

Research Article

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August Wilson, Afrofuturism, & Gem of the Ocean

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Abstract: August Wilson's Century Cycle is as much a theatrical experiment of black cultural history and sociology as it is one of storytelling. Though often considered a realist playwright, Wilson walks beyond the realist landscape into speculative and imagined ones in *Gem of the Ocean*. His investment in cultural critique and history enhances the possibility of an enriching analysis of his work as speculative fiction. This research project locates the ties between Wilson's affinity with history and the creation of a dystopian Pittsburgh in the play. In Wilson's work, set in 1904, the antebellum past is so close to the post-Emancipation present, temporally and socio-politically, that there is almost no difference at all. The flattening of time Wilson insinuates through the milieu, a capitalist-police state, is articulated through characters' relationship with it. Wilson is welcomed in conclusion into black speculative traditions of re-imagining time and using cultural histories to critique cultural realities.

Keywords: August Wilson, Afrofuturism, black speculative fiction, history, black theatre

Introduction

August Wilson's Century Cycle is as much a theatrical experiment of black cultural history and sociology as it is one of storytelling. Wilson's work often assumes a realist milieu; *Fences*, readily comes to mind in this respect. We have to question how this reduces, or at least limits, how we interact with his plays. To be sure, the playwright is able to walk beyond the realist landscape into speculative and imagined ones. What happens when we interrogate how assumptions of Wilson's work inhibit our reading and scholastic interpretations of Wilson's plays? The primary mission of the playwright's decalogue is to dramatise black American experiences in Jim Crow and with systematic oppression across the 20th century. Isn't he able to articulate such outside the realm of realism? This present study examines August Wilson as a black speculative fiction writer. Wilson's investment in history does not reduce the chance of this at all; in fact, it enhances the possibility of an enriching analysis of his work as speculative fiction.

To illustrate my point, I delineate how history and the black speculative imagination are intertwined, and especially history with the writing of dystopian fiction. This research explores *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) as a dystopian play set in a capitalist-police state. I will analyse the setting of the play and its relationship with Eli, Citizen, Caesar, and Solly, who are all products of the dystopian Pittsburgh (and America) they live in. Though the playwright is often branded as a realist playwright, inserting him into a black speculative tradition and reading his work as such strengthens the playwright's intentions of cultural criticism.

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History and the (Black) Speculative Mode

August Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" (1996) articulates not only the playwright's artistic philosophy but also his thoughts on the need for inclusion and the autonomy of black voices and artists in theatre. Black creatives tell a (hi)story that, in his view, white directors and writers would only mute. Wilson states:

So much of what makes this country rich in art and all manners of spiritual life is the contributions that we as African Americans have made. We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservation, any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so to deny us the rewards of our spiritual labors, and to become the cultural custodians of our art, our literature and our lives. To give expression to the spirit that has been shaped and fashioned by our history is of necessity to give voice and vent to the history itself. (497)

Wilson names black folk as not merely participants but producers of American culture and demands that those cultural products be owned, cultivated, and told by black folk. Black folks' lived experiences informs the art they create; Wilson's call-to-arms implores black artists to "embrace the political dictates of our history." Certainly, Wilson's Decalogue is not negligent of history or politics; his work is bound to history, a word that appears in his essay 28 times. Moreover, it was the playwright's desire to perform cultural criticism.

His intentions do not displace him from a tradition of black speculative fiction. The impulse to use the speculative imagination to question one's experiences with systems of power is at the heart of the black speculative mode and Afrofuturism. At the turn of the new millennia, Walter Mosley wrote the essay "Black to the Future," a plea for more black voices in science fiction and fantasy. His fascination with science fiction, he says, lies in the fact that whatever he conceives can be written and made possible. This is the nature of the genre, "Science fiction and its relatives (fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, etc.) have been a main artery for recasting our imagination" (405, my emphasis). That is, science fiction can be the lifeblood of black creative energy and imagination. Mosley argues that this is the reason why black people are attracted to science fiction and fantasy. Recasting black folk back into histories and narratives from which they've been erased repurposes the genre, "Black people have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history. For us, science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm" (405). Speculative fiction allows black people to be reimagined into existence and reunite with ancestral pasts.

Afrofuturism addresses and heals fractures caused by traumas of domination and oppression. Mark Dery, a white cultural critic who coined the term in 1993, says Afrofuturism can be thought of as "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (736). The critic's iteration rests in how black expression can be used along with conventions of science fiction and future world-building. Dery's concern with the making of the future may be the impetus to the inquiry, he posits, "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (736). Like Mosley, Dery is mindful of the possible effects trans-generational trauma from slavery. However, there are reductive implications to his questioning.

Dery's concern with the possible damage traumatic history can cause to a community's capacity to build futures is negligent of how black expressive arts have always used the past to be thoughtful about the present and future. In Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction, André Carrington argues that Dery's early iteration of Afrofuturist thought pigeonholes African American expressive culture to the past "as a casualty of racial oppression" (23). Dery's question implies that trauma stifles one's ability to create new iterations of the future. Carrington offers a critique to this, saying Dery "invokes the discursive eradication of the African American past as a potential obstacle to the emergence of Afrofuturism" (23). The contention with Dery's inchoate position roots Afrofuturism in a white futurist tradition, one where writers "hoped to literally destroy all vestiges of their classical civilization to extend the purported virtues of the industrial age into all areas of knowledge" (23). These futurists, coming from a European tradition, considered the time to be totally linear whereas diasporic worldviews consider the time to be cyclic and

connected. The black speculative mode blurs the rigid conditions of Western iterations of time¹ and space—Afrofuturist praxis reiterates the past to (re)imagine new futures.

Afrofuturist ideology has the capacity to add to, revise, and rethink history. Ytasha Womack's foundational work *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* is a primer for the growing paradigm. She writes, "[Afrofuturism] is a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critique" (9). Womack's iteration extracts the black speculative mode out of the Eurocentric history and praxis of the futurists who disregarded history's effect on the present. Speculative and science fiction provides the ground on which black writers can articulate their experiences. Kodwo Eshun's "Future Considerations for Afrofuturism" concedes to this, "The conventions of science fiction, marginalised within literature yet central to modern thought, can function as allegories for the systemic experience of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century. Science fiction, as such, is *recast* in the light of Afrodiasporic history" (299, emphasis added). Black speculative fiction writers draw on elements of speculative fiction—whether it be aliens, time travel, mythical beasts, or apocalypse—and their knowledge of cultural history to imagine alternative worlds as August Wilson did in writing the dystopia found in *Gem of the Ocean*.

Moreover, speculative fiction does the work of history, Mosley even says it has to the power to rewrite and ignore it (405). Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash write in "Utopia and Dystopia beyond Space and Time" that "[u]topias and dystopias are histories of the present" (1). These imagined landscapes are works of history informed by the present placed in the future or past thereby flattening and revising time. Dystopian projects are bound to history and sociology insomuch that they reiterate social patterns that we know to be true. The scholars go further, "Utopia, dystopia, chaos: these are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future" (3). Like the black speculative fiction writers before him and of his time, like Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, and George Schuyler, August Wilson operates in the black speculative mode to reimagine history and Pittsburgh. Harry Elam's work captures Wilson's concern with history and playwriting well, "Wilson delves into and rewrites the African American past, addressing and righting the wrongs of historical amnesia and social oppression, ritualistically reconnecting African Americans to the blood memories and cultural rites of the African past" (162).

Pittsburgh [and America] as Dystopia

Gem of the Ocean is Wilson's step away from the realist landscape in which he is often relegated while maintaining the playwright's vision to articulate black life in the urban in the twentieth century. This isn't to say that Wilson had not done so before, there are certainly speculative fiction elements in *The Piano Lesson* (1987). In their haunted Pittsburgh home, the Charles family must find out how to exorcise the ghosts of their pasts, figuratively and quite literally. *Gem of the Ocean* is an exceptional departure as it takes place in a dystopian setting; Jim Crow's hovering presence as a capitalist-police state, a system of governmental control where economic violence and state violence collude to suppress marginalised people, is the entirety of the foreground. This does not suggest that Jim Crow is a fictive at all, but the magnitude to which Wilson positions it in the narrative allows for the dystopian reading engaged below.

A dystopia is typically considered a setting wherein the citizens live in a legalised state of dehumanisation with a lack of autonomous citizenship conditioned by allegedly utopic sociopolitical and sometimes religious parameters. In this project of history, Wilson reimagines Pittsburgh and the U.S. as a dystopia for black folk. This is certainly possible as black folk's historical experiences of no or second-class citizenship are mimics that of characters in dystopian settings. As the scholars write, "Utopias (and dystopias) thus come laden already with conceptual anchors that fix them to specific space-time coordinates. This was,

¹ Texts that have been taken up as Afrofuturist in nature are evidence for this. Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for example, is not simply a time travel tale, but considering its narrative structure speaks to how time is flattened and revised out of a Western worldview. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and August Wilson's *Piano Lesson* are similar in this regard, especially as it relates to the narration.

and is, surely one of the features of utopia/dystopia that explains its striking realism, its lasting pull on the intellect" (4). Early 20th century Pittsburgh can be imagined into a dystopia without reducing the realism of stories of the characters that hold geopolitical and temporal specificity.

A dystopian reading of Gem of the Ocean relies on the socio-political and historical context of the early 20th century and racialised experiences therein. Set in 1904, the play takes place within the intersection of Jim Crow and the first wave of the Great Migration. Both of these are apparent in many of the characters' experiences. Eli and Solly are former slaves from the South, Caesar is a constable mandated to enforce Jim Crow laws in Pittsburgh, and Citizen is a recent migrant from Alabama looking for work. The constellation of their experiences can provide framing for corrupted citizenry typical of dystopian settings.

Dystopias corrode citizenship which Lauren Berlant says is rooted in a particular consensus of sovereignty. She writes, "[Sovereignty and citizenship] presupposes a relation between the nation's legal control over what happens in its territory and the presumption that citizens should have control over their lives and bodies, a condition of limited personal autonomy that the state has a responsibility to protect" (37). Out of these three stipulations of citizenship Berlant lists, the dystopias often only fulfil the first and corrupt the following two. This is especially the case for America, for the second agreement, the "presumption that citizens should have control over their lives and bodies," has rarely if ever been met for black bodies, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade commences this violent relationship. Isaiah Wooden's "Gem of the Ocean's Fugitive Moments" contextualises significantly. The scholar contends that fugitivity is constantly redesigned in order to reflect the relationship between blackness and the law. That the law is "ever-present" and justice for the black is just as absent. Wooden states, "Wilson scripts fugitive moments in Gem of the Ocean, in part, to bear witness to the vast chasm that exists between the law and justice for the black" (90). August Wilson places a magnifying glass on the fraught relationship blackness has with justice and citizen rights, constructing it as the crux of the setting and character's conflict in a speculative mode. Below, I will describe the historical presence and violence of Jim Crow and how they influence the Great Migration which is certainly at the heart of the play's social context.

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander that Jim Crow starts as a backlash to the progressive legislation seen in the Reconstruction Era and is a result of deep-seated white anxieties about emancipation. Alexander notes that the dawn of this era is in 1867, with the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. Most scholars agree that Reconstruction barely lasts ten years before reversal tactics take place through policy and organised terror to reify racial hierarchy. These acts and legal policies commence the Jim Crow era (21). The scholar writes:

As African Americans obtained political power and began the long march toward greater social and economic equality, whites reacted with panic and outrage. Southern conservatives vowed to reverse Reconstruction and sought the "abolition of the Freedmen's Bureau and all political instrumentalities designed to secure Negro supremacy." Their campaign to "redeem" the South was reinforced by a resurgent Ku Klux Klan, which fought a terrorist campaign against Reconstruction governments and local leaders, complete with bombings, lynchings, and mob violence. (22)

The legislation of the Reconstruction Era sought to dissolve slavery and create citizenship opportunities for black people politically. Along with this, many organisations, the Freedmen's Bureau being one of the most outstanding, were designed to advocate for citizen rights and economic support for freedmen. White cultural anxieties surround the possibility of a new social reality increases Ku Klux Klan number across the South with the mission to "redeem" or recall the (antebellum) South. Part of this "Redemption" involved the violent warning and murdering of black people. The South becomes an environment of terror and humiliation under Jim Crow. Organised terror and "vagrancy laws and other laws defining activities such as 'mischief' and 'insulting gestures' as crimes were enforced vigorously against blacks" (22). The basic right of mobility, one latently rendered with the passing of the 13th Amendment, was immediately snatched from the black folk at the start of Jim Crow. This is recounted in the play. As Citizen Barlow makes a "fugitive movement" northward out of Alabama, he tells Aunt Ester "they had all of the roads closed to colored people" (22). Legislators in the South refused to accept the shifting of the racial caste system born in the antebellum period. They sought to maintain the institution of chattel slavery through policies that created spaces of racialised servitude and second-class citizenship.

The maintenance of slavocracy is exhibited through how the characters move through the world, movements that happen in and around the law. Oyeh Otu and Onyemachi Udumukwu write, in their historiography of several of Wilson's plays, "Wilson dramatizes in *Gem of the Ocean* that the worst struggles of African Americans for freedom started after both the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment" (104). Wilson's dramaturgy presumes, and historians have agreed, the 13th Amendment failed to abolish the institution of slavery², for it lingers across the 20th century. Indeed, the liminality of this time pervades the text, "*Gem of the Ocean* captures the desperate concerted efforts of Southern whites to keep African Americans in eternal bondage and servitude: after losing the war, they make freedom a nightmare for African Americans" (105). The nightmarish atmosphere created by anti-black violence and hegemony is at the heart of this dystopia. The precarious relationship the characters have with the state, and its corrupted notion of law's power over the people make more obvious the fact of Wilson's construction of Jim Crow as a dystopia. The physical and legislative violence bred in the South, along with the fact of big-city industrial employment opportunity and desire to rebuild families away from Southern spaces of trauma, is a main impetus to the Great Migration.

Through the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans moved across the country in droves, in millions. A combination of white mob violence and lynching prominent during this time in the South and the economic opportunities present elsewhere made major incentives for the exodus from the South to Northern and Midwestern states; for example, New York, Detroit, and Chicago's black populations rose significantly. Certainly, Pittsburgh's black population increased as a result of the Great Migration given the expansion of the mill and factory industry as we seen in the play. Though they moved with the hope to start new lives, black people met antagonism as well. Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin*' bares mentioning in any discourse about migration movement experiences for black Americans, especially as her words confirm the slight black folk dealt with the "confrontation with an unfamiliar environment, interaction with technology and capitalism" (54). Griffin posits that at the core of the Great Migration and migration tales inspired from the movement lies dislocation and fracture (3). The promise to build a new life, free from the bonds of enslavement was not kept.

In fact, as Wooden details, the North and the South resemble far too much. He argues that "[W]hat Citizen encounters in the North are the doubles to the systems of exploitations and dehumanization he attempts to dodge by fleeing the South. In the North, as in the South, the project of emancipation remains unfinished" (90). This blurring of the temporal and geopolitical spaces of the North and South, and the antebellum and postbellum compounds how Wilson is both building a dystopic world for the play and writing from the Afrofuturist mode. What is dissimilar about both spaces is that "the mill replaces the plantation and a brutal black hand, the hand of Caesar Wilk's, substitutes for the white face of the law" (90). Below I take this point a step further and contend that the mill is the site where the capitalist-police state rests, where the vestiges of chattel slavery manifest. Wilson's Pittsburgh mill implies that Jim Crow is not relegated to the South.

The horrors that are often a Southern narrative are black American experiences throughout the nation. Racialized violence is an American-bred and supported entity and can exist beyond the Mason-Dixon line. Characterised by its suppressive environment accented with governmental and political corruption that disproportionately affects black people, the capitalist-police state, as it is in *Gem of the Ocean*, is a system of government where the economy and the police collude to adversely control bodies, especially those at the intersections of nonwhiteness and impoverishment. The mill as an exploitative epicentre, for example, is illustrated through the insecure employment and housing Citizen and other mill workers face, men are killed over the mill's products, riots ensue from unfair treatment, and how Solly burns it down in protest. All of the characters have a relationship to this capitalist-police state, but the men of Wilson's work seem to be uniquely plagued with or at odds with the state.

² wholly. Alexander's work charts the history of the carceral state at the time of Jim Crow, "Convicts had no meaningful legal rights at this time and no effective redress. They were understood, quite literally, to be slaves of the state. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had abolished slavery but allowed one major exception: slavery remained appropriate as punishment for a crime" (23). This, of course, directly and disproportionately affected black folk.

Fugitives of the Capitalist-Police State

Each of the men of Wilson's work is entangled with the state and its exploitative power. The lingering though amorphous existence of the institution of slavery ensnares these men. This section addresses the capitalistpolice state's relationship with Eli, Citizen, Caesar, and Solly, each of whom are complicit in or antagonists of the capitalist-police state. Each navigates the state in complex ways in ways their female comrades do not. This is not at all to say the women of the play do not suffer violence at the hands of the state. For example, Aunt Ester is arrested for housing a fugitive. The men's travelling in and out of Pittsburgh, and their outwards desires to do so makes salient their fugitivity and fraught relationship with the state. The gendered ensnarement women experience to Pittsburgh in this play and throughout Wilson's Cycle is worth consideration in the later study.

Most of Wilson's plays take place in or around the home life of black Americans. 1893 Wylie Avenue in the Hill District of Pittsburgh recurs throughout Wilson's cycle and is the home of Ester Tyler, known as Aunt Ester by the community. Eli is her caretaker and gatekeeper who says at the entrances of Citizen and Caesar throughout the entirety of the play, "This is a peaceful house." He says this as a demand for peace at the assumed threat they pose and to disrupt the violence that can come from the outside-it is an incantation to ward off evil. The peace fostered in a time where black Americans were not considered citizens is consistent with how black folk felt the need to make peaceful, respectable homes in the middle of Jim Crow as a resistance tactic in hopes that the dangers of racialised violence wouldn't step foot at their door. Eli's greeting demonstrates how the sanctity of black folks' homes was too often desecrated and the justice and peace were too often absent. Asking for his soul to be washed, Citizen's arrival and his inquiry for soul-washing commences character's relationship with the setting on stage.

Upon arrival, Citizen tells Aunt Ester of the dangers of not only what is going on at the local mill, but what is going on in Alabama. He says, "I only been up here four weeks. When I left Alabama, they had all the roads closed to the coloured people. I had to sneak out. Say they didn't want anybody to leave. Say we had to stay there and work" (22). The South of Wilson's design likens Citizen's experience to that of the enslaved who were named fugitives by laws meant to hold them hostage on plantations. The freedom of mobility is the most basic of citizen rights and Citizen's movement across several boundaries, from the South to the North, from unemployment to employment, from sin-stained to washed clean, could enhance reading him as a fugitive of the capitalist police state. Citizen had to "sneak out" out of the South, but his migration from the South informs, and these other borders are threatening to Jim Crow hegemony in and out of the South.

Even in Pittsburgh, Citizen has little to no agency to self-determine where he can live, move, and work. The mill is one of the only options for work in Pittsburgh for the working poor. He tells Aunt Ester, "[The mill] say they was paying two dollars a day, but when we got there, they say a dollar fifty. Then they say we got to pay two dollars for room and board. They sent us over a place the man say we got to put two dollars on top of that" (22). The underhanded economic disparity seen in the South appears in the urban North in at least three ways: overcharging tenants for room and board, neglecting to pay their workers, imposing poverty on them. The mill mimics the institutions of slavery and sharecropping found in Southern states before and during this same time. This systematic impoverishment creates the castes that Michelle Alexander says is inherent of race in America and constitutive of the New Jim Crow, an ever-changing system to benefit white supremacist structures (2). Citizen's entanglement in impoverishment and his attempts to find justice within and beyond are the heart of play's narrative.

As he talks to Aunt Ester, Citizen confesses that he has killed a man and come to her home so she can wash his soul. Citizen Barlow's request to have his soul washed is a call for repentance for sins against the capitalist-police state. Citizen stole a bucket of nails from the mill and a man by the name of Garrett Brown was blamed and hunted by Caesar. Brown jumped in the river to hide, drowned and died. The capitalist-police state justifies the murder of people because of its valuing of production and profit, despite the bucket of nails "lacks consequential value" (Wooden 91). Wooden contends that though the bucket of nails holds little value onto itself, they, once put with other materials, allow the mill to function. This speaks to its capitalist temerity. He goes further, likening the nails to the workers, "In many ways, the

bucket of nails is symbolic of the black mill workers in *Gem of the Ocean*. Like the bucket of nails, they are consistently undervalued both within and outside of the mill; and yet, they are absolutely crucial to the mill's proper functioning" (91). Because of how he is devalued by the state, Citizen's redemption must come from somewhere beyond and higher than the state. His inquiry to Aunt Ester, who exists in and beyond time and space³, is meant to secure wholeness. As his name implies, Citizen seeks redemption from the capitalist machine and acquire citizen rights. Though he did not kill Garrett Brown, he certainly feels guilty for his death. And he stole the bucket of nails and thievery is a sin in the eyes of the capitalist-police state. This is certainly a core belief of Caesar's.

Caesar is an embodied representative of the capitalist-police state. Caesar, a constable and slumlord of the Hill District, is complicit in the violent capitalist-police state. He has arrested hundreds of people and killed others with impunity. He is not remorseful at all about chasing Garrett Brown and causing him to jump in the river, "I tried to save him but he ain't had enough sense to save himself. People wanna blame me, but I got to keep order" (33). Caesar finds it to be his duty to *be* the law, in the same monologue he uses "I" and "the law" interchangeably. He also has no problem upholding the system of oppression because it affords him privileges and supports his belief in an inherent criminality in black folk. He is not as vulnerable to the state as others because of the labour he performs to ensure the capitalist police state continues running. He is an investor of capitalism and industry because he is a beneficiary of its oppression.

To be sure, Caesar's name is a historical allusion to the famous dictator. His name places him as a ruler over the people, with no regard for the people. Harry Elam writes that there is a particular history in Caesar's name, "His name recalls . . . the legacy of slave naming. Southern masters often gave their slaves ancient Greek and Roman names, such as Pompey and Caesar, as a means of ridiculing slave pretensions and belittling them, preemptively satirizing black attempts at dignity or pride" (82). Caesar's existence compounds the amorphous temporality of the play. Is slavery gone or is it still alive and well? His name is an embodiment of the lasting vestiges of slavery, though he too is a slave and perpetrator of its violence.

Caesar's monologue shaming the rioters at the mill is where one can find his loyalty to the state. He asserts, "[The workers] don't understand the mill is what hold everything together. If you close down the mill, the city would be in chaos. The city needs that tin. They need that tin in Philadelphia. They need it in Detroit and Cincinnati. Industry is what drive the economy" (33-34). Like the nails he chased Garret Brown into the river for, he believes the mill, this site of anti-black violence and exploitation, provides a sustainable community and economy for the rest of the country. All benefactors of systems of oppression believe these systems are inherent on one's living, that one lives in a utopia designed for the betterment of all. The constable is overly concerned with upholding the system and production so much so that he disregards how it oppresses the workers for the sake of "hold[ing] everything together."

The riot at the mill is a protest against the murder of Garrett Brown and the injustice at the mill over a living wage. Caesar's response is telling of his internalised racism and criminalisation of black people, "These niggers can't understand that. They ought to be glad the mill is there. If it wasn't wasn't for the mill, these niggers wouldn't have no way to pay their rent" (34). The irony here is mill workers *can't* pay their rent because they are underpaid and overcharged. Caesar is so beholden to capitalism that he finds moral decline to be the price if the industry is lost. By his summation, if there is no mill there would be more crime, prostitutes, and beggars. Caesar's commitment to the mill and capitalism is corrosive to his morality. When Black Mary calls him out for being a murderer of a child for stealing bread, he responds, "He was a thief! He was stealing. That's about the worse thing you can do. To steal the fruit of somebody's labour. Go out and work for it! That's what I did. I ain't never stole anything in my life. That's against the law. Stealing is against the law. Everybody know that" (36). The logic where robbery is punishable by death is a product of an investment in capitalist policing.

³ Aunt Ester is a time-travelling mystic, community spiritual advisor, and the embodiment of the Black Atlantic and the diaspora. Harry Elam writes that Aunt Ester "is in fact the 'Ancestor', the connection to the African American past which is both personal and collective, material and metaphysical.... By communing with Aunt Ester, others have the potential to rework their relationship to the past and find redemption" (76).

Caesar's investment in capitalism manifests through the violence of a police state, this is how they are interconnected. His relationship to the state makes all people subservient to the law, "People think the law is supposed to serve them. But anybody can see you serve it. There ain't nothing above the law" (36). Caesar's sentiments are typical of dystopian fiction. The belief that the law is above the people and meant to rule them is consistent with the corrupt and oppressive governments we can see in George Orwell's 1984 or Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. His personal politics are informed by a total obedience to the law. This leaves no room for the law to be critiqued or to understand how the laws as they fail to offer whole citizen rights to black people. This is what maintains dystopian regimes throughout literary history: the total, obsessive, and nearly-religious obedience to the law no matter the harm it causes. Caesar's conservative view of the law explains the tension he and Solly experience in the text and on stage. Solly is a direct opponent of everything Caesar represents; they are a dramatic foil.

Solly has an antagonistic relationship with the capitalist-police state—dystopian fiction is no good without a dissenter who critiques or is pessimistic of the ruling class. Solly is a lifelong rebel of white supremacist systems. This experience starts during slavery. As runaways from an Alabaman plantation, he and Eli worked the Underground Railroad, helping other runaways escape Southern plantations to reach Canada—mind you, this is when they are in their twenties, few dystopian works are without young adult characters who lead a resistance against the law. Solly and Eli's work and identity as fugitives and abolitionists disorders how slavery was economically dependent on free labour and the backs of black bodies, just as the mill relies on the exploitation of the same. Escaping plantations and helping escapees was against the law. Solly's rebellious nature conflicts with Caesar's literalist nature as it relates to the law. His politics as refutations to white supremacist power structures don't stop at outward actions of defiance. Solly's relationship with the state is so tarnished that he must change his name, "My name is Two Kings. Used to be Uncle Alfred. The government looking for me for being a runaway so I changed it" (26). Like Caesar, Solly's name is a holdover from the antebellum period. His renaming is an act of defiance against how slave masters would name their hostages. Solly's naming also allows him to reclaim ownership of his identity and agency. This is a critical offence to the capitalist-police state and proves his fugitivity—he is still wanted man. His life is more than an abstract resistance symbol; resistance is his praxis.

When he receives a letter from his sister saving that white mob violence is uncontrollable in Alabama and she is unable to get out, he feels emboldened enough, even in his old age, to travel back down South to save her. This is a 300-mile trip on foot, one he's familiar with from his time on the Underground Railroad. Before he leaves, Solly burns down the local mill. Burning down the mill is consistent with Solly's radical politics of freedom and resistance, perhaps his most outright declaration of rebellion against the very edifice that represents the capitalist-police state. Admitting to arson, he says, "Yea, I burned it down! The people might get mad but freedom got a high price. You got to pay. No matter what it cost. You got to pay. I didn't mind settling up the difference after the way. But I didn't know they was gonna settle like this. I got older I see where I'm gonna die and everything gonna be the same" (75). Solly's words should emphasise is the flattening of antebellum and postbellum times. Or more concretely, the failure of the Reconstruction era to secure citizen rights for freedmen at the expense of them. This failure comes at a high price, for Solly dies at the hands of the state.

Solly's death is not only the climax of the play, but also a moment wherein one can recognise the consequences of living in a dystopian society that seeks to obliterate any opposition against it. Wilson writes with a vision of hope, however, that continues Solly's legacy of resistance through Citizen. His redemption by the power of the Gem of the Ocean and Bone City in the middle of the Earth is reminiscent of how Kodwo Eshun theorises that "Afrofuturism therefore stages a series of enigmatic returns to the constitutive trauma of slavery in the light of science fiction" (299). Citizen's return and experience with the Black Atlantic has empowered him to now fight the state that he was once ensnared in. He takes up Solly's mantle to be a rebel of the state and rescue his sister. This step into Solly's legacy was an outward expression of his ability to move from a "state of sin," and guilt to one of empowerment that works subverts the capitalist-police state. Citizen is newly redeemed, absolved of his crimes against the state, so it is now his duty to work to dismantle these oppressive structures. The ultimate words of the play, spoken by Eli, "[s]o live," are not only a eulogy for his fallen comrade but also a call to arms for the spirit of resistance to live on through Citizen, a well wish that he may continue this subversive work.

Conclusion, or Welcoming Wilson

Wilson's Century Cycle is indeed a project of history, the project itself is a reimagining of history. The playwright's affinity for history is the ground on which the speculative imagination evident in his work blossoms. The playwright masterfully creates a dystopian capitalist-police state using early-20th century Jim Crow Pittsburgh to dramatize the stark relationship between the state, one that functioned based on the power of the law and economy to oppress black folk, and the people, who are poignantly represented by the playwright's narrative about freedom, society, citizenry, and rebellion. So how does August Wilson fit into a black speculative fiction tradition? Afrofuturists disrupt science fiction conventions often articulated by white male writers by placing black cultural histories and people at the forefront of the narrative. Wilson takes Jim Crow and Great Migration histories and morphs them into a creative work whose setting is bound to historical dilemmas of power. The mission he sets out in "The Ground on Which I Stand" could be likened to the re-democratization of storytelling that, as Ytasha Womack acknowledges, happens due to the heightened access to technology, "The storytelling gatekeepers vanished with the high-speed modem, and for the first time in history, people of color have a greater ability to project their own stories" (10). The politic Wilson carries during his life and in his playwrighting can be seen in the current Black Speculative Arts Movement.

It should be a scholastic endeavour to Wilson in the burgeoning field of black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism. We do a disservice to his work and legacy by neglecting the boundaries he crossed throughout his project, not just *Gem of the Ocean*, but his plays entirely. I write this knowing this will certainly disturb the peace of the canon and affect how we conceive and receive black dramatic arts. Now is the time to take to heart Wilson's desires and the Afrofuturist mission for black folks' cultural contributions and imaginations to be recognised and reclaimed.

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