A NOISE WITHIN'S 2023-24 SEASON

STUDY **GUIDE**

August Wilson's

KING HEDLEY II

March 31–April 18, 2024

DIRECTED BY Gregg T. Daniel

STUDY GUIDES FROM **A NOISE WITHIN**

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We're delighted you're interested in our study guides, designed to provide a full range of information on our plays to teachers of all grade levels.

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- General information about the play (characters, synopsis, timeline, and more)
- Playwright biography and literary analysis
- Historical content of the play
- Scholarly articles
- Production information (costumes, lights, direction, etc.)
- Suggested classroom activities
- Related resources (videos, books, etc.)
- Discussion themes
- Background on verse and prose (for Shakespeare's plays)

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All the best,

Alicia Green
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Pictured: Erika Soto, *Much Ado About Nothing* Spring 2023.
PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

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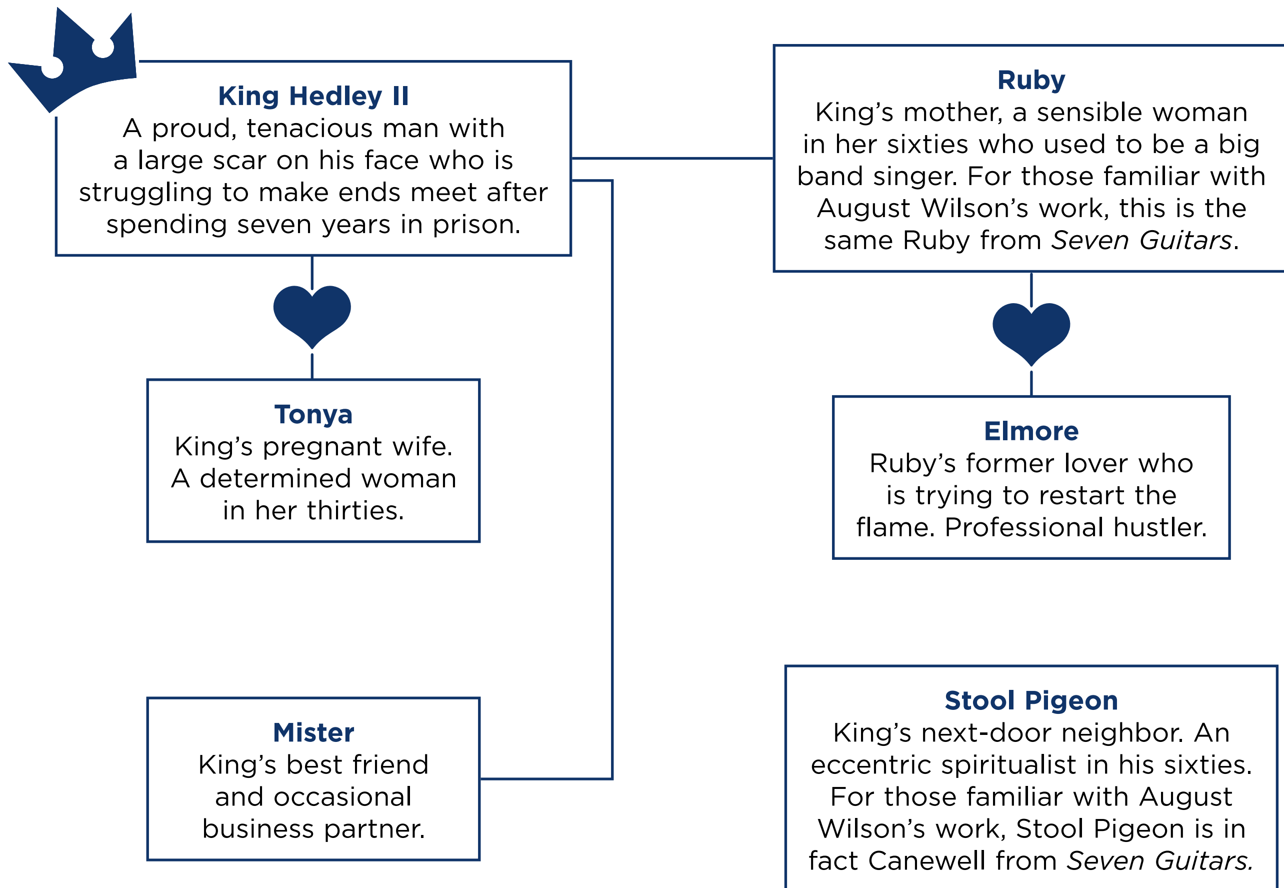
Cover Image: Desean K. Terry and Cherish Monique Duke. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

CHARACTER MAP



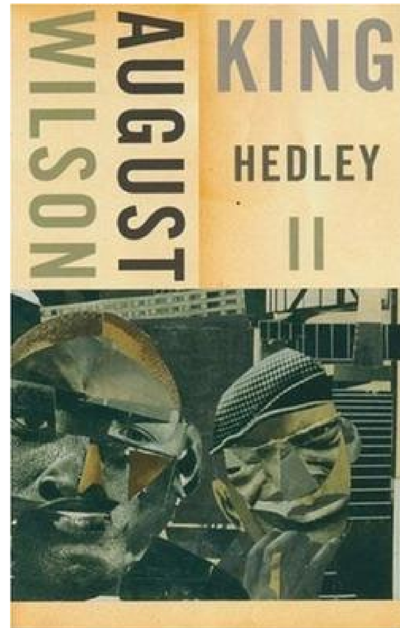
SYNOPSIS

***King Hedley II* opens with a prologue** by Stool Pigeon, who talks about spirituality, musicality, and the ever-changing nature of the Hill District. He also makes reference to Aunt Ester, a character in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* who, much like Stool Pigeon himself, is known as a spiritual advisor in the community. As the play officially begins, we are introduced to King Hedley II, an ex-convict who is trying to make money selling refrigerators with his best friend Mister. King is named for the man he believes is his father, King Hedley from *Seven Guitars*. King's pregnant wife Tonya enters, and she and King's mother Ruby reveal that Elmore, a professional hustler and old boyfriend of Ruby's, is coming into town soon. As the play continues, it becomes apparent that the refrigerators King and Mister are selling are likely stolen goods. At the end of the scene, Stool Pigeon enters to frantically declare that Aunt Ester is dead, signifying the death of the Hill District the characters knew, and harkening the beginning of a bleak future.

King starts the next scene talking with Stool Pigeon and trying to plant seeds in some barren dirt. Mister arrives and commiserates with King that the two aren't selling enough refrigerators to afford the video store they aspire to own. After Stool Pigeon reappears with bad news from around the city, Elmore arrives and the men discuss money and religion. Toward the end of the scene, Tonya and King argue about the pregnancy and we learn that Tonya has tried to procure an abortion.

The third scene opens with a discussion between Ruby and Elmore wherein Elmore divulges how much he has always cared for her. The audience glimpses potential for a new relationship as Elmore begs her to marry him. Elmore also reveals that King's biological father is Leroy, another old flame of Ruby's, but that King doesn't know the truth. Meanwhile, King laments his inability to find a job, citing the racist sociopolitical climate of the time and commiserating with the other characters. The act concludes with Elmore buying a refrigerator from King as a gift to Ruby.

As Act II begins, King's seeds still have yet to sprout on the barren soil. Stool Pigeon buries Aunt Ester's old black cat and then gives King a machete, the same machete that King Hedley I used to kill Floyd in *Seven Guitars*. Stool Pigeon reminisces about the events of *Seven Guitars* and then exits, leaving King and Mister to plan a robbery. The two decide that the robbery is the only way to get the money they need, and feel they have no other choice.



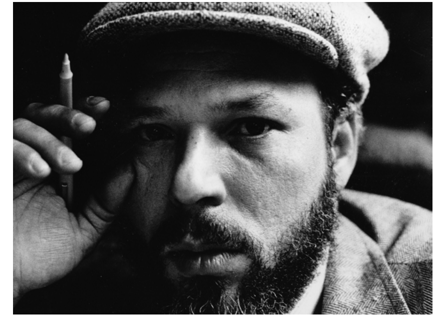
Cover of *King Hedley II* (First ed.). New York: Theatre Communications Group. ISBN 1559362618.

King and Mister go through with the theft, successfully procuring $3160 and a ring which King plans to give Tonya. The two men run into Stool Pigeon, who was recently robbed and beaten up. Despite losing $63 and getting six stitches, Stool Pigeon is most distraught that the offending men destroyed his newspaper collection. Later, King and Elmore discuss the specifics of their past crimes, and the audience learns that Elmore killed Leroy, though King still doesn't know that Leroy was his biological father.

Tonya and Ruby discuss their struggles, and Tonya tells King that she will only keep their child if King gives up his criminal behavior. King leaves the discussion upset and gives the stolen ring to Elmore, who plans to marry Ruby in three days' time. A sweet mother-son moment between Ruby and King is interrupted by Elmore, who starts talking about Leroy. The conversation escalates until finally Ruby tells King that Leroy was his biological father, and King storms away.

In the final scene, King returns, machete in hand, and settles Leroy's debt with Elmore. Then he demands to shoot craps with Elmore, trampling his seeds to clear a spot for the game. King tries to stab Elmore with the machete but finds he is unable to go through with it. Similarly, although Elmore has a gun, he fires it into the ground instead of at King. Ruby, however, blind with worry that Elmore will injure King, fires a weapon of her own and accidentally shoots and kills her son. The play ends with a lament by Stool Pigeon about sacrifice, loss, and the dangers of forgetting one's history. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **AUGUST WILSON**



August Wilson, 2003. Photo from The Estate of August Wilson

Originally named Frederick August Kittel Jr., August Wilson was born on April 27, 1945, in the Hill District community of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Daisy Wilson, a cleaning lady, and Frederick August Kittel, a German immigrant and baker. Wilson's father was absent for most of his life, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise August and his six siblings in a two-room apartment.

In 1958, Daisy Wilson married David Bedford. Growing up, Wilson had a complex experience with race. His mother was Black, his father was white, and his stepfather, David Bedford, was Black. This complexity is reflected in many of his plays.

While Wilson was a bright and creative student, he found school difficult. In 1959, Wilson attended three different schools. He began high school at Central Catholic High School, a predominantly white, private school. There, he experienced such extreme race-based bullying that he transferred to Connelly Trade School. However, Wilson quickly grew bored there and transferred once more to Gladstone High School. There, he was accused of plagiarizing a paper he had written, and secretly dropped out of school altogether at the age of 15.

Wilson, still eager to learn, chose instead to educate himself, frequenting the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh during school hours to study while his mother thought he was at school. During this period of self-education, Wilson read the works of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison and discovered his love of the blues and of Bessie Smith's voice. He began spending afternoons in restaurants and barbershops around the Hill District, listening to the residents' voices and stories. These would later provide fundamental inspiration for his plays.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving for a year before ultimately dropping out. After leaving the Army, he began to work a variety of odd jobs while writing poetry. By the late 1960s, he became involved in the Black Arts Movement and officially adopted the name August Wilson in honor of his mother. During this time, he collaborated with poets, artists, and educators and became the co-founder of the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh. Wilson served as the resident director of the theater company until its dissolution in the mid-1970s. Before the Black Horizon Theatre disbanded, Wilson met Brenda Burton, his first wife. In 1970, they married, and Wilson's first daughter, Sakina Ansari Wilson, was born.

In 1978, Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and began to focus on playwriting. In 1981, he married Judy Oliver, his second wife. One year later, he was accepted to the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. During this conference, Wilson met Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale University School of Drama and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Richards was a legend in the theatrical world, especially in Black theater. He became a mentor for Wilson and eventually directed Wilson's first six Broadway productions. The same year, Wilson's play *Jitney* premiered at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. It was the first play in his American Century Cycle, a 10-play series depicting the Black American experience throughout each decade of the 20th century.

In 1984, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the second play in Wilson's American Century Cycle, premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre to great critical acclaim. The production moved to Broadway and earned Wilson his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, Wilson continued writing his American Century Cycle. During this time, he won two Pulitzer Prizes: one for *Fences* in 1987, and one for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990.

Also in 1990, Wilson's marriage to Judy Oliver ended, and Wilson moved to Seattle, Washington. There, he met costume designer Constanza Romero, and the two married in 1994. Three years later, Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, was born.

In June 2005, Wilson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer, and died on October 2nd of that year. Though he died in Seattle, his funeral service was held in Pittsburgh, and he was buried near his mother in Greenwood Cemetery. Later that same year, the former Guild Theatre reopened as the August Wilson Theatre, cementing his legacy on Broadway and beyond. ♦

Edited from:

"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public

Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016, www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-standaugust- wilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "August Wilson."Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 23 Apr. 2019,www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson

TIMELINE OF **AUGUST WILSON'S** LIFE

1945
August Wilson is born on April 27th in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His given name is Frederick August Kittel, Jr. after his father, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. He is the fourth of seven children in his family, and the oldest son. Wilson's father is absent for most of his life.

1959
Wilson begins his first year of high school at a predominantly white private school. After enduring race-based bullying, he transfers schools twice and ultimately ends up at Gladstone High School.

1960
At Gladstone High School, Wilson is accused of plagiarizing a paper on Napoleon Bonaparte, and he decides to secretly drop out of school. He begins to spend his days reading in the Carnegie Library and absorbing the local culture of the Hill District neighborhood.

1963–1964
Wilson works a number of odd jobs while he begins to write poetry. He buys his first typewriter.

1965
Frederick August Kittel, Sr. dies, and Frederick August Kittel, Jr. changes his name to August Wilson in honor of his mother.

1968
Wilson co-founds the Black Horizon Theater with colleagues. He becomes the company's self-taught resident director.

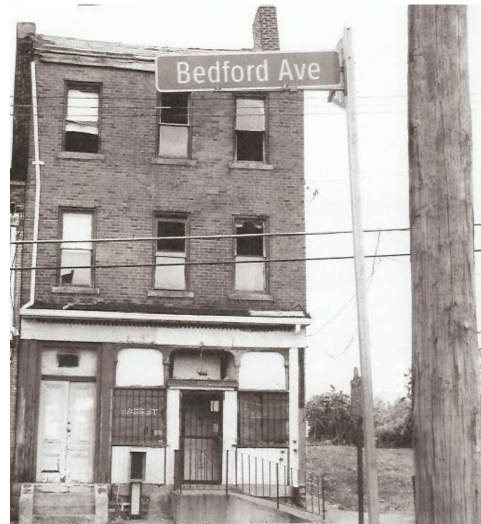
1969
Wilson marries Brenda Burton, his first wife— the two divorce in 1972.

1976
Wilson's first play, *The Homecoming*, is produced at Kuntu Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh.

1981
Wilson marries Judy Oliver, a social worker.

1982
Jitney, the first play in August Wilson's American Century Cycle, premieres at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. The same year, Wilson is accepted into the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. There, he meets Lloyd Richards, and the two forge a lasting friendship.

1983
Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson, dies.



Historic home of August Wilson in Pittsburgh by unknown artist, located on Wikimedia Commons, uploaded on Nov. 26, 2007.

1984
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom premieres at the Yale Repertory Theatre and transfers to Broadway.
Wilson wins his first New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play.

1987
Fences opens on Broadway. With this production, Wilson wins a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize.

1990
The Piano Lesson opens on Broadway. This production earns Wilson a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Wilson is named the 1990 Pittsburgher of the Year by Pittsburgh Magazine. Wilson and Judy Oliver divorce, and Wilson moves to Seattle, Washington.

1994
Wilson marries Constanza Romero, a costume designer.

1996
Wilson writes the controversial essay "The Ground on Which I Stand" about Black cultural separatism. The same year, *Seven Guitars* opens on Broadway and wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

1997
Wilson's second daughter, Azula Carmen Wilson, is born.

1999
The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh awards Wilson with a high school diploma, the only diploma the institution has ever given. The same year, *King Hedley II* is produced for the first time.

2005
Radio Golf, the last play in Wilson's American Century Cycle, premieres at Yale Repertory Theatre. In June, Wilson is diagnosed with terminal liver cancer. He dies on October 2 in Seattle, Washington.

Edited from:
"August Wilson: The Ground on Which I Stand." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 Feb. 2016,www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-standaugustwilsonbiography-and-career-timeline/3683/.

AUGUST WILSON'S **AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE**

The History of Cycle Plays

After the Roman Empire fell in the 600s CE, theatre and theatrical storytelling in general all but disappeared. What was once a celebrated and communal art form in ancient Greek and Roman societies largely fell out of practice. It wasn't until approximately 1000 CE that theatre started to make a comeback in Europe. The art form, however, had changed. Theatre was no longer a tool for social commentary and satire, exploring epic tragedies and contemporary comedies as it had in ancient Greece and Rome. Instead, theatre became a tool to communicate and disseminate stories of Christianity to a largely illiterate general population.

During this time, churches began to produce short, live performances of biblical stories known as liturgical dramas.. The number of these dramas grew until eventually, they were organized into what is known as a cycle, covering all biblical stories from Creation to the Last Judgment. These were known as Mystery Cycles and consisted of up to 50 short plays which were typically performed over periods of several days.

August Wilson's Cycle

Over the course of his playwriting career, August Wilson wrote his own cycle of ten plays collectively called the "American Century Cycle" or the "Pittsburgh Cycle". Wilson sets each of his ten plays in a different 20th-century decade, offering insight into the complexities of the Black experience through changing social and historical landscapes over the course of 100 years. The plays in Wilson's cycle, except *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, are set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—the area of Pittsburgh where Wilson grew up.

When he began writing his plays, Wilson did not have a large-scale cycle in mind. In fact, he wrote the plays out of order—Wilson's first play, *Jitney*, is set in the 1970s, his second is set in the 1920s, and his third in the 1950s. Eventually, Wilson realized that he could create a cycle out of his plays. While the ten plays in his cycle all serve a greater narrative spanning 100 years, there is no single plot thread that runs through all ten of the plays. Rather, the cycle tells the story of a neighborhood through time—cataloging the neighborhood's changing community, and the challenges facing the individuals in that community.

In his cycle, Wilson highlights characters who typically go unnoticed in society—an elderly woman in *Gem of the Ocean*, a garbage man in *Fences*—giving voice to otherwise overlooked groups. The plays in his cycle also tend to feature spiritual and supernatural elements of African and African American cultures set against the gritty realism of a city plagued by inequality. In an essay published in *The New York Times* in 2000, Wilson reflected on his work, saying,

> "I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us all in areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought of ourselves." ♦

Edited from:

"10 Plays, 100 Years - Playwright August Wilson Reveals the History of a Community (From the Playbill)."Marin Theatre Company, www.marintheatre.org/productions/fences/fencesaugust-wilsons-century-cycle.

THE **BLACK ARTS** MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement is often seen as the artistic and cultural sister movement of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. Reflecting the work of civil rights activists, artists of the time responded to social injustice through painting, poetry, literature, film, and theatre. Artists and academics organized to create works that challenged the unequal social and racial structures in the United States and addressed issues of Black identity and Black liberation.

The movement was originally spurred on by the assassination of Malcolm X, a prolific Civil Rights activist and staunch supporter of Black Nationalism. As a Black Nationalist, Malcolm X promoted the celebration of Black identity and ancestry as separate from a larger American identity. He fought against the assimilation of Black identity into a monolithic American society. His death deeply affected those who were proponents of Black Nationalism.

Malcolm X's assassination prompted the writer LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) to create the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, New York. The establishment of this theatre company is considered the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. Works in the Black Arts Movement commonly featured the concept of community at their core. Art that emerged as part of the Black Arts Movement directly addressed the needs and aspirations of Black America. In addressing these needs, the Black Arts Movement radically reorganized the symbols, myths, and icons that were popular in "mainstream" American culture by creating and expressing a separate set of symbols, myths, and icons.

In creating their own artistic symbols and narratives, artists in the Black Arts Movement explored and expressed a cultural identity distinct from the larger American cultural identity—one that celebrated ideals and beauty centered on Black culture and experiences. The aesthetic created through these new symbols, myths, and narratives centered around the relationship and ethical dynamics between an oppressor and the oppressed. In examining the oppressor-oppressed relationship, the art and artists of the Black Arts Movement began to pose the following questions:

Whose vision of the world is more meaningful?

What is truth?

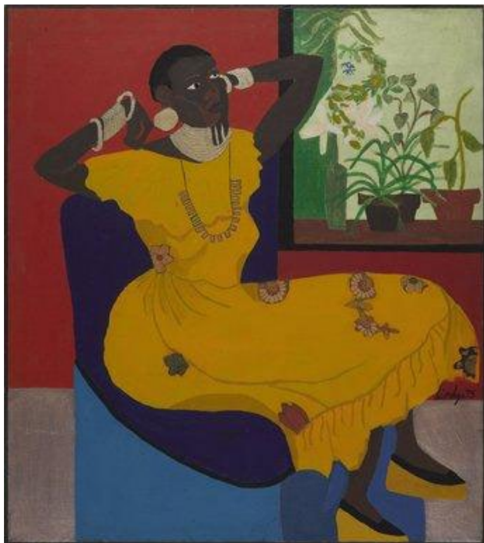
Who is able to express that truth?

Who should be able to express that truth?

In exploring and answering these questions, the Black Arts Movement sought to answer the call of civil rights activist and sociologist W.E.B. Dubois: creating art that is "about us, by us, for us, and near us."

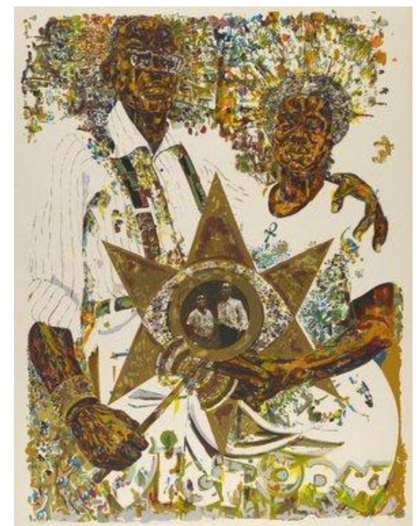
"Portrait of Bessie Smith holding feathers" by Carl Van Vechten, 1936.

THE **BLACK ARTS** MOVEMENT CONTINUED...



"Empress Akweke" by Dindga McCannon, 1975

"Revolutionary (Angela Davis)" by Wadsworth A. Jarrell, 1971



"Victory in the Valley of Eshu" by Jeff Donaldson, 1971

August Wilson and the Black Arts Movement

The Black Arts Movement reached its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, producing its most radical music, art, drama, and poetry. It was in this creative and social environment that August Wilson began to develop his distinct voice as a poet, writer, and theater practitioner. Wilson describes his greatest sources of inspiration as the "Four Bs":

1. Jorge Luis Borges, a poet and key literary figure in the genre of magical realism.
2. Blues music.
3. Romare Bearden, an African American artist who created works depicting daily African American life through oil paint, printed images, and collage.
4. Amiri Baraka, a playwright, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, who created the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, and who is credited with sparking the start of the Black Arts movement.

With these four sources of inspiration in mind, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater with fellow playwright Rob Penny. Wilson describes his work with the Black Horizon Theatre as being based in the "idea of using the theatre to politicize the community or, as we said in those days, to raise the consciousness of the people"—an idea that has its roots in the community-minded political core of the Black Arts Movement.

Beyond his work with Black Horizon Theater, Wilson became a prominent public proponent of African American self-determination. He made his views about self-determination clear in a televised debate about colorblind casting during which he delivered an address titled "The Ground on Which I Stand." In his address, Wilson calls for Black artists to define themselves through their own art rather than to participate in a work of art originally created by and for another group:

"I stand myself and my art squarely on the selfdefining 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. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by Black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction." ♦

Edited from:

Butler, Isaac. "Breaking 'Ground': How the Speech Came to Be and What It Set in Motion." AMERICAN THEATRE, 6 Jan. 2017, www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/breaking-ground-how-thespeechcame-to-be-and-what-it-et-in-motion/.

Frederick, Candice. "On Black Aesthetics: The Black Arts Movement." The New York Public Library, The New York Public Library, 21 Sept. 2016, www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/15/blackaesthetics-bam.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." The Drama Review: Summer 1968, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, p. 28., doi:10.2307/1144377.

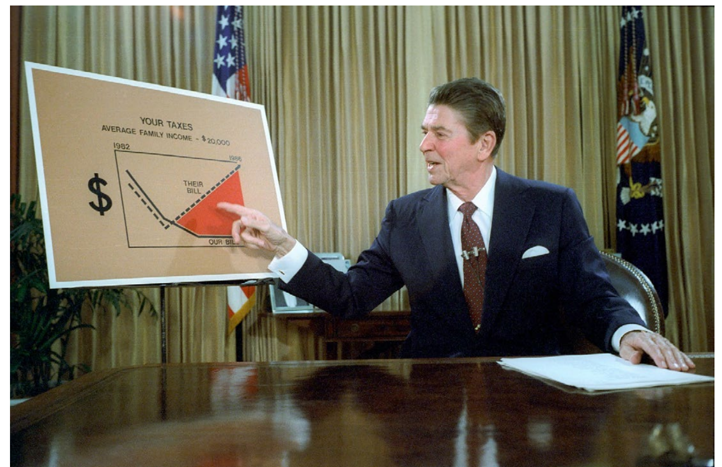
HISTORICAL CONTEXT: **AMERICAN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS IN THE 1980s**

Promotional poster for *The Breakfast Club*. 1985. Directed by John Hughes.

The 1980s. The era of MTV, parachute pants, and John Hughes movies. A time remembered fondly now, the subject of our collective nostalgia in entertainment like *Stranger Things* and *IT,* or in recycled fashion trends like bike shorts and hair scrunchies. The rose-colored glasses of nostalgia, however, edit and censor the political and cultural reality of the time period, ignoring minorities' brutal struggle with inequality. This darker side of the 1980s is what *King Hedley II* explores: the ways in which the American government and society failed their most vulnerable populations and then used those same people as a scapegoat. So, while there were many incredible individuals, events, scientific advancements, and artistic works that came out of the 1980s, August Wilson calls us to spend time instead with the difficult issues of the decade, and begs us not to forget them.

Reaganomics

Official Portrait of President Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan in The Blue Room, March 4, 1981. From the White House Photographic Collection.



President Ronald Reagan Addresses the Nation from the Oval Office on Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27,1981. From the White House Photographic Collection.

Ronald Reagan became president in 1981 and did not leave the White House until January of 1989. Therefore, much of the decade was shaped by Reagan's ideas and policy. In his campaign, Reagan promised to help dig America out of the most recent recession, positing in his campaign brochures that "The time is now for strong leadership" (Ronald Reagan for President 1980 Brochure). To Reagan, strong leadership meant restoring the American military, decreasing government spending, strengthening Social Security, and lowering taxes for the top-earning individuals and businesses. This last point is known as trickle-down economics, a subset of supply-side economics, or as it has been colloquially known, Reaganomics.

The basic idea of supply-side economics is that all tax cuts grow the economy. The theory behind trickle-down economics is that targeted tax cuts, specifically to the wealthy, grow the economy faster and make it more robust. The theory assumes that when the rich save money, they spend more money, which bolsters the American economy and has widespread effects on people in all tax brackets. This idea sounds feasible in the abstract and indeed did seem to help the 1980 recession from a certain viewpoint. It increased income inequality, however, and began the process of erasing the middle class—an issue that has continued to fester these last 40 years as politicians continue to prioritize the wealthy and powerful (thebalancemoney.com).

So why doesn't trickle-down economics work in practice? Because the idea that the wealthy will spend more money if they have more money is fundamentally flawed. In reality, the rich tend to hoard wealth, so it does not actually go back into the economy (imf.org). A 2015 study by the International Monetary Fund investigating income inequality concluded: "We find that increasing the income share of the poor and the middle class actually increases growth while a rising income share of the top 20 percent results in lower growth—that is, when the rich get richer, benefits do not trickle down. This suggests that policies need to be country specific but should focus on raising the income share of the poor, and ensuring there is no hollowing out of the middle class."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: **AMERICAN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS IN THE 1980s** CONTINUED...

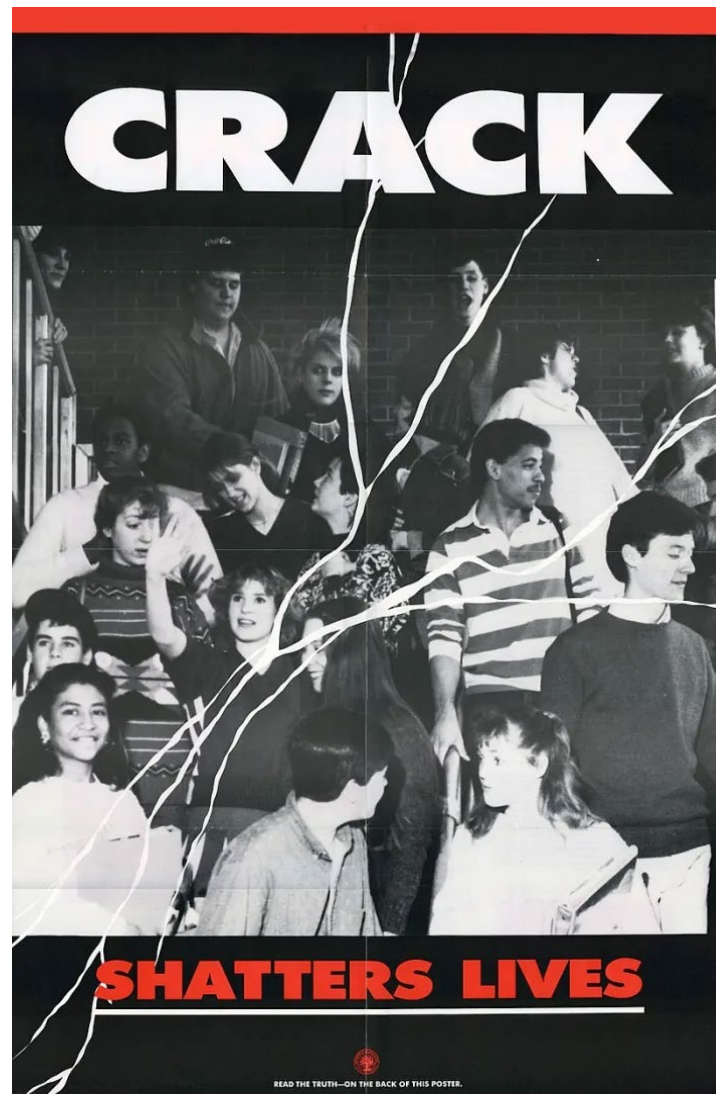
As Reagan lowered taxes for the wealthy and powerful, poorer citizens floundered. Due to long-standing systemic oppression, Black people were hit disproportionately hard by the economics that refused to trickle down. By 1990, the unemployment rate for Black Americans was 15.2% compared to 6.2% for white Americans "and in some parts of the country, 50% of African American males between the ages of 16 to 19 were unemployed" (Reaganomics Implications for African Americans).

In addition, Reagan broke his promise to improve Social Security when he drastically cut the program along with other domestic programs like Medicaid, food stamps, and education. Part of those cuts included ending coverage for over one million disabled recipients (investopedia.com). Because Black people had been systemically disenfranchised by centuries of racist laws and practice, many relied on these domestic programs for basic necessities. Reagan also cut funding for the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Housing, and Urban Development. The cuts to the department of Urban Development hit Black people disproportionately hard as well, as the majority of Black communities were in central, urban cities (Reaganomics Implications for African Americans). While claiming to reduce government spending, Reagan also increased defense spending by 35%, causing the annual national deficit to triple.

Income inequality and the struggle to obtain basic necessities are constantly present in *King Hedley II*, and although Reaganomics aren't mentioned by name, their effect is palpable throughout the show. The characters are dealing with a government that fundamentally does not care about their well-being, a government that profiles them as criminals regardless of their true background. King spends the whole play desperately trying to obtain enough money to purchase a video store and his efforts, like his attempt to plant flowers, feel more like a fruitless scraping of ground that will never yield.

Mass incarceration and the War on Drugs

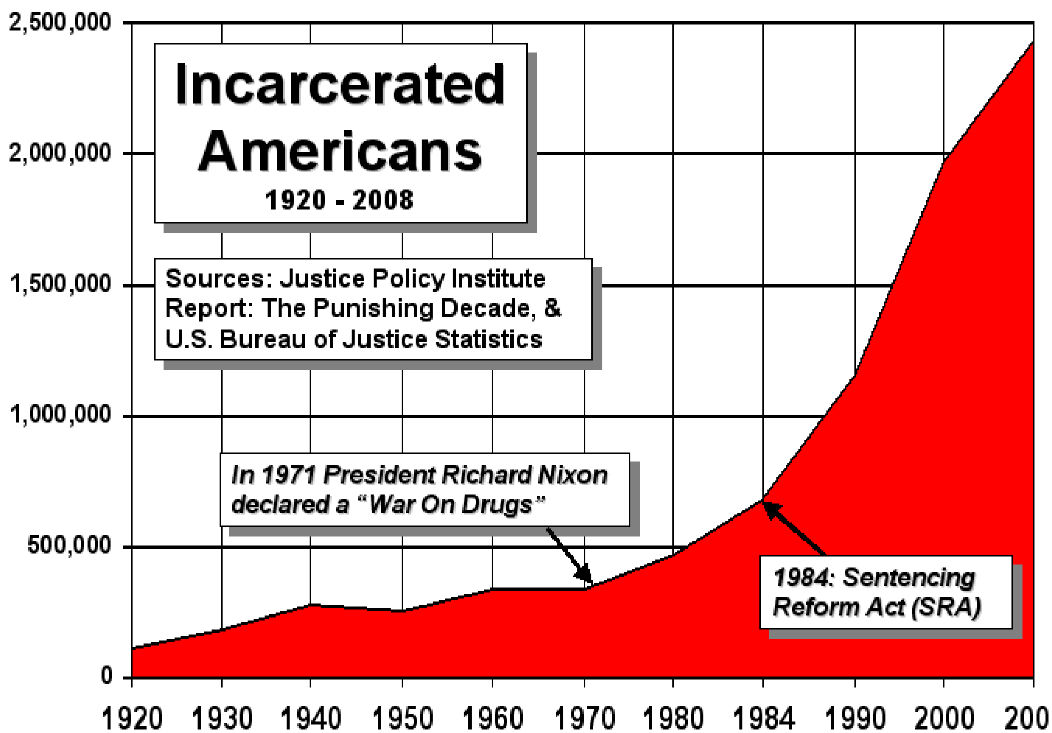
Though the so-called War on Drugs was started by Richard Nixon in 1971, the efforts to curb drug usage in the 1970s were minor when compared to those of the Reagan administration. With Reagan's belief in incarceration over treatment, Reagan's Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 passed and established mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug



An FDA anti-crack poster. Artist unknown. Between 1984 and 1989.

possession. This anti-drug fervor was spurred on by increased media coverage of the emerging crack epidemic. Part of the new mandatory minimum sentences included a stipulation that possession of 5g of crack cocaine resulted in the same automatic five-year prison sentence as possession of 500g of powder cocaine (britannica.com). Reagan's administration justified this disparity because crack is a purer form of cocaine than powder, but the difference in purity is far smaller than the 100 to 1 prison sentence suggests. The National Library of Medicine corroborates this, saying, "The introduction of crack markets was followed by largely unsubstantiated claims that crack is more dangerous than powder cocaine and warranted heightened penalties" (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The fact

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: **AMERICAN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS IN THE 1980s** CONTINUED...



US Incarceration Timeline by the November Coalition. 2010.

that the Reagan administration and the American media conveniently ignored was that 80% of crack users at the time were Black, and the majority of powder cocaine users were white.

The War on Drugs and the increase of mass incarceration in the 1980s go hand in hand. When Reagan entered the White House in January of 1981, the total incarcerated population was 329,000. When he left in January of 1989, that number had nearly doubled (brennancenter.org). A large majority of those newly incarcerated individuals were put away on nonviolent drug possession charges, and most of them were people of color. According to the National Library of Medicine reports that "data collected from several prominent social justice groups, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), report that African Americans comprise only 15% of regular drug users, but represent 37% of individuals arrested, 59% of those convicted, and 74% of those sentenced to prison for drug offenses" (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The number of Black men in prison fueled the common stereotype that Black men were dangerous criminals, despite many of them never having been charged with a violent crime.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the crime King committed before *King Hedley II*, he is branded by the world as a violent criminal. His job prospects are greatly reduced, as is the respect he receives from the rest of the world. The government that was supposed to protect him has failed and the economy is failing not only him, but those around him as well. King is stuck in a perfect storm of bad circumstances. With his choices limited and his need great, King turns to selling stolen refrigerators. Though the choice is irresponsible and frowned upon by other characters, it is important for an audience to understand the economic and social context that put King in this situation. This understanding allows the audience to withhold harsh judgment and look upon the characters as they are: flawed people doing their best to navigate a system designed to fail them. ♦

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THE **HILL DISTRICT**

***King Hedley II*, like most of Wilson's plays** and nine out of ten plays in his American Century Cycle, takes place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Hill District acts as a character in its own right: growing, changing, and responding to the social and political issues facing its community throughout the cycle.

Located northeast of downtown Pittsburgh, the Hill District's history is as vast and diverse as its inhabitants over the years. It has gone by many names, being known at some points as "Little Haiti," "Little Harlem," and "the crossroads of the world." Most commonly, however, it is referred to in sections of Lower, Middle, and Upper Hill. Initially, the Hill District was home to a predominantly Jewish and Eastern European population. When World War I sent many men overseas, there was an increased demand for labor in Pittsburgh, especially considering the city's booming steel industry. As a result, many recently freed African American people moved north seeking a better life and found a home in the Hill District. By the 1930s, it was a predominantly Black neighborhood with a culture and social scene all its own.

Even as poverty continued to plague the area, the Hill District became a flourishing epicenter of arts and kinship. As the documentary *Wylie Avenue Days* says, "from the 1930s to the 1950s, the Hill District emerged as one of the most prosperous and influential Black communities in America." Indeed, the Hill District earned a reputation for its thriving jazz scene, which boasted famous jazz artists such as Lena Horne, Billy Eckstein, and Earl "Fatha" Hines as well as iconic jazz clubs like The Crawford Grill.

In addition, the Hill District was home to Madam C.J. Walker's thriving hair care business, the enterprise that made her the first self-made Black female millionaire in American history. Her school, Lelia College of Beauty Culture, one of the first beauty schools in America, was also located in the Hill District. So was Greenlee Field, the first Black-built and Black-owned baseball park in America and the home of the legendary Pittsburgh Crawfords.

As the 1950s came to a close, the Pittsburgh government became hooked on the idea of urban renovation. One member of the city council noted, "90% of the buildings in this area are sub-standard and have long outlived their usefulness, and so there would be no social loss if they were all destroyed" (Childress). This comment, of course, ignores the thousands of people living in these "substandard" buildings who would feel a great loss if their homes, community centers, and churches were torn down. Nevertheless, the Pittsburgh government made the decision to effectively destroy most of Lower Hill to make room for Civic Arena, which finished construction in 1961. 8,000 residents were forced out of their homes, decimating Lower Hill and cutting Upper and Middle Hill off from the rest of Pittsburgh.

In the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photographer unknown. From the Library of Congress. 1941.

After decades of marginalization, police brutality,

THE **HILL DISTRICT** CONTINUED...

and the systematic destruction of local homes and businesses, tensions in the Hill District were higher than ever. This tension finally gave way on April 4th, 1968, when the news broke that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been murdered on a balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. By the next day, residents had taken to the streets of the Hill District, protesting mistreatment and expressing their grief at the loss of Dr. King. Angry, devastated, and faced with an armed police force, one citizen said, "They killed the most nonviolent member of the movement — let's burn the damn place down" (Mellon and Routh). Indeed, over the course, of the following several days, many businesses known to discriminate against Black people were the targets of fires, bricks, and looters. Unfortunately, those fires spread indiscriminately, destroying many BIPOC-owned local businesses in the process. Hundreds of citizens were arrested, and conflict continued as the National Guard was called in.

To publicly demonstrate the community's grief at the loss of Dr. King and at the continued mistreatment of the Black community in the Hill District and beyond, a march was organized by NAACP President Byrd Brown and Executive Director Alma Speed Fox. Public Safety Director David Craig attempted to shut down the march, but Alma, march permit in hand and dressed in her Sunday church clothes, calmly faced off against Craig and the police line. Half an hour later, 3,500 people began marching from the Hill District towards downtown Pittsburgh.

While the fires set during the 1968 conflicts may have been extinguished, the movement never died in the hearts of the Hill District residents, with hundreds of people still fighting to restore the neighborhood to its former glory. They fight an uphill battle against bureaucracy and systemic racism as they advocate for affordable housing, reasonable property taxes, and basic neighborhood amenities. In 2013, after thirty years without a grocery store, Hill residents finally saw the construction of a Shop n' Save market thanks to their relentless efforts. By their unending determination in the face of marginalization and gentrification, Hill's inhabitants honor the neighborhood's history and legacy.

The love August Wilson felt for his hometown is palpable throughout his American Century Cycle. Wilson's work not only reflects the transformation of the Hill District through the 20th century, but also draws attention to its residents and the battles they are still fighting. Wilson's work reminds us that the Hill District isn't simply the remnants of a cultural hub, nor should it be reduced to a footnote in the biographies of its most famous inhabitants. The Hill District is a living, breathing community full of real people facing tangible issues now, in 2023, and with his plays, Wilson calls on the rest of us to listen to their voices. ♦

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HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE WILSON CYCLE

As scholars approach the work of August Wilson, they face an inevitable question: in what order should the plays be considered? Ten plays, each set in one decade of the 20th century, were written out of order. The first play to be professionally produced, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, occurs third, chronologically. *Gem of the Ocean*, the first chronologically, was written next-to-last. *Jitney* — the eighth in chronological order — was written in 1979 but rewritten and expanded nearly twenty years later. There can be only one answer — they must be considered in the order in which the events of the plays occur. With the cycle complete and *Radio Golf* (the final play in every sense) set for its Broadway debut, the order in which the plays were written must necessarily fade into the background. Wilson chose to tie his plays to the procession of decades of the 20th century, but the Wilson cycle is more than just a series of plays. This singular achievement is both a history and a mythology of an entire people.

"Malcolm X in discussion", by unknown, 1959 or 1960.

Amiri Baraka addressing the Malcolm X Festival in San Antonio Park, Oakland, California," by unknown artist, located on Wikimedia Commons, uploaded May 19 2007.

Asked about the foundations of African-American culture in a 1991 interview, Wilson replied, "The one thing which we did not have as Black Americans — we didn't have a mythology. We had no origin myths." The Wilson cycle is permeated by the tropes of mythology, and indeed, drama and myth have been intertwined since their twin births in ancient Greece. In the Athens of 5th century B.C.E., playwrights drew upon the shared body of Greek myths for their stories. At the same time, the writers were able to both reinforce and take advantage of the Athenian self-image in the way they crafted their plays. It is no coincidence that at the end of the Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (his version of the Orestes myth) the goddess Athena summons Orestes to Athens, where he is put on trial for his crimes; Athenians prided themselves on their rational system of justice, and Aeschylus could cleverly play into this nationalism for the climax.

August Wilson had no analogous body of mythology upon which to draw in writing his cycle, and so he created one himself. There are literal myths told and retold over the course of the plays: Aunt Ester takes Citizen Barlow on a mystical journey to the fabled City of Bones in *Gem of the Ocean,* and Herald Loomis of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* sees the City in a vision. Characters are mentioned again and again- in *Two Trains Running* we learn about the opulent funeral of "Patchneck Red," a famous gambler, and in *The Piano Lesson* we learn that Patchneck Red's beginnings weren't so impressive. The figure of Aunt Ester- who we meet in the flesh only once, in *Gem of the Ocean*- takes on the status of a myth in the later plays. In *Two Trains Running,* Sterling Johnson is transformed through a visit to her house at 1839 Wylie Avenue. She has died at the beginning of *King Hedley II*,

HISTORY AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE WILSON CYCLE CONTINUED...

where Stool Pigeon declares that God has called her back to Heaven to clear the field of battle before Armageddon. Finally, the sale of her house at 1839 Wylie Avenue is a central issue in *Radio Golf*. *Gem*, as the first play of the century, is appropriately filled with mythological characters. Solly Two Kings — the Underground Railroad conductor named for Kings David and Solomon, who makes a living selling the literal waste of society — is every bit the mythical trickster, and would not be out of place in Homer's *Odyssey*.

At the same time that Wilson is creating a mythology in the cycle, he is retelling the history of African Americans in the 20th century. Historical drama has a proud tradition, with no more significant a figure than William Shakespeare at the forefront. Through his history plays, Shakespeare was able to examine the very notion of what it meant to be English. In a way, all British monarchs are judged against the example of King Henry V. At the same time, Shakespeare is able to show us that the great figures of history were also human beings — is there a more complex, flawed figure than Prince Hal (*Henry IV Part I*), whom we meet again in *Henry V* as the eponymous King?

In writing his histories, however, Wilson chose not to focus on the great and the powerful. The blues singer Ma Rainey was a real person, but more often the characters that fill Wilson's plays are original, and exist just to the side of what might be written into a history book. Troy Maxson, the protagonist of *Fences*, played baseball in the Negro Leagues, but failed to make a career of it and spent fifteen years in jail. King Hedley II, despite his oversized name, is an embittered ex-con, trying to rebuild his life but failing miserably. Wilson deliberately chose to dramatize stories on the periphery of "official" history — in *Two Trains Running* the shadow of a Malcolm X rally hangs over the play, but none of the men at the lunch counter make it there, and Sterling ends up at Aunt Ester's instead. Yet at the same time, Wilson's characters exhibit as much nobility of spirit as any Shakespearean king. If Shakespeare demonstrates the humanity within great men, Wilson dramatizes the greatness within seemingly ordinary men. Men like Troy Maxson, Citizen Barlow, and King Hedley II are faced with nearly insurmountable obstacles, and if they sometimes fail, the mere fact that they continue to struggle is a triumph.

Radio Golf occupies a unique position within this framework. In many ways, it dramatizes the central conflict between history and mythology. Harmond Wilks is a man of history, a man of destiny. The path before him is clear, and he knows what he must do in order to walk it. But into his life comes Elder Joseph Barlow, a mythological archetype in the vein of Solly Two Kings or Aunt Ester. He represents the tradition of mythology and folklore for which Harmond has never previously had time. As the successive revelations of the plot unfold, Harmond learns that he is not just a product of history; Wilson's mythology of Aunt Ester, of Bynum the binder and Herald Loomis of *Joe Turner*, of Stool Pigeon of *Hedley* and Hambone of *Two Trains*, runs in Harmond's blood, and he cannot turn his back on it. August Wilson gave the African American community, and all Americans, a great gift in his cycle. He created the cycle for all of us, and he showed us in *Radio Golf* that we need both history and mythology to move forward into the future. ♦

Edited from:

*Notated articles were created by the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company (Boston, MA) as part of their curriculum guide for their 2006 production of *Radio Golf* and are included in this guide with the Huntington's permission. Inquiries regarding Huntington-created materials should be directed to Meg O'Brien, Director of Education at the Huntington Theatre Company, by emailing mobrien@huntingtontheatre.org.

THEMES

Suspicion

> "You ain't got to tell me about gambling with Elmore. He got all my money from the last time. He sold me that watch that quit working as soon as he walked out the door. You ain't got to tell me about Elmore. I know how he do."
>
> —King Hedley II, Act I, scene i

From the opening scene, suspicion is rife throughout the play. The characters are used to fending for themselves around people willing to stab them in the back and therefore are hesitant to trust anyone or anything. This suspicion is bred not only from their proximity to crime and their dealings with criminals, but also from their mistreatment at the hands of the criminal justice system. They can't trust the police or the government to protect them, so they have to protect themselves and the people they love at any cost. Ruby and Tonya obsess over King's activities throughout the play because they are afraid of him going back to jail. In the first scene, when Ruby hears about King and Mister selling refrigerators, she says, "You all out there stealing refrigerators, you goin' back to jail" (Act I, scene i). When Mister enters, she tells him, "I know you stole them. I'm just telling you to watch yourself. You and King both." (Act I, scene i). Ruby is immediately suspicious of the fridge business, because she has lived around similar situations before and doesn't want to see her son get hurt. She alludes to her experience when she says, "You going back to jail. The police gonna find out. The police know everything" (Act I, scene i).

King himself is suspicious of Elmore from the start, and avoids gambling with him until the very end of the play. When planning the robbery with Mister, the two go over the specifics again and again, meticulous with their details, paranoid that they might make a mistake and get caught. Because the characters engage in criminal activities, they are chronically vigilant and distrustful. As a result, the audience questions the motives behind what they're seeing as well, leading to a perpetual feeling of impending dread that helps underscore August Wilson's critique of American culture in the 1980s, and illuminates the large-scale imbalances that create fractures within smaller communities.

Masculinity and Fatherhood

> "'He don't know.' He don't know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name. He don't know he fucking with King Hedley II. I got the atomic bomb as far as he's concerned. And I got to use it."
>
> —King Hedley II, Act II, scene ii

In *King Hedley II*, masculinity is chiefly defined by violence and protection. At the same time, the idea of fatherhood is intrinsically tied to manhood in the play. The men in the play feel a responsibility to perform their assigned gender roles by safeguarding the women around them. King lets Ruby stay at his house despite his complaints. Elmore is determined to marry and care for Ruby, and King wants to do the same for Tonya. Simultaneously, the characters try to prove their manhood with acts of aggression and violence. When King learns that Elmore killed his biological father, he storms off, upset. When asked where King went, Mister says, "He got to look in the mirror and see what kind of man he gonna be. You don't understand, Miss Ruby. His daddy dead and he looking at the man who killed him. He ain't supposed to be looking long" (Act II, scene v).

The idea of making one's father proud or living up to a family legacy comes up time and time again. When King learns that his biological father is Leroy and not King Hedley I as he had been led to believe, his whole self-perception changes. Yet instead of honoring his parentage by doing right by his mother and wife, he repeatedly tries to prove it with violence. Here, we see the nature of cyclical patriarchal violence—to try and make his father proud, King, engages in violent behavior. King's own father likely engaged in the same behavior to make *his* father proud, and so on and so forth. Yet through all of this, the women around them are losing husbands and fathers and sons. This legacy leads Tonya to utter one of the most heart-wrenching lines of the play as she begs King to consider her feelings and those of his unborn child:

> "Do your job but understand what it is. It ain't for you to go out of here and steal money to get me things. Your job is to be around so this baby can know you its daddy. Do that. For once, somebody do that. Be that. That's how you be a man, anything else I don't want" (Act II, scene iii).

THEMES CONTINUED...

Money

> "I need the money from the refrigerators to get my phone back on. Tonya pregnant. She want a car. I got to buy a crib. A stroller. Got to figure out how to get Ruby one of these refrigerators. I got the light bill. The gas bill. Got to get some food. But I ain't said nothing about splitting the pot."
>
> —King Hedley II, Act I, scene ii

In a literal sense, money is the most prevalent theme in the play. Hardly a page goes by without a character mentioning money or finances, and for good reason. Most of the conflict in the show comes from the same place: the unavoidable fact that people in American society need money to live and in the 1980s, American society did not want to help Black people amass wealth. King and Mister need money for the video store, but they also need money to pay bills, to support their partners, and to keep themselves fed, housed, and clothed. The desire to obtain money drives a significant amount of the action in the show. It is the reason why King sells stolen refrigerators, and why he and Mister rob the store. It is why Elmore killed Leroy and why Ruby and Elmore can't get married right away. It becomes a matter of pride for many of the characters, who refuse handouts and want to be able to support themselves. When Ruby offers King help getting his phone on, King responds, "You ain't gonna get my phone on in your name. I'll wait till I get the two hundred and twenty-five dollars. What that look like, having my phone in your name?" (Act I, scene i). King feels it's important to make his own money, to make his own way, and feels ashamed at the idea of needing help.

The metaphor of King's seeds underlines this theme of money. King scrapes at the dirt for hours on end yet is never able to make anything grow. It's not that King didn't put in enough work or care: he was doomed to fail from the start because his plot of land doesn't contain fertile soil. In *King Hedley II*, the characters were given a subpar plot of land by their circumstances, and no matter how hard they work, they will never be able to reap the same rewards as those who were gifted a richer plot of land.

The only character whose desires are not significantly impacted by money is Tonya. Tonya sees how desperate King is for money and tells him, "I don't want everything. That's not why I'm living... to want things. I done lived thirty-five years without things. I got enough for me. I just want to wake up in the bed beside you in the morning. I don't need things. I saw what they cost. I can live without them and be happy. I ain't asking you to stop living. The things I want you can't buy with money. And it seem like they be the hardest to get" (Act II, scene iii). Tonya serves as a reminder of the parts of life that money can't buy, and warns against placing one's full attention on material wealth at the detriment of the rest of personal relationships. ♦

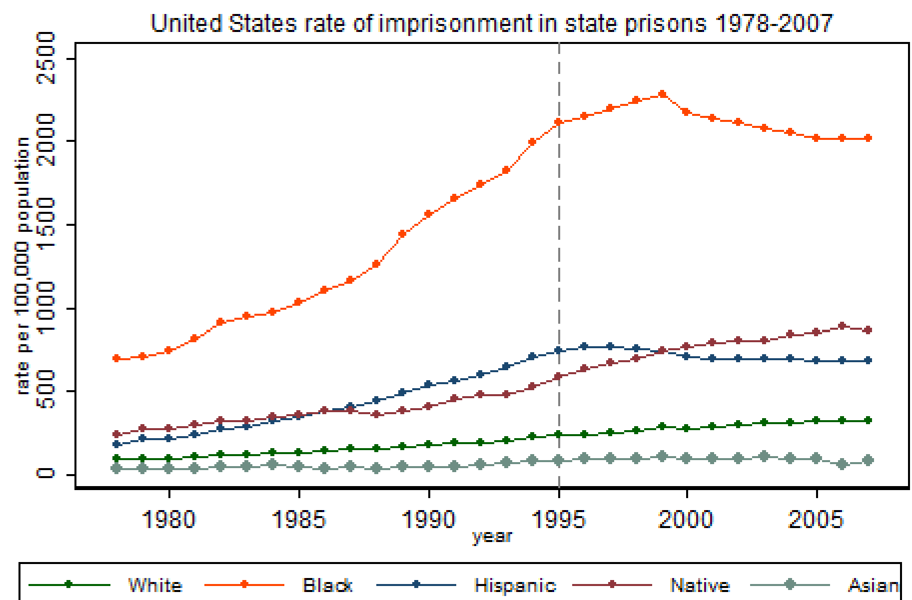
THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: **THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *KING HEDLEY II***

WRITTEN BY RACHAEL MCNAMARA, EDITED BY KALE HINTHORN

The effects of mass incarceration are palpable throughout *King Hedley II*. King himself just got out of prison and is struggling to regain a normal life. The threats of the police and the prison system are ever-present in the play, with characters consistently citing the risks of bad behavior with comments like, “You going back to jail. The police gonna find out. The police know everything.” (Act I, scene i). It is clear from the opening of the play that the characters, much like their predecessors in previous decades, are struggling to thrive under the harsh sociopolitical conditions of American culture.

“Colored” drinking fountain from mid-20th century with African-American drinking. Photographer unknown. 1939. From the Library of Congress Collection.

The disparities the characters in *King Hedley II* face are rooted in oppressive legal and social systems that date back to the beginnings of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (circa 1619), the legacies of which continue to disproportionately target Black Americans today. In 1896, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that it is constitutional to enforce and maintain racially segregated, “separate but equal” spaces, it inherently legally justified racially discriminatory behavior and policy. The discriminatory behavior that the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision validated became alarmingly normal and widespread throughout the country and went legally unquestioned for the next half-century.



Rates of incarceration in state prisons 1978-2007, by race. 2016. Graph by Pamela Oliver. Found at: https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/soc/racepoliticsjustice/2016/08/13/race-mass-incarceration-and-bill-clintons-policies/

While considerable progress has since been made in American society in regard to reforming long-standing and deeply rooted racially discriminatory laws and behavior, racial inequity is still widespread in contemporary society. Outright acts of discrimination are no longer justifiable by written law and are, in some respects, less tolerated; however, racial discrimination remains prevalent on a systemic level. The system that plays perhaps the largest role in the perpetuation of racial inequality in the country is the justice system.

The United States’ criminal justice system is the largest in the world. In 2015, 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails, accounting for nearly 22% of all prisoners in the world. Within the United States’ massive correctional and criminal justice system, there is significant racial disparity. For example, Black Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested. Once arrested, they are more likely to

THE INJUSTICE SYSTEM: CONTINUED...

be convicted. Once convicted, they are more likely to receive lengthy prison sentences. In fact, Black American adults are nearly six times as likely to be incarcerated than white adults.

This disparity has its roots, in part, in how the criminal justice system is structured to favor those with great financial means over people of lower socio-economic status. In his book, *No Equal Justice*, former Georgetown Law Professor David Cole states:

> "These double standards are not, of course, explicit; on the face of it, the criminal law is color-blind and class-blind. But in a sense, this only makes the problem worse. The rhetoric of the criminal justice system sends the message that our society carefully protects everyone's constitutional rights, but in practice the rules assure that law enforcement prerogatives will generally prevail over the rights of minorities and the poor. By affording criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the results of the criminal justice system as fair. That formal fairness obscures the systemic concerns that ought to be raised by the fact that the prison population is overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately Black."

One of the ways the justice system targeted Black Americans post-Civil War was in the establishment of vagrancy laws. Vagrancy laws criminalized unemployment, homelessness, poverty, loitering (being in a public place without a distinct purpose), and suspicious activity. The breadth and vagueness of these laws essentially allowed law enforcement officers to target anyone who might appear "out of place." In this regard, vagrancy laws served as ubiquitous tools for maintaining a class and race-based hierarchy in American society. The vagueness of these laws also allowed for the enforcement and their application to adapt to any new perceived threats to the social fabric at different times and in different places.

While vagrancy laws were deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972, they too have been redesigned in the years since the SCOTUS ruling. Today, we see the legacy of vagrancy laws at play in profiling practices, traffic stops, and 911 calls about suspicious behavior—all of which disproportionately target Black Americans. Viewing the justice system through this critical lens, it

Defund the Police - Black Lives Matter. Mid-City New Orleans, February 2021. Artist unknown.

becomes clear that our current justice system is steeped in practices and policies that mirror those of the Jim Crow era—practices and policies that inherently target and limit Black citizens' rights. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, articulates the archaic roots of the contemporary U.S. legal system's practice of incarceration of Black Americans on a mass scale:

> "As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it."

There is much more to be said about the impact of systemic racial inequality on members of marginalized communities—Latine, Indigenous, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities are also impacted by the disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system. If you would like to learn more about the history of and disparities in the criminal justice system, there are additional resources included at the end of this study guide. ♦

Edited from:

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PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **RESEARCH**

Purpose:
These research prompts will help students develop an understanding of the social and historical context of August Wilson's *King Hedley II*.

Prepare:
Students will divide into small groups and each group will research one of the following topics related to *King Hedley II*. Once all groups have prepared their research, they will present their findings to one another.

August Wilson:
- His life
- His works
- His legacy
- His influences
- Amiri Baraka
- Jorge Luis Borges
- Romare Bearden
- Blues music

The 1980s:
- Pop culture
- American politics
  - » Reaganomics
  - » The War on Drugs

The Hill District:
- Its history
- Its current state
- The cultural significance of the district
- Gentrification: its definition, its effects on the Hill District community and on your own.

Pittsburgh:
- The city's geography
- Industries in the city
- Demographics of the city in the 1980s and now
- Cultural and artistic movements that started in the city

The Black Arts Movement:
- Key artists
- Key writers
- Origin of the movement
- Black Arts Repertory Theatre
- Black Nationalism
- Marcus Garvey
- Malcolm X

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES**

Purpose:
These activities will prompt students to think critically about the themes in *King Hedley II*.

Make A Mixtape

In this activity, students will use critical thinking to discover the influence of music in the play by creating playlists with songs related to the play.

1. Have students read *King Hedley II*. Encourage them to make notes of moments that feel particularly musical.
    a. Discuss how music was a tool in the play.
    b. How did music change the plot?
    c. What does music represent?
    d. What were some themes of the play in general? What about ones related specifically to musicality?
2. Break students into groups and have them create a list of songs that remind them of the show. Songs may be related to the show based on period, genre, theme, emotional evocation, etc.
3. Come back together. Groups will present the playlists and can choose to share some song titles/lyrics/snippets that they found to be most effective at simulating the experience of the play.
4. Discuss the different songs chosen
    a. What songs were most effective?
    b. What songs reminded you of what parts of the play?
    c. How can music be symbolic in a way that text cannot? What is unique about listening to a song versus reading the lyrics?

100-Year Landmark

In this activity, students will have the opportunity to research and explore how a particular landmark or location in their hometown has evolved over time.

Background: August Wilson is best known for his American Century Cycle—a cycle of ten plays that each take place in a different decade during the 20th century. All but one of these plays takes place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Together, the ten plays tell the story of how a community has changed over time.

1. Have students pick a place, perhaps in their hometown, with which they are very familiar. This place could be a restaurant, park, store, school, house, or another geographical structure.
2. Instruct students to research the history of their chosen location for the past 100 years. If the site they have chosen has been built or developed within the past 100 years, instruct students to research what was in the location before. Encourage students to also pay attention to the groups of people who frequented the location through time.
3. After students have completed their research, direct students to create a timeline of their location's history. This timeline could include images, drawings, newspaper clippings, or printouts.
4. Allow students to share their timelines with the class.
5. Facilitate a class-wide discussion about the discoveries made during this activity. What did you learn about your location? Who has visited or used your location over time? Has your location changed drastically in the last 100 years? If so, how? Were there any surprises?

PRE-SHOW PREPARATION: **ACTIVITIES** CONTINUED...

Secret Allies and Enemies:

This activity will use physicalization to help students explore the theme of suspicion seen throughout *King Hedley II*.

1. Have students walk in the space as themselves. As they walk, instruct them to silently pick a person in the group who is their enemy. The students should not let anyone know who their enemy is. As they walk throughout the space, their goal is to stay as far away from their enemy as possible.
2. After a moment, have students silently select a different person in the group to be their ally. Again, students should not let anyone know who their ally is. Their goal now is to keep their ally in between them and their enemy at all times while staying as far away from their enemy as possible, and while not letting anyone know who their enemy is or who their ally is.
3. Advanced level: Have students silently pick a third person in the group to be their role model. Students should follow this person as closely as they can, without letting them know that they are their role model. While following their role model, students should also try to keep their ally in between them and their enemy while staying as far from their enemy as possible.
4. Discussion: How was this activity? Was it easy? Was it difficult? What was easy or difficult about it? Did you feel suspicious of the people around you? Were you successful at keeping who your enemy, ally, and role model secret?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Speak on gender roles and politics in *King Hedley II*. In what ways do the characters fulfill the expectations of the time? In what ways do they break away from them?
2. How much of King's sense of self is built on the knowledge of his father? What changes in King when he learns the truth of his parentage?
3. Discuss the role violence plays in *King Hedley II*. Are there different types of violence? What are their motivations?
4. Look further into Wilson's metaphor of the seeds and the barren land. What might they signify in a larger context?
5. What does Aunt Ester's death mean for the characters in the play? For the Hill District? Why do you think Wilson chose to include so many references to her?
6. How does Wilson use dramatic irony in *King Hedley II*? What effect does it have on the audience?

ADDITIONAL **RESOURCES**

Articles

Arndt, Heinz W. “The 'Trickle-down' myth.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 32.1 (1983): 1-10.

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De Maio FG, “Income inequality measures”. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 2007;61:849-852.

Thomas Piketty , Emmanuel Saez, “Income Inequality in the United States”, 1913–1998, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 118, Issue 1, February 2003, Pages 1–41, https://doi.org/10.1162/00335530360535135

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Books

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Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed.* PLUTO Press, 2019.

Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America.* Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Stockman, David Alan. *The Triumph of Politics: Why the Reagan Revolution Failed*. Public Affairs, 2013.

Films

Washington, Denzel, director. *Fences*. Paramount Pictures, 2016.

Wolfe, George C., director. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Netflix, 2020.

Plays

Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. Theatre Communications Group, 2006.

Wilson, August. *Seven Guitars*. Plume, 1997.

ABOUT THEATRE ARTS: **KEY THEATRICAL TERMS**

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of amusement: going to the theatre. But attending a live theatrical performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of entertainment.

In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like A Noise Within, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd.

After this A Noise Within performance, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

blocking: The instructions a director gives actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce, or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. A Noise Within features a thrust stage.

ABOUT **A NOISE WITHIN**

A NOISE WITHIN produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.

Study Guides

A Noise Within creates study guides in alignment with core reading, listening, speaking, and performing arts standards to help educators prepare their students for their visit to our theatre. Study guides are available at no extra cost to download through our website: www.anoisewithin.org. The information and activities outlined in these guides are designed to work in compliance with the California VAPA standards, the Common Core, and 21st Century Learning Skills.

Study guides include background information on the plays and playwrights, historical context, textual analysis, in-depth discussion of A Noise Within's artistic interpretation of the work, statements from directors and designers, as well as discussion points and suggested classroom activities. Guides from past seasons are also available to download from the website.

Credits

Alicia Green .... Education Director and Editor

Kale Hinthorn .... Author

Rachael McNamara .... Author

Emma Baker .... LACAC Education Intern

Dr. Miranda Johnson-Haddad .... Editorial Consultant

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