

FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE COLLECTIVE:
COMMUNITY IN AUGUST WILSON AND TONY KUSHNER

By

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Richard Noggle

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Chairperson, Maryemma Graham

Chairperson, Iris Smith Fischer

Paul Stephen Lim

William J. Harris

Henry Bial

Date defended _____

The Dissertation Committee for Richard Noggle certifies
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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ABSTRACT

My study examines the playwrights August Wilson and Tony Kushner as “political” artists whose work, while positing very different definitions of “community,” offers a similar critique of an American tendency toward a kind of misguided, dangerous individualism that precludes “interconnection.” I begin with a look at how “community” is defined by each author through interviews and personal statements. My approach to the plays which follow is thematic as opposed to chronological. The organization, in fact, mirrors a pattern often found in the plays themselves: I begin with individuals who are cut off from their respective communities, turn to individuals who “reconnect” through encounters with communal history and memory, and conclude by examining various “successful” visions of community and examples of communities in crisis and decay. My work is informed especially by Pierre Nora’s definitions of “history” and “memory” and his thoughts on “collective memory” as embodied in particular sites, *lieux de memoires*. Studies of ghosts and “cultural haunting” by Avery Gordon, Kathleen Brogan, and David Savran are used throughout to illuminate Wilson’s and Kushner’s use of the “supernatural” to illustrate the necessity of “communal memory.” Both Wilson and Kushner view “community” as a source of collective strength, a tool for change, and I conclude by arguing for the necessity of a more interconnected community of politically-minded playwrights.

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Introduction

I first encountered August Wilson in an English composition course in college. We read *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. My experience with drama at this time was limited at best. I am not entirely sure we ever read a Shakespeare play in my small, rural high-school. I know we read *Our Town*, and I wasn't overwhelmed. My taste ran to novels at the time. Yet when I read *Joe Turner*, I realized that great drama--even when simply read from the page--could feel *alive* in the same way as a novel. A great play could show me a "whole world," as Wilson has described his cycle of plays. As a southerner, I was drawn to Wilson's storytelling, those long monologues, and to his sense of place and his interest in the blues. As a *white* southerner from a very white town, my experience with African-American culture was limited, and Wilson's world was new to me. There was certainly nothing like Wilson's "bones people" in *Our Town*. I was intrigued and fascinated when I learned about his "project": ten plays, one per decade of the twentieth-century, a new "history" of African-American culture. While my work as an English major, extending into graduate school, led me away from drama for many years, I still followed Wilson's career, watching the cycle develop, an extensive depiction of a literary community that surely rivals Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. I loved Wilson's ensembles, vastly different from the single-protagonist literature I was accustomed to reading.

The notion of the ensemble, multiple-storyline approach is what originally led me to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. I remember reading the rave reviews that greeted the play's arrival, and I was intrigued, trying to visualize what a production might look like. Seeing the play in Arkansas seemed fairly unlikely, however, and I was still years

away from the kind of extensive work with theatre that might have led me to travel far enough to see a production. Oddly enough, though, the play showed up at the Arkansas Repertory Theatre a few years later. The company staged *Millennium Approaches* one season and *Perestroika* the next. Naturally, this being conservative Arkansas, there were protesters, angered by the play's openly homosexual sensibility. The productions were excellent. My experience with live theatre at the time was limited to a bit of Shakespeare and a few musicals, but Kushner's work showed me something different. The stage, I realized as I watched Kushner's spectacularly entertaining and moving work, could be a tool for explicit social change. Kushner wasn't just out to ponder big ideas. He was out to make a difference. Like Wilson's work, this was theatre with a purpose, but it didn't feel didactic.

It was many years later before the idea of linking Wilson and Kushner occurred to me. The project started with the issue of "community," a term I saw as essential to the work of both artists. When I had the opportunity to hear August Wilson speak at Kansas City's historic Gem Theatre, in connection with a performance of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, I realized that the audience was there to hear his views on the problems of African-American culture at least as much, if not more, than his views on any particular play. The work, in a sense, had taken on a life *outside* the theatre. Wilson intends his project to speak to--and, in a sense, strengthen--the African-American community by taking a traditionally oppressed group and moving them to the center of American history. His plays remind his African-American audiences of an innate African sensibility that they, and many of Wilson's characters, may have lost or forgotten through their experiences with a dominant, white culture. Wilson asks his audiences--black and white--to consider

the possibility of a self-sufficient African-American community in which such a sensibility is not subsumed but allowed to flourish. The plays, most of them large ensemble pieces, sometimes show us such communities but just as often show us communities in crisis, attempting to re-establish what has been lost. Kushner, in *Angels in America*, also takes an oppressed group, in this case homosexuals, and places this community center stage in a work set in a very specific historical and cultural moment, the Reagan years, while also looking back to consider the formation of America and forward to ponder its future. While *Angels* has an explicitly gay-activist aesthetic, the play, like all of Kushner's plays, ultimately envisions a community stretching beyond easy boundaries. As the play ends, a central character addresses, and embraces, the audience in a moment that begins as one of homosexual solidarity but widens to provide a sense of "interconnectedness" that spans sexual, racial, religious, and political lines.

"Community," as a term, is a bit wide-ranging, and means different things to each playwright. Robert D. Putnam, author of the bestselling study *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, sees "community" as a "conceptual cousin" (21) to the idea of "social capital," a term in existence since the early part of the twentieth-century, defined by Putnam as simply "connections among individuals--social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (19). Putnam writes of "bonding capital" and "bridging capital," terms he traces to Gittell and Vidal's *Community Organizing*, and the terms are a useful means of considering the ways that Wilson and Kushner think about "community." "Bonding" forms of social capital, Putnam writes, are "by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogenous groups" (22). This certainly seems the nature of

“community” in Wilson, who envisions a self-sustaining black culture in America, informed by a distinctive African sensibility. Wilson does not desire a “bridge” between cultures. Kushner, on the other hand, refuses any definition of “community” that does not look outside itself to acknowledge its inherent interconnection: “Bridging” forms of social capital, Putnam writes, “are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages” (22).

Despite differences of definition, however, Wilson’s and Kushner’s work reveals a remarkably similar outlook regarding how to *achieve* “community.” Both see the term as inextricably connected to “political” concerns: to be a community is to be united; to be united is to have a “voice”; to have a “voice” is to have the ability to effect change. To come together as a “community” in the works of these artists is not only to develop a kinship with other members of a specific or global community but to forge a connection with the past, with the cultural forces that have shaped the present configuration of the community.

This idea of confronting the past, of “history,” is essential to this study, and throughout I turn to the work of the French historian Pierre Nora, whose definitions of “history” and “memory” provide key terms for much of this discussion. History, for Nora, is merely “a representation of the past,” one that is always “problematic and incomplete” (8). Memory, on the other hand, “is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present” (8). Memory keeps the past alive in the present, as it *must* be kept alive if we are to understand our place in our respective communities. Nora sees memory as “collective, plural, and yet individual” (9). Indeed, Wilson and Kushner are especially fascinated by this notion of collective memory, be it an innate African-

American understanding of the Middle Passage as we see in several Wilson plays or the mysterious re-connection with Jewish heritage that Louis experiences in Kushner's *Angels in America*. Both Wilson and Kushner are concerned with restoring a "voice" to groups who have often been pushed to the margins of society: African-Americans; homosexuals; Jews. The "histories" of such groups are often "lost" histories, and memory is essential to recovering a feeling of group identity. Nora writes of *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, which he defines as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which...has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (4). In such sites, despite whatever sense of disconnection is experienced by the community, a "sense of continuity remains" (1). Such sites are ever-present in the works of Wilson and Kushner. In Wilson, *lieux de memoires* are found everywhere from the initial dislocation of the Middle Passage to the "blues" that serves as a foundation for much of Wilson's work, from a piano inscribed with the heritage of a particular family to Aunt Ester's house, which begins and ends Wilson's ten-play cycle and whose inhabitant is perhaps the cycle's central symbol of cultural memory. Kushner's *Angels in America* locates Jewish memory in "sites" such as the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, and New York's Bethesda Fountain, whose statue of the Angel Bethesda has its origins in Jerusalem. Both of these scenes in Kushner's work, while using Jewish "memory" as a starting point, function to unite people *across* boundaries. Kushner speaks of being drawn to certain aspects of the Jewish *kibbutz*--collective, egalitarian communities in which everyone has a voice in the government of the community--and the vision at the end of *Angels* is similar, albeit of a broader, non-religious based, collective. In the introduction to her "documentary theater" piece

Twilight, which explores the 1992 Los Angeles riots from multiple perspectives, Anna Deavere Smith writes of how often she is asked whether she found a single, “unifying voice” to speak for the city (xxiv). “In order to have real unity,” Smith writes, “all voices would have to first be heard or at least represented. Many of us who work in race relations do so from the point of view of our own ethnicity. This very fact inhibits our ability to hear more voices than those that are closest to us in proximity” (xxv). Wilson, one imagines, might argue that such issues can *only* be approached from the perspective of one’s own cultural heritage; Kushner, on the other hand, attempts to take readers beyond, into a world of what Smith calls “multifaceted identities” which possess a “more complex language” (xxv).

In Wilson, perpetuation of a certain kind of “community”—one defined by an innate African sensibility—is essential. Kushner’s work is much different. Frustrated by the modern world’s lack of a sense of “interconnectedness,” Kushner’s plays show the need for the construction of a *new* kind of community: *Perestroika*, the second part of *Angels*, is indeed an apt title. The differing goals of these artists are both tied, however, to an idea that Joseph Roach calls “surrogation”: “the enactment of cultural memory by substitution” (80). Roach’s work in *Cities of the Dead* provides an essential underpinning to much of this study. The work examines “how culture reproduces and re-creates itself” (2) as members of communities die or depart and their roles are filled by others who attempt, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to carry on the memory of the past. Wilson believes that the contemporary African-American community is on the verge of collapse as its members lose touch with the defining moments of its history, such as the Middle Passage and the rebirth of a new, African-American sensibility in the

slaveholding South, and his plays often build to moments when the characters either reject or accept their duty to perpetuate such memory. “Success,” in Wilson, is based on maintaining a sense of what *was*, and what *can* be again. In Kushner, the reverse is often true. “Success” for characters such as Prior Walter in *Angels* and Emmie in *Caroline, or Change* means rejecting a past of stasis and homogeneity for a future of change and diversity.

The question of how to represent the past on stage becomes essential in the work of both artists, and Wilson and Kushner often turn to similar, often supernatural, devices to illustrate the idea that, as Faulkner famously put it, “the past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.” Ghosts often haunt the stages in Wilson and Kushner, as they have haunted stages throughout the history of theatre, but as Kathleen Brogan notes in her study *Cultural Haunting*, “modern” ghosts are different from the specters of the past. Brogan points out the “communal nature” of ghosts in contemporary literature, which represent not only “the individual psyche” but “a people’s historical consciousness” (5). “Through the agency of ghosts,” Brogan writes, “group histories that have in some way been threatened, erased, or fragmented are recuperated and revised” (6). The ghosts who haunt Wilson’s characters certainly fit this definition, reflecting a whole society “haunted” by the lingering affects of slavery and the dislocation of the Middle Passage. Kushner uses the notion of haunting in an even more complex manner. In a *Bright Room Called Day* and *Angels in America*, we witness specters who begin as representations of *specific* cultural circumstances but ultimately function, in keeping with Kushner’s goals, to unite characters across *diverse* cultural backgrounds. As Brogan notes, a ghost is a “go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and

life, one culture and another” (6). In addition to Brogan’s work, in this study I draw on scholarship by David Savran and Avery Gordon to explore these essential notions of “cultural haunting.”

Since both authors defines themselves as “political” artists, my first chapter is an attempt to understand their “politics” through interview statements and other published works outside the plays themselves. Interestingly, both authors have written what might almost be termed a “manifesto” on which the foundations of their works rest. For Wilson, this is his 1996 Theater Conference Guild speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” which sparked a fascinating debate about African-American theatre between Wilson and the critic Robert Brustein. The comparable work by Kushner is his 1997 essay “Notes About Political Theater,” revealing his attention to bring a focus on “community” into an American theatre that has long been centered around issues of the “individual.” Beginning with a short biography of each author, Chapter One works through these two “mission statements” and then beyond, showing how Wilson and Kushner have developed very particular definitions of how to strengthen, respectively, the African-American community and a diverse, world community.

Beginning with Chapter Two, each chapter opens with a few introductory pages which set up that chapter’s focus in connection to both authors. There are four sections in each chapter which alternate between Wilson and Kushner plays. While I do make certain essential Wilson/Kushner connections *within* these individual sections, I strive not to impose Wilson’s vision upon Kushner’s or vice versa, trusting instead that the often surprising and overlooked similarities between these two very different authors will become clear through my analysis of their individual works. My examination of these

plays is thematic, as opposed to a chronological order which follows either their dates of composition or traces Wilson's plays decade by decade. Wilson, after all, did not write about each decade in order, and my thematic approach allows me a freedom to position various characters and moments side by side in a way that a strict chronological approach would not. Worth noting, also, is the absence of an in-depth discussion of two Wilson plays. Wilson wrote *Jitney* before the other plays of the cycle, but it did not receive major productions until much later, after extensive revisions. While the play is fascinating in its look at the culture of 1970's African-American "jitney" drivers, it has always felt--to me-- a little less sure of its place in the overall historical scheme of the cycle. The play *does* end with an important moment of "surrogation" from father to son, which I reference in connection to other thematically similar moments in Wilson plays. I also choose to examine his *Seven Guitars* in connection to *King Hedley II* as opposed to working with it separately, as many of the characters from the earlier play show up in the later. All other plays from Wilson's cycle are examined fully, as are the major plays Kushner has written thus far.

Chapter Two, "The Myth of the Individual," concentrates on characters who privilege a self-focused view over a more communally-centered one. In Nora's terms, these characters are out of step with the "true memory" that bonds one to ancestral connections. Here I look at August Wilson's Levee, from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, an ambitious but misguided young trumpet player willing to sell out his community for his own financial gain. From Kushner's *Angels in America*, I examine Roy Cohn, the real-life lawyer and former colleague of Joseph McCarthy who becomes, in the play, a symbol for the worst aspects of the Reagan era, during which the neglect of the AIDS crisis did

irreparable damage to the homosexual community. I also look at the way Roy attempts to pass along his damaging, self-focused mindset to his assistant Joe Pitt, a young, closeted, Mormon lawyer. Wilson's Troy Maxson in *Fences*, set in 1957, is a prisoner of history, forever haunted by a past that taught him he could not be a part of society. The chapter ends with Kushner's Caroline, from *Caroline, or Change*, a Southern maid who sadly resists the promise of connection offered by the Civil Rights Movement. These four characters remain disconnected in the plays, but *Fences* and *Caroline* move toward moments of "surrogation" in which children strive to heal what has been broken by their parents.

Chapter Three, "Waking the Dead," turns to characters who more successfully reconnect to the "true memory" of their ancestral pasts. Each of these moments of reconnection is accomplished through supernatural means, and this chapter draws more extensively than others on the work of Avery Gordon, Kathleen Brogan, and David Savran to explore these "hauntings." Herald Loomis is a broken man at the beginning of Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, but through a vision of the Middle Passage and the "bones people" he rejoins society, understanding that he has a particular "song" to sing, or role to play, in his community. Zillah, in Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*, is literally an exile, a woman dismayed by "Reagan America" who seeks escape in a Berlin apartment in which the memory of Nazi occupation--and resistance--ultimately inspires her. Wilson's Berniece, in *The Piano Lesson*, is an exile herself, hiding in the North from the memory of her family's Southern slavery experience, embodied in the ghost of a former slaveholder. To exorcise the ghost, Berniece must call upon her ancestors, a community of the dead that possesses a vital power in the present. In *Angels*

in America, Louis, a Jewish homosexual, also calls upon ancestral tradition as he recites a miraculous Kaddish over a dying Roy Cohn, joined by the spectre of Ethel Rosenberg. The plays here clearly reflect Nora's definitions of history as a profoundly "discontinuous" force and "memory" as a powerful bonding agent potentially capable of healing the rift between past and present.

Chapter Four, "We Will Be Citizens," takes its title from one of the final lines of *Perestroika*, as Kushner has Prior Walter break the fourth-wall to address the audience. In the works of Wilson and Kushner, allying oneself with particular communities is a political statement and a tool for leverage against a society that may reflect dominant, opposing values. This chapter looks at moments when "successful" communities are able to emerge. Again, "surrogation" is important here. The chapter begins with the chronological first play of Wilson's cycle, *The Gem of the Ocean*, as one of Wilson's many "lost" men reconnects with the help of Aunt Ester, Wilson's recurring symbol of African-American community. In this chapter, I examine *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* as separate entities. With *Millennium*, I focus on moments of "interconnection" between Harper and Prior, two characters united in a strange dreamscape but have never met in the "real" world. I consider, too, Kushner's use of multiple-casting and split-scenes as a way of reflecting some of his thoughts on "community." Wilson's *Two Trains Running*, set in the late 1960's at the height of the Black Power movement, is a perfect fit for this chapter. The static community of Memphis's diner achieves a new vitality as its denizens are inspired by the death of one of their own. Finally, the chapter posits *Perestroika*'s final vision of a new community gathering at New York's Bethesda Fountain as a close representation of Kushner's own

hope for the future.

Chapter Five, “One of these days the boat will turn around,” examines the authors’ more recent plays, all set in the fairly recent past. The visions of community are bleak here. Wilson turns to 1980’s inner-city violence in *King Hedley II*, as we witness a community imploding. Kushner too looks inward in the first section of *Homebody/Kabul*, taking us into the mind of a lonely London housewife whose long monologue reveals a longing for connection but also a powerful streak of inaction that parallels the Western world’s increasing resistance to ideas of “interconnection.” Wilson’s final play of the cycle, *Radio Golf*, sets its sights on “urban renewal” projects of the 1990’s which threaten to destroy community history, specifically 1839 Wylie, the home of Aunt Ester. In the second section of *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner deposits his audience in a different kind of urban wasteland: Afghanistan, shortly after bombings during the Clinton presidency. “Surrogation” in these plays is less clear-cut than in those of the previous chapter. Both Wilson and Kushner possess an encouraging optimism even in the face of catastrophe, but these plays are more ambiguous in their outcomes. We see in these works how the slow drift away from “community” has led to disastrous results.

My conclusion turns once again, briefly, to interview statements from the authors which consider exactly what they hope their work to accomplish. I also take up the idea of Wilson’s “legacy,” a topic of much debate since his passing in 2005. Also included here is a brief consideration of Kushner’s “work in progress,” *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Will Be Unhappy*, which turns to the here and now as Laura Bush reads Dostoevsky to one of the strangest and most disturbing “communities” in recent

literature: a collection of the spirits of dead Iraqi children.

In a study that is much concerned with the idea of group belonging, perhaps a note on myself is essential. As a white, heterosexual, Protestant male, I exist outside the multitude of communities--African-American; homosexual; Jewish; Mormon--that are explored in these plays. Wilson's work can be especially tricky to negotiate due to his adherence to the idea that black culture, in a sense, can *only* be fully experienced and understood through an African-American sensibility. Yet much of Wilson's greatness lies in the fact that his works do *not* make "outsiders" feel unwelcome. When I see or read his plays, I become, at least for a time, a part of that community, even if this may run counter to his intentions regarding white audiences. Kushner more specifically *forces* identification with communities that may be foreign to his audiences, a technique well-suited to his goals to unite across various borders. As *Angels* ends with a direct address to the audience, we are all immersed in the community of "citizens," which, if approached with a proper mindset, is a community large enough to accommodate everyone.

Chapter One:
 “The Ground on Which I Stand”:
 The Politics of Wilson and Kushner

...it is difficult to disassociate my concerns with theatre from the concerns of my life as a black man, and it is difficult to disassociate one part of my life from another. I have strived to live it all seamless...art and life together, inseparable and indistinguishable.”

--August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” 15

“I believe that everybody in a room together having the same experience creates something. It creates an energy. It creates a community. It creates a phenomenon that didn’t exist before, and that in almost a mystical way creates good in the world, and it also empowers people and makes it more likely that they will act.”

--Tony Kushner, panel discussion at Northwestern university, 208

Kushner, commenting on the playwright Larry Kramer, writes that “Kramer, like Shaw and Brecht, has forged a very public personality, a familiar voice and political stance through which his plays must be refracted by any reader or audience” (x). Without question, the same is true of Kushner and Wilson.

In the introduction to her 1994 study of Brecht’s profound and continuing influence on Britain’s political theater, the American theatre critic Janelle Reinelt bemoans the lack of “a committed and successful political theatre movement” in the United States (1). While America may lack a sustained, cohesive movement, political concerns *have* certainly long played a role on the American stage, and the work of the playwrights August Wilson and Tony Kushner, both of whom immediately and gladly identify themselves as “political” artists, have been bringing such concerns to the forefront over the past two decades. Reinelt, of course, does recognize playwrights such as Kushner as political artists, seeing Kushner’s *Angels in America* as a form of Brecht’s politically-committed “epic” theatre, which she defines as a work in which “...the

spectators engage the problems and understand the constraints operating on the nation and on themselves as social subjects...[in which] some sense of what might be done next is suggested but not spelled out” (236). By this definition, both Kushner and Wilson fit the bill as playwrights with distinctly Brechtian concerns, operating through similar political principles. Reinelt’s quote, with its emphasis on how such plays attempt to steer audiences toward a new view of themselves as “social subjects,” points the way toward a view of Kushner and Wilson that this dissertation elaborates. These artists, through their work, are engaged in a form of community-building. They hope, in a sense, to leave their audiences with a collective mindset, to move their spectators away from a narrow focus on the individual toward a focus on a larger society. In this study, I use the phrase “political artist” simply to mean an artist who hopes to posit the idea of a changed society, if not necessarily to instigate change through the work itself, as elucidated in Kushner’s opening quote below the chapter’s title. Throughout the dissertation, then, the notion of politics is inextricably bound to the notion of “change,” and the notion of “community” in these pages is viewed always as a vehicle for change. Wilson sees the contemporary African-American community as consistently engaged in self-destructive assimilation into a dominant society whose values run counter to a more collective-minded African-derived sensibility. Uniting through this African-derived worldview can give blacks in America a position of political leverage. Kushner too is certainly a proponent for the rights of individual groups, perhaps most prominently the homosexual community. However, what ultimately emerges in Kushner’s work is an alignment of various groups equally concerned with the future of all.

Marilyn Elkins, in her casebook on August Wilson, describes the “politics” of a

Wilson play, insisting--rightfully so--on a complexity that is often misread by Wilson's harshest critics, who see in his work a kind of "separatism" they cannot look beyond. That element of the plays *is* there, without question, and it *can* be troubling. In his public statements and in his work, Wilson articulates a need for an African-American community that stands independent--self-sufficient; unassimilated. His work, however, is not simply a lesson on how to form such a community. Rather, it is a remarkably vivid and complex portrait of how the African-American community has weathered the twentieth century, a celebration of resistance in the face of constant adversity. Elkins, defending Wilson against charges of simple propagandism, argues that his work is in no way "agitprop," noting that Wilson "draws his multi-dimensional characters fully and avoids the pat answers of such theatre. He effects, instead, a powerful theatrical experience, and trusts his audience to reach political conclusions which develop as a logical extension of his plays' narrative situations" (Elkins xii). While Wilson indeed has a political "agenda" of sorts that he is very vocal about in public forums, often explaining exactly--and controversially--just how he thinks African-American culture and theatre should operate, the plays themselves, on the whole, *do* avoid agitprop's explicit call to action approach in favor of a more subtle attempt to lead his audiences to a better understanding of African-American culture.

Tony Kushner, like Wilson, is also often noted for his outspoken public stances on American theatre and politics. Robert Vorlicky, in the introduction to his excellent collection of Kushner interviews, praises Kushner's "political awareness" and his consistent willingness to suggest in public forums "concrete steps that can be taken toward social and personal change" (2). Like Wilson, Kushner unabashedly courts

controversy through his impassioned defense of the homosexual community and his criticism of the conservative Right in American culture. However, his ultimate vision of what America should resemble is markedly less provocative than Wilson's. Whereas Wilson seeks to bolster the African-American community and feels it must function as a separate entity to remain true to its traditions, Kushner seeks to dissolve such boundaries, believing that "communities" such as homosexuals can come to flourish *within* the larger culture without losing their identity. Certain critics find the vision to be overly-utopian, working counter to Kushner's otherwise penetrating inquiry into the divides of American culture, but the optimism is essential to the politics. Change requires hope, and Kushner knows that the road to this idealistic future is complicated indeed, seeing his task as an artist to help illuminate the path: "Good political theater asks complicated questions: it explores; it doesn't offer simple dogma. Those who are involved in the struggle to change the world need art that assists in examining the issues at hand, which are usually incredibly complex" (Kushner, "Notes About Political Theater," 29).

In their plays, Wilson and Kushner offer a kind of "assistance" to their audiences as they explore their respective definitions of "community." This first chapter, however, begins not with the plays but with how each author defines his "position" through interviews and public statements, which are vitally important with these artists, since both Wilson and Kushner accept that their work sets them up as "spokesmen" for their respective communities. While these public statements cannot be imposed directly on the plays themselves, reducing them quickly to the kind of "agitprop" both playwrights seek to avoid, the authors make it clear that their work *is* a way of exploring their public concerns, making a study of their political "platforms" a necessity for this analysis before

examining the plays. In the following pages, I seek to understand exactly what the notion of being a political artist means to Wilson and Kushner, beginning with a brief biographical background for each author and paying special attention to notions of “community,” since both artists see the idea of coming together, of collectivity, as the first step toward fulfilling their visions.

...

“The blues always been here,” proclaims Ma Rainey in Act II of Wilson’s first major success, 1984’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Wilson would agree, even though the blues did not enter his own life in a recognizable way until, at the age of twenty, he first heard Bessie Smith sing “Nobody in Town Could Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine.” Wilson tells Bill Moyers, “There was an immediate emotional response. It was someone speaking directly to me. I felt this was mine...and that all the rest of the music I was listening to did not concern me, was not a part of me” (14). The blues would go on to serve Wilson as a “philosophical system” that provides an underlying foundation for all his work, since found within the music are “the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situations they find themselves in” (Moyers 14). The blues in Wilson becomes a force of great communal power: “if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive because they sanction the information it contains” (Moyers 14). Growing up in Pittsburgh’s Hill District in the 1950’s, the son of a black mother, Daisy Wilson, and a white father, August Kittel, Wilson also absorbed what would eventually become another bedrock element of his work: the black vernacular and oral tradition of the streets, which he claims he was not fully able to appreciate and transmit to the page until he experienced a lack of it during his later years in St. Paul, Minnesota. “In that

silence, I could hear the language for the first time,” he tells John Lahr “(60). During his childhood in Pittsburgh, Wilson’s father was mostly absent: “...the cultural element of my life was black. As I grew up, I learned black culture at my mother’s knee, so to speak” (Moyers 17). A modified and mythologized Hill District would later become the setting for most of Wilson’s work, with *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*’s Chicago setting being the lone exception.

Wilson’s early schooling was marred by years of racial incidents. He dropped out altogether in tenth grade after being unfairly accused of plagiarism, hiding the fact from Daisy for a long period while educating himself in the library, where he encountered the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Wilson’s earliest works as a writer were poems, but with a group of like-minded individuals he founded the Black Horizons Theater in 1968 and began to direct and try his hand at writing. A decade later Wilson found himself in St. Paul, Minnesota, where his friend Claud Purdy had established the Penumbra Theater group, which offered the first staging of a Wilson play in 1982, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. In St. Paul, Wilson worked part time at the Science Museum, writing short plays for their Children’s Theater, an experience he claims as beneficial to his later work in that the plays taught him the need for “creating a character for a specific purpose” (Shafer 10). This proved a valuable skill: although he largely avoids stock characters, Wilson’s characters *are* certainly used to present different political positions. Through Claud Purdy, Wilson encountered another primary influence: the works of the African-American painter Romare Bearden, whose “collage” style would later influence the structure and content of Wilson’s plays. It was also during his time at St. Paul that Wilson got a script accepted to the O’Neill Playwrights

Conference, where he encountered the director Lloyd Richards at staged readings of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, beginning a collaboration that would extend well into Wilson's Broadway career. In 1984, after its premiere at the conference, *Ma Rainey* was produced at Yale, went through various productions at regional theaters throughout the country, during which Wilson revised extensively, and appeared in New York, winning the Drama Critic's Circle Award and establishing Wilson immediately as a major force. The play's trajectory and revision processes were mirrored closely by later plays. *Fences* opened on Broadway in 1987, winning Wilson his first Pulitzer, with another to follow three years later with *The Piano Lesson*. By this time, Wilson had dedicated himself to an ambitious project, a cycle of ten plays, each one covering a decade of twentieth-century African-American life. Taken together, Wilson often says, the plays form a new "history" of black culture. At the time of this writing, Wilson has recently passed away from complications from liver cancer, having just completed the tenth and final play of the cycle, *Radio Golf*, set in the 1990's. The cycle stands as an achievement unparalleled in contemporary drama, a focused vision of a full century of African-American life.

As Wilson's influences gradually coalesced over the years, giving way to the distinctive style and content that would earn his position as America's pre-eminent African American playwright, he naturally developed strong--and often controversial--stances on black life in America that deserve full consideration here. Wilson's oft-cited 1996 address at the Theater Communication Group National Conference, "The Ground on Which I Stand," offers a wealth of information on understanding his views of African-American theatre, which Wilson sees as a political arena to illustrate the culture and values of African-American community. Theatre, for Wilson, is a means of restoring a

voice that has been denied through a history of oppression in America and which, in his opinion, is still being silenced through the continuing problem of under-funded black theatres. Wilson begins his address by asserting that, from the moment the first slaves arrived in America, they began “seeking ways to alter their relationship to the society in which they lived--and, perhaps more importantly, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of themselves as a community of people” (14). This quote is a perfect example of Wilson’s own political mission, a concise statement of the ultimate goal of his ten-play cycle, revealing a two-fold agenda and a resulting two-part audience. Wilson sees himself as primarily writing to the African-American community but also to the larger community of America as a whole. As Wilson tells Bonnie Lyons, he wants to “offer [white Americans] a different and new way of looking at black Americans” and to show black Americans “the content of their lives being elevated into art” (1-2).

Wilson sees his most important goal as speaking to a *black* audience, which he envisions as a community linked through shared traditions and a kind of “collective unconscious” bonding them to their African roots. His address goes on to delineate “two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society; and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity” (16). The first tradition, Wilson says, originated in the plantation houses, while the second--and most important--originated in the slave quarters. Wilson, of course, aligns himself with the second tradition, though without question he is aware that his work *does* serve to entertain--and hopefully edify--white audiences. Wilson explains in the TCG address: “I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground

to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth” (16). Wilson constantly claims a kinship, a community, blood ties, to all those who paved the way for his art. Indeed, his address is especially eloquent in its praise of the Black Power Movement of the 1960’s, “the kiln in which I was fired” (14). However, Wilson’s own dramatic work-- “warrior” and “battlefield” language aside--is not so much a radical call-to-arms in the style of predecessors like Amiri Baraka as it is a wake-up call to his black audience which asks them to recognize themselves as a self-sufficient community undefined by any values imposed on them: “We cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors...We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America” (71).

Wilson, early in the address, describes himself as a “race man” and feels that race should be used to create a sense of “community”:

Race is also the product of a shared gene pool that allows for group identification, and it is an organizing principle around which cultures are formed. When I say culture I am speaking about the behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought as expressed in a particular community of people (16).

Such beliefs lead Wilson, unsurprisingly, to an anti-assimilationist stance. Assimilation, he says, is an idea “that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years” (72). Wilson’s address culminates with a plea to black artists to unite, to embrace theatre’s power to “heal,” and with an assurance that, despite the views of certain critics, “we are

not separatists” (72).

However, there *is* a “separatist” element to Wilson’s work that has to be examined here. Criticizing Wilson’s TCG address in an *American Theatre* article called “Subsidized Separatism,” Robert Brustein accuses Wilson of employing a “language of self-segregation” (26), and claims that his public statements and plays have “fallen into a monotonous tone of victimization” (27). Wilson himself vehemently denies such charges, firing back at Brustein in “August Wilson Responds” that he is only calling for acceptance and encouragement of black theater, not asking black theater to completely withdraw from society at large: “We have never asked to stand outside...to have our work treated differently or judged by different standards or criteria because we are black” (106).¹ However, it is hard to write Brustein off so quickly, given the fact that Wilson *is* occasionally prone to making a public argument that the Great Migration was a “wrong” idea, that African-Americans should have either stayed in the South and developed a self-sufficient culture or, even more interesting and controversial, that African-Americans should pack their bags and collectively travel South again to create such a stronghold. Sandra Shannon writes, amusingly: “On two occasions I have witnessed playwright August Wilson stir his audience into an emotional frenzy simply by stating his views on the Great Migration” (“A Transplant That Did Not Take,” 659). In fact, these views are present in the TCG speech, although in a somewhat undeveloped fashion: “I further think we should confer in a city in our ancestral homeland in the southern part of the United States...so that we may enter the millennium united and prepared for a long future of prosperity” (73). The views are on full display in other interviews: “I think we should

¹ What began as a dialogue between Wilson and Brustein in the pages of *American Theatre* later escalated into a much-publicized, packed-house Town Hall Meeting moderated by Anna Deavere Smith.

all go back. We should all move tomorrow... We should move down there and register to vote, elect ourselves as representatives within the framework of the Constitution of the United States of America, and begin to provide do-for-self food, clothing, and shelter” (Pettengill 246). Shannon mostly chooses to downplay Wilson’s public calls for “actual physical relocation” in favor of showing how these ideas get explored in the plays themselves. In his work, Shannon writes, “Wilson continues to show the apocalyptic and tragic results of what he deems the original sin of African-Americans: that is, the mistake they made in transplanting an agrarian-based culture to a concrete environment” (“A Transplant That Did Not Take,” 660).

For the purposes of this study, however, the public statements which reflect “separatist” elements of Wilson’s thoughts are extremely useful prior to examining the more subtle politics of the plays. Bill Moyers asks Wilson point-blank about this “separatism”: “Do I hear you arguing for separate but equal cultures?” (55). Wilson largely deflects the question in the Moyers interview, but in a 1999 conversation with Bonnie Lyons, he seems to argue exactly what Moyers suggests. Speaking of the 1940’s to Lyons, Wilson says:

We were more self-sufficient. When blacks were finally allowed to play in the white leagues, the loss for the black community was great.

Similarly in the forties black women were not allowed to go downtown and try on dresses in the department stores. So we had our own dress stores in the neighborhood and the doctors and dentists and teachers and business owners all lived in the same neighborhood and we had a thriving community (6).

We see in this quote what may be the essential theme of Wilson's work: the decline of "self-sufficient" African-American communities through assimilation into mainstream American culture. While Wilson certainly doesn't want to return to the oppression of the 1940's, he does seem to feel that a certain common, valuable worldview has been lost over the years. In Wilson's plays, his characters often face moments of decision in which they can accept themselves as members of a community defined by African sensibilities or they can become lost in a society that offers, at best, an illusion of assimilation, since according to Wilson, "Blacks don't melt in a pot" (Moyers 16). "We are Americans," Wilson tells Moyers, "But first of all, we are Africans. We have a culture that's separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different attitudes, values and linguistics, different aesthetics..." (16).² Wilson intends his plays to illustrate these differences that separate black culture from mainstream white culture. As he says in the introduction to the 1980's play, *King Hedley II*, he hopes to reveal black culture onstage "in all its richness and fullness" and show a community that has the "ability to sustain us in all areas of human life and endeavor and through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves" (175). Ideally, then, his plays will cause white audiences to think more highly of black life in America, to recognize it not as a variation of the "norm" to be subsumed into the larger society, but as a self-sufficient society of its own. While Wilson would not claim Brecht as an influence, his concerns are distinctly "Brechtian" in his attempt to force audiences as Janelle Reinelt says, to "engage the problems" and consider the way such problems

² Throughout the dissertation, my occasional uses of the word "African," as opposed to African-American, are intentional: Wilson seems to use the term "African" to denote a worldview still connected to ancestral

impact them as “social subjects” (236).

Wilson’s comments on his writing method help reveal how he seeks to translate his self-described “political” goals to the page, and ultimately to the stage, for his multiple audiences. If Wilson’s goals, as we have seen, are basically twofold, reminding blacks of their African heritage and teaching whites a new way of looking at black culture, his use of a kind of systematic “teaching” method, a pattern of sorts, seems natural. Wilson describes his approach to Sandra Shannon: “I use history and the historical method--mythology, history, social organizations, economics--all of these things are part of the culture. I make sure that each element is in some ways represented--some elements more so than others--in the plays, which I think gives them a fullness and completeness, creates the impression that this is an entire world” (“Blues, History, and Dramaturgy,” 539). Wilson wants his African-American audience to understand that their culture is capable of offering them everything they need, making it unnecessary to define themselves in connection to white culture. In turn, he wants his white audience to understand and respect this culture, not try to control or exploit it through such means as the music industry, as vividly evidenced in such plays as *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars*.

Certain aspects of Wilson’s work are consistently used to illustrate his ideas of a self-sufficient African-American culture, and chief among these elements are the use of blues and of storytelling. While Wilson’s work, as he notes, is indeed “historical,” it is less a meticulously researched history of names and dates--the standard “white” version of history--than it is a kind of “oral” history where truth is controlled by the distinctly African-American voices who tell, and sometimes sing, it. Wilson speaks of the

tradition and culture, undiluted by the values of “mainstream white American culture.”

influence of the blues in almost all his interviews, deeming it a force that lies behind everything he writes. He explains this to Yvonne Shafer:

I discovered that contained in the blues is an entire response, an entire cultural response of an entire people to the world that they found themselves in. So the ideas and attitudes of the people, their ideas about social organization, their ideas about morality, etc, are all contained in the music, in the blues. So, the blues is sort of like a book, if you will, and it goes back (164).

The blues, for Wilson, holds a mirror up to African-American culture, revealing the entire history, its pain and its joy. This seems much in keeping with Houston Baker's view of the blues as a "forceful matrix in cultural understanding" (232). Baker offers as the ultimate "trope" of the blues an image of "the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (increasingly oppressive) landscape into the extraordinary energies of rhythmic song. The railway juncture is marked by transience...Singer and song never arrest transience...Hence, they may be conceived of as translators" (232). Wilson's work, then, can be seen in many ways as a visual "translation" of the blues to the stage, a history of oppression distilled and transformed into a vision of an African-American community under constant change throughout a century. In an analysis of Wilson's four professed primary influences, his four "B's," which are Romare Bearden, Amiri Baraka, Jorge Louis Borges, and the blues, Mark William Rocha writes that the blues serve as "*the* American language" for Wilson's plays. Bakhtin has described language "not as a system of grammatical categories, but rather...conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (258), and this

seems very true of Wilson, who believes that there is an innate, fixed identity shared by blacks in America, one that can be understood through the blues, which at its root is a response to years of African-American oppression.

Along with the blues, a similar method for transmitting knowledge in Wilson's work is storytelling itself. Wilson tells Shafer about growing up in Pittsburgh, explaining that "the community moved to educate me right and also protect me...[the] community [tells] you stories that are designed to help you" (165). Wilson's plays are indeed full of stories, long monologues that may sometimes seem unconnected to the action at hand but actually serve as riffs on the major themes, designed by Wilson to affect his black and white audiences in different ways. Mark William Rocha examines this design, specifically focusing on its impact on white audiences, in his essay "American History as Loud-Talking in *Two Trains Running*." Rocha is interested in how Wilson uses the "signifying" technique of "loud-talking" to implicate white audiences--who may feel disconnected from their role in African-American history--in the continuing oppression of blacks in America. The technique, Rocha feels, aligns Wilson more with the radical politics of his acknowledged primary influence, Amiri Baraka, than some critics have realized. Rocha's piece begins by examining the "triadic" relationship central to "loud talking": a person speaks to a second audience in a way that a third audience is meant to overhear and learn from. This technique, one could argue, is true of all drama, with the third audience of course being those present in the theatre, but Rocha gets a lot of mileage out of his exploration by considering how the "mostly white audience" for Wilson's plays is able--or unable--to locate itself in the on-stage experience:

The historical point of *Two Trains Running* is not merely to offer a

salutary addition or correction to an already existing American history.

Instead the play offers its audience the opportunity to *do* American history by including them as participants in a ritual of signifyin(g) through which they can become self-conscious about their odd disconnectedness to a black experience around which, as W.E.B. Dubois put it, “the history of the land has centered for thrice a hundred years (117)

Rocha believes, essentially, that Wilson’s work here serves to show white audiences that they “have managed to profoundly disconnect themselves from America’s past” (121). Rocha’s point is solid, but his conclusion is worthy of further consideration given Wilson’s positions on the irreconcilable differences between black and white culture. Rocha believes that, ultimately, “Wilson’s signifyin(g) in effect breaks the fourth wall of the proscenium stage, since the theatrical audience is directly addressed through loud-talking in an effort to welcome or pressure the audience into becoming part of the black community” (127). The idea of white culture being a “part” of the black community is undesirable, in Wilson’s eyes. His work is meant to convince audiences--both black and white--that African-American culture contains, in itself, a complete value system of its own, and the blues and storytelling in his plays are carriers of an African-American tradition that remains strong.

Wilson’s efforts to maintain the separate identity of black culture come clearly into focus through the controversy that erupted over hiring a white director for a film version of his play *Fences*, which raises further questions about Wilson’s politics. In 1987, when Paramount purchased the rights to *Fences*, Wilson balked at the studio’s attempts to hire a white director, reportedly Barry Levinson, on the grounds that the

project needed someone “who shared the same cultural responsibilities of the characters” (Wilson, “I Want a Black Director,” 200). This unsurprising insistence is, of course, quite in keeping with Wilson’s thoughts on cultural differences. In his commentary on the subject, first published in *Spin* magazine, Wilson insists: “Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter how astute a student they are or how well meaning their intentions. I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture” (201). The statement, though, is made a bit problematic by the fact that Wilson, as noted earlier in the TCG speech, indeed views race as “an organizing principle around which cultures are formed” (16), therefore blurring his distinction between “race” and “culture” almost beyond any usefulness. A lengthy quote later in the *Spin* piece offers great insight into how exactly Wilson *does* view the relationship between white and black culture in America. Speaking of Americans as a whole, Wilson says:

We share certain mythologies. A history. We share political and economic systems and a rapidly developing, if suspect, ethos. Within these commonalities are specifics. Specific ideas and attitudes that are not shared on the common cultural ground. These remain the property and possession of the people who develop them, and on that “field of manners and cultural intercourse” (to use James Baldwin’s eloquent phrase), lives are played out (201).

Wilson, of course, has the best of intentions, believing, and perhaps correctly, that someone who is “not a product of black American culture” cannot properly achieve the goals of his work on-screen (201). However, it is also again easy to see why critics like

Brustein term Wilson a “separatist,” especially when Wilson ends his statement by making a “rule” that “Blacks don’t direct Italian films. Italians don’t direct Jewish films. Jews don’t direct black American films” (204).

Similar in some ways to Brustein’s critiques, Michael Awkward’s reaction to Wilson’s call for a black director takes a tough, complex look at the playwright’s political ideology that provides a useful way to end this look at Wilson’s public positions--as well as a useful bridge into Kushner’s less divisive but equally complex political vision of America. Awkward has trouble buying Wilson’s argument that a white director is somehow innately unsuited to bringing Wilson’s vision of black culture to life on-screen, accusing Wilson of possessing outdated notions of African-American culture as being “an essentially unitary, fixed, and historically static entity” (210). Awkward writes, “In part because aspects of black culture have for decades been the topic of sophisticated academic and mass cultural inquiry--often in the work of white scholars--it seems to me impossible to argue convincingly that whites cannot learn enough to internalize or reproduce features of the complex ‘ethos’ of which Wilson speaks” (212). To prove his contention that the means of cultural production do not lie exclusively in the hands of white culture, Awkward points to Wilson’s own mastery of “Western dramatic form as a vessel for the expression of a black blues sensibility” (213). One wonders here how Wilson might respond, since his interviews tend to downplay Western influences. Wilson, in fact, claims to have read almost nothing in the Western canon. Almost certainly Wilson would reject this description as a misreading of the plays, since his goals are always to foreground African-American culture, which Awkward *does* see as an admirable goal, defining it as an attempt at “the dissemination of relatively undiluted

narratives which highlight in aesthetically satisfying ways the presence of ‘black self-determination and self-identity’ ” (213). What Awkward questions, though, is the possibility of “undiluted” narratives in a society which thrives on cultural borrowing. In a harsh, but not totally ungrounded, comment, Awkward argues that Wilson’s “unwillingness to acknowledge that black cultural products are equally susceptible to white mastery” results in

dangerous arguments, if only because they seem to echo those of unself-reflective white racists who, informed by a sense of perpetual Afro-American cultural outsidership quite similar to Wilson’s views on white interaction with black cultural forms, seek to justify their perceptions of exclusive Caucasian rights to citizenship and, indeed, location on American shores (215).

Once again, Wilson has been placed in the “separatist” camp. Awkward argues that Wilson seeks to get around his “racial essentialism” through an insistence that his call for a white director refers “not to biological but to cultural ‘qualifications’ ” (208). As we have seen with Wilson’s view of race, however, this may not prove entirely satisfactory, since Wilson does indeed seem to see race as determining a “predispositional fixity” (Awkward 208). Wilson’s admirable efforts, Awkward implies, ultimately doom African-Americans to a continuing “outsider” status in a culture that is, some exceptions aside, willing to accept, and sometimes adopt, their values. While there is certainly some truth in the critical contentions that Wilson’s valiant efforts to teach and preserve black culture create further distance between these two communities, Wilson’s plays inarguably strengthen the African-American community by providing one of the most detailed

depictions in literature of an entire cultural and historical worldview. In an interview with Suzan-Lori Parks conducted shortly before his passing, Wilson responds to Parks's query about how African-American culture continues to thrive and prosper by saying, "Well, it's the community...in order to survive you need a community of people who can support you" (77). If we must finally allow that Wilson is, on some level, a "separatist," we must also term him a separatist who is doing valuable work as a chronicler of *his* community, even if he is unwilling to fully open that community to all of his audiences.

...

In a *New York Times* article from the day after Wilson's death, Tony Kushner praises Wilson for his unwavering commitment "to describe large social forces" through his "politically engaged, direct, social realist drama" (Isherwood A23). Kushner himself seems to have embarked on a similar journey. Politics, for Kushner, was always there, as was the theatre. The self-described son of "New York, New Deal liberals transplanted to the South," Kushner spent much of his childhood in Lake Charles, Louisiana, watching his mother perform in local productions and trying desperately to repress his homosexuality (Fisher 14). In high-school, the self-confessed "terrible student" surprised himself by becoming an excellent debater: "I became this incredibly mean arguer. I would not be defeated," Kushner tells John Lahr, and this proclivity for debate can certainly be witnessed in the structure of his plays (46). As an undergraduate majoring in English Literature at Columbia in the 1970's, Kushner immersed himself in theatre, from the mainstream successes of Broadway to the more experimental, including several stagings of works by Brecht, who would become his primary theatrical influence, a model for both style and content. In New York, Kushner came out as a homosexual and

pursued a Master's of Fine Arts in directing at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, spending summers in Louisiana teaching at a school for gifted children, where he often staged children's plays, some of which he wrote himself. Kushner humorously recounts a children's staging of one of Brecht's "Lehrstucke," or "learning plays": "That was pretty weird. All these little kids mouthing this cryptic Stalinist stuff...It was a real lesson in how ineffectual theater can be" (Vorlicky 15-16). This self-critique would be mirrored by some critics when later New York stagings of Kushner's own early work began.

Throughout the 1980's, Kushner served as artistic director of a political theatre group in New York known as the Heat and Light Company, assistant director of the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, and artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop, where he staged versions of early plays like *A Bright Room Called Day* and *Hydriotaphia, or the Death of Dr. Brown*, the former being viewed by many critics as immature in its linking of Hitler's regime and Reagan's presidency and the latter being seen, even after much revision in a decades-later staging, as becoming tangled in its numerous themes. It was, of course, with *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, the first part of an eventual seven-hour opus, that Kushner hit his stride, finding an eventual wide audience as he, in David Savran's words, "demonstrates the mutual imbrication of the political and personal by dramatizing the often tortuous connections between various ideological positions and a wide range of various sexual, racial, religious, and gendered identities" ("Interview," 292). *Millennium Approaches* began as a commissioned work for San Francisco's Eureka Theatre company in 1990 and worked its way to L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum and London's Royal National Theatre before finding its way to Broadway in 1993, garnering a Tony for Best Play and a Pulitzer Prize. The

second part, *Perestroika*, followed a mostly similar trajectory to Broadway three years later, winning another Best Play award. The success of the *Angels* plays thrust Kushner into the limelight as a prominent spokesperson and advocate for gay and lesbian concerns while he continued to challenge himself in his career as a playwright with successful stagings of everything from an adaptation of S. Ansky's Yiddish classic *The Dybbuk*, a meditation on modern Afghanistan in *Homebody/Kabul*, and a musical, *Caroline, or Change*. At the time of this writing, Kushner continues to expand his range through collaborations with children's author Maurice Sendak, the screenplay to Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, a new translation of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, and a work-in-progress called *Only We Who Shall Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*, which turns its attention to our current war as First Lady Laura Bush reads to a group of dead Iraqi children.

The plays may range far and wide in their subjects and styles, but there is a central consciousness of political engagement that links Kushner's work, which is quickly apparent in his public statements. Robert Vorlicky defines the interview format as a "spontaneous performance of multiple selves (each attendant to the various communities of identification for the interviewee)" (3), a definition which may be more true of Kushner than other subjects, since a rather fluid definition of "identity" emerges in all of Kushner's public statements. These range from, to use Vorlicky's categories, "son, brother, uncle, lover, queer, agnostic, Southerner, democrat, socialist, Jew, feminist, political activist, Manhattanite, and theatre professional" (5). What I will argue here, however, is that all these "selves" share a surprisingly singular vision of the place of the individual in society and the need for community as a force of collective action.

Kushner's 1997 essay, "Notes About Political Theater," serves as a kind of mission statement similar to Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand." Kushner seeks a working definition of what it means to be a "political" playwright and to understand the duties of one who so chooses. American drama, he points out, concerns itself largely with the "individual": "the principle antagonists and agents of our drama are individuals, usually white men, or families, usually white families. The individual is important to us, he gives us something to 'care' about. We are apparently incapable of caring about issues, or ideas, or communities..." (Kushner 24). The political playwright, Kushner insists, must move beyond this narrow focus on the individual, opening up the theatre to complex explorations of the large-scale effects of historical circumstances. Kushner writes, "Theater has always had a vital relationship to history, the examination and, yes, the teaching of history has got to be accounted a function of any political theater" (28). Kushner's own work, indeed, is rooted in very specific historical moments. Rejecting the individual focus of most drama, Kushner writes primarily ensemble pieces that strive to illuminate interconnections between seemingly disparate characters and time periods. "The political," Kushner writes, "is a realm of conscious intent to enter the world of struggle, change, activism, revolution, and growth" (26). Such a "realm" must be entered with a clear purpose: "In times of struggle and oppression the names with which we choose to identify ourselves become very important. If we are in opposition to the established order, it's strategically necessary and personally fortifying to call oneself an oppositionist" (26). Turning his attention outward near the end of the essay, Kushner writes, "We have entered into an age of politics of which I like to call neo-barbaric, in that the previously unassailable fundamentals of civilization, of community, are under

attack” (33). By allying himself with various “communities” --homosexuality; Jewish tradition; the movement of the Left--Kushner’s work combats the “barbarism” of the conservative, Right-leaning present era and seeks to restore a larger sense of a community of humanity that he feels is slowly fading away.

Although homosexuality is not at the forefront of all Kushner’s projects, he sees his homosexuality as a defining characteristic of his political sensibility. A work like *Angels*, Kushner tells David Savran, seeks to overturn “the fiction of the white, normal, straight male center,” which “has been the defining project of American history” (302). John Lahr describes Kushner’s technique as a way of “forcing” an audience “to identify with the marginalized--a humanizing act of imagination” (44). Like Wilson, Kushner is recovering a history that has been overshadowed by the dominant society: “The recovery of antecedents is extremely important work. Historians are reconstructing the lost history of homosexual America, along with all the other lost histories,” Kushner writes in a recent essay called “American Things” (9). Kushner sees his own goals as an artist as being rooted in “the mythology of radical politics” (Savran 295), and he criticizes the lack of a sense of political mission he witnessed in such groups as the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in the early 1980’s: “It was so bourgeois and completely devoid of any kind of left political critique. There was no sense of community with any other oppressed groups” (Savran 301). Discussing the importance of radical politics over the years, Kushner mentions the significance of the Black Nationalist movement: “I mean, you depend upon the work that’s done by the slightly assimilationist but hardworking libertarian civil rights groups, like the NAACP, but then at some point you need the Panthers. You need a group that says, ‘Enough of this shit. This is going too slow. And

if don't see some big changes now, we're going to cause trouble' ” (Savran 301).

Kushner's public statements certainly reveal an anti-assimilationist stance, albeit one that is somewhat less radical than Wilson's in that Kushner is not completely opposed to the idea of marginal groups being subsumed into the larger culture *if*, and only if, they are able to maintain the values that define their own culture. Kushner acknowledges, too, an “assimilationist penchant” inherent within his own work: “For all that I have publicly decried the dangers of assimilationism, for all that the assimilationism of the lesbian and gay Right infuriates me, I have long been guiltily aware of the extent to which my work and even my politics betray an assimilationist penchant for ‘the accumulated wisdom of culture’ ” (“On Pretentiousness,” Kushner, 70).³ The problem of assimilationists, Kushner has noted, lies in their being “unwilling to admit that structural or even particularly formidable barriers exist between themselves and their straight oppressors” (“A Socialism of the Skin,” Kushner, 27). His own work, despite the acknowledged contradictions, never downplays such “barriers.” Despite the obstacles, however, Kushner believes that within American culture there is a “history tending, though not deterministically, not without struggle, towards some plausible, workable, realizable version of radical, pluralist democracy,” which is the kind of society Kushner seems to call for, one centered around a “non-violent, pragmatic revolutionary politics predicated on a collectivity of individuals reinventing themselves into something new” (“On Pretentiousness,” Kushner, 70). Kushner believe this difficult proposition to be a true possibility:

There are in this country political traditions congenial to the idea that

³ Kushner borrows the phrase “the accumulated wisdom of culture” from a description of “art” in Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit's *Art of Impoverishment*.

democracy is multi-color and multi-cultural and also multigendered, that democracy is about returning to individuals the fullest range of their freedoms, but also about the sharing of power, about the rediscovery of collective responsibility. There are in this country political traditions-- from organized labor, from the civil rights and black power movements, from feminist and homosexual liberation movements for economic reform--which postulate democracy as an ongoing project, as a dynamic process. ("On Pretentiousness," Kushner, 9).

While the work of Kushner and Wilson is often dark, there is always a deep-rooted optimism in both writers, a faith in the power of people to collectivize and initiate progress.

For Wilson, the idea of collectivity is quite simple: African-Americans must re-connect to their African sensibility and see themselves as a united, self-sufficient community. For Kushner, communities seem less determined by any particular characteristic such as race or sexual orientation than by the political mindset that governs a group of people. He is drawn to ideas of "socialism," which he sees as a misunderstood system whose underlying assumptions are solid. Kushner tells Savran that "the socialist tradition in this country is so despised and has been blamed so much on immigrants. It's been constructed as a Jewish, alien thing which is not the way socialism is perceived anywhere else in the world, where there is a native sense of *communitas* that we don't share" (305).⁴ Kushner offers a personal definition of "socialism" in an interview with

⁴Kushner here seems to use the term "*communitas*" in a rather loose sense, meaning something like "collectivity" or "collaboration." However, Victor Turner's definition of "*communitas*" as "a feeling of group solidarity, usually short lived, generated during ritual" (Schechner 62) is a useful way of considering various ideas of community that develop in the plays of Wilson and Kushner.

the playwright Craig Lucas:

Socialism is simply the idea that people are better off if we work collectively and that the economic system we live in is made by people and therefore can be controlled intelligently rather than let loose. There's no way that can't be true. As long as there are decent people in the world, there's going to be a demand for socialism. The demand for health care right now, which is a demand that 80 percent of the people in this country share, is a demand for a certain kind of socialism (37).

While *Angels* is set in the Reagan 1980's, during which Kushner claims there were no cohesive political options "for generally progressive people," (306), his work seeks to point the way toward a kind of collective vision of America that he believes is very much possible. Kushner describes the political tradition to which he is an "heir" as "mostly an immigrant appropriation of certain features and promises of our Constitution, and of the idea of democracy and federalism," and as "the aggressive, unapologetic, progressive liberalism of the thirties and forties, a liberalism strongly spiced with socialism, trade unionism and the ethos of internationalism and solidarity" ("American Things," Kushner, 5). In a 1993 conference speech built around the idea of "tolerance," Kushner writes that a "pluralist democracy" is the "best description of and possibly the best prescription for the kind of society the United States is and ought to be" ("Some Questions About Tolerance," Kushner, 42). He goes on to say: "In a large, industrialized pluralist democracy, groups of people, arranged along lines of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, must develop strategies for living together in spite of what may prove to be incommensurable differences" (42). Though these "lines" may be hard to cross, a

properly functioning society depends on a “tolerance” of other views as a necessity for creating a society that can work for all.

Kushner claims as a primary influence the work of Bertolt Brecht, a figure “deeply committed to collectivity as an ideal and an achievable political goal” (“With a Little Help From My Friends,” Kushner, 35). He encountered Brecht’s work in college and via the German literary critic Walter Benjamin’s *Understanding Brecht*. Kushner found in Brecht a way of using theater as a means of opening a debate with audiences over issues of cultural identity. He explains to Brecht scholar Carl Weber that reading Brecht “was the first time I believed that people who are seriously committed political intellectuals could have a home in the theater, the first time that I believed theater, really good theater, had the potential for radical intervention, for effectual analysis” (106). Kushner offers Weber a list of the kinds of questions that Brecht “wrestled” with, questions he also sees as essential to his own work:

...the question of the individual ego and the question of how one marries a historical, social construct like the individual ego to a theory, and what is the practice of that. What is the way in which the individual, which is a sort of glorious and immensely destructive creation of hundreds and hundreds of years of Western civilization, how does the individual become a socialist subject? How are we to remake ourselves into people who are fit to remake the world? And what becomes of the individual when the individual encounters the need to collectivize (118).

Because Kushner’s vision of an ideal America is of an inclusive community that still

allows for cultural difference, Brecht's questions are ideal for Kushner's exploration of what happens to identity--be it sexual, religious, or political--in such a collective society. Kushner also explains to Weber his attraction to the "epic" structure of some of Brecht's work: "I loved the multifocal, the multiple perspective of it" (107). Employing such a structure in *Angels* allows Kushner to give voice to the various "communities" of his work which will eventually merge into the kind of "pluralist democracy" Kushner envisions. In his 2003 play, *Caroline, or Change*, set in the 1960's South, Kushner, although working on a much smaller canvas than *Angels*, pushes himself further toward the idea of "collaboration" that is so important to Brecht: "Musicals are collaborative to the nth degree," he writes in the "Acknowledgements" for *Caroline*. The multifocal, multiple perspective element here rises out of the score itself: Jeanine Tesori's score "synthesizes field hollers, R & B juke-joint swing, Delta blues, klezmer, Mozart, and gospel, among other styles, as a demonstration of the way disparate lives come smashing together" (Green 12). Kushner's "Afterword" to *Angels* also stresses the necessity of collaboration as a way of making meaning. Kushner attacks the misguided notion that great art is the product of an individual mindset, in which "you pretend you play it solo, preserving the myth that you alone are the well-spring of your creativity" (284). Kushner writes, "Way down close to the bottom of the list of the evils Individualism visits on our culture is the fact that in the modern era it isn't enough to write, you must also be a Writer" (284). At the end of his tribute to the people who influence his work, Kushner offers these comments on the power of collectivity: "Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it; refract it; criticize, grieve over its savagery...Marx was right: The smallest indivisible human unit is two

people, not one: one is a fiction” (289). Such thoughts lead Kushner to a more fluid definition of identity that is a far cry from Wilson’s more innate definition. However, both authors share a belief that one of America’s weaknesses is the tendency to elevate *personal* gain over communal strength.

Religious identity--like homosexuality and shared political systems--is yet another means of shared power, of community, in Kushner’s work. He discusses the importance of Jewishness to his work in a 1995 interview with Rabbi Norman J. Cohen. Kushner says that “in being Jewish one is born into a history of oppression and persecution, and a history that offered, at various points, a sort of false possibility of a kind of assimilation that demanded as one of its prerequisites that you abandon your identity as a Jew” (218). This demand of assimilation is troubling to Kushner, as it is to Wilson. Both playwrights celebrate difference in their work, as Kushner explains:

For me, as I think is true for most Jewish homosexuals, the business of claiming an identity, the business of coming out of the closet [teaches one that] it’s better to be a pariah than a parvenu. If you’re hated by a social order, don’t try and make friends with it. Identify yourself as other, and identify your determining characteristics as those characteristics which make you other and unliked and despised (Cohen 218).

In Kushner’s phrase “claiming an identity” we see a further illustration of the difference between his views and Wilson’s. For Wilson, there *is* no “claiming” of identity, since being an African-American dictates who you are: there may, however, be *reclaiming* of identity, as the oppression of white America has historically led many, in Wilson’s view, to deny their true natures. At times, Kushner *can* sound much like Wilson, as if he shares

a more biological view of identity. Speaking of his Jewishness, Kushner tells Cohen that “somehow osmotically this culture has seeped into my bones” (220). However, Kushner does not believe that these--possibly--innate elements of Jewishness necessarily dictate his worldview in the way that Wilson seems to believe about race. For Kushner, a properly functioning, ideal community will absorb the best elements of its diverse members to create a cohesive whole. Cohen speaks of how Kushner uses the character of Louis in *Angels* to explore how identity functions in communities, stating:

Ultimately it’s through our relation with other people and in community that we come to some higher sense of existence. Louis is really a very powerful Jewish figure struggling with the sense of his Jewishness. Since you said that Louis is the closest character [to yourself], it’s really you, on some level, who’s struggling with the other. And the other thing is human beings. But the Otherness--that is, with the big “O”-- [is] that sense of something divine in other people that can make you even more than whole (229).

Though Kushner himself admits to a troubled relationship with his own religious identity, describing himself to Cohen as a “a very serious agnostic” (227), Jewishness is certainly one major part of his identity as an artist, and yet another reason why he identifies with the “oppressed” of society:

Something in me, smarter than me, pointed the way towards identification with the Black Other, towards an embrace of my status as a pariah, as rejected, as a marginal man. I learned, we learn, to transform the gestures, postures, and etiquette of oppression into an identity; we learn to take

what history has made of us and claim it proudly as what we are, and choose to be. We refuse victim status, we constitute ourselves as history's agent rather than as its accident, and even if that's only partly true, such a claim empowers us, and makes us grow too big for shackles, for kitchens, for closets, for ghettos of all kinds (Kushner 52).

Sounding very much like Wilson here, Kushner wants the "oppressed" to use their identity as a means of power, moving beyond victimization and into the strength of community bonds.

Kushner's politics have naturally attracted a fair share of criticism. While critics such as Robert Brustein attack Wilson for his divisiveness, Kushner more often finds himself, oddly enough, a target due to his *inclusiveness*, which critics such as David Savran and Jonathan Freedman seem to see as a form of naivete out-of-keeping with the complexity of his work. Savran's influential early piece on Kushner, titled "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism," argues that Kushner's, at first glance, "radical politics" ultimately get lost amidst an ending in which "an almost incomparable wide range of opinions, beliefs, and cultural positions are finally absorbed into a fantasy of a utopian nation in which anything and everything is possible" (28). Indeed, Kushner's *Angels* does end with a vision of inclusive community that is a far cry from Wilson's own portrayal of a world in which cultural differences still exist at a wide remove from each other, but neither is this quite the Disney-fied vision of America that Savran's comments suggest. In fact, Kushner's "utopian" vision at the end of *Angels* may hew closer to what Michel Foucault would term a "heterotopia," a space which, when contrasted to the "fundamentally unreal spaces" of utopias, are "real places...which

are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24). As Jonathan Freedman notes, the idealized “community” at the end of the work is, after all, one of “quarrelling outsiders” who have “inverted” a traditional conception of family and community into something quite different.

Freedman’s essay, “Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner’s *Angels in America*,” praises Kushner for his exploration of the “Otherness” of Jews but also criticizes the end of the play as an oversimplified and over-idealized view of American community that ultimately provides unsatisfactory answers to the complexities of Jewish identity in America. The work, Freedman writes, “collapses into a traditional assimilationist answer to the questions of identity it has bravely raised” (92). The play begins, Freedman notes, by seeming to stress the impossibility of assimilation, as an elderly rabbi eulogizes a Jewish grandmother in a discussion of “the melting pot where nothing melted,” but ends by trying to “amalgamate otherness into a culturally palatable unity” (99-100). A full discussion of the “utopian” vision of *Angels*’ resolution is a concern best saved for later in my study, but Freedman’s essay provides a better understanding of Kushner’s political goals. The end of *Angels*, Freedman writes, reveals a “redeemed America that can gather gay and straight, black and white, Mormon, Christian, and Jew into a collective identity precisely through the act of quarrelling over that identity” (99). For Freedman, Kushner’s “echoing a problematic nationalist discourse is ultimately less important than his appropriation of it for a frankly queer political project--and of the family-as-nation metaphor for a nonprocreative notion of

both family and nation that includes all forms of family in a new national narrative” (99). Ultimately, even Kushner’s harsher critics praise his goals, his attempts to point the way toward this “utopia,” however unlikely, that lies beyond the problems of the present. These critics, in their unrelenting focus on the optimistic vision that ends *Angels*, seem to miss a larger point, which is that even this remarkably diverse community is meaningless in and of itself. What such a community has the power to accomplish is the important issue for Kushner, who states that “Our best hope, I believe, for reclaiming lost ground and for pushing ahead lies not so much in cultural exchange but in securing civil rights” (“Some Questions About Tolerance,” Kushner, 47). Only after a community has made peace with its differences can the disparate groups begin to unite to assure that each element of the community is allowed a voice in society.

...

As should be abundantly clear, both Wilson and Kushner accept their roles as political artists and even as “spokesmen” for the communities in which they claim membership. Kushner says, “I’m very concerned about questions of collectivity and whether or not people can reconfigure themselves in ways that allow for collective action,” (Kushner, “The Theater and the Barricades,” 195). Wilson shares this concern, and in the plays of these artists we witness both successes and failures of collectivity. In this study, the failures are just as important as the successes, for they show us the dangers of a misguided streak of individualism in America that often prevents forward progress toward collective action. In the next chapter, we turn to characters who are unable or unwilling to ally themselves with their respective communities, clinging to a self-focused mentality that is harshly critiqued by each author.

Chapter 2
'The Myth of the Individual':
Disconnection and Rejection of Community

“There’s no progress made in America for blacks unless there’s progress for everyone.” -
-August Wilson, interview with Bill Moyers (55)

“Americans pay high prices for maintaining the myth of the individual.” --Tony
Kushner, “With a Little Help From My Friends” (33)

The French historian Pierre Nora writes that collective memory, which links a community to the power of ancestry, is on the decline in “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies” (8). Modern societies privilege “history,” “a force which “binds itself strictly to temporal continuities,” over collective memory (Nora 9). In this chapter, I examine characters who have cut themselves off from the kind of sustaining, communal memory that Nora considers in favor of a more “historical” approach to life that leaves them isolated, cut off from potentially sustaining ancestral or community connections. These characters often misunderstand or even manipulate history to their individual advantage. The process involves memory, of course, but not so much the communally-minded memory--Nora’s “real memory”--so much as a history-based memory that is “nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces” (9). Characters such as Kushner’s Roy Cohn and Wilson’s Troy Maxson and Levee attempt to rewrite history in a way that places themselves at the center of a private universe, untouched by the world around them. Kushner’s Caroline, though less self-focused, is equally stubborn, resisting the necessary change going on around her. All, in their own ways, deny the power that can always be found--in Wilson and Kushner--through connection to others, which involves the power drawn through the shared memory of a common past.

I do not intend to argue here that Wilson and Kushner are opposed to the idea of “individuality.” After all, Wilson’s cycle explores the recurring theme that each member of the African-American community must find his or her “song,” his or her individual role to play in society. Kushner’s more inclusive vision of society calls for tolerance of each individual without the expectation of conforming to societal “norms.” What I *will* argue, however, is that the work of both artists critiques a devotion to individual concerns when elevated above the good of the respective community. In his classic chronicle of American democracy, Alexis de Toqueville defines “individualism” as a “calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself” (qtd in Putnam 28). In Wilson and Kushner, the idea of the “greater society” remains front and center, as witnessed in the very structure of the plays themselves. These artists are somewhat unusual in the ranks of modern playwrights in their devotion to ensemble works, a fact that also underscores both playwrights’ constant emphasis on the need for collective power as a means of strengthening the African-American community--in Wilson--and uniting various communities--in Kushner. The plays assemble a disparate mix of characters who come to accept or reject opportunities to align themselves with various communities that can offer a source of strength, and thus leverage, against an oppressive society.

This chapter examines characters who have fallen out of step with their respective “communities” by pursuing a self-focused agenda that isolates them from potential bonds offered by, among other things, ancestry, race, and religion. While both playwrights

possess a largely optimistic view regarding the possibility of re-establishing these broken links, the plays themselves do not necessarily offer a vision of cohesive communities, nor do the characters always reconnect. Indeed, the works are often located in a fragmented world where individual citizens are “lost,” a key term for both writers, where they are alienated and pushed to the margins, unable to connect. In his Afterword to *Angels*, Kushner speaks of what he terms “the myth of the individual,” a notion that prevents the kind of collective mindset needed before progress can be made in society. The characters examined here are even out of sync with their immediate circles of family and friends, as well as out of sync in a larger sense, separated from elements of their culture and history in such a way that they function, quite unsuccessfully, as individuals cut off from communities that can sustain--and heal--them.

The ability of communities to “heal” themselves is at the heart of Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead*, which examines “how culture reproduces and re-creates itself” through a process he terms “surrogation”: “Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure...survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates,” Roach writes (2). These “alternates” will then, successfully or otherwise, help to carry on the community’s “cultural memory.” This notion of “surrogation” is essential throughout my study as a way of understanding how communities carry on “as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitute the social fabric” (Roach 2). I begin here with Wilson’s *Levee*, from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, a young musician of great potential whose failure lies in his rejection of the communal bonds offered through the present company of his fellow musicians and through the communal memory of the blues and African traditions. *Levee* should be a “surrogate” of community values but

through his rejection, which turns to violence, he creates a gaping hole in the community with no immediate replacement to be found. Turning to *Angels in America*, I examine Kushner's Roy Cohn, a take-no-prisoners New York lawyer whose worldview places himself at the center of a universe he defines largely in terms of individual power. Roy attempts to pass his dangerous philosophy on to Joe, a young Mormon law clerk struggling to come to terms with his homosexuality. While Joe rejects the corruption inherent in Roy's politics, he inherits, to some extent, Roy's refusal to "connect." In Kushner's world, this is a damaging inheritance. Back to Wilson, I look at the most famous of his characters, Troy Maxson, from the Pulitzer-winner *Fences*, a man less villainous than Cohn yet similar in his construction of a world that he defines in terms of himself. Troy is an eloquent defender of responsibility who, despite his talk, violates the bonds that link him to his family and community. A Willy Loman-like figure of grandiose dreams, Troy dies alone. Despite this isolation, the play ends with an optimistic moment of "surrogation" as his son Cory inherits the positive qualities of his father and the community bonds around the divisive figure of Troy. I conclude the chapter with Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*, whose title character is a Louisiana maid, stubbornly resisting the winds of change in the Civil-Rights era south. Her daughter, luckily, is less resistant, and the play, like *Fences*, builds to a powerful, optimistic moment of "surrogation" as Kushner explores the power of collective resistance in keeping a community alive.

...

Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* immediately stands apart from the rest of the ten-play cycle with its Chicago setting. Whereas Wilson's fictionalized version of the

Hill District is presented as a self-sufficient community--at least until it begins to self-destruct in the last plays of the cycle--*Ma Rainey* is geographically isolated. The characters are more at the mercy of the dominant white society in which they find themselves immersed, represented here through the exploitation of the music industry. Set in a recording studio in 1927, the play centers around the conflicts between Ma's African-American session players, who spend most of their time below-stairs, awaiting orders from the white studio owner and manager in the "control booth" above. The setting serves quite obviously as a metaphor for the segregation of the era, and Wilson uses the debates between the band members as a sounding-board to explore complex issues of assimilation and community.

Levee, trumpet player and youngest member of the band, is one of Wilson's most isolated characters. While many of Wilson's characters are able to find their place in African-American society, Levee remains a lost soul whose refusal to recognize his connections to his African roots--and the vital African-American community which surrounds him--ultimately damages the community at large. Levee does not enter the play until well into the first scene, after the other band members have been established. This is significant, as Wilson wants to suggest from the start how Levee has never managed to fully integrate himself into the tight community of the band, due in part to his younger age and an accompanying arrogance but also, as Wilson soon reveals, to a deeper lack of understanding of his place in society. Levee arrives carrying a shoe box, and the new shoes within play a role in the work's final moments but also suggest the idea of the "walking blues," which surfaces in other Wilson plays and denotes someone who is wandering, lost, cut off from community bonds. Wilson's stage directions

describe Levee's demeanor as one of "intelligent buffoonery, clearly calculated to shift control of the situation to where he can grasp it" (23). This calculation is soon made apparent in the play: Levee is out to better himself at all costs.

In an early scene, Toledo, piano player and unofficial "leader" of the band, attempts to explain to the group that within their little below-stairs community there is an underlying, innate "Africanness" behind even the simplest of actions such as the passing of a "reefer." Toledo says, "Now, what I was saying is what Slow Drag [the bass player] was doing is African. That's what you call an African conceptualization. That's when you name the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve what your desires are" (32). After Levee's angry interruption in which he insists, "I ain't no African," Toledo continues: "Naming all those things you and Cutler done together is like trying to solicit some reefer based on a bond of kinship. That's African. An ancestral retention" (32). Pierre Nora defines "true," or "real," memory as that "which has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions" (13). For Wilson, such memory is the knowledge of Africa, a force that many of his characters have consciously or unconsciously banished in an effort to survive in a white-dominated society. Levee possesses a kind of damaging individualism that blocks connection not only to his past but to his present as well. He has a determination to break new ground, to play music only in *his* way. Eileen Crawford addresses this in her study of the play, writing that "Levee is that individual who has yet to understand his own playing which reveals his bottomless anger--an anger generated by a father's agony, a mother's tragedy, which leaves him to make his way alone and confused" (37). Crawford's comments suggest something larger, the power of music as a bonding agent, tapping into the past as a force

of power that can be used as a means of connection with the present community as the band members play the songs together. Levee, however, is bent on playing a new “arrangement” of the traditional blues. As we saw in Chapter One, Wilson considers the blues the bedrock of his drama. The music is thus a *lieux de memoire*, a site of memory, which Nora defines as “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which...has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (xviii). In such a site, Nora writes, “a residual sense of continuity remains” (1). For Wilson this continuity is to an African consciousness that still informs modern African-American thought. The play calls to mind 1992’s *Jelly’s Last Jam*, where George C. Wolfe imagines Jelly Roll Morton, another figure of the early Chicago jazz scene, on his deathbed and largely forgotten, being tried for abandoning the African roots inherent in his music. Levee is guilty of the same crime, insisting on a music that departs from tradition to better please a white audience: “Naw! Naw! We ain’t doing it that way... We doing my version.” (33). While Wilson is not opposed to change, since communities *must* find new ways to sustain themselves, he *is* opposed to the loss and rejection of “cultural memory.”

Levee’s pent-up rage and sense of isolation is revealed as the play progresses. Act I ends with a long monologue by Levee which reveals the pain of his childhood, as he watched a “gang of white mens” rape his mother (68). He attempts to fight them and retains a long scar--which he shows the band members and the audience during this speech. Many of Wilson’s characters, interestingly, reveal such scars. Herald Loomis scars himself during the course of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, for instance, and the waitress Risa in *Two Trains Running* cuts her own legs to define herself differently from

societal expectations. For Wilson, these scars do not often mark the characters as victims. In fact, victimhood is an idea the latter plays attempt to downplay, though it *is* present in *Ma Rainey*, as Levee is unable to transcend his victim hood. Wilson tells Bonnie Lyons: “Actually, for a while I was concerned because all my protagonists seem to have scars...But I think it’s symbolic of being marked. It’s a willingness to do battle” (10). This idea of the battered body is not uncommon to political theatre, as Stanton Garner, Jr. writes in *Bodied Spaces*: “Described through dramatic speech and represented onstage, the body in contemporary political theatre is often a body tortured, disciplined, confined, penetrated, maimed, extinguished” (161). Garner goes on to examine how viewing such bodies onstage works in the mind of an audience, writing that “the enactment of human suffering and its vicarious replication in the audience serve to motivate action in the political, economic sphere that produces and institutionalizes this suffering. The witnessing of pain, in other words, is an awakening to political awareness and intervention...” (183). Levee’s scarring at the hands of the white men has left him with a need for revenge that is understandable to the viewing audience, white or black. In the work of Wilson--and Kushner, as we will see--one must be comfortable in one’s own skin and make peace with the body and its limitations in order to truly take one’s place in the world. Levee is unable to see his scars as a possible bond with the black community, the whole of which is “marked,” if not always visibly, by a history of oppression. Instead, he sees the scars only as a personal affront. During my first encounter with the play, I found myself waiting for Levee’s anger to emerge against the white record producers, whose exploitation is non-violent but damaging nonetheless. Their presence in the play is an obvious continuation of Levee’s victimization at the hands of white

“oppressors,” aligning the play closely to Wilson’s oft-professed influence Amiri Baraka. In an examination of Wilson’s influences, Mark William Rocha notes that “Wilson’s plays seem less political” since our understanding of the term is “too much caught up with confrontation, with the ‘facing of the man’ which so concerns Baraka” (6). As Rocha rightly notes, the “facing of the man,” in Wilson, is a central concern, but it more often occurs offstage “so that emphasis is placed not so much on the confrontation itself but upon how the black community invests itself in that confrontation” (7).

Wilson uses Levee to critique what he sees as a damaging strain of misguided individualism, which he contrasts with the more community-minded approaches of Ma Rainey and Toledo. Sandra Adell’s perceptive study of the play, “Speaking of Ma Rainey / Talking About the Blues,” offers a good distinction between Levee and Ma. Adell notes that Ma, unlike Levee, “knows that it was black people and not white people who made her a star,” thus never severing her bonds to the black community, despite her acknowledged exploitation (56). While several gender studies of Wilson’s work have noted her “independence,” at least in terms of her sexual and financial power, Ma’s power is drawn most especially from her bonds to community, which Levee forsakes. As we have seen from Wilson’s comments in Chapter One, one of the main things implied in the blues is its communal power, its “ideas and attitudes of the people” (Shafer 164), marking it as yet another *lieux de memoire*. In distancing himself from the traditions of the music itself, and from the traditions embodied in Ma and Toledo and the other band members, Levee is doomed to failure in Wilson’s world. Though his advice is ignored by Levee, Toledo, throughout the play, pushes Levee and the other band members to reconnect with their African roots, which will allow them to participate in the world as

themselves and not, as Toledo puts it, “imitation white men” (94). In his many lectures to Levee on the proper approach to African-American life and its relationship to white America, Toledo’s views come closest to mirroring Wilson’s own. In a comment similar to numerous Wilson interview statements, Toledo says to Levee: “I’ll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say...as long as he looks to white folks for approval...then he ain’t never gonna find out who he is and what he’s about. He’s just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That’s one sure thing” (37). In trying to transcend his true community, Levee ends up destroying it in the play’s final moments.

As *Ma Rainey* draws to a close, Levee, in a shocking moment of unfounded rage, suddenly stabs and kills Toledo for stepping on his new shoes. Speaking of the moment to Bill Moyers, Wilson says that Levee “does a tremendous disservice to blacks by killing Toledo, because he’s the one who can read, he’s killing the intellectual in the group. That’s a loss we have to make up. We have to raise up another one to take Toledo’s place” (55). As the leader of the band, Toledo is the bonding agent of the black community in the play, which Levee destroys through his desire for personal empowerment above and beyond the collective power of the group. Writing about Wilson’s play *Jitney* in his work *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam Jr. provides an example of the tension between the individual and the community in Wilson’s plays that can be used as an important point regarding the resolution of *Ma Rainey*:

The image of a jazz ensemble not only connotes individual artistry and solo virtuosity, it also implies an awareness of the players’ need to

function together and find spaces of unity. They need to hear, appreciate, and support each other's rhythms. The music must resolve. The final scene of the play...constitutes such a moment when the rhythms and music come together, the characters harmonize. There is collective understanding of the need to work, 'to play,' together for the benefit of all (39-40).

Unfortunately, this "collective understanding" never materializes in *Ma Rainey* due to Levee's misunderstandings of the importance of tradition and community. He assumes that he can go it alone, and this misguided focus on an individualistic mindset divides him from his bandmates and his past and ultimately leads to his downfall. While many Wilson plays end in harmony, *Ma Rainey* ends in dissonance. Wilson's stage directions before the final blackout leave us only with "the sound of a trumpet...Levee's trumpet, a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning" (111). Levee's ultimate rejection of his band members, their music, and his African ancestral ties results in a damaging blow to the African-American community as a whole.

...

As noted in Chapter One, Tony Kushner's "Notes About Political Theater" criticizes American theatre's long tendency to elevate individual and family concerns above all else while ignoring larger community issues. The very notion of individualism is on some level a "myth" to Kushner: everyone is connected to someone, and we are all connected in many ways beyond our knowing.

In his recent eulogy of Arthur Miller, Kushner reveals his indebtedness to the playwright, yet in his remarks we also see the way that their goals diverge in terms of the

structure of their work. Miller's work, Kushner says, singling out *The Crucible* and *Incident at Vichy*, often "sets its scene in the midst of a historical crime in progress, but soon the great dramatist that Arthur Miller was has turned his unsparing, unblinking, loving intelligence away from the grand-scale horror to demand of a single human being: ...What do you mean to yourself, what do you know yourself to be? What, in other words, is your relevance to the survival of the race?" ("Kushner on Miller"). Kushner, whose *Angels in America* is set in the "historical crime in progress" of the Reagan administration's handling of the AIDS crisis, asks similar questions, of course, but he asks them of *all* his characters, who occupy more or less equal space in the ensemble. As Part One of *Angels, Millennium Approaches*, begins, Kushner asks his audience to follow three major storylines, immediately removing us from the comfortable tradition of the single protagonist. Prior Walter struggles with a diagnosis of AIDS and its effect on his relationship with his lover, Louis; law clerk Joe Pitt struggles with his repressed homosexuality and his disintegrating marriage to his Valium-addicted wife, Harper; and lawyer Roy Cohn, also AIDS-stricken, denies his homosexuality and his illness while struggling to establish a political legacy. These storylines converge and diverge over the course of *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika* as Kushner introduces characters ranging from the African-American former drag queen Belize and the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik to a host of angels who choose Prior as a reluctant messenger and prophet. Many of the characters in *Angels* gradually come to understand their "interconnectedness," resulting finally in a new "family" at the end of the work which unites a mix of disparate characters, crossing lines of gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation. Roy Cohn is not one of this family, dead by then and isolationist to the end,

and neither is his protégé Joe Pitt.

Cohn is, on many levels, the “villain” of the play, Kushner’s equivalent of the Miltonic Satan-figure. Much of his villainy, for Kushner, lies in his unbending devotion to himself above others. Harold Bloom believes that, for Kushner, Cohn’s “individuality is one with Cohn’s evil” (300). Bloom sees this as a faulty equation on Kushner’s part, feeling that Cohn is a “fascinating blend of singularity and individuality” (300). For Bloom, “singularity” “cares about itself *and others*” (300). Indeed, Roy *does* speak of the importance of family, particularly the father/son bond, yet he spins even this form of connection to his own advantage. “The father-son relationship is central to life,” he tells Joe. “Women are for birth, beginning, but the father is continuance. The son offers the father his life as a vessel for carrying forth his father’s dream” (62). Joseph Roach writes that children are the “auguries of surrogation and its realization in the fullness of time,” (124), and Roy even sees himself as having many “fathers,” enumerating to Joe the powerful figures that helped establish him: Walter Winchell, J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy. However, Roy seems to appreciate such bonds less for their intrinsic values of connection or community than for their potential for individual advantage: “Everyone who makes it in this world makes it because somebody older and more powerful takes an interest,” he tells Joe (62). Roy needs Joe as a “surrogate” son to help him maintain his dubious legacy, centered largely around the controversial execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Roy is on the verge of disbarment, and a well-placed assistant in Washington D.C. could make the case go away. Yet Joe rejects these advances, telling Roy, “I want to be a participant in the world, in your world, Roy, I want to be capable of that, I’ve tried, really I have but...I can’t do this. ..There are laws I can’t break” (113). While Joe

may stay on the right side of the legal fence, the play suggests that Roy's brand of individualism *is* passed down to his assistant, whose religious law keeps him from claiming acceptance in a homosexual community that might offer him the identity he lacks. Steven Kruger clearly explains Joe's failings, writing that "for all his searching, Joe never finds a self of which not to be 'ashamed'; for all his 'changing' he never grapples with the self or its past history in such a way as to effect real change" (165). There is hope for Joe, however. His budding relationship with Louis, an openly gay Jewish man who has abandoned his lover, allows Joe the possibility of claiming a new identity and becoming part of a community where he will no longer have to "pass" himself off as something he is not. There is no hope for Roy, on the other hand, who is at home in the lies that have built his career.

Roy's rejection of community is also apparent in a conversation with his doctor, Henry, who gives Roy the news that he has AIDS. Roy rails to Henry against the idea of "labels": "AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that. No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order" (51). Roy makes a legitimate point here regarding issues of "power": homosexuality *is* seen as apart from and below the norm of white, heterosexual America. Yet Roy cannot fathom the power that might arise from allying himself with an organized homosexual community. Instead, he attempts a bizarre redefinition of these labels to maintain his focus on himself as an individual and his own powerful position. Roy insists that "...what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys" (52).

This *does* link Roy to a certain community--the aforementioned white, heterosexual America. However, this is a community that thrives, paradoxically, on an individualistic, competitive approach to life that stands in direct contrast to the kind of community Kushner is seeking, which is one that strives to serve the collective best interests of its members. Cohn's philosophy, however, is to move ahead at the *expense* of others, insisting, as Michael Cadden puts it, "on his personal brand of social Darwinism, the primacy of the individual in the struggle for an existence" (84). This is the message Roy preaches to Joe regarding Joe's wife, Harper, who has left after discovering her husband's closeted homosexuality: "You do what you need to do, Joe. What *you* need. *You*. Let her life go where it wants to go. You'll both be better for that. *Somebody* should get what they want" (60).

Like all of Kushner's characters, Roy is eventually offered several chances to form bonds that will connect him with a world beyond himself, as a member of a more diverse community. Dying of AIDS in the hospital, late in the work, Roy scoffs at the idea of any real bond between himself and Belize, his African-American nurse: "Jews and coloreds, historical liberal coalition, right? My people being the first to sell retail to your people, your people being the first people my people could afford to hire to sweep out the store Saturday mornings, and then we all held hands and rode the bus to Selma. Not me of course. I don't ride buses. I take cabs" (158). Roy's use of the phrase "my people" aligns him with the Jewish community, but he shows no allegiance to these bonds. In fact, he delights in the destruction of Ethel's Jewish heritage: "[she] reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas" he says, bragging of her execution (114). While the play's other Jewish character, Louis, eventually forges a miraculous spiritual

reconnection with his Jewish history, Roy rejects Nora's conception of "memory" as "a bond tying us to the eternal present" in favor of a historical worldview, "always problematic and incomplete," that privileges only his conception of the past (Nora 8). The presence of Ethel's ghost in the play, of course, proves the faultiness of Roy's conception of history. Ethel is a *part* of him, connected, an extension of the Jewish ancestral connection he denies and a constant reminder of his crimes. Avery Gordon, in her work on haunting, writes, "From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope... We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*" (64). Roy, however, is not willing to negotiate, insisting to Ethel on a form of immortality based around her unjust execution: "I have *forced* my way into history. I ain't never gonna die" (118).

Roy claims, at one point, that the only true sense of membership he feels is with the community of lawyers: "We alone know the words that made America. Out of thin air. We alone know The Words. The Law: the only club I ever wanted to belong to" (221). The resolution of the play, however, finds Roy refused help by Joe, disbarred, cut off from the one community he claims. As Roy is dying, Belize responds to Roy's morphine-induced questions about the afterlife by frightening him with a vision of heaven that, to Roy, is hellish. Belize sees heaven as "full of... racial impurity and gender confusion... And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers" (209-10). In this world, the easy boundaries of identity have been dissolved. Roy, of course, does not seek membership in such a community. As Michael Cadden writes, "the Cohnian self must be created *ex nihilo*" (85). Cadden explores how Roy counsels Joe--

and himself avoids-- “identifying with any other person or group” (85). While Roy dies, clinging stubbornly, selfishly, to Kushner’s “myth of the individual,” the world around him is changing, moving, in Cadden’s words, “toward a new community based on a solidarity across both new and old lines of group identification as a queer assortment of mourners gather to say Kaddish” (87). These mourners are Belize; Louis, who hopes to steal Roy’s horde of AZT to help his dying lover; and the unseen but ever-present specter of Ethel Rosenberg. Cadden points out that, as much as these three may despise Cohn, they nonetheless feel some connection to him. Belize claims a sense of “gay solidarity” and Louis and Ethel seem to experience a reluctant sense of Jewish responsibility (87). Roy, however, dies alone, lost and delirious, imagining that he is in the midst of one of his manic office telephone conversations with numerous people at once. As he dies, Roy hits an imaginary button and says “Hold” (247). The moment reveals Kushner’s ever-present dark comic sensibility but also offers further commentary on the limbo-like, holding pattern of Roy’s own life, with its constant tendency toward isolation. Roy tells Joe early in the play: “Love, that’s a trap. Responsibility, that’s a trap too. Like a father to a son, I tell you this. Life is full of horror: nobody escapes, nobody; save yourself...don’t be afraid to stand in the raw wind, naked, alone” (64). Roy dies true to his convictions, connected to no sustaining community.

...

In August Wilson’s second major success, 1985’s *Fences*, we meet another character who, like Kushner’s Cohn, dies alone, having rejected most of the possible bonds that are available to him. Appearing twenty-five years after Lorraine Hansberry’s seminal *A Raisin in the Sun* and sharing a director, Wilson’s first and frequent

collaborator Lloyd Richards, *Fences* covers similar ground as its predecessor but combines Hansberry's social realism with a sort of magical realism that ultimately transcends the play's historical moment and enters a realm of collective memory. *Fences* is unusual in the Wilson canon in that it centers largely around a single protagonist. "Fences is the odd man out because it's about one individual and everything focuses around him. The others are ensemble plays. I think I need to write another one like *Fences* to balance it out," Wilson tells Bonnie Lyons (5). He never did, at least not exactly. Joan Herrington suggests this early decision to focus on an individual was at least partly Wilson bowing to commercial pressures: some critics had faulted *Ma Rainey's* "non-traditional structure and its bifurcated focus" (Herrington 64). *Fences*, therefore, hews much closer to traditional Western drama. Troy is front and center, and it is possible to read him as a Loman-like figure, the common man undone by a society that does not value his worth. Wilson, however, is insistent about not wanting to portray his characters as "victims," and *Fences* is best read as a play about a man whose understanding of history--and his place in it--does not allow him the kind of family and community connection that could ultimately save him.

Troy, unlike Levee, longs for community even as he rejects it. He *does* have a certain sense of loyalty to the African-American neighborhood, shopping at Bella's, a local grocery, as opposed to the white-owned A and P, for example, though this may be largely because Bella allows credit. He complains to his supervisors at work hoping to win blacks the right to drive the trucks, but this too seems more of a desire for personal gain than a political crusade for the betterment of his fellow workers. Herrington, examining how Wilson modified Troy's character in early drafts, offers an assessment of

Troy's individualistic motives:

In the early drafts, Troy was an active crusader for social justice. But as the play progressed, his compassionate references to those on the street, those who had been dealt a bad lot, along with his comments on how African-Americans should treat other African-Americans, all but disappeared. The result is that his remaining concerns regarding equality are more personally focused...(74).

If ultimately lacking in true community connection, Troy seemingly has a strong sense of *family* bonds. He constantly philosophizes to his son Cory about the importance of “responsibility” and brags about how he provides for his family. However, these bonds only stretch so far. In one of their many fiery encounters, Troy refuses to admit that he even *likes* his son, let alone loves him: “I ain’t got to like you...Don’t you try and go through life worrying about whether people like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you” (38). Again, everything with Troy circles back to this notion of personal gain, of having the upper hand, something apparent in all his relationships. He complains that his son by a previous marriage, Lyons, is borrowing money from him, yet he takes a kind of delight in the “ritual” of it, which puts Troy in the position of advantage. While Troy loves his wife, Rose, he manages to justify an affair on the grounds that it allows him “to get away from the pressures and problems” of his life (69), contradicting his own views on his responsibility to Rose and Cory. Rose, learning about the affair late in the play, responds to Troy’s requests to try to work things out in lines that stress Troy’s ultimate devotion to himself: “All of a sudden it’s *we*. [italics mine] Where was we at when you was down there rolling around with some godforsaken

woman” (68). Troy’s constant desire to better his own situation does have some admirable qualities. Like Levee, he possesses what Wilson would call a “warrior spirit.” Unfortunately, this spirit has a damaging effect on those around him, eventually isolating him from his family and friends.

As with Levee, Troy’s damaging tendencies are rooted in his childhood. Troy had a troubled relationship with his own father and left home at an early age, a scenario that later replays itself with Troy and Cory. Absent fathers, of course, haunt much of American drama, such as Hanberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the father exists only as a photograph and a memory. Also looming in Troy’s past are stints in the Negro baseball leagues and prison. Troy tries to reconcile his past and present in an uneasy way that leaves him in a middle-ground where connection is all but impossible. John Timpane examines the way Wilson’s characters--as do we all--“read” history to our self-advantage: “...Troy insists that history is continuous, that what was once true is still true” (73). For Troy, this approach is a way to make peace with his failed past as a baseball player but also to justify his attempts to prevent Cory from playing college football. He assumes that if the color of his skin kept *him* from a shot at the big-time, the same will hold true for his son. However, Timpane clearly shows that this is an assumption at odds with the true historical circumstances of the play’s 1957 setting: Cory can look around and see “the achievements of Aaron...Covington, and Clemente; these seem incontrovertible evidence that his dreams have a foundation” (73). Timpane writes, “For Troy to acknowledge the possibility of Cory’s success is to acknowledge that his own time has passed. Thus his repression of a fact that would have been available to any avid baseball fan in Pittsburgh--that Roberto

Clemente really *is* [italics mine] getting a chance to play” (74). Troy’s essential problem, in Wilson’s view, is not so much that he reads history as “continuous”-- certainly all of Wilson’s work shows the continuing influence of the past on the present-- but that he does not acknowledge change and seeks to place himself at the center of the universe without properly honoring the bonds that hold him there. To use Nora’s distinctions, Troy is cut off from “true memory,” a kind of unconscious understanding of the collective past that breeds kinship and connection in the present, and rooted instead in a strictly historical-based memory “which is nearly the opposite: voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous, psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or encompassing” (13).

Wilson introduces Troy in stage directions that focus on his “largeness”⁵. “Troy is fifty-three years old, a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with,” Wilson writes (1). This spatial emphasis is much apparent in Wilson’s work, a suggestion that African-Americans must learn to comfortably occupy a physical space after a history that has pushed them to the sidelines and often kept them invisible. Alan Nadel’s essay, “Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity,” shows how the history of slavery stripped African-Americans of their essential humanity. Skin color, Nadel writes, served as a “fence” to “separate blacks from humans, denying the properties of humans and giving to humans property rights over blacks” (87). Nadel observes, “In black American antebellum experience, to consider oneself human was to privilege a metaphoric representation of oneself over the literal ‘facts’ of American culture. Within the codes of the dominant discourse, black humanity

⁵ The role was first brought to life on Broadway, and remains associated with, the impressive bulk of James Earl Jones.

existed only as representation, only as its own simulacrum” (88). This is an ongoing struggle for Wilson’s characters. Troy is *still* seemingly engaged in such an effort to make himself “human,” to make peace with his existence as a large African-American body who feels “fenced” out of history by his baseball experiences and stifled in his current job by not being allowed to drive the trucks and occupy the same space as the white workers. Wilson uses the idea of “fences” both literally and metaphorically in the work. Rose is constantly nagging Troy to finish a fence around their yard which, according to Troy’s friend, Bono, is her way of maintaining tight family bonds, of fencing in her husband and son. Troy, a spinner of elaborate tales in which he wrestles Death and the devil, sees the fence as a way to keep death out. While storytelling in Wilson’s plays is often, like the blues, a communal bond, Troy’s tales do not connect him with others but rather set him apart as bigger and stronger than everyone else. Metaphorically, there are “fences” between Troy and almost all of the characters, with most of these barriers created by Troy’s self-interest, which leaves him, near the play’s resolution, alone in a final showdown with death.

After Troy’s mistress, Alberta, dies giving birth to Troy’s child, Raynell, Troy brings the baby home and sits on the porch holding her in his large hands while commenting on his isolation and inability to find a true place in the world: “Your daddy’s a big man. Got these great big old hands. But sometimes he’s scared. And right now your daddy’s scared cause we sitting out here and ain’t got no home” (79). Rose, always kind, allows Troy to bring the child into their house: “...you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child,” she tells Troy, even while severing her bonds to her husband as she declares, “From right now...this child got a mother. But you a womanless man” (79).

However, Troy's experience with Cory seems to prove Rose wrong about "the sins of the father." Even while preaching the necessity of responsibility to Cory, Troy's selfish and violent behavior drives Cory further away and finally out of the house altogether, an experience similar to Troy's own childhood encounters with his abusive dad. Troy's final words to Cory are a vow to toss his son's things on the "other side of that fence" (89). Our final image is of Troy, alone, swinging his bat to "taunt Death." "I can't taste nothing," Troy says, in a mysterious bit of dialogue. "Helluljah! I can't taste nothing no more" (89). The reference circles back, appropriately enough, to the senses, the body, with Troy finally becoming detached not only from his community and family, but even from himself. He goes down swinging, but he has never figured out how to use the difficult circumstances of his past to forge connections. His past only sets him apart. Timpane writes that Troy is never able to take comfort "in having contributed to the new possibilities that may exist for others" through his baseball experiences (81). Given his difficult past, Timpane argues, it is understandable that Troy cannot "value 'political awareness' over personal survival" (81). Indeed, it *is* understandable; it is also, sadly, Troy's failure.

The play, however, does not end with the image of Troy's isolation but instead moves forward in time eight years to 1965 for a final scene. This is the only major time shift within a single Wilson play and seems a deliberate refutation of Troy's static view of history. In this scene, Cory returns for his father's funeral and gathers with the family in the backyard, where Raynell is growing a garden. The gardening metaphor returns again in later plays such as *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II*, symbolic of new life and

continuance.⁶ Here Cory and Raynell sing an old blues song passed along by Troy, who learned it from his own father. Their voices eventually become one, a collective stand against the kind of self-guided mentality that drove Troy and Cory apart. In the “site of memory” provided by the song, Cory and Raynell begin to fill the vacancy left by Troy. The resolution is quite similar, in fact, to Wilson’s earlier *Jitney*, which premiered in 1982 in Pittsburgh but did not receive major productions until after the successes of *Ma Rainey* and *Fences*. In that work, set in a 1970’s cab company, an estranged son comes to terms with his father after the father’s passing: “...he ain’t got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him...I’m proud to be Becker’s boy” (96). While Cory does not step into Troy’s role in such an obvious fashion as Booster going to work at his father’s cab company, *Fences* nonetheless moves toward “surrogation” as the void left by Troy is filled with a new, collective-minded mentality. In the last years of his life, Troy not only drove Cory away, but also betrayed his brother Gabriel by putting him in a “home” and drifted away from the community of Bono and his fellow workers as he started driving with the white men at work. However, Bono and Gabriel also gather at the end of the play in a powerful moment of “extended family,” a concept whose loss Wilson will mourn in his 1980’s play *King Hedley II*. *Fences* concludes with Gabriel blowing a broken trumpet, a fascinating parallel to Levee’s “muted trumpet” at the end of *Ma Rainey*. The difference, however, is that Gabriel has not lost sight of the connecting power of tradition. As he blows his trumpet, “He begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual” (101). “Atavistic,”

⁶ Gardening metaphors run throughout other major works of American drama too, with Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* emphasizing Willy’s hope for more space to grow something and Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* ending with the memorable return of Mama to the stage to collect her plant before the family leaves to take root in a white neighborhood.

of course, suggests a reappearance of--or reversion to--ancestral tradition. If Troy's life has been defined and stifled by "history," by "what is no longer" (Nora 8), the play ends by taking us into the realm of memory: "Memory is life," Nora writes. It is "susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (8). Troy, unable or unwilling to connect, has found himself posthumously embraced by his community.

...

In *Caroline, or Change*, the 2003 musical for which Kushner wrote the book and lyrics, we find ourselves in the South, 1963, eight years after the setting of *Fences*. For Kushner, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's was one of those rare moments in history when circumstances all cohere for successful revolution against a dominant, oppressive society. In *Caroline*, the author revisits his own childhood in Louisiana, exploring the relationship between a young boy, Noah Gellman, and the family maid, Caroline. Kushner describes a memory from this childhood: watching Martin Luther King's funeral on television:

I watched it on TV with Maudi Lee Davis, the woman who worked as my family's maid. Maudi cried throughout the broadcast, and I was both frightened and impressed--I felt her powerful grief connected us, her and me and my quiet hometown, with the struggle I knew was being waged in the world, in history. It was an instant in which one feels that one is being changed as the world is changed, and I believe I was (Kushner, "Copious, Gigantic, and Sane," 51).

Kushner's vision is interesting in connection to Wilson's thoughts on the South. As we have seen, Wilson's plays--and public statements, especially--posit the South as an

“ancestral homeland” for his African-American characters, akin to Africa itself in that the South spawned the customs and traditions that Wilson believes inform a kind of African-American collective unconscious. Kushner, as evidenced in the comments above, is always looking *beyond* individual communities to a broader notion of the term, seeing the Civil Rights Movement of the South as one of the powerful moments of “interconnection” that his plays often seek to illuminate and inspire.

In his introduction to *Caroline*, Kushner comments on the collaborative nature of working on a musical⁷: “The project began with my libretto, and I have always worked alone as a playwright until now...But the script you are about to read has changed since the first draft. The words are mine, the music is Jeanine’s [Jeanine Tesori], but responsibility for the final shape of words and music can’t be neatly allocated” (xiii). The musical format seems apt for a play that attempts to cut to the heart of the Civil Rights movement. Kushner writes that “Words betray the arduousness of the struggle to express, to interpret, to understand...Words can be graceful, but music is grace itself. Music is a blessing that enters the soul through the ear” (xiii-xiv). Kushner claims to have witnessed many moments when an “entire audience of jaded, battle-weary adult New Yorkers levitated out of their seats” in the “presence of great-musical theater,” (xiv) and this intent to unify through music is a perfect match for what Kushner posits in the play as a movement that not only unified the African-American community but serves as “a model that oppressed people around the world have embraced” (xv). The Civil Rights Movement, Kushner writes, has shown us that “change, progress, is difficult, uneven,

⁷ In recent projects, such as his musical collaborations with children’s author Maurice Sendak, his collaboration with Eric Roth on the screenplay of Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*, and his many translations and recent reworking of Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, Kushner continues to explore the notion of collaborative art.

uncertain, but also absolutely possible” (xv).

The play itself is ultimately hopeful, even while its title character is yet another who sadly remains--much like Troy--outside the change that is taking place around her. Caroline exists mostly in the basement of the home where she works as a maid for a Jewish family.⁸ As Ben Brantley writes in his *New York Times* review, Caroline possesses a “strain of self-denial” that keeps her from the “emotional freedom” offered by the Movement (1). Brantley suggests that Caroline acknowledges the inevitability of forward progress, but is so rooted in her ways that she will not allow herself to be a part of it. Her late-play aria called “Lot’s Wife” sheds light on this: “Some folks do all kinds of things and / black folks someday live like kings / and someday sunshine shine all day / Oh sure it true / it be that way / but not for me” (117). The Biblical allusion of the aria’s title is later referenced by Caroline. Lot’s wife is punished by being turned to a “pillar of salt” for her unwillingness to let go of the past, a fate Caroline herself *requests*-- “turn me to salt / a pillar of salt / a broken stone...” --before finally begging for release: “...set me free” (118). Divorced and with four children, one a son in Vietnam, Caroline has not so much rejected familial or communal bonds as she has simply and sadly withdrawn from her circle of family and friends, evidenced in the play through her tense relationship with her daughter Emmie and friend Dotty, both of whom Caroline derides for their attempts to move ahead. “Emmie Thibodeaux,” she scolds her daughter, “since when you say ‘black man’ / Say colored or negro” (43). Caroline is locked in an old “language” here, an old way of thinking at odds with the revolutionary spirit beginning to develop in her daughter. “A society living wholly under the influence of history,” Nora writes,” is

⁸ The stratification of the setting recalls Wilson’s *Ma Rainey*, with its black world below stairs in the recording studio and the white world above in the control booth.

unable to “conceive...sites for anchoring its memory” (9). Caroline, however aware she may be that a new age is coming, cannot see herself as part of its collective embrace. She is described late in the play as “the queen of keep at bay” (79), and we see her throughout the work driving a wedge between herself and her community. Dotty, another maid, notes how Caroline is “lost,” a common term among many Wilson and Kushner characters: “...it seem you come to some confusion, / you losin courage, you losin / light / lost your old light / lost Caroline” (33). Catherine Stevenson, in her examination of Kushner’s “mother figures,” has noted how Caroline’s character is “doubled” by the Moon in the play, a symbol of illumination and change. Stevenson sees the two figures as existing in a thesis/antithesis relationship: “Caroline remains rooted, the Moon changes from gibbous to new...Caroline embodies harsh economic realities; the Moon symbolizes imaginative freedom” (771). Kushner expresses fascination with the dialectic method, and many of his characters *do* manage a synthesis of seemingly opposed positions, but Caroline will not give. Her closest bond in the play is to Noah Gellman, the child of the Jewish family she works for, but even their relationship largely dissolves in the play due to an incident involving a twenty-dollar Hanukkah gift left in Noah’s pants pocket, which results in an exchange of racial and anti-Semitic insults. While there is a partial reconciliation at the end, as Caroline tells Noah, “Someday we’ll talk again; but they’s things we’ll never say” (124), theirs is a relationship--not a friendship, Caroline insists--that exists across what is, for Caroline, an unbreachable barrier between black and white, stasis and change.

Though Caroline, like Troy, remains isolated in the play’s resolution, her daughter, Emmie, only sixteen, succeeds her in a powerful moment of surrogation.

Emmie serves as the play's most articulate African-American voice of freedom and activism. Breaking protocol as she serves Sunday dinner to the Gellmans, Emmie enters their political discussion, insisting to Noah's grandfather, Mr. Stopnik, that the non-violent activism of Martin Luther King is indeed working. Mr. Stopnick, rooted in activist socialist politics, proclaims that "nonviolence will get you burned," to which Emmie responds: "No, I'm sorry, that ain't so / Listen to the radio / What we're trying's already working / Segregation's already dying" (90). As the play progresses, however, we see that Emmie's devotion to the cause does indeed extend beyond the theoretical. She has been involved in the vandalism of a courthouse statue of a Confederate soldier, removing the head, draping the statue in a confederate flag, and throwing it in the river, a symbolic act of the overthrowing of the dominant order, seemingly by any means necessary. As the play ends, Emmie sings of her experience toppling the statue: "I watched it topple like a tree. / We were scared to death to break the law! / Scared to fail, scared of jail / But still we stayed" (126). Here we see a definition of citizenship as the responsibility *one* owes to freedom for all. Caroline, on the other hand, is rooted in the past, longing for a better world but not willing to look outside the one she knows, and her thoughts on "law" contrast interestingly with Emmie's final song of revolution. Thinking of what she would do if she were President, Caroline vows to "pass me a law / Larry [her son] come home from Vietnam / wherever that is" (45), a vow that seems less a critique of the war than a simple desire for family. Indeed, Caroline's thoughts do not extend far outside her family, and ultimately not far from herself: she also wants to pass a law that Nat King Cole visits every night to "stroke my soul" (45). Yet Emmie's final song celebrates her mother, whose "strong blood flow[s] / Under ground through hidden veins

/ ...Down to Larry and Emmie and Jackie and Joe / the children of Caroline Thibodeaux” (127). Kushner’s implication in *Caroline* is that the Civil Rights movement is bearing fruit, increasingly widening its scope to a point where change is impossible to resist. If children are “the auguries of surrogation and its realization in the fullness of time” (Roach 125), then Caroline’s children will harness her inner strength and more than compensate for her passivity.

...

Levee, Roy, Troy, and Caroline are all defined--and to some extent destroyed --by their conceptions of history. Levee and Roy feel they can, as Roy might say, “force their way into history” through an individualist mindset that removes them from communal and ancestral connections. Troy and Caroline are blind to historical change. None of these characters achieve what Nora calls “true memory,” which is a “social, collective” force of “engrained memories” (13). As we move into the next chapter, we look further into characters who begin in isolation but move beyond into a successful understanding of themselves as part of a collective. Fascinatingly, all of these re-connections are accomplished through “supernatural” means, ghostly encounters with a living--and always collective--past. In her work, “Cultural Haunting,” Kathleen Brogan explores the often “communal nature” of ghosts. The ghosts of the next chapter lead the characters toward the “true memory” of their African-American and Jewish pasts and away from the strictly history-based mentality of the characters examined here.

Chapter Three
Waking the Dead: History as a Bridge to Community

“A world that once contained our ancestors has become a world in which our relation to what made us is merely contingent.” --Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History”

In a 1994 *American Theatre* article called “Epic-Cure: History That Heals,” Todd London examines the resurgence of history on the American stage, focusing specifically on works by Suzan-Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith, Robert Schenkman, and Tony Kushner, with Wilson mentioned but not examined in-depth. These playwrights, London argues, “are bringing it [history] back, urging the theatre away from its obsessions with the self and family to an investigation of the nation and its legacy” (43). This resurrection of history certainly meets the self-stated goals of Kushner, as outlined in his early essay “Notes About Political Theater,” and Wilson, too, often speaks of his project as a historical one. “The ‘Me’ decades are skidding to a halt,” London writes of the reasoning behind the shift these writers are making as they begin “re-exploring the ‘We,’ that odd congregation of ‘others’ called America” (43). Indeed, the “Me,” the individual, as we have seen in the last chapter, is often an insufficient entity in the works of Wilson and Kushner. When a person becomes, in some way, cut off from the various communities that are capable of sustaining that person, progress is impossible.

While the characters examined in the previous chapter remain isolated, rejecting bonds of community in favor of an over-riding loyalty to the self, Wilson and Kushner suggest that it *is* possible to overcome the history that has led to isolation, to forge community through a fuller understanding of the means that have led to disconnection. Pierre Nora’s conceptions of “memory” and “history” are quite relevant to an

understanding of how Wilson's and Kushner's characters attempt to situate themselves in relation to their present and past. "Memory wells up from groups that it welds together," Nora writes, stating that memory is "by nature, multiple yet specific, collective and plural yet individual," whereas "history belongs to everyone and no one" (3). While history may truly belong to "no one," the indisputable fact, as Kushner and Wilson well know, is that history has often been controlled by oppressive majority groups whose historical narratives have become accepted as standard, effectively creating a "lost" history of minority cultures. Nora's conception of memory--"collective and plural, yet individual"-- offers a power to reconnect. The characters in this chapter find themselves in what Nora terms *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, "in which a residual sense of continuity remains" (1). Nora defines the *lieux de memoire* as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which...has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (xviii). Rediscovering a lost "sense of continuity" allows the characters in these plays to feel a part of respective communities from which they may have heretofore felt disconnected.

In this chapter, the angry American expatriate Zillah, in Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*, confronts Germany's pre-WWII past in a way that will perhaps ultimately allow her to find a place for herself in a contemporary America she has rejected. In Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis, reeling from seven years in captivity, rejoins society by coming to terms with the history of African-American oppression, represented through a remarkable vision of the Middle Passage. In Kushner's *Angels in America*, Prior Walter, dying and delusional, entertains a virtual parade of his dead ancestors, while Ethel Rosenberg's spirit returns to preside over the death of Roy

Cohn, joining Prior's lover Louis in a reluctant Kaddish that provides Louis an uneasy encounter with his own Jewish heritage. Finally, Wilson's Berniece, in *The Piano Lesson*, must confront a history of pain and slavery embodied in the family piano to re-establish a link to family and her ancestors that she has long denied. Nora writes that "for the individual, the discovery of roots, of belonging to some group, becomes the source of identity, its true and hidden meaning. Belonging, in turn, becomes a total commitment" (11). All of the plays examined here share a "supernatural" element: ghosts and mystical visions lead these characters toward reconnection. Kathleen Brogan connects the work of Nora to her work on "cultural haunting," writing that "Nora's idea that certain places of memory...betoken an awareness of collective memory as fragile and threatened resonates with the anxiety underlying stories of cultural haunting" (141). "Stories of cultural haunting," Brogan writes, "differ from other twentieth-century ghost stories in exploring the hidden passageways not only of the individual psyche but also of a people's historical consciousness. Through the agency of ghosts, group histories that have in some way been threatened, erased, or fragmented are recuperated and revised" (5). The ghosts that haunt much of modern literature, Brogan writes, "remind us of a diminished sense of embeddedness in tradition: the ghosts come from some other place to the present, often bearing across the divide a lost piece of culture" (141). As we watch the characters examined in this chapter move closer to a sense of "belonging" through such supernatural encounters with their respective pasts, the constant call for collective action in the works of Wilson and Kushner comes into clear focus.

...

Kushner's early play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, first produced in 1985, is,

according to its author, a play about “exile” (Weber 112). As such, it could have been included among the previous chapter’s collection of isolated characters, as both of its central figures--Zillah and Agnes--are certainly cut off from a sense of connection, a feeling articulated by Agnes in the play’s first act: “I feel no connection, no kinship with most of the people I see. I watch them in the underground come and go and I think, ‘Are you a murderer? Are you?’ And there are so many people” (61-2). However, despite these themes, the play ultimately belongs more squarely in this chapter’s consideration of historical engagement as a means of connection. While *Bright Room* paints a mostly bleak picture of the failure of collective action in the Weimar Republic, making it in some ways the odd play out among this chapter’s selections, the failure only highlights the necessity of collectivity. Kushner says of the play:

There are moments in history when the fabric of everyday life unravels, and there is this unstable dynamism that allows for incredible social change in short periods of time...During these periods, all sorts of people, even people who are passive under the pressure of everyday life in capitalist society--are touched by the spirit of revolution and behave in extraordinary ways. These spaces only exist for very limited periods of time and then somebody’s going to get control. And what happens frequently is the Left doesn’t get control. Because the forces are very powerful against a successful Left revolution. That’s what the play is about, that’s what ‘a bright room called day’ is. That space (Szentgyorgyi 14).

The play has two settings, one fixed in the past, 1932 Berlin, the other in a present

that changes with each production of the play, a fascinating if problematic idea--even by Kushner's own admission--that says much about its author's views of history and contemporary society. Beginning with "A Brief Historical Note," Kushner points out that, in the Weimar Republic circa 1932, "the parties of the Right moved closer to cooperation and political solidarity, [while] the main powers of the German left, the gigantic Social-Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD), were entirely unable to form a united front to stop the rise of fascism" (xii-xiii). Kushner sees in this a parallel with contemporary America, where the concerns of the Left are continually undermined by the conservative Right. Each production of the play, Kushner writes in the production notes, will require "a continual updating" to reflect "whatever evildoing is prevalent at the time of the production" (x).⁹

Embodying the present in the play is Zillah, described as a "contemporary American Jewish woman. Thirties. BoHo/East Village New Wave with Anarcho-Punk tendencies" (viii). Despite the continual updates, Kushner feels that productions should keep Zillah "true to the zeit informing her particular geist, namely the Reagan-era" (xi). Disgusted with the course of American politics, Zillah has become an expatriate, exiling herself in a small Berlin apartment once inhabited by a woman named Agnes Egging. In the course of the play, Zillah comes to recognize a bond between herself and Agnes, whose "spirit" lingers in the small apartment, ultimately becoming a potential source of inspiration for the isolated Zillah. Zillah has found herself in one of Nora's *lieux de memoire*, which Nora believes "emerge in two stages: moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it--no longer quite alive but not yet entirely

⁹ One wonders what will become of the play if contemporary America ever gains the kind of "Left"-ist foothold Kushner envisions. However, given today's political climate, the future of the play seems relatively safe for a long while to come.

dead” (7). The question becomes: can Zillah “seize” such a moment, in the terminology of Walter Benjamin, an ever-present Kushner influence, and use it to her advantage to forge a more promising future? In this moment, the disconnected Zillah may be able, in Benjamin’s words, to “blast open the continuum of history” (262), to see herself as a link in what she thought was surely an irreparably broken chain.

The New York Shakespeare Festival’s production of the play opens with a monologue by Zillah during which she reads from a photo history of the Third Reich. In other productions, Kushner has cut this monologue, and Zillah does not speak until after a prologue and the first scene. In the production notes to the newest published version of the work, Kushner even considers the notion of performing the play without Zillah, an idea he deems “interesting” in theory but one which will make the play “less difficult and possibly less dangerous” (xi). To me, Zillah’s original opening monologue seems almost essential, as it introduces an important relation between history and memory. Zillah describes her purpose in Berlin as “Time now to remember, to recall: dismantle the memorial, disinter / the dead. / To call into the Now / other people, not my own; / an other city, not my own, an other people, not mine, / History as I conjure it” (appendix 155). The words immediately point to the idea of connection, linking past and present through memory. Zillah, in essence, channels the story of Agnes and her circle of friends in 1930’s Berlin, a history that the audience sees side-by-side with the present tense of Zillah, who remains onstage as this “other” action plays out. In an interesting close reading of Zillah’s speech, Christopher Bigsby notes the unusual use of the word “other” in the lines, writing, “the space between ‘an’ and ‘other’ suggests the gap which is to be closed by the play and by its methodology of weaving past and present together” (97).

However, the lines also suggest the notion of “Otherness” which is quite common throughout Kushner’s work. Zillah comes to recognize in Agnes a kinship, a counterpart to her own isolated self: “...from out of a book, / from out of a crowd: / I find / one / familiar / other face/ Now” (appendix 155). The speech ends with the present tense “Now,” but the play opens on the historical past, with memory having dissolved “now” and “then,” “self” and “other,” into one concurrent moment.

In Kushner’s *Bright Room* of 1992, a small group of artists meet regularly in the apartment of Agnes Egging. Frightened by the political climate of the time, the characters respond with small measures--anti-Nazi posters and skits at Communist meetings--but never manage to fully engage themselves in a cohesive struggle against the forces that threaten their existence. Thematically, the play anticipates, in some ways, Doug Wright’s *I Am My Own Wife* (2003), the true story of the German transvestite Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, who survived the oppressive Nazi regime of the time and developed an obsession with preserving Jewish culture and memory through collecting various artifacts. While Charlotte’s story is one of powerful political engagement, however, *Bright Room*, like Kushner’s later *Caroline, or Change*, is more a story of *disengagement*, a warning, as James Fisher sees it, “that alienation, as depicted in his main character’s agonizing inaction...leads to catastrophe” (25). Perhaps a closer parallel to *Bright Room* is Arthur Miller’s *Broken Glass*, which premiered in 1994. Miller’s play focuses on a Jewish woman in late 1930’s Brooklyn who inexplicably becomes paralyzed after reading newspaper accounts of increasing Nazi atrocities. Christopher Bigsby calls Miller’s play an exploration of “our capacity to deny that which we would rather not confront” (xxxvi). “Inaction” of all kinds is certainly harshly

critiqued in *Bright Room*, and indeed one of Kushner's intentions is to suggest that the Reagan administration's non-treatment of the AIDS crisis constitutes a kind of American Holocaust, an idea explored similarly in Larry Kramer's 1985 *The Normal Heart*. Kushner writes: "Thousands were dead or dying, the plague was gathering force. The President, up to the time this play was written and for several years to follow, had nothing to offer the sick or the endangered, nothing in the way of funding, no public declaration of solidarity and support, not even words of ordinary rage or grief, not even mild distress" (Afterword 176). Reagan's "inaction" eventually led to "civic unrest," Kushner says (176). This is potentially a force for change, and we do see a slow movement toward action in the course of the play, as Agnes becomes reluctantly involved in helping people escape from Berlin and Zillah develops the mysterious bond with Agnes's spirit, which may arguably lead her to play a more active role in American political life.

Zillah is ultimately able to find inspiration in Agnes, and Kushner sets these two women up as parallel figures, interconnected in strange ways. Zillah finds her dreams "invaded" by a woman she feels she knows from a photograph in a history book, slides from which are used as the production begins. This woman stands in the middle of a large crowd of Nazi supporters, but Zillah notices that she "isn't cheering, not even smiling, and both hands are clutching her purse and she isn't saluting" (89). Zillah thinks of her as "Restless, like me. I'm calling to her: across a long dead time" (90). While Zillah is unable to make a direct link between this dream figure and Agnes, the immobile woman is certainly suggestive of Agnes's particular situation. In a later scene, Agnes becomes even more of a presence for Zillah, a specter in the apartment which Zillah hears "moving around...looking for some lost object" (117). In "The Haunted Houses of Modernity,"

David Savran examines the continuing preponderance of ghosts in contemporary drama, writing that “ghosts are so important on contemporary stages because they function as a point of intersection between memory and history, two processes, Pierra Nora argues, that now--in this age of identity politics--‘appear to be in fundamental opposition to each other’ ” (120). “Memory is life,” Nora says, while history “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (3). Savran sees the device of “ghosts,” situated somewhere between the living and the dead, as a cure for the rift between “memory” and “history”: “The theatrical ghost is a figure uniquely positioned in relation to both memory and history. As a token of memory, the ghost is usually intensely personalized, emanating from and materializing characters’ fears and desires” (121). Zillah, her idealism shattered by right-wing Reagan America, has conjured herself a kindred spirit--pun intended--in Agnes Egging. Zillah wonders how the inhabitant of the apartment may have died, surmising that it was not in the war or the concentration camps but “at home...of a broken heart” (117). Agnes, in an odd moment that says much about Kushner’s conception of history, seems to sense the presence of Zillah, fifty plus years in the future, as she gasps, saying, “Hello? Hello?” (117). The moment is a clear illustration of Kushner’s constant focus on interconnection: every moment of the past has a bearing on the present. Zillah has an opportunity to “seize” this moment, which can then be used as a clear avenue for understanding the present. Every “image of the past,” Benjamin writes, must be “recognized by the present as one of its own” (255). Zillah has accomplished such a recognition. How she will use this knowledge remains ambiguous, but the bleak work offers at least a glimmer of hope.

As the play draws to a close, Zillah comes to see herself as somehow connected to

Agnes, whose lonely resistance could potentially inspire greater efforts in Zillah. The final words in the play are telling, suggesting the often-unconscious effects of one era on another: “The borders are full of holes,” Zillah says (151). The phrase is a repetition of one used in a conversation between Agnes and Rosa Malek, a young Communist woman who is the first to stay with Agnes after she has reluctantly agreed to use her apartment as a safe house. In Rosa’s usage, the term “borders” is quite literal, referring to a passage between Germany and Czechoslovakia. As the word mysteriously bleeds over into Zillah’s present, however, it takes on a more abstract but still seemingly optimistic meaning. Despite the wisdom of the old axiom, history may *not* necessarily be destined to repeat itself: the circumstances of Agnes’s time may spark in Zillah a resistance that could allow for a brighter future for America. A slightly different version of Zillah’s last speech, again from the 1991 New York Shakespeare Festival, is even more optimistic and more in keeping with the tentative hopefulness of much of Kushner’s later work: “Home. Now. An end to the exile / Before the sky and ground slam shut / The borders are full of holes” (appendix 170). In this version, the suggestion seems more clear that Zillah’s bridging of this “border” between past and present through her strange interconnection with Agnes has taught her something that will allow her to return and function in the right-wing America she detests. To return to Kushner’s interpretation of the play, she has discovered the “space,” what Kushner terms the “bright room called day,” in which the seeds for a “successful Left revolution” might grow (Szentgyorgyi 14). Whereas her exile in Berlin can be read as a form of cowardice, her return to America suggests a willingness to do battle.

Bigby’s assessment of the play’s resolution provides a clear view of Kushner’s

approach to history in the work and mentions yet another “specter” which haunts the play, “Die Alte,” the Old One:

Agnes alone stays, [in Germany] offering her home as a safe house for escaping Party members, and accepting the fate to which that may condemn her. And as the membrane that they believed separated them from the realities of the street begins to become permeable so, too, does that between past and present as Zillah feels the presence of Agnes and Agnes converses with Die Alte, time collapsing, bringing separate experiences together into the metaphor that constitutes the play” (103).

Bigsby identifies not only the aforementioned “border” between “past” and “present,” but also a border between the “personal” and the “political,” yet another conflict that Kushner’s work continually seeks to negotiate. In fact, Bigsby’s description echoes almost exactly Kushner’s comments on these matters from “Notes About Political Theater”: “there is a membrane, however permeable it may be, that divides inside from outside. The private is a preserve, a place of resistance...The political, in one sense, is a realm of conscious intent to enter the world of struggle, change, activism, revolution, and growth, even in the face of the fearfulness, the caution and conservatism of the past-haunted interior” (26). In the modern world and on the modern stage, as is oft-noted, the personal has become the political. However reluctantly, Kushner’s “exiles,” Zillah and Agnes, end the play by acknowledging they can play a role in the struggle against the horrible conditions in which they have found themselves. Yet these roles cannot be played alone, and Zillah’s declaration of “an end to the exile” perhaps suggests a sense of her need to join forces with like-minded individuals now that she has come to see herself

as part of a historical continuum, connected to Agnes, of course, but also, as Bigsby notes, to Die Alte, leading us even further into the past.

In his stage directions, Kushner describes Die Alte as being “somewhere between 70 and dead-for-20-years” (viii).¹⁰ While Agnes seems to perceive Die Alte as merely an old woman who occasionally visits the apartment, Die Alte seems to the viewer a spectral figure, entering through the window and reminiscing of times long past: “War was declared. / Which war, I don’t remember... / I heard the snap of the flags / crack in the wind, and the men marched by. / A wonderful time / Not now” (22). Die Alte’s “celebration of militarism” (Bigsby 99) should be read as a call for collectivity, not necessarily a pro-war sentiment, and indeed Die Alte urges Agnes away from exile, toward the connection Agnes has strenuously resisted. “Time is all that separates you from me,” Die Alte tells Agnes late in the play, adding “It’s bad to be too much alone” (122). Though the play largely bemoans the failure of various factions of the Weimar Republic to unite and stop the advance of Nazism, there is some hope to be found in the “connections” that emerge between the past and the present, which can point Zillah toward a better future.

While Kushner’s later *Angels in America* may find a smoother means of linking past and present onstage, there is something to be said for the pure provocation of *Bright Room*’s attempt to force audiences to draw a parallel between their particular present and, as Zillah terms it, “THE standard of absolute evil” as represented by Hitler (70). Though Kushner himself may admit--as many critics have argued--that the comparison is “outrageous” on some levels, he defends his audiences’ abilities to “integrate Zillah’s

¹⁰ She is, in fact, strangely akin to August Wilson’s ageless symbol of history and community, Aunt Ester, whom we will meet in the next chapter.

rant with the issues addressed by the rest of the play” (Afterword 176). Indeed, given our contemporary political climate in which conservative and religious issues increasingly enter the sphere of public policy, Zillah’s leap in reasoning is easy enough to swallow. Railing against America’s religious fundamentalism, Zillah points out that “None of these bastards look like Hitler, they never will, not exactly, but I say as long as they look like they’re playing in Mr. Hitler’s neighborhood, we got no reason to relax” (71). Zillah’s admonition to “RESIST” (71) is never far from the surface in Kushner’s work, and such resistance demands collective thinking rooted in the harshest lessons of the past.

...

In August Wilson’s 1988 *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, set in 1911, Herald Loomis ultimately learns how to “resist” his personal history of oppression, but first he must face the brutal dislocation of the Middle Passage, represented here in a powerful vision of “bones people.” The play takes us deep into the African-American collective-unconscious as the mysterious Herald Loomis confronts the ghosts of the past in a moment of what Toni Morrison might call “re-memory.” For Wilson, such a moment is “blood memory,” an often-unconscious bond shared by all blacks in America that can, in certain moments, be consciously “seized,” to return to Benjamin’s term, and thereby used to strengthen the African-American community and resist the often oppressive forces of a dominant culture, in this case a culture of slavery and its lingering power in the South. We meet Loomis as he arrives at the Pittsburgh boardinghouse of Seth Holly in pursuit of his missing wife, Martha Pentecost. Loomis has survived seven years in captivity, a prisoner of Joe Turner’s chain gang. Wilson’s prefatory note offers a vivid assessment of those like Loomis, who are part of the Great Migration of this time period: “Foreigners

in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersment which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble..." (203). Loomis is as disconnected as they come, unable to break free of the lingering power of his bondage. "I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world," he tells Bynum, a local conjure man who lives in the boardinghouse and is valued by many for his ability to "bind" people together (269). The quote cuts to the heart of what is perhaps the central "search" of Wilson's work. While Wilson's characters often speak of finding their "songs," their individual purpose in the world, their larger search is to find their place within an African-American community that is marked by a collective purpose that will allow them to exist in a fashion undefined by white culture, "bound" together through a collective memory that can recover a history that has been "lost."

Loomis, who begins the play as a stranger to himself, distant from all community bonds, *is* ultimately able to re-connect through a fascinating vision of the Middle Passage, which teaches him his "song" and re-establishes broken links to community both past and present. Loomis is a man, like those described in Wilson's prefatory note, "Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces" (203). In the modern world, Nora believes, memory is often "swept away by history" (2), a particular problem for marginal groups whose history has been, to greater or lesser extents, dictated by dominant, oppressive cultures. "Memory," Nora writes, "is capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened" (3). Bynum, unlike Loomis, knows his place, and his role is to help Loomis interpret his vision, restoring a memory that links him to his past. Wilson's stage

directions describe Bynum as having “the impression of always being in control of everything” (208). He is “lost in a world of his own making” (208), a phrase which, in Wilson’s worldview, is high praise, as Bynum largely exists outside the sphere of white influence, drawing power from the communal force of ancestral connections. Trudier Harris’s study of “folklore” in Wilson makes the important point that “conjure” figures typically exist “apart from the communities upon which they exert their power” (51). Wilson, however, centers Bynum in the heart of the boardinghouse “community,” revealing “the inability of those who attempt to escape their folk heritage to do so in reality” (Harris 52). Indeed, Bynum is a major force in bringing together the disparate characters who pass through the boardinghouse, often leading an after-dinner “juba” that manages to involve even Seth, who is often skeptical of Bynum’s “heebie-jeebie stuff” (206). The “juba,” as described by Wilson’s stage directions, is “reminiscent of the ring shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance” (249). Victor Turner, analyzing the power of certain kinds of “rituals,” writes: “We are presented, in such rites, with a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition...of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of social ties” (96). As Bynum “calls” the dance, he calls ancestral connections back into being in a moment of what, for Turner, is “spontaneous communitas,” “a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person’s being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared” (138). The juba, Harry Elam writes, is a “communal activity” which introduces “new codes of understanding, energizing its participants in the process” (205). “Spontaneous communitas,” Turner insists, “is a phase, a moment, not a

permanent condition” (140). This certainly seems true for participants like Seth. For Loomis, however, the moment triggers something profound and lasting.

When Loomis enters the kitchen during a juba at the end of Act I, the ancestral recognition he experiences is both conscious and overwhelming. Loomis rails against the juba dance, exclaiming, “Herald Loomis done seen some things he ain’t got words to tell you” (250). The third-person usage suggests a further disconnection from his life. His anger soon gives way to a startling vision, during which he “collapses, terror-stricken” (250). The vision is related to the audience as Bynum talks it through with Loomis afterward. Loomis has seen bones, at first “walking on the water without sinking down” (251). The bones then sink, finally washing on to land, “Only they ain’t bones no more,” Loomis says: “They got flesh on them. Just like you and me...They black. Just like you and me. Ain’t no difference” (251).

Wilson has termed this vision, in interviews, his finest image, perhaps the defining moment of his cycle, as he explains to Richard Pettengill:

I think you can go a lifetime and not arrive at that scene which for me crystallized everything, because it was a symbolic resurrection of those Africans who were lost, tossed overboard during the Middle Passage, and whose bones right now still rest at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. It was like resurrecting them and marching them up on the ground and walking them around Chicago right now. I’m not sure that anything I’ve written since then has crystallized as clearly what I wanted to say (251).

While much has been written, and deservedly so, on how the vision bonds Loomis to his past, re-establishing a link with an African continuum severed through his captivity,

Bynum's role as "interpreter" has perhaps not been thoroughly examined. Bynum's declaration of "Only they ain't bones no more" suggests a strange familiarity with Loomis' vision. Bynum seems to know already that the bones will wash up, flesh-covered and alive, *before* Loomis finishes his description. Bynum, we learn early in the play, has once experienced a vision of his own, involving a "shiny man" who leads him to his father, who in turn leads Bynum to an ocean where he is shown "something I ain't got words to tell you" (212-13), a phrase Loomis repeats as he disrupts the juba. Joan Herrington, in her study of Wilson's revision processes, is one of the few critics who pursue at length the interesting Loomis/Bynum link, noting that "Wilson added to Bynum's Shiny Man speech the fact that Bynum witnessed his vision near the ocean and that it was something '[he] ain't got words to tell you' There is no further description, but it leads to the possibility that Bynum had the same vision as Loomis did" (90-91). Herrington's interesting hypothesis certainly makes sense in terms of Wilson's goals to emphasize the collective memory--the "blood memory"--of African-Americans. Nora writes that there are "places" (*lieux*) where "collective heritage" is "crystallized," where "collective memory" is deeply embedded (xv), and the Middle Passage is such a "place" of African-American cultural memory. The Middle Passage, indeed, has been represented often as such a site in African-American theatre and literature, from Baraka's *Slave Ship* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to Suzan Lori-Parks *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, where the "third kingdom" itself is the Middle Passage, a sort of transitional "lost" world between Africa and America. Parks's character Kin-Seer experiences a somewhat Loomis-like vision in which he sees himself as two separate individuals staring at each other from opposing cliffs. Harry Elam terms the Middle

Passage an “initiating rupture” (206), following which blacks in America created a new community, one that Wilson sees as rooted in the South. At the moment of his vision, Loomis is unable to join this community, having been separated for so long that he has lost his “song.” In the vision, he cannot rise and walk with the “bones people.” However, the second act builds to another moment of “realization” that will allow Loomis to stand and make a place for himself in the world.

Alan Nadel assesses Loomis’s search for his “song,” once again recalling Nora’s thoughts on “memory” and “history.” Nadel writes of Loomis: “He is looking for a starting place, a site from which to initiate his entrance into time, into history. That entrance into history, in turn, is figured as the creation of a place, a world of his own” (102). In his vision of the Middle Passage, Loomis has found his “site,” his *lieux de memoire*, in which, as Nora has it, “a sense of continuity remains” (1). Nora views such sites as “hybrid places...compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal. They are like Mobius strips, endless rounds of the collective and the individual, the prosaic and the sacred, the immutable and the fleeting” (15). Once Loomis’s memory has been reawakened, he can learn to think of himself as someone with a role to play in the world, or a “song” to sing, in Wilson’s terminology. In the play’s final scene, Loomis has been reunited with his wife. The ostensible purpose of his search is complete, and yet the reunion is not enough. Loomis has viewed Martha for years as his source of salvation, but she arrives bearing only the promise of a Christian salvation that for Loomis is another form of captivity, a means of white oppression that leads further from the sustaining force of African tradition. This conflict is much apparent in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin In the Sun* as well, as Beneatha, recently enamored with all things

African, rejects her mother's Christian God. Loomis too rails angrily against the oppressive power of Christianity: "Great big old white man...your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another..." (287). However, he soon turns inward: "I don't need nobody to bleed for me. I can bleed for myself" (288).¹¹ This statement triggers a "realization" (288), as it is described in the stage directions, once again putting him in touch with the collective memory of the Middle Passage. Loomis slashes his own chest and shouts, "I'm standing! My legs stood up! I'm standing now" (288). He can now stand among the "bones people," a part of the African-American community. He has "reassembled," to use Wilson's term, and is now "free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh" (288-89). The phrase "bonds of the flesh" is especially apt, recalling the bones gaining flesh in Loomis's vision but also suggesting the necessity of connection to the present-day African-American community, a fact underscored by Wilson in the play's final moments through another mysterious moment of connection between Loomis and Bynum. Bynum has the final line of the play, as the lights go down: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money" (289). Recognizing Loomis as a "Shiny Man" is a confirmation that his "song" --his gift of "binding"--has been successful, as he was told by his father in his own vision years ago that "there was lots of shiny men in the world and if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world" (213). While Bynum is respected by local citizens for his ability to bind people together, his ultimate success, we realize in the

¹¹ Christianity, in Wilson's work, is often a problematic concept, a divisive force. While Wilson, in interviews, praises "the church" as a centerpiece of "black community," he feels that blacks have often "transformed" the religion "with aspects of African religion, African style, and certainly African celebration" (Lyons 9). The Christianity mentioned in the plays, however, is most often the kind which,

play's resolution, is in binding Loomis to the past, healing the broken link that has kept Loomis from feeling like a part of any community.

Wilson himself can be seen as a "binding" figure through his goal of helping African-American audiences reconnect with African tradition. Paul Carter Harrison writes that Wilson's work "has reaffirmed the potency of the African continuum as a psychic repository of values and survival strategies that authenticates experience and fuels the imagination for a creative achievement capable of promoting personal renewal and collective healing" (316). Despite his scars, literal and figurative--if we see the Middle Passage as a force of psychic scarring--Loomis ends the play a "healed" man who has discovered his own "song," a "song of self-sufficiency" (288). While "self-sufficiency" immediately carries associations of individualism, a potential danger if taken to extremes, the term in Wilson tends to carry both personal and communal connotations. As a "Shiny Man," Trudier Harris points out, Loomis has been elevated "to the level of myth and legend...stories will surely develop about him as the stories have about the man Bynum encountered. And as a person with a newly discovered song of self-sufficiency, he will have the power to influence other people's lives" (58). Though Loomis exits the play alone, he is no longer alone in the way he perceives the world or is perceived *by* the world. He is a part of history, not a prisoner of it.

...

In *Angels in America*. Kushner's Prior Walter, like Wilson's Loomis, experiences visions that put him in contact with his heritage. Prior's history, of course, is the polar opposite of Loomis's subjugation. In fact, Prior is aligned with the dominant culture, the

Wilson tells Lyons, has given rise to "organizations like the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and even today...sanctions inequities" (9).

long history of WASPs, represented in the play as a culture of “stasis” and control. As noted by a minor character in conversation with Prior’s lover Louis, even Prior’s name carries immediate historical connotations: “Weird name. Prior Walter. Like ‘The Walter before this one’ ” (57). Louis then responds with a brief history of the name: “Lots of Walters before this one. Prior is an old old family name in an old old family. The Walters go back to the Mayflower and beyond. Back to the Norman conquest” (57). Kushner has explained the name as “one of those WASP names that nobody gets called anymore” (Savran, “Interview with Tony Kushner,” 306) combined with the last name of Walter Benjamin, whose thoughts on history inform much of Kushner’s work. Allen Frantzen’s essay “Prior to the Normans” uses the character as a springboard for a discussion of history in the play--and the possibility of change and progress. Frantzen writes that “WASPs, as they are presented in the play, exist in a culture of stasis, while other races and creeds denied that stability and permanence and driven by persecution and need from place to place, have developed migratory and transitional cultures open to, and indeed dependent on, change” (138). While Prior, with his openly homosexual lifestyle, is hardly a traditional WASP, his position as the last Walter in a line “apparently unbroken from the mid-eleventh century to the present” (Frantzen 141) sets him up as a symbol of an old but still powerful social order that has traditionally been resistant to social and cultural change. Also worth noting is that Prior, though he may reject the values of the culture, does not fully reject its privilege. He lives “with great style off a small trust fund,” Kushner writes in the character notes that begin the play, and Prior’s position within this culture of “stasis” also helps explain why he is the one chosen to deliver an unusual angelic message that is *opposed* to forward progress. Heaven in the

play is seen, in David Savran's description, as "a kind of museum, not of the insignia of the Now, but of *before*, of an antique past, of the obsolete...More nightmare than utopia, marooned in history. Heaven commemorates disaster, despair, and stasis" (Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism," 20). Indeed, we learn that God *has* long since absconded from this outdated place. Like the WASPs, though, the angels hold strong to tradition and seek to maintain a foothold for their stasis, choosing Prior to spread their message. First, however, Prior must contend with his ancestors, who herald the arrival of the angelic "Messenger."

Late in *Millennium Approaches*, Prior awakens from a dream to find himself in the company of two "ghosts": one dressed in the manner of "a 13th century British squire," the other of "an elegant 17th century Londoner" (91-92). Prior 2, the Londoner, hypothesizes as to why they have been chosen by the Angel to appear. Aligning AIDS with the Black Plague, Prior 2 speculates: "They chose us, I suspect, because of the mortal affinities. In a family as long-descended as the Walters there are bound to be a few carried off by plague" (93). As does Wilson, Kushner suggests that allying oneself with one's ancestors can potentially be a positive force in combating isolation. Prior, however, must ultimately *reject* the values of these ancestors. In Wilson's world, community--and its concomitant power--grows out of racial and cultural bonding: Loomis cannot move forward without accepting himself as part of an "unbroken line." Kushner's view of community, though, is dependent on bonds that stretch across racial, cultural, or gender lines: Prior cannot move forward without *breaking* the line. Like Zillah, he must learn from the stasis of the past and use it to initiate progress. Frantzen's essay draws an interesting link between Kushner and the historian Bede, whose

Ecclesiastical History of the English People sets the English up as a “Chosen People,” “elevated by their likeness to angels” (147). Frantzen posits that the writers share a “political purpose, which is to create the idea of a unified people” (147). The difference--and it is a key difference--is that Kushner seeks to unify “more ambitiously and inclusively,” creating a “multicultural, tolerant world in which biological descent counts for little...and cultural inheritance can impart defining characteristics to people without imposing barriers among them” (Frantzen 147-48). This shared “political purpose” functions in much the same way between Kushner and Wilson, with Kushner again striving to unify more inclusively, showing how “cultural inheritance” can be remembered, then wisely rejected, in an effort to create a world without barriers, whereas Wilson shows how “cultural inheritance”--encountered through memory--can empower an African-American community which exists independent from and unallied with white America.

Both Loomis and Prior successfully overturn a dominant culture of oppression through supernatural visions, encounters with their respective “ghosts.” Kushner continues to employ this device throughout *Angels*. Louis, Prior’s lover, confronts his Jewish history in the guise of Ethel Rosenberg. Ethel’s spirit makes her first appearance near the end of *Millennium Approaches*, just before Roy’s struggle with AIDS leaves him hospitalized until his death late in *Perestroika*. Roy is largely responsible for the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, and her appearance certainly functions in the manner described by Savran as typical of modern drama’s ghosts: she is “not only a product of highly subjective, personal memories but also an embodiment of social, political, and economic forces” (Savran, “The Haunted Houses of Modernity,” 122).

Such a ghost, Savran explains, “may not consider itself a victim, but its refusal to die, to disappear, leads one to suspect that it has in some way been wronged or oppressed” (122). As a victim of the Communist hysteria of the 1950’s, Ethel serves for Kushner as a historical Jewish counterpart to oppressed homosexual culture in the Reagan 1980’s, a community Kushner feels went largely ignored by the administration as the AIDS epidemic spread. Savran writes that Ethel “incite[s] both Roy Cohn and the audience to remember the injustices perpetrated by McCarthyism” (122). Therefore, Ethel, “in keeping the past alive, also announces the prospect of a radically different future” (Savran 123). While much has been written about Roy and Ethel, the role Ethel plays in the development of *Louis’s* character has been examined less. Kathleen Brogan, analyzing the “communal nature” of contemporary literature’s ghosts, argues that such apparitions function “to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present” (4). Brogan examines Cynthia Ozick’s short story “The Shawl,” which is centered around “the erasure of Jewish memory” suggesting that “the proper form of memory...is not to idolize the dead but to connect the living and the dead properly, allowing the past to inform but not overwhelm the present” (Brogan 170). Louis certainly seems to enact such an effective reconciliation of past and present. Although he is never exactly cognizant of Ethel’s presence, she nonetheless effects a change in him akin to the influence that the ghost of Agnes exerts on Zillah in *Bright Room*.

Louis’s reconciliation with his Jewish past occurs during a scene in which he is pressed into saying Kaddish at Roy’s bedside. Kushner holds the Kaddish scene in high regard, viewing it as a perfect merging of his themes in much the same way Wilson

speaks of Loomis's vision of bones. "I think the most moving scene in both parts of *Angels in America* is when Ethel Rosenberg says the Kaddish for Roy Cohn," Kushner tells Rabbi Norman J. Cohen. "And the Kaddish has always been a prayer that...I mean, I think it's sort of a genetic thing. It's almost woven into the gene structure at this point" (228). Once again, the notion of "cultural inheritance" comes to the fore here. Throughout the work, we see Louis struggling with his Jewish heritage. "Jews don't have any clear textual guide to the afterlife; even that it exists. I see it as a perpetual rainy Thursday afternoon in March," Louis complains early in *Millennium Approaches* (44). Exhibiting Kushner's trademark humor-in-the-face-of-hardship, the final line is hardly the throwaway gag it first seems. Once again, we see "stasis" here. Louis's Jewish heritage could very well become another form of oppression, similar to Joe Pitt's Mormonism in the previous chapter. If channeled properly, however, Judaism has the potential to be a vital sustaining force of community. The Kaddish helps accomplish this. Whereas Louis spends most of the play on the run, avoiding the difficult circumstances of his lover's battle with AIDS, the final scenes find him re-establishing broken links with both past and present. The recitation of the Kaddish, similar to moments in *Bright Room* and *Joe Turner*, becomes yet another moment where the distance between "then" and "now" is temporarily dissolved.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Roy Cohn's death brings a motley crew of mourners to the hospital room: Belize, Roy's African-American nurse; Louis, Prior's Jewish lover; and the ghost of Ethel. Belize intends to steal Cohn's stash of AZT and has recruited Louis because he "needs" a Jew to say Kaddish over the body. Louis, at first protesting that he knows little of the prayer and is "an intensely secular Jew," (256), soon

finds himself immersed in the ritual. The Kaddish is a communal prayer usually repeated in unison by a congregation, and the hospital Kaddish soon establishes a similar pattern.: As Louis begins to recite, Ethel--unseen by everyone in the play except Roy--begins to echo his words. Initially, their recital seems to follow a call-and-response pattern similar to the structure of Wilson's juba. Like the juba, this ritual also seems a link to often-forgotten tradition, in this case Louis's Jewish heritage, a potential means of connection for him akin to the re-established links to ancestry in Wilson's works. As Louis's recitation of the Kaddish continues, however, there is a moment where Ethel ceases to echo Louis, and they begin to recite in unison. Past and present are as one. Louis's recall of the Kaddish has forged another moment of what Victor Turner might define as "spontaneous communitas," a coming together that, in its moment, is "free from the culturally defined encumbrances of...role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, or other structural niche" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 48). Turner writes that there may not be "a specific social form that is held to express spontaneous communitas" but "the liturgies of churches and other religious organizations" are often used as an attempt to provoke such an experience (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 138) Louis's Kaddish works in such a manner, temporarily dissolving the seemingly irreconcilable political differences not only between Roy and his (reluctant) mourners, but even between Louis and Belize, whose constant bickering runs throughout most of the work. Turner writes that "communitas tends to be inclusive...one wants to make the Others, We" (49). This, of course, is Kushner's own societal goal, and--in the Kaddish scene--the goal is effectively accomplished in the world of the play. As the prayer draws to a close, Ethel, fascinatingly, becomes the *leader* of the call-and-response, further suggesting that Louis

is drawing on a subconscious reserve of Jewish strength that allows for the kind of forgiveness that he cannot muster in his day-to-day existence. Ethel then ends the prayer with a final “You sonofabitch,” returning the participants to reality, to a world where differences still matter” (257). At this point, Belize tells Louis that he did “fine,” to which Louis responds with another laugh line that once again has deeper significance: “Fine? What are you talking about, fine? That was fucking miraculous” (257). Louis is right. He has, in Benjamin’s usage, “seized” the past and used it as a means of connection and progress. When we see Louis again, three scenes later, he tells Prior: “I want to come back to you” (272). Like Loomis, what was “spontaneous communitas” for the other participants seems to have had a more lasting effect in Louis.

Steven Kruger offers perhaps the best assessment of how the forces of the past in the play push the characters toward connection and collectivity:

The others who shape the self may also be internalized figures from the past--an Ethel Rosenberg who returns punishingly to urge Roy on to death. They may be powerful historical presences like the Priors of Prior’s heritage...and they may, most ‘bewilderingly’ be a complex mixture of the ‘real’ and the fantastic, as when Prior and Harper, who have never met, somehow appear in each other’s dreams/hallucinations...In such scenes even a character’s fantasies and imaginations are conceived as not solely his or hers. They gather their full meaning only in relation to, even interpenetration with, one another... (154).

In Kushner’s work, everything is linked. When private and public and past and present meet, when connections are understood, society can be reformed in a more collective

fashion. Prior, rejecting the “stasis” of the past, decides not to die alone--a fate prophesied by his ancestors--but to live and spread a new message of forward progress. Louis, rejecting the “stasis” of a life untouched by the “miraculous,” allows his heritage a voice that leads to forgiveness, pushing him back toward Prior and community.

...

In Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (1987), set in the 1930’s, Berniece has not only fallen out of touch with the power of ancestry but has consciously rejected her roots. Berniece lives a life in the North that keeps her largely isolated from her painful past, vividly represented in the play by the titular piano. Carved by the great-grandfather of Berniece into what is now the family piano is a history of faces and events that are explained, in the course of the play, by Berniece’s uncle Doaker: “See that right there. That’s my grandmother. Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn’t nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him. He made them up out of his memory” (44). Memory, Nora says, is “a bond tying us to the eternal present” (3), and as Doaker relates the history of the piano we come to understand its function as a powerful symbol of communal belonging, a very tangible *lieux de memoire*.

In the South of Doaker’s childhood, a plantation owner named Robert Sutter bought the piano for his wife, Miss Ophelia, with money from the sale of two slaves: Berniece’s great-grandmother and her son, who was Doaker’s father. When Miss Ophelia began to miss the company of her slaves, Sutter called on Berniece’s great-grandfather, “a worker of wood,” to carve pictures of the former slaves into the piano. In later years, Boy Charles, father of Berniece and Boy Willie, decided the family history did not belong in the hands of Sutter. Along with his brothers Doaker and Wining Boy,

Boy Charles stole the piano. Sutter and a group of men trailed Boy Charles to where he had hopped a train called the Yellow Dog, burning the boxcar, killing Boy Charles and four hobos, whose deaths grow into a legend of the “ghosts of the Yellow Dog.” In telling this long story, Doaker naturally establishes *his* place in the transmission of the family history. Berniece, on the other hand, rejects her family past: “I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn’t gonna happen to me. I don’t play that piano cause I don’t want to wake them spirits” (70). Like Wilson’s Levee and Troy, Berniece has cut herself off from bonds that are potentially unifying, in this case the power of family ancestry. In rejecting the past on account of its pain, she is also rejecting its power to inform the present. Using Berniece and her brother Boy Willie as opposed approaches of historical understanding, the play builds toward a climax in which Berniece realizes the necessity to “wake the spirits,” and in so doing re-establishes her own lost place in an African continuum that binds her to her ancestors.

In the opening moments of the play, Berniece’s brother Boy Willie and his friend Lymon arrive in Pittsburgh at the home Berniece shares with Doaker. Susan Abbotson writes that these newcomers “represent a healthy, embryonic community. They have brought a truckload of watermelons (symbolic of life, both as food and by their association with water) from the South, thus, they bring with them both a reminder of their Southern roots and something tangible from there with which to earn an enterprising profit” (86). Indeed, the South, in Wilson, *is* often seen as a source of vitality that stands in stark contrast to the sterility of the North.¹² Yet, despite Abbotson’s analysis, Boy

¹² For instance, a recurring image in the linked plays *Seven Guitars* and *King Hedley II* is the inability of roots to take hold in Northern soil.

Willie is, like many of Wilson's characters, somehow incomplete, as we see in his approach to the piano. Boy Willie has traveled North determined to sell the piano. While this seems, at first glance, disrespectful of the family history, his desire to use the money to buy his own piece of land in the South is admirable, a personal stand against the history of exploitation that has occurred through slavery and the sharecropping system. Wilson defends Boy Willie's goals in interviews: "He has a very good clear plan, the best plan of anyone I know that was presented in 1936 about his future. He understood that if you had a piece of land, everything else fall right up into place...Land is the basis of independence" (Pettengill 253). Land ownership will restore to Boy Willie a sense of wholeness that has been stripped away through years of working for white men. It will "root" him in a history that has denied his presence.

Boy Willie's plan soon encounters vehement opposition from Berniece. Though she has long since quit playing the piano, she holds tight to it as a kind of museum piece. The memories she attaches to the piano are a far cry from those that bond one "to the eternal present" (Nora 3). The piano is a thing of the past to her, "a piece of wood (52). In Wilson's view, Berniece is "denying everything, she's the one trying to run away from the past" (Lyons 16). Doaker tells Boy Willie that she refuses to play the piano because "She say it got blood on it" (10). Wilson's work explains, however, that the most painful parts of the past must be "seized" and refocused as a source of strength, not subjugation. As with Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner*, the repressed past manifests itself to Berniece in a supernatural fashion. Even prior to Boy Willie's arrival, Berniece has seen the ghost of Sutter, grandson of the plantation owner who sold her great-grandmother to buy the piano. Sutter has recently died, having fallen into a well--or having been pushed by the

ghosts of the Yellow Dog, as some believe. Berniece tells Boy Willie about Sutter's ghost, which has been calling Boy Willie's name. "What he calling my name for?" Boy Willie asks, to which Berniece replies: "I believe *you* pushed him in the well" [italics mine] (14). There is no textual evidence to imply that Boy Willie killed Sutter¹³, but the brief exchange raises a more interesting and largely ignored question: why *is* the ghost calling Boy Willie's name and not Berniece's? The logical answer seems to be that Boy Willie is engaged in an *ongoing* struggle with a past that Berniece has largely denied. Although the ghost is eventually made manifest to Boy Willie, he doesn't *have* to see Sutter to know that he is still engaged in such a struggle. Whereas Boy Willie has never ceded control of his spirit to the dominant culture, Berniece has cut herself off from both old and current connections to family and assimilated into Northern culture. She wants nothing to do with Boy Willie, and Sutter's utterance of her brother's name lets Berniece know that she must face her past *and* reconnect with her present, as represented in the broken bond between herself and Boy Willie. Sutter's ghost is yet another of what Savran terms the "intensely personalized" ghosts of modern drama (121), in this case embodying Berniece's misguided fear of family history, which in Wilson *should* be a source of both personal and communal strength. Kathleen Brogan writes that viewing a production of *The Piano Lesson* was her first conscious recognition that "new spectres were haunting America" (1): "...in contemporary African-American ghost stories," Brogan writes, "the individual's or family's haunting clearly reflects the crises of a larger social group" (2).

¹³ A recent talk-back panel at Howard University's August Wilson Symposium in 2005 revealed that Berniece's belief has spread to at least some members of Wilson's audiences. Charles Dutton, who played Boy Willie in early productions, was on hand to argue strongly against such a belief, which he feels detracts from Boy Willie's stubborn nobility.

Berniece is forced to face her fear in another remarkable Wilson moment where past and present exist in tandem onstage. In the final scenes, Berniece's boyfriend, Avery, a preacher, attempts to perform an exorcism of Sutter's ghost, which by then has also been seen by Berniece's daughter, Maretha, suggesting that Berniece's denial of the past is being handed down. Although Berniece allows Maretha to play the piano, she has been effectively shielded from the story of its blood-soaked history. Avery's exorcism proves ineffective, which is unsurprising. As in the resolution of *Joe Turner*, the power of Christianity pales in comparison to the power of African traditions and ancestry. Avery's constant exhortations for Berniece "to put all that behind you" is exactly the wrong approach in Wilson's world (70). Avery urges Berniece to turn to God, to walk around the "stones" of history that block her path, as opposed to "picking them up and carrying them around with you" (70). Christianity, here, seeks to sever and replace African tradition. However, when Berniece takes control of the exorcism herself, crossing to the piano and beginning to play, she turns not to God but to family heritage.¹⁴ Sutter's ghost is more powerful by this time. Though still an "unseen force" by everyone but Berniece and Maretha, the ghost physically chokes Boy Willie, who begins to "wrestle" with it as Berniece plays the piano, calling to her ancestors--"Mama Berniece." "Mama Esther." "Papa Boy Charles"--for help (106-07). For Berniece, this is "spontaneous communitas," a moment in which the immediacy may soon fade but the power may linger. The emphasis on family names is much in keeping with Wilson's focus on a restoration of African identity, a moment not altogether dissimilar from

¹⁴ Interestingly, Michael Morales notes that, in the original version of the play, Berniece *did* turn to God, repeating "Oh Lord I want you to help me" as she played the piano (Morales 110). Wilson's changes here are vital in keeping with the consistent questioning of Christianity present in many of the plays.

“Toby” reclaiming his African name, Kunta Kinte, in Alex Haley’s *Roots*.¹⁵ Wilson’s stage directions describe Berniece’s playing as “an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea...It is an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents” (106). As in *Joe Turner*, Wilson reworks traditional Christian terms to emphasize the power of African community to combat the divisive power of white oppression. The phrase “dressing for battle” certainly implies a coming together of family, past and present, to challenge the dominant history represented through Sutter’s ghost. Michael Morales points out that ancestors in African tradition “are still members of the lineage, an active part of the clan” (109). Harmony is restored within the immediate present as well, with Boy Willie agreeing to leave the piano to Berniece as long as she--and Maretha--keep playing it, insuring an unbroken line of ancestral power. With a sense of community re-established, Sutter has no power in the household and disappears.

Memory, specifically the kind of collective memory embodied in Berniece’s recollection of past family members, is a force of great power in Wilson, who has said of the play’s ending:

...when I was writing the play, I thought, if we do this right, people in the audience would call out the names of their ancestors-- ‘Sadie Smith, Cousin James, I want you to help me.’ It would take a lot of trust, because the name is sacred to the person, but through that the audience would feel like a community...The audience calling out names would disrupt the play, but the

¹⁵ In plays by Arthur Miller, the recitation of names as a rediscovery of identity often occurs similarly, as in Willy’s famous “I am not a dime a dozen. I am Willy Loman” speech from *Death of a Salesman* (105) or the efforts of *The Crucible*’s John Proctor and *A View From the Bridge*’s Eddie Carbone to maintain a reputation.

performance would take on another kind of intensity (Lyons 16).

With these words, Wilson leaves us with the fascinating idea of the play becoming a tool of real-life community-building, working toward a moment of “spontaneous *communitas*” not only on-stage but among its audience, positing memory as a key force establishing the African-American community as a self-sufficient collective force. Nora writes that history is “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (3). Memory, in Wilson, rewrites and supersedes history. The African-American community is no longer subject to the dislocation and oppressions of history. Through memory, there is only an unbroken line of communal power.

...

As Wilson and Kushner push their characters toward confrontations with the past, we see the power of memory to establish a clear link between then and now, the disjunction of which has previously left the characters isolated. To return to the Nora quote that serves as an introduction for this chapter, these characters, in bonding to their past or, in Prior’s case, rejecting its stasis, reconfigure the world into a place where their relation to their “ancestors” is *not* “merely contingent” but instead a driving force of forward progress, inspiring a need for community, for collectivity, in the present. Kushner, interpreting Benjamin’s theories of history, writes that “you have to be constantly looking back at the rubble of history. The most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn’t rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what’s piled up behind you” (Savran, “Interview,” 300). Kushner’s quote refers to Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, in which the face of the angel of history

is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of unbroken events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise...this storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris behind him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (249).

Wilson and Kushner *do* manage to “wake the dead” in their plays and, in so doing, allow their characters a means of interaction with the past that is not available to Klee’s Angel, who has neither the power to accept or resist but is simply propelled forward without understanding. In this chapter’s plays, as characters reforge--or refuse--links to their ancestral past, they in turn re-establish community in the present--or form new ones. Raymond Williams--in his essay “Walking Backwards Into the Future,” which Kushner lists as yet another inspiration for some of *Angels’* ideas--writes, “Most people want to change our present social and economic conditions, but it’s noticeable how many of the words we use to define our intentions have a reference to the past: recovery, rehabilitation, rebuilding” (281). The plays of Wilson and Kushner certainly hope to recover, rehabilitate, and rebuild notions of community in a present that values the individual over the collective. Today’s history-focused playwrights, Todd London writes, “aren’t content to sketch the problems; they dream of solutions, healing cures” (44). Encounters with the past, however painful, can lead to a feeling of belonging, “healing” broken bonds and helping to establish feelings of community. In the next two chapters, we turn to visions of community in Wilson and Kushner, and we see

communities of both strength and weakness, communities that are coming together and ones that are falling apart.

Chapter Four

“We Will Be Citizens”: Community Formation

“In order to survive, you need a community of people who can support you. And we’ve always been those people that rise up in the face of adversity.” --August Wilson, to Suzan-Lori Parks, 77

“It’s not enough to express your outrage at how people behave. You also have to get power...”. --Tony Kushner, *Utne Reader*, 81

“Wherever its frontiers might now be provisionally mapped, however, the discursive life of the ancient concept of a ‘Free-born People’ infuses law with the urgency of performance: justice can no longer be imagined as something that merely exists; it is something that must, finally, be done.” --Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 286

Richard L. Barr, in his study of the idea of “community” in modern drama, notes how the longing for community is often dependent on “nostalgia for something that has passed” (4). For Wilson, this nostalgia is most often the broken link between ancestral history and contemporary life: re-connecting with an African sensibility spurs a concomitant reconnection with the present world. Kushner too believes that the modern world has lost sight of a once stronger notion of “interdependence,” but his exploration of the idea treats the idea on a more global level, spanning cultural, sexual, and racial boundaries. Both authors certainly draw on identity politics--African-American; Jewish; homosexual--as a means of group unification, although Kushner’s loftier goals necessitate a movement beyond identity politics. Both see the stage as an ideal way of presenting a vision of both fully-functioning communities and communities in decline. Their audiences, Wilson and Kushner know, need to see *both* to attain a “proper” understanding of what is wrong and how to make it better. This chapter looks at more-or-less “successful” communities, while the following--and final--chapter turns to

communities in crisis. This seems an appropriate order considering the often bleak vision of Wilson's play-cycle as it enters the 1980's and the similarly dark worldview of Kushner's recent work featuring contemporary settings, such as *Homebody/Kabul* and the work-in-progress *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. At the heart of many of the plays examined in these last two chapters are ideas of absence and loss. Characters die--and sometimes whole communities are dying--and the holes left by the loss must be filled by someone--or perhaps replaced by a different kind of community. The struggle to move on, to fill the vacancies left behind, requires a strengthening of both body and spirit. Joseph Roach's notion of "surrogation," "the enactment of cultural memory by substitution," (80) provides a way of understanding how communities continue to reinvent themselves, physically and spiritually, keeping memory alive as a spur for forward progress.

The characters considered here find a way to organize and move forward despite the absence and loss that surrounds them and, in so doing, provide for Wilson's and Kushner's audiences a definition of citizenship that is built around the notion of collectivism and activism. The social theorist Alaine Touraine writes that "membership in a community is the defensive face of democratic consciousness, helping to free the individual from social and political domination" (469). Citizenship, Toussaine says, "confers the right to participate, either directly or indirectly, in the management of society" (471). These definitions work well in connection to Wilson and Kushner, with Wilson's work calling for a mobilization of the African-American community to maintain its tradition and integrity against an often hostile world and Kushner hoping for a multicultural community united against the engrained prejudice that prevents change.

Janelle Reinelt, exploring the idea of audience as “community,” writes:

In a sense live theater enacts one of the last available forms of direct democracy, gathering an assembly of ‘citizens’ in the tradition of civic republicanism, related to the small assembly, town meeting, church social, school board meeting, or neighborhood block party. Spectators are, at the least, an implied community for the time of performance--even if riven with antagonisms and contradictions...Moving beyond this minimal baseline to a truly radical form of civic spectatorship involves negotiation and contestation, and a fundamental transformation of the traditional ‘spectator’ function from consumer to agent (286).

Neither Wilson nor Kushner expect their work to immediately accomplish such real-world community-formation, but the plays point the way toward their authors’ respective visions of what is needed in the world outside the theatre. In Wilson’s *The Gem of the Ocean*, we watch the isolated, guilt-ravaged Citizen Barlow become a “man of the people” with the aid of Wilson’s powerful symbol of community and history, Aunt Ester. Kushner’s *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* sets up an argument regarding how one is to “live in the world,” as one character puts it (278), and in this chapter I focus on some of the techniques--split-scenes; multiple casting--that allow Kushner to realize his vision of “interconnection” as a prerequisite to understanding one’s role as a citizen. Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* offers a vision of black America in 1969, as the death of a community member inspires action--forward movement--in an environment that has become set in its ways. Finally, as *Angels in America: Perestroika* draws to a close, a diverse new “family” joins forces at New York’s Bethesda fountain as Prior

Walter actually breaks the fourth wall to exhort the audience, as well, to “be citizens.”

...

Death is never far from the surface in virtually all of Wilson’s work. Indeed, funerals play a prominent role in plays such as *Fences*, *Seven Guitars*, and *Two Trains Running*. West, a Hill District undertaker, is an oft-mentioned presence--“may the Lord bless you, and West dress you”--one of the recurring names of the cycle which helps provide a feeling of community, fleshing out Wilson’s Hill District. “In the life of a community,” Joseph Roach writes, “the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (3). Surrogation occurs at times of loss, often after a death, when a “a mysterious but powerful sense of affiliation surrounds the community” (Roach 38-9). This sense “holds open a place into which tradition injects the rituals of ultimate reincorporation, the crowning of a successor” (Roach 39). We see this process at work in *Gem of the Ocean*, which premiered in 2003 but is chronologically the earliest play of Wilson’s cycle, set in 1904. In the course of *Gem*, the appropriately named Citizen Barlow takes his place as part of a community after the death of Garret Brown and Solly Two-Kings. He is helped along by Wilson’s most powerful symbol of community, Aunt Ester.

As is often the case with Wilson, *Gem* begins with an arrival, one that occurs amidst talk of an off-stage funeral for a man named Garret Brown. Citizen Barlow, yet another of Wilson’s “lost” men, arrives at 1839 Wylie, home of Aunt Ester, needing his “soul washed,” and we soon learn that Citizen sees himself as responsible for Garret’s death. Aunt Ester develops a quick fondness for Citizen. “You remind me of my

Junebug,” she says (20), recalling a lost son and suggesting a sense of kinship that will further develop as they “journey” to the City of Bones and Citizen comes to recognize himself as a “citizen” of this country of collective memory. A few decades shy of three hundred years old in *Gem*, Aunt Ester, according to her creator, “carries the memory of all Africans, the memory of the ancestors” (Gener 20). Wilson writes: “She has emerged for me as the significant persona of the cycle. The characters are all her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personalities and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce” (Gener 66). Ester herself is aware of her role as a “carrier” of memory: “I got memories go way back,” she says in *Gem*. “I’m carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folk. I’m carrying their memories and I’m carrying my own.” (43). Roach examines the idea of “effigy,” a word that most often refers to “a crudely fabricated image of a person, commonly one that is destroyed in his or her stead,” but sometimes refers to real figures which, through certain actions--through “performance”--“hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step according to circumstances and occasions” (36). Roach writes that these “performed effigies,” which are “fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke,” “provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates” (36). Wilson’s Aunt Ester, certainly such a medium, is forever concerned with perpetuating the community, passing down her memories to others, such as Black Mary, a young woman in her twenties described in Wilson’s character notes as her “protégé and housekeeper.” Speaking of the burden of memory, Ester tells Mary, “If you don’t want it I got to find

somebody else. I'm getting old. Going on three hundred years now" (43). As the play builds, we see Ester begin to shape Citizen into a part of the community. He will eventually fill a hole left in the community by the death of Solly Two Kings, the play's voice of activism.

In the course of the play, Citizen, wracked with guilt, reveals his story to Aunt Ester. He stole a bag of nails because the mill wouldn't pay him for his work. Garret Brown was accused of the crime, jumped in the river when pursued, and drowned rather than copping to a crime he did not commit. As a result, Citizen's life--his *presence* in the world--has become defined by Garret's *absence*. Citizen cannot comprehend why Garret did not lie to save himself, a logic Ester explains succinctly: "He did it for himself. He say I'd rather die in truth than to live a lie. That way he can say that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails" (45). Ester tells Citizen that he too must find a way to "live in truth," (45) and in Wilson's world this means achieving a connection with African-African history and community. Late in the play, Citizen--guided by Aunt Ester and Black Mary in a way similar to Bynum guiding Loomis in *Joe Turner*--witnesses a vision of the City of Bones, a representation of the Middle Passage, akin again to Loomis' hallucination of the "bones people" in *Joe Turner*.¹⁶

The Middle Passage, in Wilson's world, is a defining moment of African-American history. It is the original, violent movement of the culture from one place to another and a moment that, while distant in time from most of Wilson's characters, still exists quite powerfully in the collective unconscious--in the blood--of all African-

¹⁶ In productions of *Gem*, the City of Bones has been represented on stage with elaborate sets, allowing audiences to witness the way history lives alongside the present moment. A 2007 production I attended at Washington D.C's Arena Stage, for instance, utilized the "theatre-in-the-round" approach to great effect as blue lighting transformed the entire stage into an ocean during Citizen's "journey."

Americans as what Nora might call “true memory.” Roach explains the notion of “genealogies of performance,” “expressive movements as mnemonic reserves,” which can manifest themselves as “imaginary movements dreamed in minds, not prior to language but constitutive of it, a psychic rehearsal for physical actions drawn from a repertoire that culture provides” (26). The Middle Passage *is* a language in Wilson in that it communicates a shared history, not so much as it is “discursively transmitted” through historical understanding but as a form of memory that is “publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences” (Roach 26). As Citizen envisions himself chained in the hold of a slaveship called Gem of the Ocean, Aunt Ester explains: “Them people you seen got some powerful gods, Mr. Citizen. But they ain’t on the boat with them. They don’t know to call him on their own. God don’t answer to no one man. God answer to the all. All the people...When we get to the City of Bones I’m gonna show you what happen when all the people call on God with the one voice” (66). Here we see the near-constant emphasis on the power of the collective, along with the fascinating idea of a common language--“one voice”--which comes to the forefront in the following chapter. One gains power through connection to the ancestors and to the community of the present. This does not mean that individual power is devalued: each individual has a role to play within the collective, as we saw with Loomis in the previous chapter’s discussion of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Reinelt writes that “Imagining radical democracy thus involves an appeal to communitarian thinking (usually associated with conservative and moral points of view) while simultaneously retaining an emphasis on individual freedom” (287). This is the case with both Wilson and Kushner: both have perspectives on communal power as a source for forward progress within communities that exist outside

the dominant society.

As Citizen begins to see himself as a part of African-American history, he moves beyond the horrifying vision of the slave ships to the beautiful City of Bones. Memory operates within this scene on several levels. The first is, quite obviously, the kind of “collective unconscious” notion of the Middle Passage that Wilson seems to believe exists within all African-Americans, but there is also Citizen’s memory of his *personal* past. Just before he witnesses the City, he “begins to sing an African lullaby to himself, a song his mother taught him” (67). Citizen is getting increasingly closer to an acceptance of his position within the world. When he sees the City, he exclaims, “The trees and everything made of bone” (68), going on to gleefully enumerate the sights, describing a beautiful city of bone which also gives the audience a glimpse of the kind of African-American community Wilson envisions, a world where African tradition holds everything together, even if this often occurs on a subconscious level for many members of the community. Before he can enter the City, however, Citizen must confront the gatekeeper, who in his vision is Garret Brown, the man who drowned as a result of Citizen’s transgression. “It was me. I done it,” Citizen says. “My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails” (69). The recital of his name is important here, an obvious claiming of identity, as he seems to have now inherited Garret’s devotion to truth. He is “reborn as a man of the people” (69-70), Wilson writes in his stage directions, suggesting that Citizen will now serve as a carrier of “cultural memory.” Yet the most important moment of “surrogation” comes as the play nears its resolution.

Notions of citizenship are prominent throughout the play, even when Citizen’s journey is not front-and-center. The play’s voice of community and activism is Solly

Two Kings, Aunt Ester's "suitor," a man who has saved "sixty-two people" through the Underground Railroad and carries a stick with sixty-two notches to constantly remind him of the fact (57). Solly possesses what Wilson often terms the "warrior spirit," viewing the continuing struggle for black freedom as a "war" in which he is not afraid of "losing some blood" (58-59). Interestingly, a major conflict within the play is not exploitation by a dominant white society but rather a conflict within the African-American community itself. Caesar, Black Mary's brother and local constable, has fully absorbed the dominant society's individualistic--capitalistic--attitude. Act One opens with Solly's friend Eli commenting on Caesar's corruption: "...Caesar keep evicting people. He put out two more families yesterday...He don't ask no questions. He just gather up what little bit of stuff they got and sit it out on the street. Then he arrest them for being out there" (10). In the aftermath of Garret Brown's death, the black workers at the mill riot and strike, leading Caesar and local police to arrest hundreds of citizens. During this time, the mill burns to the ground. As the play ends, we discover that Solly is responsible. The crime is somewhat mysterious, given that his act ultimately damages the community, which needs the mill to provide jobs, but Solly sees his action as a larger protest against the exploitation of the workers: "The people might get mad but freedom got a high price" (75). In a presumed attempt to free the jailed mill workers, Solly is shot by Caesar and brought to Aunt Ester's to die. After he passes away, Citizen, the reborn "man of the people," inherits Solly's sense of duty. Solly had intended to travel to Alabama to help his sister escape to the relative safety of the North, and Citizen takes over this mission. Wilson's stage directions reveal this final act of "surrogation": "Citizen takes off his coat. He puts on Solly's coat and hat and takes Solly's stick. He

discovers the letter from Solly's sister in the hat...Without a word Citizen turns and exits" (85). This is a particularly physical moment of "surrogation" with the actual donning of the dead man's clothes.¹⁷ Roach writes of the inherent difficulties of "surrogation," noting that it often fails: "the fit cannot be exact" (2). Yet in Wilson's world, Citizen's transformation from lost soul to community activist is meant to be read as optimistic, as a very close fit. Once you acknowledge your debt to the past and duty to the present, you are on the right path, and someone will be waiting in the wings to carry on after you are gone.

...

Throughout this study, my work with Kushner's *Angels* has ranged freely through both parts of the play, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*. However, in this chapter, which marks the final appearance of *Angels* in the dissertation, I want to consider how the two parts work in relation to each other. In some ways, we can see the two parts as representative of "theory" and "praxis," with *Millennium* functioning as a conversation regarding the dissolution of a sense of American community and *Perestroika*--Russian, of course, for "restructuring"--providing an answer to the questions raised in *Millennium*. "You can't live in the world without an idea of the world," Joe's Mormon mother, Hannah Pitt, says, as *Perestroika* ends, "but it's living that makes the ideas. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory" (278).

As we see from its subtitle alone--*A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*--Kushner intends *Angels* to be a meditation on the American character. Several stagings of the play

¹⁷ A remarkably similar moment occurs in the final moments of *Bent* (1979), Martin Sherman's exploration of homosexual persecution in Nazi Germany. Max, who has "passed" as a Jew in the concentration-camp hierarchy, thereby avoiding the worse treatment of homosexuals, dons his dead friend's jacket, which is marked with a "pink triangle" denoting homosexuality. Max, with no other

have even sought to reflect such inquiry in their designs. John Conklin's set design for Oskar Eustis's staging at the Mark Taper Forum "sought a unifying image that would evoke America without overly specifying or imposing a narrow view" (Aronson 214-15). The result was the "façade of a house that combined elements of a New England meetinghouse with Jeffersonian classicism" (Aronson 215). Nick Ormerod's set design for Declan Donnellan's Royal National Theatre production used a "stars and stripes" background against which the play unfolded quite simply" (Aronson 214). However, whether or not the set design matches the play's philosophical underpinnings, Kushner certainly intends the work as an inquiry into the meaning of American "citizenship." A long conversation between Louis and Belize, who are Jewish and African-American, respectively, illuminates some of these notions of citizenship. Louis wants to know how "democracy [has] succeeded in America?" despite the "monolith of White Straight Male America" (95-96). His own muddled answer, offensive to Belize in much of its phrasing, is that America is defined not so much by race or religion as by "the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics, the shifting downwards and outwards of political power to the people" (98). The optimism of *Angels* lies in the fact that the "monolith" is crumbling. In an age of increasing racial and religious diversity, America will eventually move further away from the divisions of the past. Homosexuality, in the play, is positioned as a unifying force, a potential source of great collective power, because belonging to its "community" is not dependent on such divisions. Yet the play is broader in its scope than just the identity politics of a unified homosexual community. As we see in *Perestroika*, the ultimate vision of community is

options, kills himself as an expression of solidarity, a far cry from Citizen's fate but a similar moment of communal absorption.

all-inclusive, and *Millennium Approaches* functions to set up the notions of “interconnection” that become more clear in *Perestroika*.

Perhaps the strangest “interconnection” in *Angels* is between Prior and Harper, Joe’s wife, who is lost in a world of loneliness and Valium addiction. In an early scene from *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner’s stage directions indicate that Prior appears in one of Harper’s “pill-induced hallucination[s]. Or Harper has appeared in Prior’s dream. It is bewildering” (36). It *is* bewildering, especially since the two characters have never met in “real” life, but their encounter hints at a kind of common humanity that the play is intent on exploring. Harper struggles not to believe in the “reality” of Prior, because, as she puts it, “the mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn’t be able to make up anything that wasn’t there to start with, that didn’t enter it from experience, from the real world” (38). However, this dream-world bond between Harper and Prior *does* yield “real world” impact. As Steven F. Kruger explains, “cross-identifications,” such as this fantasy meeting between Harper and Prior, are “renegotiations of identity and difference that might make certain shifts in power relations possible” (154). Dream-Prior informs Dream-Harper that Joe is a homosexual, a realization she has been suppressing in the “real world” and one that will allow her to move ahead in her own life. Dream-Harper tells Dream-Prior that “Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease” (40), an idea that Prior must accept before he can forge a battle with the AIDS virus that is killing him. At the point of their contact, Harper and Prior have become isolated, she in her loneliness, he in his sickness, yet this moment of contact--what Prior terms a “Threshold of Revelation” (39)--allows them to begin re-establishing bonds with others in the world outside their dreams. Ironically, the moment

of fantasy--disconnected from a world of pain and disease-- puts them back in touch with themselves as human *bodies* who must forge relationships in the real world in order to survive and move forward. Both of the aforementioned “revelations” within the fantasy are already recognized by Harper and Prior on a subconscious level. The fantasy is a moment of recognition which can be seen as an example of what Roach terms the “kinesthetic imagination,” which inhabits the “realm of the virtual” and whose “truth is the truth of simulation, of fantasy, or of daydreams” (27). The “kinesthetic imagination” is a way of thinking through “the otherwise unthinkable,” and Roach sees the term as most often connected to performers thinking through the movements of an art form like dance but also as a part of everyday life, “an impetus and method for the restoration of behavior” (27). This is how the fantasy moment operates for Prior and Harper, forcing them out of their isolation and back toward a world of “social organization” (Roach 27). As Art Borecca notes of such moments in *Angels*, “the bleeding of spaces into one another” reveals how “the realistic dimension of the play is coming under the sway of forces intimated in the dream scenes” (257).

Notions of interconnection are also emphasized through the use of multiple casting and split-scenes. The multiple casting raises the fascinating question of whether we are meant to immediately recognize that the same actors are appearing in multiple roles. When I show clips from Mike Nichols’ HBO production of *Angels* in drama courses, the students often do not recognize Meryl Streep as Rabbi Chemelwitz. However, I think the best productions will not seek to hide the multiple casting so effectively, as each recognition sparks a complex notion of identity--one can be oneself *and* someone else simultaneously--that is integral to Kushner’s questioning of

boundaries. The stage directions are very specific about the multiple casting, and certain “transformations” seem especially important, such as the various characters played by “the actor playing Hannah,” which I take up later in my analysis of *Perestroika*. Other transformations seem arguably less thematically essential, such as “the actor playing Harper” also playing Roy’s “yes-man” Martin Heller. Caryl Churchill, in the stage directions for *Cloud 9*, writes of that play’s use of doubling that “any way of doing the doubling seems to set up some interesting resonances between the two acts,” which seems true of Kushner’s work as well.

The split-scenes, of course, are yet another means of emphasizing “interconnection.” One of the more sustained uses of the technique comes in *Millennium* when Kushner parallels the Joe/Harper relationship with the Prior/Louis relationship. Kruger writes that “Harper and Joe’s relationship defines Prior and Louis’s, and vice versa, as both couples appear simultaneously onstage” (154). These relationships echo off each other in numerous ways, most literally in the fact that both relationships are--at this point in the play--on the verge of failure. A more interesting connection here, however, is the inability of Joe and Louis to come to terms with the human body. Joe, in his repressed homosexuality, can never be comfortable in his heterosexual relationship with Harper, while Louis finds himself unable to deal with the human effects of AIDS on his lover’s body. Kruger explores the play’s consistent focus on the body, the “skin,” writing that “Skin recurs repeatedly in the play as necessary to the integrity of a self, both macro- and microcosmic” (159). Harper’s opening and closing speeches in the play, Kruger notes, deal with an idea of the world’s protective skin, the ozone layer, collapsing but being healed by a “web” of human souls, a remarkable image of interconnection that

Kruger describes as a “coming together of those who have lost bodily integrity, whose own protective skins have been stripped from them, to replenish the skin of the world” (160). This “web,” Kruger writes, “guarantees separate identity but allows interconnection” (160), which is exactly the kind of ideal society Kushner envisions. The interesting transformative metaphor of “shedding one’s skin” runs throughout the play, allowing Kushner to suggest that to be a member of a community, a citizen of the world, one must move beyond the oppression of society toward a world where diverse members function as one body, working for the good of all. Democracy, Louis tells Belize in their debate on American culture, is an “idea with blood in it” (96). The same blood is flowing through everyone’s veins, the play informs us, an idea of bodily connection that is introduced from the very first scene, in which an elderly rabbi eulogizes Louis’s grandmother. “Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl,” the rabbi tells the mourners, “your air the air of the steppes--because she carried the old world on her back, across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home” (16). The past lives inside and alongside the present. As the play progresses, the audience witnesses the actor playing the rabbi transforming into other roles--Ethel Rosenberg, a nurse, Hannah Pitt--which take us across cultures and religions before arriving, at the end of *Perestroika*, with Hannah taking part in a blessing--an interesting contrast to the opening eulogy--which is both a recognition of interconnection and a vow of citizenship. As we will see later in this chapter, the *theory* of what it means to be a participant in American culture transforms into *practice* in the second part of Kushner’s work.

...

In many ways, all of Wilson's work is about characters attempting to reclaim what they have been denied as--supposedly--free citizens in America. In some plays, we see this in an abstract form, with characters like *Joe Turner's* Loomis attempting to reclaim their identities. In other plays, and perhaps *Two Trains Running* in particular, the theme has a more tangible form. *Two Trains*, with its 1969 setting, is--appropriately enough--the Wilson play with the most explicitly black-activist aesthetic. As the play begins, the community is preparing for a Malcolm X rally. Wilson says that this element was originally meant to constitute a larger part of the play, although he ultimately opted to keep the rally in the background, with Malcolm's ideas being "something that affected the character of society as a whole" but may not have necessarily fully impacted the average person on the street at the time, someone who is more concerned with day-to-day life (Pettengill 235-36). Wilson's Hambone, for instance, is certainly unaware of Malcolm X's politics, even though he is fighting oppression each day in his own manner, one perhaps more akin to Martin Luther King's non-violent protest. Hambone is in his mid-forties, a man, according to the stage directions, who is "self-contained and lives in his own world" (14). "His mental condition" Wilson writes, "has deteriorated to a point where he can only say two phrases," which are "I want my ham" and "He gonna give me my man" (14). In the course of the play, Sterling, a newcomer to the community, tries to teach Hambone other phrases which pertain to the black nationalist movement--"Black is beautiful"--but Hambone quickly rejects these and returns to his own mantras, which in themselves are a powerful testament to citizenship: he knows his rights, and he is being denied them. The story of Hambone is related by Memphis Lee, owner of the diner

where the play is set: “Lutz told him if he painted his fence he’d give him a chicken. Told him if he did a good job he’d give him a ham. He think he did a good job and Lutz didn’t” (23). Each day thereafter, Hambone returns to the site of his mistreatment, which Harry Elam, Jr. describes as his “originating site of rupture and terror,” a kind of personal Middle Passage (179). Memphis places much of the blame on Hambone himself for agreeing to Lutz’s terms, explaining, “That’s where he went wrong--letting Lutz decide what to pay him for his work. If you leave it like that, quite naturally he gonna say it ain’t worth the higher price” (23). Wilson’s work endorses this point: African-Americans cannot let the dominant society tell them what they are worth. Yet Memphis himself, early in the play, does not live by his own philosophy. He remains haunted by his former life in the South, where he was cheated out of a piece of property by a group of men who killed his mule and burned his crops. As a result, Memphis’s existence in Pittsburgh is filled with idle threats to return and reclaim his land: “I’m going back one of these days,” Memphis is constantly saying (73). The concept of land or property ownership is always central in Wilson’s work, as we saw also in Boy Willie’s struggle in *The Piano Lesson*. For Wilson’s African-American characters, land ownership is the very definition of freedom, of being a citizen in a country that once considered you property. Not only has Memphis lost his land in the South, he is on the verge of selling his restaurant due to the “gentrification” process that is beginning to take shape in the neighborhood and which becomes central to the latter plays of Wilson’s cycle. “Ain’t nothing to do,” Memphis insists. “Unless I do like West and go into the undertaking business. I can’t go out there in Squirrel Hill and open up a restaurant. Ain’t nothing gonna be left around here. Supermarket gone. Two drugstores. The five and ten.

Doctor done moved out. Dentist done moved out. Ain't nothing gonna be left but these niggers killing one another" (9). Memphis's restaurant is already in decline, often without the needed supplies for proper day-to-day operations and with a busted jukebox in the corner: when the "songs" are gone, in Wilson's world, there is little hope. Yet Memphis finds unexpected inspiration through the death of Hambone and eventually transforms into someone willing to fight for what he is owed. In so doing, he seeks to vitalize a community that is falling apart.

Harry Elam Jr. describes such characters as Hambone as Wilson's "madmen," characters whose inability to "grasp the world around them" allows them an entrance into "a lost African consciousness, and to a legacy of social activism" (173). "Their madness," Elam writes, "has both individual and cultural significance: it both constrains and empowers these characters" (173). Hambone dies, offstage, near the end of the play. Since he "ain't had no people," as one character puts it (90), the community begins to rally to see that he is buried properly. Wilson parallels Hambone's death with the burial of Prophet Samuel, a local religious leader whose massive funeral is occurring offstage as the play begins. Christianity, as we have seen, often offers a false sense of community in Wilson's work, and indeed Prophet Samuel is seen in the play as a poor substitute for the African spirituality of Aunt Ester, an oft-mentioned presence in *Two Trains*: various characters speak of visiting her house for spiritual guidance. Wilson says that his play suggests that "you need both Malcolm X and Aunt Ester to change your life" (236), a mixture, presumably, of activism and spirituality. Elam writes: "Lost on the characters until after his death is the way in which Hambone's personal struggle against injustice reflects their own need for persistent, collective, revolutionary action" (179). Memphis,

who has often chased the “madman” away from his place of business, ends the play by affectionately mimicking Hambone’s mantra of “He gonna give me my ham” and then launching into his own newfound plan of action, vowing to head south for revenge and return to “open me up a big restaurant right down there on Centre Avenue,” a powerful image of physical community regeneration (110). *Two Trains* ends with Sterling, who himself has spent the last part of the play fighting for money that he believes is rightfully his, entering the restaurant, covered in blood and carrying a ham which he says should rest on Hambone’s casket. The lights go down on the image of battle and thoughts of community renewal.

In reference to his 2002 production of *Two Trains Running* at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre, director Lou Bellamy says that his vision of the play fully took shape “when I discovered the power of ritual that I think is the essence of *Two Trains Running*” resulting in an approach that “recognizes the musicality of the text and pays great attention to cultural nuance and specificity” (2). Bellamy does not define exactly what he means by “power of ritual” but surely the repetition of his staging plays a key role. What lingers with me from the production, more than any dialogue or specific scene, are Risa’s slow, shuffling walks across the restaurant, sometimes exaggerated for comic effect, and—most of all—Hambone repeatedly passing the restaurant window as he attempts to reclaim what he believes is owed him.¹⁸ One of the key elements of community *is* such repetition: the comfort provided by familiar motions, familiar faces, and a familiar environment. In his exploration of the “kinesthetic imagination,” Roach writes of “resources of memory stored up” in the human body which connect us with our past

¹⁸ Presumably Risa’s movements are central to many productions of the play: Harry Elam notes the “exaggerated movement pattern” of Cynthia Martells in the Broadway production.

while keeping us rooted in the present moment (27). The interesting, ritualistic movement patterns of Risa and Hambone can be seen as placing them in a long line of African-American resistance to dominant ideologies. Harry Elam describes Risa's ritual of denying sugar to her customers until they ask for it as a "subtly subversive act" that makes them "acknowledge her presence" (100). Risa insists on identification on her own terms: she has deliberately scarred her legs to set herself apart from the dependent black women of her environment, "to force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is," as one character puts it (32). She demands acknowledgement of her bodily existence in a world that often denies African-Americans their humanity. Hambone's behavior can be viewed similarly, as he returns each day to a site, a personal *lieux de memoire*, where he feels a grievous wrong has been done to him. *Two Trains*, ultimately, is a play about the fragile nature of community, where the death of a seemingly tangential member--Hambone--affects the balance of the community as a whole. In the curtain call of Bellamy's production, Hambone emerged in character, now carrying the ham himself, raised high, victorious, magnifying the "reality" of the on-stage community and solidifying the notion, ever-prominent in Wilson, that the past is always with us, ideally a unifying force spurring forward progress. We can see Hambone here as another of Roach's "effigy" figures, his purpose "to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past" (Roach 36). Hambone's death, of course, has recently occurred, but his curtain call "resurrection" triggers much more than simply the memory of his just-completed performance. As Roach writes in his study of the actor Thomas Betterton, "the actor as effigy sustained the living memory of a past that allowed his contemporaries to imagine a number of possible futures" (115). Hambone's final

interaction with the audience can be seen as a continuous line of African-American resistance to the dominant culture, stretching into the future. An actor, Roach writes, is a “meticulous curator of cultural memory, a medium for speaking with the dead” (78). Bellamy’s staging ends with such a moment of communion.

...

In his Foreword to the combined publication of Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me*, Kushner considers the endings of these two plays, which are a fascinating inversion of the way his own two *Angels in America* plays end. Kramer’s plays, published eight years apart, in 1985 and 1993, are similar to Kushner’s *Angels* in their exploration of AIDS and their recoccurring characters. Kushner, in fact, sees Kramer’s plays as merging “into a single work of literature” (xvi). The ending of *The Normal Heart*, Kushner writes, is a “classical liberal utopian vision,” (xiv), while the ending of *The Destiny of Me* is a prophetic vision of a grim future. Kushner’s *Angels* is structured in an opposite fashion, providing more hope. As *Millennium Approaches* ends, Prior Walter is chosen to spread a message of stasis that he cannot abide, whereas *Perestroika* ends with a promise of hopeful, forward movement that many critics have seen as a utopian vision. In his influential essay “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism,” David Savran subjects the political implications of *Angels’* resolution to a tough critique:

Angels in America assures the (liberal) theatergoing public that a kind of liberal pluralism remains the best hope for change. Revolution, in the Marxist sense, is rendered virtually unthinkable, oxymoronic...Oppression is understood in relation not to economics but to differences of race,

gender, and sexual orientation. In short: *an identity politic comes to substitute for Marxist analysis*... And, despite Kushner's avowed commitment to socialism, an alternative to capitalism, except in the form of an indefinitely deferred utopia, remains absent from the play's dialectic (31-32).

While much of this may be true, I would argue that the play's ending does not veer as far from Kushner's personal politics as Savran suggests. Kushner may indeed hold fast to elements of socialism, namely its central commitment to the collective over the individual, but his interviews also reveal a strong faith in "liberal pluralism," *if* America can escape the conservative hegemony that solidified in the Reagan era. The play's challenge to capitalism occurs in its privileging of a community-minded position over unchecked individualism: the play does not become a Marxist rallying cry for a worker's revolution, yet it *does* seem to end with a call for a protest against oppression that is stronger than Savran acknowledges.

Richard L. Barr argues that on the contemporary stage and in "modern social theory" we can see "a movement from concepts of community conceived in terms of homogeneity to concepts deriving from heterogeneity, from community based on commonality to community dependent on difference" (2). This certainly seems the case in the resolution of *Angels*. As a diverse community--Prior; Louis; Belize; and Hannah--gathers at the Bethesda Fountain, Prior addresses the audience directly in a moment that seems to stand outside the flow of time. The setting is appropriate for the play's optimistic ending. The characters join in relating the story of the Angel Bethesda, who touched down in Jerusalem, creating a fountain whose waters healed those in need. The

fountain, which ran dry after the Romans destroyed the temple, is rumored to flow again when the “Capital M Millennium” comes (279). The story of *New York’s* Bethesda Fountain is more mundane, but Prior’s description of it reveals a future of--potential--collective progress, very closely echoing the similarly optimistic final lines of Craig Lucas’ screenplay for *Longtime Companion* (1990), in which a group of friends express hope to be around long enough to find a cure for AIDS. Prior says:

The fountain’s not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it’s a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be. This death will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. We will be citizens. The time has come (280).

The fountain can be seen as a somewhat different version of Nora’s *lieux de memoire*, places which--in Joseph Roach’s terms-- “canalize specified needs, desires, and habits in order to reproduce them” (28). Roach speaks of “condensation events” which “gain a powerful enough hold on collective memory that they will survive the transformation or the relocation of the spaces in which they first flourished” (28). In Kushner’s worldview, there is a deep-seated longing for collectivity, a healing force, and New York’s Bethesda Fountain seems infused with the power of the original legend. The “we” in Prior’s speech is complex. Certainly it is the homosexual community on the surface level, but the presence of Hannah in the group and the direct address to the audience problematizes the notion that Prior and--by extension, Kushner--is *only* seeking to unite the gay community. The diversity represented within the play’s final cluster of characters--female, male, gay,

Jewish, African-American--suggests that this “we” can be any group whose history has been oppressed by the dominant society.

Hannah, perhaps especially, deserves further consideration here, being the odd-woman-out among the congregants at the Fountain. Her emotional journey in the play--from a very conservative Mormon mother to an accepting member of a “family” of sexual, religious, and political diversity--is truly remarkable and inextricably connected to Kushner’s themes of the power of interconnection and collectivity to combat a dominant, oppressive society. Catherine Stevenson explores Kushner’s use of “mother figures” in an important essay that examines Hannah’s essential role in helping Prior resist the damaging message of the Angel, which favors “stasis” over forward movement. As *Millenium* ends, Hannah has traveled from Salt Lake City to New York hoping to save the faltering marriage of her son. *Perestroika* finds her taking a job at the Mormon Visitor’s Center, where she meets Prior and is drawn into his struggle with AIDS, ending up at his hospital bedside and even experiencing his Angelic visitations herself. Encouraging Prior to “wrestle” with the Angel, Hannah ends up sharing a “long, hot kiss” with the Angel and experiencing an “enormous orgasm” as the Angel tells her “The Body is the Garden of the Soul” (252). As we saw in Chapter Two, an inability to come to terms with one’s own body--its potential and its limitations--may keep one from a proper role in community life. Joe and Roy, in denying their sexuality and, in Roy’s case, his disease, end up isolated. Hannah, however, comes to terms not only with her own body as a source of pleasure but also with the bonds she shares with others who may be very unlike her. Her newfound understanding is one that could not be reached through her former, strict Mormon worldview. Hannah must open herself up to the possibilities of

“interconnection”: “This is my ex-lover’s lover’s Mormon mother,” Prior explains his and Hannah’s relationship to a bewildered nurse (234). Stevenson addresses Kushner’s strategy of “multiple casting of actors across genders” which “unsettles any easy or conventional gender associations connected with the mother figure on stage, while it also introduces a dialectical relationship between the points of view represented by the different characters played by a single actor” (761). The strategy, on a basic level, contributes to Kushner’s intent to illustrate “interconnection”; however, considering the various characters portrayed by the actor playing Hannah leads to an even better understanding of her role in the play. The actor playing Hannah also plays a rabbi, Roy’s doctor, “the world’s oldest Bolshevik,” and perhaps most importantly, Ethel Rosenberg. These are all characters who speak for collective understanding in a religiously, sexually, politically divided world. They are all characters of healing. *Millennium* begins with an elderly rabbi delivering a eulogy for Louis’s Jewish grandmother --“We assemble that we may mourn collectively” (16)--and such collectivity is emphasized in one of Hannah’s last words in *Perestroika*: “interconnectedness” (278). The play comes full circle, in a way, but we end with a blessing instead of a eulogy: “More life,” Prior says, in *Perestroika*’s final speech (280). The invocation--and its origins--are discussed more fully below, but it is clear that Hannah, so seemingly different from the other members of the family at the Fountain, has become integral to this continuance of life.

Janelle Reinelt’s reading of *Perestroika*’s resolution differs from Savran’s critique and seems more true to Kushner’s publicly-stated thoughts on American progress. Reinelt writes that play’s “ongoing set of adversarial relations are precisely not overcome, but rather temporarily set aside for a vision of utopic possibility that holds

onto what is best and useful in tradition...while gesturing toward something beyond, something impossible, but something worthy of desire and of action--a national community of diverse enfranchised citizens” (295). We see this “gesturing” in at least two ways in Prior’s line, “We will be citizens.” The first and most obvious reflects the hope that the homosexual community will be accepted and cared for in the face of the AIDS epidemic. However, reading Prior’s speech as a call for organization across all divisions gives the line a more revolutionary, all-encompassing feel.

Another line of Prior’s final speech is worth closer examination in connection with this study’s concept of community. Prior tells the audience that “the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living,” suggesting, once again, that the past stands side-by-side with the present and must be acknowledged as a bonding agent, not a divisive force. The memory of those who have died throughout history in struggles against oppression lingers on, ideally spurring a present community to come together and continue the battle. Louis, in one of his many political discussions with Belize, argues that “there are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past” (98), but Kushner’s *Angels*, of course--and the work of Wilson--proves this wrong. Even Louis, full of doubt and cynicism, has largely abandoned this notion by the end of *Perestroika*, following his “miraculous” contact with the spirituality of his Jewish past. The play ends with Prior dismissing the audience with the blessing “More life. The Great Work Begins.”¹⁹ The blessing is remarkably similar to the last words of Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*. As Citizen exits the stage, he is urged by Aunt Ester’s “gatekeeper,” “So live” (85). The message of both is clear: as citizens,

¹⁹ In his “playwright’s notes” for *Perestroika*, Kushner says the play’s final line is indebted to Harold Bloom’s translation of the Jewish word for “blessing” as “more life.”

there is work to be done. Ron Scapp, examining how “democracy” functions within *Angels*, considers Prior’s final words in terms of both characters and audience, writing, “In a moment of emotional solidarity we find ourselves gathered with the actors onstage, finally represented, a unified, singularly hopeful crowd of ‘fabulous citizens.’ But we also find ourselves being dispersed, projected somewhere further down the line of temporal possibility--we begin again to write and rewrite the narrative of what has yet to come” (98). The collection of characters at the end of *Angels*, Scapp feels, effectively challenges the “narrative of homogeneity,” without becoming the “totalizing myth of hope” that critics like Savran suggest (99). Rather, the gathering is a “courageous expression of convergence, here and now” (Scapp 99). As Reinelt aptly points out, we all know that Louis and Belize will soon start their bickering again, but in this particular moment at the Bethesda fountain, “the continuum of history is ruptured by a millennial desire” (295). The seeds of forward progress, Kushner wants us to understand, are sewn in such moments.

...

Regarding the idea of “citizenship” in his work, Wilson writes that “...the characters in the plays still place their faith in America’s willingness to live up to the meaning of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals. It is this belief in America’s honor that allows them to pursue the American Dream even as it remains elusive. The conflicts with the larger society are cultural conflicts” (Wilson, *King Hedley II* introduction, 28). Wilson’s characters--“Aunt Ester’s children,” he calls them--find power through cultural unification, and Wilson often argues for a version of what has been termed “community nationalism,” which “would mean that blacks would abide by

the principle that they should live in black communities, a commitment that would require a number of them to move to new locations. While not bringing about an independent black government, this program could arguably contribute to the establishment of a meaningful, if limited, form of collective self-determination for blacks” (Shelby 102-03). Wilson is not always specific as to exactly how the collective power of African-American community translates to political gains, but his list of what his characters often *lack* in the plays provides a sense of what he hopes the African-American community can *gain*:

Despite the fact that the material conditions of their lives are meager. Despite the fact that they have no relationship with banking capital and their communities lack the twin pillars of commerce and industry. Despite the fact that their relationship to the larger society is one of servitude and marked neglect. In all the plays, the characters remain pointed toward the future... (Wilson, *King Hedley II* introduction, 30).

Unfortunately, however, as we turn to Wilson’s 1980’s and 1990’s plays in the final chapter, the *failure* to mobilize and function as a community can create a nightmarish future.

Kushner, often considered “radical” in his politics due to his adherence to a modified vision of “socialism,” is just as likely to endorse a much more practical vision of American life and American democracy, even a faith in the Democratic party: “It’s ethnically diverse, it’s not all rich people, its platform at least is essentially progressive and decent. It’s not anticapitalist, it’s not socialist, but it at least has a sort of Keynesian idea of capitalism that understands the importance of regulation...And it’s the party that

passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the Great Society and the New Deal” (81). While Wilson sees irreconcilable differences between black and white America and even favors a separation, of sorts, between the cultures, Kushner strives for unity across all boundaries. In his recent study of the trends in American social life, Robert Putnam wonders if the 1960’s produced a “durable and more advanced repertoire of civic engagement, leaving as its legacy many rich new forms of connectedness, a ‘movement society’ in which ‘elite-challenging’ behavior becomes perpetual, conventional, routinely deployed by advocates of many different causes” (154-55). Kushner and Wilson believe that society is not living up to the promise inherent in the successful movements of the past, therefore becoming increasingly disconnected and disengaged, but both also believe that we at least have the potential to re-collectivize. “We have an ethical obligation,” Kushner says, “to look for hope and find it” (Marcus 81). The plays we have just examined *do* look for hope and find it. The ones examined in the following chapter have bleaker endings, revealing the search for hope in progress, not yet successful.

Chapter Five:
 "...if you live long enough the boat will turn around":
 A Contemporary Crisis of Community

"Devastation can be a prelude to a new kind of beauty--necessary perhaps, but always bloody. In the preface to his verse drama *Cain*, Byron tells us, 'The world was destroyed several times before the creation of man.'...Are cataclysm and catastrophe the birth spasms of the future...?" --Tony Kushner, Afterword to *Homebody/Kabul*, 148-49.

"One of the things with *Radio Golf* is that I realized that I had to in some way deal with the black middle class, which for the most part is not in the other nine plays. My idea was that the black middle class seems to be divorcing themselves from that community [of 'black Americans who share that 400-year history of being here in America'], making their fortune on their own without recognizing or acknowledging their connection to the larger community. And I thought: We have gained a lot of sophistication and expertise and resources, and we should be helping that community, which is completely devastated by drugs and crime and the social practices of the past hundred years of the country" --August Wilson, interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, 22

Kushner stated early in his career that the *Angels* plays, which he originally envisioned as an even larger "cycle," might be the only ones turning their attention to the present moment ("The Theatre of the Fabulous," 153). However, perhaps inevitably for a playwright so concerned with history and the need for collectivity, Kushner's recent plays have found him caught up in the events of the moment, with *Homebody/Kabul* exploring Afghanistan during the Clinton presidency and the in-progress *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy* turning its attention to the ongoing war in Iraq. Wilson's project, of course, dictated an engagement with the present moment as his twentieth-century cycle neared completion. As these authors set their sights on the world around them, their works naturally reflect each playwright's concern with the continuing decay of community bonds. The contemporary works examined here, much darker than the plays of the previous chapter, are haunted--sometimes literally--by absence and loss. Though the "ghosts" of these plays may not be present in the manner of the Sutters and

Ethel Rosenbergs of previous chapters, the plays are no less “haunted” by what these authors see as the continuing loss of community bonds. Avery Gordon writes, “A haunted society is full of ghosts, and the ghost always carries the message...that the gap between personal and social, public and private...is misleading in the first place” (98). Wilson and Kushner favor a society that dissolves these boundaries between public and private, stressing that the struggle of one is also the struggle of many. Yet their visions of contemporary society reveal a world in which the boundaries are, sadly, growing ever stronger. Young African-Americans like Wilson’s King Hedley II withdraw from their family and community while the affluent black middle class rejects the traditions that *should* sustain them in favor of the values of a dominant culture. Kushner’s Homebody, cut off from her family, also seems representative of the Western’s world increasing disconnection from the international community. Gordon writes that we live in a world where “entire societies become haunted by terrible deeds that are systematically occurring and are simultaneously denied...” (64). Our world does not want to face the present and the history that has led us here. These plays force us to do so.

Aunt Ester, Wilson’s powerful symbol of community and ancestral bonds, dies in *King Hedley II*, the cycle’s play of the 1980’s, and there is no immediate successor to carry on the “cultural memory” she represents. Also largely absent, as Wilson’s cycle enters the 1990’s, is the vernacular of the Hill District. The powerful bonding force of a shared language with roots in the distant past has given way to a language of capitalism, the language of a dominant culture, and certainly Wilson--who sees African-American and white culture as distinct entities--fears the loss of “shared meanings” in the African-American community. The “voice” of *Radio Golf* shifts to an assimilated, middle-class

manner of speech that betrays the values of African-American community. In Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, the central loss is the notion of a "common humanity," largely due to the unpopular policies of the West which result in further isolation from the rest of the world. Like Wilson, Kushner turns to issues of language in *Homebody/Kabul*, yet his concern is not the preservation of distinct languages within cultures but rather the idea of the increasing difficulty of cross-cultural communication. In the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, Kushner finds the notion of a "common language," a moment in time before the world became divided into factions with different languages and competing goals. Kushner, of course, is not calling for a single language for the whole world. Indeed, the play contains jokes about the failure of the universal language Esperanto, even while positing the idea itself, in James Fisher's terms, as admirably "free of the baggage of cultural history...a blameless mode of expression by which to communicate without the inherent cultural oppressions and the burdens of the past soaking every other language in blood" (199). Mainly, however, the play uses the notion of a common language as a metaphor for a shared worldview, a means of restoring "interconnection," the loss of which justifies a world of continual war and destruction.

If the plays of the last chapter showed us "healing," the plays here show us continued "decay." Both Wilson and Kushner envision communities in decay, from the "blight" of Pittsburgh's Hill District in Wilson's work to Kushner's bombed-out landscapes of Afghanistan and Iraq, inhabited by the maimed and the dead. Destruction lies at the center of the plays in this chapter. As we follow Wilson's Hill District and its inhabitants through a century of African-American life, we see a once-vital world collapsing in on itself through urban violence of the 1980's and supposed "urban

renewal” projects that, dating from Johnson’s “Great Society” to the present day, have ultimately destroyed many neighborhoods and displaced many residents. Community landmarks like Eddie’s Restaurant, an old Wilson hangout and possible inspiration for *Two Trains Running*, have disappeared and the landscape, like so many urban landscapes, is increasingly dotted by impersonal corporate operations like Starbucks. “All the things that were part of this community...are being changed because of this slickness with the new building and Barnes and Noble and Whole Foods and Starbucks, simply to entice middle class people to move back to the Hill, which is only a four minute walk from downtown,” Wilson tells Suzan-Lori Parks in one of his last interviews. “That’s prime real estate, and now what you’ve got is this slum sitting there” (74). As I write this, Wilson’s niece, Kimberly Ellis, a local poet and scholar herself, has been attempting to stop--through petitions and protest-- an Isle of Capri Casino from opening on the Hill, a further encroachment upon the neighborhood’s history which will likely increase crime rates in the area. Ellis has won a small victory in that--although a casino *will* open on the Hill--a license has been granted to one of the few African-American casino owners in the country. Wilson’s final two plays document this changing landscape. It is a bleak vision, though not without optimism as the plays encourage the kind of collective action inherent in Ellis’s recent actions.

Kushner’s settings, unlike Wilson’s, cross the nation and the world, and we are meant to understand that all people and all places are linked. When Kushner sets his sights on the contemporary world, as in *Homebody/Kabul* and the work-in-progress *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*, he envisions a disconnection like never before, a world in which America, especially, follows a policy in which “whole countries

or regions can be cordoned off and summarily tossed out of the international community's considerations, subjected to sanctions, and refused assistance by the world's powers" (*Homebody/Kabul*, Afterword, 144). Such behavior, Kushner feels, "blinds us to geopolitical reality, to say nothing of ethical accountability and moral responsibility" (145). Kushner's works, always, are infused with hope, but in recent plays the hope is buried deeper. When he looks to the past, as in *Caroline, or Change*, Kushner shows us how collective action emerged from dark times to initiate progress. His new plays take us into contemporary worlds where civilization is in disarray and the needed collective action has not yet materialized.

In this chapter, we trace what Kushner might call the "cataclysm and catastrophe" of our current moment. These plays explore how--and whether--communities can continue in the face of such desolate physical and emotional landscapes. They offer no easy solutions, although with these two playwrights there is always hope. The two late-career Wilson plays examined here do not build to the obvious moments of "surrogation" we have witnessed in his earlier work, yet there is still faith that--in the African-American community--the kind of innate cultural memory that bonds his characters together can be rediscovered and strengthened in the future. Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, a bleak vision of disconnection, nevertheless builds to a moment of obvious "surrogation" and images of rebirth, perhaps the kind of "birth spasms of the future" mentioned in the author's introductory quote for this chapter. We turn first to Wilson's Hill District in the 1980's, where the titular character of *King Hedley II* succumbs to the worst aspects of a community that has recently lost its spiritual, bonding voice: Aunt Ester. Next, in the remarkable hour-long monologue--the *Homebody*

section--that opens *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner takes us deep into the mind of a lonely London housewife who, in a sense, creates her own private language that allows her to deliberately distance herself from the world and assuage her guilt over her continuing inaction. In Wilson's final play of his cycle, the 1990's-set *Radio Golf*, Harmond Wilks, real-estate developer and mayoral candidate, seeks to profit off the destruction of the community's history in a redevelopment plan for the Hill. Finally, in the second half--the *Kabul* section--of Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, we emerge from the Homebody's mind into the "waste land" of modern Afghanistan as the Homebody's husband and daughter search for their missing wife/mother and encounter an "intersection" of languages but a lack of interconnection.

...

Despite accusations from critics such as Robert Brustein that his work is often primarily concerned with the "victimization" of the African-American community by a dominant white society, the ultimate failure of community in Wilson's world is more often due to failings within the community itself. In the contemporary African-American community, Wilson sees an inability to come together, to discover power from within, to respect life. Black-on-black violence is a concern from the start in Wilson's world, as we have seen in *Ma Rainey* when Levee turns on Toledo. The issue once again takes center stage in *King Hedley II* (2001), Wilson's 1980's play and arguably his darkest, a story of murder in the crumbling community of the Hill. In *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney*, set in the 1960's and 1970's, respectively, various characters vow to fight back against the destruction of their environment. *Two Trains* ends with Memphis Lee selling his restaurant yet vowing to rebuild. Sadly, the reference to his character in *Jitney* suggests

failure: what remains of Memphis is a boarded-up building. Like Memphis, *Jitney's* Becker, owner of the cab company where the play is set, insists that he is “gonna run jitneys out of here till the day before the bulldozers come” (85). However, Becker’s hope does not seem grounded in reality when taken in the context of Wilson’s full cycle. By the time we get to *Hedley*, the characters seem as beaten down as their surroundings.

Hedley's appearance on Broadway in 2001 was met with less praise--and fewer ticket sales--than previous Wilson productions. While the *New York Times*' Ben Brantley praised some of the long monologues--calling them “operatic arias” which offer “a stirringly musical version of public crisis and private pain”--he also deemed the plot “not always easy to understand or, when you do understand it, even credible.” (Brantley, *Hedley* review). Whereas the endings of other Wilson plays about family, such as *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, crystallize into moments of family connection, *Hedley's* resolution is one of disarray, a moment of shocking inter-family violence that simultaneously expands the notion of family beyond what is usually seen in Wilson’s work. Wilson describes the play as less about “a breakdown of the family” than “a break with the tradition of the extended family” (Boyd 237). With broken homes and fathers jailed or murdered at young ages, family lineage becomes disconnected. Wilson argues, “In order to understand who you are, you have to understand your immediate ancestors. You’ve got to make this connection with your recent past in order to understand the present and then to plot the future” (Boyd 237). The play’s mix of pessimism and hope is jarring, its ending is arguably muddled, and the overall bleak vision of community decay is perhaps not what Broadway audiences were expecting. As the decades change in Wilson’s cycle, so does the music, and *Hedley's* audience was greeted by rap music, with

the play incorporating songs such as Ice Cube's "The Wrong Nigger to Fuck With." The blues was the bedrock of Wilson's early drama, a kind of "language," a *lieux de memoire* that keeps his African-American characters connected to tradition. By removing this framework of shared meaning, Wilson further emphasizes the rootlessness of the urban environment, making it hard for viewers to gain a foothold in this forbidding setting, one which is far less welcoming than Seth's comfortable boardinghouse kitchen in *Joe Turner* or Aunt Ester's parlor in *Gem*.

In *King Hedley II*, Wilson revisits some of the characters from *Seven Guitars*, which is set in the 1940's. The vibrant backyard setting of the earlier play--with its "small garden" and card tables--has given way to a decaying row of houses, one missing, with the "vacant lot" providing a sightline to buildings across the way where "a faded portrait of Willie Mays" still advertises Alsaga Syrup and gives the audience a sense of the communal pride that once existed there (180). In the prologue, we meet Stool Pigeon, who in his late sixties has become a kind of neighborhood historian attempting to preserve fading community memories. He begins by invoking "language," the idea of God's voice sounding a warning to the people: "Everything done got broke up. Pieces flying everywhere. Look like it's gonna be broke up some more before it get whole again. If it ever do...The people don't know but God's gonna tell it. He gonna tell it in a loud voice" (181). Stool Pigeon's speech moves quickly from God to Aunt Ester, who has "got the wisdom...She got the Book of Life" (181). Aunt Ester is clearly equated with God here, possessing the Book of Life. Harry Elam examines the role of Christianity in Stool Pigeon's prayers, which begin and end the play, writing that Stool Pigeon's conception of God is not of the traditional Christian God, always seen as

problematic in Wilson's plays, but rather as one "who gravitates to the particular needs of black people" (214). Aunt Ester is the spiritual center of the people. She speaks a "language" of connection and healing.

As *King Hedley* opens, however, Aunt Ester has just passed away. In his introduction, Wilson writes that "the wisdom and tradition she [Ester] embodies are valuable tools...for exposing all the places it [society] is lacking in virtue" (175). Stool Pigeon believes that Ester died of "grief," ashamed at the decline of the African-American community, and indeed the play suggests that without Ester's spiritual guidance the community will continue its decline into disrepair and disregard for the value of human life. Her absence haunts this play, and also *Radio Golf*, the last play of Wilson's cycle. Yet, in Wilson's world, "cultural memory" cannot be completely lost and will always carry on in some fashion, be it the physical manifestation of *Gem*'s Citizen Barlow donning the clothes of his predecessor to complete a mission, or the more spiritual transmission of cultural memory passed along through remembrance of the Middle Passage. *Hedley* begins with Stool Pigeon reporting that "the path to her [Ester's] door is all grown over with weeds, you can't hardly find her door no more...The people need to know the story. See how they fit into it. See what part they play" (181). Stool Pigeon's "story" seems to single out a particularly African-American history, one often lost or overshadowed but recoverable through community storytelling and memory. The title character, King, attempts to find his "part" in the world as, on the verge of fatherhood, he begins to think more deeply about the man's life he once took away and the son left behind. Although King took someone out of the world, his hope lies in a future son of his own.

King's name itself is telling. Despite his many flaws, we are meant to see in him a kind of nobility, albeit a nobility hopelessly stifled by his surroundings. He "strives to live by his own moral code," Wilson writes in the stage directions (180), but morality of any traditional sort is hard to come by in this 1980's world of inter-city black-on-black violence. King spent seven years in prison for killing a man who called him "champ"-- "I ain't gonna be nobody's champ today" (232)--which he originally sees as reasonable justification for his behavior. King's life is paralleled by the elder Hedley, the man he believes to be his father. This original Hedley also killed someone for a similar reason: in *Seven Guitars*, Hedley says of the man he killed: "He would not call me King. He laughed to think a black man could be King. I did not want to lose my name..." (67). Yet he too finds solace in the thought of a son: "And maybe my child, if it be a boy, he would be big like Moses" (68). The Biblical notion is fascinating, but King Hedley II is hardly a leader of the people. In fact, he suffers from the flaw of characters such as Levee and Troy, who cut themselves off from their community. Hedley II considers himself invulnerable and initially fails to understand how his actions affect the world he lives in. "I set me out a little circle," King says, early in the play, "and anything come inside my circle I say what happen and don't happen" (202). Stool Pigeon calmly reminds King, "What if you in somebody else's circle and you don't know it" (203). Once again, Stool Pigeon is the voice of "interconnection," running counter to Hedley's notion of a life that excludes anyone outside his own bloodline.

King, explaining the murder he committed, says that "Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root" (238). Ideas of "growth" are prominent throughout the work, represented literally in King's continuing efforts to start a garden in his yard, which

he seems to view as a kind of atonement for his past: he will bring new life into the world with his garden and a son on the way. King's overriding desire is to leave something behind, to "Let everyone know I was here. You got King Hedley II and then you got King Hedley III" (238). King hopes for "surrogation," in this case the natural succession from father to son, which is sometimes imagined, Roach writes, "as a stately procession, as an everlasting club whose members succeed one another as if in a parade" (122). Indeed, King takes great pride in carrying on the traditions of his supposed father and is enraged by his wife's threats to abort their child. Les Gutman's review of the play makes an interesting comparison of Hedley II to Hamlet: although Hedley II, unlike the melancholy Dane, never sees the ghost of his father, the first Hedley *is* always with him, dictating his behavior. As Avery Gordon writes, a ghost "is primarily a symptom of what is missing...What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope" (63-64). Not only is Hedley haunted by the absence of his father, he is haunted too by an absence that is yet to come if Tonya aborts their child. Tonya's long monologue in Act I is singled out by Ben Brantley as one of the play's key moments, illustrating a thought process that moves from "self-centeredness to an ever-widening connective empathy" (1). The phrase perfectly illustrates my argument throughout this study: Wilson's successful characters--*Joe Turner's* Loomis and *Gem of the Ocean's* Barlow among them--move from a focus on their own problems and isolation to a desire to better their community. Tonya's decision, however, reflects a hopeless vision of the future that prevents forward progress. "Why I want to bring another life into this world that don't respect life?" she asks (205). Hedley's mother, Ruby, corrects the error of

Tonya's thinking, explaining that she had once considered aborting King, only to be talked out of it by Aunt Ester, who told her that King was especially favored by God. "That's what I'm telling you about that baby you carrying. You never know what God have planned" (207). Once again we see the idea of "surrogation" in Ruby suggestion that King's future child might carry on his legacy.

As the play ends, we begin to understand why Hedley II was singled out as important. His death will help to resurrect the memory of Aunt Ester. In the final moments of the play, Hedley is forced to confront the fact that his real father was a man named Leroy Slater, Jr, a fact that Hedley comes to believe but still rejects: "...we straight on that. But see...my name ain't Leroy Slater, Jr. My name is King Hedley II" (248). King attempts to kill Elmore, his mother's occasional lover and the man who murdered his real father, but he is unable to go through with it. At this moment, Ruby rushes into the scene, shooting and killing her own son in a complex resolution of death and resurrection imagery that deserves an in-depth exploration here. When Ruby shoots King, his blood spills onto a site in the garden where Stool Pigeon is attempting to resurrect Aunt Ester, or at least her spirit, by burying Ester's dead cat. King proves an unexpected "sacrifice," with his blood seeming to aid in the resurrection of Ester's spirit.

The final lines of the play belong to Stool Pigeon, in a mysterious prayer that invokes this notion of sacrifice: "Told Abraham you wanted Isaac / Say I want your best!" (251). If Ester is a kind of "God-like" figure in the plays, all-knowing, a mother to all the characters, then Hedley has become a Christ-figure here, dying so that she may be remembered. The prayer too reveals a vision of a very traditional Old Testament-style God, albeit one tailored to the African-American community. This God is "a bad

motherfucker,” as Stool Pigeon calls Him (251), who will seek vengeance on an African-American community increasingly losing sight of its history. Stool Pigeon’s words and King’s death seem to prove successful, on some level, at restoring Ester’s presence: the power of language here, in its invocation of the past, can restore a physical absence in the present. Wilson’s final stage direction indicates: “As the lights go down on the scene, a cat’s meow is heard” (252). The suggestion is of “rebirth”--not of Ester in any human physical incarnation but at least of spirit, hope for the future. Avery Gordon speaks of “social memory” in the work of Toni Morrison: “...social memory is not just history, but haunting: not just context, but animated worldliness; not just the hard ground of infrastructural matters, but the shadowy grip of ghostly matters” (165-66). In Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gordon writes, the title character, who has returned from beyond in a physical form, needs “to be remembered and accommodated,” which are needs “inseparable from the needs of the living” (179). Ultimately, *Beloved* must be exorcised because in Morrison’s work, according to Gordon, “to remain haunted is to remain partial to the dead or the deadly and not to the living” (182). Aunt Ester’s spirit, however, seems a *necessary* haunting in *Wilson*. A woman believed by *Wilson*’s characters to have lived for centuries, she too needs to be “remembered and accommodated.” With any luck, and with the help of community voices like Stool Pigeon’s, she will be. Therefore, even in her physical absence, Ester will remain a presence that lingers over the landscape of the Hill though her bodily existence has finally run its course.

...

Homebody/Kabul, written before the 9/11 attacks and first performed just after, in December of 2001, uses modern Afghanistan to examine ideas of isolation and the

difficulties of connection on an international scale, suggesting that Western culture as a whole has a troubling history of denying the interdependence that should link us with the world community. In his Afterword to the play, which, unlike the play itself, *was* written after 9/11, Kushner suggests that we

ought to wonder about the policy, so recently popular with the American right, that whole countries or regions can be cordoned off and summarily tossed out of the international community's considerations, subjected to sanction, and refused assistance by the world's powers, a policy that helped blind our government to geopolitical reality, to say nothing of ethical accountability and moral responsibility (144-45).

James Reston, Jr.'s *American Theatre* essay on the play points out the ways that the United States has historically used Afghanistan as a political tool to further American self-interest: "Afghanistan was used as an instrument to topple the Soviet Union and end the Cold War, and then the instrument was discarded. The CIA funded the Taliban secretly through Pakistan, exploiting her land as a buffer for Iran, against whom the U.S. was still trying to settle a 20-year-old score" (53). Reston calls the play a work for those "who can bear to contemplate the thought that we have participated to some extent in our tragedy" (53), and indeed the play works as a critique of the West's denial of its responsibilities as part of a world community. After being constantly pressed to "explain" the play after the 9/11 attacks, the first sentence of Kushner's statement calls it a play "about Afghanistan and the West's historic and contemporary relation to that country" (Afterword 142). Structurally, the play works its way toward this larger critique through an examination of the lives of a number of isolated characters, beginning with a

lengthy but extremely powerful monologue by an unhappy London housewife Kushner calls the Homebody. The work began, in fact, as *only* this monologue, performed as a staged reading by Kika Markham in London's Chelsea Theatre in 1997 and as a full production there two years later, again starring Markham.

The deep-rooted disconnection of the Homebody is quickly made apparent. As we meet the character, she has become quite taken with the history of Afghanistan as understood through an outdated travel guidebook. The Homebody speaks of her strange devotion to such outdated materials: "I invariably seek out not the source but all that was dropped by the wayside on the way to the source..." (9). Her behavior can be seen as simultaneously an avoidance of the present moment *and* a way of feeling she has some control over history. History, approached in the Homebody's fashion, has a stopping point: it exists safely in the past. The Homebody acknowledges throughout her monologue her own frustrating lack of involvement with life, but she still likes the idea of "knowing what was known before the more that has since become known" (10). Nora speaks of the idea of "the acceleration of history," which denotes an "increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear" (7). For Wilson and Kushner, of course, the past is *never* safely in the past but is constantly informing the present moment. Yet such a vision of history as something that is already said and done, safely recorded, is a way for the Homebody to distance herself from the *present*, with its increasingly dismaying historical circumstances. "The Present," she says, "is always an awful place to be. And it remains awful to us, the scene of our crime, the place of our shame" (11). So estranged is she from the world that she has even developed, in a sense, her own

language. She “basks in language,” James Fisher writes, “it is her only friend” (198). In describing her way of speaking, the Homebody says, “I speak...I can’t help myself. Elliptically. Discursively. I’ve read too many books...exceeding I think my capacity for synchresis--is that a word?--straying rather in synchisis, which is a word...My parents don’t speak like this; no one I know does; no one does” (12-13). The Homebody’s sentences do have a jumbled, confused structure perhaps similar to “synchisis,” the Greek grammatical term for such language, but what the Homebody truly seeks is “syncretism,” a means of reconciling seemingly opposed belief systems, which is what she is almost certainly thinking of with her term “synchresis.” An inability to accomplish this “syncretism” has always been, of course, a major factor in the world’s divisiveness. The Homebody attempts to find a way of reconciling Western ways and beliefs with those of Afghanistan and other “exotic locales,” which she describes as cultures of “magic” prior to being “touched” by Western ways, “before colonization and the savage stripping away of such beliefs” (10). She speaks of craftsmen who believed that wood was a “favored nesting place of a certain animus or anima possessed of powers released, enlisted in beneficent ways toward beneficent ends” (10). Western culture--or specifically the dominant white culture to which she belongs--has no room for such beliefs. Yet the Homebody longs for a world in which the “magical” is closer at hand.

The Homebody’s monologue goes on to relate her one such experience that took her out of the realm of the everyday and into the world of the magical. Months prior, she ventured into a small shop in London in search of “festive hats” for a party (14). Strangely, the Homebody never reveals the name of the street where the hats were found, but each time “makes a wide, sweeping gesture in the air with her right hand, from left to

right” (Notes). The experience, Kushner suggests, is one of those moments that stand outside of the standard flow of history, a moment where understanding and connection between cultures can become possible, at least for a brief time. It is fair to say that the Homebody is “haunted” by the past, and her strange experience within the shop, run by Afghan refugees, can be read as a moment when the past manifests itself to the Homebody, even possesses her, in a fashion. Kathleen Brogan writes that “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of a feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). The Homebody’s seemingly simple business transaction with the Afghan shopkeeper becomes a moment of transformation for her character. As she makes her purchase, she guesses the shopkeeper to be close to her own age and notices that he is missing three fingers on his right hand and his skin is “broken by webs of lines inscribed by hardships...battle scars, perhaps, well certainly the marks of some battle, some life unimaginably more difficult than my own” (23). Here again is the idea of the marked, or scarred, body, prominent in both Kushner and Wilson. The man’s scars align him with a community of the oppressed, whereas the Homebody remains, as she puts it later in the monologue, “safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching others perishing in the sea, wringing her plump little maternal hands, oh, oh. Never joining the drowning. Her feet neither rooted nor moving” (28). Yet in this moment there *is* “movement,” at least an imaginative connection across cultural boundaries. Her “borders” are “breached,” according to the Homebody, using common Kushner terms. She finds herself--or imagines herself--bizarrely, suddenly “able to speak perfect Pushtu” (23). The idea of language is a central

concern of the play, becoming even more prominent in the later *Kabul* section, which employs the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel in service of the idea that, as Martha Lavey puts it in her foreword to the play, “Humankind is burdened by the need to express a common condition but without a common language to do so” (xi). As the Homebody speaks Pushtu, she experiences a brief moment of connection, the sharing of a common language in the kind of mystical moment common in Kushner’s work, somewhat akin to characters who are strangers invading each others’ dreams in *Angels in America*. The shopkeeper tells the Homebody how he “was with the Mujahideen, and the Russians did this” (24). He begs for salvation “from God, from war, from exile, from oil exploration, from no oil exploration, from the West...” (24). The conversation then gives way to a fantasy in which the Homebody imagines leaving the shop and finding herself and the shopkeeper suddenly in the beautiful Kabul of her outdated guidebook. As she and the shopkeeper make love, “...he places his hand inside me, it seems to me his whole hand inside me, and it seems to me a whole hand” (26). In this moment of fantasy, the Homebody, our symbol of the West, seems to merge with the oppressed East, and in so doing *heals* what has been destroyed, as the hand seems “whole” again: absence becomes presence, a physical manifestation. The moment suggests that communication between cultures can help “heal” oppression of the kind the shopkeeper has experienced. Outside the “common language” of this rare moment of interconnection, however, the language of Western culture remains one of domination and economic advantage.

The Homebody is quite willing to admit her own failure, her own “culpability” in the world’s inaction:

We all romp about grieving, wondering, but with rare exception we

remain suspended in the Rhetorical Colloidal Forever that agglutinates between Might and Do...Awful times, as I have said, our individual degrees of culpability for said awfulness being entirely bound-up in our correspondent degrees of action, malevolent or not, or in our correspondent degrees of inertia, which can be taken as a form of malevolent action if you've a mind to see it that way. I do. I've such a mind (24).

As her monologue ends, the Homebody contemplates her own isolation, both from her family and from the world outside the confines of her kitchen. She speaks of withholding her "touch" from her daughter because, in the mind of the Homebody, connection leads to "corruption" (28). Yet her strange encounter with the shopkeeper has sparked a need for connection that is perhaps stronger than her fears. The Homebody wants to leave her kitchen, to visit Afghanistan, "a country so at the heart of the world the world has forgotten it, where one might seek in submission the unanswered need" (28). Nora, examining the connection between past and present, writes that "we owe our historical overview to a panoramic distance, and our artificial hyper-realization of the past to a definitive estrangement...Returning across the threshold...one finds oneself in the old abode, now uninhabited and practically unrecognizable...in the same rooms, but under another light" (18). Having bridged the distance between past and present through a sort of dream-memory of a time of interconnection, the Homebody imagines she can accomplish this sort of connection in the real world. In Nora's view, as we imagine the past in light of the present, "it is difference that we are seeking, and in the image of this difference, the ephemeral spectacle of an unrecoverable identity" (17-18). This recalls

the Homebody's description of her own "unanswered need" that might be met in the "forgotten" world of Afghanistan. In Kushner's world, we can see this "need" as a search for a common humanity, which is missing in the Homebody's world. In holding itself apart from or above the international community, the West has unwittingly exiled itself, but we can read the Homebody's attempt as one to break away from the individualistic values that have infected her noble search. We do not see the Homebody again in the *Kabul* section--likely she is dead; her search ending in failure--yet her absence haunts the second part of the play and her "unanswered need" seeps into the characters who search for her.

...

Wilson's cycle begins and ends with a house. This is 1839 Wylie, the home of Aunt Ester. As *Gem of the Ocean* begins, in 1904, the house is full of life, a sanctuary for members of the community seeking spiritual guidance. As the cycle ends, in 1997, with *Radio Golf* (2007), Ester has recently died and her house is slated for destruction in a real-estate project led by Harmond Wilks. In the story of the house alone, one can see the history of African-American community--still potentially a vital force, often neglected, often under attack. The play, with its focus on the particulars of a changing urban landscape, explores in concrete terms the challenge of preserving African-American history in a culture that often attempts to move ahead by forgetting its painful past. Interestingly, the idea is explored in a strikingly similar fashion in Thomas Gibbons's *A House With No Walls* (2007), the last play in Gibbons's trilogy of plays about race. Like *Radio Golf*, *House* centers around issues of urban renewal as a conflict erupts in the African-American community over a real-life renovation project: the 2002

construction in Philadelphia of a “Liberty Bell Center” on the grounds of the former presidential home and slave quarters. The memorial, meant to be a celebration of American freedom, was set to open with no mention of the specific legacy of its slave history until protests within the African-American community led to an agreement to honor the memory of the slaves who once lived on the site. Wilson’s *Radio Golf*, through the character of Harmond Wilks, shows us the potential birth of a similar protest movement as Harmond comes to recognize the damage he is doing within his community.

As revealed in Wilson’s comments that open this chapter, we are in a new world with *Radio Golf*, the black middle class, a world with a language far different than the rest of the cycle, which has reverberated with the black vernacular of the mostly lower class residents of the Hill. The absence of the vernacular makes an important point, though it may have affected the reception by audiences and certain critics who have come to expect a Wilson play to *sound* a certain way. As Ben Brantley notes in his review, “The surprising, antiseptic sting... is deliberate...Mr. Wilson intends for at least three of the characters to sound as out of place as they do” (Brantley, *Radio Golf* review). “They are people who have lost their natural voices,” Brantley writes. “In Mr. Wilson’s world, that’s the same thing as losing their soul” (1). For Wilson, this shift in language is indeed a loss of the “mother tongue,” to return to *Kabul*’s metaphor. Wilson is not opposed to black success in business, of course, but rather the fact that such success often dictates a rejection of the history that holds the community together.

Much of the play centers around the interaction of two characters: Harmond, a “well placed local leader” (88) on the verge of a mayoral campaign that will largely

depend on the success of his company's urban-renewal project, and his business partner and old friend, Roosevelt Hicks. We see from the start that Harmond, unlike Roosevelt, maintains some respect for local history. He wants, for instance, to name his project's health center after Sarah Degree, "the first black registered nurse in the city. Naming it after her fits perfectly" (89). When his wife points out that "Nobody knows who Sarah Degree was," Harmond responds with "That's why the Health Center needs to be named after her. So we remember" (89). This early reference to "memory" reveals an erroneous understanding on Harmond's part that will be "corrected," to some extent, as the play progresses. While his goal is noble, his attitude reflects the modern mentality that cultural memory only exists if it is clearly marked and labeled as such. Nora writes that modern societies struggle "not only to keep everything, to preserve every indicator of memory--even when we are not sure which memory is being indicated--but also to produce archives" (14). This effort, Nora says, is "a new consciousness, the clearest expression of the terrorism of historicized memory" (14). Nora *does* believe that "without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them [sites of memory] away" (12), yet Harmond's effort to construct a *lieux de memoire* by renaming the building feels somehow false, whereas his developing understanding of the importance of Ester's house as a site of memory feels genuine. The problem with Harmond, early on, is that, while he may have a healthy respect for the past and future, he is so caught up in mayoral platitudes--"We need to find our way back to the time when Americans respected each other" (96)--that he is blind to both the real truth behind his sentiments and the effects of his actions on the present moment. When Harmond first learns that his housing and retail project will involve the destruction of one of the neighborhood's old

houses, 1839 Wylie, now abandoned for a decade, he experiences *no* recognition that this location is Aunt Ester's house, suggesting that, despite the supposed resurrection we witnessed at the end of *Hedley*, the once-pervasive spiritual influence of the Hill's former resident has continued to disappear in the 1990's. However, when Old Joe Barlow, who claims to hold the deed to the house, shows up, Harmond slowly arrives at an understanding of its importance.

Old Joe, a descendent of *Gem's* Citizen Barlow, stands in stark contrast to Harmond. Joe is rooted in an African sense of spirituality, explaining to Harmond how people today "forgot how to call on God. I seen the people call God down. They don't do that much no more" (95). The reference recalls Stool Pigeon's invocation at the end of *Hedley* and seems less akin to any Christian conception of God than it does to the African notion of the power of ancestral spirits living side-by-side with the present moment. Harmond seems to have largely cut himself off from thoughts of family after the painful loss of his twin brother, Raymond, in Vietnam. However, upon learning that his own father had been paying taxes for Aunt Ester's house, Harmond is forced to reconsider notions of familial responsibility that take on an unexpected meaning at the end of the play. As certain members of the community begin to rally to save the house, organizing a painting party, Harmond pays 1839 Wylie a visit of his own and returns with an entirely different conception of the place and its historic value. "You should feel the woodwork," he tells Roosevelt. "If you run your hand over some of the wood you can make out these carvings. There's faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there's this smell in the air...The air in the house smells sweet like a new day" (103). These are essential lines. Like the piano from Wilson's 1930's play, *The Piano Lesson*,

with its ancestral carvings, Aunt Ester's house too is surely a *lieux de memoire*, forever retaining the wisdom of the spiritual "mother" of all Wilson's African-American characters. The play never reveals exactly what is carved into the woodwork of Aunt Ester's house. The possibility exists that the carvings exist only in Harmond's imagination. Yet this is enough. Harmond reconnects with the "old language," finding his lost bond with African-American community, reminiscent of characters such as Loomis, who rediscover their "song."

Harmond not only reconnects in this spiritual fashion but also finds a *physical* bond to community as well, one that ties him more firmly to the present: he discovers that he and Old Joe are cousins. Unlike the moment of family discovery in *Hedley*, with King resisting the truth, Harmond embraces this newfound, extended family connection. Wilson lets the moment play out quietly, in the middle of Act II. The two men, Harmond and Old Joe, at first unsure they are related, simultaneously write down the name of their shared ancestor. Reading the common name, Harmond intones: "Henry Samuels" (104). As in the climax of *The Piano Lesson*, when Berniece calls on her ancestors to exorcise the spirit of Sutter, we can see this too as a summoning of spiritual assistance, of "cultural memory" which may not extend as far back as Aunt Ester but which brings to mind again Wilson's comments on the necessity of *extended* family as a prerequisite to understanding the power of one's ancestors. From this point on, Harmond is determined to save 1839 Wylie, redesigning plans so as to build the retail/apartment space *around* the house, a plan that cannot be comprehended by his business partner.

The odd title of the play arises from this character of Roosevelt Wilks, whose worldview illustrates Wilson's bleak view of the African-American community's future.

Roosevelt is obsessed with golf, which he associates with the wealth of the dominant white society. Playing golf allows him to feel as if he can become a part of a world of power. Describing the first time he hit a golf ball he says, “I felt like the world was open to me...That was the best feeling of my life...You don’t have to hide and crawl under a rock just ‘cause you black” (90-91) Roosevelt has started a training camp to help young kids discover the same feeling, but what he is really doing, in Wilson’s eyes, is drifting further and further away from his own history. The fading portrait of Willie Mays that looms over the *Hedley* set is replaced in *Radio Golf* by a portrait of Tiger Woods, as if to suggest the kind of assimilationist attitude embodied by Roosevelt. In the course of the play, Roosevelt becomes a partner with a white businessman in buying a radio station, where he hosts a program called “Radio Golf.” “The seller of the station gets to defer a large portion of his capital-gains taxes by taking advantage of the FCC’s Minority Tax Certificate,” Roosevelt explains to Harmon, who accuses him of being the “black face...the front” (97). Roosevelt recognizes his own exploitation but feels it is worth the trade: “This is business. This is the way it’s done in America...I don’t care if somebody else makes some money ‘cause of a tax break. I get mine and they get theirs” (98). Roosevelt accepts himself as a pawn in the system. Instead of trying to gain economic leverage within the black community, he relies on the dominant society to help him progress.

As the play nears its resolution, Roosevelt, infuriated by Harmond’s attempts to save 1839 Wylie, attempts to “force a buyout” with the help of Bernie Smith. Harmond rails at Roosevelt: “...he’s using you to get half a stake in a prime redevelopment site that’s being funded by the federal government. But he still needs minority involvement.

He still needs a black face on the enterprise...Enter Roosevelt Hicks. The shuffling, grinning nigger in the woodpile...After he rolls over and puts his pants back on, what you got?" (108). The lines recall almost exactly Ma Rainey's description of herself as a prostitute exploited by the music industry. Seventy year later, Wilson shows, the exploitation lingers as the black community sells itself for financial gain at the expense of its own history. The ending of the play is somewhat ambiguous. Almost certainly the house is going to be torn down, as Harmond himself acknowledges, but his ownership of the Realty office allows him to eject Roosevelt from the premises. In a nice comic touch, Harmond makes him take along the poster of Tiger Woods. The lights go down on Harmond exiting the stage with a paintbrush, aligning himself with a community that may be fighting a losing battle with 1839 Wylie but recognizes the struggle as part of a larger battle. Wilson's final bit of play directions dictate that " 'Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here' is heard as the lights go down on the scene" (108). The tune--sung by Harmond and Roosevelt early in the play--takes on a decidedly different meaning here, as Harmond prepares to join the painting party at Aunt Ester's house. Fittingly, Wilson's cycle ends on this song of collective action. Having spent years putting himself ahead of his community--ahead of his "family"--Harmond is ready to reconnect. David Harvey, in his study of utopian communities and of the continuing decline of urban communities, writes:

When...we contemplate our urban futures we must always do battle with a wide range of emotive and symbolic meanings that both inform and muddle our sense of the 'nature of our task.' As we collectively produce our cities, so we collectively produce ourselves. Projects concerning what

we want our cities to be are, therefore, projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or, perhaps even more pertinently, who we do not want to become (159).

In Wilson's eyes, "urban renewal" projects such as Harmond's only contribute to a lack of respect for community history and often result in the physical destruction of the landscape. Wilson tells Suzan-Lori Parks that Americans have adopted "materialistic values at the expense of more human values" (24). *Radio Golf*, bleak in many ways, is nonetheless an appropriate end to Wilson's cycle in its suggestion of a common humanity beneath the decline of community at the end of the twentieth century.

...

The second part of Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* takes us into a very different urban wasteland: Afghanistan, 1998, just after President Clinton's bombing of several suspected terrorist training camps. If the hour-long monologue that is the *Homebody* section of the play is marked by a physical *presence*--the ceaseless talk of the lonely London housewife who calls herself the Homebody--then the *Kabul* section is marked by a physical *absence*--the Homebody has disappeared into Afghanistan, possibly killed, her body lost and likely dismembered. Roach explores how violence can be "a form of cultural expression that goes beyond the utilitarian practices necessary to physical survival" (41). Whether real or symbolic, violent "performance," or the "performance of waste," as Roach terms such acts, "sustains the community with the comforting fiction that real borders exist and troubles it with the spectacle of their immolation" (41). This notion of boundaries, of "borders," is common in Kushner, as we have seen. Whereas the borders in *Bright Room* are ultimately porous, *Kabul* shows us a world where borders

cannot always be breached: characters remain strangers to each other, unable to communicate.

In the opening monologue, the Homebody refers to herself as a “tourist” in her own life, and Marthey Lavey describes the play as “an investigation--set in the language of contemporary politics--into how we might find the bridge, how we might become a traveler across our boundaries (instead of a tourist)” (xi). Yet the Homebody seems to have arrived in Afghanistan literally resembling the stereotypical tourist: one of the explanations offered for her death is that she has literally been torn apart by a mob angered by her roaming the streets with her face uncovered, listening to Frank Sinatra on her Walkman. Such a death--if in fact she has been killed--can be seen as a harsh reminder of the perhaps unbreachable borders between East and West. The Homebody’s disappearance is never solved, but her absence haunts the play, building to a moment near the end in which her presence is felt by her daughter in a manner akin to Agnes’ spirit impinging on Zillah in *Bright Room*. Avery Gordon writes that “Haunting always harbors the violence, the denial...that made it, and the *exile of our longing*, the utopian” (207). The Homebody, even while recognizing the disarray of the present, held fast to a desire for a way to heal broken borders. Kushner holds a similar hope

Kushner’s play, both parts, is perhaps best viewed as a play about “language,” a force meant for connection but which just as often functions as a divisive and dangerous tool. Late in the play, Khwaja, an Afghan guide and poet, summarizes one of his poems:

It is about someone waiting in the garden; in the snow. She is an Angel--
perhaps she is Allah. She is our soul. Or she is our death. Her voice is

ravishing; and it is fatal to us. We may seek her, or spend our lives in flight from her. But always she is waiting in the garden. Speaking in a tongue which we were born speaking. And then forget (118).

The common bond of language seems not to exist in the modern world.: “A mother tongue,” Khwaja says, is a “language we must strive to learn again” (118). The comment recalls the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel: “The Lord did therefore confuse the language of the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of the earth” (Genesis 11:9). Martha Lavey’s insightful foreword to the play explores the Biblical allusion, which “envisions an original condition in which all people are one and positions their eventual division as a function of their secularism and hubris” (xi). This idea of disconnection is obviously in keeping with Kushner’s view of a contemporary world that has disintegrated into rival factions, denying common bonds. Lavey likens the Homebody’s opening monologue to a kind of “mother tongue” itself, “a sustained and virtuosic speech act...[which] moves to a field of speakers who invoke a variety of languages and codes” (x). This is an interesting comparison, and indeed can be seen as a kind of parallel to one language breaking into many, although we cannot ultimately read the Homebody’s manner of speech as one of “connection,” as she herself admits that her elaborate way of speaking distances herself from her family. The play works then, as both a study of a broken family and a broken world, and an inquiry into whether either can be healed.

As the *Kabul* section opens, Milton Ceiling and his daughter Priscilla have traveled to Afghanistan in search of the Homebody, who has mysteriously abandoned her family and disappeared. Priscilla, who refuses to believe her mother is dead, embarks on

a search for the Homebody and encounters, instead, Mahala, an Afghan librarian who has lived her life in the shadows of the Taliban. Driven to near madness by the Taliban regime, whose oppression has led many of her friends and relatives to commit suicide, Mahala is, as James Fisher points out, strikingly similar to the Homebody in that she “reveres language and books” and is “a woman of intellect and dignity” (196). Catherine Stevenson’s work on Kushner’s “mother-figures” argues that “the mother had to erase herself in order for the child to become part of the world again” (772). Indeed, Priscilla’s search for her mother and her relationship with Mahala become the emotional center of the play. Gordon, considering the idea of “haunting,” also explores terrorist regimes in which people are “disappeared”--killed or kidnapped--and the ways that their memory lingers on in loved ones, especially mothers, who begin to make “a special contact with loss and with what was missing but overwhelmingly present” (112). The disappearance of the Homebody is somewhat different from such “disappearances,” of course, yet we can see in Priscilla’s search a kind of reworking of Avery’s phenomenon in which the *daughter*, more than anyone, feels the loss of the *mother*. In fact, the Homebody seems more real to Priscilla when she is gone than she ever did at home in London. “Disappearance,” Gordon writes, “is a complex system of repression, a thing in itself” (112), and certainly Priscilla’s efforts to find her mother seem to unlock both her repressed love for her mother and her guilt at aborting her own child in the past. In the lost child, we have yet another “disappearance,” an interesting similarity to the considered-abortion in *King Hedley*, both of which are symbolic of a pessimistic attitude toward the future, a lack of faith in progress. Gordon writes that the mothers of “disappeared” children understand “what it meant to be connected to the disappeared,

connected viscerally, connected through kinship, connected through a shared social experience” (112). Priscilla, daughter of a lost mother and mother of a lost daughter, experiences these absences from both perspectives, and while she does not find her mother, she does find a kind of surrogate mother-figure in Mahala.

Despite her early assertions in the play that “common humanity” is “crap, really,” (59), Priscilla seems to breach “borders” in the play in a way that her father--and mother--cannot. Milton works in computer networking, a language just as impenetrable to everyone as the Homebody’s self-manufactured language. Milton tries to explain to Mahala late in the play that he works with “energies, languages traverse a passing-through place, a, an...intersection” (127). Mahala sees such a notion of “intersection” in more human terms, referring to Afghanistan itself as an “intersection,” to which Milton readily agrees: “Oh. Yes...Armies, and gas pipelines and even Islam, communism, tribes, East and West, heroin, refugees, moving chaotically, and each is a language” (127). Yet to Milton this is all abstraction. He lives in the mind, escaping only through antidepressants and--while in Afghanistan--opium, which take him further away from bodily experience. He seems baffled when Mahala cries for “Poor Afghanistan” (128). Although he has lost a wife, Milton never seems to feel the human loss all around him. His grief seems tied more to a perceived symbolic loss of human connection --“Jesus Christ. I am unmarried” (42)--than it does to the grief of palpable human absence. Milton himself is noticeably absent from the play’s final scene, the true moment of “surrogation” in which Mahala is rescued from the oppression of her country and takes the place of the Homebody in London.²⁰ Like Joe Pitt in *Angels*, also absent from that

²⁰ Kushner leaves the truth of the Homebody’s disappearance a mystery. While certain authorities in the play insist she is dead, the body misplaced, another theory is that the Homebody is alive and married to

play's final vision of family and community, Milton remains a stranger to others and to himself. We do not see him again after the Afghanistan scenes.

As the play closes, Priscilla and Mahala speak in the kitchen, months after their return to London. Priscilla is now living away from home, but she returns to the house because it makes her feel closer to her mother: "In this house, I knew...I could hear her still," Priscilla tells Mahala (139). The reference suggests a supernatural element, and we get the sense, in the final scene, that Mahala herself has been inspired by the lingering presence of the Homebody, much as Zillah in *Bright Room* is arguably inspired to fight for a better future through her spiritual contact with Agnes. Avery Gordon writes that "the oppressed past or the ghostly will shock us into recognizing its animating force" (66). Through such contact, the past can "come alive as the lever for the work of the present: obliterating the sources and conditions that link the violence of what seems finished with the present, ending this history and setting in place a different future" (Gordon 66). Mahala tells Priscilla that she has been reading the Homebody's books. Unlike the Homebody, however, who remained lost in a world of theory, feeling unconnected to her world, Mahala has begun making a home for herself, planting a garden, used here--as in Wilson's *Hedley*--as a complex symbol of rebirth. "A Garden shows us what may await us in Paradise," Mahala tells Priscilla, and the lines of course recall Khwaja's early explanation of his poem, a lady in a garden, someone who may be "our soul" or may be "our death." Roach writes of how "surrogation" "requires many trials and at least as many errors" (2), and while Kushner leaves Mahala's future deliberately ambiguous, we are surely meant to see her as bringing her culture--so often viewed as foreign and frightening--into the West, merging the two.

Mahala's former husband--a perfect act of substitution.

These cultures, Kushner suggests, cannot continue to stand in opposition to each other, but must recognize their common bonds: not language nor politics but something deeper, the kind of “common humanity” Priscilla has heretofore rejected. The play’s final line is mysterious, yet somewhat hopeful: “In the garden outside, I have planted all my dead,” says Mahala (140). While this might suggest, at first glance, leaving behind one’s past, one’s history, we know that this is never the answer in Kushner and Wilson. The notion of planting “the dead,” the past, suggests that our history will remain with us, side-by-side, a reminder of how to learn from past mistakes. Just as the spirit of Wilson’s Aunt Ester seems to re-emerge at the end of *Hedley* as an ever-present reminder of the importance of ancestry and community, so too will Mahala’s “dead”—presumably the friends and family lost in the oppressive Taliban regime—linger as a more ominous warning of the failure to understand common humanity. The play’s epilogue is called “Periplum,” a word the OED traces to Ezra Pound, who used it to refer to a view of land from the sea, a view, in a sense from the outside in²¹. One cannot understand the notion of interconnection from a perspective that refuses to look outside of one’s own culture.

...

With its premiere just after the events of September 11, 2001, *Homebody/Kabul*, according to Jacob Juntunen’s essay about the media perception of the play, was “the only dissenting voice in popular theatre” at the time (180). Such plays as David Hare’s 2004 *Stuff Happens*, which questions the post-9/11 path to the Iraq war, are now quite fashionable, but Kushner’s work was unique in its moment. As Jantenen says, the play “became an especially important site of resistance to the Bush administration hegemony

²¹ Pound uses the word repeatedly in the *Pisan Cantos* (LXXIV – LXXXIV), often in terms of a search for meaning.

because it allowed 188 people to come together nightly and experience an alternative view” (181). All of them, of course, were united by the fresh memory of 9/11, some of them no doubt with firsthand experience of the scene and everyone with myriad television images of the aftermath. “Modern memory,” Nora writes, “is, above all, archival,” dependent on “the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image” and drifting further from “true memory,” from “the body’s inherent self-knowledge” (13). The aftermath of 9/11, however, seemed to touch a chord of common humanity in many minds, somewhere beneath the immediate clamoring for revenge. Who is to say what was in the minds of the theatre audience during these productions, but it is fascinating, even inspiring, that audiences, traversing the real-life destruction of the city around them, paid their money to sit for more than three hours in a recreation of a desolated landscape that dared them not only to consider America’s complicity in terrorist behavior but their own inexorable drift away from interconnection. Perhaps only curiosity compelled the crowds for *Homebody/Kabul*, but I like to think that the largely liberal-minded theatre-going public became, at least for that time, a community willing to resist a dominant ideology. All of Kushner’s and Wilson’s work pose this difficult challenge to their audiences, but the plays examined in this chapter push even deeper, forcing audiences to understand their complicity in their own potential destruction if ways of thinking do not change toward a more interconnected means of viewing the world. In reference to the crumbling landscape of the Hill, Old Joe says, in *Radio Golf*, “They say if you live long enough the boat will turn around. Big boats turn slow but they turn nonetheless” (104). The comments suggest the great damage done by a dominant worldview at odds with the needs of minority groups but also reveal the hope that lingers even in the minds of the

oppressed. The world is seriously damaged, Wilson and Kushner tell us, but it is not too late to turn things around.

Conclusion

As I began this project, the most common reaction from others dealt with the seeming oddness of my combination of authors: Wilson and Kushner? Together? How do they fit? Yet positioning the two side-by-side has ultimately not only illuminated heretofore unexamined similarities in techniques and themes but also shed new light on theatre's capacity to not only *reflect* certain kinds of "community" but, in a sense, to *create* "community" as well.

Throughout this study, we have seen how "surrogation" helps fill a void within real-world communities which have experienced various losses: of community leaders, of values and beliefs. Aside from the *particulars* of the plays themselves, we can think of the work of Wilson and Kushner as a form of "surrogation" in itself. Both authors view contemporary America as a society that has lost various essential belief systems that create strong communities. For Wilson, this is an African-American community centered around an African-derived sensibility. His plays, all of which are fully informed by such a sensibility, help restore this lost worldview, at least for the duration of their running time. For Kushner, what is missing from the modern world is a sense of "interconnection" that can bond divergent cultural sensibilities within our borders as well as bond the increasingly disconnected United States to its international neighbors. For the duration of Kushner's plays, such interconnection is real.

"Community" as a term has had a recent resurgence in American culture, perhaps particularly after 9/11. Unfortunately, "community" is too often appropriated by politicians who play on the term's sense of comfort while ignoring the more important idea that "community" *should* be a means to an end, a coming together as a way of

strength and understanding. The term, too, is often used in discussions of theatre, as we have seen through numerous sources examined in these pages. Too often, however, a strange disconnect can be witnessed in such discussions. Critics speak of on-stage communities and the community of the audience, but sometimes neglect the “interconnection” of the two. My work here seeks to make this disconnect impossible, and my future--more performance-based--research will delve further into how specific stagings of these works shape the audience’s perception of the authors’ visions of community. In Chapter Four, my research into various stagings of Kushner’s *Angels* led me toward a need for a further, first-hand inquiry into the ways that these authors’ works are shaped by the particular cultural environments in which they are performed and the particular audiences who witness these performances. Wilson and Kushner strongly believe that political art can pave the way toward tangible societal change, and certainly the staging affects the reception. Kushner tells William Harris: “We must remember the role that art played in the early part of the century, the role that artists of the WPA played in shaping a support for a progressive agenda, and that many artists played in the birth of the Great Society programs of the 1960’s” (148). Wilson and Kushner hope to restore this role, but much also depends on those who bring their work to life on the stage.

After the loss of August Wilson in 2005, discussions of African-American theatre have often focused on his legacy. How will the process of “surrogation” work in this instance? Will other playwrights continue his political mission to explore and strengthen African-American community? Naturally, there are a number of important African-American theatre artists working in a similar tradition, chief among them Suzan-Lori Parks and Anna Deavere Smith. Yet contemporary African-American theatre is just as

often troubling, with such works as the extremely popular plays of Tyler Perry arguably contributing to the atmosphere of African-American stereotypes that pervades much of the mainstream African-American entertainment industry. Hope lies in the fact that there will surely be others like Wilson emerging in the future, playwrights intent on uncovering other lost cultural histories. A prime example is Philip Kan Gotanda whose theatrical exploration of the Japanese-American experience bridges the gap between Wilson and Kushner's intentions. Like Wilson, Gotanda's work often dramatizes a particular decade. In a recent *American Theatre* article, Gotanda is referred to as "the August Wilson of the Asian-American community," and he professes "the deepest respect" for Wilson's work:

He [Wilson] created strong individual works, but also an extraordinary body of work committed to the one task of showing us the life and soul of African Americans. He didn't compromise. Quite frankly, I don't think you can if you ever hope to dig as deep and go as far as August did. You literally have to keep putting your blood on the paper without entertaining notions of what it will bring tomorrow. If I can achieve an iota of what August did in his lifetime, then, hey, I could die a happy man." (qtd. in Hong)

Stylistically, through his use of multiple storylines and desire to bridge the gaps between diverse communities, Gotanda's work also resembles Kushner's *Angels* plays, with a strong emphasis on "interconnection." "*After the War* is a series of interlocking love stories that occur across races and cultures, so each relationship is fragile and fraught," Gotanda says of his new play (qtd. in Hong). Gotanda's work, influenced by Wilson, will surely give rise to similar theatrical explorations. "Surrogation," as Roach has

shown us, is a continuing process.

The theatre, as we have seen throughout this study, is a powerful means of resurrecting the past, allowing diverse audiences to see how the past lives and breathes within the present moment. My specific work with Wilson's and Kushner's use of the supernatural, along with studies of "cultural haunting" and ghosts by Avery Gordon, Kathleen Brogan, and David Savran, has sparked my interest in a more general consideration of how every performance can be considered as a sort of supernatural manifestation. Each night a world of fictional characters is made manifest for a limited time to deliver a message to an audience who will receive it an infinite number of ways. Each performance, Roach writes, consists of "joint transmissions, posted in the past, arriving in the present, delivered by living messengers, speaking in tongues not entirely their own" (286). I have long been fascinated by the idea of "play cycles," and considering such cycles in connection to ideas of "haunting" makes this already complex idea even more fascinating: playwrights resurrect characters from earlier works, showing audiences "surrogation" in process as these characters evolve, some of them passing away and leaving their descendents to carry on in later plays. Scholarship in the area of "play cycles" is more vital than ever now that Wilson's one-of-a-kind project is complete, his cycle of ten plays now available together and in chronological order.

What I hope that readers finally take away from my study is *not* simply a justification of the previously under-examined similarities of Wilson's and Kushner's work, but a sense of what contemporary, politically-minded theatre artists can accomplish through such means. As my research continues to expand into a more performance-based examination of these two playwrights and also branches out into a wider consideration of

other like-minded writers, I hope to break down barriers in my readers' thinking in such a way that we can view what may first seem like culturally distant authors as part of a united company of politically active writers taking on a society that is increasingly inactive and apathetic.

Kushner challenges such apathy head-on in his current work-in-progress, *Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*, as Laura Bush reads Dostoevsky to a group of dead Iraqi children. In the play, Kushner posits the Iraq War as a horribly misguided action, defended by Laura and many others long after it has become indefensible. Kushner's Laura understands the consequences of her actions: "I think there is guilt when a child dies even if the death was in a just cause, and one person's guilt is guilt for everyone..." (Kushner). The final, haunting, phrase-- "one person's guilt is guilt for everyone"--cuts to the heart of much of Kushner's and Wilson's work. As communities crumble and notions of interconnection continue to decline, *everyone* is implicated and the only solution is coming together in opposition to the problems.

In his 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin writes of the rise of Fascism that we live in a "state of emergency" which has become "not the exception but the rule" (257). "We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight," Benjamin advises (257). Wilson and Kushner certainly illuminate the "state of emergency" in which we now exist, and I hope my work has illuminated the "conception of history" that emerges in the plays of these two artists, which requires that memory keep the past alive at all times. "The quest for memory is the search for one's history," Nora states (13), and my journey through the work of these two playwrights has not only made me more aware of the often overshadowed history of

African-American, Jewish, and homosexual life but cognizant as well of my own interrelationship with the past. As my work moves beyond Kushner and Wilson into the larger community of politically-minded playwrights, I hope that the question which greets me is not “Why are we bringing together playwrights with such different sensibilities?” but rather “How can we afford not to?”

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