

CHAPTER 9

THE CENTURY THAT CAN'T FIX NOTHING WITH THE LAW: *RADIO GOLF*

Production history

Radio Golf had its Broadway premiere at the Cort Theatre on April 20, 2007, a year-and-a-half after Wilson's death, but its out-of-town premiere was two years earlier, in April 2005 at the Yale Repertory, under the direction of Timothy Douglas. In the two years that followed, it was performed in Los Angeles, Seattle, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and Princeton; all of these productions, like the Broadway production, were directed by Kenny Leon. Three members of the cast—James A. Williams as Roosevelt, John Earl Jelks as Sterling, and Anthony Chisolm as Old Joe—remained consistent (with the exception of Jelks for the Boston production) from Yale to Broadway. Harmond and Mame, however, were played by several actors; on Broadway, Harry Lennix played Harmond and Tonya Pinkins played Mame. It had sixty-four performances on Broadway.

Arrangement

In some ways, the arrangement of *Radio Golf* is deceptively simple. Instead of being the lead singer, Mame is the *accommodator*, but her limited role suggests how little room there is for that theme. The play, in fact, is about the failure of accommodation, as indicated by Roosevelt, for whom the role is a guise beneath which we find the strong strains of the *hustler* and the *pragmatist-entrepreneur*. The play is arranged so that Harmond, who starts out as a *pragmatist-entrepreneur* and *accommodator* (i.e., a politician), confronts two generations of *warriors*, Old Joe, who is also both historian and *man-not-right-in-the-head*, and Sterling, who is either a perverted

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pragmatist-entrepreneur or a *man-not-right-in-the-head*. In attempting to accommodate them and harmonize with Roosevelt, Harmond is forced to play a spectrum of parts sampled from the cycle and the century. Opting for discord over harmony, Harmond, in almost symphonic style, emerges as a *warrior* in a world where the song of a shaman must inspire through memory rather than active power.

Conclusion and renewal

Although *Radio Golf*, the last play August Wilson wrote as well as the play set in the last decade of his ten-play cycle, may be his most complex in the way it interweaves elements of the nine plays that precede it, its plot is relatively simple. At the outset, Harmond Wilks, a successful, wealthy Pittsburgh real estate developer, who is the leading candidate to become the next mayor—and first black mayor—of Pittsburgh, is opening a campaign office in the run-down neighborhood of Bedford Hill (or the Hill, as it is commonly called). With his longtime friend, Roosevelt, he is also co-partner of the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Corporation, a massive urban renewal project in the Hill, the financial viability of which depends on the federal assistance that accrues to the neighborhood's officially being declared a blighted area. The plans for the renewal project, which will encompass several square blocks, entail leveling the building at 1839 Wylie formerly owned by Aunt Ester, the matriarchal and shamanistic figure who died in the 1980s at the age of 338, her birth coinciding with the introduction of slavery in America. The house was acquired at auction by Harmond's company, Wilks Realty. While he is setting up his office, Harmond is visited by Sterling, the supporter of Malcolm X who, returned from jail in 1969, initiated the action of *Two Trains Running*, and by Old Joe Barlow, the son of Black Mary and Citizen Barlow, who met at the beginning of *Gem of the Ocean* in 1903. As these characters put Harmond in touch with his ethnic *past*, his partner Roosevelt and Harmond's wife, Mame, point him toward what they perceive as a post-racial *future*. Roosevelt, recently promoted to vice president at Mellon Bank, has, with the help of a wealthy white benefactor, Bernie Smith, become a minority (in both senses of the word) partner in a radio station. As it does with his connection to the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Inc., his ethnicity puts his white backers in line for major profits because of government programs aimed at assisting minorities, no matter how little control Roosevelt actually exercises.

That *Radio Golf*, a play about affluent, prestigious African Americans, is frequently referred to as August Wilson's only play about middle-class African Americans (or about African Americans with middle-class aspirations) tells us less about the play than about the conceptual relationship in American discursive practice between race (especially the African American "race") and class. Contemporary American culture certainly provides copious references to *rich* African Americans—Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, Herman Cain—but rarely, if ever, to *upper-class* African Americans. In his television series, widely heralded as being about "middle-class" African Americans, Bill Cosby played a doctor, Cliff Huxtable, married to a lawyer. Clearly, their income level would have put them in, or at least very close to, the top 2 percent of all American households (especially in the 1980s, before the Clinton administration, when banking regulations were radically changed, making possible a new class of Wall Street-based super rich). But if the Huxtables were middle class, what does a black person have to do to enter the *upper* class? Harmond Wilks has a real estate empire and is the mayoral race front-runner; his partner, Roosevelt, is a bank vice president and part owner of a radio station. In what sense are these people middle class?

The answer to that question, in fact to many of the questions in *Radio Golf*, lies in the other nine plays of "The Wilson Century," because with the cycle chronologically complete, Wilson did not only know that *Radio Golf* would function as an epilogue; he also knew intimately the corpus of work that *Radio Golf* would conclude, and thus the quest that it would renew.

For Wilson, we must remember, conclusion and renewal were always intertwined: endings did not resolve but initiate, such that he adamantly refused to finish any work until he knew the first lines of the next one. His craft, like history itself, especially in the way he employed history, was a springboard for the imagination, a platform for what would come next, as certain in its eventuality as it was unpredictable in its trajectory. These factors in Wilson's approach to writing become particularly cogent in that, in the final stages of revising *Radio Golf*, Wilson also knew it would be his last play. In other words, fate had impelled that this epilogue be his most emphatic renewal.

In this context, the theme of "urban renewal," which becomes an informing metaphor for both the most perverse and the most idealistic forces in the play, requires careful scrutiny. In its most common usage, "urban renewal" has functioned as a generic term for government-supported projects in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which led to the destruction of traditional ethnic

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neighborhoods, either through acts of “slum clearance,” which removed minority populations from urban areas to clear ground for commercial or cultural projects such as New York’s Lincoln Center, or for massive housing projects generally viewed as degenerating rather than improving the quality of life of their lower-income residents.¹ In contradistinction to these forms of urban renewal, the play posits a revitalization based on the kind of historical renewal foundational to a cohesive community and on the spiritual renewal that emanates from faith in the value and power of that cohesion.

To understand how Wilson converts a conclusion into a renewal, we need to identify the structures and themes that tie *Gem of the Ocean* to its bookend, *Radio Golf*.² Because Wilson wrote these two plays in chronological order, after he had completed the other eight plays, they constitute a de facto prologue and epilogue of the cycle, in that when he wrote *Gem* he was fully aware of the century it would introduce and the cycle of plays that would reflect his interpretations of or riffs upon that century, the century that several historians have dubbed “The American Century.”³

As bookends for the century, the two plays invite, in fact impel, us to engage with Wilson’s sense of progress. How have things changed for African Americans between 1903 and 1997? *Radio Golf*, after all, is a literal sequel to *Gem of the Ocean*, featuring the descendants of the characters in *Gem* and making the site of *Gem*, Aunt Ester’s house, central to *Radio Golf*’s conflict. In both a genealogical and a logistical sense, therefore, *Radio Golf* is about the fate of *Gem of the Ocean*, its characters, and their home.

As a symbol of the proverbial “American Dream,” the privately owned home signifies the kind of middle-class life that flourished in America’s post-Second World War era, with the rise of extensive housing developments and the suburban communities they created. The affordable, new suburban home, equipped with modern appliances and delimited by a fenced-in backyard, contrasts sharply with the contemporaneous inner-city house in *Fences*, where Troy Maxson lives, devoid of a fence and of a television set.⁴ Often unarticulated in discussing the rise of suburbia and the middle-class lifestyle it provided is how it emerged at the expense of African American urban communities and how it initiated forms of de facto segregation not possible in multifarious urban areas. The interstate highway system that connected the suburbs to the cities in effect destroyed old black communities, thus eliminating the home equity that would have facilitated trading up to suburban homes, if suburban developers had been willing to sell to African Americans, which, for the most part, they were

not.⁵ In the 1950s, such discrimination was not yet illegal, and in practice it carried on into the 1960s and 1970s, while in the 1980s the process of “white flight” accelerated. Thus, Aunt Ester’s house, like Troy Maxson’s house or the houses in *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, unavoidably connotes a class divide, one that made middle-class life an accessible reality for much of white America while it remained only an “aspiration” for much of black America.

But that class divide occurs over an undefined and problematically amorphous conceptual space, a mental topography upon which class lines are drawn. For several reasons, class has been a complicated concept in America, one not resembling, especially for African Americans, the traditional European model of class upon which Marx formulated his analysis. In one sense, the United States was supposed to be a classless society, in which all members had equal say and shared equal opportunities. Jeffersonian democracy anchored itself to the small farmer, whose model of self-sufficiency insulated him from large vested interests and thus made him more amenable to public welfare and the common good. While this model of democracy was in its conceptual incipience, however, others believed, as the Federalist Papers attest, that the security of the nation rested in the hands of an elite class, deemed by virtue of their wealth and education to be better suited to govern. While both positions agreed that privilege was not a simple birthright, they were less clear about the limits of equality. None would extend it to women, and it was agreed that only those who owned property could vote. Large landowners—the plantation class in Virginia, for example—enjoyed such levels of respect and influence in the social hierarchy that they have been referred to as the Tidewater “aristocracy.” They nevertheless earned more of their wealth from production, the growing of cash crops, than from investments or from the rents and taxes paid by their tenants. The point is that if one attended to *how* they earned, rather than to *how much* they earned, this upper class was bourgeois, not aristocratic. Thus, in the sense, at least theoretically, that anyone could work his way up to the highest rung in the social and economic order, America was classless.

This model of classlessness, nevertheless, coexisted with a permanent underclass of slave labor, an underclass legally linked to race. While bloodlines could not promise a seat at the top, they could guarantee a position at the bottom, so that America was a classless society that entailed, by law, a racial underclass. Space would not permit even a cursory overview of the social and legal permutations of this class-race relationship over the nation’s first century, which included Supreme Court decisions and

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armed insurrections as well as agitation, legislation, and migration, not to mention a civil war. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as America transitioned from the Gilded Age to the Progressive Era, the nation had validated the claims made by its strongest proponents and by its strongest opponents. It had created virtually limitless economic opportunity, with aspects of that opportunity furthering inequity rather than equality.

Because, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the cost at which labor could be sold was low, the working class had good reason to organize around common material interests. They constituted something like the traditional Marxist proletariat. At the same time, the nation's entrenched racial hierarchy often created a bigger class divide between black and white working people than any solidarity fostered by their common interests. Labor unions often barred African Americans, and, left outside the labor movement, they all too frequently became strikebreakers. Moving north into what we now call the Rust Belt, African Americans frequently provided labor at low wages that shackled them as well as inhibited union organizing.

Given that the 1903 world of *Gem of the Ocean* exists at the cusp of these trends endemic to the Progressive Era, it is not surprising that the play is framed by labor issues, by the treatment and rights of workers. Incorrectly accused of stealing a bucket of nails, Garret Brown chose to drown rather than acknowledge that he was guilty of a crime he did not commit. As Aunt Ester explains to Citizen Barlow (who actually stole the nails), Brown needed to prove that his life was worth more than a bucket of nails. What remains unsaid is that the *only* way available to him to prove this was to stay in the river until he drowned. In so doing, Brown joined the millions of Africans in the City of Bones, that place beneath the Ocean that houses the souls lost in the Middle Passage, those people who died instead of living as slaves, who, like Brown, rejected the conditions of their labor at the cost of their life. Like the Africans crossing in the hulls of slave ships, Brown faced a choice delimited by unequal power and underwritten by racial hierarchy. There was no union to protect his rights, nor any grievance process, just as there was no process to protect Citizen Barlow from having to give kickbacks to keep his job. These two inequities serve metonymically to reflect the working conditions in the mill that eventually foment a riot. Because the riot causes the city to clamp down on African Americans, it is much more clearly a race riot than a labor protest. Although the union movement was under way at that point in American history, *Gem of the Ocean* at no point suggests that the workers are protesting for the right to organize. They are simply rebelling against racial oppression.

Race and/as class

Thus, being black means belonging to a *class* defined by curtailed rights and restricted opportunities, a class essential in its own immobility to the upward mobility of white America. Caesar's speeches in *Gem* reflect the clash between the alleged freedom provided by the marketplace and the actual class restriction accruing to race. When he first meets Barlow, Caesar suggests that Barlow go to Philadelphia: "It's too crowded here. Too many niggers breed trouble" (*Gem*, 31). He then offers Barlow a quarter.

I'm gonna see what you do with that. These niggers take and throw their money away. I give one fellow a quarter and he turn around and give it to the candy man. . . . He can't see it's all set up for him to do anything he want. See he could have bought him a can of shoe polish and a rag. If he could see that far he'd look up and find twenty-five dollars in his pocket. Twenty-five dollars buys you an opportunity. You don't need but five dollars to get in the crap game. That's five opportunities he done threw away. (*Gem*, 32)

Caesar has thus parlayed his illegal activity such that it has allowed him to epitomize the law, which entails his benefiting from a process that helps maintain a racial caste system.

But if Caesar is extreme, he is not anomalous in Wilson's plays, where we can repeatedly trace the inextricable relationship between race and the law. We first meet Ma Rainey, for example, when a policeman with whom she has had an encounter escorts her into the recording studio. For Ma, the altercation entails her identity: "Tell the man who I am" (*Ma Rainey*, 48), she repeatedly demands of her white manager, Irvin. As a star, she is an important source of profits, while simultaneously, as a black troublemaker, she is a social disruption that threatens the growing urban centers and the flow of capital that they facilitate. Ma Rainey is outraged that her status as Mother of the Blues is not apparent to the officer, just as the officer is outraged that a black troublemaker should assume an aristocratic attitude. In the end, the charges and countercharges, the facts of the event, the events of history, become irrelevant, because the matter is resolved not by distinguishing truth from fabrication, innocence from culpability, but by Irvin's bribing the officer. This act, which in effect shows that Ma Rainey is a black woman important enough to have a white man bribe a police officer on her behalf, also demonstrates that her ability to escape the law,

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her capacity to be the Mother of the Blues, depends on a white manager's ability to fix a legal problem.

The law, as in so many instances in Wilson's canon, does not comprise the objective rules that ensure justice but rather, facilitates the agents of class maintenance. Identifying African Americans as a class rather than a race, Wining Boy, in *The Piano Lesson*, explicitly states that "the difference between a white man and a colored man is that a colored man can't fix anything with the law" (*Piano*, 38).

The term "fix anything with the law" has more than one meaning. The colored man cannot use the law to redress a wrong or to claim a right. If one has been cheated or robbed or illegally arrested, he cannot use legal options to fix the problem. Nor can the colored man bend the law to his own devices, contrive the legal situation, or design the small print to his unfair advantage. Finally, he cannot get the legal system to turn a blind eye to his perceived transgressions. Thus, Ma Rainey is colored because her white manager can bribe the policeman, but she can't. The law is not statutory but instrumental, especially in regard to class rigidity and to the most rigidly policed class in American history, black people. In this sense, despite the class mobility that Harmond and Roosevelt ostensibly epitomize, African Americans remain an economic class, a class that continues, as it has since the first slave ship, to facilitate white wealth, even at a time when the process of exploiting that class enables, in fact sometimes requires, black dis-identification with its African American ethnicity.

From this perspective, Caesar Wilkes's grandson, Harmond, appears to have escaped his grandfather's explicitly articulated class, for clearly at the outset of *Radio Golf*, Harmond *can* fix things with the law. Early in the play, Old Joe enters Harmond's office to get legal assistance because Joe has been cited for vandalism for painting the house at 1839 Wylie, which used to belong to Aunt Ester. As a politically connected lawyer, Harmond gets the charges dropped with a quick, simple phone call. To Joe, however, the phone call is much more efficacious than it is just, in that Joe believes the house is his and that he has been unjustly cited for painting his own property. Because the house's history indicates that it was auctioned off to Harmond's real estate company, and because Joe appears extremely eccentric, Harmond seems to have done Joe a favor, that is, to have used the legal prerogative historically reserved for white people to fix Old Joe's situation. But the dramatic action of the play removes several historical layers, revealing that the house was auctioned illegally, that Old Joe, not Harmond, is the legal owner, that the taxes on the house had been paid

throughout the bulk of the century by Harmond's grandfather, Caesar, and then by Harmond's father, that Aunt Ester was the role assumed by Black Mary, who was Old Joe's mother and Harmond's great-aunt, that he and Old Joe are cousins.

The most troubling discovery of all, however, is that when Harmond attempts to represent Joe's legal rights against the interests of the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Company and the banks and investors whose gentrification project stands to profit from destroying the house, Harmond not only fails terribly but also loses his chance to become mayor and is forced out of the Bedford Hills Development Company by Roosevelt's white backers. Harmond's most troubling discovery is that Joe's legal rights in no way affect Joe's claim. Being on the right side of the legal claim does not matter if he is on the wrong side of the color line. Because Harmond is *bought* out rather than *kicked* out, and because he still retains his other real estate interests, he will maintain a good level of financial security, but the fragility of his security has been made apparent by virtue of his having lost any ability to fix things with the law. At the end of the play, Harmond grabs the house paint—associated with the war paint of Native Americans, who have also been fixed by their alienation from legal power—to join the extralegal protest aimed at stopping the demolition of Aunt Ester's house.

The action of the play, in other words, is to compel Harmond to discover that he is a colored man, a wealthy colored man, like West, who owns the funeral parlor in *Two Trains Running*, but nonetheless and unmistakably colored. To put it another way, in discovering his African American (or, as Wining Boy would say, colored) history, Harmond has to accept or reject the realization that he is colored. This dramatic tension informs every moment of the play, as underscored by Harmond's growing conflict with his friend and partner, Roosevelt. That conflict arises from Harmond's embracing of the racial identity that Roosevelt is trying to reject. Roosevelt's picture of Tiger Woods, which initially decorates the office, makes this conflict graphic. Woods is Roosevelt's hero for several reasons, not least of which is his mastery of a traditionally white sport, one that at every historical turn emphasizes the idea that in America race, or at least blackness, is a class. Golf requires not only wealth—even one golf club in a set costs a lot more than a basketball, on top of which are the fees for using a golf course and the cost of getting to one, not to mention the cost of joining a country club—but also access. For the bulk of Wilson's century, black people had trouble joining country clubs, even those without explicitly or implicitly restrictive policies, in that a country club is a club first and a set of facilities second, so

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that in order to join a good country club one already had to be a member of the social club out of which that country club was constituted. But for many Americans the country club was another country, one delimited by social class, not simply by wealth. As Groucho Marx famously remarked at a time when the good country clubs barred Jews, “any club that would have me as a member, I wouldn’t want to belong to.”

In this context, *Radio Golf* extends the spirit of Groucho’s comment by inverting it. When Harmond discovers the price of membership in a “post-racial” club, he doesn’t want to be a member. Harmond thus differs with Roosevelt not over the nature of the post-racial club, but over the historical cost of joining it. In other words, the central issue in *Radio Golf* is the history of the African American lives that Wilson has described in the other nine plays.

The lessons of Wilson’s American Century

That is why the play is a virtual compendium of the circumstances and lessons—call them blues lessons, call them piano lessons—learned in the other plays. The most didactic of these come from Sterling, who disrupts the 1969 world of *Two Trains Running* by infusing it with a logic that today would be described as critical race theory, with Sterling’s idol, Malcolm X, as a proto-theorist.

In contrast to those who fix things with the law, Sterling fixes things with his hands. “Go up on Bedford and look where I fixed that porch,” he tells Harmond. “I fixed up a house on Webster Street. 1615. Go look at that. Almost everything you see fixed up around here I did it.”⁶ But Sterling cannot fix the law, in this case the laws determining union membership, which functions both to protect and to exclude workers. The biggest exclusion is the right to create a union, that is, to create the body that sets the rules. Sterling, therefore, is not asserting the right to join a union but to form one. In relation to union membership, Harmond is on the side of the law, while Sterling is outside the law, from which perspective he can challenge its underlying assumptions.

When Roosevelt worries that he will not have any new business cards to pass out at the golf course—“Without them they’ll think I’m the caddie” (*Radio*, 18)—he unwittingly replicates that moment when Ma Rainey enters the recording studio in police custody. Without white certification, Ma Rainey is no more significant to the cop than a caddie would be to people at a golf club.

Wilson makes this point again when Roosevelt, describing his visit to the golf club, takes pride in the fact that Bernie Smith covered all the expenses: "From the minute I set foot in the Cedar Oaks Golf Course it was made clear my money was no good there" (*Radio*, 35). Roosevelt does not realize, in the way those who remember early lessons of Wilson's cycle might, that when it came to fixing things with the cop, Ma Rainey's money was similarly no good. But Roosevelt, blind to this implication of his own assertion—that taking money from Smith diminished, rather than enhanced, Roosevelt's worth—rejects Harmond's claim that Smith is exploiting him to obtain a Minority Tax Certificate. "This is how you do it," Roosevelt explains, "This is how everybody do it. You don't think Mellon has ever been used?" (*Radio*, 33). Here, Roosevelt unwittingly echoes Ma Rainey's foil, Levee, who tells the band that he "don't need nobody messing with him about the white man" (*Ma Rainey*, 68). "You all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yes sir to whoever I please. I got my time coming to me. You just all leave Levee alone about the white man" (*Ma Rainey*, 70).

Roosevelt's diatribes against lower-class blacks also uncannily paraphrase Caesar, who identifies with the law while praising the extralegal ways in which he achieved his wealth and his position as constable. Extolling a class position defined by wealth, Caesar nonetheless understands that class in racial terms. About the first rooming house that he buys, he says:

There was a fellow name Henry Bryant had a place on Colwell Street he sold me. They ran him out of town. Charged me three times what it was worth. Took the money and ran. They tried to kill him for selling to a Negro. I say all right I got me a little start. Niggers got mad at me. Said I must have thought I was a white man' cause I got hold to a little something. (*Gem*, 38)

Explaining the protests and riots at the mill following from the death of Garret Brown, Caesar regards the actions not as representing their common conditions as working men, but rather, as exemplifying the sensibility of a racial class:

You close down the mill you ain't got nothing. Them niggers can't see that . . . You know 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

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to act otherwise. You try to do something nice for niggers and it will backfire on you every time. You try to give them an opportunity by giving them a job and they take and throw it away. Talking about they ain't going to work. (*Gem*, 34)

Only because Caesar regards African Americans as a class can he see himself as rising above that class. When he recounts his thorny path to financial success, therefore, it is apt for us to interpret the word “race” as a pun inflected toward his ethnicity: “You look and see the race you got to run is different than somebody else’s.” Because he is black, he has to buy the rooming house at three times its worth, but because he identifies with the laws that discriminate against blacks, he can produce the collateral that enabled him to pay the inequitable price. Each time Caesar broke the law—no matter how much his circumstances necessitated it—he went to jail, but on the county farm, “A couple [of niggers] tried to escape. I caught them” (*Gem*, 38), and when a fellow named John Hanson started a riot,

I took him on one-to-one, man-to-man He busted my eye but I put down the riot. They gave me a year. I did six months when the mayor called me in to see him. Say he wanted to put me in charge of the Third Ward. Told me say you fry the little fish and send the big ones to me. They give me a gun and a badge. I took my badge and gun and went down to the bank and laid it on the counter. Told them I wanted to borrow some money on that. (*Gem*, 38)

The irrevocable split between Caesar and his sister, Black Mary, that concludes *Gem of the Ocean* thus prefigures a century that will repeatedly represent the law as something that can or cannot be fixed. By so doing, Wilson will examine the multifarious meaning of the word “fix.” To fix something with the law is to treat the law not as a set of rules but as an agent of power. Just as it has the power to classify Ma Rainey as having assaulted the cab driver when she opened the car door, it has the power to take away seven years of Herald Loomis’s life by sentencing him to a work farm for simply walking down the road, or to send Lymon and Boy Willie to Parchman Farm for contrived reasons, or to charge Floyd Barton with attempted arson:

I asked one of the guards to show me the back door in case there was a fire. He said the jailhouse don't burn. I told him give me a gallon of

gasoline and I'd prove him wrong. He told the judge I threatened to burn down the jailhouse. (*Seven Guitars*, 9)

Barton is not protected by the right to free speech but exempted from it for figuratively (and, since he is a character on stage, literally) crying fire in a crowded theatre. Unless one belongs to the class that can fix things with the law, free speech, as Holloway in *Two Trains Running* made clear, does not exist at all: "A nigger with a gun is bad news. You can't even say the word 'nigger' and 'gun' in the same sentence" (*Two Trains*, 77–78).

Class determines not only what words are permissible but also what deeds are doable. Because Mr. McKnight is a Gulf Oil executive, the law can classify his attack on Booster, recounted in *Jitney*, as rightful indignation, while at the same time classifying Booster's anger at having been wrongfully accused of rape as an irrational act of black violence against a white woman. In the world of Wilson's century, the law empowers the class it serves, and that class returns the favor. The problem of those who cannot fix things is concisely summarized when Floyd and Red Carter commiserate with each other:

Red Carter One time they arrested me for having too much money. I had more money than the law allowed. Must have . . . cause the police arrested me, put me in jail. Told me if I had that much money I must have stole it somewhere.

Floyd They got you coming and going. Put me in jail for not having enough money, and put you in jail for having too much money. (*Seven Guitars*, 42)

If *Radio Golf*, as I have argued, forces us to engage with Wilson's vision of progress, the opening of the play suggests that things have indeed changed since Wining Boy's pronouncement. An individual black man such as Roosevelt will never be *a priori* suspect for having too much money. Repeatedly throughout the cycle, the word "Mellon" is used as shorthand for white capital and the facility with which it can be deposited and withdrawn. It is shorthand for the source of white agency, as defined by Caesar. Sterling, explaining why he had gone to jail, says, "I robbed a bank. I was tired of waking up every day with no money. I figure I'd get my money where Mellon got his from" (*Two Trains*, 44). King echoes Sterling when he tells Tonya that he got his 500 dollars "from the same place Mellon got his. You don't ask him where he got it from" (*King Hedley II*, 76). Thus, when

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Roosevelt becomes a vice president at the Mellon Bank, he seems to have transcended the confluence of legal and extralegal restrictions encapsulated by Wining Boy's distinction between the white and the colored man. This in part explains Roosevelt's identification with Tiger Woods, who signified in the public imaginary the fact that a black man could become rich and successful at a white man's game, and simultaneously that his self-designated "biracial" identity meant that his success could cast into doubt his "colored" identity.

Similarly, the fact that Harmond can fix things with the law, as much as, if not more than, the fact that he may be elected mayor of Pittsburgh, means that he has transcended class restrictions. Or perhaps it means that the *class* of African Americans has dissolved: if the colored man can fix things with the law, then there is no difference between colored and white.

This is not to say that Harmond is not of African American derivation, but rather, that in the 1990s that derivation seems to have lost its class distinctions. Unlike Troy Maxson, a Pittsburgh home-owner and civil servant of the 1950s, Harmond *can* enter the middle class. The perception of the play being about African Americans with middle-class aspirations, therefore, owes more to its evidencing that those aspirations are no longer restricted in the ways they were when race functioned as a class. But at the same time as Wilson demonstrates that Harmond is not confined to class, he also makes it clear that the class of African Americans has not dissolved. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, postracial about Harmond's world, as *Radio Golf* illustrates by systematically exposing his familial, legal, historical, and ethical connections to the class that he seems to have moved beyond.

The place of African Americans in America

To put it another way, the play forces Harmond to understand his *place* in the world, literally moving him from the office space that represents both his future (it is a campaign office) and the neighborhood's future (it is a construction office established for the renewal of the Hill District) to the protest at Aunt Ester's house, which represents his personal history and the neighborhood's past. If the process of moving in and out of this office provides the temporal parameters of the play, the retrospective engagement with the history of the century provides the temporal parameters of Wilson's century, which encapsulates the centuries of American inequity initiated by the arrival of the first shipload of Africans.

By implication, *Radio Golf* broadens the question of Harmond's place beyond the locales of Pittsburgh real estate to encompass his place in the social order, his place in history—being the first black mayor of Pittsburgh would “make” history—and, most important for this discussion, his place in Wilson's ten-play cycle. In so doing, it makes clear that the cycle is the story of the place history created for displaced people, people who, from the second they were sold on their home soil by their own chiefs to traders and captains, lost the capacity to fix things with the law. They were displaced not only on the global terrain and in the tortuous economic patterns of capitalist exchange, but in the mesh of legalities that form the fabric of American human rights. Nor is it possible to separate questions of law from questions of place from issues of identity. As the Invisible Man says to Mr. Norton at the end of Ellison's novel, “If you don't know *where* you are, you probably don't know *who* you are” (500).⁸

Not surprisingly, therefore, a very specific conflict over the kind of place that Harmond should occupy initiates *Radio Golf*. When Harmond and his wife, Mame, enter the new office of Bedford Hills Redevelopment, Inc., she expresses disappointment about its “raggedy” appearance, but Harmond tells her to “Look close” (*Radio*, 7) at the tin ceiling. Noting that it is “all hand tooled” (*Radio*, 7), Harmond demonstrates his concern with the process, that is, the history of production, the overlooked or taken-for-granted labor now visible only as artifacts, and only visible to someone who looks closely. This too can be taken as Wilson's cautionary note, a warning that if one does not look closely at *Radio Golf*, in the context of the cycle that it concludes, then one may miss a great deal about history and the craft of performing it. But if we do look closely, we can see that this is the first of the play's many allusions to *The Piano Lesson*, whose eponymous piano acquires its value not because of its instrumentality but by virtue of the labor and artistry that went into carving it.

In several other ways, the opening dialogue with Mame indicates Harmond's sense of racial identity, although his circumstances—wealth, political prominence, legal influence—might suggest a post-racial persona, exactly the image Mame, whose field is public relations, believes in. Thus, Harmond selects the campaign office for the same reason that Mame dislikes it: the location asserts Harmond's roots in the black Hill District.

In the first moments of the play, several small conflicts emerge, all of them relating to the neighborhood—what it means, how to change it, whether the ideas about change should come from the past or the present. Because the office is part of Harmond's campaign, it is about image, and

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because it is part of the urban renewal, it is about how people live. In other words, it represents the values ascribed to the piano in *The Piano Lesson*. Boy Willie wants to sell it to buy the land on which his ancestors were slaves, and Bernice wants to hold on to it because it represents the history of the family. For Harmond's partner, Roosevelt, the office represents a class of people from whom he wants to distance himself, no matter how anachronistic are his perceptions. He wants to be able to watch his car, for example, because he is afraid that the hubcaps will be stolen. "They quit making hubcaps in 1962," Harmond informs him, to which Roosevelt responds: "They'll get mad there aren't any hubcaps and steal the wheels" (*Radio*, 9).

Although a keen sense of the past informs both Harmond's and Roosevelt's values, the men view the meaning and impact of history in radically different ways. Because Roosevelt's ambitions are linked to distancing himself from the past, his anachronistic concerns about having his car damaged are symptomatic of his much more extensive fear that the neighborhood from which he came will damage him, his property, his dreams. Harmond's ambitions, to the contrary, are based on his appreciation of the past. Looking at the artist's rendering of the urban redevelopment project, Harmond notes that the name "Model Cities Health Center" has not been changed to Sarah Degree Health Center, after the first registered black nurse in Pittsburgh. To which Mame responds: "Model Cities Health Center' has been around for twenty-two years. The organization has some history in the neighborhood. Nobody knows who Sarah Degree was" (*Radio*, 10). When Harmond argues: "That's why the Health Center needs to be named after her. So we remember," Mame counters: "I understand the sentiment, but it's not practical to throw all that history away" (*Radio*, 10).

This interchange succinctly indicates the contentious nature of history, which is never an objective reflection of the past but a value-inflected interpretation of it. Thus, the history Harmond wants to preserve belongs, for Mame, to the a historical realm of sentimentality, the power of which threatens to throw away all the history she favors. The values at stake in this historical dispute reflect those informing Boy Willie's dispute with Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*, where similarly, disentangling historical value from sentimental value reflects a struggle over power and ownership. In that play, however, the struggle is resolved, at least temporarily, through a deal between the warring siblings that invests both the piano's sentiment and history into its performative power; as long as it is played, it transcends the blood shed over it and legitimizes its ownership in the face of the white ghost who would reclaim it. In this regard, the piano is no different

from Wilson's ten plays, which empower sentiment in the name of history through the power of performance.

The rightful ownership of the piano can never be resolved: it belonged to Sutter, but Sutter had purchased it with stolen goods, that is, with people stolen from Africa but "legally" purchased in the United States; the play, in the end, becomes a battle in which those who can marshal the spirit of history and the spirits of their family can, however temporarily, fend off those who can fix things with the law. In an inverse way, Sterling makes this point to Harmond when he sells Harmond back his own golf clubs (which were stolen from the trunk of Harmond's car), and then informs him "When you gave me that twenty dollars, you bought some stolen property. You can go to jail for that. You know how many niggers in jail for receiving stolen goods?" (*Radio*, 50). The original owner of the clubs, like the "original" owner of the piano, like the original "owner" of the slaves who were exchanged for the piano, muddies, rather than clarifies, the rights of possession. More importantly, in the process of confounding the issue, Sterling has shifted the term in dispute from the word *original* to the word *owner*, thereby making ownership not a right but rather the privilege of someone on the right side of the law. If *Radio Golf* thus restages the conflict over the nature of property and the legitimacy of ownership, it does so in a time when the spirit world is no longer active, and it remains to be seen whether the spirit of history is an adequate adversary for those who can fix the law.

Or, to put it another way, the play looks back over Wilson's century to ask "What can a colored man fix?" It does so by establishing a head-on collision between the meaning of "fix" and the meaning of "law." The previous black mayoral candidate, Mame points out, is now "fixing parking tickets" (*Radio*, 8). In this sense, "fix" means to rig or corrupt or circumvent the law, and at the most trivial level. A little while later, Old Joe compares America to a giant slot machine which spits back the black man's coin: "You look at it and sure enough it's an American quarter. But it don't spend for you. The machine spits it right back . . . Is the problem with the quarter or with the machine?" (*Radio*, 22). Harmond responds:

If it don't take all the quarters you *fix* it. Anybody with common sense will agree to that. What they don't agree on is how to *fix* it. Some people say you got to tear it down to *fix* it. Some people say you got to build it up to *fix* it. Some people say they don't know how to *fix* it. Some people say they don't want to be bothered with *fixing* it. You

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mix them all in a pot and stir it up and you got America. That's what makes this country great. (*Radio*, 22, emphasis added)

Harmond's fixation with the ameliorative potential of democracy, indeed, aligns him with President Obama. As Harry Elam points out, the question Wilson poses for Harmond is "whether one can remain committed to a liberal paradigm of black empowerment and at the same time achieve economic or political success within the more conservative, white-dominated American mainstream."⁹

Harmond's faith in America and American justice is very atypical of the characters in Wilson's century. Consider how this view of America contrasts with Toledo's description, in *Ma Rainey*, of the role of black people in America.

Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soonawhile they began to make one big stew.

...

Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. All right. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew. But you look around and you see some carrots over here, some potatoes over there. That stew's still there. You done made your history and it's still there. You can't eat it all. So what you got? You got some leftovers. That's what it is. You got leftovers and you can't do nothing with it. You already machining you another history . . . cooking you another meal, and you don't need them leftovers no more. What to do?

See, we're the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. (*Ma Rainey*, 57)

Or consider it in juxtaposition with Holloway, in *Two Trains Running*, explaining black unemployment in the 1960s: "The white man ain't stacking no more niggers" (*Two Trains*, 35).

From their perspective, the American slot machine is fixed, that is, rigged, and thus incapable of being fixed, that is, repaired. "I say get a new machine" (*Radio*, 22), Old Joe tells Harmond. Because he wields power with ease—consider the ease with which he fixed Joe's summons—the fact that the law is fixed, rigged, remains transparent to Harmond. This is why he can insist

to Old Joe that “The law protects you when you pay your taxes. But the law protects the city when a property’s abandoned” (*Radio*, 34), although Joe has not abandoned the house. “People act like I’m invisible” (*Radio*, 34), Joe says.

The place of history in Wilson’s century

In this regard, Old Joe speaks for the entire cycle of African American history that Wilson has staged, a history that Harmond not only discovers but joins, trading his highly visible political profile for one among many in a community of protesters. Speaking on behalf of the law, Roosevelt reads from Old Joe’s rap sheet: “Defendant states he wants to bring charges against the United States of America for harboring kidnappers” (*Radio*, 69). Although Joe’s claim is more legitimate than Roosevelt’s claim on 1839 Wylie, because of Old Joe’s relationship to the law, Roosevelt can cite “evidence” that Old Joe is not in his right mind and, therefore, that his claims are insane rather than legal.

In discovering that Old Joe is his cousin, Harmond is recognizing his kinship with all the colored people of Wilson’s century. He is recognizing exactly what Roosevelt refuses to: that he is legally empowered only to the extent that he represents the class of African Americans in such a way as benefits Bernie Smith, while Smith demonstrates his whiteness by fixing the law to his own advantage. By having Roosevelt as a minority partner, Smith can make his radio station eligible for special benefits. Similarly, by helping Roosevelt buy Harmond out of the Bedford Hills Redevelopment Corp., he can exploit the laws intended to help minority corporations restore minority neighborhoods.

Sterling’s final exchanges with Roosevelt demonstrate another important way that *Radio Golf* is in dialogue with *Gem of the Ocean*. Using the mid-century perspective of Malcolm X to confront the strain of racial neoliberalism that started to coalesce at the beginning of the century, Sterling responds to Caesar’s racial diatribes, as no one in *Gem* does. This rebuttal, a century in the making, shows that ideologically Roosevelt is more Caesar’s heir than is Caesar’s grandson, Harmond:

You a Negro. White people will get confused and call you a nigger but they don’t know like I know. I know the truth of it. I’m a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got 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. (*Radio*, 76)

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In response, Roosevelt in fact confirms Sterling's charges by asserting his dis-identification: "Who's 'us'? Roosevelt Hicks is not part of any 'us,'"¹⁰ demonstrating his "blindyitis": the only reason Smith is interested in him is his identity as black man, as one of "us" (which, for Smith, means "one of them"). Roosevelt is blind to the fact that Smith has just found another way to do what Holloway explained to Sterling in Memphis's restaurant, in 1969: stack niggers.

Another form, in the second half of the century, of stacking niggers has been their disproportionate use in war zones, a subtle point that informs the end of *Fences* when Cory attends Troy's funeral in a military uniform, indicating, as it did for most enlisted men in 1965 and especially most black soldiers, that his next stop would be Vietnam.¹¹ *Radio Golf* explicitly alludes to this moment through its reference to Harmond's twin brother, Raymond. Like Cory, Raymond was a talented football player, who, like Cory, was denied a career. In Raymond's case, it was because, like Cory, the military sent him to Vietnam, where Raymond was killed. While not in the same income bracket as Cory, Raymond shared with Cory membership in the same demographic class that served and died disproportionately in Vietnam.

In joining the act of civil disobedience that challenges the authority of the "legal" demolition, Harmond is confronting the legality of the law that, in its initial intervention, created the racial-economic class of African American, the law that enabled people to profit from selling stolen property—the human cargo brought to America by the boatload. The initial Aunt Ester was part of that cargo. Just as her kidnappers had illegally auctioned her off, the people who acquired her house illegally auctioned it to speculators, hoping, with the state's aid and blessing, to turn a profit. If, in *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester's house recreated the Middle Passage, in *Radio Golf* it recreates the slave auction. In so doing, it becomes a direct challenge to Harmond's faith in the law. "You have got to have the rule of law," he tells Mame, as he had earlier told Old Joe. "Otherwise it would be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos" (*Radio*, 70).

And with this declaration, Harmond provides dramatic unity to the Wilson cycle. As Harmond learns that he is a colored man, we conclude a unique and brilliant cycle of plays about a community, deprived of law, making art and comedy and tragedy out of their struggle to transcend the chaos into which the American legal system had tossed them, as though they were the leftovers of history.