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Solipsistic Breakthroughs or Stymying Collectives? Historical Duels in August Wilson's *Radio Golf*

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Abstract

August Wilson's place among the most significant chroniclers of African American history through the medium of fictional dramatic narratives is certainly not in doubt. Wilson consummated this through a project to write a cycle of 10 plays, each representing a significant moment in every decade of African American experience during the 20th century. August Wilson's 10-play cycle constantly dramatises the historical crossroads at which African Americans have found themselves as they contemplate which path to take on a ceaseless quest to find prosperity and establish enduring identities of the self in post-emancipation America. Wilson's plays often set up duels between antagonistic forces that represent the conflict between retaining old ground and identities of the past and the imperative to break with the past and start afresh. Coming at the end of Wilson's 10-play cycle, *Radio Golf* most poignantly represents these historical duels in ways that are reminiscent of the crisis of consciousness that has persistently assailed African Americans in their quest to make the right choices during the 20th century. Following W.E.B. Du Bois, I argue that Wilson's *Radio Golf* also presents this duel as a form of "double consciousness" or crisis of consciousness that makes it difficult for African Americans to make an easy choice at these crossroads.

Keywords: August Wilson; *Radio Golf*; African American drama; black history; solipsism; crossroads; crisis of consciousness; memory

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Introduction

The place of the late African American playwright August Wilson in the annals of contemporary world drama and theatre is certainly without doubt. Wilson's place as one of the most significant muses on the history of African Americans through his use of the medium of fictional dramatic narratives that issue from lived history requires little introduction. The playwright consolidated this through the realisation of an ambitious project to write a 10-play cycle, with each of the plays representing a significant moment in the history of African Americans decade by decade during the 20th century.

What stands out in August Wilson's 10-play cycle (sometimes referred to as the Pittsburgh Cycle) is a constant dramatisation of the historical crossroads at which African Americans have found themselves as they contemplate which path to take on a ceaseless quest to find prosperity and establish enduring identities of the self in post-emancipation America. As Alan Nadel (1994) rightly observes, Wilson's plays often set up duels between antagonistic forces that represent the conflict between retaining old ground with its identities of the past and the imperative to break with that past by opening new ground and starting afresh. It is precisely these historical duels read in conjunction with social justice and concepts of the centrality of history and memory that this article explores. This article analyses *Radio Golf*, which comes last in the chronology of the cycle, focusing on the decade between 1990 and 2000. I argue that coming at the end of Wilson's 10-play cycle, *Radio Golf* most poignantly represents the notion of double consciousness and these historical duels in ways that are reminiscent of the crisis of consciousness that has persistently assailed African Americans in their quest to make the right choices during the 20th century. In *Radio Golf* this crisis of consciousness is represented by the incipient solipsism of the American Dream on the one hand, and a sense of responsibility to social justice, collective history and memory that could potentially stymie individual progress on the other. In philosophical discourses, the term solipsism presents the view that only one's mind or the self is certain to exist (Honderich 1995). As an epistemological position, solipsism propagates the view that knowledge of anything outside one's mind is uncertain and unsure. The external world cannot be known and might not exist outside of the self altogether. Therefore, I use the term solipsism to refer to a self-absorbing sense of the self predicated on the notion that one's immediate experience and wants have a fundamental self-certifying reality that precludes external interests and other realities.

Alan Nadel (1994) has made the significant point that for African Americans the difficulty in making a choice at these crossroads has been rendered more demanding given that African Americans are the children of a double diaspora—first from their ancestral origins in Africa to the United States' slave south, and later to the industrial conurbations of the United States' north-eastern seaboard in search of true freedom after 1865. In his famous historical treatise on the African American condition, *Souls of Black Folks*, where he enunciates the concept of double consciousness, W.E.B. Du Bois makes the subjunctive point that the world of the United States is

[a] world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1997, 2)

In this statement, W.E.B. Du Bois says that having been uprooted from their ancestral homes, worldview and culture in Africa, black people who were corralled into the New World and later freed from slavery found themselves in a double bind. They found themselves in a double bind in the sense that they suffered an internal conflict where one part of them yearned to re-establish a receding African worldview, while the other had a striving to plant roots in the culture and worldview of their erstwhile oppressors, even if they did so from the unenviable position of unequals. Fortunately, the people of African descent triumphed over this double bind as a result of a dogged spirit and the sheer force of resilience and personal strength.

In this article, I argue that August Wilson's *Radio Golf* is eminently placed as a site of analysis for what Nadel (1994) has identified as historical duels in Wilson's plays, including how this is hemmed in with the centrality of history, memory and continuity in black experience as depicted in the plays.

Terminal Transitions in *Radio Golf*

Like nearly every other play in Wilson's 10-play cycle, *Radio Golf* can be read as a historical play-as-fiction in which the focus is not so much on grand events from the past, but rather on the lived-experience-as-fiction of the most recognisable characters in contemporary US society. In line with the grand project to confront African American historicity and the choices that have come with it, *Radio Golf* follows a simple cause-to-effect linear plot that is presented in a realistic style, interspersed with allusions to magic realism in order to reinforce the interconnectedness of memory and historical events as linear progression.

Coming last (but not least) in Wilson's decalogue, *Radio Golf* poignantly demonstrates the afore-mentioned historical duels in ways that are highly reminiscent of the crisis of consciousness that has assailed African Americans in their ceaseless quest to make the right choices at the individual and the collective level.

In an interview with Sandra G. Shannon (2006), August Wilson posed a question about the African American condition, which the play *Radio Golf* seems to dramatise in a significant way. Wilson asks:

The question we've been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is: "What are we going to do?" Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values and

participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values? (Shannon 2006, 130)

As the last play in Wilson's 10-play cycle, *Radio Golf* represents some form of signature take on the choices as well as the potential consequences that may ensue from the choices that African Americans have taken in the context of these historical duels. This is not least because out of all the plays in the cycle, *Radio Golf* best represents the positionality of the African American protagonist within the context of the possibilities of the American Dream as originally encapsulated in the concept of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the doctrine held by the United States' founding fathers that westward expansion from the north-eastern seaboard was inevitable and justifiable and that it represented the gateway to limitless prosperity offered by the New World. In this context, out of all the principal characters that Wilson presents in his decalogue, the protagonists in *Radio Golf* (Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks) arguably represent the most upwardly mobile characters in Wilson's plays. Roosevelt is a businessman and bank vice-president while Harmond is a real-estate developer and mayoral candidate for the City of Pittsburgh. As Harmond Wilks declares for right or for wrong early in the play:

This is 1997. Things have changed. This is America. This is the land of opportunity. I can be mayor, I can be anything I want. (Wilson 2008, 21)

The events are set long after the demise of slavery and institutional discrimination, and indeed at the dawn of the new millennium when, on a balance of probabilities, African Americans may have been at the cusp of hitherto unknown frontiers for personal growth, success and individual prosperity in modern capitalist USA (as Roosevelt confidently claims). Also, for right or for wrong, as Old Joe consistently argues, the latter belief is continually propagated by Roosevelt; for example, in one instance he boasts:

There I was holding my own, breaking out ahead of the pack at a table of millionaires. Then I look up and it was just me and Bernie sitting there. Man to man. I thought to myself this is where I've been trying to get to my whole life. And then it happened. Bernie Smith wants to partner with me to buy WBTZ radio ... My ship's come in. (Wilson 2008, 36)

In tackling the afore-mentioned historical choices, *Radio Golf* is significant in that for a change, as clearly indicated above, Wilson turns his focus to an upwardly mobile black middle class located at the cusp of a new millennium, with personal perceptions of limitless freedoms even if these may be contested by the play's minor characters, such as Old Joe, in ways that demonstrate the play's historical duels, as I seek to demonstrate. In one interview, Wilson not only acknowledges the existence of this new black middle class but he labels this middle class as one that saw itself "to be divorcing ... from [the African American] community making their fortune on their own without recognising or acknowledging their connection to the larger community" (quoted in Parks 2005, 22). Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks are prime examples of this new black middle class

in ways that situate the African American protagonist in *Radio Golf* at the delta of limitless possibilities, which probably defy the historical disadvantages of race and class in ways previously unknown.

In this, the play's title is particularly symbolic in complementary ways, literally and metaphorically. On the one hand, "Radio" alludes to limitless propagation, growth and the radiation of communication signals or identity markers over a wide reach, while "Golf" is a literal representation of the quintessential elite sport of freedom, individualism and prosperity. The complementary symbolism in the title must be approached and understood against an appreciation of the principal characters Roosevelt Hicks, who is a *nouveau riche*, golf-playing businessman and bank executive, and his business partner Harmond Wilks, who is a real-estate developer and aspiring mayoral candidate for the City of Pittsburgh. As an enterprising African American businessman and bank executive, it is therefore not insignificant that Roosevelt expresses regret at his late induction into the individual prosperity marker sport of golf. Over and above this, Wilson's innovative adoption of a historical approach to write 10 plays, with each speaking to a significant moment in a decade of African American experience, also echoes the idea of radio waves spreading over a great distance and covering diverse places and experiences in African American history. In other words, Wilson's 10 plays speak to historical issues of a people at a series of crossroads that span a century such that the 10-play cycle is in fact a historical overview conveyed in the form of radio waves, as alluded to in the play's title.

Through the characters of Roosevelt Hicks, Harmond Wilks, Sterling Johnson and Elder Joseph Barlow, Wilson's play portrays individual lives caught up in a historical duel that is implicated in a moment of monumental historical change. The main historical duel in *Radio Golf* pits Roosevelt Hicks, who represents new forces of incipient capitalist solipsism, against Sterling Johnson and the more elderly Joseph Barlow, who both represent a past that is predicated on social justice and the preservation of collective historical identity markers, even if these may be seen to potentially stymie the attainment of individual wealth and prosperity at the onset of a new millennium that is steeped in a sense of freedom which ostensibly elides race and class, as Roosevelt Hicks seems to believe. In these duels Harmond Wilks progressively comes to occupy a middle ground or ambivalent position in ways that represent a crisis of consciousness on the part of the African American. This happens in ways that speak back to W.E.B. Du Bois's aforementioned double consciousness. Whereas Old Joe and Sterling view the demolition of Aunt Esther's old house as unacceptable gentrification that comes at the expense of housing for less fortunate black folks who experience death and dispossession in the name of progress, on the other side of this consciousness is Roosevelt Hicks, who sees the destruction of the Hill District as a cut-and-dried function of progress and individual prosperity. By the end of the play, Harmond's ambivalent positionality (which essentially demonstrates the internalisation of these two consciousnesses in one character in relation to social justice, history and memory) is decided in favour of communal history in a significantly epiphanic way. Harmond gradually becomes aware

of filial connections that are encapsulated and bound up with the communal history of Pittsburgh's Hill District. These connections bind him to Old Joe as family in ways that will not allow him to destroy Old Joe's inherited historical property located on 1839 Wylie Avenue without obliterating his very own (i.e., Harmond's) legacy, history, and personal identity.

In a previous article where we jointly analyse Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Khan and Seda 2017), we borrow from Ali Mazrui's (1992) concept of transclass man to describe characters whose socio-economic and cultural experience displays a fluid degree of transitionality in some rather ambivalent ways. In that article we argue that analyses of societies in transition must pay attention to the phenomenon of transclass man. In situations of social transition (such as we find in Wilson's earlier plays like *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and indeed in *Radio Golf*) it is not always easy or possible for humanity to transit from one form of social consciousness to another seamlessly. This is because in every transition individuals are beholden to forms of consciousness that belong with the previous socio-economic ethos. Raymond Williams (1977) refers to this as residual consciousness, meaning residues of ways of viewing and contemplating the world that issue from the past as they linger and insinuate themselves to shape the present. Raymond Williams's residual consciousness is not dissimilar to W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness in so far as both speak to the crisis of consciousness. Therefore, much as Harmond Wilks sees merit in the capitalistic abandonment of collective history by pulling down Elder Joseph Barlow's treasured home in Pittsburgh's Hill District, he is also moderately aware of its existence first as a place of shelter and abode for poor blacks like Old Joe and his progeny, and second as a sentimental site of collective history and memory even if this may stymie financial gain and individual material progress accruing to his joint consortium with Roosevelt Hicks as real-estate developers. As in Wilson's other plays, the historical duels in *Radio Golf* are symbolised by different characters within a single historical epoch who all relate differently to a moment of monumental historical change. This varied approach to history is complicated by personal desire, location, and positionality within the ambits of the afore-mentioned crisis of transclass man and W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness.

Reading History and Memory in *Radio Golf*

Writing on anachronisms in the works of August Wilson, John Timpane (1994) says Wilson often presents the reader with a gradient of readings "with which we may triangulate our own readings; our own good, better, and best guesses" (1994, 79). This gradient of readings is what sets up the historical duels in Wilson's plays. The gradient of readings allows the reader to pause, to ponder and make sense of what constitutes the bad and what constitutes potentially good choices for African American characters across different historical moments.

In *Radio Golf*, the duel is between two sets of protagonistic and antagonistic characters. One represents social justice, collectivism and the importance of historical memory,

while the other represents solipsistic individualism and an enterprising spirit of individual success, even if the latter comes at the expense of the erasure of collective memory and history.

Although the term “solipsism” is often associated with Rene Descartes’s philosophical discourses of cognition and knowledge of the self against the other, in this article I use the term to refer to individuals for whom the material experience and preference of entities outside the self and its desires are subordinate and of no material consequence. Therefore, the solipsistic individual has a conception of the world as “their world,” where their perception and interests matter more than those in the external world. In that self-absorption, the solipsist will often use the personal pronouns “I” and “my” rather excessively. Put differently, I use the term solipsism to refer to extreme egocentrism of the self which knows nothing but its own modifications. Therefore, the historical duel in *Radio Golf* is set up between Roosevelt Hicks and Harmond Wilks’s desire to demolish Pittsburgh’s historical Hill District and replace it with a new site of urban redevelopment through gentrification. In this narrative, the postmodern denial and erasure of African American history are symbolised by the quest to demolish a historical district and set up a redevelopment complex complete with the world-famous Starbucks and Barnes & Noble chain stores, even if this means getting rid of the recently deceased 329-year-old Aunt Esther’s house at No. 1839 Wylie Avenue together with the communal memory and history which it represents. In this duel, Starbucks and Barnes & Noble stand as quintessential metaphors for rapacious consumerist prosperity and the establishment of a highly individualised system that will replace the ethos of social justice and old collectives.

As the last play in Wilson’s decalogue, *Radio Golf* demonstrates W.E.B. Du Bois’s double consciousness in far more ways than the earlier plays. At this material point in time, African Americans have arguably moved far forward from the moment of slavery and are to all intents and purposes ostensibly and reasonably well-integrated into the social and economic fabric of mainstream America, as demonstrated by Harmond and Roosevelt’s station in the corporate banking sector and in real-estate development. Roosevelt is so enmeshed in the socio-economic fabric of mainstream America that he has arrived at a stage where he makes a fetish of solipsistic personal achievement as symbolised by his ability to play the ultimate bourgeois sport of golf. The sport of golf and its symbolism are captured in act one scene one when Roosevelt all but loses himself:

Roosevelt: I signed up two more kids last week. That makes eighteen. I just want these kids to know what it feels like to hit a golf ball. [When] I hit my first golf ball I asked myself where have I been? How’d I miss this? I couldn’t believe it. I felt free. Truly free. For the first time. I watched the ball soar down the driving range. I didn’t think it could go so high. It just kept going higher and higher ... I felt like the world was open to me ...

That's what I want these kids to have. That'll give them a chance at life. I wish somebody had come along and taught me how to play golf when I was ten. That'll set you on a path to life where everything is open to you. You don't have to hide and crawl under a rock just cause you black. Feel like you don't belong in the world. (Wilson 2008, 13)

This statement not only serves as an image of the African American at the cusp of long sought-after freedom and personal prosperity. It echoes the American concept of Manifest Destiny and the conquering of the frontier through travel and penetration. As Roosevelt describes the trajectory of the golf ball soaring into the open skies, it becomes a veritable metaphor for the limitless opportunities that have become available for the enterprising African American citizen at the cusp of the new millennium. Roosevelt's statement conflates the elite sport of golf with the limitless opportunities that he sees ahead for those who would choose to pick their moment. The 18 kids (presumably African Americans) whom Roosevelt has just signed up represent that enterprising cohort of African Americans who have had the good fortune to pick the right moment to embark on a journey to prosperity. In the opinion of Roosevelt, the image of the golf ball soaring higher and higher represents the limitless prosperity that has been denied members of the black races. They must now seize the moment by giving themselves a good head start as he wishes to do. Roosevelt's warning for black people to avoid shying away from seizing the moment by "crawling under a rock cause you black" (2008, 13) represents the inadvisable tendency to crawl back into a coagulated past that may no longer be available, and which keeps people from seizing available opportunities to prosper materially.

In this context, the crisis of consciousness is constituted by the question: Do African Americans erase social justice, memory and the collective history that has defined them as an oppressed racial minority or do they sacrifice it all on the altar of individual prosperity? It is precisely on the back of this crisis of consciousness that the basic conflict plays out in *Radio Golf*. The conflict revolves around the gentrification of the historical Hill District, which for many years has been the communal home for African Americans who escaped the slave south to seek solace, fortune, and freedom in the north-eastern industrial conurbations of the United States. As the play opens, it turns out that Harmond and Roosevelt have just won a contract to demolish the Hill District and replace it with a new model city through a joint company called Bedford Hills Redevelopment Inc. Sadly, the process of gentrification as driven by Harmond and Roosevelt in *Radio Golf* is no different from other contexts where gentrification has almost invariably implied tearing down the fabric of poor neighbourhoods in the name of progress, renewal and the attraction of new business. For Sterling and Old Joe, gentrification goes beyond progress and regeneration. It is implicated with fundamental issues of symbolic death and the dispossession of historically disadvantaged poor black communities. It renders black people homeless, not least because as Old Joe insists, he wants to preserve Aunt Esther's old house as a dwelling house for his daughter. At a much broader level, the process of gentrification will bring deprivation and erasure no

matter that those who execute the project may view it in the spirit of entrepreneurship, progress and personal gain. The idea of erasure as something that is cut and dried with no room for sentiment is implied at the beginning of the play when Harmond makes the following statement in response to his wife's suggestion that they retain certain aspects of sentimental value in their new office:

Harmond: This is a construction office. It's not to impress anybody. (Wilson 2008, 7)

The central conflict comes to the fore when it turns out that the gentrification of the Hill District will lead to the demolition of an old historical structure that has come to symbolise the old Hill District as a monumental and sacred site of collective memory.

As a site of the play's central conflict, the structure in question is an old house at No. 1839 Wylie Avenue, which was the residence of Aunt Esther, a legendary African American matriarch. In terms of social justice, Old Joe wants to save the old house as a new dwelling for his daughter. To demonstrate the enduring centrality and importance of historical memory and continuity, Aunt Esther has lived to an incredible age of 349 years, during which time she has witnessed the trials and tribulations visited on the black races from the time of the Middle Passage through to slavery, emancipation and the exodus to the north-eastern seaboard in search of what largely turns out to be elusive freedom. In her superhuman lifespan, Aunt Esther has provided invaluable solace to several of Wilson's characters in the other plays who have all come to her to seek guidance and sanctuary from the tribulations of a changing world. Aunt Esther's incredible longevity of up to 349 years is highly significant. It demonstrates the importance of historical continuity and memory as a central trope in *Radio Golf*, as in the rest of Wilson's decalogue. Not only does Aunt Esther and her old house appear in *Radio Golf*, but she also features as a carry-over from three earlier plays, namely *Gem of the Ocean* (focusing on the decade 1900 to 1909), *Two Trains Running* (focusing on the decade 1960 to 1969) and *King Hedley II* (focusing on the decade 1980 to 1989). In all three plays, Aunt Esther is presented as a mystic repository of black history and a "washer of black souls" in a redemptive way that resembles biblical prophets in Judeo-Christian contexts. Aunt Esther's advice to her supplicants is consistently encapsulated in the dictum: "If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up" (Wilson 1993, 109). In his quest to achieve a capitalist personal breakthrough at the cusp of the new millennium, Roosevelt is willing and ready to trash Aunt Esther's old property and its rich history if it stands in his path to personal prosperity. Thus, the duel between individual success on the one hand and collective history and memory on the other ultimately plays out in the choice between selling off and selling out this sacred ancestral site in order to make millions at the level of the individual. From the standpoint of his incipient solipsism, Roosevelt represents the new African American entrepreneur who is prepared to place collective memory under siege for the sake of individual economic breakthrough, even if that collective memory is represented by a historically grounded figure in the image of Aunt Esther. As a significant figure in the central trope of history and the redemption of the black race, Aunt Esther and the house represent one character

who has identified and righted what matters for the black race. Roosevelt's siege of her old house dramatises the duel between a present that is predicated on individual breakthroughs and a past that portends a future built on collective memory and social justice. This is in line with the biblical history from which Aunt Esther derives her name. In the bible Esther saved the Jewish nation from annihilation at the hands of Haman. The significance of Aunt Esther and her old house is further enhanced if read as an instance of magic realism in the play. Aunt Esther's 349-year lifespan approximates her birth date to 1651, when the first African slaves arrived at Point Comfort in Hampton, Virginia.

In the play's central conflict, the effort to demolish Aunt Esther's old house symbolises the triumph of individual capitalist breakthrough at the expense of collective history, social justice and memory in a sad and tragic way. If, on the other hand, the property is saved (as it is) at the end of the play, this means the triumph of history and collective memory within the ambits of these historical duels. The old house thus becomes a veritable site of memory that is caught up in the throes of potential destruction in a mortal battle for individual financial reward and the preservation of collective memory. The old house assumes a highly symbolic significance as a site at which historical duels are fought based on the question: What do we do with history? For Roosevelt, the answer is entirely cut and dried: the house must be torn down together with its history and memory in order to make way for the redevelopment project. In a heated moment with Harmond and Citizen Barlow, Roosevelt asks rhetorically and contemptuously: "Why would someone paint that old ugly house?" (Wilson 2008, 14). For Roosevelt, individual ownership implies demolition in order to recreate in the image of the self for financial gain. This accounts for his constant use of the phrases "tearing down" and "private property" throughout the play. The phrase "tearing down" is used no less than 25 times throughout the play.

The intention to demolish Aunt Esther's old house immediately sets Roosevelt and Harmond in conflict with another force that represents a different but related level of the play's historical duels. This force is constituted by two secondary characters. The first is Elder Joseph Barlow, a direct descendant of Aunt Esther and heir to the property that is up for destruction (which he principally and resolutely wants to save and restore as a dwelling house for his daughter). The other is Sterling Johnson, who is an old resident of the Hill District and a repository of the area's communal history. More significantly too, Sterling has direct experience of the life-affirming activities of Aunt Esther as a powerful matriarchal deity from the old Hill District. Unlike Roosevelt, Old Joe does not view ownership as a process of rapacious "tearing down" for self-aggrandisement. Rather, he sees preservation of the old as social justice and the maintenance of sacred sites of memory and continuity.

In this second level of the play's historical duels, Sterling and Old Joe literally and metaphorically keep drifting in and out of the office of the redevelopment site in a way that continuously disrupts the solipsistic financial designs of the two entrepreneurs.

Each time they come to the redevelopment office uninvited, they engage Harmond and Roosevelt in bouts of conversational combat where they make a compelling case for the preservation of the old house. By so doing, they symbolically keep disrupting the ever-present threat of erasure that Roosevelt and Harmond represent through their individual capitalistic enterprise. In the development of the plot, their ceaseless drifting in and out of the office with a resolute purpose to stake their claim on the property begins to slowly transform Harmond Wilks's perception of the self at the locus of history. In these historical duels, Old Joe and Sterling's joint effort to restore the old property by repainting it in defiance of the redevelopment project symbolises painting as a form of preservation and restoration. This is in stark contrast to Roosevelt's obsession with reckless demolition for venal reasons of personal gain. Therefore, where Old Joe views restoration as an indispensable and integral part of historical continuity and memory (not least because he wants to restore the property for his daughter who is also a direct descendant of Aunt Esther), in his obsession with personal profit Roosevelt sees the opposite, which is clearly demonstrated below:

Harmond: You were painting our house up on Wylie? Why were you painting our house?

Old Joe: My daughter say she wanna live there. I was fixing it up for her.

Roosevelt: I told you we're tearing down that house. That's abandoned property. That house belongs to Bedford Hills Redevelopment.

Old Joe: That's my house. I got the deed on record down at the courthouse. My mother put it down there in 1925.

Roosevelt: You going to jail. They got a senior citizen jail near Harrisburg. That's where you heading. Defacing private property. What the police tell you? (Wilson 2008, 24)

Furthermore, as clearly demonstrated by Roosevelt's statement below, it is significant that the contempt and threat of erasure no longer come from members of the white race but rather from among some within the black race who have fetishised image and personal gain:

Roosevelt: Man, we're working on a multimillion-dollar redevelopment project and you're still talking about some raggedy-ass, rodent-infested, unfit-for-human-habitation eyesore that they should have tore down twenty-five years ago. (Wilson 2008, 48)

Roosevelt's statement, among several others, also validates Caywood and Floyd's (2009) observation regarding linguistic acculturation among the new black middle class. Compared to the more historical African American cadences of the language that is spoken by Sterling and Old Joe (as repositories and protectors of African American heritage), Harmond and Roosevelt use a bland rhythm and more modern and proper English diction. As the play progresses, Old Joe and Sterling not only serve as

repositories of communal memory and history, they also represent common-sense positions on the predicament of African Americans, which completely elide Roosevelt and Harmond's perceptions in their rapacious quest to make money. It is thus that Old Joe warns Roosevelt that "America is a giant slot machine" (21), and they (Roosevelt and Harmond) must be wary of the allure of false integration and acceptance in the ways of mainstream US capitalist society. In his infinite wisdom Old Joe also warns the two entrepreneurs that despite the façade of acceptance and integration that the two may seem to enjoy, they face the risk of being treated no better than First Nation American Indians who were swindled out of their heritage on the allure of false promises. In their numerous visits to the redevelopment office to stave off the destruction of a potential dwelling and the erasure of memory, Old Joe and Sterling prove to be veritable repositories of romantic images of the Hill District as a serene place of communalism where the idea of each one as their brother's keeper reigned supreme. This is in contradistinction to Roosevelt's obsession with personal advancement. In one instance, Old Joe describes fond memories of Sam Green, the forever helpful greengrocer, as he also remembers Miss Harriet's Fried Chicken place, both of which served the common person before they were demolished by the so-called march of progress. Old Joe remembers wistfully:

Old Joe: They tore that down. June 28, 1974. Miss Harriet closed her restaurant for the last time and walked straight from there to hospital. They didn't know what was wrong with her. They ran some tests and found out she had a broken heart. She died three or four days after that. (Wilson 2008, 43–44)

The dramatic action eventually builds to a climactic crescendo when Harmond realises that not only does he have strong filial bonds with Old Joe and Aunt Esther (which are also partly a source of his current wealth), but that Old Joe does own legitimate title to the old property in ways that will complicate the demolition of the property. At this moment of epiphanic revelation, Harmond's personal disposition towards history and the play's historical duels takes a decisive break with that of Roosevelt. Harmond's attitude transforms in a way that is reminiscent of Mazrui's transclass man. Rather than make a clean break with history, Harmond decides to go for the more pragmatic option to simultaneously preserve history and still gentrify the Hill District by building around the old house. That way the old house will remain standing as a historical monument and a reminder of a shared past. Harmond's solution is a validation of Neil Lazarus's (2004) and Timothy Brennan's (2004) theorisation of the duality of space and place where space can be abstract and ubiquitous while place connotes the kernel and centre of memory and lived experience. Therefore, the decision to preserve the old house by carefully and meticulously building around it makes the old house a crucible of lived experience from which posterity will continue to draw inspiration and a sense of historical continuity. Unlike Roosevelt's rapacious approach, Harmond's inspired solution manages to rewrite space and reconstitute power through the preservation of history and identity. By so doing, Harmond is able to locate the self in history and the present. Viewed against W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness, Harmond's

pragmatic approach to build around the historical property rather than destroy it is a validation of the triumph of the “one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 1997, 2). Furthermore, Harmond’s discovery of the filial connection that binds him with Old Joe and Aunt Esther’s old house, leading to his epiphanic moment, is also a validation of the significant role that history, memory and the past can play in people’s lives in terms of the play’s historical duels. In the final analysis, Harmond is living testimony to W.E.B. Du Bois’s double consciousness and the triumph of the more dogged side of this consciousness. The right side of this double consciousness allows him to choose wisely in favour of not selling off and selling out the sacred ancestral site at 1839 Wylie Avenue. This is unlike Roosevelt who immediately goes apoplectic at the mere mention of the idea to abandon the redevelopment project in order to save the old house.

In his resolute quest to sacrifice memory, history, and identity on the altar of personal wealth and self-aggrandisement, Roosevelt is no different than a host of other male characters in Wilson’s plays who seek to assert their masculinity by entering dominant white enclaves of economic power (Caywood and Floyd 2009; Khan and Seda 2017). The fetishisation of wealth and personal advancement is clearly evidenced by Roosevelt’s numerous references to the phrase “private property” throughout the play. Unlike Harmond who experiences that all-important epiphanic moment of his location in history, Roosevelt not only continues on his resolute quest to sell out on collective memory, but he is also quite willing to be used as a front for white corporate America through part ownership of WBTZ radio station. Roosevelt becomes a complicit and willing yes-man not only for his bank bosses but also as a façade of economic transformation and black ownership in the corporate sector, fronting the true owners of the radio station who are in fact white. As Caywood and Floyd rightly observe, “in embracing getting and spending as the foundation of masculinity, African American men lose touch with what it means to be African” (2009, 83). While Roosevelt’s prospective ownership of WBTZ Radio appears laudable as a personal economic breakthrough, it is ultimately dangerous, unsustainable, and self-defeating if it is built on the perpetuation of racial exploitation. In addition, Roosevelt’s selfish, unbridled effort at self-enrichment in defiance of the collective good is tragic. It has the net effect to perpetuate old-style slave relationships of racial subordination in so far as he will be used as a mere front in an essentially white-owned outfit. Harmond succinctly explains this in one of the final speeches in his epiphanic moment before the end of the play when he says:

Oh, I see! Bernie Smith ... Bernie’s calling in his chips. He used you for the radio station. Now 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 to buy the radio station. Enter Roosevelt Hicks. The shuffling, grinning nigger in the woodpile. How much he pay for something like that? After he rolls over and puts his pants back on, what you got? A hundred dollars? Three hundred dollars? Or are you one of them high-class thousand-dollar whores? (Wilson 2008, 80)

With this moment of epiphany, the play ends as Harmond tears down the last vestige of Roosevelt's involvement in the business (a poster for the WBTZ radio station which Harmond symbolically throws into the dustbin). He then rolls up his sleeves, picks up a paintbrush and prepares to go and join the communal paint party that has gathered at 1839 Wylie Avenue to restore Aunt Esther's old house as a dwelling for Old Joe's daughter.

Conclusion

This article has sought to analyse the treatment of history and the historical duels that have come to characterise August Wilson's 10-play cycle. The discussion has demonstrated that coming at the end of Wilson's decalogue, *Radio Golf* most poignantly represents these historical duels in ways that call attention to the crisis of consciousness that has persistently assailed African Americans in their quest to make the right choices during the 20th century. The article has attempted to demonstrate the importance of making the right choices not least because *Radio Golf* presents African American protagonists located in a moment of monumental historical change as they stand on the cusp of the grand opportunities of self-advancement ostensibly offered by the new millennium. Wilson treats this duel through a set of characters who dramatise the conflict between the incipient solipsism of the American Dream on the one hand, and a sense of collective history that could potentially stymie individual progress on the other.

In this play, Wilson's historical duels are symbolised by characters who exist within a single historical epoch even as their approach to history is complicated by their individual positionality. As a result, history is shown not always to be a case of seamless progression from one consciousness to a different form of consciousness. Rather, it is a crisis of reading that makes different characters react to history differently. It is only through a careful analysis of the choices that different characters make in relation to their positionality that the reader can make the right judgement. As part of a cycle steeped in engagements with the experiences faced by African Americans during the 20th century, *Radio Golf* sustains that sense of historical preservation and continuity by cleverly deploying Aunt Esther's fictional old house at 1839 Wylie Avenue to serve as the principal site of struggle at which these historical duels are fought.

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