though. Singing together is a ritual central to black identity, says Hall—from the cotton fields to church to rap concerts. “If I am telling the story about how black people have been resilient in this country, I have to use the healing power of music because that is how we’ve been able to honor the mother tongue that was snatched away from us,” she says. “With music we are able to retain some of how we communicate with each other.”

In The Hot Wing King, Cordell Crutchfield is living in Memphis with his boyfriend, Dwayne, having left behind a wife and two sons to start a new life; the couple are prepping Cordell’s masterful recipes for the city’s annual hot-wing festival with friends when Dwayne’s nephew arrives, portending trouble.

In one sense this is very much in line with her earlier work. Hoodoo Love, Hurt Village, and The Mountaintop (which recounts the last night of Martin Luther King Jr.’s life) are also set in her hometown of Memphis, while Tina Turner, who played on Beale Street in the 1960s, grew up only an hour away. “I’m very much committed to putting the city of Memphis on the map,” Hall says. “It’s known for a lot of things not to be proud of, like the murder rate or the percentage of people who are obese—you can go online for the stats,” but she sees a city of resilient strivers: “People who pull themselves up by their bootstraps even when they don’t even have a bootstrap.”

But The Hot Wing King is lighter and looser than her earlier Memphis plays—which are haunted, often angry—not to mention two others set in Rwanda. “With this play, I wanted to embrace the articulation of black life and not necessarily black trauma, so the piece is infused with joy and love and jokes,” she says. “I did not set out to make a comedy, but I saved space for people to laugh—black audiences laugh out of recognition, so there’s a lot of moments that feel like, ‘Oh that’s my brother, or ‘My momma used to say that.’”

Hall herself bursts with positive energy. Even home-bound in New York during the coronavirus closure, trying to write and care for her two children, ages 6 and 3, she frequently lets loose with a “Yaaay!!!” or laughter that leaps through the phone, cutting through the social distancing. “She’s one of the most generous people I’ve ever encountered,” says Hot Wing King director Steve H. Broadnax III. (They became friends in 2016 when he directed The Mountaintop). “She’s very collaborative and open to ideas. She’s a joy to be around.”

Hall has never lost sight of her original mission—to populate the theater with stories about and roles for African-American women—even while expanding it. “Storytelling creates a feeling of empathy, which to me can be the beginning of social change,” she says. She is keenly aware of what it means to be marginalized in America: her grandmother shared stories of life as a sharecropper, and even though Hall’s childhood in her school’s gifted program was different, she was often the only black student in classes. When she became high-school valedictorian, the school changed its tradition of having the valedictorian lead the graduation procession and instead had students line up alphabetically.

As an undergraduate in Columbia’s acting

**Kenan** professor of English and of visual and environmental studies Marjorie Garber is an eclectic and creative scholar. In Character: The History of a Cultural Obsession (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $30), she has found a suitably broad subject for her interests, spanning the meanings of the term from the ancient word for engraving or stamping, to the multiple manifestations of moral principles, upheld or violated. There is plenty of grist: for the intellect in general, and for discussions of the hurly-burly of contemporary leadership—or the lack thereof. From “The Character Effect,” her afterword:

A strange thing has happened to the idea of character on its way to the twenty-first century.

What once was an object of conviction, the belief in human character, has become more like a label, or an evaluation, or a good (or bad) grade. It’s almost as if this qualitative term is better left unspoken—except in headlines, Senate hearings, job references, and obituaries.

Scientists tend not to use it. Nor do social scientists—psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists. Philosophers prefer “ethical” or “moral.”

Biographers may write warmly of the “character” of figures from the past, like Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, or Eleanor Roosevelt. But when “character” appears in the biographies of present-day figures, especially those of politicians and celebrities, the assessment is usually not so positive. Character flaws and character failings sell books. But in the process of this evolution, something of the term’s complexity and history has been neglected, or forgotten.

Is bad presidential behavior bad character, or just locker-room talk? Is a gross violation of decency, or a glaring instance of financial impropriety, “not in character” for a person whom we would like to praise, or hire, or vote for? “Out of character” implies a sense of what would be “in character” for the individual in question. But how do we know what is “in” his or her character?

In recent years, there seems to have developed something of a gulf between the ideal of character and its practice. “Preachers say, ‘Do as I say, not as I do,’” noted the seventeenth-century English jurist and scholar John Selden, adding dryly that he would not take such advice from a doctor.