I Won't Be Blue Always: Music as *Past in August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone", "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom", "The Piano Lesson" and "Fences".

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I WON'T BE BLUE ALWAYS: MUSIC AS PAST IN AUGUST WILSON’S JOE TURNER’S COME AND GONE, MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM, THE PIANO LESSON AND FENCES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Yolanda Williams Page
B.A., Dillard University, 1991
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1993
December 2001
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, Mrs. Bobbie Morris Williams and the late John W. Williams, who instilled in me at a very young age a love for learning. For that, I am forever grateful.
Acknowledgments

Many people have been instrumental in giving me the academic, mental and emotional support I needed to complete this endeavor. Thanks to my dissertation committee, Dr. William Demastes, Dr. Femi Euba, Dr. Angeletta Gourdine and Professor Kelli Kelly for their time and invaluable insight. A very special thanks to my committee chair, Dr. John W. Lowe, who in addition to providing his time and insight, provided me support and encouragement throughout the entire process. Thanks to Dr. Cynthia Neale Spence and the UNCF/Andrew Mellon Faculty Doctoral Fellowship Program for providing me with the financial support that enabled me to take two sabbaticals and "work like crazy." Thanks to my Dillard University family, especially Dr. Sylvia Ballard-Huete, Dr. Lisa Pertillar Brevard, Dr. Gayle Duskin, Dr. Gloria Wade Gayles, Dr. Eartha Lee Johnson, Dr. Henry C. Lacey and Dr. Bettye Parker Smith for their constant support of my endeavor. As well, thanks to the other faculty in the Division of Humanities and the English Department for their continued interest in my pursuit. Special thanks to my officemate and sister-in-the-process, Chandra Tyler Mountain, who listened to me rant and rave even though she was going through the same. Thanks also to my family and friends, particularly my mother and sister, Twyla, for their constant support and reassurance. And, a special thanks to David, my husband and soul mate, who believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself.
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to prove that playwright August Wilson’s earliest works, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and Fences demonstrate the disabling effect of the slave past and the measures that must be taken to overcome that effect. This study seeks to demonstrate that this past can be made enabling through the acceptance of and reconciliation with it. In addition, it will demonstrate that the vehicle for this recognition is music, which becomes an embodiment of the past.

This study consists of eight chapters. Chapter One provides an overview of Wilson’s life and career and concludes with a detailed discussion of the study’s premise and focus. It also includes brief commentary on the plays excluded from the study and the reasons for that exclusion.

Chapter Two foregrounds and frames the remaining chapters. This chapter begins with a history of African-American theatre, moves to a discussion of the use of the Blues and history, which serve as the study’s theoretical foundation, and concludes with a discussion of Wilson’s dramatic vision.

Chapters Three thru Six discuss each of the plays in length. Because an understanding of the historical nuances the characters within each play found themselves faced with is imperative to the plot, each chapter begins with a description of the time period in which the play is set then moves to demonstrate how the protagonists either accept and reconcile
with their pasts or continue to deny them. In addition, in-depth analysis of each drama’s major characters is included.

Chapter Seven is the transcription of a personal interview with actor Charles S. Dutton. Having worked extensively with Wilson since the beginning of Wilson’s career, Dutton offers tremendous insight into the Wilson protagonists he has portrayed and Wilson’s dramatic vision.

Chapter Eight is the conclusion of the study. In this chapter, the main points of the previous chapters are reiterated. It concludes with suggestions for further study of Wilson and his dramaturgy.
Chapter One

I’ll Be a Big Man Someday: Introduction

In 1984 a dishwasher-turned-poet-turned-playwright entered the Broadway theatrical scene with a play entitled *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. In 1987 his second play, *Fences*, debuted at the 46th Street Theatre and received great critical acclaim. In 1988, he had the distinction of having two plays run simultaneously on Broadway when his third work, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* premiered at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre while *Fences* was still enjoying its stint on 46th Street. Opening night for his fourth play, *The Piano Lesson*, was in 1990 at the Walter Kerr Theatre. Two years later his fifth play, *Two Trains Running*, also played at the Walter Kerr Theatre, and *Seven Guitars*, his sixth play, made its appearance there in 1996. His eighth play, *King Hedley II* made its Broadway debut at the Virginia Theatre in 2001.¹

Over the past twelve years this playwright has enjoyed tremendous commercial success; he has won several awards, including the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Tony Award, and two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. The playwright is August Wilson, who has been compared to such great American playwrights as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O’Neill. Hailed as the foremost African-American playwright of the 1980s and 1990s (Bergesen and Demastes 218), Wilson’s dramaturgy has spurred a renewed interest in African-

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American theatre; indeed, he has almost single-handedly inspired an African-American theatre renaissance.

Wilson’s present day canonical stature is a far cry from his humble beginnings in Pittsburgh. Born the fourth of six children to Daisy Wilson Kittel and Frederick Kittel, a German immigrant, in 1945, Wilson grew up in poverty in Pittsburgh’s Hill District after Kittel deserted his mother (Shafer 4). He dropped out of high school as a 10th grader after being accused of plagiarism and completed his “formal” education in the Pittsburgh public library’s “Negro section” where he discovered such writers as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison and dreamed of becoming a writer (Shafer 7). Those dreams did not become true immediately, however, for after having served one year in the Army he returned to his native Pittsburgh where he worked as a short-order cook and porter among other odd jobs. Remembering his desire to become a writer, he tried his hand at poetry but failed at it because he tried to emulate other writers and stifled his own creative voice.

Poetry may not have been Wilson’s forte but drama certainly has been.2 Since co-founding Pittsburgh’s Black Horizon’s Theater in 1969 with his friend Rob Penny, Wilson’s playwriting career has flourished, and his plays have been packing Broadway and regional theatres since. Not only have his plays attracted large audiences, but they have also inspired much scholarly work. Scholars from the most prestigious
institutions to the not-so prestigious have written about them. To date, hundreds of reviews, essays and several full-length studies have been penned with subject matters ranging from the influences on his writing to his controversial views concerning the direction of Fences.

The purpose of this study is to expand the body of scholarship available on four of Wilson’s plays: Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and Fences. Although these particular plays have been included in previously published studies of Wilson’s dramaturgy, this study rather than providing a general overview of the plays as Bogumil, Shannon and Wolfe do in their works, will focus on a particular theme as Kim Periera and Joan Herrington do in their works. Using these plays as its points of reference, this study will prove that Wilson’s earliest plays (by historical setting), or what have been dubbed as his pre-civil rights plays, demonstrate the disabling effect of the slave past and the enabling that results when this past is recognized and reconciled with. Before continuing this discussion, it is important that this writer clarifies what is meant by the term “slave past.” In this study, slave past does not simply refer to that “peculiar institution” that existed from 1619 when the first Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia to 1867 when slaves in Texas learned of their freedom, but it also includes that period’s after affects as well: the migration,
sharecropping and disenfranchisement of the Reconstruction period and pre-civil rights era.

The protagonists in each of the plays included in this study are haunted by the ghosts of a slave past they would rather forget, and because they would rather forget those pasts, they refuse to acknowledge them. Instead, they try to relegate them to the far corners of their minds, but they find that this consignment becomes disempowering, affecting them mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This suppression informs their actions and reactions to people and situations, prohibiting them from developing healthy and nurturing relationships.

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis would rather forget his seven-year imprisonment on Joe Turner’s chain gang, but his suppression of this experience causes him to have visions. The vision of the bones people causes the other boarders to view him as insane and prevents him from finding his “starting place in the world.” In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Levee would like to forget the gang rape of his mother by white men, his father’s vigilantism and ultimate death at the hands of those same men. Because of his containment of these atrocities, he fails to relate to his fellow band members and Ma and, by dissociation, fails to succeed as a musician. In *The Piano Lesson* Boy Willie and Berniece would like to forget that the piano in her living room is a symbol of the splitting of their family, both from the sale of their great-grandmother and grandfather for its purchase and the murder of their father.
during his attempt to return it to their family. It causes them to squabble amongst themselves, almost to the point of a permanent severance of the familial bond through fratricide. In *Fences*, Troy struggles with two aspects of the slave past, a domineering father hardened by the southern sharecropping system and a rejection by the major leagues. Troy’s failure to realize the effect these actions have on his life and relationships prove detrimental to his familial bond.

In order to rid themselves of their ghosts, the protagonists of each play must come to terms with their pasts, and this occurs via an acknowledgement of it, but a simple recognition of the past is not sufficient. They must also accept and establish a bond with it, and the vehicle for this is music. Using the theory proposed by Houston A. Baker, Jr. who in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* describes the blues as “a mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding” (5), I will prove that in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson* and *Fences* the protagonists’ past and the music they sing or play are one and the same. I will demonstrate that the music becomes the medium through which the protagonists must come to terms with their pasts. Furthermore, I will also demonstrate that for some this coalescence and its acceptance will prove positive and become a source of affirmation and empowerment, whereas for others its rejection will prove negative and become detrimental.
For example, Herald Loomis realizes that he can only rid himself of the visions of the bones people by acknowledging and accepting the slave past, both his and that of his ancestors, for the two are one and the same. He makes this connection when he dances the juba and hears Bynum sing the “Joe Turner Song,” for he realizes that his experience with Joe Turner is not his alone. There have been many Joe Turners who have imprisoned African-Americans; he is a descendant of that legacy.

Berneice and Boy Willie discover that they must acknowledge the piano as their legacy, a legacy that can be neither sold nor neglected. They make this connection when Boy Willie engages Sutter’s ghost in a wrestling match and Berneice plays the piano to exorcise the ghost, calling on the ancestors, and thereby forming a four generation familial force to destroy the hold the Sutter family has had on them.

Unlike Herald Loomis, and the Charles siblings, Levee and Troy do not recognize and accept their pasts. Unlike Ma, who can serve as an example to him and who stays connected to her roots through the blues music she sings, Levee disconnects himself by refusing to play that “old jug music” and opting for the new swing sound that Sturdyvant prefers. When he does this, he unknowingly connects with that same racist past that is responsible for his parents’s death and will lead him to commit murder.

Troy, too, tries to disconnect himself from the past, and in doing so disconnects himself from his family. Fearing
that Cory will also be slighted by the sport in which he depicts athleticism, Troy thwarts all chances of Cory obtaining a football scholarship. In doing so he ostracizes his son, forever. His disconnection also causes him to feel repressed in his role as husband, father and provider, leading him to infidelity with Alberta in an attempt to forget the “problems and pressures” of the world. Too, wanting to be unlike his father, he no longer sings the song about Old Blue the one legacy his father passed on to him, one that is a testament to loyalty.

With the exception of Levee and Troy, after the protagonists of each play accept their past and establish a bond with it, they are able to move on and live productive lives. Herald Loomis finds his starting place in life and begins a relationship with Mattie Campbell. Boy Willie and Berniece reconnect and agree that the best use of the piano is in her living room where it can both be used both to generate income and revered by future Charles generations. Levee and Troy, however, because they are unable to bond with their pasts, become victims of them. Levee will probably spend the rest of his life in prison for Toledo’s murder, and Troy dies estranged from Cory and Rose.

*Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Jitney,* and *King Hedley II* have not been included in this study, for they do not fall within its scope. Although they continue Wilson’s ten-play cycle, they do not have as their central themes the effects of
the slave past; instead, these plays seem to focus more on the effects of assimilation and migration to the North. *Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Jitney, and King Hedley* are concerned with more contemporary issues the African-American has found himself faced with since relocating to the north: the breakdown of the African-American family (*Jitney* and *King Hedley II*), urban decay (*Two Trains Running*), imprisonment (*Two Trains Running, Jitney, and King Hedley II*), and crime (*Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Jitney, and King Hedley II*).

With a historical setting of 1969, *Two Trains Running* primarily focuses on the disintegration of the city.

Early into the play, there is mention that the block on which Memphis’ restaurant is located is a wasteland of empty and boarded buildings. However, this neighborhood was not always that way. In fact, it once flourished. Memphis remembers a time when there would be a line of people waiting to get into his restaurant, and he would cook four cases of chicken over the course of a weekend. But, all of that has changed. Now he’s lucky to cook one case of chicken per week, and the restaurant is empty with the exception of the regulars: Holloway, West, Hambone and Wolf.

As Memphis sees it, all of his troubles began when the city of Pittsburgh began buying out business owners. Slowly, the business owners began to accept the city’s offer for a buy-out, and now with the exception of the restaurant and West’s funeral parlor, all of the other businesses—the supermarket, the
drugstore, the five and ten—have closed. Even the doctor and dentist’s offices have closed. The city has offered to purchase his restaurant, and although Memphis knows that it is no longer profitable for him to stay in business, he refuse to sell. As he sees it, because the city desperately wants to demolition the neighborhood, and along with it his livelihood, it will have to meet or beat his asking price of $25,000.

Unlike Memphis’s restaurant, West’s funeral parlor is profitable. In fact, the interment business is the only business that seems to thrive in this wasteland. If truth be told, business is better than ever for West. As Memphis points out, as long as “the niggers are killing one another West will get richer” (9). Burying his fellow African-Americans has made West a very wealthy man. He is a millionaire, and, other than Hartzberger, he owns every other building in the neighborhood. But, West’s wealth stands in stark contrast to the economic situation of those around him. The others in the neighborhood live in utter destitution and must “scrape to get by,” which often entails criminal activity.

Crime is increasing in the neighborhood as its inhabitants try to find any means to survive. Some turn to “running the numbers” and gambling (as do Wolf and Holloway) while others turn to theft (as does Sterling). Still others turn to crime to acquire the material trapping—Cadillacs, color TVs and furs—of West and Prophet Samuel. Whatever the reason, the commission of such crimes usually leads to one of two results, death or
imprisonment. By far imprisonment seems to be the most common, for as Wolf states, “you can . . . walk down the street and ask people. . . . Every nigger you see done been to jail one time or another” (56). However, death is running a close second, and that is the result West prefers.

Death allows West to maximize his profits. Over the years, West has learned that death lends itself to manipulation. He has made a business of taking advantage of his customers’ grief. Stories abound about him convincing the bereaved to purchase a more expensive “satin-lined” casket and swapping it out for a less expensive pine one before actually burying the corpse. However, his exploitative methods don’t stop there. For an additional $100 more per feature, he also persuades them to purchase a casket that locks and is leak-proof. Thus, through the character of West, Wilson ingeniously allows himself to bring to the audience’s attention two problems of northern life, crime and exploitation

In Two Trains Running, Wilson depicts not only a decaying city, but also the cycle of death, crime and imprisonment associated with it. By the end of the play the audience witnesses the closure of yet another business as the city beats Memphis asking price by offering him $35,000 for the restaurant; Hambone dies a pauper, never receiving his ham; and, Sterling, wanting to provide closure to Hambone’s nine-year request for his ham, breaks into Lutz’s meat-market and steals one, certain indication that he will soon return to the penitentiary.
With a setting of 1948, *Seven Guitars* is Wilson’s first play, according to historical setting, to shift from the theme of reconciliation with the past. Described by Peter Wolfe as Wilson’s most bewildering and threatening play, (152) it is a murder mystery that focuses on the events leading to the protagonist’s death. But, Wilson does much more than simply depict the events leading to Floyd’s death; he also brings to the audience’s attention problems that were starting to infiltrate the African-American community at that time.

One problem is black-on-black crime. Not only is there Floyd’s murder at the hands of Hedley, but, Canewell mentions that he is lucky to be alive, for he has known “six or seven men that got killed” at the hands of other African-American men (21). Later, it is learned through Hedley’s conversation with Ruby, that Floyd is not the first African-American male Hedley has killed, for as he tells her he once killed a man for refusing to call him by his name, King. And, of course, Ruby has come to Pittsburgh because one of her lovers shot the other, seemingly without provocation. Thus, from the first scene of the play to the last there is the mention of or actual commission of ten acts of black-on-black crime. Of course, in the larger world, ten murders is not a large number and would not be a reason for alarm, but in the world of the play it is and seems to be Wilson’s way of indicating that black-on-black on crime has become an epidemic that plagues the community.
Wilson also seems to point to the cause of this plague, the proliferation of weapons in the community. Weapons abound in *Seven Guitars*. All of the male characters keep some form of weapon in their possession: Red Carter and Floyd have guns; Canewell and Hedley have knives. There is even a conversation about which form of weapon—gun or knife—is better. To possess a weapon is not gender specific, however. Louise, the matron voice of the play, also has a gun that she sleeps with and professes to being “all the man she needs” (19). And, these characters do not keep weapons in their possession because to do so is in vogue. They believe that a knife or gun can right any wrong. Floyd constantly rants about solving his woes with his .38; Hedley believes that the machete Joe Roberts gives to him will prevent him from being sent to the sanitarium, and Louise tells Vera to shoot a man before letting him use her up.

Through all this discussion about weapons and violence, Wilson seems to be attempting to diffuse the idea that violence can solve one’s problems; but instead, violence only begets more violence. For example, Floyd and Poochie rob the store, which results in Poochie’s death. The robbery, by implication, leads to Floyd’s death because Hedley, in a drunken stupor, seeing Floyd with the money from the robbery, mistakes him for Buddy Bolden and kills Floyd/Buddy for refusing to give him the money.

As in *Two Trains Running*, all of the male characters in *Seven Guitars*, with the exception of Hedley, have been imprisoned. Although the charges were trumped—varying from
worthlessness (Floyd) to laziness (Canewell) and having too much money (Red Carter)—each man has served time, and by having each one mention his experience, Wilson seems to be bringing attention to the increasing number of African-American men in prison, and the reason behind that increase, racism.

Told in flashback, the plot of Seven Guitars has been described as transgressive, challenging and difficult.\(^5\) Referred to in this way, perhaps, because Wilson’s use of flashback allows him to shift the audience’s attention more toward the issues he is addressing. Unlike the other plays, with Seven Guitars Wilson seems to be making a more direct appeal to the audience to recognize black-on-black crime and the high number of African-American males in prison as problems that require not only its full and undivided attention but a resolution as well.

Although Jitney is the seventh play produced in the ten-play cycle, it was the first play written. Penned in 1979, Jitney is set in 1971 and is the story of five Pittsburgh jitney drivers. Much like the other plays, Jitney was inspired by Wilson’s own experience, for as Joan Herrington relates, Wilson wrote the play after having hailed a jitney for transportation one day during a visit to Pittsburgh (114).\(^6\)

Much like Two Trains Running, the backdrop for Jitney’s action is a place of business slated for closure. The city of Pittsburgh has earmarked the storefront from which the jitney station is run for demolition. But unlike in Two Trains
Running, this time the city is not offering compensation, so with the building’s obliteration comes unemployment for Becker, the station’s manager, and the men who drive the jitnies: Doub, Fielding, Turnbo and Youngblood. Thus, it seems that not only does Wilson continue to address the problem of urban decay in Jitney, but he also addresses the increasing rate of unemployment in the African-American community.  

While Jitney has many similarities with Two Trains Running, it reads more like a companion piece to Fences. Like Fences one of the play’s central conflicts is the father-son relationship, but unlike Fences where the estrangement occurs during the course of the play, in Jitney the estrangement occurs before the play’s opening scene.

Twenty-five years before the play’s first scene, Becker’s son, Booster, was imprisoned for murdering his white girlfriend who accused him of rape. Soon after his sentence, Booster’s mother died of a broken heart. Not only does Becker blame Booster for Becker’s wife’s death, he also blames Booster for killing all the aspirations he had for him when he committed the murder. And like Troy, these events have soured Becker, so much so that when Booster visits him at the jitney station after being released from prison, he rejects his son. When Booster returns a second time, he rejects him again and dies thereafter. Thus, like Troy Becker dies estranged from his son.

Although Jitney has been referred to as “a minor work in the Wilson canon,” with its continuation of the themes of urban decay...
decay and the father-son relationship, it tackles major Wilson issues.  

If *Jitney* can be viewed as a companion piece to *Fences*, then *King Hedley II* can be viewed as the sequel to *Seven Guitars*. Set in 1985, *King Hedley II* finishes the story began thirty-seven years earlier in *Seven Guitars*.

While *King Hedley II* has its own plot, it is essentially a resolution to *Seven Guitars*, for throughout the play the audience receives answers to some of the questions left unanswered at the end of *Seven Guitars*. For example, the audience learns that Canewell informs the police that Hedley murdered Floyd. As a result of his snitching, Ruby and the other characters begin to call him Stool Pigeon, hence, the name by which he is referred in *King Hedley II*.

As Ruby tells Louise in *Seven Guitars*, she allows Hedley to believe he is the father of her unborn child and names the child in his honor. Ruby pursues a career as a blues singer, is very successful at it and leaves the young King to be raised by Louise when Hedley succumbs to pneumonia.

Much like *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II* has as its major theme crime in the African-American community. King has done a stint in prison for killing Pernell. Although his act was one of self-defense (Pernell had tried to kill King), King has no regrets about having another man’s blood on his hands. There is also Elmore who in *Seven Guitars* kills Leroy. Like Floyd in *Seven Guitars*, his gun is his best friend, and he has killed
plenty men as he proudly boasts throughout the play. As a matter of fact, there is so much violence and disregard for the value of human life that Tonya, King's wife, would rather abort their unborn child than give birth and have it grow-up in such an environment.

In addition to the violence in the play, there is also crime, in particular larceny. King and his best friend Mister have aspirations of opening a video store and sell stolen refrigerators as a way of reaching that goal. However, feeling that it will take them too long to acquire the money they need through the sale of the refrigerators, like Floyd and Poochie in Seven Guitars, they commit a robbery.

Despite the bleak picture King Hedley II seems to paint of the 1980s, and, though like Seven Guitars it ends with the commission of murder, it also ends with an impending birth, certain indication that there is indeed a future for the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District.12

In the following chapters I will analyze in detail each of the four plays included in this study to demonstrate how the disabling past can be made enabling when there is an acceptance of and reconciliation with it. Because Wilson intends for the plays to read as a history book of sorts, the plays will be examined according to their historical time setting rather than when they were penned. Examining the works in this order will provide more of an indication of how African-Americans of the
varying decades viewed and reacted to the slave past, especially as they became more removed from it.

Before the analysis of the texts, however, a discussion of the African-American theatre tradition, the Blues and history will be provided. The purpose of this information is two-fold. First, because the idea of homage to "those who came before" is so central to Wilson's dramatic vision, it is only fitting that any study of his work begin in such a way, for it grounds him in a tradition that dates to the 1820s. In addition, the historical information indicates that he is a torchbearer, who is simply carrying on the legacy that has been passed to him, rather than a progenitor. Second, the information pertaining to Blues and history will provide a theoretical base for examining the plays. The Blues and history are important aspects of Wilson's dramaturgy. Not only do they motivate him as a writer, functioning as a muse of sorts, but they also inform his characters, including their actions and responses to other characters. Too, the information provides a historical perspective of how the two motifs emerged as icons for the African-American experience.

Because in all of his plays Wilson uses as his backdrop the social and political atmosphere of the decade under consideration, each of the chapters examining the plays will begin with a description of the social atmosphere that prevailed during the year the play is set and then move to a close reading of the written text.
Following the analysis of the plays, I have included the transcript from an interview I conducted with Charles S. Dutton. I have included the interview, for I believe it is instrumental in providing objective insight into Wilson’s dramatic vision from someone who has worked closely with Wilson both during his days as an unknown, fledging playwright and as a renown, critically acclaimed dramatist.

The study concludes with implications drawn from this study and suggestions for future studies on Wilson’s plays.
Chapter Two


August Wilson entered the African-American theatre scene some one hundred eighty years after it began. The African-American theatre tradition dates to 1821 when Mister Brown established the African Grove Theatre in Lower Manhattan (Hay 6). Until 1823 the African Grove’s repertoire consisted of Shakespearean plays, but in that year Brown produced a play he penned, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, the first known play written by an African-American (Hay 11). The play is about the 1795 insurrection of Black Caribs of St. Vincent’s Island in the West Indies. Led by Chief Joseph Chatoyer (King Shotaway in the play) and his Brother Duvalle, the Caribs fought to avoid being driven off their island by British military forces who, upon orders from the Crown, wanted to make room for English settlers to establish sugar plantations there.¹ The play is said to be based upon Brown’s eyewitness account of the rebellion.

Unfortunately 1823 was also the year of the African Grove’s demise, and a century would elapse before there would be a renewed interest in African-American theatre, during the Harlem Renaissance.

It is important to mention that between the African Grove’s final curtain call and the Harlem Renaissance there was another important milestone in the African-American theatre tradition, the minstrel show.
Born in 1832, the minstrel show was an extremely popular form in which white actors donned blackface make-up and parodied African-American dress, dance, speech and song. The typical minstrel show featured “shuffling, irresponsible, wide-grinning, loud-laughing Negroes in a musical rendition of darky life on the Old Plantation” (Woll 1). In Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America, Robert Toll describes the plot of the typical minstrel show:

Although there was some variation in these skits, they usually focused on the Old Darky. . . . Against the background of the plantation in shambles, he stood alone—his beloved master, mistress, wife, and family departed. Often his “dreams” of happy times were reenacted on-stage, effectively contrasting images of youth and age, happiness and sadness, companionship and loneliness. Played to maximize emotions, these skits frequently concluded with sentimental reunion scenes. After Old Darky had reconciled himself to a lonely wait for death, a young white “stranger” appeared, revealed that he or she was the young child the old man had once held on his knee, and told him that either his master or mistress was still alive and would take care of him for the rest of his life. (244-245)

As Toll alludes, the early minstrel shows were popular, perhaps, not because of the stereotyped characterization of African-Americans, but for the romanticized images of plantation life they depicted. For the white audience, these shows were a nostalgic reminder of those antebellum days of the past. Regardless of the reasons for the minstrel show’s popularity, African-Americans found them offensive, not only for their use of racist stereotypes such as the coon, Sambo and Mammy, but for the message they sent: that although free, African-Americans yearned for the world of slavery which gave them the security of
protection. Thus, many African-American activists of the time, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, wrote articles and essays not only to rebut and revise the defamatory images propagated by the minstrel show but to defend African-American character and contentment with freedom, as well.

For all of its controversy, the minstrel show has been credited with spawning the modern black musical. After the Civil War, finding the minstrel show as the only mainstream outlet for their stage talent, African-American performers developed competing versions of the minstrel show. By 1870 several troupes of African-American minstrels billed as "real and original" existed and employed 1,490 African-American actors (Woll 2). Two of the more celebrated troupes were Silas Green's from New Orleans and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels.

Originally organized by a barber, Eph Williams, who had worked in another minstrel show before starting his own, Silas Green's opened in New Orleans in 1910 (Oliver 58). Later it came under the ownership of W.P. Jones from Athens, Georgia, and he continued to operate it for forty years. Although rather simple in its showing, Silas Green's was popular for the number and variety of blues singers that traveled with the show. As a matter of fact, it was so popular that it was still performing to large crowds as late as 1959 (Oliver 58).²

Silas Green's chief rival was the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Organized by a Mississippian, F.S. Wolcott, it was very elaborate in its showing. Not only did it include blues singers
as a part of its shows, but it also included jungle scenes and olios, wrestlers, comics, jugglers and vaudeville teams (Oliver 58). The show was so large that it was performed in an 80’ x 110’ tent and required two train cars for its travel between towns (Oliver 59). Another feature that set the Rabbit Foot Minstrels apart from Silas Green’s was its preference for recorded blues artists. Whereas, Silas Green’s hired any and all self-described blues singers, the Rabbit Foot Minstrels only hired those singers who had released a record. One such singer was Ida Cox who traveled with the troupe for many years before starting her own company (Oliver 59).

During the late 1890s, shows, such as those performed by Silas Green’s and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels transmuted into the coon show or the early African-American musical. Two historic coon shows are Bob Cole’s A Trip to Coontown which was the first musical written, directed, performed and produced entirely by African-Americans (Woll 12), and Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s Clorindy: The Origin of the Cakewalk the first African-American musical to appear on Broadway (Woll 8).

It is important to note here that although coon shows such as A Trip to Coontown and Clorindy evolved from the stereotyped white minstrel show and many of them portrayed the same themes, they also significantly modified them. For example, in the material they wrote and performed, African-American minstrels rarely mentioned the master or mistress. Instead, they focused all their affection on their friends and relatives (Toll 245).
Besides omitting whites from their happy memories of plantation life, African-Americans further modified the minstrel show by expressing antislavery feelings. This expression was both covert and overt. Covertly, the minstrel performers would sneak protest sentiments into seemingly non-protest songs. As Toll points out, several of the religious songs looked to heaven as the place where African-Americans would be free men and from which some whites would be excluded (246). Overtly, they decried slavery’s fracturing of the African-American family. Oftentimes the performers would sing of lovers and family members they longed to see, but knew they would never see again because they had been sold away. In Blacking Up Toll describes how one African-American minstrel sang of roaming the land in search of his wife who had been torn away from him during slavery (246).

While probably unbeknownst to them, in their effort to modify the images of the traditional minstrel show these African-American actors and writers became the progenitors of the African-American theatre movement to which playwrights of The Harlem Renaissance, the Black Theatre Movement and August Wilson would become heirs.

The Harlem Renaissance ushered in the “New Negro,” who was interested in crafting new images of himself that would subvert and challenge old stereotypes. The leaders of this movement, the Black Intelligentsia, believed that the most effective way to bring this redefinition to fruition was through
art: music, poetry, prose, canvas and the theatre. Thus, the Harlem Renaissance led to a revival of the African-American theatre. This renewed interest began with the founding of the Lafayette Players in Harlem by Anita Bush and spread across America as amateur drama groups produced plays in schools, ladies clubs and churches (Hay 173).

Two other key females of this time to mention are Angelina Weld Grimke and Marita Bonner. In 1916 Grimke penned the first social protest play by an African-American female playwright, Rachel. Hailed as a pioneering work in the use of racial propaganda to enlighten white Americans to the plight of African-Americans (Peterson 92), Rachel is the story of a young woman (Rachel) who during the course of the play’s plot becomes increasingly aware of the racial violence and prejudice to which African-Americans are subjected.

As a teenager Rachel learns that her mother left the south after Rachel’s father and brother were lynched by a white mob. When Rachel is an adult, she learns of two race prejudice incidents that completely dishearten her. First, she gets a visit from a woman whose young daughter has been ridiculed and taunted so severely about her race and dark skin that the little girl is afraid of all people except her mother and father. Next, Rachel learns that her adopted son has been the victim of racism at school. His experience is so traumatic that he cannot verbalize it and he has nightmares. By the end of the play Rachel is so dismayed with the race situation that she renounces
God and marriage and dedicates her life to loving and caring for African-American children and protecting them from the emotional and physical scars of race prejudice.

Eleven years after the debut of Rachel, Bonner also penned a protest play, The Purple Flower. Although not as critically acclaimed as Rachel, it is an allegorical treatment of American race relations in which African-Americans are depicted as wormlike creatures living in the valley trying to climb the Hill of Somewhere to reach the purple flower of Life-at-Its-Finest, and whites are depicted as sundry devils living on the side of the hill who try to keep the worms from getting to the top of the Hill.

Although social protest plays such as Rachel and The Purple Flower drew large audiences, the most popular play of the time, however, was a musical, Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s Shuffle Along. Not only did Shuffle Along legitimize African-American musical theatre, but it proved to producers and theatre managers that audiences, both African-American and white, would pay to see African-American talent (Woll 60).

Although Sissle and Blake are the two names most commonly associated with Shuffle Along, it actually began as the artistic dream of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. Miller and Lyles met while students at Fisk University and developed a comedy routine consisting of skits that burlesqued southern life in small towns (Woll 60). The composer and bandleader James Reese Europe was so impressed with their “The Mayor of Dixie” routine that he
suggested they expand it into a musical comedy and approach Sissle and Blake about writing songs for it (Woll 60).

Sissle and Blake agreed to write the score for the show with Miller and Lyles providing the libretto. The four recruited friends to perform in the musical, and after a period of short runs and one-night stands, it opened at the newly renovated 63rd Street Theatre on May 21, 1921 to rave reviews (Woll 62).

As evidenced by its 504-performance run, audiences, both black and white, loved the musical, which centered on a mayoral campaign in the fictitious city of Jimtown (Woll 58). Its score was one of the most highly praised of the 1920s, and the song “I’m Just Wild About Harry” continues to be popular (Woll 70). Too, Shuffle Along’s cast enjoyed widespread commercial success after its final curtain call. Miller and Lyles appeared on Broadway every season throughout the 1920s; Sissle and Blake wrote scores for other musicals; and members of the cast and chorus, most notably Florence Mills, Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, and Adelaide Hall, became international stars (Woll 60).

Not only was Shuffle Along successful at the box office, but it was a social accomplishment as well. It was the first theatrical performance that did not restrict African-American patrons to balcony seating (Woll 72). African-Americans were allowed to sit in the last third of its orchestra seats, “breaking the rigid barriers of segregation in New York City’s
legitimate theatres” (Woll 72). It also proved that African-American theatre could be a viable enterprise. DuBois and the rest of the Harlem Intelligentsia had long believed that there was a place for African-American theatre on the American theatrical landscape; it just had not been called for in American history (Huggins 292). They believed that call had to be “evoked by a Negro audience desiring to see its own life depicted by its own writers and actors.” (Huggins 292) This summons came in the form of *Shuffle Along*, and with its success DuBois and the other Harlem leaders began to push for an African-American theatre movement.

The movement DuBois promoted was based upon four principles. African-American theatre had to be: 1) about African-Americans (the plays should have plots that depicted African-American life as it actually was, 2) by African-Americans (the plays should be written by African-American playwrights because they understood African-American life and what it meant to be an African-American, 3) for African-Americans (the theatre should cater to primarily African-American audiences and be sustained and supported by that audience’s entertainment and approval, and 4) near African-Americans (the theatre should be located in an African-American neighborhood near the mass of ordinary African-American people) (Huggins 292). As will be discussed later in this chapter, these are the same ideas that would be espoused by August Wilson.
seven decades later in his quest to institutionalize contemporary African-American theatre.

The movement was ambitious; however, before it could gain momentum the country found itself in the midst of the Great Depression, which curtailed all theatrical activity, African-American and mainstream.

Before the theatre activities of the 1930s are mentioned, it is important to mention another theatre movement that took place during the 1920s. Just as DuBois’ movement sought to provide a stage on which African-Americans could produce, direct, write and perform, the same efforts were being made in the South and Midwest by the Theatre Owners and Booking Association (T.O.B.A.).

T.O.B.A. was organized in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1920. Formed to bring plays and other forms of entertainment to African-American audiences in the southern and mid-western states, T.O.B.A. quickly grew to include over eighty theatres as a result of its ability to book theatres and actors for performances for an entire season (Sampson 16). Although T.O.B.A. provided bookings for hundreds of African-American actors, comics and musicians, it was greatly criticized for its unfair treatment of show managers. Before taking any show out on its circuit, T.O.B.A. required the show manager to sign a contract that included the following provisions: 1) the manager would pay T.O.B.A $1500 if he cancelled the show, 2) the show manager would hold T.O.B.A. harmless from any and all claims, 3)
the artist would pay T.O.B.A. $1500 if he or she appeared or performed at another theatre after the contract was signed and prior to the show, 4) the show manager would pay the T.O.B.A. a $50 deposit to secure the contract, and 6) T.O.B.A. reserved the right to cancel the contract by giving a six day notice in writing (Sampson 455-456).

Clearly these provisions favored the organization. In addition to the stipulations of the contract, show managers were also required to pay for at least $100 worth of lithographs and to share the expense all newspaper advertising that T.O.B.A. contracted. For those who did not have the funds to meet these financial obligations, T.O.B.A. would provide an advance of $200-$300, but the entire amount was due on the first performance date, regardless of the receipts (Sampson 18). Because of such stringent requirements, T.O.B.A. became known as "tough of black asses" by show managers. By 1929 the organization’s reputation was so tarnished that show managers refused to work with it, and like DuBois’ movement it dissolved during the Great Depression.

Despite the decline in theatrical activities during the Great Depression, more African-American playwrights emerged during the 1930s than in any previous decade. This proliferation of playwrights was due largely to the efforts and activities of the Federal Theatre Project.

As a part of the Roosevelt administration’s WPA, Congress created the Federal Theatre Project. The Federal Theatre
Project established sixteen segregated African-American units for the production of plays by or about African-Americans (Craig 2).\textsuperscript{3} The Federal Theatre Project was instrumental in helping young, emerging African-American playwrights, for not only did it provide them an opportunity to concentrate on their creative efforts, but it also gave them a chance to participate in stage procedures and productions on a large scale.\textsuperscript{4} As E. Quita Craig points out in \textit{Black Drama of the Federal Theatre Era}, "the results of such participation, including the feedback they received from having their plays produced, were extremely valuable to these young playwrights, and were instrumental in their development" (8-9).

Not only did the Federal Theatre Project provide unprecedented opportunities for the playwrights, but it also provided opportunities for the audience as well. The nominal prices charged for tickets made it possible for more African-Americans to attend performances, and, the increased degree of artistic freedom practiced by the Theatre made it possible for the playwrights to project a new and recognizable image for those African-Americans (Craig 9).\textsuperscript{5}

One of the Theatre's plays that was especially appealing to audiences was the New Jersey Unit's \textit{The Trial of Dr. Beck}. Written by Allison Hughes, it was so successful that after it closed in New Jersey it did a four-week run on Broadway (Craig 24). In the play, Dr. Beck, a handsome and distinguished-looking mulatto is accused of murdering his wealthy dark-skin
wife Amanda, and the play unfolds through the evidence at his trial. *The Trial of Dr. Beck* was hailed by the African-American community for its emphasis on the need in the African-American community for a re-evaluation of its self-image. Many saw it as a daring assault on the fact that a social hierarchy based on skin color had been established in the African-American community (Craig 185).  

Although theatre productions were substantially curbed and/or cancelled during the 1940s because of World War II, one of the most renowned theatre groups in African-American theatre history was founded during this time. In 1940 in the basement of the public library on 135th Street in Harlem, Frederick O’Neal and Abram Hill founded the American Negro Theater. Not only is it recognized for its successful productions of Theodore Brown’s *Natural Man* and Owen Dodson’s *Garden of Time*, but it is also known for having trained actors Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier and actress Ruby Dee. Unfortunately, the American Negro Theatre’s success also led to its demise, for its best actors left after having found mainstream commercial work (Hay 172).

The 1950s is considered to be the period during which the African-American theatre came of age. The plays of this decade were more mature in technique, theme, and character than any that had been produced hitherto. The also presented more realistic portrayals of the interracial relationships within the larger community. Too, the plays of this decade explored the problems of integration and desegregation. One such play was
Louis Peterson’s *Take a Giant Step*, which depicts the identity crisis of a youth who seeks relationships within the African-American community after having grown up in a white neighborhood (Hatch 547).

The most successful play of the 1950s was Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Not only was it the first play by an African-American woman to have a run on Broadway, but it was also the first non-comical Broadway play to be directed by an African-American, Lloyd Richards, the same director who thirty years later would direct another fledging playwright, August Wilson. *A Raisin in the Sun* is considered by many critics to have presented the most realistic exploration of African-American domestic life of its time (Andrews, et al 619).

Beginning in the 1960s, a Black Theater Movement, growing out of the civil rights struggle, began to flower, creating great excitement in African-American drama and theatre, as a new wave of black critics began to articulate the need for more positive images in plays by African-American playwrights and to advocate the use of drama as a weapon in the Black Power struggle. The plays that emerged under this movement were more openly militant, controversial, and shocking than ever before, and often advocated violence, confrontation and revolution as a means of solving racial problems (Williams 14).

Despite their militancy, the plays of this decade did more than just advocate black rights and political activism; they also emphasized the dynamism of black culture. As was "black
power," pride in blackness, too, was a common theme of the plays. To the playwrights involved in the Black Theatre Movement, it was essential that African-American theatre become more black oriented, consciously drawing on African-American community culture. Ed Bullins, one of the major playwrights of the period, reinforced this belief, "we don’t want to have a higher form of white art in blackface. We are working towards something entirely different and new that encompasses the soul and spirit of black people, and that represents the whole experience of our being here in this oppressive land" (Butcher 239).

Perhaps the best-known figure and playwright of the Black Theatre Movement is Amiri Baraka who founded and directed the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School (BARTS) in Harlem. Not only were Baraka and BARTS instrumental in changing the focus of African-American theatre from one of racial integration to one of separation, but with plays like *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (his two most popular and commercially successful plays) Baraka brought an increasing racial consciousness and political militancy to African-American theatre (Williams 13).

Like Wilson who would espouse the same opinion twenty years later, Baraka was of the opinion that "to know who you are implies awareness of where you’ve come from" (Benston 16). In short, his belief was that the only way African Americans could succeed in present day America was to have an understanding of their history as Africans and their history as Africans in
America. But, this is where the similarities between the two playwrights end, for as William Demastes points out, whereas “Baraka incorporates the politics of an awakening self-identity and oppositionally focused racial unity, Wilson utilizes the politics of self-reflection and self-adjustment” (219). And, this is true, for unlike Wilson, Baraka’s works do not privilege history as knowledge. Instead, they assert that history is human destiny; that revolution is the authentic and “real” form of the historical process; that the individual will must come to terms with the logical necessities of change (Benston 16).

Thus, history for Baraka is a process, a dynamic dialectic of opposing forces. For example, in his Dutchman there are two divergent views of African-American history at work.

As stated earlier, Dutchman is, perhaps, Baraka’s most widely known dramatic work. The two-scene, two-character play is the story of a young Ivy League African-American, Clay, who allows himself to be picked up by a white woman, Lula, on a New York subway. The plot line revolves around Lula trying to get Clay to conform to her vision of the African-American man, that of the “hip field-nigga.” When he refuses to conform, she taunts him into revealing his antagonism towards all whites as well as revealing the real self which he hides under his Ivy League facade. After Clay’s admission, Lula kills him. The play ends with another African-American male entering the subway and Lula approaching him, a suggestion that he will meet the same fate as Clay.
Clearly, two differing views of history are at work in *Dutchman*—the stereotypical history shaped by racism (Lula) and the reinvented history shaped by a growing African-American middle class (Clay). In presenting these conflicting visions, Baraka shows that African-Americans can survive in America only by acknowledging their entire past, not just the one they have created for themselves; for, to deny (or be unaware of for that matter) any part of that past can prove to have dire consequences.

After the heyday of the Black Theatre Movement, interest in the African-American theatre began to wane. With the exception of some bright spots, for the most part African-American theatre played to empty houses. Two such bright spots were Charles Gordone’s *No Place to Be Somebody* and Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play*, both of which won Pulitzer Prizes for drama.

In 1970 with *No Place to Be Somebody*, Charles Gordone became the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Set in a New York City bar, the play examines the thwarted ambitions of the bar’s patrons (which includes hustlers, prostitutes, artists and ex-cons) and its owner Johnny Williams. Like his customers, who all are searching for that person or situation that will help them realize their dreams of making it big, Johnny has been waiting for his big break. His break, as he sees it, is the release of his mentor Sweets Crane, for before Sweets was imprisoned, he and Johnny had contrived a plan to commandeer a share of the neighborhood organized crime
market. However, Johnny has had to postpone placing the plan into action for the past ten years while Sweets served his prison term. After Sweets is released, Johnny learns, though, that a now reformed and ill Sweets wants no part of the scheme, and he must carry it out alone.

Subtitled “A Black-Black Comedy,” No Place to Be Somebody was hailed for its brute and honest examination of the individual and communal struggle for identity. Much like Wilson, Gordone believes that one’s identity in America is a result of one’s racial experience. Too, in an interview with Susan Harris Smith he suggests that the formulation for identity in American society is not based on racial experience alone but is a synthesis of cultural, racial and religious experiences (Smith 171). This amalgam of cultures, races and religions, according to Gordone, has profound implications not only in expanding the parameters of African-American identity but also in offering a broader understanding of the American experience and ultimately humanity (Smith 171). For this reason, and unlike Wilson, Gordone has said that his plays are about being an American, period.  

Twelve years after Charles Gordone accepted the Pulitzer for No Place to Be Somebody, Charles Fuller accepted it for A Soldier’s Play.

Set in 1944 at Fort Neal, Louisiana, A Soldier’s Play is a mystery play that through the course of the plot attempts to uncover the murderer of Sgt. Vernon Waters, the leader of the
African-American company at the segregated World War II army base. The officer in charge of the investigation initially believes Waters’ death is a hate crime, but as the story unfolds he realizes that Waters was killed by one of his own men.

Fuller received lots of criticism for A Soldier’s Play. As William Demastes points out in Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre, many African-Americans disapproved of the play because of its portrayal of black-on-black crime, and Amiri Baraka, in particular, saw the play as “catering to the desires [emphasis added] of the white power structure rather than to the needs [emphasis added] of the oppressed blacks” (127).

Why Baraka would perceive A Soldier’s Play in such a way is comprehensible. Its main character, Sgt Waters, is a man who hates those African-Americans who “think like niggers” and “bring the race down.” As a matter of fact, his hatred for such people is so intense that he feels a sense of duty to rid the race of such people. One such person is Private C.J. Memphis, a blues-singer in Sgt. Waters’ company. After C.J. embarrasses the race in front of the white captain, Waters “arranges” for C.J. to be arrested for firing an illegal firearm on the base. After his arrest, a deject C.J. commits suicide, and PFC Peterson kills Waters for the role he plays in C.J.’s death.

In the essay “The Descent of Charlie Fuller Into Pulitzerland and the Need for African-American Institutions,” Baraka says that C.J. represents the oldest, blackest folk ties of the African-American, and when he commits suicide Fuller, in
essence, kills the Southern blackness that connects, through slavery, directly back to Africa (52). Baraka goes on to say that Sgt. Waters and people like him (the African-American bourgeoisie) condemn this southern blackness because it prevents them from assimilating. But as he sees it, the masses are not the impediment, for they are the ones who “will provide the will, determination, muscle and revolutionary fire” to destroy imperialism and white supremacy (Baraka “The Descent” 58). The obstruction is the bourgeoisie, for they are the ones who have succumbed to white supremacy.

According to Baraka, playwrights like Fuller (who is also representative of the African-American bourgeoisie) should write plays that reflect the will, needs, and destiny of the masses rather than those that reflect the ideology of white imperialism.9 Not until African-Americans artists (like Fuller) start creating their own institutions will the entire race become united and persevere over white supremacy.

In the mid 1980s August Wilson, who like Charles Fuller would spur a similar controversy, entered the African-American theatre scene. And, like his predecessors, “Wilson started writing plays out of arrogance and frustration” (Powers 50). Wilson felt that the work of previous African-American dramatists did not fully and truly reflect African-American culture. Thus, believing that he could write just as well as other playwrights about the black experience in America, Wilson began his career as a playwright (Powers 50). And, Wilson has
proven he could do just that. In the afterword to August Wilson: Three Plays, literary critic Paul Carter Harrison calls Wilson’s plays, “a welcome model for future African-American dramaturgy” (Wilson 317).

Wilson credits much of his success at dramaturgy to the four B’s from which he finds inspiration to write. These four B’s—Baraka, Bearden, Borges and the Blues—together function as a muse of sorts, providing Wilson with the foundation upon which his plays are created.

When Wilson began writing drama, he used Baraka’s work as his model. Like Wilson, Baraka was a poet and playwright and at the time Wilson began writing, Baraka was at the height of his career. He had enjoyed tremendous success with Dutchman and The Slave, and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre was producing plays that were causing audiences, both African-American and white, to take notice.

Awe-inspired by the themes and forms of Baraka’s plays, Wilson initially adopted Baraka’s revolutionary style with its “accuse and attack” approach.\(^{10}\) However, Wilson found that the style did not work for him, so he adopted Baraka’s earlier approach of exploring the internal conflict within the characters. This method has proven to be correct, for all of his plays written in this style have been successful.\(^ {11}\)

Whereas Baraka influences Wilson’s style of writing, Romare Bearden’s art inspires the characters about whom Wilson writes. Bearden, whose collages depicting African-American life gained
him national attention in the 1960s and 1970s, has been the inspiration for the main characters in three of Wilson’s plays.

Wilson was first introduced to Bearden’s work in 1971 when he saw a copy of *The Prevalence of Ritual*, a collected volume of some of Bearden’s collages. Says Wilson about Bearden’s work:

> What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence. In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvasses. (Schwartzman 8)

The first Bearden collage to provide the inspiration for a Wilson character is *Continuities*. A painting that depicts a large man holding a small baby, *Continuities* provided the impetus for Troy in *Fences*. The image in the painting mirrors the scene in the play when Troy comes home with Raynell and asks Rose to care for her.12

The next play to have a character inspired by a Bearden collage is *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Bearden’s *Millhand’s Lunch Bucket* depicts a large, brooding man sitting at a table within a busy room. Although the room is crowded, the man seems alone and isolated. The man became Herald Loomis who, despite living in Seth and Bertha’s very populated boardinghouse, finds himself alone in his quest to find his wife and begin a new life.

Bearden’s *The Piano Lesson* is the last play to provide the idea for a Wilson play. However, not only did this collage provide the idea for the characters, it also provided the play’s
Wilson credits his storytelling ability to the Argentine poet and fiction writer Jorge Luis Borges. From Borges Wilson learned that it’s not what happens in the plot that counts but how those things happen. So, in Wilson’s plays what happens during the course of the action becomes less important than the cause. For example, in Seven Guitars (the Wilson play that is most like Borges’ style in that the audience knows what will happen upfront) it is not Floyd’s death that is the play’s focal point but the circumstances that lead to his death.

Mary Friedman notes Borges’ stories have, “central characters who travel twisted paths always to a point of little hope. . . . [to whom] . . . some fantastic, irrational event occurs, offering the possibility of spiritual salvation, of release from the world of oppression and death” (6). The same can be said for Wilson’s plays, for during the course of his plays all of his protagonists seem to be burdened by the details of their lives and on the path dismal to futures, but then experience a redeeming moment that affirms them.

The “B’ that, perhaps, has the most influence on Wilson’s work is the Blues. In countless interviews he has acknowledged the Blues as being the wellspring of his art. For this reason, not only is it key to approach his plays with a knowledge of the
music, but its history and what has become known as the blues aesthetic as well.  

The Blues developed from African and African-American work songs and sorrow songs. Field hollers, shouts, yells, and mournful spirituals provided the structural foundation for the growth of this music (Garon 39). As the Blues took shape, it began to reflect the emotional content of the lives of African-Americans, especially, their struggle to deal with and rise above their depressed lifestyles. The Blues thereby became a safety valve that permitted African-Americans to release the tension and pressure resulting from life's daily trials. The cathartic lyrics of the Blues purged the anxiety brought on by separation, discrimination, and love affairs gone sour, and as a result became the companion of many African-Americans for whom such experiences were all too familiar. For example, in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, in her discussion of the role of the Blues to African-Americans, Ma tells Cutler that the Blues "help you get out of the bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. You get up knowing whatever your troubles is you can get a grip on them 'cause the [B]lues done give you an understanding of life" (67). In this sense, the historic function of the Blues is similar to that of the Negro spirituals: it provided a way for African-Americans to rise above—at least temporarily—the problems of daily life. Although the Blues might possess the transcendent resolution of the spirituals, unlike the spirituals, the Blues
struck an emotional chord that resonated with hope even in the darkest moments. In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison’s definition imbues the Blues with a poetic aspect:

The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form the Blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (78)

It is significant that the Blues as it is known today came into its own during the turn of the century, what African-Americans call “the nadir,” one of the worst periods of modern race relations. At that time, African-Americans were forced to realize that the freedom on which they had waited all their lives existed only in a legal document with little meaning in the real world. Only the U.S. Constitution was amended; little else changed. Attitudes and practices designed to keep African-Americans in an underprivileged position were the order of the day—sharecropping enslaved them on the plantation, and the "Separate but Equal" Supreme Court decision of 1896 segregated them in the social arena. It was at this bleak moment in their history that African-Americans created the Blues (Levine 296). Just as the work songs, hollers, and spirituals had helped them move beyond the despair of slavery, the deeply felt emotions of the Blues now helped them transcend the angst that rose from freedom without opportunity.

With its elements of suffering, survival, and social
communication, the Blues has stood for many African-American writers as a powerful symbol of the flourishing of African-American identity in an oppressive environment. As Lorenzo Thomas notes the influence of the Blues on African-American literature, or the blues aesthetic, can be seen in two areas: 1) as a formal structure of music or as a formal compositional method that emphasizes a stock repertoire of traditional verses and themes organized according to a style of improvisation that allows the artist to select themes from the repertoire that are appropriate to any specific occasion, and 2) as an ethos, meaning a specific historically grounded philosophical perspective or worldview that is derived from the African-American experience in the early 20th century (Andrews, et al. 87). Whereas poets most often use the former, prose writers tend to use the latter. Wilson’s literary predecessors who have successfully used the blues motif in their writing include James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison.

James Weldon Johnson was one of the first African-American writers to use and pay tribute to the Blues in his work. The unnamed narrator in his The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man displays extraordinary talent as a pianist. It is this talent that leads him on a self and race-debasing journey that begins in New York. A stint in New York as a ragtime pianist leads to a tour of Europe where he decides to devote his talent to the development of vernacular African-American music into classic
musical forms. Returning to the roots of African-American musical traditions in the South, the narrator is so shocked by a lynching he witnesses that he rejects his new vocation and spurns identification with "a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (Johnson 191). Although *Autobiography* is primarily a study about double consciousness, Johnson explicitly recognizes the greatness of black musicians and their music.

Langston Hughes was one of the first African-American poets to adapt the Blues form for literary use. And, although his finest achievements using the form undoubtedly lie in his poetry, his prose also makes use of the Blues. Perhaps his prose that most markedly makes use of the form are the Simple collections. Simple is to Phyllis Klotman "in fact one of the Blues People" (74). She notes, that he actually sings the color problem Blues in the stories. In *The Atomic Age* Simple sings the "Last Hired and First Fired" Blues and in *Manna From Heaven* he sings the "Carry and Clean" Blues. Several of the tales are specifically about the Blues. Simple even explains in one story how he is connected with the Blues tradition:

> The [B]lues can be real sad, else real mad, else real glad, and funny, too, all at the same time. I ought to know. Me, I growed up with the blues. Fact is, I heard so many [B]lues when I were a young child until my shadow was blue. And when I were a young man, and left Virginia and runned away to Baltimore behind me came the shadow of the [B]lues. (Klotman 77)

Another writer who was intrigued by the blues form is Richard Wright. In his "Blueprint for Negro Literature," Wright
expressed that America had for too long a time been unconcerned about the role of African-American writers, and if there was any role, it was through accident rather than intent or design because it crept in through in the form of jazz and jokes (5). Like Wilson, Wright was completely convinced that African-American writers could make a unique contribution to literature by drawing on folk songs in their work. He saw folk songs and tales as the most indigenous expression of black life and culture, "Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth . . . all these formed the channels through which racial wisdom flowed" (6).

Indeed in his Black Boy Wright relies on the blues model to help him recount and come to terms with the story of his life. As such, Black Boy can be described as one long Blues song in which the inadequacy of Wright’s youth is exposed, found painful, but is accepted as the kind of pain through which he grew and came to accept reality while retaining the hope that he might one day change it. These ideas lead Ralph Ellison in Shadow and Act to refer to Black Boy as a creatively cathartic Blues sung to heal the wounds inflicted in Wright’s youth (90).

Although Black Boy can be described as a "long black song," among many, Ellison’s Invisible Man is considered the ultimate blues novel. Ellison himself saw the Blues as "the only consistent art in the United States which constantly reminds us of our limitation while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go" (Shadow and Act 172). He believed that the humor
of the Blues was symptomatic of a desire for role reversal, for
dramatic change.

Perhaps Ellison viewed the Blues in this way because he was
trained as a classical composer at Tuskegee Institute and music
was central to his life. Throughout his youth in his Oklahoma
home he was surrounded by Blues and blues-based jazz. He grew
up listening to great classic Blues singers like Ma Rainey,
Bessie Smith, Ida Cox and Clara Smith and came to feel that the
Blues captured the essence of “human situations so well that a
whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality”
(Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 172). His upbringing enabled him to
explore “human versatility,” and he became convinced that
jazzmen “were in their own way better examples for youth to
follow than were most judges and ministers, legislators and
governors . . . less torn and damaged by the moral compromises
and insincerities which have so sickened the life of our
country” (Ellison, “Becoming” 105-106).

In his “Black American Fiction Since Richard Wright,”
Robert Lee points out that in *Invisible Man* Ellison demonstrates
“his artful, controlling invention, his command of black
folklore and humor and his subtly adapted phrasing from blues
and jazz” (18). In fact, early in *Invisible Man* Ellison makes
it evident that he is deliberately using the rhythms of Blues
and jazz and consciously emulating the sound of trumpets and
trombones. He constantly uses musical metaphors and language
that has been inspired by the solos of Louis Armstrong and
Charlie Parker and the songs of Bessie Smith and Jimmy Rushing (Lee 25).

To Ellison the Blues expressed all the contradictions, all the restrictions, and all the aspirations that make up the human personality. According to Raymond Olderman, "To Ralph Ellison the [B]lues or blues mood is a symbolic expression of the human condition. The meaning of the [B]lues is identical with the meaning of man's existence, and, in the end, is the meaning of Ellison's novel" (142). Other critics agree that although Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man* is a Southern African-American, he represents all humanity as well.

Ellison undoubtedly viewed the music of African-Americans as one of the most original and valuable elements in the national, not just the African-American, past. Through the use of Blues and jazz in his writing he hoped to re-unite America with its heritage and restore "the shattered people of the nation" (Bluestein 609). He saw jazz as individualism directed toward communal interests and the improvisations of jazz as individual definitions of identity that delineate the role of each person in the group. He found in a jazz solo a statement of a person's individual and group identity. Like a Blues singer, Ellison wanted to integrate the aspects of life that might seem to be in conflict and restore a sense of wholeness.

Rinehart, the narrator in *Invisible Man*, can be seen as singing his own Blues as he tells his tale. As he does so, he discovers the meaning of his own existence through developing
perceptions. He comes to understand that within the Blues lies all the freedoms and restrictions, confusions and uncertainties, hopes and limitations of which man consists. Throughout the novel, Rinehart is actually nourished and fortified by the Blues, and this fortification prevents him from losing touch with reality. To Ellison the Blues meant accepting life as it is and letting events happen as they will. Yet although they stood for positive acceptance of life as it is, the Blues also sought change. Simultaneously the Blues provide a retreat, a hiding place where Rinehart can come to terms with his own invisibility, with the fact that African-Americans and African-American culture are not yet acknowledged as important by white Americans.

As he listens to the Blues at the end of the novel, Rinehart has reached a self-defining moment, and as a result wants to use the Blues to create new feelings and a new music; to fuse the past experience with future hopes, European civilization with African, classical music with Blues. Thus, by the end of the novel music, the Blues in particular, is seen as a connective, life-affirming force that can help people to triumph over their circumstances.

Like Ellison, Wilson’s use of the blues motif in his work is the result of an appreciation for the Blues, which he discovered when he purchased a stack of old 78s, including Bessie Smith’s “Nobody In Town Can Make This Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine.” Wilson says that when he played the record,
Everything fell to a new place. I lived in a rooming house at the time with this odd assortment of people. I had never connected them to anything of value. I began to look at these people differently, and at myself differently. I realized that I had history and connection—the everyday poetry of the people I’d grown up with. (Plummer and Kahn 66)

Since that time Wilson has acknowledged that he has made a conscious effort to include the Blues in his plays. He readily admits that his plays are, “entirely based on the ideas and attributes that come out of the [B]lues” (Moyers 14).

Similar to Ellison, who emphasized that the Blues does not skirt the painful facts of human experience, but works through them to an artistic transcendence (Bone 46) Wilson also believes the Blues contains a philosophy of life. Embedded in the Blues are instructions on how to live life as an African-American in a white world. And, as such, the Blues has become the African-American community’s cultural response to that world in which they found themselves (Powers 50). This response was passed on from generation to generation and became a link between them. Similarly, Wilson wishes for his plays to become a connective force that links the past with the present and the present with the future.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson remarked:

[B]lues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the [B]lues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of people as part of the oral tradition... The music provides you an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song [also]. (14)
In this sense in Wilson’s dramaturgy the Blues seem to operate within the same realm in which Lynda Hill says language functions in Zora Neale Hurston’s work, that of cultural performance. In her work Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston, Hill expostulates that in Hurston’s work language becomes a vehicle, not only for cultural knowledge, but also for cultural and individual survival (9). This idea of Blues as a kind of cultural performance finds varied expressions in Wilson’s plays. For example, In Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, the sense of the Blues being inextricably woven with the cultural identity of African-Americans is given shape as the characters search for their "song." Wilson says that in Joe Turner the "song" Loomis seeks is his African identity, "understanding who you are . . . you can [then] go out and sing your song as an African" (Moyers 16). Or, as Bynum tells Loomis in the same play, "All you got to do is sing it. . . . Then you be free" (Wilson Joe Turner 287).

In finding his own song--his "African-ness," his roots--the African American discovers his own identity and the value of his true self. For example, in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Levee's frustration at not being allowed to write a song his way reaches such fervor that he kills one of his fellow musicians. And, in The Piano Lesson, Wining Boy is driven almost to desperation by the attempts to suck the music from him:

Go to a place and they find out you play piano, the first thing they want to do is give you a drink, find you a piano and sit you right down. . . . They ain’t

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gonna let you get up! . . . You look up one day . . . and you hate the piano. But that's all you got. You can't do nothing else. All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me . . . or am I the piano player? Sometimes it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he's the cause of all the trouble I'm having. (41)

The frustration Wining Boy expresses with his life as a piano player is a sentiment shared by numerous bluesmen. In *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, Amiri Baraka describes the role of bluesmen and blueswomen as “instantaneous transcribers of a . . . socio-cultural philosophy” (82). This socio-cultural philosophy believed in not only the entertainment value of the Blues, but in their healing and sustaining power as well. Thus, bluesmen like Wining Boy often found themselves depended upon by their audiences not only for entertainment but for help in coping with the problems and shortcomings of their indigent lives.

As such, the Blues functions as what Albert Murray calls equipment for living (16). Oftentimes for the audience, the Blues became a means by which they, through the singer, could give expression to their feelings. In this sense, the Blues provided not only a release from despair to the singer but to the audience as well. The problems the Blues singer often sang about—Jim Crow laws, poverty, lost love and lynchings—were very similar to theirs. Listening to the Blues was a way to ease the pain of that miserable life, for the expression of that misery helped to make life more tolerable. The Blues gave its
listeners hope, that strength and confidence could be drawn from difficulty and that they were not alone in their suffering.

Like the Blues, history also plays an important role in Wilson’s plays. Thus far, Wilson has completed eight plays in a ten-play cycle he plans to write to document the African-American experience during the twentieth century. It is Wilson’s intention that these plays will explore some of the historical choices that have confronted African-Americans since their emancipation from slavery and the Reconstruction Period.

Theoretically, history is an open-ended discourse that does not constitute reality but provides a meaning, or an interpretation, of past events by an objective observer. In practice, however, historians subjectively choose and arrange events to reflect their own cultural experiences, making the so-called objectivity of history a fallacy. This concept of history-as-fallacy is supported by Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally who in their text, History and Memory in African-American Culture, note that in some languages the word for history also means story (6), a suggestion that historians are, in essence, storytellers who are concerned with introducing “characters” and shaping those characters’ stories with some sense of “the rhetoric needed to confront their audience’s expectations and to bring the past to life” (6).

This idea of history-fallacy-as-storytelling rings especially true for African-American history, which for until thirty years ago had been either disregarded or erroneously
recorded. In his groundbreaking work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Melville J. Herskovits discusses how the African-American’s past has been incorrectly written by “professed” experts on the race. For example, he remarks that in the past several supposedly race scholars have insisted that no Africanisms exist in the African-American culture, that they were all obliterated when the Africans were enslaved (pp.3-6). However, he proves throughout the text that Africanisms did survive slavery and exist in mainly every aspect of African-American life. Such oversights, he asserts, are the result of research done without an assessment of historic depth and a willingness to regard the historical past of an entire people as the equivalent of its written history and have led to confusion, error and misdirected judgment about the culture (xiii).

It is this misdirected judgment that Wilson seeks to correct in his plays. Perhaps heeding the declaration of George Santayana who said history is always written incorrectly and so always must be rewritten (45), Wilson has accepted the task of doing just that. However, as Jay Plum states Wilson does not simply write history in the traditional sense, but “rights” it in that he alters his audience’s perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied is “real” (562). By contextualizing African-American cultural experience, Wilson, in turn, creates an opportunity for the African-American community to examine and define itself.
In an interview with David Savron, Wilson elaborates his reasons for redrawing the African-American past, and in doing so explains his dramatic vision:

Writing our own history has been a very valuable tool, because if we’re going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past. This is so basic and simple, yet it’s a thing that Africans in America disregard . . . One of the things I’m trying to say in my writing is that we can never really begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans. (295-296)

Wilson wants his audience to accept and take pride in its Africanness. Like his characters who come to realize that they are African-Americans rather than Americans who happen to be of African descent, so, too, does he want the members of his audience to have this understanding.

To Wilson, the only way this knowledge will be acquired is through African-Americans’ recognition and embracement of their African and slave past. By looking to the past and incorporating its knotty, conflicted legacy of language, custom, history, slavery and deep pain, Wilson sees an affirmation that can inform, strengthen and empower. His plays tell African-Americans that strength does not lie in avoidance of the past, even one as laden with complexity as the slave past is. This avoidance of the past, believes Wilson, is one of the key reasons why the African-American community is floundering today. Rather than looking the past head-on and learning from it, African-Americans have turned their backs to it and have remained uninformed and misinformed, repeating the same mistakes:
[B]lacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. I’m not certain the right choices have always been made. That’s part of my interest in history—to say “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 in the future. (Powers 52)

One of the biggest mistakes Wilson believes African-Americans made was leaving the South for the North. As he sees it, the migration north removed them from a distinctively African-American culture that had already been founded (Rothstein 8)). Instead in the desire to assimilate, they left the South in droves and found themselves foreigners in a strange land “isolated cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces” (Wilson Joe Turner 203).

Although Wilson may view the migration North as a mistake, the estimated five million African-Americans who made the move between 1915 and 1960 did not see it as such. For these people, the North seemed a paradise when compared to the economic and social deprivation to which they were subjected in the South. Not only were they not given their “40 acres and a mule” after the end of the Civil War, but they also faced a system of legal segregation as a result of the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court Decision. In addition, in Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South, Alferdteen Harrison mentions increased hostility and lynchings, increased industrialization and agricultural mechanization, and work
opportunities in the northern factories as three additional factors that further encouraged the Great Migration.

Of the aforementioned reasons, the job opportunities seemed to be the biggest motivator for the drive North. Newspapers like the Chicago Defender published numerous articles that extolled the virtues of the work environment up north. The work conditions were better and the wages were much higher than those made picking cotton (Franklin 376). However, Wilson feels that for an increase in pay, African-Americans sacrificed something much more precious, a two hundred year old culture they had developed, something that they will never be able to regain (Rothstein 8).

Indeed, Wilson believes African-Americans would have been a stronger people if they had stayed in the South and sees the migration North as the root of all the problems they have experienced, and uses his dramaturgy to express this opinion. As Sandra Shannon points out in her essay, "A Transplant That Did Not Take: August Wilson's Views on the Great Migration," the theme of the Great Migration as a enormous mistake seems to be a recurring motif in all his published plays (660), which perchance is the reason he sets his plays in Pittsburgh, to depict the evils that plague African-Americans in the North.²⁰

Another subject upon which Wilson has been quite vocal is the African-American theatre. Like his predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s, Wilson has pushed for an African-American theatre movement. He, too, believes that
African-Americans should be writing, directing and acting in plays that depict the African-American way of life. For too long African-Americans have relied upon “others,” as he puts it, to represent them and usually these depictions have been stereotypical (Freedman 36). Hackneyed, perhaps, not out of insensitivity but out of unfamiliarity with the culture. This unawareness is one of the main reasons for Wilson’s push for an African-American Theatre. For Wilson avoidance of clichéd portrayals of the culture can only be achieved by one who is a product of that culture, one who shares its sensibilities:

White American society is made up of various European ethnic groups which share a common history and sensibility. Black Americans are a racial group which do not share the same sensibilities. The specifics of our cultural history are very much different. We are an African people who have been here since the early 17th century. We have a different way of responding to the world. We have different ideas about style, about language. We have different aesthetics. Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter how astute a student they are or how well meaning their intentions. (Wilson, “I Want” 201)

It was for these reasons that Wilson refused to hire anyone other than an African-American to direct the screen adaptation of Fences. He felt that a white director would not understand the play and see the possibilities of the film (Wilson, “I Want” 200). Too, he insisted, that only an African-American director would approach the work with the same amount of passion and respect with which he approached it (Wilson, “I Want” 200).

Wilson’s ideas concerning the direction of Fences and an institutionalized African-American theatre has spurred lots of
censure from critics, many of who see his views as hypocritical. Writing in response to Wilson’s 1998 address to the Theatre Communications Group in which he denounced the American theater as an instrument of white cultural hegemony and called for a separate African-American stage (Wilson, “The Ground On Which I Stand,” pp. 486-488), literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says Wilson’s comments and views are duplicitous, for he fails to acknowledge his own power within that same world of American theater which he condemns (134). Gates also points out that none of Wilson’s plays have premiered at an African-American theatre (134). Obviously if Wilson is sending out a call, he too, must heed it, and it seems that is what he plans to do. In his forthcoming books, The Ground On Which I Stand: Dramatic Contexts and Cultivating the Ground On Which We Stand, he will outline his plans for an African-American theatre.21

When August Wilson began writing plays, he became a part of a tradition steeped with history. Since its beginnings in the early nineteenth century, the African-American theatre has served as an incubator for playwrights, giving them an opportunity to hone their skills and then allowing them to give full expression to their artistic voice. Dramatists such as Miller and Lyles, Hansberry, and Baraka have left indelible marks on that tradition, and August Wilson is no exception. Through his use of history and the blues motif, Wilson has fashioned a repertoire of plays that pry at the deepest sensibilities of the African-American community, the slave past

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and what it means to be a person of African descent in America. It is Wilson’s desire that once his audiences are made aware of these sensibilities that they, like his characters, will leave with the knowledge that in order to become in tune with themselves they must look to their past.
Chapter Three

Come with Forty Links of Chain: Joe Turner's Come and Gone

In Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Wilson focuses on the beginning of the Great Migration and explores the genesis of what was really a journey toward self-affirmation. He depicts the influence of the migration on the identity of each character; how their quests for lost lovers and new loves reflect a deeper search for themselves. He then raises crucial questions about the nature of the African-American experience in America, probing the blending of two cultures that have informed the sensibilities of African-Americans—their African heritage and the Christian tradition into which they were thrust. Wilson investigates their poignant yearnings for meaningful relationships and their struggle to sing the song of their true identity. He also concentrates on the ways in which separation and migration launched the twentieth-century destinies of African-Americans in urban America. In focusing on these ideas, Wilson demonstrates that the path to self-discovery lies in establishing bonds with the past through music.

Although the story line of Joe Turner follows Herald Loomis's search for his lost wife, its underlying action is his odyssey toward self-empowerment. Set in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh that is run by Seth and Bertha Holly, the play begins in 1911, at the start of the decade in which began the massive influx of southern African-Americans into northern cities. Significantly, 1911 was the year in which the National League on
Urban Conditions among Negroes (later called the National Urban League) was founded, for the play focuses on the first tentative efforts of African-Americans to adapt to urban life.

As mentioned previously, the action of the play takes place in Seth Holly’s boardinghouse. The fact that he is its proprietor puts him in an unusual position for an urban African-American. Not only does he own the boardinghouse, but his parents were free Northerners and he is a skilled craftsman. All of which gives him a stability that none of the other characters have. This stability becomes more apparent when reflected against the disjointed lifestyles of those around him. His marriage of over twenty-five years is surrounded by broken relationships, and his trade as a tinsmith gives him a solidity that contrasts with the confused meanderings of the others. Seth has put down roots in Pittsburgh and has three sources of income, but this stability has made him a little intolerant toward those of his race who are less stable. He drives a hard bargain with prospective boarders, demands payment in advance, and is impatient with any behavior not in accord with his work ethic. Bynum’s rituals are dismissed as “old mumbo jumbo nonsense” and Jeremy’s brushes with the law elicit Seth’s scathing denouncement of African-Americans who have migrated from the South. His disdain springs from the fact that, as a child of free northern parents, he has no firsthand knowledge of life on the plantation and cannot sympathize with the special need to get away from the roots and locale of slavery.
Seth's anger is directed against what he perceives to be the naiveté of migrating African-Americans in leaving the safety of their southern farms to journey north, without any knowledge of the hostile social climate they will encounter. Southern African-Americans were rural folk. The cities of the North thrust them out of their element, forcing them to compete for jobs with whites from all over the world, immigrants from other lands seeking a similar freedom.

Seth knows that in the scramble for a piece of the urban pie, African-Americans invariably come up short. Like Troy Maxson in Fences (as will be demonstrated later in this study), he is aware that African-Americans come to the plate with two strikes against them, and every moment thereafter is an agonizing struggle to stay in the game, let alone win. While Seth has a firm sense of his social role as a black northern businessman, he realizes this security is tenuous: it has to be reaffirmed every day.

If life is so difficult for an African-American man born and raised in the city, it is devastating for naïve African-American migrants without the street wisdom to survive in an urban jungle. Jeremy Furlow is one such naïve migrant who falls easy prey to city predators. When Jeremy is fired from his job because he will not submit to a white man's efforts to extort part of his salary, Molly Cunningham tells him it will be easy to get his job back. He only has to return the next day and sign up again, for no one will recognize him as the man who was
fired the day before. For to urban whites, African-Americans are just an anonymous horde of nameless, faceless people without any social identity or individuality, as indistinguishable from one another as animals in a field.

Like Jeremy’s employer, Rutherford Selig is another white man who exploits the desperate circumstances of migrant African-Americans. Known as the People Finder, he keeps a list of his customers as they move about. Though he appears to be working in the service of the innumerable groups of African-Americans searching for family and friends, his enormous fee of one dollar belies any benevolent motives. Bertha claims he is a fraud who never really finds someone he did not take away in the first place. It is true that Selig finds Martha Pentecost, but the fact that she used to reside at the boardinghouse suggests that she probably left with him and that Bertha is right about his methods. Selig is the last in a long line of white pursuers, making a profit in finding African-Americans:

[W]e been finders in my family for a long time. Bringers and finders. My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships. . . . Me and my daddy have found plenty of Nigras. My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. . . . After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking all over for each other . . . we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don’t pay as much. But the People Finding business ain’t so bad. (239-40)

So, as Selig’s words denote, the disruption of African-American communities that began with forced migrations from Africa and the selling of slaves piecemeal from plantation to plantation
continues in a new cycle as sharecropping and other aspects of a southern existence drive them from their homes in search of a better environment.\(^3\) This, ironically, maintains the profitability of trading African-Americans, and Rutherford Selig has found an innovative way to continue the family tradition by finding African-Americans separated as a consequence of slavery and insufficient economic opportunity.

Hence, in the play the activities of slavery are kept alive in various ways: Joe Turner, the brother of the governor of Tennessee, ignores the law outright and enslaves African-Americans on his farm; every seven years his men scour the countryside to capture African-Americans for his chain gang, and Rutherford Selig, in the guise of a benefactor, keeps alive a three-hundred-year-old business of trading African-Americans by profiteering from the circumstances that forced them to become disconnected.

As stated earlier, the setting of Joe Turner is a boardinghouse. And, it is interesting that Wilson chose such a place as the play’s locale for a number of reasons. One reason is that, as Sandra Shannon states, Wilson’s choice is historically accurate (128). Due to a shortage of housing in the early 1900s, Pittsburgh became literally a city of makeshift dwellings (Shannon 128). There were few vacant homes and apartments available for the droves of African-Americans who came to work in the city’s steel factories. Housing was so scarce that many businesses forged agreements with residents to
house their employees (Shannon 128). Additionally, the boardinghouse is symbolic. It functions as a temporary shelter for people in transition. Typically its occupants are just passing through, for they are on their way to some place or something else. And, this is true of the inhabitants of the Holly’s boardinghouse. They all are searching for something or someone. Loomis is looking for his wife after spending seven years of enforced labor on Joe Turner’s chain gang. With his daughter he has “been out there walking up and down [the] roads,” (217) not sure where he will meet up with Martha, but determined to find her, however long it takes. Bynum is searching for the shiny man he once met in an apocalyptic experience. Mattie Campbell needs Bynum to help her find her man, Jack Carper. Jeremy wants a steady job and a career as a musician. And, Molly Cunningham is looking for a goodtime.

All of the boarders are at a crossroads in their lives. They, as Wilson states in the preface to the play, are "marbled men and women seeking . . . a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth" (203). As their searches bring them to the doorstep of Seth and Bertha’s boardinghouse, the boardinghouse becomes figuratively a crossroads. It becomes the place where the boarders arrive “dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing,” but depart at the play’s end having found a “clear and luminous meaning to the song which [was] both a wail and a whelp of joy”
(203). Each character’s search and its conclusion will be discussed later in this chapter as they are each analyzed.

All of the characters’ search puts them in transit, and throughout the play there is much mention of roads and traveling. For example, Jeremy works on a road gang, and the audience is told about the numerous roads being built all over the country. And, as long as there are roads, African-Americans will travel:

"Seth... These niggers keep on coming. Walking... riding... carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This is the city. Niggers come up here from the back woods... coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom." (209)

Although Seth may not quite understand why these ex-Southerners would bring a Bible and guitar with them on their quest for freedom, their action is quite logical. With a Bible and a guitar African-Americans have religion and the blues, their most potent symbols of hope. By 1911, the Blues was just starting to become popular as a musical form. In its rhythms African-Americans recognized not only the echoes of slave work songs but also the hopes and fears of three hundred years of slavery, reaching back all the way to the music of Africa. In their darkest moments they found comfort in the Blues, the one steadfast thing in a restless world of flux and uncertainty. It was always there whenever they needed it. "Music don’t know no certain night," says Bynum, referring to Seefus’s bar where African-Americans congregate to make the music that unites them.
with a common bond and keeps them in touch with their deepest roots (220). The Blues permitted spiritual and emotional release by codifying its African-American listeners' experiences and was a testament to the fact that they were not a disparate bunch of wandering souls but descendants from and inheritors of a rich and fascinating tradition. The Blues set them apart, for it was alien to the sensibilities of white people, as illustrated by Jeremy's story about a white man's inability to tell the difference between Jeremy and two other blues musicians:

JEREMY: [T]old me there's a white fellow say he was gonna give a prize to the best guitar player he could find. . . . White fellow ain't knew no difference. . . . After we play awhile, the white fellow called us to him and said he couldn't make up his mind, say all three of us was the best guitar player and we'd have to split the prize between us. (219-20)

Ma in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom expresses similar sentiments about white insensibility to the Blues: "White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking" (Ma Rainey 82). What whites failed to realize was that the Blues filled the lives of African-Americans with purpose, and for that they would risk anything, even imprisonment: "Some things is worth taking the chance going to jail about" (Jeremy in Joe Turner 221).

Moreover, this period of African-American history finds special meaning in blues lyrics that tell of loneliness and the search for companionship. In the blues poem, "Bound No'th
Blues," Langston Hughes captures this emotion with great poignancy:

Road’s in front o’ me,
Nothin’ to do but walk.
road’s in front o’ me,
Walk. . . and walk . . . and walk.
I’d like to meet a good friend
To come along an’ talk. (Hill, et al 894)

As long as he has the blues, Jeremy, and other African-Americans like him, can set off down the road and go where it takes him, "I can get my guitar and always find me a place to stay" (261). Migration and the motives that prompted it are typified in the vagrant lifestyle of blues singers. Robert Palmer underscores this in an episode about two famous bluesmen, Robert Johnson and Johnny Shines:

They began traveling together, hitching rides, hopping freight trains, perpetually on the move from somewhere to somewhere else. “Robert was a guy, you could wake him up any time and he was ready to go,” Shines says. “Say, for instance, you has come from Memphis to Helena, and we’d play there all night probably and lay down to sleep the next morning and hear a train. You say, ‘Robert, I hear a train. Let’s catch it.’ He wouldn’t exchange no words with you. He’s just ready to go. We’d go right back to Memphis if that’s where the train going. It didn’t make him no difference. Just so he was going.” (118)

As the banter between Johnson and Shines demonstrates, the reasons for the migration north were simple enough; having been tied down for so long by slavery and sharecropping, African-Americans were anxious to be on the move, unable to put down roots just yet, desperate to fill a spiritual void created by three hundred years of captivity. Blues lyrics spoke of this desire to get away and reflected the separation behind the
migration: men and women looking for each other or leaving their homes and their loved ones. In these lyrics there was also a fascination with travel for its own sake that was rooted in the years of African-American captivity (Palmer 20). For decades, the urge to escape or even travel had been curbed, but now that free movement was comparatively easy, many African-Americans saw migration as the only way to maintain their sanity. The transition from their old social identities as slaves to their new identities as free people lay in the very act of wandering, which in itself was a step toward self-empowerment, a reaffirmation of their freedom to go where they pleased without permits or permission.

In *Joe Turner*, the apparent endlessness of each quest appears to be connected to the nature of the event that launched the search. In every case, it occurred under circumstances over which the searchers had no control, so now they do not know where the person they are searching for might possibly be. Loomis was snatched by Joe Turner’s men while in the middle of a roadside sermon; Mattie’s husband blamed her for the loss of their two babies and walked away; Jeremy’s girl left without a word: “Woke up one morning and she was gone. Just took off to parts unknown” (225). Because the estrangements occurred without any forewarning, the very suddenness of the acts has left these characters’ egos shattered, not in the superficial sense of their pride being hurt, but in the more profound sense
of a spiritual dislocation. An essential part of themselves is lost, and they will not be whole again until it is replaced.

Each quest, therefore, seems like a crusade in search of something more intangible and mystical than just another person. Rather they seem to be a journey that is as much inward as outward—a spiritual exploration of the psyches that finds expression in a physical exploration of the country. They are all, in one way or another, looking for themselves. The innumerable references to roads, traveling, feet, and shoes, as well as the constant coming and going of lodgers in and out of the boardinghouse, create the effect of a restless world of other people on the move as well. Against this backdrop, these characters appear as archetypes reflecting countless African-Americans in similar circumstances—a whole race of people somewhere out there on a pilgrimage toward self-fulfillment.

Bynum calls this quest the search for one’s 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” (268). Without this song people are doomed to wander through life aimlessly, unaware of whom they are or what their purpose may be. This song is the music of each person’s essential nature, his or her true identity. And that identity, with its special rhythms, dictates the course of each one’s destiny. Each song is unique, with a power that derives from the mix of each person’s characteristics. Bynum has the Binding Song; his father had the Healing Song. Both were healers; the father made
individuals whole, the son does the same for relationships. But, in order for a man to touch the lives of other men, he must first be in tune with his own song.

Bynum was shown the way to his song by the shiny man and the spirit of his father. Wilson describes him as giving “the impression of always being in control of everything. Nothing ever bothers him. He seems to be lost in a world of his own making and to swallow any adversity or interference with his grand design” (208). Having found his song, his life’s work now is to help others find their songs. He chose the Binding Song “because that’s what (he saw) most when (he) was traveling . . . people walking away and leaving one another” (213). He looked around at a fractured race of wandering people and knew he had to spend his life healing the wounds caused by shattered relationships, bringing together these people dispersed by chance and circumstance.

Bynum’s search for the shiny man, however, is different from the other quests. Having found his mission, his energies are spent in its service. All he needs now is another shiny man to place the seal of approval on his work, to corroborate his belief that his true identity is indeed that of a mender of broken relationships. But, even he has had his share of wandering: “I wore many a pair of shoes out walking around that way. You’d have thought I was a missionary spreading the gospel the way I wandered all around them parts” (240).
Bynum is a rootworker, a conjurer with a special connection to nature. His strength derives from a tradition that stretches directly back through slavery to his African roots: “Ex-slaves often identified the conjurers as having been African-born. . . . The blacks believed that only blacks . . . had the secret power and that it was somehow a gift of their African heritage” (Genovese 218). He is a highly evolved descendant of the medicine man of African tribes and the conjurer of slave plantations. Many of his predecessors sought power by instilling fear in their charges, but Bynum’s demeanor is one of compassion, love, and sensitivity. In Roll, Jordan, Roll, Eugene D. Genovese describes this evolution of conjurers from an instrument of evil to an instrument of good:

Conjurers might be evildoers; they might be people who, like the witches of the European persecutions, had been wronged themselves and sought revenge on mankind. In either case, fear had to be their weapon, for even a good deed for one person normally had to come at the expense of someone else. Down to our own time, hoodoo doctors, not being fools, have studied their people and learned how to provide them with advice designed to produce results an expensive psychoanalyst might envy. They have put this talent to particular use in their work as “root doctors” and have thereby performed the closest thing to an unambiguously positive service. (223-24)

Bynum owes his mythological ancestry to the Ifa tradition—whose presiding deity is Orunmila—in Yoruban cosmology. His sharply tuned intuition appears to endow him with the gift of divination, particularly when it comes to sensing which relationships need consolidation. His is the oracular voice from which the other characters seek affirmation and solutions,
the steadying influence in this world of upheaval. Clara 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 ranging from the choice of a chief or a king from among prospective candidates, to the choice of a husband or a site for a building, or the request for the gift of a child" (202). There is a significant difference between Eshu and Ifa, 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 consolidates it (201).

Herald Loomis, as it will be shown later in this chapter, is a mythological descendant of Eshu (as are Levee in Ma Rainey and Troy in Fences as will be demonstrated in those respective chapters). It is natural that he and Bynum finally achieve individual authentication only by working together. Joe Turner, therefore, is peopled with manifestations of both systems—Eshu and Ifa—each bringing its own special characters to the negotiation table as they reach for individual affirmation and collective harmonization. The Herald Loomises are as important and necessary as the Bynums, for in their interaction they validate not only themselves but each other.
Bynum brings an intense commitment to his work, taking time and effort to study the particulars of each case. In the best tradition of a true missionary, he becomes deeply involved with the person he is trying to help: “Oh, I don’t do it lightly. It cost me a piece of myself every time I do. I’m a Binder of What Clings. You got to find out if they cling first. You can’t bind what don’t cling” (213). He does not see himself as a creator of relationships but as a catalyst helping to join only those people who were meant to be together. He is, thus, an agent of fate in the service of the cosmic forces that bind and loose people. He tells Mattie that he can put a spell on 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” (223).

In this dismembered world of former slaves only the 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. Such a voyage can be undertaken only by people truly committed to each other, companions compatible enough to foster, not inhibit, the surge toward fulfillment. The bad blood between Mattie and Jack over the loss of their babies has

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severed forever his destiny from hers, and his path now leads him to someone else.

Much like Rose in Wilson’s *Fences*, Mattie is completely obsessed with her man. Her description of Jack and their relationship (“Seem like he’s the strongest man in the world the way he hold me” (224)) echoes Rose’s description of her relationship with Troy. Mattie’s vulnerability is augmented by her guilt over the loss of the infants because Jack told her that someone had placed a curse on her. In an effort to erase that terrible memory she could easily become a slave to her husband. If this were to happen, she would then have no room for her own individuality and identity. Mattie is a desperate woman, and desperate women either get swallowed up by the relationship or, as Jeremy declares, inadvertently push their men away.

Bynum intuitively knows that Mattie’s relationship with Jack is potentially destructive and that her only hope is to break free. This severance is her first step toward self-fulfillment. Mattie must make room in her life for herself. Somehow, she needs to disengage herself from Jack Carper, just as he has detached himself from her. Bynum offers the following advice: “[A]in’t no need you fretting over Jack Carper. Right now he’s a strong thought in your mind. But every time you catch yourself fretting over Jack Carper you push that thought away. You push it out your mind and that thought will get weaker and weaker till you wake up one morning and you won’t
even be able to call him up on your mind” (225). Bynum knows this will be difficult for Maggie to accomplish on her own, so he offers her an African charm to help push Jack Carper from her mind and offers her hope, “Jack Carper gone off to where he belong. There’s somebody searching for your doorstep right now” (225).

It seems almost inevitable that Jeremy would step in to woo Mattie. Since his girl has left him, he has been in search of love and companionship from town to town, aware that in this uncertain world very little is guaranteed or permanent. With not much more than his guitar, he feels the need to keep on the move, going where the road leads him. But Mattie is weary of being on the move for so long. Like her counterparts Dussie Mae (in Ma Rainey) and Rose, she 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. With Bynum’s advice in her ears and his charm in her pocket, she is willing to take yet another chance on love, even though Jeremy is not exactly her kindred spirit. Her interest piques when she learns that he is a guitar player—the blues may be just what her bruised spirit needs, and if this man can bring the blues to her she will put out the welcome mat once more.

If Mattie is a prototype of those Wilson women in search of a permanent relationship, Jeremy is the youthful personification of the men they seem fated to meet—men like Levee and Troy—
descendants of the procreative trickster, who seek sexual gratification as their prerogative. As soon as Mattie agrees to see Jeremy, he makes his real intentions known in metaphors reminiscent of Levee’s sexual boasts: “I plays [the guitar], sugar, and that ain’t all I do. I got a ten-pound hammer and I knows how to drive it down. Good god . . . you ought to hear my hammer ring!” (227). Bynum tries to explain to Jeremy that a woman is not a sex object (“You just can’t look at a woman to jump off into bed with her” [244]) but a true companion made in the image of his mother. He says that a woman is like land to a man stranded on the great waterways of life: she can be all he will ever need if he learns to set his rhythms in harmony with hers (245). Bynum seems to be suggesting that men will never find their true identity, their song, unless they can make room in their world for women to find theirs, for the destinies of men and women are inextricably linked, as surely as sons are shaped and influenced by their mothers.

But there is no connection between Jeremy and Mattie, for they are not traveling in the same spiritual direction. They are essentially different, with different sensibilities and different goals. She wants to settle down, but he has to travel. Bynum immediately senses this incompatibility. He knows they are not meant to be together. When Jeremy announces that Mattie is going to move in with him, Bynum’s cryptic remark suggests that he thinks she is making a mistake: “Sometimes you can get all mixed up in life and come to the wrong place” (244).
Bynum's words prove prophetic, for as soon as Molly Cunningham arrives at the boardinghouse, Jeremy takes to her and jilts Mattie. Molly is the kind of woman Bynum was talking about. The antithesis of Mattie Campbell's reticence, Molly's independent spirit revolts against all the things Mattie holds dear. She, too, is the product of a broken relationship, but her experience has hardened her against trusting "[anybody] but the good Lord above, and [loving anybody] but mama" (260). Having seen her mother enslaved by babies and household chores, she is determined to avoid the familial trap—marriage is potential slavery and motherhood would cramp her style.

Molly's search for self-authentication has brought her to a point as far from her childhood roots as possible. Available for a relationship only on her terms, she tells Jeremy that she will not work, cannot be bought, and will not go south. He finds this roving spirit attractive, seeing in her self-assertiveness the promise of seasoned adventure. She is a free soul, quite able to take care of herself, certainly not one of the desperate women he sought to avoid. Maybe she can be the companion an itinerant bluesman, such as himself, needs. Both are looking for companionship but neither wants to be tied to one place. So they unite and join the multitude of African-Americans who wander along the roads and byways from town to town, "their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing . . . seeking . . . a new identity as free men [and women] of definite and sincere worth" (203).
If Mattie and Molly are searching for meaningful relationships, albeit on different paths, Bertha seems to have found what she wants out of life. Her key to happiness is a trouble-free mind, and she offers this advice to Mattie when Jeremy abandons her:

Don’t know man want a woman with a troubled mind. You get all that trouble off your mind and just when it look like you ain’t never gonna find what you want . . . you look up and it’s standing right there. That’s how I met my Seth. You gonna look up one day and find everything you want standing right in front of you. Been twenty-seven years now since that happened to me. (272)

Bertha presides over the play like a mother figure, cooking and cleaning, advising someone here, admonishing another there, acting as a conduit to diffuse Seth’s anger at Loomis, consoling Mattie when Jeremy leaves her, taking Zonia under her wing, directing Loomis to another boardinghouse. It is significant that most of the action takes place in her kitchen, a environment in which she is most at home. This underscores the importance of her nurturing presence, which acts as a calming influence on the often frantic scurrying about that occurs there.

Bertha’s strength derives from a blend of two religious traditions perfectly synthesized in her abundant spirit, African cosmology and Christianity. On the same morning she can go to church like a good Christian and then return home to sprinkle salt all over the house as a protection against evil spirits or line her threshold with pennies to keep witches at bay. When the aura of sadness that envelops Loomis seems as if it is
enveloping her home, she “moves about the kitchen as though blessing it... [with] a dance and demonstration of her own magic” (283). Having embraced Christianity, she still remains “connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood’s memory” to the rhythms of a “remedy that is centuries old” (283) and a culture whose pulse continues to beat in her. It is from these ancient rhythms that she fashions an elixir for all sadness—laughter, the kind that ripples forth like a benediction from the past: “You hear me Mattie? I’m talking about laughing. The kind that comes from way deep inside. To just stand and laugh and let life flow through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you’re alive” (283).

The sage advice that Bertha offers to Mattie about the cathartic power of laughter is in by no means the fruit of her personal experience. Rather it is the harvest of a collective experience, as laughter has been the cornerstone of African American survival and existence since the days of slavery.

Much like the Blues and the spirituals, humor has played an affirming role in the lives of African-Americans, but unlike its musical counterparts which became a part of the culture once enslaved Africans arrived on America’s shores, humor was brought with them. Africans brought with them a tradition that was rich in humor (Lowe 4), the most important aspect of this tradition being the trickster tales (which are discussed in detail in the Ma Rainey chapter).
It was through their humor that slaves were able to endure the harshness of slavery. Humor helped them to bear slavery's backbreaking work and its lash, "it was sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest and the lot most cruel" (Hurston 542). It was from humor that slaves drew the strength to endure the atrocities of slavery. It provided for them a protective shell that kept their inner spirits in tact.

Too, humor played a spiritual role in the lives of slaves. Humor allowed slaves to transcend the dehumanizing effects of slavery. It helped them to reject feelings of depravity and unworthiness for "they new that something better was coming" (Hurston 543). That something better may have been on the other side of the River Jordan, but they took consolation in knowing that something better was in store for them. Along those same lines, humor offered slaves the idea of ultimate justice. They took comfort in knowing that like Brer Rabbit who always prevailed over Sly Brer Fox, Brer Bear and Brer Wolf they, too, would one day triumph over their oppressor.

In its spiritual aspect humor can be said to be a form of Afro-Christianity. And this Afro-Christianity, for Bertha with its blend of ritual and prayer, has shaped African-Americans' deepest sensibilities and shaped their identity as African descendants living in America. Eugene D. Genovese discusses this blending of religious and national identities as an integral part of the African-American's evolution from slave to free citizen:
The folk dynamic in the historical development of Afro-American Christianity saved the slaves from the disaster that some historians erroneously think they suffered—being suspended between a lost African culture and a forbidden European one. It enabled them to retain enough of Africa to help them create an appropriate form for the new content they were forging and to contribute to the mainstream of American national culture while shaping an autonomous identity. Their religion simultaneously helped build an “American” Christianity both directly and as a counterpoint and laid the foundation for a “black” Christianity of their own. That is, it made possible a universal statement because it made possible a national statement. But, for blacks, the national statement expressed a duality as something both black and American, not in the mechanical sense of being an ethnic component in a pluralistic society, but in the dialectical sense of simultaneously being itself and the other, both separately and together, and of developing as a religion within a religion in a nation within a nation. (280-81)

What Genovese describes is very similar to W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double consciousness. In being excluded from mainstream American institutions, African-Americans created a life that was both American and un-American. Doing so aided them in developing an African-American self. Thus, Bertha’s blending of Christianity and African cosmology is simply an expression of who she is, an American of African descent.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is replete with religious and folk images of Christianity and an African cosmology. At some points the two cultures coexist peacefully and harmoniously, as in the case of Bertha or in the image of African-Americans migrating from the South with their Bibles and guitars, emblems of Christianity and the African-influenced Blues. On one level, Bynum is an embodiment of African culture and ritual, yet his encounter with the shiny man bears powerful traces of
Christianity. He compares his wandering to that of a missionary spreading the gospels, and his reference to the shiny man as The One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way could also be an allusion to John the Baptist, who went before Christ and showed the way: “As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee” (Mark 1:2). Bynum even calls his shiny man John, “’cause it was up around Johnstown where I seen him,” (211) and the cleansing ritual conducted by the shiny man is a baptism of blood: “We get near this bend in the road and he told me to hold out my hands. Then he rubbed them together with his and I looked down and see they got blood on them. Told me to take and rub it all over me . . . say that was a way of cleaning myself” (212).

Although John the Baptist used water and promised his converts that Christ would baptize them “with the Holy Ghost and with fire” (Matt. 3:11), the true baptism that cleansed the sin of Adam and opened the gates of heaven was the baptism of the blood of Christ the Lamb. “And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14).

But the two cultures—African and Christian—are not always in harmony. Herald Loomis’s arrival introduces an element of tension that later deepens into physical and spiritual conflicts. Like his cultural ancestor Eshu, he lopes along the highway in a restless quest for self-validation. The stage
description accompanying his entry bears an ominous note: "He is at times possessed. A man driven not by the hellhounds that seemingly bay at his heels, but 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" (216).

It is inevitable that such a powerful agent of change would fall foul of Seth, who sees in Loomis a threat to his ordered world. Although Seth's petulant nature makes him ill tempered with everyone, for the most part it is mere irritation, as when he gets upset with Bynum's "heebie-jeebie stuff." With Herald Loomis, it is a different matter. Having returned from the depths of hell, alienated from himself and humanity, his agonized spirit raw as a gaping wound, Loomis has an elemental aura that sets him apart, a deep sorrow that clings to him like his great coat, casting its gloom over the boardinghouse, which soon begins to quiver under his tormented gaze. A former deacon, he knows that the wife he seeks is to be found in a church, so that is where he goes. But he cannot bring himself to enter it. When Seth hears that Loomis has been standing outside the church, he assumes that he means to rob it.

But Loomis does not want to rob the church. If anything, the church has robbed him, for he was on church business when Joe Turner snatched him into slavery, forcing him to leave behind a wife who then "married" the Holy Ghost and changed her name to Martha Pentecost. Faint remembrances from his cultural
heritage have seeped through his racial consciousness into his soul, to be confronted there with the residues of his Christian beliefs. The result is spiritual disharmony. He prowls round the church because his spirit is set to do battle with it. When the juba dance, with its African rhythms and ring shouts, builds into a frenzy and the performers yell out the name of the Holy Ghost, Loomis flies into a rage, spewing a diatribe against the Holy Ghost.

According to Sterling Stuckey in *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, the ring shouts and juba dance were important features of African ancestral ceremonies: "They gathered on the principal occasions of worship, above all at ancestral ceremonies, the most important of which in North America was the ring shout, which often was but one aspect, however important, of multifaceted African religious observance" (16). How the ring shouts led to spirit possession is described by Marshall Stearns:

> The dancers form a circle in the center of the floor, one in back of another. Then they begin to shuffle in a counterclockwise direction around and around, arms out and shoulders hunched. A fantastic rhythm is built up by the rest of the group standing back to the walls, who clap their hands and stomp on the floor. Suddenly sisters and brothers scream and spin, possessed by religious hysteria, like corn starting to pop over a hot fire. This is actually a West African circle dance, a complicated and sacred ritual. (12-13)

In participating in the juba, Loomis takes the first step towards reclaiming his song. For in doing so, he begins to identify with and accept his past.
After he was snatched into slavery, Loomis began to experience the suffering of his forefathers who were stolen from their tribes. But while their captivity gave them a new religion in Christianity, his incarceration slowly stripped him of the vestiges of his adopted faith. Forced by his ordeal to confront a part of his African self, he discovers that self-empowerment can occur only with the full realization of his African identity. Standing in his way is the subverting power of his Christian self symbolized in the Holy Ghost, all the more abhorrent to him because his wife has left him for the Evangelist church. The battle for his soul accelerates in the mystical climate created by the juba, and his spirit explodes at the mention of the Holy Ghost. He is hurled one way, then the other, as the subliminal struggle toward his new identity surfaces and climaxes in a Pentecostal trance. As the Holy Ghost seizes hold of him, forcing him to talk in tongues, it is dispelled by a more powerful, apocalyptic experience that emerges from the depths of his subconscious past—the vision of the bones people. They rise from their watery graves, march on the ocean’s surface, sink down again, and, when they are finally washed ashore, Loomis sees that they are covered with flesh and that they are African-Americans like him. Then they separate from one another and take different paths, embarking on a new stage in a long journey. These bones symbolize African slaves, Loomis’s ancestors who perished in the holds of slaveships and whose bodies were tossed into the Atlantic Ocean; dead Africans
who never made it physically across the water but are an integral part of the whole African-American experience. Unwilling pioneers in a massive racial struggle for survival, they were the first victims of a terrible odyssey. For two centuries their memory was part of an important link between the old African tradition and an emerging African-American identity.

Before continuing this discussion of Loomis’s vision and its significance, it is important to point out that Loomis’s vision is very similar to Beloved’s stream of consciousness sequence in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. As a matter of fact, the two are so similar that, as one critic has noted, *Joe Turner* is almost a companion piece to *Beloved.* Like Loomis, Beloved describes seeing people in water. However, whereas, the people Loomis sees are alive, the people Beloved sees are dead, for she describes them as floating rather than walking (Morrison 210-211). As well, Beloved could be one of the people Loomis describes, for she describes herself as coming out of water: “I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up” (Morrison 213). Further credence is lent to this premise when Beloved’s description of her experience within the bowels of a slave ship is taken into consideration:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat ... small rats do not wait for us to sleep someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in ... we are all trying to leave our bodies behind ... in the beginning we could vomit now we do not now we cannot ... someone is trembling I can feel it over here he is fighting hard to leave his body which is a small bird trembling there is not room to tremble so he is not able to die. (Morrison 210-211)
Beloved is able to describe in great detail the horrid and crowded conditions of the ship. However, not only is Beloved’s experience particular to herself, but it is the shared experience of the “sixty million or more” who died during the Middle Passage en route to the Americas. Beloved, then, is the embodiment of the collective suffering of those captured Africans, and Loomis, five or so decades after the last Middle Passage voyage is the medium through which Beloved and others like herself choose to share their story.

It is no accident that Loomis is the slaves’ chosen medium. For, in order to understand his true identity and his destiny, he must relive the whole experience of his race. Having already endured an enslavement similar to that of his African ancestors, he now returns to the moment when they first arrived at America’s shores, for his spirit must make the journey from the beginning. As the dead rise from the ocean, join the survivors on the shore, and a whole race of forgotten people make their way across the new land, Loomis knows he must reconnect with his African forebears, for they are survivors and they alone can free his African spirit. The path to spiritual and physical liberty lies in establishing a bond with the past, and, once his spirit merges with the spirits of his African ancestors, the momentum of that union will sweep him to freedom. But, try as he may, he cannot rise to join his ancestors. The door to salvation lies open, but he does not yet have the strength to
walk through, to be united with the past, and to find his true place in this land.

As Loomis, overcome by the apparition, lies on the floor as exhausted as the bodies of his ancestors on the seashore, Bynum helps him articulate the vision, for he had a similar revelation when he met the spirit of his father. Like a preacher and his congregation elucidating a passage of Scripture, the two of them explore the “text” of the vision. Their sing-song call and response as they complete each other’s thoughts, repeating words and phrases, recalls the rhythmic structure of black church ceremonies and the basic pattern of the blues, which, in turn, is reminiscent of African music. Thus, this journey of revelation through a racial consciousness bears the unmistakable mark of an African-American spirituality.

Although Loomis’s African identity makes strong claims on him, the Holy Ghost still holds him in servitude by keeping his wife from him. Trapped in the obscurity between these two traditions, he is unable to determine which of them will enslave him and which will set him free. The answer to that will come the moment he discovers his precise identity, for, as Bynum says, he is still a man “who done forgot his song.” (267). Like the caged bird that does not sing, an enslaved man loses contact with his identity, which must be rediscovered when freedom is restored. Loomis must purge his tormented spirit of the brutal effects of slavery. Joe Turner owned him for seven years, crushed his spirit, and tried to possess him, just as slave
owners of the past had tried to turn their captives into chattel. Loomis is one of the lucky ones; he was released before he lost complete hold on his identity, before Joe Turner captured it for good. But he has forgotten what it was like to be free, and his perception of his real self is buried deep in his subconscious, trapped under the debris of a tortured spirit. Indeed, the old Christian Loomis is lost forever and is being replaced by the emergence of a more ancient African Loomis. But he needs to dredge the depths of his soul to release this identity. He must learn to sing his true song. Alienated from himself, he has to do what Bynum did: recognize and restructure all the fragments and characteristics from his life and racial memory that have molded him into a unique human being:

BYNUM: It was my song. It had come from deep inside me. I looked back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. . . . It got so I used up all of myself in the making of that song. (268)

Finding his song means starting a new life of freedom. Loomis must examine all the forces that shaped and set him on the path that led to a chain gang. While this involves establishing a bond with the distant past of his ancestors, it also means seeking reconciliation with the immediate past in the person of his wife. He thinks she will provide a beginning, that she will rescue him from the strange world he has been traversing and help him forge a new world to fit his needs, a world with enough room for him and his song. All he needs, he thinks, is a starting point. But Mattie knows there is none--or

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rather, every point is a potential starting place. There are no ready-made niches waiting for African-Americans; they have to carve their own with the materials at hand.

In many ways, Mattie and Loomis are kindred spirits embarked on similar pilgrimages. 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” (272). In other words, not a man like Jeremy who needs 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 can fill the empty spaces in his life. As each of them moves toward a new identity, 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.

The tension at the boardinghouse grows to a feverish pitch as the religious battle within Loomis assumes cosmic proportions. Reflecting this combat, the very forces of nature appear to be in turmoil, concentrated on this household. Even the two children, Zonia and Reuben, sense the sharpening tone as Bynum’s chanting in the yard sounds like a conversation with the wind that grows louder and more fierce. Reuben claims that the ghost of Seth’s mother appeared to him to chide him for not releasing his pigeons as he had promised his dead friend Eugene.

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This flurry of nighttime activity foreshadows the events of the final scene when Loomis finally confronts his wife, Martha. Almost as soon as they meet, it is obvious that their lives have taken divergent routes. After waiting years for her husband to return, Martha 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. Loomis realizes that their lives are different now, that there is no compelling bond between them anymore. In that moment he understands why he was searching for her—not to be reunited, but to say goodbye to her and close the book on his earlier life:

I been waiting to look on your face to say my goodbye. That goodbye got so big at times, it seem like it was gonna swallow me up. Like Jonah in the whale’s belly I sat in that goodbye for three years. That goodbye kept me out on the road searching. Not looking on women in their houses. It kept me bound up to the road. All the time that goodbye swelling up in my chest till I’m about to bust. Now that I can see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world. (285-86)

The goodbye is also a reconciliation. After ten years they know their separation was not of their own making; they were victims of circumstance. This reunion thus becomes the moment of a new parting that will lead to full self-affirmation. For Martha, it is the culmination of her search—she makes peace with her husband and is reunited with her daughter. Aware that Loomis and Martha were headed in different spiritual directions, Bynum bound Zonia to her mother, forcing Loomis to continue searching for his wife.
Once he has returned Zonia to Martha and said goodbye to his her, Loomis enters the final stage of his quest—self-empowerment in the full realization of his true cultural identity. All his life he has been restrained from pursuing his own destiny: “Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up! Reverend Toliver wanna bind me up. You wanna bind me up. Well Joe Turner’s come and gone and Herald Loomis ain’t for no binding. I ain’t gonna let nobody bind me up!” (286). Now he is ready to break free of the psychological and spiritual bonds that hold him. Martha exhorts him to be faithful to the Christian faith, to embrace Christianity once again: “Even if you done fell away from the church you can be saved again” (287). But, in Loomis’s mind, it is the church, not he that has sinned. Christianity is at the root of many of his problems and the problems of his people. White Christian men sold Africans into slavery and the white god, Jesus Christ, in whose name and under whose protective banner plantation owners exploited their cotton-picking slaves, blessed his white disciples for their efforts:

And all I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their woolly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them, grinning. . . . He grin that big old grin . . . and niggers wallowing at his feet. . . . Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting. He tallying up the cotton. “Well, Jeremiah . . . what’s the matter, you ain’t picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations.” And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is “cause he give him salvation after he die.”
To this point, just like his ancestors, Loomis had been incapable of separating Christian belief from belief in the superiority of the white man. But, as Loomis moves toward full reclamation of his song, he realizes that this philosophy of accepting this world as “just a trial for the next” equates to giving away control over one’s destiny.

Christianity engendered in slaves a passive resignation toward their fate. When the promise of salvation in the next world was offered as the remedy to all their problems in this one, it created in them an inclination for suffering, enabling the white man to continue his subjugation of them. In his book *Foundations of Christianity*, Karl Kautsky argues that ancient slaves obeyed their masters out of fear, while Christianity raised the spineless obedience of slaves to a moral duty incumbent even upon free men (355-56).

Like Levee in *Ma Rainey*, Loomis directs his anger against a Christianity that stood by while black men and women were brutalized, the Christianity in whose service he was laboring when Joe Turner kidnapped him. Many atrocities during slavery were committed in the name of Christianity by owners who believed that their Christian upbringing endowed them with the moral authority to enslave African “savages.” Hence, Loomis’s image of Jesus Christ as an overseer. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Genovese discusses Nietzsche’s description of this aspect of Christianity as a weapon of subjugation:
The notion of Christianity as a religion of slaves rose long before Nietzsche’s polemics, which nonetheless must be credited with imparting to it special force and clarity. “The Christian faith, from the beginning,” Nietzsche insists, “is sacrifice: the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit; it is at the same time subjection, self-derision, and self-mutilation.” This cruel religion of painful subjection, he continues, softened the slaves by drawing hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt (162-63).

Much like his ancestors, when Loomis appeared at the boardinghouse, his passive acceptance of slavery’s injustices had crippled his will to fight for change, which is why even though he had been released, he remained bound by Joe Turner. Loomis now knows that Christianity has never brought him relief from suffering, that the pledge of salvation is no balm for the pain: “I been wading in the water. I been walking all over the River Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I’m choking on my own blood and all you go to give me is salvation?” (288). He needs the freedom of this life, not the rewards of the next. That freedom can come only from a realization that he truly belongs to himself—not to Joe Turner, not to Jesus Christ, but to Herald Loomis, former African slave and revitalized African-American.

The Christian tradition finds its salvation in the suffering scapegoat figure of Christ the sacrificial lamb. But, Loomis does not need such a figure, for he has done his own suffering: “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed
for myself" (288). The realization that the shedding of his own blood is both baptism and resurrection sweeps over him with a transcendent force that finally sets his spirit free. As he slashes himself across the chest and rubs his cleansing blood over his face, the conflict within him reaches its peak and the African emerges free. Paul Carter Harrison's suggestion that this blood-letting 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" (313), locates this ritual firmly within the African cosmology. Sterling Stuckey's parallel between the black Christian preacher and the African priest suggests Loomis's spiritual ancestry long before Joe Turner captured him: "One errs in assuming that the slave preacher was primarily Christian and did not play a variety of religious roles, especially that of African priest. . . . The preacher's priestly or African function . . . was guarded from whites. . . . Therefore, if the African religious leader was to operate in the open, the safest cloak to hide behind was that of Christianity" (38). This moment of realization is therefore not an isolated event but the culmination of a subliminal process that gathered force from all the experiences of Loomis's past. It is at once a divestiture of his Christian identity and a full embrace of his true identity as an African, free in the land that was once his dungeon. Now he can stand up straight, for his knees are no longer bent in servitude. He has found his song, banished the hellhounds chasing him, and can join the
spirits of his ancestors as they march to freedom. Having witnessed his self-empowering ritual, Mattie now knows they can make room in their lives for each other, and she runs after him as he walks away.

Bynum recognizes the 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!" (289). Wilson's choice of money imagery here is interesting, for it signifies that Loomis is indeed a new person. Like a coin, he is now newly minted or undamaged. No longer is he the damaged man who arrived at the boardinghouse, with a spirit "weighed and pushed . . . into terrifying contractions" (289). His reconciliation with his past has left him unblemished. He now he has a present and future that is "free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh" (288-289). In essence, now that Loomis no longer carries the scars of his past, he is flawless.

Too, Bynum's pronouncement that Loomis is his shiny man brings more significance to Loomis's name, Herald, for Herald suits the title of the shiny man—One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. But, it is important to note that Loomis is no forerunner of Christianity like John the Baptist. Instead, he ushers in a new tradition. His experiences demonstrate that the path to the true destinies of African-Americans begins in their
African roots: only when they embrace their African identities completely will they really be free. This journey is extremely painful, involving, on some level, reliving the agonies of the past, for the road to Africa must pass through the plantations of slavery.

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Wilson makes the point that slavery is an unalterable fact of African-American history, forever etched in the consciousness of African-Americans. Ignoring it will cause one to become disconnected. Only by facing the slave past with fortitude and by celebrating their release, will African-Americans achieve its purgation and become self empowered. And, this comes by reconnecting themselves with their past through music and rituals. That done, they can face freedom as survivors and claim that slavery, like Joe Turner, has come and gone.
Chapter Four

I Want To Learn That Dance: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

The year was 1927, and it was a great time for African-Americans. African-Americans left the south in record numbers and found better work opportunities in the northern factories in cities like Chicago, Detroit and New York. The artistic and socio-cultural awakening that became known as the Harlem Renaissance was at full peak.\(^1\) Two new civil rights organizations, the NAACP and National Urban League, that would later figure prominently in African-American society, had been founded.\(^2\) The music of African-Americans was in vogue. The Cotton and Savoy Clubs in Harlem were hot, and African-American musicians were gaining widespread popularity because of increased exposure at such clubs. Music greats such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Louis Armstrong all began their phenomenal careers during this year. Even though 1927 saw African-American music "skyrocket," it was also a changing time for the music. African-Americans were starting to move away from the twelve-bar call and response of the blues to the new "sound" of jazz swing and big band. It is during this changing time that Wilson sets Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

Ma Rainey is set in Chicago in 1927 during a recording session by blues singer Ma Rainey and the four musicians who accompany her. The significance of the date echoes strongly throughout the play, for much of the action flows from a
conflict between proponents of the old and new forms of African-American music: blues and jazz.

Wilson makes this division apparent early in the play through the characters’ stage directions. He draws a sharp distinction between the three older musicians, Cutler, Toledo and Slow Drag, and the younger musician, Levee: Cutler, the trombonist and guitar player, is the “most sensible,” with a playing style that is “solid and almost totally unembellished (13); Toledo, the pianist, “recognizes that his instrument’s limitations are an extension of himself” and “his insights are thought-provoking” (14); and Slow Drag, the bassist, is “deceptively intelligent, though, as his name implies, he appears to be slow” (13-14). Levee is more flamboyant and “somewhat of a buffoon,” with a “rakish and bright” temper and strident voice. Their personalities also reflect their attitudes toward music: the older musicians favor the more plaintive, deeply emotional sounds of the blues; Levee is attracted to the flashier rhythms of swing.

As the play progresses and the audience learns more about the characters’ past experiences through their stories, Wilson allows the audience to explore the individual psychologies of the characters and shows their efforts to survive the injustices, social and economic, that beset African-Americans during the 1920’s. Since music is an integral part of the lives and racial identity of these characters, much of the conflict centers on their music.
From the opening scene of the play, Levee is the isolated figure, set apart from the other musicians by his youth and arrogance. Like the sound of his trumpet, his brashness rises stridently above the muted personalities of his older colleagues, the impatient notes and words clashing discordantly against the unembellished rhythms of the others. Determined to start his own band, his ambition is fueled by Sturdyvant, the white producer who promised a recording contract for his songs, songs written in Levee’s version of the emerging swing style. “Something wild . . . with a lot of rhythm,” as Sturdyvant puts it. Levee has no patience with the old style, dismissing it as rudimentary, and he is unwilling to rehearse their accompaniment of Ma’s Blues. This dissension between him and the others, later including Ma Rainey, is the basis for much of the dramatic conflict of the play. Bolstered by his ability to write music and brashly confident in his talent, he belittles the music they have gathered to play: “I knows how to play real music . . . not this old jug-band shit. I got style.” To this Toledo replies, “Everybody got style. Style ain’t nothing but keeping the same idea from beginning to end. Everybody got it” (19).

To Toledo, style is indistinguishable from content; it is manifested in the artist’s fidelity to the main musical idea or theme, whatever his improvisations. To Levee, though, style is synonymous with attitude. To play well, he must look good. The connection between his shiny Florsheims and his music is a symbolic link that acquires an explosive dimension at the end of
the play, when Sturdyvant’s rejection of his songs is immediately followed by Toledo stepping on his shoes—the final straw that snaps Levee’s control, precipitating the murder.

But there is a mythical dimension to Levee’s behavior. Paul Carter Harrison’s suggestion that Levee owes his pedigree to the Yoruba trickster deity Eshu (309) lifts the character from the purely social sphere of the itinerant blues musician and locates him and his behavior in a cultural realm integral to the development of the African-American ethos. Divine tricksters abound in the mythological traditions of most cultures, whether it be the Hindu Krishna teasing the gopis (milkmaids), the phallic Greek god Hermes and his thieving son, Autolycus, or such mischievous African mythic figures as the Dahomean Legba or the Yoruban Eshu. In their seeming lawlessness, they represent the rebellious energy that violates norms and strictures, the roaming spirit of creativity and procreativity that dances to its own rhythms in a cocky and arrogant celebration of individual will. In her essay “Femininity in Yoruba Art,” Clara Odugbesan discusses this aspect and writes that Eshu is “associated with disorderliness and confusion. . . . he is the equivalent of the ‘tempter’ rather than the ‘devil’ in Christian ideas” (201).

From this destructiveness arises true creativity, the brazen boldness that will not be contained within neat parameters of accepted behavior but bursts forth in a wild explosion as ancient and enduring as a Dionysian revel or a
Mardi Gras pageant. It is the spirit that roves the outskirts of society, the artistic genius in quest of self-authentication, seeking ways to reshape its destiny. In African-American folklore, this energy found expression in the animal trickster tales of the slaves. The trickster occupied a central position in their consciousness, for his pranks represented the victory of the weak over the strong. This depiction of the victorious weak, however, existed only at the most elemental level. Mere survival was not all the trickster wanted. He had his eyes set on most of the goals that human beings seek—wealth, power, and sexual gratification. But as Lawrence Levine writes in Black Culture and Black Consciousness, the trickster’s exploits were not always romanticized,

the universe held promise and hope, but it was also dominated by malevolence, injustice, arbitrary judgment, and paradox which had to be dealt with here and now. . . . At no point did slaves allow romanticism to dilute their vision of the world. The trickster was often celebrated, to be sure, since in his victories slaves could experience vicarious joy. But he was portrayed in hard and realistic terms. (134)

In the persona of the trickster, slaves found a continuing way to reappraise their situation, to renegotiate their fluctuating relationship with their world and their masters. One of the most enduring trickster figures in which slaves sought solace is High John the Conqueror. In her essay “High John de Conquer,” Zora Neale Hurston describes High John’s essence and how the slaves used it as a form of affirmation, “first off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find
something worthy of laughter and song. . . . It was an inside thing to live by. It was sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest and the lot the cruelest. It helped the slaves endure” (542).

It is in this persona that Levee finds freedom, “like a pesky boll weevil with an undiscriminating appetite, [to set] his sights on a feast in the midst of moral and spiritual famine” (P. Harrison 308). Unfortunately, his incontinent spirit is allowed no room to overflow. Trapped by social hatred and discrimination, and out of step with the times, he 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.

Levee’s disparaging attitude toward the blues 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). Any doctrines that demand fidelity are antithetical to the very nature of the self-empowered trickster, who finds such coercive stipulation discordant with the inner rhythms urging him along an unrestricted individual path. This arrogance, motivated by the instinct for survival, can sometimes blind the trickster to the deeper truths in the values he debunks. Levee fails to see that swing is not a denial of but a natural evolution from the older music. Each new form is built upon older forms in such a manner
that the earlier forms are often recognizable. This is particularly true of the Blues, which, because of its distinct structure, is transparent in most forms that use it; and every new mode of jazz, including swing, incorporated the Blues (Southern 383). But Levee’s musicianship is not yet mature enough to perceive the understructure of the Blues in this new musical form that has caught his fancy.

So that his musicianship can mature, Levee should seek and follow the example of his jazz forebears. Most of the great jazz artists viewed themselves as torchbearers rather than inventors. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Charlie Parker, and others were great innovators who were acutely aware of carrying on a tradition. They saw themselves as part of a tradition in which older performers were looked upon as gurus from which the younger aspirants could learn and then forge their own artistic destinies.

This tradition of “passing on” has as much to do with the nature of African-American life as with the character of music. This tradition takes its legacy from its African roots when the history and myths of a tribe were kept alive by griots (Southern 9-10). In America this tradition of orature continued in the form of storytelling. Storytelling, in the form of the slave tale, reflected the same cultural metaphors attested to and preserved by slave songs—a wish for freedom. But, they were not just “clever tales of wish-fulfillment through which the slaves could escape the imperatives of their world . . . [But were
also] painfully realistic stories which taught the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment” (Levine 115). Essentially an artistic distillation of a cultural memory, the tales afforded the slaves an opportunity to witness and comprehend their present affliction (Levine 118). Like the Blues, the tales were affirmation, for better or worse, of personal and collective experience.

Storytelling is an intricate part of the plot of *Ma Rainey*. As the musicians await Ma’s arrival, each tells a story that serves as a testimony of survival. Although each story is personal, it describes an experience that they are all familiar with as with the story Cutler tells about Reverend Gates:

Toledo: You don’t even have to tell me no more. I know the facts of it. I done heard the same story a hundred times. It happened to me too. Same thing. (80)

Through storytelling each musician is able to offer to his fellow musicians advice on how to live and survive as an African-American in a hostile environment. In this sense, storytelling along with the Blues, takes its place on the “panoply of expressive strategies that serve as a unifying principle for black identity (P. Harrison 294). It becomes a part of that tradition in which cultural values and codes are transmitted from generation to generation, a means by which the younger generation can learn and then forge its own destiny.

But Levee’s impatience leads him to ignore this sense of tradition. His swing arrangement of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” focuses more on a jaunty orchestration of the piece--with
Toledo’s piano and Slow Drag’s bass providing the rhythm, and the winds (Cutler’s trombone and Levee’s own trumpet) improvising on the breaks—than on providing the best backing for Ma. His individual streak rebels against the fact that the band is an accompaniment band. Levee is not content with being an accompanist. He does not care that the song is actually a vehicle for Ma, a vehicle from which he can now, learn and later, change; he is more concerned with swinging the tune, creating something new, than backing the singer, learning from Ma.

Levee suffers from an almost classic case of hubris, for his outrageous behavior is the result of a defiance of tradition as he pursues his own destiny (Genovese 218). It is his pride that generates his indifferent attitude toward Ma and her music at the beginning of the play. By shunning the blues, he turns his back on the most important aspect of his musical heritage. It is also a denial of an essential part of his identity as an African-American, a part woven into the fabric of all the traditions that inform his sensibilities. In seeking to discover his own identity through the new music, he chooses to reject the old music that defines the identity of his race. More ironic is the fact that in his desperation to win a recording contract he seeks approval and artistic direction from Sturdyvant, the white record producer. The result is a mixed bag of new rhythms and changes made to suit a businessman who has no artistic feel for the music.
By ingratiating himself with Sturdyvant, Levee becomes virtually a deserter to his fellow musicians, aligning himself with the white man and bestowing on him the authority to make decisions about the one thing that is truly their own--their music. Toledo’s comments are insightful: “As long as the colored man look to white folks for approval . . . than 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” (37).

Levee faces the eternal dilemma of minorities, where success often is dependent on the approval of the majority. When that majority is also the oppressor, any attempt to pander to it is viewed as “selling out.” To get his records produced, Levee feels he has to woo Sturdyvant. When Sturdyvant looks in on them, he jumps up, eager to please, with shuffling feet and ingratiating tone, prompting Cutler to say mockingly, “You hear Levee? You hear this nigger? ‘Yessuh, we’s rehearsing, boss’” (55).

Clearly in this comment Cutler is implying that in Levee’s desire to succeed Levee has sold out to “the man.” Levee is willing to enslave himself for a record deal. For that was, in essence, what the record industry of the time was, a plantation system with the artists functioning as slaves. As Charles Keil points out in *Urban Blues*, the record company had the final say on what material the artist recorded, how he recorded it and when and where the recording took place (81). Similar to their slave ancestors, many blues artists found themselves with a
muted voice in their work environment. And, like their forebears the sweat of their brow and the fruits of their labor became the bounty that was reaped by another. A myriad of artists found themselves bilked out of royalties because of ignorance of copyright laws while others were left with nothing except promises to pay later (D. Harrison 28). Still others were exploited before they signed a contract. Some had their musical and lyrical ideas lifted from them under the ruse of an audition. The artists had no recourse but to accept these exploitative practices, for should an artist take offense at any of them and seek justice or repercussions, he would be immediately branded as a troublemaker and informally blacklisted (Keil 80).

Thus, it would seem that for a chance at the bigtime, Levee willingly enslaves himself, and in doing so betrays himself and all the artists who preceded him for the proverbial “thirty pieces of silver,” yet he does not consider his behavior as a betrayal or improper. From his father he has learned to deal with the white man, to smile in his face, shake his hand, look him in the eye, and bide his time:

I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker’s face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he’s planning how he’s gonna get him and what he’s gonna do to him. This taught me how to handle them. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man. (70)

This is the language of the trickster, a philosophy fashioned from a need to survive and prevail. His eyes set on the
ultimate goal of getting his songs produced, Levee will swallow
his pride and mouth the words—and they are only words, after
all—that Sturdyvant wants to hear. Like his cunning
mythological ancestor Brer Rabbit, Levee has no qualms about
using any means necessary to outwit his stronger opponent and
attain his ends. The trickster tales that sanction Levee’s
behavior were unequivocal in their objectives. As Levine has
outlined them:

[T]hey encouraged trickery and guile; they stimulated
the search for ways out of the system, they inbred a
contempt for the powerful and an admiration for the
perseverance and even the wisdom of the undermen; they
constituted an intragroup lore which must have
intensified feelings of his distance from the world of
the slaveholder. (132-33)

His father’s death and the persistent memory of his
mother’s rape have imbued Levee with a deep desire for revenge,
and he regards his musical talent as a weapon to get even with
the white man. The world owes him a debt, and he is determined
to take it. He wants redress and the respectability his parents
never had. Although he rejects Ma’s style of singing, he
admires the way she wields her power over the white man. He
does not realize that Ma’s power comes from being true to
herself and her music. She does not pander to Sturdyvant or
Irvin and the changes they seek to make in her music. Having
been on the road for several years and with so many records
behind her, she knows her audiences and what they want.
Refusing to compromise her music, she proves that success does
not always depend on the approval of the majority. It does,
however, depend on knowing the white men who do business with her; and, as she tells Cutler, Ma has no illusions about their motives:

Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials . . . . 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 . . . . If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. (79)

It is this complete knowledge of the people with whom she deals that makes Ma successful. But she has paid a high price for it. Her words reflect the bitterness of a woman who has had to struggle against a hostile society that gave her nothing and sought to grab all she had. The audience clearly senses the agonies and frustrations of this supremely talented woman forced to place her genius in the hands of a bunch of crude businessmen. In her terse tones linger the echoes of a long, tiring journey to her present position of power, obtained despite the odds and because she never lost sight of from where she came.

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia (Lieb 3). She began her career as a vaudeville artist and started singing the Blues in 1902 after hearing a young girl sing them (Lieb 3). By the 1920s when she began to record for Paramount records, she had become the most popular female classic blues singer in the United States (Southern 332). For many of her listeners, Ma Rainey
represented the epitome of wealth and power. She had her own
group of musicians; a spectacular wardrobe that consisted of
necklaces and earrings made of gold pieces, diamond studded
tiaras; and elaborate gowns made of gold beaded satin, pearls
and furs (Southern 267) Her audiences also found in her blues
songs solace from the alienation and disillusionment of life.
And, as such, her Blues became a gift to the people, for via her
lyrics she invited them to commiserate as well as to acknowledge
proudly the existence of their mutual culture. If they could
not reverse their misfortunes, at least they were able,
together, to grapple with the enormity of them.

Much like her real life basis, Ma of the play does not
forget these roots. She gives her nephew Sylvester a job and a
chance to perform with dignity. Though she is brusque and curt
with Irvin and Sturdyvant, Ma displays an infinite patience with
the stuttering Sylvester, lovingly nursing him past his
disability and drawing from him a clean performance when it
seems certain to everyone that he was beyond hope.

It is significant that a nonmusician plays an important
role in the recording. The inarticulate Sylvester represents
those African-Americans with little or no voice in this society.
By letting him do the introduction, Ma suggests that they too
can participate in the Blues; all African-Americans have a voice
through their music, and, in a larger sense, that they
contribute to the successful advancement of African-American
culture. Levee’s vociferous opposition to Sylvester’s role
highlights the contrast between them. Sylvester’s few words are used to promote his heritage, the Blues; Levee’s verbiage debunks and denies that heritage. The results are noteworthy. Sylvester is triumphant (he manages to do the introduction without a mistake); whereas, Levee ultimately is destroyed. One lesson from the trickster tradition is that loquaciousness leads to trouble. Keeping one’s mouth shut was one of the morals of the trickster tales. As Lawrence Levine notes, “[t]he concluding lines of these widely told stories repeated one message over and over: It’s bad to talk too much. I told you something that got me here would get you here. You talk too much. I told you tongue brought me here and tongue is what brought you here” (99).

Another part of Ma’s roots, perhaps the most significant part, is the rural or classic Blues. Resisting any attempt to “swing” the Blues, she sings it the way she has always sung it, the way she believes it was meant to be sung. Her strength comes from a deep understanding of the sensibilities that inform the Blues. Any attempt to tamper with it is equivalent to a personal attack on her; to compromise this music is to desecrate the thing most sacred to her, the essence of her identity. The mere suggestion of revising her song incurs her wrath, and from the moment she hears about Levee’s rearrangement, his days with her band are numbered. His song interpretations, which incorporate Sturdyvant’s suggestions, are in direct conflict with her Blues, and his claim that improvisation is the key to
the music angers her further. Refusing to accept his function as an accompanist for Ma and fired up by Sturdyvant's promises, he takes her on and is dismissed.

But if improvisation is the essence of jazz, Blues' offspring, should Levee be denied the freedom to play his own style of music? After all, he only wants to add to a tradition that evolved from the improvisation that others, including Ma, had the freedom to make. Unfortunately, in his hurry to "arrive" he forgets the first principle of jazz, and all African-American music—a debt to the past. The right to improvise bears with it the responsibility of being faithful to all the conventions that make jazz improvisation a great art—not just the spontaneous emotional response of the artist/performer to the music, but also the manner in which improvisers study and build upon earlier styles, "[relying] heavily, in the creative sense, on all the music they've ever heard" (Coker 77). But Levee cares little for tradition. The present and future, in particular the fame and power they offer, obscure the past. He is more concerned with making records and money than with playing the music. Though content to rely on his talent, he is unwilling to perfect his skill.

Levee's ambition has stunted his musical growth. Although his attitude obviously springs from a desire to control his life and destiny, it grows so obsessive that it forces him into action that isolates him from the only people who can help him discover himself as a musician and a person. He shuns the other
members of the band because he does not recognize them for the real friends and mentors they can be; instead, he seeks to fulfill his destiny through a contract with a member of the same race that destroyed his family and cast him adrift in the first place. Against his intuition, he places his trust in Sturdyvant who, by his own admission, would rather be in the textile business.

In the end, Sturdyvant rejects Levee despite Levee’s insistence that only he can play his songs. Such a claim is patently false. Having severed himself from the roots of his music, it is not truly his own; he is not essential to its performance; it is easily taken away from him for a paltry five dollars per song. By taking Sturdyvant’s advice on how to play his music, he betrays his deepest roots and himself. Spiritual rupture usually leads to self-destruction, and the devastated Levee turns against his own people and, in a very real sense, against himself.

Levee’s behavior would be inconceivable to Ma because she is inseparable from her music, and no one can take it away from her. Although she is called the Mother of the Blues, she is the first to admit that she did not create the Blues, “I ain’t started the blues way of singing . . . the [B]lues always been there” (68). She sees herself merely as a vehicle for it, a messenger who has helped bring the healing power of the Blues to the world. A mother is not, strictly speaking, a creator of life but one who brings a manifestation of life into the world,
nurturing and encouraging it to grow. This title seems to suit Ma’s role as blues singer. Her simple humility in refusing to place the artist above the art contrasts sharply with the cocky attitude Levee displays when asked how he came to learn the music: “I just picked it up . . . like you pick up anything . . . but everybody can’t play like I do” (19). Instead of the suffering artist, there is in Levee’s glibness a lack of reverence for the music. This arrogance is tested a minute later through a symbolic challenge when he claims he can spell music and then gets it wrong. Here he is a confused, immature youth struggling to find his true identity, unsure of the precise nature of his role either as an African-American musician among other African-American musicians or as an African-American male in the white world.

It is significant that Levee plays the trumpet, the most flamboyant instrument in a band. Capable of producing brilliant notes in the hands of such masters as Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and Dizzie Gillespie, the trumpet is in many ways the ideal instrument for the “rakish and bright” Levee. But he is not yet as good as he thinks he is. Wilson’s description of his musicianship is quite revealing: “His voice is strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath. He plays wrong notes frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other” (23). He has the talent to be a good trumpet player but is still in the process of discovering his instrument, a process symbolically linked to self-discovery.
Unlike his fellow musicians, he knows how to write music and therefore has the potential to be a composer and arranger. In the true tradition of a jazz musician, he sees himself as an improviser, even a virtuoso player. But unless he can acknowledge his debt to the past, he may never truly understand the art of improvisation.

By disavowing the roots of his music, Levee repudiates its very form and substance, for it has been created from the experience of all African-Americans. Flavored with the smells and sounds of the "narrow crooked streets of East St. Louis, or the streets of [Chicago’s] Southside," with roots in Alabama and Mississippi, it is a music replete with "warmth and redress . . . braggadocio and roughly poignant comments . . . vision and prayer (Introduction, Three Plays). Compressed into the music’s swells and full-blown sounds are the agony and passion of several generations and a million lifetimes of slavery. And somewhere in the folds of its vibrant texture is the echo of every single tragedy that informed it, including Levee’s personal grief. Until he fully appreciates this, he is doomed to prostitute his musical heritage to gain favor with crude businessmen like Sturdyvant and to deceive himself into thinking he can be a star without honing his skill to match his talent.

Cutler, however, acknowledges Levee’s gifts and potential: "Levee’s all right. He plays good music when he puts his mind to it" (63). But staying focused is difficult for Levee, whose spirit smarts from the lesions of his terrible childhood.
experiences, the memories of which have shaped his personality and response to the world around him: "Life ain’t shit. You can put it in a paper bag and carry it around with you. It ain’t got no balls. Now, death . . . death got some style! That’s how bad death is! But you can rule over life. Life ain’t nothing" (92). This is the vision of a man who has felt a very deep despair, and who has firsthand knowledge of life without meaning. Although the audience is told only about one tragic experience of his life, his mother’s rape followed by his father’s lynching, it can only surmise the experiences of the rest of his life. Into Levee’s life story Wilson has distilled the essence of a thousand other desperate lives--sons and daughters of 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. The audience may 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.

At some point in this appalling existence music probably offered a solution, and Levee took it. The trumpet was his way out of the South, his ticket to the big city. Without it he would still be down there, grubbing for a meager existence. Toledo reproves him for being ungrateful that he is not performing the menial tasks usually given to African-Americans. But that, to Levee, is the path of passivity. He will not be
satisfied with tidbits. He wants it all. Like his guiding spirit, Brer Rabbit, he is not content with mere survival. The problem is that he does not know what he really wants. Having lived so long in despair, he is incapable of shaping any definable goal for himself, and he finds meaning only in death. The manner of his father's death was glorious, something to learn from and emulate. Life is pale and empty, death has style; and style, to Levee, is everything. In his fascination with death, he unconsciously denies himself any chance at life. Embittered by the raw deal society has given him, he plunges into self-destruction.

According to Toledo, the journey to complete emancipation will begin only when African-Americans fully understand that self help is their only real option, for the white man will always regard them as unwanted leftovers. Toledo is talking about true 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. However justified Levee's dissatisfaction might be, his success depends on the musical traditions of his own people, not on Sturdyvant.

Ma fully understands that her success in the music business is the direct result of cultural traditions. She knows that her commercial success is the result of an artistic connection with her cultural roots. On a lesser scale, Cutler, Slow Drag and Toledo have varying degrees of this self-knowledge. They also
know their limitation and have a strong sense of their roles as musicians. Aware that no white man will give them a handout, they depend on Ma, their musical heritage, and their own talents for their fulfillment as musicians. Content with being her sidemen, they are very successful in those roles and are better able to negotiate their way in a white society.

In her role as Mother of the Blues, Ma, with her confidence and security, provides a protective mantle for Toledo, Slow Drag, and Cutler. This protective mantle functions similar to the Spanish Virgin de Misericordia. The Virgin de Misericordia is a religious figure that functions very similar to the English Virgin Mary of Mercy. Often portrayed as a larger than life-size virgin sheltering smaller human figures beneath an immense cloak, she offers compassionate sorrow at believers' misfortune and a will to alleviate it (Cassidy 29-33). And, like the Virgin de Misericordia's believers who find daily solace within their spiritual belief of her ability to show them mercy, with no pretensions about their musical abilities or aspirations to anything beyond their present status as Ma's sidemen, Toledo, Slow Drag and Cutler appear to have settled into a comfortable niche within Ma's cloak. This in no way implies apathy or lack of enterprise but rather the realization and ensuing solace that they are the sidemen of one of the greatest blues singers of their time, jobs that give them steady work and the opportunity to make a living doing something they love.
Slow Drag, the bassist, is the most tolerant character, content to play his music, always seeking to avoid confrontation. When the others argue with Levee about the way to play Ma’s song, he is just anxious to start practicing the songs so they can “get it right the first time and get it over with” (18). He refuses to get involved in the argument over which versions to play: “Don’t make no difference. Long as we get paid.” (18). A thorough professional, he is ready and willing to play whatever is asked of him, as long as he can rehearse it first. When Sylvester stutters through his lines, Slow Drag suggests they “rehearse so the boy can get it right.” (54)

The bass is the heartbeat of a jazz band. It lays down the pulse, anchoring the incessant rhythm from which the riffs and flights of the other instruments can take wing. Slow Drag embodies some of the solid characteristics of the instrument. Throughout the play, he manages to stay calm and unaffected by the events around him. Although, like his name, he appears somewhat slow, even a bit placid, there is a reassuring quality to his homespun philosophy. His reply to Toledo’s criticism of African-Americans demonstrates a dogged faith in the ability of his race to survive:

“Well, the colored man’s gonna be all right. He got through slavery, and he’ll get through whatever else the white man put on him. I ain’t worried about that. Good times is what makes life worth living. Now you take the white man . . . . The white man don’t know how to have a good time. That’s why he’s troubled all the time. He don’t know how to laugh at life.” (41)
Like the steady line of his bass, there is something enduring in Slow Drag’s attitude toward life. He refuses to let problems affect him, unduly concentrating his energies on surviving. He believes in having a good time; in playing his music, drinking his liquor, smoking reefers, and leaving well enough alone, confident in his ability to get through any situation. The story of how he earned his nickname, by finessing an enraged male into letting him slow dance with the male’s girlfriend, and the charming manner in which he talks Cutler out of a reefer, reveal a cool audacity behind his terse exterior. This hidden smoothness and ability to surprise are evident in his playing. As Wilson describes it: “Innate African rhythms underlie everything he plays, and he plays with an ease that is at times startling” (20).

Cutler, the guitarist and trombonist, is Slow Drag’s kindred spirit. They have been together on the road for twenty-two years, and this bond is a source of strength and comfort to them.

In the early days of the Blues, before the swing era, the guitar had a limited role in a band, although it was an integral part of a blues soloist’s performance. In a blues accompaniment band the guitar was restricted to strumming and pulse-keeping, a companion role to that of the bass. The trombone’s role was not much different— to keep time and rhythm as well as to provide some tonal depth and color. Reflecting his instrument’s role, Cutler keeps the situation in the studio on an even keel. He is
the leader of the group by virtue of his long association with Ma. He draws strength from the Blues, his friendship with Ma, and his religious faith, and he is zealously protective of all three. That Levee attacks them all is evidence of the widening gulf between them. For a while, Cutler handles Levee's tantrums with great patience, even attempting to deflect Ma's anger away from the younger musician, but Levee's blasphemous attack on Christianity is too much even for Cutler to stomach, and he punches Levee in the mouth.

Like the guitar, the piano has occupied a central role in the development of African-American music, from the ragtime compositions of Scott Joplin and Eubie Blake to the barrelhouse Blues of Jelly Roll Morton, the boogie-woogie style of James P. Johnson, the wit of Fats Waller, and the virtuosity of Art Taut. While its individual contribution was enormous, particularly in the hands of the great musicians, its specific function in the rhythm section of an accompaniment band like this one was to supply the chord progression (this could be done by either the piano or the guitar). Toledo's role, therefore, does not call for great virtuosity or individual innovation but is similar to the others in providing solid, if creative, rhythmic backing for Ma's vocals. He "understands and recognizes that [his piano's] limitations are an extension of himself" (14) and is content to play his part to the best of his ability: "That's what you supposed to do, ain't it? Play the music. Ain't nothing abstract about it" (23). His no-nonsense demeanor is irritated
by Levee's pretentious behavior, for he does not have Cutler's patience and will not tolerate Levee's imprudence. As a result, throughout the play, he and Levee are at each other's throats. Having taught himself to read, Toledo is proud of his knowledge and tends to be rather scornful of Levee's brash immaturity: "Levee, you worse than ignorant, you ignorant without a premise" (24) is his final assessment of the young trumpeter. To him, the younger generation of African-Americans is too flippant about life and lacks a proper sense of direction.

Toledo's anger reflects a deep concern for the future of his race. When African-Americans were brought from different parts of Africa and "dropped into a pot like a stew" (47), the expedience of slavery created a common destiny and a responsibility to shape their future in a liberating fashion. To fulfill this mission each of them must do something positive with his life. In Toledo's opinion, hard work is the way to forge the common identity that will save them from being swept away like refuse. He sees Levee's frivolous attitude as a threat to that goal. But Slow Drag and Cutler challenge his insight:

SLOW DRAG: Toledo, just 'cause you like to read them books and study and whatnot . . . that's your good time. People got other things they likes to do to have a good time. Ain't no need you picking them about it.

CUTLER: Nigger's been having a good time before you was born, and they gonna keep having a good time after you gone. (41)
These comments by Slow Drag and Cutler echo Ralph Ellison’s observation of the “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” in the Blues (78). In his description of the Blues as such, Ellison suggests an impulse that permits African-Americans to delve beneath the inhumane conditions of their lives and mine the layers of mirth nestling there (Shadow and Act 78-79). This ability to seize life and shake whatever joy they could out of the few moments that were given them is what saw them through decades of slavery and degradation. It is the springboard for the transcendent resolution of the spirituals and the hopeful resonance of the Blues. Slow Drag and Cutler know that without this sense of joy African-Americans would be a people without luster; with it, they can survive the darkest night.

By giving his characters musical instruments to suit their personalities, Wilson creates a metaphor to explore the specific avenues that each of them has taken to find his identity as an African-American and an African-American musician. 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 African-American world of Ma and the Blues. They keep the former at bay by staying close and true to the latter, thus creating and maintaining harmony. 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.
Perhaps Levee would be in harmony with both worlds in which he exists if he were more like Slow Drag. Slow Drag is a survivor, and his survival is a result of his ability to successfully maneuver within both worlds he is apart of—the music world and the white, Jim Crow world. Unlike Levee, Slow Drag knows that his success in both worlds does not depend upon ostracizing some people (as Levee does to Ma) and finessing others (as Levee does to Sturdyvant) but depends upon his ability to finesse anyone who may be able to get him into the position he desires. Unlike Levee, Slow Drag knows that in the recording studio Ma has just as much (or more) power than Sturdyvant. For example, when Cutler notices the list of songs to be recorded that Irvin gives him differs from the one Ma has given him, Slow Drag tells him not to worry for “don’t nobody say when it come to Ma. She’s gonna do what she want to do. Ma says what happens with her” (28). And, later when Levee continues to insist that his version be rehearsed because that is what Sturdyvant wants and Sturdyvant “will put out what he wants to put out” (29), Slow Drag reiterates what he knows as fact, that Sturdyvant “gonna put out what Ma wants him to put out” (29).

Ma is a woman in control. She commands Cutler, Toledo, Levee and Slow Drag as well as Sturdyvant and Irvin. Ma demonstrates a practical understanding of the recording industry’s hierarchy and her place within it. Recognizing that the purpose of the recording session is to record her voice and her music, Ma does not allow herself to be bullied but uses her
position as desired musical commodity to legitimate her authority. For example, when Irvin tells her that the band members object to Sylvester speaking the introduction to the "Black Bottom" song she reminds him, "What band? The band work for me! I say what goes!" (60).

Thus, rather than finessing Sturdyvant, Levee should be finessing Ma. In her role as Mother of the Blues, Ma would be able to open many doors for Levee. It is apparent that he desires the respect and authority Ma has:

LEVEE: . . . I'm gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave . . . and Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and beg her to stay! That's the way I'm gonna be! Make the white man respect me! (78)

If he aspires to be like Ma, then why not become her protégée so that he can acquire some of that prestige via association? According to Daphne Harrison, the real Ma Rainey had the reputation of taking care of her musicians and keeping them happy (37). Surely she would ensure that her protégée received the same respect as she.

While Levee desires the respect Ma commands over Sturdyvant and Irvin, he fails to realize that Ma’s respect is negotiable. For Ma it has an exchange value. She barters the rights to her voice for the right to be treated with respect. But as she makes clear to Cutler, she has no illusions about the limits of that control. Ma knows that she gets her way because she has something that Irvin and Sturdyvant want, her voice. She knows that Irvin and Sturdyvant lack any real commitment to her, her
music, or the blues tradition and that they will tolerate her only as long as it is profitable for them to record her songs. Therefore, any sense of power Ma enjoys is tempered by an awareness of how very expendable she is. She explains to Cutler, “They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice . . . They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of God.” (64)

Slow Drag, too, is aware that Ma’s power is only an illusion and in the larger white society it is not even an illusion:

CUTLER: The white man don’t care nothing about Ma. The colored folks made Ma a star. The white folks don’t care nothing about who she is . . . what kind of music she make.

SLOW DRAG: That’s the truth about that. You let her go down to one of them white folk’s hotel and see how big she is. (78)

Perhaps that is why Wilson brings Ma’s altercation with the cabby and the policeman into the studio, to suggest that her power, though considerable, is at best tenuous, and is confined only to the studio. Outside, she becomes just another target of white prejudice.

Before concluding this chapter, it is important to briefly discuss the play’s structure. Unlike Wilson’s other plays, the plot of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is musical in structure, making the descriptive, “blues play,” a more than accurate characterization. Like a blues song or jazz rendition, the play is a slow-building, repetitious, unpredictable ride on an emotional roller coaster. Ma does not appear until well into
Act 1, yet the goings-on during the rehearsal session are analogous to a lengthy musical prelude leading up to the vocal accompaniment. Levee’s recurring complaints against Ma and the other band members function as the refrain to this blues play. Too, like the musicians in a blues or jazz band, Slow Drag, Levee, Toledo and Cutler are each given an opportunity to express themselves. However, rather than expressing themselves via the musician’s normal vehicle, the instrument, they express themselves via storytelling. As stated earlier in this chapter, each musician tells a story as they await Ma’s arrival. These stories and the telling of them echo the interwoven improvisation of blues and jazz performers, with each performer having a moment in the spotlight.

By setting Ma Rainey in 1927, when African-American music was at a crossroad in its development, Wilson is able to explore one of the main roots of African-American culture and identity, the Blues. Through a dramatic conflict between Ma Rainey, the blues singer, and Levee, a herald of the new emerging style of jazz, swing, Wilson suggests that African-American music, and particularly the Blues, contains ancient cultural clues to the true identity of African Americans which they cannot ignore except at their peril; it is only through this knowledge that African-Americans can become fulfilled and empowered. But, in his search for self-fulfillment and empowerment, Levee rejects the blues tradition and turns to the white man for affirmation. In rejecting the Blues, he ensures his own destruction: he
kills one of his fellow musicians in frustration and rage when the white man he turns to for affirmation denies him the opportunity that he had promised, thus slamming the door on any hope of fulfilling his musical ambitions.
Chapter Five

Tell Me How Long Is I Got To Wait: The Piano Lesson

By 1936, the activities of the 1920’s had gone into a decline. African-Americans were no longer leaving the south in record numbers. Those who had migrated north had sent word back down south that the north was not a promised land; the same widespread poverty and discrimination that was prevalent in the south was a part of northern life as well. The Blues had lost its battle with jazz. No longer was the cultural identity of African-Americans defined by blues, but it was now define by jazz. The Blues of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith had been replaced by the swing and jazz of Louis Armstrong, Count Basie and Duke Ellington.1 America was still suffering through the economic downfall of the Depression, and African-Americans found it difficult to find employment. It is during this year that Wilson sets The Piano Lesson.

The Piano Lesson is the story of the Charles family and the conflict surrounding a piano the family owns. Berniece and her brother, Boy Willie, fight over the piano in her house in Pittsburgh; he wants to sell it and she wants it left there. There is also a ghost that wants the piano and roams Berniece’s house in search of it.

In The Piano Lesson, Wilson continues to develop the themes of self-affirmation and empowerment that he develops in Joe Turner and Ma Rainey. However, The Piano Lesson more closely parallels Joe Turner in that in both plays Wilson sets forth the
idea that the relationship of the past to the present for African-Americans promotes an active lineage kinship bond between the living and their ancestors. In this sense, the transmission of history becomes a binding ritual, through which the characters obtain an empowering self-knowledge, a tangible sense of their own self-worth and identity that gives them strength to manage the future on their own terms. In both plays meaningful progress toward the future and self-affirmation are achieved only by establishing connections to the past—connections represented as the power of the ancestors, connections that are established through music.

In *The Piano Lesson* the link to the past is the piano that sits in Berniece’s living room.

The piano has had an interesting history. Developed in Italy in 1709 by Bartolommeo Cristofori, the piano quickly gained popularity because it provided a greater range of expression than its predecessors, the clavichord and the harpsichord (Goldenberg 16). However, because the first pianos were handcrafted and built to order, they became principally associated with the rich, since the rich were the only people who could afford them. In the early 19th century, mechanical modifications in the production of the piano made it more accessible to people of more modest means, particularly the emerging American middle class (Gill 175-176). Although after 1820 the piano could be found in the parlors of many homes, it never lost the appeal it had acquired from it previous
association with the rich. In effect, to own a piano was to associate oneself with a status symbol.

In the 1870s African-Americans recently freed from slavery quickly inculcated this value. And, why not? What group of people were more greatly in need of material associations that would increase their self-esteem? Therefore, many newly freed slaves indebted themselves (sometimes for a lifetime) in order to own a piano. In The Music of Black Americans, Eileen Southern discusses this point, "Families often purchased small organs for use in the homes, often paying fifty cents down and fifty cents per week for a lifetime" (315). In his autobiography, Up From Slavery, Booker T. Washington describes his observation of such a family:

I remember that on one occasion when I went into one of these cabins for dinner, when I sat down to the table for a meal with the four members of the family, I noticed that, while there were five of us at the table, there was but one fork for the five of us to use. Naturally there was awkward pause on my part. In the opposite corner of that same cabin was an organ for which the people told me they were paying sixty dollars in monthly installments. One fork, and a sixty-dollar organ! (113)

While upon first impression it may seem that people like the family Washington describes were being frivolous in their purchase, actually, their actions were more about denial than extravagance. As slaves, African-American musicians had little access to the piano (or any other instrument other than the fiddle), so one of the first ways they demonstrated their independence was to purchase the musical instruments for which they had earlier longed, but had been denied (Southern 315).
Regardless of the reasons behind the acquisition, the piano became a much desired and valued possession amongst African-Americans in the late 19th century, and many would spend their meager earnings for an instrument that, oftentimes, neither they nor their family members could play.

The piano also became quite a functional instrument that could substitute for other more expensive mediums of entertainment. Additionally, Not only were they the instrument of choice for jig musicians, the early cultivators of ragtime, but barrelhouse and boogie-woogie musicians as well (Silvester 36). Accordingly, by the late 19th century not only could the piano be found in the parlor of home but it could also be found in bawdy houses, saloons, barrelhouses, and other “venues of pleasure” (Silvester 36).

The piano in Berniece’s living room obviously symbolizes the aforementioned ideas and the Blues, but it also has a more potent signification: it has played a pivotal role in the Charles family’s fight for freedom, and its very presence in the household is a powerful testament to the success of that effort. Its history is a direct reflection of the struggle that engendered the Blues.

The piano is a visual symbol of the family and its history. On it are carved weddings, births, funerals and the sale of Berniece’s and Boy Willie’s great grandmother and grandfather. Thus, the carvings on the piano function as a photo album of
sorts, pictorially preserving important events of the family’s history as well as the images of the ancestors themselves.

Before continuing with this discussion, it is important to note that to have such carvings on a piano is not solely an African or African-American tradition. It was not uncommon for those who purchased pianos, regardless of race, to have pictures carved into the wood. In *Steinway: From Glory to Controversy*, Susan Goldenberg describes a wealthy banker who purchased a concert grand for his wife and had it decorated with small portraits of opera composers. She also relates the story of Edward Doheny who ordered a Steinway piano that had a sculpted bust of a little boy, believed to be his son, at each end of the keyboard (57-58).

In its pictorial depiction of the Charles family history, the piano that sits in Berniece’s living room is situated in the African tradition, paralleling the brass plaques of Benin that were used to preserve its oral history. These plaques covered the supporting pillars of the royal palace and were depictions of major events of the Benin kingdom, including daily court life and the lineage of rulers (Blackmum 84). Although in the past art historians have disagreed as to whether some of the representations are of individual kings or of more general signifiers of a royal line, it is clear that the plaques served as a pictorial repository and provided a stable mechanism to maintain the narrative origin and cultural assumptions upon which the Benin ruling class justified itself. (Blackmum 85).
In many respects, the carvings on the piano in *The Piano Lesson*, though no longer serving a sacral kingship and a royal order, function similarly to this Benin tradition by pictorially preserving important events of the family’s history as well as the images of the ancestors themselves.

Moreover, the piano functions as a medium through which connections are established between the past and present. These connections are represented in metaphysical dimensions. Within the imaginative world of the play, the piano serves as a site of direct mystical connections with the ancestors, functioning similar to sacred ancestral shrines or altars in many traditional African cultures. In the 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 two worlds, where descendants may contact their ancestors for protection, support, and guidance (Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodeen 15). Ironically, of all the characters in the play Berniece is closest to fully realizing this aspect of the piano, even though she distances herself from it more than any other character does, “I used to think those pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometimes late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn’t going to happen to me. I don’t play that piano because I don’t want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house” (70). Berniece believes in the mystical power of the piano, recognizing it as the site of connection to her
ancestral spirits, but at the same time she denies those spirits access to her life because of the family blood sacrificed for the piano.

The blood sacrifices made over the piano intensify its sacral properties and parallel similar African practices of pouring libations over sacred representations of the ancestors or gods to feed them and maintain their spiritual existence. The piano initially becomes family property with the human sacrifice of Boy Willie and Berniece’s father, who is burned alive after he steals the piano from the Sutter home. Subsequently, as Berniece recounts, Mama Ola, her mother, made daily sacrifice at the altar of the piano:

"You ain’t taking that piano out of my house. Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. “Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece.” Everyday. “I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece.” (52)

For Mama Ola the piano becomes a shrine to her murdered husband, where she pours the libations of her own blood and tears. It is a cleansing ritual that is consummated daily with music, and the piano becomes the prayer site where Mama Ola connects with her deceased husband and tragic past. But upon her death and with the move to Pittsburgh, the next generation loses this sacral connection to the piano, and it becomes the source of conflict.
between Berniece and Boy Willie, what should be done with this embodiment of the past.

To Berniece, whose life has been spent in the shadow of violence and death, the piano is a burden upon her shoulders, trapping her in a maelstrom of painful memories, dragging her onto the depths of a past she wants to forget. First her father, Boy Charles, was burned to death. Then her husband died in a shootout with the sheriff during a wood-stealing foray with Boy Willie and Lymon. Between these two incidents were long, hard years as the fatherless family struggled to survive. The piano is a powerful reminder of all this. She cannot bring herself to play it, afraid to release a torrent of pent-up emotions. Yet she will not part with this repository of her family’s pain. To be rid of it might purge that suffering, but it would also sever the only link she has with her ancestors. As Mei-Ling Ching writes in her essay “Two Notes on August Wilson,” to Berniece “the piano is both a legacy and a taboo” (71). It is a sacred relic of her past, a reminder of the misery her family endured; by keeping it she pays homage to their sacrifices. But by holding on to it, she also keeps alive the anguish associated with that past. Giving it up might relieve some of her pain but not without betraying her deepest roots, an action that contains its own pain. There is, therefore, a kind of desperation in her refusal to let Boy Willie sell it. Her distress is evident as she lashes out against the very people whose memory she holds dear, blaming her
father for getting killed and leaving her mother alone for seventeen years.

So, Berniece shuts the piano in order to forget her past, and the family shrine is neglected (and unused) except for the childish tinkering of Maretha and the occasional bursts of life that come with Wining Boy’s visits. While it is easy to sympathize with Berniece’s desire to forget her painful memories, if a parallel is drawn between the piano and African ritual practice, the spiritual and physical consequences of forgetting her past and not using the piano are very serious. In the parallel context of most African ancestral worship, neglect of the ancestors and the ancestral altar results in loss of their protection and threatens the destruction of the entire community (Sharevskaya 54). As a Yoruba diviner explains: “If a person neglects his or her shrine (by not offering prayers or gifts) the spirits will leave . . . all you are seeing is the images . . . the person has relegated the deities to mere idols, ordinary images” (parenthetical information added) (Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodeen 26). Ritual neglect of the ancestors not only results in the loss of ancestral protection from forces destructive to living members of the lineage, but it also threatens the very existence of the ancestors who require the food of sacrifice to maintain their existence in the realm of the dead (Sharevskaya 54). The kinship between the living and the dead is a symbiotic relation—mutually beneficial or self-destructive—and it must be carried on in order to guarantee the
continuation of the lineage. The ancestors are still members of the lineage, an active part of the clan, and after a period of time most of the ancestors will reenter the world of the living by reincarnation back into the lineage, thus completing the cycle of life and death that ensures the continuity and survival of their own kinship line (Drewal, Pemberton, and Abioddeen 15). Any break in this cycle has potentially catastrophic effects.

Boy Willie views the piano from this aspect, somewhat. For him, the piano is the lifeblood of the family. He has come North to persuade Berniece to sell the piano so he can buy the land that their ancestors worked on as slaves. True, at first glance it may seem that his desire to sell the piano is a paradox, that selling the piano is signification of him selling his past, but Boy Willie believes that selling the piano will continue to celebrate the family. In Boy Willie’s mind selling the piano will secure a better future for the Charles family:

Now I want to get Sutter’s land with that piano. I get Sutter’s land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I go the land and the seed then I’m alright. . . . I can always get me a little something else. Cause that land give back to you. I can make me another crop and cash that in. I still got the land and the seed. (51)

To Boy Willie selling the piano and buying Sutter’s land means economic independence, a way for him to rise against the destitution of the south and break its cycle of sharecropping that kept African-Americans in that revolution of poverty. It is the very same poverty that he witnessed in his father, who
“spent his whole life farming on somebody else’s land” and that he wishes to avoid.

Boy Willie’s desire for economic independence is very similar to Walter Lee Younger’s desire in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

*A Raisin in the Sun* tells the story of the Younger family, a proud lower-class family struggling to gain middle-class acceptance. The family hopes that a $10,000 insurance check from the death of the family patriarch will help alleviate that struggle. The action of the play focuses on how the $10,000 should be spent—should it be used to buy a house as the majority of the family members desire or should it be used to invest in a liquor store as Walter Lee desires.

Like Boy Willie, Walter Lee is a desperate man, shackled by poverty and prejudice and obsessed with a business idea that he thinks will solve all of his economic and social problems. And, like Boy Willie, Walter Lee finds his dream stifled by a member of his family, his mother. Walter Lee and Boy Willie believe that Mama Younger and Berniece are not cognizant of their desire and why it is so important for them to make their dreams a reality. The women do not understand the desire to be able to reap the effects of one’s labor before one dies—something that neither of their fathers was able to do. Both Boy Willie and Walter Lee are cognizant that they have been duped by the idea of the American dream. They have both found that even if they work hard and follow the rules they will not succeed because the
socio-economic structure of America is not conducive to the success of African-American men. No matter how hard one works, one will never rise above the first rung of the socio-economic ladder.

Here, however, is where the similarity between the two characters end. For unlike Walter Lee, Boy Willie’s idea is almost foolproof; there is a high probability of a return on his investment. For Walter Lee there is not; a liquor store is a high-risk investment.

Additionally, Walter Lee’s desire to open a liquor store seems to be somewhat selfish. He believes, for example, that through his business idea he will suddenly accumulate all the money he will ever need. Then, with this accumulation of capital, he will improve himself socially and will be looked up to by others—all the people who, he believes, do not think much of him as a man (Hansberry 143). The same cannot be said about Boy Willie. Boy Willie simply believes that he will be bringing to fruition a deep-seated desire of his father to be able to pass something on to his heirs, “when [my daddy] come along he ain’t had nothing he could build on. His daddy ain’t had nothing to give him. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died giving it to me. I ain’t gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it” (46). Boy Willie believes allowing the piano to continue to sit in Berniece’s living room is a dishonor to their father’s memory and family legacy.
Besides, Boy Willie does not need a visual shrine to commemorate his heritage because he keeps the memory of his heritage alive in his heart and mind. The piano is just a symbol of those memories and legacy. Furthermore, the piano is a gift that will allow him to follow in his father’s footsteps but with a freedom and security his father was denied.

Boy Willie knows the act that brought the piano into their house was an act of daring that altered forever the way in which this family could look at itself. It transformed their identity from slaves and sharecroppers to free men and women unafraid to die for their freedom. For this reason, Boy Willie cannot comprehend why Berniece does not pass the story of the piano on to her daughter, Maretha. He admonishes her for not telling Maretha about the piano’s history and says Berniece should throw a party on the anniversary of the day the piano came into their home (91). For as Boy Willie sees it, it is only by knowing the history of the piano that Maretha will, “know where she at in the world” (91). She can have pride in herself knowing that she comes from several generations of a family that refused to allow the legacy of slavery subdue it; but one that pressed through slavery and sharecropping and survived into freedom.

Perhaps Berniece’s refusal to share with Maretha the piano’s history is a result of motherly instincts. It is a mother’s responsibility to nurture and protect her child. Berniece knows this and as a result feels inclined to protect Maretha from anything that might harm her, even if it is her
history. Berniece believes that as long as Maretha does not know the piano’s history she cannot be burdened by it as she has. And, if Maretha is not burdened by it she can be successful in life, “She don’t know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don’t have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn’t have. I ain’t gonna burden her” (70). Berniece believes that if she allows the past to stay in the past, the family and its future generations can have an unencumbered future.

The riff between Berniece and Boy Willie allows the invasion of Berniece’s home by Sutter’s ghost, who begins to play his own songs on the piano. In a reversal of the pattern in which white men were ostensibly killed by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, Sutter roams Berniece’s house seeking vengeance for his death and the theft of the piano. But, unlike Sutter, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog were more than vigilante spirits. As Wining Boy discovered when he sought their advice at the railroad crossing, they were sources of strength and inspiration for dispirited African-Americans in need of renewed energy for the daily struggles that faced them.

Ironically, it is Sutter’s ghost that forces Berniece and Boy Willie to realize that they must come to a compromise concerning the piano. By selling the piano, Boy Willie would be trading the source of his family’s power and identity, however honorable and admirable his intentions may be. So, he must be brought to the realization that the piano is more than a “piece
of wood" to be used as collateral; that it is a sacred heirloom on which are etched the memories and sacrifices of his family. For her part, Berniece must realize that the piano is not a burden upon her shoulders; it is more than a depot of grief that beset her family; that those who died for it did so that their descendants might have better futures. The ghost forces them to see that as long as their house is divided, they will be enslaved by the destructive elements of their past and their former owner who will not leave. By feuding over the piano, they repudiate its function, to keep their family together. In their hands it has become a divisive force, sundering sibling bonds and preventing the Charles family from transcending its past and taking the final step to freedom.

Turning to her Christian beliefs, Berniece asks Avery to perform a Christian exorcism of the ghost, but that only seems to feed Sutter’s power rather than diminish it. They need something more, for Christian rites are insufficient to dispel the ghosts of Christian oppressors (Katusky 52). Boy Willie realizes that Christianity cannot rid the household of Sutter’s ghost, and he tries to fight the ghost physically based upon a knowledge he has acquired from his life experiences:

See a nigger that ain’t afraid to die is the worst kind of nigger for the white man. He can’t hold that power over you. That’s what I learned when I killed that cat. I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don’t like to see that. He don’t like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, 'I got it too.' Then he got to deal with you square up. (88)
But brute physical force alone cannot rid the house of Sutter’s ghost either. Something more mystic is required. And as Boy Willie wrestles with Sutter’s ghost, Berneice is suddenly aware of what she must do. She must save the family from Sutter’s presence by playing the piano. She knows that the piano contains the spirits of her ancestors, and she calls upon them that the family, united, might finally exorcise Sutter from the house and their family. Thus, like a shamanic high priestess on a journey of redemption, she walks to the piano and summons a song from its depths. In a final moment of reconciliation she fashions a spiritual from her memories, a song born in an ancient culture from which the winds of exorcism will rise then gather force as they blend with the hallowed spirits of her dead relatives:

(The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents.)

Berneice: (Singing.)
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
Mama Berniece
I want you to help me
Mama Esther
I want you to help me
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me
Mama Ola
I want you to help me. (107)

Before continuing to discuss the significance of Berniece’s playing the piano, it is important to discuss the song she plays. As Wilson’s stage directions indicate, the song Berniece
plays is a spiritual. Although the directions do not indicate Berniece’s choice was a conscious one, that she plays a spiritual is fitting for the situation.

Like its offspring the Blues, the spirituals grew out of slavery. Although there is no specific date for the origins of the spirituals, the first known reports of distinctive African-American religious singing dates from the early 19th century when plantation owners and overseers reported slaves having created their own type of song that they sang at their religious services (Cone 23). To the whites who heard these “sorrow songs” as they are sometimes referred, they were nothing more than the mournful wailing of their slaves. But, to the slaves they were much more. These songs reflected their daily life experiences—their sorrows, troubles, weariness, dreams and hopes of release from bondage (Cone 23). Then too, the spirituals are much more than sorrow songs. The creators (and singers) of the spirituals drew images from the Bible to interpret their slave experience. They testify to the belief that the supernatural interacts with the natural and the whole world rests in the hands of God (Connor 693). For this reason, the spirituals are considered a creative phenomenon.

That Berniece plays a spiritual is an indication that she is finally willing to accept and embrace the family’s past, for as Kimberly Rae Connor states, “the spirituals [are] archetypes of protest for actual and spiritual liberation” (693). Berniece seeks liberation not only for herself but also for past and
future generations of the Charles family. That Berniece
struggles when she begins to play the song is significant
because as James Cone states in The Spirituals and the Blues,
"one must feel one's way into the power of [a spiritual],
responding both to its rhythm and the faith in experience it
affirms. The song invites the believer to move close to the
very sources of black existence and to experience the black
community's power to endure and the will to survive." (4) As
Berniece plays the song, she must search deep inside herself to
identify with her ancestors. For to this point she has not.
She has not understood why her father risked his life for the
piano; she has not understood why Mama Ola made the piano a
shrine to her dead husband's memory. Not until this climatic
point does she realize that the piano is a reservoir that
represents both the positive and negative aspects of the
family's history. Perhaps it is because she has yet to make
this recognition in Act Two, Scene 2 that she refuses to play
the piano when Avery asks her to play "Old Ship of Zion" and
claim it as an instrument of the Lord (Wilson 71). She refuses
to play the piano because she cannot play it, and she cannot
play it because she still perceives it as an omen—the cause (and
epitome) of the family's grief. As stated earlier, Berniece
must acknowledge that the family's grief and joy coalesce in the
piano. When Berniece plays the piano, she is unites the joy and
sorrow, the love and hate, the hope and despair of the family
and moves it toward the direction of total liberation. Not only
does Berniece's playing unite the family's experiences, but it unites the family as well, a front that is needed to purge the family of its enemy.

This idea of Berniece taking control of her family's destiny and purging it of its enemy, resonates of the concept of the Drama of Epidemic that Femi Euba espouses in his *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate: Origins and Developments of Satire in Black Drama*. In the text Euba says that control is attained only when some kind of purgation by destruction has occurred (121). This purgation, which usually leads to cathartic therapy or a cure, represents either the direct or indirect capitulation of and control over the hostile influences that caused the crisis (122).

Thus, within the realm of the epidemic when Berniece plays the piano, this final battle against Sutter transforms the conflict that has threatened fratricide and the destruction of the kinship group into a conflict against a mutual enemy. It is a battle that only the combined action of the kinship group can resist, with Boy Willie fighting the ghost physically and Berniece invoking the ancestors' protection. This "deux-ex-piano" ending reveals the mutual interests of the kinship group by demarcating what is truly oppressor, Sutter, to the group itself. It is a moment of self-definition, defining the boundary of kinship (the Charles family) against the oppressor of the kinship group (the ghost of Sutter).
Before closing, it is important to note that Wilson seems to be using this idea of the lineage bloodline on two different levels, one literal level, the other metaphoric. On the literal level of the play, the strict lineage kinship group is the immediate family who are linked by bloodlines and a shared history; with the family, as stated in the previous paragraph uniting to demarcate its oppressor. However, when moved from the literal level to the level of metaphor, it is easy to imagine a number of possible correlatives to the situation of the family, especially in regard to African-American cultural identity in relation to the dominant culture of the United States. The lineage bond, which is literal within the world of the play, becomes a metaphor for the historical connection between African-Americans and their past, and “kinship” in general becomes a metaphor for the historical connection among all African-Americans. The ghost of Sutter becomes the disembodied embodiment of the slaveholder’s historical perspective (and perhaps even the dominant culture’s control of history). This perspective is expelled from the community with the reestablishment of the kinship bond (the historical connection). In this respect, the expulsion of Sutter is a metaphor of historical self-definition for Africans in America. Inasmuch as this self-definition occurs through expelling the dominant culture’s historical perspective, it is also an appeal for a separate history, necessitated by a cultural difference
based upon a distinct narrative of origin and historical perspective.

At last, at end of *The Piano Lesson* Boy Willie and Berniece find themselves on the same side, united against a common enemy, bonded in a common destiny. They have learned that the past cannot be ignored, nor can it be left to lie dormant, nor can it be sold or given away. For, as they learn, there is an empowering force that can come through embracing one’s history, a force that leads to both cultural and family pride.
Chapter Six

I’m Gonna Tell You This to Let You Know: Fences

The 1950s was a decade of great hope and change for the African-American. In 1950 professional basketball and tennis were integrated, following the lead of major league baseball, which had three years earlier signed Jackie Robinson as a player with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

1954 was a very important year during the decade, for it was the year that brought the most hope and change. The Defense Department discontinued its policy and practice of segregated all-African-American units. Malcolm X became minister of Black Muslim Temple No. 7 in Harlem, and soon began exhorting African-Americans to acquire their rights “by any means necessary.” In May of that same year, in the Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case, the Supreme Court voted unanimously that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.\(^\text{1}\)

December, 1954 led to the exoneration of many African-American intellectuals who had been charged of being un-American.\(^\text{2}\)

Still, in 1956 the Supreme Court provided more hope when it ruled that segregation on public buses in Montgomery, Alabama was illegal, and a year later the federal government enacted the Civil Rights Act of 1957.\(^\text{3}\) The first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction, it gave African-Americans a right to protest discrimination.

Yes, the 1950s was a great time of hope and change for African-Americans in word and law, but in action it was the same
as it had always been. African-Americans were still being
disenfranchised and forced to live under Jim Crow laws. They
were still poor and lived in fear of being lynched if they
“overstepped their boundaries” or their actions were
misinterpreted. Thus, many African-Americans viewed the new
wave of laws with great skepticism as does Troy Maxson in
Wilson’s 1957 play, Fences.

Part of the action of Fences concentrates on Troy’s
skepticism and refusal to accept the fact that social conditions
are changing for the African-American, especially the African-
American male. This creates much of the dramatic conflict,
leading to problems between him and his family, particularly his
son Cory. Troy’s obstinacy springs from his bitterness over the
fact that, despite his great talent, he could not play major
league baseball, while lesser white players became stars. He
will not let Cory go to college on a football scholarship,
arguing that there is no future in sports for the boy as there
was no future for him. His wife, Rose, reminds him that since
Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, things are a little
different, but Troy will not be persuaded. Convinced of no
professional future for African-American athletes, he is
determined to direct his son into a more practical career, at
the A & P or, perhaps, hauling garbage as he does.

Although Troy may seem to have been defeated by his major
league rejection, actually he is not. His rejection has just
taught him that there is truth to that proverbial saying, “the
more things change, the more they stay the same." While this
may appear to be a negative perspective on life, it is the
result of a life imbued with the racism and empty promises of
change.

Troy learned the effects of racism early on. As he tells
Lyons and Bono, his father was a sharecropper whose only concern
was about "getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin" (147).
Whereas Troy does not seem to understand his father's anxiety in
getting the cotton to Mr. Lubin, his father's apprehension is
understandable, for the sharecropper often received as
compensation a share of the crop.5 But, oftentimes this
arrangement worked more to the advantage of the landowner than
the sharecropper, for the sharecropper most often owed more (for
food and clothing he had gotten on credit) than the crop's cash
value, which often lead to perpetual indebtedness to the
landowner. Thus, as Edward Royce concludes in The Origins of
Southern Sharecropping, sharecropping became nothing more than a
replacement for slavery (2).

Supposedly a mutually advantageous product of welfare-
maximizing behavior on the part of both white landowners and
African-American laborers (Royce 7),6 sharecropping became a form
of slavery that exploited African-Americans who entered into
such agreements in hopes of improving their economic status.
Instead of finding economic freedom, however, those who signed
contracts to sharecrop often found themselves in situations and
conditions very similar to those of slavery.
Much like slavery, sharecroppers found themselves working for the profit of white landowners, and sometimes that landowner was their former master (Royce 216). Too, while African-American sharecroppers enjoyed some autonomy under the system, it still did not allow them to be their own masters or to free themselves altogether from the control of the white landowners. The landowners still retained ultimate managerial authority (216). Finally, because agricultural production remained oriented toward the market, many of the sharecroppers found themselves devoting the bulk of their labor hours to the cultivation of slave crops, sugarcane, tobacco and cotton (217).

Hardened by this slavery-like lifestyle, Troy’s father treated his family very poorly. In the same conversation with Bono and Lyons, Troy describes his father as viewing his eleven children as nothing more than work hands and treating them terribly. As a matter of fact, his behavior toward his family was so awful that his wives, including Troy’s mother, deserted him.

For these reasons, Troy deplores the sharecropper’s lifestyle, and as he further relates to Bono and Lyons he was always looking for an opportunity out. He gets this opportunity when he is fourteen years old. When he was fourteen, Troy’s father found him in a compromising position with a girl and beat him so severely that he decided to leave home (an act that mirrors the altercation Troy will have with Cory four decades later). However, as Troy relates to Lyons and Bono, this
father-son clash was no act of spite but a rite of passage, one that led to his realization that he was no longer a boy but a man, and by implication, his father's competitor in that most primeval male conflict, a fight over a female: "Now I thought he was mad 'cause I ain't done my work. But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man ... at fourteen years of age" (148). With this perception, Troy became a man, and by implication, his father's equal. His newly acquired manhood provided him with the opportunity, for which he had been looking, to slip from the yoke of his father's domination and, by extension, from the dehumanizing effects of sharecropping. By leaving the farm, Troy was, in essence, cutting loose the remaining bonds of the slave past. However, Troy soon found that the effects of slavery would follow him everywhere he went.

From his father's farm Troy went to Mobile and from there Pittsburgh. Lured to Pittsburgh by the promise of freedom and change, he soon found, though, that the conditions in the North were no better than those in the South; not only couldn't one get a job, but one couldn't find place to live either. African-Americans were living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper and were living near the riverbank. Thus, in his move North, Troy realized that he had traded one form of slavery for another. Rather than being a slave to the cotton field, he had become a slave to poverty, starvation and homelessness, an urban slavery.
And, this urban slavery led Troy down a road to robbery, murder and prison.

In the penitentiary, Troy found baseball. It gave him new direction, renewed meaning, and the opportunity to redefine himself and prove that he could do something well. It saved his life in prison and then became his means of existence. Soon there was no distinction between Troy Maxson, human being, and Troy Maxson, baseball player. Baseball became such an integral part of Troy’s life that when he left prison he continued to play it. He played in the Negro Baseball League, the only avenue available for African-American baseball players at the time.

The story of organized Negro baseball begins in 1920 when the owners of the top Negro clubs in the Midwest gathered at the urging of Andrew "Rube" Foster, manager of the American Giants, to hammer out the details of a league (Peterson 83). By the three-day meeting’s conclusion, governance had been agreed upon, and the Negro National League was formed. The league’s longevity was short-lived, however. By late summer 1932 the Negro National League was no longer functioning because clubowners had failed to abide by its agreements: the establishment of ball clubs in each city where there was a large African-American population, hygienic playing conditions (some teams continued to play in dirty parks and unclean players’ uniforms) and appropriate publicity (Peterson 91). But, just as early 1932 saw the demise of Negro baseball, late 1932 also saw
its revival. By December 1932, at the requests of fans and players, a new league, the Negro American League, was organized by W.A. "Gus" Greenlee and remained operational until 1960.

According to Negro baseball historian Donn Rogosin, the Negro American League produced many players of exceptional talent, many of whom could have easily had successful careers in the Major Leagues (23). But African-American players, talented enough for the major leagues, were denied the opportunity to excel at the highest levels of the sport. Such was the case with Troy, and to him, this exclusion was not only an affront to his playing ability, but also tantamount to being denied a chance to grow. Having put all his energy and being into baseball, he longed for national recognition, for the baseball diamond was where heroes were made, men who could hit a ball long and hard, pitch with acute accuracy, or catch a fly ball dropping out of the sky were idolized. In short, baseball could give even a sharecropper's son a chance to excel, but Troy was never given that chance, at least, not on the best diamonds in the country. Thus, Bono's praise that only Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson hit more homeruns than Troy (111) only evokes anger and resentment: "What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (111). The game that once was his lifeline becomes an encumbrance, dragging him into the depths of acrimony, filling his life with hostility, coloring all his attitudes, opinions, and relationships.
Because of his experience, Troy refuses to let Cory play football, for he considers his own life as an athlete a waste and wants to spare his son the same futility. As he tells Rose, "I don't want him to be like me! I want him as far away from my life as he can get. . . . I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports" (137). In venting his anger on athletics, Troy is actually turning against himself. Like Levee in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, he attacks the source of his identity rather than the source of his trouble and, as a result, becomes a slave to the bitterness he feels. This bitterness, as will be demonstrated later, stunts the development of his full potential as father, husband and friend.

In Troy's experience, chance, or fate, has played an important role in directing his life. He believes that neither talent nor skill counts for much in America, where the color of one's skin becomes the decisive factor in the workplace, the playing field, or the street. Chance made him African-American, chance took him to Pittsburgh when he was fourteen, chance led him into armed robbery, and chance brought him to baseball. Even Rose, realizing that only chance can improve their circumstance, tries her luck at gambling, although she is well aware that chance usually works against people like them: "Seems like those that need the least always get lucky."

To Troy, the idea of taking a chance on a lottery is foolish. Having been on the losing side of chance for so long,
he knows it will never work for them. His optimism lies in a shattered heap, beside his unfulfilled dreams, on the baseball diamonds of America. The only possible success left him—the only possible victory—is survival: enduring from dawn to dusk and day to day in a job that barely provides for his family (a life that bears a close semblance to his father’s). Were it not for Gabe’s service and injury in World War II, that brought three thousand dollars in compensation, Troy might not have survived. When chance does work in his favor, the price is high: Gabe’s life is destroyed, and Troy is haunted with guilt at having profited from that disaster. This guilt adds to his frustration at the soul-destroying struggle to make ends meet. Like his father, he is trapped in a life of hard labor.

In many ways, Troy’s life comes full circle. He ran away from his father and the South only to discover that escaping to the North could not exorcise his father’s legacy. The realization that he is fated to be like his father increases his sense of helplessness, for he knows there is no escaping the drudgery of his destiny. He remembers his father having been in a similar trap, fighting to stay ahead of the sharecropping system. And Troy’s never-ending cycle of labor is merely a revolution in that same cycle of grief, his inherited legacy.

Living such a life of drudgery is like living close to death, and that, indeed, is what happens to Troy. Every moment is a constant battle to survive, to stay alive. He says that during his bout with pneumonia he wrestled with Death, who he
describes as wearing a "white robe with a hood." But Troy has survived the pneumonia and his imaginary wrestling match, and from this experience he fashions a baseball metaphor to help him combat the doom that constantly threatens: "That's all death is to me. A fastball on the outside corner" (113). Every batter needs a bit of luck to hit such a ball. The percentages are not favorable, however, when one, as Troy notes, is "born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate" (113). But Troy's skill as a baseball player is matched by his skill as a survivor. 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.

This is the pain Troy seeks to spare Cory, but, unable to avoid his family legacy, he dominates his son just as his own father had dominated him. By protecting Cory, Troy denies him the chance to pursue his calling. Although he accuses Rose of mothering Cory too much, he does exactly that himself. He says that Cory should make his own way without anyone holding his hand, yet he will not let him take a chance and try to survive as he himself did. Afraid that the forces that hurt him will do the same to Cory, Troy thwarts Cory's chances, for he refuses to recognize that Cory is coming of age in a different time: when Troy was growing up, African-Americans were denied a proper high school education; now, during Cory's times, African-Americans are being offered scholarships to college. Unfortunately, Troy is too consumed by his own bitterness to notice the great
opportunity for Cory, whether or not he goes on to play professional football. It is ironic that although Troy found self-esteem and pride through athletics, he would deny his son the same opportunity. In fact, he denies his son much more—the chance to get a college education and perhaps even to become a professional player.

Although Troy tries to protect Cory, he is unable to show any affection. Rose’s suggestion that all Cory wants is Troy’s approval is met with a curt, “Rose I ain’t got time for that” (138). Troy is a hard man, the product of a severe school. With all his energies focused on survival, he has little time for parental affection. For him the greatest virtue is responsibility, not affection. As a matter of fact, the only time Troy praises his father is when he talks about the older man’s sense of responsibility toward his children. As he tells Bono and Lyons, although his father may have never shown them affection, but he did show them responsibility, for her never walked out on the eleven of them as the mothers did. Consequently, when Cory, confused and hurt by this father’s lack of affection, asks why he does not like him, Troy responds with a speech about responsibility: he feeds, clothes and shelters Cory, not because he likes him, but because it is his job, his responsibility.12

This seeming lack of affection is hard on Cory, who worships Troy. But every attempt to emulate his father is met with disapproval, and, slowly, their lives begin to collide:
Cory wants to work fewer hours at the A & P so that he can have more time to practice football. Troy tells Mr. Stawicki to schedule Cory for more hours of work so that he’ll have no time to practice football. Cory tells the college recruiter to come to the house to meet Troy and Rose and discuss his future on the football team. Troy warns the recruiter not to step on his porch. As Troy cuts off every move Cory makes to follow in his footsteps as an athlete, Cory’s frustration reaches a breaking point, and like a volcano, he erupts and attacks Troy.

Unfortunately, the only moment of physical contact between Troy and Cory is one of violence and anger, just as it was between Troy and his father. And, paralleling the events of a generation ago, Cory leaves home in search of his own identity. Thus a new cycle of father-son estrangement is begun; the legacy continues. In attempting to steer Cory’s life along a different path, Troy orchestrates exactly what he was trying to avoid. As Rose later tells Cory, “Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn’t . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was” (189).

But Cory makes a desperate attempt to end the similarities. Much like Troy a generation ago, believing he will discover himself only when he has dispelled Troy’s legacy, he joins the Marines, a career as far removed from Troy’s as possible. But Cory cannot escape Troy by getting a different profession, for Troy’s true identity does not lie in the naturalized sphere of social roles; rather, it is in a cosmic and mythological
dimension. Like Levee in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Troy is a cultural descendant of Eshu who, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., always has one leg anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in the human world (6). Moreover, as Gates further elaborates, it is this intermediary position that allows Eshu to mediate the obstacles that threaten survival (6). And, as has already been demonstrated, like the trickster he emulates, Troy is a survivor, and many of his actions—particularly the ones that directly affect Cory—spring from his pursuit of a cultural destiny and because Cory is heir apparent to that destiny, there is no escaping or avoiding it. Thus, wherever Cory goes, Troy’s large shadow will continue to hover over him. The more he tries to exorcise the legacy, the more tightly it grabs hold of him. That he can’t shake this legacy troubles Cory, and on the day of Troy’s funeral, this angst is evident as he refuses to go to the ceremony, grappling with his father’s memory in a last attempt to break free of him:

CORY: I can’t drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I’ve got to say no to him. One time in my life I’ve got to say no. (188)

But Cory is also wrestling with his own emerging identity, for, as Rose tells him, he and Troy are alike; they are father and son; just as Troy was like his father. She knows that Cory’s refusal to attend the funeral will only increase his bitterness, and she knows that by rejecting his father Cory is only rejecting himself. She knows that he must find another way to come to terms with his feelings.
In the introduction to the play Wilson writes:

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. (95)

This is the only recourse for Cory. As long as he is estranged from his father, he remains separated from his true self. The only course is reconciliation, a reunion between father and son; a recognition by Cory that it is left to him to accept the best of his father in him and banish the worst; to celebrate the strength of character that survived half a century of prejudice and forgive the pain that came out of that battle.

That Cory can accept Troy’s legacy—something Troy could not do—is as much a testament to the times in which he lives as it is to his character. He is not contained by the same circumstance that beleaguered his father and grandfather, for he lives in the sixties, a decade of tremendous strides for African-Americans. Too, his career in the Marines is not an echo of the legacy of slavery endured by his father and grandfather.

Once Cory accepts the Maxson legacy, he is free to sing the song about Blue, the possum-treeing dog. This song, which is about loyalty, is Cory’s legacy, for it is the same song Troy used to sing, the song sang by his father. Hence, Cory’s singing the song with Raynell in the play’s final scene can be seen as signification of his reconciliation with Troy; he is willing to accept his father’s legacy, the good and the bad. He will just have to, as Rose tells him, “grow into it or cut it
down to fit [himself] (189), for there is no eluding the Maxson in him.

It is interesting that Rose serves as the medium through which Troy and Cory reconcile. For she, too, has been hurt by Troy. Troy and Rose have been married eighteen years, and she has dedicated all of those years to him and Cory, attempting to be a good wife and mother. The product of a broken home, Rose was looking to create the familial environment she lacked as a child when she married Troy. Once she got her family, she focused all her energies on keeping it together: cooking and keeping house for Troy and Cory; serving as buffer between them, endeavoring to turn their anger into understanding and love; helping relieve Troy’s guilt over Gabe; keeping his bed warm, and his libido satisfied. When asked to do so, she even cares for Raynell, Troy’s illegitimate daughter. She does all this because her family means everything to her. It defines her existence, and without it she would be lost.

Rose knows that whereas the family is her lifeline, such is not the case with Troy. He is restive and she must find ways to keep him near her. That is why she wants Troy to build the fence. When Troy and Cory can’t comprehend why she wants a fence, it is Bono who informs them that Rose wants it so she can keep her family safe from the forces that threaten the stability she has worked so hard to maintain. Rose’s constant prayer is for security, and the fence is a means of keeping her family in and the world out, but Troy delays building the fence, perhaps,
fearful of the restrictions it will place on him. Something within him rebels against the idea of being cut off from the world, of having no escape from the pressures of family life. Although he loves Rose, the daily grind of providing for his family for eighteen years has left little room for joy. Maybe, subconsciously, Troy feels that the fence, while keeping his family within, might also keep him away from his mistress with whom he finds relief from the problems and pressures of his life. With Alberta, he can look beyond his social role as a breadwinner and revel in the phallocentric realm of his mythic ancestor, celebrating the freedom of his emotions and satisfying his need for laughter and sexual release. But as he learns, this freedom comes at an enormous social price: it costs him his relationship with Rose.

When Troy learns that Alberta is pregnant, he confesses his infidelity to Rose. With this confession Rose’s entire world begins to collapse. Suddenly, she is in danger of losing everything for which she has worked so hard. For years, “she has been everything a wife should and could be” (162), submerging her personality to stand by Troy and build a home, putting her personal dreams on hold to let him and Cory grow. Therefore, Troy’s profession that the affair resulted, not from her shortcomings as a wife, but rather because Alberta made him feel good about himself, made him laugh “all the way down to the bottom of his shoes,” (162), elicits a very poignant response from her:
. . . . What about me? Don’t you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh so I could feel good? You not the only one who’s got wants and needs. But I held on to you Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you. . . .(165)

In this heartrending speech, Rose informs Troy that he is not the only one who has sacrificed and desired more during their eighteen year marriage, but for her that was all those feelings were, a desire, for her faithfulness to her family kept her from acting upon that desire. When she felt herself slipping, she held to her family tighter, until the urge left her, which is what Troy should have done. But instead, he gave in to those longings in his “attempt to steal second base after staying on first all his life” (164).

As Rose admits to Cory on the day of Troy’s funeral, it was not until Troy’s confession that she realized her mistake in not asserting herself more. Her self-effacement allowed Troy to take her for granted; by giving him her strength, she weakened herself:

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 that 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. (189-190)
By investing her hopes, dreams, and personality in her husband, Rose neglected an essential part of herself. Now she has very little left to call her own.

Consequently, Troy’s infidelity forces Rose to recognize that she has lost contact with herself and that she must reconnect. Interestingly, though, she does not begin this reconnection immediately. For months she simply maintains an emotional distance from Troy, perhaps bathing her wounds and hoping that he will end his affair with Alberta. Whatever the reason, it soon becomes clear to her Troy has no intentions of ending his relationship with Alberta, so she confronts him with an ultimatum: either Alberta or her. Obviously she comes to realize that however much she might need the marriage or her family, she will not live a lie. But, just as she issues the ultimatum, fate intervenes—Alberta dies in childbirth—and spares her the decision of rejecting the family that has defined her. Yet, Alberta’s death also leaves Troy’s progeny motherless. When Troy brings the baby home, Rose is forced to either reject Raynell, and by implication Troy’s betrayal; or accept her, a tangible reminder of her husband’s infidelity. Rose chooses the latter.

By taking in Raynell, Rose becomes a mother once more and begins to reconnect with herself. As she admits to Cory on the day of Troy’s funeral, she had married only to fill some of the empty spaces in her life, and “one of them empty spaces was being somebody’s mother.” And, becoming Raynell’s mother allows
Rose to regain those pieces she relinquished to Troy during the course of their marriage. In some ways this new found motherhood becomes a replacement for her failed marriage, for once she accepts Raynell she puts the marriage completely aside (she tells Troy from that moment on his baby has a mother but he is a womanless man (173)) and completely embraces motherhood. Indeed, it revives her and as she tells Cory, gives her a new outlook on life:

By the time Raynell came into the house, me and your daddy had lost touch with one another. I didn't want to make my blessing off of nobody's fortune . . . but I took on to Raynell like she was all them babies I had wanted and never had. Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life. And if the lord see fit to keep up my strength . . . I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you . . . I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me. (190)

Thus, Rose’s acceptance of Raynell can also be viewed as an act of catharsis. Mothering Raynell allows her to give full release of all the emotions she has had within. For so long this suppression has caused her to not only be repressed, but oppressed as well. With Raynell, Rose is able to experience the joys of motherhood without the fear of having to give up her identity.

By the end of Fences, both Rose and Cory have come to realize that true empowerment comes from accepting and learning from all aspects of one's past and life. It is a realization that allows them to come to terms with the ghosts that haunt them and lead affirming lives. This recognition is due in part to their husband and father, Troy Maxson. Unfortunately, Troy
did not come to this understanding himself. Troy refused to acknowledge that his father's life was his life, that his identity emerged from his father's, and as a result dies a bitter and uninformed man estranged from his wife and son. But, the lesson learned from his life will serve as a positive example for his family for years to come.
Chapter Seven

The Ground On Which He Stands: Charles S. Dutton on August Wilson

Actor, director and producer Charles S. Dutton has had the opportunity to work extensively with August Wilson, from his humble beginnings at the Eugene O’Neill Playwright Conference to his Tony and Pulitzer Prize winning Broadway performances. Dutton played the lead male character in three of August Wilson’s most successful plays, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*, and with the exception of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (in which he only performed in the Yale Repertory production), he was the driving force in both the Yale Repertory and Broadway performances.

In October, 2000, I had the opportunity to interview Dutton when he was on the Dillard University campus. What follows is a transcript of that interview in which Dutton discusses his experience working with Wilson and offers insight into the motivations of those characters he has had the opportunity to portray: Levee, Herald Loomis and Boy Willie. In addition, Dutton candidly speaks about Wilson’s dramatic vision and Wilson’s idea for an institutionalized African-American theatre.

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WILLIAMS PAGE: What was it like working with Wilson?

DUTTON: August and I first worked together in 1982 when his play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was accepted for workshopping at the Eugene O’Neill National Playwright Conference. I was
still a student at the Yale School of Drama. I was in my second year.

When I first read the play and someone pointed the playwright out to me, I said, “That’s not the person who wrote this play. It can’t be.” And I said that because August was so unassuming and laid back. The play seemed like it should have been written by a guy who was loud and more assertive.

At that point it was just a staged reading, so we pretty much just said hello to one another and that was it. But in 1984 there was the production of *Ma Rainey* at the Yale Rep; that’s when I got to know him better. At that moment I guess you can say that we were both in awe, not of one another, but the moment; that destiny and fate had brought he, I, and Lloyd Richards together. Thinking that 25 years earlier in 1959 Lloyd had done the same thing with another young, promising playwright and actor, Lorraine Hansberry and Sidney Poitier. Then 25 years later here he was doing the same thing with another young, exciting playwright.

WILLIAMS PAGE: And actor, right?

DUTTON: Yes, and actor. So it was kind of beautiful to revel in Lloyd’s destiny. That kind of thing doesn’t happen often in the theatre, so it was a magical time.

For us to come together that way and launch each other’s career was wonderful. I can only describe it as one of the greatest times I’ve had in the theatre, and I’m sure he’d say the same thing.
WILLIAMS PAGE: Had you been in any other plays before you did *Ma Rainey*?

DUTTON: No, *Ma Rainey* was my first professional job. Actually, I became a member of the union while I was working with the play.

WILLIAMS PAGE: You have had the opportunity to portray the lead male character in three of Wilson’s plays, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson*. What was it like to play each of those characters, for they are completely different as far as personalities and life perspective are concerned.

DUTTON: Different personalities they do have, but as far as life perspective is concerned, I’m not sure they’re so different.

Let’s start with *Ma Rainey*, and why other actors fail to realize or capture that part. The character Levee is 33 years old, but he’s very much a man-child, so there has to be some imbalance with him. Now when I say imbalance, I don’t mean that he’s mentally challenged, but that he’s severely, emotionally scarred.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Are you referring to the scene in the text where he talks about his parents?

DUTTON: Yes, the sense of his father being killed and his mother being raped; all of that. He’s so emotionally scarred that there has to be some imbalance to him. And the imbalance is pretty much the man-child aspect of him. Levee is a
character who can talk about your mother all day long, but the minute you start talking about his mother he wants to fight, and that’s because of his past, what he’s seen. But on a deeper level if Levee is played as the big, strong, know-it all villain who can take care of himself and knows what he’s doing, then the murder of Toledo at the end of the play is indeed an act of murder and not a crime of passion. I’ve seen it played post-Broadway where either the actor or the director don’t know this and you don’t see this Levee. He’s a hoodlum. But he has to be played with almost a boyish, childlike, lovable quality, where the audience just wants to take him, hug him and love him despite what he does or says.

WILLIAMS PAGE: I would describe Boy Willie that way as well.

DUTTON: Yes, but in a whole different way. Boy Willie can take care of himself; Levee can’t. Boy Willie wouldn’t spend a whole week’s paycheck on a pair of shoes. Boy Willie is looking for something very practical—100 acres, and Levee is chasing a pipedream—that this white studio executive is going to give him a record deal. The three older guys try to tell him this the entire play, “Man, don’t trust that white man,” but he doesn’t listen.

Boy Willie has an ability to take care of himself, a history of his own. Boy Willie has what Levee doesn’t have—that family structure of support.
WILLIAMS PAGE: Family support with the exception of Berniece, wouldn’t you say?

DUTTON: Yes, but it’s still family. He has somewhere to go. They may be at odds with one another, but she’s still family. For example, she’s been telling Boy Willie to leave since he got there, but does he leave? No. Does she insist that he leave? No, because he’s her brother; he also has uncles, but Levee doesn’t have any of that. His family is the band; his blood family has been wiped out.

WILLIAMS PAGE: But he ostracizes the members of the band and Ma who could possibly be a surrogate family for him.

DUTTON: I don’t think he ostracizes them so much as this. It’s that beautiful thing that black men have, the dozens. The band plays the dozens throughout the entire play, and if the play is done right, the banter between them is always light, with a lot of love for one another and not viciously. Now I’ve seen it done viciously where you would think that they hate each other, but they don’t. It’s just the way band members are. “Ah, man shut-up. You ain’t nothing. Nothing but an old trumpet player that come a dime a dozen.” But all of that is said with them enjoying one another, and when the play is directed with them seeming like they don’t enjoy one another that’s when it doesn’t work. Those four guys should have as much of a good time together when they’re talking about one another as they do when they’re not talking about one another. When the play is done that way, in the sense that the other band
members really do love Levee and he really loves them, he’s not ostracized.

Now Ma’s problem with Levee isn’t one to write volumes of critique about. Ma is Ma. Ma doesn’t take no shit. Play the songs you’ve been told to play and that’s it. The only reason Ma has got a beef with Levee is because he’s after her girl. If Dussie Mae wasn’t in the equation, they’d be ok because Ma is the type of person who wouldn’t pay Levee any attention anyway. He’s just a member of the band. If you notice the only person she talks to in the band on a serious level is Cutler. The others she’ll talk to if she has to, but it’s Cutler who she talks to about personal things.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Let’s talk about Herald Loomis, whom I would say is the darkest character of the three. What was it like playing him?

DUTTON: He’s probably the most difficult character I’ve ever done. That’s a difficult role to play. It was so difficult that I didn’t want to take it to New York.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Really?

DUTTON: First of all it was two years before it even went to New York. They did regional theatre for two years, and I said I’d go out of my mind if I had to do that character for two years. Herald Loomis is probably one of the most difficult characters to play in literature, period. He’s as difficult to play as any Shakespearian, O’Neill or Tennessee Williams character. As a matter of fact, I would compare the level of
difficulty to playing a Greek character rather than a Shakespearian character.

If the character were on stage all the time it would be less difficult to play him, but because he’s on and off the stage so much, he’s difficult. With him you can’t go off stage, have a cup of tea, read the newspaper and be ready to go back on twenty minutes later. You have to stay in character even when you’re not on stage. With him you have to leave the stage, go backstage and find a corner and stay in that corner until it’s time to go back on stage. Otherwise when you go back on stage you won’t be the same intense character you were twenty minutes ago. You’d have to regenerate it. So, playing Herald Loomis is a very lonely life.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Because he’s so intense?

DUTTON: Yes. All the things that motivate him are very intense. Loomis is one of those people in the world who has seen things. Whether they’re on the other side of the spirit world or whatever, Loomis has seen things and nobody understands him. Loomis can’t go up to people and say, “You know I saw bones coming up out of the water.” People wouldn’t listen because they’d think he was crazy. The only person he can talk to about that is Bynum because Bynum has seen things. When you walk around not knowing whether the person who walks besides you is a real person or a bones person, that makes you intense.

That’s what Loomis’ problem is. He doesn’t know who’s who now because as soon as those bones came out of the Atlantic
Ocean they became human beings. They got flesh and clothes and started walking around everywhere, so Loomis doesn’t know if a person is a bones person or a regular person, and he carries that all the time. Consequently, when he looks at people that’s what he’s trying to find out. “Are you one of those people?”

It takes a certain kind of actor to play that role because you have to have a lot of discipline.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Well, let’s go back to Levee. How did you prepare to play this imbalanced role, as you call it?

DUTTON: By making him a man-child. If you’re given that direction, that he has to be a man-child, then it’s easier to play him. Levee’s also a boundless character. He’s full of fun and frolic; he’s fearless, uninhibited, lovable, mischievous, deceptive, conniving; he can be vicious, but at the same time apologetic. He’s the complete package to play, but at the same time if he’s played as a gangster, a guy with a knife then the murder at the end of the play is not justified.

WILLIAMS PAGE: In what way?

DUTTON: There’s a difference between a guy who has a switchblade in his back pocket versus one with a pocketknife in his back pocket. A guy with a switchblade has a weapon and is looking to stab somebody. A guy with a pocketknife has a tool, not a weapon.

Anybody who worked on a farm had a pocketknife. You could use it to open something if you were on the road, a can of beans; if you had to screw something in, you could use it; you
could use it to clean your fingernails; or you could use it to cut something like a piece of string, so it was a tool, rarely used as a weapon. You could use it as a weapon, but to pull it out, un-do it and all that is time consuming.

But with a switchblade you’re looking to cut somebody. That’s what it’s for. It’s not a tool. You try to screw something with it and it will break. So, when I played the part, I made the decision that Levee would not carry a switchblade but a pocketknife and that makes the difference in how he is perceived—the guy who’s looking to hurt somebody versus the guy who has a tool. Although it’s not said, all of the band members have a pocketknife. That’s a part and parcel of men, especially men back then.

Part of Levee’s man-childness informs why he’s so gullible about certain things. For example, why he believes that Sturdyvant is going to produce his records when the other tells him that Sturdyvant is not.

Levee does things in the play that are classic Greek tragedy. First he comes into the play with all kinds of hubris. He’s on top of the world, you can’t tell him nothing, nothing can stop him or stand in his way. Then in a moment of revelation he challenges the gods and after that challenge everything is downhill. The beauty of the play is that in the moment of killing Toledo it’s about the amount of self-hatred we all have within ourselves. At that point he hates Sturdyvant for reneging on his promise to cut him a record deal, and he
hates himself for believing Sturdyvant’s promise, but he can’t
do anything to Sturdyvant because he’s a white man. So when
Toledo steps on his shoes all those years of self-hatred start
to surface and he reaches out and hurts the next best thing—his
own people.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Kind of like a transference of anger?

DUTTON: Yes, as a culture we’ve had a history of doing
this. We couldn’t do anything to the oppressor so we’d do it to
ourselves.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Like the rioting in L.A. after the Rodney
King verdict?

DUTTON: Exactly.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Let’s talk more about Boy Willie. I’ve
read that Wilson said that he wrote the character of Boy Willie
with you in mind as playing the role. How are you
similar/dissimilar to Boy Willie?

DUTTON: I don’t think he wrote it because of any likeness
between me and the character, but he wrote it for the actor. If
a playwright writes a play and the actor has the capacity for
him to realize that character completely and fully, then he’s
going to write for that actor’s voice or capacities. As a
matter of fact, he going to say, “Well, I can stretch myself as
a writer because I know this actor has the physical and vocal
stamina to do this work.” So, he wasn’t writing based upon any
similarities between me and the character. He was writing based
upon the type of acting talent I’ve been blessed with, that I’m
the type of actor who understands the physicality of the theatre and has the emotional depth required.

Had I not done *Ma Rainey* or *Joe Turner*, I don’t think he would have made that statement. He just would have been writing a play, but because he had seen what I had brought to Levee and Herald Loomis, he knew that I could do the same thing with Boy Willie. And he hasn’t done that since then because I haven’t been available. Now if I were to say, “Come on August, it’s time for me to get back on the stage.” He’d probably write a character for a play with me in mind. It’s been said, not by him but by other people, that he hasn’t written those type epic characters since that play because I haven’t been available to do them. This isn’t ego, but August became very spoiled in his early days. He had James Earl Jones and myself doing his plays, so he became very spoiled.

People may refute this, but there’s a wide river of stage actors and trained artists, but there’s only a tiny pond of real talent, and what I mean by real talent is yes, everyone can walk and talk on the stage, but not everyone can realize a playwright’s work; everyone can’t make the audience leave the theatre wanting to change their lives after witnessing and experiencing a true theatrical event. Everybody can’t capture an audience that way. There are only a handful of actors on the entire planet who can really play King Lear. Just because you’re an English actor doesn’t mean you can do Shakespeare, and just because you’re a black actor doesn’t mean you can do August
Wilson. If that were true, every performance of an August Wilson play would be monumental. I don’t think the rest of the U.S. other than New York has really seen August Wilson done the way it should be done.

So I think he wrote the play for what he saw in me as an actor because I don’t know what Boy Willie and I have in common. I certainly don’t dress like him, but I’m sure there are some things. For example, I guess you could say that we’re both a lover of life, but I’m not the kind of actor who looks for similarities between the character and myself. To me you’ve only done the role, the play and the playwright justice when you as a performer leave an ounce of your internal essence on that stage floor every night. If you haven’t done that, you haven’t done the play.

WILLIMAS PAGE: With that in mind, for the sake of this interview would you repeat what you said at the roundtable discussion about the difference between the entertainer, the actor and the artist?

DUTTON: Certainly. An entertainer will do anything regardless of the image he or she is portraying or depicting; it doesn’t matter. An actor will do most things; he or she won’t do everything the entertainer will, but he or she will do just about any thing. The artist will only choose to do those things that he or she feels will advance civilization. He or she expects to change the lives and minds of the audience.
WILLIAMS PAGE: Wilson has described his dramatic vision as teaching African-Americans that we should not avoid our past, but should face it and learn from it because our past holds lessons that can help us succeed in the present and future. What’s your opinion on looking to the past and learning from it?

DUTTON: I agree with that totally. If I had to put into a sentence or a paragraph what I’m about, I’d just simply say that in the larger scheme of things, we’re only on this planet a couple of seconds, life goes by extremely fast, and as an artist you have to leave an epithet. Mine would simply be that you have to respect the African tradition of lineage. There were many who were entertainers decades ago who had to be buffoons. They had to play clowns and demeaning characters because that was the only venue available to them, but they’d be turning over in their graves to see that people are still doing those kinds of things today. The sad part about it is that you make the same kind of money doing intelligent work as you do unintelligent work, so you might as well make it intelligent.

Who would have thought we would see the day when black music would demean women, promote killing one another, and glorify individualism and disunity? The artist of yesterday didn’t struggle for that. To me that’s sacrilegious, an un-African thing to do. It’s a total disrespect of your cultural lineage. I know many of those artists say they’re only speaking from experience, but that’s bullshit. I used to rob banks, so every time I write or direct something is it going to be about
robbing banks? No. To me it's about what I would like to do in my lifetime, to get people to understand that you're supposed to progress in culture, not digress.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Does that sum up who you are as an artist?

DUTTON: Yes. I've always considered myself an artist, since the day I got out of the penitentiary. If I were to let that go I would probably be richer and more famous, and I would probably being doing some of that buffoonish, clownish work on television I just finished talking about, or I'd be doing any thing in the movies just to be rich and famous. But, that's not who I am, what my chemistry make-up is. I've always been an outlaw, since I was 12 years old, and I'm still an outlaw, just in a different way.

I may not get to be the richest or most famous person in Hollywood, but I've never cared about that. I've always cared about whether or not I would be able to look at something I'd done five years later and not be embarrassed about it, so I've always tried to choose what I do extremely carefully. Now, though, I don't have to choose as much because I'm only given or sent those things that people know I'd be interested in.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Since we're on the subject, in what projects are you currently involved?

DUTTON: I'm continuing to direct "The Corner."

I'm trying to resist becoming a director, but it seems that's what the industry is trying to make me become. I'm developing an hour-
long drama and a half-hour comedy for HBO. I’m also developing a story on the life of Denmark Vesey for HBO.

I try to read two scripts a day. I usually receive ten. I’m looking for the one thing that will move me.

I recently received a phone call from August’s people about performing in his latest play King Headley which is playing in L.A. I read it, but it didn’t have a strong protagonist.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Is it the latest play in his ten-play cycle?

DUTTON: Yes, it’s set in 1980. It’s about the son of Headley from Seven Guitars.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Wilson has said that one of the problems of African-American theatre is that it is not institutionalized. Do you agree with that assessment?

DUTTON: Yes, that’s true, but we also don’t have a history of theatre. But, there’s also no culture of theatre in America like there is in Britain. Yes, there’s Broadway and regional theatre, but the regional theatre movement is only about 35 years old. Minus a culture, it’s every man for himself. White people will create their own personal, public and private endowments to ensure that their theatre is taken care of. We don’t, and that’s because for us life has always been a struggle. We haven’t had the extra money to set aside for those type things. Another problem I see is that black theatre management doesn’t possess those organizational skills needed to keep the theatres afloat.
WILLIAMS PAGE: So how do we move towards institutionalization?

DUTTON: As I said, first we need people with good organizational skills. In the heyday of government liberalism in the arts, a lot of the money that was given to black theatres was squandered, so we need people who will be able to run the theatre as well as keep the books. Secondly, we need people who will be committed and sincere about running the theatre, people who have an interest in creating a culture of theatre and passing it on. Next we need to find playwrights who are writing serious works, nurture them and give them the venue they need.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Do you think part of the problem is that as a people, historically, we tend to not patronize those plays that are serious, like Joe Turner, but patronize those that are less serious and more comical such as Beauty Shop and A Good Man is Hard to Find?

DUTTON: Those type plays, and to call them plays is a stretch, have their place and audience, and they prove my point about the difference between the entertainer, the actor and the artist. Those people are only out to make a dollar. The only thing I can say about those “plays” is that do get people to get out of the house and spend $25 or $30 to see them. Now if we could cultivate those people who go see those type plays for some serious drama, then we’d be getting somewhere. Now I believe that can be done; it just will take some time; it will have to be a process.
WILLIAMS PAGE: As I am sure you are aware, in 1990 Wilson was criticized when during the search for a director for the screen version of Fences he stated that he would prefer a black director for the film and would stand firm on that preference. His reason being that he wanted someone who would, and I’m quoting, “Share the cultural sensibilities of his characters.” Do you support that belief?

DUTTON: To a degree I think it has more to do with the kind of director a person is rather than whether he or she is black or white. There are some black directors who couldn’t doing Fences, to be honest; who would screw it up just as much as a white director would. John Singleton can’t do Fences. He wasn’t around during the 50s. He has no idea about that decade. It takes a certain kind of human being, and I don’t mean Spielberg, that would really understand the dynamics of the individual struggle of Troy, and not necessarily the cultural scope of it.

I agree with August in that that whole scenario has been forced by the lack of the industry’s diversity. It doesn’t make August Wilson a race-baiter because he insists that black directors do black work. It’s Hollywood who says “We’ll let white directors do all the work, whether it’s white or black.” So, the reaction to that is ok, if the white directors get to do the majority of the work at least let the black directors do the black work.
The biggest problem with Oprah Winfrey's *Beloved* was that she didn't have a black director on that project to capture the cultural nuances. I'm sure there are some white directors who would have been able to capture the essence of it, the humanity of it, but they have to be those kinds of individuals.

We are a society that is very much racially and culturally divided despite what the pundits and politicians would like us to believe. Black people and white people are as different as night and day.

WILLIAMS PAGE: Well Mr. Dutton those are all of the questions I have for you. Do you have any final thoughts?

DUTTON: To really realize August Wilson's work takes just as much emotional commitment, physical commitment and overall sacrifice as it does with any other play or playwright. You have to be just as tireless and fearless to do August Wilson as you would Shakespeare. For August Wilson’s plays to retain their classical affinity, then one must be committed when he does them. Now, of course, kids in college should do August just as they do Shakespeare, but once you’re on a professional level you have to realize that that’s some beautiful stuff you’re spewing out, and that at this point it’s the only African-American historical record of literature in the theatre. When he finishes all ten plays, we’ll have a decade-by-decade volume of works that are ours. Now unfortunately they’re pretty much male-dominated, but nevertheless it’s ours. If we can find a black female writer who is going to chronicle the black female
experience in the last century, then we have to grab and nourish that person just as much as we have August Wilson.
Chapter Eight

Feeling Tomorrow Like I Feel Today: Conclusion

In 1925 historian Arthur Schomburg stated that the African-American must remake his past in order to make his future (231). Seventy-five years later this same idea is being espoused by August Wilson and has become the wellspring of his art. Wilson firmly believes that Africa should remain a powerful influence in the lives of African-Americans.

Of course, Wilson is far from the first African-American writer whose work calls for a spiritual return to Africa. This appeal may be traced back as early as the 1910s when writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes wrote about and encouraged ancestral ties. Additionally, in the 1960s Amiri Baraka and the other members of the Black Arts Movement advocated the idea that a linkage with Africa in the art, music and writing of African-Americans was crucial to their liberation from Western influence.

Like the works of his literary predecessors, in Wilson’s works, he emphasizes the wondrous possibilities that come from establishing bonds with one’s ancestry. One such possibility is the ability to shed the limitations imposed by others and achieve self-definition. However, this self-definition can only be attained if one has knowledge of, and accepts his past. Additionally, Wilson’s works demonstrate that in one’s roots there are solutions for the present and future, for the African heritage is a repository of both values and survival skills, and
when these solutions are applied to one’s daily life, they can have a liberating effect.

Pivotal to the idea of one’s heritage being a source of affirmation is the underlying premise to which Wilson constantly returns in his work, the Blues.

In Wilson’s opinion, there is no better teacher and recorder of African-American history than the Blues. Within the lyrics of the Blues are instructions on how to react to those situations one might find himself or herself faced with in a society that places race above individual merit. The Blues assures all who listen that their experiences are not singular to them, but are events that all within the race, at one time or another, have found themselves faced with, and if they just listen and learn they can prevail.

In the four plays analyzed in this study, this author has attempted to demonstrate that in Wilson’s earliest plays, by historical time setting, the protagonists must come to terms with their slave pasts. Although they would prefer to ignore them, they must willingly face and accept the forces of the past so that they can lead normal and happy lives. This author has also attempted to prove that the vehicle for this acceptance is music, for it is only after the characters recognize that their pasts and the music that is a part of their lives are the same, that they acquire the hope, power, and deliverance necessary to lead empowered futures.
Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson and Fences each depict either the positive results of facing one’s past or the negative results of continuing to deny it.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson demonstrate the personal freedom that comes from recognizing and accepting one’s cultural or personal legacy. In Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Herald Loomis learns that the only way he can find his “starting place in life” is to recognize the slave past, his enslavement on Joe Turner’s work farm and the enslavement of his ancestors in the South. He makes this connection when he sees the other characters dancing the juba and recalls the apparition of the bones people.

In The Piano Lesson Boy Willie learns that he cannot sell his legacy and Berniece learns that it should not be hidden either. They learn the past should be celebrated and passed on from generation to generation. The connection is made when Berniece plays the piano and unites the past and present Charles generations to forever exorcise Sutter’s ghost.

It is only after Herald Loomis and Berniece are able to reconcile with their pasts that they are able to move on with their lives into bright and empowered futures.

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and Fences, on the other hand, demonstrate what can possibly happen if one doesn’t establish a bond with his heritage. Unwilling to learn from and accept the sage advice of Ma and the other band members, Levee puts his
trust (and music) in the white man, Sturdyvant. And, when
Sturdyvant tramples upon that trust by reneging on his promise
to help Levee start a band and record his music, Levee lashes
out and kills Toledo, an action that will probably cause him to
spend the rest of his life in prison.

In Fences, Troy refuses to accept the fact that his legacy
is the same legacy of his sharecropper father. Throughout his
entire life he denies this legacy in himself and his son.
Because he refuses to accept his legacy, he dies estranged from Cory.

Certainly the approach used in this study is only one of a
myriad of possible approaches to studying Wilson and his
dramaturgy. As alluded to in the preceding chapters, there are
any number of ideas/issues to be further elaborated upon or
works and authors to which Wilson and his plays may be compared.

One approach to Wilson is to study the lack of
major/central female characters in his plays. The women in
Wilson’s plays often play marginal roles in the plots' action.
Wilson has been quoted as saying he doubts if he will ever make
a woman the focus of his work because of the fact that he is a
man (Shannon, “Ground” 151). Obviously, this comment has some
merit, but how can one write a people’s history and relegate its
women to the margins, when that people’s culture is a
matriarchal one? This is a question that certainly needs to be
addressed in any study of Wilson’s plays that approaches them
from a feminist perspective.
Throughout his career, Wilson has espoused that he is attempting to use his drama to promote cultural and political reform. He has also said that his plays challenge both the aesthetic and ideological premises of the reigning Caucasian, American theatre. While the former may be true, the latter assertion may be questioned. As several critics have pointed out, most notably Mary L. Bogumil, Wilson seems to be writing in the same tradition he is confronting.\(^1\) A new study could examine the ways in which, despite Wilson's argument, his plays, especially *Fences*, employ traits often found in American dram.

Another approach to Wilson is to compare his work to that of Amiri Baraka. Wilson has referred to Baraka as one of the four B's that influenced his writing. Certainly, to compare the idea of history/the African continuum in Baraka and Wilson's plays would be an endeavor leading to a full-length work of great scholarly magnitude.

Still another possible author/work comparison would be to consider the similarities between Wilson and Ellison. As was mentioned in Chapter Two of this study, Ellison, too, believed that music was an important aspect of African-American culture and made a conscious effort to make it an integral part of his fiction. Not only can the semblance in ideology between the two authors be written about, but innumerable connections can be drawn between *Invisible Man* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, as well. For example, the protagonist in both pieces is seeking to
make a place for himself in a world that has stripped him of his humanity.

The Piano Lesson can be compared to Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun. Although Wilson has said he has never read Hansberry, there is an uncanny similarity between the plays’ protagonists and their pursuit of the American dream.

A final approach would be to consider similarities that can be drawn between Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. Wilson has admitted to reading and admiring Morrison’s work, and as stated in the chapter concerning that play, the two works read as companion pieces.

As Wilson continues to write and add the final two plays of his ten-play cycle, there will be many other scholarly opportunities made available to the student and fan of August Wilson.
Notes

Chapter One

1. Wilson’s seventh play, Jitney, did not have a Broadway stint; instead, it ran Off-Broadway at the Second Stage Theatre during the 1999-2000 season.

2. Wilson believes one reason he has been successful as a playwright is because he has not read anyone else’s plays, including those of the “great” playwrights. However, Mark William Rocha points out discrepancies in this assertion in “August Wilson and the Four B’s Influences.”

3. Full-length studies of Wilson’s plays include Kim Pereira’s August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey; Sandra Shannon’s The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson; Joan Herrington’s I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done: August Wilson’s Process of Playwrighting; Peter Wolfe’s August Wilson, and Mary L. Bogumil’s Understanding August Wilson. Two noteworthy essay compilations are Mary Elkins’ August Wilson: A Casebook and Alan Nadel’s May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson.

4. Whereas Pereira focuses on the theme of separation and migration in his work, Herrington follows Wilson’s process of revision.

5. Peter Wolfe uses these adjectives in an attempt to explain why Seven Guitars has not been as critically successful as its predecessors, p. 152.

6. In Herrington’s I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done: August Wilson’s Process of Playwrighting, she recounts how Wilson admits he has always been intrigued by jitney cab drivers, p. 114.

7. In From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. note whereas in 1970 the African-American unemployment rate was 6.7% by 1975 it had increased to 14.7%, p. 570.

8. Originally Booster was sentenced to death by electrocution but later the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

9. Peter Marks makes this comment in his review of the play in “Cabdriver’s Melancholy Resists the Liquid Cure,” p. 3.

10. Jitney is unpublished. The play was seen July 22, 2001 when it premiered in New Orleans under the direction of Wendell Pierce whose production company, Jinja Media, produced the play during its Off-Broadway run.
11. Ruby decides to tell Hedley he is the father of her child because “he’s the only man who ever wanted to give [her] something,” *Seven Guitars*, pp.95-96.

12. *King Hedley II* is unpublished. The play was seen January 2001 at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago.

**Chapter Two**

1. No extant script of *The Drama of King Shotaway* exists. This information was garnered from Bernard L. Peterson’s *Contemporary Black American Playwrights and Their Plays: A Biographical Directory and Dramatic Index*, pp. 37-40.

2. During that year Silas Green’s was absorbed by another company, the Gooding No. 1.

3. The units were concentrated in urban areas like New Jersey, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.


5. According to Craig before the Federal Theatre Project, there were not many African-Americans who could afford to pay the price of commercial theater tickets, and most commercial plays were produced by whites who portrayed African-American characters as comic or subservient, p. 8.

6. Craig states this hierarchy was the result of the derogatory stereotypes and myths which had been established by the white stage of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

7. *No Place to Be Somebody* also has the distinction of being the first off-Broadway play to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama.

8. Throughout his career Gordone has adamantly refused to be pigeonholed as a black playwright who writes about black experience. Rather he has repeatedly defined himself as an American concerned with what he calls “American chemistry,” the cross-cultural mixture of races and religions.

9. Baraka asserts that in awarding Fuller the Pulitzer, the Pulitzer committee was not rewarding his writing but the ideology presented in the play, one that is identical to that of white imperialism and supremacy, p. 54.

11. According to Mark William Rocha, Wilson transported three quintessentially Barakan themes to his 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 the quest for one’s song that is ultimately realized in the blues, “A Conversation with August Wilson,” pp. 8-9.


14. Hereafter, for clarity, references to the music will be distinguished by the representation *Blues* and references to the condition will be distinguished by the representation *blues*.

15. Houston A. Baker, Jr. coined the term in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, finding it a better descriptive than the word culture, p. 64.

16. Most notably this is the French term “histoire” which Fabre and O’Meally defines as "history as it is lived and experienced; the discipline through which history is approached and the narrator who relates it," p. 6.

17. In *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, author Alferdteen Harrison says that this forty-five year span represents the period during which the south continuously saw tremendous decreases in its African-American population, p. vii.

18. In *Black Exodus* Harrison notes that 40 acres and a mule were considered the appropriate means of survival at the time, p. vii.

19. Most commonly known for its “separate but equal” doctrine, *Plessy v Ferguson* legalized separate railroad accommodations.

20. In her essay “A Transplant That Did Not Take: August Wilson’s Views on the Great Migration,” Sandra G. Shannon lists those evils as blasphemy, self-mutilation, convulsions, arrested speech, unexplained scars, incarceration, domestic turmoil, splintering of the nuclear family structure, and mental trauma that manifests itself in either neurosis, schizophrenia, or dementia, p. 660.
Chapter Three

1. There is some disparity about when the exodus North actually began. Some historians put the date as early 1879 when thousands of African-Americans left the farms and towns of the south in search of a better life in the north while most others use 1910, *From Slavery to Freedom*, pp. 309; 374-375.

2. In this sense, Seth seems to act as Wilson’s creative voice, voicing Wilson’s feelings about the Great Migration.

3. See Chapter Two of this study for a description of life in the south for African-Americans during this time.


5. Mattie’s experience rings of the Igbo idea of the obanje, a wicked child who perpetually dies and return to the mother’s womb to be reborn.


Chapter Four

1. The peak years of the Harlem Renaissance are often accepted as 1923-1929.

2. The NAACP was formally established in 1910 after having grown out of the Niagara Movement. The Urban League was established in 1911 when The Committee for Improving Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women merged.

3. In *The Urban Blues*, Charles Keil notes that there are four main categories of blues: country blues, city blues, urban blues and soul music. The distinction between them being the type and number of instruments used and delivery style. Ma Rainey is associated with the city blues, pp. 63-64.

Chapter Five

1. According to John Hope Franklin, jazz reached its height during what has become known as the Jazz Age, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 412.
2. Many slave musicians played the fiddle because it could be fashioned out of tree bark.

3. In *The Book of the Piano*, Dominic Gill notes that because player pianos could be purchased and played for hours at a time, they were sometimes used instead of musicians who had to be compensated and sometimes fed and sheltered, p. 179.

4. For more information about orita meta, see J.O. Awolalu’s *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*.

**Chapter Six**

1. The Brown decision was a direct blow to *Plessy v Ferguson* which had legalized segregation.

2. Many African-American professors, politicians and artists were interrogated by the FBI for subversive activities such as membership in various so-called communist front organizations during the Red Scare.

3. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 authorized the federal government to bring civil suits in its own name to obtain injunctive relief in federal courts where any citizen was denied or threatened in his or her right to vote.

4. In 1955 fourteen-year old Emmett Till was brutally lynched in Money, MS when he allegedly whistled at a white woman.

5. In *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping*, Edward Royce estimates the share being one-third to one-half the crop’s cash value, p. 182.

6. In *Origins*, Royce presents three explanations for the rise of southern sharecropping: 1) the pre-disposing conditions argument which attributes the emergence of sharecropping to the existence of three factors (a class of large landholders, a shortage of labor and a level not so advanced that it provided incentives to mechanization); 2) the good reasons argument which is defined in the text of this study; and 3) the class conflict model which states sharecropping emerged from the conflict between planters and newly freed African-Americans as they confronted one another with mutually antagonist visions of a new economic order, pp. 3-13.

7. As is discussed in Chapter Two of this study, Wilson believes that the African-American’s migration North led to conditions far worse than the one he had experienced in the south.

8. Although Negro baseball was officially organized in 1920, the first team, the Cuban Giants was formed in 1885 at a long
Island summer retreat. See Robert Peterson’s Only the Ball Was White, p. 94.

9. According to Donn Rogosin in Invisible Men: Life In Baseball’s Negro Leagues, Negro League baseball teams won over 60% of their encounters with white major league opponents, p. 6.

10. At its December 1867 meeting, the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP) called for exclusion of “any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons.” This exclusionary measure became known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement. See Rogosin, p. 3.

11. In Kim Pereira’s August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey he states that this descriptive is a symbolic reference to the Ku Klux Klan or all white men as Death-like figures, pp. 42-43.

12. In Understanding August Wilson, Mary L. Bogumil suggests that Troy’s response to Cory’s question reveals that he has linked the relationship between son and father with the relationship between employer and employed, thereby, defining their relationship in the language of commerce rather than the language of blood, p. 48.

13. Troy does not finish the fence until Alberta dies, perhaps only then to keep whatever is left of his family in tact.

14. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Troy can be viewed as a cultural descendant of Eshu, who is also the phallic God of copulation and fecundity and often portrayed with an enormous penis. See Gates’ The Signifying Monkey, p. 6.

Chapter Eight

1. In Understanding August Wilson, Bogumil points out that Fences, in structure and theme, is very similar to Eugene O’Neill’s Long Day’s Journey Into Night and Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, pp. 38-41.
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Vita

Yolanda Williams Page was born in Shreveport, Louisiana. Upon graduation as valedictorian from Green Oaks High School, she attended Dillard University where she was a University Scholar, the highest academic honor bestowed on entering freshman at that time. During her matriculation at Dillard, Williams Page double majored in English and Business Management and received the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1991.

Upon graduation from Dillard, Williams Page was admitted into the Graduate School at Louisiana State University where received the Master of Arts degree in English in 1993. Thereafter, she was admitted into the university’s doctoral program.

Williams Page began teaching at her alma mater, Dillard University, in 1994 because she wanted to serve as a role model and mentor to the students who now sat in the very same desks in which she had sat. She is Assistant Professor of English and will serve as Department Chairperson for academic year 2001-2002.

In January, 2000, Williams Page married David Page with whom she looks forward to sharing many more years of marital bliss.
Candidate: Yolanda Williams Page

Major Field: English

Title of Dissertation: I Won't Be Blue Always: Music As Past In August
Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and Fences

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination: 10/23/2001