

Prospectus for August Wilson & Beyond Fall 2024

Course ID and 7-digit Number:

AFRC 2325.401 / ENGL 2222.401 / THAR 2325.401

Instructors:

Herman Beavers, Julie Beren Platt and Marc E. Platt President's Distinguished Professor of English and Africana Studies

Suzana Berger, Director of Arts Partnerships, Netter Center for Community Partnerships

**The people need to know the story.
See how they fit into it. See what part they play.”
- August Wilson, *King Hedley II***



Course Description and Level

If you want to get to know community members from West Philadelphia, collaborate deeply with classmates, gain deeper and more nuanced understandings of African American history and culture, engage in a wide range of learning methods, and explore some of the most treasured plays in the American theatre, then this is the course for you. No previous experience required, just curiosity and willingness to engage.

In this intergenerational seminar, Penn students together with older community members read groundbreaking playwright August Wilson's American Century Cycle: ten plays that form an iconic picture of African American traditions, traumas, and triumphs through the decades, nearly all told through the lens of Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood. (Two of Wilson's plays are receiving fresh attention with recent acclaimed film versions: *Fences* with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* with Davis and Chadwick Boseman.) Class participants develop relationships with one other while exploring the history and culture that shaped these powerful plays.

As an Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) course, the class plans and hosts events for a multigenerational, West Philadelphia-focused audience with community partners West Philadelphia Cultural Alliance / Paul Robeson House & Museum, and Theatre in the X. Class members come to a deeper understanding of Black life in Philadelphia through stories community members share in oral history interviews. These stories form the basis for an original performance the class creates, presented at an end-of-semester gathering. Wilson's plays provide the bridge between class members from various generations and backgrounds. The group embodies collaborative service through the art and connection-building conversations it offers to the community.

For an up-close look at the way this course operates, see this article featuring the year the class collaborated with Paul Robeson House and Sayre High School:

<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/bridging-gap-between-penn-students-and-west-philly-community>

For more information on the 2024 professors, visit

<https://africana.sas.upenn.edu/people/herman-beavers>

www.suzanaberger.com

Course Structure for Fall 2024

- Class meets in person on Mondays & Wednesdays 1:45pm - 3:15pm.
- Class members include full-time Penn students and older community members affiliated with our partners [Paul Robeson House](#) and [Theatre in the X](#).
- This fall, the class will read six to eight out of the ten plays in Wilson's American Century Cycle, plus most of the book *I Ain't Sorry For Nothin' I Done: August Wilson's Process of Playwriting*, and other writings that contextualize the material. (The full list of Century Cycle plays is *Jitney*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Radio Golf*.)

- **September - early November:** Class reads multiple August Wilson plays and related materials. Most class meetings include a mix of brief lectures, discussion among the whole group, and work in pairs or small groups to address discussion prompts or analyze a passage of text. Content is oriented toward giving students the critical tools necessary to
 - reach their own informed conclusions regarding Wilson's plays and
 - use question formation and storytelling related to the plays as a means to connect with others. (Others meaning other class members as well as audience members who attend our events.)
- **September - early November:**
 - Students will contribute to and participate in a weekend event with community members. At this event, Theatre in the X will present scenes from a selected Wilson play. Then the audience divides into small groups for discussion led by class members around the themes presented in the play.
***tentative event date: Saturday, October 4, 2025**
 - Class generates questions to ask in oral history interviews. Class members meet up with audience members from their October event discussion groups to conduct those interviews.
- **Early November through end of semester:** through a guided ensemble creation process, the class members of all ages work together to create a second event that honors stories shared in the oral history interviews and facilitates further connections among a multigenerational, multicultural audience.
 - There is extensive collaboration among class members of all ages and professors
 - Class members of all ages contribute to writing, acting, directing, design, stage management, and publicity. Professional actors also participate.
 - ***Event to be held Saturday, December 6, 2025**

Assignments

the list below reflects the 2023 syllabus and will be updated for 2025

Readings

We expect that you will read the assigned material and come to class prepared to ask questions about it, share observations, and do further close reading from an informed place. Reading is heavier from September through October, typically one play per week and a few other materials (book chapters, essays, etc.). November and December include very little reading in order to focus on event creation assignments.

Monologue Analysis Essay

Due late September

A close reading of a monologue of your choosing from one of the Wilson plays we have read so far. You will utilize terminology and concepts from the Monologue Analysis Workshop, plus related readings and class discussions.

5 to 7 pages double-spaced

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Visit to the Robeson House and Museum + Documentation

Due late September

Students will take a tour of the Paul Robeson House & Museum or attend an event there. The Teaching Assistant will organize a few options for tour dates with class members and the Robeson House. Students will reflect on their visit, choosing from a list of recommended formats (writing, visual media, etc.)

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Companion Assignments

These short writings are preparation for in-class activities. We will directly utilize them in class.

Unlike longer assignments, these are graded complete or incomplete.

Weighted value: these assignments combined = 20% of final grade

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| • Write your discussion questions for the October event | early October |
| • Write your discussion questions for Oral History Interviews | mid-October |
| • Play Creation materials | early November |
| • Free Write + Character Page | early November |
| • Character Questions | mid-November |

Oral History Interviews and Tape Log

Due early November

Students will schedule and conduct oral history interviews with the community members whom you meet during the October event. The class will work together to generate a brief set of shared questions / topics, other questions are your choice. After conducting your interviews, you will submit a Tape Log for each, which organizes the interview into topics and includes selected transcribed quotes and summary of content. (The required Tape Log format is posted on Canvas.)

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Community Performance

Due dates for individual components mid-November through early December

Students will write multiple drafts of material for the community performance the class will host on December 7 or 8, 2024. This project includes writing assignments done outside of class sessions, workshoping during class, possible rehearsal outside of class time, and other event-related jobs. Event work is graded as a package, not one component at a time.

Weighted value: 20% of final grade

Intergenerational Partnership Reflection Essay

Due approximately one week after classes end

5 to 7 pages double-spaced

Weighted value: 10% of final grade

Grading Breakdown

Community Performance (multiple drafts and event work)	20%
Participation	20%
Total of Companion Assignments	20%
Robeson House & Museum Visit + Reflection	10%
Monologue Analysis Essay	10%
Oral History Interview + Tape Log	10%
Final Paper	10%