Continuum: The Journal of African Diaspora Drama, Theatre and Performance
Volume 3 Number 1 – **Calls for Social Action in Black Theatre** – May 2016 - ISSN 2471-2507

Celebrating the "Historical" Community through Different Voices: Ping Chong and Talvin Wilks's "Women of the Hill"

Yuko Kurahashi

Abstract

The focus of this essay is the 2009 installment of Ping Chong & Company's oral history series *Undesirable Elements.* Co-created and directed by Ping Chong, Talvin Wilks (playwright and director), and Sara Zatz (who has worked with Chong on *Undesirable Elements* for over a decade), "Women of the Hill," performed by six women who live or have lived in Pittsburgh's Hill District, chronicles decades of the participants that include lives and experiences of the participants and their family members.

Exploring historical meanings embedded in the narrative of the script, I will investigate the role of "Women of the Hill" as an important oral history of the Hill community. In examining how the participants' shared personal memories to capture and re-inscribe history of the Hill, I argue that the process of the re-inscription has brought about a new, performative, oral history. I also argue that the finished piece itself becomes another important historical document that reflects not only lives but emotions of the participants and people who surround them. I will examine how Chong celebrates diversity within the group, finding the "Hill" as the amalgam of variables in personal and communal history while valuing the shared memories and histories. To that end, I will also examine how multiple voices of the participants are woven to a larger, macrocosmic history, illuminating underrepresented parts of history in a way that the members of the Hill community could memorialize.

CHARLENE: My name is Charlene Foggie Barnett, I was born January 5, 1958 at Montefiore Hospital in Pittsburgh, PA. It was a chilly winter day. Marlene?

MARLENE: My name is Marlene Scott Ramsey, I was born on February 18, 1948, at 9:00 p.m. at Magee Women's Hospital, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was winter. Norma?

NORMA: My name is Norma Jean Thompson. I was born on February 20, 1935 at Magee Women's Hospital, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was winter. Phillis?

PHILLIS: My name is Phillis La Rue Daniel Lavelle. I was born at home on November 17, 1948 at 2:00 AM, in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. It was fall. Brenda?

BRENDA: My name is Brenda Tate. I was born on March 21, 1949 at Magee Women's Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was the first day of spring. Kim?

KIMBERLY: My name is Kimberly Charisse Ellis, I was born October 17, 1972 at Flowers Hospital, in the Bronx, New York. It was fall.

The above self-introductions are from the opening section of "Women of the Hill," the 2009 installment of Ping Chong & Company's oral history series *Undesirable Elements.* Co-created and directed by Ping Chong along with playwright and director Talvin Wilks and Sara Zatz—who has worked with Chong on *Undesirable Elements* for over a decade—*Women of the Hill* chronicles several decades in the lives of six women and their family members who live or have lived in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Chong, who has been known for his innovative scenography since his first theatre piece staged in New York City in the 1970s, used his training in visual arts and film at the Pratt Institute and at the School of Visual Arts and in dance with Meredith Monk to create an unconventional type of theatre that integrated different art forms—dance, film, puppetry. He has explored and developed eclecticism in his art for the last four decades, staging multimedia and movement-based theatrical pieces on a wide range of subjects from his early abstract conceptual theatre work to more recent story-based work.

Participants of *Women of the Hill*
(L to R) Norma J. Thompson, Brenda Tate, Kimberly C. Ellis, Charlene Foggie Barnet, Phillis Daniel Lavelle, Marlene Scott Ramsey. Photo Credit: Ping Chong + Company

Besides his heavily textured and visually infused work, Chong has also used theatre as a tool for people in various communities to tell their life (hi)stories through an oral history series called *Undesirable Elements.* A collaborative, community-based oral history-performance series, *Undesirable Elements* has explored histories and experiences of various groups and communities that are marginalized or considered "undesirable" in society. Although each installment holds a different theme, the series' central focus has been on the investigation of "the lives of people born in one culture but currently living in another, either by choice or by circumstance."[1] The selected participants share their personal histories, which they present in resonance with a larger context of histories (i.e. community, national, and international) through the creative trajectory from the interview stage to a staged-reading.

Since the first installment of *Undesirable Elements* in 1992 in New York City, Chong has presented a number of UE pieces in different communities around the world. For each installment, Chong and his creative team serve as the artists in residence, visiting a host community, interviewing prospective participants, selecting the final participants from the pool, conduct further interviews, writing and revising a script, rehearsing,[2] and mounting a staged reading at a performance venue in the community.

In each staging of *Undesirable Elements*, Chong keeps the stage simple by using only a few symbolic visuals. Placed on a bare stage are semi-circled chairs and music stands for the participants to place the script. Chong often projects, on a screen on the back wall, an abstract geographical shape to signify the selected community in the global context. A heap of salt on the center stage adds a sense of spiritual connection between the audience, performers, and the world. The participants clap at certain moments in the performance, adding rhythms and energy to their narratives. Several times during a performance, members of the cast stand, move around the chairs to change their positions. These rhythmical theatrical punctuations add the sense of vibrancy and urgency to their stories.

Unlike many of other *Undesirable Elements* installments which collect stories from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, nationalities, and geographical locations of their upbringings, Chong chose the participants of "Women of the Hill" (Phyllis Lavelle, Charlene Foggie-Barnett, Brenda Tate, Norma Jean Thompson, Marlene Scott Ramsey, and Kimberly Ellis) from the pool of people who were born and raised in the Hill District. The participants' shared geographical location helps to create a unique, oral history of this district. Another trait of this piece is the hosting community's recognition of August Wilson who was born and raised in the Hill District. The participation of Kimberly Ellis, Wilson's niece and the performance venue, the newly formed August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh, added another layer to the celebratory and communal spirit of the performance.[3]

An exploration of the historical contexts embedded in the script of "Women of the Hill" reveals a little known yet important oral history of the Hill community. Moreover, an investigation of the actors' shared personal memories of the Hill yields a new performative and oral history. The finished piece itself becomes another important historical document that reflects not only lives but also the emotions of the participants and of the people who surround them. Chong celebrates diversity within the group, finding the "Hill" as the amalgam of variables in personal and communal history while valuing the shared memories and histories. To that end, multiple voices of the participants are woven into a larger, macrocosmic history, illuminating underrepresented parts of history in a way that the members of the Hill community could memorialize.

Pittsburgh, the Hill District, and African Americans

Located in the place where the Monongahela and the Allegheny rivers join to form the Ohio River, Pittsburgh became a "major supply point" and "a commercial entreport" for westward pioneers in the early nineteenth century.[4] By the 1880s, after the decline of cotton production, oil refining, and the manufacture of paper goods and wood products, the central

support to the city's economy became heavy industries that require large amounts of heat such as iron, steel, aluminum, and glass.[5] By the beginning of the twentieth century, Pittsburgh had become the center of heavy manufacturing and mining such as coal fields, iron, steel, and cooking plants, as well as brick, glass, foundry, and electric machinery factories.[6] The city soon became an ideal destination for a number European immigrants and African Americans in the South. During the first two decades of the new century, Pittsburgh's population increased by nearly one-third, due to a "massive infusion of unskilled and semiskilled workers and their families from largely agricultural areas" in Europe and the South.[7]

Between 1900s and 1940s, Pittsburgh's African American population had increased by more than 200%, in contrast to a 42% increase of the city's nonblack population.[8] Between 1910 and 1930, Pittsburgh's African American population doubled from 25,623 (4.8% of the population) to 54,983 (8.2% of the population).[9] The increase was due to a labor shortage in Pittsburgh during the post-World War I period. In response to restrictive immigrant legislations of 1921 and 1924 that affected European immigration and created a severe labor shortage, steel and other industries "changed their hiring policies and began employing blacks."[10] The decrease of the number of European immigrants allowed African American workers to move into previously-excluded regular employment in the northern manufacturing sector.[11]

During the 1930s, many of the residents in Pittsburgh, including African Americans who had migrated from the South, worked as truck drivers, machinists, bricklayers, and painters in large corporations. Black women also served as a significant labor force in the city's industrial sector in the early twentieth century. The post-war economic-growth provided numerous job opportunities for women as well, contributing to the growth of new "female" jobs as typists, office secretaries, and telephone operators.[12] Among those female employments, African American women exceeded others in employment. Indeed the percentage of African American women who worked outside of the home as wage laborers was five times greater than women in any ethnic group in 1920.[13]

The Hill District

The Hill District lies on a series of hills with a magnificent view of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. Located west of the downtown and south of the Strip District and the Polish Hill of the city of Pittsburgh, this old immigrant neighborhood overlooks the downtown Pittsburgh business district, serving as "the most direct link between Pittsburgh's major economic and cultural centers."[14] In the beginning of the nineteenth century, as the city's elites began moving to the Hill District to "escape downtown congestion and grime,"[15] the Hill became "the principal destination of new immigrants, beginning with Irish and German in the 1850s,"[16] and subsequently "Southern and Eastern European immigrants, especially Jews and Italians."[17] In the late nineteenth century, as whites began to move out of the Hill, its population became majority black."[18]

Consequently, many of the African Americans who moved to Pittsburgh during the time of booming economy chose the Hill as their home. From the inception of their settlement, however, the residents in the Hill suffered from multiple problems in housing, environment and education. Absentee landlords and industrial employers took advantage of African Americans

who were willing to work for the lowest possible wages. Politicians were only concerned about "their own operation in gambling, speakeasies and prostitutions," making the level of poverty of the community "catastrophic and deplorable."[19] The March 7 1935 Bulletin index reported that "living cheek by jowl would be six in a room in a tumble down hovels, sharing common faucets, cups, toilets and beds."[20] In the same decade, the death rate from tuberculosis among Pittsburgh African Americans was six times higher than that of whites.[21]

In the 1930 report, Ira de A. Reid, Director of the Department of Research for the National Urban League, reported that "mediocrity in social programs and social institution among Negroes" had affected the lives of the residents of the Hill. Based on the Committee comments, Reid recommended various measures, including "constructive measures in housing and sanitation."[22] for the housing in the Hill District. He proposed the campaign to make the properties in the Hill District tenable, raising the quality of hospitals, providing hospital training and clinical experience for African American physicians and nurses, providing the "health education of the Negro," exercising "provisions for unmarried Negro mothers"[23] and integrating "the opportunity for promotion into the semi-skilled and skilled positions."[24] Reid also proposed to repair two public recreational centers which are "totally inadequate to meet the needs of the Hill District,"[25] to improve "the physical conditions of the average Hill District school" which are "below the average of those for the city"[26] and to establish an affordable day care system.[27] The city agencies followed only limited portion of these needs and recommendations. In spite of the social problems, the Hill remained one of the most vibrant sections in African American lives in the city of Pittsburgh until the mid-1960s. As Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace observe, "living under these oppressive conditions," the residents of the Hill were "united in their neighborhood" through political and social organizations and built a strong community.[28]

"Women of the Hill" recaptures the Hill community's vibrancy and self-sustainability as important parts of its history. Norma Jean Thompson and Marlene Ramsey detail key events which helped the community's economic growth in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1930s, FDR's national housing program for low-income families helped the community to gain more economic stability.[29] During the WWII when "a myriad of jobs"[30] were available for people, "families on the Hill begin to get a taste of middle class stability."[31] "Women of the Hill" concludes that this once viable community is suffering from the lack of lack of subsidy for maintenance and repairs as well as riots in the 1960s.

"Women of the Hill" also illustrates the Hill as the center for cultural entertainment. *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh* refers to the Hill as one of the three distinct "Negro communities" full of entertainments since the 1870s.[32] In the 1940s the Hill's Wylie Avenue was the mecca for jazz frequented by such musicians as Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and Billy Eckstine.[33] In Thomson's words, Hill's Wylie Avenue was "similar to Harlem" to which "people drove all the way to listen to music, both white and black."[34]

The prosperity and stability that the Hill community had maintained—with great difficulty—was destroyed by the devastating economy of the late 1940s and early 1950s when "thousands of women and men, especially African Americans," lost their jobs.[35] This downward spiral is detailed by Thompson's personal story in "Women of the Hill": "My mother, Eartha,

returns to cleaning houses. My Father, Jack, returns to driving a cab. Although the opportunity is taken away it leaves a taste for wanting more."[36]

One of the city plans which further aggravated living conditions of the residents in the Hill was the Redevelopment Plan introduced in the 1950s.

MARLENE: 1955

PHILLIS: The federal government approves the Lower Hill Redevelopment plan. Ninety-five acres are slated for clearing.

NORMA: The new Civic Arena Project is announced and at first we are excited. We think it's going to bring new jobs and new cultural opportunities to the Hill. Instead,

KIMBERLY: They uproot families.

Under the "Urban Renewal" program, originally instituted under the federal Housing Act of 1949, the government seized lands in the areas deemed "blighted,"[37] and then sold them at substantially reduced prices to developers for new and "higher" uses. The Federal Government approved the Lower Hill Redevelopment Plan in September 1955, making $17.4 million available in loans and grants. The plan slated 95 acres for clearing, with the demolition of the first of 1,300 structures set for June 1956.

One of the city's main projects in the "Urban Renewal" program was to develop a new civic arena, which Pittsburgh's civic leaders originally planned to build as an indoor/outdoor venue to host musicals and concerts. Located on the slopes above the downtown, this 100-acre "Cultural Acropolis" was supposed to consist of concert halls, a museum, and a convention center. Eventually, the architects expanded the Civic Arena's original design, making it "the home of the Calder Cup champs the Pittsburgh Hornets, the ABA champs the Pipers, and the Stanley Cup hockey champs the Pittsburgh Penguins along with indoor professional soccer, tennis, lacrosse and football teams."[38] Over 7,000 events were held at the Civic Arena during its 50 year history.

In the beginning stage of the Urban Renewal Project, many African Americans had faith in the proposed redevelopment plan[39] because they believed that the plan would improve housing, streets and sanitary conditions. When the city promised that those evicted would get new housing, many believed that "new housing" meant "more units like the well-regarded public housing projects."[40] However, promised housing did not materialize and residents were forced to find places in other neighborhoods such as the Middle Hill and Homewood, bringing "overcrowding and tension to those areas."[41] The Lower Hill Redevelopment Plan eventually "displaced over 8,000 residents"[42] after leveling "dozens of city blocks in the heart of the community."[43]

As the area was declared "blighted," business and civic leaders cleared more than a hundred acres of land. The displaced people had to move into housing projects in other parts of

the Hill District or other segregated neighborhoods.[44] Among the 8,000 residents were 1,239 black and 312 white families. Of these, 35% went to public housing communities, 31% to private rentals, and 8% bought homes. The 90 families who refused to move out were forced to move to substandard housing. Contrary to their expectation, the displaced citizens received little relocation compensation, including minimal benefits from the federal government.[45]

This urban renewal was followed by the period of disinvestment, redlining,[46] and deindustrialization. Businesses and other institutions pulled out of the Hill and "a substantial proportion of the houses were lost because of lack of maintenance and poor civic services."[47] While many were leaving the Hill, the housing stock collapsed and social disorder increased. Eventually "the Hill came to be known as a dangerous place, causing most Pittsburghers to stay away."[48]

Declining conditions of the Hill district, however, does not mean the complete absence of efforts for anti-discrimination in housing market. In 1958, African American activists, with the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), convinced Mayor David Lawrence and the Pittsburgh city government to pass a fair housing ordinance, which banned racial discrimination in Pittsburgh's housing market. Although it did not completely solve discrimination, the new ordinance led to a "landmark decision" in the U.S. district court, ordering a metropolitan Pittsburgh listing service to enroll a black broker.[49] This and other successes stemming from the legislation unequivocally emboldened African American residents to petition the mayor's Human Relations Commission about ongoing discriminatory practices in the Pittsburgh housing market.

The devastation in the 1950s was just a prelude to the destruction of the neighborhoods in the city of Pittsburgh, including the Hill district, in April 1968. The only three commodities readily available on the Hill in the five years following the riots in 1968 were alcohol, narcotics, and religion. The first two were found "easier than a decent roast" and the drugs were often less expensive than food. The singing, praying, and preaching were "more intense than ever except for night services."[50] "Women of the Hill" narrates these changes and challenges on both the individual and community levels.

By the end of the 1960s, the Black Power movement "emerged at the center of Pittsburgh's African American freedom struggle."[51] Staging protest marches against employment discrimination in the building trades in the late 1960s, the Black Construction Coalition, a fruit of the Black Power movement, secured passage of the Pittsburgh Plan, which afforded African Americans new hiring and training opportunities in the construction and building industries. In the 1970s, Pittsburgh's industrial decline and shrinking population inspired its political and economic leaders to launch Renaissance II, a public-private joint venture designed to attract technology- and service-based firms to downtown Pittsburgh.

The Steel City's adoption of Renaissance II signaled a significant move away from its steelmaking identity, establishing the financial and technological conditions that contributed to Pittsburgh's economic resurgence by the 1980s. Pittsburgh's resulting economic transformation, however, adversely affected African American social and economic fortunes. Middle-class

whites and blacks moved to the suburbs and to Sun Belt cities while many working-class blacks were trapped in Pittsburgh's highly segregated job and housing markets and education system.

"Poverty, unemployment, the dispersal of the Hill's middle-class population, as well as "dilapidated and abandoned housing, drugs, and crime" resulted in the decrease of the population of the Upper Hill (the area closed to Oakland), which dropped from 5,800 in 1950 to 2,590 in 1990."[52]

In the late 1980s, a new development called Crawford Square was built at the edge of the Lower Hill, overlooking the Civic Arena. In order to complete Crawford Square, "one of the largest residential developments ever undertaken in Pittsburgh," the Urban Redevelopment Authority expected to "trigger a wave of additional revitalization."[53] The rent in Crawford Square was so high that it was impossible for both those who stayed on the Hill and who had left the Hill (and hoped to return) to rent there. As a result Crawford Square became the home of affluent newcomers, who "were not emotionally linked to the Historic Hill."[54]

The Crawford Square development was followed by HOPE VI development in the 1990s that "raced public housing projects to build mixed-income housing," again displacing those who had moved to the housing projects.[55] In his last play *Radio Gol*f, August Wilson depicts how the African American middle class, "blinded by desires to make it be in the real estate industry,"[56] choose to sell and abandon African American cultural identity and legacy. Not being able to cope with the high cost of living, many residents moved out of the area, and some "out of the city of Pittsburgh."[57]

In the late 2000s, around the time of the production of "Women of the Hill," the Lower Hill was again the center of controversy. In 2007 a set of proposals were submitted to introduce gambling at the Civic Arena. This triggered a campaign for a community benefits agreement. The "One Hill Coalition" which consisted of over 100 organizations in the Hill District joined together, united to presented a series of united set of demands to the city, county, and the Pittsburgh Penguins.[58]

The Board of the Sports Exhibition Authority of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County voted unanimously on September 16, 2010 to demolish the Civic Arena, which occupied the downtown as the cultural and sport center, in order to clear the way for a mixed-use development proposed by the Pittsburgh Penguins that would reestablish an urban street grid. However on November 24, Hill District residents nominated the vacant structure as a City of Pittsburgh Historic Structure, thus setting a review process in motion."[59] According to Norma Jean Thompson, while some wanted to tear down the Civic Arena, some wanted to keep the Civic Arena in the original location as a memorial site for the residents to remember what happened to the working class community in the Hill district. Eventually the old civic arena was demolished in the year of 2012.

The Oral History, Cultural Memory, and Personal Narrative

The core narrative in the *Undesirable Elements* series is the marginalized (undesirable) people's experience which remains invisible in legitimized, mainstream history. Theatre scholar

Yvette Hutchison argues that one of the historian's jobs is to locate and document voices of the people who have been excluded from "national expressions of their lived experience"[60] Hutchison argues that in writing a new history, a historian should take responsibility for shifting "the focus of memory from the exact outlines of history (public memory) to that of the private world" which can be extracted through the "personal narrative."[61]

In order to re-visit and re-vise the existing (mainstream) history, Chong uses a staged reading of "oral history," a vehicle he uses to encourage participants to articulate and present cultural memory of different cultural groups. As Carol L. Bernstein, an English and comparative literature scholar, states, cultural memory is generated when different cultural groups "identify and describe their shared past."[62] The act of reconstructing "cultural memory" serves as an important creative fuel in Chong's oral history series. Chong views the traditional, historical archive as a culturally contested vessel filled with various kinds of historical documents, which would become legitimized only when the historians/scholars interpret and present in a canon.[63] He integrates the "archival" history into the participants' personal narratives, thus breaking the boundaries between the "archive" (documents in the libraries, for example) and "cultural memory" (shared, reminisced experience as well as family histories stored in the people's memories).

The term cultural memory should be distinguished from the general term "collective memory," which is, according to Michael Billig, an ideologically constructed "social memory," and "the patterns of beliefs and practices in society, which ensure the reproduction of power relation."[64] While collective memory is shaped by ideology which would easily dismiss and erase those who are ideologically marginalized, communal or cultural memories entail memories about events, incidents, and moments without being legitimized by dominant ideology. Cultural historian David Gross calls this communal memory, which is opposite to the dominant type of social or collective memory, a "divergent or oppositional memory" which would recall things about the past that "are not commonly thought about and perhaps even missed in the population at large."[65] Gross asserts that humans are able to freely remember things which are not prioritized, valued, and legitimized in the "conventional norms."[66]

In order to reconstruct the community's cultural memories from the participants' "memory of the will," Chong and Wilks asked the participants to recall familiar names of the establishments in the community, which became the focal subject in the beginning of the piece. There, all of the participants recite the name of the shops and places in the Hill District.

CHARLENE: Filner's Bakery

BRENDA: Godfrey Skating Rink

PHILLIS: Ella Reen Beauty School

MARLENE: Townsends Bar-B-Que

ALL: Hot Sauce Williams

NORMA: The Bamboola Club

KIMBERLY: Finches Drug Store

ALL: The Roosevelt Theatre

CHARLENE: The Florentine Lounge

KIMBERLY: Butch's Meat Market

BRENDA: Wolfe's Shoe Store

NORMA: Ada's Restaurant

PHILLIS: and WHOD

NORMA: These are some of the places that no longer exist on the Hill. (7)

The local stores mentioned in "Women of the Hill" render important historical meanings. The depiction of these stores' daily businesses signifies an upward move of urban African Americans in the early and mid-twentieth century when African Americans in northern cities launched local, small business establishments in their communities.[67] These stores, which have been archived in the memories of participants and audiences, are revived in the form of oral narrative. In the process of remembering these stores, the audience learns the participants' relation to them, appreciating their symbolic and individual meanings. During telephone interviews, the participants explained ways in which these places have been part of their lives. According to Norma Jean Thompson, "I think Tyson's Bakery was the best, though both Filner and Tyson were great. Even now I could smell that smell of Tyson's Bakery."[68] Thompson's sense-memory about one particular bakery shows how much one particular bakery can carry symbolic meanings. As Thompson explains in the interview, the Hill once used to be a self-contained community with many individually-owned stores and companies: "As a young child, I remember we went back and forth in the street. The Hill was a self-contained neighborhood. We did not have to go out of the neighborhood because pretty much everything was there."[69]

Macrocosmic and Microcosmic/The Personal is the Political

In theatricalizing events and places extracted from the participants' individual and cultural memories, Chong establishes a parallelism between macrocosmic and microcosmic histories. One of the macrocosmic references of the "Women of the Hill" is the Great Migration. The lives of the participants' parents and grandparents[70] are described as one of the important references in this oral narrative. The Great Migration serves as a catalyst between the participants' family histories and macrocosmic history, reviving and reinscribing the existence of "individuals" in the public paradigm. Charlene's grandfather Foggie, a respected blacksmith in Sumter, South Carolina, escapes lynching mobs after an argument with a white patron in the 1920s. Brenda's grandfather also flees from the lynching mob, after he accidently killed a white man in self-defense in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1930s.

Their fathers' "death sentences" in the South in the 1920s and 1930s prompted them to move and settle in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. The two "flights" which took place in two different decades of the Great Migration provide a symbolic meaning of the Hill as the hopeful destination for not only for Charlene and Brenda's grandfathers, but for many of the African Americans who migrated to the North in search for better lives with security and promise. After sharing respective stories about their grandparents, the participants conclude the story with such phrases as: "He [my grandfather Foggie] will become my grandfather." "If he hadn't left that day, I probably wouldn't be here."[71] The references to their lineages express the participants' pride and appreciation about their families (past), thus creating a multigenerational "symphony" through their narratives.

Charlene and Brenda's stories about their grandfathers during the Great Migration are two of the examples of Chong's weaving of the personal and political. The integration of the two categories resonates with the principle championed by Carol Hanish who viewed her women's group sessions as a "form of political action."[72] According to Hanish, through her group sessions the participants could bring personal experiences and memories into the "legitimate" history of society. Like Hanish's group sessions, the creative process and staging of "Women of the Hill" served as a "form of political action" which allowed each individual in the performance to function as an agent in her own history, which in turn was incorporated into other participants' stories and histories.

As a microcosmic history, Chong illuminates details from each participant's individual experience. Norma Jean Thompson, once a recipient of the DAR Award in History and highly promising student, became a teen-age mother at the age of 15 in 1949. Subsequently Thompson dropped out of school and got married, causing a rift between her and her father. Norma's marriage lasted a few years; she began to raise her children as a single mother, working at the VA hospital to become a certified Lab technician. When she moved to an apartment with her children, her next neighbor woman took her in as if she were her own daughter.

NORMA: I am raising my children on my own. When I move into my first apartment, I'm greeted by a large woman, or shall I say, grabbed.

PHILLIS: I'm your neighbor and I will help you as much as I can.

NORMA: Her name is Mary Howard, and she is the Republican Committee Ward Chairman.

ALL: Yes, a black Republican.

NORMA: Mary becomes a second mother, sharing food with my family, and taking care of my daughter, Terri, as if she were her own. She introduces me to politics but most importantly, she teaches me how to make

ALL: Barbecue Sauce.

NORMA: Mary works at Hot Sauce Williams,

MARLENE: The biggest barbecue joint on Wylie Avenue.

The Hill was a place of neighboring support. The "communal efforts" in raising children is recorded in several historical/scholarly documents about African American communities including Eva-Maria Simms's "Children's Lived Space in the Inner City." In the article, Simms describes how adults cared for the young and had authority in the community of the Hill. For example, when 19-year-old Dale and his young wife moved to the Hill in 1944, Mrs. Brown, his landlady, "acted like a parent. She insisted and I still belong to Macedonian Baptist Church."[73] The young couple's relationship with their landlady certainly resonates with Thompson's friendship with her friendly neighbor.

In the narrative that melds both the personal and political, the participants' politicization and activism constitute an important component of the messages and themes of "The Women of the Hill." Each participant recounts her life journey not only as a wife, mother, daughter and educator but also an activist (a sympathizer). Phillis talks about Robert Lavelle's[74] lawsuit filed under the "Sherman Anti-Trust Act"[75] in which Lavelle, with the help of prominent African American lawyer Byrd Brown, filed a suit against the local all-white realtors' group (multilist) that had denied him membership. Lavelle won the suit and became the first African American member of the local multi list, opening the door for minority realtors to become multi list members across the country.[76]

After explaining Lavelle's suit, Phillis describes her own politicization. While attending the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, Phillis stopped straightening her hair in spite of the Dean's warnings.[77] Phillis was one of the students who took over the computer center to demand the establishment of the Black Studies Program.[78] After Phillis became a registered nurse her fight against discrimination continued. She explained that "in 1969 black registered nurses are still not very common" and often her patients "want the 'real nurse.'"[79] Phillis's path eventually intersects with that of the Lavelles' when she married Lavelle's son. Her political engagement and participation were carried onto the next generation in 2009, when Phillis' son, Daniel Lavelle, ran for the City Council District 6.[80]

Other participants' politicization epitomizes the politicization of the community. After the riots in the Hill District in 1968, Marlene joined the NAACP Pittsburgh chapter and became a member of its Labor and Industry Committee. In 1970 the members boycotted and picketed in the east Hill Shopping Center which had made little effort to hire minorities. Their boycott resulted in changes in some stores and companies' policies on hiring, wages, and compensations.

As the youngest participant of "Women of the Hill," Kimberly's politicization happened much later. During her high school years, in 1987, Kimberly organized black students to ask St. Paul's Cathedral High School to hold a Black History Month assembly. In 2006, Kimberly, as a dancer, performer, writer, and a scholar, fought against the construction of a Casino on the Hill.

Some participants' personal history merges with a macrocosmic history. Charlene explains how she witnessed a rift within her extended family during the Civil Rights Movement:

> My parents were very faithful and also activists in the peaceful protest movement. My dad became a church bishop and could work at the national level for the movement. During my youth, I met many prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, including the Kennedys, Coretta King, and Dorothy Height. The younger generation wanted to take action however, wearing Afro Hair and dashikis. Some of my younger relatives were involved in more militant movements, creating some sort of disjointed-ness between them and my parents.[81]

What is powerful about these women's accounts about their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement lies in the manifestation of their continuing activism in their lives. In 1955, Norma Jean Thompson's neighbor put her on the election board and she joined "the fray of grassroots politics."[82] Eventually she became the judge of the election board while she gained more independence and economic security. Two years after the riot in the Hill in 1968, Thompson left the Hill where she had lived for 35 years for Wilkinsburg to give her family a better environment. In the 1980s, at the VA hospital where she worked as a certified lab technician, she witnessed a number of cases of the PTSD who were ill-treated as well as AIDS patients who were ostracized from the community. The aftermath of the Vietnam War came to her own life when her son returned from Vietnam with the PTSD. The "second politicization" in her life prevails as an advocate for PTSD and AIDS patients, paralleling her first activism during the Civil Rights Movement. Thompson's commitment to her community and most importantly to herself resulted in the completion of her higher education; in the 1990s, Thompson went back to college to finish her bachelor's program. In 1998, at the age of 63, she graduated Cum Laude from University of Pittsburgh with a bachelor's degree in Social Work.

As one of the "Undesirable Elements" installments, "Women of the Hill" provides the participants with a tool to remember, "document," and share what has been rarely recorded in mainstream history. Writing and performing history of people and locations using both personal and communal memory, these women could reassess their respective life situations. "Women of the Hill" documents not only the history of the community but also the history and legacy of their families as part of the community's history. The experience of sharing stories and performing them allowed the participants to find and use a tool to "remember" and "document" historical archives which had existed outside of mainstream history. Charlene Foggie-Barnett told: "This performance project allowed me to find out about myself and family. I had been researching history of the Hill for my book but when something like this is coming at you, in the play form, it takes a different meaning for you. I could easily talk about my family history, I can talk about my roots."[83]

Re-inscribing the forgotten part of the history is usually accompanied by a number of challenges. First, a newly reinscribed history could become another historical account controlled by its author and director (if it's is a produced work). Second, the subjectivity of the revised history's "characters" could become, again, a curious object for new viewers and readers. "Women of the Hill" reclaims the forgotten past of the collective memory by excavating specific, local experiences of the Hill residents. The black body, in this case, could be the five

African American women on stage, who are vessels of the history of the Hill, Pittsburgh, and the United States. What might differentiate "Women of the Hill" from a play like *Venus* by Suzanne Lori Parks, is that historical experiences are not embodied by actors but by the very agents of the experiences.

The audience of "Women of the Hill" serves as reclaiming agents of American history. As Harvey Young argues, the act of reclaiming means knowing "the past in the present as you work toward creating future."[84] Many of the audience members of "Women of the Hill" were friends and family of the participants and their families, thus being able to participate in this "reclaiming" project with the participants. They share the participants' stories, adding their own "interpretation" and "analysis" of the performance, placing another layer to the sense of the community. For the older generation, the Hill is the place where their grandparents and parents moved in, met, married, raised children, made friends, became politicized during the Civil Rights Movement, and experienced the riots that caused the deterioration of the community in the1970s. For younger generations, the Hill is the place with abundant memories of their parents, grandparents, and relatives. Together with these diverse generations of the audience, the five women of "The Women of the Hill" were able to excavate what East Asian historian Harry Harootunian calls "the surplus or messy residues of modern life"[85] from the margins of the memories of both the individuals and community, reclaiming them as a valuable cultural asset for the future.

---

[1] http://www.undesirableelements.org/pages/about-undesirable-elements.html.Accessed 5 February 2010.

[2] During the rehearsals, Chong and his collaborators continue to revise the script to fit into a one hour to one hour and a half hour performance period.

[3]The piece was presented as the last production of the season at the newly formed August Wilson Center for African American Culture in Pittsburgh. As one of the markers that would honor August Wilson, the Center was founded and opened in 2009 downtown on Liberty Avenue. Unfortunately, due to its construction debt, the center was permanently closed in January 2014. The center was sold to Dollar Bank in November 2014.

[4] John Bodner, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber. *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 13.

[5] Bodner, 14.

[6] Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916 – 1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 39. Also see Nina Banks, "Uplifting the Race through Domesticity: Capitalism, Africanamerican Migration, and the Household Economy in the Great Migration Era of 1916-1930," *Feminist Economics* 12.4 (2006): 606.

[7] Bodner, 29.

[8] Information is from multiple sources. *U.S. Bureau of the Census 1912*, Thirteenth Census of the United States: Abstract of the Census, Washington GPO:95; (quoted in Alexander 361), John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber *Lives of Their Own: Blacks ,Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960*. (Urbana: University of Il1inois Press, 1982):186.

[9] Information is from multiples sources. US Bureau of the Census. 1910, 567;*Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, 672. Population. Washington: Government Printing Office. Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population 1930, volume 111, part 2. Also see Nina Banks, "Uplifting the Race through Domesticity: Capitalism, Africanamerican Migration, and the Household Economy in the Great Migration Era of 1916–1930." *Feminist Economics* 12(4), 2006: 606.

[10] Laurence Glasco, "The Hill and the African American Experience." Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays.* Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011, 29.

[11] Banks, 606.

[12] Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh,1916 – 1930.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

[13] JacquelineJones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present.* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1985), 162. quoted in Nina Banks 607.

[14] Eva-Maria Simms, "Children's Lived Spaces in the Inner City: Historical and Political Aspects of the Psychology of Place," *The Humanistic Psychologist,* 36 (2008):74.

[15] Laurence Glasco "The Hill and the African American Experience." Laurence A. Glasco and Christopher Rawson *August Wilson: Pittsburgh Places in His Life and Plays.* Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation, 2011, 29.

[16] Glasco, 29.

[17] Glasco, 29.

[18] Glasco, 29.

[19] Ralph Lamuel Hill. "A View of the Hill—A Study of Experiences and Attitudes in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from 1900 to 1973" (Ph. D. diss.,University of Pittsburgh, 1973), 120.

[20] Hill,122.

[21] Hill,121.

[22] Ira de A. Reid, "Social Conditions of the Negro in The Hill District of Pittsburgh" (Report, General Committee on the Hill Survey, The National Urban League, 1930), 11.

[23] Reid, 13.

[24] Reid, 13.

[25] Reid, 14.

[26] Reid, 16.

[27] Reid, 18.

[28] Fullilove, 387.

[29] The federal government had attempted to provide housing for the poor since the early 1930s. Public housing projects began in 1937 with the Wagner-Steagall Act. Despite almost seventy years of federal involvement in providing housing, the number of families in need of housing assistance is higher than ever. See Michael S. FitzPatrick "A Disaster in Every Generation: An Analysis of HOPE VI:HUD's Newest Big Budget Development Plan," *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy* 7.2 (2000):422-23. 421-448.

[30] Ping Chong "Women of the Hill," 2009, 14.

[31] Chong, 14.

[32] Laurence A. Glasco, *The WPA History of the Negro in Pittsburgh.* Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 2004, 267.

[33] Eva-Maria Simms, "Children's Lived Spaces in the Inner City: Historical and Political Aspects of the Psychology of Place," *The Humanistic Psychologist,* 36 (2008):75.

[34] Interview with Norma Jean Thompson, 6 February 2011.

[35] Chong, 17.

[36] Chong, 17.

[37] Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace "Serial Forced Displacement in American Cities, 1916–2010," *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, Vol. 88, No. 3 382.

[38] https://sites.google.com/site/pittsburghmusichistory/pittsburgh-music-story/venues/civic-arena

[39] Glasco, Wilson 38.

[40] Glasco, Wilson 40.

[41] Glasco, Wilson 40.

[42] "In September 1955, the federal government approved the Lower Hill Redevelopment plan, making available $17.4 million in loans and grants. Ninety-five acres were slated for clearing, with the demolition of the first of 1,300 structures to be razed set for June 1956. Redevelopment displaced over 8,000 residents; 1,239 black families, 312 white. Of these, 35% went to public housing communities, 31% to private rentals, 8% bought homes. About 90 families refused to move and ended up in substandard housing. Relocatees received little relocation compensation, with minimal benefits coming from the federal government." *Alliance* 2, quoted in http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill/hill_n4.html

[43] Vince Rause, "Welcome Back to The Hill: The Crawford Square Development May Be The Hill's Best Hope for a Turnaround. It Worked in Cleveland. Can It Work Here?" *Pittsburgh* (March 1992): 31.

[44] Fullilove and Wallace, 386.

[45] Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, *Pittsburgh Neighborhood Atlas: The Hill* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Neighborhood Alliance, 1977), 2.

[46] Instituted in 1937 by the federal government's Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC), redlining was designed to steer investment away from risky places. See Fullilove, 382.

[47] Fullilove and Wallace, 386.

[48] Fullilove and Wallace, 386. The population of the Hill declined dramatically, falling to 9,830 in 1990 from 38,100 in 1950.

[49] Hill 102.

[50] Hill,156.

[51] Hill 108.

[52] The already substantial black population, 73 percent in 1950, reached nearly 90 percent by 1990.Roy Lubove, T*wentieth-Century Pittsburgh Vol 2. The Post-Steel Era.* Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. 154.

[53] Lubove 156.

[54] Mindy Thompson Fullilove and Rodrick Wallace "Serial Forced Displacement in American Cities, 1916-2010."n Journal of Urban Health 88.3 (2011) 387.

[55] HOPE IV was enacted by the federal government in 1992. The program offered money to cities to redo existing public housing as mixed-income housing. Although the intention of this program was to "solve a problem of hyperconcentration of the poor," many HOPE VI projects simply moved the poor to new areas of concentrated poverty." See Fullilove 383.

[56] Sandra G. Shannon, "Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookends Plays in August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle." *College Literature* (Spring 2009): 37.

[57] Fillilove, 387.

[58] Fullilove, 387.

[59] Glasco, 54.

[60] Yvette Hutchison "Truth or Bust: Consensualising a Historic Narrative or Provoking through Theatre. The Place of the Personal Narrative in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Source." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15.3 (2005): 354-362, 355.

[61] Yvette Hutchison , 354-362, 355.

[62] Here I use Carol L. Bernstein's definition of cultural memory. Carol L. Bernstein "Beyond the Archive: Cultural Memory in Dance and Theater." *Journal of Research Practice* 3. 2 (2007):1-14. 1

[63] This resonates with Derrida's view of the memory, history and archive. Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (E. Prenowitz, Trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)1996: 5

[64] Michael Billig,"Collective Memory, Ideology and the British Royal Family." In D. Middleton & D. Edwards (Eds.), *Collective Remembering* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 60-62.

[65] David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*. (Amherst, U of Massachusetts, 2000), 134.

[66] Gross, 133.

[67] The merging corporate management options were completely closed to African Americans. See William Joe Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Urban Industrial Proletariat, 1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985): 80-114, *Coal Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-32* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990):145-176.

[68] Interview with Norma Jean Thompson, 6 February 2011.

[69] Interview with Norma Jean Thompson, 6 February 2011.

[70] During the large waves of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries, The Hill, as it is called by its inhabitants, was the gateway to an American life for Polish, Irish, and Jewish immigrants, who used it as the starting place for their work and family lives and moved on from there to more affluent and less crowded neighborhoods in city and suburbs. See Eva-Maria Simms, 74.

[71] Chong 9.

[72] Hanish "The Personal Is Political" *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalisPol.pdf

[73] Eva-Maria Simms, "Children's Lived Spaces in the Inner City: Historical and Political Aspects of the Psychology of Place," *The Humanistic Psychologist,* 36 (2008):78.

[74] According to the obituary, Lavelle, realtor and banker, founded the former Dwelling House Savings & Loan. He was as much preacher as banker in his evangelistic crusade to increase homeownership among the low-income residents of Pittsburgh who had trouble getting loans from mainstream banks. http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/postgazette/obituary.aspx?page=lifestory&pid=143958666 Access 11 November 2013.

[75] A federal anti-monopoly and anti-trust statute, passed in 1890 as 15 U.S.C. §§ 1-7 and amended by the Clayton Act in 1914 (15 U.S.C. § 12-27), which prohibits activities that restrict interstate commerce and competition in the marketplace. http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/sherman_antitrust_act Accessed 11 November 2013.

[76] Chong 37 and http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/postgazette/obituary.aspx?page=lifestory&pid=143958666#sthash.wt3i8juu.dpuf Accessed 14 November 2013.

[77] Chong 38.

[78] Phone Interview Phillis Lavelle. 2 February 2011.

[79] Chong 44.

[80] He is the chief of staff for the District 6 Office.

[81] Phone Interview with Foggie-Barnett, 16 Feb 2011.

[82] Chong, 23.

[83] Charlene Foggie-Barnett, Interview, 16 February 2011.

[84] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press), 135.

[85] Harry Harootunian "Shadowing History: National Narratives and the Persistence of the Everyday." *Cultural Studies* 18.2/3 (2004):181.

Yuko Kurahashi is an Associate Professor of theatre in the School of Theatre and Dance at Kent State University. Her areas of specialty include multicultural theatre, community-based theatre, and intercultural theatre. She is the author of *Asian American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players* (Garland, 1999) and *Multicultural Theatre* (Kendall/Hunt, 2004 & 2006). Kurahashi is a writer for PlayShakespeare.com.