A DUST AND FRESH HOPE: BLACK MASCULINITY AND THE SPACE LEFT FOR WOMEN IN AUGUST WILSON’S DRAMA

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Allia Ida Homayoun 2009
Spring 2009
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DEDICATION

To my loving parents, Bahereh and Amir - your dreams cultivated my possibilities.
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ABSTRACT

DUST AND FRESH HOPE: BLACK MASCULINITY AND THE SPACE LEFT FOR WOMEN IN AUGUST WILSON’S DRAMA

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This project examines August Wilson’s ten-play cycle as a blueprint for the process of decolonization. Using postcolonial theory as a framework for reading his plays, this thesis explores the development of identity and achievement of freedom in Wilson’s twentieth century. The second chapter argues that Wilson values a measure of masculinity that celebrates African sensibilities rather than the dominant concept of American masculinity. The third chapter considers the space women occupy on stage and the mobility they experience in their relationships with their male counterparts. Furthermore, this thesis concludes that the route for discovery of identity and liberation differs greatly for men and women in Wilson’s drama.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

By his own admission, August Wilson did not originally plan to write ten plays that spanned the twentieth century. However, within the pages of one of his earlier works a thesis that connects all of his plays and provides a perspective for understanding emerges. *Joe Turner=Come and Gone*, quoted below and published in 1988, outlines several themes that intersect in all of his works. Furthermore, this passage in particular serves as a valuable point of entry for this study. Though lengthy, each word in this passage defines Wilson=project:

From the deep and near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. 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. (x)

In these first two lines Wilson establishes the duality of freedom his characters experience. In the first line he explains that they have been newly emancipated from the perils of slavery. In the second line he details how their slavery persists in other forms.
One of his pursuits is to unveil the truth that slavery survived under other guises beyond the Emancipation Proclamation. His characters emerge from varying forms of enslavement—spiritual, cultural, peonage, debt, mental and imprisonment—and attempt to rediscover their identity. Most notably many of his characters are challenged by the enslavement of their song. Wilson equates song with identity, such that when he details a song beating within one's chest, he is suggesting that one's song, one's identity, is always within his possession, he must simply rediscover it. In addition, the words 'sleep' and 'near' illuminate the illusion of the distance between the North and the South. Although these men and women anticipate the fulfillment of the promise of freedom in the North, some find that many of the ideologies that hindered their ability to achieve the rights of citizenship still exist in the North. Although they may be exiting the deep and distant South, the North is in many ways much nearer than expected.

The word 'isolated' categorizes the struggle many of his characters must overcome. The isolation his characters face evolves throughout the century, but it ultimately echoes the separation that occurred during slavery. Moreover, this isolation occurs on different levels, representative of a disconnect his characters experience with their lineage and African culture. This is also a result of their physical separation from loved ones and lastly, this symbolizes their inability to claim their own identity. The process of reclaiming their identity and finding their song can be described as a cultural return.

In their book *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theatre* Chris Banfield and Brian Crow explain that
this has to do with the urgent need of subjugated peoples, as an essential part of the process of decolonization, to recuperate their own histories, their own social and cultural traditions, their own narratives and discourses. Call in the service, not of a myth of racial essence, but of what Said describes, citing Fanon, as a liberation that is also a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness. (11)

A major purpose of this study is to recognize Wilson’s documentation of the twentieth century as a blueprint for the process of decolonization. This concept will be explained further, but identified here is the need for a process that allows a character to rediscover his long denied ancestry. As long as this heritage remains undiscovered, the character remains isolated and even enslaved.

The Bibles and guitars become tools for this process. The spirituals sung by slaves in America are a site of intersection for both of these tools. The guitars symbolize the musical element, and certainly the oral nature of African history. Secondly, stories from the Old Testament were repeated in the spirituals for two specific purposes. The presence of the stories reminded the slaves of Moses and the deliverance of his people. The repetition of these stories allowed the slaves to potentially view themselves as chosen people, connected to God with a better place in heaven. Conversely, these spirituals held a very practical purpose and carried coded messages that aided in the Underground Railroad, and brought many slaves to freedom. Moses became a code for Harriet Tubman or another leader. Directions such as Wade in the Water or Walk Together Children relayed different messages to runaway slaves. For example, these songs alerted runaways that they should seek water to divert their scent from dogs on their chase or that they should stay close and walk together. Wilson recalls these two tools as necessary even with the turn of the new century so that his characters can
discover a new sense of freedom for themselves.

The dust and fresh hope, included in the title of this study, represent the past and the future. Wilson explains one must accept and understand the past to know how to act in the future. Wilson lines his characters’ pockets with dust so that the history as slaves is never forgotten. The dust here represents the hours, days, months, years spent working the land. For Wilson, the remnants of slavery, the physical residue of their labor, should always carried. Criticizing what he views as a disregard of history, Wilson questions why parents do not teach their children about slavery, arguing that is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history? (Savran 27). The fresh hope shares the pocket space to indicate that with a recognition and acceptance of this history, one can move forward into a positive future. Wilson purposefully places these two items in the lining of the pockets not only to show what is present, but to also highlight what is not. His decision to line a space generally occupied by money highlights Wilson’s reordering of values. As this study argues, his characters find freedom in their appreciation of history and a vision of the future over monetary and material goods.

It is perhaps ironic that Wilson calls these men and women foreigners because many come from families that have lived in America for centuries. However, Wilson’s use of this word most accurately highlights the experience of being Africans in America. A goal he holds for his characters is that they may eventually be able to
recognize and appreciate the fact that as Africans they have a unique way of looking at the world which is, in many cases, in direct opposition with the European or American way of seeing things. The feeling of foreignness aligns with W.E.B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness. Du Bois explains:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (694)

Wilson’s characters must answer the question of how to act as a result of this vision. This vision can become both empowering and also crippling. This can enable characters to recognize and reject a vision of themselves that is not of their own making and move beyond the glares of others to create their own measure of themselves. Conversely, characters can be consumed by the sight of themselves through the eyes of others and can become paralyzed by this. Wilson’s characters, males in particular, continually make decisions regarding their vision of themselves and their own measure of masculinity to suggest the separate outcomes resulting from different choices.

The A song that is both a wail and a whelp of joy is a reference to the blues, which pervade Wilson’s work in both his use of language and of blues tropes. Certainly, the role the blues have had on Wilson cannot go unmentioned. Along with Amiri Baraka, Jorge Borges, and Romare Bearden, the blues complete what Wilson has called his four Bs, or his four major sources of influence. His use of the blues is recognizable through the rhythm of his diction, repetition of line and the presence of actual songs onstage. In
addition, Wilson’s use of the blues goes beyond the form and language of the blues as he adopts, in many ways, the function of the blues. Wilson describes the first moment he heard the blues, *there was an immediate emotional response. It was someone speaking directly to me. I felt this was mine, this was something I could connect with that I instantly emotionally understood.* This spoke to something in myself. It said, this is yours (@Moyers 63). His plays come to parallel certain functions of the blues. Many songs tell a story that accurately reflects the experiences of those within the community. Moreover, the songs granted a stylized complaint about earthly trials and troubles, a complaint countered, if at all, by the hope of better days in some other town or by the flickering promise of an occasional loving companion (@Gates 48). Similarly, his plays reflect a realistic perspective on daily troubles but are able, at times, to display a potential better day such that it is both a *wail* and a *whelp.*

Lastly, the desire to reconnect, to reassemble is prevalent throughout his work and also drives this study. In all of Wilson’s plays, characters undergo some level of physical movement ranging from their temporary time in a boarding house, to a return to their lover, and even their death. His plays document the aftermath of years of separation from loved ones during slavery and continued migration to the North post-emancipation. In the last lines of this preface to *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* cites the ultimate goal that is to rebuild the community and reconnect people who have been purposefully torn from one another for centuries.

This study specifically examines Wilson’s twentieth century as a process of decolonization, of rebuilding and reconnecting. The focus here is to consider how Wilson
charts the progress of fighting for basic human rights in 1904 to the mayoral campaign of Harmond Wilkes in 1997. The theoretical framework guiding this examination includes Fanon primarily, but other post-colonial theorists as well. Although traditional theorists of African American literature such as Houston Baker were explored, the decision to rely more heavily on post-colonial theory stems from a purposeful desire to provide a new, and different perspective on Wilson’s work. In his text *Decolonization and the Decolonized* Albert Memmi explains that

the end of colonization should have brought with it freedom and prosperity. The colonized would give birth to the citizen, master of his political, economic, and cultural destiny. After decades of imposed ignorance, his country, now free, would affirm its sovereignty. Opulent or indigent, it would reap the rewards of its labor, of its soil and subsoil. Once its native genius was given free rein, the use of its recovered language would allow native culture to flourish. Unfortunately, in most cases, the long anticipated period of freedom, won at the cost of terrible suffering, brought with it poverty and corruption, violence, and sometimes chaos. (3)

Set in 1904, *Gem of the Ocean*, stages all four of the actual challenges Memmi describes above. Slavery is comparable to the process of colonization as millions of native Africans were torn from their land, treated as chattel and forced to adopt and adapt to the European-influenced American culture. As Wilson navigates through this timeline of restoration he outlines specific choices made by characters that greatly influence their ability to achieve true freedom and reclaim their native culture. This thesis first examines the development of masculinity in Wilson’s drama, suggesting that he outlines specific choices his characters must confront in order to rediscover their song and define their masculinity on their own terms. More specifically, Wilson’s male characters are divided into three groups: the A spiritually and culturally bankrupt(Elam 158), the warrior sons,
and the blues singers. The characters are separated to display the impact each character’s individual perspective on his masculinity has on his ability to experience freedom. This chapter suggests that Wilson establishes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic [and] proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology (Neal 2039).

The third chapter in this study explores the space left for Wilson’s women, questioning whether a woman’s song ever makes it onstage. Wilson clearly states that the telling of a woman’s story is not his central purpose. Furthermore, the space they are provided onstage is limited, and can be described as what is left over. However, Wilson’s women are still able to achieve mobility within this space and in their relationships with men. This chapter explores how they achieve this mobility and the consequences that follow. The chapters are separated by gender so that the decisions the men and women make can be explored in isolation. Examining the characters in this way allows for a claim to be made about the different ways men and women are able to reach freedom. Men must define their masculinity in their ability to be part of their community while women are only granted mobility when they become free of domestic or marital responsibility. Lastly, this reading of Wilson’s dramas allows for a consideration of how these sons and daughters can truly reconnect [and] reassemble.
August Wilson reexamines the stories that American history textbooks have left unvoiced. He explores a post-emancipation black community struggling to define and create a meaningful cultural identity in a society that has long denied the existence of any such thing. Wilson argues that the history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks [and] writing our own history has been a very valuable tool, because if we’re going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past (Savran 27). His plays reveal the vestiges of slavery and how the struggle goes on, in a particularly intense form, for the definition and assertion of an authentic rather than an imposed identity, by those who have long been subjugated and subordinated (Banfield 16). In each of his ten plays Wilson unveils the story of at least one man attempting to rediscover his song, which represents to Wilson his identity as a black man, as an American, and as a soul that has inherited a history of separation but also tremendous strength. Though he clearly maintains the spotlight on at least one man’s story, critics warn that his works are neither misogynistic nor phallocentric, but [instead] they are male-centered (Clark 100). The
space left for women will be discussed in the following chapter; the focus here is on Wilson’s telling of a man’s story. Wilson is clear that his male characters are individuals who select their own paths and, moreover, do not represent every black man.

However, what nearly all of his male characters do share is the recognition that there exists an established conception of masculinity in the dominant culture. It should be noted that in Wilson’s ten plays there are only three white characters, all male, who appear onstage. In the spirit of Ed Bullin’s Pig Pen, we see that although the dominant culture is relatively invisible onstage and Wilson’s focus is clearly on the black residents of the Hill District, there is simultaneously a constant presence of the effects of the hegemonic society. This chapter explores three specific paths Wilson delineates for his male characters to travel in response to the task of defining their own masculinity. Wilson suggests that attempting to uphold the dominant society’s definition of manhood, one that emphasizes wealth and power, will only lead to one’s own demise and furthermore, a separate measure of masculinity has existed for centuries. One simply must rediscover it. He places value on the masculinity that demands from his characters a deep sense of appreciation and recognition of their rich heritage and their acceptance that they are indeed responsible for their neighbors and play a vital role in their community.

More specifically this study focuses on twelve men in particular appearing in Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Two Trains Running and Radio Golf published in 2003, 1988, 1993, and 2007, respectively.

This study first examines the men who have discarded their heritage and the desire to find their own song. These men are the spiritually and culturally bankrupt.
(Elam 158), for they measure their masculinity in their wealth and power and far from being a source of help, they have become obstacles in the lives of those around them. Secondly, we explore the young men emerging from some particular form of abandonment, confinement or imprisonment with the spirit of warriors and their heart[s] kicking in their chest[s] with a song worth singing (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone). These men have not been able to fully develop their song and their initial experiences with manhood have left them unsatisfied and searching for ways to redefine the role that society has already created for them. Furthermore, the issues of abandonment, confinement and imprisonment contribute to their limited access to either wealth or status. Lastly, there are the men who once were the warrior sons and now fully recognize and accept their song and their responsibility to their community. These are the metaphorical blues singers who share their experiences with their community and aid the younger men in finding a fulfilling song.

When embarking on an exploration of Wilson’s ideas of masculinity, we must first recognize what he is specifically rejecting. Speaking of the American way, Wilson comments on the obsession with ownership by narrating a scene in American history: there’s some nice land out there, someone says. Who got it? another says. Indians. another says. Well, let’s take it that’s the premise for life in American society. It’s the American way (Grant 187). This process negates tradition and concepts of heritage that Wilson values. Wilson suggests that this pursuit of land disregards the history of the land and the history of the people who inhabited the land. Moreover, this process is repeated in Wilson’s own neighborhood as he details the beginnings of
urban renewal and gentrification. Memphis, his protagonist in the late sixties, regretfully sells his restaurant building to the city, and in the nineties the insertion of a Whole Foods and a Starbucks evidence the replacement of small local businesses with corporately operated establishments that will eventually raise the rent to a level that the historically working class community of the Hill District will not be able to afford. Certainly, the value placed on ownership in American society is absolutely linked to the historical presence of Africans as slaves in America. For over two centuries slaves were considered property, bought and sold, willed and inherited, and reduced to a monetary measure. Consequently the desire to own something serves, in many ways, as the foundation of the American Dream for all but especially for blacks post-emancipation. The ability to own became, as it existed in society, a status symbol, a source of pride and an expression of freedom. Let us begin with this first group of men who internalize the obsession with ownership and assimilation.

AThe Spiritually and Culturally Bankrupt@

The first group of men, Ahe spiritually and culturally bankrupt,@receives their name from a description of a character by Harry J. Elam. Although Elam was speaking specifically about West in Two Trains Running his description of the character actually applies to several male men in Wilson’s canon. This name is accurate and perhaps the best description of this group because they are void of any spiritual or cultural connection to anyone in their community. Moreover, the use of a monetary measure to describe this void further exemplifies the things these men worship above all else: wealth and power.
Unfortunately, these men choose to dispense the same oppression they have received onto the men and women in their community. They view themselves as separate and are unable to achieve fulfillment in their lives because of their choices. Furthermore, each man carries a name that bears significance to the status they are attached to. Caesar signifies Roman nobility, displaying his prowess over the other characters. Seth represents a biblical analogy to the third son of Eve and Adam, considered to be a replacement for Abel. West elicits the Western belief of Manifest Destiny, the belief that God wanted America to stretch from coast to coast and a policy that made the acquisition of land a religious invocation. Lastly Roosevelt becomes a symbol of the 32nd president known for the New Deal. However, the pronunciation of the name in production (Roosevelt) attaches him to the concept of a ruse, highlighting the deceptive nature of his own new business deal. These men reject all ties with their African ancestry and attempt to mimic and embody European values. Wilson clearly makes a separation between African and American, or rather European, culture when defining African sensibilities:

The whole philosophical system is different. For instance, Europeans look at man as apart from the world. In African sensibility, man is a part of the world. That is a very basic philosophical difference which influences how you think, how you live, how you respond to the world around you. You see, blacks in American society have had to respond to the way Europeans respond to the world in order to survive in the society. And they have not been allowed their cultural differences. I think that if we move toward claiming the strongest parts of ourselves, which is the African parts, so that we can participate in society as Africans, we would be all the stronger for it. (Livingston 57)

The four men that follow view themselves as intrinsically apart and separate from their
community and their world.

Although Caesar is in 1904, in closest proximity to the era of slavery, his actions and values suggest that he has fully forgotten the oppression of his not-so-distant ancestors and has instead internalized the practices and language of the oppressor. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson creates a character that is arguably the most vile in the entire cycle because he fully composes his masculinity in his ability to control and oppress those in his community. For Caesar the measure of a man is his wealth and power. His first lines in the play explain his views, claiming *A*hey was over at the mill rioting, *Y*talking about how they ain’t going to work, *Y*police had to arrest about two hundred people. I ain’t never seen nothing like it. Want to bust out the goddamn windows! Running around like a pack of animals. Talking about they ain’t going to work. You can’t have that. The mill losing money (30). These first lines reveal a great deal about where and how Caesar envisions his place in society. Immediately, the usage of the term *A*hey to describe a large group of men creates distance between himself and the other men. *A*hey are separate from and below him. Secondly, it becomes evident that he does not harbor animosity towards the police because of the fact that he refers to them by name. However, he dehumanizes the group of men he just previously distanced himself from by describing them as animals. Furthermore he is not concerned with the cause of the riots, or any sense or reason behind them. Instead, he is concerned with the potential financial impact this may have. Caesar sees money, not people. Caesar blames Lincoln for the freedom he wrongly bestowed upon the slaves, arguing:
I tell you whose fault it is. It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing. He didn't know like I know. Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. They don't know how to act otherwise. You try and do something nice for niggers and it's backfire on you every time. You try and give them an opportunity by giving them a job and they take and throw it away. (34)

Certainly, what Caesar believes is indisputably terrible. But more than anything it is incredibly sad. It is sad that Caesar fails to see that in the eyes of the men that enslaved millions of Africans, he is no different. Moreover, his casual usage of the word *nigger* suggests his appropriation of a language used by whites to discriminate and oppress his fellow blacks. His repeated use of this word to distinguish himself from others displays the extent to which he has internalized his oppression such that this word easily leaps from his tongue with no regard to how it has been used.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon elaborates on the usage of an oppressor's language, explaining

all colonized people—increasingly, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave—position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become. (2-3)

As part of his mission to achieve whiteness, Caesar imprisons the most sacred character in all of Wilson's plays and murders a man who spent his life as a conductor in the Underground Railroad. When Caesar arrests Aunt Ester—Wilson’s character who, depending on the decade in which the play takes place, is roughly four hundred years old—he dismisses his heritage and severs any connection he may have to his culture. Aunt Ester's birth is between 1619 and 1620, representative of the first footprint made by an
African on American soil. She is the connection to Africa and carries with her all that Wilson wants people to never forget. Moreover, his murder of Solly in the conclusion of the play illustrates how he has fully dismantled any belief that he is part of a community. This is the biggest crime in Wilson's eyes. He has rejected his heritage, his African-self, internalized the obsession with wealth and status, and has murdered a hero.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Seth Holly has internalized the traditional concept of manhood to the extent that he can no longer associate himself with others in his community because his pursuits are in direct opposition with their social position. As the owner of a boardinghouse in 1911, he occupies an elevated status when compared to others onstage. This social position grants Seth with an exceptional opportunity to help others in his community. However, in every occasion he has to help he instead selects to demean or obstruct the progress of others. Seth shares some of his thoughts on the migration of men and women seeking better lives:

> These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. But these niggers keep on coming. Walking, riding, carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This the city. Niggers coming up here from the backwoods, coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening. (6)

What is first and most noticeable about Seth’s rant is his language, and specifically his usage of the word *nigger*. Like Caesar, Seth has accepted a language of oppression and uses it on others. Like Caesar, he also sees himself as separate not a part, of these people. However, Seth enjoys a distance from slavery that others, namely the tenants in his
boardinghouse, have not. Born to free parents in the North, Seth fails to recognize how he was simply dealt a different set of cards. The only fact that separates him is the time and the place in which he was born. This inability to see that the only difference is chance paralyzes his potential to make meaningful connections and contributions to the people around him. Moreover, the people who do move North help maintain the roof above his head, but despite this, he still sees to it that he is part of their rude awakening. He criticizes Bynum's spiritual practices, citing *All that old mumbo jumbo nonsense*.

Though Bynum is the character most connected to African spirituality in the play, Seth disregards his belief as nonsense. In his treatment of the other boarders he displays his deep attachment to the ways others view him and his property, telling Jeremy after he has been arrested, *Aknow these is respectable quarters. I don≠ put up with no foolishness. Everybody know Seth Holly keep a good house. Was my daddy≠ house. This house been a decent house for a long time*.

Furthermore, Seth specifically criticizes the migrants' attachment to their Bibles and guitars. The Bibles represent their faith and for some, became the site of a family tree. Etheridge Knight describes the multiple uses for the Bible in his poem *The Idea of Ancestry,*

> My father≠ mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody≠ birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for *Awhereabouts unknown.*

In his poem, the grandmother accounts for the existence of every member of the family,
and perhaps most importantly her Bible becomes the place to document those who have disappeared in some form. In these pages she has created her own birth and death certificates and also places her family story alongside Ahe Chosen People (Gates 9). The guitars symbolize their song, their identity and also their appreciation of music and of oral storytelling. Historically songs recorded Ahe cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they [found] themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work Y. This is a way of passing along information (Moyers 63).

Certainly, the combination of biblical stories of Moses, Daniel and Ezekiel placed in a song the spirituals often became a map filled with coded language to aid in the escape of slaves in the Underground Railroad. Even past the emancipation, these two items Bibles and guitars Care still incredibly valuable to Wilson and to his characters discovery of freedom. Seth’s dismissal of these two items establishes his distance from his culture and also his belief that these things were no longer relevant and became instead a hindrance to the assimilation he sought. The act that is most revealing about Seth’s character is his refusal to help Loomis find his wife when he knows where she is.

Seth explains

something ain’t setting right with that fellow Y. I take him up there and try to talk to him and he ain’t for no talking. Say he been traveling Y. coming over from Ohio. Say he a deacon in the church. Say he looking for Martha Pentecost. Talking about that his wife Y. You see that little girl? I didn’t hook it up till he said it, but that little girl look just like her Y. I ain’t told him nothing. The way that fellow look I wasn’t gonna tell him nothing. I don’t know what he looking for her for Y. Something ain’t setting right with that fellow, Bynum. He’s one of them mean looking niggers look like he done killed somebody gambling over a quarter. (19-20)

He fulfills the role of the oppressor by judging Loomis fully on his exterior. Though he
knows who Loomis’s wife is and knows where she lives and recognizes the similarities between the child and Martha, he chooses to not help Loomis. Like Caesar, Seth identifies himself as separate and above the others around him. He internalizes the oppression he has faced and in turn doles it out to others. He judges others as being backward without even recognizing that it is only his own way of thinking that is such. Moreover, his specific choice of degrading the young men for coming with guitars becomes symbolic of his own refusal of his song and a larger refusal of his ancestry, culture and community.

Fanon sees another path for men like Seth, suggesting that

the black man should no longer have to be faced with the dilemma Awhiten or perish.@ but must become aware of the possibility of existence; in still other words, if society creates difficulties for him because of his color, if I see in his dreams the expression of an unconscious desire to change color, my objective will not be to dissuade him by advising him to Akeep his distance@ on the contrary, once his motives have been identified, my objective will be to enable him to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict, i.e., the social structure. (80)

Seth holds a position where he can actually contribute to some change in the social structure. In Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, we see another character who, like Seth, has the ability to house others and chooses however, unlike Seth, to actually help. The nameless protagonist explains his relationship with the woman who gave him shelter when he is plagued with questions similar to Loomis’s own uncertainties:

She was something more Ca force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive. And the obsession with my identity which I had
developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? (258-259)

Through her own generous act, Mary shows the potential to serve as a guide or mentor that Seth refuses. Preoccupied with maintaining his own image, Seth truly lets down his community by deciding to not lift others up with him.

In *Two Trains Running*, West can never reach spiritual fulfillment in his life because he places wealth above everything else. Certainly, his occupation as an undertaker highlights his disconnect with the living and his inability to connect both spiritually and emotionally with those around him. West describes his experience of visiting Aunt Ester shortly after his wife passed away and her refusal to take payment for her healing services. West and Holloway converse about her request:

WEST: She told me to take and throw twenty dollars in the river and come back and see her. I thought she was crazy to tell you the truth. I didn’t pay her no mind. I know she was old, but I figure she had gotten too old.

HOLLOWAY: That’s what your problem is. You don’t want to do nothing for yourself. You want somebody else to do it for you. Aunt Ester don’t work that way. She say you got to pull your part of the load. But you didn’t want to do that. That’s why you don’t know. And it didn’t cost you but twenty dollars.

WEST: I wasn’t going to throw my money in the river, nigger. (70)

The money never does come back to her; the money either sinks, floats, or eventually gets lost somewhere down the stream. What is important is the act of throwing that money away. She values this act because it requires that person to make the decision that money is not the center of his life. This act requires a person to deny any control money may have over them. This act allows people to see that they control the money and that
their life will continue with or without that twenty dollar bill.

Wilson contends that West values money over everything. I don’t know why it is that way, but somehow the more money you have, the wealthier you are, the more important money becomes for you. The man in the play who is most capable of throwing twenty dollars in the river doesn’t want to do it (Pettengill 160). Water serves as a powerful symbol in Wilson’s drama and is an allusion to the City of Bones. The City of Bones is the resting place for those who passed during the Middle Passage. The connection here between West’s refusal to throw the money in the river and the allusion to the submerged graveyard is that both highlight greed. Greed drove people to kidnap innocent fathers, mothers and children from their lives. Greed prompted people to place shackles on those innocent hands and feet and ultimately, greed blinded those people from seeing the fathers, mothers and children as more than just an increase in income. West’s refusal of this act denies him the peace he seeks to make with his wife’s death. He leads an unconnected life. Aside from the occasional appearance he makes in Memphis restaurant he is an incredibly isolated individual.

Elam argues that West has established himself as a rich and successful businessman. However, he had made his money by exploiting black people. He even tries to cheat Memphis out of fair price for his restaurant and lost his soul in the process. West is both spiritually and culturally bankrupt (158). Through his final rejoinder to Holloway in the above passage, it becomes evident that West locates himself in the role of an oppressive force through his usage of the word nigger. His use of this word similar to both Caesar and Seth is used to demean and lower the status of Holloway. He
sees himself as separate and employs a hate-filled, destructive word to situate himself in a position of power. Ultimately, West defines his masculinity in the cash that insulates his pockets and he is unable to reach any sense of a spiritual self. Through West, we see how A Wilson presents varying outcomes to his characters—struggles to rise from the bottom of a white-dominated society, just as he endows them with differing values, attitudes and aspirations. But their common condition is one of struggle against the racism, corruption and predatory materialism of white America (Banfield 48). West internalizes this obsession with materialism and chooses the comforts of cash over his community. His name serves as an allusion to the concept of Manifest Destiny because he moves through his community purchasing the properties that his neighbors sell because they are going out of business. Rather than help his neighbors, he becomes part of the process of forcing them out of the neighborhood. Much of his involvement in the play highlights his attempts to purchase Memphis restaurant for a price that is less than it is worth, as Elam noted above.

In *Radio Golf*, Roosevelt’s desire to have Nike purchase a piece of him serves as a metaphor for the enslavement he volunteers for, if the price is right. The 1990s were a time of economic prosperity and the characters experience more opportunities in this decade than in any other before. However, some of the men, namely Roosevelt, still succumb to the dominant concept of masculinity and worship wealth and status regardless of the personal costs they may have. Roosevelt expresses his admiration for Tiger Woods by decorating the office that he and Harmond share with a large poster of the golf pro. In a 2008 TheatreWorks production of the play (in Mountain View,
California), the figures each character places as his hero provides insight into the separate ways each man defines his masculinity. Harmond hangs a poster of Martin Luther King, Jr. which is later joined by Roosevelt’s poster of Woods. For Roosevelt, the image of Woods is more important than the actual man himself. What he values in Woods is not who he may be as an individual, but rather the idea that he has both wealth and power, not to mention a generous sponsorship by Nike, among others. Roosevelt receives an opportunity to host his own golf talk radio show with the support of wealthy white investors. Suspicious, Harmond questions, Why Bernie Smith want to partner with you? What he get out of this? Roosevelt explains:

ROOSEVELT: The owner gets a tax incentive. It’s an advantage for him and an advantage for us.

HARMOND: Incentive for what? What do you bring to the table?

ROOSEVELT: The FCC offers a Minority Tax Certificate.

HARMOND: So you’re the black face? You’re just the front. Roosevelt allows himself to be bought, metaphorically allowing the white investors to own him. Although he does receive financial benefits from this it comes at the cost of tokenizing himself, and by doing so, implies that this is the only way to get in the door. Furthermore, many of Roosevelt’s actions in the play display his desire to attain both wealth and power with a disregard to how it is actually earned.

In this particular scene Sterling defines Roosevelt on the basis of his actions and treatment of his black community. Sterling says to Roosevelt, You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don’t know like I know. I know
the truth of it. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. 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 a Negro. He
thinks he’s a white man. It’s Negroes like you who hold us back (76). Sterling’s
frustration stems from his understanding that Roosevelt sees himself as separate and
apart from the world and his community. He recognizes that Roosevelt’s refusal to
appreciate his heritage contributes to upholding the hegemonic society. In this way,
Sterling identifies Roosevelt as an embodiment of an obstacle to progress while bearing a
striking resemblance to Langston Hughes’ description of a particular group in *The Negro
Artist and the Racial Mountain*. Hughes describes, A frequent phrase from the father is,
Look how well a white man does things. And so the word white comes to be
unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and
money. The whisper of I want to be white runs silently through their minds (1311). In
response Roosevelt makes clear that there is nothing connecting himself to Sterling. He
furthers negative stereotypes and reveals his ignorant beliefs:

Who’s? Roosevelt Hicks is not part of any. It’s not my fault your daddy is in jail, your mama on drugs, your little sister pregnant and the kids don’t have any food cause the welfare cut off the money. Roosevelt Hicks ain’t holding nobody back. Roosevelt Hicks got money. Roosevelt Hicks got a job because Roosevelt Hicks wanted one. You niggers kill me blaming somebody else for your troubles. Get up off your ass. Quit stealing. Quit using drugs. Go to school. Get a job. Pay your taxes. Oh, I see, you can’t do that cause Roosevelt Hicks is holding you back. (77)

Roosevelt clearly sees himself as unconnected to those in his community. He views
himself as separate and above the people around him. What becomes perhaps more
interesting than his ignorant views of others is the way he views himself. He measures
himself only in his wealth and power. When Roosevelt defines himself there is no mention of a spiritual or cultural connection to anyone or anything beyond himself.

Elam poses a question that becomes significant to Roosevelt’s position in the play:

If part of Wilson’s project in defining a liberatory masculinity is to construct a place where black men are in fact free, then a critical question is how they can remove the vestiges, the markings of prison, once outside its walls and constraints. Are black men within the general society still systematized, watched, and controlled by a panoptic unseen white observer, as they are within the prison walls? Are they truly free? To what degree do Wilson’s men specifically and African Americans more generally still bear the scars of the imprisonment of slavery? Within each historical period of his cyclical plays Wilson recontextualizes his answer to these questions. His responses confront the external manifestations of white patriarchal control as well as the myriad of ways black men have internalized their oppression. (147)

When Elam’s question is considered, Roosevelt appears to not be free, but instead still a prisoner to his flawed definition of masculinity. When Roosevelt places wealth and power over everything else in his world he immediately becomes a prisoner to a system that can provide him with those two things. Similarly, Caesar, Seth, West and Roosevelt are all controlled by a dominant capitalistic society that replaces prayers with paychecks and psalms with pistols. These men may not have forgotten their ancestry, but they surely have denied it. They have internalized the oppression that they or their fathers have faced and now redistribute that oppression onto others within their community. Their money and their positions of power do not grant them freedom because they are enslaved to that which dispenses their desires whether it be property ownership or a job that grants a higher status. When Roosevelt is asked to become a partner in a radio show he does so knowing that the wealthy white men who have invited him, only do so because they
receive a tax break for having diversity. He is being used. And he knows, but allows this
to occur because to the outside world, his status has just been elevated. Wilson suggests
that liberation comes through a spiritual and cultural connection with one’s community
and a recognition of one’s ancestry. While these men attempt to mimic and even replace
the oppressor, they remain the most enslaved group in all of the plays.

In his text *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines and August Wilson*, Keith Clark supports this concept and provides these men with the title: A mimetic subject arguing that

the figure is physically present in his community but has misguidedly inculcated
values that preclude emotional and spiritual bonds. This character often valorizes
some aspect of a patriarchal masculinity: an obsession with economic independence
and capitalistic values, an anachronistic, extramasculinized conceptualization of
malehood rooted in violence and the objectification of women. (102)

We can see how Wilson, in this way, is simultaneously critiquing the dominant culture’s
maintenance of a conception of masculinity grounded in wealth and status. Through the
portrayal and punishment these mimicking characters undergo onstage, it is evident that
Wilson is persecuting the thought that one’s only measure is monetary. By internalizing
these dominant beliefs, his characters essentially sterilize themselves from any fruitful
connection with their community. To Wilson, this is the ultimate betrayal.

Warrior Sons

Let Black People understand

that they are the lovers and the sons

of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.

Let the world be a Black Poem

And let all Black People Speak This Poem

Silently

or LOUD (Baraka 220).

Within the lines of Amiri Baraka’s poem Black Art, shown above, exists
Wilson’s vision for this second group of characters. They descend from a long line of
warriors and sons and lovers, but do not know it yet. These characters are placed onstage
in the moments that they are most attempting to confront the ideologies touted by the
spiritually and culturally bankrupt. All of these men are currently in battle. They have
attempted to attain the dominant concept of masculinity and have received resistance as a
result. All of these men have experienced some element of isolation, confinement or
abandonment 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 (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone i). Their
experiences also serve as a reminder of their desire to make [their] own world (Joe
Turner’s Come and Gone 90). These men are at a crossroads between the first group and
the heroic blues singers. Citizen, Loomis, Sterling and Harmond all embody W.E.B. Du
Bois=theory of double-consciousness as they feel their Awo-ness, Can American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The Awo warring ideals are represented by the decision they must make in terms of how to define their masculinity and identity. They have already attempted to follow the route of the first group and have found that it did not work. However, as they have experienced some form of isolation, they know of no other avenue. Therein lies the necessity of the call Baraka makes, similar to many other artists producing during the Black Arts Movement, in the first line quoted, Aet Black people understand that they are descendants of a rich heritage and history. Unlike the spiritually and culturally bankrupt they have not yet denied their lineage and culture. In many ways, Lorraine Hansberry Walter Lee Younger can be seen as their literary brother. He too struggles with his own definitions of manhood and ultimately decides, as do each of these men, that the contributions he can give his family and community that truly matter are not monetarily measured. As with the previous group, the names of these characters provide insight into their desires, mistakes and current position in society. Citizen deeply desires the rights that his name demands; Loomis is looming in search of his wife and life; Sterling believes his problems can be solved with money; and Harmond is challenged to become the warrior his name suggests.

Although Citizen Barlow knocks on the door of 1839 Wylie Avenue, the only known sanctuary in the Hill District, seeking a simple solution he leaves with an acceptance of his ancestry and ultimately his place in the world. In *Gem of the Ocean,*
Citizen has come North in pursuit of the dream his mother attached to him by way of his name. The belief that he has the right to participate in the development of his own world is reiterated every time his name is called. And yet, his first experiences in this world have left him feeling as less of a citizen and more of a faceless, powerless bystander. He recalls his attempt at a job:

They say they was paying two dollars a day but when we got there they say a dollar fifty. They say we got to pay two dollars room and board. They sent us over to a place the man say we got to put two dollars room and board. They sent us over to a place the man say we got to put two dollars on top of that. Then he put two men to a room with one bed. A bowl of soup cost ten cents around the corner. I wasn’t desperate. I had sixty-five cents to make it to payday. I ate half the bread and say I would get soup tomorrow. Come payday they give me three dollars say the rest go on my bill. I had to give the man what own the house two dollars. What I’m gonna do, Miss Tyler. I told the people at the mill I was gonna get another job. They said I couldn’t do that cause I still owned them money and they was gonna get the police on meY. I don’t know, Miss Tyler. I feel like I got a hole inside me. (22-23)

His repeated use of the word they describe his experiences emphasize his feeling of separateness. This word shows his belief or struggle with the concept that everything, or everyone, is working against him. While Caesar also used this word to create distance, the way these two men use the word differs greatly. For Citizen, this controls his actions and has power over him. As a result of the debt he has incurred because his rent exceeds his income, reflecting a common occurrence in cities across America well beyond the decade of this play, Citizen resolves that the only way to break even is to steal a bucket of nails. After watching another man drown to prove his innocence against the charge of Citizen’s crime, our protagonist ventures to have Aunt Ester (Miss Tyler) wash his soul. Herein lies the major difference between a character like Caesar and Citizen. This innocent death would not have even warranted a pause in Caesar’s schedule, but for
Citizen it is paralyzing.

This hole inside him took form as he attempted to navigate the society in which he hoped to create a life and was ultimately disappointed. Aunt Ester reasons that Citizen cannot find a place to stand until he understands his lineage. She leads him on a journey to the City of Bones. For Citizen this symbolizes a metaphorical baptism in his ancestry. He must understand and accept the hardships of his ancestors to understand where to stand in the present. The importance of understanding his ancestry lies in the acknowledgement that he is not alone, but instead deeply connected to many who fought for him to have a place to stand. To borrow from Baraka, he is the son of lovers and warriors. It is through this experience that Citizen is able to recognize that he can compose a definition of masculinity that is separate from the dominant one that measures only in wealth and status. Aunt Ester shares a story with Citizen about a man who defined his identity in his property of a pig farm. She explains, "One day another man come along and killed all his pigs. He lost everything he had. He lost the center of his life cause it wasn't inside him. It wasn't something nobody could take away." In these lines Wilson explains his reasoning in creating characters that ultimately reach a recognition of their identity within themselves rather than assume a capitalistic ideology. Moreover in 1904, wealth and status are not easily accessible to Citizen, unless he chooses a route similar to Caesar.

In Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone*, Loomis struggles to locate and understand his identity after being held for seven years on a chain gang. The role that Loomis performed of husband and father is stolen from him the moment he is captured by Joe
Turner, based on the actual brother of Tennessee Governor Pete Turner. His world is further shattered after returning home and finding that the people who once depended on him are no longer there. He explains:

I made it back to Henry Thompson’s place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha’s gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North. We been looking for her ever since. That’s the only thing I know to do. I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That’s what I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else’s world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own. (72-73)

It is crucial for Loomis to find his wife because he needs her to need him so that he can restore his purpose again. He believes that finding her will allow him to once again fulfill his conception of masculinity. Through the experiences of Loomis, Wilson suggests that not all is well and restored immediately post-emancipation. He explains that those who have survived a form of colonization or slavery, an attempt to in some way eradicate a native culture, carry with them deep wounds that prohibit their ability to recognize themselves as whole. Wilson explains that the seven years in which his world is torn asunder and his life is turned upside down, can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery, of being taken out of Africa and brought to America. At some point someone says, “Okay, you’re free. What do you do? Who are you, first of all, and what do you do now that you’re free,” which is Loomis’ question. He searches for a woman to say goodbye to and to find a world that contains his image, because there is nothing about the world he finds himself in that speaks to the thing that’s beating inside his chest. And in the process of that search, he falls into an ancestral drove and is witness to bones rising up out of the ocean, taking on flesh and walking up on land. This is his connection with the ancestors, the Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage and were thrown overboard. He is privileged to witness this because he needs most to know who he is. It is telling him, “This is who you are. You are these bones. You are the sons and daughters of these people. They are walking around here now, and they look like you because you are these very same people. This is who you are.” (Powers 9)
Loomis is not plagued by his missing wife. Though it is sad that has been torn from her, the tragedy here is that Loomis does not know how to stand on his own. By way of another character and a journey to the City of Bones, he learns that it is his song, his identity, that has been stolen by Turner and must be restored before he can fully stand. In other words, though losing his wife was a tremendous defeat, his identity does not rest in her, and will not be restored by her return. His identity will only be brought back through a process of his own recognition involving an acceptance of his ancestry.

Like Citizen, the experience of this baptism in his heritage allows Loomis to see that he alone is enough, and that he has his own identity that is separate from any relation to another person whether it be as slave, husband or father. In this passage Wilson outlines the struggle that many of his characters and moreover, people who have experienced some form of colonialism, must overcome. The challenge here is to recognize that one has a separate and unique identity that must be rediscovered. Moves made by slave owners sought to dismantle any connection between the African people. One must only read the words of Willie Lynch to recognize that there was a system purposefully set in place to separate the young from old, male from female, light from dark to create deep divisions hoped to survive in the sons and daughters of slaves for centuries to come. Wilson illustrates his characters answering the question Who are you? and displays that although all eventually are confronted with this question some choose to dismiss it like Seth or Caesar, but some, like Loomis, decide that they can bleed for themselves. Loomis’s final act in the play of slashing his chest brings to the surface the warrior blood that flows like rivers ancient as the world.
proudly and unapologetically through his body. In this moment Loomis’s actions suggest an acceptance of his responsibility for his own salvation, and by way of that, an acceptance of his responsibility for his own presence in the world (Sheppard 110). This is echoed through the title of this play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, which displays that the appropriation of Loomis’s song by Turner is over. This time has passed and will not happen again because Loomis has finally discovered that his identity rests fully within him and can never be taken away. At the close of the play he is able to stand and we understand his name not as someone who is still looming, but as someone who is luminous (Powers 9).

As Wilson progresses through the century, from the era of Jim Crow to the peak of the Black Power and Arts Movements, his characters face different challenges. However, despite the differences in challenges, connections can be drawn between the reactions and roles of some of the male characters. In *Two Trains Running*, set in 1969, we are introduced to another young male character that, like Loomis and Citizen, has recently been reintroduced to society and is attempting to navigate his way. Sterling initially believes that money will make him a man. As a result, he searches outside of himself and is consequently imprisoned:

I robbed a bank. I was tired of awaking up every day with no money. I figure a man supposed to have money sometime. Everybody else seem like they got it. Seem like I’m the only one ain’t got no money. I figure I’d get my money where Mellon get his from. That was after Mr. Lewis at the orphanage died. I would never want him to know I would do something like that. After he died I got kinda desperate. I just kept getting deeper and deeper in a hole. (44)

From this passage we can gather that Sterling has grown with a sense of abandonment.
He was an orphan and suffers greatly after the death of the one male role model he had in his life. He has no concept of his heritage and this void cripples his ability to understand that he contains within himself all that he needs to become a man. But he doesn’t know this yet. It is only after he visits Aunt Ester that he is able to embrace his own strength that is rooted in his heritage. She tells him, Anake better what you have and you have best(89). She tells him that there is something only he can offer the world and something that he can work to perfect. Until this moment his relationship with the world seemed more about what he could take than what only he could give. For Sterling, his decision to rob a bank stems from a desire to claim a form of masculinity he viewed as unattainable otherwise. Elam elaborates contending that Sterling is a young warrior in search of direction, and of the proper articulation of his revolutionary energies. Like Bigger Thomas and Booster [of Jitney], Sterling finds momentary glimmers of bigness through crimeSterling understands the unequal distribution of power and the burden that earlier generations of black men had to endure and as a consequence desires a different outcome for himself. (138)

The exchange that he has with Aunt Ester becomes liberating. Through this moment his name becomes less about money and is replaced by signifying upon the moment when Loomis has found and accepted his song and Bynum exclaims, Ayou shining! You shining like new money!@94). Of all the warrior sons examined here, Harmond in Radio Golf is perhaps the best example of Awo unreconciled strivings.@With Roosevelt in one ear and Sterling in the other, Harmond is caught on the battlefield, unsure of which armor he wear. Bearing the name Wilkes, Harmond serves as Caesar legacy. Although generations stand between the men, in his bookend to the cycle, Wilson challenges Harmond to reject
his grandfather’s obsession with wealth and become a positive leader in his community. Aunt Ester dies in 1985 in *King Hedley II*, reflecting one of the most violent decades that witnessed an increase in black-on-black crime, and 1839 Wylie Avenue now bears the marks of a house abandoned, with windows boarded and patches of overgrown weeds.

Harmond’s true test of character occurs when it is revealed that his real estate company has purchased the abandoned home illegally. When Aunt Ester’s house stands literally in the way of his plans for a shopping center complete with a Starbucks and a Whole Foods, his actual inadequacies emerge. Harmond must choose between a sanctuary that has immense cultural value or baptizing his hometown in the commercialization the majority of the country celebrates. He decides to attempt to compensate Old Barlow (Citizen and Black Mary’s child) financially—essentially buying his silence, explaining to Sterling that he is trying to help him. This way at least he has something. If he doesn’t take the ten thousand dollars he won’t have anything. It doesn’t make any sense. Can you talk to him and get him to see that?"

What is most interesting about this scene is that this similar situation occurs ninety years earlier between siblings Black Mary and Caesar. Caesar attempted to use his wealth to distract from Black Mary’s moral commitments. Harmond initially ventures down the same avenue traveled by his grandfather, but does so because he has no true connection to his heritage. Sterling returns to Wilson’s stage three decades after *Two Trains Running* and serves as Harmond’s guide, to lead him to a recognition of what Aunt Ester’s home stands for and what its presence means to the community.

Moreover, through the decision to build the Starbucks and the Whole Foods
around Aunt Ester’s home Wilson suggests that perhaps a devotion to expressions of heritage can still exist amidst the seemingly unavoidable rise in commercialism. Wilson is not making a statement about the quality of those establishments, but rather illustrating the progression of the process of gentrification in his community. Thirty years earlier we watched as Memphis closed his doors onstage. Memphis had to sell his restaurant that once housed the neighborhood’s citizens for a few hours a day and served as a gathering place. That space no longer exists. While these new chain businesses may provide employment opportunities for residents of the Hill District, their additions may also potentially raise rent and housing prices that will eventually force them to find shelter elsewhere. Wilson is also criticizing the assumption that a chain supermarket or coffee shop is better than or should replace the community’s historical spaces just because they have fresh paint, fancy signs and organic food. In Fences, written twenty years before Radio Golf, Wilson develops this argument through Troy’s refusal to shop at the chain market his wife prefers. He explains his loyalty to the locally owned store, A&T: The A&P ain’t never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I’m treated right. I go down to Bella, say I need a loaf of bread, I’ll pay you Friday. She give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me(@7). By the nineties, Bella no longer exists, but the idea of how to participate in society and what establishments one selects to support with their business is still present. Wilson puts forth a question:

The question we’ve been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is: What are we going to do? Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values
and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values? (Shannon 130)

*Radio Golf* highlights a contemporary issue faced by residents of the Hill District but also by many throughout the nation. In this play perhaps more than the others, Wilson truly shows concern about how people will be able to maintain a link to their heritage as we move to another century and had he continued his cycle further, we may have witnessed how his characters struggled with maintaining a connection as time progresses. His play challenges the concept that the ultimate destination is assimilation as these corporately operated businesses now cast their shadow on his precious Hill. The answer for Wilson is that a connection to and celebration of African heritage must always remain central.

In the conclusion of each of these plays, each man individually reaches a moment of self-actualization when he is are able to see himself as closely connected with the people around him and also his ancestors. Once this moment occurs, the men are able to fully fulfill their roles as warriors and conclude the play with their song understood and accepted and begin new journeys that contribute positively to the community around them. However, in each of these moments the men confront and ultimately rebel against unjust laws, religions or social conventions to create a new space that is uniquely theirs to stand in. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen's final act is to take Solly's stick, hat and coat and walk out the door, leaving the audience with the impression that he will take up Solly's acts of revolutionary rebellion. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Loomis leaves his daughter with her mother and slashes his chest to show that he does not need Jesus to bleed for him because he can bleed for himself. In *Two Trains Running*, Sterling...
act of breaking Lutz’s window and stealing a ham for Hambone’s casket serves as a symbol of moving beyond talk to active black resistance (Elam 139). Lastly, in *Radio Golf*, Harmond embodies the warrior spirit by leaving to fight for the maintenance and survival of Aunt Ester’s home and picking up his paintbrush. These acts, argues Elam, hold a place of value in African American history for as early as the slave revolts of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner and escapes along the Underground Railroad by Harriet Tubman, lawbreaking within black history has been celebrated as a means to overcome unjust rules and mistreatment (Elam 148). Each of these men has entered into battle and exited as warriors.

**Blues Singers**

The third path traveled by several of Wilson’s men is that of the guide. These men are all older and generally experience a lower external status than the majority of the other characters on stage. None of these men care about wealth and power, and as a result, none of them has much of either. In place of valuing their external status, the preoccupation with how society views them that enslaves the spiritually and culturally bankrupt, these men negotiate only with their internal status. Their focus remains on how they view themselves so that their masculinity is defined on their own terms. In many ways the role these characters fulfill is that of the blues singer. They tell the stories and experiences of the community in which they live. Furthermore, they have not only found and accepted their own song, they also chose to spend their lives leading others to this recognition. The title for these men is born from Wilson’s own definition of actual
blues singers:

If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa and various other parts of the world. They are people who are carriers of the culture, carriers of the ideas the troubadours in Europe, etc. Except in black America in this society they are not valued except among the black folks who understood. I’ve always thought of them as sacred because of the sacred tasks that they had taken upon themselves to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people. (Shannon 121-122)

Now that Solly, Bynum, Holloway and Sterling have accepted their songs and their connection to their African ancestry, their responsibility is to enable others to reach this same recognition. Through these characters Wilson suggests that masculinity is measured in a man’s ability to be part of the world around him. Rather than take, Wilson contends, one should contribute. Furthermore, his choice to define himself and the characters whose stories he places onstage as African rather than European or even American highlights the movement in which Wilson grew as a writer. The Black Arts Movement strove to create a distinctly black aesthetic. In his essay bearing the same title as the movement, Larry Neal describes that Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. More than the reordering and creation of a separate aesthetic, many of the writers and artists producing during this movement maintained a direct and forceful voice that openly rejected standards of white culture. Wilson said Ahe Black Power Movement of the 1960s was a reality; it was the
kiln in which I was fired, and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes I carry as part of my consciousness. As this study illustrates, the ideals of this movement beat within many of his male characters.

Solly navigates a path for Citizen to follow and establish his masculinity in his ancestry, rather than in capitalistic values. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Solly aids in Citizen’s journey to the City of Bones, teaches him the weight of his name and lastly, illustrates how self-sacrifice can give life greater meaning. After escaping slavery and finally safely reaching Canada in 1857, Solly explains why he returns:

I asked myself, *What I 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 breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn’t taste no different. I just sat right down on the ground and started crying. I told him say, *I don’t feel right.* I stopped crying soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad. Look at that. 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. (57)

Solly measures his masculinity in his ability to contribute to his community. He risks his life and potential recapture back into slavery because he views himself as deeply connected to those still suffering. He devotes his life to bringing others to freedom. Moreover, aiding in Citizen’s quest to find his own song displays his commitment to his community and ancestry. This journey has to do with the urgent need of subjugated peoples, as an essential part of the process of decolonization, to recuperate their own histories, their own social and cultural traditions, their own narratives and discourses (Banfield 11). He explains the task left for him by his name, commenting, *Your mama*
trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It’s hard to be a citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that. And time you get it you be surprised how heavy it is (27).

The lesson Solly provides Citizen with here is that as a black man in 1904, he must be prepared to fight for his place to stand. One of the final messages he shares with Citizen is to never fear his blood being shed. He says, **Your blood is like a river it don’t never stop till you dead. Life got lots of comebacks but death ain’t got no comeback. That’s the only way life have any meaning** (59). In every act, Solly exudes the spirit of a warrior who knows his purpose. Though his death marks the end of the play, through Citizen’s final stage directions, **He puts on Solly’s coat and hat and takes Solly’s stick. Without a word Citizen turns and exits**, Wilson shows how in death Solly has given life to the warrior spirit inside of Citizen. Solly spent his life bringing the enslaved to freedom on the Underground Railroad. In his exchanges with Citizen, Solly brings this warrior son to freedom by showing him how to define his masculinity on his own terms.

If the **spiritually and culturally bankrupt** are enslaved by their worship of the dominant definition of masculinity and the blues singers are the truly liberated characters, then the warrior sons are the bridge that stands between. Solly carries Citizen to the understanding that there is a more righteous way to live and in doing so, wrestles him free of the shackles that burdened his vision of himself.

Bynum in *Joe Turner* is perhaps the strongest example of a blues singer as he is the first character to fully explain the process of finding one’s song. Moreover, the purpose his song entails best addresses one of the most paramount struggles faced by blacks post-emancipation: the struggle to reconnect after centuries of
separation. Eventually Bynum is reunited with his dead father. Bynum explains that his father told me he was gonna show me how to find my song. Then he carried me further into this big place until we come to this ocean. Then he showed me something I ain’t got words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there. I stayed in that place awhile and my daddy taught me the meaning of this thing that I had seen and showed me how to find my song. I had the Binding Song. I choose that song because that’s what I seen most when I was traveling people walking away and leaving one another. So I takes the power of my song and binds them together. Been binding people ever since. That’s why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together. (10)

Bynum witnesses the submerged grave of his ancestors. This journey back to the Middle Passage symbolizes an appreciation and acknowledgement of his cultural lineage. For Bynum this moment serves as his indoctrination into a life of bringing others together. He grounds his identity in his pursuit of re-linking the families who have been broken by chain links used to separate. Furthermore, Wilson’s decision to equate song with identity uniquely addresses cultural values that are distinctly part of the African experience in America. Expressive of the Black Arts movement this choice displays how the emphasis now, at least in its more radical version was not so much on the need for black equality with whites as on black difference, the uniqueness of black culture, of black identity. To give artistic expression to this liberated identity required, some believed, a complete break with a white dominated theatre aesthetic, and a return to African roots (Banfield 43). Thus, the use of song as identity resonates with the oral nature of African history and storytelling. In addition, Bynum is a root worker both in his use of language onstage and also in his ability to work with natural ingredients. He is truly a man who is part of the world around him.
Immediately upon meeting Loomis, Bynum recognizes that he suffers from a stolen song. He explains this to Loomis, further clarifying what Turner really wanted from him:

what he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he’s looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he’s got you bound up to where you can’t sing your own song. Couldn’t sing it them seven years cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it. (73)

This knowledge becomes empowering and liberating to Loomis. In this passage, Wilson explains that this identity existed before slavery and can be reclaimed. Loomis must reconnect himself to the person he was before his capture and also to the many who went before him so that he can fully accept his song. Lastly, Bynum further explains his purpose reconnecting people to each other and to their songs. Shortly after he receives his song, he is told that A here was lots of shiny men and if I ever saw one again before I did then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and I could lay down and die a happy death. A man who done left his mark on life.

On the way people cling to each other out of the truth they find in themselves(10). At the close of the play, Loomis shines and Bynum knows that he has contributed something immeasurable. The truth he guides people to see is that they are deeply connected and can positively influence each other’s lives.

Although Holloway does not take the other characters on the journey through the City of Bones, he does serve as the catalyst to get the others to visit Aunt Ester so that they may reach a spiritually and culturally fulfilling moment. As Two Trains Running is the first play in which Aunt Ester is mentioned, the concept of the City of Bones was not
as developed as it was in *Joe Turner = Come and Gone*. However, the play does emphasize the common theme of a significant decision faced by characters. Wilson explains how the title relates:

> the title came from a blues song called *Two Trains Running*, and actually that phrase is used in several blues songs. It’s most commonly followed by the line *Two trains running, neither one is going my way. One running by night, one run by day.*

There were two ideas in the play, or at least two ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism. (Pettengill 155)

This reasoning for this title highlights a major theme in his drama, and certainly the theory guiding this chapter. Here, Wilson explains that there appear to be two major choices: either assimilate or separate. The spiritually and culturally bankrupt characters definitely travel the route of assimilation, whereas the blues singers move in the opposite direction. This does not suggest that Wilson is rejecting involvement with other cultures in America or that he is supportive of segregation, instead he is arguing that black Americans should appreciate their unique culture and not feel the need to reject their heritage as a means to advance in society. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson explains this further,

> It’s to understand that Africa is in you, that this is who you are, that you can participate, and that there isn’t anything wrong with being an African, even through the linguistic environment teaches that black is all these negative things. You understand that there isn’t anything wrong with the way that you do things, and there isn’t nothing wrong with the way that you respond to the world; it simply not the way that whites respond to the world. (69-70).

In many ways, it is this understanding that Holloway attempts to share with the others onstage. He serves as a guide that leads them to a sanctuary. Holloway pleads with them, *Go on up there and see her. I go up and see her every once in a while. Get my soul*
washed. She don’t do nothing but lay her hands on your head. But it’s a feeling like you ain’t never had before. Then everything in your life get real calm and peaceful. He becomes instrumental in the rediscovery of a song for both Memphis and Sterling. Both men’s lives change drastically after following his advice and enter the stage carrying a purpose they never had before. The laying on of hands is symbolic for the power of healing she has. Furthermore, set in 1969, we witness how his play confronts, head on the quintessential issues, of respect, identity self-determination and freedom. Through his presence onstage, Holloway is able to guide both Memphis and Sterling to a greater acceptance and understanding of what each of these issues mean to them and their ability to compose meaningful identities for themselves.

In Radio Golf, Sterling Johnson, a once warrior son, returns to fulfill the role of a blues singer. When we last met Sterling he was recently released from jail and seemed to be finding his way back in until he listened to the advice of his guide, Holloway, and visited Aunt Ester. The visit with Aunt Ester and the connection he builds with his ancestors inevitably changed the course of his life, giving him a purpose and allowing him the strength he needed to become a guide for another warrior son. Here Sterling describes his experience to Harmond, in an attempt to dissuade him from allowing 1839 Wylie to be bulldozed:

I bet you ain’t even been inside. Used to be a line to her door every Tuesday. I went up there to see Aunt Ester once. Had to go up to the red door three different times before she see me. Had this peacefulness about her. I went up to see Aunt Ester cause I was feeling sorry for myself for being an orphan and I was walking around carrying that. She told me set it down. Make better what you have and you have best. Told me if I wanted to carry something carry some tools. I been carrying tools ever since and I been at peace with myself. You should go up there.
The selection of tools over weapons bears an interesting similarity to a plea made by President Barack Obama in his *Anaugural Address*. President Obama argued that *your* people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy *(Obama, *Anaugural Address*, par. 23)*. Similarly, the idea of masculinity measured in your contributions to society is echoed throughout Wilson's work.

Aunt Ester allows Sterling to see that there is something only he can contribute to the world. This message is incredibly empowering and it redirects where he placed his identity. As a young man he viewed money as a measure of masculinity and here Wilson illustrates how he now understands his position differently. When Sterling returns in *Radio*, he is able to teach Harmond in this passage is that he must help rebuild his community not replace it. Though Aunt Ester has passed away in the previous decade, the ability for her spirit to live on resides in the survival of her home and what her home represents. Sterling has a tremendous influence on Harmond's ability to recognize that he is attempting to build his masculinity with the wrong tools. Both Roosevelt and Harmond share an affinity for golf. Roosevelt explains the feeling he experienced when he first hit a golf ball:

> I felt like I had my dick in my hand and was waving it around like a club. A man! Anybody want some of this come and get it! That was the best feeling of my life. That's why I keep my golf clubs in the trunk of my car just in case I drive by a golf course. I keep looking for that feeling. That set you on a path to life where everything is open to you. You don't have to hide and crawl under a rock just 'cause you black. Feel like you belong in the world. (13)

In this passage Roosevelt draws a correlation between his masculinity and his ability to play golf. Certainly, the phallic image of the club itself is clear, but what is most
interesting about his equating this to his manhood is the exclusivity of the sport of golf. Golf is one of the most expensive and exclusive sports to participate in. The clubs are expensive, but then there is also the bag that must house them as well, not to mention the fee of using a golf course which also generally comes in addition to a membership fee, as most golf clubs are attached to country clubs. Moreover, although Tiger Woods is one of the greatest golf players to live, historically, golf has been a predominantly white sport. The metaphor that Wilson is suggesting here is that Roosevelt attaches his masculinity to an activity that screams status. We see how Harmond subscribes to a level of Roosevelt’s belief as he also keeps his clubs in his car trunk. Sterling awakens Harmond from this misapplication of the club to measure his masculinity by stealing his clubs and then later selling them back to him. Through this act Sterling proves to Harmond that when you locate your masculinity in something such as wealth or status—something that is ultimately subject to change—you will eventually find yourself with nothing. Instead he challenges Harmond to truly satisfy his full potential and save Aunt Ester’s home.

Each of these characters chooses to serve others and define his masculinity in his ability to be positive and contributing members of his community. Though these men share no familial ties with the men that they help, their unwavering desire to lend both a hand and a voice suggest that they believe a connection exists between themselves and others in their community and that they must view the betterment of their neighbors as directly related to their own lives. Wilson suggests that men continually have the free will to determine how they choose to define their masculinity, as there are always two trains running. However, as evidenced by the treatment of his male characters, there is a
connection between masculinity and freedom. The men who measure and define their masculinity in part by their ability to contribute to the community around them become liberated. Conversely, the men that separate themselves from their community and actively work against the people around them remain enslaved. To achieve this freedom the men must also accept a recognition of their cultural history and ancestry. In other words, A part of Wilson’s project is to re-present black masculinity so that it becomes a site of self-determination, pride, self-respect, and historical consciousness. The loss of historical awareness, Wilson believes and his (w)righting implies, has led to a self-destructive image of black masculinity, the devaluation of black life and the escalation of black-on-black violence (Elam 128). Wilson’s version or vision of masculinity demands from black men a position within the community. He reverses the stereotype of black men as irresponsible (Savran 30) and instead portrays them as strong leaders within their community. The warrior sons and the blues singers are true to their African roots and find freedom through their chosen paths.
CHAPTER III

A SING A BLACK GIRL’S SONG: THE SPACE

LEFT FOR A WOMAN’S SONG IN AUGUST

WILSON’S TWENTIETH CENTURY

I doubt seriously if I would make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, and I guess because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. I can’t do that although I try to be honest in the instances in which I do have women. I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. I try to, to the extent that I am able to step around on the other side of the table, if you will, and try to look at things from their viewpoint and have been satisfied that I have been able to do that to some extent. August Wilson explains his dramatic vision: An interview.

August Wilson’s own admission highlights the difficulty he faced as a male writer giving voice to female stories and perspectives. The title of this chapter draws from a line in Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* a work that emerged around the same time Wilson was developing his voice as a poet and a playwright. Considering Wilson’s use of the term song for identity, this questions whether Wilson can also sing a black girl’s song in an authentic voice.

In Wilson’s ten play cycle there are fifty-four men and just nineteen adult women with speaking roles. As a result, one major source of critique for Wilson has been his lack of female characters. He has been accused by critics, writes Harry J. Elam, Jr.,
A of constructing women who, in his male-dominated dramatic vision, not only exist in subordinate positions but also operate solely in reaction to men and are defined and confined by these relationships. In response to this claim, Sandra G. Shannon contends that the female characters are actually quite strong and if somebody else perceives them as victims, I think that person doesn't read the plays carefully enough because these women choose their routes rather than become victims of men. When examining the women closely in regard to their words and actions, one will find that Wilson's women are realistically complex and cannot be reduced or simplified to such measures as strong or weak because in truth, they exhibit both qualities at different times. And on several occasions make up for their limited share of lines with their strength of both voice and character.

That being said, a focus must be placed on the actual space Wilson's women do inhabit. As he said himself, they are not in the center of the work, and certainly not in the center onstage. Moreover, one must question how accurately the voices of women actually are when translated through the pen of a man. Though Wilson contends that he is satisfied with his portrayal of female voices in the plays, we must examine the extent to which their authenticity is fully possible. This chapter first explores the space left for women in their relationships with men and the mobility they are able to achieve. The women are examined from this vantage point because that is how they are presented onstage. In each play there is one male character struggling to define his masculinity and rediscover his identity. Thus everyone else onstage is set in relation to this man. Throughout his ten play cycle Wilson creates women who are able to voice their often
progressive beliefs and achieve a sense of movement in their relationships with men. However, these choices are ultimately taxed by some form of sacrifice. If we accept that his male characters’ concept of masculinity is born out of the Black Power and Arts movements, as argued in the previous chapter, then we must also understand the effect this had on female roles. In other words, we must understand that within these movements led by men the space left for black women was miniscule.

Consequently, the Black Feminist Movement was developed to house what the other movements did not and could not fully voice. The Combahee River Collective, a group of black women who named their group in honor of the river where Harriet Tubman led many slaves to freedom, issued this statement in 1974:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. (326)

This group voices the concern that unless they speak for themselves, their oppression will go unchallenged. Our interest in Wilson’s plays is not in the why but more in the how these women make certain decisions and moreover, the consequences or sacrifices that immediately follow. This chapter explores eight women from eight different plays in chronological order to suggest that in Wilson’s telling of the twentieth century, women do not experience as dramatic of an evolution of liberation that may be expected. Wilson’s women confirm that though time has brought some change, there is still work to be done.
Through Black Mary’s decision to confront her brother Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean* Wilson suggests that to stand against him, she must also stand apart from him. In other words, once her words of disapproval fill the air, their relationship is suffocated and left to die alongside Caesar’s victim Solly. She disowns him:

> Caesar, I gave you everything. Even when I didn’t have to give you. I made every way for you. I turned my eyes away. I figured if I didn’t see it I couldn’t hold fault. If I held fault I couldn’t hold on to my love for you. But now you standing in the light and I can’t turn away no more. I remember you when you was on the other side of the law. That’s my brother. I don’t know who you are. But you not my brother. You hear me, Caesar? You not my brother. (84)

In this passage Black Mary defines herself as a provider. Although Caesar is the character that holds the most wealth, he does need her support and it is through this acknowledgement that she is given power. She is given power in some respect because she recognizes that there is something he needs that she can give. However, this passage also indicates the length to which she has had to make her morals pliable to continue to supply him with support. What also becomes interesting about their relationship and his role as a spiritually and culturally bankrupt character is that she has no desire for what he can provide. Black Mary does not value wealth, especially at the price it costs Caesar. Her position in Aunt Ester’s home represents the choice she has made in life. She ultimately chooses to fulfill a positive role in her community and surround herself with people like Aunt Ester and Solly.

Realizing that by association she bears some responsibility and guilt for his crimes, she decides to speak against him which ultimately marks the death of their
relationship. This decision comes with several sacrifices, as she is granted very limited rights as a woman in 1904. In speaking her mind she loses her only relative and any financial benefits she would receive by their relation. She establishes herself as a powerful subject and rejects his desire to objectify her as a thing who is always present. However, the inequality in their relationship is recognizable by the fact that as soon as she steps out of her role as submissive and accepting sister and moves into a space where she is critical of his action, their relationship becomes null and void. Although she claims that his actions are not those of the brother she knows, disowning him, it is he who ultimately leaves and establishes the death of their relationship. Not surprisingly, Caesar does not dignify her words with a response. Instead he draws the attention onstage immediately back to himself and to his power: *Caesar is stunned by this declaration*. *He crosses to the door, turns and looks back at Black Mary, then raises himself to his full height and exits*[@84]. When the attention returns to him, we see that to reject the imposed wounds her words should have he must establish his masculinity. Raising himself to stand physically taller than Black Mary is his way of attempting to disregard her and raise his own external status and presence onstage. Had these two experience roles of equality in their relationship, her criticism would not be as offensive. In several moments in the play he freely criticizes her decision to live with Aunt Ester, citing his embarrassment that his sister must work and live in this way. He is allowed to do this with no harm because she has a lower status them in him in both society and in their relationship. Wilson does lend Black Mary a voice of empowerment but also shows the sacrifices that are associated with her choice to step out of her given role.
Although Martha in *Joe Turner = Come and Gone* is able to reach a relatively unique level of mobility for a female in 1911, her movement only occurs because of her decision to momentarily relinquish her role as mother and wife. After her husband is captured by a chain gang, Martha reclaims her strength and decides to move north in pursuit of a new life. However, she can only achieve this mobility by becoming a single, childless woman. Reacting to Loomis’s accusations of desertion, she explains:

> you talking about Henry Thompson’s place like I’m still gonna be working the land by myself. How I’m gonna do that? You wasn’t gone but two months and Henry Thompson kicked me off his land and I ain’t had no place to go but to my mama’s. I stayed and waited there for five years before I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren’t you was dead to me. I wasn’t gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make a life without you. I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I couldn’t drag you behind me like a sack of cotton. (90)

Matha must kill Loomis metaphorically and her attachment to him to achieve the mobility necessary to move forward in her life. She realizes that to survive she must build a new life around which she is the center. In her essay *The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson’s Perspective on African American Women,* Shannon highlights this journey towards an autonomous self, arguing, in each play a singular African American woman manages to wrestle free from prevailing social restraints or domestic concerns to, in some way, affirm a separate identity (151). Martha’s decision is tremendously complex. She can either stay and grieve alongside the dust shrouded memories of her long gone husband while remaining loyal to her maternal obligations, or she can travel in hopes of building a new and safe life for herself and her child—a life in which she salvages her independence and sense of self. She chooses the latter, momentarily setting
aside her domestic obligations, recognizing that the immediate traumatic consequences her daughter must suffer will be difficult, but may eventually evolve and become a useful script for her daughter’s future understanding of female sovereignty. Martha must, in other words, fully liberate herself from all domestic relations to rediscover and redefine her identity. Moreover, logistically speaking, traveling with a young child would have been potentially dangerous and certainly difficult, which accounts for her need to leave her daughter with her mother.

The decision to migrate north came with immense consequences for Martha. With this massive migration, states Mary L. Bogumil, same feelings of displacement for many of those who were former slaves and for the sons and daughters of those slaves. This displacement was a symptomatic reaction to the new social climate. The freedom in the north] often took the form of a self-imposed isolationism, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South (Bogumil 53-54). Although Martha has her church, and the symbolic nature of her name change to Pentecost is evident, she has been isolated from all those who were significant parts of her life in the south. Bogumil argues that this is a pivotal process in her ability to create her own song, and ultimately her own agency. In comparison to other female characters present in the boardinghouse, Bogumil explains that they are black female migrants in search of their own songs, a sense of spiritual and emotional stability in their lives. Each woman’s interaction with the Joe Turners, those disenfranchised African American males, elicits a change to some extent within each one of them, resulting in a song of self that each woman must discover for herself (Bogumil 72-73). This self discovery comes at a steep
price, as we witness Loomis’s inability to communicate with her.

Through their reunion, we witness their inability to communicate which ultimately leads to the complete death of their marriage and family. After Martha has explained her circumstances, he still responds, Aoe Turner let me loose and I felt all turned around inside. I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together. I got there and you was gone, Martha(89). His decision to ultimately leave her and their child reflects his failure to understand her. His departure suggests that he cannot make the adjustment necessary to continue their relationship. In other words, when Loomis leaves he does so because he expects to find Martha waiting for him, in the same home on the same land with the same love for him. He is incapable of adjusting himself into their new relationship. Although Martha achieves this mobility because it is necessary for her survival during his absence, he cannot accept the changes in her or the space she now fulfills in their relationship. Kubitschek explains that Afor black adults to move beyond Joe Turner’s influences and reclaim their true selvesCfor them to rear healthy children and thus preserve their culture, Wilson impliesCmen and women must exchange stories of their divergent experiences@192). Unfortunately, as evidenced by his actions, this does not occur and ultimately, Ahe dissolution of the Loomis family represents the very human cost of so many years of fragmentation@Shannon 158-159). Similar to Black Mary, her mobility comes at the death of her relationship with her husband. When the death of the relationship occursCwhen Martha says she kills her husband in her heartCpart of the way she recognizes herself dies simultaneously. Thus, Martha must
rename herself by abandoning the last name she accepts through her marriage and replaces it with what replaces him, the Church, by taking the name Pentecost. Where she formerly identified herself only as his husband and mother of his child, she now finds purpose in her role in her new community. Unfortunately, her decision to move outside of her role severs their relationship.

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* the title character experiences a mobility that was shared by few others, namely other female blues singers. Her fame and the wealth that follows allowed her to achieve a status others could not. In her text *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Y. Davis explains that this offered them the possibility of challenging the social norms governing women’s place within the community and within the society at large (74). However, despite her wealth and ability to travel freely, we are reminded of the power she relinquishes in her relationship with her record producers in the moments when they do share the stage. In speaking of the space she occupies, we must recognize that although Ma Rainey’s name appears in the title of Wilson’s play set in 1927, she does not appear onstage until page 48. While Ma does recognize that she has something that the record producers want—something that they can sell—she needs them, and in this way we see how her power dissipates. It is through the character of Ma that we realize wealth and celebrity do not override gender. In other words, we see how Ma is marginalized and powerless simply because she is a woman of color. On page 48, when she finally does appear she must have her white record producer testify to her identity:

MA RAINEY: ArvinY you better tell this man who I am! You better get him straight!@
IRVIN:  A Ma, do you know what time it is? Do you have any idea? We've been waiting.

MA RAINEY:  A Tell the men who he's messing with.

POLICEMAN:  A Do you know this lady?

MA RAINEY:  A Just tell the man who I am! That's all you gotta do.

POLICEMAN:  A Lady, will you let him talk, huh?

MA RAINEY:  A Tell the man who I am!

IRVIN:  A Wait a minute! Let me handle it. Ma, will you let me handle it?

MA RAINEY:  A Tell him who he is messing with!

IRVIN:  A Okay! Okay! Give me a chance! Officer, this is one of our recording artists. Ma Rainey.

MA RAINEY:  A Madame Rainey! Get it straight! Madame Rainey! Talking about taking me to jail!

IRVIN:  A Look Ma! Give me a chance, okay? Here. Sit down. I'll take care of it. Officer, what's the problem?

This scene displays her place and struggle in society. She must demand for her identity to be acknowledged five times before Irvin finally hears her. Elam contends that her declaration of self, her demand for Irvin to inform her accuser of her unique status and identity, testifies to her independence and self-determination (93). Were this the case, and this moment an exclamation of her independence, what purpose does her white record producer serve? Is it possible that he reinforces her power and self-
Absolutely not. Ma can view herself as independent as she likes, and in truth she has a ferocious sense of self, but none of this matters to anyone onstage. What matters is that a white man testifies to her identity. Had Irvin not claimed her, this scene would have ended with her in handcuffs, blues singer or not. The necessity of having her identity attested to by a white male bears a striking resemblance to the treatment of the first African American poet also a woman. When Phillis Wheatley published in her poetry in 1773 extensive statements paired with the signatures of several men accompanied her collection. The authenticating documents, as they were called, that preface Wheatley’s poems attest to the extent of the challenge facing the emerging African American writer, when even her friends and sponsors could not see how a black writer’s work could speak for itself without being first spoken for whites (Gates 214).

Furthermore, her entrance causes a large commotion, as she enters with a police officer. Despite this, Irvin’s initial reaction is to reprimand her for being late and making him wait. When he finally does acknowledge her demands he refuses to call her by her chosen name even after she corrects him. He introduces her as a possession, as an object, as one of our commodities, and maintains a power over her. Kubitschek evaluates this prostitute and pimp-like relationship that Ma draws attention to: When Ma voices her sense of the limitations of her powers outside of the blues, her imagery underscores her gender: As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain’t got no use for me then (79).

Bogumil explores the history of discrimination blacks faced in the North
noting that it was established by previous and incoming immigrants from Europe who were also seeking better lives. The rage that Irish immigrants felt against their British oppressors was rechanneled toward blacks, often resulting in violent actions against those with whom they had to compete for jobs in the major industrialized cities.

She further connects this with the treatment of Ma by the record producers, conjecturing that when Wilson writes in his preface, somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and has broken into pieces of silver, the biblical analogy of betrayal is clear: those African Americans who dared to dream of and hold out faith in the promised land discovered that this promised land did not exist. Irish Americans, though, were not the only people of European heritage who discriminated against African Americans and used their whiteness to subordinate and commercially exploit blacks, in Ma Rainey = Black Bottom the characters Mel Sturdyvant and Irvin, the two white men who operate the recording studio, exploit entertainers such as Ma Rainey and the members of her band, even though without the music of these African Americans their capitalistic gains would not exist. (18-19).

Within the realm of the blues, Ma's voice and presence is recognized and honored with the title mother. However, on the street, she is a faceless black woman and in this way, Ma is able to reveal that she is just as vulnerable as any African American woman of her day who dares to step outside her traditional role and confront head-on the forces of racism and oppression (Shannon 153). Furthermore, one must question how to reconcile with the fact that she is announced in the title and yet remains a minor character. Ma lacks the authority, argues Elam, of a signature monologue that voices her sentiments in the ways that the male figures are enabled to speak their personal histories. The structure of the play itself removes her from the discourse of men and the final decisive action (100). Perhaps the most memorable moment, this final act, happens when Levee breaks,
exploding in misplaced rage that leaves Toledo dead. A moment that occurs after Ma has already left the stage. Her general absence in the larger scope of the play draws attention to the fact that although she is meant to be the mouthpiece of this band, it is the voices of others onstage that are ultimately heard above her own.

Once Berniece moves into the space of mother and father to care for her child after the death of her husband in *The Piano Lesson* she refuses to relinquish her new identity when her boyfriend proposes to her. She, like Martha, recognizes that the combination of both children and men render women virtually immobile and refuses to surrender her new independence. Unfortunately this comes at the price of her relationship and earns unanimous disapproval from the men onstage. Furthermore, although Berniece clearly asks Avery for time and space when he attempts to propose, he ignores her request and pushes the issue further. His insistence displays a disregard for her desires and furthers a misconception that if a woman does not seek marriage, there must be something inherently wrong with her. Avery suggests, *you too young a woman to close up, Berniece* (66). The suggestion and sexual imagery of *closing up* unveils a dilemma women like Berniece face. Women are pushed into inhabiting the boundary between being too open or too closed, walking the line between whore and old maid. Berniece is still nurturing her wounds from her husband’s passing and maintains focus on raising her young daughter. She is at this moment, simply surviving. *Her present life is,* Shannon explains, *thus filled with self-denial and frustration as she plays warden over a two-hundred-year-old piano, dodges marriage proposals from a love-stricken minister, and perpetually grieves for her murdered husband and murdered father* (159-160). What is
perhaps most interesting about Avery’s marriage proposal is his complete ignorance of her needs. He pleads his case, ABerniceYI be at home and I get to thinking how that look to have a preacher that ain’t married. It makes for a better congregation if the preacher was settled down and married(66). There is no mention of her needs, her daughter’s needs, and there certainly is no romance present here. What is present, however, is his desire to objectify her. Though Avery may be well intentioned, he ultimately turns her into a prop that completes his perfect image as preacher of the congregation.

One must consider why it is that she must marry. As Shannon highlights, ABernice is a complex and potentially misunderstood womanY. All men seem to tolerate Berniece out of respect, yet they all apparently concur that she would be less vocal, less troublesome, and less of a threat to their domain if she remarried(160). Having heard enough of Avery’s wants and desires, Berniece questions this double standard:

you trying to tell me a woman can’t be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without meCa womanC and still be a man. That alright. Ain’t nobody gonna ask you, Avery, who you got to love you? That alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. AHow Berniece gonna take care of herself? AHow she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she gonna do with herself. How she gonna live like that? Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can’t be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me, AveryC you know C how much woman am I? (67).

Berniece questions the logic behind the societal construction that defines a woman’s worth in her ability to marry and bear children. She has been married and has a child but is inundated with pressures to make her picture right again by finding another man. This concern for her need for a man hints at the subordinate role women were meant to inhabit, furthering the misconception that she is somehow less because there is no male
figure to take care of her. Here Wilson draws upon the biblical meaning of Aknow. She is implying that they have been intimate, suggesting that if she was enough of a woman to have sex with, why is she suddenly less of a woman for not being married. In other words, she shows the absurdity in suggesting that her femininity and womanhood is suddenly in question because there is no ring on her finger. To this, Avery can only answer Ayou can± blame me(67), evading responsibility and denying her question and the hypocrisy she highlights.

Moreover, Shannon notices that ABerniece± ideas about men, marriage and her independence seem anachronistic when one considers the 1930s setting of The Piano Lesson.[However, Wilson± women] seem decades ahead of Wilson± men in terms of envisioning new roles for themselvesCroles which still involve being wives, mothers, or nurturers but which also involve freedom and independence@Shannon 161). As evidenced by Berniece± speech, we see how she dispenses an independence that appears before her time. While this is true, we must also recognize that within the space she is given in this play, her independence convinces no one, especially not Avery, that the position she desires is one of strength and empowerment. Even if Wilson± women are given the chance to step out of their marginalized space to attempt, in some way, to stand more central, they are reprimanded and reminded of their role by the men. Wilson expresses the difficulty he faced with Berniece, revealing, Avwomen in 1936Cm sorryC were not liberated. They were not the same as women in 1993. Originally I had Berniece in Piano Lesson utter some very feminist ideas. These were not ideas that were even in the world, that she would have been aware of in 1936. I had to take that away
from her (Conversations 182). As a result, we witness that in the end Berniece succumbs
to admitting that in regards to Avery's proposal, she is thinking about it (96). In
response to Wilson's concern and objection to the presence of these ideas, one only need
to look as far as blues lyrics sung by females in the twenties and thirties to recognize that
evidence of this ideology was alive and well. In her text Black Pearls: Blues Queens of
the 1920s, Daphne Duval Harrison argues that this idea became an emerging model for
the working woman one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative and trend-
setting (10).

As a single, childless woman, Vera has the potential to experience a
heightened level of mobility, yet her inability to kill the metaphorical ghosts of her
former lover Floyd renders her stagnant. In Seven Guitars, Floyd returns to town after
running off with another woman and expects that he will be warmly welcomed back into
the bed he deserted. When questioned about his decisions he casually replies, A told you
what it was. It wasn't nothing to me. Pearl Brown don't mean nothing to me (13). Vera is
looking for the space to express the depth of her love for him and the vacancy left behind
in her heart when he ran off with another woman. It becomes obvious that she is still very
much in both pain and love and seeks a closure that she will never get from him. Vera
must find this closure and satisfaction within herself because as long as she places any
piece of herself with him, she will be disappointed. Now back in town, he begs for that
place back but clearly they desire different things. Vera explains,

it wasn't nothing to you but it was something to me. To have you just up and walk
out like that. What you think happened to me? Did you ever stop to ask yourself, A
wonder how Vera doing C1 wonder how she feels? I lay here every night in an
empty bed. In an empty room. Where? Someplace special? Someplace where you had been? The same room you walked out of? The same bed you turned your back on? You give it up and you want it? What kind of sense does that make? (13)

The space Vera inhabits in the play repeatedly posits her in relation to Floyd. We see her explaining the pain he causes, lamenting whether she should take him back, taking him back, and ultimately mourning his death. And unquestionably, this specific dialogue between the two characters exposes Vera's vulnerability. Essentially, her sense of self-worth is contingent upon her ability to satisfy Floyd (Bogumil 124). When she does experience physical mobility, it is in response to his desire to return to Chicago. Reading aloud the one way ticket from Chicago back to Pittsburg she just purchased, she tells Floyd good for one year from date of purchase. I'm gonna put that in my shoe. When we get to Chicago I'm gonna walk around on it. I hope I never have to use it. (72). She is not defeated by her decision to leave with him and does not conform to any traditional female role. In this moment we see Vera as a prime example of a woman who desires both independence and pleasure. She reenters the relationship with Floyd on her own terms and is entering the relationship as an equal with the ability to stay or leave as she so inclines. While this is true, we cannot ignore the fact that her nonrefundable ticket will expire without being used when Floyd dies. While she is particularly cautious of Floyd's attention and intentions, Vera is twice the victim of a blues trope common in Wilson's cycle as well as in the history of black women's blues, the my man has left me blues (Elam 103). His death reveals a reality about the mobility of men and women during this time. Without him, she has no need or desire to be in Chicago, and all of the movement or action that occurs onstage is initiated through him.
The difference in mobility experienced by men and women is evident in a conversation between Canewell and Vera. When Vera asks Canewell where he is staying he replies, *You don’t know her. She just some old gal. I’m just helping her out with the rent. We got an understanding about what that is. It ain’t nothing. I keep my trunk packed up*. Citing the problematic nature of people moving so quickly, Vera responds: *That’s what the problem is now. Everybody keep their trunk packed up. Time you put two and two together and try and come up with four* they out the door*. Not surprisingly, Floyd spares no breath in defending the presence of their understanding as Canewell explains: *Quite naturally, when it’s time for me to go that be the end of our understanding. When it come to the end of our understanding I’m gonna drink a toast and keep on stepping*. Unbeknownst to *some old gal* Canewell can and will move when he chooses. Elam argues that *the economic condition of the characters speaks to a historical reality of that time*. More specifically, these circumstances enable Vera and Louise to exercise degrees of autonomy and to maintain associations with men that are not based on financial dependence. At least for Vera, and perhaps for Canewell’s *gal of the moment*, the mobility, even if it brings temporary rent, is not desired. In other words, while the rent the men who stay contribute may be welcomed, it appears through Vera’s condemnation of this practice, a more permanent love-filled arrangement is preferred. Moreover, Wilson plays the psychological repercussions of *man trouble* are all too common for many of his female characters; it is a gendered struggle experienced to various degrees. And ultimately, it is Vera who suffers financially in the end for the ticket she independently paid for and will now not
re redeem because of Floyd’s final movement to the grave.

Amidst the admission of his affair, and the ensuing birth of his child by another woman, we can identify in this scene between Rose and Troy the fact that these two are not only speaking completely different languages but additionally view their respective roles in sharp contrast. This scene in Fences evokes undeniable vocalized reactions from the audience and certainly remains fresh in the minds of viewers longer after the performance. While some argue that Rose can be seen as the most powerful character in the play because she sees that forgiveness leads to hope rather than despair within the Maxson family (Bogumil 50), and others argue that she is the most Christian character in all of his plays for her ability to forgive, we can also see how her own space is compromised in this scene and how Troy is not hearing her. Similar to the miscommunication illustrated between Martha and Loomis in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Kubitschek contends that Fences shows men and women speaking the different languages imposed/derived from their unconscious acceptance of an implicitly Eurocentric view of separate male and female spheres (184). The separate spheres Kubitschek references were simply the existence of gender roles that were developed within the dominant white community but could not be transferred as a reality to the majority of blacks in America at this time. These spheres of the 1950s, documented in Dick and Jane storybooks, reflect neatly separated roles for women and men at the time.

The disconnect occurs with Troy and Rose when he places his hope in achieving the unachievable image of masculinity and is denied, and rather than relocate his conception of masculinity he places his sexual self with another woman. After he
confesses his affair, Rose's immediate response is: A done tried to be everything a wife should be. Everything a wife could be. Been married eighteen years and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing another woman and done fathered a child by her (67). These lines suggest that Rose needs to defend her role as a wife when it is Troy who commits the offense. Her first move is to defend her role as a wife. As though had she been a so-so wife, allowing dust to gather and regularly forgetting necessary seasoning in her cooking, we would feel his sin as less vile. Perhaps even more interesting is his response, A Rose Y stop it now Y I can't make it go away. It's done now. I can't wish the circumstance of the thing away (67). Do not hold your breath because Troy Maxson is not apologizing, as he draws the attention onstage to himself and seeks to quiet her. She continues to reference the eighteen years they have shared, to which he replies once more: A Rose Y now listen to me Y we can get a handle on this thing. We can talk this out Y come to an understanding (67). Certainly, the understanding he seeks is beyond the point of being salvaged. Returning to the concept of separate spheres, Kubitschek argues that

historically, the separate-spheres ideology has combined with white male economic control to erode African American families and communities by preventing black men from achieving the only culturally endorsed definition of manhood and by subordinating the activities of black women, sometimes making them competitive in formerly common arenas of endeavor. Fences explores the damage that results when European constructions of sex roles separate, hierarchically order, and then alienate men and women. (185)

Troy highlights the exact damage that can occur when the dominant conception of masculinity is denied, attempting to excuse himself from his actions, explaining A just Y she give me a different idea Y a different understanding about myself Y Rose, you
not listening to me. I am trying the best I can to explain it to you. It is not easy for me to admit that I have been standing in the same place for eighteen years (68-70). While we see validity in his frustration with the promises that life did not bestow upon him, his actions are inexcusable. Rose recognizes a voice of strength inside her and allows it to be shared with all those within shouting distance:

I been standing here with you. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don’t you think I ever wanted other things?...You not the only one who got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and my needs, my dreams, and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn’t take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn’t ever gonna bloom. But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give to you. And upstairs in that room...with the darkness fallin in on me...I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn’t the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going...I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband. Cause that’s the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give and what you don’t have to give. But you take too. You take and don’t even know nobody’s giving!

While the stability of these last eighteen years is a mark of pride for Rose, it is for Troy, a failure. The recognition of his masculinity that he could not find in his work he replaces with another woman. Additionally, Rose attempts to explain everything that she has put into this relationship—the lengths she has gone to not see a day like this. In this way, Rose does experience mobility in her relationship as she is the agent of change. However, she suffers too as she is now without a companion.

Shannon describes this moment in the play:

Rose’s conversion from passive homemaker to an enraged woman is swift and riveting. In a matter of moments she steps out of her predictable character to deliver a salvo of pent-up emotions despite her feelings of anger, hurt, and betrayal. Rose’s diatribe serves to purge her of years of self-imposed repression and stagnation.
Ironically, it also marks the beginning of a new and more self serving, less altruistic Rose, but at the price of the marriage she so desired. When Rose chooses to nurture Alberta’s child, she not only makes Troy a womanless man but also makes herself a husbandless woman. Wilson thus represents the disintegration of the African American family as Rose’s having to choose between nurturing the father and the child. (156)

When Rose decides to stay in the home with Troy and tend to his child, we can certainly identify how a piece of her identity has faded. Though she outlives Troy physically onstage, we are reminded that *Fences* is his story. This play is unmistakably about him. Although she delivers this speech that echoes strength and receives vocal support from the audience, particularly the female viewers, it is only seconds later when Troy regains both power and attention onstage as he grabs her arm as she attempts to wrestle free. One cannot disregard her fragility against the often large Troy (originally played by James Earl Jones). Furthermore, what becomes rather interesting about the conclusion of this scene is that the victim is ultimately forgotten. Though Rose is obviously the one who has been wronged and should harbor all the anger in the world, it is Troy who holds her violently as he takes offense to the claim that he does not give. In this exchange we clearly see the different languages being spoken. Here, Rose refers to the fact that he does not give emotionally, that his soil is hard and rocky. She does not say *I wish you made more money,* though this is what he hears. To Troy, this attack on his ability to financially provide for his family is his responsibility and the measure of his masculinity is the ultimate offense that prompts him to latch onto her arm, leaving her to cry out. The power in the conclusion of this scene lies with the men onstage, as it is Troy who attacks her and her son, Cory, who must come to her rescue. In seconds, the powerful speech has
faded to her cries for help.

The violence of the eighties becomes tangible as Tonya pursues an abortion rather than bring a child into the present world. In *King Hedley II* Wilson addresses a woman’s choice to reign over her body. In her short story *Abortion* Alice Walker succinctly explains that having a child is a good experience to have had, like graduate school. But if you’ve had one, you’ve had the experience and that’s enough (Walker 65). Considering her conversation with King, it can be argued that Tonya would agree. She is arguably the strongest woman, provided with the most powerful voice, in Wilson’s ten play cycle, yet we still witness a disconnect between her and her husband, King. He questions her decision to abort the child now when she gave birth to her daughter from a previous marriage. Locating the difference for her, Tonya explains, About seventeen years. That’s a whole lot of difference. I’m thirty-five years old. I done seen the whole thing turn around. When I had Natasha I was as happy as I could be. I thought life was gonna be something. Look up and the whole world seem like it went crazy. 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 (37). Though she cites several reasons, what King chooses to hear in this conversation is that he is the difference. He is supremely offended that Tonya would have another man’s baby years prior, and now will not give him the same gift. What he fails to understand is that Tonya does not want the immobility a child creates, for she already must bear the responsibility for her teenager’s child, and secondly, the death present on the street everyday reminds her that keeping a child alive in the present social climate is a challenge she is not willing to carry.
King is deeply concerned with his lineage, an extension of his masculinity and his ability to have an heir. We see this in his name, King Hedley II. He persists, arguing, *What I say don’t mean nothing. That’s what you telling me?* (38). She responds, *At ain’t like it don’t mean nothing, King. It don’t mean everything like you think it ought to mean.* There are other people in the world (38). In this moment he is questioning her perception of his worth. This is everything to King. Tonya has different concerns that stem from her reality as a mother. She has witnessed that men in the past have experienced a different mobility, similar to that present in *Seven Guitars.* Though their movement has ironically sometimes positioned them in jail, she understands that she is ultimately left alone to care for the child. In a moment of self-empowerment she explains:

*I’m through with babies I ain’t raising no more. Ain’t raising no grandkids. I’m looking out for Tonya. I ain’t raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him. Why I want to bring another life into this world that don’t respect life? I don’t want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive? I ain’t going through that. I ain’t having this baby and I ain’t got to explain it to nobody.* (39)

There does appear to be some contradiction with Tonya’s decision because it seems as though she is killing the child growing inside her to prevent it from being killed by someone else. She lists the different opportunities for death this child may face in life, but ultimately sees the violence she imparts on it as different. She allows this violence to take place on and in her body because in this way, she can control what will happen to this child. Though originally written as a response to *The Color Purple,* Janet J. Montelaro’s perspective can shed light on what Tonya is explaining here, suggesting that the question of who will care for the children when African American mothers face overwhelming
hardship or death as a result of patriarchal forms of oppression consistently recurs (Montelaro 29). In the passage noted above we recognize that Tonya continually uses to reference the caring of the child. She recognizes that the bulk of the burden of raising this child will be placed on her shoulders. Not a commentary on absent fathers, but rather an implication of their relationship. Her speech that spans nearly four pages stands as one of the most powerful and most direct examples of social commentary in all of Wilson’s work. Though a definition originally created for Ma Rainey, Shannon highlights a diametric role Tonya fulfills. She approximates a human mixture of inner strength, defiance, and fierce independence on the one hand and warmth and compassion on the other. Like many of Wilson’s women, Tonya is a deeply complex character. She certainly removes herself from the object position to that of a subject when she expresses her possession of her body visible through her sole ability to decide whether she will have the child.

In *Radio Golf*, Wilson introduces us to Mame, a prime example of a 1990s career-oriented woman. In bold colored skirt-suits and matching pumps she garners attention onstage. However, what becomes noticeable about the space she inhabits is the direct influence or relation the position of her husband has on her own ability to be successful. Though she has a career independent from his real estate venture and political campaign, she explains how his decisions have had a direct effect on her business life, noting, got a call this morning from the governor’s office. They canceled my next interview and said they didn’t want to reschedule any further interviews with me at this time (72). Expanding on the correlation of his recent radical speech printing in the
newspaper, and her recent job loss, she explains, \textit{you jumped but I'm falling too. I'm the wife of Harmond Wilkes. That's all the governor sees. All any of the other board members see. What all our friends see. I tied myself so tight to you that there is no more. I don't know if I can carry this any further}. Though highlighting the independent vision of others that place her in a space relative to him, she does take responsibility for the distance she did allow herself. Mame is an interesting female character when juxtaposed with many of the others because though she similarly has a meager share of lines, she makes her presence known onstage. When she enters the stage she does so with purpose and she is often airing her opinions and beliefs on what would be best for Harmond. She never shies away from letting him know what she sees fit when it comes to his campaign slogan or the colors of political buttons. However, it is this involvement that she cites as responsible for her inability to be separate from him.

Furthermore, through another example provided illustrating moments when her career has taken an unexpected turn, we see how she carries the burden of sacrifice. Harmond draws upon a memory of an important event she had planned for her company. He recalls,

\begin{quote}
I blew a tire on the way. There you were all dressed up. You didn't sit in the car. You were standing out along the road beside me. That red scarf wrapped pretty around your neck. You didn't get mad. You didn't blame me. We worked through it together. I still remember you standing out there holding out your hands ready to take the rusty bolts. That's when I knew I loved you. \textit{(73)}
\end{quote}

While this may remain a love-filled memory for Harmond, it marks for Mame one of the first sacrifices that she must make as a career woman in a relationship. This blown tire is symbolic of the fact that she has decisions to make between her role as wife and her role
as a businesswoman. In each space that she enters she does undergo a compromise. She ultimately decides to separate herself from his campaign, explaining, *I still standing here, Harmond. I still love you. But this is all you now. Your campaign, that old house, the Hill.* You're on your own with that. I can't live my life for you. And you can't live yours for me. But I'm still standing here.*@2) This decision ultimately relinquishes the voice and power she held on stage earlier in the play. The differences in the space she and Harmond each individually maintain is identified here, as we see that he makes no sacrifice for her decisions in her career. Furthermore, this signifies a surrender or death for Mame. She valued her position in his ear, constantly giving him her opinion and advice. She identified herself as a strong resource for him. When Mame says *But I'm still standing here,* there is a defeat that is evident. In other words, Mame becomes defeated because of the toll that this experience has taken on her ability to be an independent businesswoman. In this relationship she must pick either businesswoman or wife of politician because through her experience, one aspect of her identity will ultimately suffer.

Ironically, in the 2008 Mountain View production of this play, running just weeks before the election, the prop framed photograph placed upon Harmond's desk was of Michelle Obama. Though this was perhaps placed there mainly to display support of the Obama and to also draw attention to the seemingly prophetic nature of Wilson play, it does highlight the role a wife of a politician must accept. Certainly, few might not want the role of President's wife, as it does come with access to make positive changes in this country. And although Michelle Obama, our First Lady, is a pillar of strength and an
exceptional role model for young females across the globe, one might consider the sacrifices that she, similar to Mame, has had to make in her support of her husband's political career. To return to Mame, Wilson selects a name that allows for an interpretation of her role. Pronounced A
aim, we see how she is susceptible to wounds not by her own actions and decisions, but by those made by her husband.

In making any argument about Wilson’s women, the figure of Aunt Ester must receive mention. In comparison, she occupies a space that is unparalleled certainly by any other woman, but also by any other man in Wilson’s entire cycle. In Wilson’s own words he represents our tradition, our philosophy, our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture (160). She carries with her the entire history of the African presence in America, dating back to between 1619 and 1620. Thus, she is recognized as a spirit more so than any other character. She is incomparable to the other women in many ways, but certainly because she is not set in relation to any one on stage. Every woman in this study is seen in relation to a man to a certain degree. Aunt Ester stands completely on her own, although she and Solly do flirt, there is no suggestion that there is anything beyond that, as she also is over 300 years old. Her purpose on stage is to serve as the connection to the ancestry and to provide access to the journey to the City of Bones. We do recognize in Wilson’s decision to place this honor upon the shoulders of a woman that he is incredibly respectful of women and the presence they do have. He explains, A grew up in a house without a father, in a single-parent household with my mother. I am cautious in writing women characters; I am respectful of them as I would be of my mother. That is, I try to write honest women. I try to place myself in their shoes, I try to look on both sides I
write honestly whatever I find but I am cautious of being respectful(109).

In no way is this study suggesting that Wilson is chauvinistic or that he bears no concern for the stories of women. Conversely, he deeply respects women but recognizes that the contribution he can provide to the conversation is the story of black men and their rediscovery of an identity. What this does suggest is that two people—specifically a man and a woman—cannot achieve their discovery simultaneously on stage. Wilson only leaves for one, and it is always the female voice that is deafened to allow more room for the men.

Wilson creates a variety of women whose struggles in the play illuminate real obstacles present in society and moreover, the space that women of color have often had to occupy. As wives and mothers the mobility some of the women achieve is limited and certainly, Wilson's plays remind us that even over the course of a century, women still do not experience full equality in business or domestic matters. Shannon concludes that upon closer examination of how Wilson depicts women, one discovers that, rather than complimenting the men around them, they actually attempt to break free of the male definition, although their voices are outnumbered in each of the plays (162). The most pivotal word Shannon purposefully selects here is attempt. These women are, for the most part, independent minded and strong-willed and do indeed exhibit a sense of autonomy that appears before their time. However, the actions occurring around them and the mistranslation that often inhibits their ability to actually be heard, undermines their ability to ever truly take center stage. Although his women individually have deeply interesting stories, we are reminded that these plays are ultimately not about them.
Thought to Wilson’s credit, their meager share of lines accurately depicts a struggle women historically faced in society—the struggle to raise one’s voice above the crowd. When we examine their lines closely, we see that these women battle to exit the subordinate positions society has left for them, often making progressive decisions along the way.
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<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/> 


Mississippi, 2006.


