August Wilson (1945-2005) was one of the greatest playwrights of the 20th century. He devoted his genius to exploring the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities of African American experiences through an approach unique in theater history, the writing of one play for every decade in the 20th century. Born in Pittsburgh, Wilson moved to St. Paul in 1978, where he developed a relationship with the Penumbra Theater and wrote most of his plays. His plays were awarded two Pulitzer prizes, *Fences* (1987) and *Piano Lesson* (1990), and all of them received productions on Broadway. Indeed, when he passed away in 2005, a major Broadway theater was renamed in his honor.

This new, co-taught, topics course will use Wilson’s plays as windows into African American history, particularly key themes and issues, and it will use African American history to contextualize Wilson’s plays. We will divide our time between engaging the history of African Americans in each historical period, and close readings of five of Wilson’s plays (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Seven Guitars, Fences,* and *Two Trains Running*). We will also explore criticism and analysis of each play, and we will talk with actors, directors, and critics who were involved with Wilson’s productions.

Students will be also be organized into five groups, each group developing a class presentation on one of Wilson’s other five major plays in his historical cycle (*The Piano Lesson, Jitney, King Hedley II, Gem of the Ocean,* and *Radio Golf*). There are no prerequisites for the course, and it is open to first year students. Students who wish to earn Humanities credit for this course should register for it as History, and those who wish to earn Fine Arts credit should register for it as Theater.

Class itself will mix lectures and discussions, both classwide and in small groups. We will read some of the text from plays out loud, the better to discuss it carefully. We will have occasional guest presenters who have had particular experiences in Wilson productions. There will also be a film made available each week, on reserve at media services, taking us deeper into the issues, dynamics, aesthetics, etc., of the time periods and the plays. We hope that you will make opportunities to see and discuss these films in groups, and we welcome discussion of them in class. We also hope to attend Penumbra Theater’s production of *Ain’t Misbehavin’* this fall (there will be a ticket cost for this).

Our assigned readings include one historical text, *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans Since 1880,* edited by Robin Kelley and Earl Lewis, a new book of criticism and analysis by pre-eminent theater scholar, Harry Elam, Jr., *Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson,* and a variety of essays, articles, interviews, etc., which will be available on electronic reserve, in an electronic course folder, or in hard copies on reserve at the library. We will let you know where to find each reading as we get to it. There will be five plays for you to acquire and another five plays placed on reserve.

Students will be expected to turn in short papers in response to each historical period, identifying and discussing what you think is a/the central issue of that period, and short papers in response to each of the five plays read by the class, identifying what you think
is your favorite or least favorite scene in that play, with some discussion of why. These papers will be ungraded but they are an important part of your participation in the course and your preparation for class discussions. Your overall participation will count for 20% of your final grade. Obviously, it is important that you come to class faithfully and that you are prepared to participate in class discussion. Each student will also be expected to turn in an analytical paper discussing one or more of the plays we read before mid-term, which will count for 30% of your grade. The student groups will receive a grade for their presentation to the class at the end of the semester, earning each participant another 20% of her/his grade. The remainder of the final grade—another 30%—will depend on the final paper each of you writes, analyzing the play that your group has presented to the class.

Grading:
Class participation, including response papers ………… 20%
First paper, due 10/24 ………………………………………………… 30%
Second paper, due 12/14 ………………………………………… 30%
Group oral presentation, 12/7 or 12/12 ………………… 20%

Books:
Purchase (college bookstore), but also on Reserve:
Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis, eds., *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans from 1880*
Harry Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*
August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*
August Wilson, *Seven Guitars*
August Wilson, *Fences*

On Reserve (R):
Marilyn Elkins, ed., *August Wilson: A Casebook*
Sandra Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*
Alan Nadel, ed., *May All Your Fences Have Gates*
August Wilson, *Two Trains Running* (This is out of print. You might look for it via an internet used book service.)
August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*
August Wilson, *Jitney*
August Wilson, *King Hedley II*
August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*
August Wilson, *Radio Golf*
Various commentaries, articles, interviews, essays, etc.

Daily syllabus (subject to change)

Th 9/7  Introduction to the course
3.

**T 9/9**  August Wilson, African American History and Theater
Read: “Preface” to *To Make Our World Anew*
   Rocha, “August Wilson and the 4 B’s” (R)
   Bogumil, “Understanding August Wilson as an African American
      Playwright” (R)
   Elam, “Introduction: (W)righting History: A Meditation in Four
      Beats,” in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*

Video screening on your own: *Sankofa*

**Th 9/14**  Wilson, African American History and Theater (cont.)
Read: Neal, “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic” (R)
   Craig, “Black Drama of the Federal Theatre” (R)
   Robinson, “Africanisms and the Study of Folklore” (R)
   Jahn, “Ntu” and “Nommo” from *Muntu* (R)
Recommended: Fishman, “Romare Bearden, August Wilson, and the
   Traditions of African Performance,” in *May All Your Fences Have Gates* (R)

**T 9/19**  Prolegomena to the 20th Century
Read: Bair, “Though Justice Sleeps,” in *To Make Our World Anew*
Short paper due: central theme of the era, 1880-1900

Video screening on your own: *I’ll Make Me a World, I*

**Th 9/21**  Music, Musicality, and August Wilson’s Writing
Read: Elam, “The Music is the Message,” in *The Past as Present*
   Berman, “Romare Bearden: I Paint Out of the Tradition of the
      Blues” (R)
Recommended: Werner, “August Wilson’s Burden: The Function of
   Neoclassical Jazz,” in *May All Your Fences* (R)

**T 9/26**  *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
Read: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
Short paper due: favorite or least favorite scene

Video screening on your own: *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind* and
   *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices*, Parts I and II

**Th 9/28**  *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
Read: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
Recommended: Shannon, “Finding One’s Song: *Joe Turner’s Come and
      Gone*,” in *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (R)
   Kester, “Approaches to Africa: The Poetics of Memory and
      the Body in Two August Wilson Plays,” in *AW: A Casebook* (R)
4.

T 10/3 Migration North, Urbanization, and Proletarianization
   Read: Grossman, “A Chance to Make Good,” in To Make Our World
   Short paper due: central theme of the era, 1900-1920

Video screening on your own: The Killing Floor

Th 10/5 Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
   Read: Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
   Short paper due: favorite or least favorite scene

T 10/10 Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
   Read: Oliver, “Blues – Off the Record” (R)
   Recommended: Shannon, “The Blues on Broadway: Ma Rainey’s
   Black Bottom” in The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson (R)
   Adell, “Speaking of Ma Rainey: Talking About the Blues,” in
   May Your Fences Have Gates (R)
   Crawford, “The Bb Burden: The Invisibility of Ma Rainey’s Black
   Bottom,” in AW: A Casebook (R)
   Marra, “Ma Rainey and the Boyz: Gender Ideology in August
   Wilson’s Broadway Canon,” in AW: A Casebook (R)

Video screening on your own: Strange Fruit

Th 10/12 The 1930s: Depression, New Deal, New Struggles
   Read: Trotter, “From a Raw Deal to the New Deal,” in To Make Our
   World Anew
   Short paper due: central theme of the 1930s era

T 10/17 Seven Guitars
   Read: Seven Guitars
   Reference Table of Seven Major Yoruba Orishas (R)
   Short paper due: favorite or least favorite scene

Video screening on your own: I’ll Make Me a World, II

Th 10/19 Seven Guitars
   Read: Turner, “Jacob Lawrence – The Migration Series” (R)
   Other readings on migration (R)
   Recommended: Arnold, “Seven Guitars: August Wilson’s Economy
   of Blues,” in AW: A Casebook (R)
   ** We will organize the five play groups today

T 10/24 Fences
   Read: Fences
   ** First major papers due
5.

Video screening on your own: *Kings of the Hill*

**Th 10/26**  Fall Break – No Class

**T 10/31  Fences**  
Read: *Fences*  
            Fishman, “Developing His Song: August Wilson’s *Fences*,” in *AW: A Casebook* (R)  
Short paper due: favorite or least favorite scene

Video screening on your own: *I’ll Make Me a World*, III

**Th 11/2**  The Civil Rights Era  
Read: Harding, Kelley, and Lewis, “We Changed the World,” in *To Make Our World Anew*  

Video screening on your own: *Eyes on the Prize* (selections)

**T 11/7**  The Civil Rights Era (cont.)  
Read: Harding, Kelley, and Lewis (cont.)  
Short paper due: central theme of the era, 1945-1970

Video screening on your own: *I’ll Make Me a World*, IV

**Th 11/9  Two Trains Running**  
Read: *Two Trains Running*  
Short paper due: favorite or least favorite scene

**T 11/14  Two Trains Running**  
Read: *Two Trains Running*  
Recommended: Rocha, “American History as ‘Loud Talking’ in *Two Trains Running*,” in *May All Your Fences* (R)  
            Shannon, “Going Back to Pick Up the Ball: *Two Trains Running*,” in *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (R)

video screening on your own: *Lackawanna Blues*
6.

Th 11/16 Wilson and History
Read: Harrison, “August Wilson’s Blues Poetics” (R)
Fleche, “The History Lesson: Authenticity and Anachronism in August Wilson’s Plays,” in May All Your Fences (R)
Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (R)
Recommended: Harris, “August Wilson’s Folk Traditions,” in AW: A Casebook” (R)
Pettengill, “The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson,” in AW: A Casebook (R)

T 11/21 A “Post” Civil Rights Era?
Read: Kelley, “Into the Fire” in To Make Our World Anew
Short paper due: central theme of era, 1970-2000

No video screening this week

Th 11/24 Thanksgiving

T 11/28 Men and Women in August Wilson’s Plays
Read: Elam, The Past as Present, chapters 2, 3, and 4

Video screening on your own: I’ll Make Me a World, V

Th 11/30 Past and Present in Wilson’s Work
Read: Elam, The Past as Present, chapters 5 and 6

T 12/5 In class time for group project preparation

Video screening on your own: I’ll Make Me a World, VI

Th 12/7 Group presentations on two plays

T 12/12 Group presentations on three plays

Th 12/14 Final discussion
Final papers are due in class