



Chapter IX: "I Can't Take It!": August Wilson Leaves Pittsburgh

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Sala Udin never forgave [Claude] Purdy for luring August away from Pittsburgh, but in hindsight believes it was time for August to move on.

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Abstract

The story of August Wilson leaving Pittsburgh for St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978.

Keywords

August Wilson, Brenda Burton, Sakina Ansari, Claude Purdy, Elva Branson, Sala Udin, Mary Bradley, Black Horizons Theatre, Kuntu Repertory Theatre, Ron Pitts, Vernell Lillie, Sarah Dixon, Curtiss Porter, Maisha Baton, Recycled, Coldest Day of the Year, The Homecoming, Black Bart and the Sacred Hills

In the spring of 1977, Ron Pitts was parked outside The Original Hot Dog Shop, waiting for his friend August to come back from rehearsal. Vernell Lillie, the head of Kuntu Repertory Theatre, had asked August Wilson to direct Ed Bullins's play, *In New England Winter* and Pitts knew there had been tension between the two. When August got in the car, it was immediately clear that something bad had happened. In fact, he learned, August and Vernell had gotten into a row that culminated in Vernell cursing him out. To Pitts's astonishment, August announced with tears in his eyes that he was leaving, exclaiming "I can't take it! I can't do this!" At first, Pitts thought he meant he was leaving Vernell and Kuntu Repertory. "No!" August said emphatically. "He was leaving Pittsburgh," said Pitts. "He was getting out of there."¹

August's falling out with Vernell capped a series of disappointments that stretched back eight years and involved much more than the head of the Kuntu Rep. It all began in 1969 when August angrily and abruptly quit Black Horizons Theatre over financial matters and the sort of politically-driven plays the theater was staging. The break was especially painful because, less than a year earlier, August had been one of the company's co-founders.

After the break, August returned to his first love, poetry, but now, even that brought disappointment. In the mid-1960s, August's poetry—inspired by Dylan Thomas, John Berryman, and avant-garde white modernists—had drawn enthusiastic audience responses. Now, after the riots of 1968, audiences wanted a stronger black power message than August



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was delivering. Curtiss Porter, one of the founders of the Black Studies Department at the University of Pittsburgh, recalls witnessing August reciting his poems at the Halfway Art Gallery, the main venue for poetry and cultural activities in black Pittsburgh, and being “rejected, dejected and almost ejected” while doing so. Porter says audiences almost felt like August “wasn’t doing black poetry.”² August himself was not happy with his poems, which were notoriously opaque and difficult to understand.

As August struggled to find what he called his own poetic “voice,” he began to re-engage—tentatively, partially, and informally—with Black Horizons Theatre. His new interest in the theater stemmed from the arrival in 1970 of Claude Purdy, a talented actor with whom August quickly bonded. Claude arrived in Pittsburgh with formal training in theater and years of acting in New York, Paris, and Nigeria. Pittsburgh actors and audiences were thrilled that Purdy and his girlfriend Elva Branson, the director of the company, were taking Black Horizons productions to a new level of excellence.

Although August was still smarting from his break with Black Horizons and refusing to have anything to do with the company, at least formally, Claude’s presence proved an irresistible attraction. August began dropping by after rehearsals, when the actors had left, and going out for drinks, food, and conversation with Claude and Elva. He loved discussing all sorts of things with Claude and valued his feedback. He listened as Claude urged him to forget his avant-garde poetry and write in the way black people actually talk. Frank Hightower, who had replaced August when he quit Black Horizons, says Purdy told August to “find himself.”³

In 1973, after two or three years of hanging out with Claude and Elva, August wrote his first play, *Recycled*. Claude and Elva planned to stage the play and had it in rehearsal at Black Horizons. However, nothing came of it because they suddenly left so that Claude could pursue a film career in Los Angeles. As they left, Elva surprised August by asking him to replace her as the director of Black Horizons. Just as surprising, August accepted the offer, a move that brought him back full circle with the company. Even so, Claude’s departure was another disappointment, depriving August of his closest friend and mentor.

1973 brought August another painful disappointment, the breakup of his marriage. In 1969, he had married Brenda Burton and had a child, Sakina Ansari. However, August’s preference for casual, part-time jobs caused problems. The jobs gave him the free time he craved to walk the city, observe, and write, but the inadequate and irregular income strained the marriage, finally causing August’s wife to sue for divorce. The breakup was especially bitter because August dearly loved Brenda and their three-year-old daughter.

1973, however, brought a couple of bright spots. One was the composition of “Morning Statement,” August’s first poem that he felt captured his own voice in simple, straight-forward, and understandable lines.⁴ Another was the invitation of his friend Rob Penny to work with him in cofounding a series of neighborhood theaters, each based on one of the seven principles of Kawaida, Ron Karenga’s African-based, nationalist philosophy.⁵ Rob hoped the theaters would engage Pittsburgh youth with Kawaida’s uplifting principles, a goal that August found exciting and ambitious.

Rob and August set up their theater in Northview Heights, a troubled housing project on Pittsburgh’s North Side. The initiative soon floundered, however, because the neighborhood’s young people showed little commitment. They would apologize for missing a rehearsal, August says, but at the next rehearsal, “only two dudes would show up out of the six who said they were coming.” August thought the problem might be that he and Rob were from the Hill and so were regarded as outsiders.⁶ More likely, the problem was that the young people had not bought into the project because August and Rob had not asked them what kind of plays they wanted to perform.

August and Rob soon abandoned the theater in Northview Heights, but their efforts had not gone unnoticed. A community activist from Hazelwood—where August had spent his teenage years—came by Rob’s office and asked if he would set up a theater in her

neighborhood. Sarah Dixon explained that Hazelwood had little to occupy its young people, who were running afoul of the law. She and her husband hoped that a children's theater would keep the kids out of trouble and develop their reading and social skills.⁷

Mrs. Dixon arranged for August and Rob to meet with the children, parents, and some of the staff at the Glen Hazel Recreation Center. Perhaps learning from their Northview Heights failure, Rob and August asked the youngsters what sort of plays they wanted to put on. The kids enthusiastically said *Superfly*, the popular Blaxploitation film featuring Youngblood Priest as a cocaine dealer trying to quit the business.⁸ Because of the film's glorification of the drug world, August laughed at the suggestion, and so did Ron Pitts and Mary Bradley, staff members of the Recreation Center.⁹ Rob, however, did not laugh. He went home and came back the next day with a script, threw it on the table, and told the kids they could do *Superfly* on the condition that afterwards they would do the plays that he and August wanted to do. The kids readily agreed.¹⁰

Everyone wanted to be in the play, so it was easy picking the seven or eight needed for the cast. Rehearsals went well, although Mary Bradley detected tension between August and Rob.¹¹ She never figured out the reason, but was puzzled that "there wasn't the harmony" she had expected.¹² Apparently because of the tension, Rob distanced himself from the production and left most decisions to August and Ron Pitts. August enjoyed working with Ron, who was willing to do whatever would make the play a success, including chauffeuring August back and forth between Hazelwood and his apartment in the Hill District.¹³ August thought Pitts had talent, and encouraged him to act in *Superfly*, and even think about becoming an actor. Pitts was focused on completing high school and going to college, but said he would act in *Superfly* if August would do the same.¹⁴ At first, August resisted, but ultimately agreed to play the role of the white photographer while Pitts took the part of Scatter, the bar owner. In rehearsals, Pitts was astonished at August's acting ability. "He was believable! He did it well!" Pitts exclaimed.¹⁵

The community and August worked together to support the production. A sewing club made costumes. Sarah's Dixon's daughter helped with the artwork and announcements.¹⁶ August drew on skills he had acquired at Black Horizons to sketch a model of the lighting board and get the electrical shop at Connelley Vocational School to build it.¹⁷ However, like August and Rob, community members were bothered by *Superfly's* celebration of the drug culture. A community group asked that before each performance a disclaimer be handed out saying attendees did not approve of drugs or violence.¹⁸

The reception of *Superfly* far exceeded expectations. At every performance, the audience packed the 200-seat theater at the Glen Hazel Recreation Center, with the overflow standing around the edge of the auditorium.¹⁹ "Everybody wanted to come," Pitts says. "They just kept coming. It was a beautiful sight, just a good feeling."²⁰ The production bolstered residents' sense of pride and self-confidence. Pitts says: "We did it! It was all homemade, but it was ours. We ... could look around and be very proud ... It wasn't a rich theater. But it was ours."²¹ And, he says, it gave people something to think about instead of the riots.²²

Parents thanked Rob and August for helping keep their kids occupied and out of trouble.²³ The mother of Gilbert, who played the lead role, said the experience had transformed her son. "When he got involved in this theater," she said, Gilbert "became a whole different person. He got confidence in his self ... and turned his life around." She told August, "I can't thank you enough for what you've done to my son."²⁴ The young actors loved the experience. One, however, gave mixed reviews of August, describing him as "encouraging ... a great guy [someone] we were just crazy about," but also someone who was "stand-offish ... wouldn't play with kids ... didn't laugh that much ... looked like he always had things on his mind ... [was] real serious."²⁵

Superfly was a success, but was so exhausting that August and Rob dropped any idea of making it the first of seven Kawaida theaters.²⁶ However, in deference to their original idea,

they christened their Hazelwood initiative “Ujima Theatre”—Ujima being the third principle of Kawaida and the Swahili term for collective work and responsibility.

After the success of *Superfly* came the need to decide what plays to do next. The young people kept their promise and agreed to act in whatever plays August and Rob wanted to do. These turned out to be three classics from the Black Arts repertory: Amiri Baraka’s *Black Mass*, Ed Bullins’ *The Corner*, and Benjamin Caldwell’s *Prayer Meeting*. In addition, August seized the chance to stage his own play *Recycled*, which had been in rehearsal at Black Horizons when Elva and Claude left for California. That August chose to stage the play at Ujima suggests he was not devoting much time or energy to Black Horizons.

Recycled was a one-act play that August both directed and acted in. August had directing experience from his time with Black Horizons, but other than his minor role in *Superfly*, he had no experience acting.²⁷ The plotline was inspired by a gruesome scene August had witnessed earlier that year. A bartender and a patron got into an argument in which the bartender pursued the man into the street and shot him. A crowd gathered and, in an effort to revive him, a nurse began beating on his chest. Someone standing nearby said, “No need you beating on the man’s chest. That man dead. His brain laying right there on the car.” August followed the nurse, who crossed the street. She went into Pope’s Restaurant, and told Pope, “The niggers are killing one another these days.” Pope asked matter-of-factly, “Yeah, is he dead?” The nurse replied, “Yeah, I beat on his chest. He’s dead.”²⁸

That true-to-life exchange became part of the play’s opening scene. The setting is a bar in which a shot is heard off-stage. A man, played by August, enters the bar, and a woman says to no one in particular “The niggers are killing each other.” Later, toward the end of the play, the woman says something that informs the audience that the man who was shot at the play’s opening has been “recycled” into this bar.²⁹

Recycled continues the figure of the outsider, a trope which had long intrigued August. In the opening scene, when the man comes into the bar, the woman looks at him and asks, “Where did you come from?” He replies, “Down the street lady. And did you forget?” She asks, “Forget about what?” To which he expounds, “Forget about everything. Long dancing one afternoon. ... All the mean shit we gotten together.” Coldly dismissing the overblown rhetoric, the woman replies, “Nigger, I don’t know you from a lump of coal. You got a woman? Why don’t you go home to her.”³⁰ The phrase “I don’t know you from a lump of coal” turns the man into an outsider, an unloved stranger. Some of the play’s dialogue retains the flowery, enigmatic language of August’s early poetry, but much of it captures the cadence and flow of black vernacular. Like August’s poem “Morning Statement,” which also was written in 1973, the play demonstrates he had listened to Claude Purdy and was becoming more skilled in capturing the way blacks talk.

In addition to being inspired by an actual tragedy, *Recycled* references August’s recent divorce. August says that, at the time, he was suffering the breakup of his marriage, and the play was “a way to get [the anger] out of me, kind of find a way to purge that, to write about that in poetry and whatnot.”³¹ However, the anger caused August to overact, sometimes dangerously. At one point, his character was to strike the female antagonist, played by Maisha Baton. August hit her so hard that people wondered whether his emotions had gotten the better of him. Years later, Maisha could be philosophical about the incident, but clearly had not found it funny at the time. “We only did it that one time,” she laughs. “I wasn’t going to let him hit me again!”³² Despite fairly realistic and understandable dialogue, people were baffled by the plot. “What’s it about?” they asked. “Where is he going with this?”³³ The first night’s performance at the Recreation Center had a large turnout because people thought it was going to be like *Superfly*. But Pitts needed only one word to describe attendance at the second performance: “Phew!”³⁴

August was beside himself. Trying to figure out why his play had failed to connect, he asked Pitts for advice. But Pitts was not about to offer any. August, he says, was so “moody” and “intense” that it seemed he was “going to explode.”³⁵ Not long afterwards, August did

explode. During a rehearsal for Ed Bullins' play, *The Corner*,³⁶ he became irritated by several actors who were not taking things seriously. They resisted directions and argued over minor points. "I'm not going to do this part. I'm not going to do that part."³⁷ The most troublesome was Rodney, who had been part of the original group that asked Rob and August to do theater in Hazelwood. Rodney always had a story to tell while actors were trying to rehearse. Finally, August lost patience and said firmly, "Hey man, we're rehearsing." Rodney's reply, "Oh man, we can do it later," enraged August, who picked up a chair and hurled it through a window.³⁸ Pitts was shocked. "I had never seen August get that mad," he says. "I could see the frustration building up in him. I could see it, but I did not know what he would do. And when he walked over to the chair and picked it up and threw it through the window, everybody stopped." Pitts feared August might do the same to Rodney. "This guy's crazy," he said to himself. August went on for quite a while, cursing at Rodney and finally ordering him to "get the hell out of here!"³⁹

After the disappointment of *Recycled*, August waited three years before writing another play. But in 1976 he wrote *The Coldest Day of the Year* and staged it at Ujima. Directed by Rob and featuring August and Maisha performing together once again, the one-act play was patterned after Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. The setting is a cold winter day in which an elderly man engages in tortured conversation with a woman waiting for someone at a bus stop.⁴⁰ The play deals with male-female relations and, August says, was partly inspired by a breakup with his girlfriend of the time. The play's theme was engaging, but the dialogue contained such forgettable lines as "Our lives are frozen in the deepest hate and spiritual turbulence." As one can imagine, the audience hated the play, and it closed after one performance.⁴¹ Realizing once again that audiences did not like his plays, August shelved a third play he was working on, "Rite of Passage," which to this day remains unpublished, undated, and unperformed.⁴²

With their egos bruised, August and Rob lost interest in Ujima. The theater, in August's words, "just like faded out"⁴³ and closed later in 1976.⁴⁴ The experience taught August that political theater, as well as theater with esoteric dialogue and complicated plotlines, would not connect with the public, especially with the sort of grassroots public that he wanted to reach.⁴⁵

Frustrated that audiences had so soundly rejected his plays, August tried something new: incorporating music and dance into the play. The idea emerged when August began hanging out with Bob Johnson, a talented newcomer with a combined interest in dance and theater. "BJ," as he was called, came to Pittsburgh in 1970, and brought with him a wide-ranging interest in dance, theater, and cinema. Born in 1938 in New York, he had worked with such major troupes as the Alvin Ailey Studio, the Katherine Dunham School, the June Taylor Dance Studio, and the New Lafayette Theatre Workshop. He had performed in the original New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Hair* and acted in Ed Bullins' *Goin' a Buffalo* at the American Place Theatre.⁴⁶ He had even appeared in the film *Midnight*, the sequel to the Pittsburgh-made film *Night of the Living Dead*.⁴⁷

Recruited by the Black Studies Department in 1970, Johnson founded a number of well-regarded initiatives.⁴⁸ One was the student-based Black Horizons Dance Ensemble that performed around town and at productions of Black Horizons Theatre. Two others were the Bob Johnson Dancers and the Harambee Dancers, which also drew enthusiastic audiences.⁴⁹ BJ's most important group, the Black Theater Dance Ensemble, was founded in 1972, and boasted two members of the Alvin Ailey Studio as instructors.⁵⁰ The word "theater" in the name reflected BJ's desire to combine theater with music and dance. The Pittsburgh Theater Dance Ensemble quickly became a leading feature in Pittsburgh's Black Arts movement.

In addition to his dancing skill, BJ had what August called a "warrior spirit." He demonstrated that spirit during an unforgettable outing with August, Rob, and other poets to Western State Penitentiary. The men had been invited to perform for the inmates, but unfortunately, BJ did not bring along the female members of his company. When the inmates

realized this, they vigorously let their unhappiness be known.⁵¹ August and Rob came out to read poetry, and the inmates made it clear they didn't want to hear any poetry. BJ started dancing, and the men let it be known that they didn't want to see him dance. They wanted the women. Finally, in a move that August never forgot, BJ went out on stage and, in front of four hundred very unhappy men, danced a solo tribute to baseball great Roberto Clemente with such power and feeling that, by the time he finished, the inmates were applauding and calling for more.⁵²

August admired BJ for his "warrior spirit" that had been on display at the penitentiary. August was overjoyed when BJ established Theatre Urge in 1975 and asked him to direct Phillip Hayes Dean's play, *Owl Killer*, for the company. He considered the chance to work with BJ "a great experience." Apparently BJ did not feel the same, for he never again asked August to direct a play for him, to August's great disappointment. "I thought that BJ would ask me to do other stuff," August lamented. "I used to go home and think about plays I would direct. And then the next play he did, he had some group from Philadelphia come in and direct it and I was wounded by that."⁵³

August regretted this rebuff by BJ, but he continued to engage with theater, now with a new company at the University of Pittsburgh, Kuntu Repertory Theatre. Under the direction of Vernell Lillie, a newcomer to the city, Kuntu quickly became the city's leading producer of black theater. Born in 1931 in the Brazos Bottoms region of Texas, Vernell earned a degree in speech and drama at Dillard University and taught in the Houston public schools. There, she and her husband founded a theater with a nationalist agenda that sought to raise racial consciousness through literary readings and dramatic collages.⁵⁴

In 1969, Vernell came to Pittsburgh to pursue graduate studies at Carnegie-Mellon University, concentrating in psychodrama.⁵⁵ She was completing her doctoral program when, in 1973, Curtiss Porter recruited her to teach in Pitt's Black Studies Department.⁵⁶ Vernell agreed to do so, but had no intention of starting a theater. She simply wanted to finish her dissertation and return to Houston. However, despite misgivings, in 1973 she founded Kuntu Repertory Theatre.⁵⁷ Kuntu had a nationalist orientation and was self-consciously part of the Black Arts movement. The company's very name is derived from a Central African word for "way" or "mode," a term popularized by German scholar Janheinz Jahn, whose book *Muntu* argued that Africa has a unified cultural essence and aesthetic.⁵⁸

Vernell quickly bonded with her colleague in Black Studies, Rob Penny. She liked that his plays focused on the lives of the marginalized and provided what Vernell called positive "propaganda" aimed at getting black men "to think about their responsibilities."⁵⁹ She also admired Rob's portrayal of women. "He can create women with such beauty," Vernell says, even "better than most ... female writers."⁶⁰

Vernell had reservations about August, who she felt was not a committed black nationalist. "I don't remember August dealing at all with the ideas of Baraka," she says, "or the other black writers."⁶¹ Vernell felt August did not measure up to Rob as a playwright,⁶² and she was not alone in that regard. Most black Pittsburghers considered Rob the city's premiere black playwright, and ranked August a clear second. Mary Bradley, who had worked with both men at Ujima, says Rob was the one who was always getting the recognition. "Never August." Years later, Bradley was surprised that it was August, not Rob, who became nationally famous.⁶³

Vernell came to know August because he spent so much time in Rob's office—even when Rob was not there. August was in Rob's office so much that Brenda Berrian, a new faculty member, at first confused the two men. "He lived there!" she exclaims.⁶⁴ August also palled around with two of the department's other theatrically inclined members, BJ and Maisha. The three developed what Berrian calls a "little clique ... really tight ... like brothers and sisters."⁶⁵ Almost every noon, they would head over to Pace's Restaurant nearby in Oakland and spend lunchtime "solving the world's problems."⁶⁶

August began stopping by Kuntu Repertory rehearsals, working with the actors and helping them learn their lines. As usual, he remained the outsider, staying on the periphery, not saying much, not asking many questions, and carefully observing.⁶⁷ When Rob told Vernell that August had experience as a director, she asked him to direct two plays for her, *The Corner* by Ed Bullins and *Prayer Meeting, or The First Militant Minister* by Ben Caldwell. She was impressed with August's directing skills, feeling that he exhibited "sophisticated approaches" to blocking, character development, plot nuances, social purposes of the author, and the capabilities of each actor.⁶⁸

When Rob told Vernell that August also wrote plays, she asked him if he had anything that Kuntu might stage. August told her that he had three plays, two of which—*Recycled* and *The Coldest Day of the Year*—were still being revised. But a third one, *The Homecoming*, was "complete."⁶⁹ In 1976, Lillie staged *The Homecoming* at Schenley High School and at Ujima in Hazelwood.⁷⁰

The Homecoming is a fictionalized account of two men's reactions to the death of their friend, blues singer Blind Lemon Jefferson. Called Blind Willie Johnson in the play (ironically there was an actual blues singer by that name), Jefferson was a Texas-born bluesman and guitarist who sang for a pittance on street corners and at social gatherings. Sometime in the late 1920s, Paramount Records asked him to come to Chicago and make some recordings. Considered by many the "Father of Texas blues," Jefferson complained of exploitation by the record company.⁷¹ Legend has it that, one morning after a recording session, he was found dead on a cold, wintry street.⁷² The play is set in an abandoned train station in rural Alabama where two men, Obadiah and Leroy, are waiting for the arrival of Blind Willie's coffin. Two white agents from a Northern record company happen to be in the station, and tell Obadiah and Leroy that they are looking for bluesmen to come North and record. With fresh memories of what happened to their friend in Chicago, they gain revenge by killing the agents.⁷³ A play about black men settling racial scores through violent retribution makes *The Homecoming* August's first play to fully embody the sort of racial violence and nationalism championed by Baraka and others of the Black Arts movement. In addition, its characters bear identity traits that August admired and are part of his own identity, those of the warrior and the race man. Obadiah and Leroy are poor, uneducated, and rural, the sort of traditionally subservient blacks that Baraka wanted black theater to convince of the need to strike a blow for revenge and racial retribution.

However, August was not comfortable with plays that project such an overtly political message. As a result, *The Homecoming* became his first—and only—play fully in the tradition of Baraka. August recognized as much when he said that he liked Baraka, and in his early one-act plays—presumably *The Homecoming*—he tried to imitate Baraka. But then, he says, he realized he "wasn't [Baraka] and that wasn't going to work."⁷⁴ *The Homecoming* taught August that he couldn't, or didn't want to, do political theater. It should also have taught him that his dialogue remained opaque and unnatural. *The Homecoming* was full of such forgettable lines as, "Well, I'll tell you, it's cold up North, all right. That's what I hear anyway. Froze to death! Don't make much sense. Yessir, that's something the way they treated Blind Willie."⁷⁵ Vernell had grave misgivings about *The Homecoming*, and concluded that August had a future as a director but not as a playwright.⁷⁶

I had no idea that he was going to emerge as the great, great playwright. I really thought he was going to emerge on the national scene as a tremendous director. And I still say that maybe the secret to his success as a playwright is that he was just so good as a director, and that he saw people on stage. It doesn't matter whether or not he had the words to go in their mouths. He saw them on the stage. He saw them in conflicts. He saw them needing to make change. And then he saw their flaws as well.⁷⁷

In addition to harboring doubts about August's skills as a playwright, Vernell did not warm to him personally. "[I]t was not that I was denying August," she says. "[Y]ou must keep in mind that, at this point, August Wilson was not at all involved in playwrighting. He had only

written one play.” And, she adds proudly, “I was the first one to ever produce [that first] August Wilson play.”⁷⁸ Similarly, August had ambivalent feelings about Vernell, and minimizes their relationship. “I didn’t really have a relationship with Vernell,” he says, “other than the fact that ... she discovered that I wrote this one-act play that she wanted to do And so she said she wanted to do it, and I said okay.”⁷⁹

Disappointed at his failed efforts in theater at Black Horizons, at Ujima, with BJ, and now with Vernell, August once again turned back to poetry. He did so at a Black Studies initiative, the Kuntu Writers Workshop, founded in 1976 by Rob and Maisha, and meant to provide a space where playwrights could come together, support one another, and get feedback. Once the workshop started up, Rob realized that poetry remained popular, so much so that he opened it to poets as well.⁸⁰ Rob did not mind August’s focus on poetry because he considered himself a poet. Vernell says that Rob and August both thought that “the highest honor was to be called a poet, and they would correct you on not calling them a poet.”⁸¹

Maisha Baton, the other leader of the Workshop, had worked with August at Ujima and brought considerable experience to the project. Born in 1939 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Maisha (née Shirley) had moved to New York at the age of seventeen, planning to become a nurse. Realizing that she did not like nursing, she took a variety of jobs that paid the rent for an apartment in the East Village.⁸² While living there, Maisha never met Baraka, but did attend poetry readings by Beat poets, including Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso.⁸³ Their writing appealed because “It had a rhythm, it had a beat that was more like the old poets, John Donne and Baudelaire. ... [They] were saying, ‘Bam Bam Bam Bam, I saw the best minds of my generation,’ you know, Ginsburg, ‘destroyed by madness, starving, naked, dragging themselves.’” Maisha committed to poetry once she realized that poetry doesn’t have to be “that little quiet Emily Dickinson thing.”⁸⁴ She liked the Beats but, being shy, did not participate in their poetry readings.⁸⁵ In 1969 or 1970, she moved to Pittsburgh, where a cousin lived, and settled in the Hill. In short order, she joined Black Horizons Theatre, where Claude Purdy was directing.⁸⁶ Maisha liked that Pittsburgh had a strong sense of community and featured a number of places where writers, artists, and actors gathered regularly.⁸⁷ Along with August, Rob Penny, Sala Udin, BJ, and others, Maisha hung out Eddie’s Restaurant, where in the 1970s she wrote a play, *Tears for Living Children*, which BJ later staged at the Laboratory Theatre Center.⁸⁸

Maisha and August began dating on and off. As she recalls, “What happened was he was obsessed with writing and I was interested, [but] not as obsessed as he was. But still in love with the writer and the writing and the potential ... so we hung out together a lot.”⁸⁹ August and others especially appreciated that Maisha had a car. “That was another reason they liked me,” she says, laughing. “If somebody needed to go somewhere, if there was a theater thing ... I would drive.”⁹⁰ Like August, Maisha was struggling to find her own voice, sometimes in ways that took on humorous aspects. One snowy night, while driving August and Claude back from a poetry reading, Maisha stopped the car, turned around, and announced to one and all: “I must not be a poet because I don’t sound like them. Something’s wrong.”⁹¹ Claude said a bit nervously, “we’ll talk about it later.” But Maisha wanted to talk about it then and there. “I’m really worried about it. I don’t have the voice, the rhythm,” she said as the car went into a snow bank. August and Claude started hollering, “keep going, keep going,” but Maisha did not move. She needed “to think this rhythm thing” through. Years later, she could laugh about that evening. “I’ll never forget those guys shouting and trying to make me get out of that snow.”⁹²

Maisha touched August’s life in a variety of ways. When he joined the Kuntu Writers Workshop, August became one of three co-leaders, focusing on poetry while Rob focused on fiction. The workshop met every other Saturday at the Black Studies Department. August still worked at temporary, low-paying jobs, and often did not have money for bus fare, so he had to walk two miles from his apartment in East Liberty. But as a true bohemian he didn’t mind. “I walked and I said that’s okay because when I get there I can get fifty cents from Rob and ...

get me some cigarettes. And Rob will give me a ride home, and I'm cool man. That's all I needed, that's all I wanted. To get ... cigarettes and then talk about poetry."⁹³

August and Maisha had misgivings about the way Rob ran the Workshop. Rob's easy-going personality made him reluctant to critique others' work, whereas August thought feedback was very important. In addition, August and Maisha disliked that Rob did not make participants bring original work to the Workshop.⁹⁴ Especially aggravating to August was the political nature of the writing that Rob encouraged. Natalie Bazzell, a member of the Workshop, noticed that August's poetry was distinctly less political and Afrocentric than Rob's. "A lot of the poetry at that time," Natalie says, "was very rhetorical, very black black black power, nigger nigger nigger. It was more than that, but it had a lot of that in it." Natalie adds that Rob's poetry was like that, but August's was very different.⁹⁵ August enjoyed the Writers Workshop, but his writing was still floundering. His poetry lacked the political militancy that was popular. His directing had not impressed BJ. His plays had not appealed to general audiences. And his one overtly political play had not impressed Vernell.

August was looking for a new approach, and turned to the advice of his old friend, Claude Purdy. Claude always had high regard for August's talent, but for years had urged him to try something different, something that would be artistic but also would have popular appeal. Acting on Claude's suggestion, August tried writing a musical satire. The effort began in 1973, just before Claude left for Los Angeles, with a long poem about the exploits of a black bandit in the old West, entitled "Black Bart and the Hills."⁹⁶ August at first was unsure what to do with the poem, and had given it as a present to his girlfriend, Barbara Evans. However, soon afterwards, he apparently decided to develop the poem, and asked Barbara to return it.⁹⁶

August's desire to convert "Black Bart" into a musical may also have been inspired by BJ. In 1975, Johnson planned to have Theatre Urge stage a musical about Stagger Lee, the mythical black renegade of the early twentieth century whose adventures were celebrated in song and folklore. BJ wanted the production to include dance and music, and so contacted August and a local musician, Nelson Harrison, to work with him. The three met frequently to discuss creating such a work. It was decided that Harrison would do the music, BJ would sketch out some scenes, and August would write the script. In the end, however, nothing came of the idea.⁹⁷ One more disappointment.

However, working on Stagger Lee may have given August the idea for converting his poem about a black cowboy into a musical, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. Originally titled "Black Bart and the Hills," the poem invoked the memory of an actual historical figure, Charlie Bolles, a white Englishman and stagecoach robber whose place in the folklore of the American West ranks just behind Jesse James and Billy the Kid.⁹⁸ Bolles' name and notoriety were the only things "black" about him, but he had remarkable flamboyance, a sense of humor, and open disdain for the elite. After each robbery, he would leave behind a poem that had the sort of impudent, sardonic humor that August loved. One example:

I've labored long and hard for bread,
For honor, and for riches,
But on my corns too long you've tread,
You fine-haired sons of bitches.

*Black Bart, 1877*⁹⁹

While August was working on *Black Bart*, his old friend Claude Purdy, after several years in Los Angeles, shelved hopes of breaking into the movies and joined Penumbra, a newly formed black theater company in St. Paul, Minnesota. Then, in 1977, just as August was working on *Black Bart*, Claude and Elva returned to Pittsburgh and joined the Pittsburgh City Players, an experimental, integrated theater on the North Side.¹⁰⁰

¹ Although long poem titles are typically placed in italics, we are going to keep the poem version of "Black Bart" in quotation marks to distinguish it from the play, which will be placed in italics.

Upon their return, Claude and Elva learned that Black Horizons Theatre no longer existed. They tried to learn what happened, but August and others spoke only in the vaguest of terms.¹⁰¹ The theater seems to have faded away with no formal death notice.¹⁰² Curtiss Porter thinks it closed “around” 1972; Rob Penny says it was functioning “off and on” as late as 1973.¹⁰³ Those dates suggest that Black Horizons closed not long after Elva appointed August to head it.

One night after their return to Pittsburgh, Claude and Elva went to the Crawford Grill to hear August read “Black Bart and the Sacred Hills.” Claude liked the poem, and thought it had commercial possibilities. He was aware that in the late 1960s, black cowboys had become all the rage following the republication of *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, the 1907 autobiography of a black cowboy nicknamed Deadwood Dick. In 1976, Fred Hudson and Roger Furman of New York’s Black Theatre Alliance announced plans to do a play about Love.¹⁰⁴ Penumbra Theatre was interested enough that it staged *Deadwood Dick: Legend of the West* as part of its 1979-1980 season.¹⁰⁵

Claude urged August to convert “Black Bart” into a musical or, even better, a movie that he would direct. “Hey man we could make this into a film!” he said excitedly.¹⁰⁶ August liked the idea, and plunged into the challenge. Once August got excited about something, says his friend Lee Kiburi, he was like a little kid in terms of his enthusiasm.¹⁰⁷ “[N]ot knowing any better,” August says, he sat down and, working almost non-stop, converted his poem in just one week into a 137-page, single-spaced musical satire.¹⁰⁸

Because a musical score requires collaboration, August brought in Maisha and BJ to work with him and Claude. The four held brainstorming sessions at Maisha’s apartment and occasionally at Kuntu Writers Workshop.¹⁰⁹ Maisha tape recorded some of the collaboration. On one tape, Claude can be heard encouraging August: “Come on, let’s do it ... I know you can work that up. Have Bart saying blah blah blah.” August replies, “Let me try it this way,” and others join in with their own suggestions.¹¹⁰

Black Bart shows that August was starting to follow Claude’s suggestions about writing dialogue that reflects how people actually talk. He had begun doing this in his short, 1973 poem, “Morning Statement,” but now he was doing it in a much longer work. Elva noticed approvingly that with Bart, August had begun to write dialogue “just the way he heard it.”¹¹¹ Maisha also noticed the change. She says that August’s early plays—*Recycled* and *The Coldest Day of the Year*—were written in his “James Joyce voice” in which the characters speak “classic” English. However, in Bart, the characters “talk, and talk shit.” Years later, Maisha says, the Bart voice takes over and “becomes *Ma Rainey*, becomes *Two Trains [Running]*.”¹¹²

Bart, the musical’s central character, is a black cattleman who is angry that the government has built a railroad through his ranch. Turning to rustling as a form of revenge, he gets caught and thrown in jail. After taking a course in magic, Bart escapes and settles in a retreat he calls the Sacred Hills, where he begins making gold out of water, aiming to flood the world with so much of the precious metal that it would lose its value. Bart hangs out with a zany, interracial cast of characters with wickedly funny names. Master Divine—a spoof of Father Divine, the founder of a black religious cult in the 1920s—is a preacher and self-admitted “fake prophet.” Pharaoh Goldstein, the Mayor of Little Egypt, is a member of the Culturally Independent Adults (C.I.A.) and financial overseer of the Nile Valley Pyramid Construction Company. Horsefeathers, the all-knowing Indian narrator, can be found sitting atop a barrel in front of the “Hoedown in the John” saloon, owned by Chauncey Riff Raff III. Mother Principle is the madam who oversees the female workers at the Hoedown saloon, also known as the “Ain’t No Ho’ Down in the John” saloon.¹¹³

The musical’s dialogue captures the cadence and lilt of black speech, as in this interchange between Horsefeathers and Sweet Delight, one of the “fancy ladies” at the Hoedown saloon:

H F: Just call me stranger.

S D: Okay. Stranger.

H F: I put your key on the dresser.

S D: Okay Stranger. You sound kind of different.

H F: You do too. You sure I'm in the right room?

S D: Sure, daddy. You write [sic] where you belong.¹¹⁴

Nelson Harrison, who composed the music, was extraordinarily talented and something of a Renaissance man. As a child, Harrison had played trombone with the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony. Later he played for the likes of Dionne Warwick, Nancy Wilson and James Brown when they came through Pittsburgh. Along the way, Harrison composed original musical scores, most notably "Isis au Noir," a reinterpretation of the Egyptian legend of Isis and Osiris.¹¹⁵ The songs Harrison composed for *Black Bart* included gems with such ironic titles as "The Last Stop Camel Feed and Water Company," "The Hoedown in the Gambling Hall," and "The Nile Valley Pyramid Construction Company."

August, Pitts, and the other actors felt good about the musical. BJ's Theatre Urge was chosen to stage it, with Claude directing and Ron Pitts playing the role of Black Bart.¹¹⁶ Given this enthusiasm, one can understand August's great disappointment when, at the last minute, he had to tell the group that the performance was cancelled. He had been unable to raise the necessary financing.¹¹⁷

1977 August leaves Pittsburgh

The collapse of *Black Bart* was one more in a long list of disappointments. To make matters worse, the musical's closing was followed by a confrontation with Vernell. In 1977, Vernell had asked August to direct Ed Bullins's play, *In New England Winter*, for Kuntu Repertory. The play was to open in late June at the University's Studio Theatre, with a cast drawn both from Kuntu and BJ's Theatre Urge.¹¹⁸ August was thrilled. He considered this the biggest project he had ever done.¹¹⁹

Unfortunately, the personal chemistry was not good between the two. Vernell had a reputation as being strong-willed and insistent, and the same was true of August. Vernell apparently became unhappy with August, or with his directing, or both. The upshot was that the two clashed sharply one evening, and Vernell cursed him out. This was the confrontation that occurred while Ron Pitts was parked outside Oakland's Original Hot Dog Shop waiting to drive August home. August got in the car, visibly agitated, and related what had happened. With tears in his eyes, he announced he was leaving, and exclaimed, "I can't take it!"¹²⁰

Pitts was astonished. He found August's announcement "surreal, almost like a play he was writing." When August confirmed that he was serious, Pitts pleaded, "Man, you got to finish what you started." Pitts knew this was not the first time August had said he was going to leave. "But this time," Pitts says, "you could see it in his face. He was going to be with Claude Purdy somewhere in Minnesota. He was through with everything—Ujima, Kuntu—anything that had to do with theater in Pittsburgh."¹²¹

August, in fact, had been in touch with Claude, who by then was happily ensconced in St. Paul, directing plays for Penumbra. Claude loved Penumbra. He loved St. Paul. And he very much missed August. Wanting to work together again, he sent August an airplane ticket around Christmas, 1977, inviting him to come to St. Paul and revise *Black Bart*.¹²² August found the invitation too good to resist. He said to himself, "A free trip to St. Paul? What the hell."¹²³

The following January, August left for St. Paul. Before he did, he stopped by the home of his old friend, Thad Mosley, to tell him about his plans. Most people think August left Pittsburgh in order to work with Penumbra, but that is not what August told Thad. "I can remember as plain as day," Thad says, "he told me he was going to Minneapolis to go to the Tyrone Guthrie drama school."¹²⁴ The Guthrie would have been attractive to someone with August's ambitions. Founded in 1963 and located just across the Mississippi River from St. Paul, it staged plays of the highest quality while avoiding the cut-throat commercial

environment of Broadway.¹²⁵ Elva Branson confirms that August's goal was the Guthrie. She says August wound up at Penumbra because that was "Claude's connection," but he always had his eye on the Guthrie. "I know that."¹²⁶

Thad was stunned at August's leaving, but he was even more stunned at the reason. "I'm stopping writing poetry," August said. "You don't get anything back from poetry."¹²⁷ Thad considered this an astonishing statement from someone who had always considered himself first and foremost a poet.¹²⁸ It was a sign that, after so many disappointments, August hoped that, with revisions and further work, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* could achieve the sort of popular and critical success that had long evaded him.

On a snowy winter's day in early January, 1978, August caught a plane to St. Paul.¹²⁹ On his way to the airport, he stopped by to see Maisha.¹³⁰ While there, he asked her for some Valium to ease his anxieties about flying.¹³¹ "He left for Minnesota," Maisha says, "practically from my house."¹³² As August left, he implored Pitts to keep Kuntu going. "Man, you got to do it. You're what's going to keep theater going in Pittsburgh." Pitts declined, partly because he didn't want to deal with Vernell.¹³³

August's departure left his friends despondent. Sala Udin never forgave Purdy for luring August away from Pittsburgh, but in hindsight believes it was time for August to move on.¹³⁴ August's leaving added to the decline of Pittsburgh's Black Arts movement. "It was a thriving scene for a while," says Ralph Proctor, a major collector of African art, "but when the movement died, it all died. Everybody just scattered and went their own way."¹³⁵

August had been only on the periphery of the Black Arts movement, but he regularly expressed his commitment to cultural nationalism. Despite that avowed commitment, *Black Bart* distanced him even further from the movement. The play has elements of protest, but satire is not designed to politicize the masses and raise their consciousness—certainly not in the way that Baraka or Karenga wanted. *Black Bart* illustrates the argument of Sandra Shannon that August embraced the politics of empowerment and cultural affirmation, but his writing "was not to be the belligerent, vindictive voice of Baraka or Bullins but the subtly provocative ... voice of a playwright with some thoughts of his own."¹³⁶

There is no question that things had not worked out as August had wanted. His lack of formal education had limited his job prospects. His marriage had failed because he couldn't provide for his family. His poetry and plays had been poorly received by the public. His efforts at a musical had been canceled for lack of funding. He was a distant second to Rob Penny in the local theater scene. And now he had fallen out with Vernell, the most important figure in black theater in the city.

Leaving was difficult, for Pittsburgh was August's home town. He loved the city, but the two had what he called a "love-hate relationship." He told his friend and theater critic Christopher Rawson, "This is my home and at times I miss it and find it tremendously exciting, and other times I want to catch the first thing out that has wheels."¹³⁷ In this case, August left in something that has wings. But he left nonetheless. Afterwards, August would return for visits, but he never again lived in Pittsburgh.

In St. Paul, August suffered several disappointments before he finally achieved success. That success, however, would be based on the continuing influence of Pittsburgh. This is because, in a real sense, August never left. Years later, when asked about leaving for St. Paul, he replied: "I never really left. You carry your home with you wherever you go. ... I carry [Pittsburgh] around in my heart with me."¹³⁸ Pittsburgh remained for August "the deep well of memory into which he kept dipping the ladle of his art."¹³⁹ "I can't take it!" became "I can do it."

Notes

- ¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ² Curtiss Porter, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 November 2007.
- ³ Frank Hightower, interview by author, 12 November 2013.
- ⁴ Vera Sheppard, "August Wilson: An Interview," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 103.
- ⁵ Rob Penny, interview, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ⁶ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁷ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.; Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007; August Wilson interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ¹¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007. The cast, as best Pitts can recall, consisted of Robbie Dixon, Greg Jones, Joyce Dixon, Eileen, Kenny Robinson and his brother, plus a few others.
- ¹² Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹³ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011; Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹⁴ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. The daughter was Joyce. Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹⁷ Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ¹⁸ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ¹⁹ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ²⁰ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ²¹ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999 .
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Noel McCarroll, interview by Lee Kiburi, 30 July 2013.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ²⁸ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ²⁹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ³⁰ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Shannon mentions 1976 and 1977. For 1976, see Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995), p. 30 (hereafter cited as Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*). For 1977, see Sandra G. Shannon, "August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 122.

⁴¹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.

⁴² Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 241. Shannon lists the full set of Wilson's unpublished plays, including those written for the Science Museum of Minnesota.

⁴³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

⁴⁴ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

⁴⁵ Ujima was a failure for August, but for Pitts it was transformative. After finishing his studies at the University of Pittsburgh, Pitts took a job with an optical firm in Columbus, Ohio. There, inspired by his years at Ujima, he joined a theater company that, ironically, also bore the name Ujima. Ron Pitts, interview by the author, 13 February 2015.

⁴⁶ Allegheny Repertory Theatre, Press Release, 1982-09-23 for the premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney* at the Fine Line Cultural Center, 3300 Fifth Avenue in Oakland. University of Pittsburgh Theater Archives, Hillman Library.

⁴⁷ Walter Ray Watson, "Choreographer Bob Johnson Remembered," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 Oct 1986: 6.

⁴⁸ "Spotlight on African Art Folk Festival," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 May 1970: 3.

⁴⁹ "BAS Slates Black Week," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 November 1970: 8.

⁵⁰ "Ailey Dancers Teach Master Class at Local Center," by Greg Mims, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 March 1974: 17.

⁵¹ "Choreographer Bob Johnson Remembered," by Walter Ray Watson, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 October 1986: 6.

⁵² *Ibid.* The present author saw BJ dance once, in a solo rehearsal. The performance was so moving, it brought me almost to tears. Johnson's talent and power had to be seen to be appreciated.

⁵³ Johnson does not include the play in his resume. See Bob Johnson Papers, University Archives, University of Pittsburgh. August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

- ⁵⁴ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 9 June 2007.
- ⁵⁵ Lillie's education options were all in the North. Universities in the South did not admit black students, but Southern states provided scholarships for blacks to do graduate work in the North. Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 9 June 2007 and 15 November 2007.
- ⁵⁶ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 9 June 2013.
- ⁵⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁵⁸ Kuntu showcased the works of Rob Penny, who was the theater's playwright-in-residence. In 1975, Kuntu's first year of operation, Lillie staged four of Penny's works—*Little Willie Armstrong Jones*, *Just Rob Penny* (a collage), *The Depths of Her Star*, and *Slow Lives on the Humdrum*. The plays were staged at the University of Pittsburgh in the Stephen Foster Memorial Chapel, as well as in several community locations. Lillie CV, in Black Studies Department, 1978.
- ⁵⁹ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 7 and 9 June 2013.
- ⁶² Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 22 May 2014.
- ⁶³ Mary Bradley, interview by Lee Kiburi, 11 October 2011.
- ⁶⁴ The department had relocated from its original office on Craig Street to a suite of offices on the second floor of a building on Forbes Avenue, across from the old police and fire station. Brenda Berrian, interview by the author, 8 September 2013.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Diana Nelson Jones, "Obituary: Maisha Baton/Nurturing Poet, Playwright, Therapist and Teacher," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 March 2012.
- ⁶⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 7 June 2013.
- ⁶⁸ Vernell Lillie to August Wilson, 26 January 1976, in the August Wilson papers, by courtesy of the August Wilson estate.
- ⁶⁹ Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 15 November 2008; August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999; Vernell Lillie, interview by the author, 9 June 2013.
- ⁷⁰ Staged in 1976. Vernell Lillie, cv, 1978
- ⁷¹ Marilyn Elkins, "Wilson, August," in William L. Andrews, et al., eds., *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, accessed 6 July 2015. Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, pp. 35ff has a summary of the play.
- ⁷² Robert Uzzel, *Blind Lemon Jefferson: His Life, His Death, and His Legacy* (Austin, Tex.: Eakin Press, 2002), pp. 45-46.
- ⁷³ Joan Herrington, *I Ain't Sorry for Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting* (New York: Limelight Press, 1998), p. 25.
- ⁷⁴ David Savran, "August Wilson," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 23.
- ⁷⁵ "The Homecoming," by August Wilson. Courtesy of the August Wilson Estate.
- ⁷⁶ Lillie says she still has a copy of the play but declines to share it because of its relatively low quality. Sharing it, Lillie says, would be a disservice to August's memory. Lillie, interview by the author, 7 June 2013, 9 June 2013.
- ⁷⁷ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 15 November 2008.
- ⁷⁸ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁷⁹ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁸⁰ Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ⁸¹ Vernell Lillie, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 April 1998.
- ⁸² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.

- ⁸³ Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid.; C.V. in Bob Johnson Papers (Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh); Geri B. Ransom, "Theatre Urge Stages 'Black Happenin'," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 June 1981; A3.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ⁹¹ Ibid.
- ⁹² Ibid.
- ⁹³ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.
- ⁹⁴ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ⁹⁵ Natalie Bazzell, interview by the author, 30 August 2013.
- ⁹⁶ Barbara Evans, interview by the author, 2 July 2018.
- ⁹⁷ Nelson Harrison, interview by the author, 26 July 2013.
- ⁹⁸ When August lived in Los Angeles, he may have seen the 1948 film that celebrated Bart's exploits. See "'Black Bart' Arrives," by Philip K. Scheuer, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 February 1948: 18.
- ⁹⁹ Wikipedia, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Bart_\(outlaw\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Bart_(outlaw)), accessed 17 February 2013. See also Frederick Nolan, *The Wild West: History, Myth & the Making of America* (London: Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2003), p. 133
- ¹⁰⁰ Rohan Preston, "Claude Purdy Gave August Wilson His Break in St. Paul (obituary)," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 28 July 2009, online; Nelson Harrison, interview by the author, 26 July 2013; Nelson Harrison email to the author, 25 March 2014. Macelle Mahala, *Penumbra: The Premier Stage for African American Drama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 21 (hereafter cited as Mahala, *Penumbra*); *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, misc. items, Feb-May 2017.
- ¹⁰¹ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ¹⁰² Years later, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* dated its demise as 1971. Ervin Dyer, "Obituary: Robert Lee 'Rob' Penny," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 18 March 2003. Curtiss Porter says Black Horizons ended "about 1972" (Curtiss Porter, interview by Lee Kiburi, 28 November 2007.)
- ¹⁰³ Rob Penny says it was still functioning "off and on" in 1973, when he and August established Ujima Theater. Rob Penny, interview by Lee Kiburi, 18 August 1998.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Jet Magazine*, 27 May 1976: 64.
- ¹⁰⁵ Mahala, *Penumbra*, p.27.
- ¹⁰⁶ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹⁰⁷ Lee Kiburi, interview by the author, 31 July 2017.
- ¹⁰⁸ Bonnie Lyons, George Plimpton, "August Wilson, The Art of Theater," *Paris Review* #14 (Winter 1999), accessed on-line 12 January 2018.
- ¹⁰⁹ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹¹ Elva Branson, interview by the author, 8 May 2017.
- ¹¹² Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.
- ¹¹³ Script and comments for "*Black Bart and the Sacred Hills.*" in Bob Johnson papers, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.
- ¹¹⁴ "*Black Bart.*" 125 MS, Box 28. Quoted courtesy of August Wilson estate.

¹¹⁵ Gifted intellectually as well as musically, Harrison went on to earn a Ph.D. in psychology and teach in the Music Department at the University of Pittsburgh. Today, he runs the Pittsburgh Jazz Society, dedicated to the promotion of jazz in Pittsburgh. The web site is at <https://pittsburgh.jazznearyou.com/pittsburgh-jazz-society.php>.

¹¹⁶ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

¹¹⁷ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.

¹¹⁸ Vernell Lillie, CV 1978. The play ran 23-26 June, 1977. (University of Pittsburgh) *University Times*, 16 June 1977. Also Vernell Lillie, CV, Black Studies Department.

¹¹⁹ August Wilson, interview by Lee Kiburi, 6 April 1999.

¹²⁰ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Justin Maxwell, "August Wilson and the Playwrights' Center," *Minnesota History*, (Winter 2006-07): 133-142; Rohan Preston, "Claude Purdy Gave August Wilson His Break in St. Paul," (Minneapolis) *Star Tribune*, 28 July 2009, accessed online. Purdy later became an expert interpreter of Wilson plays, directing them in such cities as Pittsburgh, Houston, San Francisco and London.

¹²³ David Savran, "August Wilson," in Jackson R. Bryer and Mary C. Hartig, eds., *Conversations with August Wilson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), p. 22.

¹²⁴ Thad Mosley, interview, 30 April 2013.

¹²⁵ In fact, the Guthrie would not have been a good fit for August. The theater was self-consciously interested only in established playwrights with outstanding national and/or international, reputations. Only after August established himself as a major American playwright did the Guthrie stage his plays. See Daniel Gabriel, interview, 31 July 2014.

¹²⁶ Elva Branson, interview, 8 May 2017. Jacqui Shoholm, Purdy's widow, says August came with the intention of working with Claude in St. Paul. Jacqui Shoholm, interview, 25 August 2017.

¹²⁷ Thad Mosley, interview by the author, 30 April 2013.

¹²⁸ Thad Mosley, interview by the author, 23 May 2014.

¹²⁹ Date per Jacqui Shoholm, widow of Claude Purdy.

¹³⁰ Maisha Baton, interview by Lee Kiburi, 26 December 2007.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ron Pitts, interview by Lee Kiburi, 23 November 2007.

¹³⁴ Sala Udin, interview by the author, 7 June 2013.

¹³⁵ Ralph Proctor, interview by the author, 24 June 2013.

¹³⁶ Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, p. 26.

¹³⁷ Christopher Rawson, "The Power Behind the Plays: August Wilson Has Changed the Way Theater Approaches Race," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 6 June 1999.

¹³⁸ August Wilson, "Feed Your Mind, the Rest Will Follow," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 28 March 1999; Elaine Effort, "Pittsburgh Profiles," KQV radio, 25 September 1987.

¹³⁹ Christopher Rawson, "August Wilson, Pittsburgh Playwright Who Chronicled Black Experience," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 3 October 2005.

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