A City Within a City: African American Regionalism in the Works of Gwendolyn Brooks and August Wilson

by

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For Chicago—*the city I love so well*
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Both photographs were taken by the author.
Introduction
De Witt Williams and Doaker Charles

He was born in Alabama.
He was bred in Illinois.
He was nothing but a
Plain black boy.

Featured in Gwendolyn Brooks’ first collection from 1945, *A Street in Bronzeville*, “of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery”\(^1\) depicts De Witt Williams’ journey in a casket through the Chicago South Side. Brooks writes, “He was born in Alabama. / He was bred in Illinois.”\(^2\) The first lines of the poem introduce him as a product of the Great Migration, creating a double narrative that weaves in and out of the poem—one that reveals his southern past, connecting him with the history of slavery in the American South, and one that depicts what his life was like in Chicago. The beginning refrain of the poem is a form of “compressed Afro-American history, post-Reconstruction,”\(^3\) connecting De Witt with an entire pattern of migration and linking him with a collective African American narrative.

The driving impetus behind Gwendolyn Brooks and August Wilson’s work is to create a literary representation of the urban African American experience. Their works are grounded within African American neighborhoods that exist as disparate spheres within the large cities in which they are located. Writing about the neighborhood in which he grew up, Wilson locates all of his work within the Hill District in Pittsburgh. He claims, “I set [my work] in Pittsburgh I guess because that

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\(^2\) “of De Witt Williams on his way to the Lincoln Cemetery” lines 1-2
is what I know best.”⁴ Knowledge of Pittsburgh enabled Wilson to confidently set his plays in that city, but it is his characters who are intrinsically linked with the setting—and they determine the trajectory of his ten-play Centennial Cycle. Composed primarily of dialogue, his plays are shaped by the characters who voice them. It is through their struggles that the reader is able to imagine Pittsburgh, and to see the problems that plague the black community in every decade of the twentieth century.

Brooks lived in and wrote about the Bronzeville neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Discussing her upbringing in the city, she says, “It was better for me to have grown up in Chicago because in my writing I am proud to feature people and their concerns—their troubles as well as their joys.”⁵ The people of Bronzeville inspire Brooks’ work, and she drew inspiration from their interactions with their urban environment. She claims, “for instance, Maud Martha goes to the Regal Theater, which is almost dead now, but had a great history in Chicago. She looks at the people; she looks at the star; she looks at the people coming out of the theater” and while her characters are deeply embedded within their surrounding, she “[doesn’t] start with the landmarks.”⁶ Brooks is a “citizen poet,” and her poetry encapsulates a black urban existence.⁷ She focuses on commonplace inhabitants of Bronzeville; her characters create a composite portrait of the neighborhood.

According to Maria Mootry, “as a regionalist, Brooks brought together a remarkable

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sense of black folk culture and American popular culture that affirmed black life and also critiqued indirectly those forces that limited black access to the American dream.  

De Witt Williams is a character who personifies Bronzeville, and who is also connected to a greater black community. His experience is rendered as commonplace, and his individuality diminished. De Witt is “nothing but a / Plain black boy.” He is reduced to the color of his skin. The phrase “plain black boy” is set apart, occupying an entire line, which further emphasizes his race and his lack of distinctiveness. His skin color becomes the focal point of his existence, and his race is connected to his surroundings. The term “black boy” also associates the poem with other works in the African American literary cannon, recalling Richard Wright’s autobiography of the same name—an autobiography that chronicles an African American’s move from the South to Chicago. The word “plain” also serves to make De Witt less unique—his life is similar to that of thousands of other African American migrants.  

Kenny J. Williams claims that Brooks’ characters are most effective when considered collectively, for as a group “they display the pathos and frustration of modern life in a restricted neighborhood.” Only named in the title, De Witt remains otherwise anonymous throughout the entire poem. Due to the lack of naming, the piece could be telling the story of any African American in Chicago.

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9 “of De Witt Williams on his way to the Lincoln Cemetery” lines 3-4
10 Gladys Williams 212
The historical account depicted in the beginning couplet is reintroduced into the poem through the incorporation of a slave song. Brooks writes, “Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot / Nothing but a plain black boy.”\(^{12}\) The ballad-like structure of the poem alludes not only to the history of the Great Migration, but of slavery in the American South. Through referencing spirituals, the narrator is eulogizing De Witt in yet another manner that serves to connect him with the experience of other African Americas. The poem reveals the ordinariness of African American men’s lives in Bronzeville, but also serves to illuminate the finality of their existences—for De Witt’s “plain” life ends in a casket. The juxtaposition of the two narratives in the poem, De Witt’s history in Alabama and his upbringing in Chicago, serve to connect his story with both past and present racial oppression.

The tone of the poem shifts with the second storyline—De Witt’s life in the city. He advances through the streets, not actively but in a casket. His movements are restricted in a region where migrants hoped for increased social and economic mobility. He is limited to Chicago’s South Side, moving,

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Down through Forty-seventh Street:
Underneath the L,
And—Northwest Corner, Prairie,
That he loved so well.\(^{13}\)
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The L tracks roaring above him, and the numbered streets, which begin on the South Side, place him solidly within the African American section of the city. The “Prairie” street sign positions him near the entrance to the elevated train tracks, but also references his upbringing in the Prairie State, Illinois, and connects him to an agrarian

\(^{12}\) “of De Witt Williams on his way to the Lincoln Cemetery” lines 5-6
\(^{13}\) Ibid., lines 11-14
past. Ironically, De Witt’s life in Chicago is marked by recreational activity. The poem states,

Drive him past the Pool Hall.
Drive him past the Show.
Blind within his casket,
But maybe he will know.14

The markers of De Witt’s life in Chicago are spaces that exist exclusively for enjoyment, rather than institutions that indicate social advancement. They are also spaces that were typically segregated within the community. Later in the poem, De Witt is driven past “the Dance Halls, / Warwick and Savoy,” places “Where he picked his women, where / He drank his liquid joy.”15 His life, other than being defined by his race, is qualified by how he spent his free time—drinking, dancing, and picking up women. His interactions with his neighborhood are not described in terms of his family, job, or religious involvement—in death he is a condensed character, defined by his geography, his vices, and his skin color. Brooks characterizes a life in four verbs, and as Williams points out, of these verbs, “only three of them [are] actions for which he is solely responsible.” De Witt “picked his women, he drank his liquid joy,” and he also “loved the city.”16 He actively engages with his neighborhood, and throughout his life seeks pleasure from his surroundings, but within the poem all movement through Bronzeville are outside of his control. As De Witt is transported on a casket through the same city he “loved,” he is “blind” to the social locales that marked his life—venues that provide a stark contradiction to his ancestral history of slave labor.

14 Ibid., lines 7-10
15 Ibid., lines 15-18
16 Gladys Williams 213
The poem closes with a repetition of its beginning couplets. The spiritual, which is associated with the horrors of slavery, bookends De Witt’s life of enjoyment in Bronzeville.\textsuperscript{17} He is a member of a greater American history and social context. The juxtaposition of Bronzeville sites with the hymn reveal that oppression exists within urban contexts, and has persisted against African Americans despite their geographic location. Mootry claims the poem acts as a representation of the experience of thousands of African Americans who were “uprooted for one reason or another from their southern origins, coping in the neosegregated ambience of northern ghettos.”\textsuperscript{18} De Witt’s experience is not just his own, it is that of every other migrant who faces urban oppression after leaving the South. In Brooks’ work, “a sense of place is synonymous with a sense of identity or alienation.”\textsuperscript{19} De Witt is emblematic of Brooks’ corpus; his isolation within his casket is a physical representation of Bronzeville’s detachment from white Chicago.

Doaker Charles, from August Wilson’s \textit{The Piano Lesson}, occupies an equally transitory position between the North and South. Part of Wilson’s Centennial Cycle, the play takes places in 1936 against the backdrop of the Great Depression, and during the period of the Great Migration in the United States. Within the play there are two storylines, much like the dual narratives in “De Witt Williams.” Both storylines are brought together through a family heirloom—a piano that features ornate carvings, engraved by Doaker’s grandfather. The ancestral piano represents

\textsuperscript{17} The title of the cemetery also can be related to Abraham Lincoln and emancipation—creating a reproachful tone throughout the poem that illuminates the inherent loss in American ghetto life (Bolden 22). Lincoln Cemetery, where Brooks herself is buried, is a large cemetery on Chicago’s far South Side.

\textsuperscript{18} Mootry 5

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
the family’s enslaved past, and is a point of contention between family members in the present—where siblings Berniece and Boy Willie fight over whether they should sell the instrument. Doaker acts as an intermediary between the siblings, navigating their argument and attempting to monitor the rift. His role as intermediary is not limited to the siblings’ feud, however, for Doaker also mediates between the past and the present through storytelling, and he acts as an intermediary between the North and the South through his work on the railroad, constantly straddling the two regions. As a railroad cook he occupies a position of service and provides sustenance for travelers, often catering to white patrons.

All of the characters in the play have migrated to Pittsburgh from the South, but Doaker embodies the physical movement between the two areas. Occupying a liminal place in the play, he exists on the border between the two geographic regions, never settling in either. Doaker’s profession sets him apart from other characters in the play that are struggling to attain jobs and establish themselves during the Depression Era; Doaker holds one of the most reliable, and best paying, jobs available to African Americans during the 1930s. While Doaker currently cooks on the train line at the time of the play, he “used to line the track.” His labor went into the foundation of the train line; he was instrumental in bridging the gap between the North and the South because his work physically enabled migration to occur.

Doaker establishes a set of axioms about regional distinctions, legitimizing them through the retelling of his experiences. He avows, “See, you got North. You got West. You look over here you got South. Over there you got East.”

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20 Shannon 156
21 The Piano Lesson 22
himself an authority on regional difference, he demonstrates how the railroad can connect these disparate regions. He continues, explaining,

Now, you can start from anywhere. Don’t care where you at. You got to go one of them four ways. And whichever way you decided to go they got a railroad that will take you there…But you’d be surprised how many people trying to go North get on a train going West. They think the train’s supposed to go where they going rather than where it’s going.22

While the train only transports the passengers, many of them ascribe greater significance to their journeys. The train becomes a symbol of escape, change, or social advancement. No matter what they envision for their journey, however, the train is going to stay on the exact tracks on which it rides—tracks that Doaker, and other black laborers, laid. He adds, “If everybody stayed in one place I believe this would be a better world,” because no matter where they want to go, “The train don’t never stop. It’ll come back every time.”23 Doaker’s commentary propagates the theory that mobility is not fundamentally beneficial, and that African Americans should have either stayed in the South, or will inevitably return. The railroad acted as the primary mode of transportation for Southern migrants, and Doaker’s stories regarding the trains, and the people who ride them, represent the larger story of the Great Migration. Mary Bogumil writes that “in their desperation to change the direction of their lives” many passengers are ignorant of the conditions they will encounter in the North—and the fact that they will still face disfranchisement in their new locale.24 For Doaker, the migration does not inherently mean that black Southerners will encounter better opportunities in the North.

22 Ibid., 22-23
23 Ibid., 23
His story also establishes an idea that infiltrates the entire play—that an entity can be intrinsically connected with a legacy. The trains end up going exactly where they are supposed to go, and every member of the Charles family, regardless of where they start, is connected with the ancestry and history that the South represents. The piano is a physical reminder of the past and of the South, with the story of their family carved into the legs. Doaker’s rendition of the piano’s history simultaneously introduces a slave narrative into the text, and imbues the object with ancestral significance. According to Bogumil, “That past is brought to life and commemorated through the various characters’ stories.” Doaker regales the history of the piano, explaining that Robert Sutter owned their ancestors, and wanted the piano from another man, Mr. Nolander. In order to facilitate the purchase of the instrument, Sutter “Told him he would give him one-and-a-half niggers for it.” Doaker’s story seamlessly introduces slavery through the piano by hearkening back to a time when the family was equated with objects and dehumanized in the eyes of their white superiors. Structurally, the play becomes a “narrative within a narrative, a

26 Every member of the family feels connected to the piano, and believes that they are part of the myth that it embodies. Doaker connects all characters in the play to the piano through story telling, and through establishing the parameters for the folklore that infiltrates their family history. Many of the initial African American railroad employees were tapped from slave labor, and many white passengers treated the employees as if they were still enslaved—in order to deflect racism, employees engaged in singing and storytelling. Thus, the working environment in which Doaker participated was steeped in folklore (Shannon 157-8). He is essential in conveying, and conserving, the myth of the family’s piano. As the only existing member of the play who helped to reclaim the instrument, he understands the struggles that are associated with the piano.
27 Bogumil 76
28 The Piano Lesson 45
29 The narrative of their former lack of personhood is still echoed in the current climate of the 1930s, for Boy Willie “the events of his own life constitute, in his mind, a second, metaphorical, enslavement,” one that is economic rather than physical (Boan 265). He believes purchasing Sutter’s land will not only give him his own property, but economic means.
literal slave narrative integrated into a metaphorical one.”^30 The present, with Boy Willie and Berniece fighting over the piano, reflects an effort to respect, and a continuation of, the legacy of their family.

Despite their attempts to gain independence from the past, the second generation of the Charles family continues to feel bound to the piano. Griffin writes that the South “becomes a place where black blood earns a black birthright to the land, a locus of history, culture, and possible redemption.”^31 Within The Piano Lesson, ancestral roles become integral in connecting the South to the North. Each member of the family struggles to reconcile their own place in relation to the piano and the South, except for Doaker.^32 Berniece claims, “Doaker don’t want no part of that piano,” because “He blames himself for not staying behind with Papa Boy Charles.” Doaker was unable to save his brother from getting killed after they repossessed the piano, and thus the piano is a reminder of his own guilt instead of a memory that needs to be upheld. Berniece continues, “He washed his hands of that piano a long time ago. He didn’t want me to bring it up here—but I wasn’t gonna leave it down there.”^33 For Doaker, the piano is a physical relic of the South that infiltrates the new Northern sphere, which also serves to bring the violent memory of slavery into the emancipated present. As he navigates the two realms, he is not

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^30 Boan 264


^32 Doaker connects the piano to Berniece and Boy Willie’s father. He emphasizes how Boy Charles, their father, talked about the piano all the time, and how he claimed the piano “was the story of our whole family.” As long as Sutter had the piano, Boy Charles asserted, “we was still in slavery.” In order to free themselves from Sutter’s bonds, Doaker, Boy Charles, and their brother Wining Boy “went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter’s house” (The Piano Lesson 47). They did so on the Fourth of July, symbolically freeing themselves of the chains that Sutter, and his possession of the piano, had over the Charles family.

^33 Ibid., 70
beholden to the piano and the South it represents—he instead navigates between the two regions, and between the two generations of the Charles family.

Brooks and Wilson both explore how the past has shaped the communities of Bronzeville and the Hill District. In *The Piano Lesson* and “of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery” there are two narratives at play—one that draws upon the collective history of racial oppression and slavery in the United States, and another that reveals the persistence of urban oppression in the North. The South, and the process of Southern migration, profoundly shape the context in which Brooks and Wilson write. Each writer addresses racial oppression by humanizing the struggles facing black communities in Chicago and Pittsburgh. Doaker’s constant retelling, indeed reifying, of the piano’s history serves to normalize the mythology associated with the story—making it applicable to all African Americans. The Charles’ past becomes a collective past, and Boy Willie’s economic struggles become representative of the social disadvantages facing the black community post-emancipation. De Witt’s journey, when presented in conjunction with the collective history of slavery, transforms his individual struggles into a representative tale of urban oppression in the North in much the same way. Brooks and Wilson both employ characters in order to convey the social conditions of Bronzeville and the Hill District, and reveal how the black communities within Chicago and Pittsburgh are incorporated into their larger urban contexts. Following the tradition of migration narratives, their characters grapple with managing the descent from the South to the

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34 Boan 266
35 For more information about migration narratives, see *Who Set You Flowin’* by Farah Jasmine Griffin, and *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson.
North, understanding their ancestry, and navigating through “urban spaces like kitchenettes, dance halls, and street corners.”\textsuperscript{36}

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In my first chapter, I will discuss how the influx of African American migrants from the South completely reshaped the dynamics of both Chicago and Pittsburgh. Through exploring the history and conditions of Southern migration, I will reveal how Bronzeville and the Hill District developed, and how Brooks and Wilson engaged critically with their changing surroundings. Both neighborhoods housed residents in substandard living conditions, which Brooks examines through her poetry, and Wilson concentrates on in his plays. I look at works by both authors that address how displaced migrants continue to embody the South, grapple with limited access to the “American Dream,” and navigate their new urban conditions.

In my second and third chapters, I turn to the authors themselves. Through analyzing the work of Brooks and Wilson, I look at the ways in which they address urban oppression and conjure their respective neighborhoods. Brooks and Wilson both represent their communities through exploring familial relationships. For Brooks, mothers play an important and active role in shaping Bronzeville. Bronzeville mothers are limited in their ability to raise children, and forced to confront their lack of agency in protecting the bodies of their kin. Fathers in Wilson’s Centennial Cycle likewise struggle to raise their children in a racially hostile environment, while their sons struggle to establish themselves in a city that categorically denies them even a modicum of success. Inter-generational relationships define both Brooks and Wilson’s writing, and tie their work to a specific

\textsuperscript{36}Griffin 3
urban setting—revealing how the space continues to face similar cyclical pressures over time.

As De Witt’s body passes the various urban spaces that characterized his life, he also is driven past the city—the city “That he loved so well.” Brooks and Wilson continue to return to and redefine Bronzeville and the Hill District, constantly inhabiting and evaluating their respective urban spaces. In revisiting their neighborhoods through writing, they attempt to honor the cities that they themselves love so well.
Chapter 1

Southern Migration and the Development of Bronzeville and The Hill District

Brooks said, “In my twenties when I wrote a good deal of my better-known poetry I lived on 63rd Street—at 623 East 63rd Street—and there was a good deal of life in the raw all about me.” She continued, “I wrote about what I saw and heard in the street.” She lived in a small, second-story apartment on the corner, gathering her material from the life around her. Capturing the noise of the passing L train, the pulse of the city streets, and the cramped confines of the kitchenette apartments, Brooks extracted inspiration for her work from her surrounding environment. Her apartment was one of many multi-room apartment complexes in Bronzeville that housed a majority of community members.

Depicting the tenement-style housing on Chicago’s South Side, Brooks portrays the limitations imposed upon the residents of Bronzeville. Kenny J. Williams argues that the urban existence that Brooks writes about is “fundamentally the universe of the city’s South Side ghetto after years of benign neglect.” The Chicago that she chooses to represent in her work is “a city of back streets and alleys, of kitchenettes and vacant lots,” where “the American dream no longer mattered to the people whose lives had so consistently been empty.” In her poem “kitchenette building” Brooks provides an example of one of the new apartment buildings that was constructed from old houses and leased at extremely high rates for the incoming African American migrants from the South. In accordance with Chicago’s unwritten

37 Interview by Angle 15
38 Additionally, Brooks’ Bronzeville was also “symbolic of the impersonality of the overcrowded ghetto generally ignored by white Chicagoans caught in the daily activities of their own lives” (Kenny J. Williams 55).
39 Selected Poems 3
policy of racial segregation, “poor Blacks were forced to live in former mansions which had been dissected into tiny rooms with kitchenettes.” Opulent estates that formerly housed rich whites were converted into substandard living conditions for impoverished blacks. For the migrants, the history behind the kitchenettes was an ironic testament to what was unattainable in Bronzeville—personal wealth and property.

Brooks explores the relationship between the rented rooms and their implications for the residents. She writes,

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong  
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

Through the use of “we,” Brooks is establishing a collective experience. Richard Wright likewise emphasizes the communal experience of living in kitchenettes, writing, “the kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.” Wright does not view the kitchenette as an apartment, instead his interpretation of the space is laden with constraining, violent, imagery—the kitchenette is intentionally harmful and endlessly threatening towards its residents. Forced to inhabit the congested rooms at inflated prices, every community member was bound through the same economic and physical constraints—confined to the cramped apartments.

40 Bolden 16  
41 “kitchenette building” lines 1-3  
For Wright, the kitchenette assumes a violent, entrapping role that does not discriminate among residents. Space serves to separate and categorize individuals, and neighborhoods and kitchenettes serve to enclose blacks, setting them apart from the dominant white urban power. According to Griffin, African Americans “are not allowed beyond certain borders,” and the new migrants were confined to Bronzeville. The same confining urban power, she continues, “also seeks to educate migrants and to create in them a desire for those things available in the dominant society.”

Through the combination of subjugation and education, the greater white population is able to foster a sense of lack within the black community. Brooks describes the residents as “things of dry hours,” people leading lives dominated by economics. Life is delineated by hours, not conceived in protracted rhetoric or thoughtfully planned out. Life in the kitchenette is quantitative, reduced to numbers—defined by one’s salary, zip code, or rent. For residents in Bronzeville, it is a luxury to systemize one’s life qualitatively. The act of imagining a different future, let alone having that dream be actualized, is a privilege granted to those possessing greater wealth and a different skin color. A life defined by “dry hours” isn’t conceptualized in the long-term.

The entire kitchenette environment is inhospitable for dreaming: dreams are abstract, starkly contrasting the concrete realities of Bronzeville. Brooks’ discussion of “dreams” reveals the instability in striving to attain a purely theoretical goal, serving to punctuate that the American Dream has no place in Bronzeville. Writing during the Chicago Renaissance, Brooks engages with literary traditions and discourses that preceded her. The “dry hours” in the first line do not allow for the

43 Griffin 102
cultivation of planned futures in Bronzeville, but also allude to T.S. Eliot’s emphasis on the “dry infertility of modern life.” Brooks draws influence from styles and themes in both Modernist poetry and the Harlem Renaissance, and “juggles the pessimism of [the former] with the general optimism of the [latter].” Indeed, the end of “kitchenette building” concludes with a “humored optimism” that is reflective of the tone of Harlem Renaissance writers.\textsuperscript{44}

Echoing former literary conventions, Brooks engages with other discussions of “dreams” in African American literature. Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” similarly situated in an African American urban neighborhood much like Bronzeville, explores a dream that is unable to exist within the context of a marginalized black community, and asks, “What happens to a dream deferred?”\textsuperscript{45} Instead of living in an immaterial sphere, Hughes’ dream exists, but is unable to actualize in the Harlem streets. He proposes different outcomes for the “dream deferred,” asking “Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?”\textsuperscript{46} He also wonders if it would “fester like a sore” or “crust and sugar over”—fates that consign the dream to a stagnant future. The last line, however, hints at a different possibility—Hughes asks, “or does it explode?”\textsuperscript{48} The possibility of an eruption accompanies the inactive fates Hughes outlines, revealing how deferral and inaccessibility can incite transformative riots. Wright claims, “The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands, and


\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., lines 2-3

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., line 4, 7

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., line 11
even children behind to shift as best they can.\textsuperscript{49} There is an underlying violence that accompanies constant limitation and deferral—and Wright sees the kitchenette as the nexus of societal limitations within Bronzeville.

Brooks similarly reveals the kitchenette as a limiting sphere. She takes the “giddy” dream, distinct from Hughes’ “deferred” one, for it is hypothetical, and sets it within the confines of the assaulting kitchenette:

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms\textsuperscript{50}

The dream must “send up,” “fight,” “flutter” or “sing an aria” in the small, cramped spaces of the tenement. It has to be active, engaging with people who are passively “grayed in.” Brooks gives the dream agency, using only active verbs to describe how it must assert itself among the rented back-rooms of Bronzeville. The tenants themselves are not dreaming; instead they are creating meals and amassing garbage, working to feed their wives. The elusive “dream” must fend for itself, wholly separate from the collective consciousness of the kitchenette dwellers. The ethereal, diaphanous dream has to compete with the solidly real dinners, waste, and space that confine a Bronzeville life. While Hughes asks if a dream deferred would “stink like rotten meat,”\textsuperscript{51} Brooks’ dream has to compete with a reality defined by the scent of refuse.

Residents in Bronzeville are unable to accommodate dreams within the physical spaces of their kitchenette apartments. The poem continues,

\textsuperscript{49} Wright 109
\textsuperscript{50} “kitchenette building” lines 4-7
\textsuperscript{51} “Harlem” line 7
Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin.\(^5^2\)

The dream Brooks writes about is not native to Bronzeville. It is a construction from outside the limits of the kitchenette buildings, and must be “let in” and accepted by the community. The kitchenette is a locale that, according to Wright, “blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them,” and “blinds them to hope.”\(^5^3\) As children grow up within the kitchenette atmosphere, they are conditioned not to expect, or wish for, different life circumstances. They do not believe they are capable of maintaining the conditions for a dream. Thus, residents “wonder. But not well! not for a minute! / Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now, / We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.”\(^5^4\) The phrase “lukewarm water” reveals the mediocre expectations residents have learned to expect. Additionally, it is a biblical reference, alluding to Jesus’ address to the Church of Laodicia: “So then because though art lukewarm, and neither cold not hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”\(^5^5\) Jesus simultaneously refers to the common belief that lukewarm water was thought to unsettle the stomach while also revealing his disdain for an indifferent church. Much like the congregation of the Church of Laodicia, residents in kitchenettes have become apathetic towards their condition, learning to stomach daily indignities that they face.

\(^{52}\) “kitchenette building” lines 8-10
\(^{53}\) Wright 110
\(^{54}\) “kitchenette building” line 11-13
The residents of Bronzeville’s kitchenette buildings are nameless, rendering their condition as a universal one. Their aspirations are tepid and grayed in. The “lukewarm” water bathes them in a feeling of indifference, and reveals how the residents are aspiring to a moderate level of warmth and comfort. Their expectations are hampered by the physical space surrounding them, and the residents can only “hope” for water that echoes the ideal of a hot shower. The reality of their life and the limitations of their position aren’t able to accommodate the intangible or the lofty.

The “kitchenette building” encompasses an entire African American world—one that emerged within the highly segregated city streets of Chicago. Born from different groups of immigrants, Chicago became a city of foreigners who settled into distinct communities upon their arrival. The first wave of immigration during the 1840s brought primarily Irish, German and Scandinavian immigrants to the city. By the 1880s the northern European immigrants were eclipsed by Eastern Europeans, mostly Poles and Jews. By 1890, sixty years after Chicago was established, the population had grown to a million people, three-quarters of whom were either foreign-born or children of foreign-born immigrants.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the number of European immigrants relocating to Chicago dropped dramatically. Concurrently, war industries in Chicago, as well as the rest of the country, were expanding—necessitating an influx of new labor. Filling the employment gap left by white workers, black

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56 The only resident that is given a name is “Number Five,” who is kept anonymous and described by his place in the building. Brooks’ poem “The Bean Eaters” echoes this sentiment, maintaining the anonymity of the kitchenette residents and defining them by the food they eat, showing that their condition is universal and applicable to all residents of urban black ghettos.

Southerners sought work in the steel mills and packing-houses of Chicago’s South Side. Writing from the perspective of black southern farmers, Wright claims, “for a long time now we have heard tell that all over the world men are leaving the land for the streets of the city, so we are leaving too.” The North appeared to be a beacon of economic opportunity, and “when a man lives upon the land and is cold and hungry and hears word of the great factories going up in the cities, he begins to hope and dream of a new life, and he leaves.” The economic opportunities in Chicago made it a popular destination for black Southerners; additionally, it was an accessible city for residents in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana because it was the ultimate stop on the Illinois Central Railroad. Between 1916 and 1920, over 50,000 African Americans migrated to Chicago from the South to join the industrialized workforce.

Their arrival was part of a greater national migration, and shifted race relations. The changing racial demographics in Chicago precipitated a race riot in 1919. A black male was injured while swimming on a beach in a predominantly white neighborhood—and the incident catalyzed the already tense relationship between different immigrant gangs in the city. The riot, which lasted approximately a week, was one of many that took place around the country within cities with large immigrant populations. The riots made white Chicagoans more aware of the new black residents, but they did little to encourage racial integration or improve the black migrants’ situation. By the end of WWI an African American ghetto was established,

59 Wright 93
60 Ibid.
62 Drake and Cayton 8
and the riots “merely strengthened both the external and internal forces” that had originally created the separate black community. Chicago had been primarily composed of European immigrants and white citizens before WWI, but after the war the city’s racial makeup changed completely.

While foreign-born communities were decreasing, the black community in Chicago became more concentrated. Black migrants continued to relocate to Chicago, contributing to the formation of a “Black Metropolis” within the greater city. As African American migrants encountered foreigners, “never [dreaming] that there were so many in the world,” Wright explains they settled into transitional neighborhoods where most newcomers to the city resided. That transitional area was “just beyond the business belt,” where “a sooty conglomeration of factories and mills belches smoke that stains [black migrants] clothes and lungs.” The black migrants never transitioned out of that area, or saw their community absorbed by the larger population. According to Drake and Cayton, the “Black Metropolis remain[ed] athwart the least desirable residential zones” while “its population [grew] larger and larger” unable to leave the confines of their neighborhood. The Black Metropolis became known as Bronzeville, and grew to be one of the largest black communities in the world.

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63 Spear 130
64 Wright 99; immigrants first gathered in neighborhoods where the rent was lowest and where they knew other members who had relocated from the same ethnic or racial group, but dispersed as they became more ingratiated within the city and established connections for themselves in Chicago.
65 Ibid., 101
66 Drake and Cayton 17
67 The community was extremely confined, however, and in his sociological research The Negro Family in Chicago, E. Franklin Frazier analyzed Chicago’s neighborhoods as zones restricted by class. Frazier’s study revealed how Bronzeville residents, most of whom were low on the socioeconomic scale, were restricted in a city where neighborhood “movements were controlled by economic resources,” and where “Bronzeville as the least mobile segment of that metropolis” (Bolden 8).
When Richard Wright first arrived in the city in 1927, he claimed that, “the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies.” He only wanted a job in the new city, because “hunger had long been [his] daily companion,” and “diversion and recreation, with the exception of reading, were unknown” to him. The recreational spaces that Wright craved, like the public dance halls passed by De Witt Williams, were segregated; thus, while Bronzeville became more and more populated, it remained a space apart from the greater Chicago metropolis.

In the nascent stages of the Great Depression, Chicago was no longer a city of immigrants, but a metropolis segregated along American racial lines. Despite intense segregation, the Bronzeville community prospered from 1924-1929. Its residents fought for inclusion within Chicago’s changing political sphere, and worked to attain access to the changing aspirations of the American Dream. As they faced discrimination from the greater white Chicago community, Bronzeville residents began to focus their energies on developing their own black community. In 1928 they elected a black congressman, who was the first African American to hold a seat in the House of Representatives since 1901. Bronzeville’s dream for political power was makeshift, “a substitute for the real American Dream of complete integration into American life.” As illustrated within “kitchenette building,” Bronzeville residents

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69 In the decade before the Depression, Chicago underwent intense political turmoil as Socialism grew in popularity. With the rise of Socialism came a redefinition of the traditional American Dream, one that emphasized capitalist ideals and granted power and ascension to those involved within the business world. Civic leaders emphasized small businesses and a new capitalistic image for the city, but for average workers, the American Dream implied home ownership, a steady job, leisure time with family and friends, savings, education for children (Drake and Cayton 25).

70 Drake and Cayton 81
were not granted access to the idealized dream portrayed in the white media. Wright claims, “Slowly I began to forge in the depths of my mind a mechanism that repressed all the dreams and desires that the Chicago streets, the newspapers, the movies were evoking in me,” for “What could I dream of that had the barest possibility of coming true? I could think of nothing.”

The elusive dream he was seeking was propagated through the greater Chicago media, and was not able to be “kept clean,” free from festering, in Bronzeville. Existing as a separate city within a greater urban center, the residents of Bronzeville wanted to engender a sense of political agency within their own community. In 1930 the black newspaper *Chicago Sunday Bee* called for an election of a “Mayor of Bronzeville.” The election became an annual community event, and was symptomatic of the completely insular African American city forming within Chicago.

Bronzeville continued to transform during the 1930s-40s as New Deal reforms came into effect and the Second World War began. During WWII, the black population in Chicago increased dramatically. Disenfranchised African American neighborhoods in northern urban centers, like Bronzeville, became more race-conscious with WWII because blacks were “not only segregated from whites in the

71 *Black Boy* 267
72 The community name “Bronzeville” was adopted after the release of this publication.
73 An increasing number of Bronzeville residents grew dependent on government relief after the stock market crash, and as the community grew more families became dependent upon the government to survive. Wright wrote of going to the relief station, and his experience talking with fellow black Chicagoans. He explains, “Before this they had lived as individuals, each somewhat afraid of the other, each seeking his own pleasure, each stanch in that degree of Americanism that had been allowed him,” but because they all needed relief they were able to talk with each other, and “their talking was enabling them to sense the collectivity of their lives” (*Black Boy* 300). While Wright left the relief station knowing “that the relief officials had not wanted to give [the food] to me,” he also left the station with a greater sense of the struggles facing the entire black community (*Black Boy* 301).
armed forces,” but also in public spaces on domestic ground.\textsuperscript{74} The awareness of racial divisions increased as more blacks continued to relocate. Between Pearl Harbor and D-Day, around 60,000 additional blacks migrated to Chicago; by 1944 there were 337,000 blacks living in the city.\textsuperscript{75} Of those 337,000 people, 10 percent lived integrated within the white Chicago population. Bronzeville was a city within a city, “seven miles in length and one and one-half miles in width” with five peripheral African American neighborhoods that contributed to the black metropolis.\textsuperscript{76} Brooks published her first collection, \textit{A Street in Bronzeville}, in 1945, living amidst ninety percent of Chicago’s black community.

Brooks began writing during a period of black artistic expression in Chicago. Like the Harlem Renaissance before it, the Chicago Renaissance of 1930-1960 was “a revitalization of the black expressive arts, especially music, art, literature, theater, and dance.”\textsuperscript{77} In addition to Brooks and Wright, Chicago boasted authors like Arna Bontemps and Loraine Hansbury, artists such as Eldzier Cortor, and musicians like Earl Hines. Arna Bontemps claimed Chicago was “the center of the second phase of Negro literary awakening” during this time period.\textsuperscript{78} The cultural climate that enabled the Chicago Renaissance resulted from the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Before the 1930s, Chicago’s black population had been small: in 1910 it was approximately 2 percent of the city’s total population, in 1920 it was 4 percent, and in 1930 it was 6.9 percent.\textsuperscript{79} With the new demographic base in Bronzeville, and

\textsuperscript{74} Drake and Cayton 94  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 9  
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 12  
\textsuperscript{77} Knupfer 1  
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 52  
\textsuperscript{79} Bolden 2
public reforms that resulted from New Deal policies, black writers were able to create the framework for the Chicago Renaissance.

While some businesses suffered after the stock market crash, many social and cultural institutions in Bronzeville endured. Of those, the most notable were women’s clubs, black churches, and social settlements, and “alongside these organizations, another set of ‘institutions’ flourished and reinvigorated Chicago’s southside: storefront churches dance halls, theaters, and jazz clubs.” As women’s clubs persisted throughout the Depression, they contributed to the Bronzeville arts scene; during a period of social unrest and discrimination, black women’s clubs advocated for community interests. A group of five black women created the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), which was the first black art museum in the United States. They wanted it to be a place that showcased the talents of “African and black American artists” as well as a meeting space for local artists, writers and activist groups. They also wanted the space to provide art classes for children in addition to community workshops. African American institutions in Bronzeville became spaces where artists and writers could meet and discuss their work and encourage each other to think and write more communally.

During the 1930s and 1940s, New Deal organizations provided support for Bronzeville institutions. With the government’s assistance, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) was able to gain a foothold in Chicago. In conjunction with local organization, the WPA fostered a black literary scene in Bronzeville. The WPA, Federal Art Project (FAP), and Federal Theatre Project (FTP) were critical

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80 Knupfer 3
81 Spear 101
82 Knupfer 19
during the Great Depression and WWII in developing the Chicago artistic scene. The WPA gave many black Chicago writers and artists their start, and not only provided a degree of economic security but offered camaraderie for Chicago writers of both races. Authorizing a study called “The Negro in Illinois” from 1936-1942, the WPA stabilized local writers’ groups in the South Side. Richard Wright supplemented efforts of the WPA when he took charge of the South Side Writer’s Group at the 1935 National Negro Congress, and continued to fortify literary spaces for Chicago’s black intelligentsia. While Brooks did not get her start from the WPA or the Southside Writers’ Group, they contributed to the formation of a unique Bronzeville literary culture that influenced her poetry. Inez Cunningham Stark further cultivated the literary environment nurtured by Harsh and Wright, providing the support system for Brooks to begin her career. Brooks had already begun gaining recognition for her poetry, publishing in newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, and she took classes with Stark when she began teaching aspiring black poets at the SSCAC in 1941. She eventually won first prize in a contest sponsored by Stark in October 1944, and in the same month had poetry appear in *Poetry* magazine.

Brooks continued writing into the late twentieth century as the Civil Rights movement gained momentum. According to Drake and Cayton, Bronzeville residents experienced “very little change in the fundamental values,” and “in the basic social

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83 The WPA was also able to support the work of Vivian Gordon Harsh, who became the first black librarian to head the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library in the South Side in October 1933. She created a “Book Review and Lecture Forum” for black writers to meet and discuss their work, and cultivated a space for black literature to develop (Bolden 3).
84 Bolden 4
85 Ibid.
structure and cultural patterns of the community.” But the community continued to expand, and more black aldermen were placed in Chicago’s City Hall. Additionally, the black population in Chicago doubled between 1950 and 1960. Bronzeville continued to grow, concurrent with the Civil Rights movement. A new set of racial tensions arose from integration, and old problems of discrimination persisted. Brooks’ third collection, *The Bean Eaters*, was published in 1960—and while Bronzeville residents were still central to her poetry, she relocated it within the changing national sphere.

During the 1960s, Brooks was very involved with other young black poets in Bronzeville. They had a motto: “Black Poetry is written by blacks about blacks to blacks.” Brooks would enter taverns with her poetry group and begin poems like “We Real Cool” aloud. “We Real Cool” depicts a group of teenagers who spend their time shooting pool in a local tavern. Subtitled “The Pool Players. / Seven at the Golden Shovel,” the poem is presented in rhyming couplets that embody the unified experience of the players. Brooks begins the poem with, “We real cool. We / Left school. We” starting and ending the lines with the collective “we.” The use of “we” presents a shared existence, and a singular conception of what it means to be a young person in Bronzeville. The players’ “coolness” is defined by their absence from school, and an existence contingent on the disavowal of social ascension. They are people, Brooks said, who “have no pretensions to any glamour,” and who “are

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87 Ibid., xvi
89 “We Real Cool” lines 1-2
supposedly dropouts, or at least they’re in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school…but they’re a little uncertain of the strength of their identity.”90 Unsure of themselves, but sure of what they want to convey, the players are children who aspire to be “cool.” Their environment, the space of the poem, caters to an enjoyment of the present:

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.91

Much like De Witt Williams’ life, the lives of the pool players are captured by a ballad. They “sing” and “jazz”92 throughout their lives, making their daily routines a performance. Despite their wishes, however, the players are destined to “die soon.” The last line of the poem, the only one that lacks a concluding “we,”93 visually emphasizes this existential brevity. The players’ lives are cut short—truncated, never changing. Bolden says the poem signals “the plight of Black Americans who are

91 “We Real Cool” lines 3-8
92 Many people believed that “jazz” had sexual connotations, but Brooks offers up another interpretation that is influenced by the players desire to challenge anything that was accepted by “proper” people. She claimed, “I thought of something that is accepted by almost everybody, and that is summertime, the month of June.” Instead of appreciating “the loveliness of June—the flowers, blue sky, honeyed weather—[they] wanted instead to derange it, to scratch their hands in it as if it were a head of hair.”
93 Brooks decided to place a “we” at the end of every line but the last because the subjects were “youngsters who don’t have much attention. They would like some attention. They’d like to be looked at with some respect and affection by their society.” The placement of the “we” is meant to make the reader “pause just a split second” to give the players the attention they desire.


entrapped in the all-Black community of Bronzeville.”\textsuperscript{94} As Bronzeville children are filled with strange moods, and “the streets, with their noise and flaring lights, the taverns, the automobiles, and the poolrooms claim them,” their parents realize that no voice of theirs “can call them back.”\textsuperscript{95}

Both “kitchenette building” and “we real cool” offer gender-based perspectives of Bronzeville, perspectives that are in line with traditional migration narratives. As the characters in the poems try to navigate their urban landscape, Griffin notes, the “female protagonists attempt to create ‘home’ in hope of providing a space where dreams are possible,” while “male protagonists give up any hope of dreaming and seek instead to carve out some degree of manhood in a male-defined street culture and its accompanying spaces.”\textsuperscript{96} The women in Brooks’ work attempt to create a space for their families, compensating for the inhospitable, and uncontrollable, city streets. Wright, the pool players, and De Witt reveal the male experience in black Chicago, and their masculine experiences are marked by chasing unattainable economic dreams.

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August Wilson’s work is set among the streets, homes, and businesses of the Hill District in Pittsburgh—and his plays, too, are steeped within the history of Southern migration. Wilson views the mass exodus of African Americans from the American South as a type of rupture, an extension of the African Diaspora. He observes, “We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans.” After

\textsuperscript{94} Bolden 128  
\textsuperscript{95} Wright 136  
\textsuperscript{96} Griffin 110
developing an African American culture, rooted in the soil of the South, Wilson continues, “We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North,” a transplant he believes was unsuccessful, for blacks should have clung to their land. The Southern soil was no longer sustainable, however, and blacks needed to find a new source of labor that was not agriculturally based. Wilson argues that the cities like Chicago and Pittsburgh were not capable of fostering black communities: “We came to the North, and we’re still victims of discrimination and oppression in the North.” Throughout Wilson’s Centennial Cycle characters are subjected to societal discrimination, and are unable to escape their Southern pasts. As they strive to achieve more than their predecessors, Wilson’s characters are unable to ignore their Southern roots.

The Great Migration affected Chicago and Pittsburgh in similar ways. The two cities are juxtaposed within Seven Guitars, which is set during 1948—three years after Gwendolyn Brooks published A Street in Bronzeville. One of the main characters, Floyd Barton, portrays Chicago, not Pittsburgh, as a Mecca for African Americans. He understands it as the antithesis of a shared Southern past. He explains, “Seem like everybody in the world in Chicago,” adding that the city is “the only place for a black man to be.” Unlike Pittsburgh, Floyd asserts, “Chicago is what you make it.” He explains, “It got whatever you want. That’s why everybody go there.” He equates Chicago with opportunity; while African Americans are

97 Shannon 12-13
100 Ibid., 80
subjugated in Pittsburgh, Floyd assumes Chicago will prove more hospitable. He declares, “I am going to Chicago,” even if he will “have to buy me a graveyard and kill everybody I see.” He continues:

I am going to Chicago. I don’t want to live my life without. Everybody I know live without. I don’t want to do that. I want to live with. I don’t know what you all think of yourself, but I think I’m supposed to have. Whatever it is. Have something. Have anything.”

His desire for possession and ownership of anything stems from the loss of land in the South. Not wanting to live “without,” he is arguing that a valuable life necessitates content; he does not distinguish between dreams or tangible possessions. Living in Pittsburgh, recently released from prison, Floyd constantly hears a hit song he recorded on the radio—yet he makes no money from the exposure it receives. While the song was his creation, he has no agency over what happens to it and is forced to live without any reward for his hard work. Unable to maintain a steady job, he also faces blatant discrimination in the city: the white police arrested him in Pittsburgh, and he insists, “I ain’t done nothing but walk down the street.” He explains that he had just “Come home from the cemetery after burying my mama, was walking down the street—and they arrested me.” Floyd was not walking near the scene of a crime; rather he was alone, in mourning, when the cops seized him. The arrest was disrespectful on multiple levels—for its injustice towards Floyd and his grieving process.

Throughout Seven Guitars, both Pittsburgh and Chicago are linked with the South. While the Hill District is in the North, the South is still a part of every character’s past. Despite his preference for Chicago, Floyd dismisses Ruby’s

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101 Ibid., 82
102 Ibid., 22
insistence that all places, in the South or North, are alike. He claims, “This is Pittsburgh. This ain’t Alabama,” and that there are “some things you get away with up here you can’t get away with down there.” While Pittsburgh is distinct from Alabama, the South pervades all elements of the play. Ruby herself is a migrant from the South, bearing a child who will be raised in the North. Every character in the play has been displaced, and relocated in the Hill District; every day they hear the South, however, in the crowing of a neighbor’s rooster. Canewell, asserting his prior knowledge of Southern agricultural life, tries to classify the rooster: “That’s one of them Alabama roosters…Then you got your Georgia rooster…Then you got your Mississippi rooster.” Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama are all distinct entities—but wholly separate from the North. Each region has its own history and its own institutions of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and migration. In the North, however, they are all seen as one homogenous zone. Canewell is unable to fully ascribe to a Northern identity for himself. He is still personally connected with the South, as evidenced by his insistence on classifying different types of agrarian labor. The rooster itself is emblematic of the Southern country and its farms. It is a distinctive bird, particularly aggressive, and generally one rooster guards a henhouse and alerts the rest of the farm that a new day has arrived. Roosters are also associated with male dominance: they protect their family and property with a fierce tenacity. But they are uncommon in cities, especially a city where no one owns his own property.

The rooster represents a regional divide, and quickly becomes a point of contention between the characters in the play. Floyd tries to articulate the separation

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103 Ibid., 68
104 Ibid., 60
between the two regions, claiming, “You ain’t gonna find no rooster living next to you making all that noise in Chicago.” Canewell and Red Carter immediately refute his statement:

    Canewell: There’s more roosters in Chicago than there is in Pittsburgh. There’s more people from the country in Chicago than there is in Pittsburgh. Red Carter: You right. There ain’t nothing but niggers from Mississippi in Chicago.

Like a rooster in the city, an African American in Chicago is still a displaced Southern migrant, as such, they are subject to the same discrimination that they faced in the South. As the migrant interacts with his new urban environment, he retains remnants of his agrarian past. According to Griffin, a displaced Southerner “is embodied in spaces, rituals, and belief systems which act to either nurture or inhibit the urban protagonist.” New migrants are defined by the spaces in which they congregate, the Southern rituals they maintain, and the beliefs that they continue to emphasize in their daily lives. The North is a new bastion of the South, a larger setting in which African Americans still face the same opposition and are viewed much as they were in Mississippi.

Wilson works to re-imagine the role of the South in African American cultural history. According to Harry Elam Jr., he sets the region “as an ancestral homeland for African Americans,” and the ultimate reclamation of their homeland is done through the attainment of property. Hedley, one of the renters in the house where the play is set, aspires to have not just his own land, but also his own plantation: “When I

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105 Ibid., 61
106 Ibid.
107 Griffin 52
get my plantation I’m gonna walk around it.” He’s not going to work on the plantation, as his ancestors did; rather, he is going to walk freely throughout the property admiring it and doing as he pleases. He adds, “I am going to walk all the way round to see how big it is,” and the bigness of the land mass will be reflected in his own person, for he will “be a big man on that day.”\textsuperscript{109} Hedley is measuring prestige by physical size, equating “bigness” with power. While Floyd believes that Chicago is the only place for a black man, Hedley is propagating an entirely different ideology—through reclaiming the South, he will become a “big man.” Louise quickly re-orient\textsuperscript{s} Hedley, however, exclaiming, “There ain’t no plantations in Pittsburgh, fool! This the city.”\textsuperscript{110}

The city that Louise inhabits, a post-war Pittsburgh, had undergone dramatic demographic changes. African Americans had not always been segregated within the Hill District. Before WWI, African Americans in Pittsburgh had been dispersed throughout every ward. While they had begun to congregate in the Hill District, which was located in the third and fifth wards, the neighborhood housed primarily Russians, Syrians, and Romanians. By 1910, approximately 42 percent of Pittsburgh’s blacks lived in the neighborhood. Residential segregation within Pittsburgh began to increase between 1916 and 1930, as more blacks began to move north.\textsuperscript{111} Many of the migrants heard about work opportunities in Pittsburgh through newspapers, railroads, and contacts that had already left the south.\textsuperscript{112} As with Chicago, railroads played an important role—they were the primary mode of

\textsuperscript{109} Seven Guitars 24
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 40
transportation for migrants, in addition to a mode of communication between the new Northern communities and their old Southern counterparts. At the onset of WWI, the city’s African American population was under 27,000. The population was over 82,000 by the end of WWII, which represented “an increase from 4.8 to 9.3 percent of the city’s total population.”113 The African American population of Pittsburgh increased concurrently with that of Chicago’s, and with the population growth came an increasingly segregated Hill District.

In the period of time before WWI, Pittsburgh emerged as a center of industrialization, and patterns of migration mirrored employment opportunities within the city. Employment was the driving impetus for migration.114 Before WWI African Americans constituted only 3 percent of Pittsburgh’s total workforce, but as the demand for labor grew, so did the amount of African American workers.115 Throughout Wilson’s cycle characters struggle to find work and establish economic stability, many believing that social ascension is intrinsically linked to steady work. Often the only work that black migrants, and many of Wilson’s characters, could find was in the city’s steel industry working in Pittsburgh’s steel mills. Between the end of the Civil War and 1910, Pittsburgh’s African American population increased from under three thousand to nearly twenty-six thousand people, and from no steelworkers

114 Because the African American population growth reflected the demand for black labor, the population did not grow steadily. For example, “during the years from 1922 to 1930 fluctuating labor demand in Pittsburgh caused sharp changes in the tempo of black migration. From late 1922 until the fall of 1923, migration revived vigorously, but then slowed again in 1924. The following year a new survey found that the number of blacks in the city itself was about 25 percent greater than it had been in 1920” (Gottlieb 64).
115 Trotter and Day 7
to around eight hundred.\textsuperscript{116} African American workers were also used as strike breakers, which encouraged some migrants to come to the city for work—but guaranteed they were still in the lowest rungs of society.\textsuperscript{117} Labor policy was both shaped by, and affected the course of, black migration. From 1914-1923 there were new sanctions on foreign immigration, which decreased the supply of inexpensive labor in Pittsburgh and the North. As in Chicago, many workers were enlisted in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), fighting abroad during WWI—which further depleted the supply of labor in the city. There were some industries that were unable to continue without the aid of the new black workers.\textsuperscript{118}

As the labor force increased, distinct black communities developed, along with community organizations that allowed for the exchange of music, writing, and religion. The Urban League of Pittsburgh (ULP) formed in 1918, with the purpose of helping African American workers find jobs and adjust to their new industrial setting.\textsuperscript{119} ULP also provided access to different cultural events, along with groups like the local YMCA and African American Greek societies at the University of Pittsburgh. A variety of African American authors, poets, and artists visited the city to work with the ULP.\textsuperscript{120} The Negro Drama League also formed, allowing for African American actors and dramatists to create productions; prior to 1935 the Pittsburgh Drama League had not allowed African Americans to join the Olympian

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 5
\textsuperscript{117} By 1907, compared to American-born and European immigrant workers, African American workers entered the least skilled, hardest, and lowest paying sections of the Pittsburgh labor force. Through strikebreaking, African Americans attempted to gain some degree of control over their own labor (Trotter and Day 3-4).
\textsuperscript{119} Trotter and Day 23
\textsuperscript{120} Glasco 194
Players.\textsuperscript{121} Music was the most widely shared and practiced art in the Hill District, however, partly because it developed within the churches.\textsuperscript{122} Churches were the nexus of social, political, and spiritual activities within the Hill District community. According to Griffin, “in some instances, church was a place where migrants could invoke the South as a means of sustaining them in the city.”\textsuperscript{123} The church connected them to their Southern pasts, and created a spiritual community in a foreign, cramped city.\textsuperscript{124}

Distinct black communities formed in conjunction with changes in the immigrant communities of Pittsburgh. While the earliest migrants had lived alongside Italians, Greeks, and Poles, later migrants primarily lived within mostly African American neighborhoods. The African American population in the Third and Fifth wards grew by 13,814 during the period of the first Great Migration; concurrently, successful foreign-born families moved out, and the foreign-born population in the Hill District fell by 7,613.\textsuperscript{125} The large influx of Southern migrants led to a shortage of housing and severe overcrowding within the black residential areas. A study conducted during WWI revealed that almost two-thirds of black men

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 305
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 307
\textsuperscript{123} Griffin 62
\textsuperscript{124} The number of churches and denominations in the Hill District grew with the population. Before 1920, in any given ten year period there had not been more than two new congregations. Between 1920 and 1930, however, fourteen new churches were formed; by the end of 1930 there were forty-five churches in both the Third and Fifth wards (Glasco 237). The wide variety of churches allowed migrants to choose a church based on theology, friends, and the pastor. The pastors were important figures for the recent southern migrants, because they could help find jobs and housing, and they connected migrants with social opportunities in the city (Gottlieb 201).
\textsuperscript{125} Gottlieb 67
slept in rooms that had three or more lodgers.\textsuperscript{126} Overcrowding within the Hill District only exacerbated the poor housing conditions.

The African American population inhabited the most run-down, dilapidated sections of the Pittsburgh housing market. A housing study of the Hill District in 1929 revealed that only “20 percent of black houses had bathtubs and only 50 percent had inside toilets,” while “30 percent had nothing better than outside water closets and 20 percent no more than privies.”\textsuperscript{127} As WWII advanced, housing conditions did not improve. African American housing remained overcrowded, under-regulated, and largely rented. Almost 98 percent of residents in the Lower Hill rented their homes, compared to 75 percent in Polish Hill and over 50 percent in the predominantly Italian neighborhood, Bloomfield. By 1960, while 25 percent of whites in the community owned their homes, less than 6 percent of African American families in the Lower Hill were homeowners.\textsuperscript{128} Hedley’s dream of a plantation is far from the reality of his small rented room, or the rented rooms of his neighbors in the Hill District. Wilson connected Pittsburgh to Chicago in its housing practices: “Look at the Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. They’re isolated and separated. In Pittsburgh they’re isolated and separated.” In those neighborhoods, residents are “paying these

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\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 70
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 69
\textsuperscript{128} Additionally, African Americans continued to pay larger proportions of their incomes for housing than their white counterparts—“ Some 50 percent of blacks paid more than a quarter of their annual earnings for housing, whereas only about 30 percent of white families paid that much. Partly because the demand for housing among African Americans greatly exceeded the supply, landlords and realtors regularly charged blacks, renters, and home buyers alike higher prices for lower quality housing” (Trotter and Day 65).
guys twelve hundred dollars a month for a little room,” to live in apartments where, “there’s no screens. There’s no heat. There’s no air. There’s nothing.”129

The second Great Migration occurred simultaneously with the decline of the steel industry, and the rise of a city-sanctioned redevelopment plan. Pittsburgh dominated the U.S. shares of the world steel market—shares that decreased from 54 percent at the end of WWII to 20 percent in 1970. During the same time, Pittsburgh’s overall population decreased from nearly 700,000 in 1950 to just over 500,000 in 1970.130 In an attempt to address economic and demographic decline, Pittsburgh proposed an urban redevelopment program called Renaissance I, which began in 1943 and continued through the 1960s. The plan was created by Democratic mayor David L. Lawrence in conjunction with banker Richard King Mellon, and was a public-private endeavor that had an immense impact on the Hill District.131 While the overall population of Pittsburgh declined, the African American population rapidly increased. By 1970 the African American population had increased to 105,000, or 20 percent of the total population, compared to 82,500 in 1950—when African Americans accounted for about 12 percent of the city’s population.132 As jobs in the steel industry, which had traditionally provided economic opportunities for migrants, decreased, the black community in Pittsburgh suffered heavily in the declining postwar economy. Residents of the Hill District found it hard to relocate from the urban renewal areas under attack by Renaissance I; most blacks were absent from the

130 Trotter and Day 45
131 Ibid., 46
132 Ibid., 47
white-dominated city council’s planning, and were forced to remain in a neighborhood that was increasingly under attack. By the 1960s Pittsburgh’s Urban Redevelopment Authority, with federal funds from Renaissance I, had begun or completed nineteen renewal projects; many of these included demolishing buildings in the city’s poor and increasingly African American neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{133} The Hill District rapidly became wholly segregated as other residents moved to better housing in other parts of the city and surrounding suburbs. In 1940, 60 percent of the Hill District was African American; in 1950 over 80 percent of the neighborhood was African American; in 1960 the community was nearly 100 percent African American.\textsuperscript{134}

In 1965, August Wilson moved out of the home where he lived with his mother, Daisy Wilson, and into a rented basement apartment in the Hill District. It was there that he lived among a group of writers and painters, and it became a community and a demographic subset that would reappear in his writing.\textsuperscript{135} After dropping out of high school, Wilson began educating himself in the Hill District’s library, an education that took a turn when he discovered the Halfway Art Gallery. The gallery was a local meeting area for members of the Beat Culture, and provided an outlet for Wilson to read aloud his work and connect with fellow writers—creating a space much like the taverns where Brooks would read “We Real Cool.” Among those writers were poets Rob Penny, Charley Williams, and Nick Fournoy, who were active in Pittsburgh’s African American writers scene. Along with Wilson, they helped create the Center Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop, and established a literary...........\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 69\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 70-71\textsuperscript{135} Shannon 17
magazine to begin printing their work.\textsuperscript{136} As he found support in his newfound writers’ group, Wilson witnessed as his neighborhood was marked for the city’s urban redevelopment plan—and chose to portray that aspect of the Hill District in \textit{Two Trains Running}.

Set in 1969, \textit{Two Trains Running} follows Memphis, a diner owner whose property has been slated for demolition. Amidst the dramatic changes of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, the characters in Memphis’ diner are facing massive community upheaval. Throughout the play, the social and political realities of 1969 act as the backdrop to Wilson’s characters, who, according to Shannon, “all struggle to release the internalized pain and suffering of an explosive decade that has essentially passed them by.”\textsuperscript{137} They remain in the diner, stagnant, as social upheaval occurs outside; and they remain in the diner, expectant, waiting for the city to tear down their neighborhood. Memphis, a migrant from Alabama, claims “I been up here since ’36. They ran me out of Jackson in ’31,” explaining that white members of his town killed his mule and forced him to cede his property. He adds, “One of these days I’m going back and get my land,”\textsuperscript{138} echoing Hedley’s sentiments in \textit{Seven Guitars}. Even though Memphis dreams of repossessing his previous property, the characters in \textit{Two Trains Running} are not concerned about appeasing the past; unlike the Charles family in \textit{The Piano Lesson}, “going back to pick up the ball or reclaiming their cultural legacy is simply not a high priority.”\textsuperscript{139} As the city is about to take over

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 19
\item Ibid., 192
\item Shannon 188
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the restaurant, characters are most concerned with finding a position for themselves in the drastically changing Pittsburgh.

Holloway, a local patron, claims the city has had plans to “tear this whole block down for the last twenty years.” The city council, which traditionally left African Americans out of new redevelopment plans, exercises complete control over a community who must abide with their rules. West, who runs a funeral home and owns several properties in the community, claims the council “can go anywhere in the city and take any piece of property they want…The city council done voted to take over these whole twelve blocks. They getting five this year and seven next year.” Residents of the Hill District are left without any defense against the city, and are forced to inhabit an increasingly empty and run-down neighborhood. If the city goes through with their plans to tear down his restaurant, Memphis explains what will happen:

Ain’t nothing gonna be left around here. Supermarket gone. Two drugstores. The five and ten. Doctor done moved out. Dentist done moved out. Shoe store gone. Ain’t nothing gonna be left but these niggers killing one another. That don’t never go out of style.

The businesses that Memphis lists are essential for guaranteeing health and longevity in life. His restaurant is closing, and without a supermarket residents are unable to buy their own groceries in lieu of eating out. The community does not have any access to health care or medicine, or inexpensive housing goods. Unable to purchase shoes, residents cannot even protect their feet from the harsh pavement. Surrounded

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140 *Two Trains Running* 9
141 Ibid., 39
142 Ibid., 9
by abandoned businesses, residents are essentially left for dead. They are left only
with violence to assert themselves—and violence to expedite an inevitable death.

Desperate to redevelop run down areas of Pittsburgh, the city council
perpetuates problems that they are trying to eradicate through remodeling—they leave
residents who are unable to afford relocating without any means of making a living.
While Boy Willie remained hopeful in The Piano Lesson, Wolf, a patron of the diner
and a bookkeeper, has a disposition that reflects his disenchantment with the
“American Dream.” Shannon argues that Wolf has “been forced to work outside the
same American Dream that eludes [Boy Willie],” and can be seen as a “now-
disillusioned version of Boy Willie; no doubt most of his dreams also have been
defferred.”

As the entire socio-political landscape changes around them, the
characters in Two Trains Running continue to face the same urban oppression that
plagued characters in every prior decade of Wilson’s Centennial Cycle.

Each decade of Wilson’s Cycle discusses southern ancestry, housing
discrepancies, and employment. Every character is simultaneously affected by the
Hill District environment, and grounded within a history of Southern migration.
Geography is equally important; Wilson believes in chronicling African American
history through the lens of location, and through a generational approach to that
locale. Each play is a renewed attempt to identify the essence of life in the Hill
District. Wilson declares, “The importance of history to me is simply to find out who
you are and where you’ve been.”

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143 Shannon 179
University of Mississippi, 2006. p 5.
Chapter 2

Motherhood in A Street in Bronzeville and The Bean Eaters

While the dream that is sought in Brooks’ “kitchenette building” seems conventionally male, the poem also shows how the kitchenettes ensnare women in gendered roles. The community in the building is one where “feeding a wife” and “satisfying a man” are as important as having a place to live. While men are tasked with economic duties, and need to provide the basic necessities for their families, women are relegated to the domestic sphere, left to make sure men are “satisfied.” Women are forced to raise families in an environment where they are unable to envision personal satisfaction, economic growth, or social recognition. Mothers must work for their children’s futures in a community disenfranchised both by physical space and social expectations. Wright notes, their “orbit of life is narrow—from their kitchenette to the white folk’s kitchen and back home again.” In addition to enforcing gendered roles, he comments, “the kitchenette creates thousands of one-room homes where our black mothers sit, deserted, with their children about their knees.” Mothers, not women, are left behind in Bronzeville.

The idea of motherhood is intrinsic to Brooks’ writing, and mothers play an integral role in her depiction of Bronzeville. While A Street in Bronzeville and The Bean Eaters feature poems concerning young men and soldiers, many of them are placed outside the confines of the South Side’s streets—while the women are both defining and defined by the cramped Bronzeville avenues they call home. In her

145 Wright 141
146 Ibid., 109
147 Women, and mothers, also play significant roles in Brooks’ other work—most significantly in Annie Allen and Maud Martha.
writing of Chicago, Beverly Guy-Sheftall insists that Brooks’ “sexual identity as well as her racial identity has molded her vision of the city.”\(^{148}\) While Brooks’ Chicago has many women, all of them are, or will grow up to be, mothers. Black women had established maternal roles in the South, where many had worked in the plantation houses. Many of them, Wright explains, “were allowed to remain in the slave cabins to tend generations of black children,” and with the title of “mammy” black women “became symbols of motherhood, retaining in their withered bodies the burden of our folk wisdom, reigning as arbiters in our domestic affairs.”\(^{149}\) For Wright, black women embody motherhood, and race is intrinsically linked with maternity. Brooks filters the racial injustices facing the black community during the second half of the twentieth century through the lens of motherhood. Within the confines of Chicago, Bronzeville is a space defined by maternal figures, and functions as a matriarchal sphere. Mothers are the center of the Bronzeville community, tasked with the job of protecting their children and preserving their community while acting as spectators to the racial violence committed against their husbands and sons. They are mothers who are denied motherhood because they do not have an inherent right to the bodies of their children.

While De Witt Williams and the pool players were sons, Brooks wrote about a daughter in her poem “a song in the front yard.”\(^{150}\) The poem confronts the relationship between physical, communal space, and a mother’s role in shaping her


\(^{149}\) Wright 36-37

\(^{150}\) Selected Poems 6
child’s existence within those spaces. Written from the perspective of a young girl, the poem begins by confronting physical boundaries: “I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life. / I want a peek at the back.” The front yard is representative of where the girl has been raised, and the physical limitations to which she has grown accustomed. She claims the back is “where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows,” and “a girl gets sick of a rose.” The narrator wants only to “peek,” or get a glimpse at the backyard; she idealizes “rough,” “untended,” and “hungry weeds.” The narrator is attracted to weeds, the invasive, unwanted plants that crowd out desirable flora. Disavowing the value of “a rose,” the narrator gives weeds an unconventional appeal. She is attracted to a lifestyle that is seemingly valueless and undesirable—one that is usually seen as harmful to a cultivated garden. The life she is attracted to mirrors how many whites in Chicago viewed the neighborhood of Bronzeville: as a population that was expanding, invading the carefully constructed white metropolis surrounding it.

While the poem seems to be about the daughter, it’s actually about the mother. Even though she is not physically present in the poem, she designates her daughter’s place in the front yard and negates any value awarded to the backyard. The narrator notes,

My mother sneers, but I say it’s fine
How they don’t have to go in at a quarter to nine.
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae

Brooks has said the girl in “a song in the front yard” was based off of her own experiences as a child in Bronzeville, when her mother would make her children come into the front yard, and remain in front. They became envious of the children that were free to wander around the block. Brooks, Gwendolyn. “A Conversation with Gwendolyn Brooks.” 1961. Interview by Studs Terkel. Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks. Ed. Gloria Jean Wade Gayles. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003. p 6.

Ibid., lines 1-2

Ibid., lines 3-4
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George’ll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).

The narrator’s mother is defining different types of womanhood, and attempting to
direct the fate of her child. She is guided by what society deems acceptable, and her
criticism is steeped with rhetoric of responsibility—she is judging Johnnie Mae and
George’s values. She tries to restrict her daughter by excluding her from the
seemingly inevitable downfalls of other community members—but she does not
outline any specific plan to guarantee her own daughter’s success. Once again the
physical spaces in Bronzeville serve to foster or subdue different types of lifestyles.
The narrator is trapped in her front yard, and within the societal expectations for
black women in Bronzeville—either consigned to a ruined fate, or forced to live up to
white standards for excellence within the Bronzeville community. She is confined to
certain roles and conventions, and subject to her mother’s attempts to define her as
“good.”

Through her limited life in the front yard, the narrator becomes attracted to
another type of life—one that is just as limited as the first. The narrator asserts, “I’d
like to be a bad woman, too. / And wear the brave stocking of night-black lace / And
strut down the streets with paint on my face.” Denying the conventional beauty
and romance associated with a “rose,” the narrator showcases her desire for a life of
pleasure. She idolizes overt sexuality, craving a life where she can don stockings and
makeup that make her brave and bold. She sees a life of sex work, one that is judged
morally irresponsible, as freeing and unfettered by social constraints. Her mother’s

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154 Ibid., lines 11-16
155 Ibid., lines 18-20
disproval also makes the backyard lifestyle appealing, and Brooks has said, “certainly if anything is universal, it is a child’s wish not to be constrained.”\footnote{156} While children wish to live life without limitations, mothers must set rules and create boundaries for them. In Bronzeville, where rented back rooms do not possess the infrastructure to nurture dreams, every household member is constrained. The narrator’s mother’s futile efforts to direct her daughter are executed with the knowledge that both the front yard and the backyard are in Bronzeville; thus both paths are subject to the same discrimination and marginalization from the greater white Chicago populace. The mother in the poem has to envision a life for her daughter that is different than the one she has grown to expect for other community members, while still understanding that her daughter will never be granted access to any other community.

Brooks traces the evolution of Bronzeville girls into women in her poem “Sadie and Maud.”\footnote{157} While the pool players are consigned to dying soon, and the narrator from “a song in the front yard” only has a future outlined in opposition to others’ downfalls, Brooks depicts two distinct life trajectories for Sadie and Maud. Sadie and Maude, much like the narrator from “a song in the front yard,” begin as young women in Bronzeville, constrained by their surroundings, and forced to take one of two paths—either staying in the front yard, or venturing to the back. The two disparate paths are outlined within the first two lines of the poem: “Maud went to college. / Sadie stayed at home.”\footnote{158} Maud is only able to breach the Bronzeville boundaries by pursuing higher education, while Sadie remains, never to leave.

\footnote{156} Interview by Howe and Fox 140
\footnote{157} Selected Poems 8-9
\footnote{158} “Sadie and Maud” lines 1-2
Despite going to college, Maud is still connected to her past in Bronzeville. Even with an education, she is “a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone/In this old house.” Maud is solitary, meek, and indistinct. Much like the characters in “kitchenette building” and “a song in the front yard,” Maud is defined by her physical surroundings, inhabiting a space that is heavy with age and wear. When Sadie becomes a mother, “Maud and Ma and Papa / Nearly died of shame.” Maud’s shame separates her from Sadie’s motherhood. Her return to Bronzeville marks another separation between her, Sadie, and the community, as if she is an interloper in her own home—a mouse that attempts to survive unnoticed within the infrastructure of someone else’s life. Her life, according to Guy-Sheftall, “has lacked the vitality and fullness which makes one’s existence meaningful”—it is lived, not enjoyed. The distinct absence in Maud’s life comes from her childlessness. Her house is physically empty, without any children to inhabit it, and her existence is unfulfilled—metaphorically empty. Maud’s desiccation stems from not being a mother; despite her education, she remains alone in Bronzeville.

On the other hand, Sadie attempts to live life as completely as possible. She:

…scrapped life
With a fine-tooth comb.

She didn’t leave a tangle in.
Her comb found every strand.
Sadie was one of the livingest chits
In all the land.

\[159\] Ibid., lines 18-20
\[160\] Ibid., lines 11-12
\[161\] Guy-Sheftall, 236
\[162\] “Sadie and Maud” lines 3-8
Sadie uses the accoutrements of styling and beauty as her tools for living, and is “one of the livingest chits / In all the land.” Sadie is a character defined by her liveliness, youth, and zeal—starkly contrasting Maud’s “lukewarm” existence. Her liveliness is conflated with her motherhood, she leaves her “comb” for her children, and she physically brings life into Bronzeville, through birth.

Assessing her societal limitations, Sadie attempts to fill those boundaries with love and life as opposed to shrinking within them. Sadie creates a legacy of fulfillment for her children, encouraging them to use the tools afforded to black women in order to garner the most pleasure from life. She is aware of her limitations yet thriving within them:

When Sadie said her last so-long
Her girls struck out from home.
(Sadie had left as heritage
Her fine-tooth comb.)

Her daughters, much like Sadie and Maud originally, are also faced with the option of leaving—but they leave Bronzeville armed with the liveliness that defined their mother. Smith argues that the two sisters are confronted with choosing between “death-in-life and life-in-death,” and “what is noticeable in the lives of these Black women is a mutual identity that is inextricably linked with race and poverty.” Both Sadie and Maud were forced to live out proscribed existences. Sadie’s children leave, like Maud, but are influenced by Sadie’s disposition—when they “struck out from home” there is no sense of inevitability in their fates. They are both still bound to Bronzeville; but their futures, and their leaves from the community, are not fixed.

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163 “Sadie and Maud” lines 13-16
164 Smith 69
In “the mother,” Brooks presents a figure that is also redefining the future of her children. The narrator, who is simultaneously defined by her maternal role and her lack of maternity, is a character attempting to gain control over the bodies of her children, and over her own motherhood. The title of the poem is the only place where she is given a label or name. Along with the mothers portrayed in Brooks’ other work, “the mother” recognizes the limited existence available to Chicago offspring and the limited resources Bronzeville mothers can provide for their children.

The first stanza of the poem addresses the reader in second person. The first line of the poem, “Abortions will not let you forget,” contrasts the title of the poem with a depiction of a childless mother, while simultaneously granting agency to the abortions in much the same way dreams became active agents in “kitchenette building.” Brooks immediately challenges conceptions of motherhood by presenting a mother without living kin. But, the abortions themselves won’t allow for the mother to forget the role that defines her, and will not allow the reader to forget, either. Rather they force her to “remember the children [she] got that [she] did not get.” The question of ownership in this line, she “got” but “did not get,” asks not only what it means to be a mother, but also what it means to possess something or someone in a neighborhood of rented rooms and limited opportunities. The use of the second person throughout the first stanza makes the poem inclusive, and applicable to not just “the mother” but also everyone reading the poem. The anonymity of the title not only serves to define the narrator by her maternal role, but also makes abortion

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165 Selected Poems 4-5
166 “the mother” line 2. The unedited first two lines of the poem, “Abortions will not let you forget./You remember the children you got that you did not get,” speak directly to the reader, implicating the audience, equating them with “the mother.”
applicable to every mother. Brooks directly engages the reader, writing, “you will never windup the sucking-thumb,” and “you will never leave them.”\textsuperscript{167} The audience develops a sense of the loss derived from understanding that lives that were almost within reach, but not attainable. “The mother” of the title has no access to the bodies or lives of her children. In the second stanza, the poem’s narrator suddenly seizes a first-person voice:

\begin{quote}
I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim 
killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

She asserts the finality, and plurality, of her children’s deaths. Through setting off the second line, Brooks draws emphasis to the phrase “killed children.” In doing so, she illuminates the status of their truncated lives, declaring that the children were “killed” instead of just dead; instead of a passive death, the aborted children were actively deprived of existence. In death, the children are completely inactive—yet Brooks employs active language to describe their lack of life. The narrator experiences the gestures associated with motherhood, “contracting” and “easing” her children to her breasts, but her children still have never been breastfed.\textsuperscript{169}

Maintaining the constant incongruity present within the poem, Brooks is depicting yet another way that “the mother” is defined by her maternity without raising children. Denied ownership of her children, she still endures the motions and emotions of a mother. Like the residents of Bronzeville who exist within a separate microcosm of

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., lines 7, 9
\textsuperscript{168} “the mother” lines 11-14
\textsuperscript{169} Refuting the idea that “the mother” is simply “an abortion poem,” Brooks said that the poem includes a catalogue of “the qualities of motherhood,” and that she hopes the poem allows for “all the aspects of motherhood to be considered (Interview by Presson 136).
the greater Chicago realm, the narrator is able to grasp at motherhood without experiencing the physical acts involved in raising children.

Bronzeville mothers are spectators in their children’s lives, unable to impact their futures. The narrator in “the mother” is working to ensure a certain fate for her children in a community where every action is unplanned or fleeting. In the next lines the narrator continues:

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches,
and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.170

The narrator begins by verbally addressing her children, marking a shift in the direction of the poem. The second person is used to refer to the aborted children, instead of the audience, and the formerly generalized mother gains a definitive voice. She wonders “if” she rid her children of their lives, questioning her role in denying them access to personhood—and questioning her ability to ensure something better for them if they had not been aborted. The statement “even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate” echoes the earlier sentiments of getting but not having got, and the idea of being a mother without having delivered a child. The formerly active language gives way to indecision, and while she definitely “contracted” and “eased,” her new actions are clouded by doubt. The most decisive, intentional actions are qualified by their inverse.

170 “the mother” lines 15-23
The narrator also challenges the implications of living and dying. She asks “if” she seized lives, or stole births, names, loves, and deaths. After referring to her children as “killed,” her questioning of her role in stealing their deaths is particularly poignant. If death is an essential companion to life, the abortions did not cause her children’s deaths; yet they were still killed. The abortions curtailed any lived experience that could have been had by the children, yet their lives could also have been limited in the same way that Sadie’s, Maud’s, and the pool players’ lives had been:

Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.\(^{171}\)

Addressing the contradictions inherent in every section of the poem, Brooks attempts to redefine living, distinguishing it from the act of evading death. The narrator’s children were killed, but they never “giggled or planned or cried.” They died, but never were able to experience any aspect of living. They never laughed at a joke or enjoyed a spring day, but they also never experienced disappointment or unexpected setbacks for their goals. Life is composed of more than heartbeats and shallow breaths, and Brooks is showing the inconsistencies that arise from calling the children dead. Instead, they had corporeal matter, but were never able to use that body to experience life. Their existences were never allowed to come into fruition.

While “the mother” questions her role in limiting her children’s lives, she still had to confront the reality of what their lives would have been if they had grown up

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\(^{171}\) Ibid., 26-33
in Bronzeville. Her aborted children could have grown up to be Sadie, Maud, the pool players, or Emmett Till. James Johnson insists that the poem isn’t about the destruction of unborn children, “it is ‘about’ a woman whose bare recollection of waste is also the measure of her life.”\textsuperscript{172} While the children weren’t able to live, the mother’s entire life is defined by their non-existence, and by the pain of raising, or choosing not to raise, a child within the confines of black Chicago. She is a mother who has no control or power over her children’s physical bodies or their life paths. Through aborting her children, she has tried to exercise the only control she has over their lives.

Another childless Bronzeville mother is depicted in both “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”\textsuperscript{173} and “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.”\textsuperscript{174} Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old son of the “Bronzeville Mother,” was lynched in 1955 after reportedly cat-calling a twenty-one-year-old white woman during his trip to Mississippi—leaving yet another mother in Bronzeville to be defined by her child’s non-existence. His mother, Mamie Till, was denied motherhood because she was unable to protect her son’s living body; after his death she repossessed his corpse, displaying it to the world.

Mamie claims her maternal role as well as her son’s body, defining herself by his brutal death. In “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” she is introduced “after the murder, / after the burial” and shown to be a “pretty-faced thing;
/ the tint of pulled taffy.”175 Her presence is only noted after the murder, and in vivid imagery. Her skin color, which was passed on to her son, is “pulled;” violence is implicit in her coloring. Colorful imagery plagues the poem; as Mamie “sits in a red room / drinking black coffee” she is surrounded by “chaos in windy grays / through a red prairie.”176 Encompassed by a bloodied landscape, Mamie occupies a space seeping with racial implications. While striking colors permeate the entire poem, its “windy grays” reveal Mamie’s desolation at the loss of her son. Gladys Williams notes that the last two lines “play readers inside the mother’s mood and outside to the world.”177 Her inner turmoil is echoed within the colors of the landscape, and in the chaos that permeates the natural terrain. The chaos serves to offset Mamie and magnify her stillness and numbness in facing her son’s death, and her powerlessness in the face of her son’s murder.178 In this tense poetic environment, the only action she takes that marks her role as a mother is leaning forward to kiss “her killed boy.”179 In addition to kissing Emmett, she eats and drinks—all external motions that reveal little about her internal condition. The only glimpse of her emotional state is when she leans in, “And she is sorry.”180 Mamie’s apology stems from her inability to protect her son, change his violent death, or shield him from racial prejudice. She is able to preserve the memory of his life, but must also remember the violence that predicated his death. She is faced with the irrevocable truth of her son’s murdered body—and her position as a childless mother.

175 “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” lines 1-3
176 Ibid., lines 5-6, 9-10
177 Gladys Williams 221
178 Shaw 103
179 “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” line 7
180 Ibid., line 8
Mamie’s childlessness starkly contrasts Carolyn Bryant’s status. Bryant is the central character, and bacon-burner, in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” Instead of focusing on Emmett or Mamie, Brooks centers the poem on the people responsible for Emmett’s death. The poem offers a lyricism similar to “we real cool” and “of De Witt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery,” and produces another tale of a child’s life cut short. The poem begins: “From the first it had been like a / Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.” The word “ballad” is set off, emphasizing the importance of reading the poem and its story as a literary ballad, while simultaneously recognizing the fairy-tale conventions that echo throughout. While the poem itself is a ballad, within the poem the term is misused. Brooks shows how Byant idolizes ballads, but misunderstands the conventions associated with the form, confusing them with fairy tales. The rhetoric used throughout the poem supports her misreading. The sentence “It had the blood” immediately reveals the racial violence that permeates, and defines, the poem—much like the red world in which Mamie confronted her son’s death. The Mississippi Mother sees,

Herself: the milk-white maid, the ‘maid mild’
Of the ballad. Pursued
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.
The Happiness-Ever-After.

The fairy-tale of her life takes on racialized qualities; Bryant is the “maid mild” to Mamie’s “pulled taffy” appearance, and her son’s “Dark Villain” façade. The ballad

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181 “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” lines 1-2
182 Gladys Williams 217
183 “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” lines 6-9
is propagating an image of white maternal bliss—one that starkly contrasts the tragic reality that Mamie faces as an African American. As the Mississippi Mother goes through her maternal routine preparing breakfast in the kitchen and making biscuits for her family, she passively watches as “her bacon burned”\textsuperscript{184}—much like her inaction in preventing the mutation of Till’s flesh.

Bryant’s domestic performance advances a portrayal of maternity that is in direct opposition with that of the loitering Bronzeville Mother. Interrupted by the scorched bacon, Bryant begins to acknowledge the perverse nature of her fairy-tale life; she admits that the “Dark Villain” threatening her purity was merely,

\begin{quote}
…a blackish child  
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,  
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder  
Of its infant softness.\textsuperscript{183}
\end{quote}

Emmett is defined by his childlike qualities, his innocent features. At fourteen, with his “young” face, he has seen little else than the Bronzeville streets. The “Dark Villain” was wholly unable to protect himself, let alone to perpetrate the crimes typically associated with storybook antagonists. He is a child who is never able to grow-up; and no matter how limited his existence might have been, his life is violently ended. Till is a child whose death was linked to another mother, and directly related to an exertion of racial power.

While mothers in Bronzeville struggle to provide for their families and set parameters for their children, the adults in Mississippi are the perpetrators of violence. The Mississippi Mother thinks, “That boy must have been surprised! For /

\begin{footnotes}
\item[184] Ibid., line 13
\item[185] Ibid., 28-32
\end{footnotes}
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.”  

The traditional ballad form is completely corrupted by the acknowledgement of Emmett’s youth and the horrific actions of the Mississippi adults. While ballads convey a dramatic event through a heroic tale, the Mississippi Mother’s story of heroism is spoiled through the acknowledgment of her husband’s misdeeds. As she sees herself as a character in a ballad, the Mississippi Mother realizes that she “is responsible for the murder not of a villain but of a fourteen-year-old child,” and that she has been given an identity she does not want. Gertrude R. Hughes explains, she is “the ballad, and the more she sees what dangers its beauties hide, the more she understands her complicity in young Till’s murder.”  

She is trapped in her role, and unable to escape her responsibility for Till’s murder and the horrific violence that her husband inflicted.  

While the poem’s title mentions both mothers, the only mention of the Bronzeville Mother in the actual poem appears in conjunction with Bryant’s husband. Associated with dominating imagery, the husband is linked throughout the poem with violence. Bryant, discussing her oppressive husband, claims, “his mouth would not

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186 Ibid., lines 33-34
188 Unlike much of Brooks’ poetry placed in Bronzeville, here the father plays a significant role in determining the fates of children within the poem. He is introduced in relation to the “maid mild” as:

…the Fine Prince
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing
her,
Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial
And acquittal wore on) rushing
with his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)
That little foe. (“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” lines 41-48)
go away and neither would the / Decapitated exclamation points in that Other
Woman’s eyes.”\textsuperscript{189} Till’s mother has “decapitated” eyes, stained by the brutality of
her son’s death. She is the “other woman” in the poem, the quiet, African American
mother. She is silent, “absent in a brilliant representation of the invisibility whites
can confer on blacks.”\textsuperscript{190} Loitering in Mississippi, the Bronzeville Mother is
childless, powerless, and rendered invisible, defined by the place and role she no
longer occupies.

Only through addressing her status as a mother, and recognizing the
limitations of her ability to protect her children against her own husband’s violence, is
the Mississippi Mother able to recognize Mamie Till’s motherhood. As she realizes
the violence her husband is capable of, she understands her helplessness in protecting
her own children—the same way Emmet’s mother was unable to keep her son out of
Bryant’s husband’s grasp. His hands, the instruments of violence used against Till,
become disembodied entities. Initially, the husband “looked at his hands,”\textsuperscript{191} and
then “glanced again, almost secretly, at his hands,”\textsuperscript{192} awed by their capabilities.
Realizing her powerlessness, the Mississippi Mother begins to watch his hands in the
same way, as if their actions are separate from her husband, the “Fine Prince.” When
their child misbehaves, she watches as “instantly / The Fine Prince leaned across the
table and slapped / the small and smiling criminal.”\textsuperscript{193} Bryant’s child is “small and
smiling,” like Till himself, and is a victim of her husband’s violence:

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., line 141-142
\textsuperscript{190} Gertrude Hughes 193
\textsuperscript{191} “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” line 73
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., line 75
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., lines 97-99
…When the Hand
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
At her baby-child,
She could think only of blood. 194

Seeing her “baby-child” as the victim of her husband’s violence, the Mississippi Mother recognizes how Till, with his infant softness, was also a baby—belonging to another helpless mother who was unable to prevent white male violence against her son. As her husband’s “Hand” is used against her child, Bryant begins to perceive Till as a child akin to her own. 195 As blood occludes her consciousness, she realizes violence infiltrates her own domestic sphere. Her child, argues Williams, “becomes for an instant the child-villain,” and is transformed into “any child disappearing in a tide of blood.” 196 As her child becomes linked with Till in her mind, the Mississippi Mother is unable to see him as a force of evil—instead he becomes any other child, one like her own.

Understanding her role in Till’s death, the Mississippi Mother no longer can see her husband as a hero, and begins to understand the daily terrors affecting all black mothers in Bronzeville. She is both silenced and subjugated by her husband, a position that all residents of Bronzeville experience daily. According to Bolden, while the poem is addressing an overt act of racial violence, it does so “while

194 Ibid., lines 101-104
195 Blood permeates the entire poem, much like “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” and the violence becomes entirely engulfing. As her shoulder becomes:
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist
the idea
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly
Over her white shoulders, (“A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” lines 123-126)
and she saw only “a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end” (Ibid., 107). As the “maid mild’s” fairy-tale dream becomes increasingly tainted by the violent realities of her position, the poem itself becomes bloodier. She is unable to stop the onslaught of violence, or her husband’s actions. Recognizing her role as the catalyst in Till’s murder, the Mississippi Mother also recognizes her inability to escape her husband’s authority.
196 Gladys Williams 219
simultaneously addressing the sexism inherent in white male patriarchy and white female silence.” As her husband lays his hands on their kids, Bryant sees “…the children were whimpering now. / Such bits of tots. And she, their mother, / Could not protect them.” She is placed in a similarly disabling position to that of Bronzenville mothers, able to understand the reality faced by all black mothers—but her children are still alive.

The title firmly distinguishes between the two mothers based on geographic region, insisting that there is an inherent difference between being a mother in Mississippi versus Bronzenville. As the Mississippi Mother understands the violence that her white husband can inflict, she grows to hate him in a way that is “big, / Bigger than all magnolias.” The reference to magnolias places the mother amidst the flora of the South, and firmly places the poem within a greater literary and musical tradition. Billie Holliday’s song “Strange Fruit,” which discusses racial violence and lynching within the South, references the “scent of Magnolia” in conjunction with lynching. Within the song, Griffin says, “The horror [of lynching] is organically linked to the place.” Violence becomes associated with natural aspects of the South, inherent to the landscape. The Mississippi Mother’s hatred also alludes to the motif of the “Steel Magnolia” woman in Southern literature. The Steel Magnolia figure embodies an ideal of white, Southern womanhood that first arose when men went off to fight in the Civil War. It was created after the man was no

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197 Bolden 141
198 “A Bronzenville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” line 119-121
199 Ibid., line 146-147
200 Griffin 16
longer able to be the protector of the household. The Mississippi Mother realizes that her husband, who justified the murder of Till on the grounds of protecting his wife, is more capable of harming her family than guarding them. Despite realizing the extent to which her husband can cause harm, the Mississippi Mother’s child is still alive, and her white, Southern life exists in a wholly different sphere than the racial oppression faced by the Bronzeville Mother.

While Bryant is compared to the emblematic Steel Magnolia figure, Bronzeville mothers are characterized in the inverse—they are unable to ensure the safety of their households. Brooks depicts a community that faces constant subjugation—a community where mothers are most affected by oppression within the city. They are rendered voiceless next to men, immobile, and incapable of protecting their children. The title figure from “the mother” is purposefully anonymous—her experience can be any mother’s experience in Bronzeville. In the last lines of the poem, the narrator avows, “Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you, / All.” Her sentiments are applicable to all mothers, and the singular “All” creates a collective experience. She experiences the pain of all mothers in Bronzeville who have loved even as they felt the fleeting nature of their children’s lives. Subjugated both by gender and race, the mothers in Bronzeville are left to imagine a future in which their children won’t “die soon.”

202 “the mother” lines 32-33
Chapter 3

Fatherhood in *Jitney, Fences, and King Hedley II*

As in Bronzeville, mothers play a large role in caring for the residents of the Hill District. According to Wilson, the character of Aunt Ester\(^{203}\) is “the most significant persona of the cycle,” because “the characters, after all, are her children.”\(^ {204}\) As the most important character in the Pittsburgh Cycle, Aunt Ester is a source of guidance for members of the community: Wilson explains,

> The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce, and for exposing all the places it is lacking in virtue.\(^ {205}\)

Such generational relationships connect Wilson’s characters, and plays, to each other. While Wilson’s world is primarily male-centric, and “the male characters fail to understand women,” each reveres his mother. Throughout the cycle, notes Bogumil, “Mothers, whether natural or surrogate, are portrayed by Wilson and perceived, for the most part, by male characters with much warmth and regard.”\(^ {206}\) But while Wilson offers mothers who are caregivers, the fathers are also given important roles in shaping their children’s futures. Sons inherit fathers’ names, problems, and social statuses, while fathers struggle to establish their own masculinity, and prevent against breeding a culture of failure and emotional disconnect.

Throughout the twentieth century, regardless of decade, Wilson’s characters face the same sorts of opposition, and even as time progresses, his characters are held

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\(^{203}\) Aunt Ester appears in *Gem of the Ocean*, a play set in her house; in *Two Trains Running; King Hedley II*, where she dies; and *Radio Golf*, which concerns the demolition of her old house.


\(^{205}\) Ibid., p x.

\(^{206}\) Bogumil 125
back by their connections with preceding events. Due to the retrospective structure of the Cycle, Bogumil observes, “Wilson dramatized the forces and factors that influence or determine a character’s actions in the present,” attempting to explore the ways in which the present is impacted by the past.\textsuperscript{207} The most important relationships that arise within Wilson’s dramas are familial ones—wherein identities are grounded in hereditable qualities and convictions. While the question of inheritance factors most prevalently in \textit{The Piano Lesson}, it also manifests itself throughout the cycle in a variety of father-son relationships. Wilson’s fathers measure their success in life not through personal gain, but through the advantages they enable their children to obtain. While mothers act primarily as caregivers, Wilson’s fathers are largely providers who view their duties as supplying basic necessities for their children. Fathers in the Hill District work to ensure their offspring will be unaffected by the same injustices that plagued their parents’ upbringings.

Wilson’s \textit{Jitney}, which takes place in a gypsy cab company during the fall of 1977, explores the relationship between a father and his estranged son. Their reunion takes place within the confines of the father, Becker’s, headquarters for the company—a business that is only able to exist because of segregation. During the 1970s, “white-owned and operated cab services shunned the predominantly black areas of Pittsburgh,” so gypsy-cab companies thrived out of necessity.\textsuperscript{208} The underground jitney service provided employment for many black residents in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[207] Bogumil 10
\item[208] Shannon 56
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Pittsburgh, and Jitney stations had a large presence in the Hill District. Despite their necessary status for the Hill District, the city has plans to demolish the gypsy cab station in Jitney; Becker’s business, and those who work for it, will be casualties of a new neighborhood improvement plan. Just as Becker’s livelihood is threatened, his son is unexpectedly released from prison.

Despite the intense renewal project that frames the text, the central conflict in the drama is between a father and a son. The play’s introduction, written by Marion Isaac McClinton, explains the universality of that conflict: “The story of Becker and Booster, a tale of a father and son, becomes the legend of every parent and child.”

While Becker and Booster provide the central father-son relationship in the play, other characters serve as counterexamples. Indeed, each character serves to emphasize the relationship between Becker and Booster: “paternal responsibility is illustrated in the relationships between Doub and his two sons, Shealy and his estranged son, Pope, whose love he thinks he can buy with a new Buick, and also in Youngblood’s relationship to Jesse.” Youngblood articulates a desire to provide a home for his child, understanding his paternal duty as providing economic stability.

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209 Studying the jitney service in Pittsburgh, “urban economists Otto Davis and Norman Johnson estimated that this underground industry was probably twice as large as the city’s commercial taxi service” (Trotter and Day 61-62).


211 Bogumil 155; Youngblood, with his efforts to secure a house for his son and girlfriend, is trying to take advantage of the GI Bill. By attempting to use the governmental initiative, he is ascribing to the American ideal of home ownership—and trying to relocate to a different neighborhood, moving his family to a geographically wealthier, and whiter, area of the city. He is trying to provide for his family, and be there for his son, but still lacks a collaborative relationship with his wife. Rena, the only female character who is on stage, tells Youngblood about his responsibilities for their child. She claims, “‘He ain’t gonna be laying up in the bed hungry and unable to sleep cause his daddy took the grocery money to pay a debt” (Jitney 34). He responds, “You want to know what I was hiding from you? I’ll tell you. I been hustling…working day and night…while you accuse me of running the streets…and all I’m trying to do is save enough money so I can buy a house so you and Jesse have someplace decent to live…” (Jitney 74). Youngblood believes being a good father is the same as providing a roof and economic support for his child.
When Becker encounters his son for the first time after he spent twenty years in prison, he argues that he tried to give Booster the same things that Youngblood is working to secure for his son.

With Booster’s release from jail, Becker reveals how he defines himself as a father. Booster tells his son:

You could have been something. You had every advantage. I tried to fix it so you didn’t have to follow up behind me…So you could go on and go further. So you could have a better life. I did without so you could have.\textsuperscript{212}

Floyd, another man from the Hill District, used the same rhetoric to describe his move to Chicago. He did not want to “live without,” and saw further migration as a means for achieving economic success. Floyd was not a father; Becker views having a son in the same way that Floyd views migration. For Becker, fatherhood necessitates the acceptance of a lack of agency in his own affairs—with the hope that his son will be able to “go further” than he did. Becker ascribed to the ideology that his own submissiveness, hard work, and self-sacrifice could be justified through his son’s life. Booster’s stint in jail, however, negated any chance he had of graduating from the University of Pittsburgh—an institution that is deeply embedded within the city. His prison sentence also derailed a trajectory that would have allowed him social mobility within the white community.

After Booster’s release from prison, Becker marks success separately from fatherhood. In lieu of ascribing to a familial identity, he defines himself relationally within the community:

I am a boss of a jitney station. I’m a deacon down at the church. Got me a little house. It ain’t much but it’s mine. I worked twenty-seven years at the

\textsuperscript{212} Jitney 58
Despite having lived “without” for his son, Becker is able to name multiple possessions that mark his success. Becker’s self-selected identifiers are deeply embedded within the culture of the Hill District. Becker mentions his church, his job, and his house, naming institutions that denote progress within the Hill District. As a deacon he serves the community, and acts as a religious leader for his fellow neighbors. Home ownership sets Becker apart from the overcrowded renters, and denotes a level of economic success. It is important to note, too, that he is only able to own a jitney station due to the lack of cabs that will service his neighborhood; before opening his own business, he worked in the largest industry in Pittsburgh.

Becker measures success through the lens of economic and social stability. His relationship with his son is not part of his self-definition: “What I ain’t got is a son that did me honor…The Bible say ‘Honor thy father and thy mother.’ I ain’t got that. I ain’t got a son I can be proud of.” After his son’s sentence, Becker no longer viewed “living without” as sacrificing material possessions; it is his son’s dishonor that creates a vacancy within his life. He does not ask for love from his son, and he does not try to give it. He asks only for the same respect from his son that he receives from fellow Hill District residents.

Becker believes that Booster’s actions directly impact his reputation within his community. He says, “I’m the one got to walk around here with people pointing at me. Talking about me behind my back. ‘There go his father. That’s him.’” While

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213 Ibid., 55
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid.
Becker has not gone to prison, he is infamous for being the father of someone who has. He explains that he does not have “a son to come up behind me…living a good honest decent life.” Instead, he has “a son who people point to and say, ‘That’s Becker’s boy. That’s the one that killed that gal,’” or, “That’s Becker’s boy. The one they gave the electric chair.” While Becker defines himself as a deacon, homeowner, and businessman, his son is marked as a murderer and a man who was formerly sentenced to death. His son is not referred to as Booster, but rather “Becker’s Boy.” Booster is an extension of his father—an outgrowth of his name and image. Booster’s actions are, potentially, a direct result of his upbringing, and of the values imparted to him from his parents; Becker notes that the community judges him, wondering, “what kind of man would raise a boy to do something like that.” Becker sees his son’s life and actions as directly correlative with his own; indeed, while he “has a home and a second wife, and he is making a fairly comfortable living,” Shannon asserts that he is still “heartbroken over Booster’s lackadaisical attitude about life.” Even though he has achieved the American ideal of homeownership, he believes his son’s actions have devalued his successes.

Furthermore, Booster’s criminality and his mother’s death are inextricably linked. Becker does blame his son for the death of his first wife and that blame eclipses the anger he feels at Booster for dishonoring his life’s work. He claims, “That’s what killed her,” adding, “To hear the judge say that the life she brought in the world was unfit to live.” He is honing in on the fact that his son’s life itself was
deemed unworthy, not just his actions were judged, but his entire existence was questioned and rejected. The judge’s verdict, and subsequent dismissal of Booster’s existence, negates his mother’s role as a creator of life. Booster is Becker’s only child, a reflection on both him and his wife. Becker sees his son and sees the lives that have been wasted—Booster has intentionally murdered one woman, wasted his own life in jail, and contributed to his mother’s death. Booster’s actions have also negated Becker’s sacrifices, and Becker tells him, “Everything I give you…you threw away. You ain’t got nothing now.” Booster was meant to be “something,” but his actions have left him with nothing—without a mother, without an education, and without respect from the community. Booster is the only person who will inherit Becker’s name, and continue cultivating his image within the community.

Becker sees his son as an heir. His is not an inheritance of love and affection, but rather one that attempts to ameliorate the shortcomings of the prior generation. Booster had every opportunity for academic and economic ascent in Pittsburgh, and he is able to enter institutions to which his father did not have access. He ends up back in the Hill District, in the very place where his angry and resentful father worked—continuing the same job his father stridently hoped he would avoid. Just out of prison, Booster himself is a stranger to the district—relocating, and resituating, himself in the community after twenty years sequestered away. Before his imprisonment, a return to the Hill District would have been seen as a failure after he began attending school at the University. After his release, however, his trajectory and its implications have completely changed. By continuing his father’s job, and fighting for the preservation of the jitney station, Booster is attempting to honor his

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220 Ibid., 54
father’s memory and work—giving Becker the honor he felt he never received. Booster is trying to regain footing in a world that has undergone vast social change through emulating his father and remaining in the Hill District.

Troy Maxson, the lead character in the 1957-set *Fences*, struggles to connect with his children and to overcome his resentment about the opportunities they are afforded. Unlike Becker, who only has one son, Troy has three children—and is a different type of father to each of them. Troy was absent for most of his son Lyon’s life, incarcerated for an accidental murder he committed during a robbery. He was robbing a man who proceeded to shoot at him, and Troy stabbed him—and he blames Lyons for his stealing, claiming that after his birth he had to “steal three times as much” in order to feed his family. Like Booster and Becker, much of Troy and Lyons’ lives passed free from the presence of the other. Troy’s relationship with his eldest son consists solely of requests for money: whenever Lyons enters the scene, Troy says he is “in the neighborhood cause it’s my payday.” Their relationship exists in purely professional and monetary terms. Because of Troy’s absence during Lyons’ upbringing, Lyons notes, “You can’t change me, Pop. I’m thirty-four years old. If you wanted to change me, you should have been there when I was growing up,” adding, “You don’t know nothing about how I was raised.” Thus when Troy critiques Lyons’ profession as a musician, despite its lack of dependable income, his criticism holds no weight. Any example Troy could have set, or influence he would have exercised, is negated by the fact that he spent Lyons’ childhood in jail for being

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222 Ibid., 14.
223 Ibid., 18-19
a murderer and robber. While he was absent for most of Lyons’ life, Troy maintains a constant and overbearing presence in Cory’s life.

Troy wants to raise Cory differently than Lyons, and differently than his own father raised him. Troy asserts that his father “ain’t had them walking blues!” Troy’s father did not abandon his family, but despite his father’s presence, Troy still harbors resentment towards the way his own father treated him. He explains, “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t known my daddy. He ain’t cared nothing about no kids,” instead, “All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working.” Troy’s father’s interest in his children did not lay in their development but in they ways they could profit him economically. After his stint in prison, Troy learned how to be an advocate for himself within the workforce, taking great pride in earning a paycheck—even fighting for a higher-paid job within the sanitation union. Nonetheless, Troy’s troubled relationship with his own father is echoed in his interactions with Cory. According to Shannon, while Troy has inherited a work ethic from his father, “that father’s legacy also includes the withholding of warmth and affection.” Troy is unable to be gentle with his sons, and according to Day, he believes that by bullying them, “he’s teaching Lyons and Cory that the world is a hard, fighting place.” Troy believes that his fatherly duty is to prepare his children for the hardships he himself experienced, and to encourage them to secure financially stable jobs.

224 *Fences* 51
225 Ibid., 50
226 Shannon 100
227 Day 57
Troy successfully rejects the absent role he had in Lyons’ life, and is able to raise Cory. After his release from prison, he claims, “fifteen years cured me of that robbing stuff.”

Along with theft, Troy is cured of absenteeism. He reverses a stereotype of the black family that is common even in Brooks’ work, “the conspicuously absent father,” a figure that results in settings that revolve “around the black female as sole head of the household.”

Troy instead occupies the role of head of his household—and his relationships define the play. While his three children each have different birth mothers, they all congregate in their father’s house. Troy opposes the father that his friend Bono presents within the play. Bono claims, “…my daddy came on through…but I ain’t never knew him to see him.”

Troy is economically responsible, and present to a point that is almost overbearing. His presence was so notable, that after his death, Cory said, “Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere.”

A “shadow” is an entity that is connected to someone, unable to be shaken or lost. While he might not physically follow Cory around, Troy’s intangible presence is always felt—it is like a literal extension of his son’s body. Shadows are also warped impressions of the body to which they are attached; Troy is shaped by his son’s actions, and their movements reflect one another.

Troy’s relationship with Cory is primarily oppositional. Shannon describes Cory as “the son with boundless aspirations for a lucrative career and a college

\[228\] Fences 55
\[229\] Shannon 101
\[230\] According to Bogumil, “Troy subverts the bigoted view of the African American male—the lazy, shiftless, inarticulate, and irresponsible man who abandons his family. Wilson expressed a desire to counteract that image of black men: ‘I know there are not strong black images in literature and film, so I thought, why not create them? …Troy Maxson is responsible. Those images are important. Every black man did not just make a baby and run off.’ Troy articulates admirably the ideal of masculine loyalty, duty, and responsibility in the financial stability of the family” (Bogumil 42).
\[231\] Fences 50
\[232\] Ibid., 97
education,” yet Troy tries to limit the trajectory of his son’s aspirations. Troy believes that being a father is about providing shelter and monetary support, not love or indulgence. Troy constantly spurns affection, instead emphasizing filial duties. Troy explains his philosophy while talking with Cory, questioning him about what he believes are his duties as a father:

Troy: Don’t you eat every day?  
(Pause.)  
Answer me when I talk to you! Don’t you eat every day?  
Cory: Yeah.  
Troy: Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!  
Cory: Yes…sir.  
Troy: You eat every day.  
Cory: Yessir!  
Troy: Got a roof over your head.  
Cory: Yessir!  
Troy: Got clothes on your back.  
Cory: Yessir.  

Their conversation takes on militaristic tones, as Troy insists that his own son call him “sir.” His tone is aggressive, didactic, and devoid of emotion. He never once refers to his son by his given name, and does not allow Cory to refer to him as “father,” thus he removes any interpersonal connection from their interaction. He emphasizes his role as head of the household, asserting his position of power—effectively weakening his son’s agency within their home.

For Troy, parenting is not about forging a caring, loving relationship with your children—it is about preparing them for a harsh world, and providing them with the tools to survive. He explains to Cory:

A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house…sleep you behind on my bedclothes…fill you belly up with my food…cause you my son. You

233 Shannon 100  
234 Fences 37-38
my flesh and blood. Not ‘cause I like you! Cause it’s my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you.”

He says “a man” has to care for his family, conflating masculinity with fatherhood; a man is someone who provides for their family, instead of shirking their role as father. Troy acts out of a sense of responsibility, and a duty to “care” for his son. Troy uses the possessive, qualifying his house as “my house,” filled with “my bedclothes,” and “my food.” His son is also described in the same way—Troy claims Cory is “my son,” and “my flesh and blood,” as if Cory is the same as his other possessions. It is a responsibility that he feels he “owes” to his son, as if there is a monetary value, or debt, associated with fathering a child. Establishing himself as the authority figure in the Maxson household, his duties include sheltering, feeding, and clothing his son—not loving, or liking, him. His connection to Cory is composed of “flesh and blood,” it is a genetic connection that has no implicit emotions included within it. Troy believes that affection and emotional support are irrelevant to his relationship with his son, as long as he is present in his son’s life, providing him with the necessities for living. He exclaims, “I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life!” Asserting that he gave Cory “life,” Troy is rendering himself as an almost god-like figure—Cory’s creation was Troy’s ultimate act of giving. Passing on his own genetic material, Troy has given his son “everything” he had to give him. Troy is voicing that the most essential part of fatherhood lies not within the

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235 Ibid., 38
236 Becker expresses the same sentiment in Jitney, naming the same three necessities. He justifies his reasoning for not standing up to Mr. Rand, his white landlord, to Booster by saying, “I had your black ass crying to be fed. Crying to have a roof over your head. To have clothes to wear to school and lunch money in your pocket.” He didn’t stand up to their white landlord, he explains, “Because I had a family. I had responsibility.” His rationale for being submissive is his familial responsibility (Jitney 60).
237 Fences 38
upbringing and care of the child, but within the conception. Becker echoes his sentiment, telling Booster, “I helped to bring you into this world.” Both fathers stress their role in conferring genetic material, and life, to their sons. Troy sees his paternal responsibility giving his son the materials he needs in order to protect that life.

Troy distinguishes his paternal responsibilities from liking his son. He makes that distinction clear when Cory asks, “How come you ain’t never liked me?” Troy, replies with his own question, asking, “what law is there say I got to like you?” Once again, he engages in emotionless language to describe their relationship to each other—while he “owed” his son a place to live, there is no “law” that dictates how he must feel about his son. Additionally, in a place Troy describes as “my house,” he is able to create his own laws that dominate the domestic sphere. While Cory is searching for some type of paternal affection, Bogumil argues, “Troy reveals that he has thoroughly blended all sense of the personal and the professional, linking the relationship between son and father with the relationship between employer and employee,” and in doing so, “Troy loses any hope of an affectionate relationship with his son by defining their relationship in the language of commerce rather than the language of blood.” He acknowledges his genetic connection to his son, but views it as an obligatory, almost contractual, relationship. He conveys his filial roles in the rhetoric of laws and obligations, instead of love or affection. For Troy, “liking” his son is not a duty he must fulfill. The act of liking implies enjoyment; Troy views fatherhood as a task that must be endured, the antithesis of recreation. Liking

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238 Jitney 60
239 Fences 37
240 Bogumil 52
someone also entails growing close to a person, and deriving pleasure from their personality and company. He acknowledges his son’s physical existence, and addresses the consequences of that existence; Troy does not attempt to see his fatherly duties extending beyond ensuring his son’s physical (not emotional) wellbeing.

Troy is trying to prepare his sons for an oppositional world while also attempting to lead them into a world separate from his own. While Becker is upset at his son for wasting an opportunity that he was not allowed to have, Troy wants the opposite for Cory. Troy, a failed baseball player, refuses to allow Cory to play football.241 Troy had played baseball when it was still segregated, in a city where the Negro National League had a strong influence, but he was never able to play the sport professionally. While Major League Baseball teams like the Pittsburgh Pirates excluded black players up until the late 1940s, there was a baseball stadium on Bedford Avenue, in the Hill District, for the city’s two black teams—The Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays.242 Much of the play takes place in 1957, during one of Hank Aaron’s top seasons on the Milwaukee Braves. Baseball is no longer segregated—but Troy still believes that a black man aspiring to be a professional athlete is futile. Discussing the white recruiter who is trying to offer Cory a scholarship, Troy insists: “The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway.” He emphasizes the need for Cory to learn a trade, instead, adding,

241 Within Fences, “the central conflict between father and son mirrors the difficult relationship between [Wilson] and his stepfather, David Bedford, who died when Wilson was twenty-four. Only following Bedford’s death, after the two had been at odds for some ten years, did Wilson discover that this man had been genuinely concerned about him and not just determined to hassle him about his decision to quit his high school football team” (Shannon 91-92).
242 Trotter and Day 20
You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can’t nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people’s garbage.²⁴³

His advice to Cory emphasizes the importance of learning a trade, and is aligned with Booker T. Washington’s credo. Washington believed that African Americans should work within the segregated racial system to combat racism; through learning specific trades, African Americans could make themselves indispensable to society. Troy is advocating for Cory to learn something that “can’t nobody take away,” using hands—his “flesh and blood”—and using his body for economic stability instead of football. He doesn’t want Cory to be an athlete or a garbage-man, the only two fields that he himself has experienced. He adds, “I don’t want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get,” adding, “I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn’t getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.”²⁴⁴ Troy is treating his life’s successes and failures as if they are genetic material—he does not want to pass on his experiences to his son. His own setbacks tinge the way he interacts with Cory, rendering him incapable of seeing Cory’s potential in sports.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ *Fences* 35
²⁴⁴ Ibid., 39
²⁴⁵ Troy’s attempts to quell his son’s interest in athletics could be from concern, and “While on the surface it would appear that Troy is acting in Cory’s best interest, his motives reveal an undercurrent of jealousy prompted by a fear that Cory will exceed him on all counts. Troy cannot envision that his son’s athletic ability may finance his college education and does not even consider discussing the matter with Rose” (Shannon 100). Troy’s insistence that his son escape the prejudices he faced is echoed in many of Becker’s speeches, Becker had internalized the racial injustices he faced. He says, “I swallowed my pride and let them mess over me, all the time saying, ’You bastards got it coming. Look out! Becker’s boy coming to straighten this shit out!’” He explains, “Becker’s taking this ass whipping so his boy can stride through this shit like Daniel in the lion’s den” (*Jitney* 59). Both Becker and Troy hope that their sons will be able to escape the same racial persecution that they had experienced.
Troy attempts to break a cycle of economic subjugation, but many of his actions are fueled by the fear that his son will become the more powerful man in their family. Troy’s past experiences with his father haunt every moment he spends taunting his own son. According to Shannon, he “mirrors his own father’s behavior as he vehemently denies his son’s coming manhood and continues to relish his powerful roles—as Cory’s father, as the sole provider, and as head of the Maxson household.”246 After years of answering to his father and the courts, Troy appreciates the advantages of his position within the Maxson family. He begrudges Cory for threatening his carefully constructed control, and fears Cory will dismantle the hard-won power dynamics of the family. He tells Cory, “I’m the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts.”247 Defining himself once again through workplace rhetoric, Troy is asserting his dominance within the house. According to Day, Troy claims that Cory won’t succeed because of white people, but he is the one who “thwarts his son’s hopes to go to college on a football scholarship; Cory’s white coach and work supervisor both support him.”248 Troy is worried that his son will eclipse him, prospering where he had failed. Even though he wants his son to have economic success, “he also resents the social changes that have opened doors for Cory as an athlete that were closed in his own day.”249 Both Becker and Troy view self-sacrifice as a paternal responsibility, but still want their sons to learn the value of hard work. For both fathers, however, “the fragility of their own masculinity within the white patriarchy complicates their dreams of their sons’ development,” so even

246 Shannon 100
247 Fences 36
248 Day 30
249 Ibid., 63
though “they want their sons to have a better life…they also ironically keep their sons small.”

Troy’s attempts to quell Cory’s career in sports are related to his fear that his accomplishments will be remembered as secondary to Cory’s achievements. As head of the household, Troy is constantly grappling with the desire to have complete control over everything, and everyone, around him while still wanting his son to develop an individual sense of pride and responsibility.

Finally, Troy is a completely different father to Raynell—with whom he has a relationship that departs from his pattern of affection-less paternity. When Troy reveals his marital indiscretion, rather than directly admitting to infidelity, he chooses instead to focus on his new role as a father: “I’m trying to find a way to tell you…I’m gonna be a daddy.”

Avoiding any discussion of the actual act of cheating, Troy focuses instead on the result of his indiscretion—the conception of Raynell. Rose refuses to “visit the sins of the father upon the child,” and agrees to help care for Raynell—but not to forgive Troy for cheating on her. In this, Day notes, she is “breaking the cycle of anger and displacement that has hemmed in three generations of Maxsons.”

While Raynell is freed from her father’s indiscretions, she also is free from a lifetime of living in his house. His interactions with her as a baby are gentler, and take on a confessional tone. When he brings her home from the hospital, he notes how she “ain’t but a wee bittie little old thing” in his arms. He is focusing on her size, emphasizing her fragility in his arms. As with Cory, he is focusing on her

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250 Elam Jr. 141
251 Fences 66
252 Ibid., 79
253 The play is introduced with the mirroring quotation, “When the sins of our fathers visit us/We do not have to play host./We can banish them with forgiveness/As God, in His Largeness and Laws.” (Fences np)
254 Day 71
255 Fences 78
physical being—she is also his “flesh and blood,” as much a part of his genetic material as his other children. Raynell’s delicacy is echoed within Troy’s vulnerability, a condition that he does not reveal to his other children. He says, “Your daddy’s a big man. Got these great big old hands. But sometimes he’s scared.” He focuses on his size and on his hands—the same body part he told Cory to master a trade with. His confession provides a counterpoint to the physical strength of his body. When holding his newborn daughter in his arms, Troy reveals a gentler, more emotional side than he ever exposed to his sons. Imploringly, he tells Rose, “I’d appreciate it if you’d help me take care of her.” With Raynell, Troy is referring to himself as a caretaker, rather than economic provider, for the first time. Troy dies eight years later, leaving his daughter with the image of a present, hardworking father—one whose legacy she can construct from memories. After Troy’s death, Rose insists that she will honor Troy’s memory, giving Raynell “the best of what’s in me.” Her sentiment echoes Troy’s earlier discussion with Cory, when he claims he has given “everything [he] had to give” to his son. Rose’s promise adopts a more positive slant, as emphasizes she will give “the best” she can offer to Raynell. Troy’s death acts as the catalyst for her statement, and through Raynell’s upbringing his earlier sentiment is re-imagined as selfless and positive.

King, of King Hedley II, also grows up trying to honor the memory of the man who he believes is his father, and whose name he bears. King embodies the idea that fathers pass on their beliefs and ways of life to their sons. His name, the most obvious inheritance from his father, stands out as the most important piece of King’s

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256 Fences 79
257 Ibid.
258 Ibid., 98
identity. King takes on the Roman numeral II—showing that he is adopting his
teacher’s name exactly, rather than acting as a diminutive, junior, version. According
to Elam Jr., in King Hedley II, “the sins of the father are, in fact, visited upon this
son.” After his mother, Ruby, named him after a man she slept with while already
pregnant with another man’s son, King believes Hedley is his real father—
“consequently,” says Elam Jr., “the son lives in what he perceives to be his father’s
footsteps.”259 Hedley, who acted as a father for King when he was a child, died when
King was three years old. Thus, King attempts to live up to the scarcely remembered
image of the caring father he had in infancy. He announces, “I want everybody to
know that King Hedley II is here. And I want everybody to know, just like my daddy,
that you can’t fuck with me.”260

King’s every action is done in the defense of his shared name, and Hedley’s
memory. Before King’s birth, Hedley revealed to Ruby that he had killed a man for
not calling him by his proper name, after the man had “laughed to think a black man
could be King.” Hedley elucidated, “I did not want to lose my name, so I told him to
call me the name my father gave me…”261 The man questions the validity of
Hedley’s name because of his race, as if a black man is not as deserving of certain
titles; not only did he not refer to him as King, he openly ridiculed Hedley’s proper
name. Hedley was defending the moniker his own father chose. He does not want to
“lose” his name, as if it is a tangible possession. His father “gave” it to him, imbuing
it with importance, and making it seem like a gift. Both Hedley and King give great
importance to their proper names, attributing their own individual pride and

259 Elam Jr. 82
260 Wilson, August. King Hedley II. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005. p 58
261 Seven Guitars 67
personhood within the titles. Once out of jail, King stands by his decision to kill Pernell. He claims, “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.” As the second iteration of “King Hedley,” King is attempting to ameliorate the wrongs taken against his ancestry. With King’s story, Wilson is also drawing upon the African American literary tradition of calling someone “out of his name.” He is fighting against the degradation of his name, an integral part of his identity and history. He has inherited the title from his father, and the denouncement of it also calls into question his ability to honor his father’s memory.

Every decision King makes is in honor of what he perceives is his father’s legacy. His perception is skewed, however, as he has only stories of Hedley to influence his memory of him. He knows of Hedley’s grand gestures, having been told stories of him killing men over his name; he only has stories with which to construct memories. Tonya explains, “He try and do everything the way he think Hedley would do it.” He only can act in the ways he “thinks” his father would, not actually knowing how Hedley would respond were he alive. King’s place in society allows for such little movement that he turns to the example of who he believes is his father as a guide, and attempts to live as he did. According to Elam Jr., “repeating both the cycle of black-on-black violence and the desire for size and value,” King reveals that like his surrogate father, he has “killed another black man, Pernell,

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262 King Hedley II 73
263 In Maya Angelou’s autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, she claims, “Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name’” (Angelou 109).
264 King Hedley II 78
because he too wanted to be a big man.” Striving to live up to his name, King justifies his actions through citing Hedley’s actions in a previous lifetime.

The only way that King understands killing Pernell is through the lens of fatherhood. After seeing Pernell’s grave, he remembers only the marker with the words “Father. Son. Brother” emblazoned on the stone. The titles, which can only exist in conjunction with the others, place Pernell within a familial, relational web. They demonstrate the necessity of the terms in the definition of each other—fathers cannot exist without children, and Pernell could not be a son without having a father. King had viewed Pernell as a threat to his own person, a disembodied entity who had no familial connections. King says, “I didn’t even know Pernell had no kids.” Thinking of Pernell’s son, King realizes, “His daddy laying out in the cemetery. That’s like me and my daddy. I wasn’t but three years old when he died.”

Of course, King’s name, and the example he is trying to uphold, is not actually reflective of his biological father. Elmore finally tells King the truth of his paternity: “Leroy was you daddy.” Elmore is revealing the identity of King’s true father—referring to him both by his role and his name. King was raised trying to fulfill the legacy of a father he barely remembers, but who holds a constant presence in his every day actions. With the revelation of his true heritage, he suddenly has another absent father—one who was killed by Elmore. Out of prison, and already uncertain of his future, Elam Jr. explains that King “finds his position all the more

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265 Elam Jr. 139
266 King Hedley II 83
267 Ibid., 97
desperate and dislocated when Elmore reveals his true birthright, that Hedley is not his real father.”

Confronted with an ambiguous future, King only could rely on the surety of his name, to which he assigns great importance. Elmore causes King to doubt the most essential part of his identity, an entity for which he killed. With his confession, Elmore is forcing King to consider what familial connections are stronger—those of name, or blood. Tonya asserts, “Somebody kill your daddy, that seem like blood for blood to me…Your blood is your blood and ain’t nothing thicker than that.”

Tonya is propagating the idea of a biological inheritance, where “blood,” or genetic material, connects generations.

King ascribes to the notion of an inheritance that is passed on through ideology. His name, a label worth killing over, is more important to him than knowing his actual biological donor. He initially tells Elmore, “You say he’s my daddy…I’m gonna pay my daddy’s debt.”

Much like Troy, King is discussing filial obligations in terms of monetary obligations. He is working off the assumption that debt is transferred postmortem, carrying on to the next generation—much like genes. Because he has inherited Leroy’s debt, King is willing to pay it; he views his relationship with Leroy in contractual terms, void of emotional involvement. Despite paying Elmore, King chooses to align himself with his name. He continues, “But see…my name ain’t Leroy Slater, Jr. My name is King Hedley II and we got some unfinished business to take care of.”

Through the negation of Leroy’s name, King is firmly aligning himself with the man who raised him during his infancy, and his
namesake. Wilson himself changed his name—eschewing his biological father’s name of Kittel for his mother’s last name. In doing so, he rid himself of the Jr. attached to his name, which signified Frederick August Kittel was a name inherited from his biological father; additionally, Wilson was raised not by Kittel, but by his stepfather. While Troy and Becker distanced themselves from their own sons, Hedley did not choose to distance himself from King; Hedley’s death left King fatherless, only able to construct a memory of his father from stories. Thus while Cory and Booster choose to disassociate from their uncaring fathers, King chooses to ignore blood-ties and is electing to align himself with an ideological and cultural inheritance.

Both Hedley and King see the opportunity to be a father as a way to gain a foothold within the Hill District. When talking to Ruby, Hedley insists, “I am the son of my father,” and adds, “Maybe I could be the father of the messiah.” He perceives fatherhood as a type of destiny, one that can overcome his frustrations with racial and social subjugation by providing a child who is better able to combat the same social ills. In much the same way, Elam Jr., notes, “King—desperate to find a compensatory of his manhood—turns to the biological, the malecentric authority of paternity.” Once again, fatherhood is conflated with masculinity—paternity is viewed as an affirmation of manliness. Just out of prison, King is unsure of his place in the Hill District, only sure of his name. By fathering a child, he will have an established connection to the community, and also be assigned a role of which he can be certain, the role of a father. King says, “I used to tell Neesi I wanted to have a baby. Wanted somebody to hand off the ball to.” He explains, “Now Tonya

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272 Seven Guitars 68
273 Elam Jr. 140
pregnant. It’s like I finally did something right.”

He sees fatherhood as collaborative, a son as someone to who he can “hand off the ball.” By becoming a father, he will have someone that can continue using, and defending, the name King Hedley.

Tonya is unsure if she wants to have King’s child, and her concerns center around the Hill District community in which she would raise her child. According to Elam Jr., Tonya fears “the inherent dangers of bringing another black boy into a chaotic, senseless, violent environment,” and she plans on aborting the child. After all, she reasons, if she had another child, it would be younger than her current grandchild—and would be raised in an equally violent, and chaotic, landscape.

She explains, “I ain’t raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have the police shoot him.” She adds, “Why I want to bring another life into this world that don’t respect life?” Her nihilistic attitude reflects her belief that life is not valued in the Hill District. Any person can be shot indiscriminately—both the police and good friends pose an equal threat in an environment where violence is the premiere medium for asserting oneself. While Becker claimed Booster’s violent actions conveyed a lack of respect for his father, Tonya is advancing a new idea—that the Hill District does not respect any life, at all.

Additionally, Tonya does not want to proliferate single parents households, raising another fatherless child. According to Bogumil, “Natasha’s pregnancy, like

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274 King Hedley II 24
275 Elam Jr. 140
276 At the age of 35, Tonya already has a daughter, and a grandchild. She cites Natasha as a reason she shouldn’t have a child, claiming, “Look at Natasha. I couldn’t give her what she needed,” asking, “Why I wanna go back and do it again” (King Hedley II 38)?
277 King Hedley II 39
her own, is no cause for celebration because Natasha will become just another statistic, a mother out of wedlock whose child is fatherless." While Tonya is debating an abortion in 1985, census data from 1994, which would include her as a mother, reveal the discrepancy within single-parent homes. Out of 231,531 family homes, there were 44,665 homes maintained by mothers. The mother-to-father ratio in Pittsburgh was six to one, which meant Natasha, and potentially Tonya, were part of a much larger group of women that raised fatherless children. As a mother, she feels incapable of protecting her unborn child, especially when King’s future is equally undeterminable.

Her fear of that violent environment, however, is also related to her fear that King will be absent for their child’s life. Every argument she makes is connected to her relationship with King. She explains that one day she woke up and realized that Natasha’s “daddy in jail. Her step-daddy going to jail. She seventeen and got a baby, she don’t even know who the father is.” Tonya does not want to perpetuate a culture that is defined by absent fathers. Speaking about Natasha, she claims, “She don’t even know what a daddy is. I don’t want that for my children. What kind of mother that make me.” Her role as a mother is intrinsically linked to her child’s relationship with the father, and her ability to keep a solid familial unit intact. Rose voiced many of the same concerns after learning of Troy’s impending child from another mother. She explains, “…I ain’t never wanted no half nothing in my

278 Bogumil 136
280 King Hedley II 37
281 Ibid., 84
282 The characters of Rose Maxson in Fences and Tonya in King Hedley II are the only two “that are both wives and mothers,” in the cycle. This position is dependent upon relationships, because the titles
family. My whole family is half,” adding “Everybody got different fathers and mothers.”

For Rose, a child who is not raised by both parents is somehow not whole; a lack of constancy in upbringing creates ruptures in both the family unit and members. Tonya and Rose each express the idea that raising a child without a cohesive familial unit renders their efforts illegitimate. In both families, however, any questions surrounding true paternity and maternity are secondary to the idea of care-giving—Rose raises Raynell as her own daughter, and King disassociates himself from his biological parents, instead favoring those that raised him. For King, intimacy is a stronger connection than blood.

Despite his desire to have a child, King’s inability to articulate his fatherly responsibilities supports Tonya’s resistance to raising their child in a violent world. While Troy saw fatherhood in vocational and obligatory terms, King views fathering a child as distinct from a job. He tells Tonya, “I can’t go and get no job just because I’m somebody’s daddy.”

King is arguing that being a father will not change his social position; to him employment is wholly separate from raising a child. She replies, “Your job is to be around so this baby can know you its daddy,” adding, “That’s how you be a man, anything else I don’t want.” She is redefining fatherhood, equating it with a profession. Instead of describing paternal duties through workplace rhetoric, like Troy, she is conceptualizing a job in terms of familial responsibility. Conflating masculinity with fatherhood, Tonya is advocating
for an involved father who exists as more than a name. She is propagating an image of a man who is responsible, caring, and present for his family; she argues that a father who plays an active role in his child’s life is the embodiment of masculinity.

Wilson’s portrayals of father-son relationships are marked by acts of resistance. King’s disavowal of Leroy challenges traditional conceptions of fatherhood. Both Cory and Booster question their own father’s power, and their relationships fracture as they realize their fathers’ limitations. Elam Jr. argues that each play serves to “reveal the faults and frailties of the father,” but Wilson is not trying to denounce them. Rather, “the underlying objective is to reconcile and restore the position of the patriarch within the fabric of the family, precisely because the black father seems so apparently lost.”

Troy and Becker attempt to establish themselves within the Hill District as heads of households; wielding influence over their sons in order to assure themselves of their own masculinity. Troy claims that giving his son life, “feet and bones,” and “that pumping heart” is “more than anybody else is ever gonna give” to him. Troy treats his son’s physicality as if he bequeathed each separate body part to him. Partitioning his son’s body, he is implying that Cory’s existence itself is the greatest gift he could give. Cory disagrees, disabling his father’s logic. He claims, “You ain’t never gave me nothing!” Qualifying his statement, Cory continues, “You ain’t never done nothing but hold me back.”

Cory is accusing Troy of preventing his own growth and impeding his son’s progress. Cory fights against the notion of his father as a provider; rejecting the control his father has asserted over his own life.

\[286\] Elam Jr. 131
\[287\] *Fences* 86

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Booster has a similar moment where he rejects his father’s influence, a realization that underlies all father-son dynamics within Wilson’s Cycle. As he understands Becker’s debilitated position within society, he sees that his father also has a limited hold over his family. After viewing a confrontation between his father and their white landlord, Booster claims his father shrunk before his eyes. His father had been “a big man,” who would take Booster to the barbershop and “fill up the whole place.” Booster gauged his father’s power by size; fixating on his father’s physical presence as an indicator of communal influence. Booster believed his father was able to overtake a space, which was filled with men from the community, commanding the room’s attention. After seeing his father rendered voiceless by their white landlord, Booster’s entire perception changed. He says, “When we went back to the barbershop you didn’t seem so big no more.” As Becker diminishes in front of Booster’s eyes, he is no longer a reverential figure; Booster understands his father’s lack of agency. His father’s disempowerment causes Booster to sever his familial ties. His father, the man responsible for his own existence, becomes, “just another man in the barbershop.”

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288 Jitney 56
289 Jitney 57
Conclusion
Bronzeville and The Hill District Today

The Hill District and Bronzeville remain predominantly African American neighborhoods today, facing many of the same problems that Wilson and Brooks attempted to illuminate in their writing. In an interview during the late 80s, when asked what had happened to the Hill District, Wilson replied, “Same thing that’s happened to most black communities. Most of it is no longer there.” He continued, “At one time it was a very thriving community, albeit a depressed community. But still there were stores and shops all along the avenue. They are not there any more. It has become even a more depressed area than it was then.” With each decade in his cycle, Wilson portrays an unchanging condition of urban oppression and its effect on African Americans. Even as political situations shifted, and new neighborhood renewal plans were created, the Hill District remained stagnant, facing different iterations of the same subjugation from the greater Pittsburgh metropolis.

Wilson’s childhood home, at 1727 Bedford Avenue, sits on a wide street, boarded up, surrounded by overgrown weeds. His nephew, Paul Ellis, claims, “It’s an eyesore,” and has tentative plans to turn the house into a new arts center, or a café. But, as of January 2014, when I visited the site, the building was still vacant. Wilson’s house is situated directly across from Bedford Hill Apartments, a complex of new housing units in the heart of the Hill District. These provide a stark contrast to the empty lot next to Wilson’s house, and to the painted plywood mural covering his front door, which depicts an elderly Wilson next to a quill and sheet of paper.

290 Interview by Moyers 67
Wilson’s face is outlined by a quotation from Jorge Luis Borges: “a single moment, the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he is.” Wilson tried, in play after play, to capture that moment—to articulate the essence of a Hill District resident.

Unlike other industrial centers such as Chicago, after WWII Pittsburgh’s entire economy was buffeted by sever economic setbacks, including losses in mining, manufacturing, and construction. Chicago, among other large cities, “entered the postindustrial era from a more diversified economic foundation than Pittsburgh.” But in Pittsburgh, where steel was the preeminent industry, there were far worse economic consequences after the industry collapsed during the 1980s and 1990s: the entire population of Pittsburgh suffered massive job losses. During the mayoral election of 1976, Richard S. Caliguiri won by promising to initiate a Renaissance II plan in the city of Pittsburgh that would foster economic growth. He began to shift the city’s economic focus, concentrating on a service-oriented economy. Despite the new economic direction within the city, Pittsburgh still found it difficult to create new jobs and retain its existing population. African Americans were disproportionately unemployed: in 1990 over 37 percent of black men were out of work, compared to only 13 percent of white men. Different economic sectors were unevenly distributed by race, entry-level positions paid less, and there were fewer opportunities for advancement within fields. African Americans were predominantly excluded from top-tier jobs in finance, marketing, and sales. Pittsburgh’s

292 Trotter and Day 200
293 Ibid., 143
294 Ibid., 146
295 Ibid., 148
economic downturn caused many people to relocate in search of better economic opportunities, and the African American population dropped from 105,000 in 1970 to just over 94,000 in 2000. The Hill District, which had been the focus of renewal plans in previous decades, became increasingly vacant.

During the late twentieth century, the Hill District underwent a myriad of social changes that were connected to the greater city’s economic upheaval. Mayor Caliguiri cut many social service and affirmative action programs, and blacks began to lose their influence in Pittsburgh’s Democratic party. Those changes occurred simultaneously to the city’s economic restructuring, heightening the spread of poverty in Pittsburgh’s African American neighborhoods. While only 14 percent of white residents were living in poverty by 1989, around 41 percent of African Americans in Pittsburgh were impoverished. Poverty was concentrated within public housing projects, such as Bedford Dwellings in the Hill District. During the twenty-year span of 1970 to 1990 close to 36 percent of the African American population lived in public housing or subsidized private rental units—compared to only 13 percent of white residents. In 1992, the federal government instituted the HOPE VI law, which aimed to dismantle many large, predominantly black urban public housing projects. At the same time, gang violence was increasing within those economically depressed areas, and the homicide rate for young black males rapidly rose. From 1974 to 1996 in Allegheny County, where the Hill District is located, the homicide rate for black men between fifteen and twenty-four increased from 69 per 100,000 population to

296 Ibid., 144-145
297 Ibid., 153
298 Ibid., 154
130 per 100,000 population.\textsuperscript{299} Within Pittsburgh, both crime and poverty became concentrated within African American neighborhoods such as the Hill District.

Recent renewal efforts in the Hill District have reinvigorated interest in the area. From 1990 to 2000, there was a 19 percent drop in population in the Hill District, but the neighborhood did see an increase in homeowners, who were primarily African American.\textsuperscript{300} Plans to destroy Bedford Dwellings were met with massive resistance, and the neighborhood was able to galvanize and maintain the housing projects, preventing displacement of residents. Currently, groups like the Hill District Consensus Group create mediums for community involvement, and residents of the Hill District have developed their own renewal plan. Indeed, the “Greater Hill District Master Plan” outlines anti-displacement policies, and proposes different arrangements for creating more mixed-income housing. The plan also offers development plans for businesses, green space, and recreational areas.\textsuperscript{301} The neighborhood’s Carnegie Library, where Wilson spent most of his time reading after he dropped out of school, has been completely redone—when I visited, the light and airy space boasted about its environmentally green redesign. While the community is involving itself in the renewal effort, the city of Pittsburgh still plays a role in designating funds for projects. The neighborhood, which now is situated in the Sixth District, is discussed using rhetoric that hearkens back to the Hill District’s larger history. The District’s website claims, “This historic neighborhood is just beginning to experience an economic renaissance from the blight and devastation that occurred

\textsuperscript{299} Ibid., 157
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid., 164
\textsuperscript{301} “Hill Community Development Corporation.” Hilldistrict.org. Web. 01 Jan. 2014.
as a result of the struggle for civil rights that occurred during the 1960’s.” Without addressing any economic struggles that plagued the community in any other decade, or the problems that infiltrated every one of Wilson’s plays, the city refers to renewal projects in a manner that ignores the realities that necessitated a “revival” in the first place.

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Bronzeville residents have struggled to combat many of the same problems that plague Hill District members—including similar spikes in violence. A disproportionate amount of the city’s violence takes place in its South Side, which has expanded well beyond, and farther south, than the initial settlement of Bronzeville. A majority of the violence occurs after school hours, and in 2010, nearly 700 students in Chicago were hit with gunfire, averaging almost two a day. The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) created a “safe passage” program in 2009 to address school violence in high schools. After Mayor Rahm Emanuel decided to close nearly fifty CPS schools in 2012, he decided to institute new “safe passages” for the 2013 school year. Many of the school shutdowns were in African American neighborhoods, and Mayor Emanuel and CPS worked to create police-protected zones that would provide protected routes for students who were travelling to their new schools—many of which were located in territories of rival gang affiliations. One of those zones was created around Fiske Elementary, just blocks from where Gwendolyn Brooks lived on 623 East 63rd street. Driving towards the location of her apartment, I was blocked by

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multiple police vans that were monitoring the routes of children as they were being
dismissed from school. Approaching Brooks’ apartment, which now is a vacant lot—one
of many within the neighborhood—I also passed the nearby Emmett Till Math
and Science Academy, an elementary school that pays homage to a past Bronzeville
child.

In addition to increased gang activity, Bronzeville, like the Hill District, has
also experienced a change in population. From 1990-2000, the Bronzeville
neighborhoods of Douglas and Grand Boulevard dropped a combined 36 percent in
residents. Despite the exodus, Bronzeville remains in a more privileged economic
position than many of Chicago’s African American neighborhoods. The Illinois
Institute of Technology (IIT) brings in funding to the community, and the White Sox
U.S. Cellular Field is located at the northernmost end of the neighborhood on 35th
Street. Bronzeville is closer to the Central Business District (CBD) than most of the
African American neighborhoods located further south (such as Englewood, which
now has one of the highest rates of crime in the city, as well as lowest average
income). The Federally enacted reduction in public housing has pushed impoverished
populations farther away from the CBD, and Bronzeville’s proximity to the District
has made it a site of several more renewal projects.

Most of the renewal projects targeting Bronzeville have been introduced by
the greater city, rather than by neighborhood residents. Mayor Richard M. Daley, the
last mayor of Chicago, introduced renewal projects in certain districts that relied on a
Tax Increment Finance (TIF). The funds drew from property taxes, and were

305 Hyra, Derek S. The New Urban Renewal: The Economic Transformation of Harlem and
306 Ibid., 152
instrumental in introducing long-term goals for community restoration. While there are TIFs for many south-side neighborhoods, the Bronzeville TIF specifically draws upon the history of the community as a literary and cultural center. The original redevelopment plan claims that the Bronzeville TIF district was intended to revitalize an area that was “at one time the center of the City’s African-American cultural, economic, and social life.” The rhetoric of the redevelopment plan draws on Bronzeville’s historical past, focusing on the cultural potential of the neighborhood rather than the economic disparities that have long persisted between the community and the city. The TIF asserts that the neighborhood still possesses attributes that “made it such a viable neighborhood in the past,” because the neighborhood remains close to the CBD, the lakefront, and the city’s Museum Campus. The project was created specifically to enable “the rehabilitation and renovation of existing structures including historically significant structures documented in Black Metropolis Historic District,” like the Chicago Bee Building, Chicago Defender, and the Sunset Café. Discourse surrounding the Bronzeville renewal process centers around restoration of a cultural Mecca, the same one that Brooks wrote about.

Current Mayor Emanuel has recently begun extensive restoration projects within Bronzeville, continuing the work of Mayor Daley. Last year, he designated seven different neighborhoods within the city as “opportunity areas,” identifying

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307 In Chicago there has been history of TIF funds being misused. As Daley was in control of the city for so long, TIF money and other federal funds, such as Empowerment Zone Initiative money, was not always allocated for their specific purposes (Hyra 153).
309 Ibid.
310 Ibid., 2
public and private developments that could attract investors. His targeted areas include Bronzeville and the aforementioned Englewood.\footnote{Moore, Natalie. “Englewood, Bronzeville Wait for Mayor’s ‘opportunity’ Plan to Pay off.” 06 Aug. 2013. Web. 01 Jan. 2014.} A recent press release from the Mayor’s office described the “opportunity areas” as “part of a holistic and strategic vision to foster and seize upon growth and development in neighborhoods across Chicago,” but the Bronzeville section of the release only named touristic goals (like supporting McCormick Place expansion and turning Motor Row into an entertainment district) and plans to bring in private partnerships for new shopping and housing within the area.\footnote{City of Chicago. Office of the Mayor. Mayor Emanuel Announces “Opportunity Areas” As Part of Long-Term Strategic Vision to Support Growth and Development Across Chicago. Cityofchicago.org. 17 Mar. 2013. Web. 01 Jan. 2014.} The city’s renewal project relies heavily on large private investors; recent construction has created a complex of mixed-income housing and shops, including a Wal-Mart. The project, which will draw 13 million dollars from the TIF fund, includes retail space, provides a grocery store in a food desert, and features 44 affordable housing units, 28 public housing units, and 24 market-rate apartments.\footnote{Presta, John. “Mayor Emanuel Breaks Ground at Bronzeville's $45.6M ‘Shops and Lofts’ Project.” Examiner.com. 03 Apr. 2013. Web. 01 Jan. 2014.} The new complex will create jobs, but at the cost of local Bronzeville businesses that have long suffered.

When Wilson and Brooks were writing, Bronzeville and the Hill District existed as economically depressed areas with strong literary and cultural communities. Both authors sought to portray the racial disparities within their neighborhoods, and reveal persistent Northern discrimination. It is clear that there are still vast differences between these neighborhoods and their surrounding cities—and both Brooks and Wilson portray a condition that is unfortunately, largely in tact
today. Both Chicago and Pittsburgh draw upon the idea of restoring neighborhoods that were previously African American cultural capitals, focusing on “re-invigorating” those neighborhoods instead of admitting to the urban structures and systems that allowed them to fall into disarray. Bronzeville exists as a microcosm, revealing only a fraction of the socioeconomic disparities that affect many black communities, especially on the South Side. While Bronzeville was the first African American neighborhood within the city, it has not been the last—the conditions Brooks addressed now extend far beyond 47th Street and Prairie Avenue. As it becomes part of a greater gentrification process, Bronzeville has been targeted for its cultural potential and for its geographic advantages; it, like the Hill District, appears to be a locus of urban economic opportunity. Brooks and Wilson portrayed their communities as separate entities—cities within cities that existed as distinct spheres, decidedly apart from their greater urban backdrops. But with their current restoration comes the risk of commodifying exclusively black histories for the benefit of larger white spaces. The separation between the neighborhood that De Witt 'loved so well' and the city that contains it still exists today.
Works Cited


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