

CANEWELL

That ain't nothing but two more. Killed one last week and three the week before that.

CANEWELL

They didn't mess with Jack Harding. They let somebody else kill him. You remember that Floyd.

FLOYD

I was there!.

Hedley  
CANEWELL

Jack Harding was a bad man.

FLOYD

I don't care how bad you are. There is always somebody badder. I was standing right there. Gator asked him for his money and Jack Harding told him, say he didn't pay nobody.

RED CARTER

He was telling the truth too. He didn't even pay the government.

FLOYD

That's what he told him. Say the United States government don't even mess with me. I owe everybody and don't pay nobody.

CANEWELL

People used to ask the police, "How come you don't arrest Jack Harding? He a bad man." The police say, "We waiting till somebody kill him. Might have to wait a long time but we waiting just the same." Man done killed five men and he walking around talking about he don't pay nobody and the police turn their back when they see him coming.

# Forum

## ENCOUNTERS IN THE AUGUST WILSON ARCHIVE

ERIC M. GLOVER, OMIYEMI (ARTISIA) GREEN,  
VICTORIA LAFAVE, KHALID Y. LONG, AND  
LADRICA MENSON-FURR

*Edited and introduced by Sandra G. Shannon*

*and Isaiah Matthew Wooden*

### INTRODUCTION

August Wilson's deep affection for the city of Pittsburgh and its libraries is well documented. Indeed, when asked in interviews about his time coming of age in his Hill District hometown—the historically African American neighborhood that provides the setting for nine of the ten plays in his acclaimed American Century Cycle—Wilson routinely reminisced about the opportunities that visiting libraries afforded him to encounter worlds, stories, and lives previously unfamiliar and unimaginable. “When I quit school at fourteen, I didn’t want my mother to know, so I’d get up and go to the library and stay there until three o’clock. My mother taught me to read when

Page 70 of this script dated November 1995 is annotated by Wilson and contains a self-portrait. The script relates to the 1995 American Conservatory Theater production of *Seven Guitars*. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive at the University of Pittsburgh.

I was four years old, and in the library for the first time in my life I felt free,” Wilson remarked in a 1997 interview with Bonnie Lyons. “I could read whole books on subjects that interested me. . . . It always amazed me that libraries were free,” he continued.<sup>1</sup>

Given the significant role that Pittsburgh’s libraries played in Wilson’s personal, educational, and artistic development, the 2020 announcement that the University of Pittsburgh Library System (ULS) had acquired the August Wilson Archive from the playwright’s estate seemed quite fitting. According to Constanza Romero Wilson, his widow and chief custodian of his legacy, “[Wilson] left Pittsburgh in 1978, but he took The Hill, the three rivers, the streets, the steel mills, the fish sandwich shops, and the cadences of the language he heard in cigar stores and barbershops with him.”<sup>2</sup> Following two years of quiet negotiations between the ULS and Romero Wilson, the playwright’s personal and professional effects have returned to the milieu that produced him and that heavily influenced his artistry. Although other top-flight institutions had vied for possession of the August Wilson Archives, for a host of reasons the University of Pittsburgh prevailed. It was, as August Wilson Society president Dr. Sandra Shannon described in a 2022 essay for *Pennsylvania Heritage* magazine, “a full-circle moment,” one that promised to grant new generations of Wilson enthusiasts a chance to experience a similar sense of freedom as the playwright described feeling while visiting libraries during his youth.<sup>3</sup>

Two years after receiving and processing more than four hundred and fifty boxes of Wilson’s notebooks, draft scripts, correspondences, and artworks—among other materials and effects—the ULS hosted a weeklong celebration from February 24 to March 3, 2023, to commemorate the opening of the August Wilson Archive to the public. Library staff partnered with an auspicious lineup of Pittsburgh-based and national institutions and organizations, including the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, the August Wilson House, and the August Wilson Society to organize panels, performances, and guided tours for community members. The celebration culminated with a grand opening event that brought together an impressive array of luminaries from Wilson’s life and career to fete and preview the archive at the ULS’s newly renovated Hillman Library where its holdings are housed.

For its contribution to the celebration, the August Wilson Society agreed to host its 2023 Biennial Colloquium, “Excavating New Critical Landscapes for August Wilson Studies,” in tandem with the ULS’s weeklong celebration to herald the public opening of the August Wilson Archive. The broader aim of the colloquium, which took place at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center March 2–4, 2023, was to gather artists, scholars, educators, archivists, curators, students, and lovers of the late playwright and his work to assess the current and future impact of memory and preservation work being done in Pittsburgh and beyond.

The specific charge of the “Encounters in the August Wilson Archive” panel,



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Attendees at the opening for the August Wilson Archive at the University of Pittsburgh mingle in front of sketches and self-portraits by Wilson, 2023. Photo: Aimee Obidzinski

which Dr. Isaiah Wooden conceived, curated, and moderated, was to invite a small cohort of participants to journey to the August Wilson Archive upon its opening in January 2023; make the first formal critical intervention into Wilson's unpublished writings, notes, and personal ephemera; and develop presentations that reflected on the materials that they encountered during their visits.<sup>4</sup> Some of the questions we hoped panelists would consider included, How might materials from the August Wilson Archive complicate existing critical discourse in Wilson studies, and Black theater studies more broadly? What does the August Wilson Archive reveal about August Wilson and the politics of production? And in what ways do the holdings perhaps reflect Wilson's awareness of the archive as a practice of preservation and creation? In addition to these questions, we also invited panelists to speak to aspects of the archive that they personally found compelling or generative, attending to their own affective responses while encountering materials that few people had previously seen or touched. Our goal was that the first-of-its-kind event would illuminate and demonstrate for the public the various ways that they, too, might be in dialogue with the August Wilson Archive, making its rich holdings meaningful to them critically and creatively.

After circulating our call for proposals and receiving a very robust response to it in fall 2022, we selected the five participants whose reflections are published in this forum: Eric M. Glover, Omiyemi (Artisia) Green, Victoria LaFave, Khalid Y. Long, and Ladrica Menson-Furr. Each scheduled visits in early 2023, eager to discover what fresh insights their time in the archive might yield about, among other things, Wilson's religious and spiritual life, his family history, his forays into musical theater, his unpublished writings, and his collaborative relationships, as well as the impact of Black nationalism on his politics and aesthetics. What follows in this forum are condensed versions of the remarks they delivered in the panel. As they indicate, they uncovered so much more, often negotiating a range of feelings while doing so.

The long-awaited archive opening drew a large and eclectic gathering to Pittsburgh to mark the occasion. From stunning multilevel displays on Wilson's American Century Cycle plays throughout the Hillman Library to inspiring speeches from invited dignitaries and guided tours, the week's tribute to its native son, dubbed "From the Hill to the Stage: Celebrating the August Wilson Archive," was indeed historic on many levels. The August Wilson Society was clear from the outset about what access to the August Wilson Archive means: an entirely new critical landscape for August Wilson scholarship. Scholars and other knowledge seekers can now excavate and share little-known primary source materials about the playwright's life and work to better understand the genius of one of America's finest writers.

ERIC M. GLOVER

BOOK BY . . .

October 12, 1978

Dear Mr. Johnson:

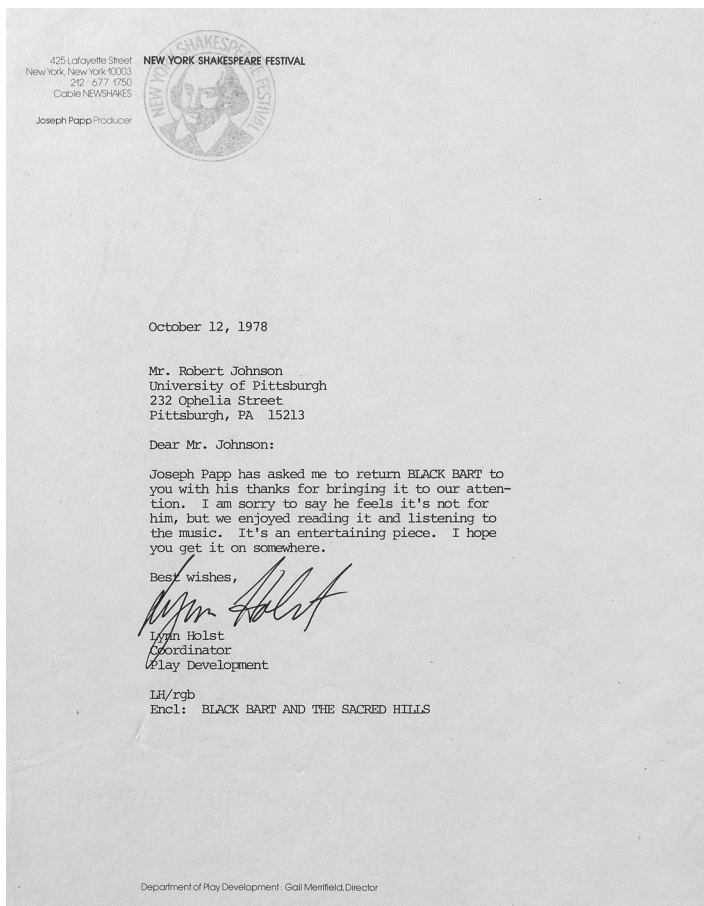
*Joseph Papp has asked me to return Black Bart to you with his thanks for bringing it to our attention. I am sorry to say he feels it's not for him, but we enjoyed reading it and listening to the music. It's an entertaining piece. I hope you get it on somewhere.*

*Best wishes,<sup>5</sup>*

So wrote Lynn Holst, coordinator of play development, to the late Bob Johnson after he submitted *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977) to Joseph Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival. Johnson (or “BJ” as administration, staff, and students who knew and loved him called him) served on the faculty at the University of Pittsburgh. By day Johnson was a full-time faculty member in Black studies teaching dance and drama, and by night he was the founding artistic director of Black Theater Dance Ensemble choreographing stage works. Johnson appeared in the original New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Hair* (1967), where Papp cast him, and Ed Bullins’s *Goin’ a Buffalo* (1968). August Wilson later brought Johnson on to choreograph the world premiere of the musical that was scheduled to be produced in 1977 in Pittsburgh, even putting up a sign advertising the audition.<sup>6</sup>

My encounter in the August Wilson Archive confirms my suspicion that no discussion of Wilson is complete without mention of his musical theater writing. I am referring, of

Letter from the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Lynn Holst to the University of Pittsburgh’s Bob Johnson rejecting *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* on Joseph Papp’s behalf. Bob Johnson was collaborating with Wilson on the musical in the 1970s. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive



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course, to Wilson's 1981 musical satire *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, the book of which I read in a physical reading room and the score of which I listened to in a virtual reading room. (Having said that, dramaturgically the American Century Cycle shapes and is shaped by dance and music found in *Gem of the Ocean* to *Radio Golf*.) Were it not for the August Wilson Archive, I would never have accessed an unpublished typescript or gotten to learn more about the script's production history because of Pitt's Bob Johnson Papers. The musical's book was never published, the musical's lyrics and music were never released, and the musical was rarely produced except for two productions.

The August Wilson Archive also helps me answer my research question on Black people's extracted and invisibilized labor in the history of the musical, conceptually. When I was an undergraduate student at Swarthmore College, I served as an intern at the Signature Theatre Company, where Charity Miller, another Black intern, and I got to do production dramaturgy. I helped the associate artistic director conduct research into Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, create lobby displays, prepare actor's packets, and write and edit program materials. When I was following the proper dramaturgical protocols for Wilson's *Seven Guitars* in summer 2006 at Signature, I kept finding references to *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, and seventeen years later I come full circle and encounter Wilson's musical satire, charting the script's production history and the world of the musical satire in what follows.

Wilson cut his teeth as a musical theater writer after the Ujima Theater productions of *The Coldest Day of the Year* and *Recycled* flopped. According to Laurence Glasco, an associate professor of history at Pitt and a Wilson studies scholar, dance and music combined to make Wilson's dramaturgy accessible to his Black and grassroots constituent audiences. Johnson's production company Theater Urge, where he directed the first full-length production of *Jitney* in 1982, also engaged Nelson Harrison, a composer, and Wilson. Harrison, Johnson, and Wilson discussed plans for a musical about Stagger Lee with Harrison as the composer, Johnson as the dramaturg, and Wilson as the book writer, but nothing came of them. However, getting to work with Johnson sharpened Wilson's desire for a broadening of his popular appeal, and he took a stab at musicals proper.<sup>7</sup>

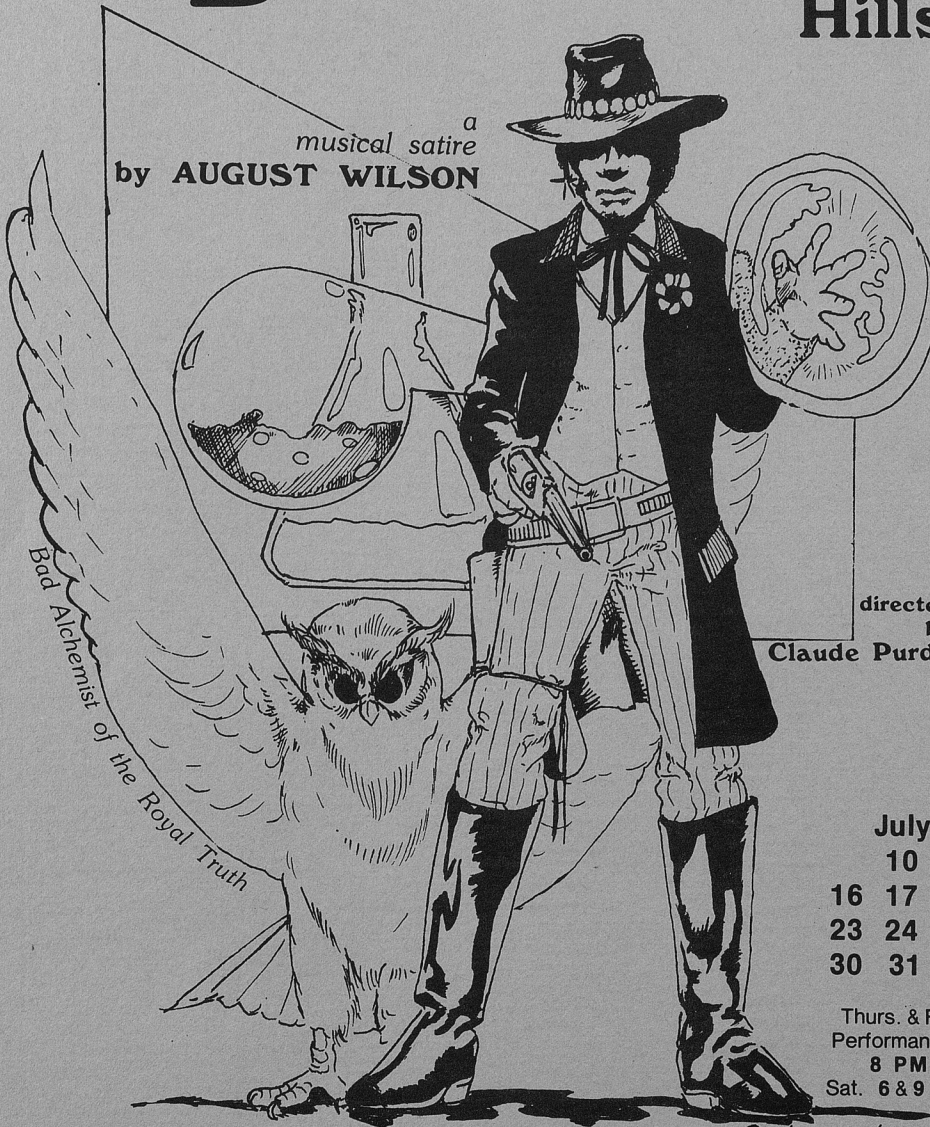
Wilson, at his friend Claude Purdy's suggestion, wrote a musical based on Black Bart, the hooded robber of twenty-eight stagecoaches in California from 1875 to 1883. Although Black Bart was a white villain whose mama named him Charles E. Boles in real life, Wilson's character is a Black hero defending his land from white capitalists seeking to expand. Wilson's poem "Black Bart and the Hills" (1973), in which he delights the reader with tall tales, formed the basis of the musical satire. Wilson asked Maisha Baton (who taught Kuntu Writers' Workshop with him and Rob Penny), Harrison, Purdy, Johnson, and Ron Pitts to write the score, direct, choreograph, and perform as Black Bart, respectively. The world premiere was not meant to be, however, because Wilson (and others) failed to secure the financial backing necessary to produce his musical.<sup>8</sup>

Flyer for Penumbra Theatre's 1981 production of *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive

# BLACK BART and The Sacred Hills

a musical satire  
by **AUGUST WILSON**

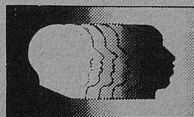
directed  
by  
**Claude Purdy**



**July**  
 10 11  
 16 17 18  
 23 24 25  
 30 31 1

Thurs. & Fri.  
 Performances  
 8 PM  
 Sat. 6 & 9 PM

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# PENUMBRA

Hallie G. Brown Theater 270 N. Kent St. St. Paul, MN 55102



A staged reading of *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* was given by the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center Reader's Theater in 1978. Composed by Gregg Williams and directed by Purdy, Carmen Hayward as Fair Life, Black Bart's love interest, and Ernie Hudson as Black Bart led a staged reading featuring a chorus of twenty-three. The world premiere production of *Black Bart*, produced by St. Paul's culturally specific Penumbra Theatre, opened at the Hallie Q. Brown Theater in 1981. Composed by Richard Greenwood for six musicians, directed by Purdy, and choreographed by Anne Marie Gillen, the musical's book remained cumbersome, by all accounts, even after a workshop in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Pitt's Kuntu Repertory Theater also revived and remade *Black Bart*, this time on a double bill with *The Homecoming*, at Alumni Hall in 2002.

Act I of *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* starts with Little Egyptians singing "Wake Up Little Egypt," a musical leitmotif with instrumental accompaniment. Just as the Black characters organize a community in the American Century Cycle in Pittsburgh's Hill District, so too the Black, Chinese, Mexican, and white characters organize a community in the sacred hills. Horsefeathers (played by Wilson warrior Marion McClinton) serves as the Native American narrator of the musical who recounts the events and tells the story. The musical's book concerns the titular character turning his water into gold in the US frontier, so that the precious metal loses its value to white characters settling in the Wild West. Williams sets Baton's lyrics to music inspired by African music, gospel, jazz, popular music, reggae, rock and roll, Spanish music, and Sun Ra Arkestra.<sup>10</sup>

Pharaoh Goldstein, much like the white recording industry in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, seeks to exploit Black Bart for personal gain in Act II. In order to outwit the invisible electric angels that keep Black Bart out of harm's way, Pharaoh asks two men, Master Divine and Chauncy Riffraff III, to help him in his scheme. Mother Principal also sends femmes fatales in but archenemy Kid Sampson takes matters into his own hands when none is successful in their seductions. Dressed in a combination frock coat and Jesse James-style raincoat, cowboy boots, a cowboy hat, and leather pants with African juju pouches for magic, Black Bart squares up for a magical duel. Black Bart and Kid Sampson fight, Bart finishes Kid Sampson off, and Black Bart and Fair Life decide to run away happily ever after.<sup>11</sup>

Characters, events, given circumstances, performers, symbolism, and themes that surfaced in Pittsburgh's Hill District also surfaced in the sacred hills either consciously or unconsciously. Where Aunt Ester is a conjure woman as old as the Black presence in the US, Bart is a "bad alchemist of the Royal Truth" discovered to possess magic powers. Aunt Ester also leads her Black cat in death in *King Hedley II*, and Black Bart's talking owl, Who, follows him around his land. One of the characters in *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* is known as Sylvester, and another character in the musical makes a passing mention to Raynell unseen and unheard off stage. Wilson warriors, such as Russell Curry (Black Bart), Abdul Salaam El Razzac (Kid Sampson), and James A. Williams (Chauncy Riffraff III), sing and dance.

The sound recording of the staged reading given at Los Angeles's Inner City Cultural Center revealed what was and remains an entertaining stage work. Feet stomping, hand clapping, and a piano accompany the act 1 opening "Wake Up Little Egypt," sung by a soloist to triumphal opening chords and then a chorus to triumphal closing chords. Fair Life's "Ain't Gonna Be Poor All My Life" is a soprano's dream and the chorus's "Hoe Down in the John" is a cappella. "Who Is Free" is absurd, existential, and expressionistic all at once, declaring Black Bart's talking owl Who's freedom all the while interrogating who is free—what freedom means and why freedom matters. Graverobber and Zooty Zoot's "Can't Do Nothing Right" and Black Bart's "Magick," both lined out by Williams on the sound recording, were also preserved.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, the materials in the August Wilson Archive continue to guide me in my thinking as both a dramatic critic and a dramaturg. When I offer my course on Black musical theater, "The Art of the American Musical, from Chattel Slavery to Mass Incarceration," I teach Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* much to my students' surprise. However, each band member's speech pattern is patterned after his musical instrument that he starts to play to accompany Ma when she sings blues. The play's script is not only a book, but also a score of lyrics and music, what with Dwight Andrews's musical direction and Wilson's dialogue serving as lyrics and music philosophically speaking. How excellent that the next time I teach students will benefit from the encounter Wilson and I enjoyed in his archive in January 2023.

OMIYEMI (ARTISIA) GREEN

#### A SITE OF REMEMBRANCE

The same ritualized approach I take to engaging my altars as a priest of an African diasporic religion is how I prepared for my visit to the August Wilson Archive. In the late hours of January 30, 2023, I said prayers and made food offerings to my Ògún pot, the Yorùbá deity of iron and technology, and made my way to the City of Steel. My supplications were for safe travels and for Ògún, who lives in the earth—the Realm of the Ancestors—and the one with the tools to carve a pathway through uncharted terrain, to carve a trail to what August wanted me to see during my encounter in the archive. My plan was to arrive in Pittsburgh by 7 a.m. on Tuesday in alignment with the West African cultural consciousness—some Akan, some Senegalese, and some Yorùbá—observed within the pages of and in some production approaches to the American Century Cycle, so my aptitude and investigative process would benefit from the day's energy. Per the Akan calendar or the Adaduanan, "the genius of Tuesday" (Bena), is the belief that the Tuesday born are spiritually well done. In another method of time-keeping among the Yorùbá, the Kójódá, Tuesday (Ọjọ Ìṣégún) is considered the day of victory. In the Cycle, Tuesday holds a special significance for Aunt Ester; it is the only day she performs soul washings. Equally eager as Citizen to get his soul cleansed,

Citizen is with the usual - this time on the side  
Be with the man who cher the Kelly peer  
- (she gonna stand by you)

Time frame

Citizen works  
for power

Give  
citizen  
a choice  
to make -  
used to do with  
freedom

Sally -  
only for power

Piss Sally off -  
what you can  
work for power

Choose between  
these two men -

Aunt Eger knows  
what citizen destroy is.

we know they can  
go with me -

Citizen of America  
Citizen of Africa -

Atagya has responsibility  
to  
(world community -)

How he knows what  
Sally knew -

upon arrival I checked into the hotel, ate breakfast, enjoyed a happenstance conversation with a former member of the Black Panther Party of Chicago and self-described “Hedley”<sup>13</sup>—he was also the shuttle bus driver and a cook at the hotel—and was seated in the archive by 9 a.m.

My first observation was that Wilson wrote on everything, as when the flood of words came, they immediately needed a place to be memorialized. His handwriting was either easy to read or extremely difficult, evidence that he did not write with the intention of archival discovery, but for himself. He used colorful language that did not make the final cut for the stage or publication. Some of the books he read included Chinua Achebe’s *When Things Fall Apart*, either whole or in part, *Born in Blood: The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry* by John Robinson, and Velma Maia Thomas’s *Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation*. Each of these texts reinforce themes and dramaturgical elements across the Cycle: the lingering effects of colonialization, moral and communal development, symbols and allegories, and the importance of remembering.

Among the *Gem of the Ocean* files, I discovered a manila folder with a heart cut-out of it and plot points, character motivations, and a timeline of actions written inside the jacket. As I traced the outline of the heart with my fingers—cut by a very young person, presumably, his daughter Azula Carmen—I recalled a line in *Gem* where Aunt Ester asks Citizen if he’s ever had love.<sup>14</sup> As I touched things that August once handled, I was filled with gratitude as I remembered all of those who made this archival visit—a form of ancestral remembrance—possible. I was indebted to my colleagues for selecting me as part of a team to explore the not yet discovered. I was appreciative of University of Pittsburgh Library System staff members Bill Daw, Dial Thomas, and Leah Mickens for their assistance in traveling the roads of the archive. Yet, I was most grateful for Constanza Romero Wilson, who shared Wilson with the world during his lifetime and, through her generous gift to the field of Wilson studies, continues to do so in his death. Like many in the cast of Wilson’s dramatic womenfolk, left to reassemble and bear the weight of their warriors’ absence, choices, feats, and losses, Constanza’s big-heartedness in giving Wilson’s work back to the community he championed demonstrates his ethic to remember. Furthermore, it ensures that the circle would never be unbroken as he asks of his daughters in the *Gem* dedication.

In Wilson’s memorialization of possibly his daughter’s artwork, he wrote words around the edges of the heart like *destiny, choice, freedom*, recurrent themes in the Cycle, and none of which can be pursued if the heart—the headquarters of Ògún within the human body, the seat of personal will, courage, and determination—is riddled with fear. Fear is one of the very things Wilson asks his warriors to confront and was a subject with which he wrestled in other writings, such as in the untitled poem discovered among the *King Hedley* files. Replaying words within the first and fourth lines of this poem, I wondered if these phrases—“between this space & that” and “tremor and trust”<sup>15</sup> were also on repeat in Wilson’s psyche as he wrote the ending of each

This manila file folder has a heart-shaped cutout and contains handwritten notes by Wilson relating to *Gem of the Ocean*. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive

Cycle play. The door Wilson brings each warrior to, positions near, or through is either the means by which their experiences, personal or communal, are reframed and ethics reconstituted, and/or is the road to their redemption. Will the warrior spatially situated between two worlds choose fear or love? Will they cross the threshold trusting that their destiny will help them give proper meaning to freedom?

For researchers seeking to deepen their familiarity with Wilson and develop or nurture dramaturgical sensibilities in line with the constitution of his personhood, the archive is a gift that keeps giving. On a spiritual level, the archive is also a site of remembrance, the ancestral altar that allows scholars and lovers of Wilson to remember the pieces of history. It gives memories of Wilson's personality, continual presence, and ensures his legacy in the hearts and minds of the community he loved. It is the place we can go to weave an Egún cloth, a tapestry which binds the past and present together, and reflect on what Wilson taught us through the Cycle, that "the preservation and promotion, the propagation and rehearsal of the value of one's ancestors is the surest way to a full and productive life."<sup>16</sup>

VICTORIA LAFAVE

"I LIKE WORKING WITH YOU"

*The Dramaturg in the Archive*

The acquisition of the August Wilson Archive sent a creative jolt through the Cathedral of Learning. The University of Pittsburgh Theatre Department, or Pitt Stages, opened *Seven Guitars* as their first production from August Wilson's American Century Cycle on March 17, 2023. Although a first for Pitt Stages, Wilson's works were no stranger to Pitt's campus thanks to the Kuntu Repertory Theatre. Housed in the Africana Studies Department, the Kuntu Repertory Theatre was a foundational Black theater company that frequently produced Wilson's works alongside his collaborators, mentors, and friends—Rob Penny and Dr. Vernell A. Lillie. As a graduate student, I was honored to extend this performance legacy to Pitt Stages and the University Library System by serving as the dramaturg for this production.

*Seven Guitars* tells the story of the untimely death of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton. Following his military discharge, the success of his hit record "That's All Right," and ninety days in the workhouse, Floyd returns to Pittsburgh in 1948 with a new perspective. He aims to get back his guitar and his girl and return to Chicago to fulfill a new record deal. Gathered in Vera's backyard, Louise, Canewell, Hedley, Red Carter, Ruby, and Floyd build a community. In staging this production, we aimed to introduce our contemporary community to the August Wilson Archive and explore what the archive could offer us as artists.

With the Wilson Archive's homecoming, Theatre Arts faculty member Karen "kj" Gilmer began planning the Pitt Stages production. Gilmer, a Black artist born and

Page 69 of this script dated November 1995 is annotated by Wilson and contains a sketch of a guitar. The script relates to the 1995 American Conservatory Theater production of *Seven Guitars*. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive

FLOYD

What's wrong with that woman you got?

RED CARTER

Her mama ain't taught her how to cook. She know how to do everything else but she can't cook. At first I thought she was lying I come to find out it was the truth. I told her. "Come here baby I'm gonna show you this one time." Told her, "Pay attention." Then I showed her how to make biscuits. That's the only thing she can cook. That's why I'm getting fat. You hungry? We can go down there right now and get some biscuits.

FLOYD

You ought to teach her how to open up a can of beans. I don't want no women who can't cook. She ain't too much good for me. She might be good for somebody but much as I like to eat she ain't good for me. That's what got me so mad when they arrested me cause I was gonna miss Vera's cooking. I asked him say, "I done nothing. What you arresting me for?" He say. "I'm arresting you in advance. You gonna do something." I just look at him and told him, "Well, Boss you right cause if I had my druthers I'd cut you every which way but loose." He just laughed cause he know a black man ain't never had his druthers. They took me down there and beat me with them rubber hoses till I said Uncle. I told him say, "If I ever meet you out in the back by the alley one day we gonna have some fun."

HEDLEY

The police man shoot.

CANEWELL

Yeah, I heard about that. Was you down there Hedley?

HEDLEY

Blood everywhere. Plenty blood. The police kill two men.



Reproduction  
of *Seven Guitars*  
costume design  
for the character  
Louise by Constanza  
Romero. Courtesy of  
the August Wilson  
Archive

opening at the Huntington Theatre. Wilson considers Carroll's suggestions for cuts in the script, ultimately defending the cultural necessity of some moments, including Canewell's collard greens recipe monologue. When Carroll asks if it is necessary to devote the stage time to listening to Floyd reminisce during the Lord's Prayer in Act 1, Scene 4, Wilson vehemently insists on the entirety of the prayer: "You can't cut 'The Lord's Prayer'!! What would god [*sic*] think? 'Sorry Lord, but I ain't got time to say a whole prayer. Maybe next time.' I think the audience should, for the extra minute it takes him to sing the song, pray along with him or at least quietly acknowledge someone is praying. I like working with you."<sup>17</sup> When similar questions later arose in our rehearsal process, I used this archival encounter to explain how the moment was sig-

raised in Pittsburgh, grew up with a guitar-playing father and a grandmother who made paper carnations for Mother's Day, much like Wilson's *Seven Guitars* characters. Gilmer is now a professional costume designer, teacher, and director. Gilmer is familiar with historical research and was eager to see the Constanza Romero Wilson costume designs. However, with Gilmer serving as the costume designer, intimacy coordinator, and director of *Seven Guitars*, I was sent to search the archive for possible answers to key questions: How are Wilson's influences echoing throughout this script? What details were essential to Wilson? Who are these fascinating female characters? How do we emphasize the relevance of this play and archive to our community?

I found that the creative energy of Wilson abounds in dozens of script drafts, ideas scrawled on a copy of *Buddy Guy's Legends Bluesletter* from January–February 1995, designs, and rehearsal notes, among much more. Through the remnants of conversations between Wilson and his dramaturg for *Seven Guitars*, Sandi Carroll, I could map Wilson's process and priorities. In a fax between Wilson and Carroll dated August 31, 1995, Wilson responds to Carroll's comments in preparation for the show's Boston

nificant for everyone, not just one character.

The August Wilson Archive also provided context for how the final script developed, which I eagerly shared with our cast. Three student actors played the female roles of Louise, Vera Dotson, and Ruby, and professional actors played our four male roles. Wilson originally planned to have male musicians in a courtroom drama, and archive folders were full of male characters that were ultimately cut from the *Seven Guitars* script. After meeting these discarded characters in the archive, I provided the student actors with more information about the centrality of their characters and Wilson's requirement of a feminine perspective for this story. Surrounded by professional male actors, we used this archival evidence to strengthen the confidence of our young women actors.

Finally, I looked to the archive for how to engage the audience. Because many students at the University of Pittsburgh, a primarily white institution, have never knowingly entered the Hill District except to see a Penguins game, I worked to contextualize the thriving community of the historically Black neighborhood through the study guide, the dramaturgy note, and lobby displays. We aimed to remind our audience that the Hill District of *Seven Guitars* was—and continues to be—a living community rather than allowing the archival process to relegate the community to “history.”

Similarly, our lobby display combined our behind-the-scenes look at *Seven Guitars* through the August Wilson Archive with a celebration of our design team's incredible work. In the same space that the audience read Wilson's notes, they were invited to scan QR codes to our sound designer's inspiration playlist; Romero Wilson's designs stood alongside the work of Gilmer and our set designer, Kensey “MadamQueen” Coleman.

Ultimately, the archival materials underscore what was crucial for Wilson in this work: culture, community, and collaboration. I keep returning to that sign-off from



Reproduction of *Seven Guitars* costume design for the character Ruby by Constanza Romero. Courtesy of the August Wilson Archive



Wilson to Carroll: “I like working with you.”<sup>18</sup> In the archive, I felt as though I was working with Wilson, and I liked it, too. His wit, passion, and process felt alive across time; our conversations flowed. With every question, I turned a few pages to find his thoughtful response. I am eager to see how we continue to work with and alongside Wilson as more practitioners enter the August Wilson Archive.

KHALID Y. LONG

MALCOLM X, *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*, AND THE AUGUST WILSON ARCHIVE

One of my central fascinations with the work of August Wilson is how he used theater to document the African American experience. Indeed, Wilson’s oeuvre functions as an archival repository of Black lived experiences that span a significant era of American history. Upon traveling to the newly acquired August Wilson Archive and deep diving into some of Wilson’s unpublished plays, I discovered further that Wilson gives new meaning to the moniker cultural historian.

For my part, I was deeply interested in the Black Nationalist cultural politics and aesthetics of the 1960s, mainly how they played a significant role in August Wilson’s life and, subsequently, his creative output. For example, after marrying Brenda Burton in 1969, Wilson joined the Nation of Islam. Within the context of his writerly voice, Wilson was inspired by Black Arts Movement pioneer Amiri Baraka. Like Baraka, Wilson fashioned himself a poet before turning to playwriting. Although their public careers as writers commenced at different times, there is significant overlap in Baraka’s and Wilson’s political and cultural beliefs demonstrated through their writings. Even more, both writers were inspired by the life and legacy of Malcolm X, so much so that both figures penned poems and dramas about the slain human rights activist. Unlike Baraka’s play, *The Death of Malcolm* (1966), Wilson’s unpublished play, *Malcolm X*, has yet to be critically examined. Thus, my interest in Wilson’s archive was the hope to assess Wilson’s draft to explore Baraka’s influence further while making more extensive connections to Black Nationalism.

Fast forward to my first day in the archives. The requested boxes were waiting for me, making locating the *Malcolm X* script relatively easy. I also came across a program-like pamphlet and a performance review written by journalist and theater critic Michael Phillips. Together, these documents revealed a production history of Wilson’s unpublished play. I surmised that Wilson was commissioned by Penumbra Theatre’s Artistic Director Lou Bellamy to write a one-act play about the human rights activist. According to Phillips’s review, the play was written in the late 1970s and revived in the 1980s. James Craven played the titular character, and Claude Purdy, an early collaborator of Wilson’s, was the director. The pamphlet further noted that Wilson won the 1984–85 New York Critics Circle Best Play Award for *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and that Pen-

umbra was preparing to produce *Ma Rainey* for their upcoming 1987 season. One deduces that *Malcolm X* was produced in 1985–86.<sup>19</sup>

Wilson fashioned a one-man show from Malcolm X's words and presented an overview of his life with a heavy focus on his time with the Nation of Islam. In his review, Phillips did not entirely pan the production, but he was not a complete fan. He writes, "The problem with 'Malcolm X' in its short form—and, one suspects, in its long form as well—is its insufficient dramatic power." As a scholar of Black theater and performance, thus someone who recognizes the history of critics and their unbalanced and often misinformed opinions of Black theater productions, I am quite skeptical of reviews. Sandra G. Shannon writes in her essay, "Keeping His Gloves Up: August Wilson and His Critics," "To be sure, not all of the criticism levied against Wilson is without merit, yet research reveals that more than a few theater reviews appeared to be laced with bias—indeed, contempt—for the playwright, his unabashed project of recovering narratives of the African American experience, and his insistence upon preserving its culture."<sup>20</sup> Maybe this was the case with Phillips as he may have been unable to grasp the larger project that Wilson was crafting. I make this assertion because the play has a production history, thus proffering some artistic merit that may have been elevated with directorial and acting choices.

Returning to Phillips's review of Wilson's *Malcolm X*, he writes, "Wilson has claimed that if he wrote a play about Malcolm X and his teachings today, he wouldn't depict the man himself at all. Wilson's coming *Two Trains Running*, in fact, concerns in large part characters lit by the flame of black revolutionary fervor." What Phillips captures in his announcement of Wilson's coming play, the play that would eventually represent the 1960s within his American Century Cycle, is both the essence and the era that most ignited Wilson's artistic fervor. As Wilson states himself, "The Black Power movement of the '60s was in fact a reality . . . that is the kiln in which I was fired and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness."<sup>21</sup> Wilson's play about the slain human rights activist Malcolm X was undoubtedly a prelude to *Two Trains Running* (1990).

Like all his plays in the American Century Cycle, Wilson's engagement with history is prominent in *Two Trains Running*. However, Wilson does not directly address the historical events of the 1960s. Instead, these events hover over the play as a backdrop, thus informing the actions and motivations of the characters. This history includes the legacies of leaders of the civil rights and Black Power movements, namely Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. It also includes the death of Robert F. Kennedy, the beginning of gentrification and displacement within Black communities, and the fallout from the Vietnam War. When asked why he kept these historical events of the 1960s off the stage, Wilson responded with the following:

The play does not speak to the so-called red lettered events of the sixties, because at the time all of that was going on—the assassination of Martin Luther King and

Bobby Kennedy and all the anti-war administrations, etc.—people were still living their lives. You still had to go to work every day, you still had to pay your rent, you still had to put food on the table. And those events, while they may have in some way affected the character of society as a whole, didn't reach the average person who was concerned with just simply living. And so, in *Two Trains* I was more concerned with those people and what they were doing and how they were dealing with it, than I was with writing a "sixties" play.<sup>22</sup>

As such, Wilson peoples his plays with everyday folks—those whose lives fluctuated between what was happening nationally and what was happening locally. Although Wilson put fictional stories on the stage, it is evident, as in *Two Trains Running*, that these stories are inspired, and perhaps haunted, by real history. Now, with the newly acquired archive, as playwright Suzan-Lori Parks tells us, "through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down."<sup>23</sup> As instructed, we must keep on diggin'.

LADRICA MENSION-FURR

ON "FULLERTON STREET"

*Discovering August Wilson's South*

August Wilson's American Century Cycle is its own archive. Populated with southern-born characters and African and southern cultural retentions, it holds the stories of the various migrations that Africana people have taken from the African continent to the "Africa that is the south" (Wilson). I entered the archive intent to discover a note pad written in Wilson's hand that detailed a plan for the US South and the Great Migration as cornerstones of many of his characters' pre-Hill District lives. I hoped to answer: When did Wilson begin to address the Great Migration? How and through whom did this discussion begin? Mr. Wilson, just as in his plays, was not to reveal his impetus for the South easily. I would need to journey through his script drafting and note-taking/composing process to locate his South. My journey began with and on "Fullerton Street."<sup>24</sup>

"Fullerton Street"'s unpublished scripts, set in 1941 and 1942, provided answers to my queries. I requested this text and its accompanying artifacts after revisiting Sandra Shannon's "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson,"<sup>25</sup> reminded that this script followed *Jitney!* and could have become Wilson's second offering within a cycle of plays. As I read Wilson's summary of the work, I became intrigued by the descriptor *urban northerner*, used to *categorize and characterize* the text's characters. Wilson explained that what he "wanted to do was to show some people who had

come north and encountered the cities and lost whatever kinds of values they had in the South—almost as if the environment determined that you had to adopt different values in order to survive up here.”<sup>26</sup> This dramatic discussion of northern movement and its opposing result of southern losses reflects Wilson’s contention that the African American movement to the north was not as fortunate a move, a contention that he espoused early as a playwright.

He boldly makes this pronouncement through the “cameo character” Grandma Lee when she asserts, “Talking about niggers in the North got it good. Look at yourself. Look at the way you’re living. All crowded together in this little old house. People living on top of you, beneath you, side to side. Everybody knowing everybody’s business. Everybody contributing to everybody’s trouble.”<sup>27</sup> Additionally, he further contrasts the differing southern and northern experiences as he drafts a character sketch of her grandson, Moses Lee, whom he first describes as “Moses Lee a recent migrant, with his wife and parents, to the Urban Industrial North feels oppressed by the socio-economic conditions.”<sup>28</sup> Then, he expands Moses’s characterization to include not only the contrast between the southern Moses and the northern Moses, but also a Moses who must choose how to navigate on the other side of a “shattered dream”:

Moses Lee, who with his wife and parents, migrated from the South to the Urban industrial North. Oppressed by the socio-economic conditions and memories from his past, he enlists in the Army in an effort to obtain first class citizenship by helping America win the war. After a bittersweet homecoming, and his dream of social and economic equality is shattered, he is forced to choose between blind allegiance to his principles or understanding the contextual alterations of right and wrong.<sup>29</sup>

In “Fullerton Street,” Wilson also begins the practice of using the traumatic (often southern-based) memories that catalyze the beginnings of the American Century Cycle’s characters’ self-reflection and discovery of their identities as they “find [their] song.” In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *Gem of the Ocean*, Herald Loomis and Citizen Barlow are led to the City of Bones—the middle passage, the first and forced migration of Africans to America—to begin their journeys into their spiritually healed/culturally redeemed selves by reconnecting with their African ancestors. In “Fullerton Street,” Moses’s process of renewal begins as he returns to the site of a southern lynching.

As Moses and his friends are sharing jokes about the foibles of southerners who have come to the North, Moses is possessed by a memory-experience that turns their laughter to pain as he details the lynching of his friend Willie. Through this memory, Wilson discloses another reason for Moses and his family’s migration north and reveals that it was not only for socioeconomic gains and the hope of equitable occupational opportunities. “Fullerton Street” painfully discloses other reasons catalyzing the Lee family’s decision to “go north,” including Moses’s wife’s sexual assault, his father’s land

loss, and he emphasizes that despite these traumatic realities, the family's new reality is fueled by alcoholism, marital strife, subpar housing, and economic and occupational poverty. "Fullerton Street" dramatizes the contrasting African American experiences, with Wilson clearly proving that the northward movement may have been a quest for fool's gold.

Both "Fullerton Street" draft scripts and its teleplay script compel me to reestablish Wilson's dramatic imagination of the South within Wilsonian scholarship because the South and the Great Migration are more than notions. Instead, they are synonymous characters that must be discussed and studied because they are not simply generalized southern and migration stories. These stories hail from the urban cities of southern states—Alabama ("Fullerton Street," *Gem of the Ocean*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Fences*), Mississippi (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Two Trains Running*), and Tennessee (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*)—and present an intriguing analysis of the urban southerner's migration to the urban North. The three iterations of "Fullerton Street" provided answers to my questions and dramatically photographed the "cultural landscapes" of the Century Cycle's characters' herstories and histories, pre- and postmigration.

## NOTES

1. Wilson in Bonnie Lyons and August Wilson, "An Interview with August Wilson," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208817>.
2. "About the August Wilson Archive," August Wilson Archive at the University of Pittsburgh (website), <https://augustwilson.library.pitt.edu/> (accessed June 1, 2023).
3. Sandra G. Shannon, "A Full-Circle Moment: Three Pittsburgh Institutions Work to Secure August Wilson's Legacy," *Pennsylvania Heritage*, Fall 2022, <http://paheritage.wpengine.com/article/a-full-circle-moment-three-pittsburgh-institutions-work-to-secure-august-wilsons-legacy/>.
4. We benefited tremendously from the time, care, and consideration of a generous group of thought partners as we imagined and put together this forum. We would like to extend particular thanks to Patricia Jackson, Ernest C. Jackson, Lolita Marie Horne, Tre Merritt, Bill Daw, Ed Galloway, Leah Mickens, Diall Thomas, Michael Thompson, Janis Burley Wilson, the team at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, the staff of the ULS, and the August Wilson Society executive board. Special thanks also go to Constanza Romero Wilson, executive director of August Wilson Legacy, LLC, and veteran Wilsonian Warrior; and Dr. Kornelia Tancheva, Hillman University Librarian and director of the ULS, for their vision in making the August Wilson Archive available to the public.
5. Lynn Holst, "Correspondence, New York Shakespeare Festival, 1978," box 4, folder 56, Bob Johnson Papers, 1949–2003, CTC.2014.03, Curtis Theater Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.
6. "Flyer, Auditions, 1978," Bob Johnson Papers, box 4, folder 54.
7. Laurence Glasco, "Chapter 9: 'I Can't Take It!': August Wilson Leaves Pittsburgh," *August Wilson Journal* 1 (2019): 9.

8. Glasco, "Chapter 9," 11.
9. Macelle Mahala, *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 61.
10. August Wilson, "Black Bart and the Sacred Hills—Script (2), Undated," Series IX, Subseries 1, August Wilson Archive, ca. 1965–2020, sc.2020.05, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.
11. Wilson, "Black Bart and the Sacred Hills—Script (2), Undated."
12. "Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, LA Showcase, ca. 1980," audio recording, Series VIII, Subseries 1, Bob Johnson Papers.
13. Hedley is a pop-cultural reference to the Hedleys, "the hardest working West Indian family," portrayed in the sketch comedy *In Living Color* ("Hey Mon").
14. August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 21.
15. August Wilson, "untitled poem beginning with the lines 'Between this space & that,'" (unpublished manuscript, January 2023), Section 5-1, Subseries 5, August Wilson Archive, ca. 1965–2020, sc.2020.05, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.
16. August Wilson, *King Hedley II* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), viii.
17. August Wilson to Sandi Carroll, August 31, 1995, the August Wilson Archive, University of Pittsburgh Library System.
18. August Wilson, *Seven Guitars* (New York: Dutton, 1996): 5.
19. I learned after my visit to the August Wilson Archive that *Malcolm X* was presented at the 1989 National Black Theatre Festival in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
20. Sandra G. Shannon, "Keeping His Gloves Up: August Wilson and His Critics," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theater and Performance*, ed. Renee A. Craft, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Kathy A. Perkins, and Sandra L. Richards (New York: Routledge, 2019), 266.
21. August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand," *Callaloo* 20, no. 3 (1997): 494.
22. Richard Pettengill, "The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson," in *Conversations with August Wilson*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 155.
23. Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994), 3–5.
24. August Wilson, "Fullerton Street" (unpublished manuscript, 1981), Subseries 1, Series XI, August Wilson Archive, ca. 1965–2020, sc.2020.05, Archives and Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.
25. Sandra G. Shannon, "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An Interview with August Wilson," *African American Review* 27, no. 2 (1993): 539–59.
26. Shannon, "Blues, History, and Dramaturgy."
27. Wilson, "Fullerton Street."
28. Wilson, "Fullerton Street."
29. Wilson, "Fullerton Street."