

***Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*. Edited by Sandra Shannon and Sandra Richards, New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2016.**

Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist August Wilson is arguably the most prolific storyteller of the African American experience and the most discussed Black playwright in the American academy. As indicated by the book editors, Sandra Richards and Sandra Shannon, Wilson's works are a "powerful, astonishing [piece of] theater that offers new, restorative possibilities" (3). This book, *Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson*, contains a collection of well-written interdisciplinary essays by scholars, directors, and dramaturgs. Dissimilar to previous studies, the book concentrates on pedagogical strategies for examining and interrogating the life and works of August Wilson in a mixture of academic spaces, courses, and structures. Contributors include Paul Bryant-Jackson, Faedra Chatard Carpenter, Harry Elam Jr., James Engstrom, Joan Herrington, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., Alan Nadel, Andrew Scheiber, Von Washington, and Dana Williams.

*Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson* is a volume in the *Approaches to Teaching Work Literature* series by the Modern Language Association. The book is divided into two parts. Part One, "Materials," commences with an introduction that purposely omits a comprehensive biographical description, as the book's principal function is to administer strategies for interrogating and engaging the dramatic works of Wilson's life. Subsequently, the volume editors offer readers ways to access Wilson's plays as well as present a comprehensive list of full-length critical resources, significant essays, and additional anthologies for further reading. The editors also provide a variety of resources for students who are more accustomed to or captivated by the use of multimedia as an investigative learning tool. For instance, the editors recommend viewing the 2004 film *August Wilson*, initially titled the *South Bank Show*, produced by Films for the Humanities and Sciences in 1999; viewing Bill Moyer's interview as a part of the *A World of Ideas* collection; and visiting [www.augustwilson.net](http://www.augustwilson.net), the website run by Michael Downing.

Part Two, “Approaches,” is the most impactful of the two sections, as it serves as a framework for examining Wilson’s works. This section is further divided into three parts. In the beginning, the editors contextualize Wilson’s understanding of and proclamation for a “unified, black consciousness” (15), which permeates throughout his life and works. By providing this critical framework, readers can better comprehend the significance of the “ways in which his dramaturgy complicates predominant American constructions” as well as providing a foundation for the included essays (15). Afterwards, Richards and Shannon provide a brief summary of each section as a way to describe the significance and relationship of the essays.

In “Engaging the Dramatic Mainstream,” the first section of “Approaches,” the contributors offer ways to examine Wilson’s work in juxtaposition to canonical plays and writers. Soyica Diggs Colbert’s “Teaching August Wilson in an American Drama Survey,” for instance, details how *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *King Hedley II*, can be used to “challenge, augment, and revise some of the central themes of the American dramatic tradition: the status of national traditions, the accessibility of the American dream, and relationships between fathers and sons” (45). In doing so, Colbert offers readers a list of texts in which instructors can examine these notions, including Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* and *Death of A Salesman*, Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, and Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. Joan Herrington and Von Washington’s essay, “Telling the Story: August Wilson’s Challenge to Young Actors,” delineate the impediments of performing Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* without adequate consideration of African American culture within predominately white university programs. In a review of the challenges, the authors suggest integrating scholarly readings, multimedia, and facilitating conversations centered around significant historical moments associated with production as a way of grounding students’ understanding of the “deeply embedded” Black cultural history (70).

In “Spotlight on Material Culture,” contributors examine notions of economics, geography, and the role of multimedia in teaching Wilson. One essay, “The Logic of Chance: Blues and Policy in August Wilson’s *Two Trains Running*” by Andrew Scheiber, describes how instructors might engage students’ understanding of socioeconomic power and “alternative and subversive culture of gaming” in Wilson’s plays (77). In “Spatial Politics and Memory: The

Urban Geography of August Wilson’s Radio Golf,” authors James Engstrom and Paul K. Bryant-Jackson present the “conceptual framework for understanding two competing visions of the urban: a neoliberalism urban vision and a ‘right to the city’ vision” in Wilson’s works (91). Given this, they offer guidance on how instructors can introduce students to these concepts, suggesting a series of critical readings and the incorporation of study questions to help facilitate class discourse.

In the final section, “African Routes,” the essays center on strategies for teaching Wilson’s embedded use of Africanness and rituals as well as “exposing the inattention to grounded histories” of female characters. Harry J. Elam’s essay, “Teaching *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*,” is situated in Wilson’s use of ritualistic acts such as Bertha’s bread offering and Loomis’s performance of the Juba. His approach, rooted in contextualizing “the power of embodied knowledge and experiential learning” (145), ask students to become co-producers of meaning through their own investment in and active engagement with the play” (145).

*Approaches to Teaching the Plays of August Wilson* is a well-crafted addition to the MLA “Approaches” series. What is so valuable about this book is the extensive list of critical resources that it provides. In particular, instructors, no matter the course design, are equipped with an abundance of substantial resources and methods that help facilitate discussions around Wilson’s legacy, career, and his understanding of Blackness and the Black experience. Significantly, this book’s greatest value, whether it is at the undergraduate or graduate level, rests in its multiplicity of entry points to teaching Wilson “in a variety of curricular settings” (20). This book is an ideal resource not only for academics looking to invigorate and introduce Wilson’s work, but also for practitioners needing to further contextualize Wilson’s understanding of the world within the plays.

DeRon S. Williams, ABD  
Lecturer of Theatre  
Middle Tennessee State University  
[deron.williams@mtsu.edu](mailto:deron.williams@mtsu.edu)