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August Wilson's Twentieth Century Slave Narrative: "Dark was the Night and Cold was the Ground"

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August Wilson's Twentieth Century Slave Narrative:

“Dark was the Night and Cold was the Ground”

William M. Purcell

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2022

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Introduction:

They made do without surnames and lived in dirt-floor cabins. They labored without pay. They were bought and sold and traded for money and gold and diamonds and molasses and horses and cows. They were fed the barest of subsistence diets. When they tried to escape, they were tracked down by dogs and men on horseback. They existed as an appendage to the body of society. They had no moral philosophy and no moral status in civic or church law.

After two-hundred-odd years, as a political expediency, they were granted freedom from being the property of other men. During the next hundred years they were disenfranchised, their houses were burned, they were hung from trees, forced into separate and inferior houses, schools, and public facilities. They were granted status in law and denied it in practice. (113)

So wrote August Wilson of the African American experience in the “Afterward” to *King Hedley II*, the penultimate play in his ten play Twentieth Century Cycle. With each drama set in a different decade, Wilson’s plays represent a slave narrative of the Twentieth Century.

Though slavery was ostensibly ended by the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, its legacy continued to be felt throughout the twentieth century and beyond. An unfortunate clause in the amendment says that slavery shall be banned “except as punishment for crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted” (U. S. Constitution, Amendment 13, Section 1). Thus, slavery continued in various prison systems, most notably through convict leasing, until World War II (Blackmon). Ian Haney Lopez writes that by the 1870s in Alabama “blacks comprised 74 percent of the prison population, but only two decades before, they had been just 2 percent” (38). As Bryan Stevenson wrote in his book, *Just Mercy*, in 2014 “one in

every three black male babies born in this century is expected to be incarcerated” (15). Indeed, the trend to privatize prisons, particularly in the deep South, has again rendered many black citizens as property.

The issue of property is key in considering the legacy of slavery. The slave was property, worth hundreds of dollars in 1860 (Williamson and Cain). As Nadel and others have noted, when slavery was overturned, nullifying the portable value of the slave, a person formerly valued as much as \$800 was now freed with no resources and, in many cases, with no family (“Beginning” 16-17). He or she now faced eking out an existence in a system that provided them no nurture. The greatest challenge for the former slaves and their descendants was to survive without again enslaving themselves to an unforgiving system that views people, particularly poor people, as expendable cogs in a machine.

Slavery in the nineteenth century and before is well chronicled in multiple slave narratives. Two of the best known are the accounts by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. James Olney writes that there are 12 features, shared, at least in part, by most slave narratives: an account of the subject’s birth, usually featuring a place of birth, but not a date; an account of their parentage; a description of a cruel master; accounts of a hard working slave, mistreated for no just reason; barriers against literacy; a devoutly Christian slaveholder who behaves in a fashion worse than non-Christians; an account of food, clothing, and work conditions; an account of a family separated due to slavery; accounts of failed escapes; accounts of successful escapes; assumption of a new last name; and a reflection on the practice of slavery (152-53). Most of these characteristics are evident in Wilson’s cycle. Subsequent African American literature, fiction, may also be placed in the genre of slave narrative. Prototypical, perhaps, is Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. Though Ellison denied

intentionally writing his classic work as a part of the genre, he conceded that the “pattern of movement” from the South to the North was “so basic to Afro-American experience . . . that I had no need of slave narratives to grasp either its significance or its potential for organizing a fictional narrative” (quoted in Davis and Gates, xix). Ellison’s work does not focus on slavery or prison, *per se*, but on the alienation felt from being Black in America.

Several scholars have viewed Wilson’s work as “neo-slave narratives,” following the work of Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell describes the neo-slave narrative as blending “elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people” (285). He goes on to state that they are “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289).

Jacqueline Jones applies the construct in her analysis of Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, utilizing central motifs that Bell identifies within the genre including “the power of faith, messianic hope, self-reliance or direct action, and the lynching ritual” (285). Stacie Selmon McCormick writes that both literature and dramatic works “align with the broader neo-slave narrative in that both present contemporary engagements with a myriad of historical texts, debates, and images of the slave era” (518). There are certainly aspects of the neo-slave narrative in some of Wilson’s plays, most notably in *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson*. However, even Patrick Maley, in his well-argued essay framing *The Piano Lesson* as a performative neo-slave narrative, notes:

But as the timeline of Wilson’s *Cycle* advances, the echo of slavery dwindles.

The Middle Passage, slavery, and the Underground Railroad are central to the collective consciousness of *Gem of the Ocean*, set in 1904, but *Radio Golf*’s 1990s characters drift dangerously close to assimilation with white culture while struggling to embrace the wisdom of their griot, Elder

Joseph Barlow. One prominent element of the narrative arc of Wilson's *Cycle* is therefore Africans in America's growing distance from their slave roots. While moving away from the memories of a painful past might seem desirable, it is for Wilson a deeply troubling systematic forgetting of crucial cultural origins. (62)

The echo of slavery dwindles not so much because the characters are forgetting their roots, but because they are living their own slave narratives forged in the oppressive realities of their own times. Yes, Harmond Wilks, the central character in *Radio Golf*, has his conscience pricked when he realizes that his further success is a detriment to his community and his ancestors, represented by Aunt Esther, but the vehicle for his realization is through the interaction with people who have continued to live as twentieth century slaves, Joe Barlow and Sterling Johnson. Moreover, the neo-slave narrative attributed to some of the plays coexists with characters who are living their own slave narrative. As Malcolm X put it, they are not living the American dream, but "an American nightmare." I shall, therefore, regard the cycle as a slave narrative plain and simple. Wilson's plays do not reminisce about slavery so much as they depict people who continue to live and endure the systemic vestiges of slavery at ten discrete points in time.

The reality of the contemporary slave narrative is reflected in works by various authors. Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* identifies a variety of concepts, many deeply based in historic systems that constrain the lives of African Americans: segregation, assimilation, biological racism, and deeply held attitudes in regard to ethnicity, body, behavior, culture, class, gender, sexual identity, and space. His delineation is recounted, in part, through his own autobiographical experiences growing up as a Black man in the United States. Though the situation, which he compares to metastatic cancer, appears hopeless at times, his spirits are

buoyed by his own successful battle against stage four colon cancer. Kendi argues that we have identified the root causes of racism/cancer relatively early and though he has seen no signs of serious change, he says that we must continue to fight. Frank B. Wilderson III, however, is not so sanguine.

Wilderson ends the “Acknowledgements” section of his 2020 book, *Afropessimism*, with an arresting statement. The process of storytelling, he writes, is challenging “when the narrator is a slave” (xi). Wilderson believes that current theories of suffering and liberation are insufficient in viewing the Black experience. *Afropessimism* is cynical about analogies made between the Black experience with the suffering of other oppressed groups (14). Unlike other groups, Blacks, he argues, have not been viewed as human, but, rather, as “*structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures . . .*” (15). Blacks were never included in the narrative of “we the people.” Therefore, theories about the nature of humanity, he argues, are contradictory in regard to Black people and their experience. Consequently, the Black remains a slave. He quotes Saidiya Hartman: “The everyday practices of the enslaved occur in the default of the political, in the absence of the rights of man or the assurances of the self-possessed individual, and perhaps even without a “person,”

in the usual meaning of the term” (13). A Black agenda, Wilderson writes, is a radical one which asserts that there can be no amelioration within the current system and recognizes a stark division:

In short, Black people and non-Black people do not exist in the same universe of paradigms and violence, any more than fish and birds exist in the same region of the world. It is not the violence of economic exploitation and alienation, although most Black people are members of the working class and they suffer, at some important level, economic exploitation as a result of alienation from what is, presumptively, their labor power. I say *presumptively* because Black labor is not the possession of Black people any more than we possess our bodies. . . . The antagonist of the worker is the capitalist. The antagonist of the native is the settler. *But the antagonist of the Black is the Human being.* (241)

The Black person, as Wilderson sees it, is not regarded as human. The divide from humanness is the “Black’s and the Human’s disparate relationship to violence.” Violence against Humans is contingent. It is enacted when they violate society’s laws and rules. But violence against Black Americans was created by violence when they were first brought to the country and has been sustained by violence ever since. The Black person is “gripped simultaneously by subjective and objective vertigo” and therefore lives a markedly different life (245). At one point in graduate school Wilderson experienced what he thought was a breakdown. After medical treatment and psychological and psychiatric consultations he concluded that he could not be healed. He writes, “Many people go crazy and many of them are healed, but none of them are Black. One can go crazy only if one has been sane. The time of sanity is not a temporality that the Slave has ever known” (313). This type of “sanity” is a recurring theme in Wilson’s narrative.

Wilson's Twentieth Century Cycle enacts a contemporary slave narrative, one that engages with the legacy of slavery since 1865. The Cycle features dramas set in each decade of the twentieth century: *Gem of the Ocean*, 1900s; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1910s; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1920s; *The Piano Lesson*, 1930s; *Seven Guitars*, 1940s; *Fences*, 1950s; *Two Trains Running*, 1960s; *Jitney*, 1970s; *King Hedley II*, 1980s; and *Radio Golf*, 1990s. Each play, in large measure, addresses the effects of post Thirteenth Amendment slavery on the African American experience. In his landmark 1996 speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson made it clear that the legacy remains:

The term black or African-American not only denotes race, it denotes condition, and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory. That this abuse of opportunity and truncation of possibility is continuing and is so pervasive in our society in 1996 says much about who we are and much about the work that is necessary to alter our perceptions of each other and to effect meaningful prosperity for all.

What Wilson call the "truncation of possibility" may also be seen by viewing the struggles of Wilson's characters from the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. Maslow viewed humans as developing in stages. The basic drive is toward physiological needs: food, water, nourishment. Next comes safety: shelter, a place to live. Love is the third stage, followed by esteem. The final stage is self-actualization, a movement toward personal fulfillment beyond the previous four. The legacy of slavery impacts Wilson's characters at every stage. The newly freed slaves were left at the very base of the pyramid, in the first two stages, scratching for their very survival. They are migrants, transitioning from prison and or the rural South. They live in rooming houses. They wander from one poorly paying job to another. Their sexual relationships

are often grounded in the needs of the first two stages. Love is fleeting, particularly for the men, as they wander from one relationship to the other. Esteem is often found in the relationships with friends, but any other kind of status, as human beings, citizens is elusive. Perhaps most absent is the quest for self-actualization. Each of the characters is stalled in a quest for self-actualization. In most cases, that self-actualization is blocked by the prevailing socio-economic-justice system. No one has money. The quest for money has led many to prison or death. Years in prison for some have delayed any attempt to progress on the pyramid. The system for gaining money is stacked against them. They have no inherited wealth. Their very status as Black Americans has rendered them subject to forced labor and imprisonment. The law and criminal justice system, in their experience, oppresses the poor and imprisonment hampers their ability to progress. As my reading of Wilderson and Kendi might indicate, application of Maslow's hierarchy, however, represents a range of possibilities that may truly lay outside the Black experience. Maslow, it is said, based the hierarchy on Ruth Benedict, a white, upper class, college professor, who was his instructor at Columbia (Banner). Though I will utilize Maslow's vocabulary at times, I want to distance myself from its complete implications. As we shall see, self-actualization, may not necessarily be predicated on all the earlier stages.

In the pages to follow I will read the Twentieth Century Cycle as an ongoing slave narrative that weaves and wanders up, down, and around Maslow's hierarchy through generations negotiating the realities of economics, spirituality, love, law, and justice. An important part of Wilson's narrative is the origin story—both slavery and the migration. Nicholas Lemman and Isabel Wilkerson have both written excellent accounts of the migration of Black Americans from the South to the North. African slaves were brought to America largely in the role of machines to cultivate cotton and tobacco. Lemman focused particularly on the

experience of migration from Mississippi to Chicago. He wrote: "African slaves were brought to this country mainly to pick cotton. For hundreds of years, the plurality of African-Americans were connected directly or indirectly to the agriculture of cotton" (14). After the end of slavery, the connection with cotton continued for 80 more years via sharecropping and convict leasing. Sharecropping was a system only a few steps above slavery. Families worked plots of land, presumably for a share of the profits. When rent, supplies, food and other expenses were deducted, however, there was seldom any profit to be had. Indeed, sharecroppers often had to carry over negative balances from one year to the next, essentially becoming indentured servants. When the mechanical cotton picker was developed during World War II it rendered that relationship obsolete. According to Lemman, one cotton picking machine supplanted the work of 50 people at nearly one eighth the cost. The Black labor, which had sustained the cotton industry for hundreds of years had now become surplus and fed a mass exodus. In 1940, 77 percent of Black Americans lived in the South. By 1970 that number had dropped to around 50 percent. Migration started in World War I and picked up again around World War II. Manufacturing jobs often went back to whites when wars ended. Indeed, as Peter Gottlieb has written, employers in Pittsburgh, the setting for nine of Wilson's ten plays, kept the "black work force as a reserve of unskilled casual labor," what he refers to as a "reserve army" (96). Living conditions in the North were initially better, but pressure against the influx of Blacks led to poorer conditions as American manufacturing declined. In the end Black Americans continued to be viewed as a commodity.

Isabel Wilkerson provides a disturbing perspective in a 2020 *New York Times Magazine* article, identifying African Americans as the Dalits, the untouchables, of an American caste system.¹ She wrote:

Caste is the granting or withholding of respect, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefits of the doubt and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy. . . . It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things. (33)

Dalits in India were assigned to the dirtiest, least desirable tasks of the society and those jobs were essentially assigned to families in perpetuity. African Americans were assigned a similar fate: “After enslavement and well into the 20th century, they were primarily restricted to the role of sharecroppers and servants—domestics, lawn boys, chauffeurs, and janitors” (50).² Even after migration North, Wilkerson writes, by 1930, only five percent of African American males worked in positions not involving manual labor. Factory work was often closed to them, as was enrollment in Unions. Holloway, a character in *Two Trains Running* refers to the issue of surplus Black labor as “stacking niggers” (35). Gottlieb’s conclusion to his study of Black Southern migration in Pittsburgh puts it this way: “Absorbing and casting off southern blacks in time to the irregular cycles of industrial growth and decline, Pittsburgh industry made permanent space for relatively few of those who came to the mines, mills, and machine shops” (222). Oeh Oku Otu and Udumukwu Onyemaechi succinctly state the essence of Wilson’s slave narrative in their study of the first three plays in Wilson’s cycle:

¹ Wilkerson’s argument is extended in her book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).

² See also Gottlieb, 117-145.

. . . whereas slavery confined slaves to plantations (and domestic servitude), mainly in the south, freedom made the whole of America a metaphorical plantation where the black man is exploited and abused without much legal protection. In other words, Wilson's drama reveals that despite the abolition of slavery, African Americans are still victims of the stigmatized social status of the slave; that what has really changed are patterns of racial discrimination and deprivation. North or South, their racial and individual identities are yet defined anachronistically, and they are classified and treated as a subordinate racial caste. This is one of the ways through which Wilson dramatizes the perpetuation of slavery and the implications of its attendant structures on identity politics on freedom, privilege and power for the black race. (116)

Wilson's plays were not written in chronological order.³ Indeed, *Gem of the Ocean*, the first play, was composed next to last, only two years before *Radio Golf*, the last. There are no doubt arguments for considering the plays in order of composition but given my focus on the progression of the slave narrative, the analysis here will be chronological, according to the dates in which they are set. None of the plays addresses a focused theme per se, but rather adds more layers to the narrative, overlapping with elements of earlier and later plays. Chapter One, "Shining Like New Money," connects the slave legacy prominent in *Gem of the Ocean* with the issue of convict leasing that is prominent in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Chapter Two, "The Colored Man is Leftovers," considers the role of Black Americans as a commodity to be stored in prisons (*The Piano Lesson*) or used and jettisoned as demand dictates (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*). Chapter Three, "Crazy 'cause he Black," examine the mental pressures and instability

³ For the sake of continuity I shall be using the boxed edition of the plays, *The August Wilson Century Cycle* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2007).

displayed by central characters, Troy and Gabe in *Fences* and Hedley in *Seven Guitars*. Chapter Four, “The White Man Ain’t Stacking No More Niggers,” adds in the element of depressed neighborhoods in *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney*. Finally, Chapter Five, “Negroes are the Worst Thing in God’s Creation,” squarely addresses the double roles Black Americans must negotiate in their attempts to survive, themes brought together in *King Hedley II* and *Radio Golf*. The narrative begins, in more ways than one, with *Gem of the Ocean*.

Chapter One

“Shining Like New Money”

Gem of the Ocean and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* take place within seven years of each other in 1904 and 1911, both in Pittsburgh. The first play deals directly with slavery and its legacy while the second addresses its successor, convict leasing. Both plays feature characters who have escaped oppression in the South only to find other obstacles in the North. And both plays feature characters desperately in search of their souls.

Gem of the Ocean is set in the Hill District, 1839 Wylie Avenue. Eli, an ex-slave and veteran of the Underground Railroad, lives in a house owned by Aunt Ester, a very old woman, said to have great spiritual powers, and run by a woman known as Black Mary. A young man named Citizen Barlow has come to see Aunt Ester but has been told that she cannot see him until Tuesday. It is Saturday and Barlow has been standing across the street, waiting. Black Mary and Eli are engaged in conversation with visiting friends, Solly Two Kings, another ex-slave and veteran of the Underground Railroad, and Selig, a white, itinerant peddler. The topic of conversation centers on the death of a man named Garret Brown who, accused of stealing a bucket of nails from the nearby tin mill, has jumped in the river to avoid capture, professing his innocence, and eventually dying of exposure from staying in the river so long. Solly has gotten a letter from his sister in Opelika, Alabama, which he asks Black Mary to read to him. Things have gotten rough in Alabama. Whites will not let Blacks leave the state and many people are being harassed and beaten. Solly vows to go to Alabama and bring his sister back with him.

After the others have left the house Citizen has climbed in a window to talk to Aunt Ester. Citizen is troubled and he asks Aunt Ester to cleanse his soul. They talk about Garret Brown. Aunt Ester compares Brown to Jesus. She asks Citizen where he is from. He has come

from Alabama four weeks earlier. Roads have been closed to Blacks and he had to sneak out. Barlow says they did not want Black people to leave. They needed them to stay and work. When he got to Pittsburgh, he got a job at the mill. They paid him a \$1.50 a day, but then he was charged four dollars a week to stay at a company boarding house. After a few more various charges, he owed more than he was to be paid. Citizen quit, still owing the company money. He was going to try to leave town, but then, he says, he killed a man. Aunt Ester invites Citizen to stay in her home. She introduces Citizen to Solly and Eli.

The first exchange between Solly and Citizen involves a conversation about their names. Solly tells Citizen that his name is Two Kings. His slave name was Uncle Alfred. He changed his name to avoid being captured as a runaway. Citizen tells Solly that his mother named him Citizen because of Emancipation. His mother would be disappointed in him if he changed his name. Solly remarks that their names carry a heavy burden. His name refers to Solomon and David. People can call him Solly, but the person who calls him Uncle Alfred is asking for a fight. Solly associates his name change with government oppression. Citizen, on the other hand, has been given a name that reminds him of many of the things he is not.

Eventually Caesar Wilkes, Black Mary's brother, the local Constable, enters the scene. The people in the community are rioting around the tin mill, protesting the death of Garret Brown. Caesar notices Citizen's presence and quickly establishes himself as the local enforcer, stating that if he catches Citizen breaking the law that he will put him jail. Caesar then launches into a long tirade about the stupidity of the people in the community and the protest about Brown. The people will be sorry, he says, if they cause the mill to shut down:

A hundred niggers is going to go to jail for trying to steal something. . . . A hundred

niggers is going to jail for loitering. A hundred niggers is going to jail for disturbing the peace Five hundred babies is going to go hungry. You gonna have a hundred new prostitutes. . . . Them niggers can't see that. Want to blame me. You know whose fault it is. I'll tell you whose fault it is. It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing. . . . Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. (35-36)

His sister, Black Mary, pushes back against the tirade, noting that she disapproved of Caesar when he killed a boy for stealing a loaf of bread. Caesar declares that he was upholding the law. He goes on to assert that life is hard and that he had to play the hand he was dealt. He is a free man. He has worked hard to get where he is, and others need to do the same. Caesar argues with Black Mary some more and departs. Though on the side of oppression, Caesar points out the situation in which they find themselves, nearly 40 years after the end of slavery. Ironically, he is enforcing rules and laws which essentially continue their enslavement and make it quite difficult for his people to live.

The next scene opens with Black Mary and Aunt Ester conversing in the kitchen. Aunt Ester tells how she was taken in by Ester Tyler when she was nine years old and renamed:

Miss Tyler gave me her name. Ester Tyler. I don't tell nobody what I was called before that. . . . I stayed right on there with her till she died. Miss Tyler passed it on to me. If you ever make up your mind I'm gonna pass it on to you. People say it's too much to carry. But I told myself somebody got to carry it. Miss Ester carried it. Carried it right up till the day she died. I didn't run from it. I picked it up and walked with it. I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. . . . I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own. 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. (45)

Thus, the mystical power of Aunt Ester (the ancestor) is delineated. She is the spiritual mother of African slaves and bears the story of their legacy since they were first brought to America in 1619. The troubles of African Americans are all tied up with that legacy. Aunt Ester and her successors are the living repositories of an oral history of slavery and oppression.

Ester tells Mary to bring Citizen to her now. She asks Citizen to tell her about the man he killed. Citizen tells her that he stole the bucket of nails that Garret Brown was accused of stealing. He was angry at the mill. He thought Brown would come out of the water, but he didn't. Now he feels like he has got "a hole in inside me" (46). He asks Ester what he can do. She tells him that he can never forget about Garret Brown. It will haunt him for the rest of his life. What he needs to do is to find out why Garret Brown "chose to die" rather than be "branded a thief." He did it, she tells Citizen, because: "He say I'd rather die in truth than to live a lie. That way he can say that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails. What is your life worth, Mr. Citizen? That what you got to find out. You got to find a way to live in truth. If you live right you die right. Like Garret Brown" (47). She then compares his situation with St. Peter denying Christ three times. Peter, she notes, was repeatedly offered redemption, and turned it down. She wonders if Citizen will take his own chance at redemption. She then sends Citizen on a quest, up the Monongahela River, to find two pennies laying side by side. When he brings them back to her, she says, she will tell him about the City of Bones. The pennies mean nothing, Ester later tells Black Mary, but Citizen needs to think that they do. The first act ends as Eli bursts in the door and reports that the mill is on fire.

Act Two opens with the news that the mill has burned down and there is unrest in the community. Some whites have suggested that it is time to return to slavery. Citizen returns to Aunt Ester with his two pennies. Aunt Ester takes the pennies and tells Citizen a story about a City of Bones, a half mile by a half mile, made entirely of bones. It is made up of the bones of the Africans who did not survive the Middle Passage. It is made up of the bones and souls of their descendants:

They coming across the water. . . . They on their way. I came across the ocean, Mr.

Citizen. I cried. I had lost everything. Everything I had ever known in this life I lost that.

I cried a ocean of tears. Did you ever lose anything like that, Mr. Citizen? Where you so lost the only thing that can guide you is the stars. . . . You got the stars but it's that wind what drive the boat. (55)

Aunt Ester makes a paper boat out of an old bill of sale. She tells Citizen that he is going to take a ride in the boat. Citizen is in disbelief, noting that it is just a piece of paper. The piece of paper, which we later learn is the original Bill of Sale for the purchase of Ester Tyler, Aunt Ester tells him is a magic boat. If Citizen wants to get his soul washed, he must believe that the boat is real. Citizen, desperate to wash his soul, agrees. Aunt Ester tells him to go bathe and to prepare for his journey.

The next scene opens with Solly, who has come to pick up laundry that Black Mary has washed. He is preparing to walk to Opelika, Alabama, to bring his sister north. Citizen comes into the room and Solly tells him about the City of Bones. Citizen tells Solly that he had come by

the tin mill and seen it burning. Citizen remarks that he still owes the mill money and says that “Making the people owe is worse than slavery” (59).⁴ Solly is quick to respond:

Ain’t nothing worse than slavery! I know: I was there. Dark was the night and cold was the ground. Look at that . . .

(He hands Citizen a chain link.)

That’s my good luck piece. That piece of chain used to be around my ankle. They tried to chain me down but I beat them on that one. I say, I’m gonna keep this to remember by. I been lucky ever since. I beat them on a lot of things. I beat them when I got away. I had some people who helped me. They helped show me the way. I got all the way to Canada. There was eight of us. I was in Canada in 1857. I stood right there in Freedomland. That’s what they called it. Freedomland. I asked myself, “What I’m gonna do?” I looked around. I didn’t see nothing for me. I tried to feel different but I couldn’t. I started crying. I hadn’t cried since my daddy knocked me down for crying when I was ten years old. I breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn’t taste no different. The man what brought us over the border tried to talk with me. I just sat right on the ground and started crying. I told him say, “I don’t feel right.” It didn’t feel right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage. Told him, “I’m going back with you.” I stopped crying soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad. Look at that . . .

(Solly shows Citizen his stick.)

⁴ Gottlieb speaks to the situation regarding Black migrants and pay. “Some owed money for transportation from the South to Pittsburgh and for boardinghouse lodging that companies arranged for them. Since these charges were deducted from the migrants’ semimonthly pay envelopes, black workers were often left with too little money for necessary or incidental expenses during the first weeks on the job” (125). Later some mills allowed workers to draw their wages before official pay day.

That's sixty-two notches. That's sixty-two people I carried to freedom. I was looking to make it sixty-three when Abraham Lincoln come along and changed all that. (59-60)⁵

Eli then joins Solly in telling Citizen about their time with the Underground Railroad. Solly tells Citizen that even after Emancipation the former slaves are still drowning: "The people drowning in sorrow and grief. That's a mighty big ocean. They got the law tied to their toe. Every time they try and swim the law pull them under" (62-63). Solly and Eli agree that the white people still don't know what they mean by Emancipation.

The time has now come for Citizen's journey to the City of Bones. Aunt Ester returns his two pennies and Solly gives him the link from his chain. Black Mary and the others don European masks and Aunt Ester hands Citizen his paper boat. The boat, she says, is called The Gem of the Ocean, and he is going to take a ride on it. Black Mary, Eli, and Solly join in singing songs about the City of Bones. Aunt Ester tells a narrative about the journey and Citizen, now in something of a trance, gets up and starts swaying to and fro. Citizen sees himself chained to the boat with other people. Citizen throws the boat away and is immediately taken into a storm. Aunt Ester tells him he must get the boat back, but Mary, Solly, and Eli seize him and symbolically whip him and brand him. They throw him into the hull of the boat. Eventually Citizen arrives at the City of Bones. He tries to pay to enter the gate with his two pennies, but the gatekeeper denies him entrance. Aunt Ester tells him to look at the face of the gatekeeper. It is Garret Brown. Aunt Ester tells him: "You got to tell him, Mr. Citizen. The truth has to stand in the light. You got to get your soul washed." Citizen responds: "My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails" (72). The gates open and the room returns to normal. Citizen wakes, as from a

⁵ Wilson frequently uses 3 spaced periods to indicate pauses in the dialogue. I use spaced periods to indicate where I have deleted sentences within a quoted section. Any variance in this practice will be noted in the text.

dream. The group sings to celebrate Citizen's return, but the celebration is cut short by a knock on the door. Caesar has come to arrest Solly for burning down the mill. An eyewitness saw him do it. Solly whacks Caesar in the knee and escapes.

After Caesar has left, Aunt Ester sends Citizen upriver to bring Selig, the peddler, to her house. Be careful, she tells Citizen, that Caesar does not follow him. After Citizen exits Black Mary and Aunt Ester get into an argument about the temperature in the wood stove. Mary explodes: "You got something to say about everything. . . . I'm tired of it! You way ain't always the best way. I got my own way and that's the way I'm doing it. If I stay around here I'm doing it my own way." Aunt Ester responds: "What took you so long?" (77). Black Mary is her own woman now, prepared to take Aunt Ester's place.

Selig arrives back at Aunt Ester's house. She asks him to carry Solly downriver. Citizen decides to go with them. Solly and Citizen exit through the back door. Caesar arrives at the front door with an arrest warrant for Solly, calling him by his slave name, Alfred Jackson. He waves the paper in Aunt Ester's face. She tells him she has a piece of paper too. Black Mary unfolds the paper boat, which is the Bill of Sale for twelve-year-old Ester Tyler for \$607. Aunt Ester asks Caesar how much that he thinks the paper is worth. He says he would not give her ten cents for it. Aunt Ester responds: "Then how much you think your paper's worth? You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper, but that don't make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law says I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that. Do you need a piece of paper, Mr. Caesar?" (82). Caesar responds that slavery is over and the law must be respected. Black Mary responds that their house is a sanctuary and quotes the Bible. Caesar says his Bible is the

Penal Code of Pennsylvania. Further, he says that he has a warrant to arrest Ester Tyler for aiding and abetting a fugitive. Caesar takes Aunt Ester away.

The final scene opens with Aunt Ester, Black Mary, and Eli returning from the jail. Mary takes Ester to her room and Eli is startled by a noise at the back door. It is Citizen. Caesar, he says, has shot Solly. They bring Solly into the room and he dies. There is a knock at the door. They push Citizen into another room and Caesar appears, planning to arrest Citizen. They tell him Citizen has run off. Caesar vows that he will catch him. He stands over Solly's body and declares "Good riddance!" (87). Black Mary turns to him and speaks:

Caesar, I gave you everything. . . . I made every way for you. I turned my eyes away. I figured if I didn't see it I couldn't hold fault. If I held fault I couldn't hold on to my love for you. But now you standing in the light and I can't run away no more. . . . I remember when you was on the other side of the law. . . . I don't know who you are. But you are not my brother. You hear me, Caesar, you are not my brother. (88)

Stunned, Caesar turns to the door and leaves. Black Mary, Aunt Ester and Eli start singing a song about the burying ground. Citizen emerges from Aunt Ester's room. He puts on Solly's hat and coat and takes Solly's stick. Eli pours a drink and raises a glass in a toast: "So live," (89) he tells Citizen. Citizen departs and the play ends.

Gem of the Ocean possesses most of the characteristics of the traditional slave narrative. Solly is illiterate. Solly and Eli recount their experiences of escape from slavery as does Citizen tell of his escape from post slavery Alabama. Both men have had to escape from the south. Indeed, Citizen's is a false escape, as he quickly becomes enslaved by the economic system. We see Solly's graphic evidence of his history: the link from his slave manacles and stick notched with 62 slave rescues. We hear the account of Solly's sister's hardships in Alabama and of his

resolve to bring her up North. We see the Bill of Sale for a twelve-year old girl. More importantly, we see reflection on slavery and its legacy. Citizen and Solly's sister and are still struggling to escape an Alabama maintaining its dominance over its Black population. Citizen comes north only to encounter a system that indentures him nearly to the point of slavery. Caesar, though a Black constable, is nonetheless the law and he wields the law with a force that victimizes and constrains his black neighbors. The means to success, in Caesar's narrative, is by exploiting and persecuting his own people. As Otu and Udumukwu wrote, "Caesar is a product of the hostile, annihilating and capitalist American environment. Driven by an inordinate ambition for freedom, wealth, privilege and power, he exhibits unparalleled cruelty in his execution of the racist agenda of his white overlords" (108). Garrett Brown is so fearful of the law that he would rather die of exposure than surrender himself to the justice system.

And then there are the names. Citizen's mother named him to remind him every day of the promise of Emancipation, but his life experience and the people around him say emancipation has not really taken place. Solly names himself after two Biblical kings rather than maintain his slave name. Aunt Ester has taken the name of the mother of all slaves and Black Mary is in waiting to do the same. Most importantly, the play establishes the idea that the law serves to maintain the status of the Black population as slaves. Indeed, less than 45 years after the end of the Civil War, Caesar maintains that Blacks were better off in slavery. Every application of the law takes away freedom, economic viability, and, as we shall see in the next play, destroys and destabilizes family. As Alan Nadel has written, extending from the work of Kermit Hall, Emancipation physically freed the slaves, but did not address the issue of human rights violations in slavery, thus privileging property rights over human rights. Nadel asserts that Wilson's characters "represent the lot of people who have descended from property—descended

that is, from a condition in which they constituted the capital that they were not allowed to acquire” (17). Otu and Udumukwu state the situation more boldly: “In the dramatist’s view, white America has perpetuated slavery even after the abolition of slavery” (116). Citizen is rebuked by Solly when he maintains that “Making the people owe is worse than slavery.” As we shall see, however, the maintenance of debt is a key element in slavery’s perpetuation.

Ibram Kendi has described the existence of African Americans and the economic system, capitalism, with a striking metaphor. Kendi, who changed his middle name from Henry to Xolani because of Prince Henry the Navigator’s development of the slave trade, wrote that “Prince Henry’s Portugal birthed conjoined twins—capitalism and racism—when it initiated the transatlantic slave trade of African people” (156). He went on to say that the conjoined twins “powered industrial revolutions from Boston to London” and beyond (157). The twentieth century slave narrative is thus founded with the exportation of slaves to America in 1619, the year of Aunt Ester’s birth, and maintained by capitalism’s exploitation, indeed, harvesting, of labor. Our slave narrative is grounded not merely by the legacy of slavery, but by the fact that exploitation of labor, particularly of laborers of color, is a constant thread in the history and reality of African Americans. Indeed, it is the basis of the laments stated by each of our subsequent characters. Solly’s dismissal of Citizen’s comparison of his predicament to slavery sets up a tension that pervades the entire cycle.

Citizen only exists in the first two stages of Maslow’s Hierarchy. He is a migrant transitioning from the rural South. Despite his ennobling name, he is still struggling toward love and self-esteem. Perhaps most absent in Citizen is the quest for self-actualization which he sees as blocked by the prevailing socio-economic-justice system. Aunt Ester and Solly, ironically, may be the most self-actualized characters in *Gem of the Ocean*. Solly’s sense of esteem and

self-actualization comes not from money or tangible property, but from his record of having escaped and helped 62 others escape from slavery. He is his own man, confident and secure in himself. He and Aunt Ester help Citizen to escape the boundaries of his previous life and move toward a higher level. Citizen dons Solly's hat and stick, presumably to march on in his own battles against slavery.

None of the characters has money, save for Caesar, and the paths to his riches have made him a cruel man. As we shall see, Caesar's legacy is key to the conflict of the last play in the cycle, *Radio Golf*. Aunt Ester essentially dismisses the value of money and the law by instructing Citizen to throw his two pennies in the river and by dismissing the significance of her Bill of Sale and Caesar's warrant. Aunt Ester is featured by name in three of the other plays but has no physical presence in them. She is nevertheless a part of an important mystical/spiritual element that carries throughout the cycle. In two of the bleakest plays, *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II*, she serves as an important spiritual touchstone. In the final play, *Radio Golf*, she binds the nine Pittsburgh plays together. The theme of being bound together is a central focus of the next play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, is set some seven years later, in 1911. It squarely addresses the issue of convict leasing in the persona of Joe Turner. The title of the play comes from what some regard as the first blues song, "Joe Turner's Blues." The song was popularized by Big Joe Turner in the 1930s, but dates from some time earlier. The original song, to which the characters in the play refer, was in reference to Joe Turney, a Tennessee Sheriff, whose brother was the Governor of Tennessee. Joe Turney exploited the convict leasing system to great

advantage, rounding up men, 40 at a time, bound together with 40 links of chain, on charges such as loitering. They were then convicted swiftly, sentenced, and sold into slavery (Merry).⁶

The play is set at the home of Seth and Bertha Holly in the Hill District. They run a boarding house that largely caters to migrants from the South. Wilson sets it up as follows:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. . . .

Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy. (6)

Seth and Bertha's one longtime tenant, Bynum, a "conjure man," keeps pigeons and appears to do some kind of ritual with them from time to time. Seth, born to a free family and a longtime resident of Pittsburgh, is opinionated and cantankerous. He is disdainful of the newcomers:

These niggers coining up here with that old backward country style of living. . . . Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. Word get out that they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads . . . [ellipses in original] and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. (11)

⁶ William Barlow offers an alternate version of the song's origins, dating from the Mississippi flood of 1892 (33). Given the way blues songs tend to morph, both accounts could be true.

Though he provides a service to the people, Eli's remarks display the attitude of a man who has gotten on in a system that has granted him privileges others do not have. He is nonetheless aware that being white puts other newcomers at an immediate advantage over him.

Seth, Bertha, and Bynum are eating breakfast and are joined by Selig, the peddler. In addition to his peddling, Selig is often asked to inquire about and look for people during his travels. Bynum calls him the "people finder." Bynum has asked him to look for a "shiny man," a man who "shines like new money" (12-13). Bynum begins a long story about meeting a shiny man on the road. The shiny man took him on a mystical experience where he met his late father and they talked about the secret of life and finding one's song. The shiny man is "The One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way." Bynum's father told him that if he ever meets a shiny man again he will find out if his song had been accepted and that the life he had lived had been worthwhile (14-16). Bynum's song is the "Binding Song." He had seen so much of people walking away from each other that Bynum's life work has become one of attempting to bring people together: "Been binding people ever since. That's why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together" (16).

Seth and Selig question Bynum a little; Seth notes that some people don't need to be together. Bynum responds that it takes effort on his part. He's the "Binder of What Clings." Part of his job is to determine whether the people cling. Selig presses him to tell him what the secret of life is. Bynum replies that he has seen it, but that we all have to figure it out for ourselves. That is why he is still looking for the shiny man. Seth dismisses it all as nonsense (16).

Selig departs and Jeremy, the other boarder, arrives on the scene. 25 years old and newly arrived from Alabama, he is still adjusting to his new environment. He has just been arrested for loitering and had to pay a two-dollar fine. Soon, a man, Herald Loomis, 32, and his eleven-year -

old daughter, Zonia, arrive and rent a room. Loomis is looking for his wife, Martha. They suggest that he talk to Selig when he returns in a week's time. Seth and Bertha, discussing the boarder later, wonder if Loomis' Martha may be a woman they know named Martha Pentecost. The Loomis family gets established and another person, Mattie Campbell, arrives. Mattie is looking for Bynum. She has been told Bynum can fix things. She wants Bynum to fix it so that her man will come back to her. Bynum says he can mix up a potion that will make the man come back, but that it might be that the man is not supposed to come back. "Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain't no way for you to get back into it. 'Cause you lost from yourselves and where the places come together, where you're supposed to be alive, you heart kicking in your chest with a song worth singing" (26). She tells Bynum that her man, Jack Carper, left her because both of their babies died. Bynum responds that there is nothing left to bind them together anymore. There is someone else out there waiting for her. He gives her a packet to put under her pillow. After she sleeps on it for a while, he says, she will forget all about Jack Harper. Jeremy overhears the conversation with Mattie and strikes up a conversation of his own. He tells her he can make her forget all about Jack Harper. They eventually go out on a few dates and she moves into his room.

Later, Selig returns to the house and is enlisted by Loomis to look for his wife, Martha. Here we get more back story on Selig, whom we first met in *Gem of the Ocean*. Though comfortable and certainly welcome in Black homes, we learn that Selig, himself, is not too many steps away from being their oppressor. His great grandfather was a slave trader who brought slaves across the ocean from Africa. His grandfather made his fortune, married a woman "of good Christian charity" and begat Selig's father. Selig and his father used to hunt down escaped slaves for plantation owners, but after Emancipation he and his father "started finding Nigras for

Nigras” (41). Selig represents the tenuous, often uneasy connection between blacks and their white allies, as well as the opportunistic and morally ambivalent nature of business.

Soon, however, another woman moves into the house, Molly Cunningham. Wilson’s notes describe her as “the kind of woman that ‘could break a dollar anywhere she goes’” (46). She quickly charms both Seth and Jeremy.

The final scene in Act 1 finds all the residents of the house in the dining room after consuming a sumptuous Sunday dinner. Seth produces a harmonica and invites everyone to join him in a Juba, the household’s Sunday ritual. As the dance grows to a frenzy Loomis appears on the scene and commands the dancers to stop. Loomis rages about their singing about the Holy Ghost: “Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want?” (50). Loomis starts to unzip his pants and then starts dancing around the room and speaking in tongues. He stops his dancing and declares that none of them know anything about him. He starts to leave, but becomes terror stricken by a vision. Bynum recognizes the situation and asks him what he has seen. Loomis has seen bones rising up out of the water and walking on the water. They sink down into the water, are washed over by the waves, and then rise out of the water as black people. It feels like the world has burst in half and then he sees the people, the former bones walking all around. Loomis wants to get up, but he can’t and stays collapsed on the floor. The scene ends.

Harry J. Elam, Jr. sees this scene as an “antiphonal rite of call and response” between Loomis and Bynum. Loomis’ vision of the bones people and his expressed desire to join them “symbolizes the need of African Americans to reconnect with their perceptions and relationships to history” (*The Past* 3). As we shall see in the resolution of this play and others, that reconnection is often painful.

The second act opens at breakfast the next day. Seth has decided that Loomis needs to leave the house. Loomis points out that he is paid up for the next week and they agree that he will leave on the following Saturday. Mattie and Molly have a conversation about being women, men, babies, birth control, and work. Mattie prepares to leave for her work as a housekeeper and Molly says in no uncertain terms that she will never be doing ironing for other people. Jeremy returns from work early. A man came around telling the workers that they all had to pay 50 cents a week to continue to work there and Jeremy decides to quit. He starts flirting with Molly. She says she thought Mattie was his girl. No, he says, they were just keeping company for a while. Jeremy suggests that they take up together and travel around the country. Jeremy says he can play the guitar and is a good gambler. Molly is agreeable but points out that it takes more than a dollar a day to keep her and that she neither works, nor is she for sale.

The next scene opens with Seth and Bynum playing dominoes. Bynum is singing while they play, much to Seth's displeasure. The song he sings is an early version of the "Joe Turner Blues:"

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. (64)

Loomis enters the room and tells Bynum he does not like the song. Bynum responds that he sings a lot of songs that people do not like, but he'll sing another if Loomis wants. Bynum starts peppering Loomis with questions and starts to tell him about the shiny man. He tells Loomis that he thinks he is a man who has lost his song: "See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it . . . till he find out he's got it with him all the time. That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. 'Cause you forgot how to sing your song" (68). Loomis is incredulous, first in denial, but then proceeds to tell his story. He was a deacon in the church, walking down a road in Memphis. He came upon a group of men gambling and started talking to them, trying to turn them away from their sinful ways. Joe Turner's men came in and arrested them all:

Had a whole mess of men he caught. Just go out hunting regular like you go out hunting possum. He catch you and go home to his wife and family. Ain't thought about you going home to yours. . . . Joe Turner caught me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight. Kept everybody seven years. He'd go out hunting and bring back forty men at a time. And keep them seven years. (68)

When Loomis was released his wife and daughter were gone. Loomis puzzles over why Turner had to "catch niggers" (69). Why did the brother of the Governor of Tennessee need to catch him? What did he have that Turner needed? Bynum replies: "That ain't hard to figure out. What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. . . . Now he's got you bound up where you can't sing your own song. . . . But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it."

Loomis turns to Bynum and says: "I know who you are. You one of them bones people" (70).

The final scene begins on Saturday morning, the day Loomis is to leave. After breakfast Loomis and Zonia leave, but stay near the house, standing at the street corner. Shortly, Selig appears at the door with a woman named Martha Pentecost, whom, it turns out, is Martha Loomis. Herald Loomis and Zonia come back to the house and enter. Herald talks about how when he returned from jail Martha was gone. Martha responds: "They told me that Joe Turner had you and my whole world split in two" (82). She was evicted from their land after two months. She went to live with her mother. After five years she decided that Loomis was dead. "So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. . . . I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I couldn't drag you behind me like a sack of cotton" (82). Loomis tells Martha that he had to see her face before he could let her go. He had been bound up all those years. "Now that I can see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world" (83). Loomis tells Zonia to go with her mother.

Loomis turns to Bynum and accuses him of binding him up. He launches into a furious outburst: "Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up! Reverend Tolliver wanna bind me up. You wanna bind me up. Everybody wanna bind me up. Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding. I ain't gonna let nobody bind me up!" (83-84) Loomis draws out a knife. Bynum and Martha try to talk to him. Bynum tells him he needs to let his song out. Martha tells him he needs to look to Jesus. She recites the 23rd Psalm and Loomis refutes it line by line:

MARTHA: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—

LOOMIS: "That's just where I be walking!"

MARTHA: "I shall fear no evil. For thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."

LOOMIS: You can't tell me nothing about no valleys. I done been all across the valleys and the hills and the mountains and the oceans.

MARTHA: "Thou prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies."

LOOMIS: "All I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their woolly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them grinning."

MARTHA: "Thou annointest my head with oil, and my cup runneth over."

LOOMIS: "He grin that big old grin . . . and niggers wallowing at his feet."

MARTHA: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

LOOMIS: Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. . . .

"Well, Jeremiah . . . what's the matter, you aint't picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations." And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is 'cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here. Something don't fit right!" (84-85)

Martha tells Loomis that he has to be washed in the blood of the lamb. Loomis protests that he has been washed, he has waded in the water, and it has got him nothing. Martha persists and

Loomis responds, "You want blood? Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?" (85)

Loomis slashes himself across the chest and smears the blood all over his face. He feels transformed and declares "I'm standing now!" Wilson's stage notes say he has found his song.

He says goodbye to Martha and walks away with Mattie following from behind. Bynum calls out: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (86)

Joe Turner's Come and Gone advanced Wilson's narrative from traditional slavery to convict leasing, the next mutation. The Loomis family has been broken apart by Loomis' enslavement. His daughter, Zonia, has been separated from her mother and did not know her father for the first seven years of her life. Loomis was an upright, hard-working, member of the community who was mistreated only because he was Black. The trope of the cruel master is extended in an interesting way. The master, the white centered system of justice and its connection to capitalism, represented by Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean*, is here personified by Joe Turner. For Loomis, however, the master has been extended to include Jesus Christ, who grins at Loomis throughout his torments. Loomis maintains his name, but, in his absence, Martha has changed her last name to Pentecost, perhaps signaling the end of her torment and that she has found her song in her faith. In the season of Pentecost Jesus descends into the world. Martha has responded to Loomis' absence by filling herself with the presence of the Lord. Loomis has responded to his removal from his family with despair and has rejected his once stout Christian faith. Slashing his chest washes him in the blood of the lamb and restores his soul, though not necessarily his faith, and moves him toward living his song.

Selig, the people finder, the descendant of slave traders and slave hunters describes himself as the product of a "wife of good Christian charity." Broken family is also represented by Jeremy, Mattie, and Molly's situations. Each is searching. Jeremy, like Citizen Barlow, is trapped in a system of economic slavery that affords him few options. Kim Pereira wrote that the "characters appear as archetypes reflecting countless blacks in similar circumstances—a whole race of people somewhere out there on a pilgrimage toward self-fulfillment" (63). They are searching for their songs.

The absence of a song represents many things. On the one hand it represents a higher purpose for living, something that transcends basic needs. To borrow from Maslow, it is a drive toward self-actualization. Felix Ogoanah provides an insightful analysis of Wilson's use of "song." Song, he writes, refers to the "highest point in a continuum of personal development." When a person has found their song they have achieved a "stage of self-sufficiency and complete independence" (148). In Loomis's journey he has become ensnared by a "binding song" that has rendered his true song forgotten until it is discovered in a "song of personal redemption" (149-50). Song, then, is true self-actualization. One wonders, however, if many of Maslow's earlier stages are not part of the binding song. Most of Wilson's characters are in a continual state of being bound. A person who is bound up cannot see a higher purpose. The justice and economic system have put the black citizens into a situation where there is no way that they can pursue their songs. Loomis sees Christianity as binding him to the white man's song. It has kept him so tied to a system of oppression that he cannot see the possibility of a song. The idea of justice only applies to those who are on the way to self-actualization. Otherwise, it is only a cruel oppressor. The means to justice are denied to many African Americans. Moreover, the absence of a song is like the absence of a name. To find one's song is to reclaim their identity and to be self-actualized. The song about which Bynum speaks, however, is not the self-actualization that emerges from Maslow's stages. Rather, it is one that emerges when one has thrown off the limitations and expectations, the bonds, indeed, the stages that the "system" has imposed upon them and accepts themselves on their own terms.

Herald Loomis was a slave, literally and figuratively. For seven years he was enslaved as a leased convict. The damage from that experience destroyed his world and, to use Wilderson's perspective, he no longer saw himself as a human being. The absence of a song is basically the

reflection of the psychic damage, the conditioning that devastate the Black psyche. Loomis is painfully aware of the limitations the world has placed upon him and, again, to utilize Wilderson's perspective, is insane. Loomis and Bynum are the first of Wilson's characters who might be regarded as crazy. I will explore that theme more extensively in Chapter Three. First, however, I will consider the evolution of Black Americans from perversely valued property to expendable commodities in Chapter Two.

Chapter Two

“The Colored Man is the Leftovers”

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is something of an outlier in the Twentieth Century Cycle. It is the only play that takes place outside of Pittsburgh and the only play that portrays a real person. William Barlow wrote that Ma Rainey's songs were deeply rooted in day-to-day experiences of Black people from the South. Her “blues were simple, straightforward stories about heart break, promiscuity, drinking binges, the odyssey of travel, the workplace and the prison road gang, magic and superstition—in short, the southern landscape of African-Americans in the Post-Reconstruction era” (159). Both Pereira and Nadel see the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* through the lenses of jazz and blues. Pereira writes that “the characters engage in dialogue and banter” and then “each has a solo turn to talk about past experiences. . . . As point and counterpoint sharpen the dramatic conflict . . . the play builds toward a shattering crescendo of murderous rage” (34). Building on Pereira, Nadel sees Wilson's entire Cycle as presenting “ten versions of African American blues, played by a combo with one to three singers” (*The Theatre* 40).

Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, the play focuses on a day in the life of Ma Rainey and her backup musicians, Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Levee, as they gather to record some songs. Though the account is fictional, the notion of drama at a recording session could certainly be real. Rainey made over 90 recordings for Paramount Records in the 1920s (Barlow 158), including her signature piece, which is also the title of this play. The first act is centered around the musicians as they set up before the recording sessions. Ma, something of a diva, is late, much to the chagrin of Sturdyvant, the white producer and recording engineer, and

Irvin, Ma's manager. Sturdyvant is also interested in recording some arrangements by Levee, the band's young trumpet player.

The musicians, Cutler, Levee, Slow Drag, and Toledo, enter the studio and Irvin takes them to the band room. There is already some dissension in the band, as the list of songs they will be playing is not the list they were given by Ma. Levee is late because he has gone to buy a new pair of shoes with money he won off of Cutler shooting craps. Levee enters, carrying a shoe box under his arm. Levee is in his early thirties, while the others are in their mid-fifties. Levee immediately makes a splash with the others as he shows them the new shoes. Toledo, the piano player, is the only member of the group who is fully literate, and he often irritates Levee with perhaps overly erudite explanations and comments. He and Levee immediately get into an argument on the nature of change. Toledo tells Levee that he is ignorant, and Levee tells Toledo that he reads too many books. Levee professes to be much more musically sophisticated than the others, who play what he regards as "old jug band" music. He takes another jab at Toledo, saying that Toledo can't even spell music. Toledo responds by saying that Levee "can't spell music, much less play it." They bet a dollar on it. Levee spells it "m-u-s-i-k." When Toledo spells it correctly, no one in the band knows that he is right (18-19). It is easy to look at the band's bickering as acrimonious, especially having seen the 2020 movie version, but Charles S. Dutton, who portrayed Levee in both the original 1984 production and the 2003 Broadway revival, offers a different view. The band, he says, is playing the dozens throughout the course of the play. "The banter between them is always light, with a lot of love for one another and not viciously" (Page 179). There are other factors, however, that contribute to Levee's part in the play's tragic ending.

The band finally starts to rehearse but argues some more when Levee starts to play his own arrangement. Irvin comes in looking for Ma. The band asks about the arrangements and

Irvin tells them to rehearse Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." The men argue about which version of the song they should play. Levee says they will play his arrangement because Irvin is the boss of the recording studio and they play what the boss tells them to play. Cutler says the only one that matters is Ma. They will play it the ways she says. Toledo tries to put the discussion in a broader perspective: "As long as the colored man looks to the white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to the white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about" (ellipses in original, 27). They bicker and practice for a while and Slow Drag inadvertently steps on Levee's new shoes, angering him. More arguments ensue about far ranging subjects, but the discussion is essentially about what it is like to be Black in America. Each man has his own variation of similar stories.

Ma finally arrives. She has been in a car accident and had an altercation with a police officer. Ma is a loud, commanding woman. She arrives with her nephew, Sylvester, and her lover, Dussie Mae. Irvin pays off the policeman and he leaves. The recording session, however, is still not ready to begin. They send out for sandwiches. Levee takes two and is reprimanded by Toledo. Another quarrel ensues and then Toledo tells an allegory about leftovers. Levee, he says, seems to have an overvalued opinion of himself. Toledo wants to set him straight. Civilization, he says, is a stew, but there are leftovers from the stew preparation that nobody wants: "Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. . . . You find me a nigger that knows that and I'll turn any way you want me to. . . . 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. . . ,'" (44-45). The allegory just confuses the others and they argue some more. Finally, they start to rehearse.

Meanwhile, Irvin broaches with Ma the idea of playing Levee's arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." She dismisses the idea in blunt, certain terms. Ma and Sylvester go down to the studio. She announces that they will be playing the old version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and that Sylvester will be doing the spoken introduction. She leaves. Levee protests that the people do not want to hear the old "circus" and "tent-show" stuff. Cutler reminds him that he is just a member of the band. His job is to play what he is told to play. Cutler teaches Sylvester the spoken introduction, but there is problem. Sylvester is a stutterer. The band argues, Sylvester stutters, and Levee pouts. Sturdyvant enters and asks Levee about one of his songs. Levee gives him the music and Sturdyvant tells him that he will see him about the song later. The band makes fun of Levee's obsequiousness toward Sturdyvant and being "Spooked up with the white men" (53). Levee says he has "studied" the white men and that he knows how to handle them. There is another exchange between Levee and Toledo and Levee tells his story, his own version of a slave narrative. His father had left their farm for a day and a group of 8 white men showed up and attempted to rape his mother. Levee was 8 years old. He attacked the men with a knife. The men took the knife from him and cut him across the chest. When Levee's father returned he took the news calmly and told everyone that they were moving away. He smiled and sold the land to one of the "crackers" who had assaulted Levee's mother. His father quietly hid in the woods and snuck up on the men and killed four of them before he was restrained. His father was then hanged and burned. Levee concludes the story somewhat ironically: "That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man" (56). The first act ends.

The second act begins with more squabbling. They attempt to record "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," but Sylvester cannot control his stutter. Then Ma demands that she be provided with

Coca Cola. During the break Ma and Cutler talk about Levee and the music business. She provides a little of her own narrative. Ma says that Irvin, their manager, cares nothing about her. She is tolerated because he and the music company can make money off her. “Otherwise you just a dog in the alley. I done made this record company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them” (63). Meanwhile, in the band room, Levee is trying to make out with Dussie Mae.

Ma and Cutler continue their conversation in the studio. Ma doesn’t like the quietness. Music, she says, helps to keep her “balanced.” She goes on: “White folk don’t understand about the blues. . . . You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life.” Cutler adds that the blues help you get a “grip on life.” Ma continues: “The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something” (66). Ma literally finds her song via song, the blues.

Slow Drag and Sylvester return with the Coca Cola. Slow Drag goes into the band room for a sip of liquor and startles Levee and Dussie Mae from an embrace. The band gathers again to record. Sylvester stutters the introduction through two takes, but, finally, on the third, he is perfect. Unfortunately, one of the microphone wires is bad and the recording did not take. Ma throws a tantrum and threatens to leave. Irvin begs her for 15 more minutes. She agrees and the band takes another break.

The band members warn Levee to quit messing around with Dussie Mae. She is Ma’s girl. The men talk about their relationships with women. Toledo reveals that he was married

once, but then his wife joined the church and wanted Toledo to be like the other Christian men. Toledo, she decided, was a heathen and she left him. Cutler remarks that life has not been fair to Toledo. Toledo replies that life is fair, you just need to take what comes. Levee, in his typical contradictory fashion, says that life “ain’t got no balls,” but death is bad. “Death will kick your ass and make you wish you never been born” (75). He ridicules Toledo for saying life is fair when he “ain’t got a pot to piss in.” Toledo responds that “If there’s one thing I done learned in this life, it’s that you can’t satisfy a nigger no matter what you do. A nigger’s gonna make his own dissatisfaction.” Levee responds that he has a right to that dissatisfaction: “Is you gonna be satisfied with a bone somebody done throwed you when you see them eating the whole hog?” (76). Toledo says that they have sold themselves to the white man. “We’s imitation white men” (77). Levee says he is going to be just like Ma and tell the white men what to do. The band members correct him. Cutler says whites don’t care about Ma. It is the colored folks who buy her music. He tells a story about a colored minister who was humiliated in Georgia.

Levee explodes again and this time the argument becomes a little more rancorous. Levee wants to know where God was when the minister was abused. Cutler warns him that he will burn in Hell because of his sacrilege. Levee continues: “Don’t come telling me this burning-in-hell shit! . . . why didn’t God strike some of them crackers down? I’ll tell you why! I’ll tell you the truth! ‘Cause he a white man’s God! That’s why! God ain’t never listened to no nigger’s prayers. . . . God hate niggers! . . . Talking about burning in hell. God can kiss my ass!” (80). Cutler again accuses Levee of blasphemy, jumps on him, and starts punching him in the face. The others drag Levee off Cutler, but then Levee pulls out a knife. “Cutler’s God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama. . . . Your God ain’t shit, Cutler” (82). The lights fade to black and then come up on Ma singing. It is the last song of the session. Irvin

congratulates them and the musicians start to wind down. Ma scolds Levee for improvising on the songs. Levee talks back and Ma fires him. Irvin and Ma get into an argument about whether Sylvester should be paid. The band packs up and starts to play cards. Sturdyvant arrives and pays Ma the money. Sturdyvant pays the band and Levee approaches him about his songs. Sturdyvant tells him that they are not the kind of songs he is looking for. Levee persists and Sturdyvant gives him five dollars for each song. Levee throws the money on the floor. The other musicians start to leave and Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's shoe. Toledo apologizes, but that is not enough for Levee. He charges at Toledo with his knife and stabs him in the back. Levee tries to help him up, but Toledo slumps to the floor. Toledo stares up at Levee and Levee gets mad again. "Don't look at me like that, Toledo. . . . Cutler. Tell him don't look at me like that" (92). Cutler tells Slow Drag to call Irvin. the play ends with the sound of Levee's trumpet heard playing in the background.

The age gap between Levee, Ma, and the other members of the band is quite significant. Ma and the older musicians were born in the 1870s, during reconstruction. Of the band members, only Toledo and Levee, to some extent, are literate. We are not sure of Ma's educational background. All the musicians are originally from the South and had impoverished, hardscrabble upbringings. They share an understanding about life, power, and the world that is resigned to a social order in which they are the bottom feeders. Ma has some power in that she is a sellable commodity. Nonetheless, she is aware of the limitations of her power and her place in the order: "As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then" (63). The older people were presumably born of ex slaves and grew up in a culture buoyed by emancipation and reconstruction and then dashed by post reconstruction changes. Their

perceived options are limited by their pasts. Levee was born of free parents, though he learned very early that life was grim. He, nonetheless, believes that he can be captain of his fate.

Unfortunately, he has neither the education nor life experience to make that happen. While the others are acutely aware of their status and limitations, Levee is convinced that he can beat the system through the sheer force of his will. Levee believes that he is a free agent, but he doesn't realize that his agency alone is insufficient. His bandmates have long ago given up on the notion of free agency. Rather, they have accepted their roles within the system.

Enslavement through property is a huge theme in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The band members are an expendable part of a machine, in a society that values them only as parts. Blacks, once seen as a valuable commodity, have become disposable goods. The record company needs its product, and the band and Ma are only a means to that end. Each of the musicians has a tale of personal woe. Their lives as musicians, however, are not much better and, except for Levee, they know the score. Ma knows the limits of her power and how to use it. Levee, young foolish, and hopeful, thinks he can master the system, but fails in all respects. As Toledo remarks, the band is "imitation white men." In many ways they are the embodiment of the blues.

Each of the musicians has ascended at least to about the second level on Maslow's pyramid. Love seems to be absent, as is esteem. Only Levee seems to have a great sense of self-worth or a longing for self-actualization. Unfortunately, as Sturdyvant tells him, nobody wants his kind of song, the means to his self-actualization. The older band members have accepted their status. They are who they are. Levee is still striving for esteem and self-actualization, but he is ill equipped to negotiate his way through the system. Ma, on the other hand, certainly has gained a good bit of esteem and, probably from Levee's point of view, some measure of self-actualization. Ma does not see it that way, noting that she too is just another whore to be used

and discarded. Nonetheless, Ma has some understanding of her song. Levee has contempt for Toledo and his philosophy of life, noting that he hasn't "got a pot to piss in," an expression uttered a couple of times by Troy Maxson in *Fences*. Toledo may have neither a pot nor a song, but he has an understanding of the world and his role in it that helps him abide. Levee, on the other hand, is consumed by his lack of a pot. Looking back at *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Solly, Citizen, and Loomis haven't got a "pot," but each has found his song. The idea of African Americans being stockpiled and discarded, an idea espoused by both Toledo and Ma is an important undercurrent in the next play, *The Piano Lesson*.

The Piano Lesson takes place in 1936 at the home of Doaker Charles, a railroad cook, in Pittsburgh. He shares the home with his niece, Berniece, and her young daughter, Maretha. The family is awakened at 5:00 in the morning by Boy Willie, Doaker's nephew and Berniece's brother, and his friend, Lymon. They have driven a truck full of watermelons up from Mississippi. They plan on selling the watermelons in Pittsburgh. Boy Willie and Lymon have recently served three-year terms in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. Doaker and Berniece are a little suspicious of the two men. Boy Willie wants to earn some money from selling the watermelons to buy land back in Mississippi. The watermelon money will not be enough though. He wants to sell the piano, a family heirloom, that he and Berniece jointly own, to make money for the rest of the purchase. The problem is that Berniece does not want to sell. There is a spiritual problem too. The land that Boy Willie wants to buy was owned by Sutter, a man with whom Boy Willie's family has some history. Sutter was pushed into a well and drowned. This death is attributed to the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog." After Boy Willie arrives in Pittsburgh the ghost of Sutter starts to appear to Berniece and others in their home.

Not long after Boy Willie and Lymon arrived in Pittsburgh, Wining Boy, Doaker's older brother appears on the scene. Wining Boy travels around, playing the piano and gambling. Wining Boy has made a decent amount of money at times but spends it as quick as he gets it. He is broke now and is touching the various family members for cash. He meets up with Doaker, Boy Willie and Lymon and they talk about the way things were back home. Wining Boy, like Boy Willie and Lymon, had spent some time at Parchman. Boy Willie talks about their crime. Boy Willie, Lymon, and Crawley, Berniece's late husband, had been hauling wood for a man and keeping a little bit of it for themselves. When they tried to sell the wood a group of white men ambushed them. Crawley was killed and Boy Willie and Lymon were sent to Parchman. Both Boy Willie and Lymon are still avoiding the Sheriff and local charges of "not working." Wining Boy tells an allegory, not dissimilar to Toledo's "leftovers" speech, about the relationship between the white man, black man, and the law:

Now you take and eat some berries. They taste real good to you. So you say I'm gonna go out and get me a whole pot of these berries and cook them up to make a pie or whatever. But you ain't looked to see them berries is sitting in the white fellow's yard. Ain't got no fence around them. . . . Now the white man come along and say that's my land. Therefore everything that grow on it belong to me. He tells the sheriff, "I want you to put this nigger in jail as a warning to all the other niggers. Otherwise first thing you know these niggers have everything that belong to us. (40-41)

He goes on to extend his example. The white man sells the land to a black man, but he arranges a proviso in the sale whereby the white man has the right to harvest the berries. "Now that's the difference between the colored man and the white man. The colored man can't fix nothing with

the law” (41). Boy Willie says that he just ignores the law. Wining Boy warns him that they will send him back to Parchman.

The men then reminisce about Parchman and all join in singing “Berta, Berta,” a Parchman work song:

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-uh

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

...

Go ‘head marry don’t you wait on me oh-uh

Go ‘head and marry don’t you wait on me well

Might not not want you when I go free oh-uh

Might not not want you when I go free well.

...

When you marry, marry a railroad man, well

Every day Sunday, dollar in your hand oh-uh

Every day Sunday, dollar in your hand well. (41-43)

This scene, coupled with the exchanges in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, crystalizes an important part of the evolution of the slave narrative. Slavery itself has been abolished and convict leasing is on the way out. The next means of controlling the former slaves and their descendants, in addition to sharecropping, is through the law, the penal system and the economic system. Wining Boy pointed out the “Catch 22” aspects of the law. We have seen that at work in the earlier plays; it is articulated well by Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean* and by Ma and the band in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Wining Boy, Doaker, Boy Willie, and Lymon have all served their time in Parchman, the state work plantation, established not long after the adoption of Mississippi's new, post-reconstruction, constitution in 1890. The Innocence Project argues that Parchman was modeled after a slave plantation. Indeed, the prison grounds, some 28 square miles, produced 1, 034, 013 pounds of vegetables, mainly for inmate consumption, and a soybean crop that netted \$794,000 in 2017, according to the Mississippi Department of Corrections website. Other characters in Wilson's plays, notably Troy Maxson and Jim Bono in *Fences*, served time at Parchman as well.

The men sing the work song rhythmically, clapping their hands and stomping their feet, with all the fervor and intensity of the juba scene in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. When I saw the play performed at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2015, I was struck by the joy expressed in singing the song. Though clearly sung in accordance with Ma Rainey's definition of the blues, it came off like a group of college alumni singing an *alma mater* or fight song. The African tradition of juba has been replaced by a prison work song.

The men then talk about the legacy of the piano. Doaker and Boy Willie's families were owned by the Sutters. Sutter wanted a special gift for an anniversary present for his wife. He admired the piano that was then owned by a man named Nolander. Lacking enough cash to buy the piano, Sutter traded an adult female slave, Berniece, Doaker's grandmother and her nine-year-old son, Doaker's father, to Nolander for the piano. Mrs. Sutter missed Berniece and the boy and wanted them back, but Nolander would not reverse the trade. So, Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather, the first Boy Willie, a skilled craftsman, to carve pictures of Berniece and her son on the legs of the piano. He also carved pictures of his father, Boy Charles, and his mother, Esther. He carved other family scenes on the sides of the piano as well. Boy Charles, Doaker's older brother, did not like the Sutters owning the piano with family history carved on the sides:

“Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we was still in slavery” (47). On July 4, 1911, while Sutter was away at a picnic, Wining Boy, Doaker, and Boy Charles took the piano from Sutter’s house and transported it to the next county. Sutter and his men went to Boy Charles’ house and set it on fire. Boy Charles tried to escape by a train, called the Yellow Dog, but Sutter’s men stopped the train and set the boxcar, where Boy Charles was hiding, on fire and killed him and four other men. After that, the men suspected of killing Boy Charles started dying in mysterious circumstances, like being pushed into a well. It was said they were killed by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the ghosts of the men who died in the fire.

Boy Willie has heard the story before and is unmoved. His father left him with nothing but the piano, he says. He is just trying to make something for himself: “If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn’t be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else’s land. I ain’t gonna do that” (48). Berniece, nonetheless, is equally resolute. Boy Willie and all his schemes, she says, killed her husband. It has to stop.

Act Two begins with Boy Willie and Lymons having just about sold all their watermelons. Boy Willie continues with his plans to sell the piano despite Berniece’s opposition. Various sightings of Sutter’s ghost continue. Lymons is distracted by women and the attractions of the city while Boy Willie holds firm to his plans.

Berniece has been keeping company with Avery, a minister, and asks Avery to pray over the house to rid it of Sutter’s ghost. Boy Willie ridicules the ghost business and prepares to move the piano. The group feels the presence of Sutter in the room. As Avery prays and sprinkles holy water, Boy Willie runs around the room flinging water from a pot on the stove and challenging Sutter: “Hey Sutter! Sutter! Get your ass out this house. Come on and get some of this water.

You done drowned in the well, come on and get some more of this water!” (104). Sutter’s ghost makes sounds and when Boy Willie attempts to go to the upstairs he is opposed and choked by an unknown force. He breaks free and continues upstairs calling for Sutter. Avery is praying and Boy Willie is engaged in a “*life-and-death struggle*” with the ghost upstairs. Avery tells Berniece that his prayers are not working. Berniece goes to the piano and starts pounding out a song.

Wilson’s directions describe it as follows: “*The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents*” (105). Berniece prays to her ancestors by name: Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Ola—“I want you to help me,” over and over again 19 times. They hear the sound of a train approaching and then all sound ceases. Berniece begins to chant “Thank you” and Boy Willie returns to the room. He asks Doaker and Wining Boy if they have time to catch the train back home. Maretha embraces Boy Willie. He turns to Berniece and says: “Hey Berniece . . . if you and Maretha don’t keep playing on that piano . . . ain’t no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back” (107). He leaves. Berniece says “thank you” one more time and the play ends.

Like *Ma Rainey’s Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson* pulls in a different direction from the first two plays. The play breaks many of the emasculating legacies of the typical slave narrative. The characters in *The Piano Lesson* have retained family pride in their slave names and squabble proudly over their meagre slave legacy, a piano carved and polished with the sweat and blood of those ancestors and at the expense of their freedom. The family, after all, sees the demise of their white tormentors, but the remaining features of the twentieth century narratives remain—particularly imprisonment and enslavement by the criminal justice system and societal

structures. These themes continue through the rest of the cycle. The intricacies of the law and how it seems to be regularly manipulated at the expense of African Americans is also carried on. Nadel (2018) puts the situation into perspective:

The term “can’t fix anything with the law” has more than one meaning. The colored man cannot use the law to redress a wrong or claim a right. If one has been cheated or robbed or illegally arrested, he cannot use legal options to fix the problem. Nor can the colored man bend the law to his own devices, contrive the legal situation, or design the small print to his unfair advantage. Finally, he cannot get the legal system to turn a blind eye to his transgressions. Ma Rainey is colored because her white manager can bribe the policeman, but she can’t. The law is not statutory but instrumental, especially in regard to class rigidity and to the most rigidly policed class in American history, black people. (*The Theatre* 146)

The legal system becomes a constant factor as the cycle continues.

Although the ancient slave legacy carried on by Aunt Ester and Bynum and Loomis is absent, the story of the Charles family, is carried forth with the retelling of their oral history, embodied in the family’s slave names, and carved and stained by blood, sweat, and tears into the piano. We have seen a call and response pattern between Bynum and Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Devon Boan sees *The Piano Lesson* as representing a double slave narrative written in a call-and-response pattern. Boan sees the play as “a narrative within a narrative.” The call is inscribed on the piano itself with narration by Doaker. The response is Boy Willie’s “improvised effort to translate that myth into the reality of his own economic and social emancipation” (264). Boy Willie declines to respond to the call as expected, but rather pursues his own “song” as a means of controlling his own destiny, inverting the call-and-response

pattern. “Boy Willie, by selling the piano, would be asserting the preeminence of his own narrative over that of the piano and its carvings--present over past, utility over tradition, freedom over community” (269). Though not as overt in the early plays, the tug between past and present is an undercurrent in all the plays.

Maslow’s hierarchy is challenged here in an interesting way. Boy Willie sees the piano as a material asset with which he might move toward self-actualization. Berniece sees it differently. Boy Willie’s move to self-actualization places the family’s blood, sweat and tears, their family legacy, back into the white man’s economy. He wants to sell their song. Berniece has a home with her uncle and daughter and a priceless family heirloom that is a transcendent vehicle of her family’s legacy. Boy Willie has become mired in the violence of that legacy, perhaps because of his time in prison. Berniece is in a place of peace, having found her song. As long as she nurtures the piano and plays her song she and the household will stay in peace. The struggles with Sutter’s ghost and the Yellow Dog, like the City of Bones in *Gem of the Ocean*, takes the characters on a spiritual journey. Boy Willie, unlike Citizen Barlow, doesn’t quite get the lesson to be learned from the piano. The family legacy, like Aunt Ester’s retelling and reenactment of the Middle Passage and the City of Bones, is carried on by the repetition of names and by the piano itself. As Boy Willie reminds Berniece in his departing words, they need to continue playing the piano, playing their song, or he and the ghost will return.

Three of the first four plays feature important components of African spirituality—Citizen’s journey to the City of Bones, the juba and blood cleansing of Loomis’ soul, and the struggle with the Ghost of the Yellow Dog. The juba has been replaced by a bluesy prison work song in *The Piano Lesson*, effectively removing one tie to African spirituality from the extended narrative. Michael Morales, however, sees the Charles family’s piano as an *orita meta*, a link

“between the world of the living and that of the dead” in Yoruban mythology. Such links allow descendants to “contact ancestors for protection, support, and guidance” (108). A connection with spirituality, save for Levee’s blasphemy, is largely absent in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. It is replaced in part with the blues motif, the unique African American art form on which Wilson’s slave narrative is grounded. Subsequent figures with a spiritual bent, now infused with Black Nationalism, particularly Hedley in *Seven Guitars* and Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II* are seen as insane. The loss of that spirituality, we shall see, moves our characters further away from their songs.

The prison motif is an important one from this point on in the Cycle. African Americans, no longer a sellable commodity, are leftovers to be discarded or stockpiled in prisons. Most of the significant characters in the remaining plays have served time in jail or prison as contemporary “slaves.” The trend continues in the present time. According to Daniel Moritz-Rabson, writing in *Newsweek*, inmates in American prisons are paid an average of 14 cents an hour; prisoners in eight states, including Alabama and Mississippi, are not paid at all.

Our narrative takes something of a different turn in Chapter Three as the story is firmly set in Pittsburgh and post war America. It has come a time in which an oppressed people must consider the sanity of a life lived as a leftover.

Chapter Three

“Crazy ‘cause He Black”

Seven Guitars could have just as easily have been entitled *Seven Songs*. As Brenda Murphy wrote, Wilson’s title reflects the songs, the stories told by the seven characters (124), paralleling *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (127). In contrast to *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*, the play depicts the struggles of the characters enslavement rather than those of their ancestors. Their stories are clearly regarding their own time, reporting the current reality of their experiences as African Americans.

Set in Pittsburgh, in 1948, the play opens with a brief scene set after the funeral of Floyd Barton and flashes back to the events that led up to his death. The drama is set in the back yard of a house, divided into apartments, shared by Louise, Vera, and Hedley. The residents have gathered with friends, Canewell and Red Carter. Floyd was a musician who had had an off and on-again relationship with Vera. Floyd had recently recorded a hit with a song called “That’s All Right.” Carter and Canewell were his bandmates. Louise opens the play singing a bawdy song, “Anybody Here Wanna Try My Cabbage?”

I gave some to the parson
 And he shook with glee
 He took a collection
 and gave it all to me
 Anybody here wanna try good cabbage
 Just step this way (8)

The group then begins to talk about the funeral and life and death. Vera says that she saw angels take Floyd up to the sky. All the others, save Louise, say that they saw the angels as well.

Canewell, a bit surprised that Floyd would be going to heaven, sings a line from “Death Don’t Have No Mercy:”

He’ll come to your house

He won’t stay long

You look in the bed

Find your mother gone (10)

The scene closes with the recorded voice of Floyd singing “That’s All Right.”

The brief opening scene sets up the drama on several levels. As Steven C. Tracy has written, Wilson’s characters sing lyrics from over 12 blues and Gospel songs and make references to more than 50 (52). “Anybody Here Wanna Try My Cabbage,” Tracy argues, introduces four important themes that foreshadow the action of the play. First, it sets the sexual interplay between the various characters. Second, it introduces the double-edged language that is often present in the Blues and in signifying, the indirect method of communication that has often been used out of necessity by African Americans. Third, it addresses the tension felt between recognizing sexuality as an essential part of human life and the “guilt-riddling church philosophy” espoused by many ministers. Fourth, the reference to cabbage alludes not only to sex, but to the necessary evil of money (58-61). The themes bounce around throughout the remainder of the play.

The second scene returns to a time some days earlier in the same yard. Floyd and Vera are dancing to a recording of “That’s All Right.” Vera thought she had had a relationship with Floyd, but he took off to Chicago with another woman when he recorded his record. The lyrics of “That’s All Right,” playing as they dance, highlight the tension between the two:

You told me baby, once upon a time

You said I would be yours

You would sure be mine

But that's all right . . . (12)

Floyd has recently served 90 days in the workhouse for vagrancy. Apparently illiterate, Floyd had paid one of his fellow inmates to write a romantic letter to Vera. He is trying to rekindle their relationship, but she is resistant. He says that he will never “jump back” on her, but she reminds him of how he broke her heart. Floyd has gotten a letter from Savoy Records in Chicago asking him to record some more songs. Now he needs money to redeem his guitar from a pawn shop. Louise walks in with some groceries. She will join Vera and Floyd for dinner. She reports that her niece in Alabama has been in some trouble and will be coming to stay with her for a while.

It is now the next day and we meet Hedley, a West Indian, who makes his living selling chicken sandwiches at various events around the city. He slaughters, cooks, and prepares the chickens in the yard. Hedley is 59 years old, perhaps suffering from Tuberculosis. He is prone to outbursts of various scriptures, allusions to Marcus Garvey, and fantasies about Buddy Bolden, the late jazz musician. He often sings a song about Bolden:

I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say

Here go the money, King,

Take it away . . . (20)

Hedley departs and Canewell arrives. He and Hedley often argue about the meaning of scripture. Canewell plays harmonica with Floyd and his band. Floyd wants him to go back to Chicago with him, but Canewell doesn't want to go. He was arrested when they were there before and served 30 days in jail. Floyd points out that he can be arrested for the same thing in Pittsburgh. He and Canewell are about to leave to see about redeeming Floyd's favorite guitar

from a pawn shop. Floyd says the workhouse owes him 30 cents a day for his time in the workhouse. He plans on collecting that, pawning another guitar, and using the money to get his other guitar out of hock. Floyd can't get the workhouse money because he doesn't have his paperwork.

Hedley returns and starts rambling on about how the musician Buddy Bolden is going to give him his (Hedley's) father's money and he is going to buy a big plantation and then no white man will tell him what to do. He quotes the Bible to support his contentions. Hedley has an Afrocentric view of the Bible. Jesus, he says, was a black man: "The Bible say his hair was like lamb's wool and his skin the color of copper. That's 'cause Mary was a Moabite" (28). The three men continue in something of a random discussion about a variety of things. Canewell and Red Carter do a lot of bragging about how good they are with women. Red has fathered a baby with a woman named Willa Mae. Willa Mae has named the baby "Mister." The men have a good time with that:

CANEWELL: White folks gonna have fit with a nigger named Mister. Mister Mister Carter.

HEDLEY: Yes, the bible say Ethiopia shall rise up and be made a great kingdom.

Marcus Garvey say the black man is a king. (41)

Hedley goes on to talk about the Lion of Judah and Toussaint-Louverture, much to Floyd and Red's dismay. Red Carter reports that he was once arrested for having too much money. He was told that if a black man had that much money then he must have stolen it. Floyd starts to wag his .38 around when they talk about altercations with police. Canewell says he carries a knife. The two men debate the relative strengths of knives versus guns. Eventually, Floyd Canewell and Carter start playing a little music. Hedley makes a simple, one stringed instrument to play along

with them. He learned how to make the instrument from his grandfather, who said that when he played it he could hear the voice of his late wife. Floyd reminisces about his late mother, whom he misses very badly. He would love to hear her voice again. He remembers that she used to sing the Lord's Prayer. He then sings it. He tells the group that he needs to buy a marker for her grave. Canewell, who sang the song about death in the opening scene, then breaks into another discourse on life and death.

Vera calls the men in to listen to the Joe Louis fight on the radio. They all dance in celebration after he wins. Red dances with Vera and generates a little hostility from Floyd. Louise' niece, Ruby, arrives and the men practically fall all over her. As the group later engages in a game of cards, Floyd comments on the irony of Louis' victory. He would have to serve five years if he had punched a white man. Louis does it in front of thousands of people and earns millions. They complain about a rooster nearby that crows frequently. Canewell engages in a lengthy discourse on the differences between roosters from Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. The first act ends with Hedley killing the rooster and making a somewhat ominous speech:

God ain't making no more roosters. It's a thing past. Soon you mark my words when God ain't making no more niggers. They too be a done thing. . . . You hear this rooster you know you alive. You be glad to see the sun 'cause there come a time sure enough when you see your last day and this rooster you don't hear no more. (*Takes out a knife and cuts the rooster's throat*). That be for the living. Your black ass be dead like the rooster now. . . . This rooster too good live for your black asses. . . . Now he good and right for you.

(61)

Act II opens with Hedley in conversation with Ruby. Hedley tells her his name is King Hedley, after King Buddy Bolden, the late jazz musician. Ruby has a long conversation with Hedley. Hedley tells her that he once killed a man when he would not call him by his name:

He laughed to think a black man could be King. I did not want to lose my name, so I told him to call me by the name my father gave me, and he laugh. He would not call me King, and I beat him hard with a stick. That is what cost me my time with a woman. After that I don't tell nobody my name is King. It is a bad thing.

Everybody say Hedley crazy 'cause he black. Because he know the place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man's boot. . . . I don't like what I see from the people. The people is too small. I always want to be a big man. Like Jesus Christ was a big man. He was the Son of the Father. I too. I am the son of my father. (66)

Hedley would like to be special, he says, at least inside himself in "that place where you live your own special life." He wishes that he had a child. That child might be "big like Moses" or Marcus Garvey to "lead the black man out of bondage." He is running out of time, though: "Hedley is looking for a woman to lie down with and make his first baby. Maybe . . . maybe you be that woman for me. Maybe we both be blessed" (66). Ruby tells him to put those thoughts out of his mind. She tells him he is too old to be making babies.

Floyd returns and Hedley asks him about his guitar. Floyd has been told that he waited too long to claim the guitar and now he would need to give full price to reclaim it. Floyd says he is going to lay down ten dollars and if the man doesn't give it back he will have to use his .38. Floyd takes Ruby out to see the town. Ruby returns and chats with Vera and Louise. Floyd and Canewell go off downtown. Ruby tells Louise and Vera that she left Alabama because she was involved with two men, one of whom killed the other in a fight over her. Now she is pregnant.

Canewell and Floyd return. They announce that the band will be playing at a Mother's Day Dance, for which they will receive an advance. They have also made arrangements for a recording date in Chicago on June tenth. Floyd has paid what money he has been able to gather for a headstone for his mother's grave. Hedley arrives on the scene, ranting and raving. He balls up a letter and throws it on the floor. Louise reads the letter and explains that Hedley has been ordered by the board of health to report to the TB sanitarium. Hedley had been spitting up blood and Louise reported it to the board of health. The group discusses the situation. Louise notes that it just feeds Hedley's "plot-against-the-black-man stuff." Most of the group feels it will be good for him to go to the sanitarium. Floyd dissents. Hedley has a right to choose, he says: "it might not be what you think but you ain't him. You ain't been where he been" (75). Hedley returns to the room and then departs.

The next scene opens with Floyd pacing in the yard. T. L. Hall, the man who was to pay him his advance for the Mothers' Day dance, did not show up at the designated time. Floyd needs the money to get his guitar out of the pawn shop. He needs money to get Red's drums out of hock. And he owes the rest of the money for his mother's headstone. He wants to buy Vera a blue dress. Red enters the scene. He reports that T. L. Hall has gotten arrested for a fake insurance scheme. Floyd reflects on it all and muses about his struggles with the system:

I had seven ways to go. They cut that down to six. I say, "Let me try one of them six."

They cut it down to five. Every time I push . . . they pull. . . . I am going to Chicago. If I have to buy me a graveyard and kill everybody I see. I am going to

Chicago. I don't want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. . . . (my ellipses) My mama ain't had two dimes to rub together. And ain't had but one stick. She got to do without the fire. Some kind of warmth in her life. I don't want to live in a cold

house. In a cold world, let me have a little shelter from it. That's all I want. Floyd Barton is gonna make his record. Floyd Barton is going to Chicago. (78)

Floyd departs.

Hedley returns and is in a very good mood. He talks about Toussaint-Louverture and Marcus Garvey. He learned in school that Toussaint-Louverture said that the black man could be somebody. He told that to his father and his father kicked him in the mouth. Later, he heard Marcus Garvey and found his voice. He went to his father when he was on his death bed to forgive him for kicking him. His father died before he could tell him. Years later his father came to him in a dream and told him that he was sorry that he had died, but that Buddy Bolden would bring him money to buy a plantation. Today he has been to see a man named Joe Roberts. Roberts has given him a machete. He is ready if the white man comes to take him away.

The following scene opens with Hedley singing about how he is the Lion of Judah and that Ethiopia shall spread her wings, expressions from Marcus Garvey. The black man, he announces, is not a dog. Ruby enters the yard and asks Hedley what he has been singing about. Hedley tells her that he is the man to father her children. Hedley continues his raving and Ruby tries to comfort him. Ultimately, she lifts her dress and brings Hedley to her.

Floyd opens the following scene, brandishing a new guitar. He presents Vera with a new dress. Vera wants to know how he got the money. He tells her not to ask. He "took a chance," he says. He has paid off his mother's tombstone. He has made hotel reservations in Chicago for him and Vera, "soon to be Mrs. Floyd Barton. That is . . . if she say yeah" (ellipses in original, 87). Vera recounts her disappointment from before. Floyd admits that he was wrong and Vera agrees to try again.

It is now the next day and the women are all dressed up to go to the Mothers' Day Dance. Louise talks about all the odd things that have been happening. Hedley says he will go to the sanitarium. He and Ruby have gone to church, a place she has not visited since she was a small child. Ruby returns, but without Hedley. He has gone to see a friend. Louise and Vera know that friend to be a moonshiner. Louise says that she thinks that Hedley has waited too late to go to the sanitarium. Ruby says she just wants him to live long enough to see the baby born: "I'm gonna tell him it's his. He's the only man who ever wanted to give me something. And I want to have that. He wants to be the father of my child and that's what this child needs. I don't know about this Messiah stuff but if it's a boy—and I hope to God it is—I'm gonna name it after him. I'm gonna name him King" (91). The group gathers together and they leave for the dance.

The penultimate scene opens, back in the yard, after they have returned from the dance. There was an overflow crowd in attendance to see Floyd. The group starts to break up when Canewell notices that one of the new plants in the yard has had dirt pushed away from the roots. He starts to fix it and discovers 1200 dollars in cash buried in a bandana. Canewell figures it must be Hedley's. Canewell and Floyd argue about who owns the money. They scuffle. Floyd pulls his gun on Canewell. Canewell realizes that Floyd was involved in a recent robbery where another man was killed. Canewell gives him the money and leaves. Hedley arrives on the scene. He thinks that Floyd is Buddy Bolden, finally coming to give Hedley his money. Floyd shoos him away and starts to rebury the money. Hedley reemerges from the cellar with his machete and cuts Floyd's windpipe.

The play ends with the group back in the yard after the funeral. Apparently, the police don't know who killed Floyd. The others scatter leaving Canewell and Hedley. Canewell starts singing the Buddy Bolden song: "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say . . ." (101). Hedley asks

him what he said. Canewell says “Wake up and give me the money.” Hedley corrects him: “Naw. Naw. He say, ‘come here, here go the money.’” Canewell asks him what Buddy gave him and Hedley holds up a handful of crumpled bills that he drops on the ground. The play ends with the men singing the Buddy Bolden song.

After five plays and fifty years the narrative of the plays has begun to move in a different direction. *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* were about rebirth and regeneration. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is a rather grim story, ending in death. *The Piano Lesson* moves neither toward death nor regeneration, but back to the spiritual tone seen in the first two plays. In *Seven Guitars* the spiritual element, voiced by Hedley and Canewell is, at best, confused. The play ends in a tragic death. But there is some hope, with the pending birth of Ruby’s child, to be named for Hedley.

Sexual tension pervades the play. Floyd clearly wants Vera, but their past history has given her pause. Carter brags of his sexual exploits, claiming to have once had a woman for each day of the week. Ruby arrives, exuding “a sensuality that is electric” (54) and charges the atmosphere even farther. Hedley delivers a rambling discourse on roosters and the way that they crow. Ruby awakens the dormant sexuality in Hedley. Louise is the outlier here. Her man left some years before and now nobody “wants to buy her cabbage.” That part of her life seems to have passed her by.

The prison/justice system motif continues in *Seven Guitars*. Hedley spent the prime of his life in prison for murder. Canewell and Floyd have both served time for loitering. Canewell is afraid to go back to Chicago, for fear of arrest. The consequences of Floyd’s incarceration have interrupted his chance for a successful career and livelihood. Ultimately, it leads him to a serious crime and his eventual death.

Names are significant here. Canewell's name comes from his proficiency in cutting sugar cane, a plantation crop of the deep South. When we meet him again in *King Hedley II*, his name will have changed again. Conversely, the audacity of Hedley's father in naming him King led Hedley to kill a man in defense of his name. That led to a lengthy prison term which cost Hedley his youth. Carter's woman has done something similar in naming her child "Mister." And Ruby says that she will name her child King. As we shall see, those names have future ramifications as well.⁷ The naming decisions, on the one hand, are an affirmation of hope for the future. On the other hand, they are a possible reason for future disaster. Hedley, after all, killed a man in defense of his name.

The idea of song is also important. As Tracy noted, Louise's opening song foreshadows the play and other songs raise a variety of issues relevant to the content of the play. We might also consider who sings. All of the characters, except Louise and Ruby, sing. Ma Rainey told us that she sings the blues to understand life. The old hymn, "His Eye is on the Sparrow," tells us we sing because we are happy and free. The singing characters in *Seven Guitars* seem to sing with at least some optimism toward the latter. Vera has continued to pursue happiness, hopefully with Floyd. Floyd is looking for love, fame, fortune, and a better life. Canewell and Carter both live in the present. They seem to know that they are the "leftovers," as Toledo would say. Hedley's song, deluded as it might be, points toward his future plantation and riches. Indeed, just before his liaison with Ruby, he sings his own bawdy song: "Take your hand from she, don't

⁷ Isabel Wilkerson reports a similar situation in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*. Harold Hale, who had grown up near Selma, Alabama, witnessed the disrespect with which Black women were given in regard to their names. He named his oldest daughter, born in 1970, "Miss." The name is a constant reminder, her father told her, that white people don't have "the corner on everything it means to be a whole, admirable, noble, honorable female member of the species" (88).

touch my pussin at all” (82). Louise, however, does not sing. She is something of a mother figure, who was badly hurt when her man left after 12 years. She cares for Hedley and ultimately, as we will see in *King Hedley II*, for another woman’s child. Perhaps she is the living embodiment of the blues. Ironically, Ruby, who we shall later learn, has a career as a nightclub singer, does not sing in *Seven Guitars*.

Hedley and Floyd are both mired in the early stages of Maslow’s hierarchy. Their pursuit of love, esteem and self-actualization are hampered by a lack of money and an inability to negotiate the economic and judicial systems in which they must live. Both men have struggled to find their songs. Floyd wants to play music and marry Vera. His arrest for vagrancy sets into motion a series of events that interrupt his musical career. Frustrated by a lack of money, his inability to negotiate the system, and T. L. Hall’s fraud, he “takes a chance” and resorts to robbery to pursue his song. Hedley’s song is about money but is wrapped up in his fantasies about Buddy Bolden, Marcus Garvey, and the Lion of Judah. The two men’s quests for love, esteem, and self-actualization lead to a perverse conclusion in which Floyd dies and Hedley is sent away. Hedley, however, does find his song in some degree. Ruby has “laid up with him,” and will give birth to King Hedley II. His song will live on.

Finally, there is the issue of sanity. Harry J. Elam, Jr. cites W.E. B. Du Bois in noting the double consciousness of African Americans. Elam goes on to note that the madness in Wilson’s characters, particularly Hedley in *Seven Guitars*, Hambone in *Two Trains Running*, and Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II*, results from “symbolic or real confrontations with white power structures” (“August Wilson” 178). The characters are representative of the collective African American experience. Hedley wanders in and out of coherence, a trait that is shared by characters in several of the remaining plays. Part of his talk is centered around his fantasies, but

much of it addresses his experience as a Black man in America, an experience similar to those recounted by Wilderson: “Everybody says Hedley crazy ‘cause he black. Because he know the place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man’s boot. Maybe it is not all right in my head sometimes. Because I don’t like the world” (65). What is the difference between Floyd and Hedley? Both express an inability to negotiate the world around them. Each pursues sanity in different ways. Hedley, “crazy ‘cause he black,” is a black nationalist, frequently quoting from Garvey and Toussaint-Louverture. The song pursued by Floyd follows the white man’s path. Hence the speech on roosters and niggers. Floyd does not want to be a rooster, to celebrate his blackness. Unlike Hedley, he wants to pursue his song at the foot of white man’s boot. As Murphy has noted, “Floyd’s dream of the future was a dream of musical gadgets and empty status symbols, uprooted from the community that nurtured and supported him. . . . In being so eager to get to Chicago and leave his community behind, Floyd was in a sense cutting himself off from the people and floating off into the sky, as the image of the funeral angels suggests” (133). There is a shift in the narrative here. There are no direct references to pre 1865 slavery, but, rather, to the oppression, the current enslavement, they experience in their own time. Floyd is attempting to take control of his narrative in compliance with the white man’s boot, though through theft and violence. Hedley is also trying to control his narrative, though his expression of black nationalism falls on deaf ears.

We have seen that literacy, or more correctly, the lack it, has been a factor in the plays, starting with the Solly in *Gem of the Ocean* and continuing with the Band Members in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Though born around 1913, Floyd Barton is also illiterate. His illiteracy has led to a part of his money problems and, ultimately, his crime. Troy Maxson, the central

character in *Fences*, born some 10 years before Floyd, shares that same distinction. That and other shared characteristics brings our slave narrative to the mid-century.

Fences is set in Pittsburgh in 1957. The central characters are Troy Maxson, 53 years old, a garbage worker; his wife, Rose, 43; their teenage son Cory; Lyons, Troy's son from a previous relationship; Gabriel, Troy's brother, who returned from World War Two with a debilitating brain injury; and Jim Bono, Troy's coworker and friend of 30 years, with whom he spent time in prison. The play opens with Troy and Bono having a drink on Troy's back porch after work. Troy has asked the supervisor why only white men drive the trucks while the black men haul the garbage. Troy has been asked to come to the supervisor's office on Friday. Bono is fearful that there will be repercussions. The conversation is free ranging. Bono suggests that Troy may be showing a little more than appropriate interest in a woman named Alberta. Troy dismisses the suggestion with a line of braggadocio. Rose eventually joins the men and reports that Cory, their son, has been attracting interest from college football scouts. Troy retorts that it would be better if Cory learned a trade. Bono recalls that Troy was quite an athlete, but Troy dourly dismisses the talk: "What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (15). Rose chides Troy about his drinking, that he will kill himself from drinking. Troy responds with a longwinded story about having "wrestled with Death" and won.

Shortly, Lyons arrives on the scene. Lyons is 34 years old and fancies himself as a musician. Troy cuts right to the chase in their conversation, noting that Lyons only comes by on payday. Lyons says he needs ten dollars. Troy responds with a long story about how he signed a deal with the devil/white man to pay ten dollars a month to buy some furniture for their house. He has been paying that money, he says, every month for ten years. Rose and Bono dispute the story. Lyons persists in asking for the money. Troy asks him why he doesn't have a job. Lyons

can't find a good job, he says and rejects Troy's suggestion that he could haul garbage with Troy and Bono. Troy responds pointedly, stating that the money he wants comes from his job hauling garbage. Lyons responds that they each have their own ways of doing things. Troy shoots back that Lyons' mom "did a hell of a job" raising him. Lyons turn it back on Troy: "You can't change me, Pop. . . . If you wanted to change me, you should have been there when I was growing up. I came by to see you . . . ask for ten dollars and you want to talk about how I was raised. You don't know nothing about how I was raised" (23). Rose tells Troy to give Lyons the money. Lyons hands his pay envelope of \$76.42 to Rose. She gives money to Lyons and he leaves.

The next scene opens at morning in the Maxson house. Troy is grumpy, complaining and sniping at everyone. Troy's brother Gabriel arrives. Gabe is 46 years old and carries an old trumpet with him everywhere he goes. He believes that he is the archangel, Gabriel. Gabriel engages Troy with some nonsense talk and goes on his way. The encounter leads Troy to vent yet another one of his frustrations. Gabriel was given \$3000 in payment for his war injuries. Troy used the money to buy the house where they all live, including, until recently, Gabriel. Gabriel has moved into a rooming house on his own now, a point of guilt for Troy. Rose says that Troy should not feel guilty about it. He took care of Gabriel for a long time. Troy responds: "If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old" (31). Troy leaves the house.

Four hours later Troy has returned, and Cory is home from football practice. Troy is all over Cory about doing his chores. They start to do some work on building a fence around the back yard and Cory tries to engage Troy in conversation. Troy seems to be enraged by every topic. Troy speaks to Cory about the football recruiters and Cory reveals that he is not working

his part time job at the A & P until after football season. This upsets Troy and he explodes. He tells Cory that he had better get his job back or he'll have to quit football. Frustrated and hurt, Cory asks Troy, "How come you never liked me?" Troy again reacts in anger, pointing out that Cory has a roof over his head, food in his stomach, and clothes on his back. Why, he asks, does Cory think he provides for him. Cory says hesitantly, 'Cause you like me." Troy thunders back:

Like you? It's my job. It's my responsibility! A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind in my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . 'cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you. 'Cause its my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!

. . . . I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain.

(39)

Troy is bitter about sports because he was too old to play when major league baseball was integrated (Of course, spent a good part of his youth in prison). He wants Cory's life to be everything that his life is not. His life, he tells Rose, is a constant grind: "I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. . . . That's all I got Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else" (40).

The next scene takes place two weeks later. It is Friday afternoon and Cory is preparing to go to a game. His room is a mess and Rose tries to stop him to ask him to clean it up. He leaves. Troy and Bono arrive home from work with a bottle. Troy has been offered a job as a driver. Lyons shows up. The mood is good as they celebrate Troy's triumph. In the joking

around it is revealed that Troy cannot read, nor does he have a driver's license. The talk turns to Cory and his potential football scholarship. Troy reveals that he has been to the A & P and discovered that Cory had quit his job. Troy is angry that he was disobeyed. Cory, he says, needs to pay the consequences. Bono reflects on how he never knew his father. His father drifted from town to town, "Searching out the New Land" (48). Bono assumed his life would be the same. He never wanted children.

Troy says he knew his father all too well. He was a hard man, who felt trapped by his eleven children. Troy says the man treated them all harshly, but he stayed because he felt a responsibility. His mother couldn't take it anymore and left when Troy was eight. When Troy was fourteen, he got into a fight with his father, when he was distracted by a girl and let the mule run off. His dad beat him and then went to take the girl for himself. Troy picked up his father's strap and tried to beat him. His father then beat Troy unconscious. He woke up to find his eyes nearly swollen shut. Troy never went back home. He walked 200 miles to Mobile. He slept under a bridge for a while. He stole. He met Lyon's mother and they had Lyons. He tried to rob a man who subsequently pulled a gun and shot him. Troy stabbed the man and killed him. He ended up serving fifteen years in Parchman where he met Bono and learned how to play baseball. Bono departs. Cory returns and reports that Troy had told the coach that he could not play football anymore. Troy affirms that it was punishment for quitting his job and lying to Troy.

Act Two opens with Cory and Rose in the back yard. Cory says he is not quitting the football team. Troy has gone to see about Gabe, who has been arrested for disturbing the peace. Troy and Bono are walking back after paying Gabe's fine. Bono tells Troy that he knows he is having an affair with Alberta. He warns him that he shouldn't mess up his marriage. Troy says that he loves Rose, but that the thing with Alberta just happened.

Bono leaves and Troy tells Rose that he needs to talk to her. He tells her that he has gotten Alberta pregnant. As they try to talk, Gabriel enters the yard. Rose sends Gabriel into the kitchen. She tells Troy:

Been married eighteen years and I got to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers . . . my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and your mama and my poppa and my mama . . . (64)

Troy tries to explain his feelings. Alberta, he says, helps him escape from the pressures of the household. She helps him forget his worries. He tells Rose that he can't give that up. He feels that he was stuck in one place and that Alberta helped him to see that he could do more. Rose responds that she has needs too and that she has put those needs in Troy: "I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn't take no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't never gonna bloom" (67). She tells Troy that he talks a lot about how much he gives but doesn't seem to know how much he takes from others. Cory enters the house as they quarrel. Troy has grabbed Rose and Cory strikes his father to stop the altercation. Rose holds Troy to keep him from Cory. Troy tells him that that was strike two. "You living with a full count" (68).

The next scene happens six months later. Troy enters the house and Rose tells him she wants to talk to him. Troy retorts that she hasn't wanted to talk to him for months. Rose wants to know if Troy will be coming straight home on Friday. Troy says he needs to go to the hospital to look after Alberta. She is about to go into labor. She tells him that the authorities have taken

Gabriel to put him back in the hospital. Troy has signed papers that send part of Gabriel's check to the hospital and the rest to Troy. Troy says he just signed what he thought was a release form, "Hell, I can't read, I don't know what they had on that paper!" (70). Rose accuses Troy of sending Gabriel to the hospital so he could get his money. The phone rings. Rose answers. It is the hospital. Rose tells Troy that Alberta died in childbirth.

Troy returns to the house three days later, carrying his newborn daughter, Raynell. Troy starts in on an attempt at conversation, but Rose turns her back on him and goes back into the house. Troy talks to the baby, thinking aloud. Rose finally returns and he makes his appeal. Troy says that the baby is a part of his family, just like Rose, Lyons, and Cory. "I'd appreciate it if you'd help me take care of her" (73). Rose agrees: "I'll take care of your baby for you . . . 'cause . . . like you say . . . she's innocent . . . and you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time. . . . From right now . . . this child got a mother. But you a womanless man" (74).

The next scene takes place two months later. Lyons drops in. He has twenty dollars to pay Troy. Troy is not home, but Cory is. He is looking for a job, he says. Lyons leaves. Cory leaves. Troy arrives home. Rose leaves to go to church. Bono comes by but doesn't stay. Troy is left home, alone, drinking by himself. Cory returns and tries to go into the house. Troy blocks his way and the two begin to argue about the same old things. Troy recounts that he gave Cory life and a roof over his head. Cory retorts that "All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name" (79). The men struggle and Cory says he is leaving and will come back for his things. Troy says that they will be on the other side of the fence.

The final scene is set seven years later, in 1965. The family is preparing for Troy's funeral. Cory has arrived home as a Marine corporal, dressed in his blues. Lyons has been furloughed from the workhouse where he is in the middle of a three-year term for cashing other people's checks. Cory doesn't want to go to the funeral. He and Rose talk about Troy.

Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or or wrong . . . but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm. He wasn't always right.

Sometimes when he touched he bruised. And sometimes when he took me in his arms he cut. . . .

When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. But at that time I wanted that. I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. (88)

Cory and Raynell talk. They sing a little song that each of them used to sing with Troy: "Blue laid down and died like a man, now he's treeing possums in the promised land" (90). Gabriel arrives and he blows his trumpet to send Troy through the pearly gates.

Fences, perhaps more than the previous three plays, embodies the mid-century slave narrative. There is no direct link to chattel slavery nor Aunt Ester and the African tradition. Troy was abused by a cruel master, but that master was his father. He has no education, is illiterate, apparently because his father put him to work immediately on the farm (a sharecrop, with intense pressure to produce bales of cotton). He leaves his unstable, motherless home and walks 200 miles to Mobile, presumably to freedom. There, he sleeps under a bridge until he can make something of a living by ultimately stealing. His fifteen-year incarceration, another enslavement,

leads to his separation from his woman and newborn son. Moreover, the cruelty of his father led to his separation from his immediate family, except for Gabriel. Lyons grows up with an absent father. Troy continues the fragmentation of his family when his affair with Alberta results in the birth of Raylene and his subsequent estrangement from Rose. That separation further contributes to his already fragile relationship with Cory. His tough treatment of Cory, mild compared to his relationship with his own father, nonetheless leaves his son confused and rudderless.

Troy and Bono reflect on the legacy of their fathers. Bono's absent father led him never to have children, while Troy's hard upbringing had led him to roughly condition Cory for what Troy regards as a tough life to come. Troy and Bono, not unlike Boy Willie and Lymons, formed a bond as they came to age in prison. Troy's fifteen years in prison taught him what he ultimately regards as a useless skill, to hit a baseball. He is bitter about the role the color line played in denying him a chance at the big leagues, though his age and prison term were ultimately deciding factors. The limits he places on Cory's pursuit of a football scholarship are a direct result of his own embittered experience. It is not insignificant that Troy relates the story of his harsh upbringing to Lyons and Bono, but not to Cory, his struggling son. His narrative is his own, bound by his fences. Nadel, however, provides yet another perspective. Troy, he argues, makes himself and his father both a positive and negative role model for his sons in contrast to Bono's father who abandoned his family ("Boundaries" 95). Troy knows responsibility, but possibly not love. Nonetheless, Troy attributes the Blue song to his father and he used to sing it with both Cory and Raynell.

Troy is also enslaved, in his mind, by his family dynamic. He supports a disabled brother and a grown, directionless son in addition to Rose, Cory, and, finally, Raylene, a daughter born

when he is 54. He is trapped by his life and his dogged determination to take care of his responsibilities by himself. Ultimately, though, he cannot connect those responsibilities to love.

Significant too is the relationship between the literal fence Troy builds in his yard and the metaphorical fences he builds in his personal life, particularly in regard to his family. Indeed, as Nadel observes, the very name, Troy Maxson, evokes images of the walls of Troy and the Mason-Dixon line. Troy is continually in turmoil with those around him, constantly raging against his lot in life and pending death. Troy is bound up by the constructs, the fences of his life and the society which has shaped it. By constructing his own fences he is able to exercise a measure of control. His constant struggle against death, literally and figuratively, lessens death's power over him and "affirms Troy's status" as a man. Troy thus inverts the literal and figurative. His brother, Gabriel, provides an interesting contrast. Nadel sees Gabriel's "madness" as a product of a struggle between nation, warfare and humanity. As a soldier, he wrote, Gabriel

. . . invested his primary literal claim to human rights—his human life—in support of a figurative structure—the United States—that on the very site of his investment, the segregated armed forces, denied the status of that life as human. One can assume that the part of his brain blown away in the war contained the beliefs and conceptions that allowed him to accept the figurative status of his own humanity. (76)

The brain damage made him dysfunctional in the "dominant white culture" (76). Ultimately, however, Troy and Gabriel are in the same realm of insanity. Gabriel's brain damage prevents him from adhering to the dominant culture. Troy refuses to comply. The result for both is a perceived insanity or madness.

Though *Fences* is not an ensemble piece in the sense of the nine other plays in the cycle, Troy is nonetheless surrounded by an ensemble that each has a voice in the chorus of our

twentieth century slave narrative. Rose comes from an unstable family and is determined to make a stable life of her own. Troy had been the foundation of that stability for 18 years, though not without cost. Heartbroken by her husband's betrayal, Rose is then burdened with the obligation of raising her husband's love child. Cory and Lyons are likewise bruised by their relationships with their father, an overbearing master.

Troy is mired in the first three levels of Maslow's hierarchy. He doesn't know how to love. He doesn't know that he is esteemed and loved. Self-actualization has never entered his mind. He has no song. He constantly rails against his lot in life, that he has no "pot to piss in," yet he is surrounded by a friend and family members who want to love him. Troy would be self-actualized, would find his song, if he could focus on the love around him, but he cannot see the bigger picture. Rose, on the other hand, found love with Troy and Cory. Troy destroys their love for him, but Rose is able to move on and continue to show her capacity for love with Raylene. Rose found her song years before when Troy bought a house in which she could "sing." Her song persisted even while Troy's remained lost. Rose also found a song in her faith which provided her own fence. Early in Act One we hear her sing:

Jesus, be a fence all around me every day

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way.

Jesus, be a fence around me every day. (25)

Her faith comforted her as Troy began to turn away.

Twelve years pass between the central action of *Fences* and the next installment of Wilson's cycle. Things have changed as far as the law is concerned. Martin Luther King's star has risen and fallen. It is now a different kind of Pittsburgh in which the next four dramas take place. The once vibrant, but poor, Hill District has begun to decay. There is no longer a direct

link to slavery and convict leasing, but imprisonment remains constant, as does the struggle with the law and the economic system. Our characters are now fully engaged in that system.

Chapter Four

“The White Man Ain’t Stacking No More Niggers”

Nina Simone recorded a very popular version of “I Wish I knew How It Would Feel to Be Free” in 1967. The Billy Taylor and Dick Dallas tune had been popular in the Civil Rights movement, something hardly acknowledged in Wilson’s plays. Indeed, the 12-year period between the central action of *Fences* and the setting of *Two Trains Running* seems ages apart. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X had been on the ascent in 1957, but by 1969 both men had reached their peaks and been assassinated. The Hill District of the previous plays had also passed its prime. Two of the characters in *Two Trains Running* are successful businessmen, but the neighborhood that they served for many years has been deemed a slum, waiting for urban renewal.

Two Trains Running is set in a restaurant, run by Memphis, the proprietor, and Risa, the waitress. Risa has self-inflicted cut scars on her legs. The men are always asking Risa for “some sugar,” a double-edged request that asks for sweetener as well as a little flirtation. She doesn’t say much, but when she does it is usually quite pointed. A group of regulars frequent the restaurant. Wolf, a numbers runner, often uses the payphone, much to Memphis’ disapproval. Hambone is a neighborhood man who suffers from mental illness. He can only say two phrases, which he repeats over and over again. West is the owner of the funeral parlor across the street. Sterling is a man just released from prison. Holloway is a source wisdom and of information about most things in the neighborhood.

The group is engaged in a far-reaching conversation, first talking about playing the numbers. Then, Wolf asks about Memphis’ wife, who had left him two months before. Memphis doesn’t want to talk about her. He is incredulous that she would have left him after twenty-two

years. Risa suggests that she might not have liked the way Memphis treated her. Memphis says he gave her everything, that he treated her like “the Queen of Sheba.” Risa persists, saying “She had to leave for something.” Memphis misses Risa’s point, among others, in his response:

I ain’t done nothing but ask her to get up and make me some bread. And she got up and walked out the door. I know she don’t expect me to make it myself. I went down there and saw her. Asked her what the matter was. She told me she was tired. Now, how you gonna get more tired than I am? I’m the one going out there wrestling with the world. She ain’t got to do nothing but stay home and take care of the house. She got it nice.

Talking about she tired. She wasn’t too tired to make them four babies. (10)

Holloway comes in. He talks about the long line of people waiting outside the funeral home to see the body of Prophet Samuel. Samuel, he says is covered with jewels and that the casket is full of money. West, the funeral home director, he says, will gather all that money and reuse the casket. He maintains that West is a millionaire. Memphis talks about how he bested West when he beat him to close the deal on buying the restaurant building. Owning the building has allowed Memphis to put away his gun and take up a better way of life. Now the city is talking about buying the whole block. Memphis will soon be going to a meeting about it. Memphis says he won’t take less than \$25,000 for the building. They talk more about the funeral home business and how shrewd West is. Memphis says West is the only man he knows who can cheat people and then have the people thank him for doing it. Hambone enters and starts repeating his only words: “He gonna give me my ham. I want my ham. He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham” (17). Risa gives him a bowl of beans and some corn bread. She also gives him a warm coat.

Sterling enters. He is unknown to the others, though he had grown up in the neighborhood. He says he used to hang out with Risa's brother and their friends. He starts flirting with Risa. Memphis sends her back to the kitchen. Sterling tells the others that he just got out of prison and is looking for a job. The men make some suggestions, including the steel mill. Sterling tells a story about the steel mill that is reminiscent of Citizen Barlow and Jeremy before him. He cannot get a job at the mill until he is a member of the union. The union told him he could not become a member until he got a job. The union people told him to go back to the mill and have his name put on the waiting list. Sterling says he asked his landlady if he could put his rent on a waiting list. She refused in no uncertain terms.

Holloway continues to marvel at the people lining up to see Prophet Samuel. They think that seeing Samuel will result in money. Holloway says that they should be going to see Aunt Ester at 1839 Wylie: "Aunt Ester give you more than money. She make you right with yourself." He goes on: "Aunt Ester got a power 'cause she got an understanding. Anybody live as long as she has is bound to have an understanding" (24). He explains Hambone's obsession with ham. Lutz, the owner of the meat market across the street, had hired Hambone some ten years before to paint his fence. Lutz, in return, would give hambone a ham. Lutz did not like Hambone's work and gave him a chicken instead. Holloway thinks Hambone needs to see Aunt Ester. Sterling wants to know if Aunt Ester can help him. Holloway says she can fix anything. He, himself, goes there periodically to get his soul washed. Memphis dismisses the idea of Aunt Ester changing anything. If she did, he says, "we'd all be rich." Holloway responds that it is not about getting rich but changing one's luck. Both West and Prophet Samuel had been to see Aunt Ester. Sterling leaves bound to visit Aunt Ester.

The next scene opens with the group watching Hambone confront Lutz about the Ham, something he has done practically every day for over nine years. Memphis and Wolf dismiss Hambone as crazy. Holloway offers a different perspective. The situation with Lutz has left Hambone with a dilemma. If he accepts the chicken, he will always have a bad taste in his mouth. Hambone, he says, is unwilling to let himself be cheated by the white man. It might be the path of least resistance, “But he say he don’t mind getting out of bed in the morning to go at what’s right. I don’t believe you and me got that much sense” (31). Memphis somewhat agrees, talking about it being a rejection of “that old backward Southern mentality.” He says that he once had a farm near Jackson, Mississippi and was run out of town 38 years before. He wants to go back some day and claim his land.

Risa leaves to pick up some supplies and Memphis comments on how Risa has ruined herself by cutting her legs. “A man would be happy to have a woman like that except she done ruined herself” (32). Again, Holloway responds with a more nuanced view. Risa matured early and has been putting off men’s advances since she was 12. “She figures if she made her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is” (32). Wolf opines that she just needs a good man.

Memphis reports on some information that he found out about Sterling. Sterling had robbed a bank and was out spending the money ten minutes later. Sterling, he says, doesn’t want to work. Holloway responds that the work people give him don’t get him anywhere. Ten dollars a day is not much in a community where people can make three hundred dollars by gambling. Eventually, he says, “niggers” trade the money off between each other and the money ends up with the white man. The money goes to rent, the phone bill, the doctor. It is “Like trying to haul sand in a bucket with a hole in it. Time you get where you’re going the bucket empty.” Five

hundred dollars will make a person in their neighborhood a big man, but in the white community they have “five thousand dollars in their pocket trying to figure out how to make it into five hundred thousand” (34). He goes on, “Ain’t no money in niggers working.” The railroads, highways, and telephone lines have been built. There is no need for the Black man:

The white man ain’t stacking no more niggers. You know what I’m talking about, stacking niggers, don’t you? Well, here’s how that go. If you ain’t got nothing . . . you can go out here and get you a nigger. Then you got something, see. You got one nigger. If that one nigger get out there and plant something . . . get something out of the ground . . . even if it ain’t nothing but a bushel of potatoes . . . then you got one nigger and a bushel of potatoes. Then you take that bushel of potatoes and go get you another nigger. Then you got two niggers. Put them to work and you got two niggers and two bushels of potatoes. See, now you can go buy two more niggers. That’s how you stack a nigger on top of a nigger. White folks got to stacking . . . and I’m talking about they stacked up some niggers! Stacked up close to fifty million niggers. . . . They couldn’t find you enough work back then. Now that they got to pay you they can’t find you none. If this was a different time wouldn’t be nobody out there on the street. They’d all be in the cotton fields. (35)

Holloway has put the current situation in graphic perspective. There is no longer a need for cheap, unskilled labor, but the population that filled those jobs still exists.

Risa returns and West comes in. West and Memphis talk about Prophet Samuel and then about the potential sale of Memphis’ building. West offers Memphis \$15, 000. West says that the city will not meet his price. West leaves. Sterling comes in. He has been to see Aunt Ester, but she was sick. Sterling is handing out fliers for a Malcolm X birthday celebration. He and

Holloway talk about Malcolm and Martin Luther King, Jr. Sterling says that he would have followed Malcolm. Memphis says that “Niggers killed Malcolm” (40). Holloway, as usual, puts it into perspective: “Malcolm got too big. People call him a saint. That’s what the problem was. He got too big and when you get that big ain’t nothing else you could do. They killed all the saints. Saint Peter. Saint Paul. They killed them all” (40). Memphis agrees, noting that they killed Martin Luther King, Jr. “If they did that to him you can imagine what they do to me or you” (41). Sterling says that is why they need to rally. Memphis responds with his most philosophical speech. The people talking about freedom do not really know what it means. Each of us is born free, he says, but we have to work to maintain freedom: “Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom. . . . And if you around here looking for justice, you got a long wait. Ain’t no justice. That’s why they got a statue of her and got her blindfolded.” You can’t accomplish anything with the white man, he says, without a gun. And he doesn’t understand why people are shouting about Black being beautiful. “Sound like they trying to convince themselves. You got to think you ugly to run around shouting you beautiful. You don’t hear me say that. Hell, I know I look nice“ (41). Hambone enters with his usual rant and the scene ends.

The following scene features Sterling, alone, with Risa, at the restaurant. Sterling talks about his frustrations trying to find a job. He says he has been talking with Hambone. Risa says that Hambone understands what is going on around him, but that others don’t try to understand him. Sterling tells Risa about his life. His mother died and he was raised in an orphanage. He has been on his own since he was 18. He went to prison for robbing a bank because he wanted to see what it would be like to have money. He asks Risa about her scars. He talks about a boy at the orphanage who cut himself and bled to death. He asks Risa if she will go to the rally with him.

They talk about playing the numbers. Risa tells him to play 781, she has 7 scars on one leg and 8 on the other. Sterling says he will put \$5 on the number and with the cash he and Risa can get married.

Holloway comes in. Sterling tells him he looked at the fence that Hambone painted. He says he did a good job. He says that Lutz should have paid him. Wolf arrives. They all talk about making money and good paying jobs. Sterling says a woman wanted to have a baby with him one time. He told her no. The baby “might live to be seventy-five years old. Just think how much hell he gonna catch. I wouldn’t do that to nobody” (49). Wolf agrees. He said that he has told women the same thing. Holloway says they need to quit talking and start working. Sterling says if he doesn’t get a job he will get himself a gun. Wolf says he can make that happen. Holloway says the gun will put Sterling back in jail. Sterling says people end up in jail anyway. They don’t have to do anything. Wolf agrees: “You can walk down the street and ask people . . . every nigger you see done been to jail one time or another. The white man don’t feel right unless he got a record on these niggers” (50). The conversation drifts to other things and Hambone comes in. Sterling tells everyone that he has been working with Hambone to help him build up his confidence. He prompts Hambone to say “Black is beautiful” and Hambone repeats it back. Memphis returns. He has been to the hearing about his property and the city only wants to offer him fifteen thousand. Memphis is defiant. The city needs to meet his price. Act One closes.

Act Two opens with Risa and Sterling alone in the restaurant. Sterling has a handful of flowers and a 5 gallon can of gas. Sterling has apparently stolen the flowers from the funeral home. Holloway comes in. Sterling asks him if he thinks Aunt Ester is well. Sterling wants to ask Ester about Risa. If Risa is the right one he is ready to make babies. Risa accuses him of stealing the gas. Sterling says he found it in the alley. Hambone comes in. Sterling tries to teach him the

“black is beautiful” chant adding “united we stand.” Hambone reverts to “I want my ham.”

Memphis enters and Sterling manages to sell the gas to him for two dollars. Wolf arrives with a paper bag containing a gun. Sterling agrees to buy it for twenty dollars that he will pay to Wolf the next week. He then pays Wolf two dollars for ticket number 781. Sterling departs. West comes in. Somebody has broken a big window at the funeral home. West and Memphis talk about the building. This time West offers \$20 thousand. Sterling returns and asks West if he could work for him, driving or washing his cars. West says he doesn’t need anyone. If he does, he’ll let him know. The men talk about Aunt Ester. Sterling still hasn’t been able to see her. West says that Aunt Ester told him to throw \$20 into the river. West refused. Sterling suggests to Memphis that they could make good money selling chicken sandwiches to men at the steel mill at lunch hour. Memphis doesn’t want any part of it.

Wolf arrives to open the next scene. After the usual banter he reports that Sterling hit on 781 for two dollars the day before. Unfortunately, so many people bet on the number that they cut the payout in half. He knows Sterling won’t like it. Holloway and Memphis talk and Holloway points out that Sterling has a gun now: “a nigger with a gun is bad news. You can’t even use the word ‘nigger’ and ‘gun’ in the same sentence. . . . The white man panic. Unless you say ‘The policeman shot the nigger with his gun’ . . . then that be all right” (77-78). Sterling comes back in and the group talks about Prophet Samuel. Memphis leaves, apparently headed for Aunt Ester’s.

The next scene happens later that day. Risa, Holloway and Wolf are in the restaurant. Hambone has died in his sleep. West comes in and the group talks about the price of caskets. Sterling enters. He suggests that he and West go to Las Vegas and Sterling will teach him how to gamble. West says he needs to forget all his get rich schemes. He tells Sterling that his

expectations are too high. Sterling, he says, is going through life with a “ten-gallon bucket.” He needs to get a smaller cup. “Get you a little cup and somebody put a little bit in and it’s half full. That ten-gallon bucket ain’t never gonna be full” (85). Sterling doesn’t get the message and continues to talk about Las Vegas. Risa and West return to the discussion of caskets and Sterling discovers that Hambone has died. Wolf enters and Sterling asks him for his money. He needs it, he says, because he and Risa are going to get married. Wolf breaks the news that the payout has been cut in half from 1200 to 600 dollars. There is an argument. Risa says she is not getting married. Wolf pays Sterling his money, but Sterling says he is going to Alberts, the numbers operator, and get the rest.

It is late at the restaurant and Risa is sweeping the floor. Sterling has seen Alberts and got the man to pay him back his original two dollars. He has been to see Aunt Ester, listened to her wisdom and thrown twenty dollars into the river. Ester told him to “Make better what you have and you have best” (89). Sterling tries to romance Risa. She points out that he has no future and that he is probably going back to the penitentiary. They eventually kiss and dance to music on the jukebox, Aretha Franklin singing “Take a Look at Yourself.”

The final scene starts with the usual crowd in the restaurant. The menu has a notice indicating the day and time of Hambone’s funeral. They talk about neighborhood events. The Malcolm X birthday celebration drew a huge crowd. The drugstore had burned down the night before. West comes in. Risa and Wolf talk about Lutz burning in Hell. Sterling pays Wolf the twenty dollars he owes him and gives Risa the remainder of his money, \$562, to hold. He leaves. Memphis enters. He has been drinking. He went to see Aunt Ester, threw his twenty dollars into the river, and went down to the courthouse. The city gave him \$35, 000 for the building! An

alarm is heard from outside. Sterling enters, bleeding from the face and hands, carrying a large ham. Grinning, he tells West to put the ham in Hambone's casket. The play ends.

Sterling is perhaps the exemplar of the late twentieth century slave. Placed in an orphanage at an early age, he was on his own for a short time before being convicted of robbery and sentenced to prison. Released to his old neighborhood at the age of thirty, he has no family, no money, no education, no skills, and no job. In his quest for employment, he finds the same barriers identified before him by Citizen and Jeremy. Holloway states the dilemma well in his "stacking niggers" speech. He describes what was the economic system of the antebellum South and extends it to the present day. From Holloway's perspective, the African Americans, cheap resources, have been used up and cast aside. Persons who have tried to ignite a fire of hope, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., have been killed. Memphis further delineates the problem when he speaks of the blindfold on Lady Justice. In their community of despair, the only hope seems to be quick money schemes like robbery and the numbers, Sterling's ultimate resort. West provides a more pragmatic solution. African Americans need to quit approaching the world with a ten-gallon bucket. Rather, they should approach it with a cup. Hambone has taken the opposite approach. He refused to let an injustice pass. Unfortunately, for the characters in Wilson's plays, to dwell on ongoing injustice, indeed, to demand justice, is to render oneself insane. Risa might be viewed similarly, but from a somewhat perverse angle. For a woman to be seen as something other than a sex object, she must render herself ugly. Though Risa may not have yet found her song, she is nonetheless in control of her destiny.

The scars on Risa's legs are an intriguing mystery. Holloway says she did it to ward off the men who were all over her. She tells Sterling she did it to make herself ugly. She later suggests that Sterling pick 781 in the number's lottery. Seven and eight represent the scars on

each of her legs, but she will not disclose what the number one represents. Is there another scar? Elam argues that ritual scarification by the Tiv of northern Nigeria “renders the Tiv tribe beautiful, thus inverting Risa’s belief that by scarring her legs she makes herself ugly” (*The Past* 167). Omiyemi Green connects Risa’s scarring with similar traditions by the Yoruba. Perhaps the one symbolizes Risa’s reclamation of her body. After West has prepared Hambone’s body for burial he reports that Hambone’s body was covered with scars. Nadel argues that that Risa and Hambone have a special bond signified by the scars: “It indicates their common cause of human rights, extended by Risa to the area of women’s rights” (*The Theatre* 125). Hambone’s suffering, and perhaps Risa’s, inspires Sterling to action. As Elam writes, “. . . the young rebel Sterling enters bleeding but carrying a ham stolen from Lutz’s window, a blood sacrifice for Hambone’s casket” (“August Wilson’s Women” 72). The blood sacrifice, reminiscent of Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, coupled with Sterling and Memphis’ visits to Aunt Ester, brings the cycle back in touch, though just a little, with African spirituality.

Again, much of the cast is lodged in concerns for their day-to-day survival. Love does not seem to be an issue, though Sterling is still hopeful. Memphis and Sterling are still hoping for a pot of gold—Memphis through the sale of his building and Sterling through the numbers. Neither has a song until he visits Aunt Ester, who appears in the cycle for the first time since *Gem of the Ocean*. Holloway, the most philosophical of the group, has sent them there. Memphis and Sterling are both consumed by the desire to make money. Both, however, follow Ester’s injunction to throw twenty dollars into the river and “make better what they have.” Both find that the exercise brings them some relief. Both find something of a payoff. Memphis seems to be on the verge, but Sterling is all the way there. He has found his song. He is ready to marry and make a baby with Risa and he is willing to throw that all away to make things right for Hambone.

Prison may be inevitable, but that doesn't need to interfere with his song. As Memphis said, justice doesn't necessarily go with freedom. You are born free. It is up to you to maintain it.

West, the wealthiest of the characters, has made his fortune in the funeral business. As Stephen Bottoms writes, "death is presumably the Hill District's only profit industry" (147). Both West and Memphis stand to reap substantive financial rewards from the death of the Hill District and its subsequent urban renewal, a subject addressed in *Jitney* and *Radio Golf*. Success, it would seem must require the death, in various ways, of others.

The issue of weapons has been an interesting motif in each of the plays. In *Gem of the Ocean* Solly and Eli debate the relative merits of sticks versus knives. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Levee kills Toledo with a knife. Floyd Barlow and Canewell discuss knives and guns in *Seven Guitars*. Indeed, Canewell is known for his skill with a knife. Though Floyd robs a bank with a gun, he is ultimately killed with Hedley's machete. In *Two Trains Running* Sterling has decided that a gun is necessary for him to secure the means for a fortune. It was what Memphis needed in his early days and he says that is it the means to get the white man to listen. Unfortunately, as Holloway observes presciently, "you say the word 'nigger' and 'gun' in the same sentence and they [white men] will try to arrest you" (78). Guns and the relationship with white men plays an important role in *Jitney* as well.

Jitney is set in 1977, 8 years later, with the Hill District in further decay, in an independent, non-licensed, car ride, or jitney station set up in an abandoned storefront. Becker serves as dispatcher for four drivers: Youngblood, Turnbo, Fielding and Doub. Youngblood is the youngest of the group, a Vietnam veteran, who can be edgy at times. The station is the site of checker playing and combative discussions between the men as they wait for calls. Initially, Becker is not there. Shealy, the local numbers runner, drops in. He says that Becker's son,

Booster, is about to be released from prison. Turnbo and Doub are older men; Turnbo disapproves of just about everything that Youngblood does. Doub is more understanding. Fielding is an alcoholic and unreliable. Youngblood works several jobs trying to buy a house secretly on the GI bill for his girlfriend, Rena, and their child. Money is tight. Turnbo thinks Youngblood is running around with his girlfriend's sister, Peaches. Peaches is actually helping Youngblood with the secret. Rena comes into the station to confront Youngblood about missing household money. Meanwhile, Doub has discovered that they are losing the lease on the building and means to confront Becker.

The men discuss Booster's, imminent release. Turnbo tells Booster's story. He had been an outstanding student, winner of the city science fair for three years in a row and had earned a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. At school Booster started going with a white girl whose father was an executive with Gulf Oil. The father discovered Booster and the girl making love in her car. The girl said it was rape and Booster was arrested. When Booster was released on bail he went to the girl's house and shot her dead. Youngblood says it served the girl right for lying. Turnbo turns it around on him and asks if Youngblood should get shot for lying to his girl. The men begin to fight. Turnbo pulls out a gun. Becker arrives the station and breaks up the fight. Fielding comes in with a bottle and Becker fires him. Becker leaves for a call.

The following scene starts with Booster arriving at the station to see his father. He is talking with Fielding, who has remained, still drinking. Becker arrives and sends Fielding home. Becker and Booster exchange short greetings, but then Becker launches into him, asks what he is going to do now that he has ruined his life. They have a protracted argument. Booster is not ashamed of what he did. He paid his debt. Becker tells him he has had to bear his son's shame for 20 years. He had hired a lawyer; they could have fought the rape charge. Booster says he

would rather have the honest title of murderer rather than rapist. Becker says he taught him better and Booster replies that he taught him other things too, like how to hang his head. He recounts a time when the landlord came to the house and cursed Becker because he had not paid the rent. The incident diminished Becker in young Booster's eyes. The landlord, Mr. Rand, had made Becker seem "small." Booster vowed that when he grew up, he would not let people put him down. His time of reckoning came when he was accused of raping his girlfriend:

Then when I met Susan McNight and found out her father was the vice-president of Gulf Oil . . . that's when I got big. That made me a big man. . . . Then when she told that lie on me that's when I woke up. That's when I realized that I wasn't big on my own. When she told that lie it made me small. I wanted to do something that said I wasn't just another nigger . . . that I was Clarence Becker. I wanted to make them remember my name. And I thought about you standing there and getting small and Mr. Rand shouting and Susan McNight shouting out that lie and I realized it was my chance to make the Beckers big again . . . my chance to show what I had learned on my own. I thought you would understand. I thought you would be proud of me." (43)

Becker is incredulous. "Proud of you for killing somebody!" Booster responds: "No, Pop. For being a warrior. For dealing with the world in ways that you didn't or couldn't or wouldn't" (43). Becker bemoans the future that Booster might have had, how he sacrificed for him. Booster dismisses it. He made his choice and is living by it. Becker responds to Booker's charges of "hanging his head" with words quite similar to Troy's in *Fences*:

And now you want to come in here and ridicule me 'cause I didn't knock Mr. Rand on his ass. You wanna know why? I'll tell you why. Because I had your black ass crying to be fed. Crying to have a roof over your head. To have clothes to wear to school and lunch

money in your pocket. That's why! Because I had a family. I had responsibility. . . . I swallowed my pride and let them mess over me, all the time saying, "You bastards got it coming. Look out! Becker's boy's coming to straighten this shit out! You're not gonna fuck over him! . . . And what I get, huh? You tell me. What I get? . . .

I get a murderer, that's what. A murderer. (44-45)

Becker goes on to accuse Booster of killing his mother by breaking her heart. "You are my son. I helped bring you into this world. But from this moment on . . . I'm calling the deal off. You ain't nothing to me, boy. You just another nigger on the street" (46). The first act ends.

The second act opens with the men again sitting around the station, talking. Youngblood learns that the jitney station will be closing, a casualty of urban renewal. Youngblood laments that: "White folks ain't got no sense of timing. They wait till I get in a position to buy me a house and then they pull the rug out from under me!" Doub responds that the white man "ain't paying you no mind." There had been plans to tear down the buildings for some time: "you keep thinking everybody's against you and you ain't never gonna get nothing. . . . You want to make something of your life, then the opportunity is there. You just have to shake off that 'white folks is against me' attitude. Hell, they don't even know you alive" (50).

Youngblood responds that they knew he was alive when they sent him to Vietnam. Doub points out that he was not the only one who was sent to war. Doub was sent to Korea in 1950. Doub goes on to tell Youngblood that his job was picking up the dead bodies. They stacked them 6 bodies high. He continues: "what I'm trying to tell you is the white man ain't got no personal war against you 'cause you buying a house and they gonna tear down this block." He tells him that he is too young to be driving jitneys. Youngblood asks where else he can earn 50 dollars a day, tax free. Doub tells him that he should use the GI bill to get some education, or he could get

a job at the mill. Youngblood says the mill sucks the life out of a person. Doub replies that “It ain’t all the time what you want. Sometimes it’s what you need. Black folks always get the two confused” (52). Essentially, Doub is telling him to forget any thoughts of self-actualization or a song.

The conversation continues for a while and Rena enters. She confronts Youngblood about his erratic behavior; the fact that he hasn’t been coming home nights. He tells her the truth, that he has been saving up and working extra so that he could buy a home. He came up a little short and had to take money from the household cash. He has had her sister to come along at times to help him make some decision about the house. Rena expresses her disappointment that Youngblood would do something as big as buying a house without consulting her. Youngblood says she doesn’t trust him. He doesn’t run around anymore. He has changed. She could have noticed that he did not come home smelling of alcohol. They kiss and make up. Becker arrives and tells them that they need to take it to the house.

The station has emptied and Booster enters. Becker gathers up some papers and leaves, ignoring him. Fielding enters and the two talk. Booster tells him that he is trying to figure out what to do with his life. Fielding says that he needs to figure out how he got to where he is. He looks at Booster’s prison issue suit and begins to criticize its construction. He reveals that he was once a tailor who made suits for stars like Billy Eckstein and Count Basie. Then the bottle got the better of him. Booster says he was going to be the next heavyweight champion and Albert Einstein. But he learned that you can’t live your dreams. When he was seven he had a bicycle that he rode everywhere. Then it was stolen. That is when he found out that you can’t live your dreams. Booster departs and then Fielding leaves with a customer.

The next scene opens with the drivers sitting with Becker to plan about the future of the station. Becker announces to the men's approval that they are going to fight the condemnation of the building. They are hiring a lawyer and they are staying put. He leaves for the mill, where he once worked, as a substitute in a key position he had performed before.

The men are talking in the station the next day. Becker has been killed in an accident at the mill. Shealy, the local numbers runner, comes in. He says Booster hit on a winner the day before. The men quarrel about various things. Booster comes in and learns of his father's death. Booster can't believe it. He punches Doub for telling him the news. The other men have to restrain him.

The final scene opens at the station, three days later. The men have just come back from the funeral. They engage in the usual talk. Booster enters, shakes Doub's hand and thanks him. Fielding tells him that he can be proud of his father. Booster responds:

I never knew him too much, you know. I never got to know him like you all did. I can't say nothing wrong by him. He took care of me when I was young. He ain't run the streets and fuss and fight with my mama. The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard. It didn't matter to me too much at the time 'cause I couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways. I guess everybody do. The only thing I feel sorry about . . . is he ain't got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him. I can't help thinking that. But you right . . . I'm proud of my old man. I'm proud of him. (The phone rings) And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. (76)

The phone continues to ring. Eventually, Booster goes over to answer the phone. He responds: "Car service" (77). The play ends. Evidently, Booster will carry on his father's work.

Jitney was the first play written and produced in what has become known as the Twentieth Century Cycle, and its place in the slave narrative is not quite as obvious as in the others. Nonetheless, the imprint is there. Booster stepped outside of his assigned station and pays the price with a twenty-year term in prison. His family is torn apart by the situation, and, by Becker's account, it kills his mother. As a boy, Booster had witnessed his father's humiliation. His decision to kill Susan McKnight was an attempt to break the cycle of victimization and to take control of his destiny. Becker points out that he did what was necessary to support his family. Though Becker and Booster end their conversation in a point of brokenness, the fact that they both provided explanations for their actions ultimately puts Booster in a place where he can move on. The conversation with Fielding is notable. Fielding looks at Booster's prison issued suit and observes how poorly it was constructed. Perhaps the premise of Booster's previous life was poorly constructed as well. Fielding is telling him "to take a look in the mirror." Booster comes to realize that his father's life was an honorable one and he pays tribute to Becker in the end.

Kimmika L. H. Williams-Witherspoon provides a fine insight into *Jitney* with her analysis of the character's names. Following Donald Bogle's and Sterling Brown's work, she notes that certain negative African American character types have been predominant in the broader American culture—the "contented slave," the "comic coon," the "brute," the "tragic mulatto," the "exotic primitive," "wretched freeman," and the "local color Negro." Because audiences have been conditioned to view drama from those classifications African American art often features "hidden transcripts" that challenge prevailing stereotypes: "That hidden transcript uses musicality, call and response, and the African American vernacular English so that recognizing the hidden transcript requires a cognizance of cultural competency . . . and the

importance of active social rituals” (41-42). Williams-Witherspoon goes on to decode the double meaning of the character names in *Jitney* in relation to portrayals of Black masculinity. Becker “beckons the audience to understand the history of black progress, to lead by example, and to work tirelessly to give children access and opportunity.” Fielding’s alcoholism calls us to the field of his isolation. Doub, “like *dub* personifies grateful reason.” Shealy represents the shield of underground employment via the numbers, not dissimilar to the jitney station. Turnbo directs the audience toward “turnabout” and the play of both sides in which African Americans must often engage (44). Booster boosts or moves beyond and “inverts images of black men like Emmett Till because of the same ‘white’ lies.” (48). Booster, in vernacular jargon, a shoplifter, steals the narrative of his own life (48). The significance of names, which we have already noted in *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *Seven Guitars* will continue to be an important trope in the plays to come.

The jitney drivers are all a part of the service economy, though in this case they serve the black community. Driving is a second career, a dead-end job, for most of them—Becker had been a skilled worker at the mill; Fielder had been a skilled tailor. Youngblood is chastised by Doub for working as a jitney driver. Youngblood responds, where else can he earn \$50 a day, tax free? Working around the white man’s system is an issue with which they must all deal. Youngblood’s desperate need for cash is fueled by his attempts to negotiate the process of buying a home. The jitney station’s future is threatened by the ongoing specter of urban renewal and the condemnation of the black neighborhood without apparent renewal. Becker’s decision to fight the condemnation shows a new effort to negotiate the system, as does Booster’s apparent decision to continue his father’s work. On the other hand, Booster seems to have decided to allow himself to join the service economy.

The exchange between Youngblood and Doub is an interesting one. Doub seems to imply that the white man's system is open to Youngblood; the black community, he says, has limited itself by continuing the persecution narrative, a theme stated by Memphis in *Two Trains Running*. Doub's time in Korea, handling the remains of dead soldiers and stacking them six bodies high, has allowed him to see that the system uses everyone up in some way. His remarks resonate with Holloway's remark in *Two Trains Running* about "stacking niggers." The play also continues the theme of distant, or harsh, relationships between sons and fathers. In this case, however, the relationship was torn as a result of Booster's murder and conviction. Though Becker has told Booster that he is no longer a part of his life, their rancorous exchange of views seems to have inspired him to challenge the rules (Williams 38).

None of the men in *Jitney* are much beyond the first two or three stages of Maslow's Hierarchy. Booster, however, may be on his way. His father's death releases him from a lot of his conflicted past and allows him to move on. One feels that his identification with the jitney station gives him something of a song. In *Jitney*, as in *Two Trains Running*, the numbers, a game of chance, is seen as one of the only means to break from the cycle of poverty and violence. Booster and Sterling both hit a jackpot in the numbers. Amidst the oppression from the system voiced by characters in both plays, both characters reach for the only means they perceive available to gain a stake for their future, guns and the numbers. Both Sterling and Booster, in finding their songs, seem to have moved beyond that perspective. Nonetheless, we will see how the cycle of violence continues in *King Hedley II*.

Chapter 5

“Negroes are the Worst Things in God’s Creation”

Set in Pittsburgh in 1985, in the backyards of three row houses in the Hill District, *King Hedley II* is something of a sequel to *Seven Guitars*. King, 36, son of Ruby and Hedley from *Seven Guitars*, is planting seeds in the backyard while arguing with Ruby, 61, about paying the phone bill and other things. Ruby tells him that he needs to plant the seeds in better soil. King insists that the soil is just fine. King has recently been released from prison and is engaged in what Ruby feels is a dubious business selling refrigerators that she thinks are stolen. Louise, who raised King, has died. Ruby has retired from a career as a nightclub singer and returned to lay claim to her aunt’s house. Mister, King’s longtime friend, and son of Red Carter from *Seven Guitars*, enters. He reports that a line of people is hanging out in front of Aunt Ester’s house. Mister says a man has been in town looking for King. King killed the man’s cousin, Pernell, after Pernell slashed King’s face, leaving an ugly scar. King served his seven-year prison term for killing Pernell. Tonya, King’s wife enters. King and Tonya are going to have formal pictures taken to commemorate their anniversary. King goes into the house and returns with a 9 mm pistol in case Pernell’s brother arrives. Stool Pigeon, known as Canewell in *Seven Guitars*, arrives on the scene and announces that Aunt Ester has died.

In the next scene Stool Pigeon and King talk about Aunt Ester’s death. King used to cut her grass and get her medicines from the drug store. There had been a storm the night before and the electricity is out. Stool Pigeon says they went out when Ester died. Stool Pigeon leaves to take water to the mourners outside Ester’s house. Mister shows up and King and Mister talk about their refrigerator business. They have planned to earn enough money to start a video store.

Both men have other bills to pay, but they are trying to hold firm. Mister needs money. King needs money. Tonya is pregnant. The men decide that they will rob a jewelry store.

Elmore arrives on the scene. He is a hustler and sometimes man friend of Ruby. The men enlist Elmore to help them sell the refrigerators. Mister has to go to work and remarks that “The white man got all the money” (34). Elmore scoffs at the idea of working and gives a long dissertation of about how he gets his money. Stool Pigeon is reading a collection of papers. Every death and shooting he sees as a portent of bad times. He holds up a paper and reads the headline, “City Violence Escalates. Teen Killed in Drive-By.” Elmore responds: “‘Teen Killed in Drive-By.’ I’m tired of hearing that. See . . . a man has got to have honor. A man ain’t got no honor can’t be a man. He can only play at being a man. . . . You can’t be stealing somebody’s life from the backseat of a Toyota. That’s why the black man’s goanna catch hell for the next hundred years” (34-35). King agrees: “It used to be you get killed over something. Now you get killed over nothing” (35). Mister remarks that you look at somebody wrong and they start a fight. Then King, Elmore, and Mister talk about their guns. Stool Pigeon says “You a gunfighter, but God’s a firefighter. . . . God is a motherfucker” (36). Elmore dismisses talk of God. He says he is the boss. King says that he is in charge of what happens in his life. God is in charge of some things, but he is charge of what is in his “circle.” Elmore asks: “what if you in somebody else’s circle and you don’t know it? And all the time you thinking you in charge?” Mister responds that it is a “rude awakening.” Elmore says “the reason I ask is ‘cause you already in my circle.” King remarks that “You might wake up and find otherwise” (38).

Tonya arrives to talk to King. She doesn’t want to keep the baby. She already has a seventeen-year-old daughter who, herself, has a child: “Her daddy in jail. Her step-daddy going to jail. She seventeen and got a baby, she don’t even know who the father is. She moving so fast

she can't stop and look in the mirror. . . . All she care about is the next time somebody gonna look at her and want to lay down with her" (30). King replies that everything he does is for her. Tonya replies that it isn't enough. She couldn't give her daughter, Natasha, what she needed: "I ain't got nothing else to give" (40). She laments that she hasn't been able to help her first child and doesn't see a much better future for the one he is carrying: "I ain't raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him. Why I want to bring a life into this world that don't respect life?" (41). She continues on in a very long speech and leaves. The conversation is similar to the one in *Two Trains Running* where the men talk about whether they want to father a child in the world in which they are living. Ironically, both King and Mister are the offspring of men who gave them names that that would automatically place them in tension with that world. Neither man was around to help their sons negotiate their lives.

King exchanges words with Ruby and also leaves. Tonya returns and talks to Ruby. Ruby tells her that when she was pregnant with King she went to Aunt Ester, thinking that she did abortions. Aunt Ester told her "man can plant the seed but only God can make it grow" (43). Ruby tells Tonya that she can never know God's plans. "Life's got its own rhythm. It don't always be what you think it's gonna be. . . . That's all life is . . . trying to match up them two rhythms. You ever match them up and you won't have to worry about nothing" (44).

Later, Ruby and Elmore are engaged in conversation. It becomes evident that Elmore killed LeRoy, King's birth father. King still doesn't know. Elmore wants to tell him. Ruby says no. Elmore wants to get married. They recount all their problems. Elmore wanted her to send King to Louise to be raised. Elmore walked out on her. The conversation ends and Elmore leaves.

Mister drops by and chats with Ruby. We learn that his mother also left him with someone else to raise. His dad, Red Carter, introduced Ruby to the bandleader she sang with. Elmore arrives again with a present for Ruby. It is cheap jewelry, but he tells her that it is made of silver and gold. Ruby goes into the house and Elmore sells Mister a derringer for \$55. King returns. He had gone to get his photos, but they apparently lost them. King made a scene and the police were called. King had a receipt and everything, but they told him that it didn't matter, that he "don't count" (in Kings words). Mister says they have "different rules for different people" (56). King goes on a rant about "they." "Every time I try to do something they get in the way. . . . They got fifty-eleven ways to get money and don't want you to have none" (56). Mister agrees: "The white man got fifty-eleven ways to get money and go to school to learn more ways. If you go to one of them schools say, 'I'm gonna learn how to make money' . . . they'll give you a mop and a bucket. Say, 'you be the janitor.':" King says that is what his fifth-grade teacher told him. King and Mister talk on and on. King tells about how he was convicted for killing Pernell. The judge and jury couldn't understand that Pernell had cut his face. King ends the first act with a tirade about how no one can mess with him: "the next motherfucker that fucks with me it's gonna be World War III (57)."

Act Two begins with Stool Pigeon burying Aunt Ester's cat near King's seeds in the back yard. Stool Pigeon tells King about Hedley killing Floyd Barton. He says he had to tell and that was how he was named Stool Pigeon. He gives King the machete that Hedley used to kill Floyd. Mister comes by and he and King start planning their robbery. They look at Mister's new derringer and leave to attempt the robbery.

The second scene opens with King and Mister running away after their robbery. They are arguing because King lingered too long at the jewelry store. They netted \$3160. They encounter

Stool Pigeon on the way home. Stool Pigeon has been robbed and beaten for \$63. Stool Pigeon sprinkles ashes on the grave of the black cat and says a prayer. Elmore arrives and the men talk about selling refrigerators. Elmore negotiates a lower price for a refrigerator and then says it is for King's mother. King and Elmore talk about their prison terms. Elmore served 7 years in Alabama; King 7 in Pennsylvania. They talk about their crimes. Elmore feels guilty that he deprived Leroy of so much. King doesn't feel that way about Pernell. Both men feel that once you kill you are living without God. Pernell called King "Champ.:" He told him that his name was King: "He don't know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name. He don't know he fucking with King Hedley II" (78). Pernell cut him and left him needing 112 stitches in his face. Two weeks later King tracked Pernell down and shot him 14 times. King's only regret is that he did not get away. Ruby enters the scene. King tries to give her \$500 and she refuses it, knowing that it must be stolen. She tells King not to steal for her.

Later, Ruby and Tonya are talking. King has gone off to look for Pernell's cousin. Mister returns looking for King. He gives Ruby the derringer and two bullets. King returns. Ruby talks about the seeds. Mister exits. King talks to Tonya. He tells her he has visited the grave of Neesha, his first wife, for the last time. He is over her loss. He stumbled on the grave of Pernell and realized that Pernell was a father. He realizes the damage that he did when he killed Pernell. He talks about the seeds he planted and Pernell's death:

Elmore stepped on them [the seeds] and they still growing. . . . Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It don't make me a big man. Most people see me coming and they go the other way. . . . They try to pretend they don't see my scar when that's all they looking at. I used to think that Pernell did that to me. But I did it to myself. That's why I need this baby, not 'cause I took something out of

the world but because I wanna put something in it. Let everybody know I was here. You got King Hedley II and then you got King Hedley III. Got rocky dirt. Got glass and bottles. But it still deserve to live. (89)

Tonya points out that he “walking around with a gun, looking to kill somebody, talking about you wanna have a baby. You either gonna end up dead or in jail” (89). She continues, “It ain’t for you to go out of here to and steal money to get me things. Your job is to be around so this baby can know you its daddy. Do that. For once, somebody do that. Be that. That’s how you be a man, anything else I don’t want” (90).

The following scene opens with Mister announcing that he has quit his job. Ruby and Elmore announce that they are getting married. King offers Elmore the ring that he stole from the jewelry store for \$100. Elmore puts the ring on Ruby’s finger. They all dance. Ruby recalls that she used to dance with Leroy. Elmore says something negative about Leroy. Ruby asks him to stop, but he continues. They get into the business of Elmore killing Leroy. He and Leroy had hustled some others in a crap game. Elmore loaned Leroy \$50 for his stake, but Leroy didn’t want the stake deducted from his winnings. Leroy later pulled a gun on him in a bar. He walked away. Elmore decided he would leave town. He went to the barbershop to tell Leroy to forget about the money. Elmore had had a headache about the incident for days. He got to the barbershop and Leroy was sitting there laughing. Leroy pulled out his gun. Elmore pulled out his gun and started firing at him. He provides a graphic description of the scene. Ruby adds a few details and Elmore says that she needs to tell King the rest. Ruby pleads with him not to. Ruby hits Elmore as he tells King that Leroy was his father. King walks away with the machete.

The final scene opens with Ruby, Mister, and Tonya all in the yard. Mister has been looking for King and can’t find him. Mister fears that King will kill Elmore. King enters,

carrying the machete and calling for Elmore. He pays Elmore the \$50 Leroy owed him. He makes it clear that he is not Leroy Slater, Jr., but King Hedley II.

King pulls out a pair of dice and tells Elmore that they need to play. He tramples down the spot where he had planted his seeds and clears a spot for them to play. They play and argue about rules. Elmore rolls a seven and then eleven. The men start to fight and King puts the machete at Elmore's throat. King accuses Elmore of switching the dice. Elmore pulls his gun. Ruby goes into the house. King has the chance to kill Elmore with the machete, but is unable to do so and sticks it into the ground. Elmore is unable to kill King, lowers his gun and fires into the ground. Ruby comes from the house, calling King's name. King starts for the house and Ruby shoots him in the throat. He falls to the ground near where the cat is buried. Ruby falls to her knees, singing "Red Sails in the Sunset," ". . . Oh carry my loved one, Bring him home safely to me" (109). Stool Pigeon is joyous that there is now blood on the cat's grave:

Thy will! Not man's will! Thy will!

You wrote the Beginning and the End!

Bring down the fire!

Stir up the tempest!

You got the wind in one hand

And fire in the other.

Riding a red horse!

Riding on a black wind!

The Alpha and Omega!

You a bad motherfucker!

. . . .

The Conquering Lion of Judah!

Our bright and Morning Star!

I want your best!

See Him coming!

We give you our Glory!

We give you our Glory! (109-10)

The stage fades to black and the sound of a cat's meow is heard.

King Hedley is the grimmest of the 10 plays. The Hill District of 1985 is a war zone. Stool Pigeon is collecting newspaper after newspaper accounts of the latest shootings, victims of black-on-black violence. King, conceived in the wake of violence between Leroy, his natural father, and Elmore, was raised thinking Hedley was his natural father. Hedley died in prison after killing Floyd Barton. King, disfigured by a vicious knife attack from Pernell, served seven years in prison. He and Mister are frantically trying to raise money to start their own video store, and they are obtaining that money by any means necessary, including selling stolen refrigerators and robbing a jewelry store. Louise, who raised King, has died. Ruby, who spent the formative years of King's life on the road as a singer, has returned and Elmore, her off and on-again lover, has come back to rekindle the flame. Elmore, a hustler, is a conscienceless, amoral opportunist. Each man has a peculiar honor code based on a notion of blood vengeance. The situation is further clouded by Tonya's pregnancy. Having raised a 17-year-old who already has a child of her own. Tonya, who herself was a teenage mother, does not want to bring another child into what she views as a miserable world. It is a world perfectly normal to King. Ruby, serving as Tonya's confidant, is hardly the best guide through the malaise. Aunt Ester has died and the community is without a moral center. King badly wants the baby so that he can leave some kind of legacy,

albeit the same troubled legacy left to him by King Hedley I. That potential legacy is represented by his attempt to grow seeds in the poor, unnurtured soil of the backyard, seeds that he later obliterated to engage in a rage filled craps game with Leroy. Elmore and King realize that killing each other is not the answer to their problems. Ruby, mistaking the situation, kills her son with the gun that the ever-hustling Elmore had sold to Mister. It is yet a final scene of her neglect for her child. Though she spent most of her life as a singer, the final scene gives her a song, “Red Sails in the Sunset,” a song of hope that is contradicted by the events of the day.

Amidst this tragic chaos is Stool Pigeon, giving long, disjointed prophecies of doom and gloom. He is now, by default, the community’s spiritual leader. The play depicts a community grimly determined to hang on. As Solly said earlier in *Gem of the Ocean*, “dark was the night.” Ruby, of all people, quotes Aunt Ester in regard to Tonya’s pregnancy and her struggles in trying to make a life with King.

This could be the culmination of our slave narrative. Aunt Ester has died after 366 years. The slave descendants of the Hill District are mired in a broken community. They still tell the stories of a history of mistreatment, but some of the mistreatment is largely of their own making. Imprisonment, however, remains as a rite of passage for young males, further perpetuating broken families. The theme of a system rigged in favor of whites continues, but given the absence of equal justice, our characters must negotiate and endure a bitter, dog-eat-dog, system in which the only reality is that the strong survive. The way to get ahead is the grim domination and exploitation espoused by Caesar Wilkes in *Gem of the Ocean*. The legacy that bound the earlier communities together as a common foe is gone and now the foe is themselves.

Nadel puts the play in stark contrast to *Seven Guitars*. King has had no past connection with his birth mother: “Estranged from her, from the blues tradition, and from the political

traditions that have made black lives matter, he lives exclusively in a world of death, violence and revenge. Unlike his predecessors in the Wilson canon, he was imprisoned for serious crimes rather than police caprice or the furtherance of ‘slavery by another name’ For him “illegal activity and immanent violence have become a way of life” (*The Theatre* 134). Given the downward spiral of events occurring in *Jitney* and *King Hedley II*, one would not expect the final play in the cycle, *Radio Golf*, to take place in the office of a lawyer and real estate developer. The arc of the cycle, which opened at the home of Aunt Ester, 1839 Wylie Avenue in 1904, closes with a controversy about that same address some 93 years later.

Radio Golf is centered around the interactions of Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks, partners in real estate development, Harmond’s wife, Mame, and two neighborhood men from the opposite end of the socioeconomic spectrum, Sterling Johnson and Old Joe Barlow. Wilks is running for mayor. His wife, Mame, is a PR agent. The play opens in a new real estate office in the Hill District where Mame and Harmond are discussing potential locations for his campaign office. Harmond wants the office in the Hill District; Mame wants something a little more upscale. Harmond is soon to give his opening campaign speech and Mame has arranged for it to be published in the newspaper the following day. Roosevelt enters the office. Roosevelt is worried that neighborhood people might steal the wheels off his car. He talks to Mame about her forthcoming appointment as the Governor’s press representative. Mame says she has told the governor to hold off until after the mayoral campaign is over. Roosevelt shows Mame a brochure from their newest development, with a Whole Foods and a Starbucks nearby. There is a discussion between the three about naming the new health center building. Mame and Roosevelt favor naming it after the organization; Harmond wants it named after Sarah Degree, the first black Registered Nurse in Pittsburgh. Roosevelt, obsessed with golf, is putting up a poster of

Tiger Woods over his desk. Mame leaves. Harmond and Roosevelt talk about their plans for the future. The Hill District needs to be declared “blighted” for them to receive necessary federal minority redevelopment money. Roosevelt has organized a golf camp for minority kids. Mame calls and reports that someone is painting one of the condemned houses on the hill.

Sterling Johnson enters the office. He is the same Sterling from *Two Trains Running*. Johnson identifies himself as a construction worker who needs a job. He says he was a grade school classmate of Harmond’s. Sterling played football with Harmond’s brother, Raymond, who was killed in Viet Nam. Sterling did not go to Nam. He robbed a bank and was serving time in Prison. Sterling explains his crime. He wanted to know what it was like to have money. The money, however, didn’t do much for him:

It didn’t make me smarter. It didn’t make me better than anybody else. You can’t do nothing with money but spend it. After that you back where you started from. Then what you gonna do? I found out I was looking for something that you couldn’t spend. That seem like the better of the two. To me. Everybody got their own way of looking at it but if you ask me . . . I’d take something you couldn’t spend over money any day. (15)

Harmond says they are going to bring back the Hill. Sterling says the Hill is dead. Sterling leaves his number and leaves. Harmond later determines that Sterling has not attended trade school, nor is he a member of the Union. Roosevelt returns. He has checked out the man painting the condemned house. The man said that he owns it.

The owner, Old Joe Barlow, enters the office to start the next scene. Barlow talks in circles, getting to the point of things indirectly. He asks Harmond if there are any Christian people there. He complains that his dog died and it cost \$300 to bury it. Turns out the dog had died 8 years before. Harmond tries to get rid of him. Barlow says he needs a lawyer and was sent

to see Harmond. Harmond, he was told, is a big man. Harmond says he is not a big man, but if he is elected mayor he will be. Barlow says they won't let a black man be mayor. Barlow says he knew Harmond's father and brother. He needs a lawyer like Harmond. He feels they have good "rapport." Harmond asks him what the issue is. It is a convoluted story interrupted by more discussion of Harmond's candidacy. Harmond says it is America and he can be anything he wants. Barlow counters:

But you got to have the right quarter. America is a giant slot machine. You walk up and put in your coin and it spits it back out. You look at your coin. You think maybe it's a Canadian quarter. It's the only coin you got. If this coin ain't good then you out of luck. You look at it and sure enough it's an American quarter. But it don't spend for you. It spend for everybody else but it don't spend for you. The machine spits it right back out. Is the problem with the quarter or with the machine? Do you know? Somebody running for mayor ought to know that. (21-22)

Harmond replies that you have to fix the machine. America, he says, is great because it is a melting pot. Barlow responds that they need to get a new machine. Harmond replies again that the machine has to be fixed. Barlow warns him that "If you do win mayor they gonna change the rules and give you only half the keys. You know that don't you?" Harmond says he will have all the keys and that they will make him new ones (22).

They talk about a local ball field. Old Joe thinks the field needs lights. Harmond wants to put a driving range there. Harmond says "You teach the kids how to play golf and they have all the rules they need to win at life" (23). Roosevelt returns. He identifies Old Joe as the man painting the house on Wylie. Joe tells them that it is his house, he has a deed for it. He is fixing it up for his daughter. He says his mother got the deed in 1925. Harmond calls the police station to

have charges against Joe dropped. Roosevelt tells Joe to go find the deed, otherwise he says to go away. Barlow leaves. Roosevelt is excited because, Bernie Smith, a local big shot, has invited him to play golf. Harmond warns Roosevelt that Smith is involved with some big litigation. Roosevelt announces that he has just been appointed a Vice-president at Mellon Bank.

Some time later we see Mame and Harmond talking in the office. Mame wants Harmond to cut a passage out of his speech pertaining to a policeman shooting an innocent black man. Mame says he needs to cut it if he wants to get elected. Old Joe comes in and interrupts them. Someone has broken into Harmond's car and stolen his golf clubs. Mame warns Harmond not to publish his original speech. She leaves. Harmond calls the newspaper and tells them to publish the speech as written, or not at all. He calls the Police Commissioner and invites him to a groundbreaking for the Bedford Hills Redevelopment site. Joe says he talked to the people about the deed and they said that Harmond has it, that Harmond bought the house. But, Joe says, he never sold it. The city officials told him it was sold for back taxes. Harmond asks why he didn't pay his taxes. Joe says that his mother had told him that they didn't need to pay taxes. Each time they went down to pay their taxes they were told they had already been paid. He says he never got notice that the house would be sold. Harmond says that is the way things go. If you don't pay the taxes the city can sell the house. They put out a notice in the paper 30 days before the auction. Barlow asks Harmond a pointed question: "Is this the kind of mayor you're going to be? Just like your daddy. Put the big man on one side and the little man on the other" (34). A bit taken back, Harmond promises Old Joe to look into the matter for him.

Roosevelt enters and Old Joe leaves. Roosevelt has just come from golfing with Bernie Smith. Roosevelt is excited. Bernie Smith paid the expenses and Roosevelt was able to meet a lot of people. Smith wants him to buy a radio station with him. Roosevelt is an important partner

because it means that they can buy it through a Minority Tax Certificate. Harmond warns him that Smith is trying to use him as his “Black face” (36). Roosevelt responds:

This is how you do it! . . . You don’t think Mellon has ever been used? We’re talking about an eight-million dollar radio station! This is the game! I’m at the table! There was a time they didn’t let any blacks at the table. You opened the door. You shined the shoes. You served the drinks. And they went in the room and made the deal. I’m in the room! Them motherfuckers who bought and traded them railroads . . . how do you think they did it? This is business. This is the way it’s done in America. (37)

Roosevelt leaves.

Later Harmond is on the phone talking to a researcher at the records office. They cannot find where the Wylie house was advertised before it went to auction. Mame enters. She has gotten the job with Governor’s office. Harmond tells her to start now, not after the campaign. She says he needs her to run the campaign. They talk about slogans. Mame leaves. Sterling enters. He tells Harmond that he read his speech in the paper. Sterling suggests the slogan “Hold Me to It” for Harmon’s campaign. Sterling reads aloud from the editorial, including the passage about police accountability. Sterling again asks about a job. Harmond tells him that the union says he is not on their rolls. Sterling replies that he has his own union. He has been trying to play by other people’s rules all his life and taking their tests with arbitrary questions about things like buying a parrot for twelve dollars. “Who the hell gonna spend twelve dollars on a parrot? What you gonna do with it? Do you know how many chickens you can buy for twelve dollars?” People, he said, thought he was slow. “That’s when Mr. Redwood told me, ‘You ain’t dumb. You just faster than everybody else.’ I’ve been going in the back doors all my life ‘cause they don’t never let me in the front” (43). Old Joe comes in. He smells fried chicken. He and Sterling reminisce about a fried chicken restaurant that was located nearby. Joe and Sterling talk about

Joe's house issues. Harmond says that he is going to take care of it. Old Joe notices Harmond's flag lapel pin. Harmond says he can get him one just like it. Joe talks about his experience in World War II. His friend, Joe Mott, carried the flag into battle until he was shot through the head. Joe picked up the flag and carried it through the end of the war. Barlow says he carried the flag so that his friend's life would mean something. After the war he traveled to Georgia to visit Joe Mott's mother. "Walking down the street a white fellow stopped me. Reached up and tore my flag off my coat. Told me I ain't got no right to walk around with an American flag. I hope they let you keep yours" (45). After an uncomfortable silence Harmond speaks of the flag that covered his brother's coffin. His mother put it away in a trunk and he never saw it again. Joe says to Harmond: "It used to be I couldn't talk about your father 'cause I didn't have nothing nice to say about him. But now I can talk about him" (46). He hands Harmond some papers that show Harmond's father was the one who paid the taxes on the house.

The next scene opens with Roosevelt and Harmond talking in the office. Harmond tells him that there is a problem with the house. The sale was conducted before advertising. It was illegal. Roosevelt is not at all sympathetic. The phone rings. Harmond is told that the neighborhood has been declared a blight. They celebrate. Sterling enters. He says he is owed \$26 for the paint he used on the door at 1839 Wylie. Someone has painted an X over it. Harmond pays Sterling, but says that they are going to tear the house down, "rightly or wrongly.:"

Sterling calls him on it: "Did I hear that shit right? 'Rightly' or 'wrongly' you're going to tear down Mr. Barlow's house? 'Rightly' or 'wrongly?'" It don't matter if it's wrong?" Harmond says they have to face facts. Sterling replies: "You just can't tear down the man's house. That's the kind of shit they did to the Indians. They sign a treaty and as soon as the Indians walk out the door they start plotting how to break it. I don't care what the law say." Roosevelt declares that

they are going to tear it down. Sterling escalates: “If you fuck with Mr. Barlow’s house . . . if you move one goddamn pebble . . . you gonna have to answer me on the battlefield. You the cowboys. I’m the Indians. See who wins this war” (51-52).

The second act opens at the office, now decked out with campaign materials. Roosevelt’s voice is on the radio, talking about golf. Sterling enters carrying a bunch of flyers. Sterling tells Harmond he is organizing a paint party to fix up the house; it’s Aunt Ester’s house. He goes back outside and returns with Harmond’s golf clubs, which had been stolen from the trunk of his car. Sterling bought them for twenty dollars. He asks Harmond for pointers. He offers the clubs to Harmond for \$20. Harmond agrees. They talk. Sterling asks if Harmond will be the mayor of the white people or black people. Harmond says he will be mayor of all the people of Pittsburgh. Sterling replies that the mayors have always been on the side of the white folks. Black people need some people on their side. Old Joe enters. Joe reminisces about a man, a successful green grocer on the Hill, who was arrested by police for looking suspicious. He ended up in an asylum. Harmond tries to present Old Joe a check for \$10,000 in payment for the house. Old Joe refuses the check. It is his house. Harmond says the house will be torn down the following Thursday. Old Joe leaves. Sterling points out that Harmond bought stolen property from Sterling, the clubs; it was a crime. Harmond, he says, stole Old Joe’s house. He gives Harmond the twenty dollars. Harmond says it is not the same thing. Sterling says it looks like it to him.

Later we see Roosevelt practicing his golf swing. He tells Harmond that he quit Mellon Bank. Told the bank president to kiss his ass. Harmond congratulates him. He tells Roosevelt that he has been to the 1839 house. He has noticed the beautiful woodwork and carvings. He tells Roosevelt how well built it is. He shows Roosevelt a revised development plan, with the complex built around the old house. Roosevelt strongly disagrees. He tells Harmond not to do

anything without him and leaves. Harmond makes a phone call and tells someone that they are not tearing the house down. Old Joe enters and gives Harmond a \$100 payment toward the back taxes. Harmond says they are not tearing the house down and shows him the new plans. Old Joe starts to leave. Harmond says he has been trying to figure out why his grandfather, Caesar Wilks, paid the taxes. He says his father was a hard man but dedicated to his family. Old Joe says that when his daughter, Black Mary, whom he named after his mother, was born that there was a lot of talk about the house. Harmond says he thought Joe's mother was named Ester Tyler. He concurs, but says that her birth name was Black Mary. Harmond says his grandfather's sister was named Black Mary. He notes that Mary and Caesar had different fathers. He asks Joe the name of his grandfather. Joe writes it on a piece of paper—Henry Samuels. Harmond smiles and hugs Old Joe. They are kin.

The next scene features Roosevelt, Mame, and Harmond talking in the office. Harmond has told Mame that he and Old Joe are cousins. Harmond says he wants to move back to the Hill. Roosevelt has been undoing the plans to save the house. He reads a rap sheet on Old Joe, who has been arrested and institutionalized several times. Harmond doesn't care; he is saving the house. Roosevelt says he is proceeding with the demolition. Harmond says he bought the house illegally. He will file an injunction. Mame says that Harmond will throw away his career and his reputation. Harmond replies that they have to live by the law.

The final scene sees Harmond talking on his cell phone. Mame enters. Harmond tells her that they need to release a statement. Mame says there are bulldozers at Barlow's house, but also people there organizing a paint party and barbeque. Mame tells Harmond that he could have been Mayor if he had followed their plan. Harmond says he had followed the plan all of his life. "I can't follow the plan this time, Mame. I'm afraid you look away from what's right too long you

won't turn back. Start all the time looking for what's in this for me" (72). Mame says he is tearing their life apart. She says he is "acting like a kid who because things don't go his way takes his ball and goes home. . . . All your life you always had everything go your way" (72). Harmond replies that it was his father's way. He is following his own path now. Mame leaves. Harmond returns to the phone trying to get the injunction signed. Sterling enters. "Harmond Wilks . . . a desperado," he declares (74). Sterling says he is fighting a losing battle: "If you score too many points they change the rules. That's what the problem was . . . you scored too many points. If things had kept going on like that you was gonna have to buy you a gun" (75).

Harmond says he knows the rules. Sterling asks him if he knows when the game is over. Roosevelt enters. He tries to run Sterling off. They exchange words. Sterling confronts him:

You know what you are? It took me a while to figure it out. You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don't know it like I know. I know the truth of it. I'm a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God's creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blindyitis. A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's Negro. He thinks he's a white man. It's Negroes like you who hold us back. (76).

Roosevelt says he is not the one holding him back. People like Sterling blame other people for their problems. He says that they need to get some ambition and make something of their lives: "Get up off your ass . . . quit stealing . . . quit using drugs . . . go to school . . . get a job . . . pay your taxes. Oh, see you can't do that 'cause Roosevelt Hicks is holding you back" (77). Sterling responds: "Yeah, you holding me back. You go around kissing the white man's ass then when they see me they think I'm supposed to kiss it too" (77). Roosevelt threatens to call the police

and have Sterling thrown out. Sterling dips his finger into the paint can and paints a line on his face. “See that?” I learned that from Cochise. We on the battlefield now” (77). He leaves.

Roosevelt and Harmond argue. Roosevelt says the demolition starts at 10:15. Harmond says he has an injunction. Roosevelt says that the injunction has been dismissed. Harmond tells Roosevelt that he is “on the edge.” They need to stand up for something:

The rules change every day. You got to change with them. After a while the edge starts to get worn. You don’t notice it at first but you’re fraying with it. Oh, no, look . . . We got a black mayor. We got a black CEO. . . . Twenty-four million blacks living in poverty but it’s their fault. Look. We got a black astronaut. I just love Oprah. . . . After a while the center starts to give. They keep making up the rules as you go along. . . . It’s all a house of cards. Everything resting on a slim edge. . . . Wasn’t nothing solid about it.

Everything is was an *if* and a *when* and a *maybe*. . . . I don’t want to live my life like that Roosevelt. (79)

Roosevelt says he is buying Harmond out of the company. They argue more and Harmond tells Roosevelt to leave. He takes down the Tiger Woods poster and tells Roosevelt to take it with him. Harmond paints a stripe on his face like Sterling’s. The play ends.

Radio Golf is an amazing coda to the saga begun in *Gem of the Ocean*. It revisits the legacy of Aunt Ester, Black Mary, Caesar Wilks and Citizen Barlow and links them with Sterling, Hambone’s champion, in *Two Trains Running*. The decline of the Hill District, presumably dealt a death blow in *King Hedley II*, is now to the point of extinction with the “blight” decree and a rechristening as Bedford Hills. Harmond, the grandson of Caesar Wilks, has lived a life of relative ignorance and the privilege that came with the hard-won legacy of his father and grandfather. Harmond is on the brink of being elected Mayor of Pittsburgh when he is

connected to the other side of his family legacy. The house at 1839 Wylie was the home of Aunt Ester and his grand aunt, Black Mary. Indeed, the Wilks family had paid the taxes on Aunt Ester's house for years. Old Joe is his half first cousin once removed, the son of Black Mary and Citizen Barlow. Aunt Ester's legacy is Harmond's legacy. Old Joe and Sterling are the unlikely messengers who awaken his nearly slumbering sense of justice and right and wrong. Harmond deeply trusts the system of laws but attempts to restore justice in a system that would have let him commit a grave injustice to his family. In response to Black Mary's, Aunt Ester's successor, invocation of the Bible to support her claim of sanctuary status for the 1839 Wylie house, Harmond's grandfather, Caesar Wilks, declared in *Gem of the Ocean* that his Bible was the Penal Code of Pennsylvania. Through his reconnection with his family legacy Harmond recognizes that justice favors those in power and abuses those who are not. Sterling poses the ultimate question: which side are you on? Harmond chooses his race and his family and in so doing discovers that he is a part of the great slave narrative. As Nadel observed, the drama forces Harmond to recognize that he is a black man whose citizenship and power is dependent on his money rather than legal standing. Moreover, Nadel argues, the play forces Harmond to consider his place in history. Thus the play emphasizes that Wilson's cycle "is the story of the place history created for displaced people, people who, from the second they were sold . . . lost the capacity to fix things with the law. They were displaced not only in . . . the tortuous economic patterns of capitalist exchange, but in the mesh of legalities that form the fabric of American human rights" (*The Theatre* 153).

Sterling and Old Joe, discredited by the society in which they live by virtue of their past misdeeds, serve to awaken the moral conscience of a man who is connected to their lives not only by blood and relationship, but by capital, material and human. Though the Wilks family had

presumably rewritten its own family narrative, Harmond joins the counter narrative in yet another call-and-response when he stands against injustice and, as a result, disenfranchises himself from his privilege. He chooses not to be a negro, a man who follows the white man in exploiting Blacks, but a Black man identified with his heritage. Black Mary and Aunt Ester, whose legacies were barely known in King Hedley II, are now alive with Harmond, Joe, and Sterling. The cruel mastery wielded by Caesar lived on in his son and, in more polite fashion, in Harmond. Harmond has renounced that mastery and now stands oppressed.

Sterling, who found his song after a conversation with Aunt Ester, emerges as the voice of her conscience. Citizen Barlow was sent on a journey to throw two pennies into the Monongahela River to cleanse his soul and to find his song. Aunt Ester, Eli, and Solly took him on a journey into his people's past to understand the ramifications of his wrongdoing and to move forward. Memphis, Holloway, and Sterling had similar experiences with Aunt Ester when she instructed them to throw twenty dollars into the river. Sterling exchanges twenty dollars with Harmond over the stolen golf clubs and Old Joe Barlow, descendent of Aunt Ester and Black Mary, and takes Harmond into his own city of bones, pricking his conscience and connecting him with the conflicting sides of his slave legacy. The price of Harmond's cleansing is far more than twenty dollars. He is throwing away a successful career, possibly a marriage, and a sure shot at high elected office. In doing so he found his song.

Conclusion

Wilderson wrote that storytelling is difficult “when the narrator is a slave” (xi). And so it is. Our twentieth century slave narrative is told by some 70 diverse characters, 50 male, each mired in the “subjective and objective vertigo” (Wilderson 245) brought on by their existence as Black persons in America. Wilson’s cycle features all the hallmarks of a slave narrative. Most of the characters have been abused by a cruel master, whether it be at home, work, or through the economic or legal systems. There is strategic use of names, both by the characters and their families and by the playwright. The plays feature families torn apart by slavery, convict leasing, and the criminal justice system. There are successful and unsuccessful escapes from enslavement, the South, and the economic system. Many characters have also escaped the bonds of the dominant culture’s expectations. The characters are largely illiterate or poorly educated. Most of all, we have heard/seen the stories of people who have survived enslavement or imprisonment. It is an issue that endures today. According to the NAACP, African Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of white Americans.

The character’s stories are told on a number of levels. Charles S. Dutton remembered that the conversations in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* were conducted in the spirit of playing the “dozens” (Page 179). Others have identified a call and response pattern at various points in the plays (Boan). One might also see the plays as embodying “signifying,” the African American practice of communicating indirectly, with a literal meaning that is undercut by an ironic, figurative meaning (Gates). Indeed, Gates traces the practice of signifying back to Yoruba traditions in Africa. African slaves often communicated openly, in the presence of their masters, uttering phrases that taken literally meant one thing to their masters, but quite another to their peers. Gates traced the tradition to contemporary times. Wilson’s twentieth century cycle fits squarely in that tradition. Nadel has written that Wilson’s plays “privilege the figurative” as a

way of making “a claim for the human rights of Black Americans (“Boundaries” 103). They shift between text and performance, literal and figurative. A white person, like myself, may well read/hear/see Wilson’s plays from one perspective, while Black auditors take it from another. Wilson captures not the voice of Black Americans, but the voices, the “guitars,” of dozens of Black Americans and in so doing leaves the auditor with a cacophonous understanding that is perhaps better felt than understood. Each of the characters in Wilson’s slave narrative has their own story to tell, but there are some important recurring themes.

Their stories depict lives of hardship, loss, broken families, and everlasting struggle against an oppressive system which they negotiate with difficulty. As Toledo says in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, “As long as the colored man look to the 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” (27).

Three of Wilson’s characters have experienced actual slavery or convict leasing and 17 others have experienced jail or prison terms. Indeed, of the 10 plays, only *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* does not feature a character who has been incarcerated. Again, with the exception of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the women’s stories are largely ones of abandonment. Martha Pentecost’s husband had been gone for ten years. Berniece’s husband was killed by a white man. Louise was left by her man and Vera’s relationship with Floyd has run hot and cold. Rose, the product of a “half family,” is badly bruised by Troy and ends up raising his love child. Risa has cut her legs in an effort to ward off aggressive males who have been pestering her since she was a preteen. All of the women in *King Hedley II* have gotten the short end of the stick. Louise, who declared in *Seven Guitars* that she “don’t need no love” (33), has died after raising King, the son

of yet another abused woman, Ruby. And Tonya, a teenage mother herself, who has a pregnant teenaged daughter, is pregnant and considering an abortion.

Violence or implied violence is present in almost all of the plays. A mob gathers around the tin mill to protest Garrett Brown's death. Caesar polices the community by violence. Loomis is taken away from his community to enslavement by violence. Levee witnesses the rape of his mother and gruesome execution of his father at the hands of a white mob. The struggle between the Charles family and the Sutters originates in the violence of slavery and continues in the various deaths attributed to the ghost of the Yellow Dog. *Seven Guitars* ends in a violent death, as does *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Troy is brutally beaten by his father in *Fences*, Violence is an everyday occurrence in *King Hedley II*. Booster kills his girlfriend in *Jitney*, in part because it is the only demonstration that he can make to show that he is in control of his own destiny. There is no violence in *Radio Golf*, but there is a renewed sense of activism against the system, symbolized by warpaint, a struggle that is constantly in conversation in all the plays. Aside from the violent acts, there are ongoing conversations about weapons and the system. Indeed, when Harmond Wilks realizes his complicity in that system Sterling warns him that he may have gotten to the point where he needs a gun.

Weapons are an interesting motif. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Solly and Eli debate the relative merits of using sticks versus knives. Levee kills Toledo with a knife in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Floyd Barlow and Canewell debate knives versus guns in *Seven Guitars*. Though Floyd robs a bank with a gun, he is ultimately killed by Hedley's machete. Ruby later kills her own son, King, with a derringer that had been brought into the household by her lover, Elmore, the man who killed King's birth father. Sterling decides that a gun will be the means to his fortune in

Two Trains Running. But as Holloway warns, a Black man with a gun draws the attention of the White man.

West and Memphis have played the game of capitalism. Nonetheless, neither is particularly hopeful. Memphis ultimately places his hopes on the city's urban renewal buyout—his own rainbow. Though Sterling has hit a jackpot in the numbers (as does Booster in *Jitney*), he may have thrown it all away in deciding to do right by Hambone. Harmond's entire life, and his father's before him, has been grounded on the American system. He values the law, as did his grandfather, and capitalism. Yet, in *Radio Golf*, he is forced, via his newfound family connection with Joe Barlow, to see the impact that the law and his own family's capitalism has had on the unseen side of his family and on the neighborhood he thinks he is redeeming. Ironically, Harmond and Sterling, close in age, have lived in that neighborhood their entire lives and do not know each other.

Aunt Ester is featured by name in four of the plays, but has a physical presence only in the first. She is nonetheless a part of a mystical/spiritual motif, Christian, African, that carries through. In the two bleakest plays, *King Hedley II* and *Two Trains Running*, she adds an important spiritual element. Hope and song are inspired by visits to Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running*, but in *King Hedley II* Aunt Ester has died. In *Radio Golf*, however, her spirit is being revived by Sterling, Joe Barlow, and, perhaps, Harmond. Aunt Ester's Afro-Christian spirituality is shared in varied degrees by Hedley and to some extent by Canewell/Stool Pigeon, though both men are seen as scarcely sane. Martha Loomis/Pentecost, Berniece, and Rose have found spiritual fulfillment in the Christian Church. At times Herald Loomis, Levee, Elmore are quite outspoken, indeed sacrilegious, in their allusions to God.

The decision to have children is another recurring theme. None of the characters in *Gem of the Ocean* has children, though, as we learned in *Radio Golf*, Black Mary and Citizen Barlow later have a son, Joe. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* Herald and Martha Loomis have a daughter, Zonia, but the other characters are apparently childless. No children are mentioned in *Ma Rainey's Come and Gone*. The only progeny of the Charles family in *The Piano Lesson* is Maretha. Two children are mentioned or foreshadowed in *Seven Guitars*, Mister and King. Cory and Lyons are featured in *Fences*, as is their stepsister, Raynell. All have troubled relationships with their fathers. Troy was abused by his own father. A troubled childhood has led Bono to declare that he and his wife never wanted children. There are no children featured in *Two Trains Running*. Indeed, Wolf and Sterling talk about how they are reluctant to bring a child into the world in which they live. Sterling eventually, after his visit with Aunt Ester inspires him with hope, says he wants to have a baby with Risa. Booster, returns to see his father in *Jitney* and Youngblood is struggling to make enough money to buy a house for his girlfriend and child. Again, in *King Hedley II*, there are discussions about bringing children into a troubled world. Tonya does not want to give birth to the child she is carrying. King and Mister, troubled sons of troubled fathers, struggle to make their ways in the world. King, nonetheless, wants to beget a child. Finally, no children are mentioned in *Radio Golf*, save for Joe Barlow's daughter, who hopes to live in Aunt Ester's house. There are so many themes in Wilson's work that have and will continue to be discussed.

Solly rebuked Citizen Barlow for comparing the conditions he encountered in Pittsburgh to slavery, but the overground railroad to the north was nearly as grim. The transition from slave to sharecropper and low skilled factory worker does not seem to change anything. The caste system remained in place for Sterling nearly 100 years later and as Wilkerson writes, it has not

changed much for Americans of color today. As Citizen Barlow and Sterling both observed, factory jobs often seemed like another form of indentured servanthood. The conjoined twins of racial oppression and capitalism continue to dominate African American life.

This project began with connecting the slave narratives with barriers to self-actualization and shifted to the idea of a song. Maslow's White, upper class, model of self-actualization doesn't apply here. That model is grounded in an ideology that presumes that we all have access to the means necessary to ascend the hierarchy. Neither safety nor security nor self-esteem was readily accessible to Black Americans in the twentieth century and, as the events of 2020 have shown us, not necessarily today either. Bynum's articulation of a song, the inward voice that provides one comfort and connection in the world in which they inhabit, bypasses the need for self-esteem designated by the mandates of others. Solly and Citizen Barlow had a song, as did Ma Rainey. Sterling Johnson finds his song, as does Harmond Wilks. Herald Loomis eventually finds his. Martha Loomis Pentecost and Rose Maxson find theirs, but not without considerable heartache. Troy Maxson dies without a song, as do Levee, Floyd and King. Troy lamented that he "didn't have a pot to piss in" and that knowledge destroyed his ability to sing out the joy in the life he had. The characters who find their songs are ones who have ignored the measure of success imposed on them by others. As Aunt Ester advised Sterling, "Make better what you have and you have best." Maslow referred to his model as the hierarchy of human needs, but, as Wilderson asserts, the Black has never been regarded as fully human. The idea of finding a song is ultimately a means to pursuing humanity.

Wilson's Twentieth Century Cycle presents us with the great dilemma of Black existence in America, where freedom, economic security, indeed, life itself is a constant, tenuous struggle. As Memphis remarks "freedom is heavy" (*Two Trains* 41). One can be a small cog in a great

machine, stockpiled at the whim of an economy they neither understand nor can master, or can choose to drop out of that economy. Either way puts one in constant struggle. The multiple voices in Wilson's *oeuvre* can be overwhelming in just one play, let alone in their entirety. Yet to witness these plays over the course of some 15 years or more, as I did, can dull the experience. As Ma Rainey says, the Blues are a way of understanding life. It is through the engagement with one's struggles that they find their song. Wilson's plays perform a similar function. If one could only experience the plays over a short period of time. Julia Kristeva described the experience of women throughout much of history as being lodged in monumental time: ". . . a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. . . . the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the word temporality hardly fits" (16). This is the experience of Blacks in America that Wilson so aptly depicted in his twentieth century slave narrative. Indeed, dark is the night and cold is the ground.

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