explained, "I have labored to bring forth its fruits, its daring and its sometimes lacerating, and often healing, truths" (10).

Race, central to his plays, reveal the parameters of life that it dictates for the black individual in America, a basic building block behind the story brought to life by Wilson's characters. He does not confront the issue but instead makes it a matter of fact, a second

nature assumption behind the choices. Citizen freely decides to take the nails; Levee pulls out his knife and kills Toledo. Both choices are emotional reactions to situations that defy race. For the black individual, living in a Jim-Crow world exasperated the situations. Without being confrontational, he opens the door to the white people in the audience to feel the emotions from the play the way a black person would feel them.

Wilson makes his plots and characters memorable and appealing to the audience with humor and common needs to which people relate. This is important because through engaging people of different cultures in archetypal feelings of joy or sorrow, the causes of prejudice can gradually disappear. Any number of reasons including simple but overpowering fear of the unknown can provoke prejudice, but a thoughtful story can undo a lot of harm caused by greed, pride, gluttony, wrath, lust, slothfulness, and envy augmented perhaps by media representations. While news commentators can set forth a daily agitating agenda that reaches out to people constantly on radio and television segments and political rhetoric, a story about people that touches the heart becomes a memory, a part of the memories of the individual in the audience. As the man in the McClinton encounter said, "because once you feel it, then it's *yours* (McClinton 8).

August Wilson understood the power of performance and storytelling. In his 1996 address, he reflects on the origins of black theatre going back to the slave quarters where the slave:

> sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center, and his existence was a manifest act of the creator from whom life flowed. He would then create art that was functional and furnished him

> with a spiritual temperament necessary for his survival as property and the dehumanizing status that was attendant to that. (20-21)

Out of Wilson's plays emanates a spirit bolstered with energy to nurture the presence of thought to go forth and build an abundant future. From the rough and tumble migrants in *Gem* to the sophisticated developers in *Radio Golf*, Wilson provides that art.

Wilson wanted to preserve the memory of past and at the same time motivate his black brothers and sisters to grow and prosper. He was aware of the issues confronting black people in a white world. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig share an interview of Wilson with Bill Moyers in 1988 from their *Conversations with August Wilson* where Wilson responds to a query from Moyers about blacks becoming like their white counterparts to become a part of the mainstream society in America. Wilson explained:

> Blacks don't melt in a pot. People hold up the examples of the Irish, of the Germans---these are all Europeans who share the same sensibilities as the mainstream, so it's very easy for them to melt. But we cannot change our names and hide behind the label of being an American, because we're a very visible minority. You can see us coming a block away. When you see us coming, we become a victim of that linguistic environment that says all those things---that we're unqualified, that we're violators of laws, or this, that, and the other. So we have a very difficult time even getting started, and there's no way that we can melt into the pot. We have a culture. Other ethnic groups and other races---the Orientals, for instance---are allowed their cultural differences. (70)

Wilson appreciated and acknowledged the differences. He explained that cultures of other ethnic groups are welcomed, but blacks are expected to emulate whites, an effort that requires us to "turn our head around almost three hundred sixty degrees." And he clarified, "Our worldviews are drastically different" (70).

In 1923 author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston wrote to her sponsor, Annie Nathan Meyer, about her difficulty understanding white people. Quoted in Carla Kaplan's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, Hurston lamented about her ability to include white characters in her novels or plays: "If I knew white psychology I would attempt one . . . I see white people do things, but I don't know that I grasp why they do them" (58-59). Both Wilson and Hurston appreciated and acknowledged the differences, and both endeavored through their works to preserve the memory of the culture of American blacks as they evolved from slavery to an integral part of life in America.

Given that African Americans do not share the common European roots of most American immigrants, as Wilson explained, their views of the world were different, and as Hurston described, their motivation for doing things was different. Consequently, white Americans tended to impose restrictions to keep the cultures separate, perhaps to avoid conflict. Although the American Civil War was fought over disagreements concerning states' rights and financial issues, slavery is the more frequently discussed issue. Emancipated slaves brought changes to society as the two cultures and sensibilities came together. Amidst the turmoil of change, African Americans needed the basics of life: employment, houses, and amenities. As the years passed after the war, because of the associations that Wilson cited to Moyers. black people found themselves underachieving in the quest of the American Dream because society favored hiring and

catering to white people. Employers expected black people to steal, be lazy, and perform poorly, so they hired white people instead.

Wilson's plays depict how African Americans learned to manage in that predominately white society until they finally succeeded. During the twentieth century, African Americans overcame life in a Jim Crow society, and with the help of Congress, hard work and perseverance, educated themselves to compete with their white counterparts. From the horse and buggy setting in *Gem of the Ocean*, where a preoccupied man stands across the street from Aunt Ester's, to a bustling office setting in *Radio Golf* where cars pass by, Wilson's plays reflect the attributes of each decade. He shows the impact of the riots, union issues, and technological progress in the twentieth century on the African-American family. His characters describe each decade with their conversations that reveal information about music, cars, entertainment, love, war, food, and even fertilizer. Wilson's plays provide an intimate look at America in the twentieth century through the stories about the lives of African-American characters.

Unlike Amiri Baraka's dramas, Wilson's plays base themselves in everyday reality and are not overtly political, thus his plays are more similar to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* than those by Baraka Eric Bergesen and William W. Demastes discuss the different agendas of Baraka and Wilson in "The Limits of African-American Political Realism: Baraka's *Dutchman* and Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*". They argue that Baraka emulated the posture of William DuBois, who believed that to improve the situation of blacks, literature and the theatre needed to sermonize and protest.

Teaming with African-American director Lloyd Richards to produce most of his plays, Wilson won Pulitzer Prizes for *Piano Lesson* and *Fences*. To further honor his

contributions to the theatre, after his death in 2005, the Virginia McKnight Binger Theatre was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. When Wilson addressed the National Black Theatre Festival in 1997, he lamented that although there were sixty-six members of the League of Resident Theatres, only one of them actually promoted plays that depicted the African-American way of life. In that address, Wilson emphatically explained that he wanted more theatres to focus on plays about black society to help preserve the memory of the older slave-based African-American culture rapidly fading with the blending of the black and white societies. He argued that although it is true that a theatre is a theatre for all Americans, the African-American story will vanish if a special effort is not made to preserve it.

Wilson contributed to that effort, along with many other African American playwrights, historians, and anthropologists. Contributions of Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. DuBois, and August Wilson are not lost. Wilson's plays are still being staged, and Hurston's *There Eyes Were Watching God* is now available in movie form. DuBois is still read and studied. Wilson's specific dream may not be materializing as he hoped, but his goal is being realized, and his stories designed for the live stage performance keep his dream energized, literally coming to life over and over again every time they are played.

Finding a New Life in the North

Over the course of the twentieth century, life changed rapidly with airplanes and automobiles, and finally computers and televisions. In the first decade of the twentieth century, many technological changes began to be part of a glorious new life for people in America. However, in 1904 when the first play is set, African Americans had been emancipated from slavery for a scant forty years, and they had to find work in a predominately white world. Consequently, they not only adapted to being free, but just like their white counterparts, learned to incorporate all the new gadgets into their lives and became factory workers and entrepreneurs.

Carter Woodson explains in *A Century of Negro Migration,* that in the early part of nineteenth-century America, many African Americans journeyed north to freedom with help from the Underground Railroad to destinations such as Indiana, and others sailed to Liberia in Africa with help from the American Colonization Society (22 - 24). So, by the 1900s, blacks were experienced at migrating, but now they were free to move anywhere in the world they wanted to go. During the early decades of the twentieth century, many African Americans from the Deep South migrated north to find employment and consequently a better life. Figures related in *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32* from the Bureau of the Census show the dramatic increase in the North, with 880,771 in 1900 increasing to 1,027,674 by 1910, and 1,472,309 in 1920. Wilson examines that better life as it played out in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the seat of government for Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. In *Gem of the Ocean* (1904), Wilson examines the justice system in Pittsburgh from the point of view of the perpetrator, of the officer of the law, and of the people affected by the crime. In *Joe*

Turner's Come and Gone (1911) at a boarding house in the Pittsburgh Hill District, Wilson exposes the emotional trauma of separation from loved ones. Common to both plays is the impact of Pittsburgh's steel industry and her burgeoning infrastructure on the lives of its workers and inhabitants, respectively facilitated and comprised of migrants from the South and immigrants from Europe.

Wilson set *Gem of the Ocean* in 1904 and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in 1911. Thus, both are before World War I, and this choice keeps the focus on the people in the story rather than on the war. In fact, Wilson does not incorporate the headline items of the time into his plot. Martin Gilbert in *A History of the Twentieth Century* reports a host of world events for each of those years. In 1904, the President of the United States was Theodore Roosevelt, a Spanish-American War hero; the Wright Brothers proved the possibility of flight; the Irish were fighting the English for their independence; Sun Yat-sen was rising to power in China and pressing for revolution against imperial rule; Mahatma Gandhi was advocating for a peaceful revolt against British rule in India; and St. Louis, Missouri, hosted the 1904 Olympic Games simultaneously with the World's Fair. Throughout the first decade, war and revolutionary uprisings were in contrast with accomplishments such as the development of flight technology, and inventions of the tea bag and the safety razor. Wilson's characters live in this time, but are concerned with adapting to freedom and making a living.

Joe Turner is set in 1911, the beginning of the second decade and a year replete with turmoil and tragedy. Workers on strike in the United States allegedly blew up the *Los Angeles Times*; racial issues dominated the scene in Hungary; dock workers went on strike in Liverpool, London, and Manchester, and black dockworkers rioted in Cardiff

insisting that the strikes caused ship owners to favor hiring whites; fires in Russian cinemas, a cinema near Pittsburgh, and a blouse shop in New York City claimed hundreds of lives; an explosion in an underground mine in Alabama took the lives of over a hundred convicts; in Pennsylvania, a black man who attempted suicide after being charged with theft was kidnapped from his hospital room along with his bed and burned alive in that bed; and Germany sent a foreboding message by launching the first submarine U-boat equipped with automatic weapons and torpedoes. In contrast, officials in San Francisco banned any film that showed a person hitting another. Filmmakers added the first dialogue inter-titles to silent movies, and the idea of air mail took off with the first successful attempt in India. Wilson's characters represent people influenced by those times, people who would have read stories in the newspapers or heard the stories related in public places.

Wilson does not include of any of these specific events, but the issues with justice and labor in both *Gem* and *Joe Turner* reflect developments in society around the world. The incident of the black man burned alive in his bed was not only an incident in Pennsylvania, but because he attempts suicide after being charged with theft bears similarity to the Garrett Brown character in *Gem* who chooses to die rather than surrender to Caesar. People in the Hill District would have heard about the black man being burned alive in his bed. Sensibilities of any race or culture dictate that natural law working in concert with justice in a community would find that event abhorrent. Wilson examines the human price paid for justice in *Gem*.

In *Gem*, Wilson weaves a story around solid archetypal elements including a bucket of stolen nails, a basic building item, and a flashback story about stolen bread, the

staff of life. Characters' names, also archetypal in the play, hearken back to stories in the Bible and the Roman Empire. The protagonist is a migrant named Citizen Barlow, a free black American citizen, who sets out on an exodus from the South to become an employed citizen in the steel empire policed by a character named Caesar Wilks, certainly not the leader of the Roman Empire but still a man who can decide the fate of an individual, even chase down an individual for stealing a loaf of bread.

In 1904 Pittsburgh, the steel industry was the contemporary empire upon which the majority of the citizens in the city depended for their livelihood. In tune with the uprisings around the world, the steelworkers in Pittsburgh had their problems about working and living conditions as well as pay with the steel corporations. In *Gem*, the provocation is enough for Citizen to steal a bucket of nails.

Citizen is an example of one of the many migrants from Alabama who chose to move north. Wilson develops the character of Citizen to show how places to live in Pittsburgh were difficult for both black migrants and European immigrants to find and how industry in Pittsburgh took advantage of the many workers looking for jobs. In *A Century of Negro Migration*, Woodson explains, "The immediate cause of this movement was the suffering due to the floods aggravated by the depredations of the boll weevil" (169-170). He describes that the flooding has devastated the crops fourteen times since 1874. About the boll weevil, "an interloper from Mexico in 1892" (171), he explains that while authorities expected it not to leave Texas, it is invading at the rate of forty to one hundred sixty miles a year (171). Citizen's choice to move north speaks truthfully about the job situation in 1904 when he declares, "I'm up here looking for a job. Ain't no jobs down there" (28). Abraham Epstein, in *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh*, applies

numbers: "The Negro population in Allegheny County grew steadily from 3,431 in 1850 to 34,217 in 1910" (19-10). Consequently, Citizen competes for a job in Pittsburgh, against the blacks already there and European immigrants.

Citizen not only describes the conditions in Pittsburgh, but he also explains the difficulty of leaving the South: "[T]hey had all the roads closed to the colored people. I had to sneak out. Say they didn't want anybody to leave. Say we had to stay there and work" (22). Although Citizen seems to contradict himself, what he says is true. Many in the South did not want the cheap laborers to move north, but the landowners did not have work for them. Emmett Jay Scott in *Negro Migration During the War* explains that shortly before the World War, "Thousands of landlords were forced to dismiss their tenants and close the commissaries from which came the daily rations. Some planters in Alabama and Mississippi advised their tenants to leave and even assisted them" (14-15). On the other hand, many did not want to lose labor to the North. Consequently, Scott also explains, "Considering the temper of the South and its attitude toward any attempt to reduce its labor supply, it is readily apparent that leaders who openly encouraged the exodus would be in personal danger. . . .The tactics adopted by influential persons who favored the movement, therefore, were of necessity covert and very much guarded" (Scott 26). Epstein adds more, "Many of them said they had to leave their homes in secrecy and at night, and to walk to some station where they were not known, before they could board a train for the North" (26). Citizen's account is much like those of the people Epstein interviewed. Wilson's characters in his 2003 play are relating and acting out likely events from 1904.

Consequently, as Wilson relates in *Gem*, thousands of people including the blacks from the South look for work and lodging. Some determine to camp under the Brady Street Bridge because Caesar, the local landlord and enforcer, evicted them when they could not pay their rent. Eli says to Black Mary, Caesar's sister, "He just gather up what little bit of stuff they got and sit it out on the street. Then he arrest them for being out there" (*Gem* 10). With the character of Caesar Wilks, Wilson shows how the situation in 1904 Pittsburgh could mold a person's life. Until demand for steel would employ thousands during the upcoming World War, migrant blacks who stayed in the North coped with bare subsistence wages. Woodson, in *A Century of Negro Migration,* describes the situation:

> The Negroes have made some progress in the North during the last fifty years, but despite their achievements they have been so handicapped by race prejudice and proscribed by trades unions that the uplift of the race by economic methods has been impossible. The European immigrants have hitherto excluded the Negroes even from the menial positions. In the midst of the drudgery left for them, the blacks have often heretofore been debased to the status of dependents and paupers. (172)

Citizen does find work at the mill, but by the time the payroll department deducts money for his room and board, his pay is only three dollars, so he quits, and he feels justified in stealing the nails (22). In *The World of the Worker,* James R. Green describes the atmosphere: "When prosperity returned in the late 1890's, the steel mills exploded with activity. The officers in Carnegie's new production army drove the men hard. They extended the work week to seven days, despite worker protests, and forced most laborers

to put in a twelve-hour day..."(11). By 1901, Carnegie had become a subset of U. S. Steel Corporation and in that same year defeated a strike (11). Workers were a commodity, "which meant that steel masters treated workers not as fellow producers who shared profit and loss but as proletarian subjects whose labor power could be bought and sold at a market price just like coal and ore" (12). Thus, both Citizen and Caesar have defendable positions. However, Caesar serves the law and answers to the people downtown, and despite the fact that Citizen feels justified stealing the nails because of the money deducted from his check, it is still a crime.

Caesar is functioning as a Hill District constable reporting to an alderman. H. V. Blaxter and Allen H. Kerr in *The Pittsburgh District Civic Frontage* explain that in 1904, aldermen are the law in Pittsburgh and for many years thereafter, they issue the warrant for arrest, hold hearings, and send the accused to jail, unless bail is posted (139). At this point in American labor history, there is no union or grievance board through which Citizen can find assistance, and Wilson uses Citizen to portray this situation to the audience. By 1904, workers all around the world were beginning to protest and strike. Citizen does not turn himself in, but instead seeks the help of Aunt Ester Tyler at 1839 Wylie Street in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

Aunt Ester, like Esther in the Bible but without Xerxes, uses her cunning to help her people. Wilson describes Aunt Ester as "a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community" (6). A young and beautiful Esther in the Bible uses her wits and charm to become the wife to the Persian King Xerxes, and this puts her in a position to convince him spare the life of her Uncle Mordecai and the lives of her Jewish brethren. To achieve

their goal, both Aunt Ester and Xerxes' Esther suggest ideas that put the desired outcome in reach by making individuals believe it is their own idea.

Not unlike one of Jesus' followers, close to Aunt Ester is Caesar's sister, Mary, called Black Mary, and she tends to the needs of Ester. Wilson gives Ester's age as 285 years, equal to the number of years since the first Africans came to America in 1619. Aunt Ester describes her nearly three hundred years of life as an "adventure." Conversing with Black Mary, she says, "Miss Tyler gave me her name. I don't tell nobody what I was called before that" (43). She explains how important her memories are: "I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks" (42). She suggests that she committed many stories about people's lives to memory because life as a slave did not allow reading or writing. Ester admonishes Black Mary, "If you ever make up your mind I'm gonna pass it [her name] on to you. People say it's too much to carry. ...If you don't want it I got to find somebody else. I'm getting old. Going on three hundred years now. That's what Miss Tyler told me. Two hundred eighty-five by my count" (43). Aunt Ester suggests that responsibility for memories and knowledge comes with the name "Ester Tyler." Wilson represents the memories, the recorded historical knowledge of the Africans in America, as two hundred eighty-five years of Aunt Ester's memories or as she calls it, her age.

When Citizen sees Aunt Ester, he explains what happened to provoke him to take the bucket of nails. A man at the steel mill told him that a room costs two dollars a week. Citizen relates to Aunt Ester, "They sent us over to a place the man say we got to put two dollars on top of that. Then he put two men to a room with one bed" (22). Paul U. Kellogg explains in "Community and Workshop" of *Wage Earning-Pittsburgh* that in

1914, "There is one necessity of life in Pittsburgh of which there was and is a paramount shortage and to which the Survey gave specific attention, ---shelter. . . . . [In 1908] there were over 3,000 tenements in the Greater City" (20). Similar to Citizen Barlow's circumstances, Kellogg describes that boarders in the Pittsburgh District, "rent from a boarding boss, and sleep eight or ten in a room or sleep at night in the beds left vacant by the night workers who have occupied them throughout the day" (22). Citizen represents a typical example of the historically exploited newcomer regardless of color in 1904 Pittsburgh. Wilson's exposure of Pittsburgh's problems with infrastructure is complete.

Not only was there a housing shortage in Pittsburgh but water and waste management needed improvement. Aunt Ester admonishes Black Mary, "don't waste the water" (39). In 1904 Pittsburgh, most people did not have indoor running water. They used a shared outdoor pump or water hydrant outside. Kellogg mentions that for over thirty-five years Pittsburgh citizens suffered from a typhoid endemic until in 1908 when the city completed a "six-million-dollar filtration plant" (17). As late as 1914 eight to ten thousand privy vaults were still in use. In one case "One hundred and ten people were found using one yard hydrant" (23). Kellogg remarks, "The dice were loaded in Pittsburgh when it came to a man's health" (23). Kellogg also makes the point that if a man is sick, he does not work, so Wilson covers one more characteristic of the time in Pittsburgh that invaded the lives of all the inhabitants.

Wilson presents people confronted with bad working conditions and poor living conditions. When Citizen Barlow arrives from Alabama, he becomes a recipient of both, and when his paycheck after expenses is only three dollars, he steals the bucket of nails. Pathetically he explains to Aunt Ester:

> I stole a bucket of nails. The mill wouldn't pay me so I stole a bucket of nails. They say Garret Brown stole it he ran and jumped in the river. 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. It's like I got a hole inside me. If I ain't careful seem like everything would leak out that hole. What to do, Miss Tyler? (44)

Citizen Barlow visits Aunt Ester Tyler to make peace with his soul, so that he can go on with his life. In 1904, blacks were habitually treated unfairly by the law, so neither Brown nor Citizen chooses to put his fate in the hands of the justice system. When Citizen thinks about speaking up for poor Brown, he says "something got in the way" (44). In *A Social History of the American Negro* Benjamin Griffith Brawley documents incidents of lynching, burnings, and riots perpetrated against black men that never made it to trial (297-340). In closing comments that express hope for a better future, Brawley notes that "in 1909 a number of people who were interested in the general effect of the Negro Problem on democracy in America organized in New York the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People" (338). With the fears of Citizen and Brown, Wilson touches on one of those "lacerating, and often healing, truths" (*The Ground on Which I Stand* 10), reminding the audience of how bad things really were. Unfair and unequal treatment of blacks as human beings in a land called America where people are supposed to have equal rights as laid out by the Declaration of Independence was a problem for Americans.

In *Gem*, Wilson reminds the audience that the Declaration applies to both black and white alike, but in 1904, that was not a reality for the black American. Garrett Brown, only remembered as a victim in the play, drowns while running from Caesar. Wilson uses the surname Brown which is also the surname of John Brown, the abolitionist instrumental in organizing the Underground Railroad. Garret, the first name, defines the area under the roof of a house, a sheltered protected area. Garret Brown chooses to protect his name and memory. Brown is accused of taking those nails, knows he is innocent, but chooses to perish rather than let Caesar railroad him into jail and convince people that he is guilty. Brown feels he has his integrity to lose and dies to keep it rather than risk living a lie or be known as a thief. While Citizen takes nails, a tangible item, to avenge his position, and Solly burns the mill, a tangible item, to avenge the underpaid and underappreciated employees at the mill, Brown dies to preserve his memory, an intangible item. Correspondingly, the abolitionist John Brown was hung for his actions in the pursuit of abolishing the idea of slavery, an intangible concept that brought pain and suffering to thousands.

In 1904, the NAACP was not there to help Citizen, so he turns to Aunt Ester Tyler to find his redemption. Aunt Ester uses methods passed down to her from her African heritage. Wilson's explanation of Aunt Ester's history reminds the members of the audience of their responsibility to learn and remember their past and share that history with their younger family members. Especially in 1904, many black Americans did not have the opportunity to pursue an education and write down their history, so it was up to them to commit it to memory. Wilson fights to keep black culture and history from being forgotten. He explains in his 1996 address that the contributions that black Americans

made to the American culture should not be just an afterthought. Joan Herrington explains in *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done*, "Wilson is driven by the need to award the African-American experience its deserved place in history and on stage" (95). Aunt Ester wants Black Mary to follow in her footsteps, just as Wilson pleads in his 1996 address to fellow black artists to help keep the memories alive, but Black Mary never answers Aunt Ester.

Aunt Ester's healing idea for Citizen gives Wilson the opportunity to remind his audience about the sacrifice of those who created a City of Bones at the bottom of the sea, those who died while being transported to the Americas. Aunt Ester says to Citizen, "listen to what I tell you. I'm gonna help you. I'm gonna tell you about the City of Bones but first I'm gonna send you upriver" (46). She sends him in search of two pennies and an unidentified object from "a man named Jilson Grant" (46). After he leaves on his quest, Aunt Ester explains to Black Mary that the purpose of the search for two pennies is 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 come face to face with himself" (47). Wilson is sharing a bit of African healing culture, which resembles modern day powers of positive thinking, and at the same time shares the memory of that ill-fated boat trip across the Atlantic with the audience.

Aunt Ester uses a little folklore and voodoo coupled with some rhythmic shouting with the help of her gatekeeper, Eli, her friend, Solly Two Kings, and Black Mary to help Citizen Barlow cope with his guilt. Guy B. Johnson describes some of the background for Aunt Ester's methods. He states that, "Outside of a dozen African words, a few

modifications of English dialect, the custom known as 'shouting' in the sea-islands region, some survivals of African rhythms in Negro music, an occasional 'voodoo' remnant, and a sizable body of folk lore, there is little left to show the cultural connection of our Negroes with Africa" (329). Philip Alexander Bruce in *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* documented that in 1889, "He [a freeman] has a unquestioning faith in the art of witchcraft, a form of superstition that prevails universally among his fellows, overshadowing every other, and differing very little in character and exhibition from the variety of superstition that flourishes on the west coast of Africa today among the descendants of ancestors who are common to the American negro also" (114). Wilson's scene reflects that African heritage. Citizen Barlow dearly wants to believe in Aunt Ester's remedy. He will never forget the drowned Garret Brown, but he wants to find a way to live with himself.

Conversely, Aunt Ester relies on Citizen's belief in her ability to help him. Citizen already has found his two pennies and a corresponding faith in their importance. Aunt Ester adds a map: "Black Mary, go get the map. I got something I want to show Mr. Citizen" (52). With a map, Aunt Ester creates credibility, "I done seen all the adventure I want to see. I been across the water. I seen both sides of it" (52). "Take a look at this map, Mr. Citizen. See that right there... that's a city. ...It's made of bones. Pearly white bones. I seen it. I been there" (52). She builds, "You want to go there, Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go" (52). Aunt Ester does not give Citizen a chance to respond until she relates some personal testimony, but assuming a yes, she folds a paper boat on which, if he so chooses, he can ride to the city.

In *Conversations with August Wilson*, Maureen Dezell shares Wilson's response about the City of Bones, "Wilson's mythic spiritual center of African American life" (255). He relates to Dezell that while many slaves perished in the voyage across the Atlantic, it was a triumphant beginning of the great American experience. Wilson explains that his mythical place is more than the "millions of bones of slaves in chains, entangled in ships. The city is part of all of our history, our experience" (255). Consequently, Wilson remarks that Citizen "enters the play as an individual and leaves it as a member of a community" (255).

Not only is Citizen a member of the community, he changes it. When Citizen takes the nails, his transgression not only influences life at Aunt Ester's but causes the end of two lives and precipitates a strike at the mill. Two people in Aunt Ester's life are Eli and Solly Two Kings. Aunt Ester's gatekeeper is Eli, also the name of a figure from the Bible: the high priest who mentored Samuel. Aunt Ester's Eli watches over her household and mentors Black Mary. Solly Two Kings is a gentleman friend of Aunt Ester. Of the three magi from Jesus' manger scene, two of the kings from the orient brought the aromatic resins, frankincense and myrrh. At sixty-seven years of age and once a member of the Underground Railroad, Solly is a man people can depend upon to arrive in time of need, but he had no gold, so he is as two of the three magi. In the closing lines in the play, Eli compares Solly to David and Solomon, reflecting the daring of David when he risked his life to help with the Underground Railroad and the wisdom of Solomon to outsmart the posse. When Citizen needs a little help on his journey to redemption, Solly is there for him.

Solly joins the group to help him while Aunt Ester leaves Citizen in suspense as she leaves the room to prepare. Upon her return, she does a classic takeaway, "Jilson Grant was supposed to give you a piece of iron. You ain't got that. You got to go without it. That iron would have made you strong. That's what Samson had" (62). To the rescue, Solly offers Citizen a piece of chain saved from his leg irons from his time before his escape. Much relieved, Citizen takes it and boards his voyage to redemption midst chanting and dancing.

With that exchange, Wilson connects the African-American belief culture to the faith that saw them through the difficult times of fear midst the hardships of living in a dynamic and often cruel urban environment. Citizen might have believed that Brown would haunt him. Robert Thomas Hill in *Cuba and Porto Rico* explains, "The negroes believe that not only the spirit but the person of the dead, in a modified form, returns to trouble the living" (395). Although Aunt Ester does not appear with a bag of herbs, "horsehairs and reptile-claws" (397), she still represents a conjure-doctor. He explains, "The Atlanta 'Constitution' of November, 1895, stated that perhaps one hundred old men and old women practised voodooism in that city---telling fortunes, pointing out the whereabouts of lost and stolen goods, furnishing love-philters, and casting spells upon people and cattle. They belonged to all ranks and classes of negroes" (397). As the freed slaves began to make their way in American society, they had to figure out where they would live and how they would support themselves. In Wilson's plays, Aunt Ester counsels all classes. In every strata of society, people suffer loss, need love, and want money. Citizen Barlow suffers the loss of Garret Brown, needs money and wants

forgiveness. Aunt Ester uses her knowledge of African spiritual methodology to help Citizen Barlow forgive himself.

Citizen learns that the boat is called the *Gem of the Ocean*, hence Wilson's title for the play. Aunt Ester hypnotically captures Citizen's imagination: "And it takes a lot of me to sail a boat. Them was some brave men. ...There's good luck out there in the world. Them brave men went looking for it. . . . .The wind will take you every which way. . . . .Don't you feel that boat rocking? Just a rocking and a rocking. The wind blowing" (64). Eli chimes in with "You got to watch out for that North wind" (64). Black Mary contributes, "It's like Satan. He's gonna have his way with you" (64). Eli puts him in control, "You got to figure out what to do" (64). Wilson set before his audience an example of a man, Citizen Barlow, getting help from people to overcome an obstacle in his life. Aunt Ester and her household explain to Citizen that life, like the wind, will not always be predictable but that he can prevail, that he can make choices that determine the courses his life will take.

After a rather frightful ordeal, Aunt Ester takes Citizen to the gate of the City of Bones where he must have the two pennies for the toll. Lo and behold, Garret Brown is the man at the gate. Cries Citizen, "He won't let me pass" (69). Aunt Ester encourages him to talk to Brown. Citizen confesses, "It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails" (69). When the gate opens, Citizen sees a beautiful city and he gradually comes out of the trance to rejoin the group. Wilson aptly merges the characteristics of a séance atmosphere with Aunt Ester's manipulative skills. Fortunately for the hurting Citizen, it works. He cannot bring poor Garret Brown back to life, but at least, he believes, that he made peace with him.

Aunt Ester's band of supporters for Citizen Barlow realize that he will still need to escape Caesar after Aunt Ester helps him to cope with his heartache. When Citizen brings his troubles to Aunt Ester, he becomes part of Aunt Ester's community, and they do not let him down. Aunt Ester reaches out to Rutherford Selig to help Citizen and Solly make their getaway.

Rutherford Selig, a white character who appears in both *Gem* and *Joe Turner*, is a Jewish peddler of German descent. Selig is the typical traveling salesman of the day. Nathaniel C. Fowler, Jr. in *Starting in Life* gives some insight into the nature of the traveling salesman in 1904: "The salesman, above all, should be well posted on the common topics of the day and be able to converse intelligently upon popular subjects. A reasonable amount of talk is necessary for the consummation of trade, a proportion of it being of general and social import" (71). Wilson represents this character aptly and uses Selig to share information with the characters to develop the storyline about the death of Garret Brown.

Reminiscent of a scene from the Book of Exodus in the Bible, Selig is a Jew with a wagon, a chariot that he can use to depart when need be. Incidentally, Selig also hails from a family who profited in the slave market as well as finding runaway slaves, (*Turner* 239-240). Although he still makes money off the blacks by peddling his wares, he is also a trusted individual in Aunt Ester's household. During the development of early Christianity, both Jews and Christians lived alongside one another, albeit not always amicably, but both groups survived Roman persecution. Wilson shows Selig, a former slave trader and Jew, living alongside the blacks in Pittsburgh. Both the former slave trader and the former slaves are making a new life. In "The Negroes of Pittsburgh,"

Helen A. Tucker explains that Jews rented houses to blacks in neighborhoods that traditionally rented only to whites. She also describes the area around Aunt Ester's Wylie address as populated with many poor European immigrants (426). Consequently, Wilson combines accurate elements and relationships as they were in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh.

Tucker also describes the living conditions as "unhealthy" (426). With the influx of thousands of people, the city was overwhelmed, and living conditions reflected it. Many of the working class came to the conclusion reflected by Karl Marx in his 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (64). Eli says to Solly, "That's what Caesar can't understand. He can't see the people ain't got nothing to lose" (60). With this comment from Eli, Wilson poses the heart of the play. Citizen feels betrayed with nothing to lose so he takes the nails. To support the laborers who were rioting for better pay and working conditions, Solly feels he has nothing to lose so he chooses to burn the factory down.

Wilson shows each individual reacting to the situation in which he finds himself. Caesar, Solly, Selig and Citizen respond according to their character's background and development. Caesar did not plan to become a representative of the law, but he found himself serving society as a policeman for the impoverished Hill District. James Forbes's contribution, "The Reverse Side," in *Wage-earning Pittsburgh* addresses the situation of Caesar and his community: "In a community where, without money, life is intolerable to most of the helot type, we find numerous 'crimes' against property, committed not by habitual outlaws and recidivists, but by older men bankrupted in the struggle for existence, and by younger men who lack the virility either to struggle or to renounce"

(367). He explains that the person charged with policing "must become a force for reaction or for progress . . . Whether they have wanted it or not, they have become part of society's machinery for dealing with misfortune, maladjustment, disease, and vice" (369). This is the history Wilson brings to light when the policeman, Caesar, after returning from a riot at the mill, first meets Citizen Barlow. Caesar is agitated and shouts, "These niggers gone crazy! They was over at the mill rioting. Busting out the goddamn windows. . . . The mill losing money. . . . They after me downtown to put a stop to it" (30). Wilson makes it clear that the characters are not in control of the events. Caesar is obliged to answer to the people downtown, and he reacts according to their expectations.

When Eli, Black Mary, and Solly discuss Caesar, Eli speculates that Caesar will place everyone in jail for participating in the riot. Black Mary insists that, "Caesar's doing his job. That's what the people can't see" (14). However, it is Solly who praises him: "Caesar's the kind of people I would want working for me. If I ever get me a plantation I'm gonna hire him to keep my niggers in line" (14). Solly expects Caesar to manage the situation and feels that he could manage a similar situation for him if he were in a position to hire Caesar. Caesar does what the people downtown expect him to do. Solly believes he could expect no less if he were the one with the authority to tell Caesar what to do. Wilson also uses Solly to share the likely dream of many a black man from 1904 to own a plantation and employ a group of laborers, including blacks.

In a conversation with Caesar, his sister, Black Mary, reveals that she will not work with him because he killed a man for stealing a loaf of bread. When they argue, Caesar insists that he had to shoot him: "People don't understand the law is everything"

(36). Caesar explains, "I got to play the hand that was dealt to me" (37). If anyone is suspected of breaking the law, Caesar will not stop until he apprehends the supposed criminal. So, if Citizen falls into that lot, Caesar will get him. With Caesar and Citizen, Wilson portrays two people pitted against each other as they each make choices to survive in 1904 Pittsburgh. Citizen painfully remembers what happened when Garret Brown ran from Caesar, but now he has Aunt Ester's household, a community, to help him.

Rumormongers spread the word that Brown did not have to die; Caesar would have helped him out of the water if he quit running. Choosing legacy over life, Brown chooses to stay in the freezing water rather than admit to a crime he does not commit. This fortitude implies he did not trust the legal system. Had Brown given up, Caesar would have taken him before the Alderman, and without bail, he would have sat in jail until the trial. Instead, Brown chooses to drown. Caesar is thus a typical arm of the law in 1904 Pittsburgh. This is the Caesar that Solly, Black Mary, Eli, and Aunt Ester know. This is the Caesar who shot a man in the back for stealing a loaf of bread. Garret Brown perishes for stealing nails, another man for stealing a loaf of bread.

Solly Two Kings appreciates Caesar's tenacity to his obligations to the people downtown and the mill, but he still elects to help his comrades in need. Because of the conditions at the steel mill, Solly burns it down. In a conversation with Eli, Solly states his case: "The people drowning in sorrow and grief. That's a mighty big ocean. They got the law tied to their toe" (60). Solly explains that things must change, that emancipation did not make a difference, "I didn't mind settling up the difference after the war. But I didn't know they was going to settle like this. I got older I see where I'm

gonna die and everything gonna be the same. I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here" (75). Wilson uses Solly to show a man who regardless of the price is committed to making things better and exposing problems.

Unfortunately, Solly commits an illegal, destructive act. Somebody sees Solly set the mill on fire and reports it to Caesar, so Ester calls on Selig to facilitate an escape, which is successful. However, Solly decides to turn himself in so other people will not be blamed, and he can state the reasons for his act, but Caesar shoots him in the chest before he can get to the jail, and the wound is fatal.

Wilson juxtaposes Solly's decision regarding the rioters with that of Citizen's regarding Garret Brown. Because Solly does not feel comfortable being free while the mill workers that rioted are in jail, he turns himself in. Solly seems to make a righteous decision and is killed. Citizen is wary of the law, does not turn himself in, and survives. Wilson leaves it to his audience to sort it out.

Finding and Binding in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

While the focus of *Gem* is with Citizen, many currents of historical reflection and tangential stories lie with Solly, whose real name is Alfred Jackson. Solly's story flows into the heart of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* In the first act of *Gem*, Solly receives a letter from his sister, Eliza Jackson, who asks his advice about a way to get out of Alabama. Her comments in her letter are similar to Citizen's about the situation in Alabama: "I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. . . . The white peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave" (15). At sixty seven, Solly is not sure he is up to the more than eight-hundred-mile walk, noting that eight hundred there is also eight hundred miles back. Solly is confronted with choices in the play of marrying Aunt Ester, of taking part in the issues at the mill, and attempting another long walk across the country. He explains to Ester that they cannot marry while his sister needs his help. Meanwhile, he also joins the revolt at the mill and perishes for his participation. Consequently, Eliza will never see her brother again nor have his help leaving Alabama, and Ester will bury instead of marry him.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* set in 1911, Wilson examines the choices and consequences of several people finding lost loved ones, people finding love among each other, and people finding the love from within in that 1911 environment. Wilson examines the difficulty of people, especially black people from the South, keeping in contact and staying in a permanent relationship.

It is seven years later in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Wilson moves the story from the household at 1839 Wylie to a nearby street in a boarding house owned by Seth and Bertha Holly. Wilson continues the twentieth-century historical saga

in the Hill District where immigrants and migrants are still pouring in, competing for lodging, and work, and social interaction away from those everyday problems of survival. People who come and go in the boarding house each tell a story that illuminates society in Pittsburgh in 1911. Wilson contrasts the methodical, cautious choices and entrepreneurial dreams of a family living in the same house for more than a generation with those of both lost and unsettled migrants.

In *Joe Turner*, every name, including Joe Turner, a cruel Tennessee lawman, is significant in meaning, in history, in ethnic stereotyping, or in top-of-mind impressions. Herald Loomis, the protagonist in the play, searching for his wife and finds himself at the boardinghouse of Seth and Bertha Holly. Loomis explains that his life unraveled nearly eleven years ago when Joe Turner took him and forty other black men to work on a chain gang in Tennessee. Forty is also the number of years that the Jews wandered in the wilderness. When Loomis arrives in Pittsburgh, he is preoccupied with finding his missing wife, Martha, so that he can reunite her with her daughter, and he can learn why she left him and their daughter behind when he was working seven years on the chain gang. His first name, Herald, means an announcer or messenger, and at the root of his surname is the word loom, which is a frame for making a fabric from strands of yarn. Loomis is preoccupied with reuniting his family just as a seamstress joins yarn on a loom, and like a herald, he announces his quest to the people of the Hill District to the point of being obnoxious.

To create this situation for Loomis, Wilson draws on the historically documented actions of Joe Turner from Tennessee. Dorothy Scarborough tells the story about Joe Turner in "The 'Blues' as Folk-Songs" from *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*.

Her information comes from W. C. Handy who explains that Joe Turner was brother to former Governor Pete Turner of Tennessee. Joe Turner had a reputation of taking prisoners from a kangaroo court in Memphis to Nashville, where they would be gone indefinitely to labor on a chain gang (53). Wilson incorporates a song in the play that is a version of "Joe Turner Blues," which relates the sorrow of the black man's ordeal. Note the forty links of chain in the second stanza of Wilson's version, another allusion to the forty years that the Jews wandered:

> They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
>
> Ohhh Lordy
>
> They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone
>
> Ohhh Lordy
>
> Got my man and gone
>
>
> Come with forty links of chain
>
> Ohhh Lordy
>
> Come with forty links of chain
>
> Ohhh Lordy
>
> Got my man and gone (264)

Scarborough relates a stanza from Handy's version:

> Dey tell me Joe Tuner's come to town.
>
> He's bought along one thousand links of chain,
>
> He's gwine to have one nigger for each link.
>
> He's gwine to have dis nigger for one link! (53)

When Joe Turner took Loomis away, he separated Turner from his wife and daughter. Wilson describes an all too frequent disruption in life experienced by blacks in the South, and he shows how those violations compounded the rigors of adapting to life as a free person. In the play it is a free person making a life for himself in the Hill District. Handy relates to Scarborough that another title for the folk-song is "Going Down the River for Long", a poignant reflection of the reality of the situation. In *Joe Turner*, Wilson brings the heartache and the full impact of the destruction of the Loomis family to life.

Harold Loomis arrives at the boarding house with his daughter Zonia. After he arranges for their room, Harold explains, "I'm looking for a woman named Martha Loomis. That's my wife. Got married legal with the papers and all" (217). W. E. Burghardt Du Bois documents in *The Negro American Family*, "The essential features of Negro slavery in American was: 1. No legal marriage. 2. No legal family. 3. No legal control over children. . . . the recognition of the black family from 1619 to 1863 was purely a matter of individual judgment or caprice on the part of the master" (21). Loomis was proud that he could be legally married and took advantage of the opportunity.

Loomis' wife, Martha, like Martha in the Bible, looks for solutions from the Lord. Luke 10:38 contains a story about Jesus visiting a woman named Martha and her sister, Mary. When Martha becomes annoyed with Mary not helping with hosting activities, she asks Jesus to intervene on her behalf. In *Joe Turner*, Loomis' Martha turns to Reverend Tolliver and his Pentecostal congregation for solace and solution to cope with being left without her mate. Jesus refuses to reprimand Mary, but Reverend Tolliver allows Martha to move with his church when they relocate to Pittsburgh. Martha Loomis waits five

years for Herald and then leaves her daughter with her mother while she establishes a new life for herself in Pittsburgh. She even changes her name to Martha Pentecost.

Wilson describes Loomis' daughter, Zonia, as eleven years of age. He addresses the reason behind Zonia's name when she introduces herself to a young boy, Reuben, who lives next door. Reuben asks Zonia about her name, "What kind of name is that?" Zonia says, "It's what my daddy named me" (228).

Loomis bears the responsibilities of a single parent for Zonia. Although the name "Zonia" does not reflect a Biblical or historical figure, following the theme of the play, the root of Zonia's name, "zone", understates the dimensions and devotion of their abbreviated family as they search together for her mother. Their love and devotion for one another is poignantly expressed in the closing scene of the play. Loomis believes the daughter should be with her mother, but the thought of leaving the life she knew with her father terrifies young Zonia. He explains to Martha, "I tried to take care of her. See that she had something to eat. See that she was out of the elements. Whatever I know I tried to teach her. Now she need to learn from her mother whatever you got to teach her. That way she won't be no one-sided person" (286). Zonia tries to take responsibility for mending the situation by promising to remain little; she just wants to stay with her daddy, living in the zone, the parameters, to which she was accustomed. Wilson leaves Zonia comforted by Martha and leaves the audience with the vision of distress that family separation leaves with a child.

Throughout the play, Zonia plays outside with the young neighbor Reuben Scott. Reuben is not unlike a rube; he is an awkward, stubborn young boy who cares for and keeps pigeons that once belonged to a friend who died. Keeping the pigeons helps

perpetuate the memory of his friend, despite instructions from the deceased to let them go when he died. Often used to deliver messages in earlier times, the pigeon returns to its roost. The idea of the pigeon works with the theme of the play to return people to one another, and for youthful Reuben, the idea is to maintain a connection to the love and memory of a departed friend. While Wilson tells the story of the people in the boardinghouse, Reuben's is a place for Zonia to spend time or roost.

Loomis pays two dollars a week to Bertha and Seth Holly for room and board. To provide for themselves, the Hollies rent rooms in their house, and Seth works a job as well as fabricating dust pans, coffee pots, and other sheet metal items to sell. Wilson sets up a network of people connected to the often cantankerous but always planning Seth Holly. Holly, Seth's surname, is a plant used in Christmas decorations that has thick-skinned sharply pointed leaves, but those same leaves have undulating edges and produce bright red berries. Indeed Seth's personality is not unlike the description of the holly plant. While he is flexible in his ability to manage his livelihood, he maintains steadfast rules of conduct for his boarders. Seth's first name is the same as one of Adam's sons from the Bible. He works for Mr. Olowski, buys his sheet metal from Rutherford Selig, and wants to borrow money from Sam Green or Mr. Johnson to open a small metal works shop of his own. In Seth Holly's network are two Jews, a Pole, and an Englishman, which aptly represents the diverse demographic makeup of Pittsburgh in 1911. A man named Seth connects all of these people, and he carries the name of the direct progeny of Adam and Eve who as related in the Book of Geneses, connect all of mankind. Bertha, Seth's wife, manages the cooking and cleaning and Seth.

"Bertha is five years his [Seth's] junior. Married for over twenty-five years, she has learned how to negotiate around Seth's apparent orneriness" (205). Bertha is a proud German name in these early years of the twentieth century. Not only is Bertha the name of Charlemagne's mother, but P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in *The Religion of the Teutons* relates that Bertha was the name of a pagan German goddess, and by the late nineteenth century with influence from other religions was credited with being the maternal ancestor of families, for success with housework including spinning, but also for provoking catastrophes. (With regard to catastrophes, in a few short years a German cannon in the First World War will bear the name Big Bertha.) Wilson's Bertha emulates the successful housewife reputation of the goddess who tries to make all people feel at home. She is an optimist and a diplomat. Whenever Seth gets upset about anything, Bertha is ready with a kind word. Thus, she is powerful.

One of Seth and Bertha's boarders is Bynum Walker, who dabbles in what Seth calls "all that heebie-jeebie stuff" (206). Bynum calls himself "Bynum" because he believes he can bind people together, can reconnect lost loved ones, or even conjure up a love spell. With regard to his surname, "Walker", people walk to connect to a destination, and the elderly use walkers to maintain their mobility. Although Bynum frequently irritates Seth with his conjuring, Bertha points out, "You don't say nothing when he bless the house" (205).

Bynum is the spiritual positive thinker in the play, much like Aunt Ester in *Gem*, but Bynum claims that he can use roots and powders to make a person come back. Mattie calls on Bynum to put a spell on her man Jack to return. Bynum tells her, "I can fix it so he can't stand to be away from you" (223). Curiously, Bynum needs Selig to

find a shiny man whom he saw in a dream or vision. From an episode in his past, Bynum's father helped him to understand that his calling was to help people be together, to bind, that the man in his thoughts was the one who showed the way. Bynum shares, "if I ever see one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down and die a happy man" (213). Consequently, Bynum takes his conjuring and helping people very seriously.

Another irritation for Seth is boarder Jeremy Furlow, a young man from North Carolina. Seth believes that Jeremy is in jail for being drunk. When he shows up, Seth tells him that he cannot allow his house to earn a bad reputation. Bertha comes to Jeremy's defense, admonishing, "Leave the boy alone, Seth. You know the police do that. Figure there's too many people out on the street they take some of them off. You know that" (*Turner* 216). Wilson uses Jeremy to depict the choices and consequences of the migrants. Jeremy has problems coping with his new surroundings, and Seth has problems with Jeremy.

For Jeremy's name, Wilson again draws from Biblical names: Jeremy is the English representation of the Biblical Jeremiah, who witnessed the wrath of God over the Jews as they behaved crudely and worshipped idols. Jeremy's actions are not unlike the misbehaving Jews in the Book of Jeremiah. Not only is he in jail for allegedly carrying an open container of liquor on the street when the play opens, but during the course of the play he chooses to live with one woman and then another, without getting married. While Jeremy is not a representation of Jeremiah the Prophet, Jeremy's actions may prophesize a popular profession as a singer/songwriter that many blacks will choose as a career for themselves. When Jeremy chooses to leave a job working with one of the

many road crews in Pittsburgh to earn a living playing his music, he is able to make that decision because he is a free man.

While the main story line in *Joe Turner* is Loomis' quest for Martha, a subplot occupies the audience with Jeremy, Molly, and Mattie. Jeremy meets Mattie when she seeks help from Bynum to find her man, Jack. In a conversation between Mattie and Jeremy, Wilson lets the audience know that Jack left her after each of their two babies died. Compounding that information, Jack was her third man after her first two men died. Jack concluded that she must be cursed and therefore could not have his children. Neither her past nor situation detours Jeremy. He asks her to come hear him play and maybe get to know one another: "A woman like you need a man. Maybe you let me be your man. I got a nice way with the women" (226). Wilson closes the scene with the two planning to meet at eight. Jeremy wins a dollar for his guitar playing, and Mattie accepts his invitation to move in with him at Seth's.

In a later scene, Mattie and Molly exchange opinions about life and work enabling Wilson to convey their sexual behavior. Molly expresses her disdain for work and her knowledge of avoiding pregnancy, knowledge shared with her by her mother. In contrast, Mattie does ironing for a living. Although Mattie is apparently on intimate sexual terms with Jeremy, Jeremy entreats Molly to an sexual encounter, and Mattie only refuses an invitation from Loomis because of his depressing quest for his wife. Loomis begs, "You a full woman. A man needs a full woman. Come on and be with me" (273). Mattie replies, "I ain't got enough for you. You'd use me up too fast" (273). Wilson closes the scene with Loomis unsuccessfully reaching to touch her.

Wilson stages these characters to show the interaction between the sexes of the black population in the Hill District in 1911. Several authors wrote about black promiscuity and the resulting venereal disease, unplanned pregnancy, and family disorganization. In *The American Negro Family* (1908), W. E. DuBois documented the findings of a study made by the junior and senior students at Atlanta University. Research included the sexual and marriage culture of African tribes as well as that corresponding culture of the American slaves. In *The American Negro Family*, DuBois' introduces the findings regarding sexual morals:

> Without doubt the point where the Negro American is furthest behind modern civilization is in his sexual *mores*. This does not mean that he is more criminal in this respect than his neighbors. Probably he is not. It does mean that he is more primitive, less civilized, in this respect than his surroundings demand, and that thus his family life is less efficient for its onerous social duties, his womanhood less protected, his children more poorly trained. All this, however, is to be expected. This is what slavery meant, and no amount of kindliness in individual owners could save the system from its deadly work of disintegrating the ancient Negro home and putting but a poor substitute in its place. The point is however, now, what has been the effect of emancipation on the *mores* of the Negro family. (37)

Wilson's characters from *Gem* and *Joe Turner* demonstrate those effects defined by the scholars in 1908 Atlanta. Citizen Barlow, Jeremy, Mattie, and Molly fight loneliness and relocation in a strange new world with intimacy. Unfortunately, that intimacy, especially

out of wedlock of so many lonely people, resulted in more venereal disease and more orphans in crowded dirty cities. This provoked more prejudice.

Reflecting that prejudice in 1914, Charles H. McCord in *The American Negro as Dependent, Defective and Delinquent* reflected his findings of research about the culture of the African in his native tribal environment and the culture that evolved after emancipation. McCord, just as DuBois, concluded that emancipation without preparation did the liberated slave no favor. McCord explains that the American slave had

> . . . scant opportunity for the development of learning, independent initiative, and self-dependence. Among the mass of slaves there must, in the nature of the case, exist a condition of degraded self-respect, and ambitions and aspirations must suffer defeat. But knowledge, self-respect, self-dependence, more or less ambition and personal initiative are necessary to good citizenship in a democratic republic. But the American Negro was unfortunately thrust into full citizenship without such attributes. An unfit citizen easily becomes a pauper or a criminal. (57)

And the predominant white society enacted Jim Crow laws to keep the two cultures apart. McCord concludes that while Jim Crow laws were not perfect and certainly it was imperfect human beings that enforced them, "We must be content to judge and act according to what seems to be for the greatest good to the greatest number all phases and exigencies of the situation considered" (274). DuBois and McCord present a black and white view respectively of the world that Wilson depicts in *Gem* and *Joe Turner.*

When Jeremy quits his job to become a musician, he portrays a typical response of a black man in his situation in 1911 (McCord 80-83). When Mattie and Jeremy decide

to stay together, they portray a likely choice in 1911 (99-100). So too are the forward proposals from Loomis to Mattie as well as Citizen's comment to Black Mary, "A woman's got needs. I can fill you up" (*Gem* 41). Black Mary hesitates, but then acquiesces, a glimpse of early 1900s bawdy black culture in the Hill District.

Wilson also shows what the established black society in the Hill District thought about the migrant from the south. With rooms to let and dustpans to manufacture and market, Seth and Holly do not have to depend on a job at the mill or as a laborer building the city and its infrastructure. They are established successful black people. Seth expresses his frustration about Jeremy's situation:

> These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish acting niggers. 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 fellow looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got. (*Turner* 209)

Since Jeremy recently migrated from North Carolina, he fits the description of the "foolish acting" black man in Seth's tirade. Seth says about Jeremy, "that boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This is the city" (*Turner* 209). Jeremy has to learn his way around the city. On his way home from work, he ends up in jail.

Jeremy's incarceration is an example of police taking advantage of the many immigrants from Europe and black migrants from the South. Jeremy and his friend Roper Lee from Alabama collected their pay from the road crew, purchased a half pint, and were just about to share it as they walked home from work when, "[The police] snatched hold of us to get that two dollars. Me and Roper Lee ain't had a chance to take a drink when they grabbed us" (215). The constable knew it was payday; he knew that Jeremy and Roper Lee could pay a fine.

They were victims of policing for profit. James Forbes in *Wage-earning Pittsburgh: The Reverse Side* (1914) describes the police force as an organization fraught with corruption. By 1911, many of the heavy drinking Europeans learned to avoid incarceration, "This change had occasioned a sad shrinkage in revenue for the worthy constable and his master" (379). Consequently, two black migrants on the street carrying a bottle were easy money. Tucker emphasized that "newspaper accounts of Negro crime" (424) foster a prejudice substantiated by an increasing number of "idle, shiftless Negroes" (379). One of the local officials Tucker interviewed explained that the entire black population in the area suffered because of the behavior of 10 percent. Bertha defends Jeremy to Seth and reminds him that "the police do that" (216). Police corruption provokes more crime and charges some falsely, which causes more of the problem than the law was originally designed to manage, thus requiring more room at the jail and more officers for enforcement.

In this scene on the street, Wilson introduces the first hostile expression of prejudice. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen chooses to steal and Caesar chooses to find the thief. Wilson examines choices and internal issues involving the value of a man's life. In

Joe Turner, Wilson examines the issues surrounding Jeremy working and living as a freeman with whites. As a freeman, the black American had to be careful of his actions just walking down the street lest he find himself in jail.

In contrast to the contemporary migrant, Rutherford Selig and Sam Green represent Jewish inhabitants of the Hill District. In the opening scene, Rutherford Selig is bringing Seth sheets of tin to fabricate dustpans. Helen Tucker, in her contribution to *Wage-earning Pittsburgh* entitled "The Negroes of Pittsburgh," describes a thriving community of small business owners catering to the needs of the Hill District. She observes from a survey from the time, "The eight business enterprises listed under 'miscellaneous' include an insurance company, a stationery and book store, a men's furnishing store, a photographer's gallery, a real estate company, a loan company, a shoe store and repairing shop, and a manufactory of a hair-growing preparation, which has sent out 65 agents" (429). She continues with specific examples of the entrepreneur initiative including barbershops that provide baths, laundries, teamsters, and she concludes with there are many more. Bertha and Seth represent the entrepreneur providing a service. However, Tucker also explains that most of the men find jobs in industry and building, working for a company. In *Joe Turner,* Jeremy represents an example of a reaction to the job situation and shows how the job can influence a relationship.

Selig also represents the entrepreneur. Anna Reed explains in "The Jewish Immigrants of Two Pittsburgh Blocks" that Jews in Pittsburgh left various countries in Europe, Romania, and Russia to escape persecution. Reed corroborates Gilbert; she relates that restrictions in their homelands prevented them owning land, learning a

profession or even owing a home. After a ten to twelve year study in Pittsburgh, Reed's research revealed that many were now shopkeepers or peddlers. Door to door peddling was a frequent way for Jewish immigrants to make a living when they first arrived in Pittsburgh regardless of the skills they used in their homeland. It was also a backup job when the family needed income replaced or augmented.

With so many people escaping intolerable situations as near as the southern United States and as far away as Russia, families did not always arrive together. Reed describes that immigrants sent money home to their families, and it often took years for all the members of a family to immigrate. In the case of the Loomis family, Herald's legal wife, Martha, had to relocate to Pittsburgh before he came home from his seven-year stint on Joe Turner's chain gang. Loomis is proud to tell that they were married legally. Although Martha only appears in the last scene, she is foremost on the minds of the players and the audience. Although Loomis hires Selig to find her, he spends his own time looking for her.

While the problem in *Joe Turner* is finding Martha for Loomis and his daughter, the relationships and choices of the people in the rooming house and neighborhood assure there is never a dull moment. In Wilson's preface to *Three Plays*, he cites a defining moment in the play for Loomis, when "the residents of the household, in an act of tribal solidarity and recognition of communal history, dance a Juba" (xiii). Like Citizen going to the City of Bones in *Gem*, in *Joe Turner*, Loomis, during a ritual becomes aware of the many bones at the bottom of the Atlantic, "I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water" (251). But more than this, he sees the bones wash out and come back to the shore as live beings again, but they just lie still on the shore. Wilson

uses the tragic loss of life of the slaves crossing the Atlantic in both *Gem* and *Joe Turner* to help the protagonist reconnect with life. Loomis learns how to live again after his dehumanizing experience on the chain gang: "Joe Turner let me loose and I felt all turned around inside" (285). Loomis explains to his wife that when he made it home after seven years all he wanted to do was see her face to "connect myself together" (285). Ultimately, what Loomis discovers is that he is an independent free man connected through flesh, blood, and bones within his own identity. He was together all along, able to act on his dreams, not just lie on the shore never to see his hopes materialize. Wilson lets the story end with good-byes on Seth and Bertha's front porch, and a fulfilled Bynum in the background declaring that Loomis is shining.

Shiny Shoes and Death in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

In both *Gem* and *Joe Turner*, the characters cope with problems associated with migrating to Pittsburgh, including issues with the justice system. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, set in 1927 Chicago, the protagonist is a young cornet player named Levee, a migrant from Tennessee, who is aspiring to become the leader of his own band. To succeed, he will have to persuade the white operators of the recording studio that his new sound will market better to the public than the already successful arrangements of Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues. In *Ma Rainey*, the characters explain how they feel about the problems that faced black Americans living in a segregated and prejudiced 1920s society, and Levee portrays how difficult it can be to accept a setback.

The sound of music via records and radio along with a host of other technological advancements was becoming commonplace in mainstream 1920s America. Gilbert points out that, "On 7 January 1927 a telephone conversation between the President of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and the Secretary of the British Post Office, inaugurated the first commercial transatlantic telephone link" (171). On May 20 of that same year, flight took a step forward with Charles Lindbergh's successful non-stop flight from New York to Paris. Not to mention that just a year earlier, in January of 1926 in London, John Logie Baird successfully transmitted a picture through a device called a television. Technologically, the world was changing rapidly.

In *Ma Rainey*, Wilson juxtaposes that exciting technology against the incorrigible attitudes of black and white people. Chicago is an ideal choice to stage these elements. During the Roaring Twenties, Chicago was replete with nightclub entertainment,

Communists rallies, educational opportunities, bootleg activity, and diverse industrial endeavors. Chicago, a robust city, filled with laborers was the birthplace of the American Communist Party in 1919. In *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928-1935*, Randi Storch explains that laborers made up of diverse people "from Italy, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and the American South joined older settlements of Germans, Irish, Scandinavians, and Czechs, distinguishing Chicago as a working-class city of immigrants and black migrants" (10). Cooperation between so much diversity was difficult, and Storch describes that government policies coupled with employers conspiring to keep wages low and provoke tension between the different ethnic groups created an opportunity for organizers of labor unions and supporters of the Communist movement. In 1919, the Stockyards Labor Council "organized an interracial march from the neighborhood adjacent to the stockyards, the Back of the Yards, through to the neighborhood populated predominately by African Americans, the Black Belt" (18). By the end of the year two parties emerged: "a Communist party and a Communist Labor party" (19). In contrast to the tension, there were opportunities.

Christopher Robert Reed, in *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929*, notes that Chicago supported determined people of color. Dr. Julian Lewis became the first African American professor of pathology at the University of Chicago's Medical School. Chicago money from Robert S. Abbott, publisher of the *Chicago Defender*, and Jesse Binga of Binga Bank in Chicago funded Bessie Coleman to take flying lessons. Because she was black, no one in the United States would train her. Consequently in 1921, Lewis and Binga financed her training in France where she became the first black American to earn an international pilot's license, and ultimately, she became a popular

barnstorming aviator (57). Regarding Chicago entertainment, Reed explains, "Chicago was democratic with all classes sharing the delights of choral music, blues, and jazz" (57).

In his introductory comments to *Ma Rainey*, Wilson describes the setting and the feel of a day in March 1927 in Chicago at one o'clock in the afternoon as cold, windy, and bustling with every imaginable personage from gangster to grandmother. He reminds his audience that Chicago was an extremely busy city with a large number of black people in positions of service. He writes:

> The busboys in Mac's Place are cleaning away the last of the corned beef and cabbage, and on the city's South side, sleepy-eyed negroes move lazily toward their small cold-water flats and rented rooms to await the onslaught of night, which will find them crowded in the bars and juke joints both dazed and dazzling in the rapport with life. It is with these negroes that our concern lies most heavily: their values, their attitudes, and particularly their music. (9)

A confident Levee, who plays a cornet, has every reason to believe he can succeed, and in 1920s Chicago, he was not overwhelmed by a white population. Levee, from Jefferson County in Tennessee (*Ma* 51), is one of many thousands of southern black migrants relocating to Chicago. Reed describes the growth of the south side, the black side, of Chicago: "the movement of 51,000 able-bodied young, African American men and women from the southeastern United States' "Black Belt" region . . . into the [Chicago] South Side's Black Belt district, provided an unanticipated body of workers that, along with African Americans already in residence, constituted the city's first black industrial

proletariat" (Reed 4). Wilson explains that Levee and his fellow band members, Cutler on trombone or guitar, Slow Drag on bass, and Toledo on piano, are all in their mid-fifties, "dressed in a style of clothing befitting the members of a successful band of the era" (*Ma* 14).

Levee's name is the same as the old red light district of Chicago, which until 1912 was called the "Levee" district. By 1912 it was reestablished in the South Side, the same part of town that Reed describes, the segregated South Side of Chicago which represents one of the results of the two races living uncomfortably together. In *The Chicago Race Riots July 1919*, Carl Sandburg reports events related to the riots that ensued after a young black boy "swam accross an imaginary segregation line. White boys threw rocks at him and knocked him off a raft. He was drowned" (1). Fighting followed, which, after three days, resulted in twenty blacks and fourteen whites dead "and a number of negro houses burned" (1). Although the riot was eight years prior to the setting of the play, that 1919 event and the makeup of Chicago at that time help to put discussions in Wilson's play in perspective. Assigned by the *Chicago Daily News* to research the three weeks leading up to the riot, Sandburg compiled information garnered from interviews to understand the causes that influenced the incident. Information from those interviews reflects the bewildering contrasts of planned cooperation versus the resulting hostilities activities between the races.

Most interesting in Sandburg's research are the rumors he discovered, accepted by the public as fact, which cannot be substantiated. One came from John Hawkins of the Chicago police department about residents hearing reports from Washington "that the causes of the outbreaks were attacks by colored soldiers on white women. Though this is

a serious and sinister charge to repeat day after day in dispatches that go to the entire nation, the fact is that there have been no supporting details, no particulars of knowledge or information" (55). Another rumor claimed that the people in the northern states were preventing the black migrants from returning to the South. When a military intelligence officer, Lieutenant W.L. Owen, queried Dr. George C. Hall, a black leader, about the truth of the matter, Hall replied, "There isn't any undercurrent. Everything is in the open in this case. The trouble started when the Declaration of Independence was written. It says that every man has a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. So long as the colored people get more of those three things in the north than in the south they are going to keep coming, and they are going to stay" (52-53).

Sandburg also interviewed a meat packing official who explains that the blacks do not like to pay union dues. So, even after they join the union in order to work, they do not stay. He notes that the percentage of blacks employed across the industry averaged about twenty-one percent of the employees. With regard to racial violence in the work place, he noted that the work tools included knives, axes, and cleavers, so "it would show itself in violence inside the yards where they work" (64). He also notes that the other workers look forward to the rioters getting back to work; "Take the beef luggers. They carry on their shoulders the quarters of beefs. Negroes have always been best at this" (65). They probably have, but opinions that set a race apart and that can be seen as a negative can breed problems. Maybe the black man does not want to lug any more quarters of beef. That said, the meat packer, the policeman, and the black leader all looked forward to a better future for black and white, of the planned cooperation being mirrored by the outcome.

Another example of a failed attempt at cooperation is related in *Louis Armstrong, an American Genius* by James Lincoln Collier. Louis Armstrong, the great American jazz musician, played in Chicago in the mid-twenties. Collier describes the situation that existed for an aspiring black musician during that time: "in the [Chicago] Black Belt they had a real community with the best black newspaper in the country, its own political machine, its own shops and stores, its folkways" (86). He notes that in 1920, the government of Illinois adopted a new constitution that "included a strong and explicit civil rights clause" (86). Referring to the *Journal of the Constitutional Convention 1920-1922 of the State of Illinois* in Article VI regarding suffrage and elections, the committee declares:

> Excepting only idiots and persons adjudged insane or convicted of infamous crime and not restored to civil rights, every citizen of the United States above the age of twenty-one years who has resided in the state one year and (unless naturalized because of military or naval service) in the United States five years shall be a qualified elector. He may vote only in the election district and county in which he has resided thirty and ninety days respectively next before such election. (894)

Nowhere in the document does the legislature denote different rights for white versus black citizens. For black Americans relocating to Chicago to go to college, start a business, and live a free life, the 1920s Illinois constitution legitimized those pursuits. Yet despite the constitution and opportunities, the Chicago Black Belt was a filthy ghetto full of dirty and bombed homes plagued with white gangsters who owned businesses in

the neighborhood and bordered by neighborhoods populated with whites who resorted to violence to keep the blacks in the ghetto.

Despite the legal enfranchisement, the affairs of people plodded slowly along with relentless prejudice and power struggles. 1920s Chicago reflected experiences in other parts of the world. Gilbert relates that tragic unrest continued in China with tens of thousands dying in various clashes between rival governing factions. In India, the Muslims and Hindus contended for religious domination with riots and skirmishes in the streets claiming nearly three hundred lives and injuring almost 2,600. But, a ray of hope developed for the underclass society of India, including the Untouchables, when the government allowed Indian participation in the once predominant British rule, and they made military positions available to Indians. Around the world, the age-old struggles of the proletariat looking for a better life pitted against the maneuvers of aspiring rulers continued as it had for centuries. In Chicago, the rulers actually tried to help, but the attitudes and prejudices of people cannot be legislated.

Wilson's character Levee is as complex as the environment in Chicago and the rest of the world. Levee is talented and his heart is set on a bright future, playing his style of music, but he also carries a knife that he does not hesitate to use. He is determined to overcome obstacles posed by white people. Levee believes that he knows how to play the music that both black and white audiences want to hear. Discussing the Chicago blacks, Collier says, "They tended to be young, with families, and they had a little more money in their pockets than they had in the South [United States]. They were naturally receptive to the new hot music" (86). Collier relates that this new jazz sound was on the radio waves "almost from the moment radio existed" (89). When Levee

defends his new arrangement for the song, "Black Bottom," he argues, "The peoples in the North ain't gonna buy all that tent-show nonsense. They wanna hear some music!" (53). Levee protests, but Ma Rainey will do it her only way, and at the end of the play, Sturdyvant reneges on his deal with Levee to promote his music. Levee's dreams of leading a band are crushed.

Tension between the characters in *Ma Rainey* mirrors the tension in Chicago. Dialogue in *Ma Rainey* reveals the underlying prejudice that fuels the tension. In the opening scene, Wilson describes in his stage directions the white studio operator, Irvin, is "a tall, fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them" (11). In contrast, Wilson describes the Sturdyvant as, "Preoccupied with money, he is insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm's length" (11). Sturdyvant tells Irvin to handle Ma. They also discuss Levee's new sounds because "Times are changing. This is tricky business now. We've got to jazz it up . . . put in something different. You know, something wild . . . with a lot of rhythm" (13). Wilson brings to the stage a likely conversation and setting from a mid-1920s Chicago recording studio.

Wilson does not stop at letting the audience know about the prejudiced attitude of the whites toward the blacks and vice versa; he also provides insight about the relationship between the blacks by sharing emotional conversation among the band members in which each wants to prove that he is better than the others. Being better is important to them. Alfred Holt Stone researched the situation and, in *Studies in the American Race Problem*, relates an opinion from Fannie Barrier Williams, a popular black American educator and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored People: black unemployment rose in Chicago during the early 1900s because foreign immigrants such as Greeks, Italians, and Swedes outperformed the blacks in many jobs by improving efficiency and organization. She explains the situation: "One occupation after another that the coloured people thought was theirs forever by a sort of divine right fell into the hands of these foreign invaders. This loss was not so much due to prejudice against colour, as to the ability of these foreigners to increase the importance of the places sought and captured" (157). She continues to explain that in many cases the black people really did not want to do these jobs: "White men wanted these places and were strong enough to displace the unorganized, thoughtless and easy-going occupants of them" (157). Wilson uses the conversations among Levee and the other band members in the studio to provide their view of the situation in Chicago, and it supports those findings by Stone, experiences by Armstrong and Ma Rainey, and observations by Williams.

Opening conversations among Toledo, Slow Drag, and Cutler tell the audience that Levee won four dollars from Cutler shooting craps the night before, so he is shopping for a new pair of shoes. Cutler remarks about Levee, "That nigger get out in the streets with that four dollars and ain't no telling when he's liable to show" (15). He adds that Ma was at the same club, and Levee made advances toward "some gal Ma had with her" (15). As they discuss the opinion that Levee does not have a chance with the gal, they pass around a pint, an illegal prohibition pint, of "good Chicago bourbon" (16), and Levee arrives on the scene.

After Levee puts on his shiny new shoes, the conversation meanders to an argument about the layout of the room, which goes nowhere. Finally, Slow Drag suggests they practice which opens the door for Levee: "You ain't gotta rehearse that . . .

ain't nothing but old jug band music. They need one of them jug bands for this" (18). Levee proffers the idea that he is more talented than the others, which evolves into arguments about how to spell the word "music" and knowledge of the Lord's Prayer. Because Toledo is the only one able to do both, the audience realizes that he is also the only one who can read.

Illiteracy among black Americans from the South in 1930 was 19.7 percent, whereas in the North it was only 4.7 (*Negroes* Census 229). In *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32*, the Bureau of the Census figures describe the highest illiteracy among the older black Americans. A black between the ages of forty-five to fifty-four years of age was five times as likely to be illiterate as a child between the ages of ten and fourteen. In Chicago, 3.2 percent illiterate whites of 2,628,156 individuals outnumbered the blacks, whose illiterate population was 2.2 percent of 199,233 (237). Because the band members are from the South, Wilson is correct to show that most could not read.

As if the bourbon needed accompaniment, Cutler rolls up a reefer, illegal at the time, while they argue with Levee about practicing his new style. Finally, amidst rollicking banter among the marijuana-and-liquor-influenced players, Irvin comes in looking for Ma and resolves the issue of which arrangement to use: "Oh, Levee's arrangement. We're using Levee's arrangement" (28). So, Levee has on a shiny new pair of eleven dollar shoes, and he will get to show the band how to play Ma's songs his way.

Things seem to be looking up for Levee, but Cutler insists on making one foreboding last point: when Ma Rainey gets there, she will tell them what will be played no matter what anyone says. And Toledo makes an observation, "See, now . . . I'll tell

you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing" (29). With this comment from Toledo, Wilson shows how blacks are determined to establish their own identity, and from what Cutler says, Ma Rainey seems to have established her identity and control of her life. Unfortunately, for many black people, coexisting with the myriad of other cultures and establishing an identity are difficult undertakings.

Realizing the difficulties of blacks learning to shoulder the responsibilities of living life as a free person, President Lincoln favored gradual integration of blacks into the free society. In *Lincoln and the Negro*, Benjamin Quarles shares a comment from Lincoln to Maryland supporter, John A.J. Creswell, that gradual emancipation "would produce less confusion and destitution" (218). Lincoln's plan was to provide states, including the Confederate states, with money to compensate the former slave owners, but "The Cabinet unanimously rejected the idea. They did not see the measure as a magnanimous act that might shorten the war by a few weeks; they saw it as an act of appeasement that might be misconstrued by the enemy" (220). Had Lincoln succeeded, perhaps the relationship between whites and blacks, especially in the South, would have developed differently throughout the century following the Civil War.

Lincoln did not get his way. People recovering in the tatters of a shattered society in the South had to redesign their lives. Difficult times followed along with issues between the two races living side by side. A Scotsman, David Macrae, toured the United States shortly after the Civil War and shared his experience in *The Americans at Home*

(1870). He found conditions in the South better than he expected from reports appearing in Scotland. Macrae interviewed many people from all walks of life, including President Grant, retired generals from the North as well as the South, educators, and former slaves as he traveled from New York City down the eastern corridor across to New Orleans, and up the Mississippi River to Chicago. He provided an observation that applies to the situation in Chicago fifty-seven years later when Wilson's play is set:

> In any country the subversion of the whole system of labour, especially if it meant the turning adrift of four millions of negroes unaccustomed to provide for themselves, would necessarily involve much confusion and distress, even under the most favourable circumstances. But in the South it was effected under circumstances as *un*favourable in many respects as could possibly be conceived. It was effected forcibly and without preparation: it was effected in regions wrecked and devastated by war: it was effected in violent opposition to the will of the people on whom its success largely depended, who predicted that it would be a failure, some of whom seemed to me, in the exasperation of defeat, to wish it to be a failure, and in many cases, by withholding their land and refusing to employ negro labour, did something to make it a failure. (322)

Not only did they want the emancipation of the blacks to fail, but they had help from many blacks. Macrae observed many blacks loitering about the towns through which he passed. When he discovered one man asleep at noon, he asked if he was well. "Oh, he's quite well, sah," replied the woman; "but he says he's free now, and can lie in bed when he like" (323). With freedom came a choice for the free black American as well as a

choice for the former slave owner. Not every black and white person adopted these respective attitudes, but there were enough to cause problems.

When Toledo examines the problem about attitude, he compares the black man to the leftovers of a stew; and that the problem is that the blacks do not realize the predicament. He speculates, "The problem ain't with the white man. The white man knows you just a leftover. Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man's belly and now he's full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself" (*Ma* 47). Even before emancipation, the desire of many of the whites to thwart efforts to bring the black Americans into society as equals was obvious to many blacks. Toledo suggests that one of the band members ask Mr. Irvin what he ate for "supper yesterday. And if he's an honest white man . . . which is asking for a whole heap of a lot . . . he'll tell you he done ate your black ass and if you please I'm full up with you . . . so go on and get off the plate and let me eat something else" (47). Toledo recognizes and tries to share with Cutler, Slow Drag, and Levee that if they are to be successful, they best not depend on a white man going out of his way to help them.

Writings from the late 1920s and early 1930s from Zora Neale Hurston show a similar conclusion. From Carla Kaplan's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, in a letter to Langston Hughes dated 20 September 1928, Zora complains, "It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. I am almost sick --- my one consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us" (126). Then in July/August of 1932, Hurston comments to her friends, Walter and

Gladys White about her research work for a book about black American folk tales: "It is folk tales with background so that theyn are in atmosphere and not just stuck out into cold space. I want the reader to see why Negroes tell such glorious tales. He has more images within his skull than any other human in circulation. That is why it makes me furious when some ham like Cohen or Roark Bradford gets off a nothing else but and calls it a high spot of Negro humor and imagery" (269). Not unlike the "glorious tales" (269) in Hurston's book, Levee wants the people to hear his new music, and he is frustrated when he finds so little support. Toledo compares his race to a "leftover," and Huston is annoyed with the term "high spot." Each term disparages the race unjustly.

Toledo's criticism continues when Slow Drag plays a tune and Levee sings a few lines that close with, "He's the man who makes me get on my dancing shoes" (32). Toledo reprimands him, "That's the trouble with colored folks . . . always wanna have a good time. Good time done got more niggers killed than God got ways to count. What the hell having a good time mean? That's what I wanna know" (32). Levee retorts that a good time need not be explained, and Toledo adds, "The more niggers get killed having a good, the more good time niggers wanna have. (SLOW DRAG *stops playing*.) There's more to life than having a good time. If there ain't, then this is a piss-poor life we're having . . . if that's all there is to be got out of it" (32). As they continue arguing about what defines a good time, Slow Drag accuses Toledo of being like Booker T. Washington and points out that Toledo's idea of a good time is reading a book.

When Booker T. Washington comes into the conversation, Wilson moves to the problem-solving step with Toledo suggesting that the black man needs to concentrate

more on improving his condition rather than having a good time. Toledo gets the last word:

> It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you think . . . I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. Got to do his part. I ain't talking about what I'm gonna do . . . or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I'm talking about all of us together. What all of us is gonna do. That's what I'm talking about, nigger! (33-34)

With these comments from Toledo, Wilson reflects the efforts of leading black commentators of the 1920s. DuBois was publishing *The Crisis*, a black publication for the NAACP, now a quarterly journal. Langston Hughes was writing poetry including *The Weary Blues* (1926). Carter Woodson was writing about history including *The History of the Negro Church* (1921) and *The Negro in Our History* (1922). In New York, the Harlem Renaissance was materializing with works from black writers including Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Color Struck* (1925) and *Sweat* (1926). Many black writers were trying to document the story of their race and make life better.

Also published, following the 1919 Chicago riot, were the findings by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, reported in *The Negro in Chicago: a Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (1922). A remarkable incident occurred when the Chicago Commission tried to rent an office in Chicago: "the commission found several agents of buildings who declined to make a lease when they learned that Negroes as well as whites were among the prospective tenants. They stated their objections as based not upon their own prejudices, but upon the fear that other tenants would resent the presence

of Negroes" (xvii). Feelings reflected in Wilson's play are those from 1920s, especially in Chicago.

Despite the experience of the Commission, the prospects in Chicago for a black American were better than in the South. When Sandburg researched material for *The Chicago Race Riots*, he learned from Secretary Arnold Hill of the Chicago Urban league, that an influx of black migrants followed a lynching in the South: "Every time a lynching takes place in a community down south you can depend on it that colored people from that community will arrive in Chicago inside of two weeks" (26). He went on to describe that whenever there was news of a "public hanging or burning in Texas or a Mississippi town, we get ready to extend greetings to the people from the immediate vicinity of the scene" (26). Circumstances similar to those described by Hill are what incited Richard Wright's journey away from the South.

In *Black Boy*, Wright relates the story of his Uncle Silas Hoskins, who owned and operated a saloon in Elaine, Arkansas, in 1916-17. One night, he did not come home at the usual time, and the next day there was a loud knock at the door by a "tall black boy" who said, "Mr. Hoskins . . . he done been shot. Done been shot by a white man," the boy gasped. "Mrs. Hoskins, he dead" (54). Wright explains that, "I learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. He had been threatened with death and warned many times to leave, but he had wanted to hold on a while longer to amass more money" (54). Wright moved north with his mother and Aunt Maggie Hoskins. After a few years in Jackson and Memphis, he and his Aunt Maggie finally arrived in Chicago in 1927, the same year as *Ma Rainey* is set. Sandburg summarizes the enticements, "Better jobs, the right to vote and have the vote

counted at elections, no Jim Crow cars, less race discrimination and a more tolerant attitude on the part of the whites, equal rights with white people in education --- these are among the attractions that keep up the steady movement of colored people from southern districts to the north" (26).

But it was not perfect. When Ma Rainey arrives, she tells about a cabbie turning down her fare. A cabbie turns down a fare from a black, and a landlord turns away money from a government funded research project. In *Black* Boy, Wright describes his feelings when he first learns about segregation. He is ten years of age when he and his mother move to Elaine, Arkansas, and he learns about the different places for black people, segregation in the Jim Crow system. So, his mother explains to him that he is part black, Indian, Irish, Scotch and French. Consequently, he will be considered black by society. He writes, "I did not object to being called colored, but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. . . . There was, of course, a vague uneasiness about it all, but I would be able to handle that when I came to it" (49). In *Ma Rainey*, Wilson shows choices blacks made to handle different situations.

Wilson's characters in *Ma Rainey* reflect the atmosphere encountered by Richard Wright in 1927 when he and his Aunt stepped off the train in Chicago. Leading up to their departure from Memphis, Wright shares that "southern whites hated the idea of Negroes leaving to live in places where the racial atmosphere was different" (255). With that in mind, he tactfully quits his job in Memphis. When he steps out of the train in Chicago, the first thing he does not see is a sign for black people. What he does see is the bustle of people moving about with purpose, "There was no racial fear. Indeed, each person acted as though no one existed but himself" (261). He buys a newspaper without

waiting behind all the white people. These simple things welcome a person into society as an equal participant. When he got on a streetcar, he sat beside a white man. It was different from what he was accustomed.

Wright sums up his fears of leaving a known for an unknown: "Wherever my eyes turned they saw stricken, frightened black faces trying vainly to cope with a civilization that they did not understand. I felt lonely. I had fled one insecurity and had embraced another" (263). He discusses racial discrimination: "I wondered if there had ever existed in all human history a more corroding and devastating attack upon the personalities of men than the idea of racial discrimination. In order to escape the racial attack that went to the roots of my life, I would have gladly accepted any way of life but the one in which I found myself" (265). Wright is glad to be away from Jim Crow, but Chicago is an enormous, soot-covered, loud city full of opportunity, but nothing is guaranteed. This is Wright's view of the faces and the perplexities facing a black from the South in 1927 Chicago.

Toledo's view is that black people are leftovers who need to work together to improve, and not count on the white man. Levee has a harsher point of view. He explains his feelings to the band with a tragic story from his childhood. He was only eight when his father, Memphis, went to Natchez to buy fertilizer and seed to plant his fifty acre farm. Levee saw the white men come into the kitchen where his mom was frying chicken, and saw each of the men rape her. He went after them with his father's hunting knife. As he tells the story to the band, he lifts his shirt to show the scar on his chest. "That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death" (58). He lived because his mother carried him two miles to a friend who was willing to drive

them to a doctor. That doctor "was waiting on a calf to be born, and say he ain't had time to see me" (58). So, they drove him to the home of a midwife who sewed him up. When his father returned, he sold his property to one of the rapists, moved his family, then came back and killed as many as he could, four of them, before they caught and hung him. Consequently, that is the method Levee deems appropriate for dealing with a situation: "That taught me how to handle them [white men]. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man" (58).

Toledo talks to people about issues and reads to solve his problems, much like Wright. On the other hand, Levee uses a knife and hostility to solve his problems. Although Wilson describes Slow Drag as "perhaps the one most bored by life" (13), he is optimistic. When Toledo complains about blacks putting too much effort into having a good time, Slow Drag is not moved: "Well, the colored man's gonna be alright. He got through slavery, and he'll get through whatever else the white man put on him. I ain't worried about that. Good times is what makes life worth living. Now, you take the white man . . . The white man don't know how to have a good time. That's why he's troubled all the time. He don't know how to have good time. He don't know how to laugh at life" (33). As it turns out Slow Drag got his nickname from his dance moves. He does enjoy life.

Slow Drag also tells the band a thing or two about God and selling one's soul to the devil. His story is about a fellow named Eliza Cottor, from Tuscaloosa County in Alabama. The devil came by one day, and Eliza sold his soul to him. He went from living in a shack to living in a nice house with a picket fence, from "shoeing mules and horses, making them charms and things in secret. He done hooked up with the devil,

showed up one day all fancied out with just the finest clothes you ever seen on colored man . . . dressed just like one of them crackers" (35). Eliza was not only well dressed, but he had a pocketful of money, and according to Slow Drag he also got away with murder when he killed a man in an altercation over a "gal he was messing with" (35). He laughed about the incident and was so adamant about selling his soul to the devil that the preacher would move to the other side of the street when he saw him coming. According to Slow Drag, Eliza is up north giving "hundred-dollar bills on the spot to whoever wanted to sign on with the devil. That's what I hear tell of him" (36). Embedded in Slow Drag's amusing story is his use of the racial slur, "cracker." Throughout the play, Wilson lets the characters talk realistically.

Because Slow Drag brings up the devil, discussion opens up about God. Levee immediately wants to find Eliza and sell his soul. Cutler refuses to believe Eliza is real and accuses Levee of blasphemy. He adds a foreboding comment, "You gonna be sorry. You gonna fix yourself to have bad luck. Ain't nothing gonna work for you" (37). Wilson describes Cutler as "the leader of the group, possibly because he is the most sensible" (13). He tries his best to steer Levee in the right direction.

Cutler also tells a story. His is about a Reverend Gates who gets left behind at a train stop off en route from Tallahassee to Atlanta. Cutler explains that the outhouse for the black people was over two hundred yards from the station, so Reverend Gates was unable to get back to the train before it pulled out. To make matters worse, while he was preoccupied with trying to figure out what he was going to do, a group of white men accosted him. They tore his cross from his neck and forced him to dance for them. Levee remarks about the story: "if he's a man of God, then where the hell was God when

all of this was going on? Why wasn't God looking out for him? Why didn't God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talk about to me?" (81). With each scene, Wilson brings the racial problems of 1927 Chicago alive, and he uses the example of needing to use a restroom to show how miserable segregation can be for the lower class people. More than expose issues with segregation, Ma Rainey exposes the graft and cheating.

Ma Rainey is late arriving for the one o'clock recording. When she finally makes her appearance, she is arguing with a policeman about a car accident, and the policeman is charging her with assaulting a cab driver. Despite Ma's insisting the car was hers, the policeman refuses to believe her: "That's what you say, lady . . . We still gotta check" (40). It does not help that she tried to make a getaway: "While I was calling a paddy wagon to haul them to the station, they try to hop into a parked cab" (40). Unfortunately, the cabbie is waiting on a fare, and allegedly Ma shoves him aside when he steps out of his cab to explain why he cannot drive them somewhere. Ma explains that she did not hit him; the door hit him when she tried to get in the cab. She remarks, "[The cabbie] said he wasn't gonna haul no colored folks . . . if you want to know the truth of it" (41). Ma's version appears more truthful by the minute as the policeman wants only to talk to Irvin, the white man. Irvin slips the officer "a bill from his pocket" (42) and promises, "As soon as we're finished with the recording session, I'll personally stop by the precinct house and straighten up this misunderstanding" (42). Wilson describes that the officer pockets the bill, winks at Irvin and says, "Well . . . I guess that's alright. As long as someone is responsible for them" (42). And again, the black people are referred to as "them." In the opening scene, Sturdyvant tells Irvin to manage "them," and the officer is

happy that Irvin will take care of "them." Conversely, Levee and Slow Drag each refer to whites and "them crackers."

Ma Rainey is no stranger in dealing with the white man. In *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey*, Sandra R. Lieb gleans information from a variety of sources to piece together Gertrude Rainey's biography. Born on 26 April of 1886, she died 22 December of 1939, so she was forty-one in Wilson's 1927 play. From a letter by Ma's brother, Thomas Pridgett, Jr., Lieb learned that Ma appeared on stage as a young woman at the Springer Opera House in Columbus, Georgia, where she met and soon after married Will Rainey (1). Lieb describes Madame Rainey:

> a short, heavy, dark-skinned woman with luminous eyes, wild, wiry hair, and a large mouth filled with gold teeth. . . . Conforming to the prejudice against dark skin (shared at that time by many black as well as whites), she lightened her face with heavy greasepaint, powder, and rouge, so that she looked almost gold-colored under the amber stage lights. (8)

Ma coped with segregation. Lieb explains that in order to travel the rail lines in the South, "any black minstrel show with more than twenty-five people kept its own, separate baggage and coach cars which would link up with the smaller railroad line. In the jim-crow South, black performers were not allowed in the dining car; they bought their own food wherever they could and were housed with families along the way" (10). For the performance, which was staged under a big tent, the "whites sat on the right side of the tent, while the blacks sat on the left" (10). Ma learned that the whites only wanted to see the performance; they wanted nothing to do with her socially. Ma's describes, "They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice" (*Ma* 64). Lieb relates

that she earned money providing music for white people at their parties. Afterward, she would find something to do in the black part of town (12).

Lieb relates that people close to Madame Rainey began to call her Ma because of her maternal nature. In the play, her character portrayal reflects that aspect of her personality. She has two traveling companions, her nephew Sylvester and a young lady, Dussie Mae. She is determined to help Sylvester earn money to send home to his mother, and so she makes sure that Sturdyvant pays him. When Dussie Mae complains about her sore feet, Ma plans a shopping spree for shoes before they head back to Memphis" "They got clothes up here you can't get in Memphis. I want you to look nice for me. If you gonna travel with the show you got to look nice" (49). Wilson implies an intimate relationship between Dussie Mae and Ma. When Levee makes advances toward Dussie Mae, Cutler warns him, "Nigger, don't you know that's Ma's Gal?" (*Ma* 73). Lieb shares that Ma probably was bisexual; she was arrested in Chicago for "an indecent party" (17), and "Later in her career, Ma Rainey wrote and recorded an explicitly lesbian song, "Prove It on Me Blues" (17). Wilson depicts Ma in his play as she was in life.

Wilson also illuminates an important development in the recording industry by staging the 1920s play of his cycle in a Chicago recording studio. Lieb relates that Ma "recorded her first eight songs in Chicago in December 1923, at the age of thirty-seven" (21). Record companies produced "separate numerical listings for their 'race' catalogues; at that time, 'race' was a term of pride in the black community" (21). Ma's recordings were part of those history-making vinyl productions with Paramount Records: The Popular Race Record as advertised in the Chicago defender (Lieb 24). Ma's touring band included a piano player who could read music, Thomas A. Dorsey, "David Nelson on

trumpet, Eddie Pollack on Saxophone and clarinet, Albert Wynn on trombone, and Gabriel Washington on drums" (28). Dorsey directed the band.

Again Wilson mirrored the actual events, including Levee's prediction about the jug music. In 1928, Ma began the year performing in Chicago and closed the year in Chicago at the Monogram Theatre, and then her "contract was terminated . . . Ma Rainey had perfected the Classic Blues style and showed an increasingly down-home influence during her five-year recording career, remaining faithful to a country, deep South tradition of minstrelsy, blues, and vaudeville that was fast becoming outdated" (Lieb 41). Wilson accurately portrays Ma's conviction to perform her songs the way she wanted to perform them. She understands what Levee is trying to do with the music: "Irvin, what is that I hear? What is that the band's rehearsing? I know they ain't rehearsing Levee's 'Black Bottom.' I know I ain't hearing that" (*Ma* 51). Defending her position to Irvin, she adds, "I don't like to sing it that way. I'm doing it the old way. That's why I brought my nephew to do the voice intro" (*Ma* 51).

Ma suggests to Levee that he leave and start his own band, so he can play his own style of music. That is actually what he has planned. He pouts but plays for the recording session, and then hopes to close his deal with Sturdyvant. Perhaps Irvin would have scheduled a recording session for Levee and his band, but evidently Sturdyvant had another plan. In the closing scenes, he lives up to Toledo's comment about white people being dishonest. He pays the band for the recording session, then turns to Levee, "Oh yes, . . . uh . . . Levee. About them songs you gave me. I've thought about it and I just don't think the people will buy them. They're not the type of songs we're looking for" (89). Levee is not having a good day, and this news is too much for him.

Ma is experienced enough not to sign her release forms until she and Sylvester are paid, but Levee has given Sturdyvant his music with no contract. Sturdyvant knows what he can get away with, so he insists, "I'll give you five dollars apiece for them. Now that's the best I can do" (90). Levee's luck is going the way Cutler predicted. Levee has no leverage, no recourse.

Instead of learning from the experience, he gets angry, and then Toledo steps on one of his shiny new shoes, "Look at that! Look at that! Nigger, you stepped on my shoe. What you do that for?" (91). Levee takes the shoe off and shoves it in Toledo's face. Toledo apologizes, but that is not enough for Levee. In his rage, he loses control and finds his knife. He stabs Toledo fatally in the back. All happens in seconds, and then he pitifully realizes what he had done, but there is no bringing Toledo back. He just wants him to close his eyes, "Cutler. Tell him don't look at me like that" (93).

Wilson combines a study in anger management skills with elements of drug and alcohol use, legal and racial issues, and sexual and creative tensions as they would have been in 1927 Chicago. Reefer madness was prevalent among the 1920s bands. Collier relates Louie Armstrong's experience with marijuana; it was in Chicago that a songwriter introduced him to the drug which he would use without apology for the rest of his life. Armstrong claimed it made him feel better and helped him cope with the problems he faced as a Negro (221). In *The Curse of 1920*, Gary D. Naler provides background to Armstrong's experience. He explains that musicians used marijuana to help them play for long hours at a time, and that they believed the music they created was better when they were under its influence. Naler also shares that white authorities "expressed concern that itinerant black musicians were spreading a powerful new 'voodoo' music and that

they also sold the weed which made decent folks abandon their inhibitions" (149). Wilson brings the connection of marijuana and music to the stage.

Wilson does not forget the alcohol. William Kenney, in *Chicago Jazz*, lists the similar ingredients that Wilson portrays in *Ma Rainey*:

> "The continuing threat of police raids, far from dampening public enthusiasm for South Side night life, seemed to contribute just the right note of excitement to Chicago's jazz scene, mixing with new styles of personal liberation---clothes, insiders' slang, cigarettes, bootleg gin, marijuana (called 'gage'), sexual expressiveness, and interracial mingling---to add drama to the new music. (30)

Chicago was the sight of Capone bootlegging and Chicago bourbon. Kenney explains that in 1927, Bill Thompson, a bourbon drinker, was reelected mayor of Chicago. "In return for the organized political support constructed through South Side entertainment establishments, Big Bill Thompson's political machine protected speakeasies, with which jazz, of course, was closely associated" (29). In *Ma Rainey*, Wilson captures the tension between these elements. Toledo and Cutler represent reason juxtaposed against the tempers of Levee and Ma Rainey.

Wilson also shares the frustration of recording in a 1920s studio. Record production was a risky business; Sturdyvant represents the darker side that could cheat or disappoint people. In *Mother of the Blues*, Sandra Lieb describes record companies such as Meritt Records, Black Patti, and Black Swan that could not compete against the bigger companies. Ma recorded with Paramount's race label, designated as The Popular Race Record in their ad in the *Chicago Defender* (1924). Lieb explains that when Ma recorded

with Paramount Record Company, the company was struggling with a limited budget and went "bankrupt in the 1930s" (xii). While Wilson does not name the record company, he reflects the poor technical quality of the recording when Sturdyvant and Irvin have to repair a frayed cord and record Ma's song a second time. Many of Ma Rainey's records are available today because they were later released on "Milestone and Biograph labels" (xii).

With Ma's recording session, Wilson shares stories from each of the band members. He develops their personalities with humor and pathos. And, just as in *Gem* and *Joe Turner*, Wilson includes a scene that portrays a sexual conversation between the characters. Comments among the band members in the opening scenes of Act I indicate that Levee is interested in Ma's gal. Later in the studio, Levee does not waste any words when he asks Dussie Mae, "Look here, sugar . . . what I wanna know is . . . can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen" (67)? Because he boasts to Dussie Mae that he will have his own band, Levee is confident that he can win her affections, and she does not turn him down. Consequently, when Sturdyvant reneges on his recording deal with Levee, he not only spoils Levee's dreams of leading his own band, but Sturdyvant also thwarts Levee's chances with Dussie Mae.

Wilson shows how breaking a promise to a person can trigger a bad end. In 1982, when Wilson wrote *Ma Rainey*, black Americans were just beginning to escape the attitude of Jim Crow. In 1994, in *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, Ellis Cose interviewed successful black Americans to find out how America was progressing in its efforts to end racism. Regardless of the black individual's successful appearance, he learned that whites stereotyped a black as a potential shoplifter or drug pusher, or a homeless

individual (41-42). Statements from the black individual made no difference. In *Ma Rainey*, the policeman is not interested in what Ma has to say. Because it is a play, Wilson's audience does listen. Toledo, Cutler, Slow Drag, and Levee in *Ma Rainey*, tell their reactions to prejudicial acts. Wilson endears the audience to his characters and makes the feelings personal. Nearly every conversation that transpires in the play includes a racial slur or description of a race-related event. When Levee's mom gets raped, the audience can see Levee's rage and hurt. When Sturdyvant tries to cheat Ma, the audience can see her anger and her resolve to win. In 1927, songwriters did not have the copyright protection or organizations that they would have later in the twentieth century, but Ma knew what to do and left with her money. On the other hand, Levee did not know what to do; he felt violated.

Wilson's representations in *Ma Rainey* are perfect. Because of the historical significance of Chicago, recording, and Ma Rainey, an abundance of information is available, and Wilson is able to share a plethora of elements with his audience. Each of his characters sees the elements with a slightly different perspective. Toledo might compare these ingredients to a recipe. Slow Drag would deal with it tomorrow and have fun tonight. Cutler would manage the different aspects with a list and schedule time for a resolution. Levee would go sit in a corner, write some music, and sharpen his knife.

Conclusion

Wilson wrote his first five plays during a dynamic time in America when blacks were beginning to establish their foothold in mainstream society. He wrote *Jitney* in 1979, *Ma Rainey* in 1982, *Fences* in 1983, *Joe Turner* in 1984, and *The Piano Lesson* in 1986. These seven years was Wilson's most prolific period. Over the next twenty years, he wrote *Two Trains Running* in 1990, *Seven Guitars* in 1995, *King Hedley II* in 1999, *Gem of the Ocean* in 2003, and *Radio Golf* in 2005 to complete the cycle.

Wilson explains in his 1988 PBS interview with Bill Moyers that in his plays, he wanted to show the historical choices that black people made, such as moving to the North for work, and show how those choices worked out. About the choice to move North, Wilson thought they should have stayed in the South: "We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experiences of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been hospitable" (61). Indeed, in the first three plays, Wilson shows the inhospitable atmosphere of the North. In his interview, he shares with Moyers that there was actually a Negro section in the library, which made only "thirty or forty books" (66) available to the black patrons in Pittsburgh. An incident with his mother is representative of the inhospitable North. In a Morton Salt radio show contest, she won a new washing machine, "But when they found out that she was black, they wanted to give her a certificate to go to the Salvation Army and get a used washing machine" (73). They thought she could make do with leftovers. She probably could, but she chose not to. Reflecting Toledo's comparison of blacks to leftovers, Wilson points out that it was not the oppression in the South that drove blacks north; it was the jobs, and "Today, in 1988,

we still don't have jobs" (62). Basic parts of life such as finding a job are the focus of Wilson's cycle.

Wilson focused on the everyday life of American blacks rather than examining the effects of major events such as World War I or II, the 1929 stock market crash, the Chicago riot of 1919, or the 1907 flood in Pittsburgh. Each of these events would have overshadowed the stories about the lives of the people in the play. Wilson directed attention on the lives of the characters in the plays, not on the newsworthy topics already occupying space in the history books.

He directly addresses this in "A Note from the Playwright," introducing *Seven Guitars*: "Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture, and while my plays have an overall historical feel, their settings are fictions, and they are peopled with invented characters whose personal histories fit within the historical context in which they live" (x). Consequently, he brings the audience back to the lives and culture of migrants learning to live in 1904 and 1911 Pittsburgh, and then moves on to budding young musicians meeting in a recording studio in 1927 Chicago. In each, the historical context and cultures accurately represent the decade. Of course, he does fit Ma Rainey into the recording studio, and her personal history in 1927 would have put her in a studio. From clodhoppers to frayed extension cords, Wilson brought reality to the stage, and in *Joe Turner* and *Ma Rainey*, Wilson included the blues.

Not only does Wilson include the blues in both *Joe Turner* and *Ma Rainey*, but both plays were published in the same 1980s decade. Consequently, when Moyers asks Wilson about the influence of the decade in which he wrote, he explains:

> Strange as it may seem, I don't look at our society today too much. My focus is still on the past. Part of the reason is because what I do, I get from the blues, so I listen to the music of the particular period that I'm working on. Inside the music are clues to what is happening with the people. I don't know that much about contemporary music, so if I were going to write a play set in 1980, I would go and listen to the music, particularly music that blacks are making, and find out what their ideas and attitudes are about the situation, and about the time in which they live (62).

Listening to Ma Rainey, Mother of the Blues, and W.C. Handy, Father of the Blues, on YouTube helps to understand the impressions and visualize the translations that Wilson brought to the stage with his plays.

In *Ma Rainey*, Cutler and Ma talk about the blues. When the room gets quiet, Ma tells Cutler, "I never could stand no silence. I always got to have some music going on in my head somewhere. It keeps things balanced. Music will do that. It fills things up. The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is" (67). Wilson explains to Moyers,

> Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition. . . . The music provides you an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive because they sanction the information that it contains. (63)

And Wilson keeps it alive in his plays.

Maybe, he also helps the attitude. Both white and black listen to the music. Ma Rainey's audience may have sat on different sides of the theatre, but they heard the same music, and as Wilson instructs, attitudes and an emotional reference go hand in hand with the music. Wilson explains to Moyers about the interactions of the black characters in *Fences*: "So, while the specifics of the play are black, the commonalities of culture are lager realities in the play. You have father-son conflict, you have husband-wife conflict --- all these things are universal" (75). These are archetypal commonalities that transcend race. Both black and white alike can appreciate, embrace, and understand the reality of the situation expressed in the music or on the stage.

With that reality, perhaps Wilson enabled members of the audience to better appreciate the dynamics of prejudice and begin to see people without the profile. Profiles can be inaccurate; at the very least they do not apply to all of the members of a race. People generally agree that a child should not pay for the sins of the parent. It follows that a member of a race should not pay for the history of the race. Germans should not pay for Hitler. Ancestors of slave traders and owners should not feel guilty. Blacks in America should not be indiscriminately viewed as indolent or ignorant. Wilson recorded accurate representations of the decades of the twentieth century. Now, perhaps the cycle can provide ten stepping stones to a less hateful world, and people of both races can move forward.

Wilson reminds us that we should listen, even when it is not blues - that in rap songs, "They're defining the world in which they live, they're working out their ideas and attitudes about the world, they're working out their social manners, their social intercourse - all these things they're working out through the rap" (64). Moyers

encourages Wilson to make his point about rap music, Wilson does not disappoint. He makes it clear that listening to the story in the music can help bridge the communication between the listeners. Even more, when Moyers queries him about blacks adopting American values, he unequivocally declares, "Blacks know more about whites in white culture and white life than whites know about blacks. We have to know because our survival depends on it. White people's survival does not depend on knowing blacks. But we still have our own way of doing things, even though we are Americans" (71). Perhaps watching and listening to Wilson's plays and listening to the music, the white people in American can learn more about blacks and their culture. Perhaps the white people can learn to see black culture as simply different, not inferior.

Works Cited

Bergesen, Eric, and William W. Demastes. "The Limits of African-American Political Realism: Baraka's *Dutchman* and Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.*" *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition.* Ed. William W. Demastes. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996. 218-235.

Blaxter, H. V., and Allen H. Kerr. *The Pittsburgh District Civic Frontage.* Ed. Kellogg, Paul Underwood. New York: Survey Associates, 1914.

Brawley, Benjamin Griffith. *A Social History of the American Negro, Being a History of the Negro Problem in the United States, Including a History and Study of the Republic of Liberia.* New York: Macmillian, 1921.

Bruce, Philip Alexander. *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman: Observations on His Character, Condition, and Prospects in Virginia.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889.

Bryer, Jackson R., and Mary C. Hartig. *Conversations with August Wilson.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006.

Chantepie de la Saussaye, P. D., and Bert John Vos. *The Religion of the Teutons.* Boston and London: Ginn & Co, 1902.

Chicago Commission on Race Relations. *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922.

Cose, Ellis. *The Rage of a Privileged Class.* New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Negro American Family: Report of a Racial Study Made Principally by the College Classes of 1909 and 1910 of Atlanta University, Under the Patronage of the Trustees of the John F. Slater Fund; Together with the*

Proceedings of the 13th Annual Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, on Tuesday, May the 26th, 1908. Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1908.

Epstein, Abraham. *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh.* 1918.

Ellsworth, Scott. "The Tulsa Race Riot." *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.* 21 February 2001, 37-102.

Forbes, James. Russell Sage Foundation. *Wage-earning Pittsburgh.* Ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg. New York: Survey Associates, 1914.

Fowler, Nathaniel C. *Starting in Life; What Each Calling Offers Ambitious Boys and Young Men*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1906.

Gilbert, Martin. *A History of the Twentieth Century: The Concise Edition of the Acclaimed World History*. New York: Harper, 2001.

Glazer, Nathan. *Affirmative Discrimination: Ethic Inequality and Public Policy.* Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Green, James R. *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieh-Century America.* New York: Hill, 1980.

Harrison, Robert. *State and Society in Twentieth-Century America.* New York: Longman, 1997.

Herrington, Joan. *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1998.

Hill, Robert Thomas. *Cuba and Porto Rico, with the Other Islands of the West Indies;*

Their Topography, Climate, Flora, Products, Industries, Cities, People, Political Conditions, Etc. New York: Century Co., 1898.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters.* Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Illinois Constitutional Convention. *Journal of the Constitutional Convention 1920-1922 of the State of Illinois.* Springfield: Illinois State Journal Co., 1922.

Johnson, Guy B. "Some Factors in the Development of Negro Social Institutions in the United States." *The American Journal of Sociology*, 40.3 (1934): 329-337.

Kellogg, Paul U. "Pittsburgh Community and Workshop." *Wage-earning Pittsburgh.* Ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg. New York: Survey Associates, 1914.

Kenney, William H. *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lieb, Sandra R. *Mother of the Blues: A Study of Ma Rainey.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.

Macrae, David. *The Americans at Home.* New York: Dutton, 1952.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrick Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party.* Translated by Samuel Moore. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1906.

McClinton, Marion Isaac. Introduction. *Jitney.* By August Wilson. New York: Overlook, 2000. 7-8.

McCord, Charles H. *The American Negro As a Dependent, Defective and Delinquent.* Nashville: Press of Benson Print. Co, 1914.

Moyers, Bill, and August Wilson. "August Wilson: Playwright." *Conversations*

with August Wilson. Ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 2006. 61-80.

Naler, Gary D. *The Curse of 1920.* Salem, Mo: RTC Quest Publications, 2007.

Pettet, Zellmer R., and Charles E. Hall. *Negroes in the United States, 1920-32.* Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 1935.

Pickett, William P, and Abraham Lincoln. *The Negro Problem: Abraham Lincoln's Solution.* G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York and London, 1909.

Quarles, Benjamin. *Lincoln and the Negro.* New York: Da Capo Press, 1991.

Reed, Anna. "Appendix IV: The Jewish Immigrants of Two Pittsburgh Blocks." *Wage-earning Pittsburgh.* Ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg. New York: Survey Associates, 1914.

Reed, Christopher R. *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Sandburg, Carl. *The Chicago Race Riots, July, 1919.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919.

Scarborough, Dorothy. "The 'Blues' as Folk-songs." *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society.* Austin: Texas Folklore Society, 1916.

Scott, Emmett Jay. *Negro Migration During the War.* New York: Oxford U P, 1920.

Storch, Randi. *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928-35.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Tucker, Helen A. "Appendix V: The Negroes of Pittsburgh." *Wage-earning Pittsburgh.* Ed. Paul Underwood Kellogg. New York: Survey Associates, 1914.

West, Elliott. *Growing Up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference*

Guide. Westport: Greenwood, 1996.

Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theatre Communications, 2006.

---. *Jitney*. New York: Overlook, 2000.

---. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone. August Wilson Three Plays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991, 193-289.

---. *King Hedley II*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

---. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. August Wilson Three Plays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991, 1-93.

---. *Seven Guitars*. New York: Dutton, 1996.

---. "The Ground on Which I Stand." New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996.

---. *Two Trains Running*. New York: Dutton, 1992.

Woodson, Carter Godwin. *A Century of Negro Migration*. Washington, D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1918.

Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Perennial, 1993.