

BLACK SUFFERING AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN AUGUST WILSON

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Preface

August Wilson emerged in the 1980s as a compelling new voice in the American theater. Within a short span of time he received such coveted honors as the Tony Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and two Pulitzer prizes. His dramatic works are part of a planned play-cycle devoted to retelling the story of black experience in twentieth-century America. "I'm taking each decade and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it," says Wilson. "Put them all together and you have a history" (qtd. in Hunter 370). Wilson seeks to reclaim the strong, distinctive personality of the African-Americans because he believes that they, too, are a long line of honorable people with a cultural and political history. He writes plays to preserve and promote the elements of black culture that stands acknowledged today to have been an inseparable part of the American experience.

Wilson's theater as a whole presents the familiar with a freshness and in a manner never quite seen before. It seeks to reveal the richness underlying the life of blacks. In his interview with Kim Powers Wilson explains: "Blacks in America have so little to make life with compared to whites, yet they do so with a certain zest, a certain energy that is fascinating

because they make life out of nothing--yet it is charged and luminous and has all the qualities of anyone else's life" (373). Sometimes he works with stereotypes, but with a view to stripping away layer by layer the surface to reveal what is underneath--the "real" person, the "whole" person. Wilson's plays maintain a contemporary involvement with the past, and foreground each era with its own history of black suffering and the strategies blacks have adopted in order to survive.

Wilson's treatment of his subject has been highly praised by critics. They explore the various ways in which Wilson's brilliance as a playwright illuminates the complex themes encompassed by his characters' experiences. Hilary DeVries, in an early study titled "A Song in Search of Itself" (1987), examines briefly the recurring themes in Wilson's cycle of plays about the black experience. She identifies as the most pervasive theme "the need for black Americans to forge anew their identity, an identity that is at once African and American" (375-78). A year later Margaret E. Glover wrote "Two Notes on August Wilson: The Songs of a Marked Man" (1988), in which she examined the role of blues music in Wilson's plays. She observes that blues "gave the black man a place in the white man's world, but at the cost of losing his right to that music and the part of himself he put in it" (378-79). Sandra G.

Shannon, writing two years after Glover, examines in her essay, "The Good Christian's Come and Gone" (1990), the shifting role of Christianity in Wilson's plays. Christianity for African-Americans is traditionally a good old-fashioned religion. But Wilson's men affirm that it did not, and will not, suit their need, and therefore "they demonstrate their disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from the religion of their ancestors" (379-87). In "Essential Ambiguities in the Plays of August Wilson" (1995), James Robert Saunders overviews Wilson's life and career for a contextual exploration of ambiguous and often paradoxical characters, details, and themes in his works (1-12). In the same year, Yvonne Shafer wrote "Breaking Barriers: August Wilson," analyzing Wilson's dramaturgy and chronicling the stage productions of his plays (403-11).

The 1990s drew greater critical attention to Wilson's plays. His works were discussed in book-length studies and in Ph.D. dissertations. Corlis Angela Hayes's dissertation, "A Critical and Historical Analysis of Five Major Plays by August Wilson" (1993), examines how Wilson uses the themes of separation, migration, and reunion to depict the experiences of his characters as they travel from Southern plantations to Northern industrial cities in search of new identities. Central to the above study is Wilson's use of the blues as collective

consciousness that redefines the black identity. It was not until 1995 that the very first book devoted entirely to Wilson, Kim Pereira's *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, was published. It attempts to show how Wilson uses the migrant experience to depict the physical and psychological journeys of ex-slaves as they traveled from the South to the North. Of the other scholarly works on Wilson, Vera Lynn Nobles's "Emi: The Concept of Spirit in Selected Plays of August Wilson" (1995), Sandra G. Shannon's *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* (1996), Michael John Dawning's "Restoring the Myths: Converting Stereotype to Archetype in Five Plays of August Wilson" (1997), and Mary L. Bogumil's *Understanding August Wilson* (1999) merit special attention. In addition, James Lawrence Taylor Jr.'s dissertation, "Understanding Wilson's Blues Women: A Dramaturgical Exploration of August Wilson's Female Characters" (2000), attempts to show that despite being grounded in a decidedly male frame of reference, Wilson's female characters cover as wide a range as do his men. "Strategies of Coping with Social Oppression in Selected Plays of August Wilson" (2000) by Joans Nissen, though partly a source of inspiration behind the present work, underplays the theme of victimization to focus on the survival instinct especially of Wilson's secondary

characters and therefore offers a somewhat partial view of the "historical reality" Wilson aims at.

From the above brief survey, it is obvious that not much attention has been paid to Wilson's twin projects of rearticulating black suffering that has been understated in "official history" and of rediscovering the strategies that blacks have desperately adopted in order to sustain themselves in extreme situations of oppression, to forge anew their identity, to preserve their dignity, their pride, and to fence out their humiliation in a world unspeakably hostile to them. Though a few scholars and critics have focused around these issues, their studies remain limited to one or two of Wilson's plays, as they are mostly essays. If Lisa Wilde's "Reclaiming the Past: Narrative and Memory in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running*" probes how the play gives expression to the memories of African-Americans, Bogumil's "Tomorrow Never Comes: Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*" explores within a brief compass Wilson's handling of black identity, culture, ethnicity, and displacement. Another essay by Pamela Jean Monaco, "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: From the Local to the Mythical in August Wilson," looks on Wilson's presentation of the African heritage as a repository of black survival skills, but then again the essay deals with such skills

only from a spiritual, and therefore limited, perspective. Hence, a fresh, full-length study of Wilson's plays is still very much possible so far as his simultaneous representation of black suffering and reassertion of different survival strategies are concerned.

Wilson turns to drama for a meaningful representation of his perceptions and experiences because he considers drama as a large canvas that can include everyone and a medium that can most effectively reconstruct black history as substantially truer than "actual" documents, which have been largely written from the perspective of dominant culture. Striking characters earmarked by the eras in which they live people his dramatic chronicle. Collectively, these characters live in a society that refuses to recognize their worth, that enslaves them as a culture both physically and psychologically, and that prevents them from thinking of their own welfare. Despite all discrimination, these people are the thinkers, the doers, the dreamers; their struggle to survive in such a society symbolizes the collective struggle of all African-Americans. They fight fate as determined by white men, the authority that plays by rules written for the black "Other." Their stories, however, go beyond the crises they faced throughout the twentieth century or

still earlier and become sagas of their fortitude and resilience.

Based on the above problematic, my study endeavors to examine how Wilson in his plays resists "the egalitarian myths" of America as a land of equal opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on social, political, economic, and spiritual displacement of black people over the past hundred years or so. Simultaneously, it examines how these distressed and displaced people have restored to survival strategies--as diverse as traditional rituals, folklore, music, religion, materialism, violence, family--to cope with their hardships. If there are circles of sorrow, there are lines of struggle too. Since my study considers Wilson as a creative chronicler, it also examines his drama as a countertext that "'rights' American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of 'real'" (Plum 562).

Wilson wrote more than a dozen plays. Among them, however, *The Homecoming* (1976), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1979), *Fullerton Street* (1980), and *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1981) have garnered little notice. Wilson himself admits, "I had submitted a couple of other plays to the O'Neill, but I'm glad they weren't selected" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 372).

Besides, these plays are not part of his cycle of "history" plays. My study will examine seven major plays of the said cycle, each of which depicts a decade of the twentieth century in the lives of African-Americans. But I would like to follow not the chronology of production or publication but the chronology of events to put the plays in proper historical perspective. The play set in the 1940's, for example, was produced/published a decade after the production/publication of the play dealing with the 1950's.

When I contemplate how I have "completed" my project, I recognize more clearly the fundamental inadequacy of the traditional term "acknowledgement." Yet I am moved to affirm the obvious fact that this entire work would not have been possible without the valuable guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Ashis Sengupta. Any endeavor on my part to thank him in words would prove inadequate.

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Lastly, my apologies for any inadvertent errors and typos.

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Chapter I

Introduction

A critic for *Time Magazine* (1990) writes, "Wilson has established himself as the richest theatrical voice to emerge in the U.S. since the post-World War II flowering of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller" (qtd. in Shafer 408). Praised for their vivid characterization, Wilson's plays center upon the black life, as it was and is lived, in America. His characters are multidimensional; they display the subtle and complex experiences of black life, rather than speaking about the so-called red-letter events of history. Wilson's exploration of black history prompted Samuel G. Freedman to describe him as "one part Dylan Thomas and one part Malcolm X, a lyric poet fired in the kiln of black nationalism" (448).

In Wilson's opinion, the present should redefine the past so that the future can be determined: "'Let's look at this again and see where we've come from and how we've gotten where we are now'. I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed with the future" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Such a consciousness about past motivates Wilson to re-examine African-American issues of each decade of the twentieth-century so ultimately his plays could stand as a theatrical record of black experience over the past hundred years. For Wilson, the

history of black people is a most intimate part of American history. A re-examination of it can encourage the blacks, as Ralph Ellison says, "to trust [their] own experience, [their] own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow [their] masters to define these crucial matters for [them]" ("Interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard" 87).

In his attempt to dig out the black experience of the last hundred years, Wilson begins from the transitional phase in African-American history: the Great Migration. Over a period of thirty years, from 1900 to 1930, as Douglas Anderson says, some one and a half million African-Americans left rural and urban areas of the South for industrial cities of the North--New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and the locale for most of Wilson's plays, Pittsburgh. In leaving for the industrialized cities of the North the migrants hoped to find higher wages, economic and political equality, educational opportunities, and social justice. But what they found in the North was something less: voting rights that did not translate into political power, discriminatory hiring and promotion practices that kept them at the bottom of the employment ladder, segregated and substandard housing and education (434-35). Some gains were made in terms of economic well-being, political rights, and opportunities in education. But, as James R. Grossman suggests, "the dreams

embodied in the Great Migration eventually collapsed under the weight of continued racial oppression and the failure of industrial capitalism to distribute its prosperity as broadly as the migrants expected" (265). Ethnic conflicts frequently marked the relations between the white "Old Settlers" and the new black arrivals. Conflicts generated by differences of class were often manifested as the fear that the newcomer's rural manners or religious expression would injure the white's community image.

Wilson dramatizes this subject of displacement in its entire psychological vicissitudes. However, the migration, for him, is not merely a demographic or geographical shift; rather it is a historical transition to a new identity. He sees the migrants and the established black community in the North as sharing a sense of ethnic identity, which synthesizes much of the experience of both groups and redefines the African-American cultural identity across the country. In his plays, the image of movement, of traveling the roads, serves as an apt metaphor for the search for self--both personal and collective. His characters seek an individual "song"--a metaphor for self-definition and life's purpose--that will guide them along the road into the future, and they are enabled to recover this song

only through the recovery of a collective as well as a personal past.

Blacks venting their anger and frustration on each other are no less visible in Wilson's plays, but he considers these internal issues as a direct result of external forces--racial discrimination, exploitation, and violence. Oppression does not necessarily produce group cohesion; but Wilson suggests that it sometimes does. An absence of complete unity among human beings is hardly surprising. Even then, Wilson's characters differ less over black hope and determination, and hence, failure would never be the final word.

In his new racial consciousness, Wilson, however, does not confine himself only to a hundred years of black history; he excavates the remote past and searches, as an African, for a proud tradition. What he writes is not political propaganda. Yet he has, indeed, an agenda, a specific aim--to open a vista of the "origin" no blacks should lose sight of. A return to Africa is not possible today, but all blacks can reclaim or retain their cultural legacy as they move forward. "As African-Americans, we should demand to participate in society as Africans," Wilson insists. "That's the way out of the vicious cycle of poverty" (qtd. in Savron 299). He shuns the melting pot metaphor of liberal white America and rejects the

assimilationist rhetoric, both of which emphasize homogenization as a way to secure democracy. In his interview with Bill Moyers, he says:

Blacks don't melt in a pot. People hold up the examples of the Irish, of the Germans--these are all Europeans who share the same sensibilities as the mainstream, so it's very easy for them to melt. But we cannot change our names and hide behind the label of being an American, because we're very visible minority. . . . We have a culture. (173)

Wilson thinks that the process of organizing American coherence through assimilation will breed a new cultural hegemony; consequently, black culture will recede into the margin until finally it faces erasure. He looks at the process of assimilation from the outside. Like the outsider he steps back and says, "it was a big mistake" (qtd. in Savron 304). But unlike the outsider, he refuses to reduce himself to an "Other." He knows that he is not an outsider who came to America during the early twentieth century and became very much American, because he has the history of four hundred years in the country. He is this Other/Same who moves about with at least two gestures: that of affirming, "I am like you" while persisting in his difference; and that of reminding, "I am different" because

"I am an African, and I can participate in this society as an African" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 173). In his writing he, therefore, embraces and explores "this African presence in America" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 3). In fact, Wilson's stress on unmeltable ethnics is directly influenced by the black civil rights movement and strengthened by its radicalization in the 1960s. Politically this was the moment when the term "black" was used as, what Stuart Hall says, "a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization" in America and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance against the whites with, in fact, a very different history, tradition, and ethnic identity. In this moment, Hall further says, "'The Black experience', as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became 'hegemonic' over other ethnic/racial identities--though the latter did not, of course, disappear" ("Ethnicities" 223).

Like Hall, Wilson thinks of black identity in two different ways: in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common; and in terms of "difference" which constitutes--since history has intervened--"what blacks have become" (Hall,

"Cultural Identity" 111-12). His former concept of black identity reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which bind black people as "one people," with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of their actual history. This "oneness," underlying all the other differences, is the "truth" of African presence, which he excavates, discovers, and brings to light in his dramatic representation. His latter concept acknowledges the ruptures and discontinuities, which constitute, precisely, the African-American uniqueness. Black identity, in this second sense, is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the past, present, and future simultaneously. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. "I think it's largely a question of identity. Without knowing your past, you don't know your present --and you certainly can't plot your future," Wilson says. "You go out and discover it for yourself. It's being responsible for your own presence in the world and for your own salvation" (qtd. in DeVries 378). Black identity for Wilson comes from somewhere and it has history. But, like everything, which is historical, it undergoes constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, it is subject to the

continuous "play" of history, culture, and power. "The original 'Africa'," as Hall says, "is no longer there. It too has been transformed" ("cultural Identity" 117). In this sense, the origins of black identity have also been changed by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, and transformation, and to which blacks can never in any final or literal sense return. In his interview with Moyers, Wilson, therefore, says, "It's not a question of going back to Africa. It's to understand that Africa is in you, that is who you are, that you can participate, and that there isn't anything wrong with being an African" (173). He seeks to reckon Africa, but does not endeavor to recover it. It belongs irrevocably, for him and for the blacks in America, to what Edward Said once called an "imaginative geography and history," which helps, "the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the difference between what is close to it and what is far away" (*Orientalism* 55).

It is more from Wilson's second perspective that we can properly understand the traumatic nature of black experience in his plays. The ways in which black people were positioned in and subjected by the dominant regime were the effect of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization. Not only, in Said's "Orientalist" sense, were the blacks constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of

America, the white also had the power to make them see themselves as "Other." Every regime of representation, Foucault says, is a regime of power formed by the fatal couplet "Power/Knowledge." But this kind of knowledge, says Hall, "is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm" ("Cultural Identity" 112). This is the lesson of Wilson's insight into the black experience in his drama. He insists on reclaiming the rich legacy of a separate identity, while exploring simultaneously the possibilities of participation in a multicultural America.

The desire to uncover the historical reality of African-American past fuels Wilson's dramatic project: the unearthing of the context in which his dramas originated, evolved, and took on cultural significance. Wilson's act of resurrecting the "authentic" history is incompatible with the poststructuralist idea which claims that culture has lost a sense of historical consciousness of cause and effect. Postmodernists do not believe in teleological metanarratives. Fredric Jameson, in particular, sees literary postmodernism as a by-product of the

new world view according to which, as Kimberley C. Davis says, "our concept of history has become spatial or flattened out, and we inhabit a perpetual present in which images of the past are merely recycled with no understanding of their original context" (242). Similarly, Jean Baudrillard argues that mass media has neutralized reality for us and it has done so in stages: first reflecting, then masking reality, and then masking the absence of reality, and finally, bearing no relation to reality at all. Such stances of Jameson and Baudrillard have provoked numerous antagonists to speak out. Linda Hutcheon is one of them. In her two studies of "historiographic metafiction" Hutcheon argues that much of the postmodern fiction is still strongly invested in history, but more importantly in revising our sense of what history means and accomplishes. "The function of the conjunction of the historiographic and the metafictional in much contemporary fiction" she says, "is to make the reader aware of the distinction between the *events* of the past real and the *facts* by which we give meaning to that past, by which we assume to know it." To Baudrillard she replies, "postmodern art works to contest the 'simulacration' process of mass culture--not by denying it or lamenting it--but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality." In her opinion, it is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as

Baudrillard claims; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues. "We are not," she views, "witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what 'real' can mean and how we can know it" (*A Poetics* 223).

Wilson's treatment of history bears some similarity to Hutcheon's postmodern "historiographic metafiction," but his relationship to this discourse is affected by his aim to write what Morrison would call "black-topic" texts. In his desire to fill up a gap, neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of racially discriminated people, Wilson breaks the hierarchy of master historical narratives and raises by its side a "real" African-American history. He sees himself as a creative chronicler who reconstructs, while deconstructing "official history," by tapping the well of African-American "presence." Thus Wilson's dramas show a "both-and" dialectical, indeterminate character, a doubleness that draws the best from two otherwise opposed theoretical and political camps. While his project is informed by postmodernism's denaturalizing critique in demystifying master historical narratives, it is no less characterized by an African-American political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory and agency, of keeping an "essentialized" past alive through story telling and

representation in order to envision a better future. As an artist, Wilson has a great deal of faith in the power of new representation to redefine the perception of reality.

By doing so, Wilson foregrounds black suffering along with their struggle to survive, and seeks to rewrite black history as life lived, suggesting that a dramatic account of the interior life of black people might be substantially truer than "actual" documents which are mostly written from the perspective of dominant culture. He turns to "history" to make the African-American community understand the reality of their cultural heritage and their place in America. "History," according to Jay Plum, "theoretically is an open-ended discourse that does not constitute reality but provides a meaning, or an interpretation, of past events by an objective observer" (562). In practice, however, historians have often chosen and arranged events according to their own cultural bias and orientation, and made the so-called objectivity of history a fallacy. In writing American history, for example, historians (the majority of whom have been whites) have brought the experiences of white people to the center and marginalized the blacks'. Much of American history tends to be the story of white men whereas the story of black men and women recedes to the background. Wilson challenges this paradigm by contextualizing black experience

and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself: "I think Blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people." Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson narrates black American experience with a view to presenting "the familiar with a freshness and in a manner never quite seen before" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). His narrative deals with the cultural and esthetic imperative to construct a historical path into the cultural geographies of African-Americans. His plays, says Plum, are more than dramas "containing history"; they are active attempts to reconstruct the very methods and modes of the estheticized history. His history, stripped of its numbing informational qualities, demographic insistence, and subservience to pastness, thrives in the "fluid immediacy" of a story being told. He creates a counterdiscourse, a critical fiction more "authentic" than recorded history. His stories represent more than the possibility for experience; they are human history (561-62).

In his play, storytelling becomes the means by which Wilson creates drama out of history, not drama of history. Remote historical substrata establish his present-tense notion of history. He seeks to ground his narrative in the historical reality while simultaneously blending it with fiction. Or the

whole narrative may be a fiction, yet it provides a fresh perspective on the historical reality of black life in America. What he presents in his drama is certainly not a total history, but rather some historical moments, which he finds crucial to his project.

The complex model Wilson proposes for the black theater develops from his understanding of African myths and rituals as an alternative substantive category that can dislodge the fixed referent of the West. He makes his stories an integral part of the folk continuum authenticated by African symbology to reaffirm the ethnic kinship which invites spiritual renewal. The revival of a collective African memory helps him achieve an uncompromised expression of ethnic ethos in his creative process. His stories teach black people the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment. An artistic distillation of cultural memory, his stories afford blacks an opportunity to witness and comprehend their present affliction, to see themselves as those who endured and resisted oppressive powers, and to authenticate themselves not as sufferers but as survivors. In his work, Wilson lets the cultural perspective manifest itself as ghosts, divine revelations, and spirits that interact with the real world of common experience. Like Morrison, he is a mythmaker. He

creates his own mythic figure, who is an extranatural guide/seer leading other human characters to a discovery of the "song" that defines their being, their purpose in life, and their relationship with each other. "Wilson," says Trudier Harris, "adapts that pattern of human encountering otherworldly being from historical folklore" (50). In Yoruba mythology, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., Esu-Elegbara is one such otherworldly being. He "is the sole messenger of the gods, . . . interprets the will of the gods to man, . . . [and] carries the desires of man to the gods. Esu is the guardian of the crossroads . . ." (*Signifying* 6).

Walking along the road, Wilson's characters meet a stranger who offers to show them "the Secret of Life" and teach them how to find their "song." The stranger is able to serve as a guide on the unfamiliar road. Cleansing their hands with blood, he leads them to a "place where everything [is] bigger than life" (*Joe Turner's* 212) and leaves them there, disappearing in a light streaming from his body. Possession of this song confers on blacks both a new identity and a unique task in the world. Wilson also suggests that the shiny man [the guide] could be anybody because each individual possesses the potential for self-realization. By attributing a single characteristic to all black people, Wilson seeks to show that African-Americans are

indistinguishable from one another, that they are, in fact, not individual subjects but bodies that are ultimately the same body. In a fragmented community with the self-alienation of its members, such a stance might cohere its members and help them find their own identities through a past that is collective. A search for the self in the past is crucial for Wilson because he thinks that the past is one which can ground a self, that it was made by other selves whose agency can function as the precedent for and promise of one's own. "In imaginatively expanding traditional forms of the lore," says Harris, "Wilson shares kinship with Morrison, who also takes traditional forms, gives them new shapes, and bends them to her imaginative will throughout her novels" (50).

The folklore Wilson (re)creates helps him rewrite the history of the blacks tied to racism and repression and simultaneously to a strength that transcends those limitations. He encourages "a willing suspension of disbelief" about the nature of the lore he presents. He does not seek to "prove" the existence of certain phenomena; he simply presents them as if they were givens. In his drama, as Harris says, "A world exists; Wilson invites viewers into it. Instead of going to meet the audience by trying to prove belief in supernatural phenomena, Wilson unapologetically invites the audience to come

into his world, to rise to his level of belief" (50-51). Wilson thus successfully combines the naturalistic Western drama with the mystical, non-Western theater of ritual and metaphor. This dramaturgy of Wilson evokes Clive Barnes to say, "it is his gift for the seat-edgingly theatrical and thrillingly, mysteriously dramatic that has made him the most acclaimed playwright of his time" ("Piano Lesson" 455).

Wilson first came to prominence in the mid-1980s, with his fourth play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), which director Lloyd Richards was able to move from Yale Repertory Theater to the Cort Theater on Broadway. Wilson's dramatic and verbal imagination galvanized critics, and heralded a major new presence on the American stage. Gates Jr. acclaimed him as "probably the most celebrated American playwright . . . and is certainly the most accomplished black playwright in this nation's history" ("The Chitlin" 132). Wilson's political and artistic consciousness directly relates to the dynamics of the 1960s--an era which brought Black Arts Movement and Black Power concept together. With contempt for the discriminatory legislative process, the Black Power concept informed the civil rights movement and, as Krishnamoorthy says, "urged black people to acquire political and economic strength, and resort to violence and riots, if necessary, to realize their long deferred

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dreams. While Black Power propagated political nationalism, the Black Arts Movement . . . celebrated cultural nationalism" (35-36). The poetics accompanying the new ideological orientation underwent a "generational shift" during this period of political and cultural turbulence. Houston A. Baker Jr. defines this generational shift as "an ideologically motivated movement overseen by young or newly-emergent intellectuals who are dedicated to refuting the work of their intellectual predecessors and to establishing a new framework of intellectual inquiry" ("Shifts" 3). These intellectuals abandoned traditional integrationist poetics which aimed at bringing black literature and criticism in line with the American mainstream, and set up Black Aesthetic Theory, a poetics wholly indigenous to black culture, and politically committed to a separate identity for the blacks. As such the Black Arts Movement envisioned an art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of black America. In order to perform this task, it proposed a radical reordering of the Western cultural esthetic. It recommended a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology and addressed the African-American desire for self-determination and nationhood. It postulated that there are, in fact, and, in spirit, two Americans--one black, one white.

As a black artist, Wilson takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people. He reviews the black experience in the racist America and seeks to develop in his drama a "black esthetic" out of an African-American cultural tradition. He does this task by becoming more inward-looking, critical, and painstakingly analytic so that he can raise consciousness in blacks. Wilson's commitment to black esthetic is often accused of cultural chauvinism, and of retreat from universal human problems. But he responds to such accusation by arguing that racism in America still persists. In his interview with Gwen Ifill he says, "Black folks did not go through . . . [a] time of prosperity for . . . [long] in America." With reference to *King Hedley II* (1999), he further says: "America's not playing by the rules. The rules say that if you have the lowest bid on the contract, you're supposed to get the contract if you bid the lowest bid. So you're black and you bid the lowest bid, but you don't get the contract . . . so it's things like that." Therefore, Wilson thinks, "when you have a work of art that deals with a culture that's so seminal through black American culture, . . . you just simply have black sensibility behind the artistic development of that project" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 3-5).

Wilson became artistically and politically conscious amid the civil rights and Black Nationalist Movements of the 1960s. Among the black artists and intellectuals who influenced Wilson during the 1960s were Amiri Baraka and Malcolm X. "My own youth is fired in the kiln of black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties," says Wilson (Preface IX). Baraka's radical analysis of the issues with which the Black Arts Movement was concerned is the source of his impact on Wilson. Like Baraka, Wilson sees the power of the theater as giving reality to dreams, as serving as food for the hungry and, as Baraka says, as "propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind." Its function is religious--a summoning of the world spirit. Its purpose is to move people to an understanding "of what the world is; and what it ought to be" ("Revolutionary" 211). Baraka's plays that Wilson liked most were the ones published in the volume *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1969). It served, says Mark William Rocha, "as the main fare of the Black Horizons Theater of Pittsburgh, which Wilson founded with Rob Penny in 1968 and operated until 1972." "Wilson," Rocha further says, "not only subscribed to but also lived the well-known Barakan manifesto, 'The Revolutionary Theater'," directing many of Baraka's plays. The experience had a profound impact, for Wilson adapted three fundamental Barakan elements to his own

plays: "the motion of history as the emergence of the African 'Geist' out of the bones of the Middle Passage, the enactment of the ritual dance in which personal experience and racial history converge, and, most importantly, the quest for one's song that is ultimately realized in the blues" ("Four B's" 7-8).

Wilson, like Baraka, thinks that the true validation of black art must come from its reception by the black community and not from the reactions of white critics and audiences. He, therefore, pregnates his dramatic world with black issues and seeks to shatter the illusion of the American body politic-- blacks have become an integral part of American culture and civilization, and their fate is inextricably connected with it-- in order to awaken black people to the reality of their lives. He sees culture as the most important element in the struggle for self-determination. Similarly, it is Malcolm X's influence upon him that leads him to empathize with black nationalism. Like Malcolm X, he too urges African-Americans to break away from their psychological, cultural, and political dependence on white values. They should turn their efforts toward building their own world in terms of their own interest. In his interview with Kim Powers, he says that Malcolm X was the person who articulated for the first time "what the masses of Black people were saying on the street corners. It was all a part of

the people's lives; they had been given a platform, and there was an explosion of Black art and literature comparable to the Harlem Renaissance" (373). These influences locate Wilson in a tradition of African-American activists who have advanced the cause of their race through the reclamation of African cultural roots. By self-consciously authoring a history of his people, Wilson has followed a trajectory charted by his influential predecessors.

While adhering to the tradition, Wilson "positively discourages" it, to borrow Eliot's phrases, and makes his own place in the annals of black drama by realizing his "individual talent." His work, he says, is an attempt to confront "the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks and the way blacks look at themselves." By questioning the social malignity with sufficient metaphor but without conspicuous didacticism, Wilson has set himself apart from Baraka and Ed Bullins. "I can only do what I do because the '60s existed," Wilson reasons. "I am building off that original conflict" (qtd. in DeVries 376). Besides, in comparison with the polemic of Baraka, Bullins, and Malcolm X, Wilson's indictments are relatively mild. His characters never appear like menacing street people screaming obscenities. He takes the homeliest of locales and makes it a way station for the destiny of blacks.

As Freedman says, "Wilson gives words to trumpeters and trash men, cabbies and conjurers, boarders and landladies, all joined by a heritage of slavery. Their patois is his poetry, their dreams are his dramas" (447).

Wilson writes of the particulars of black life, elevating his anger to a more poetic plane. His characters confront blackness not as a function of color but as a condition of being and becoming, as a complex cultural reality of African-American heritage. The white man in his plays can be ignored, it is quality of life against which his characters rail. Unlike his more politicized predecessors, Wilson has created, as Freedman says, fallible humans, not simplistic paragons. His fictive families form bulwark against a hostile world, almost the same world as he himself encountered:

bricks through the window when the family tried moving into mostly white Hazelwood; "Nigger, go home" notes on his desk at an overwhelmingly white parochial high school; accusations of cheating when a term paper on Napoleon seemed a bit too good to have been done by a black boy. Hounded out of one school, frustrated by another, Wilson dropped out in the ninth grade. At the age of 15, his formal education had come to an end. (449)

Wilson carefully articulates the structures that inform his personal history and the forms that truthfully express, first, his own experience and second, collectively, the experience of his people. He then blends both the experiences with mystery and creates high drama in his plays. In order to get closer to "African retentiveness" he infuses his plays with African mysticism and folklore--ghosts, myths, chants, and spells. Wilson's "Africanism" serves as a vehicle for blacks in regulating love and the imagination as defenses against suffering. By it, as Morrison says, "the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52). It helps blacks to define their goals, to know blackness in relation as much to themselves as to others, and to display this knowledge to ease and to order external and internal chaos.

In Wilson's plays, the blues is what Baker Jr. identifies as "the process of discovering AMERICA in its relationship to Afro-American culture" (*Blues* 66). Wilson's discovery of Bessie Smith, the classical blues singer, and his understanding of her song's coded message made him what Baker Jr. calls a "blues detective," who is able to decipher black forms by looking to

"the limitless freedom of myth and fictive discourse . . ."

(*Blues* 122). The sign "AMERICA" signifies the broken promise of presence. All blues songs grew out of the awareness of the black American condition as the sign of an absence, a broken promise, and the blues is the form blacks invented to negotiate this absence. So when Wilson discovered the blues, he, in effect, discovered America in relation to all blacks. "In Wilson," says Rocha, "the blues is *the* American language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of an America that is always already absent" ("Four B's" 10). The blues in Wilson's drama is about black life and at the same time about the gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression. It is at the core of the daily life of his characters. It helps them to define the world in which they live and to work out their ideas about and attitude toward that world. Thus it is their means of healing emotional wounds on the one hand and a universal means of communicating on the other. Wilson in his interview with Moyers explains this crucial cultural element: "The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work" (168).

In his Preface to *Three Plays*, Wilson says that the blues provided him with an esthetic to deal his growing idea of himself as part of something larger. And it was not until he discovered the art of Romare Bearden that he was able to turn the blues into a narrative that would encompass all of the elements of culture and tradition. Bearden had accomplished in painting an expression as full and varied as the blues. Wilson's discovery of Bearden's work was somewhat akin to his discovery of Bessie Smith. "I try to explore, in terms of the life I know best, those things which are common to all cultures . . .," Bearden had said (qtd. in Wilson, Preface X). Wilson takes it as his credo and seeks to induct into his art the elements that define traditional African forms. In the selection of his theme and the portrayal of his characters, Wilson, like Bearden, incorporates the familiar into ritualistic drama recognizable and influential to his audience. He presents, as Bearden does, "a rainbow of the life cycle incorporating the past and the present, the dead and the yet-to-be-born, offering images and inspirations intended to heal the community" (Fishman 133). Like Bearden, he too offers conflict and struggle within the African context, "whose tragic understanding transcends the causes of individual disjunction and recognizes them as reflections of a far greater disharmony

in the communal psyche" (Soyinka 50). Blues finds its way into the work of both artists not only as subjects but also as technique. For both artists, the process of creation has an improvisatory quality, with experimental variations on a theme. Listening to Wilson's dialogue, one hears the soulfulness of the blues in the long speeches of the characters. Wilson sees, says Hedy Weiss, "Bearden's use of the collage . . . [as] the visual equivalent of blues--music that you sort of have to piece together as it jumps from one thing to the next" (7).

Slavery is the historical background out of which the spirituals and the blues were created. The spirituals deal with the theme of God and heaven, and are a communicative device for blacks about the possibilities of earthly freedom. In it, the image of heaven serves functionally to liberate the black mind from the existing values of white society, enabling blacks to think their own thoughts and do their own things. The blues, on the other hand, is closely related to "slave secular." Following the Emancipation and Reconstruction, it has invited black people to embrace the reality and truth of black experience. It expresses, as Sterling Brown says, "laments of folk Negroes over hard luck, 'careless' or unrequited love, broken family life, or general dissatisfaction with a cold and trouble-filled world" (qtd. in Cone 110). And implied in the

blues is a refusal to go beyond the existential problem. It is not that the blues rejects God; rather it "ignores" Him by embracing the joys and sorrows of life. Wilson has apparently chosen to focus on the oppression of African-Americans to symbolize the collective struggle of the community as such. Placing little faith in Christianity, he has adapted a rather secular ideology that the blues embodies. While Christianity has, for centuries, provided inspiration, strength, and moral principles for blacks, Wilson doubts if it will suit their needs. His work expresses his disavowal by challenging a white religion imposed on his ancestors. He says in his interview with Moyers, "in fact, what you do is worship an image of God which is white, which is the image of the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on the slave ships, who have beaten you, and who have forced you to work" (178).

Wilson's views on Christianity are close to that of his influential predecessor Baraka who, in his plays like *The Baptism* (1966), attacks Christianity and possibly the black church in particular for its impotent mixture of messianic dreams and political conservatism. Wilson's male protagonists, therefore, shift from devout Christian reverence to outright blasphemy--something that Joseph Washington labels as "folk religion" (qtd. in Shannon, "The Good Christian's" 380). This

religion was black people's communal response to economic, social, and racial oppression. Realizing that their white oppressors often quoted the scriptures to them to justify the so-called "ordained" subjugation, many blacks gave up the Bible, which did not serve their interests. "According to folk religion," says Shannon, "ethics and morals were determined by adhering to group consensus and by adapting as righteous certain accepted practices within the African American community; the Bible was not the focal point of 'folk religion'" ("The Good Christian's" 380). It is not difficult, therefore, to see that Wilson's men find greatest solace in the blues, not Christianity. It is more than a pastime for them. It is their collective means of communicating on the one hand and a means of healing emotional wounds on the other.

Although Wilson's stance on Christianity is sometimes critiqued, it is also a fact that he does not altogether deny the important role Christianity has played in bringing order and stability to the lives of blacks. In some of his plays, the raising of the next generation is left to those who espouse Christian ideology: for instance, to Rose in *Fences* and to Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*. Both characters are women and both are devoted Christians. While Wilson's men demonstrate their disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from

Christianity, his women are more involved with the church, participate in its events, and sing hymns. Explaining this polarity, Wilson, in his interview with Richard Pettengill, says that what "men and women wrestle with is the question of self-definition: women define themselves in terms other than the terms men define them in" (211). Obviously, Christianity is that "other" in terms of which Wilson's women seek to define themselves and continue their struggle for survival and liberation from the world where they have been doubly marginalized. His women have their spiritual beliefs remain rooted in the Christian religious tradition. On the same morning they go to church like good Christians and then come home to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits, or line up pennies across the threshold to keep witches at bay. What Wilson does reject is the prioritizing of Christian religion over African religions, particularly if Christianity blinds blacks to the stark realities of this world.

"The ground on which August Wilson stands," says Shannon, "has yielded a number of male characters. . . . Yet this very same ground has produced his African-American women." It is often alleged that he is "a playwright whose sensibilities are admittedly and understandably masculine." Despite his grounding in a decidedly male frame of reference, Wilson's portrayals of

women cover as wide a range as do those of his men. Although individually his female figures "tend to slip into comfort zones of what seem to be male-fantasized roles, collectively they show Wilson coming to grips with the depth and diversity of African American womanhood" ("The Ground" 151). It is important to note that, Daisy Wilson, the playwright's mother, is the model on which Wilson bases the majority of his women characters: "My mother's a very strong, principled woman," says Wilson. "My female characters like Rose come in large part from my mother" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 175). Thus they repeatedly reflect some degree of his mother's indomitable spirit, her maternal warmth, and her complete independence.

For most of Wilson's characters, Christianity somehow does not seem to blend fully with what many struggling African-Americans see as necessary survival tactics. Clearly, then, their opportunism is an extension of their personal code of survival. Their religion is either folk religion or a practical religion with the haunting overtones of Social Darwinism--survival for the fittest and self-preservation. These perspectives on life are for them the only means of sustenance in the face of dehumanizing poverty and failed careers. So when they fall into the pits of suffering, they create their own convenient laws--survival strategies. Their survival strategies

differ; depending upon the times they live in. These strategies are not only means of protecting themselves from racial vicissitudes but also explorations of the ways of participation in the land they were born and raised in.

In the 1910s, Wilson's characters are free men and women in the Northern cities, but their freedom unfortunately often turns into a "self-imposed" displacement and isolation, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South. To overcome this sense of disintegration, they envision themselves among their ancestors and commune ontologically with the past--an act of spiritual transformation that foreshadows their mission of personal and collective release. "While the condition of slavery and forced labor in the New World," says Paul Carter Harrison, "caused psychic and physical rupture, it resisted the cosmic vitiating of the true song, and spiritual resilience encouraged reclamation for the sake of liberation and freedom." If the renewal of spirit is to be made possible, the body must become transfigured. Thus the discernment of the ancestral experience offers these oppressed blacks, as what Harrison further says, "an opportunity to disregard flesh and spirit as opposing forces and to view their suffering in the context of a spiritual continuum that reassures physical liberation" (314).

The 1920s in Wilson's drama witnesses a brief spate of enthusiasm for black music. In the recording industry, opportunistic white promoters line their pockets from the sale of music albums of black artistes. In return what the musicians get is only a paltry wage. Though such exploitation has caused his black characters unspeakable psychic and physical trauma, it has nevertheless vitalized the true song to earn their liberation and freedom. As a survival strategy, blues empowers them with the strength to endure, to transcend the sense of disfranchisement that daily erodes the spirit. The blues is a part of the black legacy and an important element that sustains black life.

It is in the 1930s, for the first time, that Wilson introduces characters who are eager to return to the South. "This is significant," says Pereira, "for it marks a potential turning point in the fortunes of black people" (86). Earlier they had considered the North as their true destination. For the first time now blacks suggest that the South is their place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. It is a moment of black transmogrification that Wilson examines in his play, *The Piano Lesson*, set in this decade. The characters' heritage, a heritage of a dubious past, also becomes a self-serving voice and a promise of the future for them.

While exploitation of early blues musicians is a central subject of Wilson's dramas set in the 1920s, in the plays dealing with the 1940s it is made to ignite protest. His characters battle with society and themselves for self-worth. They become conscious of the discrepancy between promise and reality that fills them with pain and rage. Therefore, they try to resist discrimination and change their situation. To even the odds, they even arm themselves. Wilson sees their stance as political and revolutionary. They are about black power, self-determination.

In the plays centering on the 1950s, Wilson's characters are responsible and like the idea of the family. The sense of responsibility--for their own destiny as well as for their family--is pivotal for them, not only in its metaphysical ramifications but in its more pragmatic applications as well. "We have been told so many times how irresponsible we are as black males that I try and present positive images of responsibility," says Wilson (qtd. in Devries 377). Besides the institution of family, sports serves as another survival strategy for blacks in the 1950s. A Wilson character, Troy Maxon, finds in baseball a metaphor for survival. For him, life is a baseball game riddled with fastballs, curve balls, and sometimes uncontrolled balls. It gives him a new direction, a

renewed meaning, and an opportunity to redefine himself and prove that a black man can also do something meaningful and worthy. His quest for self-authentication and his will to protect his family help him negotiate social realities with an unusual gusto. It is indicative of a confident movement toward a positive individual and collective destiny, of a greater instinct for survival that would usher in changes in the decades to follow.

Wilson's characters of the 1960s are distrustful of the sound and fury surrounding the civil rights movement. Migration to the North has almost ended, and now blacks are as much northerners as any whites. Although some of them talk about their lost land in the South, most of the time they are busy struggling to make a living in the city. Their attention is focused on the present and future, the past being merely a distant memory. However, these blacks do not completely give up their past, since past is always crucial for them as it, says Wilson, "helps determine how to proceed with future" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Reclamation of the cultural past, for them, is a means of achieving a proper place in the white world. To underscore this concept, Wilson incorporates characters like Aunt Ester, a seer who claims to be 322 years old. She is the repository of all the struggles and victories of African-

Americans and epitomizes the value of racial memory and the power of the occult, which offset black despair and alienation. The 1960s was obviously an anxious time in the lives and fortunes of blacks in America, but this was also the time to think how they should best proceed in their struggle for basic human dignity.

Wilson's characters of the 1970s still live below the poverty line and for them America has no jobs. But unlike their predecessors, they are more assertive and self-scrutinizing. They look inward rather than looking out and pointing to others. They struggle to create jobs for themselves by using their limited sources. They follow and are bound by the rules and regulations, which they themselves have made. They are responsible for what they think and do. With their collective effort and sense of morality, they earn their living. Their stories reveal their solidarity and they resolve that they must walk their day with grace and nobility.

At a conference of the Theater Communication Group, held at Princeton University in June 1998, Wilson, reports Gates jr., declared that the American theater was "an instrument of white cultural hegemony," and the campaign to integrate it had only made things worse. The physical, spiritual, and moral "survival of black Americans demanded that they be given a stage of their

own. They needed their very own theaters the way they needed sunlight and oxygen." Wilson told his audience:

There are and have always been two distinct and parallel traditions in black art: that is, art that is conceived and designed to entertain white society, and art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America. The second tradition occurred when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center.

(qtd. in Gates Jr., "The Chitlin" 132)

Wilson differentiates between black artists who write for white audiences and those who write for black audiences, placing himself among the latter. As an African-American playwright, Wilson thinks that racism is still out there in America, under different guises. Therefore, he insists that the blacks tend their own souls and tell their truths for themselves. They must define and reveal themselves as individuals who are part of their own community.

Wilson's ideology is in contrast to the Egalitarian myth of America, which affirmed, particularly after World War II, that there would be no differences between the races, which were

likely to affect their social, cultural, and intellectual performance. Egalitarians argued openly for the possibility and desirability of the assimilation or integration of blacks into American life. These doctrines, of course, had great impact in that they provided a theoretical basis, in different ways though, for the integration and civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s respectively. By arguing that prejudice could be eliminated through education and legislation, the egalitarians raised hopes that America could become, in the relatively near future, a "color-blind" society. America "attempted to guarantee its social equilibrium and embarked on efforts to influence the non-Western world in behalf of its interests and ideology, overt and virulent intellectual racism came to be recognized as a dangerous liability" (Fredrickson 331). But events of the late 1960s served to raise doubts about the adequacy of such formulations. Wilson's ideology is the upshot of this inadequacy. He thinks that the black community is still in a dilemma. He metaphorically reveals this dilemma in his interview with Pettengill: "Two trains running, neither one going my way. One runs by night, one runs by day." He further says:

two ideas . . . have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation

and cultural separatism. . . . [For a black,] neither of these trains [is] working. He [has] to build a new railroad in order to get where he's going, because the trains are not going his way. (208)

Wilson seeks to build this "railroad" on the basis of an ethnic diversity which will at once respect difference and ensure participation in a distinct way. He thinks that black people's difficulty is that they have accepted the American Dream of success at its face value, that they are trapped, like Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Floyd Barton in *The Seven Guitars*, by the false dream. The result is a confused identity. Like Edgar Murphy, Wilson believes "if the blacks were given the opportunity for a self-sufficient social and cultural life on their own side of the color line, . . . they would develop their latent racial genius, evolve a worthy and distinct culture of their own, and, as a result, lose all desire to amalgamate with the whites" (qtd. in Fredrickson 294).

Controversial though his thought may be, Wilson energizes his audience by reminding them of the power of the theater to inform, to heal, and to reconstruct truth. He sincerely feels that black theater can "reignite and reunite our people's positive energy for a political and social change that is reflective of our spiritual truths rather than our economic

fallacies" ("The Ground" 73). But it remains to be seen whether this can happen in an integrated theater or whether only black theater can achieve this goal. More importantly, Wilson's self-image as a black playwright and his views on the distinctive character of black theater are not necessarily in conflict with his desire to be remembered as "August Wilson, playwright". Asked by Ifill in 2001 whether he prefers to be known as "the great African American playwright or the great American playwright," Wilson replies: "I . . . view my plays as belonging . . . to theatrical literature" He clarifies his remarks in the next few lines:

Yes, of course, and I mean, I am. I mean, I am. I'm a black American playwright. You know, I couldn't deny it. I couldn't be anything else. I make my art out of black American culture, all cut out of the same cloth, if you will, you know. That's who I am, that's who I write about. You know, in the same manner that Chekhov wrote about the Russians, I write about blacks. So there's no reason why you can't say "August Wilson, playwright"--even though all of my work, every single play, is about black Americans, about black American culture, about the black experience in America, you know? "August Wilson,

playwright." I write about the black experience of men, or I write about black folks. That's who I am. I couldn't do anything else. I wouldn't do anything else. (5)

Wilson, whose plays center on conflicts not only between blacks and whites but between blacks who embrace their African past and those who deny it, certainly does not deny his own roots. What he wanted to mean is that "the universals [do not exist only] outside of Black life" ("Interview with Gwen Ifill" 9). He writes about the black experience in America, and contained within that experience, because it is a human experience, are all the universalities. This may imply a shift from his earlier view of black theater with the sole objective to raise black consciousness, but equally significant is his sense of pride in having brought the black theater (his own in particular) on a par with mainstream American theater artistically, and proved black experience and culture as an inseparable part of American experience and culture. Like Suzan-Lori Parks, Wilson also thinks that though blacks still need to talk about themselves in contrast to whites, they now equally need to talk about themselves in relation to themselves to give their life and literature a new stamp of authenticity that would compel wider attention (*Span* 42-44). This element of self-introspection

informs many of Wilson's plays which, while rooted in black experience, never fail to have a universal appeal.

Chapter II

Between Slavery and Freedom: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Following the Reconstruction period in the South and then the 1896 Supreme Court ruling about the "separate but equal" status, the Southern states began to impose segregation and enforce Jim Crow laws by rewriting each state's constitution, legislating an exclusionist policy toward African-Americans. "By 1907," as Bogumil says, "many African-Americans had moved to Northern industrial cities to escape the impact of this constitutional discrimination and to find work other than that of itinerant sharecroppers and docile servants." With the huge migration came feelings of displacement to many of those who were former slaves and the sons and daughters of those slaves. "These feelings," she further says, "were symptomatic reactions to their new social climate. While the African Americans were now free men and women in the North, their freedom unfortunately often took the form of a self-imposed isolation, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South" ("Tomorrow Never" 390).

This historical sense of displacement has been dramatized in its entire psychological vicissitudes in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), set in a boardinghouse in 1911 Pittsburgh. The play deals with the ways in which the displacement launches the

destinies of blacks in urban America. Its characters are sons and daughters of newly freed slaves seeking to make a place for themselves in an environment which is polyethnic and certainly hostile. "Foreigners" in a strange land, they are in search of their voice, a "song," which will enable them to survive with their own individual and cultural identities, a song that, perhaps, will lead them down the "right road" to a new future.

In the play, the apparent endlessness of individual quest is associated with the nature of displacement that launches the search. Each individual quest is, therefore, like a journey in search of something intangible and mystical. They are all, in one way or another, searching for themselves--a search which can only reach a successful end when the past is carried forward into the present and the future. No doubt, they are unable to go back along the path of a lost past; instead, they must use signposts of a remembered past to find out the way in which they should direct their footsteps to a new future. The innumerable references to roads, traveling feet--as well as the constant coming and going of characters in and out of the boardinghouse--create the effect of a restless world. "Against this backdrop," says Pereira, "these characters appear as archetypes reflecting countless blacks in similar circumstances--a whole race of

people somewhere out there on a pilgrimage toward self-fulfillment" (63).

The quest for self-authentication is focused chiefly on the protagonist, Herald Loomis, a former deacon struggling to emerge from white oppression vividly symbolized in the fabled Tennessee bounty hunter, Joe Turner. Wilson sees seven years of Loomis's servitude to Joe Turner as metaphorical, as representative of all the years of African-American slavery, and Loomis's search as emblematic of the need of the newly freed slaves to reconnect with their families and themselves. Loomis, says Wilson, is "driven . . . by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself. He is unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him, and seeks to recreate the world into one that contains his image" (*Joe Turner's* 216). Bynum Walker, the conjurer in the play, calls his quest a search for his song: "See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it . . . till he find out he's got it with him all the time" (*Joe Turner's* 268). Without this song he is doomed to wander through life aimlessly, unaware of who he is or what his purpose may be. This song is the music of his--and, of course, of all black people--essential nature, his true identity. And that identity, with its special rhythms, charts the course of his survival. Each individual's song is distinctive, with its

power deriving from the distinctive blend of each person's characteristics. Bynum himself has the Binding Song; his father had the Healing Song. Father made the individual whole; the son does the same for relationships.

Seven years of slavery has denied Loomis his human rights and reduced him to Joe Turner's property. When he is freed, he experiences the predicament of a newly freed slave. Displaced of his roots, without family, home, or job, he is in an environment that still fails to recognize him as human. Although he is looking to start anew, his present circumstances replicate the past. Under such conditions, he comes to assume that the future lies elsewhere. He goes off on a search to find a "starting place" for remaking the self. Once on the road, he begins to experience the suffering of his forefathers who were separated from their tribes. But while their suffering gave them a new religion in Christianity, his imprisonment slowly strips him of his adopted faith. Once concerned about saving the lost souls of gamblers, he now wants no part of what Wilson calls "the white man's God" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 178). Forced by his ordeal to confront his African self, he begins to discover that self-empowerment can occur only with the full realization of his African identity. But standing in his way is the disturbing presence of his "Christian self symbolized in the

Holy Ghost, all the more anathematic to him because his wife has left him for the Evangelist church" (Pereira 73). His spiritual crisis deepens in Seth Holly's boardinghouse when the lodgers perform a variant of the "ring shout" configured as the Juba dance, which, according to Anderson, is "an Afro-Christian ritual in which frenzied dance and ecstatic shouts mediated an experience of possession or inspiration by the Holy Ghost" (452). He is, hurled one way, then the other, and soon is overtaken by a haunting vision of bones walking across the ocean and then sinking back into the water. They rise again from their watery graves, march on the ocean's surface, and, when they are finally washed ashore, Loomis sees that they get flesh on them and that they are black people like him. Then they separate from one another and take different paths, embarking on a long afflicting journey. These bones symbolize African slaves, Loomis's ancestors who perished in the holds of slave-ships and whose bodies were thrown into the Atlantic Ocean. These "dead Africans," says Pereira, "never made it physically across the water but are an integral part of the whole black experience in America" (74). In a massive racial struggle for survival, these blacks were the first victims of an exploitative white culture. For Wilson, their reminiscence is a link between

the old African tradition and an emerging African-American identity.

To understand his true destiny in America Loomis must relive the whole experience of his race. He must understand, as Harrison says, that "despite the trauma of slavery and the consequent degradation of the body, the ancestors achieve spiritual ascendancy as they 'walk on water' and arrive in the New World with flash on their bones. Inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors . . . is the true song of redemption and liberation" (314). And once Loomis bears witness to the true song in the vision of the ancestors, he can become part of this spirituality for his own redemption. He understands the past in relation to his victimization and rejects the charges of worthlessness which oppression forced upon him. He becomes strong enough to say "goodbye" to what he has lost and reclaim the self that Joe Turner has not been able to take away fully. What Loomis has lost is the life he had with his wife, Martha, before Joe Turner came. He does not reclaim that life except as a past that comes back only to be left behind. On finding Martha, he says: "I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together" (*Joe Turner's* 284). Loomis says goodbye to Martha, but this goodbye is everything.

By relinquishing the past, he also reclaims it as his own, in a sense, nullifying Joe Turner's expropriation. His declaration, "Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for no binding" (*Joe Turner's* 286), transforms the meaning of the words sung by women whose men had been taken away. The words no longer communicate present loss but consign Joe Turner to a history of which Loomis is the subject. Repossessed of the past, Loomis is no longer its victim but the measure of its meaning, free to judge it and reject what seems false, including the Christian faith that his wife tries to lead him back to. He rejects Christian promises of salvation as complicit with African-American historical oppression and declaring, "I don't need nobody to bleed for me!" (*Joe Turner's* 288), slashes himself across the chest. "Loomis's blasphemy and bloodletting," says Shannon, "represent an extreme denunciation of Christian belief by an African American and an extreme act to compensate its loss." Loomis is, no doubt, a tormented African-American man; yet, instead of renewing his faith in God, he not only viciously blasphemes Him but also resorts to self-infliction as a measure of his disgust. "Loomis's self-flagellation," Shannon further says, "forces one to examine this man and others like him within the entire context of their sufferings--internal and external. They each stagger from the

weight of antagonistic forces around them, which seem to favor their being nomads rather than the crucial cohesive element in their families" ("Good Christian" 385). In the case of Loomis, however, this declaration of self-sufficiency, together with his break with the pieties of Christianity, is also one which reconnects him with a collective identity and a heritage of self-empowerment. Reclaiming himself and translating a collective past into the present, he becomes indeed the shiny man who knows his own song and, "shining like new money" (*Joe Turner's* 289), shows the way.

Bynum's search is not the same as Loomis's. Loomis searches for himself through recovery of the past; Bynum is dedicated to finding what he calls another Shiny Man, who can guide him and validate the efficiency of his own song. Though Bynum and Loomis represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their personal search, their destinies are intertwined. The search for the Shiny Man is a collaborative and, indeed, a collective project; for the self is enmeshed in a past that is held in common with others. The first Shiny Man Bynum met on the road many years ago seemed to emanate light. The Shiny Man gave him "the Secret of Life" and showed him the path he was to follow on a journey that would not be complete until he discovered another Shiny Man. Bynum's encounter with his Shiny

Man connected him to a large continuum in which he found his song. He chose the Binding Song: "Been binding people together ever since. That's why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together" (*Joe Turner's* 213). Discovery of another Shiny Man will indicate to Bynum that he has completed his life's work. Having built his future from the stones of his past, Bynum will have left his mark on society and he will have fulfilled his destiny. He, therefore, devotes all his energy to his mission. All he needs now is another Shiny Man to give approval to his work, to corroborate his belief that he can survive as a mender of broken relationships.

Reading Bynum's story in the light of African mythology suggests that the Shiny Man who guided him toward his song and then disappeared in blinding light must be Odu Ifa, who, according to Clara Odugbesan, "is a mythological deity of the Ifa tradition in Yoruban Cosmology." Odugbesan describes Ifa "not as a deity to be worshipped, but as an oracle from which people try to obtain certainty from uncertainty in any human problem . . ." (202). Bynum himself, according to this paradigm, owes his mythological ancestry to the Ifa tradition and his Binding song is the task of uniting African-Americans. He too is the oracular voice from whom the other characters seek affirmation and solutions in this world of upheavals. Bynum

hopes to see the Shiny Man again. If the Shiny Man is a guide, he is not an otherworldly or even exceptional individual. As Bynum tells Selig, a white peddler, "I ain't even so sure he's one special fellow. That shine would pass on to anybody. He could be anybody shining" (*Joe Turner's* 211). The Shiny Man is an ordinary man who, possessing his song as "a voice inside him telling him which way to go . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 212), is able to guide others toward repossession of their songs, toward becoming shiny men in their own right. And since that shine could pass on to anybody, says Anderson, "the shiny man is also the individual who has not yet found his song, one who searches for himself. That search takes place in the world, and for Bynum to see the shiny man "again" means assisting that search by acting as the shiny-man guide to another. Seeing the shiny man again does not entail Bynum's deliverance from the world but confirmation of his contribution to it" (449). As Bynum's father told him, "there was lots of shiny men and if I ever saw one again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 213).

In addition to making his own search, Bynum is a spiritual agent for all the other characters, a catalyst for their search. As a true guardian angel, he becomes deeply involved with the

person he is trying to help. He joins only those people who are meant to be together: "I'm a Binder of What Clings. You got to find out if they cling first. You can't bind what don't cling" (*Joe Turner's* 213). He tells Mattie Campbell that he can put a spell on her husband, Jack Carper, to return, but he warns against bringing back a person, who "ain't supposed to come back. And if he ain't supposed to come back . . . then he'll be in your bed one morning and it'll come up on him that he's in the wrong place. That he's lost outside of time from his place that he's supposed to be in. Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and ain't no way for you to get back into it" (*Joe Turner's* 223).

Bynum believes that in this dismembered world of black people only healthy relationships are worth preserving. The search for one's song is a quest for spiritual transcendence, a sensitive journey into the innermost depths of one's being in pursuit of self-affirmation. Only people truly committed to each other can undertake such a journey. The conflict between Mattie and Carper over the loss of their babies has separated forever his destiny from hers, and his path now leads him to someone else. Bynum intuitively knows that Mattie's relationship with Carper is potentially destructive and that her only way is to break free. Mattie must survive for herself. Her two children are

dead and there is nothing that can bind her to Carper. Somehow she needs to separate herself from him just as he has separated himself from her. This is difficult for Mattie to accomplish herself. But Bynum, reaching deep into Mattie's African roots, brings succor to her and helps her push Carper off her mind. Before offering the solution, he hints that she may soon find a replacement for her lost husband: "Jack Carper gone off to where he belong. There's somebody searching for your doorstep right now" (*Joe Turner's* 225).

Where Bynum owes his mythological ancestry to Ifa, Loomis owes his to Eshu-Eligbara, who, according to Harrison, is "the trickster deity of Yoruba mythology" (302). In a way Eshu and Ifa are opposites, as Odugbesan points out:

The roles of Eshu and Ifa within the cosmological system of ideas are diametrically opposed to one another. Ifa is a system whose function is to promote orderliness in the world, one that corrects all wrongs by mediating between men and gods for good, and produces certainty where there is uncertainty. Eshu, on the other hand, is associated with disorderliness and confusion. . . . Both Eshu and Ifa mediate between men and their gods; but while one [Eshu] disrupts

relationship between them, the other [Ifa] consolidates it. (201)

These two traditions operate simultaneously within the African-American cosmology like Apollo and Dionysus in ancient Greece. Although Eshu is opposed to Ifa, Africans discovered that both forces needed to be present together in their culture. Gates Jr. says, "Esu is the path [or route] to Ifa" (*Signifying* 15). Each of them alone would present a one-dimensional world of either order or chaos. Together they symbolize the complexities of living that derive from daily renegotiations of the very oppositions represented by them. In fact, the term "opposition" is almost a misnomer; rather the forces appear to be complementary entities in a complex cultural system. Being descendants of two opposing ancestries, Bynum and Loomis have significantly different natures. The former is guided by reason, the later by emotion. It is natural that they finally achieve individual authentication only by working together. Bynum's cooperation facilitates Loomis's step toward establishing independence, Loomis's assistance enables Bynum to get his Shiny Man. Though Bynum has no tangible involvement in the search for Martha, below the surface it is Bynum's magic that brings Loomis and his wife together--not because they can reunite, for neither wishes to do so, but because Loomis can end

his search and Zonia, their daughter, can be with her mother again.

While Loomis realizes his personal servitude, he does not recognize initially the connection he has with the enslaved whom he sees in his haunting vision of bones walking on the ocean water. He wants to walk with them, but is unable to stand up. This is a crucial revelation of Loomis's dilemma; he cannot join those on the road, though he wants to. He is unable to accept what the vision is revealing to him--that slavery is his history, too, that these people are his people, and that he must acknowledge his past if he is to establish his place in the world and move effectively into the future. But when Bynum encourages Loomis to discuss his past and tells him he must find his song in himself and bring it out, Loomis begins to understand: "You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It's right there kicking at your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free" (*Joe Turner's* 287). By recognizing Bynum's mystical power, Loomis takes steps toward accepting his past and achieving a meaningful life. In all of Loomis's interaction with Bynum, Wilson seeks to clarify Loomis's progress toward his salvation--a salvation which comes from recognition and acceptance of one's personal and cultural past. Subsequently,

when Loomis slashes himself across the chest and rubs his cleansing blood over his face, he performs a ritual. Harrison's suggestion that this bloodletting is a reenactment of "the Osirian mythos, which invites the death of the body in order to allow for the resurrection of the spirit/body . . . ," locates this ritual firmly within the African cosmology. Loomis's self-infliction symbolizes insightful "death." For his "body," as Harrison says, "becomes the seeding of the new soul, the body glided with the precious life-force--blood--until it shines like the armor of pure song/spirit." Such discernment of ancestral experience in Harrison's view "offers the oppressed an opportunity to disregard flesh and spirit as opposing forces and to view their suffering in the context of a spiritual continuum that reassures physical liberation" (313-14). Bynum recognizes this blood-cleansing as a reenactment of his Shiny Man's ritual, and, as Loomis runs from the room, Bynum knows that his own search has also ended. He has found his Shiny Man: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (*Joe Turner's* 289). Loomis's first name, Herald, partakes of the significance of the title of the Shiny Man--one who goes before and shows the way. Thus, Bynum and Loomis achieve together individual affirmation and collective rapprochement.

Bynum is a Binder. He has the power to bring people together--a power derived from faith and strength of spirit. The other character in the play that brings people together is, of course, Selig, the People Finder, who accidentally discovers people's lost relatives while selling pots and pans. Selig is the one to find Loomis's wife and bring her back to the boardinghouse. Both men's skill at bringing people together has been passed on through generations, and both men retain something of the character of their forebears. Bynum's father helped Bynum find his Binding song. Selig's grandfather was a "bringer" working on the ships, which transported Africans into slavery. From his blood, his past, Bynum drew enlightenment, while Selig has inherited a kind of blindness. But "Selig," for Wilson, "is not evil at all. In fact, he's performing a very valuable service for the community" ("Interview with Kim Powers" 374). Despite Wilson's sympathy, Selig's job is no less malicious than the jobs held by his grandfather and father. He creates his own advantages out of the "peculiar situation" of the blacks. To be "found" by him, a black man and woman must first buy something from him. Selig's control over this human exchange is even more extensive in that he represents the institutions and practices that initially reduced blacks to property. As Seth Holly's wife, Bertha, points out:

You can call him a People Finder if you want to. I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too. He done carried a whole bunch of them away from here. Folks plan on leaving plan by Selig's timing. They wait till he get ready to go, then they hitch a ride on his wagon. Then he charge folks a dollar to tell them where he took them. Now, that's the truth of Rutherford Selig. This old People Finding business is for the birds. He ain't never found nobody he ain't took away. (*Joe Turner's* 240-41)

This characterization connects Selig more with Joe Turner. The economic system represented by Selig, a system that exploits and excludes blacks, is one that thrives on white oppression. He is the representative of those economic forces, which not only exploit blacks but also deny them their intrinsic worth as humans. Though these forces may not be self-consciously evil, the injury they inflict through indifferent exploitation resembles that inflicted by Joe Turner's direct oppression. Selig cannot find the Shiny Man because neither he nor the economic system he represents is able to recognize African-Americans as persons or individuals. The Shiny Man's spiritual or inner shine cannot be discovered materialistically. Bynum uses Selig to find the Shiny Man, but he does not rely on him.

Having found their song, the song of self-sufficiency, and accepting the responsibility for their own presence in the world, Loomis and Bynum are free. The fact that they are free, however, poses a major dilemma, for we are left to wonder if blacks will ever move past the shadow of slavery. Seth's condition is a case in point. Seth is a black man who was born and brought up in the North. He is a man of position in Pittsburgh. He is a skilled craftsman and has stability that none of the other black characters have. This stability becomes more apparent when we observe it against the dislocated lives of those around him. His long uninterrupted conjugal life is surrounded by broken relationships, and his trade gives him a solidity that other wandering blacks lack. Indeed, Seth is the most socially established of Wilson's characters: "The fact that he [Seth] owns the boardinghouse and that he is a craftsman, that he has a skill other than farming, sets him apart from the other characters," says Wilson ("Interview with Kim Powers" 373). Despite this financial security, he too is vulnerable to a white society bent on extracting what it can from him and limiting his economic opportunities. He says, "[Whites] want me to sign over the house to borrow five hundred dollars. . . . Sign it over to them and then I won't have nothing" (*Joe Turner's* 243). While he has a firm sense of his social role as

a black northern businessman, he knows this security is tenuous; it has to be reaffirmed every day. Working almost twenty-four hours a day is not enough. He lags economically behind even those whites who have recently come to the city from all over the world. He is keenly aware of the predicaments of blacks in the North. He, therefore, knows what is going to happen to those who are still unaware of their destiny and who have arrived here with "their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, . . ." (*Joe Turner's* 203). Mark his snort of disgust at their innocence: "niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. . . . Niggers coming up here from the backwoods . . . coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening" (*Joe Turner's* 209). If life is so difficult for a black man born and raised in the city, it will be virtually devastating for the innocent blacks who are still in the streets with the hope to survive in an "urban jungle" (Pereira 58).

Jeremy Furlow is one such yokel who falls easy prey to city predators like the police, who have their own methods of clearing the overpopulated streets--rounding up blacks like cattle, arresting them, and herding them off the streets. At the work place, blacks are bullied unmercifully into giving white men some part of their salary to hold on to their jobs.

In case of resistance, they are fired. Jeremy is fired from his job because he will not yield to a white extortionist. But then Molly tells him ironically that it will be easy to get his job back if he returns the next day and signs up again, for no one will recognize him as the man who was fired the day before. To urban whites, blacks are just an anonymous herd of faceless people, as indistinguishable from one another as animals in a field. Jeremy is also in continual danger of being dispossessed of his song.

The female characters in the play are in search of permanent relationships and stability in their life. Mattie wants to settle down, to link her fate with one man in a lasting relationship. Though the setbacks in her search for companionship have dimmed her optimism, they have not shaken her faith in the possibility of love. On Bynum's advice, she is willing to take yet another chance on love, even though Jeremy is not exactly her kindred spirit. Her interest peaks when she learns that he is a guitar player--the blues may be just what her bruised spirits need, and if this man can bring the blues to her she will welcome him, most heartily. But Mattie and Jeremy are not traveling in the same direction. They are essentially different, with different sensibilities and different goals. Mattie wants to settle down, but Jeremy has to travel. Bynum

immediately senses this incompatibility. He knows that they are not meant to be together. When Jeremy announces that Mattie is going to move in with him, Bynum thinks she could be making a mistake. And Jeremy drops Mattie the minute a more attractive woman, Molly Cunningham, comes along. Mattie's need for a man and a family brings her into contact with Loomis. Though she is not, ultimately, attractive to Jeremy, she is to Loomis. "In some ways," as Pereira says, "Mattie and Loomis are kindred spirits embarked on similar pilgrimages" (76). Mattie's search for her husband has become, under Bynum's gentle prodding, a search for a man who, in Bertha's words, has "some understanding and [is] willing to work with that understanding to come to the best he can" (*Joe Turner's* 272). In other words, Mattie looks for a man not like Jeremy who is needed to go out and garner some more life experiences, but a man who has discovered himself. Loomis, on his part, is searching for his wife, but he sees in Mattie someone who could fill the empty spaces in his life. "As each of them gropes toward a new identity," Pereira further says, "they appear to be headed in the same direction. But they must first take that final step toward self-empowerment; they have to affirm their individual identities separately before beginning a journey together . . ." (76).

Like Mattie, the twenty-six-year old Molly is lonely, but there the similarity ends. Where Mattie wants a family to support her, Molly takes the family as a burden, which she claims killed her mother. Molly's independent spirit revolts against all the things Mattie holds dear. She too is the product of a broken relationship. Her experience has taught her not to trust anybody "but the good Lord above, and [her] mamma" (*Joe Turner's* 260). Her search for self-authentication has made her undertake a journey away from the South. Jeremy finds her nomadic spirit attractive and appreciates her self-assertiveness. She is a free soul, quite able to take care of herself, certainly not one of the desperate women Jeremy sought to avoid. She can well be the companion of the itinerant bluesman. Both are looking for companionship but neither wants to be tied to one place. So they join the throngs that wander along the roads and byways from town to town, "seeking . . . a new identity as free men [and women] of definite and sincere worth" (*Joe Turner's* 203).

If Mattie and Molly are in search of their own songs, a sense of spiritual and emotional stability in their lives, albeit along different paths, Bertha seems to have found what she wants out of life. A dedicated, hardworking, boundless source of maternal strength, sustenance, and sage advice, she is

the stereotypical nurturing black matriarch. Seth is the most prosperous black man in the play, and his prosperity is shown to be linked to the self-sacrifice and fortitude of his wife. Bertha is thus made the alpha and omega for the black man's search for selfhood. She derives her strength from two religious traditions perfectly synthesized in her soul. On the same Sunday morning she goes to church like a good Christian and then comes home to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits, or line up pennies across the threshold to keep witches at bay. Having embraced Christianity, she still remains "connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory" (*Joe Turner's* 283) to a tradition and culture whose descendant she is. It is from these traditional customs that she fashions an elixir for all sadness--laughter resonates even amid the torments.

Zonia has a significant role in the play. As voiced by a child on the verge of adolescence, her unique rendition of the blues is encoded with or "constitutes" what Baker Jr. calls "the amalgam" of purposes of the blues. Her songs represent the "always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (*Blues* 5). She acts as her father's guide in his interaction with other characters; and, in turn, she serves them as a guide into her father's

enigmatic character. Her blues is emblematic of her relationship with her father, for she must accompany him on his travels in search of her mother. And at the same time, it affords her a certain distance from her trouble and thereby offers her a liberating catharsis.

Martha is a devoted Christian. While her husband demonstrates his disavowal by challenging and withdrawing from Christianity, she is more involved with the church. After waiting years for her husband to return, she was forced to give him up for dead. The Evangelist church helped her pick up the pieces of her life, and she owes it allegiance. Finally, when she meets her husband, both of them realize that their lives are different now, that there is no compelling bond between them anymore. They say goodbye to each other. But the goodbye is also a reconciliation, because it is the moment of new displacement that will lead to self-affirmation and survival. For Martha, it is the culmination of her search: she makes her peace with her husband and is reunited with her daughter. For Loomis, it is the moment of closing the book on his earlier life and of moving toward a new future.

Most of the female characters in the play, as Bogumil observes, "represent the dissolution of a myth--a simplified, traditional . . . portrait of women as merely doting mothers

. . .” (*Understanding* 72). Simply stated, each woman is psychologically more complex than the creatures that dwell within such a mythic construct. Each woman’s interaction with the “Joe Turners,” as a suffering African-American, leads her to discover for herself a song that sustains her in the face of odds.

Thus, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* addresses the issues of uprooted African-Americans, who, as a culture, have been “enslaved” both physically and psychologically. But at the same time, it explores how they struggle to rise above the non-human status imposed upon them by reclaiming the past and bringing it into the present. To search for this past, and to accept it, is life’s most important journey, for only through this journey can one achieve an understanding of oneself and survive better as a human being.

Chapter III

The Politics of the Culture Industry: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

In the 1920s blacks became self-assertive and racially conscious as if for the first time. The clearest expression of that moment of change is found in the remarkable outpouring of blues music. It seemed that blacks discovered themselves through their music, and it was their spirit, which heralded the Jazz age. But ironically, while black performers were denied access to public facilities, their white fans were welcomed in the exclusively white entertainment halls where blacks danced and played their Jazz for them. Needless to say, blacks were still hardly more independent than they had been a century ago. While they had a vision of social and economic freedom, they were mostly reliving the same unhappy experiences.

It is this era in which Wilson sets *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984). The action of the play centers on a recording session by Ma Rainey, the blues singer, and her band in a Chicago studio. As the drama unfolds, we observe the vulnerable state of African-American blues musicians creating music in a decade when majority of the country's African-American population have been preoccupied with moving to crowded urban areas. Though slavery no longer exists, exploitations continue in newer guises. White producers of recording studios have been

profiting from the "race" division of their enterprise by co-opting black artists and capitalizing on the new market of consumers. In so doing, they have corrupted the blues, a source of African-American cultural knowledge and sustenance, into an instrument of racial exploitation. They have openly turned it into an industry obeying the same rules of production as any other production of commodities. Under the capitalist dominance, they have controlled all the means of blues production, obligating black performers to please them in anyway they like. A glaring instance of a precarious business arrangement made to have an absolute economic control over the black artists and an outstanding denial of faith in the equality of humankind can be observed in the following conversation held between the producer, Sturdyvant, and his manager, Irvin, on the subject of dealing with Ma Rainey:

STURDYVANT. She's your responsibility. I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit!

IRVIN. Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.

STURDYVANT. I don't care what she calls herself. I'm not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here . . . record those songs on that list . . . and

get her out. Just like clockwork, huh?

(*Ma Rainey's* 12)

The play rejects the conviction of the American Dream on the ground that it has made difficult for African-Americans to achieve a state of self-actualization. It resists the egalitarian myth of America as a land of endless opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on the economic and racial exploitations of African-Americans, and frequently echoes Wilson's reservations about the dangers of assimilation.

Contrary to its title, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is not really about Ma Rainey, the real blues singer. Born in 1886, in Columbus, Georgia, Ma Rainey, says Saunders, was "privy to the work songs, field hollers, and ballads out of which the classic blues tradition grew. By 1900, she had begun her stage career with the Bunch of Blackberries Revue, and for the next two decades she performed with many black minstrel troupes." In those early days, her repertoire included songs such as "I Ain't Got Nobody" and "See, See Rider," the latter a song she would become the first singer ever to record. "Though she was not," Saunders further says, "the first singer to make a recording, she was part of the 'race' record phenomenon of the 1920s that saw blues singers rise to a level of popularity that had heretofore never been achieved" (3). Even though the play

revolves around the life of this blues legend Ma Rainey, Wilson includes her not as a leading lady but rather as a less conspicuous though uninhibited commentator on the callous, white-controlled music industry.

When Wilson's Ma Rainey does appear in the play, she makes a grand entrance. Accompanied by stuttering nephew, Sylvester, and high-style friend Dussie Mae, she enters the studio like an ocean liner entering the port. Once in the studio, she takes charge ordering her manager and the record producer to do her bidding. She refuses to sing until someone goes out to get her Coca-Cola. She demonstrates a practical understanding of the material hierarchy and her place within it. Recognizing that the purpose of the recording session is to record her song, she does not allow herself to be objectified but uses her position as desired musical commodity to legitimate her authority. She reminds Irvin, "What band? The band work for me! I say what goes!" (*Ma Rainey's* 60). But under this ludicrous "imitation" of white stardom, we see Ma Rainey a helpless woman carrying a legacy of unspeakable agony. For her, independence is not without cost. Despite her veneer of indomitability, she must struggle against the interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression. Her entrance in the play is delayed because of an altercation with the police and a white cab driver. As a black

person in Chicago in 1927, she is unable to hail a cab. In a rare reflective moment, she pours out her tale of woe:

They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. . . . As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on.

Ain't got no use for me then. (*Ma Rainey's* 64)

Ma Rainey's words reflect the bitterness of a black woman who has to struggle against a hostile society that gives nothing but seeks to grab what she has. In the absence of economic security, she has been left with no option but to submit to the ruling whites--a submission that takes away all direct contracts from her, perpetuating the deprivation. Wherever she goes she gets much the same masters, who have their own ways of running the system with a view to serving their selfish ends. She suffers the double jeopardy that stems from her being a black woman. She has not only been exploited and degraded by white male studio executives but also frequently threatened by the macho rivalry of Levee, the young trumpeter of her band, who is ever ready to replace her music with his flashier rhythms of swing. Her inclination to live in close communion with blues is incessantly thwarted by his autonomous, authorial, and entrepreneurial will.

Fully aware of the extent to which she is being exploited, however, Ma Rainey uses her exploitation to her advantage whenever she can. To cite just one example, although she does not deliberately disrupt Irvin and Sturdyvant's plan to run the recording session "just like clockwork," when she finally arrives at the studio she takes advantage of the commotion caused by the automobile accident that detained her. Ignoring Irvin's remarks about her tardiness, Ma Rainey insists that he talk to the policeman and settle the matter. For Ma Rainey blues has an exchange value. She exchanges the rights to her blues for a right that is denied to most other blacks, including her musicians: the right to be treated as she wants to be treated. But she has no illusion about the limits of that right. She knows that she gets her way because she has something that Irvin and Sturdyvant want--her voice. She knows that they lack any real commitment to her, her music, or the blues tradition and that they will put up with her only as long as it is profitable for them to record her song.

In the absence of other options for survival, no doubt, Ma Rainey merchandizes the blues as commodity in the economic market, but she maintains a fidelity to history, to cultural past. Her solidarity with blues arouses in her the sense of "one true self" hiding inside many other, more superficial or

artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. This self provides her with an identity, which is African-American. That is why any attempt to tamper her song is tantamount to an attack on her personal as well as communal identity as re-created by that song. She delivers the legacy of black American culture to her community through "Black Bottom," a song that enlivens the African past and establishes a feeling of cultural continuity. Like a traveling blues singer, she tells her experience of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, strength and weakness, and bittersweet glory to the people both rural and urban. When Levee insists on remolding her song for better commercial reasons, she gets offended and warns him off the act. As Levee is still adamant, she finally counts him out of her band. This conflict between her and Levee is a conflict between proponents of the old and new forms of black music, between the blues and the swing. She does not accept Levee's rendition because she thinks it is not a legitimate means of conveying blues. For her, blues is and will remain an integral part of black life and a means for establishing African-American existence. Commenting on Ma Rainey's life, Sandra R. Lieb says:

Ma Rainey's life symbolizes the confrontation between the black rural South and the change wrought by

industrialization, urban migration, and the development of modern mass communications. She represents a collision between the unchanging aphorisms of folk poetry and the nervous rhythms of modern life. (qtd. in Saunders 3)

Blues gives Ma Rainey strength. It empowers her and provides her with the forum to subvert racial oppression, to revolt against male domination, and to survive outside male social norms. In a private moment, she explains to Cutler, her lead musician, that she sings the blues because "that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding life" (*Ma Rainey's* 67). She is, of course, absolutely right in her assessment of the source of her strength:

The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (*Ma Rainey's* 67)

Ma Rainey uses this strength as a countercheck in the unequal war along color and gender lines. Angering white management and annoying her band members, she prolongs the

recording session so that Sylvester can deliver the introduction to her song. It is significant that a nonmusician plays an important role in the recording. The inarticulate Sylvester represents those black people with little or no voice in American society. By letting him to do the introduction, Ma Rainey suggests that they too can participate in the blues--all blacks have a voice through their music--and, in a large sense, that they can contribute to the successful advancement of black culture. When Irvin balks about not having enough time to let her stuttering nephew record the lead-in lines to her "Black Bottom," she does not hesitate to remind him that this recording session is something she does not need to do. She can easily return to her South tour, where over the years she has cultivated large numbers of loyal fans:

If you wanna make a record, you gonna find time. I ain't playing with you, Irvin. I can walk out of here and go back to my tour. I got plenty fans. I don't need to go through all of this. Just go and get the boy a microphone. (*Ma Rainey's* 60)

Ma Rainey does not need to go through the inhibiting ordeal of a recording session because she remains solidly grounded in the tradition out of which her music evolved. Her contract is not with Irvin and Sturdyvant; it is with the people, the down-

home folk who identify most closely with her brand of the blues. Her "Black Bottom" belongs to them, and she refuses to give it up to anyone unless she gets something in return. When Irvin comes out of the control booth after the recording session to pay Sylvester part of the money he owes her, Ma Rainey sends Irvin right back to fetch the boy's pay, and then makes him and Sturdyvant beg her to sign the release form. Just before she makes her exit she signs, but by that time she has gotten everything she can out of Irvin and Sturdyvant and their recording machines, including the satisfaction of making them put everything on hold, of making them wait.

Ma Rainey threatens Levee's idea of manhood with her emphatic declaration: "I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it" (*Ma Rainey's* 51). She adds salt to Levee's injury by favoring Sylvester manifestly less capable than him. This insulting blow is dealt on Levee in full view of the white bosses and Dussie Mae. After the session, Sturdyvant revokes his offer to record Levee's songs, claiming that Ma Rainey's records will sell better, and Dussie Mae rejects the trumpeter, too. Ma Rainey does not beg for the short-lived flattery of people. The values that inform her artistic integrity also make her loyal to friends and family. Her concerns for Dussie Mae and Sylvester

are easily apparent. She supplies clothes and money to them and asks Sylvester to send money to his mother in the home.

A grimmer picture of racist exploitation of blacks in the play is largely conveyed by the story of Levee. Levee believes that music can afford him the opportunity to fulfill his potential and participate in the American dream. He sees Ma Rainey's success without understanding the compromises she has made to achieve it, witnesses her control over her own career without acknowledging the accompanying abuse and humiliation. He also believes he can achieve greater success than Ma Rainey because he has a "vision" for a different sound. At the center of his conflict with Ma Rainey is the interpretation of black music. Ma Rainey understands the value of the blues she sings, how they are rooted in her people, her culture, and her very soul. Levee wants to modify the music to please the white producer looking for better sales. Levee's rejection of traditional blues is in a sense a denial of a cultural connection--a denial he makes in an effort to assimilate and cash in, but a denial which is ultimately self-destructive. Ambitious and volatile, Levee has seen the destruction caused by racial oppression but turns a blind eye to it now, knowing that the prize he longs for can only be awarded by the white man. So he plays by the white man's rules and loses. His loss that

leads him toward self-annihilation perhaps epitomizes the most latent and ultimately the most destructive form of victimization.

Levee is corrupted by the materialistic aspirations at the heart of Western civilization, and his corruption issues forth from his petty little dream. But it is his dream, and it is all he has. And that makes it a matter of life or death to him. Succumbing to Sturdyvant's fatal lure that he can play and record his songs and create a different sound for the new generation, Levee trusts him and hopes to achieve both economic independence and a place in the white world. But his hopes of equality are dashed when the subjugator cunningly plays a dirty trick in the name of generosity and seeks to buy his songs for just five dollars each. Inevitably, the promised door of opportunity slams closed, quite literally, in his face, and the sound has a violent ring that reverberates through the decades. He suffers not just the collapse of his hope but the loss of what is truly his own-- the music. Having played to the white man's tune, he is left with less than nothing. Toledo's comment sums up his condition:

As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never

gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing. (*Ma Rainey's* 29)

Toledo understands that the complete emancipation of black people is possible only when they fully rely on themselves. He is talking about self-knowledge--the ability to accept the facts about one's position in society at large, no matter how unseemly or unflattering, and then to seek self-affirmation within one's own cultural community. Levee's success depends on the musical tradition and the gratification of his people, not on Sturdyvant. Ma Rainey understands this fully. She knows that her commercial success is the result of an artistic connection with her people and thereby with her cultural roots. The other musicians have also varying degrees of this self-knowledge. They also know their limitations and have a strong sense of their roles as musicians. Aware that no white man will give them a lift, they depend on Ma Rainey, their musical heritage, and their own talents. Content with being her sidemen, they are very successful in those roles and better able to negotiate their way in a white society. Lacking this perspective, Levee is more vulnerable to exploitation.

When Levee finally realizes that naïve enthusiasm and a sense of triumph in gaining white's favor have betrayed him,

he becomes a "Frankenstein" rather than a perceptive "sage." Having been manipulated and shaped by deceptive ideals, he is driven to murder--he stabs Toledo to death. He is unable to effectively challenge Sturdyvant, but he can kill Toledo. Commenting on the event, Shannon writes, "Levee Kills another African man in a blood ritual that provides a temporary catharsis for his hatred of Sturdyvant" ("Good Christian" 381). In fact, Levee kills Toledo not because of his irascibility, but out of frustration caused by Sturdyvant's very attempt to blot out forever the hopes of a man, who had sought to liberate himself from all pain by the power of music. His devastation results from the vain investment he had made in his quest for validation in the world. The violent event makes explicit the death threat white America holds for the blacks.

Despite all shortcomings, Levee is not a character to be blamed fully. History tells us that the most painful aspect of his manhood centers on his own childhood experience of the most fiendish and diabolic outrage of whites on his family--the raping of his mother and eventually the lynching of his father. His perception of destruction, hidden beneath the veneer of white culture, breeds in him a spiritual desolation and cynicism. His passionate hatred is only exorcised when he blasphemes God, for he can still hear his mother's cries for

help: "I heard when she called you! I heard her when she said, 'Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!' And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back?" (*Ma Rainey's* 83).

The stark realities of the world around him produce in Levee a sense of loss and the futility of life. Into the tragic life of Levee's, Wilson, says Pereira,

has distilled the essence of a thousand other disparate lives--sons and daughters of black slaves who grew up legally free but practically enslaved by a system that regarded them as less than human, objects to be used and abused. We do not know all the particulars of this life, but the pattern is familiar: years of poverty without a father or a proper home, living with a mother who had to deal with the harrowing experience of gang rape. (24)

His father's death and the persistent memory of his mother's rape have filled Levee with a deep desire for revenge, and he regards his musical talent as a weapon to beat whites at their own game. The white world owes him a debt, and he is determined to claim it. He wants redress and the respectability his parents never had. Although he rejects Ma Rainey's

conventional style, he admires the way she wields her power over the white men. He seeks in his own way to cope with his problems and looks for a track up and out. His trumpet, says Shafer, is "a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning" (405). It is apparent that his music represents his individual commitment to a certain goal in a society that denies him even a minimal chance for success. He exhibits a rich artistic sensibility. Cutler is well acquainted with his talent. He says, "Levee's alright. He plays good music when he puts his mind to it" (*Ma Rainey's* 63). Unlike his fellow musicians, he knows how to write good songs, how to improvise the music and, therefore, is a potential composer. With such great abilities, he wrestles with life. It is a different matter that his spirit is always crushed by the ugly specter of racism and his ways often prove wrong.

Levee is a more complex character than he seems, almost a foil to Ma Rainey. There is a mythical dimension to this character, which lifts us from the social sphere to a cultural realm of African-American ethos. Harrison suggests that Levee owes his pedigree to the divine trickster figure in Yoruba mythology, Eshu-Elegbara. Precisely because he plays tricks, he represents the rebellious energy that goes against norms and

structure. He creates his own songs and sings them at his own will. In Odugbesan's words, Eshu is "associated with disorderliness and confusion . . . he is the equivalent of the 'tempter' rather than the 'devil' in Christian ideas" (201). From this chaos arises true creativity, the pioneering nerves that will never be contained within the Apollonian parameters of behavior--clear, ordered, rational, and calm--but bursts forth in a wild explosion as a Dionysian force. He has much in common with Dionysius whom Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, credits with having broken the "spell of individuation" that governs the artistic energies of the Apollonian, or the plastic arts, and opening the way for the symbolic expression of what he feels is at the heart of all human experience: the tragic (100). His Dionysic spirit "roves the outskirts of society, the artistic steppenwolf in quest of self-authentication, seeking ways to reshape its destiny" (Pereira 16). In Yoruba myth, according to Gates Jr., this energy found expression in the monkey figure:

It is the presence of the monkey in the Yoruba myth, . . . which stands as the trace of Esu in Afro-American myth, a trace that enables us to speculate freely on the functional equivalence of Esu and his Afro-American descendant, the Signifying Monkey.

(*Signifying* 13-14)

The monkey trickster, says Pereira, "occupied a central position in the [black] consciousness, for his pranks represented the victory of the weak over the strong" (16). This the monkey does with a rhetorical trick, challenging the dominant forces for his own contentious purposes.

It is in this persona of monkey trickster that Levee confirms his behavior. Like the trickster, he reposes no confidence in conventional canons and adopts instead his own ideology. While these canons have, for centuries, provided inspiration, strength, and moral principles for African-Americans, he affirms that they have not and will not suit his need. Therefore, he demonstrates his disavowals by challenging and withdrawing from the norms and structure established by his ancestors. This disparaging attitude of Levee reflects his mythological heritage, for "the one central feature of almost all trickster tales is their assault upon deeply ingrained and culturally sanctioned values" (Levine 104).

Through the image of a trickster, Levee seeks to preserve his appearances. But his incontinent spirit is allowed no room. The culture industry denies him any fulfillment. Even Ma Rainey, or his own people, fails to see that the swing he has created is itself a natural evolution from her "Black Bottom." Each new form is built upon older forms in such a manner that

the earlier forms are often recognizable. But Ma Rainey's blind adherence to a single form does not allow her to perceive the essence of blues in this new guise. In her attempt to perpetuate a tradition, she fails to understand that the legacy itself was kept alive by the griots of her race. Pereira says, their performance "was no mere narrative but an artistic rendition in a communal setting that revitalized culturally sanctioned myths." The performance of the blues, "particularly in its improvisatory aspect," Pereira further says, "[is] part of this tradition in which cultural values and codes are transmitted from generation to generation, and where older performers are looked upon as gurus from whom the younger aspirants may learn and then forge their own artistic destinies" (17).

Trapped by social hatred and discrimination, Levee is alienated from everyone around him, including himself. The trickster, bent on survival and secure in a sense of indestructibility, very easily slips into actions that are destructive to himself and to his community. Commenting on Levee's condition, Wilson in his interview with Moyers says:

I think Levy [Levee] has a warrior spirit. He does a tremendous disservice to blacks by killing Toledo, because he's killing the only one who can read, he's

killing the intellectual in the group. That's a loss we have to make up. We have to raise up another one to take Toledo's place. But I still salute Levy's warrior spirit. It's a progression to the wrong target, but I salute his willingness to battle, even to death. (179)

Unwilling to settle for the white man's crumbs, he will fight for what he believes is his. For all his faults, he has the warrior spirit that launches him into a battle he may or may not win. But against such high odds his only option is to flail away wildly, and in the melee he cannot differentiate between friend and foe.

The fate of every other member of Ma Rainey's band is unmitigatedly tragic by the same token. Non-recognition of their talent disrupts their social lives, making it difficult for them to achieve a state of self-actualization. They are compelled to view themselves, as Toledo says, "just [as] a leftover from history" yet necessary only in order to fill "the white man's belly" (*Ma Rainey's* 46-7). Their predicaments have thwarted all their hopes. They endure fate as designed by whites. They are, in Eileen Crawford's words, "worn out by the battles they have engaged in during a persistent, lifelong quest for authenticity" (36). Essentially, their hopelessness is due

to the common experience of racism. Toledo perceives that black people's plight is only socially caused and therefore can perhaps be ameliorated; but he is unable to bring any change alone: "I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. Got to do his part" (*Ma Rainey's* 33). The fate he is unable to escape despite his abilities confirms his status as a black. His personal story, together with the stories of other black characters in the play, is an allegory of black history.

No blacks are spared the ignominy of being "a leftover from history" (*Ma Rainey's* 46). Whether it is Ma Rainey and her band members, or Levee's parents, or even black minister Reverend Gates, everyone is doomed to racial hatred and discrimination. Levee's father struggled hard to establish himself on his own land, but only to have his white neighbors call him "an uppity nigger cause he done saved and borrowed to where he could buy this land and be independent" (*Ma Rainey's* 57). But the same neighbors, finding him away from the house one day, came and raped his wife and nearly killed his son. The lynching of Levee's father is a spectral representation of genocidal "impulse" in whites that was so alive during the days of American slavery. Reverend Gates missed his train to Atlanta at

Sigsbee station and was surrounded by a group of jeering whites, who stripped him off his cross and Bible and made him dance until they grew tired of watching him.

Ma Rainey's "blues understanding" of life, however, provides a protective mantle for Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo. But this does not imply a lack of enterprise on their part. Cutler is the master of guitar and trombone. His playing is solid and almost totally unembellished. His understanding of music is limited to the chord he plays. Slow Drag's bass incorporates his innate African rhythms, which underlie everything he plays, and he plays with an ease that is at times startling. Toledo, the piano player, is in control of his instrument; he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself. What holds these successful musicians together with Ma Rainey is the blues that gives them steady work and an opportunity to make a living by doing something they understand and love. Thus, by giving his characters musical instruments to suit their personalities, Wilson, says Pereira,

creates a metaphor to explore the specific avenues that each of them has taken to find his identity as a black musician and a black American. The rhythm section of Cutler, Toledo, and Slow Drag walks a

steady, balanced line between the commercially exploitative white world of Irvin and Sturdyvant and the abundant black world of Ma Rainey and the blues. They keep the former at bay by staying close and true to the latter, thus creating harmony out of potential dissonance. Levee, like his strident trumpet, constantly tries to break out on his own. He cannot be contained by either world and is in discord with both. (33)

Adorno says, "the entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms" (99). In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* this culture industry transfers the profit motive onto the blues, which is an integral part of black people's lives and a true element of African-American culture. The play points out the irony: "on most recordings the notes about the [black] music are written by white men" (Shafer 405). Yet Wilson shows that the blues never ceases to display its profundity by rising above disappointment to a vision of black people's freedom. With its indomitable spirit the blues will ever help blacks sort out the mess in any uncongenial situation.

Chapter IV

Looking Back and Forward: *The Piano Lesson*

The Great Depression did much to dampen the enthusiasm of blacks. The blacks who, even during the days of prosperity, found the going very difficult, now met almost insurmountable barriers in the job market. By the middle of the 1930s, however, the national economic scene began to stabilize. Blacks realized, better than before, that they should develop institutions of their own in order to preserve their identity and dignity. Some even felt the necessity of returning to the South to give shape to their institutions and promote their integration, to a degree, into the pattern of life that had a legacy.

It is in the thirties, in 1936 to be specific, that Wilson sets *The Piano Lesson* (1987). In the two earlier plays--*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*--migration to the North is a major theme, with characters undertaking a long journey in search of jobs, relationships, and self-affirmation. In *The Piano Lesson*, however, we are introduced to characters eager to return to the South. This is significant, for it marks a potential turning point in the lives of blacks. Earlier they had considered the North as their true destination. For the first time now a black suggests that the South is their

place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. It is a moment of individual transmogrification that Wilson examines again. In his interview with Pettengill, he says:

Boy Willie empowers himself. He has a very good clear plan, the best plan of anyone I know that was presented in 1936 about his future. He understood that if you had a piece of land, everything else [would] fall right up into place. . . . Land is the basis of independence. (225)

The search for self-authentication continues in the play, which adds a new meaning to the same theme of displacement. The displacement, however, occurs on a psychological level: blacks are seen grappling with their memories, their debts to the past, and coming to terms with their emerging role as free people. By 1936, thousands of blacks had settled in northern industrial cities, searching for their own version of freedom, struggling to realize the American dream but living an American nightmare of poverty and discrimination. The lives of many of the characters in the play exemplify this despair.

Set once again in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh, the play shows the blacks who live there as persons displaced from their roots and acquaintances in Mississippi. "This rootlessness,"

according to Leslie Catherine Sanders, "suggests a black attitude, arising from historical experience, that in spite of long tenancy, the land is never really theirs" (184). Certainly, much of the play reflects the same quality of expectations and self-delusion so oppressively present in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The characters are trapped in some sophistries, and there is little reason to believe that they will escape their fate. They experience the familiar pattern: the suffering of trial and betrayal, the discovery of inhumanity in those to whom they have given their allegiance, and the ultimate feeling of frustration and defeat. But, while *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* externalizes the conflict between the blacks and white culture through the recording industry, *The Piano Lesson* dramatizes more emphatically the conflict between the blacks themselves in relation to their heritage through an heirloom. Commenting on the play, William B. Branch in his introduction to the *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama* (1992) writes:

Posing conflicts between the consequences of holding on to often painful memories of the slave heritage and cashing them in for more tangible assets, *The Piano Lesson* reveal[s] still more complexities of Wilson's

pondering on the promises versus the realities of the Black experience in America. (XXXI)

In *The Piano Lesson* Wilson's historical project, as Michael Morales says, "moves into a world of ancestral visitations, visions, and ghosts. . . . The mystical elements intertwine closely with Wilson's historical project in what might be characterized as an experiment in African American historiography." Like in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson, in this play, predicates the relationship of the past to the present on an active lineage, a kinship bond between the living and their ancestors. In this sense, Morales further says, "the transmission of history becomes a binding ritual through which his characters obtain an empowering self-knowledge, a tangible sense of their own self-worth and identity, that gives them the strength to manage the future on their own terms" (106). Like Herald Loomis, they are able to find their own "songs."

The piano in Charles's family living room lies at the center of the drama. It provides key links to the past. It has dual functions. First, it functions as a mnemonic device for the transmission of history. The images carved on it preserve a narrative generating visual memory that connects the family to their own ancestors who brought its rhythms and style from Africa and transformed them in the context of slave life. The

carvings tell that a white slave-owner (James Sutter's grandfather) sold two of a slave family, a wife and a nine-year-old son, in order to possess the piano. The bereaved father in memory of his loss did the carvings on it. His grandson, Boy Charles (the father of Boy Willie and Berniece) stole it back to avenge the torments perpetrated on his ancestors and reclaim the visual symbol of his family's past--a crime for which he was burnt alive in the boxcar. His lynching, a grave testimony to white cruelty on blacks before emancipation, however, brought about, after emancipation, a series of encounters between blacks and whites. Whites first killed blacks; whites were then killed mysteriously. Wilson's treatment of this theme in *The Piano Lesson* brings him close to Baraka, who depicts blacks as enslaved by white culture and an imposed white consciousness, and focuses on the act of liberation through counterbalance. Like Baraka, Wilson chooses "the particular task of freeing the oppressed from the stereotypes that live in their imagination and replacing them with a viable and liberating mythology" (Sanders 157). Second, the piano serves as a site of direct mystical connections with the ancestors, reminding us of sacred ancestral shrines in many traditional African cultures. In terms of Yoruba cosmography, it is "an *orita meta*, a crossroad between the world of the living and that of the dead. For the

Yoruba, ancestral shrines are key links between the two worlds, where descendants may contact their ancestors for protection, support, and guidance" (Morales 108).

The piano has always stood as a symbol of conflict. In the past, it involved blacks and whites in bloodletting. Now, in 1936, it involves a sister and a brother. The former wants to keep the family heirloom as a reminder of her family's suffering and hardships in slavery times, while the latter wants to sell it in order to buy a farm their ancestors had once worked on. There are two choices: to cling to the past or to meet the challenge of the present/future. For the sister, the piano has a potent significance: it has played a pivotal role in the fight for freedom, and its very presence in her household is an eloquent testament to the success of that effort. Its history is a direct reflection of the struggle that engendered the blues. Recording the history of her family for several generations--weddings, funerals, and other events, including slave sales--the piano is imbued with a totemic aura. No one can confiscate it from her because it is alive, inescapable, and immeasurable. For the brother, the piano, if sold, can buy the freedom his father wanted to have. It is a means to independence and equality in a white man's world.

The brother and sister are not the only claimants to the piano. For, the house is being haunted by Sutter's ghost, who, it seems, has his own feeling for the instrument. Sutter is dead but still "alive" to claim the piano once again in a way his grandfather had laid claim to Charles's family. The ghost of Sutter is a grotesque version of the white figure as confiscator of what Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* calls "the song" of black people. In the 1910s, Joe Turner had kidnapped blacks into slavery in order to "possess their song." In the 1930s, a white man is still trying to capture their song; this time, by buying the instruments that produce it--there are several references in the play to one white man who is "going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments" (*Piano 26*). Music for black people is the source of their survival, their identity and power. Though it keeps alive the painful experiences of their past, in one magnificent leap it elevates them from the status of slaves to the level of artists. Something so spiritually supportive became a commercial prospect in the capitalist market of the twentieth century urban America and, therefore, a source of great power to performers like Ma Rainey and Bassie Smith. Small wonder then that even as this music provided blacks with a passport to a world beyond the plantation, it also became a

threat to the white people who controlled that world; and they moved quickly to bridle its galloping pace. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the music-makers at Seefus's bar were "liable to end up in a raid and go to jail sure enough" (*Joe Turner's* 220). Ma Rainey complained that white people take her "voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials . . ." (*Ma Rainey's* 64); and Levee's songs were belittled and bought for five dollars a piece. For blacks, at this time of their history, music is their only bargaining chip at the table of negotiation. But they also run the risk of losing possession of it, and with it their hard-earned identity. The intrigues of white people to rob the blacks of their source of survival, their identity, and power continue. And as long as this process continues, blacks will remain inevitably doomed to slavery of some kind or other.

The piano also has the potential to reflect the personality of those who come into contact with it. Every living member of the Charles family reacts differently to it, according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears, and desires. It thus becomes a touchstone to evaluate their attitudes and dispositions. To Boy Willie, it is a source of accomplishing his cherished dream: a dream that confuses, for the time being, his sense of kinship and understanding of the power of the piano as an heirloom.

Ready to fight with everyone, he sees himself very much as a man of his time--unwilling to suffer any more indignities, he will seize control of his own fate. Yet, he cannot be blamed for his behavior, because America has left no room for him to define himself with any other dreams. His status bears out the pattern of defeated self. Like Levee, he too is a victim. His victimization is also characterized, in part, by the dichotomy, or rupture, between present and past, turning him into a cynic. However, like Levee, he does not channel his rage against own kinsfolk when his dream is shattered. Nor does he remain mulish. There is evidence, in fact, that he, when not forced to forage for survival, has magnanimity alongside shrewdness in him. When Berniece plays the piano to summon the spirits of her ancestors to overcome the ghost of Sutter, Boy Willie at once acknowledges the spiritual power of ancestral music, and changes from a kind of detached gamesman to a recognizer of the inner necessity of living in a state of relationship and harmony. There is a selfish side to his former role, but a great human depth informs the latter: "Hey Berniece . . . if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano . . . ain't no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back" (*Piano* 108).

Boy Willie's warning emphasizes that he feels it necessary to keep the ancestors alive. Like Levee, and, of course, like

almost all the young protagonists of Wilson, Boy Willie too is a trickster. Gates Jr. says that individuality and indeterminacy, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty may characterize a trickster (*Signifying* 6). Behind all this, however, lies the trickster's motive for survival. Therefore, Boy Willie also cannot be blamed for collaborating with the whites, or for apparently failing to align himself with his own kin. Having suffered a lot for being black and confronted with his rootlessness, he seeks to exploit whatever means are at hand to sustain himself. Later he tries to recreate his all-but-devastated spirit. Leaving the North, where many of his fellow beings still live, is not easy for him either, emotionally: "You gonna come down South and see me? Uncle Boy Willie gonna get him a farm. Gonna get a great big old farm. Come down there and I'll teach you how to ride a mule. Teach you how to kill a chicken, too" (*Piano* 20).

Boy Willie's quest has a pragmatic aspect; it speaks of a desire to be the master of a farm where his ancestors had been slaves. Instead of "settling" in the North to live as an exile, he prefers to stay home and do the work that generations of blacks had done before him--but this time as an owner, not as a slave. Addressing Boy Willie's issue, Richard Hornby, in his *Hudson Review* article (1990), writes:

for Boy Willie, selling the piano is not just a means of getting some cash. Buying a hundred acres of the old plantation is a way of getting control over the family's terrible past. The land for him functions as the carvings on the piano did for his great-grandfather. Taking something that belonged to the master and making it into his own is a means to power, a way to go on record and be somebody. (qtd. in Saunders 402)

His resolve to move South stands for a search for cultural roots, for the will to discover who and what he is. His sentiment can be acknowledged, unequivocally, as a projection of the "expatriate consciousness, the creations of the black man's nostalgia for a milieu from which he has been temporarily, or permanently, separated" (Brown 138). Boy Willie's desire to stay in the South encapsulates Wilson's overall intent, which he reveals in his interview with Moyers:

I think we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to transplant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experiences of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been

hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we would have strengthened the culture. (167)

Boy Willie's final act has in it some solace rather than solution, but this solace has the resources to deepen true kinship and intimacy. Though he "loses" money to buy the farm, he succeeds in, as Pereira says, "establishing the identity of [himself and] his family as truly free black men and women--free from the psychological and emotional shackles of the past, free from the incubus of their white owners, and free from the dissension that threatened to serve them" (98).

Like her brother Boy Willie, Berniece too has a mission: "let her [Maretha] go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano" (*Piano* 70). This extrapersonal mission signals the beginning of release from the ancestral suffering of having fallen into the hands of whites. Though like Boy Willie, she has no means of executing her mission, she has the determination that springs from a deep conviction that blacks are not inferior to whites--her daughter will not stay at the bottom of the social ladder despite the forces conspiring to keep her there. Unlike her brother, she refuses to escape the weight of circumstances. Nor does she need to go South to find her destiny. She is the descendant of a proud heritage, the bearer

of a standard handed down by several generations of a family that refused to surrender, a family that struggled through slavery and survived to see freedom to an extent. For too long her predecessors have been at the bottom of a static wheel of fortune. Now she struggles to spin the wheel and reverse the situation for her successors. Racial prejudice lies everywhere, but she is well prepared for the battle. She has the Charles spirit. She wants to preserve the piano to activate and renew that spirit, and at the same time, to validate the suffering of her ancestors, to ensure that their sacrifices were not in vain. When her brother wrestles with Sutter's ghost, she joins him by playing the piano and summoning a benediction from the depths of black life. The battle against Sutter transforms the family conflict into a collective resistance to a mutual enemy. This final event of the play reveals the mutual interest of the kinship group by demarcating what is truly "Other." It is a moment of self-definition, putting the kinship of blacks against the kinship of white outsiders. The ghost of Sutter, a symbol of historical torture, is expelled from the community with the reestablishment of the kinship bond. In this respect, the expulsion of Sutter is a metaphor for historical self-definition for blacks in America.

Thus, Wilson's intention to create a self-definition by expelling the dominant culture and his appeal for a separate black history, necessitated by cultural difference, are apparent. Finally, Boy Willie and Berniece learn, as black people in America must, that they should struggle together if they and their loved ones are to be free and move on with their lives, balanced and whole. The music that Berniece plays on the piano reaffirms the stories of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope. Commenting on this moment Pereira says:

At this moment of spiritual invocation, time and space are suspended; past and present come together, and the ancestral spirits surge forth from the piano to bless this house that they [the Charles] built. At last, brother and sister find themselves on the same side, united against a common enemy, bonded in a common destiny. This is the lesson that the piano teaches them: only as a united family can they transpose the discordant rhythms of bondage into the harmony of full freedom. (103)

Taken together, Berniece and Boy Willie try to pursue the dual strategy of embracing both black cultural heritage and economic opportunity for survival and prosperity. To create a

new meaning of life, both individuals look back at the past and thereby understand the present. Boy Willie is intent on literally capitalizing on the family's history to carve out a new beginning. Berniece wants to keep it up, to preserve family unity and cultural continuity. Their approaches are different, yet the piano synthesizes the discordant notes by becoming a symbol for the legacy of struggle as well as for the necessity of pragmatic future plans.

Avery, the preacher, experiences the familiar pattern of conflict as every black does. He prepares to enter the white world, but cannot decide how much of him he should "sell out" to white men. Despite his confusion, he does not go wrong. The awareness of tradition in him has kept his dignity alive and helped him to survive as best as he can in a white world. His donning of the preacher's mantle is a part of a continuing African tradition. As Sterling Stuckey says:

The old Negro preacher and other religious leaders in the slave community were the ones who spoke for their people whatever their ethnic origins. The authority of major religious leaders on the plantations owed much to the divine-kingship systems of West Africa and for that reason was the least likely to be questioned.

In this role, Avery is responding to his cultural past. But while his purpose carries intimations of what may be called metaphysical value, its basic concern is with coping with life in what Pereira calls the "urban jungle." Like Boy Willie, Avery too is a pragmatist-with-a purpose, but he is more intelligent than Boy Willie in carrying out his plans. He also collaborates with the whites, but to take only small favors--half a day off to go to the bank, a turkey for Thanksgiving--because he has set his eyes on greater things: to be a leader among his own people. His delicate balancing act between these two societies is evident when he sends a white man to buy the piano from Berniece and then, realizing how much it means to her, supports her decision to keep it. Indeed, he even forgets the name of the would-be buyer. He wants Berniece to use the piano in the service of the Lord and to release her spirit from the captivity of grief. Although he has not completely emerged out of his dilemma, he has learnt how to walk a fine line between both races. And this knowledge is also a powerful strategy, which will one day certainly help him achieve his purpose.

A growing realization that blacks can call the South their home is also in Wining Boy, the uncle of Berniece and Boy Willie. In 1936, for the first time, blacks seem to have

discovered that the North is not a place as heavenly as they had considered before. The lives of blacks in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson* have borne witness to racism in the North. Now they are beginning to look back at what they had left behind. Some twenty-five years ago, Winning Boy had left the South for Pittsburgh with a dream of becoming somebody. But now he has become an itinerant gambler who has lost whatever he had brought with him to fulfill his cherished dream--the music. Spending twenty-five years of nomadic life in the North, which claimed the life of his wife and his music, he thinks that his real home is the South, for his emotional roots are still there: "I'll go back [to the South] with you. I'm on my way down there. You gonna take the train? I'm gonna take the train" (*Piano* 37).

Blacks in the play are destined to perpetual suffering, yet they hope that one day they would liberate themselves. Boy Willie seeks to buy some land and settle in the South because he hopes he can survive best if he works on a farm of his own. Berniece attempts to preserve her tradition-steeped piano so that it can usher in a new future. Avery wants to be the leader of his community in order to live a worthy and respectful life. But Doaker, Winning Boy's brother, and Lymon, Boy Willie's friend, have no such mission. They have no destination.

Twenty-seven years of stay in urban, industrial America has made Doaker aware that his plight is socially caused and not simply a human condition. He knows but cannot transform the situation because he has been literally imprisoned in and by the world of Pittsburgh. His years of attachment to a mere job of a railroad cook is its testimony. Devoid of hope, he has turned into a passive onlooker. Whereas the spiritually bereft Winning Boy seeks renewal in a reunion with his roots in the South, Doaker does not have any yearning for the South. He has learnt what it means to be colored in America and there is no place in this country he can call home.

Lymon, by contrast, has yet no conception of life and thinks that the North holds the answer to all his problems. In the South he lived in the shadow of a law that found creative ways to keep him enslaved to the whites: "Fined me a hundred dollars. Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that" (*Piano* 37). He has now entered the glamorous Pittsburgh, unconscious of its challenges. Of course, he has escaped his fate in the South, and by so doing he has freed himself. But his freedom is ever transient, for the forces that jeopardize the lives of the blacks still living

there will certainly not spare him. For sure, he would be one of the blacks to suggest that life in Pittsburgh is painful for a black. Poverty is like an infectious disease and he is a carrier, and will carry this epidemic with him wherever he goes as long as he is poor.

Blues once again reflects what Wilson calls "the resiliency of . . . [black] spirit" ("Interview with Bill Moyers" 169). Though the avenues for participation in urban society are almost closed to these people and their ambitions have been thwarted, they are still able to discover in the blues a beauty and nobility that accompany their struggle to survive. It is a means to heighten their energy, convert their pain into joy, and lessen the tension that arises out of the chaos of life. Blues helps them express their "perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions" (Cone 116). Though their attitudes are different and though they encounter different difficulties in their struggle for existence, they sing together to affirm an essential worth of black humanity:

BOY WILLIE. They had Lymon down there singing:

[Sings]

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

[LYMON and WINNING BOY join in]

BOY WILLIE. Come on, Doaker. Doaker know this one.

[As DOAKER joins in the men stamp and clap to Keep time. They sing in harmony with great fervor and style]. (Piano 39)

At the end of the play, Boy Willie tells Berniece that unless she lets Maretha play the piano, both he and Sutter's ghost will be back. The blues enables the young girl to bear the responsibility of preserving the newfound ties between sister and brother. "In her innocent hands," says Pereira, "the piano will fill their house with its song of freedom, and its music will be a touchstone for the daily process of reappraisals and renegotiations by these people struggling for survival" (103).

"The Piano Lesson," says Barnes, "is first a confrontation of the heritage of the past and [then] the promise of the future" ("Piano Lesson" 455). Yet the ambiguity in the play is due to the ambiguous fate of blacks. The opening suggests that blacks turning to the South might bring a new order to their lives, but the end leaves the effort unresolved. The fate of the blacks may be ambiguous because it lies beyond the knowledge of Wilson himself.

Chapter V

Empowering the Black Subject: *Seven Guitars*

The nature of World War II and its demands on the resources of the belligerents implied, from the beginning, that its successful prosecution involved the utilization of every factor that could possibly contribute strength. For the United States the waging of total warfare presented innumerable problems. It could not be achieved without erecting some controls that served to reduce the freedom of the individual, a move that was strenuously resisted by considerable portion of the population. Nor could total warfare be achieved without the country's making substantial concessions to its minority groups so that they could make their contribution to the defeat of the Axis Powers. This, also, found considerable opposition among groups that were determined to carry on the fight abroad without upsetting the existing pattern of race relations at home. Many admitted, however, that for the sake of consistency with the ideology of the United Nations, as well as for the purpose of increasing efficiency, the United States would have to deal more justly with its entire people. As a matter of course, the United Nations tried to eliminate discriminatory policy in the employment practices. Thousands of blacks got jobs in industry when the defense program began. But when war ended, the

majority of blacks became jobless again. In several significant ways President Truman contributed to the creation of a climate in which the status of blacks could be improved. In 1946 and subsequently in 1948, he appointed committees to inquire into the condition of civil rights and to make recommendations for their improvements. However, such improvements were neither uniform nor without vigorous opposition in some quarters (Franklin 437-38).

Set in 1948 Pittsburgh, *Seven Guitars* (1995) depicts black life in post-World War II America. In the play, history is viewed with blacks as the spiritual center. Wilson describes that center as "a garden where something is growing--it's new life." While exploitation of early blues musicians was a central theme of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, here it is made to ignite protest: "*Seven Guitars*," says Wilson, "is about people battling society and themselves for self worth" (qtd. in Taylor 412).

The "seven guitars" are the seven characters who, in Regina Taylor's words, "strut around the backyard in their Pittsburgh neighborhood like roosters scratching for territory. They crow in unison, each with his own unique voice" (412). At this time in history, these blacks express intense concern about themselves as subject and seek to redefine, reaffirm, and

reclaim their moral personality. They are determined to do all within their power to improve their own status. They try to rediscover themselves, as Wilson says, "to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy" (*Joe Turner's* 203).

In their discovery, culture plays a vital role. They take it as what Baker Jr. calls "a reservoir" from which the African-American spirit flows. No matter how ineffable the source of this spirit or how elusive its precise contours, it is a black spirit, an impulse that seeks the birth of a nation perceptibly different from the existing one. The spirit evoked by these blacks, as Baker Jr. says, is "an eternally transformative impulse that converts desire . . . into [a] courageous and ceaseless motion. A picture arises of civil rights marchers moving into the very face of white viciousness, singing 'Woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom'" (*Afro-American* 5). Their stirring spirit is a form of energy that Wilson describes as "Black Power," which can alter relationships to society, can alter how they see themselves.

These blacks, according to Julia Peterkin, "represent human nature obscured by so little veneer; human nature groping among its instinctive impulses and in an environment which is tragically primitive and often unutterably pathetic" (qtd. in

Sanders 4). They respond in a way true to their social milieu, and never try to suppress their natural inclinations. They arm themselves--Floyd Barton carries a .38 Smith and Wesson; Red Carter carries a snubnose .32 pistol; Canewell carries a "professional" pocketknife; and Hedley brandishes an immense butcher's knife--to resist the opposing forces. These blacks feel the need to protect themselves, their rights as citizens, in an America that many black men fought for during World War II. They are, says Wilson, "standing there in the yard, in this time in history, with blood on [their] hands." He sees their stance as political and revolutionary: "They are about black power, self determination. . . . People refer to the Civil Rights Movement, but Black Power means we can alter relationships to society to gain power. We can alter how we see ourselves" (qtd. in Taylor 413).

Arming themselves is not the choice of these blacks, but a compulsion. Whenever they seek to ameliorate their appalling conditions, they are singled out for attack, either physically or psychologically. As they press to make a move forward, whites begin to dig deep-ditches on their path. They are always made to feel what it means to be a black in America. The machinery for maintaining law and order is apparently unwilling to operate; if it operates, it adds to their suffering. The

racial segregation and bias that limited the lives of blacks decades ago still linger in the 1940s. The issues have not changed much. They remain almost as they were in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Floyd was arrested for vagrancy, or, as he says, for "worthlessness" in Chicago. During his detention, his words were misinterpreted by a smug white guard as a threat to burn the jailhouse down, and the judge sentenced him unfairly to ninety days: "they took me down there and charged me with worthlessness. Canewell had five dollars in his pocket and they let him go. Took me down there and give me ninety days" (*Seven Guitars* 9). Unfairness is expected when blacks confront a legal system constructed and enforced by whites, "cause he know a black man ain't never had his druthers" (*Seven Guitars* 41-2). The black man has no option but to submit.

Floyd's prison sentence is a harsh instance of the way the law is used against black people. He is arrested and sentenced to ninety days imprisonment for having no money. "Men are arrested for vagrancy, for worthlessness," says Wilson. "Worthlessness is a crime in America" (qtd. in Taylor 412). By contrast, having enough money is a crime too. Red Carter was arrested and put in jail for possessing too much money because the officer just assumed that he had committed a robbery: "One time they arrested me for having too much money. I had more

money than the law allowed. Must have . . . cause the police arrested me, put me in jail. Told me if I had that much money I must have stole it somewhere" (*Seven Guitars* 42). Similarly, Canewell was arrested in Chicago on numerous charges: disturbing the place, loitering, resisting arrest and disrespecting the law, and soliciting without a license. While he was waiting for his friend, Floyd, Canewell decided to set down his hat and play his harmonica, and he was sentenced to thirty days: "They rolled all that together and charged me with laziness and give me thirty days" (*Seven Guitars* 23). The arrests prove that blacks are helpless before a capricious and all-powerful white law. The cruelty, the neglect, the hatred with which they are treated stunt the development of their personality and relegate them to the status of the inferior. Paradoxically, blacks ever remain dreamers; they cannot stop believing in the American myth of freedom and equality.

Floyd's search for self-authentication and new independence by joining the U.S. force during the World War II proves fruitless as it ends in the same emptiness as he had before. The discriminatory policies of the U.S. army against blacks, indeed, belie the egalitarian myth: "I had just got out the army," says Floyd. "They give me forty-seven dollars. Adjustment allowance or something like that" (*Seven Guitars* 12).

Regarding the discrimination in the armed forces during World War II, John Hope Franklin writes:

among the considerable number of Negro soldiers and sailors . . . there was much dissatisfaction with the discriminatory policies of the army. . . . At post exchanges they were segregated and given inferior merchandise. The theaters and other entertainment facilities were frequently set apart, and the accommodations for blacks were below the standard of those provided for white soldiers. (435-36)

Black people's struggle to ensure America's victory at the cost of their life turned futile, as it could not transform [read black] reality. Wilson's comments to John Lahr about African-American history after the war clarify Floyd's point further: "We had gone off and demonstrated our allegiance and willingness to die for the country. We actually believed that things would be different, and that we would be accorded first-class citizenship. We came back after the war, and that was not true" (100). In both life and death disfranchisement befalls these African-Americans. After death they have to get buried in a segregated graveyard, and they are never afforded a fair shake, either in life or death: "God don't give you no chances. The

devil let you roll the dice. See if you crap out" (*Seven Guitars* 51).

"The Negro mind," says Alain Locke, "reaches out as yet to nothing but American wants, American ideas." These wants have, however, always forced blacks "to build [their] Americanism on race-values . . ." (53). The consequence is that they are trapped by the whites' allurements and deceptions. Floyd is one such victim. His difficulty is that he has accepted the American myth of success at its face value, that he is trapped. To achieve success, he, too, shares with other young blacks, like Levee and Boy Willie, an unawareness that hinders the progress that he feels he is making. It does not occur to any of them to question the nature of the allurements. Floyd accepts and believes in the world as it is presented to him. He does not wish to examine it: "Look here . . . look here. Look what they sent to my sister's house. . . . It say, 'Come on back to Chicago and make some more records'. Say . . . 'we'll talk about the details when you get here'" (*Seven Guitars* 10). He sees the summons as promising him the career of a star--all he has to do is find a way to get enough money together for his band to return to Chicago. He thinks that he must negotiate with the white community in order to salvage his dreams of recording his music.

Floyd cannot, in fact, be blamed for his dream, nor can his band members, whose dreams are linked with Floyd's. Coming from an impoverished society, preoccupied with its own debility, they have been, indeed, left with nothing but false dreams. With the passage of time, their dreams take on different forms--in the 1930s Boy Willie dreams of a farm of his own, chickens, mules; in the 1940s Floyd of Cadillac, telephone, nice furniture. But black people's dreams have always been shattered. Their ordeals are markedly similar. They have virtually no "worth" and, to a significant point, no opportunity for the possible solutions to their problems. Society does not allow them to consider themselves as part of it. It willfully excludes them. And because of this repressive system in which these young blacks are forced to live, they manifest much of their tension in different forms of aggression--murder, burglary, and death:

A robbery at the loan offices of Metro Finance ended in the death of a Hill District man Friday. Willard Ray Tillery, twenty-seven, an unemployed laborer, was shot and killed while fleeing the scene of the crime.

. . . Police say the suspect fired two shots at Officer Haywood, who returned the fire, striking the suspect in the back. . . . Police are searching for two other men believed to be accomplices, who police

say escaped with an undisclosed amount of cash.

(*Seven Guitars* 96-7)

The statement has an element of irony: a white policeman is the only one who always shoots straight. A black always misses.

Materialism seduces and corrupts many blacks. Hedley is one of them. He "severs [Floyd's] windpipe with one blow of machete" (*Seven Guitars* 104) for some money. His aggressiveness springs from the fact that he, jarred by crisis, runs hysterically into violence or the coma of apathy. Commenting on Floyd's murder by his own fellow native, Wilson says, "the point is not who killed him [Floyd] but the content of his life" (qtd. in Shafer 410). The angry and frustrated Hedley takes out his frustration and pain on a younger black. He has witnessed the discrepancy between black lives and the American dream over the years. Although he is old enough to understand better, he does not know how to vent his frustration, and ultimately makes Floyd his victim. Black people's plight is encapsulated in this traumatic event. This tragic moment is the inevitable outcome of the confused actions of helpless blacks. The event depicts the impact of the humiliation, blacks are subjected to, on the ways they conduct their relationship with their folks. This particular event raises many basic issues; the most obvious being the loss of personal dignity, which explains not only

their hatred for the whites but also, and more importantly, their mutual exploitation.

"All the attitudes of my characters come straight out of the blues," says Wilson. "The blues is the bedrock" (qtd. in Taylor 411). Hedley, dying of tuberculosis, dreams of money that will transform his existence as a marginalized black man, money that will come to him from the legendary New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden to buy a plantation. This dream is all he has; but, instead of money, all that he receives are ashes. Ashes are a symbol of the death of the dream Hedley refuses to relinquish. The plantation, a symbol of the white man's subjugation of the black man, would allow Hedley to free himself from the yoke of second-class citizenship and obtain his father's forgiveness. Hedley's music constantly nourishes his dream: "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say. Here go the money, King take it away" (*Seven Guitars* 70).

Red Carter would happily return to Chicago, if Floyd could only get his drums out of the pawnshop; Canewell, a harmonica player who is tired of the road, still hungers for fame. Though these blacks are the victims of big-city record producers, their spirit is still high. They can make wonderful music out of nothing. The women of the play, a bit worn around the edges, sing of love gone wrong. Vera, Floyd's girlfriend, takes him

back after he left her for another woman; Louise, the landlady, claims she does not want anyone knocking on her door anymore; Ruby, Louise's niece, has just fled Alabama where one man killed another over her. "All these characters," Wilson points out, "are living the blues" (qtd. in Taylor 412). For these blacks, blues is the source of power and sustenance. It pulls them back to their origins and offers a clue to their future, outside the determined structures of social life. Their music emerges from the "dream in their hearts." It tells the stories of their past, carries the friendly down-home customs, and displays relaxed attitudes about daily life. In fact, their music enables them to live fully in the face of all shortcomings:

[Dressed in their Sunday best, they have come from the cemetery where they have buried Floyd Barton. There is lingering evidence of food and drink. LOUISE, in a much needed affirmation of life, is singing a bawdy song].

LOUISE [*singing*]:

"Anybody here wanna try my cabbage
just step this way
Anybody here like to try my cabbage
just holler Hey . . ."

RED CARTER: Hey! (*Seven Guitars 1*)

When the group activity in some way is channeled into the singing of blues, one finds the joy of living--even amidst pain. Blues helps these blacks forget the loss of their loved ones. It helps them keep themselves together and attempt to carve out a significant existence in a context where color means rejection and humiliation. They sing blues not for music's sake, but it is their way of life that inspires them to come into being, to give expression to their identity and the will to live. And because the blues is an expression of struggle, it is inseparable from blackness and trouble. The ample presence of the blues in the play gives validity, dignity, and power to black experience and being. With the help of blues, Floyd, when he is alive, makes an effort to beat the odds. His ways of coping with his condition are, indeed, different from others'. For him, the open sesame that will enhance his condition is music. He says:

I'm going there [Chicago] to take advantage of the opportunity. I'm gonna put out some more records. I know what will make a hit record. I leave here on the Greyhound and I bet you in one year's time I be back driving a Buick. Might even have a Cadillac. If you come visit me you be able to use my telephone. I'm gonna have everything. Some nice furniture. The

white man ain't the only one can have a car and nice furniture. Nice clothes. (*Seven Guitars* 80)

Floyd shares the same rebellious impulse that drove Levee. His mythological lineage can also be traced to Eshu-Elegbara "who rails against the status quo and the rigidity of rule and order, preferring the freedom of individual will" (Pereira 98). Besides, he is a black hero whose prowess is more in keeping with Hare, Tortoise, and Anancy--the three great African icons that oppose the accepted values of the world and ensure triumph in revolt. His intrepidity is that he defies the canons of the white man's world; he is not afraid to demonstrate his ability to surmount the obstacles of the immediate environment. His spirit roves all alone in quest of self-authentication and seeks ways to reshape his destiny: "All I want is you to get out my way. I got somewhere to go. See, everybody can't say that Time done got short and it getting shorter every day. The only thing I want you to do is get out my way" (*Seven Guitars* 41).

Floyd understands the potential of his music and is unwilling to have any intervention. As a trickster, he constantly seeks to reinvent himself so as to become and embody the generative myths of his culture that can usher in a new future. Mere survival is not all he wants. He has his eyes set

on wealth, power, and glory. But at the same time, he is a victim of fate, or the imposed order. Mythically, in his effort to clutch a swinging branch of a tree [as a monkey does] to escape torrential waters, he loses his grip and tumbles into the water, "drowning." Despite his doom, Floyd initiates his successors toward dispensing with their dependence on white values and encourages them to re-construct the black reality.

Like Wilson's earlier plays, *Seven Guitars* portrays American society in a way that reflects the real lives of the majority of blacks in America. It is about dreams--mostly unrealized. The play depicts the black struggle against racism that continues to pervade the country's institutions. In their struggle, however, blues inspires them to move on with a renewed vigor. Blues is their true weapon.

Chapter VI

Moving Beyond Barriers: *Fences*

By the 1950s blacks were no longer a race of ex-slaves. They were inching closer to the "mainstream" of American society. Their struggle was now not against a particular community, but against the policies of the United States. Having responded to their country's call during World War II, they were ready to claim what had been denied to them so long-- full citizenship. This was the time when blacks mounted their most spirited protests against the bastions of white supremacy. In 1951, Thurgood Marshall launched the battle against segregation that culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against the "separate but equal" doctrine; in 1955, Rosa Parks ignited the civil rights movement and inspired a young Martin Luther King Jr., to become its champion. In many ways, 1957 was one of the most crucial years of this decade, for in that year was enacted the first Civil Rights Act since the Reconstruction era, an act aimed at desegregating the franchise. This also gave legal endorsement to blacks' right to protest discrimination. But later in many southern communities economic sanctions were invoked against blacks who were civil rights activists. Dismissals from jobs, denials of loans, and foreclosures of mortgages were some of the actions taken against

them. Legally, blacks had been free for ninety-four years, but practically they had little or no access to any of the benefits that ordinary citizens take for granted--recourse to the law, equal employment opportunities, education. Thus, 1957 represented a time of some protest, much hope, and great skepticism--all of which are presented in *Fences* (1985) (Pereira 36).

Set in 1957, the play deals with the theme of separation and discrimination, symbolized in the title itself. It traces the fate of the Maxon family for three generations. In their thwarted hopes, their fears, their faith, and ultimately their survivals, we see the impassioned efforts by a race of people, long discriminated against racially and economically, to gain equal status with white Americans. The play interrogates the ideology of the "American Melting Pot," suggesting "America more accurately is a cultural stew in which African Americans are the leftovers" (Plum 562). It dramatizes the evils of segregation and inequalities, especially what Baker Jr. calls the "economics of slavery" as experienced by the black working class (*Blues* 26). But at the same time, it depicts newer strategies of black survival as an answer to racially motivated socio-economic inequality. Separation is again a crucial issue in the play, one that preoccupies Wilson in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and

The Piano Lesson. There are several references to people leaving their homes, families, and lovers. In *Fences*, however, separation takes a different form: people walk down the road in search of a new identity, power, and place which they had been denied for several years even after their freedom.

The question of boundaries takes place at the very outset of the play, which reveals a series of social and personal restrictions placed on blacks. The play begins with Troy Maxon and Jim Bono entering the former's partially fenced yard on "Friday night, payday, and the one night of the week the two men engage in a ritual of talk and drink" (*Fences* 105). This ritualistic space is filled immediately with discussions of blacks' fear of whites:

TROY. I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. Talking about . . . "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand? . . . And it sitting there big as life.

BONO. What did Mr. Rand say?

TROY. Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home. (*Fences* 105-06)

In its reference to the nigger hiding the watermelon and the authoritative white man, the talk effectively characterizes the racially hierarchal relationship between blacks and whites, and attempts to foreground the boundaries set between the races. The socio-economic inequality grows denser as the action moves onward. Most of the play's action concentrates on Troy's refusal to accept the fact that social conditions are changing for the blacks. In the yard where a ball is suspended on a rope serves as a sad memento of his career. His wife, Rose, reminds him that since first colored baseball player Jackie Robinson's breakthrough, things have been a little different. But he will not be persuaded. He had called for a new beginning--not forgetting the past, but seeking to overcome it, to transform its meaning through the creation of a new future. But his aspirations were bruised when it was time for him to reap the fruits of his labor. He was denied the opportunity to excel at the highest level of sports. "Having put all his energies into baseball, he [had] longed for national recognition, for this was America's game. This was where heroes were made," says Pereira. Baseball provided every American player with a chance to excel. Troy's dream never came true; he was never given that chance in the best arenas of the country. "The game that was once a beacon in his life," further says Pereira, "becomes a millstone

round his neck, dragging him into the depths of acrimony, filling his life with bitterness, coloring all his attitudes, opinions, and relationships" (41).

In the same way, Troy epitomizes the tragic plight of Josh Gibson, a baseball player, who is said to have died of a broken heart because he had been denied his entire athletic career. Both Troy and Gibson were powerful hitters, deprived of occupational opportunity. Saunders says, "baseball was so substantially a part of Gibson's life that once his playing days were over, he quite likely lay down and died" (7). Just as we cannot know how good Troy was in his prime, we will never know how good Gibson was, or hundreds of others who were barred from the major leagues during their time.

Troy is so trapped in the tragedy of his own athletic experience that he cannot believe things will be any different in future. He is therefore angry. He vents his anger on sports. Like Levee, he attacks the source of his identity and, in seeking self-empowerment as a free human being, becomes a slave to bitterness. His bitterness grows dense when he observes the condition of the world where he survives. He faces discrimination in job. He is upset that only white men drive the garbage trucks while the job of hoisting the huge trash-filled receptacles and emptying them into the compactors belongs

to the black workers. He claims to have encountered the devil who assumed the guise of an ordinary man offering credit for furniture purchase. That was fifteen years ago. But to this day, on the first of the month, he sends his ten dollars installment for the furniture he had purchased from that man: "Now you tell me," he says, "who else that could have been but the devil?" (*Fences* 117). Of course, we know that it was no devil that extended him the offer of credit, but a white man doing his business. But this white man is indeed symbolically a devil in the lives of poor blacks who are lost in financial indebtedness.

In Troy's experience chance, or fate, has never played a favorable role in the fifty-three years of his career. Chance made him black, chance took him to Mobile when he was fourteen, chance led him into armed robbery, and chance brought him to baseball. He therefore thinks it to be a foolish endeavor of his wife in taking a chance on a lottery: "Them numbers don't know nobody. I don't know why you fool with them" (*Fences* 122). He sees no chance for a better life in America where color of one's skin rather than talent or skill becomes the decisive factor in the workplace, or on the playground. Having been on the losing side of chance for so long, he knows it will never work for him. The only possible success he has been left with

is survival: enduring from dawn to dusk and day to day in a job that provides for his family. When chance does work in his favor, the price is terrible: his brother's life is destroyed and he is haunted by guilt at having profited from that disaster. Like his father before him, he is trapped in hard labor. He is fated to be down at heel because there is no escaping the drudgery of his destiny. Being a descendent of a slave, he is doomed to perpetual "slavery." His never-ending cycle of labor is merely a key modulation in that same kind of slavery that his ancestors were reduced to.

Despite all the traumas, Troy is a survivor, enjoying the transgressions of a trickster, reinventing strategies, as the occasion requires. Like his ancestors, whose shrinking world caused them to experience a sense of everlasting servitude, he does not engage in devaluations of self-esteem that might reduce him to a victim. Instead, says Harrison, in the spirit of Eshu-Elegbara, Troy erects "a fence to set the boundaries of his universe, a barrier that serves the dual function of keeping the profane at bay and containing divine order within his immediate province where, on the heels of hard labor, he engages in weekly payday drinking rituals to signify his sexual prowess and testify to his personal heroics while straddling the brink of despair" (303). Even death is no match for him who, when

stricken with pneumonia fever, challenges Death with a signifying riff:

TROY. Death standing there staring at me . . . carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "You want bound over for another year?" See, just like that . . . "You want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!" It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it . . . and me and him commenced to wrestling. We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can't say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I'd reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better. (*Fences* 114)

Out of such imaginary wrestling match, Troy fashions a baseball metaphor to help him combat the doom that constantly threatens. It needs a bit of luck to hit such a ball. The percentage is not favorable, however, when you are "born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate" (*Fences* 164). But his skill as a baseball player helps him learn the skill to survive. He knows he cannot always keep that fastball from

streaking past his swinging bat, but until it does he will play hard and survive as long as he can.

Having lived a life of drudgery, Troy seeks to protect his son, Cory, from falling into such mishaps. He sees himself as a father fenced in with responsibilities to keep his son from repeating his failure. Unlike a conventional black father, he expresses a desire for change in the son's life:

TROY. I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports. (*Fences* 137)

But unable to avoid the parental trap, he dominates his son just as his father had dominated him. By protecting Cory, Troy denies him the chance to pursue his own calling. Accusing Rose of "mothering that boy too much" (*Fences* 138), he does so himself. He says that Cory should make his own way without anyone holding his hand, yet he will not let the boy take a chance and try to survive as he himself did. Afraid that the same force that hurt him will destroy Cory, Troy seeks to restrain his son's ambitions. When Troy was growing up, blacks

were, no doubt, denied opportunities. But things are different in the 1950s. The American law has increasingly taken cognizance of racial questions and has rather ruled in favor of equality. The government has exerted considerable influence in eradicating the gap between creed and practice in American democracy. The interaction of these forces has created a better place for African-Americans than before. When, for example, Troy complains to Mr. Rand and subsequently to the union about a hierarchization of labor in the garbage collection company for which he works, he is promoted to the status of driver, thereby achieving a measure of racial justice of the sort he believes he was denied during his baseball career. His insurgent act, which insists on white confirmation of its responsibilities to ensure constitutionally guaranteed African-American rights, might well be viewed as an instance of changing circumstances. Even more, it can be viewed as a formal challenge to the racially hierarchal status quo and an attempt to delegitimize the hegemonic structures, which have sought historically to contain and control black desires. But unfortunately he fails to notice the great opportunity for Cory--the chance to get a college education and perhaps even to become a professional player. In the 1950s, says Pereira, "athletics began to provide a second avenue--after music--for blacks to excel in ways that commanded

the attention and admiration of white society" (43). It is quite ironic that although Troy found self-esteem and pride through baseball, he would deny his son the opportunity to take part in games.

The acute sense of responsibility in Troy finally affects the father-son relationship. Doing right does not mean imposing one's own will; what is necessary is an intense concern about the psychic welfare of those for whom one has assumed responsibility. Troy's defective code of living leaves no space for a pursuit of self-fulfillment and, therefore, his every attempt to mould Cory into his own pattern is met with disapproval, and, slowly, as Pereira says, "their lives begin to revolve in concentric circles--beginning at the same center, destined to describe similar patterns, overlapping in some ways but without any real contact" (44). As Troy cuts off every move Cory makes to follow in his footsteps as a sportsman, the boy's frustration reaches a breaking point, and he attacks his father. He, then, leaves home in pursuit of his own destiny. Believing he will discover himself only when he has dispelled his father's spirit, he joins the marines, a career as far removed from his father's as possible. Cory's moving beyond the barriers is a testament to the times in which he lives. He is not contained by the same circumstances that beset his father and grandfather,

for he lives in the 1950s, a decade of hope for blacks for self-determination and negotiation with the white establishment.

"One of the most important functions Esu bears is that of uncertainty or indeterminacy," says Gates Jr. (*Signifying* 32). Like the trickster, Troy too is unable to reconcile his words and actions to the philosophical views by which he has been governed. On the one hand, he intends not to do Rose, his wife, a bad turn: "I ain't talking about doing Rose a bad turn. I love Rose. She done carried me long ways and I love and respect her for that" (*Fences* 158-59). On the other, he constructs his motives for infidelity to her. Whereas "Esu," despite his indeterminacy, as Gates Jr. says, "rules understanding of truth, a relationship that yields an individual's meaning" (*Signifying* 39), Troy's understanding creates fences between him and his wife, their feelings, their rituals of living, and thereby the meaninglessness of his own individuality. Perhaps, this is the difference between a deity and a mortal human being.

Troy's relationship with his elder son, Lyons, is equally frail despite the fact that he feels guilty for not rearing him properly when he was a child. While Troy, motivated by a strong sense of responsibility, chooses to fight his way past a hostile world, Lyons chooses just the opposite. He would not place himself in a vulnerable position: "I don't wanna be carrying

nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock" (*Fences* 118). Following an easygoing lifestyle, Lyons is content with his hours at a club. Flamboyant, he dresses stylishly and uses his special brand of bonhomie to make his way into the world. But behind his nonchalant, cheery mask, Lyons is just another confused black man dealing with a difficult world. Raised in poverty by his mother and lacking the fortune to make the up-hill climb, Lyons takes the easy way out. "Such a lifestyle," as Pereira says, "carries a high social price, and Lyons finally pays it--three years in the workhouse" (47). Only then, in prison he decides to turn his life around. He learns to "take the crooked with the straights" (*Fences* 135), and uses them to create his own survival strategy. An important part of that strategy is the music that will sustain him in the years ahead. The blues will help him find his true self. It will help him survive.

Of all the characters in the play, Rose is perhaps the worst victim. As a black woman, she has been doubly marginalized. Living with Troy, she loses her individual freedom required to pursue her own needs; she is reduced to a functionary who has to fulfill expected roles, including bearing the brunt of her husband's frustrated dreams. Her responses to Troy's quest reveal her consciousness of her position as a black

woman, the extremity of his obsession with black manhood, and the indelibly gendered nature of the widening divide between them. Wilson tells us: ". . . her devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibilities of her life without him--a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration" (*Fences* 108). She gets confined to her roles as wife and mother. She dutifully washes, cooks, and nurtures the family. Because Troy gives her "a house to sing in" (*Fences* 190), she keeps his bed warm, and his libido satisfied: "We go upstairs in that room at night . . . and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever" (*Fences* 138). Ignoring her own condition, she always endeavors to keep the family bonds intact. She insists Troy to build a fence around the yard to keep the family together in. But her illusions are shattered when Troy explains to her that he has not only been unfaithful to her but has also fathered a child outside of their marriage, and one day he brings the baby girl home after her mother's death. The fence that she had asked Troy to make to keep herself in keeps her out forever. She turns out to be no more than an expendable commodity--a scapegoat for Troy's insensitive antics. For years, she had been a shoulder to cry on for Troy, co-operated with him to

build a home, and put her personal dreams on hold to let the family thrive. But now she realizes her mistake in not asserting herself more. "Her self-effacement," as Pereira says, "allowed Troy to take her for granted; by giving him her strength, she weakened herself" (50). Years later, at Troy's funeral, she reveals this to Cory:

I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me. For my part in the matter. . . . I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. I did that. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore.

(*Fences* 189-90)

Rose describes here the consequences of her emphasis on marital space; chief among them is her failure to pursue her own desires beyond satisfying the wishes of her husband. Subsequently, she shifts from a male determined world to a self-centered womanhood. In figuring the interior spaces of the self-protective male as a potential uterine site of her own development, she defies--and, in fact, denies--the limitations

of both the biological and Troy's economics of duty. Her act heralds the African-American women's movement for liberation in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the black women were active in that movement and all their lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was their experience within the liberation movement, as well as experience on the periphery of the white oppression, that spelt the need to develop that was antisexist and antiracist.

Rose, no doubt, breaks the fences of her husband's domination, but she does not forget to recognize Troy's intrinsic worth. That is why she urges Cory not to seek to erase the aspects of his character, especially his imaginative repertoire, which reflect his father, but instead to combine these characteristics with other conceptually persuasive modes of being in order to develop his own ethics of living. Rather than attempting to deny Troy's positive influence on him, Rose suggests him to honor and improve upon that which was good about his father. It is Rose who best understands Wilson's epigraph, which he has composed for the play to insist on the possibility of improving upon, or transcending, the negative aspects of a cultural legacy:

When the sins of our fathers visit us

We do not have to play host.

We can banish them with forgiveness

As God, in His Largeness and Laws.

It is only Bono in the play who seems well adjusted. Quite happy with his current life, he gives the impression of having lived through so much that nothing now could disconcert him. His sense of satisfaction is absent in other characters. In that, he bears some resemblance to Bynum in *Joe Turner's*, Slow Drag in *Ma Rainey's*, and even Doaker in *The Piano Lesson*. He walks the middle line wonderfully; wise, experienced, and mature, he has developed a strong sense of who he is and what his role might be. He has learnt how he could survive in the face of pain. At one place, he says that he did not want to have children because he "didn't know if [he] was gonna be in one place long enough to fix on them right as their daddy" (*Fences* 147). He renounces the pleasure of having progeny but develops a strong relationship with his wife, Lucille, and seeks to build a comfortable nook in which they could grow old together.

Bono is also a true friend of Troy Maxon and is very much concerned that his friend, for all his "honesty, capacity of hard work, and his strength" (*Fences* 1), does not recognize the potentially disruptive nature of his interest in another woman

called Alberta. As he tells Troy: "some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you" (*Fences* 61). Specifically, he is worried that Troy's attention to Alberta may lead his best friend to overstep the boundaries of acceptable marital behavior. Troy's extramarital desires trouble him because he thinks these desires would throw his friend off his personal responsibility and duty. He thus demonstrates an intense concern about the welfare of his friend.

During World War II Troy Maxon's brother, Gabriel, felt it necessary to fight at the front for better treatment at home. President Roosevelt had said, "The nation cannot expect colored people to feel that the United States is worth defending if the Negro continues to be treated as he is now" (qtd. in Franklin 444). Gabriel was determined to do all within his power to win the victory for America so that his own status would improve. For him, the task of protecting the Four Freedoms abroad also involved the elimination of discrimination and maltreatment back home. But in the War when he got "half his head blown off," he received, for his sacrifice, from the government "a lousy three thousand dollars" (*Fences* 128), and from the society--years of intimidation, harassment, and the title of a madman.

Gabriel's "madness," however, has a meaning. For his wound can be read in a broader national and historical context. As a soldier in World War II, he fought for human rights as espoused by the United States. To attain that goal often meant sacrifice. Gabriel's sacrifice also adds a new chapter to domestic history. The normative discourse of white American history, in 1957, as Alan Nadel says, was one of progress and assimilation.

Textbooks promoted the idea of the melting pot and of upward mobility; historical films and dramas reinscribed the myth of the nuclear family; and despite the continued presence of Jim Crow laws, segregated schools and facilities, rampant denial of voter rights, and extensive discrimination in housing and employment, American history and, more important, its popularizations represented the United States as a land of equal opportunity, with liberty and justice for all. (95)

Gabriel's sacrifice for his country spells out the need to re-examine the enshrined ideals in the light of realities and to recognize the contribution blacks have made to the making of the American nation.

Quite noticeable in *Fences* is the regard for Christianity as a positive force that helps sustain the lives of the characters. After a World War II head injury leaves Gabriel mentally retarded, he is convinced that he is, in fact, Archangel Gabriel, whose task is to open the Pearly Gates in Heaven and to chase away Hell hounds. Despite being an object of pity as well as of community harassment, Gabriel maintains self-assuredness uncharacteristic of any of the sane individuals around him. He proves to be the embodiment of Christian virtue that other characters lack. Then Rose also seeks comfort and direction in life by finding solace in the words of Jesus:

Jesus, be a fence all around me every day

Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. Jesus, be a fence all around me every day.

Jesus, I want you to protect me

As I travel on my way. (*Fences* 122)

Against the view that "contemporary" black women have lost their culture as a result of colonization, Wilson examines the "relationality and spirituality" that have survived to characterize black women. He suggests that black women's relationality is based on giving priority to personal relations based on principles of generosity, empathy and care which connote ideals of respect, consideration, understanding,

politeness, and nurturing. Even after being betrayed by Troy, Rose is a responsible "mother" to his baby daughter, Raynell. As a virtuous Christian, she becomes more involved with the church, participates more in its events, sings more of its hymns, and seeks freedom to find new channels for her energies. She does not leave Troy but continues to be the woman of the house to set it in order. We should be reminded here of Wilson's stance on Christianity. Though he considers Christianity as an enforced religion that produces mental servitude among blacks, he does not deny the important role this religion has played in bringing order and stability to the lives of suffering blacks. This is why he assigns the raising of the next generation to black women who espouse Christian ideology. Such stance is subject to feminist criticism, though.

Apart from Christianity, the characters in *Fences* draw sustenance from the family. During slavery, the forced separation from the kin engendered in blacks a new sense of belonging by way of forming a family of estranged souls held by common fate. According to Franklin, there are numerous examples of the emergence of a stable slave family, especially where there were children to strengthen the bond. The slaves did what they could to stabilize their family and to keep it together. After Emancipation blacks migrated to the North. But the

problem of living in a complex industrial society multiplied their difficulties, so they had to work out their own formulas for survival. An important means for maintaining group cohesion and rendering help to each other was local community. No one was without a "family"; everyone belonged to the community (148-49). In the play, the characters are linked to their families in one way or another. Gabriel lives with Miss Pearls, who has given him two rooms. When he holds up the key to his room, his voice is filled with a triumphant glee: "That's my own key! Ain't nobody else got a key like that. That's my key! My two rooms!" (*Fences* 126). A sense of home generates vigor in him. "He is," says Pereira, "the Archangel Gabriel and the key in his hand opens the gates to his heaven on earth" (40). Bono has a strong relationship with Lucille and is, therefore, comfortable and content. He asks little from life. Though Lyons depends on his wife's earning, he shows signs of starting again with his music. Troy feels more alive as long as he is dedicated to his family and struggles to perform his responsibilities. The sense of responsibility provides him with the spirit to protest against the discrimination in an unfeeling white world. But once he seeks to escape from the family bonds by betraying his wife, his life becomes increasingly empty and estranged. The price is high in terms of separation from one's family. He

cannot survive. The Troy, who, once used to have a heroic perception of his own mortality and grapple with death by placing it comfortably within the context of his convenient baseball metaphor, is now weaker and therefore gets defeated. Rose, by contrast, survives because she does not give up her commitment to her family. As a woman of the house, she willingly relinquishes certain aspects of herself for the upkeep of the family, though that is more an extension of her role as a mother than as a wife. In Daryl C. Dance's words, she is "unquestionably a Madonna, a strong Black bridge that we all crossed over on," whose love, strength, endurance, and "ability to survive in the most ignominious circumstance . . ." (130-31) have made possible the survival of black race under white oppression. The view, however, should not blind one to the loss of her individuality in the process. Family value, when not antithetical to self-reality, can hold a community better.

Like Wilson's earlier plays, *Fences* is also about the intimations of life, impressions of people who are born black, and the images of a society. But unlike those plays, it displays less rage at racial injustice even though the element is present. The family is curiously schematic. As Barnes says, "In many respects, *Fences* falls into the classic pattern of the American realistic drama--a family play, with a tragically

doomed American father locked in conflict with his son. Greek tragedy with a Yankee accent" ("Fiery" 484). Troy Maxon stands on the brink of new society, but his past experiences force him to distrust the promise of change. This creates conflict between him and his son, a conflict between past and present, which covers the greater part of the play. The conflict, however, propels the son toward his own destiny in the new emerging society. The play takes us down to 1965. The 1964 Civil Rights Act can be said to be the most promising of all the civil rights legislations to date, the first real hope for the blacks in almost a century of freedom. Reflecting this optimism are Cory, Lyons, Rose, Raynell, and, perhaps, Bono too. Each of them has a purpose in life. They have learnt, as Wilson says, to "stand to meet life with force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon" (*Fences* 103). As all of them move toward their individual and collective destinies, they have a surer sense of who they are and reveal a greater instinct for survival.

Chapter VII

In Search of New Directions: *Two Trains Running*

The 1960s was the most turbulent decade in African-American history. The sit-in movements, the freedom speeches, marches, demonstrations, and the voter registration drives suggested that a new destiny for blacks was in the making. Slowly, then more rapidly, the optimism gave way to pessimism and even cynicism. Justice and equality were not to be extended to blacks, though the Civil Rights Bill and the Voting Rights Bill became laws in 1964 and 1966 respectively. Both before and after the bills were passed, there was violent white opposition, followed by black retaliation. In 1963 John F. Kennedy, whom many blacks had come to regard as their friend, was assassinated. Then there was the murder of numerous civil rights workers as well as of innocent blacks. Finally, in 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was shot down. To many blacks, this violent act symbolized the rejection by white America of their vigorous but peaceful pursuit of equality. In more than a hundred cities, rioting, burning, and looting ensued--a grave and desperate response by blacks to the wanton murder of their leaders.

Set in 1969 Pittsburgh, *Two Trains Running* (1990) addresses the tumultuous 1960s. In Frank Rich's words, the play "is Mr. Wilson's account of the 1960s, unfurling at that moment when

racial conflict and the Vietnam War were bringing the nation to the brink of self-immolation" (388). In his interview with Pettengill, Wilson says that the title of the play came from a blues song, "Two Trains Running": "Two trains running, neither one going my way. One running by night, one run by day" (207-8). There are two ideas in the play, ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation: the idea of cultural assimilation and the idea of cultural separatism. Symbolically, these two ideas are the two trains. For blacks, neither of these trains is working. They have to build a new railroad in order to get to where they want to go--because the trains are not going their way. However, the play does not address the so-called red-letter events of the nineteen sixties. Nor does it seek to depict the political violence that destroyed both whites and blacks. Such omissions of historical facts point to Wilson's intentional avoidance of the official versions of American history. What *Two Trains Running* does is that it keeps open the problem of writing American history. W.E.B. Du Bois's prophetic announcement, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (1), resonates throughout the play, reminding the audience that the solution to this problem would be to get blacks to cross the color line.

The characters in *Two Trains Running* are, despite all the upheavals of the 1960s, living their usual lives. These events, while they may have in some way affected these blacks, do not loom large because the characters are average people who are simply concerned with living. Wilson seeks not to convert blacks to the belief in any revolution but to cultivate in them a kind of self-perception that can overturn the existing social order without much bloodshed.

The action of the play takes place in a restaurant scheduled for demolition along with nearly a dozen surrounding city blocks. Outside, the world moves convulsively toward the future. But within the walls of the restaurant the regulars spend hours philosophizing, telling stories, debating politics, and competing to prove each other wrong. It seems that the restaurant is the only refuge left for these blacks as an extended family. Through their conversations these blacks establish a kinship, a community within the safe confines of the restaurant, away from all the violence that occurs outside. They seem to be more interested in their little things than in distant leaders sowing lofty dreams of change. They are distrustful of the sound and the fury surrounding the civil rights movement, especially the old men, who have quite often witnessed such movements in life.

Memphis, the restaurant owner, recalls to have seen various movements and demonstrations, none of which have brought about any reforms: "All them niggers wanna do is have a rally. Soon as they finish with one rally they start planning for the next. They forget about what goes in between" (*Two Trains* 63). Their attempts to gain justice and equality are each time predoomed. They are fighting fate as determined by white men, the authority that enforces rules written for the black "Other." Their struggle goes back past the nineteen sixties; it spreads over centuries of suffering. But while their sufferings are mostly caused by whites, blacks themselves, as Memphis thinks, are no less responsible for their present plight. They sometimes fail to understand, even after years of harsh experience, the deceits of whites and easily fall prey to their ruses:

They had that boy, Begaboo. The police walked up and shot him in the head and them same niggers went down there to see the mayor. Raised all kind of hell. . . . After that it was business as usual. The only thing anybody remember is the funeral. The mayor sat down there and waited it out. Didn't even bother to transfer the cop to another precinct. . . . Then he had enough nerve to come up here and ask these niggers

to vote for him and they like to broke their neck
running to the polls. (*Two Trains* 63)

The compulsion to live by the white institutions of modern America is but a variation on slavery. Blacks have, no doubt, gotten legal freedom. But that is only a half-won battle. American economic system still does not reward them for their contributions. To employ the metaphor of the numbers game, which continues throughout the play, the fix is always in against the black men. The legal clauses entitle them to a minimum recompense for the loss of their property; even lottery winnings are cut in half. The life of Hambone, who resembles the mentally disturbed Gabriel in *Fences*, better exemplifies the economic exploitation of blacks. Nine and a half years earlier, the owner of Lutz's Market promised him a ham for painting his fence. Once the fence was painted, however, Lutz was only willing to give Hambone a chicken. He said that Hambone did not do a good job; so he did not owe him a ham. As long as such manipulations exist, hopes for prosperity and harmony cannot be realized; different races cannot live together peacefully in a society where the patterns of relations are, at best, confused. The murders of Martin Luther and Malcolm X are cases in point. Their murders betray the rejection by dominant whites of their pursuit of equality, and underscore the senseless violence

perpetrated against blacks at a time when America had been emerging as a great nation.

The blacks in *Two Trains Running* are, however, considerably different from those in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and even in *Fences*. They are, as Rich says, "the furthest removed from both Africa and the Old South and are now aware of the choices they need to make as African Americans in the North" (389). They have a clear understanding about the means of achieving what they have been deprived of. For them, the issue of mere survival is not a major concern; rather their efforts are directed toward living life with dignity and pride. They seek to celebrate their presence in the world and look about themselves to discover their true confidence and abilities. These blacks are, as Wilde says, "not innocent: they have already tried to make their lives work as the world dictates and lost. Their need to reclaim what has been taken from them, either in actual or symbolic terms . . . becomes the truest form of revolution and affirmation" (74). Memphis wants the fair-market value for his restaurant, which he must sell because of the urban renewal campaign. He has placed over thirty years of hard work into his restaurant, losing his wife in the process, and he demands recompense. When the court offers him \$20,000

for his property, he makes it plain that he will not settle for less than \$25,000.

For nine and a half years, Hambone has stood outside Lutz's market demanding his ham, rejecting Lutz's insistence that he just take a chicken. He is not "willing to accept whatever the white man throw[s] at him" (*Two Trains* 50). He dies restive and leaves behind him the meaning of his death--do not give up your hope because the possibility always exists that you might one day get your "ham." He voices the traditional African belief in the majesty of the eternal human spirit. To him, it means an endless fight for dignity, freedom, and justice. He is the character who, when he dies, changes things. His death without a ham strengthens everyone in the community to preserve their dignity and signals a tentative deliverance from the misfortune that has befallen each of them. It inspires them to identify themselves with his quest. Sterling turns into a man of action. He realizes that what appears to be madness in Hambone is actually his resolve to hold on to life in the face of defeat: "I started to go over there and get his ham for him. But then he wouldn't have nothing to do in the morning. I didn't want to take that from him. He have more cause to get up out the bed in the morning than I do. I consider him lucky" (*Two Trains* 56). Memphis sees himself in him: "Man been around here ten years

talking the same thing" (*Two Trains* 54). Memphis has been around for ten years, too. Hambone has chosen to stand up for his material rights. Memphis has more in common with Hambone than he would like to believe. Like Hambone, Memphis has been denied what was his by right. Memphis's lines, "My clause say they got to give me what I want for it. It's my building. If they wanna buy it they got to meet my price" (*Two Trains* 58), express the ethos of Hambone's "He gonna give me my ham. I want my ham" (*Two Trains* 54). In the white idiom hambone is merely an insane black, but then there is also nothing benevolent about white Lutz. Hambone's philosophy of human dignity is superior to the hypocrisy of his oppressor. "Hambone," says Wilson, "shows us that a new black man was created in the 1960's who would not accept a chicken" (qtd. in Saunders 10). His rejection is, in fact, a conscious affirmation of human identity in the face of dehumanizing circumstances.

In the 1960s, blacks became fully aware that they could, as Baker Jr. says, "never 'reintegrate' into a dominantly white society with a 'socially responsible' status" (*Blues* 154). And therefore they began to search for an integration of their own personality, in a society where segregation and integration were the two faces of the same white politics. In pursuit of their goals, they directed their move toward "a black subject

position" (Awkward 13) and entered a world that demanded a radical shift from the traditional conception of self. Memphis, who is demanding \$25,000 for the demolition of his restaurant, is confident that he can beat the white man at his own game as long as he knows the rules. He has hired a white attorney, who knows the white man's rule, in order to realize the amount from the city council before it pulls down his building. He believes that as a businessman he can overcome white prejudice and outwit the white men by achieving his primary aim--to make money. Years of white men's company has oriented him toward their philosophy of individual success in the competitive capitalistic system. He emulates white business practices by preying on whites themselves, and flaunts the fruit of his success, a Cadillac. The complexities of American society have made him a trickster. The imperious fiats of whites have always relegated him to an underclass. The only means of negotiating a passage beyond this underclass is playing tricks. He has learnt that "the only way to recover what has been lost or stolen is by following the dominant culture's tactics: robbery, burning buildings for insurance, carrying guns to assert power" (Wilde 388). He can now exercise his choice and has almost found an answer to the question that Levee had asked during the 1920s: "How can I live this life in a society that refuses to allow me

to contribute to its welfare--how can I live this life and remain a whole and complete person?" (Wilson, "Interview with Kim Powers" 373).

Memphis's tricks finally help him win the fight: he gets the twenty-five thousand dollars for his restaurant. At Aunt Ester's (the 322-year-old conjure woman) advice, he resolves to return to Jackson to confront Stovall, the first white man to cheat him and chase him off his land. If he survives his confrontation with Stovall, he will return to the Hill and use his twenty-five thousand dollars to build "a big restaurant right down there on Center Avenue" that will employ "two or three cooks and seven or eight waitresses" (*Two Trains* 72). While he was leaving Jackson some forty years ago, he was determined that one day he would buy a V-8 Ford, and it took him only thirteen years to get the Ford. Six years later, he traded that in for a Cadillac. Though he does not believe in politics, he believes that God blesses the child who has got his own ability and minds his own business. He protects his property as best as he can. His success is certainly the result of his realization that productive arrangements of life can also be made through individual effort and self-dependence.

Wolf, an amicable trickster, profits from running numbers for Old Man Albert. He offers new lives for the price of a

ticket. Playing the numbers is a way to try to get enough money to get ahead. Getting ahead happens also through a lucky number: "It's the same thing as putting money in the bank. This way you might take out more than you put in. . . . The numbers give you an opportunity. If it wasn't for the numbers all these niggers would be poor" (*Two Trains* 43). Wolf has a clear sense of ethics and a strong sense of self-preservation.

West, the undertaker, is another black whose hard work and confidence bring him financial rewards. His field of business relates to his philosophical credo that gradual economic advantage leads to gradual social equality. He believes in being patient and realistic in realizing one's dreams. He claims that in order to be content in life one should carry "a little cup" so that it seems like something when it fills up. He is a modern high priest presiding over the ceremonies of grief and valediction. He is a self-made person with his "practical view of death . . . perhaps the community's keenest social observer and certainly its wealthiest entrepreneur" (*Rich* 389). He is the preacher of new dawn for black Americans and is also a businessman who makes money. His entry into the bourgeois economy is perhaps a crucial move in a repertoire of black survival in America.

Prophet Samuel is dead but his attainments include a cache of jewelry, a white Cadillac, a harem, and a huge folk. When he was alive "The police didn't bother him no more. Wouldn't even give him a parking ticket" (*Two Trains* 48). Unlike Reverend Gates in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he held a good deal of social respect. This shift in status marks a new order of black life in the 1960s America.

The fundamental difference between the 1920s and the 1960s was cognizance. The evolution of consciousness in the blacks as a separate and dignified group of people "contributed to a heightened sense of power on the parts of Negro Americans" (Franklin 492). During the 1960s, many blacks moved decisively away from Christian humility and Gandhian forbearance that marked the strategy of Martin Luther. Their voices became more strident, their actions more aggressive. They substituted Black Power for Civil Rights as a survival strategy. The new phrase rang out with the sound of gunfire and the rumble of tanks. The last two years of the decade and the beginning of the 1970s found black men and women throughout America invoking Black Power that led to the Black Revolution. "Their arms had been raised," says Baker Jr., "in a gesture of unconditional refusal, and many had granted their allegiance to the black nationalist

doctrines so convincingly advocated by a man like Malcolm X" (*Afro-American* 116).

The play reinscribes the Black Nationalist ideology, with the young characters as its harbingers. Sterling and Risa attend the program associated with Malcolm X. Their spirit is elevated via worship of the civil rights leader, who sacrificed his life for a great cause--liberty and happiness for black people in America. By associating themselves with Malcolm X, they are sustaining their revolutionary consciousness. It is this consciousness that prompts Sterling to look for some change in life after coming out of the penitentiary. He is disillusioned by the racial inequities of the American system, and he virtually demands new forms in which to express his reality. He recognizes the revolutionary attitude displayed by Hambone and the magnitude of his disgust with the white oppression. He finds in Hambone's act a call for unified class action. In response to this call, he violently breaks into Lutz's store and takes the ham out that Lutz has been refusing to give to Hambone for nine and a half years:

[STERLING enters, carrying a large ham. He is bleeding from his face and hands. He grins and lays the ham on the counter]

STERLING: Say, Mr. West . . . that's for Hambone's casket. (*Two Trains* 72)

The white world was full of prejudice; it seldom gave blacks anything on its own, unless seized by force.

Risa is engaged in a radical protest against the objectification of women. Frustrated by men who deny her humanity by considering her body as a sex object, she scars her legs to deter their sexual advances. She wants others to look deeper into her character and has the determination and the steel to do what must be done to keep herself free. Holloway, the elder of the community who acts as an oral historian by preserving and interpreting the experiences of others, tells us, "She figure if she made her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is" (*Two Trains* 50). Risa's revolt deconstructs the traditional concept that "the female body is imaged within representation only as the site of male desire" (Dolan 84). She defies traditional expectations and exists outside the cultural codes of femininity. Memphis with disdain proclaims:

A man would be happy to have a woman like that except she done ruined herself. She ain't right with herself . . . how she gonna be right with you. Anybody take a razor and cut up on herself ain't right. . . .

Something ain't right with a woman don't want no man.
That ain't natural. If she say she like women that be
another thing. It ain't natural but that be something
else. But somebody that's all confused about herself
and don't want nobody I can't figure out where to put
her. (*Two Trains* 50)

This lays bare the "double jeopardy" the black woman suffers. The words of the black man ironically bring out the effectiveness of Risa's political strategy. No longer is she viewed simply as a sex object or a property of "some man to lay up with" (*Two Trains* 50). Wilson himself explains the cause of Risa's scarring of her legs: "For me the scarring of her legs was an attempt to define herself in her own terms rather than being defined by men . . . basically for me it was her standing up and refusing to accept those definitions and make her self definition" (qtd. in Shannon, "The Ground" 163). Risa accepts Sterling's love because Sterling values her as a positive force and considers her a living icon of personal and racial pride.

In Risa, says Shannon, "Wilson continues to demonstrate that the black woman's capacity to nurture is not limited to certain members of her family, nor is it confined to a domestic setting." Like Bertha Holly, who clearly regards her boardinghouse customers as her family, or like Ma Rainey, who

treats her nephew Sylvester as her child, Risa has singled out Hambone as the recipient of her compassion. "Risa's unexplained allegiance to Hambone," Shannon further says, "leaves room for much conjecture." ("The Ground" 161). Her strong commitment to him seems based upon some previous experience they apparently shared at another time and place. This strange bond is underscored by Risa's exceptionally protective instinct for Hambone. When necessary, she speaks for him, feeds him, and defends him. Her maternal concern for this mentally unstable man casts her as "the epitome of altruism" ("The Ground" 161). Knowing that her routine kind gestures toward Hambone stands to anger Memphis, she continues to give him coffee, a warm bowl of beans, or a wrap to shelter his body from the cold. When Hambone dies from multiple stab wounds, it is Risa who frowns upon the traditional welfare burial that awaits him, preferring --despite a \$700 price tag--to "lay him out in a gold casket" (*Two Trains* 67). Risa's nurturing of Hambone may also be the result of the common physical and emotional scars that seem to forge a bond between them. Both Risa and Hambone are victims. Both of them live on the fringes of society, and seemingly out of their roughly similar circumstances, they gravitate toward each other for mutual support.

By 1969, the migration to the North had almost ended and blacks were as much northerners as any whites. Although Memphis does talk about his lost land in Jackson, most of the time he is busy struggling to make life better in Pittsburgh. His attention is focused on the present and the future, the past being merely a distant memory. So is the case with other characters. However, Wilson does not give up his theme of the past. Cultural memory, for blacks, is a means of achieving a proper place in the white world. To underscore this concept, Wilson incorporates Aunt Ester. The 322-year-old woman, as Wilson says, represents the entire length of black life in America with its rich cultural wealth--black tradition, philosophy, folk wisdom, hobbies, culture, and whatever blacks care to call their own. She is for reclaiming the past. Blacks cannot know who they are unless they recognize--irrespective of recent political history--that they have come from a long line of honorable people ("Interview with Richard Pettengill" 209-13). She is perhaps Wilson's most explicit figure functioning as a force of cultural cohesion and continuity.

Blacks seeking answer go to the red door at 1839 Wylie Street to consult Aunt Ester. Like the Sphinx in Sophocles drama, she provides her visitors not with answers but with riddles and parables, divinations that they themselves must

interpret. Specifically, "she offers them," says Wilde, "the choice of remaining passive or moving towards their fate--if they are ready to walk through fire to reach it. . . . Her presence, reaching to precolonial days, represents African American memory" ("Reclaiming" 388). Her power is so great that she transforms an ordinary minister into Prophet Samuel, founder of the wealthy, influential First African Congregational Kingdom. His transformation has accorded him the status of a spiritual guru above the white man's law. Holloway, who dreams of a return to the South he left in 1927, looks upon Aunt Ester as the oracle of African wisdom and bearer of the vernacular, for she speaks in a language native to the African-American community. He goes back beyond the slave past to the Middle Passage, and then returns to the present. To him, blacks need a sense of perspective that history can provide: "Niggers is the most hard working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. . . . If it wasn't for you, the white man would be poor" (*Two Trains* 66).

Wilson has reasons for revisiting the past. He says, "The message of America is 'Leave your Africanness outside the door'. My message is 'Claim what is yours'" (qtd. in Freedman 448). Reading the present in the light of the past allows one to move on with a distinct vision of the future. By reinscribing the

past and incorporating its legacy--custom, belief and pain--into their consciousness, blacks can reaffirm their belief in the need for a move toward better life. If blacks, says Wilson, seek today to find "the real person, the whole person," they must look to all their yesterdays. Then they can find their own "song," vigorous and enabling. Acknowledging the vestiges of the past within themselves, they can truly lay claim to what is their own ("Interview with Kim Powers" 372-75).

The blacks in *Two Trains Running* are standing at the most crucial moment of their lives. They are no longer willing to stay where they are; they demand back what they were deprived of. Their policy of "wait and see" has ended. Their present "struggle," in the words of Baraka, "moves to make certain that no man has the right to dictate the life of another man" (qtd. in Baker Jr., *Afro-American* 122). They, too, have boarded a train that runs counter to the whites'. However, they are yet to find a station where the two trains meet, recognizing a difference within sameness and a sameness within difference. The play, at best, captures a racially divided America; the bringing together of the two halves is a drama yet to unfold.

Chapter VIII

Creating Out of Nothing: *Jitney*

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s, no doubt, brought significant change to the quality of black life in the United States. Yet the dissatisfaction was so deep in the black community during the 1970s that just some developments were not enough to reduce it. Many blacks had become so frustrated that they were inclined to interpret individual advancement in public and private sectors as nothing more than cunning designs of whites to buy off, and thus to silence, their most talented and influential leaders. Thirty-one percent of blacks were still living below the poverty line and 13.2 percent were jobless. Even in jobs chances for them to move up were greatly restricted by meager opportunities for apprenticeship training and discrimination in many labor unions. In 1971 the Gallup Poll reported that twenty-five percent of the black population was dissatisfied with the quality of community life (Franklin 491-94). Small wonder that there was considerable unrest among blacks as they headed toward the 1970s.

Set in 1971 Pittsburg, *Jitney* (1982) explores the confrontations inherent in the day-to-day struggle of blacks for living. It derives its name from the unlicensed, privately owned "taxis" that bring passengers to parts of the city avoided

by licensed cabdrivers. The play is the product of a real experience that Wilson underwent during a visit to his hometown of Pittsburgh. One day, he hailed a jitney and was struck by the energy of the people who ran these car services: "These guys would just get an abandoned storefront and put a pay phone in there and disseminate the number throughout the community and go into business, thereby creating something out of nothing. These were guys who sent their kids to college driving jitneys" (qtd. in Herrington 114).

Like *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney* has one set: a dilapidated storefront used as jitney dispatch station. Service requests come via a pay telephone hanging on the wall. While demolition, murder, and incarceration seem to suggest the stereotype, *Jitney* hangs much more on its atmosphere, presenting extraordinary verisimilitude in its portrayal of a group of struggling African-American men. It abounds in experiences that include war, alcoholism, lost love, skirmishes with the law, and continued disappointment. The characters are more than types; some are highly individualized. Turnbo is a bitter man who fills his days with a running ironic commentary on the lives of his colleagues; and his favorite target, Youngblood, a twenty-four-year-old Vietnam veteran, is trying to build a life for his family. Youngblood's energy contrasts with the resignation of

Fielding, a drinker who still dreams of his wife, dead twenty-two years ago. Doub, a steady worker, remains optimistic despite the battle he has fought in and out of war. All of them are jitney drivers whose station is owned by Becker who holds these men together while struggling with his estrangement from his son, Booster, who was imprisoned for murder twenty-five years earlier. With these men is Shealy, a numbers runner who uses the station as his office.

Day after day the drivers fan out into the neighborhood to pick up their fares as they have done for years, only to learn that they will soon face the closing of the station and the loss of their livelihood. In this play, however, Wilson is more concerned with the creation of new, vivid images of blacks and has deliberately tried to expand the dramatic world beyond the rather narrow ethos of their helplessness. He alludes to the expectations raised by some progress in the 1960s that change will bring them prosperity and genuine respect. He deals with the issues of how blacks should best proceed in their struggle for survival with dignity. Above all, Wilson comprehensively raises the ethical issues that must be confronted if they are to realize those ideals in whose name the civil rights movement has been won.

Even in the 1970s, blacks in *Jitney* are living below the poverty line and for them America has no jobs. No doubt, the civil rights movement has brought some changes in the relationship between blacks and whites, but the structure of society that determines the nature of contact has remained essentially the same. These blacks are part of an economy, stuck in a life that has them driving jitneys, and are the people who have pride but hardly anything else. While waiting for the pay phone to ring (usually for the summons of a customer for a cheap cross-town shuttle), they play craps, hit each other up for small loans, berate and console each other, get drunk, get mad, get fired and, best of all, tell stories. But they are not hopeless, nor are they more ineffectual dreamers. They are strong despite stark social conditions and think in terms of progress. These blacks are challenged to act, and their responses reveal their basic fighting spirit.

What is more provocative, however, is that *Jitney* reveals the potency of black integration. While there are skeptics like Fielding, the others are convinced that only total effort by the black community to achieve their independence will break the yoke of white oppression. These people hope that good, honest labor will bear success as its fruit. Becker and his drivers together hang on to what they have gotten and are engaged in the

struggle to rise above their present situation in the face of such leveling gusts. Their collective struggle to move ahead is the struggle that shapes most human endeavor. These blacks are bound in their effort to a common end of liberation. Their approaches to the goal of freedom are coextensive, interdependent, and conjoined. What so palpably characterizes such collaboration is a desire for self-definition and self-determination beyond the reality of black marginality. They combine their efforts to rid themselves of white ethnocentrism and to stress the survival of minority culture. Excluded from the center, they have developed their own culture that not only functions within their own setting but also compensates for the discrimination they have long suffered. They promise to adhere to the rules that they themselves have made: "No overcharging; Keep car clean; No drinking; Replace and clean tools" (Jitney 11).

One who breaks the rules is subject to be dismissed from membership of the station. They drive jitney not just to make money but also to do what is better for their community. They are, as Becker says, "providing a service to the community. We ain't just giving rides to people. We providing a service. That's why you answer the phone 'Car service'. You don't say Becker's Cabs or Joe's Jitney's" (Jitney 86). These blacks make

themselves feel better about themselves and their place in America because everyone has now understood that "This is a free country! I'm a free man! You can't tell me what to do! This is the United States of America" (*Jitney* 50). In Marion Isaac McClinton's words:

They [seem to] say: "This here is our place," a place that is inherited, just like our blood and bones, a place where stories live that help to define who we have been and who we are, so we might wonder at the possibilities of who we can be. This is our place to stand upon, so that we can snatch the future and claim it forever, never to lose it again. (Introduction to *Jitney* 8)

Such understanding gives them a purpose and direction in life: to serve their community. By serving the community they try to find their true place in the U.S. society.

The union of Youngblood and Rena represents the bond between black men and black women. Their son, Jesse, is symbolic of all that fructifies out of the bond. Youngblood is as bound to Rena by his love as she is to him by will: "I want you baby . . . I told you that. You already my pride. I want you to be my joy" (*Jitney* 77), he tells her. This sense of love creates in him the sense of responsibility, respect for

authority, and a clear life plan. Becker thinks he has found in Youngblood what he has lost with the fate of his own son. Youngblood works hard day and night to buy a house and give his family "someplace decent to live" (*Jitney* 74). "For many Americans," says Helen Keyssar, "the act of purchasing one's own house clearly signifies upward mobility and membership in the middle class" (142). Youngblood's family is moving up to that standard. Both Youngblood and Rena attempt with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for and try to make a decent and better life for their son. Their effort suggests what survival might look like, if parents were true to their responsibilities for the progeny. Symbolically, their union also reworks the Edenic image of creation. Youngblood, as the new Adam, and Rena, as the new Eve, seem to be ready to start the historical process of the creation of a new race of black people.

After twenty years' imprisonment for murder, Booster tries to reconnect with his estranged father. Yet, at the same time, he remains the uncompromising voice of black militancy. Twenty years ago he had killed the rich white society girl because she falsely testified against him as a rapist. Instead of seeking an escape, he chose "to resist" what Malcolm X calls "the white avalanche" (qtd. in Marable 54). Like Malcolm X, his conflict

is with the oppressive and mechanized social system. He therefore protests, confronts, and pre-empts the forces that drives him toward servitude--he would choose death as freedom rather than submit to the indignity and injustice of exploitation. His denial of white superiority, his rejection of white oppression, and his display that black endurance has its limits, express African-American disgust with the prevailing system. Coming out of the penitentiary, he is not worried about his survival. What he seeks to do is to make a history, rather than compromise with the world. His way of responding to this world is in marked contrast to the way his father responds.

The difference between Becker and Booster is obliquely reminiscent of the division of black Americans into two groups--the "integrationists" and the "separatists." It implies the ideological differences that defined the black freedom movement of the 1960s: the division between the integrationists led by Martin Luther, who sought cultural inclusion and reforms within the system, and the black nationalists following Malcolm X, who championed black separatism, militancy, and protest.

BECKER. Proud of you for killing somebody!

BOOSTER. No, Pop. For being a warrior. For dealing with the world in ways that you didn't or couldn't or wouldn't. (*Jitney 57*)

Becker, is also a fighter because he too seeks an overthrow of white supremacy. But he could not rebel as he believed that militant protests would deprive his family or his people of whatever little they had to sustain themselves. Instead, he aims at generating resources within his own community to empower it for its own well being. He acts as a disseminator of thought, of the collective will of a large segment of his people. He sets an important pattern for others to follow. He too defies, but in a non-violent manner. He calls a meeting of the drivers to discuss how they can fight the closing of the station. Becker's decision to fight the case legally, to lead the men, and to increase their self-respect reflects his iron will to wage a war, but on his own terms. Wilson says, "he's [Becker] not just going to take what's given, what's presented to him; he's going to stand up" (qtd. in Herrington 128).

The relationship between Becker and Booster forms the core of the play. Becker deeply resents Booster and sees him as a murderer twice over, holding him responsible for the loss of his wife who died shortly after Booster was sentenced. He still feels devastated by the crushing of all the dreams he once held for his son. Contrarily, Booster clashes with his father for accepting what life doles out without a fight:

I don't know if you knew it Pop, but you were a big man. Everywhere you went people treated you like a big man. . . . That day when Mr. Rand came to the house it was snowing. You came out on the porch and he started shouting and cussing and threatening to put us out in the street where we belonged. I was waiting for you to tell him to shut up . . . to get off your porch. But you just looked at him and promised you would have the money next month. Mama came to the door and Mr. Rand kept shouting and cussing. I looked at mama . . . she was trying to get me to go in the house . . . and I looked at you . . . and you had got smaller. The longer he shouted the smaller you got. When we went back to the barbershop you didn't seem so big no more. You was the same size as everybody else. You was just another man in the barbershop. That's when I told myself if I ever got big I wouldn't let nothing make me small. (*Jitney* 56-7)

Yet, the father and son seek to get over their "minor" differences in order to seek a solution to their common problem. Becker shows new lines that make a clear statement about his hope for a reconciliation with his son: "Say Doub . . . my boy been around here? You seen him?" (*Jitney* 87). As Wilson moves

toward revealing a deeper bond between the father and son, he justifies what is probably most significant for the progress of black Americans. After Becker's funeral, all of the drivers return to the jitney station. Booster joins them briefly. Then, as he turns to leave, the phone begins to ring. A moment passes and then Booster picks up the receiver and says, "Car Service." The son has come full circle, into his father's shoes.

After his father's death Booster recognizes the clues his father had left behind. He understands what it means to be working hard together peacefully: an understanding, which generates its own special form of power in the struggle to resist and overcome racial subordination and terror. He once had heroic notions, but he now understands how true heroism can be achieved. He says:

the only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard.
It didn't matter to me too much at the time cause I
couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways
. . . I'm proud of my old man. I'm proud of him.
And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. (*Jitney* 96)

Finally, by taking over the charge of his father's jitney station, Booster starts growing bigger. What now distinguishes him from many other blacks is his transformed awareness. We

expect that the rest of his life will be devoted to the uplift of the condition of his people rather than to the killing of whites.

Surrender to white supremacy is death. The play makes it equally clear that Becker has to die because he retreats to the life he had abandoned long before. It is Becker's financial failure that causes his destruction, and ultimately his death. Intellectually and emotionally capable of supporting his family, he is ultimately unable to find a job that pays enough to support them physically. His only alternative is to return to the same low paid hazardous job--the job in a mill with old machines--which he had left many years before. In this light, his retreat points to his painful realization that the black man is so powerless in America that it is difficult for him to sustain his freedom. What ultimately destroys Becker's body is a "capitalist bullet"; what destroys his spirit is prejudice--the big white fog that denies him all dignity and thrusts its deadly cancer into the very heart of the black community, including his family. The matter here is not disillusionment, but having all roads blocked from the outside. Becker, once again, becomes a victim of the same urban anonymity and disharmony that so many blacks confronted after their migration from the South to the North at the beginning of the century.

Most painfully, his death can be viewed as the murder of blacks who seek to survive with freedom and dignity. The portrait that Wilson paints--of the gruesome effects on black identity and experience of the white myths with all their derivative forms of oppression--is stark; and clearly his intention is to present the black reality. Becker's death, no doubt, suggests that black people continue to live with fewer options, but then it is also necessary for them to open, with their collective efforts, all the blocked roads and head toward making a world of their own.

Thus, in *Jitney*, Wilson attempts to portray the complexity of black life in America and offers supportive values. His characters strive for a freedom that always accompanies deeper self-knowledge and a genuine understanding of their place in America. In this sense *Jitney* is a journey toward the liberation of black Americans from the remnants of an oppressive system. Further, the play is, as McClinton refers in his introduction to a viewer's comment, not just black people's story, but who they are. It is not their story, it is their truth, the facts of the matter concerning their life in the land of the free and the home of the brave people (*Jitney* 8). Wilson writes, as he himself puts it, about "the unique particulars of black culture . . . I wanted to place this culture onstage in

all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us . . . through profound moments in our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves" (*Jitney*, back cover).

Chapter IX

Conclusion

The plays of August Wilson, discussed in the present thesis, cover a period of sixty years--from the 1911 of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to the 1971 of *Jitney*. They span more than six decades of struggle of African-Americans to survive, to define themselves as individuals and as a community, and to secure their place in America. However, what those people had achieved in those sixty years of hard struggle was not enough for self-authentication. What account for this gap between the struggle and its outcome are continued economic exploitation and the changing narratives of racial discrimination. Blacks always expect to have--like other Americans--the rights of freedom and equality. Instead, they often find themselves crammed into a small part of American society, buried by the weight of everyday reality and, therefore, incapable of living a full and free life. Poor economic condition, unemployment, discrimination in public life, and the basic assumption of an inherent difference between whites and blacks continue to account for their marginality. Because these blacks live in a world that has an inferiority and instability reserved for them, they often undergo the shattering sense of frustration and alienation.

With each succeeding decade, black suffering in Wilson's plays takes on a different form. In the 1910s, blacks suffer the lingering trauma of slavery, of displacement, and of spiritual dislocation. They are forced to feel "the racial etiquette of difference and subordination" (Takaki 344). The discrimination creates a continuum--an institutionalized repetition of practices that, despite some differences, compose a coherent pattern of historical exploitation. A most poignant feature of the time is newly freed blacks searching for husbands, wives, or children who years ago had been separated by sale or other transactions. They are distressed because they lack the necessaries of life. They struggle for a better living condition, but their survival in a complex urban society becomes another nightmare for them.

In numerous ways Wilson dramatizes these experiences of blacks in his play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in 1911 Pittsburgh. The trauma of slavery, of displacement, and of spiritual dislocation is clearest in the character of Herald Loomis. Loomis was separated from his wife ten years earlier when he was imprisoned and forced to work on a chain gang for seven years by a white man named Joe Turner. When he is finally released, he has little left of his former life. He sets out in search of his wife. Joe Turner separates him not only from his

family and the life in which he knew himself but, in a more fundamental way, from his sense of self-worth and identity. This worthlessness, which he is forced to accept, has marked him as "one of Joe Turner's niggers." It has, in other words, reduced him from a subject into an object, a condition in which he remains bound to Joe Turner even after nearly half a century of Emancipation.

Seth Holly's labor is being exploited. Even a property owner like him has been quickly surpassed economically by white immigrants. The fruits of his labor become the profit of the white community. To be deprived of the products of one's labor is to be denied individual worth and identity; it means alienation from self and the world it inhabits. Almost every black character in the play faces similar difficulties. They remain "slaves" in a post slave society.

In the 1920s the majority of the African-American population started crowding northern cities. Social and economic problems increased in proportions as the urban population grew to unprecedented heights. Not only did the migrant blacks buckle to the poverty and racism that awaited them in the cities, but those who were already there also experienced increasing injustice. Despite the bleak present, their hopes for the future soared high as they discovered

themselves through their music, and it was this spirit that characterized the jazz age. Black musicians were gaining wide popularity, but their music could not protect them from the social and economic oppression they were experiencing on a daily basis. While black performers were often denied access to public facilities, their white fans were welcome in the exclusively white entertainment halls where blacks played their jazz before them. Frequently, in the recording industry especially, opportunistic white promoters lined their pockets from ticket and album sales from the music of African-American artistes. This often proved to be a precarious business arrangement, for such artistes had no protection against being discarded at the slightest signs of waning popularity or disfavor with the promoter.

Set in 1927 Chicago, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* makes up a sustained synthesis of black history and sensibilities of the 1920s. It explores the dreams, quests, hopes, and fears of the blacks, their efforts to survive the social and economic injustices. Much of the conflict in the play centers around black music. In the recording industry, opportunistic white promoter Sturdyvant enriches his coffers from album sales from the music of black artist Ma Rainey. A representative of the white society, Sturdyvant is responsible, in the eyes of other

black characters, for their unhappy lives. Ma Rainey understands his motives and also the limits of her commercial success. She seeks out no better sound studio for her recordings because she knows that music industry is exploitative: "They don't care nothing about me" (*Ma Rainey's* 64), she tells Cutler, another member of her band.

The theme of racist exploitation of blacks in the 1920s is reinforced by the story of Levee. Relying on Sturdyvant's words that he can record his songs and create a different music taste for the new generation, Levee dreams to achieve both economic independence and identity in the white world. But his dream is badly shattered when Sturdyvant buys his songs for a paltry five dollars each. Levee suffers not just the collapse of his dream but also the loss of what is truly his own--music. The fate of every other member of Ma Rainey's band is tragic by the same token. Whether it is in the studio or outside of it, blacks are destined to fall victim to white manipulation and prejudice. Cutler cannot cash a hard-earned check in a bank because when white people "see a nigar with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace" (*Ma Rainey's* 88). They are repeatedly forced to feel as history's "leftovers."

In the 1930s, blacks lived an American nightmare of poverty and discrimination in the wake of the Great Depression. As

business closed, banks failed, and mines shut down, a larger number of black workers became unemployed. Because of the blacks' little or no reserve of capital, there were soon dire want and untold suffering. However, as more and more blacks suffered, they began to feel that they should develop institutions of their own in order to preserve their identity and dignity. Some even felt the necessity of returning to the South to achieve their goal, while others kept on fighting for rights in the North. Thus, it was suffering and struggle, which drove blacks along different directions in thought as well as in action.

Wilson examines black suffering of the 1930s and the black consciousness awakened by that suffering in *The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936 Pittsburgh. In this play, we are, for the first time, introduced to characters willing to return to the South. In Wilson's view this is a sign of their being conscious about their actual destination, that is, the South. It is the place to pursue their destinies as free men and women. He says, "I often wonder what the fabric of American society would be like if blacks had stayed in the South and somehow found a way to [economically] develop and lock into that particular area" (qtd. in DeVries 378). The play's central symbol is a piano, which stands as a silent testament to racism in America. It is the

Charles family's legacy. It carries the history of enslavement and racial oppression that the family had endured and which still keeps its members from realizing their version of the American Dream. The conflict occurs between a brother and sister, who argue over the "proper" use of their shared legacy, the family piano. "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?" says Wilson (qtd. in DeVries 378). There are two choices, one taken up by Berniece, who wants to preserve the blood-stained piano as a record of the family's violence-wrecked past. Her brother, Boy Willie, however, is intent on capitalizing on the family's history to create a new future; he wants to sell the piano and buy the land, which their forefathers farmed as slaves. Finally, the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie as well as between the past and present is resolved, symbolically. The white claimant of the piano --shutter's ghost--is exorcised with Boy Willie battling with it, backed by the spirits of their ancestors whom Berniece reawakens by playing the piano.

With the outbreak of World War II, blacks had better access to jobs, especially those deserted by whites. Gradually, a considerable number of blacks were also drafted into the armed services to win the war. But when the war ended, the majority of blacks became jobless again. Their sacrifice for the

preservation of, at least, the ideal of the Four Freedoms could hardly bring them a sense of relief from the discrimination, segregation, and oppression that America's "arsenal of democracy" had imposed upon them. Seldom did whites yield to blacks, who remained "masters" even while advocating assimilation.

Set in 1948 Pittsburgh, *Seven Guitars* depicts black life in post-World War II America. Blacks are battling against society and themselves for self-worth. Through Floyd and his band members, Wilson comments on the discrepancy between the reality of black lives and the American dream--a discrepancy that fills them with pain and rage. These blacks have no control over the operation of the music business and are again victims of big-city record producers. This echoes the conditions of the musicians in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Hedley kills Floyd for money because he thinks money will transform his existence as a marginalized black. Floyd's life is cut short just as he is on the verge of "making it" in the cutthroat world of the urban music industry. The female characters--Louise, Vera, Red, and Ruby--are awaiting their destiny.

By the 1950s blacks were more African-Americans than a race of ex-slaves. They were moving closer to the "mainstream" of American society. There were signs of social change when some

firms began to provide them with jobs. Upgrading of black workers made it possible for some blacks to move into positions of responsibility that had hitherto been closed to them. As the blacks began to get jobs, it was hoped that the second half of the twentieth century would witness the elimination of much of the racial discrimination in American society. Nevertheless, the improvement of the status of blacks was neither uniform nor without vigorous opposition in some quarters. White workers frequently threatening to quit if blacks were employed or upgraded served to retard the advancement of blacks. Blacks who sought to improve their lot were often singled out for attack. However, blacks also did not remain silent. They protested against white abuse and directed themselves toward more drastic action to secure their rights. Having discovered that their problems persisted, even increased, they began to seek improvement through political actions. Such actions provided a considerable stimulus to their movement for racial equality. Thus the decade represented a time of some protest, much hope, and great skepticism--all of which are present in *Fences* set in 1957.

The play has the fence as its central metaphor: fence between the races, fence to keep out, fence to keep people in. It examines the psychological battles of a frustrated African-

American garbage collector, Troy Maxon, who is living in America of the 1950s, a time when the Civil Rights Movement was just germinating, a time when opportunities for blacks were slowly increasing. Troy learned to play baseball in prison, but despite his proficiency in the game he was barred from playing in the major league. Collecting the garbage is the only job available to him. He, therefore, rages against white racism. He even denies his son, Cory, an opportunity to play in the college football league as bitter memories of his own youth continue to haunt him. Troy's failed career comes to stand for the denial of professional and personal opportunities to African-Americans of the time. When some progress was later made on the racial front, Troy could not personally benefit from it. His potential had been lost; he lived on in the memories of his friends as one who might have been a good player. In fact, Troy can only move up from a hauler to a driver. So at a time of heady social and racial advances, he merely moves from the back to the front of the garbage truck. And therein lie the irrecoverable loss, pain, and alienation of a black man.

The 1960s witnessed the beginning of the most profound of revolutionary changes in the status of blacks in America that had occurred since the Emancipation. The road to revolution had been paved by significant shifts in the black population from

rural areas to cities; by the changes in black attitude toward themselves and their place in America; by the changing white attitude toward blacks; by Supreme Court decisions on Voting Rights for blacks and on Civil Rights in general. Blacks were so preoccupied with civil rights that they were scarcely influenced by other considerations. They were determined to press for equality and they demanded fair employment opportunities and desegregation of public facilities. There were several demonstrations. Nothing, however, filled blacks with such despair as the murders of President Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. during this decade. More people openly supported racial equality than ever before in the history of America. But at the same time the opposition was as openly hostile as ever.

Two Trains Running set in 1969 explores the 1960s. Although the political events of the period do not appear in the play rather directly, they are constantly in the air. The play is set in a Pittsburgh restaurant, which is scheduled for demolition. The plight of the blacks in inner cities is reflected in the conversation about their closed businesses and the absence of opportunities for them. Holloway says he has survived for sixty-five years because he stayed out of white man's business. Sterling is looking for some chance in life.

Memphis, owner of the restaurant, had been run off his farm in the South by a white man and he is now determined to act tough to protect his interest. He has hired a white lawyer who knows the white man's rules, and demands a fair compensation from the authority before they pull down his building. Hambone dies without accepting chicken for ham. Risa has deliberately scarred her legs so that men will not consider her as a sex object, but will look deeper into her character. These blacks are trying to work against what American society wants them to be. They struggle to reclaim what has been taken from them, and their struggle, in actual or symbolic terms, becomes the truest form of revolution and affirmation. According to Wilson, there are two ideas that have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the warring ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism. Two trains are the symbols of these two ideas. For the blacks neither of these trains is working. They have to build a new railroad in order to get to where they want to go, because the trains are not going their way.

In the 1970s dissatisfaction with the living conditions was so deep in the black community that some developments, however significant, seemed insufficient. There was considerable apprehension among blacks as they faced the future. Blacks insisted that they were entitled to more than America was giving

them. Even though the government undertook welfare programs for poor blacks, significant discrepancies remained between black and white employments. The trauma of Vietnam and then of Watergate distracted liberal consciences from the unfinished business of achieving racial equality. The recession and financial crises of northern cities threatened the urban black population. There were even greater signs of a black return to the South.

Set in 1971 Pittsburgh, *Jitney* depicts the lives of those blacks who are still unemployed. But these blacks are not hopeless. They struggle to ameliorate their economic condition by using their own limited sources. They drive jitneys not just to make money but also to do what is better for their community. They are, as Becker says in the play, "providing a service." They make themselves feel better about themselves and their place in America. It gives them a purpose and direction in life: to serve their community. Youngblood and Rena, two young adults attempting with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for, are trying to carve a descent and better life for their son. Turnbo, Doub, Fielding, Shealy, and Philmore--the drivers and customers of the Jitney Station--meet each day head on with the dignity and integrity that they began

with. Their stories reveal solidarity and the resolve that they must walk their day with grace and nobility.

Despite all the traumas, these blacks adopt different survival strategies and seek to transcend the afflictions that daily erode them, physically and spiritually. With the turn of each decade, they reinvent themselves to survive fresh onslaughts and find new ways to affirm their self-worth. This self-reinvention, which has cultural and mythological dimensions, helps them reject the stereotypes and renew their identity as Africans in America. Thwarted by a hostile society in their roles as African-American males, Wilson's heroes attain self-affirmation in the African phallogocentric trickster tradition. The trickster in African mythology is a source of power to survive the predicaments.

Loomis, Levee, Troy each owe their pedigree to the trickster. Despite the trauma of slavery, Loomis reclaims his "song." He is a redeemer trickster, who seeks salvation without submitting to the powers larger than his own. He challenges the authority of the Holy Ghost by letting his blood in a cleansing ritual. His redemptive act empowers him to walk erect in the world once more "shining like new money." Levee, with an imperturbable spirit of the trickster, discovers the will to survive. He dons a mask so that he can play his "song." He

challenges the metaphysical potency of God, a human construct, and disregards Him as a match for his newly discovered will. Troy opposes the limitations imposed on him by a dominating world and refuses to play a consenting victim. Instead, in the spirit of the Yoruba trickster, Eshu, he seeks to erect a fence to set the boundaries of his universe. Even Death is no match for him. He, when stricken with pneumonia, challenges Death with his metaphoric statement.

Wilson's heroes shift from the Christian frame of reverence to outright blasphemy and ride roughshod over any obstacles toward their respective goals. They choose to give up Christianity as practiced by fellow African-Americans in favor of their own survival tactics. By contrast, Christianity plays a vital role in the search of Wilson's women for comfort and direction. It serves as a positive force in their lives. In communion with the church, they seek to transcend prevailing social restraints and affirm a separate identity. Deprived of her husband, family, and a place to live in, Martha latches herself onto the church for shelter and support. The church prompts both a religious and a personal conversion in her; she, eventually, acquires the strength to deal with her fate and make necessary choices to ensure her own mental and physical stability. Berniece goes to the church to lessen her suffering

at the murder of her husband and father. Confined to the private sphere, Rose willingly puts away all ambition and lives vicariously with and for her husband, Troy. But, when Troy stuns her with admissions of his infidelity and impending fatherhood, she steps out of the "fence" that she had erected herself. Despite her feelings of anger, hurt, and betrayal, Rose's surrender to Christianity serves to purge her of self-imposed repression and stagnation.

Wilson's characters seek self-affirmation within the cultural community. Their music is a constant attempt to reconnect with their cultural roots. Blues, more than anything else, gives them a sense of cultural identity and self-worth, for it is a continuous reminder that they are not just a group of ex-slaves but African-Americans with a cultural history and worth of their own. Blues, for Wilson, is important primarily because it contains the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation they find themselves in. It functions as the link between the experiences of those who struggled during the time of their servitude and that of the present generation. Blues, in Wilson's drama, serves as a survival strategy for blacks. It not only articulates black suffering but also stresses the opportunities, limited as they may have been, for advancement. Ma Rainey and her band members survive in the

"bruising city" of Chicago with the help of blues. Bynum sings blues to get over his sense of displacement and difficulties in the white world. Zonia's songs describe her father's sorrowful experiences--his departure from his wife, from his labor, and his phantasmagoric self-imposed exile. Floyd resolutely prepares to pursue his dream, to make a name for himself as a musician, much in the way Levee does.

Wilson's characters seek to establish relationship with their communal ancestors. The physical and spiritual worlds are often connected through the ritual aspects of their performance. Often there is a reenactment within a performance of a recognizable activity, which becomes ritualistic in its repetition. The combination of these elements with the everyday ritualistic actions captures a strong sense of continuity, a mysterious connection between the past and the present. To emphasize the linkage between generations, Wilson's black figures bring traditional African elements into their contemporary culture. Their performance of the African juba--a dance of traditional immutability from their ancestral land--provides an example. They participate in this dance as a form of celebration, for they acknowledge it as a sign of their autonomy as individuals and as members of a race, as an "act of tribal solidarity and recognition of communal history" (Takaki

344). Thus, Wilson commingles the sacred and the secular to reclaim the folklore tradition and restore it to its original spiritual meaning within African-American culture. By creating such a ritual in his drama, he confirms the possibilities of a deeper understanding of the present through cultural memory and narratives. He presents the African heritage as a repository of spiritual values and survival skills, and offers blacks in America access to their mythical past, a source of internal strength.

Wilson rewrites black history keeping in view that a dramatic account of the life of blacks might be substantially truer than "actual" documents, which have mostly been written from the perspective of dominant culture. He turns to "history" to make the African-American community understand the reality of their cultural heritage and their place in America. He thinks blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent there to see the choices that they made as people. He is not certain that right choices have always been made. Therefore, if blacks know their past, it will help determine how to proceed with their future. Wilson believes that "in a world dominated by white culture, the black must be strong enough not only to survive but to reestablish his own identity and heritage which flows unbroken from an African Fountainhead" (qtd. in Nelson 5).

He urges African-Americans not to be swept by the predominant white culture and to discover their own uniqueness in a land away from "home." His plays move toward empowering African-Americans to acknowledge and celebrate their difference in another country, which now is as much theirs as the whites'. His characters therefore do not want to integrate into a monolithic white society. They struggle to define themselves as unique individuals and at the same time to understand their own place in America. They seek to find their own salvation, their sense of identity by their own effort. They embody love laughter, strength and pathos; they are "a way of life kicking up under your hand" (*Joe Turner's* 244). They are African-Americans in search of their own "songs," a sense of spiritual and emotional stability in their lives. Their interaction with their own circumstances elicits a change to some extent within each of them, resulting in a "song" of self that one discovers for oneself.

Wilson's thought has much in common with the tenets of Black Nationalism. He became artistically and politically conscious during the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements of the 1960s. He was considerably influenced by Amiri Baraka who wrote, "We wanted art that would actually reflect black life and its history and its legacy of resistance and struggle. We

wanted art as black as music" (qtd. in Herrington 30). Baraka's outrage and energy inspired Wilson to expose the exploitation of African-Americans. However, in the process Wilson's plays follow a pattern different from that of Baraka's. Wilson rejects an external solution to exploitation and instead focuses on the change the protagonists must make within themselves in order to survive. Levee, Loomis, Troy, Floyd, and Boy Willie-- in fact, none of them kills a white; rather they struggle to define themselves as individuals and to understand their place in America. The battles they wage are not so much against individuals as against human institutions and historical attitudes, which sometimes take on the appearance of metaphysical forces. They include Mr. Death in *Fences*, Sutter's ghost in *The Piano Lesson*, and Jesus Christ in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Another eminent black artist who inspired Wilson was Romare Bearden. Wilson was particularly interested in Bearden's incorporation of traditional African elements into contemporary black art (Herrington 23). Inspired by Bearden, Wilson's drama promotes an understanding of how the African culture of the past can continue to speak to African-Americans. For example, the characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* perform a juba, a call-and-response dance, "reminiscent of the ring shouts of the

African slaves" (*Joe Turner's* 249). And "'juba' itself is a West African word for 'ancestors'" (Herrington 24). Like Bearden, Wilson builds his plays from small pieces drawn from a wide variety of sources, including history.

Wilson's dramaturgy deconstructs the position of African-Americans within "official" American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself. His deconstruction of "official" history does not, however, seal off the domains of black and white from each other. Wilson deconstructs with a view to reconstructing a black subject position away from white control. To this end, the blues provides his black figures with a historical knowledge to transcend the marginal existence and with a mediational site to resolve the contradictions between the past and the present. Similarly, myths evoke in them an understanding that helps them interpret the unresolved conflicts of the present on the ground of the past. Loomis's vision of "bones people" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a case in point. Wilson employs this myth to suggest that a black man can reshape his own destiny; for him to do so, he must also reshape the dehumanizing myth of the Middle Passage and move toward mental freedom. A vernacular voice resounds through Wilson's dramatic world, recreating the rhythms

of the blues. In combining the literary possibilities of a realist theater with folk narratives and blues poetics, he brings into play a constant exchange between the physical and the spiritual, the oral and the written, the temporal and the timeless--a welcome model for future African-American dramaturgy that can adequately address the black experience in the United States.

Wilson's work shows a combination of traditional black and innovative white drama. On the one hand, his characters as in traditional African-American drama, reject the socially fixed position of African-Americans as a cultural "Other" and reclaim their legacy to reaffirm their sense of who they are. They move through a timeless and statusless liminality in which they receive instruction often in the form of ancestral wisdom. Finally, they achieve a sense of self-sufficiency and see themselves reincorporated into society. Rather than imitating white cultural values, they experience a separate way of being that should be recognized by the society they inhabit. Herald Loomis, for example, transcends his liminal existence through ancestral wisdom and, as Dinah Livingston suggests, recovers his "African sensibility"; that is, he benefits from adopting an African humanist worldview in which human beings are considered "as a part of the world," rather than "apart from the world"

(qtd. in Plum 565). On the other hand, Wilson's people resemble a number of memorable characters in the mainstream drama. Levee and Floyd are much like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Like Loman, they accept the American myth of success at its face value and get trapped into it.

Like Miller, Wilson is concerned over the debilitating influence of a materialistic and mechanistic society in which forces external play a key role in the internal conflict-- a conflict between the blacks themselves. In Wilson's drama the internal conflict does not, however, deny the earlier history or the continuation of black suffering due to racist exploitation or racial inequality--but focuses on a world of self-conflicting values and introspective attitudes to bring out the dynamics of black living on its own term. "I," says Wilson, "try to figure out the intent of these [blacks] lives around me" (qtd. in Freedman 450). His plays mostly dramatize the conflict between those who embrace their African past and those who adopt the values of the dominant society and seek to give up their cultural legacy. Ma Rainey and Toledo confront Levee to stop him from selling off his composition to the white record company executive. Berniece clashes with Boy Willie to preserve the piano with legs carved into family totems by their great-grandfather. Cory opposes his father Troy Maxon to step into

the world of opportunity available to him. Thus, Wilson's work combines traits from both types of drama: a powerful but destructive central character, the family as a microcosm of society, a concern about success linked with personal identity, racial inequality as a characteristic of American society, the atavistic connection of characters to their past, and a resolve to carve out a distinctive collective identity. While Wilson follows both the traditions, he also discovers a unique way of exploring the lives of blacks in America. The internal conflict, it may be noted here, is not always precipitated by external forces, but often caused by divergent black attitudes toward a common past as well as a common present.

Similar concerns characterize the last three plays that I have not included in my thesis for time and space constraints. Set in 1904 Pittsburgh, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) is chronologically the first in Wilson's cycle of plays depicting the African-American experience throughout the twentieth century. The play addresses a time when slavery was a living memory. The year 1904, characterized by general economic downturns, was particularly hard on the black community that had been swelling in northern cities due to the flood of southern sharecroppers escaping the increasing oppression of Jim Crow laws. Exploited and cheated like other new arrivals whose labor

feeds the expanding industrial machine, the characters --Pittsburgh's black tin-mill workers--in the play are already in a restive state when an act of Citizen Barlow--a recent arrival from Alabama--followed by an unjust accusation from Caesar--a self-made entrepreneur--leads to a black man's death, a work stoppage, and an act of arson precipitating a riot for which several hundreds are arrested. At the center of the play is Aunt Ester, the presiding figure on an allegorical canvas, an enduring spirit from a brutal past, who guides the blacks who are lost. Using her paper boat, Ester inducts Barlow into the City of Bones, which lies at the bottom of the sea and is composed of bones of slaves who perished on the hideous Middle Passage--an image of cultural reclamation as Wilson used in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Wilson sets *King Hedley II* (2000) in 1985 Pittsburgh, a time when the Bill Cosby Show portrayed a vision of African-American life that mainstream America had never seen. White fans were accepting African-American sports figures and celebrities as never before. The media were telling people that race troubles were over. But the reality was that differences between the haves and the have-nots were becoming sharper. And gang violence was increasing at unprecedented rates. In the play Wilson tells of the hurts and frustration of blacks with

insufficient income. He tells of their deep anguish that flows from societal rejection and isolation, and from not having a chance to get a first leg up. As drama unfolds we get to know each character through their exposition on the motives behind their actions. They are trying to find that one missing link between the life they want and the life they deal with. The tragedy is that in each case, the link is elusive. Each looks to the others for support, but ultimately they do not hear each other. The differences in their thinking only bring them to greater suffering.

The set, backyards in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is the same as in *Seven Guitars*, but now more ravaged by the blight of Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" which cut federal support to many programs needed by African-Americans. Hedley, the protagonist, and his friends and family are the victims of two-century cycle of racism and hatred. Hedley's self-image is as fragile as glass. He is an ex-convict who now desires to establish himself legitimately in the world, but has no material resources to realize his dream. He finds no way beyond crime.

Set in 1997 Pittsburgh, *Radio Golf* (2005) is the last of Wilson's ten-play cycle about the African-American experience in the twentieth century. Most of the characters belong to the black middle class, and it appears that the doors to a bright

white world of economic and political success have finally opened to those willing to play by white rules. Harmond Wilks, the protagonist, is torn between the forces of the past that shaped him and a perilously seductive future. That future is embodied in Harmond's wife, Mame, and his golf-loving business partner, Roosevelt Hicks, who, in addition to helping Harmond oversee the redevelopment of the Hill District, has plans for them to purchase a radio station. But as always with Wilson, the cultural past is never lost sight of in spite of the materialistic progress of a class of blacks.

Wilson's commendable effort to rework the tradition of American drama in order to explore the complexity of African-American experience creates a distinct place for him in the American theater. His trenchant analysis of the myth of American egalitarianism and his insight into black suffering and survival tactics make him a playwright with a new voice, acceptable to both black and white audiences. His plays are all black-topic texts, but they treat the issues on such a scale as to incorporate the universal themes of self, family, society, politics and love, and find their way into the heart of the reader/audience. A success on Broadway and beyond, he has won accolades from literary and theater critics. With the publication of *Radio Golf* (2005), Wilson has completed the

project he had begun in the 1980s--one play for each decade of the last century. Wilson kept his word before he left the world in 2005, and that is no less dramatic. The cycle of plays bequeathed to us signals a whole new beginning --a new perception of America:

In many ways . . . it's [American society] immensely successful, it has some wonderful values, it's able to create some great work of art. And we're moving toward this art being American art--that means being influenced by all of the different ethnic groups that make up America--and further and further away from the old, old Western conventions of Europe. We're . . . not building on Western convention anymore, but on this amalgam of ideas and thoughts and necessity and struggle of all the various ethnic groups in America. Eventually, we are going to become an American culture, an American society unlike any other.

("Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks" 4)

His plays (re)tell the stories not only of African-Americans but of all Americans to an extent, of a society "unlike any other."

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