

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.