Elon Dancy (00:00:00):

Good morning. I'm Elon Dancy, and I have the pleasure of serving as the Helen S. Faison Endowed Chair in Urban Education and Executive Director for the Center for Urban Education in the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. Thanks for being with us this morning. If you're new to the Pitt Center for Urban Education, we focus on education practice for freedom and justice through a range of creative and intellectual endeavors, perhaps most notably research, teaching and service. We thank our colleagues in the Center for Urban Education and the School of Education, our faculty, staff and students whose labor enabled this event. We give a special thanks to our co-sponsors, the University of Pittsburgh Library System, the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, and the Kinloch Commons for Critical Pedagogy and Leadership located in our own School of Education. Our apologies for the absence of ASL support with this event due to staffing issues. We'll transcribe this talk and make available to all our registrants.

(00:00:59):

We always want you to know that there's a way to keep in touch with center events as well at our website, cue.pitt.edu. That's cue.pitt.edu. You can click Contact on our main menu to receive information about our events. While you're there, learn more about us, what is upcoming and read our newsletter. We're gathered today in the synergies of exciting celebrations. The first of the opportunity to study the educational philosophy of playwright and Pittsburgh Hill District native August Wilson, whose trailblazing cycle of 10 plays chronicle the 20th century Black experience in what is known as North America. Each play is set in a different decade and collectively became known as the Century Cycle. "Put them all together, Wilson once said, "and you have a history." At a time when several communities are engaging Black History Month in various ways, we take this opportunity to learn from Wilson's life and work as essential to teaching and learning, because his creations help us to gain better understanding of our practices and educational context, because it helps us articulate our desired principles and commitments for world yet to exist, and because it helps us to understand, organize, and act.

(00:02:18):

Second, we celebrate our relationship with the University of Pittsburgh Library and announce our collaborative partnership to offer workshops in which any educator can learn how to design experiences through the August Wilson Archive, which now lives in the University library. Details are forthcoming on both our websites, and if you have registered for this event, you will receive a special invitation. Third, how meaningful to celebrate this collaboration than with the wonderful conversation we are about to have with a panel of thoughtful intellectuals and creatives. I now welcome Diael Thomas, who is curator for the August Wilson Outreach and Engagement Unit within the University Library System Archives and Special Collections. She's going to share more about the treasure chest that is the August Wilson archive. Diael, good morning and welcome.

Diael Thomas (00:03:15):

Good morning. Thank you so much for that introduction, Elon. Hello, everyone. My name is Diael Thomas. I am the August Wilson Outreach and Engagement curator in the University of Pittsburgh Library System. I'm so excited for our conversation today and for this partnership with the Center for Urban Education. I'm just going to share a few more details about the archive and our outreach plans with it. So in the fall of 2020, the University Library system acquired the August Wilson Archive from his estate and his widow, Constanza Romero Wilson. The archive arrived in 450 plus boxes, yes, on an 18-wheeler truck. It chronicles Wilson's writing career from early unpublished works through his American
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Century Cycle plays. It contains handwritten notes, drafts of scripts, production history, speeches, essays, correspondence, awards, degrees, photographs, audio-visual materials, and much more.

(00:04:10):
I don't think I have to say this, but Wilson's work has been amazingly influential and impactful, not just in Pittsburgh, but across this country and the world. We know that the archive is a treasure trove for exploring not only Wilson's writing process, how he developed characters, dialogue, plot, but also, issues important to him, his creative and personal relationships, and even the practicality of how his plays were produced from contracts, casting script edits. We are now focused on working with our local community to create, learn, and be inspired by what is in the collection. We also hope to initiate conversations on race, African American history, the great migration, social justice, and much more with this conversation being the first of many. So my role is focused on outreach to local high school students, educators, artists and community organizations.

(00:04:59):
My goal is to keep Wilson's legacy as well as the Black experience chronicled in his play is alive for current and future generations. Wilson tells the story of the Black experience and the struggle for cultural and economic preservation through the lens of the Hill District. Our programs will leverage the existing Pitt community engagement centers in both the Hill District and Homewood, also leveraging our existing partnerships with August Wilson House, the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, the August Wilson Society, University Prep Milliones, Pitt Center for Creativity, Department of English and University Educational Outreach Center. We're also forging new relationships with the Center of Life, the Hazelwood Historical Society, Bloomfield Garfield Corporation, the Hill CDC, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the City of Pittsburgh, and of course, Pitt Center for Urban Education.

(00:05:47):
These relationships allow us to form partnerships for programming and events, reach interested communities and enrich our offerings. With a strength-based approach, we will work with many of these community organizations to plan specialized programming. The last thing that I want to highlight is that the archive is open for research now. It opened in early January and many of our panelists today actually have already visited the archive, which is so very exciting. We have welcomed academic researchers and several student researchers, and we hope to continue to hold research and creative projects to contribute to a body of work around Wilson and our understanding of his corpus. We have an opening celebration for the archive next week, March 3rd in Hillman Library from 6:00 to 8:00 PM along with a week's long of programming. So I hope to see you there, and I hope to see you at the archive. Thank you so much, and I look forward to the conversation.

Elon Dancy (00:06:41):
Yes. Thank you, Diael. Absolutely exciting. Now without further delay, let's get to our panel. Please welcome our wonderful facilitators. Ariana Brazier received a doctoral degree in English Critical and Cultural Studies from the University of Pittsburgh in April 2021. As a researcher, Ari's work is centered on Black children and families living in poverty in the southeast United States. She documents how Black child play functions as a grassroots method of community-based storytelling, teaching and organizing. She's joined today by Robert Randolph, who is director of the Writing Center at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. His research and teaching interests include 20th and 21st Century African American literature and cultural production, sociocultural foundations of education and Black feminists and queer rhetorics and pedagogies. His notable publications include The Queer Poetics of Social Justice
Literacy, Affect(ion) and the Critical Pedagogical Imperative, and Shifting the Talk: Writing Studies, Rhetoric and Feminism at HBCUs. Welcome, excited.

Robert Randolph (00:07:55):
Thank you, Elon. I am going to just frame our conversation today. With his American Century Cycle, August Wilson is one of the most significant American playwrights of the 20th century. Beyond richly-drawn characters, poetic language and artistic merit, Wilson's works also serve as a pedagogical tool for many helping to educate and inspire individuals, particularly African Americans in their pursuit for self-determination and social justice. Overall, this multifaceted discussion will highlight the enduring impact of Wilson's plays and their continued relevance in shaping our understanding of race, identity and social justice in America. So I welcome all of our great esteemed panelists. I will begin with a question here and any one of you can jump in and share your thoughts. The question is, to what extent do August Wilson's plays promote the idea of self-determination as a means of achieving personal and collective freedom and liberation for African Americans? Don't all jump in at once.

Justin Emeka (00:09:14):
Exactly.

Shaun Myers (00:09:16):
I'll start us off. I just-

Robert Randolph (00:09:17):
Thank you.

Shaun Myers (00:09:18):
What comes to mind in thinking about Wilson's plays, Seth, the character from Joe Turner's Come and Gone, he's the boarding house owner. He's a property owner, a proprietor in 1911. He has this skill to, "Make something out of nothing," is what he says, and to take metal in particular and bend it and twist, he says, "I can do whatever I want with it." This captures this sense of self-determination at this pivotal moment in African American history, the nadir and the nader, he has a dream of not only working for himself but of teaching other Black men his metal craft work so that they can all work together alongside him. So there's this individual dream leading to this collective outcome. So that moment in the play, but also, what Wilson did with the Century Cycle itself is this sheer act of determination.

Elon Dancy (00:10:37):
Thank you.

Khalid Long (00:10:39):
I can jump in and follow up. Shaun, thank you for that. The thing that comes to mind immediately for me is that August Wilson by writing his 10-play cycle, and in addition to that, his speeches, writing his critical commentary, he's urging folk, and in particular Black folks to own the narrative. In many ways, he's asserting the idea that we need to own our narrative and in doing so, we insert ourselves into discourses about history. Not only do we insert ourselves into the discourses, but we also get to participate in revising narratives and historical documents through dramatic literature that have often erased,
silenced, or really just were problematic in the ways in which they've attempted to document and address who Black folks are and our experiences.

(00:11:38):
Following up a little bit on Shaun, thinking about a play in particular, I'm thinking about The Piano Lesson, which is the play that's set in the 1930s. Interesting in that play, it is about a brother and sister and they're having a struggle about what to do with the family's legacy that is embodied in the piano that was used to purchase family members during the period of enslavement. But I think if we look closer at some of the other characters, and in particular Boy Willie, who is the central character, and we also look at Lyman who is his best friend who travels with him from the South to the North, Pittsburgh in particular. We look at those two characters and they're offering us divergent ideas and possibilities for this notion of self-determination.

(00:12:28):
Boy Willie wants to take the piano, he wants to sell it, and he wants to use the money to return to the South and invest it in an entrepreneurial way where Lyman does not actually want to return to the South. He wants to go up North and follow the folks who've moved to the North and create new opportunities. Now, essentially, August Wilson argues that neither one of them are right, neither one of them are wrong, but the goal is to deal with the history and legacy of African Americans, particularly around the period of enslavement before we can move forward. But I think it's interesting that he's offering us a variety of possibilities for what it means to move forward in an already problematic world. I'll leave it there for now.

Justin Emeka (00:13:18):
Yeah, I think that so much of August Wilson's work is, though, about providing a perspective of Black people that inherently Black people are self-reliant, that that's one of the lenses of his plays. So if we really look at it, all his characters are self-reliant. Even characters that if looked at from another lens, a character like say maybe Hambone in Two Trains Running who's just a homeless guy who's just walking around the street saying, "I want my ham." But he's still, he's pursuing, he's trying to claim his own destiny is the way of one might look at him and say, "Oh, he's just a shiftless homeless bum or something." You know what I'm saying? But August Wilson very carefully reveals the self-reliance that's inherent in all of these Black people in this world that's dominated by white supremacy without ever really centering whiteness or white supremacy.

Robert Randolph (00:14:27):
Thank you all for those. Before we continue, I neglected to introduce you, my esteemed panelists, blame it on my head and not my heart. So Justin Emeka is an associate professor of theater in African American studies at Oberlin College and resident director at the Pittsburgh Public Theater where he directed August Wilson's Two Trains Running in 2022, and most recently, A Midsummer's Night Dream in Harlem. He specializes in new approaches to classic texts and imaginative stagings of popular and emerging playwrights. Dr. Khalid Y. Long is an assistant professor in the Department of Theater and Film Studies and at the Institute for African American Studies at the University of Georgia.

(00:15:24):
He is a scholar, dramaturg and director specializing in African American Black diaspora. Theater performance and literature through the lenses of Black feminist, womanist thought, queer studies and performance studies. He previously served as the August Wilson Society's vice president and conference planner. And lastly, Dr. Shaun Meyers is an assistant professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh.
who specializes in African American diasporic literature and culture focusing on Black aesthetics, transit and transnationalism and Black feminist literary histories. Her current book project Black Anesthetics: African American Narrative Beyond Man explores posthumanism in African American Literature. Thank you. All right, let's continue.

Ariana Brazier (00:16:18):
We'd also like to [inaudible 00:16:20] Oh, we'd also like to invite all participants to post any questions they may have in the chat and we will reserve plenty of time at the conclusion of our questions, mine and Robert's, for you all.

Robert Randolph (00:16:42):
I think you have the next question, Ari.

Ariana Brazier (00:16:44):
Okay, I wasn't sure. I was waiting for the cue. Okay. So August Wilson is quoted as saying, quote, "All art is political in the sense that it serves someone's politics," end quote. In what do you think of this quote In light of the underfunding of arts classes due to educational budget cuts and recent book bans due to fearmongering around critical race theory? I also have a sub-question to that and I'll pose that as well. Then my second question is, how do we foster an interest in art as a tactic for resistance and cultural celebration amidst this political climate?

Khalid Long (00:17:29):
I can jump in here and offer some giving thoughts. I'm actually really, really interested in the second portion of the question. For me, I believe that a strategy is to continue to teach it. We have to continue to teach art. What by that is, we do not, oftentimes we teach art, we're teaching it as an addendum. We're teaching it as on the periphery, and it's not often the central, centered in the curriculum. I think that we have to begin to rethink that. I'm talking about in terms of from grade school to higher education as well. If we put it in the center, then that really forces us and students and parents to rethink the purpose of the arts and the possibilities that the art offers.

(00:18:19):
I'm not talking about in terms of teaching art in all of its manifestations simply for students to promote or to attempt to push students to go into the arts as a career. But I'm talking about teaching art as a way to get students to explore deeply the human condition. It's to get them to explore history and culture of various groups of people and not just Black folks, but obviously we're talking about Black folk indicative of August Wilson, and then let's use August Wilson as an example. If we put August Wilson at the center of the curriculum, whether that's in English, whether that's in theater, performance studies, whether that's in sociology and I'm naming areas that have taken him up and their various discourses and so forth. It then allows us to put Black folk at the center of the discourses and Black folks at the center of the curriculum. So for me, that is a strategy that can be implemented that have been on many people's part.

Shaun Myers (00:19:21):
I'll jump in to say how much I appreciate how Wilson is parsing out the political versus seemingly apolitical art. He's betraying the lie that certain art traditions are non-political or apolitical. All art is advancing or upholding some type of worldview or a set of social relations or some type of political
structure. So there were certain points in his career where he said, "My art is not explicitly political, but all art is animated by either conditions of power or some type of contest of power." Thinking about the underfunding of the arts, I'm speaking here, not only as an educator but as a parent that when we underfund art classes we're underfunding children's imagination and creativity.

(00:20:27):
When you're cutting access to music and visual arts and literature and drama and dance, you're eliminating entire ways of thinking and feeling and relating and moving through the world. Thinking about just you turn the news on every day, so this is a problem we're contending with on a daily basis, but looking to the Black Horizons Theater and those types of things, I grew up in Cleveland, we had the Karamu House, just those community places, our home bookshelves. We have to lean on those things again.

Justin Emeka (00:21:15):
Yeah. I think the idea of all art being political, for me, as August Wilson talks about it is one, the recognition that all art comes from a unique perspective and that it somewhat indict the idea of what is universal. There's this idea that some art is universal in some is peripheral or in terms Black theater versus theater. I think that August Wilson at one level is indicting this idea of what we consider as just universal. Whether this idea Shakespeare is universal and Chekov is universal, whereas, Ntozake Shange is more specified and more specialized in the idea that at one level, I think that August Wilson is asserting for me, as I take it anyway, is that what is universal is not the art; what is universal is the people and the experiences. So love is universal, pain is universal, struggle is universal. Shakespeare is not universal. August Wilson is not universal. Nobody is universal and they're able to just reach everybody as much as they create pictures and portraits of a human experience that reaches everybody, then we start achieving what's getting at what's universal as opposed to political.

Robert Randolph (00:22:56):
Wow. Okay. So y'all are opening up with the big guns here. Actually, so your comments also lead to the next question, which is more poignant here. Aligning with key themes of Wilson's life and work, how does viewing oneself as a part of his cultural and artistic lineage embolden students to see their own contributions as equally political and therefore, political?

Justin Emeka (00:23:28):
Well, I think that one, his work forces us to confront certain deficiencies, of legacies, that Black people in America are working uphill, are working uphill against forces that have been designed to keep them in a certain place. Paramount to that struggle is self-awareness. So just as much as the original question saying August Wilson was concerned with self-reliance, just as much or even more so he was concerned with self-awareness and this idea of Black people being Africans in America, which is still a very controversial idea, but August Wilson promoted that idea to the hilt that we are African people in America, that even Black people in America pushed back on.

(00:24:25):
But to connect us to a greater legacy, going back to the Black Nationalists Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, this idea that we are connected, we come from a larger source of history than just these slave ships that dropped us off in the 1600s. So important in order for young people to understand their true power and their true purpose is to be able to connect with those roots that go further back, reaching back beyond America even. He uses his art as plays, as a tool to shine that light in that direction.
Robert Randolph (00:25:06):
Thank you. Can you give us a couple of examples from specific plays where he is particularly taking up this question of self-awareness?

Justin Emeka (00:25:25):
Almost every single one of them have ... Of course, Harold Loomis and starting at the top, he's plagued by not knowing who he is in the world. It's the song that actually helps him figure out who he is so that the art is then becomes a conduit for us to remember the essence of who we are. It's Aunt Ester who takes citizen on a journey to the city of bones at the bottom of the ocean. Again, metaphorically, though, it's an artistic journey. It's a poetic journey that she uses. So August Wilson throughout his plays is time and time again is showing us how art is the highway, the vehicle, the avenue that we can get on and ride towards self-awareness and Black pride and African pride.

Khalid Long (00:26:23):
I also think that it is important to think about this idea of self-determination is the thread throughout today's chat. But I think it's important to bring in August Wilson's argument around the idea of community and investing in community. So even though we can name specific characters or individual characters from the plays within the cycle, it is important to recognize that in each of his plays, the characters are connected to a larger community. It is through the community that the characters are able to survive or to be successful at the attempts that they're making throughout various plays. I just wanted to bring that in for a moment. Then I think in the context of getting students to see their own contributions, I think it's important then for students to recognize that nothing exists, nothing happens without being connected to a larger community, even though people like to think that they're moving throughout the world alone and by themselves. Yeah, I'll leave it there.

Shaun Myers (00:27:37):
I'll just say, I mentioned before that I'm from Cleveland, so not having come here to live in Pittsburgh until working at the University of Pittsburgh, but marrying into a Pittsburgh family that I felt like I knew Pittsburgh before I ever arrived or ever dreamed of living here. I think that's what August Wilson, that's his inheritance. That's what he has left us, that he has honored the streets that we walk on. He has elevated the family and the community ties that we have. He sees the art in our language and he says that it is artful, that is the legacy. So that's the source of a self-awareness that we have that it particularly resonates what he did for the city, that I'm going to honor you across an entire century, the politics of your everyday life, your everyday language. There's an eloquence there.

Robert Randolph (00:28:51):
When you all have taught Wilson's works or engaged his works with students or at various levels, actually I'll just ask, what do the students talk about? Do they have a political analysis as it were about their connection to Wilson's work?

Khalid Long (00:29:19):
It's interesting because, I teach at University of Georgia, and prior to that I was at Columbia College Chicago, and I'm bringing that in because right before I left Columbia, I taught an August Wilson course. It was a dramatic literature course and we just studied August Wilson's work for the entire semester. What I learned there was teaching Wilson for an entire semester allowed us to go deeper obviously and
to bring in critical scholarship around Wilson's work and African American theater and American theater in general. Students have a greater appreciation when they're thinking about and able to engage the cycle from beginning to the end regardless of how you teach it. What by that is I remember being in graduate school, I had a Professor, Paul Jackson, we did a graduate seminar in August Wilson.

He taught the plays in terms of when they were written because he wanted us to see the development of Wilson's writing. But oftentimes, in undergraduate courses we'll teach them from Gem of the Ocean, 1904 to Radio Golf, the 1990s play, I think, what is that, 1997? 1986? Something like that to see the arc of African American history. So either way it works and then you could do dramatically however you like that. What I find really interesting is that I always thought that Fences, Piano Lesson, to some degree Two Trains Running are a bit more accessible in terms of their relationship with other examples of dramatic literature, realism and so forth where Gem of the Ocean and Joe Turner's Come and Gone and even King Hedley may be a little bit more complex.

They are for many reasons because they're delving into directly into some of the Africanisms and so forth that Wilson is attempting to get at. But my point is this, when I teach Gem of the Ocean, that is the play that they connect with most, because for them it is doing something powerful and that's what interests them. With Fences, we can talk about Troy, we can talk about Corey, we can talk about father-son relationship, we can talk about the Negro Baseball League and it's beautiful and it's fascinating, but it is Gem of the Ocean and Joe Turner's Come and Gone they find Wilson's work to be not necessarily accessible, but most interesting, because he's doing this what they consider to be this magical work on the stage.

Granted, I'm also teaching theater students who, for them, they're always envisioning, "How will this work on the stage? Who can I play? What monologue can I learn? What monologue can I take on to audition with?" So I also want to acknowledge that it also depends on what department you're teaching the work in. If that is a conventional, traditional English department and is being taught by someone who is not thinking about it for the stage, but rather as simply literature. Then that also makes me think about Sandra L. Richards and her really important essay when she questions, and I got to get a title of the essay, but when she questions what is missing when we think about these dramatic texts as simply literature and then what gets materialized? What are the areas of the piece of literature that gets emboldened and enlivened when it is presented on the stage, when bodies are in motion and so forth.

I really would like to pick up on the thread that Shaun just left us about the language of the streets, and I hope that Robert won't mind me skipping around in our agenda.

No, go for it.

Go for it.

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But August Wilson explains how many of his plays begin with a single line of dialogue that then guides his character development. What does his appreciation for the way Black people teach us as educators about the value of our students' culturally-specific language and dialogue, and how can our appreciation for the way they talk help us guide their character development?

Justin Emeka (00:33:27):
I think his work challenges us to reevaluate how we measure the complexity of language and how we measure the complexity of vocabulary. It's not about the words, it's about the ideas. It's about the feelings and how Black people express ideas and express feelings, or rather how we find a way to express feelings and complex thoughts within the limitations of whatever system of vocabulary we are giving is part of the genius of Black people throughout the world. I think that the specificity of his language, though, how much detail he pays to each, to the construction of it and how much detail it demands of the actors to pay attention in constructing the language also invites us to embrace just the complexity of how Black people engage language.

Shaun Myers (00:34:42):
I'll say that speaking as a literary scholar who's teaching in literary studies classrooms, this isn't always the case, but to really put an emphasis on students' voices, allowing them to be storytellers, I think so much of our work is built around just simply writing an essay. I shouldn't say simply, but writing essays, interpretation, close reading, but I'm always trying to get the students' voices into the classroom, whether it's through ... My students are reading, Joe Turner's Come and Gone right now as we speak. This is what we'll be taking up in the next class. The assignment coming up is a video essay where you are bringing in your own voice, your own body into the practice of close reading. I often have them do autobiographies. I teach classes about mobility, which might center a historical event like the Great Migration like. What is your autobiography of mobility or immobility? Have you never left the place where you were born? So listening to student voices and just that wonderful emphasis and everything Wilson does on the language. Dialogue is king for Wilson and that's part of the pleasure of Wilson.

Khalid Long (00:36:21):
Yeah. I'll just add briefly that I think it's important to also think about what influenced Wilson to people his plays with these particular characters and therefore, the ways in which they talk their dialogue as well as their stories. We know that Wilson was inspired by the people he lived around, those in Pittsburgh in particular, from the diners, the community spaces, I'll say; so the diners, the barbershops, the corners, the stores. So then Wilson moves on and he peoples his plays with what Glenda Dickerson would call the dry long souls, the everyday ordinary people who are in many ways, they're impacted by what's happening socially, culturally, and politically on a national level. (00:37:08):
But that's not the focus of the play. The focus of the play is how do these people survive what's happening nationally, locally, what's in their communities, which then allows them to talk about the everyday mundane experiences that they're having. But the language is beautiful and it's poetic. So it's August Wilson then gives us plays that affirms that everyday Black folk, that they are poetic in and of themselves, that their language is poetic and beautiful and that their experiences and their stories and their dialogue is valued. For me, that's the takeaway for that question.

Ariana Brazier (00:37:47):
This seems to connect quite fully with the thread of womanism. Can you speak more to how you see womanism showing up in August Wilson's work? I'm thinking about the ordinary every day and the mobility in our everyday connections.

Khalid Long (00:38:08):
Did anybody want to jump in first or, okay, I'll go ahead. So I think it's important then to think largely about Wilson and the ways in which he's been critiqued for the women in his plays, and rightly so. Nothing and no one is without critique and many, many scholars have picked up, including Sandra Shannon, Dana Owens, I'm thinking about the work of Ladrica Menson-Furr. I'm thinking about the new work coming out by Leticia Ridley, who has a new chapter talking about the women in Wilson's work and many, many other scholars and critics and artists who have talked about this. I always go back to Harry Elam's work, scholar Harry Elam's work where he talks about the women in Wilson's work. That is, we can critique Wilson for the development of the women for the ways in which he depicts them.

(00:39:04):
The argument is simply this, the fact that they're flat, they're not not given as much stage time and presence and dialogue or specifically language and script as the men, and that there is a reliance upon men within the plays in terms of the women and how they're portrayed and developed. But Harry Elam offers a really nuanced idea, and that is this: First and foremost, we have to take up his plays in terms of its historical and social context. So it's easy to take today's theoretical and cultural frameworks and apply them to the past in which Wilson is dealing with women in his plays. But he also talks about the idea that the women, they really have a greater function. If we look closely at how they're participating in the community within the plays, so I'll think about Two Trains Running. I'll think about Risa who plays the waitress in Two Trains Running in the diner, and throughout the play, "Risa, give me some sugar, Risa, give me some sugar, Risa, give me some sugar."

(00:40:13):
Then there are moments where Memphis who owns the diner comes in and he's not berating her, but in an aggressive, assertive manner, "Risa, where is this and what's that? Turn the fire down! You got to put that chicken on! Get the ribs going!" But he's the boss of the diner, so he's also asserting a dominance and attitude that, "This is my place, and I'm going to run it how I want to run it." But here's what we know, take Risa out the play, take Risa out the diner, it would fall apart. So while Risa doesn't necessarily assert a response often to him verbally, her response is literally in the physical work and the labor she carries out in the diner. So if she was absent, the diner would fall apart and the play ultimately would fall apart and we would need to set the play somewhere else. That is her place, if that makes sense.

(00:41:10):
I often think about, let's talk about Fences really quickly. Rose Maxon, the wife of Troy in the play. Troy is this big, stern figure. He is this dominant figure. He's aggressive, he's assertive, perhaps the most flawed character throughout Wilson's oofer, and really a character that I think competes ... As we know, Wilson wrote this play to compete and be paralleled with other great American dramatic works predominantly by other white European playwrights, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and so forth. But here's something that oftentimes gets overlooked, especially in classrooms. Troy is literate and cannot read, something that he admits later on, which is how he ends up signing papers that allows his brother, Gabriel, to be sent to a permanent home, a permanent hospital where he'll stay. This happens later in the play. Every Friday, he gives Rose his paycheck, and what we learn is that Rose is taking care of the household bills and so forth.

(00:42:24):
What I think is important is to recognize Rose is not illiterate. She can read, so she's also the one who has to take care of the everyday activities to maintain the household, which again, illustrates that if she's pulled out, if she's taken away, that home would fall apart. I think also she's the one that held Troy up. I want us to all acknowledge the gender dynamics that's playing out there, but I don't mean simply in this emotional way. I'm talking about literally the one who's able to carry out the daily functions because he's living in a world where he can't fully participate because of his illiteracy. So I just want to give just two examples of the ways in which women participate and function in the play. There's many, many, many more, but those are the two that I'll give for now.

Justin Emeka (00:43:18):
I will jump along Dr. Long's comments as well. As a director, one of the things that I found a lot working with actors on the plays is how much space there is for the women to fill these voids that people criticize him for not giving them so many words, and particularly like Risa in Two Trains Running, one of the actors who played that role, Melissa Clark is on this call. I got to give her a shout-out. She's an amazing, amazing actor, and was working with her on the role. We had conversations about this, about, "Oh wow, she doesn't have that many lines as the other guy. She doesn't have these big speeches," but we really found how much acting moments she had just occupying the space and how much she does really keep that place running. Just the nuances that Melissa was able to find as an actor in creating these moments with these actors was just infinitely rich.

(00:44:26):
So I think oftentimes we think it gets at, for me as a director, what is the play? Oftentimes, we think the script is the play, but the script is not the play. The script is a literary piece of work. The play is a living, moving thing that only exists in a finite time and then it closes and then it's gone until somebody brings the play to life again. It's a play, it's a very elusive thing that no one can really own the play, even the author themself, even, that's the magic of theater. A great writer creates these spaces for other artists to come in and breathe nuances that they might not have even figured out. I feel like at one level, August Wilson even, and he talks about recognizes his own shortcomings in trying to articulate everything that's going on inside of a woman, instead of him trying to write it there, he just left space for people to come in, actors to come in and put of themselves in the role in a way that I think it is hard to appreciate until you really dive into staging the text.

Shaun Myers (00:45:46):
I'll just briefly add that I'm thinking of Rose in Fences and Bertha us Two Trains Running. So there are moments where women have voice, but I also, coming from the literary canon and approaching drama first as literary text, but often as well as a performative text that I'm thinking of something like Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison's 1977 novel, which has lots of correspondences with Joe Turner's Come and Gone and the story of migration. But the question with both of these texts, Morrison's and Wilson's, is the aim to be a mimetic text to represent or mirror reality, the world that we live in, which is patriarchal, or is there something disruptive there? Both of those goals for the text are useful, even if it is just mirroring what happens in the Jitney Station or the restaurant or the boarding house. There's use there to be able to critique the relationships and the power dynamics there.

Khalid Long (00:47:23):
I also want to jump in, if I can, and Ari, to think a little bit about your question specifically around womanism. I don't know if I would consider Wilson's work to be feminist or an example of Black feminists or womanist of works. But if we think about womanism, particularly thinking about Layli
Phillips, her definition around idea of womanism, then I think that in particular, I'm thinking about womanism, this notion that Black women should be at the center, but Black women should be at the center because then therefore, we can think about the larger community. Wilson's work, again, he's really invested in the idea of the entire community being at the center of the discourse, seeking freedom and liberation, seeking retribution, seeking survivorship and so forth. So I think that is an interesting way to branch off and think about it without dismissing or without not engaging in the critiques that have been published about Wilson in the ways in which he depicts women within his works as well.

Justin Emeka (00:48:30):
[inaudible 00:48:38]

Khalid Long (00:48:37):
You're muted.

Robert Randolph (00:48:38):
You're muted.

Justin Emeka (00:48:39):
Sorry. Yeah, there's a question in the chat that says, "Do we think that it was a cultural norm that women weren't given much attention at the time or August Wilson was just misrepresenting women?" I don't know if I would say August Wilson was misrepresenting women in terms of August Wilson was giving his perspective, sharing, and that's all an artist can really do is share their perspective on a thing. It is fair game to criticize, I feel like. It's fair game to have conversations about what's effective and what's not effective or what's offensive or what's empowering.

(00:49:15):
All of that is good stuff in terms of, but trying to throw August Wilson's work away because it's not feminist enough or it doesn't center Black women enough, I would take issue with that. But I feel like it's healthy for us to talk about what works. Particularly as time goes by when we look at works from the past, we have different standards. We think of feminism very differently now than we did in the '80s and stuff. So as time goes by, we got to keep these conversations going in looking at these texts, but not throwing them away, we still can recognize their merits with while questioning some of the things within them.

Khalid Long (00:50:04):
Can I jump in and add a little bit to that and respond to that a little bit, particularly, the question I saw the question as well? I think first of all, it's important to acknowledge that Wilson has spoken on this. What he has said for is that he models the women in his plays and in particular, roles from Fences after his mother, Daisy Wilson. So again, similar to what Professor Emeka is getting to is the idea that he's creating off of what he knows and what is his experience. He has also argued that he doesn't want to depict women because he's not one, he doesn't identify with one and he doesn't know their experiences. So again, he's writing culturally and from a gendered perspective what he knows and what he has experienced himself. I used to be one of those folks, especially when I was in graduate school. Many of us, when we're in grad school, we try to challenge all of the readings and find the flaws in the argument rather than recognize and appreciate what the argument and/or the work is attempting to do in the first place.
That's something that I try to get my students to do now. When I'm teaching theater and we're using plays as an example or something to explore, something that has happened in theater history and so forth, I always tell them, "I don't care if you like it or did not like it, that does nothing for us. It's unproductive to think in those ways. What is the work attempting to do? Let's start there." So for me, if we think about Wilson and how he's attempting to chronicle the Black experience through a particular time period, I think then the goal is to put Wilson in conversation with other people who have also attempted to do such a project, and maybe even think about Wilson as a front-runner or as a pioneer or someone who opened their door for these kinds of works to be taken up in commercial theater.

So for instance, I'm thinking about Dominique Mariso, who's another African American woman playwright who has also written a cycle of her own, and she's chronicling the Black experience in Detroit, so again, thinking about the ways in which the plays are set in very particular location throughout various time periods. But what Dominique Mariso does differently is that she puts women at the center of these plays, so again, she's someone who's taking up ... And I also want to acknowledge, and Dominique Mariso has said this herself that Wilson is an inspiration, but also Pearl Cleage is an inspiration. Pearl Cleage is also someone who has done this as well, looking at various moments throughout history and people in her place to respond to what's been happening socially, culturally, and politically. But again, very much inspired by Pearl Cleage who she considers a mentor, Pearl Cleage herself, putting women at the center of these plays.

So I'm not saying that the critiques are not valid, but I'm not invested in continuing having that conversation because Wilson is one person, and he's not a standalone playwright who has attempted to chronicle Black experience through dramatic literature. We can look to many others who were writing prior to Wilson, and at the same time as Wilson doing something very similar. If we want to more of a nuanced approach with regards to gender, look at some of the other folks. The last person I'll mention who does something quite similar is Lynn Nottage. Again, while she's not doing a chronological purview like Wilson, this lineage like Wilson, well, she does offer a genealogical view by writing these plays that are set at various times throughout American history where women, again, are at the center. So I think really it's just who else can we look to and then put Wilson in conversation with those people rather than thinking about Wilson as a standalone artist who has to bear that burden.

Ariana Brazier (00:53:49):
Thank you for all of these responses. This is giving me a lot to think about as someone who also looks at womanism and community in my own research. Just I guess shifting slightly from maybe gender-specific theory to a broader question about identity, I want to pose a question about Black theater broadly. So I'm thinking more along the lines of what Justin had shared earlier about there being this default universal idea of theater and then there being Black theater on the margins.

So Wilson's state of position on theater was based on W.E.B. DuBois' principles, the plays of a True Black theater must be one about us, two, by us, three, for us, and four, near us. With this in mind, I really want to know what you all think Black theater looks like today and how we juxtapose contemporary offerings with Wilson's productions to race consciousness within and in our culture. So what does Black theater look like today if we're moving it to the center, if we're thinking about it as a central theme in our
everyday lives? How do juxtapose today's offerings with Wilson's unique specificity around Black theater as a mode of consciousness raising?

Shaun Myers (00:55:13):
So one of the reasons that Wilson insisted on these principles laid out by DuBois is the very fact of the conditions of Black theater theater in the United States. So he famously had a debate about this with one of the theater organizers in New York, and he was insistent that we need to focus on about us, by us, for us and near us because there is a dearth of Black theater houses devoted to Black theater in the United States. So that was the case in 1997, and he was talking about the stats, like one out of 64. Even though we’ve had a wonderful Broadway, a flourishing of Black theater in recent years, it was only in 2020 that there was a organizing around Broadway for Racial Justice and documenting the widespread racism in the industry. So that still marks contemporary theater and Black theater to this day.

Khalid Long (00:56:51):
I think that it's interesting, the question that you posed, Ari, I just did a forum on Black theater performance, and it was a similar question posed and it got me thinking about it. Before I answer that specifically, I want to think about what Professor Myers was just giving us and thinking about the voice as a pioneer and really, I guess a progenitor of a Black theater aesthetic, if you will, a theoretical framework to think about the purpose of Black theater and performance in America. But I also want to acknowledge that, and particularly thinking about Wilson who names the Black Arts Movement as a very important moment for his life as well as an inspiration for his work to think about Amiri Baraka pushed forward DuBois’ principles about us, for us, near us, and really added a fifth principle many would argue, and that that Black theater should be liberating as well.

(00:57:58):
I think in many ways, that is what August Wilson was attempting to do with his work. But to think a little bit more closely about the question, I think that what we are witnessing today is like a Black cultural renaissance that expands on both the politics and the aesthetics that were innovated during the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the Black Feminist Movement of the 1970s. So in many ways, I think Black theater today maintains the traditions and that is of amplifying voices of some of the most vulnerable communities and the people within those communities. I think that Black theater today inspires and it entertains, its intellectual. I think that it offers relief from the pressures of social and personal responsibilities, and therefore, we can appreciate theater and performance as a form of entertainment, as a way to remove ourselves from the pressures of everyday life, 'cause sometimes you do want to go to the theater and just simply have a good time at the theater and see a good show.

(00:59:07):
Oftentimes, I go to the theater and I find myself delving in intellectually and then it feels like work for me. That's not a good thing or a bad thing, it's just a thing. I think that Black theater today is embracing inclusivity and equity on a larger scale. Black theater in particular is becoming a model for how that can happen in mainstream American theater as well as in academic theater. Black theater today is boldly queer, and I think that Black theater today gives new meaning to the phrase, "I'm here to stay." I would like to think that August Wilson is a pioneer in opening that space for Black artists to come in and create the kind of works that are continuing to show those who have rarely been shown in theater, in literature, media and so forth.
Justin Emeka (01:00:04):

I think it’s the idea of Black theater by us, for us, near us, at one level today, the idea of us is a little bit more abstracted than I think it was historically. The community was much more polarized. It was very clear what was Black, what was white in ways that we don’t operate around those strict polarities from the past anymore. In one way it’s a benefit, and sometimes it makes things harder to build consensus as a, quote, unquote, “Black community” because there is so many different layers of Blackness and so many ideas of what it even means to be Black. If Candace Owens puts on a play is that Black theater? Is Justice Clarence Thomas, is he a Black Supreme Court Justice? There’s all these things that are in question.

(01:01:04):

So it’s not just, “Okay, a Black person doing it makes it Black,” so to speak. So for me, myself, I try and think about, and I take inspiration from August Wilson, I feel like he was much more trying to point us towards a legacy, align ourselves with a cultural legacy that he wasn’t necessarily trying to be clearly definitive of, but just point us in a direction towards looking toward the past, towards a cultural legacy that we all share, and it doesn’t have these hard defined rules. Very early on, August Wilson was playing with that in terms of Ma Rainey’s sexuality and Hambone’s mental health, so he was showing us this very complex Black community. Even though it was contained in the Hill District, it was international, in mind scope, it was, so all these things. So I really try and think for me, in terms of Black theater being something where Black culture, Black cultural legacy is at the center of the storytelling, that’s how I tend to work with and define it now.

Khalid Long (01:02:19):

Thank you for acknowledging that. I have heard critiques around this idea that August Wilson doesn’t people his plays with queer characters, and I go, “Well, not necessarily so.” I often think that there are many characters in the play that in his plays that could possibly be queer, he just did not delve into those possibilities. But we always forget about Ma Rainey, right?

Justin Emeka (01:02:43):

His first play, that’s his first play.

Khalid Long (01:02:46):

That’s the play that catapulted him to fame and really made him an award-winning playwright. Not only does he depict and illustrate Ma Rainey’s queerness, and I’m using queerness specifically. With the character Dussie Mae, he’s talking about the fluidity of sexuality. I don’t know if he knew, if he recognized that he was doing that, but that’s important. Then how do we then take that thread and then just recognize how that was a possibility and now how it is materialized in the work of many contemporary playwrights and in particular, Black playwrights today. I just thank you for acknowledging that. Thank you.

Ariana Brazier (01:03:37):

Yes, thank you. Thank you to all the panelists at these, I would say really critically engaging responses. You’ve really generated much discussion in the Q&A. I would like to-

Robert Randolph (01:03:53):

Absolutely.
Ariana Brazier (01:03:54):
... transition. Yeah, there's a lot of movement here, a lot of-

Robert Randolph (01:03:56):
Yes.

Ariana Brazier (01:03:56):
... thinking that's happening. It's actually really exciting 'cause it's spanning the many areas of this conversation from pedagogy to place-making to gender and memory. But I do want to start with Kirsten's question, Kirsten Scott, because it brings us back to this last question I posed about Black theater. I'm thinking of this question as a place-making question as well. She says, "I'd like to build on two themes that Dr. Myers posed, those of the autobiography of mobility and mimetic possibilities of Wilson's work. If we imagine, and she believes we can, Wilson's cycle of plays as a place-based autobiography/biography of Black life in Pittsburgh, what mirrors are made possible and what mirrors are shattered as it relates to views of Black life in Pittsburgh today?" Ooh, I love that. Shattering mirrors. Said another way, what do Wilson's Cycle of Plays challenge us to think about contemporary Black life in Pittsburgh? I'll say this question felt particularly poignant to me because of that near us component of Du Bois' Black theater description.

Shaun Myers (01:05:17):
So I'll say just to lead us off that and thinking about what mirrors are made possible and what mirrors are shattered as it relates to views of Black life in Pittsburgh today, so it is wonderful that we have the August Wilson Center here, the August Wilson House, and now the August Wilson Archive. But I think that we also need to think about how are we keeping August Wilson alive in our schools? What does the literature course, the drama class look like at the high school level? From what I have seen, there seems to be an absence of we have Wideman, we have Wilson, we have Teenie Harris, and a whole range of musical icons and the history of Pittsburgh, and how are those things kept alive? How are we mirroring those things? If we are talking about this legacy of self-determination and self-awareness, have we not emphasized this type of history and legacy within our educational spaces?

Ariana Brazier (01:06:46):
Thank you. I could also share my thoughts if the panel's okay about that. Oh, okay. So this also makes me think about when I first got to Pittsburgh, a professor said to me that Pittsburgh statistically is one of the widest metropolitan cities in the country because there's less people of color and more white people per capita in the city. I think referencing the, what mirrors the shatters part of Kirsten's question, I think the presence of August Wilson in Pittsburgh, the way in which he documents Black life in Pittsburgh really shatters this perception that many people have of Pittsburgh being a white city.

(01:07:29):
I do think culturally there are questions marks about how it's portrayed, I guess, economically, how it's portrayed politically and a broader sense. But when we are really thinking about art as culture, when we're thinking about the ordinary and how that keeps a city alive and it keeps it functioning, I do think it shatters this idea that Pittsburgh is a white city because so much of Black life and Black culture is what's undergirding Pittsburgh's entire existence as a place worth considering in drama, in arts, in literature is Black people putting Pittsburgh on the map in very specific and targeted ways.
Justin Emeka (01:08:17):
To that, building on that idea, similar is the idea that a numerical count is how we determine how Black or how white a city is, 'cause in the same sense is America a white nation when Black culture is at the root and the foundation and the bedrock of American culture? But again, if you're just counting numbers of it, that's also a political strategy to use numerics to define the majority and the minority, which is what I know many of our parents really cringed at the idea of being called minorities because it just suggested the idea of because you're numerically lower, you are lesser of importance within society. So August Wilson's legacy in Pittsburgh forces the city to confront, it's Black culture that in a lot of ways has helped put Pittsburgh on the map in many different arenas; not every arena, but many different arenas. So how we value, again, Black culture, Black life and how we center it is important for us to always keep at the forefront.

Robert Randolph (01:09:39):
That reminds me of Ralph Ellison's essay, which I think is titled, What Would America Be Without Blacks? Where he does his thought experiment extracting Black culture from history, politics, literature, and his conclusion is much of nothing is what it would be. So you cannot really poll us or relegate us to a number when we're talking about the makeup of country. Thank you.

Khalid Long (01:10:13):
I think you can also include a play, I think it was Douglas Turner Ward's play, A Day of Absence, which I remember we did that when I was in college, which is a play that the Black folks disappear for the day and white folks are scrambling to survive and carry out their daily mundane activities.

Robert Randolph (01:10:36):
Wow. Okay. I need to read that. There is another question here from Kevin Mosley, and I like this question. Mosley says, "Wilson was inspired by the activism of Romare Bearden, i.e., The Piano Lesson. What other Black artists and musicians did he draw inspiration from?"

Justin Emeka (01:10:59):
I think that connects to another question that was there as well, anonymous-

Robert Randolph (01:11:10):
Yeah.

Justin Emeka (01:11:11):
... with no mention, I don't know, Dr. Long if you want to respond?

Khalid Long (01:11:15):
Yeah. So oftentimes we think about Wilson and the Bs. Sometimes it's the three B, sometimes it's the four Bs. So there's Romare Bearden, visual artist. Wilson was inspired by his collage-like work in particular, Piano Lesson, Joe Turner's Come and Gone and I forgot the other play where there were direct correlation between beard's work and Wilson's plays. In terms of where Wilson takes the title of its plays from Bearden's work, there's also Amiri Baraka, Black Arts Movement. In terms of the Bs, there's also Jorge Louise Borges. Some people say Borges, I always say Borges how I heard it and it was taught to me, who was a Argentinian, God I can't remember, writer.
Wilson was inspired by the ways in which he used what people consider to be these fantastical elements in his work such as ghosts and trips to the past. But of course, Wilson, when he was influenced and borrows these tropes within Borges' work, he very much Africanized or recognized the Africanisms within the idea of a trip to the past or this idea of a ghost. So for Wilson, it's very much in the context of ancestors and so forth. I think the only direct correlation with this idea of a ghost is with the ghost of Sutter in The Piano Lesson. Then the other Bs there is the blues.

I think if we know nothing else about Wilson, we know that the blues was at the center of his work, both as a musical genre as well as a philosophical system, as a method in which Black folks used to express their vulnerabilities and where they were at that time. In particular, it wasn't Ma Rainey in particular, it was actually Bessie Smith who was Wilson's inspiration and connection to the blues. So those are the main four Bs that we often think about. Wilson later on adds two more Bs and that's Ed Bullins, the playwright from the Black Arts Movement. Not only the Black Arts Movement, but a pioneering figure in the Black Arts Movement who also set out to write a cycle of plays that documents the African American experience. The other one was James Baldwin. So we think about Wilson and then the four Bs, but also adding on the two other Bs.

I think his work, though, inherently demands we take a closer look at the context that created his work, and largely because he dealt so much with metaphors and poetry that what is so brilliant about his work I think is how specific it is, but also, still how abstract it is. So even in a play like Two Trains Running, which is one of his most realistic plays. You're dealing with West who was an actual figure who actually lived, who had the funeral home. One time the West family criticized him for the depiction of West, and his response was, "Well, there's more than one West."

So basically, again, he's taking license, he's not trying to be so specific as say this is history in writing. So there's this abstraction that pulls you in to want to know, "Where are these philosophies coming from?" There's a lot of them that are informed, from Bessie Smith to Malcolm X, to the Nation of Islam, to Elijah Muhammad that are woven little in into his work. Without it, if you don't do that work, you are really not going to understand or appreciate half of what the play is about.

Wow. Okay. You all are giving me a lot to think about and a lot to explore as we are going through these questions. One of the very first questions we got, and it speaks to, I think, to a point Professor Myers made about incorporating the arts and what happens when we strip the arts away from schools. A Kipp Dawson said, "Please comment on the potential or importance of having middle school students do August Wilson's work. I snuck in doing so as a middle school English teacher beginning the year he died with The Piano Lesson, using the PBS video, but then snuck in having my students work on scenes and monologues. Piano Lesson, Fences and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom all resonated with them. Doing this work was a growing experience, particularly following work with Shakespeare. Thank you so much for the conversation today." I think it's interesting the verb snuck, like, "I had to sneak in and do that," and I think a lot of particularly public school teachers do a lot of that.
Yeah, that's what I was going to start to ask, and maybe we won't get a response, but where did the need to sneak this come in from. Is the curriculum not broad enough to accommodate? Is it some type of violation to actually bring August Wilson? These are all questions for a school board and superintendent, but ...

Ariana Brazier (01:17:13):
I think this question could also be paired with a question from Brianna, just thinking about how we move these things to the center. Brianna writes "Regarding colleagues' answer about teaching art at the center of the curriculum as opposed to at the periphery," love that, "how do you make that happen? I think for us as humanists and artists, the importance of the arts is obvious, but we're increasingly going against the grain." I think maybe that's what Kip Dawson is getting at is having had to go against the grain very intentionally, so maybe it feels like a sneaking. It feels like a subversion if it's not already deftly placed on our syllabus or a teaching guide. "Are there pragmatic strategies to get school systems and parents to value arts education?" Brianna also says, "Thanks," because they realize this is a tough question.

Khalid Long (01:18:05):
I teach on the college level. I want to acknowledge that I have a little bit more leeway with curriculum. I'm also someone who does curriculum development so I can go in and do some things, but I also taught middle school and high school at one time. I don't know if I'm invested in getting parents to get on board anymore. Let me be very clear what I'm saying here. I don't know if I have the energy or the time or the capacity and where we are today to convince parents that literature that has existed for hundreds of years is valuable. If I got to spend time convincing you of that, then that takes up my time for actually teaching your child, number one. My goal is to actually penetrate the mind of the young folks in my classroom so that they can then go home and go to their communities and teach their people.

(01:19:00):
That's me. I want to name, that's my philosophy. I'm not asking anybody to take that up. I'm not saying that that's the only way to do that, because I'm also thinking about who's going to be leading us and teaching folks and my children in the future, and it is the people that's that I'm teaching now. I will say also that I do a yearly teaching August Wilson Workshop at the Goodman Theater, which was initiated by Willa Taylor, the director of audience engagement and community outreach at the Goodman Theater. That, I think, is a model for how that's done and specifically, the teaching August Wilson Workshop is not about teaching college professors how to teach it.

(01:19:42):
It is about teaching grade school teachers, so it was specifically Chicago public school teachers how to teach and engage with Wilson's work in the classrooms beyond Fences and The Piano Lesson. So really, it's about cultural competency and then it's about developing the language and the skills and the know-how to include it in the curriculum. Once you have an understanding of what Wilson is attempting to do, you can then fight back and resist the dominant forces and the administrators who say you should not include this because of these reasons and so forth. To sum all that up, I think it really is about having the greater appreciation for Black folk in their art.

(01:20:30):
I get these folks who are saying, I want to teach this play. I think we should and you should, but why do you even have an appreciation for Black folks in their art at large. Because once you do, I don't know if the struggle for reworking the curriculum and putting Black folk in their art at the center would be as
hard as it may be now. So I think it really is some internal things that we got to work through as well. I'm talking about Black folk, white folk, Asian, whoever, it's our own internalized anti-Blackness that we have to work through as well to have a greater appreciation for some of the work that we don't teach or that we feel as though we got to sneak in. Then that gives us a greater, I think, response to the folks who do control the curriculum and so forth when we have that voice and we're allowed to push back and so forth.

Justin Emeka (01:21:19):
I think a lot of this is too, a little bit getting at this idea of universal education, it's very European in terms of education being this factual based thing. So that's like, let's read about these facts that are agreed upon and we read a book that tell us the facts of what happened, when one, that's problematic in and of itself because there's no book that's going to give you from history a factual account. Inherently, we're diving into somebody's politics when we read their history book. What's African in terms of education is that stories are the education. We know that Griots in West Africa would educate the people by telling them stories that remind them who they are and where their place in the world is.

(01:22:18):
I think that some of these ideas are starting to come into education, into people's classrooms in terms of, so instead of thinking we need a factual textbook to talk about the Civil Rights Movement, we could have a play. We could take a play and read the play, and that's going to take us into the Civil Rights Movement, and it's going to take us from a first person perspective. That's one of the powerful things about art and students reading, becoming these characters because they become these characters. They walk in the shoes of these characters and they can empathize and feel the lives of these and the struggles of these characters in a way that you can't really do when you're reading a history book that's just telling factual accounts of what happened, this, there and that. So the more that we use art at the center of the curriculum to get at the same issues as opposed to thinking, well, we need to start with a factual, non-biased account, which is impossible to do, and then sprinkle a little art to flavor it up, we can flip that over. We could do the opposite. Let's just deal with all art, with just the music of the time, the visual arts of the time, the plays of the time, and then also supplement it with some factual accounts from other people. But again, recognizing that there is no such thing as universal education, universal facts, universal history.

Robert Randolph (01:23:50):
I wanted to say that Kipp came back with some additional information, Kipp Dawson, and they said, "I use snuck because public schools increasingly have been under pressure to stick to test preparation and and the arts all have been pushed out, not okay." They additionally say, "Everything you have presented here is relevant to the question. As an educator who works with these children, I am most grateful. Thanks a lot." Lots to think about.

Shaun Myers (01:24:23):
I'll just say thank you, Kipp, for coming back to give us more information. But on my end of this problem, the college classroom teaching African American literature semester in and semester out, one of the very first questions I ask on day one is, "How many of you all have read these texts before, before we get into each text, Toni Morrison, the Song of Solomon, how many of you have read this? Increasingly and in an ongoing way, very few students who arrive in my college classes have had some past
experience outside of one Toni Morrison text or one James Baldwin essay. So thank you for the sneaking.

Robert Randolph (01:25:19):
I think we are coming to an end, unfortunately, of this discussion. This was very powerful, and I will turn this over to Ari.

Ariana Brazier (01:25:32):
Yes, thank you. So I want to thank everyone for coming, especially our esteemed panelists, and I want to thank everyone for the comments and questions in the chat and the Q&A. You've given the panelists and facilitators much to think about, so it feels like a reciprocal energy throughout today's event. We want to encourage you all to sign up for the Center for Urban Education's listserv on our website in order to continue receiving information and invitations to our 20th anniversary events. So we thank you again for coming, and we look forward to all the work you will do to move Black theater, August Wilson and all of the named poets and inspirations from the periphery to the center and your classrooms and in your daily lives. So thank you all.