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Audience and the African American playwright: an analysis of the importance of audience selection and audience response on the dramaturgies of August Wilson and Ed Bullins

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AUDIENCE AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDIENCE SELECTION AND
AUDIENCE RESPONSE ON THE DRAMATURGIES OF
AUGUST WILSON AND ED BULLINS

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DEDICATION

To Mark, Morgan and Mama (Gwendolyn Menson)
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So many people have touched my life as I have toiled through this process that I could simply write one sentence saying, “Thank you to all those persons who believed in me, when I did not believe in myself.” However, I wish to attempt to list them all as a way to let them know that their assistance, prayers and support will always be inscribed on my heart.

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ABSTRACT

In this study I discuss the importance of audience selection and response upon the dramaturgies of African American playwrights August Wilson and Ed Bullins. Using the theories and criteria for African American art and theatre as espoused by Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Amiri Baraka, and created by the 1960s and 1970s Black Theatre and Black Aesthetic movements, I discuss the importance of audience selection to Wilson’s dramas, especially given his tremendous success on Broadway. I also explore the claimed lack of importance of audience to Bullins’s dramaturgy, particularly as demonstrated in those plays written during his brief tenure as Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party and those works comprising his twentieth century cycle in which he discusses the lives of members of what he calls the “black underclass.” This study relies on theatre reviews from New York Times theatre critics on both Wilson and Bullins as examples of mainstream audience responses to their works. Moreover, I cite published interviews by both playwrights where they discuss their influences, approaches to drama, and the importance and/or lack of importance of audience to their work.

This study concludes with the chapter “Same Subject, Different Audience” in which it is noted that although Wilson and Bullins have both been influenced by Baraka and the Black Theatre/Black Aesthetic movements (also indirectly by the theories of Locke and Du Bois), they
offer differing representations of the African American experience. The reason for these different approaches to the same subject is because Wilson and Bullins create their works for different audiences. While Wilson presents an African America that features the “common folk” of the culture, and (indirectly) protests against racism and segregation, he creates this world for mainstream audience members. Conversely, Bullins explores the dark side of the African American experience in his “black America,” focusing on issues and characters (the other “common folk”—pimps, prostitutes, etc.) that many mainstream American and middle class African Americans theatre patrons wish to ignore.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE—WHOM SHOULD IT ADDRESS?

From its inception, formal African American theatre has struggled with two issues: How should the African American be represented on stage? and to whom should African American drama be focused—the mainstream, white American audience or an African American audience reflective of the culture to which it represents? This latter problem has been one that has perplexed the African American dramatist the most, for he not only desires his craft to be reflective of his desire to present a story dramatically, but he also wishes to attain financial and critical success. In the essay "The Dilemma of The Negro Author," James Weldon Johnson discusses this quandary that the African American author, in this case a dramatist, finds himself facing: "the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience" (477). Johnson notes how this audience is more than just a double audience made up of "both [w]hite and black America," but it is an audience that is "divided" by perspectives and insights. Because of this double and divided audience, Johnson states that the African American writer faces the challenge and/or decision as to which audience to appeal to:

The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter, he is immediately called upon to solve,
consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools. (477)

Although stated in 1928, Johnson's argument was relevant throughout the twentieth century and remains true today, especially as African American dramatists struggle to have their works received and respected within American mainstream theatre culture. The works of Lorraine Hansberry, Charles Fuller, Amiri Baraka, and Douglas Turner Ward all reflect Johnson's contention; however, they also demonstrate what can occur once the African American dramatist solves the double audience dilemma and selects the mainstream audience as its focus—commercial success.

Framed within W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory that the African American has existed as "two warring souls" since and because of slavery, Johnson's double audience theory reflects the complexity that the African American dramatist confronts as he struggles to create work for art's sake and for economic benefit. The desire for financial and critical success oftentimes takes precedence over artistic desire; hence, the African American dramatist finds himself appealing to the audience that can ensure that success. Traditionally, this audience has been the mainstream, white American audience.
When an African American dramatist makes the choice to follow the more profitable audience, he often finds himself riddled with criticism from his cultural contemporaries that he has "sold out" and sacrificed his true voice for acceptance by white America. Moreover, this dramatist often becomes self-indicting and critical of himself. However, once the choice to appease the mainstream audience is made, the African American dramatist has the opportunity to experience waves of commercial and critical success that his contemporaries can only dream of. This success, though, does come at a price. As Adam Miller offers in "It's a Long Way to St. Louis: Notes on the Audience for Black Drama," this success, particularly in "Johnson's time [the early part of the twentieth century] demanded that the Negro playwright lie about his experience...[for,] most whites were willing to see Negroes presented in images that permitted white comfort" (302). Unfortunately, the theatrical world has not changed much since Johnson's essay, for it appears that mainstream comfort continues to be a prerequisite for commercial success. Miller states, "What Johnson might have said but didn't was that the white audience could act as a cultural tyrant partly because white society apparently offered great rewards to those authors whose creations fitted within socially acceptable limits, rewards the non-white society could not match" (302).
It is imperative that one focus on audience as a factor in the creative process of the dramatists because few playwrights garner any true success without taking into consideration the tastes of his viewers. Despite what many may contend, that audience is not important to their work, audience is very important to how they edit and present their work and the stage. Hence, for this discussion the analysis of audience response will serve as an example of how the African American dramatists has not only had to confront this issue in the past, but also how the power of the audience’s response affects the reception and writing of the African American drama today.

Along with the question whom should African American theatre be addressed is the question how should the African American be represented on stage? This latter question becomes the main focus of the debate between two of the major figures in African American literature, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. Although one would think that two of greatest minds of African American thought and letters would be in complete agreement on such an important development within the culture, they were instead at war. Both Du Bois and Locke appeared to be in agreement that the audience for African American theatre should be African Americans; however, the battles began, ironically, on the subject of protest drama. This genre of theatre, like much of early African American literature, sprang forth from the years of enslavement, Jim Crowism, and inequality that African Americans
faced in the United States. With its theatrical voices nursed at the hands of Du Bois, protest drama became the first real area of African American theatrical presentation and composition.

Du Bois's school of protest drama, according to Samuel Hay, was founded with the ultimate goal to prove to white society that blacks had contributed greatly to the civilization of North American society; hence, they deserved to be recognized and treated as enfranchised citizens (2). Characteristic of Du Bois's protest school were plays in which the actors spoke in eloquently delivered monologues on the subjects of racism and inequality while presenting the members of the race as upstanding citizens. Du Bois believed that the purpose of an African American or Negro theatre was to present characters who reflected the possibilities of African American culture. He contended the Negro theatre (characters, plays, etc.) should serve as a vessel to inform the mainstream culture that black people desired a better life and that they could achieve that life if they were allowed all of the freedoms outlined in the United States Constitution—"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Hence, Du Bois envisioned African American theatre to be a place where the Negro characters did more than perform but also proved what black life could be.

Conversely, Locke envisioned a theatre where the "common folk" would be presented on stage. He did not believe, as Hay notes, that theater should be used to protest against the injustices of American
society or to protest for equality. Instead, he argued that Negro theatre 
should be based upon the experience of the Negro and not the hope of 
the Negro. Locke objected to Du Bois's protest themes and 
characterizations. Locke believed, instead, in presenting the "earthy" 
members of African American society. Street pimps and prostitutes, 
winos, and the buffonish characters of the African American minstrel 
shows were his ideal characters. Speaking and singing in dialect, 
dancing on stage, and addressing issues that occur within the culture 
were the theatrical representations Locke advocated. In contrast to the 
clean and eloquent themes of Du Bois's protest school of drama, Locke 
wished to reach the members of the African American culture 
themselves. He was not concerned with protesting and attempting to 
prove blacks' worth to the members of the larger society; instead, he 
wished to make theatre accessible to African Americans of all classes. 
According to Hay, Locke began what would later be known as the Black 
Arts School of Drama (4-5).

Inherent in the Du Bois/Locke debate was not only the question of 
how should the African American be represented on the stage but also, 
and more importantly, the question of to whom should these 
representations be presented. Upon examination of the respective 
representation agendas advanced by Du Bois and Locke, it appears that 
Locke is attuned to the black audience in spite of his advocation of what 
Du Bois and other critics would call stereotypical images of black life.
Locke did not see theatre as an arm for propaganda. He envisioned African American theatre as a place where the black culture could offer its gifts to the stage, to other blacks, and any white audience members who wished to attend. It is this belief that serves as the foundation for Locke's Black Arts Theatre foundation. In "The Negro and The American Stage," Locke discusses the importance of the contributions that the African American actor has brought to American theatre, but he also points out that true Negro theatre and art will only flourish if the Negro actor is offered scripts reflective of his life (116). Locke points out that primitivism in the Negro's experience is what makes his art unique and that the Negro artist (playwright) should continue to create art from his wellspring of experience, challenge the conventions of traditional American theatre, and have the "courage" to demand to be viewed on its own terms and not those of the commercial stage:

Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from the handicaps of external disparagement, but from its self imposed limitations. It must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts. It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new moulds; in short to be experimental. (116)

Locke's plan for African American theatre was that it be a place where African retentions were allowed to come to the forefront, for as he states
"[e]specially with its inherent color and emotionalism, its freedom from body-hampering dress, its odd and tragic and mysterious overtones, African life and themes, apart from any sentimental attachment, offer a wonderfully new field and province for dramatic treatment" (117). He contends that if the Negro actor and dramatist are allowed to focus on these themes, then they will be emancipated and finally able to "move freely in a world of elemental beauty, with all the decorative elements that a poetic emotional temperament could wish" (117).

As Locke argues for a free place for the African American artist/dramatist to create, he also argues for a free place for the African American audience member to see himself reflected on stage as he is, not as he should or hopes to be. He concludes his essay by stating that a "classic development" in Negro theatre will have been reached once the Negro dramatist returns to his roots and dramatizes the "folk spirit" of the African American race. This will, in turn, "[herald] cultural and social maturity," arguably among a Negro audience that will enable the artist, as well as the race to prosper in American society and on the American stage (120). What Locke suggests is a pride in the culture for what it is at the present. Regardless of the commonness of the common folk, their lives should be celebrated on the stage for them and all others to see: "In the discipline of art playing upon his own material, the Negro has much to gain. Art must serve Negro life as well as Negro
talent serve art. And no art is more capable of this service than drama” (119).

Whereas Locke encourages the development of black theatre upon cultural lines, Du Bois contends that theatre, like all art, should be used for propaganda. In his famous address “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois states: “... all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been always used for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (296). Thus Du Bois viewed the stage as another weapon in his struggle; however, this stage was not to be a place for the “common” images of African American life to appear. As suggested by Hay and by Du Bois’s own dramatic attempt The Star of Ethiopia and the NAACP widely endorsed Rachel (written by Angelina Weld Grimke), the propagandic role for theatre was to create black life as it could be. Many of the characters endorsed by Du Bois’s Protest Drama School were “upstanding folk” almost reflective of the limited elite Du Bois creates in his famous “Talented Tenth Theory.” These are African Americans who illustrate the best of black life, but they are haunted and scarred by American racism. Take for example Grimke’s Rachel, sponsored and produced by the NAACP in 1917. This “problem-play” as called by Locke, is representative of the type of work that Du Bois’s protest drama school advocated (Hay 23). In Rachel, the heroine
protests against racism by refusing to marry and bring more black children into a racist America. She is a northern maiden, of fair complexion and who has been educated alongside whites, but she is reminded of the atrocities of racism through her brother's unemployment and the experiences of the "little brown children" she encounters. Rachel's character and the play itself challenge pejorative images of African American men and women and point out the emotional, psychological, economic and social effects of American racism and segregation. Judged according to Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art," Rachel is an exemplary work for it is a picture of African American culture created by an African American drama, it is propagandic in theme, and it challenges stereotypical images of African American life.

Unlike Locke, Du Bois clearly indicated that the audience for the Negro artistic works be members of the African American community. However, Du Bois appears to have trapped himself within the division of the Johnson's theorized "double audience" without truly selecting one audience type over the other. Although Du Bois calls for a black theatre to address black audiences with upstanding black characters, the plot lines that he encourages and approves all tend to lend themselves to the works of those playwrights who "...felt and showed in his work that if only certain evils such as racial discrimination and segregation were
removed, then he and other blacks could take their “rightful places” alongside whites” (303).

Who actually needs to see the message: an African American theatre audience or a white American theatre audience? Although Du Bois’s platform for Negro theatre included the black audience as the critical and deciding judge of the merit(s) of a Negro work, it was actually “preaching to the choir.” Those African Americans who were viewing Du Bois endorsed plays knew who they were and knew what their possibilities were, so why protest to them. Du Bois, arguably, envisioned a segregated theatre, but his aims were for theatre to be used to prove to white America what black America could be. Hence, he had to consider the white American audience as more than just a force to contend with, but also as a force to inform by way of propaganda. Ultimately, Du Bois’s school of protest drama finds itself in a dilemma not as to which audience to address itself to for economic success as suggested by Johnson, but over the question of which audience will benefit the most from the message—the black audience or the white audience. In spite of what Du Bois argued, he appeared to take the white audience into consideration as he developed his criteria for Negro art. Locke, on the other hand, did not really take any audience into consideration. Instead, he focused on the subject matter of the art itself, regardless of what anyone—black or white—had to say about it.
The irony of this division in thought on the purpose of black theater addresses the issue of the similarities and convergences of the two schools in the African American theater that followed. Although Locke and Du Bois quarreled for many years on the subjects of appropriate characterizations and themes for African American theatre, both schools needed one another in order to pave the way for African American theatre as it is known today. Subsequent playwrights began to attempt to bridge the divide by experimenting with mergers of the two schools’ ideals. Playwrights such as Langston Hughes managed to do this successfully, thus proving that the DuBois and Locke schools could become one unified platform for African American theatre and that it was beneficial for the two to reconcile their differences.

Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance dramatists challenged the “camps” of Du Bois and Locke by creating characters from within the culture that appealed to the tastes of both audiences—black and white. They created characters that simultaneously “wore the mask” of the Negro expected and accepted by white audiences and of the moral person of color who could serve a role model for members of his race. Thus it may be argued that Harlem Renaissance writers created a “meeting ground” for all audiences, that although not universal, was accommodating of the tasks of entertaining both audiences and solving the dilemma of the Negro artist discussed by Johnson.
The 1960s brought a new perspective to African American theatre by way of the Black Arts and Black Theater Movements. Represented by the voices of Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, these movements used the ideologies of Locke and Du Bois and the new character types of the Harlem Renaissance dramatists in order to create not only a black theatre that was both representative and political, but that also demanded a new set of criteria upon which to judge black dramatists and black culture as a whole. Thus another movement in the evolution of African American theatre, the Black Arts/Black Theatre movement led to the development of an excavation into African American culture that would be just as complex and culturally specific as the characters and subject matter presented on stage.

The presentation of Jones' (Baraka's) *Dutchman*, according to William Mance, is thought to be the beginning of the Black Theatre movement from which a black aesthetic would be built (17). However Baraka evolves as the spokesperson for this movement through the ferocity of his “Black Revolutionary Theatre” manifesto in which he calls for a theatre that:

should force change[,] EXPOSE![,]...teach[,]...Accuse and Attack[,]...take dreams and give them a reality[and] show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and
that they themselves are victims if they are blood brothers.

(Baraka 1899-1901)

From Baraka and the Black Arts/Black Theatre Movements emerged not only a new manner of understanding and creating the black experience on the stage, but also a new way of interpreting the black experience that differed from the criteria Du Bois, Locke, and the Harlem Renaissance dramatists were judged by and used to judge themselves. Larry Neal, a second important figure in the establishment of the Black Arts/Black Theatre movement advocated for “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, iconology” that would become known as the black aesthetic (17). This new aesthetic would support the ideas of Baraka’s black revolutionary theatre and demand that this theatre be judged through the lenses of the culture. Moreover, this new aesthetic would respond to the questions of to whom should black theatre address and how should black characters be presented on stage by asking that the audience and the characters be received and understood through the tenets of the African American culture—the mainstream aesthetic no longer fit the black theatre.

Mance traces the development of the black aesthetic to Harlem Renaissance poets who based their poetry on the “oral and musical elements traditional to black culture”(17). Furthered by the Black Arts/Black Theatre movements, the black aesthetic became a movement not only by the artists but that also required the participation
of cultural members to "revolt" in order for the change from western symbols, criteria, etc. to those of the black experience to begin (Mance 19). The term "revolution" as used by Baraka and various members of the Black Arts/Black Theatre/Black Aesthetic movements, then like the black aesthetic itself, had to be replaced and redefined from as Mance quotes "the overthrow of the government" to mean a change of thought from the mainstream to the black, from the apathetic to the political, from the artist to the masses:

Therefore, he revolutionary ideology of the Black Aesthetic was more than mere protest or political reform. In addition to serving as a means of effecting political and social change, it aspired to the more monumental and idealistic task of affecting the masses of Black people with a new sense of identity and spiritualism. (20)

Because of the evolution of African American theatre from its nineteenth century beginnings, to the Du Bois/Locke debates, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts/Black Theatre/Black Aesthetic movement we have the premise and foci for this study in the playwrights August Wilson and Ed Bullins. Thematically, to examine the dramaturgies of the these playwrights one would place Bullins in the protest category because of his notorious reputation within the theatre, while placing Wilson within the category of Locke's Black Arts genre. However, upon closer study, it becomes difficult to place either
playwright into one category or the other. Bullins, for example, is known for his early protest dramas; however, his characters are all Lockanian—the pimps, winos, prostitutes, drug addicts/sellers, and hustlers—in other words, the street people.

Wilson, conversely, usually presents especially moral African American working class persons and businesspersons with an occasional mystical-type character such as Bynum the conjure man in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* or the shell-shocked Gabriel in *Fences*. Many of his themes protest not only against what blacks do to one another, but also how whites have treated them. Hence, he is not as Lockanian as he initially appears. Neither is Bullins as Du Boisian as he may seem. A close examination reveals that the because of the influence of the divided schools of Locke and Du Bois, the amalgamated characters of the Harlem Renaissance and the political nature of the 1960s Black Theatre movement the two schools have merged within contemporary African American drama, but the question to whom should black theatre address itself remains an issue.

The critical receptions of Wilson’s and Bullins’s dramaturgies suggest that the question of “how to depict the black race” also remains a problem within African American theatre; however, their receptions also demonstrate that this question has found its way into American (or mainstream) theatre as well. More importantly, dramaturgies of
Wilson and Bullins prove that the question of audience remains a constant in the psyche of the African American dramatist.

As this study will disclose, Bullins, whom Wilson acknowledges as one of his dramatic models, has not received the same type of favorable critical response from mainstream audiences. Although he candidly states that his works, particularly those of his twentieth century cycle, were written for and about black people, particularly black people from the black underclass, Bullins has gained an infamous reputation within mainstream theatre for his conscious choice of themes and audience. As a result of his decision to exclude the mainstream, he has become a black-balled genius of avant-garde and off-Broadway theatre.

Conversely, Wilson's choice to use universal themes and character types in his work has benefited him greatly in the mainstream theatre. His answer to the question of African American representation is one that does not strike at the nerve of mainstream theatre audiences. Instead, he chooses to present figures that can be considered universal "everymen" and women and to focus on themes that can come from every culture of American society. This non-categorical combination of characters and themes for Wilson enables him to compose works that allow everyone to walk away from the theatre with a palpable lesson learned, one that does not strike at the jugular vein of non-African American audience members.
Ed Bullins was a prominent figure in the continuation of African American theatre and the establishment of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts theatre movement. During his most critically reviewed period, many of his works (particularly *Clara's Ole Man* and *In the New England Winter*) received favorable reviews from both African American and European American critics. Yet he has not received the same type of mainstream accolades as have Hansberry, Baraka (one of his greatest influences), or August Wilson. I use Bullins as the exemplary figure in this examination because his plays' themes and characters, like those of Hansberry, Baraka, and Wilson, come from the black community. He writes from within the culture about the struggles and actions of believable African American peoples; however, his works, like his name, remain on the periphery of mainstream theatre.

From my research and study of Bullins's plays and their critical receptions in comparison to those of Hansberry, Fuller, and especially Wilson, it appears that his work may be ostracized because while protesting as the others do in the works, he may be blending the protest and Lockanian character types a little too well. For example, not only does Bullins give us a wino like Curt in *In the Wine*, but he also gives Curt a dream of a better life by way of his pursuit of an education. Hence, what we find in Curt is not only the Du Boisian protest character, but also a Lockanian street personality. Bullins, as this study will contend, may also be ostracized because he has decided, without
waiver, that the audience for his plays is to be black just as the characters in his plays are (except where indicated). Bullins has never attempted to appease the mainstream audience; therefore, he has not struggled with the issue of the double audience as so many African American dramatists have. Instead, he selected his audience early in his career and held fast to it in spite of any criticism—favorable or detrimental.

This “hybrid” of the Du Bois and Locke schools was first accomplished by Langston Hughes in 1938 in the play Don’t You Want to Be Free? According to Hay, this play not only introduced expressionism into African American theatre, but also “smudged the line of demarcation between [Locke’s] art-theatre and [Du Bois’] protest theatre”(25). Hughes created the character A Young Man from traits found in Locke’s street personalities and Du Bois’s idyllic heroes. I digress here to show that although in Bullins and Wilson we can find descendants of Hughes’ A Young Man, Bullins’ characters and interpretations are not receiving the same acknowledgments as those of Wilson. Thus, I am led to ask if mainstream theatre is ready for this type of merger from all African American artists?

Attempts to respond to this inquiry emerge as the crux of this study. Why are playwrights such as Bullins “shut out” from the kudos of mainstream theatre? Although he has made it quite clear that the periphery is a place he chooses to be, it is still somewhat confounding
that a playwright with such talent and insight hasn’t been afforded the opportunity to come into the mainstage—whether he accepts it or not. Moreover, how is it possible for a playwright who has clearly played a major role in the development of African American theatre and has offered, as identified by Hay, three major “gifts” to African American theatre—(1) a filimic playwrighting style; (2) extremely contemporary themes; and (3) impetus to new black playwrights to be ignored by the nation’s premier stage? What are the criteria of African American theatre? Are all plays supposed to follow a certain a pattern and meet a prescribed criteria? Or, is it acceptable to present the African American experience in different ways?

To begin to answer these questions one should first revisit the plans for African American theatre as proposed by its founders—Du Bois and Locke—and by Amiri Baraka, who helped to add a new dimension to African American theatre with his seminal “Black Revolutionary Theatre” manifesto. Du Bois envisioned African American theatre as a political venue. He wished theatre to evolve from the minstrel forms which dominated the Broadway stages prior to the twentieth century and toward a theatre which depicted the “Outer Life” of the African American experience as well as the positive images that African Americans aspired to (Hay 3). He aspired toward ameliorative images in African American theater. These images, Du Bois believed, could help alleviate the pains of racism and stereotypes
of the already socially scarred African American. He strove for a place to present African Americans with dignity as “model human beings and historical figures” (5). Such personalities were completely contrary to the images of African Americans being presented on the stage. Moreover, instead of focusing characters and themes solely on blacks, Du Bois wished the themes of African American theatre to penetrate white consciousness as well. Hence it can be purported that Du Bois’ theatre, while actively going against the norm, also posed a challenge to norm.

Conversely, Locke aspired for a theatre that was more reflective of the common folk. He encouraged artists to look to these personalities for their stories and “tap the gifts of the folk-temperament—its humor, sentiment, imagination, and tropic nonchalance” (Hay 4). Locke believed that tapping into these resources would provide theatre for and by African Americans—period. In fact according to Hay “Locke directed his themes almost exclusively toward African Americans. Without sentimentalizing issues, he sometimes indicted whites”(5). He advocated that the “Inner Life” of African American lives be presented, for “[he] held that from such representations African Americans developed ‘a positive self reflect and self reliance’”(Hay 21).

Baraka adds to these listings of criteria by adding a new category—the Black Revolutionary theatre. He defines this theatrical space as being an active theatre where African Americans were forced
to look at the world and themselves through the lenses of their cultural, not mainstream culture. Obviously fueled by the embers of Du Bois, Locke, and other African American fore parents in the theatre, Baraka’s theatre takes on a more direct didactic and political tone. Moreover, Baraka’s theatre is not really created as a voice within a debate as Du Bois’s or Locke’s but, rather, as a pointed plan for black theatre, black revolutionary theatre to adhere to. It is clear that Baraka’s theatre is closely aligned with the tenets of Locke’s theater. He, too, wishes to establish a theater that has no regard for white interpretation or acceptance. Furthermore, this theatre also demands a self-reflective experience for the audience—thematically and in character.

The last criterion of Locke’s “Black Revolutionary Theatre”, “which will lead to a better understanding” (Baraka), or in other words, the catharsis that Aristotle speaks of in his Poetics, is where the African American stage opens itself up for the various realities of the culture. Simply studying the timeline of African American theatre allows for this observation to come through clearly. Hence, it should be of no surprise to meet a voice like Bullins and then Wilson’s in this medium; thus, this study argues that there should be a more equitable acknowledgement of the differing versions of the African American experience.

African Americans sharing a common culture (history) does not necessitate that they share a common reality. One can read or watch the various forms of media to come to this conclusion. All families are
not the Huxtables of "Cosby" fame, nor are they the Evanses of "Good Times" success. The reality is that there are persons caught out in the limbos and abysses of African culture, and it takes multiple voices to bring their stories into existence. These voices, however, will not have the opportunity to present these nuances of the culture if they are represented on the stages by one singular voice and its depictions.

Although the argument over how to represent African American culture has not escalated to the heights of the Du Bois-Locke conflict or even really found its way onto the agendas of contemporary theatre scholars and critics, it still exists. Inherent in this question, however, is an even more important question—to whom does the African American dramatist present his work? The critical responses to the dramaturgies of August Wilson and Ed Bullins prove that the African American writer must make a choice between which audience he will serve, and he must choose the correct audience—the mainstream audience. When he does not make the correct choice, he becomes subject to mainstream invisibility and/or silence.
Wilson’s African America (n)-a theatrical world where African American characters, culture, mores, and values dominate and illustrate the issues, concerns, aspirations, ideas, and beliefs that not only reflect African American culture, but also a/the universal cultural; a place where black people’s stories become world stories.

On stage, August Wilson creates a space that can be referred to as Wilson’s African America. This theatrical space is situated and created within the history of African American culture. This place is also an amalgam of the tenets of Locke’s art-theatre school and Du Bois’s school of protest drama, for it is a place where black culture is celebrated in its purest form, but also a place where the protest motif underscores the themes dramatized in Wilson’s works. From Locke, Wilson’s African America examines what this study considers to be the working class, “low down common folk” and their struggles. From Du Bois, it points out and verbally protests against the racist practices that have prevented African Americans from fully participating in American life and living the American dream.

Wilson’s African America is also a controversial place where its creator, combines black nationalist beliefs with universal themes. It is a place where he allows his universal themes to reflect through its
specifically black characters’ ideas of the commonality of the world’s cultures.

The Twentieth Century Cycle

From his first successful dramatic venture, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson’s goal has been to compose a play reflecting each decade of the African American experience since the eradication of slavery in the United States. At the present, he is well on his way to reaching that goal with eight plays of his dramatic cycle—*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1985), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1987), *The Piano Lesson* (1989), *Two Trains Running* (1992), *Seven Guitars* (1995), *Jitney* (1999), and now *King Headley II* (2001). It becomes apparent after viewing or reading Wilson’s dramas that it is imperative to him that his work focuses on (re)connecting contemporary theatre audiences with the lives, experiences, and histories of persons within the African American culture through his art.

To attend any of Wilson’s plays is an African American history lesson. For example, *Jitney* teaches about the existence of the African American car (or taxi cab) drivers, while its predecessor, *Seven Guitars*, returns his patrons to the theme of the disenfranchised African American blues musician first discussed in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Moreover, Wilson’s works remind his viewers of the bonds African Americans have to one another as well as to their African ancestors. Plays such as *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson* relay
this lesson through their ritualistic actions with characters’ dreams of the middle passage (Herald Loomis) and their oftentimes unremitting possession of ancestral items and stories such as Berneice’s obsessive protection of the family’s piano.

According to Michael Morales, Wilson’s task “is a simultaneously reactive/reconstructive engagement with representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture” (105). Wilson aspires to re-present African American history in a light totally of its own and separate from that of comprehensive American history. Morales quotes Wilson as saying that he is “more and more concerned with pointing out the differences between black and whites, as opposed to pointing out similarities. We’re a different people. We do things differently” (105). Quite similar to Alain Locke’s desire to present African Americans as they were/are, Wilson expands the historical vision of his dramatic ancestor to examine the ties African Americans have with an African-spiritual heritage. According to Morales, Wilson situates his work within the historical context of an African “ancestral legacy” in order to both “differentiate his own historical traditions as well as to emphasize the ‘cultural retentions’ of his characters” (112). As Wilson relays these cultural claims to Africa, he challenges the traditional historical and scientific beliefs about Africans and actually critiques the audience that has validated his work:
Wilson's championing of this African worldview implicitly critiques the ecumenical claims of a Western, historical perspective that systematically has represented Africa, Africans, and peoples of the diaspora as the uncivilized, history-less, human Other to a rational and objectively "civilized" humanity. (112-13)

If Morales is correct in his assessment of Wilson's cultural frame, it would appear that Wilson has fully adopted the Lockanian position on drama—black theatre for black people. However, in Wilson's African America this is not the case. Although Wilson has historically and ideologically aligned himself with black nationalism, he (as will be discussed in the audience section), does not write for a particular audience. He verbally aligns himself with an African/African American platform, but then ends the black nationalistic position and creates works that appeal mainly to mainstream audiences. Thus, Wilson finds himself in that limited space between Locke, who advocated black theatre for black people, and Du Bois, who advocated black theatre be focused toward mainstream audiences in hope that they would see African Americans as human beings.

Audience

The audience for Wilson's African America and its history lessons is composed primarily of mainstream theatre attendees and critics. It is from this audience that Wilson's African America earned its first
accolades, and it is from this audience that Wilson’s African America continues to earn praise. For example, during its preview run Wilson’s most recent work, *King Headley II*, earned praises from every mainstream media source from *The New York Times* to *Vogue* magazine, and all critics were in agreement that Wilson had created yet another successful play.

However, when asked if he envisions a particular audience for his plays Wilson responds “no.” In an interview with Elisabeth Heard, Wilson contends that he writes “to create a work of art that exists on its own terms and is true to itself” (100). Audience, according to Wilson, is not part of his creative vision:

I don't have any particular audience in mind, other than the fact that the play is an artwork which is written with the audience factor sort of built in so that, craft-wise, when you do your exposition, the exposition is for the purpose of the audience knowing certain aspects of the play at certain times, and knowing what happened prior to the events of the play and the things of that sort, but I don’t write for a particular audience. (100)

In spite of the accolades received from the mainstream audience, Wilson denies catering to its expectations or any audience’s expectations. This anti-Lockanian and anti-Barakian move against writing theatre for a specific audience, a black audience, places
Wilson’s dramaturgy in a position that encourages all audiences to partake of the messages of his drama. Unlike Baraka and Bullins, he does not declare that audience is important to the creative or performative processes of his work. Wilson understands, however, that different audiences have different responses to his work. Whether he focuses on a specific audience or not, the audience—because of the interactive nature of theatre—greatly influences the outcome of the performance. Of this audience influence Wilson tells Heard that the power exuded by the theatre audience is what makes it (theatre) so "exciting" and the different audiences are what create the theatrical experience:

The communication between the actors and audience is different with each and every audience. If you do the play 700 times, you are going to have 700 different groups of people sitting out there, and so each audience has its own nature, its own thing, and they respond differently, and that's what makes it thrilling. You have a play, you have a large number of African Americans in the audience, and it is going to be a different response. And as a part of that the actors feed off of that audience, and they give a different performance, and that is what makes theatre. (100-101)

When asked by Bonnie Lyons in a 1997 interview about his contention that although his plays are political, they are not didactic or
polemical, Wilson again differentiates between the white audience and black audience responses to his work, stating that his goal is to acquaint white or mainstream audiences with black life in order to spark an awareness, not to change anything:

I don’t write primarily to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that’s not why I write. I work as an artist. However, all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks, and I think my plays offer them a different and new way to look at black Americans. For instance, in Fences they see a garbageman, a person they really don’t look at, although they may see a garbageman every day. By looking at Troy’s life, white people find out that the content of this black garbageman’s life is very similar to their own, that he is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. (2)

Instead of concisely setting about to change black/white relations through his plays, Wilson contends that the white audience is allowed the opportunity to become aware of overlooked realites within the black experience. If change occurs in this sector of his audience, it is not because of what he intended to do. Rather, it happens as an innocent result of the power of art, or as he says: “Recognizing these things are
as much a part of his life as of theirs can be revolutionary and can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives”(2).

This is where Wilson cuts himself off from Du Bois and his protest theatre, for according to Hay, Du Bois’s theatre was designed to present themes and images of black life that would encourage change in white America’s perception of black America. According to Du Bois, “all art is propaganda and ever must be,”(296) so for Wilson to separate his art from his propagandistic effect is also a move to place his African America outside the norm of African American theatre as being a revolutionary place, but rather to place it as a universal space where everyone may have access to some type of truth, and not a political platform. When asked by Lyons what reaction a black audience should have to his play *Fences*, Wilson is a little less emphatic in his response. He simply states that, “Blacks see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don’t know that is possible, and it is important to know that”(2).

Although Wilson contends that his African America is not directed or designed for a defined audience, he does concede the importance of the audience’s reaction to theatre itself. It appears that his perspective on audience is just as universal as the themes (which I will discuss in the next section) that he explores in his works. This universality in Wilson’s audience gains him praise from mainstream critics, but criticism as well. For example, white audiences, as noted by Jim Lahr,
and various critics often time have difficulty understanding the elements of the supernatural that are present in several of Wilson's plays. This miscommunication between his work and the mainstream audience is yet another example of Wilson's contradictory position within American theatre. Instead of "preaching to the choir" of African Americans who can understand the supernatural elements of his work, Wilson presents his plays on stages where they become sources of information or as Lahr states best, "[t]o the black world, Wilson's plays are witness; to the white world, they are news"(53).

Wilson's understanding of audience and his desire to appeal to all audiences is noble; however, it has not prevented theatre-goers, scholars, or critics from comparing him to both African American and non-African American playwrights, and to be called both an African American and an American playwright. His response to these categorizations calls to mind Countee Cullen's statement to Langston Hughes that he did not want to be known as a black poet but rather, simply as a poet. However, Wilson complicates any classification of himself (as will be discussed in later in this chapter) especially when it comes to the question of audience, he constantly upholds his contention that he only writes about the black experience. Ifill asks him about this comparison/classification and learns that despite the classifications Wilson's bottom line is that he writes about black folks:
I don’t view my plays as belonging to black history. They belong to theatrical literature, you see—because I don’t think of Anton Chekov as writing about the Russians. I mean, I don’t view his work that way. You see, I don’t view Shakespeare as, you know, an English dramatist, you know?

Gwen Ifill: But surely you’re aware that people view you that way.

August Wilson: Yes, of course, and I mean, I am. I’m a black American playwright. You know, I couldn’t deny it. I couldn’t be anything else. I make art out of black American culture, all cut out of the same cloth, if you will, you know. That’s who I am, that’s who I write about. You know, in the same manner that Chekov wrote about the Russians, I write about blacks. So, there’s no reason why you can’t say “August Wilson, playwright”—even though all of my work, every single play, is about black Americans, about black American culture, about the black experience in America, you know? “August Wilson, playwright.” I write about the black experience of men, or I write about black folks. That’s who I am. I couldn’t do anything else. I wouldn’t do anything else. (5)
Again, regardless of how mainstream audiences or primarily African American audiences respond to his work, Wilson advocates and writes from a black nationalist perspective, claiming that he “couldn’t do anything else”(5). This is where Wilson brings in the nationalism expressed by Baraka and the “common folk” experience supported by Locke. Wilson emphatically states that he writes from the position he knows best—the black male experience. In spite of which audience applauds or abhors his work, it can be argued that Wilson writes for his own audience—neither mainstream or African American—of everymen who wish to see the black experience on the stage.

Characters

Wilson’s use of characters as links to both the American and African pasts serves as a means to validate the existence of African Americans and in some respects explain the mores and beliefs of the culture itself. By focusing on this ancestral connection, Wilson goes beyond the “real” characters Locke advocates for and offers characters that teeter on the spiritually historical.

Wilson’s characters are amalgams of both the idyllic characters of Du Bois’s protest school of drama and the “real folk” of Alain Locke’s art-theatre school. While providing his viewers and readers with ameliorative images of African American businesspersons, families, and male/female relationships, which may be interpreted as the heroic figures of Du Bois’s theatre, Wilson remembers to “color” these
characters with bits of farm dirt and street dust. According to Hay, this blending of the Du Bois and Locke schools is what sets Wilson apart from other writers, for he has "perfected it":

[Wilson’s] decadent stories about often clowning people were the kind of plot Du Bois had feared would feed traditional prejudices. Wilson tells these “lusty” histories successfully, however, because he uses them as cultural tools to gain political rights. Wilson’s characters, however, are not Du Bois’s exemplary models and historical figures. They are, instead, the “open and free” characters of Locke expressing Du Bois’s frustrated hopes. (70)

While Hay points out how Wilson has successfully merged the two with slightly more emphasis on the Lockanian characteristics, he fails to point out the importance of the use of the Lockanian characters for the “gain[ing] of political rights.” Remember, Du Bois’s theatre is steeped in the political; thus, through his characters it may be argued that Wilson falls squarely between the Du Bois and Locke schools regardless of how the characters are depicted.

An example of this amalgam may be found in one of Wilson’s most famous characters, Troy Maxson of Fences. Troy is a city dwelling, factory working Pittsburgh resident. However, the plot of the play reveals from whence Troy, like most of Wilson’s characters, has come—the rural, segregated South. These migrant African Americans
of Wilson’s African America have made their way North in search of a better life. Unfortunately, upon arrival many learn that the disenfranchisement they sought to escape in the south has followed them like a rain cloud to the urban cities of the North, leaving them almost as bad off as they were before. Troy and the rest of his kin in Wilson’s African America articulate Wilson’s belief that the black migration was the worst thing that black people could have participated in, and that blacks should have remained in the South. Wilson explains this “honest assessment” of black migration to Richard Pettengill:

I think we need to make an honest assessment, an analysis of where exactly we as a people are. I think if we do that, we’ll find out that we’re in a worse position in American society in 1993 than we were in 1940. If you look at Black American communities in 1940, when we were operating under the idea of separate-but-equal, we had communities that were economically viable. You couldn’t play on the white baseball league, so you started your own, you had a Negro baseball league. This Negro league had Black owners as well as Black players...(211)

Those characters of Wilson’s world who work hard find themselves in good jobs as domestics, porters, or if lucky as studio musicians. Some, for example, like the character Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* are lucky enough to become celebrities in the
North. Nevertheless, the celebrity status, as Wilson has Ma Rainey eloquently critique within the play, comes at the hefty expense of understanding the black musician’s real worth(lessness) to the record companies as a human being:

MA RAINNEY. They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them...As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then...(Wilson 64)

Wilson continues his presentation of the financially empowered African Americans in the characters of Becker, the car company owner in Jitney; Memphis Lee, the restaurateur of Two Trains Running; and Seth Holly, the second-generation boarding house owner, in Joe Turner's Come and Gone. By offering his readers and viewers a sampling of positive African American figures, Wilson paints what can be considered a very positive picture of African American life. Granted, the plot lines of these plays reveal the hardships that these characters may have endured during slavery, Jim Crowism, and the like, but Wilson doesn’t quite create them in the image of the “street people” Locke advocates for in this art-theatre manifesto. Instead, he populates
his African America with what can be considered the beginnings of the black middle class.

Wilson’s African America, although mostly peopled with upstanding African Americans, does include figures who border on the eccentric and the stereotypical. These figures come from Wilson’s own “archetypal African American experience” as suggested by Yvonne Shafer, and are considered to be his “spectacle character[s]” whose role in the play “is to command attention and to force both acknowledgement and understanding of issues that are sooner ignored (Shannon 111). Raised in inner city Pittsburgh, Wilson experienced the racism and hardships of the north. Leaving school at the age of fifteen, Wilson earned his diploma and continued his education of the street. The model for many of his characters comes from the personalities he encountered at the pool halls and corner stores during his adolescence and his early years as a poet and playwright. The stories he heard from these Lockanian street types have provided the plots of many of his plays.

One of his most comically and spiritually memorable characters is the conjure man Bynum of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. Staged as an eccentric, mystical, and extremely discerning old man, Bynum’s character is illustrative of Wilson’s use of the supernatural in his works. In comparison to his fellow characters in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (maybe with the exception of Herald Loomis) Bynum stands out as an
anomaly. His only trade, to the chagrin of his landlord, appears to be conjuring and selling various charms to lovesick women. However, Bynum also possesses an ability to read a person’s song and bind people to one another. Although one cannot classify Bynum as one of Locke’s street people, nor as one of Du Bois’ heroic figures, he can be considered one of the best examples of Wilson’s merger of the African ancestral spirit with the African American spirit.

Bynum does not occupy this space alone in Wilson’s world. He is neighbored by another prophet-like character in Gabriel, the shell-shocked brother of Troy in *Fences*. Wounded in the war, Gabriel walks around the Pittsburgh community with his horn, selling his wares to those persons kind of enough to indulge him. His speeches are few within the play, but they resonate long after he leaves the stage. The best example of his prophet-like perspective is found in his foreshadowing of Troy’s death in the play:


Wilson’s more “street savvy” or rather more urbanly sophisticated characters may be found within his later plays such as *Two Trains Running* and *Seven Guitars*. In *Two Trains Running* we meet Wolf, the streetwise numbers runner who understands the illegal nature
of his occupation, but he also understands the need he fills within the African American community. He defends his job to Risa who feels he is taking advantage of the already disenfranchised African American: "It's the same as putting money in the bank. This way you might take out more than you put in...but Mellon ain't gonna let you do that. The numbers give you an opportunity. If it wasn't for the numbers all these niggers would be poor" (Two Trains Running). Wolf, like many African Americans during this era in Wilson's African America (the 70s), has tired of trying to work within the confines of the rules of mainstream America. Thus, he has resorted to his own resources for his livelihood.

_Seven Guitars_ returns to the musical characters of Wilson’s African America introduced in _Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom_. Again focusing on Blues musicians, this play tells the story of Lockanian street type characters Floyd Barton, Canewell, and worldly Ruby. Set in Pittsburgh, in 1948, _Seven Guitars_ addresses the theme of the blues musician and how blues music reflects his life. Floyd, although street wise enough to understand the Hill District of Pittsburgh and Chicago, is still a novice when it comes to understanding the recording industry and the relationship of the black musician to the white dominated music industry. Finally, however, after attempting to break into the music industry the correct way (by using an agent and trusting in him), Floyd realizes that he must rely upon his urban training to help finance his dream—robbery.
King Headley II, Wilson’s newest character and the titular character of his latest Broadway production King Headley II, is a reflection of eighty years of the African American male struggle of the twentieth century. Having served time in jail for murder, attempting to support his family on “earnings” from the selling of stolen refrigerators, and striving to own his own video store specializing in Kung-Fu movies, King encompasses all of the rage that has been walled up after eight decades of African American disenfranchisement. However, in King, Wilson offers perhaps his most complex character, for although bitter, King still has a loving spirit that oftentimes during the play overshadows his raging persona. His character is both comic and tragic, (more so tragic) and leaves the viewer to wonder if Wilson has answered Langston Hughes’ question posed in the poem “Harlem,” “What happens to a dream deferred?” For King Headley II, as for so many African American men of the 1980s and previous decades, “it explode[s].”

Wilson’s Caucasian-American characters, although not largely discussed in critiques and analyses of Wilson’s work, are important within Wilson’s African America, for it is against the mainstream rules and obstacles of this group that many of Wilson’s characters fight along with their own persons and intra-cultural struggles. It is because of these characters, that one may argue that Wilson has a keen understanding of his audience. As suggested by Lahr, the “white world
is a major character” in Wilson’s African America that remains unseen; however, “its rules, standards, its ownership are always pressing in on the black world and changing the flow of things” (53).

Whether he considers this construction of the white persona in his work universal or not, Wilson understands that the indictment of white culture on Broadway is not a profitable or reputable way to succeed in mainstream theatre. Thus, he places his white characters in palpable and traditional roles in relation to black characters (for example the white record producers, Sturdyvant and Irvin, in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*; Selig, the salesman/people finder in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and Sutter the ghost of the former slaveholder’s son in *The Piano Lesson*), but he allows his black characters to critique their treatment by these powers verbally on stage without physical violence. Often Wilson’s white characters are only alluded to and/or discussed in absentia, thus, again lessening the offense that Wilson could cause to his mainstream audience members.

Wilson’s female characters, although few in number, exemplify the strength, character, determination and ability of the African American culture to survive and persevere during the twentieth century. Although Wilson states that he writes from the perspective he knows best, that of the black male, he creates women, especially in his latter dramas, who will linger in the minds of theatre patrons long after the plays have ceased to be presented. Consider Rose of *Fences*. Rose’s
speech to Troy after learning of his infidelity is one of the most powerful
in Wilson's dramaturgy. Not only does it convey the pain of broken-
hearted women, but it also reflects the pain experienced by all African
Americans as they have strive to achieve some sense of wholeness in
their lives and minds:

ROSE. I done tried to be everything a wife should be.
Everything a wife could be. Been married eighteen years
and I got to live to see the day you tell me you been seeing
another woman and done fathered a child by her. And you
know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My
whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and
mothers. . .my two sisters and my brother. . .Can't never sit
down and talk about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and
your mama and my mama and your papa. . .(Fences 162)

Then there is Risa of Two Trains Running. Although not the main
character in the play, she indirectly steals the show as the men in the
play discuss her decision to take control of her sexuality by scarring her
legs in order to encourage male suitors to see her, the person, and not
Risa, the object:

HOLLOWAY. . . .I know Risa. She one of them gals that
matured quick. And every man that seen her since she was
twelve years old think she ought to go lay up with them
somewhere. She don't want that. She figure if she made
her legs ugly that would force everybody to look at her and see what kind of personality she is. (Two Trains Running 32)

This powerful act, by a culturally and socially powerless character, proves that Wilson’s women possess just as much drive and determination to be treated fairly by American society as do his men. Wilson’s women, however, have to demand equality from both the white world and the black.

The women of Seven Guitars are just as powerful and knowledgeable about the plight of the black woman, especially when it comes to love. Ruby, the wayward niece of Vera of Seven Guitars, although young, articulates a sad but honest assessment of the dangers of an obsessive lover:

RUBY. The problem with Elmore was that he never could get enough of me. He wanted to take it all so nobody else could have me. He wasn’t gone to leave none for nobody else to hear him tell it. That make you feel funny to hear a man want to use you up like that. (Seven Guitars 73)

Hence, it can be said that Wilson creates characters both reflective of the African American culture and the Caucasian American culture. He clearly understands how mainstream theatre will expect these characters to represented on stage. Again, as Hay suggests, merging Du Bois’s protest theatre ideology with Locke’s “real black folk” platform, Wilson’s African America presents characters, both
black and white, that reflect historically accurate representations of both groups without making either group feel uncomfortable. Wilson's characters are not only amalgams of Lockainian and Du Boisian representations of African American personalities, but they are also people whom, again reflecting his universal spirit, can be found in any culture.

Influences

Although the majority of Wilson’s African America has been shaped by experiences from his youth and early years as a poet and playwright, his “dramatic vision,” to use the title of Sandra Shannon’s biographical account of his dramatic life, has also been greatly influenced by outside persons and art. One his greatest and most significant influences has come from his friend and director Lloyd Richards. That fact that Wilson, educated largely on the streets of Pittsburgh, and Richards, former Dean of the Yale School of Drama would meet is phenomenal; however, their partnership has resulted in financial, artistic, and national success for both men.

In “Subtle Impositions: The Wilson-Richards Formula,” Shannon discusses Richard’s term for the influential perspective he adds to Wilson’s world. According to Shannon, the Richards influence on Wilson’s dramaturgy began immediately upon his initial reading of Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. Although Richards noted flaws in the script, he set about to collaborate with Wilson to make the necessary
corrections by making him (Wilson) responsible for explaining the 
holes in the script and answering the questions which the holes in the 
script spawned. In other words, subtly, Richards imposed his changes 
on the script and began the practice of “subtle imposition” on Wilson’s 
work. Hence, his job as director of Wilson’s work is:

To extend August’s thinking...which means understand[ing] it and even to provoke it. Sometimes 
people think they know things that they don’t consciously 
articulate. And so my job becomes to get all of that out of 
him, out of my perceptions of what might be there, and to 
shape that in theatrical way...I coax him to discover what I 
want him to discover and reveal it in a manner in which I 
would like it revealed. You can call it subtle imposition.

(Richards qtd. by Shannon 185)

Richards takes Wilson’s work and forces him to re-view it through the 
eyes of another. Instead of pointing the problematic areas out to him, 
he forces Wilson to play the role of his own critic and see the necessary 
changes for himself. In doing this Richards separates Wilson from the 
play, thus offering him a chance to anticipate the adjustments he 
[Richards] will suggest, but allowing Wilson the credit for them.

As a result of these initial changes to Wilson’s work by Richards, 
the origin of the “formula” Shannon acknowledges as the Wilson- 
Richards formula is found. It has, as she states “maneuvered Fences,
Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, and Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars," and now King Headley II on a steady course from brainstorming sessions to Broadway. A vital component of this formula is, as Shannon mentions, the professional and amicable respect Wilson and Richards have for one another, and also the shared heritage of the two. As Shannon notes, not only do Wilson and Richards share a common impetus of being "black men in a traditionally white-controlled industry,"(192) but they also share biographical experiences. Richards, like Wilson, grew up largely without a father (due to his death during Richards's youth) and he and his brother had to work at menial jobs to support themselves as well as their mother. Richards learned the vernacular of urban African America just as Wilson did while on the streets, from the original street griots. This experience for Wilson appears to have relaxed from his first encounter with Richards, hence, allowing the Wilson-Richards formula to be refined over years and to continue to work its theatrical magic.

Consequently, the "subtle imposition" Richards uses to persuade the usually "uncompromising Wilson" to change his plays has resulted in the version of the African American experience we witness on the stage. For example, the introductory play upon which the Wilson-Richards formula began, Ma Rainey, is an illustration of the shaping of Wilson's African America. According to Shannon, one of the first changes Richards suggested to Wilson was that the play tell one story:
"[Richards] observed that the play’s most glaring problem was that it was actually two plays under the guise of a single title"(185). Also, Richards suggested that Wilson “de-emphasize the role of the central female character [Ma Rainey],” resulting in a change that, according to Shannon, “would later find its way into Wilson’s later plays...[and] ground his writing in a decidedly male ethos”(185). Thus, Wilson’s African America, although inhabited by women, most often relays the black male experience. In a 1992 interview with Mark Rocha Wilson says of this “male ethos”:

You’ve got to understand the sociology of it. The transition from slavery to freedom was a cultural shock for blacks. All of a sudden black men had to ask themselves things like, “What is money?” “What is marriage?” Black women, for all their own struggles, were relatively stable. Economically, they had control of the house. But what were black men supposed to do to make a living? (Wilson qtd. in Rocha 38)

By focusing largely on the African American male experience, Wilson shapes his African America around the men of the culture. Although the women are present, and many of the female characters have very strong and pervasive roles in the dramas, Wilson’s world is largely male, by choice.
Another influential imposition Richards has made on Wilson’s work has been his suggestions for rewrites of several of Wilson’s final scenes. As pointed out by Shannon, “Wilson is adamant about maintaining the original integrity of his work, [but] Richards is faced with job of translating it to suit the needs of audiences...and financial backers” (197). Thus, again he must utilize “subtle imposition” to force Wilson’s African America to adhere to a shape satisfying to both Wilson and his patrons.

It can be concluded that Wilson’s collaboration with Richards has not only resulted in the formation of Wilson’s African America, but also a perspective into American mainstream theatre that many African American playwrights have not and do not usually have. Because of Richards’ tenure in mainstream theatre, he understands the importance of audience to a successful Broadway play. Wilson, then, has benefited from this knowledge and allowed it to help him to continue to write for a particular audience type. Wilson understands the role he finds himself in as an African American playwright who wishes to reach the masses; thus, he creates universal ideas, themes, and characters so that these audiences can have a view into the African American culture without feeling threatened or accosted during their brief theatrical experience.

Interestingly, the Wilson-Richards collaboration has ended. Jitney (1999) was produced by Marion McClinton, who appears to have taken Wilson’s position in the Wilson-Richards relationship. Wilson
has replaced Richards as the teacher and director; McClinton is now the student-director. Lahr suggests that Wilson has mastered the technique of mainstream playwrighting and he no longer needs the "subtle-impositions" of Richards. He can now anticipate the changes needed in his plays himself and create the remainder of his African American dramatic history his way.

While Richards' influential "subtle imposition" and Wilson's personal experiences and encounters may be credited with shaping Wilson's version of the African American experience, one must not overlook the other four influences of Wilson's art. Fittingly called the "Four B's" by Mark William Rocha and often mentioned by Wilson himself in many of his interviews, the blues music of Bessie Smith, the artistic renderings of Romare Bearden, the intellectual and somewhat political agenda of agit prop writer Amiri Baraka, and the work of the Brazilian writer Jorge Borges have together contributed to the construction of Wilson's African America. Of these influences, Rocha notes that Wilson pays them homage by allowing these minority muses to be credited with shaping his plays as opposed to the western traditional influences of theater (5). Wilson not only acknowledges them himself in discussions, but he also didactically introduces his readers, viewers, and interviewers to these persons:

Wilson doesn't just talk about his four B's, he teaches them, not merely as discrete influences, but as constituent
elements of an African American cosmology. In offering his four B's—Bearden, Baraka, Borges, and the Blues [Bessie]—Wilson not only inscribes a theory of African American literature but he names the creators of the sign system he inhabits. (Rocha 5)

What Rocha speaks of as “the sign system”, speaks directly to and of Wilson's African America. In Wilson's dramatic world, music, art, literature, and drama meld together (with Richard's final shaping) to encompass a world built on historical and ancestral connections. His influences, as Rocha suggests, challenge his readers/viewers to approach his work not only from a multicultural perspective, but also from an “interdisciplinary perspective” that adds to the experience of the works played out on the stage of Wilson's African America: “Reading Wilson requires that we learn about the blues and American music, about Bearden and modern art, about Baraka and Black Nationalism, and about Borges and the postmodern” (15).

Rocha explains Wilson's denial of the dramatists Eugene O'Neill and Neil Simon as his attempt to be “liberated from Western Influence” just as Baraka with his “post-white, post-American, post-Western form” has done in his work:

I therefore interpret Wilson to be “facing” the Western tradition, to use a vernacular term from the vocabulary of Signifyin(g) compiled by Henry Louis Gates...Gates offers
Signifyin(g) as the basis for an intertextual theory of literary history in which an African American writer like Wilson would both repeat and revise the work of literary antecedents, which Wilson's case means “getting in the face” of the American triumvirate of O’Neill, Miller, and Williams. (Rocha 5)

Baraka appears to have been the first influence on Wilson’s African America. Rocha calls him “Wilson’s brother-poet” because of the effort of both playwrights to separate themselves from the tradition of the western triumvirate and because of the influence of the year 1965 on both of their lives. This year, as noted by Rocha and Benstorn, is the year in American history when Malcolm X was assassinated. As stated by both Wilson and Baraka, their lives and their art changed. Although Wilson does not consider his change to be as agit-prop as that of his contemporary Baraka, Rocha argues that still “Wilson must be identified, as he so forthrightly identifies himself, as a Black nationalist...[for] the political agenda of Black Nationalism is every bit as much at the heart of Wilson’s plays as Baraka’s...”(6). Moreover, Rocha acknowledges Wilson’s less political approach to his drama, but states that:

it is because of our sense of the term political is so much caught up with confrontation, with the “facing of the Man” which so concerns Baraka. Yet a closer look within
Wilson's plays will show that he continues and deepens the motif of facing the white man which Baraka developed so fully... [but] Wilson's plays are organized around these facings with the signal difference that in Wilson's plays the confrontation occurs off-stage so that the emphasis is placed not so much on the confrontation itself but upon how the black community invests itself in the face-to-face encounter. (7)

Although I include Rocha's statement here as reason for Wilson's difference from Baraka, this argument is also an indication of how Wilson separates himself from even his non-western predecessors. It is interesting that Wilson acknowledges Baraka as an influence, (for this is the playwright who has said he has never read or seen Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*), but he disassociates himself from the agit-prop nature of Baraka's work.

This disassociation by Wilson can be interpreted as yet another example of his understanding of the mainstream audience. Although he at one time aligned himself with the nationalistic beliefs of Baraka (and Ed Bullins), Wilson knows that these beliefs are oftentimes not accepted by the mainstream audience. This audience wants to be both entertained and informed, but not antagonistically. Thus, we see how skillfully he has characters verbally discuss the majority society's role in his or her restrained position; yet, there are no direct or lewd
confrontations between the two. Wilson demonstrates his ability to take what he sees fit from his dramatic predecessors and to learn from both their successes and their failures.

It is this disassociation that makes Wilson's position, again, contradictory. While claiming to be influenced by Baraka, but distancing himself from Baraka politically, Wilson appears to be a writer who believes one thing, but creates another. He considers himself anti-Western in influences, but he has mastered the technique of these dramatists. As suggested by William Demastes, Wilson's position is confusing because he cannot align himself with Eugene O'Neill or Neil Simon although his mainstream acceptance and playwrighting style prove that he is much more western than he believes. If he admits to position, then he cannot stand "firmly on the ground on which he stands" that he is a black playwright. Neither can Wilson align himself completely with Baraka, for he knows the consequences of this categorization—little and/or controversial success. Instead, as William Demastes points out, Wilson can only pretend to be influenced by Baraka, and he accomplishes this by dealing with conflict between white and black America off stage instead of on stage as Baraka does (especially in *Dutchman*) (Demastes "Chapter One").

Bessie Smith and the blues became the second set of influences on Wilson's work. Again, as noted by Rocha, the year 1965 provided the
backdrop for this merger to take place. According to Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was inspired by Rainey's song "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine,":

> For the first time someone was speaking directly to me about myself and the cultural environment of my life. I was stunned by its beauty, by its honesty, and most important, by the fact that it was mine. An affirmation of my presence in the world that would hold me up and give ground to stand on.  

(Wilson 3)

This was the beginning of the blues influence found in the majority of Wilson's plays. For Wilson this blues aesthetic reflects the musing of black America. According to Eileen Crawford in "The Bb Burden: The Invisibility of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "from [this encounter with] Bessie Smith, Wilson learned that all black people have a song, a song of themselves to present to the world"(32). Rocha points out that "when August Wilson discovered the blues, he in effect discovered America," for he contends that the blues music found in Wilson's works "are what [Houston] Baker identifies as 'the expressive site where the American experience is named'"(64), and constitute an ontology that is the very idea of America itself: that the sign "America" signifies the broke promise of presence. Rocha contends that the blues stem from "an absence, a broken promise—and the blues is the form blacks invented to mediate this absence"(10); hence, Wilson's African America is
designed to acknowledge these absences and fill them with the songs of its inhabitants, to heal their wounds through the musical salve of their own creation—the blues. Rocha continues:

In Wilson, the blues is the American language for telling and confronting the tragic reality of an America that is always already absent. Any American history is as much about our future as about our past, and Wilson’s American history in the current cycle asserts that the sign of “America” itself can only be read into the future as a tragedy, as an experiment that must fail because it was committed to the impossible from the beginning. (10)

It is interesting that Wilson himself, Rocha, Crawford, and other Wilson scholars identify the blues influence in Wilson’s dramaturgy, for Hay analyzes it as an organizational tool for his work. As he applauds Wilson for being the most successful playwright to merge the dramatic perspectives of Locke and Du Bois, thus placing his works within the category of his “unified Binding Relationship class” of African American drama because of their presentation of the extended African American family, he also discusses the musical arrangement of Wilson’s plots and themes. Hay compares Wilson’s organizational style to “musical ensembles and compositions” and suggests that his plays follow a Greek pattern using a “chorus to give the drama structure, to comment on the action, and to reveal the theme[s]” (62). Moreover, he
suggests that Wilson uses “music to structure the prologos, stasima, and exodus” which answers Locke’s call for a new theatre (62).

The works of artist Romare Bearden have also influenced the works found in Wilson’s African America, especially the plays Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson. Wilson was introduced to Bearden’s work in 1977 while examining a copy of the book The Presence of Ritual purchased by his friend Claude Purdy, and from that experience he states that “In Bearden I found my artistic mentor…” (Wilson 8):

“Look at this,” he [Purdy] said. “Look at this.” The book lay open on the table. I looked. What for me had been so difficult, Bearden made seem so simple, so easy. 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 his presence. It was the art of a large and generous spirit that defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience. (134)

Although identified by Wilson as one his influences, Bearden and Wilson share the same artistic vision. Hence, when Wilson first met the work of Bearden in 1977, not only was he meeting an artist, but he experienced a catharsis that he, at the time, did not understand. Wilson
remembers his introduction to Bearden’s work: “I don’t recall what I said as looked at it [The Prevalence of Ritual]. My response was visceral. I was looking at myself in ways I hadn’t though of before and have never ceased to think of since”(8).

Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone was inspired by Bearden’s 1978 collage/painting Millhand’s Lunch Bucket. According to Joan Fishman in the essay “Romare Bearden, August Wilson, and the Traditions of African Performance,” Wilson not only used the “dark figure” in the collage as a model for Herald Loomis, the main character of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, but he also used Bearden’s story behind the painting:

Aspects of Bearden’s life, as well as his painting, find their way into Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. For example, the physical set for Wilson’s play closely resembles the sketches Bearden made of his grandmother’s boarding house in Pittsburgh. And Wilson goes so far as to create a young character he names Ruben who is a representation of Bearden himself as a boy at this boardinghouse. (Fishman 136)

Ruben, in the play, is the young man who befriends Loomis’ daughter Zonia. In his only scene, he tells Zonia about his encounter with the ghost of Seth Holly’s mother, who instructs him to let his deceased friend, Eugene’s, pigeons go. Fishman notes that here “Wilson took
elements of one real life, Bearden's, and combined them with elements of other real lives, and he created a drama" (136). Bearden's *The Piano Lesson* was the influence for Wilson's fourth play of the same name. After seeing Bearden's collage in an art gallery, Fishman states Wilson turned to a friend and said, "This is my next play" (144).

Although greatly moved by the work of Romare Bearden, Fishman points out that Bearden and Wilson can be regarded as kindred spirits just as much as they can be seen as mentor and mentoree. Fishman identifies several parallels in the works of Bearden and Wilson and points out the universality of their artistic work as these two men create "art that simultaneously captures the energy of the African American experience and releases it back into the world, art that speaks clearly to African Americans and is heard clearly by all audiences, and art that speaks for a generation and to a generation"(133). Audience participation, as discussed by Fishman, is also an important similarity in the works of Bearden and Wilson, for as both artists illustrate their connection with the African art tradition, they also "encourage audience response"(137).

The creative process is another point where this mentor/mentoree line becomes blurred, for both artists build their works from small pieces of memories and experiences, thus creating visual and dramatical collages that speak to and from the communities of their creators (138). The same thing occurs with the characters who
find themselves on Bearden's canvasses and those found in Wilson's plays. As Fishman states, "As they create their work both Bearden and Wilson are guided by the characters who appear in their paintings and plays" (138).

The fiction of Jorge Luis Borges is the literary influence on Wilson's African America. As suggested by Rocha, Borges contributes to the universal characteristic of Wilson's African American by bringing an international influence to his work. Also, Rocha notes how Borges allows Wilson "access to the Western tradition without the need for [his] deference to it. Borges' influence allows Wilson to transcend the American categorization and become a member of the "intercultural Americas" (15). Probably the greatest illustration of Borges's influence on Wilson's African America can be found in the people, the characters that populate his African America and their need to tell stories in order to remind themselves (and their audiences) of the whats and whys of their existences. Wilson, as suggested by Rocha, has adopted Borges' skill for storytelling and placed it within the vocal cords of his African American protagonists as a means to help them to find themselves or to undertake "a Borgesian quest to locate or lose a text" (13). The result of this move by Wilson is a return not only to the history of the African American as articulated by the protagonist of choice but also a brilliant return to the African American oral tradition and the use of the voice
(which during slavery was the only instrument the southern Negro slave
had in his possession) to help one find his song, his spirit.

In a 1997 interview Bonnie Lyons asks Wilson about a fifth
influence (as mentioned by him) on his work, South African playwright
Athol Fugard. Wilson says that he appreciates Fugard’s work, for he
wrote about the experiences of “voiceless” South Africans when their
own playwrights “had no outlets for their work” (4). Yet, while he
admires Furgard’s “magnificent spirit” for wanting to write about the
experiences of oppressed South Africans, he tells Lyons he thinks that
Fugard should “write about the white experience in South Africa and
more about himself, from his own focus” (4).

As noted by Rocha, Wilson’s influences are just as diverse and
universal as thematic approaches to drama. He finds inspiration in
largely minority voices, and he does not acknowledge the western
theatrical tradition as an influence on his work. This is interesting, for
Wilson’s plays are presented on theatrical stages that mainly adhere to
the criteria of mainstream or western theatre. Also interesting is that
outside of Baraka and Fugard, Wilson does not name any other minority
dramatists as influences, especially Lorraine Hansberry whose most
successful play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was directed by his mentor Lloyd
Richards.
Themes

The themes of Wilson’s work are where one can find the merger of his protest and ghetto politics. Hay states that they are similar to Du Bois’s “positions on racism, politics, and economics,” but they are not the “sentimentalized protests that Locke so abhorred (of the Du Bois school) but the “enlightened” indictments that Locke promoted”(71). Also, as espoused by many critics, his themes are universal and speak to archetypal concerns and questions of all persons—black and white. Shafer identifies these themes as the questions of: “What is true freedom? What is it to be a man or woman? How does a family relate? What is the true nature of responsibility? What, ultimately is the purpose of life and how does one find one’s own song?”(17).

Inherently, the overall theme of each play is African American second-class citizenship. Each play from his first Broadway success Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom to King Headley II deals in some manner with the theme of African American disenfranchisement financially, morally, psychologically, and socially. However, as noted by Shafer, Wilson addresses these issues thematically in such a way that is not threatening to audiences of other persuasions. She states, “unlike many black playwrights, [Wilson’s] own experience and his knowledge of the history of blacks in America has not resulted in bitter, vituperative dramas. [Instead,] Wilson movingly evokes the psychic burden of slavery without laying guilt or political harangues”(9).
Wilson’s exploration of these themes in a non-threatening manner is one of the reasons for the success of his African American perspective. Although a black man, and a black playwright, he does not allow the violent protest element of his mentor Baraka’s Black Arts movement to shape his recitations on the injustices African Americans have suffered at the hands of white Americans. Instead, he takes a non-violent approach to his protest against African American second-class citizenship, and he allows this gift for language to mete out the blows to mainstream society. Wilson’s universal themes become universal protests that both his mainstream and African American audiences can applaud and appreciate.

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* Wilson makes a poignant statement about the African American performer’s victimization at the hands of white record producers and agents. Ma’s character proves that she is well informed of her worth to the white producers; hence, they need to honor her requests. But Wilson continues the theme by allowing the naive band member Toledo to fall prey to the promise of stardom and he ends up destroying one of his own because he cannot destroy the one who used him.

Familial separation is another theme that finds itself into Wilson’s work, especially in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Herald Loomis is not only looking for his song, as Bynum discovers in this play, but also his wife. Torn from his family by an indentured enslaver
and forced to work seven years for his freedom, Herald is an African American man tormented by the pain this forced separation caused.

_The Piano Lesson_ continues to ponder the theme of family. Again relying heavily on the supernatural and the ancestral, this play centers on an unplayed piano and the ghost and live person who try to steal it away. Berneice and Boy Willie, the two main characters, battle one another for the birthright that was left to the family after their father’s death—a carved piano. For Berneice the piano encompasses the blood, tears, and laughter of the family’s foreparents and the struggle to stay alive amidst slavery. Boy Willie, conversely, sees the piano as the blood and tears of the family; hence, an inheritance that the present generation should use to make their lives easier. As the siblings feud, the family griot, Doaker, tries to hold the family together by sharing the story of the piano and how important both of their desires for the family heirloom are. In the end, family and the belief that “blood is thicker than water” prevails and the siblings mend their riff.

In _Seven Guitars_ Wilson returns his patrons to the theme of the disenfranchised blues musician. This time, however, the theme is set within a murder mystery frame with one member of the black community brutally slaying another. Although situated within the African American culture through the characters, setting, and especially the blues music infused within the text of the play, _Seven
*Guitars* is a story that could center upon a European musician and his desperate but failed attempt at success.

*Two Trains Running* examines the search for justice in an unjust world. With most of the action taking place in the restaurant of Memphis Lee, *Two Trains Running* ponders the question of justice several years after the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, the play (as will be discussed) does not dwell on these two persons. Rather, it examines the justice that the patrons of Memphis’s restaurant attempt to attain for themselves.

*Jitney!* , although written earlier, moves Wilson’s African American history closer to the 90's. Set in the 1970s, Jitney revisits the father-son feud began in *Fences*. This time the father is bitter because the son foils his opportunity for a better life. An exemplary example of the evolution of Wilson’s African America and its themes from the early 1900s to the more contemporary time period, Butler Becker has the opportunity and the support, unlike Cory his dramatic ancestor, to attend college and break the cycle of violence and miseducation that has plagued black men since their introduction into the North American culture. Butler, however, ruins this chance by becoming another statistic, or rather stereotypical Negro, and lands himself in the penitentiary for murder of his former white lover. For this his father, Becker, cannot forgive him. Their strained relationship becomes the primary focus of this work.
King Headley II, set in 1985, is Wilson's most contemporary drama. It delivers his most recent interpretation of universal dreams deferred. King finds himself living a "hand-to-mouth" existence just like his dramatic brethren in Wilson's African America. Even in the 1980s, the world still has little opportunity to offer him. Set in the midst of the Ronald Reagan dominated 80s, King finds himself unemployed and with nothing to call his own except for his wife, his unborn child that he wishes to keep, and a little plot of land that he has barricaded so that he may have some space and grow something of his own. All of this results in a rage in the titular character, King Headley, that some audience members may find frightening, but as the drama progresses King's rage becomes understandable and universal. He picks up where Troy leaves off and becomes the everyman of the 1980s. He simply wants to support his family without a struggle, but he feels that society will not give him the opportunity to do so. King says of this lack of opportunity:

KING. I go for a job. They say, "what can you do?" I say I can do anything. You get me a tanks and the airplanes, I can win any war that's out there...I could dance all night if the music's right. Ain't nothing I can't do. I could build a railroad you give me the steel and a gang of men. The greatest fight. I ain't linking this to nothing. I can go down there, do metal shop. I know how to count money, I don't
loan money to everybody who asks for it. I know how to do business. I'm talking mayor, governor, I can do it all. I ain't got no limits. I know right from wrong. I know which way the wind blows too. It don't blow my way! (qtd. in Ifill 3)

Again, Wilson's talent for indirect protest allows him to point the finger at the mainstream establishment without King being seen as a brutal and vicious black male. Instead, the audience is asked to empathize with King's rage and to question how much could it bear before being pushed to the same limit as King. It is Wilson's ability to challenge the audience to question itself that enables his plays, although steeped in African American culture and history, to become universal works of art. Wilson takes themes that every human has the ability to understand and to experience, saturates them in the black experience, then hurls them back into the faces of each audience member so that he/she can view it from his/her own subjective baggage and see that all humankind is essentially the same.

Wilson's use of universal themes aligns him with Du Bois's position on black theatre, for although he uses characters that may be considered Lockanian and "earthy," in scripting out his lives he illustrates Du Bois's belief that black theatre should be used to prove to audiences (particularly mainstream audiences) that African Americans
are just as human as white Americans. Thus, they too are entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Wilson’s African America is a multi-faceted place where an African American playwright has the ability to accomplish two theatrical feats: first, to present a version of the African American experience on major American stages; and secondly, to become recognized as not just an African American playwright but also an American playwright. Wilson accomplishes these tasks by aligning the mandates of American theatre with his African and African American perspectives and forcing them to become one. Wilson’s African America exemplifies the idea of America as a melting pot of cultures and demonstrates the ability of a writer, even one who claims to write from a particular cultural experience, to transcend race, class, and nationality and to become known as a universal playwright.
Bullins's Black America- (n) 1) a place where black people strive to exist in the face of racism, sexism, alcoholism, unemployment, drug abuse and any and all other vices they perpetuate within their own communities, although they often blame others, particularly white Americans, for their problems. 2) a place where black revolutionaries are offered a mirror in which to see themselves as they truly are.

One of the most prolific playwrights of the twentieth century, Wilson's predecessor and contemporary, Ed Bullins, probably appears to be an unlikely personality for comparison to him. Yet, upon closer examination, Bullins provides one of the most interesting dramaturgies and personalities to be compared to Wilson. Ed Bullins's mark on black theatre began during the 1960s and 1970s movements when African Americans strove for political and social enfranchisement within the United States. Credited by many theatrical scholars for continuing Baraka's development of black theatre, Bullins helped to transform a primarily white dominated medium to that of one with an arm specifically for persons of African American descent. The title of Leslie Sanders' discussion on Bullins and his work, "'Like Niggers: Ed Bullins' Theater of Reality," encompasses Sanders' interpretation of this expansion of Baraka's doctrine into what would soon become reflective of and within Ed Bullins' work:
...while Jones [Baraka] chose the theater of symbol and allegory to show the beautiful themselves, Bullins, early in his dramatic career, chose what he termed a “theatre of reality”: “Any theatrical style or method can be used separately or in combination to reach the truth of the play...dramatizing the journey of the character through his own psyche to reach his loss of innocence, self-awareness or illumination. To reach what individually is called reality. The method is not the goal in this theatre; the result must elicit the single response of ‘Yes!’” (176).

As Bullins states, “the method is not the goal,” but the persons to whom this method is directed and their cathartic “Yes” are. These persons, black Americans, are who Bullins creates his work for. As Sanders suggests, “In his [Bullins’s] plays, a black stage reality and black audience are assumed. The matters he takes up often are intimate, sensitive, and particular to the black experience”(176).

Bullins, as an artist, strives to depict the African American experience on its own terms. Instead of presenting the culture from an outsider’s perspective, he writes from the position of participant/observer. From this perspective he is able to capture both the subtle and obvious nuances that make the black American experience unique. Although this monovisioned angle may appear to be segregatory, Bullins does not apologize for it, nor has it prevented
white American audiences and critics from appreciating his work. He has made it his goal to depict black America for black Americans—period. Granted Bullins is not the first African American playwright to make this choice, nor the only, but his work stands out as a precedent for those dramatists who desire to focus solely on one audience. August Wilson credits Bullins and other playwrights of the Black Arts Movement for helping to pave the way for his work by taking a stand of “self-definition” in the formation of black theatre:

It was this high ground of self-definition that the black playwrights of the ‘60s marked out for themselves. Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Phillip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonne Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and Amiri Baraka were among those playwrights who were particularly vocal and we remain indebted to them for their brave and courageous forays into an area that is marked with land mines and the shadows of snipers—those who would reserve the territory of arts and letters and the American theatre as their own special province and point blacks toward the ball fields and the bandstands. (Wilson “The Ground on Which I Stand” 4)

If the name August Wilson has become synonymous with Broadway success, then the name Ed Bullins is synonymous with the term theatrical contrariness. To utilize the term that Hay uses to begin
his discussion of Bullins, “contrariness,” is a good place to begin this
discussion of him and his black America. If it is true that order comes
out of chaos, then Bullins’ dramaturgy is the one of the most ordered of
all African American playwrights.

In the introduction to his literary biography of Bullins, Hay offers
a brief timeline of Bullins’s early career then sums up his overall
demeanor as a playwright:

Who he was became insignificant because of what he was—
simply contrary. Whatever already existed was there only
to be opposed. It is predictable, then, that his plays were
unlike anything ever seen in African American theatre.
Bullins’ plays had to directly oppose such “proper” and
“right” Art-theatre classics as Willis Richardson’s The Chip
Woman’s Fortune ...Bullins’ plays had to be different even
from Baraka’s Dutchman, which Bullins took as the New
“right-proper”. (23)

Bullins’s work dared to be different in the face of those of other African
American playwrights who came before him. His contrariness leads to
his contrasting thoughts and patternings; thus, adding other dimensions
to even at this writing what may be considered a growing sector of
American theatre.

Ed Bullins found his way into the world of theater largely by
accident. Like Wilson, raised in inner city Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,
Bullins's surroundings were not unlike those of many of his characters. Also educated to the mores of Pittsburgh's African American culture by its more street-wise inhabitants, Bullins internalized these lessons and revisits them in the language, settings, and actions of his characters. Bullins also enrolled in several formal educational programs. After a tour in the Navy (which he joined at the age of seventeen), he realized, according to Hay, that "he was not as well equipped for the world as he had previously thought" (21). Hence after being discharged in 1955, he returned to Philadelphia and enrolled in the William Penn Business Institute. Here is where he met an instructor by the name of Mr. Jason, whom Hay says "can be blamed for pushing Bullins in the direction of theatre" (22). Next, Bullins enrolled in the Temple University High School and then migrated west to Los Angeles, California where he completed General Education Degree studies at Los Angeles Manual Arts Adult High School in 1959. Bullins then enrolled at Los Angeles Community College in the summer of 1959 and began his interaction with and introduction to many of the major black arts and black activist leaders of the 1960's.

The years 1964 and 1965 saw the birth of Ed Bullins the playwright. At this time Bullins had moved to San Francisco and was already a published poet and short story writer. 1966 found Bullins in the company of Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), who would become Bullins'
guide and muse into agit-prop theatre. Thus, Bullins’s Black America would begin.

Twentieth Century Cycle

Bullins’s Black America is best exemplified in the works that comprise his twentieth century cycle. Like Eugene O’Neil and August Wilson, Bullins envisioned a collection of plays that would examine the lives of a small group of persons within the black underclass. In The Wine Time (1968), The Duplex (1970), In The New England Winter (1971), The Fabulous Miss Marie (1971), Home Boy (1977), Daddy (1977) and Boy x Man (1995) comprise the world that these persons exist in as Bullins attempts to offer African Americans “some impressions and insights into their own lives in order to help them consider the weight of their experience of having migrated from the North and the West, from an agricultural to an industrial center” (Bullins qtd. in Hay 258). Moreover, in this cycle of plays Bullins states that he wishes to explore the lives of those black persons typically excluded from mainstream and middle class African American thought. This group would be led by and visited often by one Bullins’s most legendary characters, Steve Benson, but would trace the lives of several other characters connected through kinship and friendship.

The plays of Bullins’s twentieth century cycle not only reflect his adherence to the tenets of the Black Aesthetic/Black Theatre movements through their subject matter or even their specific
audiences, but also through the important messages that Bullins attempts to send to African Americans themselves. For example, the alcohol abuse that is present in the majority of these seven plays is, particularly in *The Wine Time*, blatantly points out of the downfalls that the persons within the culture place upon themselves. This is an illustration of the way Bullins defines “revolution” in these works—it means to get African Americans to realize that they are guilty of crimes against themselves and one another, mainstream culture has little to do with their problems.

At this writing, approximately seven of the twenty plays planned for this twentieth century cycle have been written and staged. It will be interesting to see how and if Bullins will complete his proposed cycle, or will he, like Tennessee Williams, abandon this goal.

Audience

The audience for Bullins’s Black America are members of the African American population. He did not envision a mainstream audience for his earlier works, and he acknowledges and realizes that although he creates his works for an African American audience, not all African Americans care for his version of the African American story, particularly middle class blacks. He tells John DiGaetani:

Many middle-class blacks dislike my plays, particularly academic blacks. They feel that the image of blacks which I give is too negative, it’s not an upwardly mobile type of
progressive image. I don’t seem to pay homage to the right
cultural or ghetto gods, such as the preacher and the
politician. And I deal too much with the people in the
street, and they feel nothing’s going on in the street, so
consequently, I’m not worthy of interest. Many times I’ve
attacked Western icons, and there’s this striving for
Western identities and icons in the middle-class black
community, and consequently they feel I must be out of my
mind for not recognizing them as the final authority. So I
don’t sit well with most of those people. (43)

Bullins realizes that although he writes black theater for black people,
he is not a favorite of all African American theatre patrons, particularly
those persons who can afford to purchase a theatre ticket. However as
Bullins’s staging history proves, his plays are most often produced in
small, community, theatres within African American neighborhoods
and off-Broadway theatres, again illustrative of his training in the Black
Theatre Movement.

Despite Bullins’s selected audience, many of his early works
(particularly those staged between 1965 and 1970) gained attention from
As will be presented later in this study, surprisingly many of these
critics while mentioning the “racist” nature of Bullins’ works, also
noted the creative and artistic quality of his work. It is interesting to
identify mainstream critics’ approval of Bullins talent as playwright, for although Bullins has both lived as black revolutionary and offered examinations of both black nationalist and black underclass subjects and themes in his work, he situates himself as an “American writer” (Bullins “Two Days Shie” 67-68). Bullins, whose works may ostracize mainstream audiences because of their black characters and themes, considers himself to be not only an American playwright but also a universal playwright whose aim is to offer the world, especially the black world, a picture of black life as experienced by those persons who probably would not make up a typical theatre audience.

Bullins’s approach to audience is more reflective of Locke’s tenets for black theatre, particularly in characterization and audience selection. He exemplifies Locke’s belief that Negro theatre could sustain itself if its dramatists and artists return to the primitive and/or those things African for material and inspiration. I ask who can be more primitive than the African American from the underclass who has not been afforded or does not wish to partake of the opportunities for a better life? Bullins’s discussion of the people of the black underclass and their choices and lack of choices is not only representative of Locke’s contention that black theatre should focus on the “common folk” for subject and representation but also that black audiences should be allowed to see themselves represented as they are and not as they should be.
Characters

Upon first glance, Bullins's characters may be considered as Lockanian as they can come, or they are realistic representations of African American personalities as encouraged by the Black Theatre/Black Aesthetic movements. Thus, they are one of several reasons why many find it difficult to read, let alone attend a Bullins play. Vulgarity, profanity, alcoholism—all these characteristics represent several of the characters that can be found in one of Bullins’s plays. However, within these socially unacceptable characters, one finds the Lockanian-Du Boisian hero as created by the Harlem Renaissance dramatists.

One of his most infamous characters, Steve Benson, is thought by many critics and scholars to be an autobiographical character of Bullins himself. Steve, the sophomoric philosopher of Bullins' canon, is symbolic of the African American male of the twentieth century. Although granted the opportunity for an education and a better life, he still remains closely allied to familiar places, actions, and people of the black, uneducated underclass. The opposite of the character Jack, in Clara's Ole Man, Steve has not allowed his educational experience to move him out of the world he knows. Instead, he sets his book knowledge on the periphery of the street knowledge he as obtained. In doing so, Steve allows himself to be constantly dragged from one world to the other.
Richard Scharine in the article “Ed Bullins was Steve Benson (But Who Is He Now?)” contends that through the character of Steve, one does not only find an interesting and complex character, but also has the opportunity to trace the evolution of Ed Bullins from black revolutionary poet to a successful playwright:

When the first Steve Benson play was produced, Ed Bullins was Information Minister for the San Francisco Black Panther Party. When the last one was presented five years later, he was the Obie Award-winning resident playwright of New York’s New Lafayette Theatre. In the plays Steve Benson is first defined by the intensity of his love-hate relationship with White values. Gradually he learns to accept his Blackness and the importance of his emotional commitments, a development that parallels Bullins’ evolution in public posture from political ideologist to cultural humanist. (108)

Beginning with Steve’s appearances in Bullins’s twentieth century cycle dramas In New England Winter and It Has No Choice, Scharine states that Steve is “a pathological figure, motivated by an intense love-hate relationship with both his concept of himself and his concept of ‘whiteness.’” He exists in a constant state of racial self-betrayal, but cannot himself accept what he interprets as betrayal from anyone else” (104).
Scharine notes how the character of Steve Benson met in *The Duplex* and *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, both plays in which he is a secondary character, has changed from being the angry young man who wants to define the world on his own terms, to being a man who can sympathize with the black experience instead of trying to change it. He notes how this change is clearly illustrated in Steve's progression from *In New England Winter* to *The Duplex*, both plays in which Steve loses love:

The portrait of Steve Benson in the plays of Ed Bullins involves one long odyssey from a constricting soul-destroying, White-oriented consciousness to a Black sensibility, aware of its inherent problems but determined not to sacrifice humanity to them. The first key event in that transformation is the realization that despite Steve's betrayal of his brother [*In New England Winter*] Cliff, still loves him. The second is the decision—despite its potential consequences and, more importantly, despite the fact that she still wants her husband—to take on the responsibility of Velma Best [*The Duplex*]. (106)

The Steve Benson met in *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, according to Scharine, is "more passive than parasitical" and "devoid of either of the hats that drove him in earlier plays, and deprived of the love he found in
The Duplex” (108). Thus, he is placed into the play simply to replace, Art, Miss Marie’s former lover than to spout any revolutionary rhetoric.

As Steve changes, Scharine contends that Bullins changes also from being a black, militant poet into what Bullins calls himself, an American playwright. He, like Steve, recognizes that the problem is not white culture only but also the black underclass culture itself. Only if one is able to move himself outside of this culture can he clearly see the limitations that this world has to offer. This recognition by Bullins (and Steve) can be found in several works, particularly the play Death List, where he questions the actions of his former Black Panther party members and in Bullins’s own assertion that he is an American playwright. As Bullins changed, Steve changed, and they both became men who, over time, were able to see and critique their worlds from a safe distance.

Then there is Curt of In The Wine Time and In New England Winter. Steve Benson’s older half-brother, Curt, like Steve, has had the opportunity to move outside of the black underclass with his enlistment in the Navy and his college attendance by way of the GI Bill, but Curt allows alcohol to dictate his life and the lives of those around him. A natural leader of the black underclass, Curt leads his wife Lou, and their friends astray by example. He drinks, cusses, commits adultery, and mentally and physically abuses his wife. No one is exempt from Curt’s wrath; however, no one attempts to escape his rule either. In
Curt, Bullins combines powerful potential with self-loathing and self-imposed limitations—thus, producing a dangerous combination in this character. When Curt is first introduced he appears to be a ruthless tyrant who deserves the hell he has placed himself in. However, at the end of *In The Wine Time*, Bullins offers a Curt whom audiences can applaud and in someway respect. Curt’s character comes full circle from brute to benefactor when at the play’s end he admits to a murder in order to save his wife’s nephew from falling into the cycle that he and so many men like himself had fallen into within the black underclass. He offers his nephew a chance to escape in hope that he will cross the barriers of this world.

Bullins’ women are interesting characters that span the gamut from willing victims to controversial feminists. Two of his most interesting female characters are Miss Marie (*The Fabulous Miss Marie* and *The Duplex*) and the infamous Clara (*Clara’s Ole Man*), for they demonstrate the strength of the women in this sub-culture of the African American culture.

Miss Marie is an amalgam of the African American club woman (the black bourgeoisie) and the aging, but promiscuous, juke joint female. It is through her character that Bullins makes his most scathing critique of the black bourgeoisie and its attempt to disown those persons (even themselves) who “happily” live within the black underclass. Miss Marie is interesting not only because she can and
should be placed in the black underclass because of her wayward ways but also because she believes that the money her husband makes places her above the members of this class and a true member of the black bourgeoisie. In *The Fabulous Miss Marie* we meet Marie’s friends, primarily black professionals, but we also run into Steve Benson and several other visages from the black underclass. Thus, if the old cliché “birds of a feather flock together” rings true, the reader/viewer learns that Miss Marie is really no different from the common black folk. She drinks, smokes, commits adultery, and encourages others to partake of these vices all under the auspices of middle class entertaining; thus, she proves, again, that even this group of black people have the same vices as those they look down on. In *The Duplex*, we meet Miss Marie again, this time drinking and sleeping in a place outside of the suburbs. She brings some class to the black underclass, but then by the play’s end she becomes a willing participant in this group’s “fun”; thus she steps backward and becomes her true self, like them.

The most direct contrast to Miss Marie or any of Bullins other female characters in Bullins’s dramaturgy is Clara of *Clara’s Ole Man*. Although she and this play are not part of Bullins’s twentieth century cycle, she is a character that stands out in his dramaturgy and demands discussion. Clara, like Miss Marie is the matriarch of her group; however, Clara’s maternal character stops at her gender. Bullins uses
Clara’s character to introduce the powerful African American female lesbian to the stage and to discuss her place in both the black underclass and the black experience. By introducing Clara, Bullins challenges the notion that the only powerful persons in the class are the men. Moreover, he proves that not all of the women are helpless victims or sex toys. Instead, Clara purports a feminist nature that the stage had not seen before. She controls both the men and women in her world, the language of her world, the vices of her world, and as proven, controls visitors into her world as well. The beauty of Bullins’s Clara is that she does not wear her sexuality on her sleeve; instead she dons her power, and dares anyone to challenge it or her.

Bullins white characters, although few in number, are probably the root cause of much of his criticism by mainstream theatre audiences, for they are directly indicted—physically, verbally, etc.—for many of the problems experienced by the black characters in his work and/or oftentimes misused by the black characters in his work. Two plays spring to mind in which Bullins’ white characters are victims at the hands of his black characters It Bee’s Dat Way and Goin’ A Buffalo. In It Bee’s Dat Way, a short one-act play, the white members of the audience are physically and verbally abused until they actually run out of the theatre. This completely interactive theatrical experience not only made Bullins notorious in theatre circles, but also caused him to be labeled as an extremist and cruel playwright.
The play *Goin' A Buffalo*, one of Bullins' most anthologized works, again features a white victim (if the director so wishes this character to be) in the heroin-addicted prostitute Mama Too Tight. Although Bullins leaves it up to the director to decide if Mama should be played by a black or white actress, the staging of her as a young, white woman at the mercy of both drugs and a black pimp is certainly not a typical image of the white female for mainstream audiences, regardless of how true this image may be or may have been. Thus the character, herself, moves further outside of the sphere of mainstream expectation and into the arms of the avant-garde.

Bullins's characters provide interesting personalities for African American and American stages. Although his characters appear to follow those encouraged by Locke, they are, like Wilson's characters, examples of that merger of Lockanian and Du Boisian character types. In these seemingly crude and base characters, Bullins places a strain of Du Bois protest element; however, this element is not always pointed toward mainstream America. His characters, particularly those in his later works and those found in his twentieth century cycle, protest against themselves, other "victims" of the African American culture, and the self-imposed situations in which they place themselves.

Bullins's characters present to his audiences, particularly his black audiences, the dangers of deferred dreams and encourages them to find new ways to live and alter their futures.
Themes

Bullins's themes are the core of the contrary nomenclature given to him by Hay and his more severe critics. Dealing with issues and characters that are the stereotypical images found in African American dramas, Bullins presents the persons who inhabit the "netherworld" of the African American community. According to Hay, Bullins' early works turned the tables against many African American playwrights themselves as he chose to "all but ignore the theme found in most of his contemporaries' plays, that all whites are enemies of African Americans" (27). His themes are not made up, but come from the challenges that human beings face daily. Actually, Bullins's themes are universal themes that range from as he states "people's needs for sexual satisfaction, safety, economic security, family, self-esteem, and self-improvement" (Hay 27). Bullins tells DeGaetani that he also examines the theme of "You can't go home again" in which he examines "the breakdown of communications among loved ones, and misunderstanding among good intentions" (41). Hay quotes Bullins as saying that his themes and characters are disliked because they address contemporary issues that many in the theatrical world do not wish to see or experience: "the establishment has no desire to recognize the contemporary black urban experience as subject for great literature..." (qtd. in Hay 28).
Two themes that Bullins is highly criticized for are his discussions and use of violence and rape (this theme, according to Bullins was influenced by Eldridge Cleaver) (Bullins qtd. in DiGaetani 42) featured in several of his plays. He defends the use of these themes to DiGaetani as he contends that the violence in his plays is used to “startle and shock” his audience members and to highlight those issues in the play that he deems important. He uses “violence” and the violence of rape metaphorically to represent “some race relations and pseudo-race relations” and to explore another way in which people can acquaint themselves with one another:

...In addition, I’ve been interested in some of the ways that these people could touch one another to get to know one another, or even just move one another. One of those ways is through violence, and that violence can be verbal or physical. But also violence is an exciting spectacle in the theater. (Bullins qtd. in DiGaetani 41)

Bullins contends that he uses rape in his plays as a metaphoric framework, particularly in the highly controversial play The Taking of Miss Janie. To Bullins rape is more than an act of violence, but it is also “a mind trip. It’s someone who invades someone’s mind and that person’s psyche” (41). Of course theatre critics and feminists alike reacted negatively to these rape-themed plays, as will be discussed in chapter four; however, Bullins never recanted his dramatic thoughts.
Instead, he again lived up to his contrary reputation in mainstream theatre and defied traditional dramatic conventions.

It is from these same characterizations and themes that the plots of Ed Bullins’s Black America come into existence. Also, it is from these same characterizations (when combined with Bullins’ plots and themes) that the argument of this discussion evolves. It appears that because Bullins has chosen to depict a blatant version of contemporary society in his dramas that he remains on the periphery of theatre. Of course many persons could argue against this interpretation of Bullins position, for he has received numerous awards and accolades from various dramatic organizations and his work has even been introduced at the famous Lincoln Center; yet these same persons must also acknowledge the fact that Bullins is not, nor has been, as well known, discussed, or celebrated as his protégé August Wilson. The same reasons for this oversight, may be argued—timing, finance, interest, etc.—but these reasons still do not offer an answer to the question. Why has Bullins, who has been reviewed and accepted by several mainstream critics, remain on the periphery of American theatre?

Influences

Like Wilson, many of Bullins’ character types and themes come from persons he encountered and situations he found himself involved in while growing up in the ghettos of Philadelphia. However, Bullins’s experiences in the Navy and his membership in the Black Panther Party
gave him more worldly and politically influenced dramatic perspective. To note Bullins's influences, outside of his black revolutionary experience and the playwright Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) is difficult, for it appears that Bullins used what was present in African American theatre as a means of contradiction instead of imitation. As noted by Hay, from his first play, *How Do You Do* (1968), Bullins challenged conventional African American and American theatre by "ma[king] words into musical instruments, accompanied by blues guitar and multi-hued sight" (24). Bullins tells DiGaetani that playwrights Samuel Beckett and Eugene O'Neill have also had an influence on his work (40). He says that it was from Beckett that he learned "a great deal about dramaturgy, dramatic action, and conflict in the theater" and that his earlier plays "indicate the influence of Beckett, particularly *Clara's Old Man*, *How Do You Do?* (a parody of Beckett's *The Gentleman Caller*), and *The Theme Is Blackness*" (40-41).

Thus from the beginning, Bullins was different from other agit-prop playwrights, and this difference lead to his contributions to and influences upon African American theatre. As suggested by Hay, Bullins changed the method of playwriting by creating "films for stage." Influenced by those jazz artists whom he calls "black avant garde musicians: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Charlie Parker, Clifford Brown, Theolonius Monk, and many others [,] these 'films for stage were created to appeal to the audiences
that preferred “the fast-paced episodes of television and film over the slower paced non-guerilla theatre” (Hay 27). In order to accommodate this audience’s taste and lure them into the theatre, Bullins “shortened the beginning and end of the play, enlivened and elaborated the middle, and urbanized the characters, themes, and slight plots” (27). Bullins calls this playwriting style “improvisational” and notes that this style of writing would “enable [him] to continually create fresh forms for [his work]” (27).

Although Bullins notes the influence of jazz music on his dramatic technique, Geneva Smitherman identifies the Blues experience in Bullins’s dramaturgy. In “Ed Bullins/Stage One: Everybody Wants to Know Why I Sing The Blues,” Smitherman aligns the messages of Bullins works with the experience of the African American at this point in history and concludes that Bullins’s studies of the black underclass reflect the message and meter of blues music, as she says, “the blues”. A thang most Black folks can identify with. One of the life-renewing resources that have enabled Black folks to survive” (7). Smitherman notes, and I agree, that while Bullins writes about members of the black underclass, or “Bullins’ blues people” (9) in their most vulgar forms, he humanizes these images by pushing to the forefront their delayed hopes and dreams:

Bullins’ blues people enact the drama of their/our lives in rhythmic step with various blues notes. The tunes and
types selected are those soulful, funky sounds of the blues-
jazz tradition. The emphasis on Black music in Bullins’
productions is not merely an “artsy” gimmick. It serves
both as a symbolic representation of the psychological
states of his characters and as a cultural reaffirmation of
the integral part that Black music plays in Black life-style
and survival. (9)

The blues music in Bullins’s Black America adds to the already
complex character traits he gives to his black (and white) characters
and makes their stories even more tragic and grim. Like Wilson, he
uses the blues music to echo the sentiment of the characters and to set
the tone and the mood for the actions carried out on stage and in the
minds of the audience members.

However, just as Bullins does with all of his influences, he
reverses the order of things and becomes an influence on them. With
the blues music and its lyrics and stories as a canvas, Bullins creates
characters and themes that shock the theatre world and become his
next influence on African America. By exploring the lifestyle(s) of the
“contemporary black urban experience,” the black underclass, Bullins
exposed the theatrical world to the issues and complex lives of the
members of this often ignored facet of African American culture and
demanded that it and the members of this group themselves recognize
that many of their issues are their own and self-imposed.
Hay contends that Bullins's third and most important influence or contribution to African American theatre has been his influence on other African American playwrights. By sharing his talents and vision through various playwriting workshops and theatre groups, Bullins has ushered a new group of African American playwrights and has encouraged experimentation in African American theatre. Bullins continues to share his vision through his teaching. Currently at Northeastern University (Boston, MA) Bullins continues to work in the theatre and encourages future playwrights to challenge traditional forms of theatre and to create theatres of their own.
CHAPTER 4
THE CONTROVERSIAL POLITICS OF WILSON/THE CONTRADICTORY POLITICS OF BULLINS

Wilson’s African America and Bullins’ Black America are spaces where the African American experience is presented for all persons to see. Each representative space has its own culture that is governed by its own rules, values, traditions and mores; yet, they both reflect some aspect of the African American culture. What is interesting about Wilson’s African America and Bullins’s Black America is not only the representations of African American experience that they purport, but also the creators of these spaces themselves. Wilson and Bullins are interesting not only because of what they say about themselves and the African American culture within their plays but more so because of what they say about and to the world in which they create--the world of American theatre.

Bullins enters the American theatre scene with “contrariness” as part of his theatrical presence. Not only challenging the American criteria for theatre but also the criteria for African American theatre as created by Hughes, Fuller, Hansberry, and his own theatrical mentor Amiri Baraka, Bullins changed the face of African American theatre and made it a place for experimentation and challenge to traditional theatre expectations. Bringing with him a strong black nationalistic sentiment and a individuality that even membership and an appointment as Minister of Arts for the Black Panther Party could not force to conform,
Bullins opens the door in African American and mainstream American theatre for a necessary discussion of the lives of members of the black underclass and their associates. Bullins' contrariness, though, is one of the factors that has lead to his exclusion from the mainstream stage. Because he holds fast to his creative politics and his disregard for mainstream acceptance or acknowledgment, he tends to push toward the periphery of American theatre.

However, Bullins's contrariness has not excluded him from mainstream critique or approval. As will be exemplified in chapter five, Bullins's talent as a playwright, for several mainstream critics, transcends the black nationalist messages of his plays. The critics were able to discern the panache' Bullins has for not only dramatic structure, but also for creating and recreating characters that the off-Broadway American stage will not forget. This favorable reading of Bullins's talent challenges the theatrical and artistic platform. Although Bullins attempts and proves in numerous instances that he is black man, writing about the experiences of black people; his pro-black rhetoric is not threatening enough to dissuade mainstream critics from viewing his work.

Despite the separatist theatrical examinations presented in his dramaturgy, Bullins considers himself to be an American playwright. This position being stated by him, for some, could appear completely contrary to his agenda. However, if one has studies Bullins artistically
and politically, one can understand and appreciate his claim of Americanness. Although Bullins has used his work as a platform upon which to dissect and to discuss issues affecting the minority population in this country and because he has made these presentations largely to and for black audiences, Bullins has never placed himself or his characters outside of the American borders. Every experience illuminated in Bullins's dramaturgy is an experience of some African American. What makes these characters and their experiences seemingly un-American is their creator's—Bullins's—decision to write specifically for them, in this case the black underclass. Artistically, Bullins aligns his work with his cultural politics, blending both the African and the American experience into his works. Thus, what is contrary about Bullins's politics is that he is not only challenges the rules of the sub-culture from which he takes his subject matter but simultaneously challenges the American culture itself and demands that we all re-exam what the term and idea of being an American means. By highlighting the deferred dreams of the black underclass, Bullins challenges and encourages his readers/viewers to realize that even the bleakest black life is still a part of the American experience. Thus, he too sings America for them:

Whatever my faults, I am indeed an American writer, an African American writer, who has something to say to all of America. My work is real, not only to me, but to my found
and unfound audiences, who feel its sweat, its cries, its bleeding, its loves and hates, and fights for what is right and good, even though it sometimes fails through its own excesses of bad taste, bad blood, and poor judgment, but righteously so, even innocently so. I feel that I am a writer quite unlike any other American writer and, through a retrospective de ja vu of my staged scenarios, some sense of this can be displayed. I am an artist of the theater, and my scope is as wide as humanity will allow. ("Two Days Shie" 67-68)

While Bullins’s contrary position is demonstrated in both his work and his politics, Wilson’s controversial role in African American and American theatre is not exemplified in his work, but in his politics voiced in interviews and speeches. Also claiming to be a Black Nationalist, and influenced by Baraka, Bullins, and the Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements, Wilson places himself in conflicting position within American theatre. Fueled especially by the “Ground On Which I Stand Speech” Wilson delivered to the Theatre Communications Group in 1996, Wilson encouraged a barrage of criticism and re-opened a critical debate that Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Amiri Baraka articulated in the 1920s and the 1960s. Wilson, in the “Ground” address, called for the creation of and financial support for a theatre specifically for the continuation of African American
theatre. From many black members of the audience, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Wilson aroused an excitement and pride that finally someone had articulated their plight to this group: “The black members of the audience started glancing at one another: heads bobbed, a black-power sign was flashed, encouragement was murmured—‘Go ahead, brother,’ ‘Tell it.’”(46). Gates notes that the mainstream TCG members did really not how to react to this call for a black theatre by Wilson, as demonstrated in their uneasy shifting in their seats and their faces “gradually acquiring an expression of compounded pain and puzzlement”(46). However, Gates also notes that several African American audience members felt that Wilson was in essence being a hypocrite. He quotes noted playwright Suzan-Lori Parks’ reaction to Wilson’s speech: “August can start by having his own acclaimed plays premiere in black theatres, instead of where they premiere now. I’m sorry, but he should examine his own house”(qtd. in Gates 46).

The audience’s reaction to Wilson’s speech ran the gamut from approval to chagrin, for no one expected Wilson—probably the most popular and powerful African American dramatists in American mainstream theatre—to use this forum as a podium to advocate the cause of black theatre. Instead, the expected theme of Wilson’s speech was probably something universal just as those themes that he expresses within his dramaturgy. This is where many would think
Wilson's controversial position in mainstream and African American theatre begins, but it actually began earlier in his career. Somehow his critics and his supporters missed Wilson's Black Nationalist politics as they became enamored by his craft as a playwright and his repeated claim in various interviews that he does not use his art as a political forum.

One of Wilson's earliest controversial statements came in 1987 when Paramount Pictures opted his play, *Fences*, for the screen. At this writing, *Fences* remains unfilmed because Wilson as he states in "The Ground" speech does not believe in color-blind casting, nor does he believe in color-blind directing. As the title of his essay on this matter plainly states, "I Want a Black Director," that is precisely what Wilson is waiting on before the filmic translation of *Fences* can be made—a black director. This position has not appeared to have gained nearly as much press or cause as much debate as Wilson's "Ground" speech, for Wilson was not the August Wilson that he is today. He was on the road to stardom, but at this point only two of his planned twentieth century cycle plays had been staged. In this essay, he presents the same tone and convictions that he does in the "Ground" speech. He clearly argues that only a black director can bring the necessary perspective to his work: "I meant that I wanted to hire somebody talented, who understood the play and saw the possibilities of the film, who would approach my work with the same amount of passion and measure of
respect with which I approach it, and finally, who shared the same
cultural responsibilities of the characters"(200).

Throughout the "I Want a Black Director" essay Wilson discusses
the cultural politics of Hollywood and points out its disproportionate
practice of hiring black directors for fear they cannot do the job.
Arguably, he makes the same statement in 1996 when he speaks of the
disproportionate funding of African American theatre companies. What
Wilson manages to do in both the "Black Director" essay and "The
Ground Speech" is after speaking the truth from the perspective of an
African American in the theatre business, he returns to his gift of
universalism rhetoric to salve any wounds that he may have caused to
audience. For example, in the "Black Director" essay he says that he
does not want to hire a black director just because he (or she) is black,
nor is he trying to force Hollywood to change its practices and hire more
black directors, but he "is trying to get the film of his play made in the
best possible way"(201). Wilson believes that, yes, as Americans—he
being black and whomever Paramount recommends to direct Fences—
we share those things Americans, but that is where it both begins and
ends. For Wilson, the African American experience is unique to the
African American. Thus, only an African American director can present
his work accurately on the big screen.

Interestingly, Wilson uses this essay not only to state who he
wants to direct his work, and why this particular person must direct his
work, but he also makes a clear distinction between black interpretation and white interpretation of his work, or rather response to his work, and contends that a white director simply cannot recreate the African American experience:

- We [white Americans and black Americans] have different ideas about religion, different manners of social intercourse. 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. I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the job. The job requires someone who shares the specifics of the culture of black Americans. ("I Want a Black Director" 202)

Wilson acknowledges that his position on this matter will be criticized by persons--both black and white--as being segregatory and that some may contend that he is setting black directors back by insisting that a black director direct black playwrights work. However, in Wilsonian fashion he ends this culturally political call with a humorous and again universal answer to any mayhem that he may have caused and suggested that every culture be represented by one of its
own cultural representatives and allow the American films to be open to all who qualify:

What to do? Let’s make a rule. Blacks don’t direct Italian films. Italians don’t direct Jewish films. Jews don’t direct black American films. That might account for about 3 percent of the films that are made in this country. The other 97 percent—the action-adventure, horror, comedy, romance, suspense, western, or any combination thereof, that the Hollywood and independent mills grind out—let it be every man for himself. ("I Want a Black Director" 204)

Wilson, as this essay proves, possesses an alter ego or agenda within American theatre. He presents the final draft of that agenda in “The Ground” speech. It is Wilson’s appearance versus reality theme in his dramatic persona that is unveiled in “The Ground” speech for all that were in attendance and/or read the transcript. In this address, Wilson reminds the members of the American theatrical world that in spite of what they think they know or see of him through his plays, that he is a black man and he does understand the plight of the black playwright, although he has not had to fight through the theatrical jungle as many of them have: “I mention this because it is difficult to disassociate my concerns with theatre from the concerns of my life as a black man, and it is difficult to disassociate one part of my life from another. I have strived to live it all seamless...art and life together,
inseparable and indistinguishable" ("The Ground..." 3). As Wilson discusses the situation of black theatre companies and lists what is needed to ameliorate their situation, he resituates himself as a black nationalist playwright, and a "race man": "I am what is known, at least among the followers and supporters of the ideas of Marcus Garvey, as a "race man." That simply that I believe that race matters—that it is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality" (3), and he echoes the call for a black theatre shared by Du Bois and Locke, and revolutionized by Baraka:

The time has come for black playwrights to confer with one another, to come together to meet each other face to face, to address questions of aesthetics and ways to defend ourselves from the nay-sayers would trumpet our talents as insufficient to warrant the same manner of investigation and exploration as the majority. We need to develop guidelines for the protection of our cultural property, our contributions and the influence they accrue. It time we took responsibility for our talents in our own hands. We cannot depend on others. ("The Ground..." 8)

Wilson uses the Theatre Communications Group conference as a prime audience before whom he momentarily sheds his universal appearance for both its mainstream and African American members and allows them to hear the reality of his politics and his belief that black theatre
has been overlooked for too long by mainstream American theatre culture, and that it is now the time to recognize and correct this problem:

If you do not know, I will tell you that black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital, it just is not funded. Black theater doesn’t share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth. The economics are reserved as privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote and perpetuate white culture. (3-4)

By pointing out this truth about the lack of funding which limits black theatre, Wilson places himself in a quandary not just between his work and the mainstream audience and critics who have validated him within American theatre, but also in the minds of many African American theatre members. As noted, Parks was chagrined by Wilson’s call for a black theatre, while other members cheered his words. However, the question of why would Wilson place his mainstream reputation on the line for black theater surely loomed in the minds of both the minority and majority TCG attendees.

One answer to this question is that Wilson is fully aware of the power that he has gained in American theatre and has decided to use

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this opportunity to reclaim his blackness, and his ties to African American theatre culture. Through this address, Wilson positions himself as a skillful cultural politician as he demonstrates his understanding of his position in both American and African American theatre. Now that he has a place within mainstream theatre culture, he has to prove that he has not "forgotten his roots" and shockingly realigns himself to the African American theatre culture by becoming its spokesperson. Discerning enough to realize that he should not attempt to speak for all minority members of the theatre world, Wilson inserts a disclaimer into the beginning of his address as he clearly states that he does not "have a mandate to speak for anyone," but "I only speak for myself and those who may think as I do"(1). This disclaimer also enables Wilson to support his contention that the position he takes in this speech is based primarily upon his own observations of the mainstream theatre's slighting of African American theatre and not necessarily his personal experience. By aligning himself culturally with the struggles of his fellow African American theatre colleagues, Wilson challenges his mainstream appearance of universal playwright and dons the reality of his cultural politics. Or does he?

In this same address in which he indicts mainstream theatre culture for financially and culturally ignoring African American theatre culture, Wilson as he does in the "Black Director" essay, leaps from a black nationalist perspective back to his universal mode using the
pronoun “we” and the term “universal” itself to align mainstream theatre with the seemingly separatist African American theatre that he passionately argues for at the beginning of his address: “All of human life is universal, and it is theatre that illuminates and confers upon the universal the ability to speak for all men. The ground together: We have to do it together”(10). In Joan Herrington’s study of Wilson’s playwrighting process, *I Ain’t Sorry For Nothin’ I Done*, she explains how Wilson’s plays undergo the mainstream theatre’s drafting system until they reflect the universal themes that are applauded by both mainstream and African American audiences. Herrington’s study may also be used as a guide to understand how Wilson uses the same drafting techniques in his speeches and essays, and concludes each one with a non-separatist position in spite of any separatist views expressed earlier in the respective work. For example, in “The Ground On Which I Stand Speech,” after berating mainstream theatre for excluding black theatre, he ends the address with a “we are the world”-like sentiment in order to discourage any ill feelings from his audience members and to encourage them to help to correct the problem:

I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about the human condition, its power to heal, its power to hold the mirror as ‘twere up to nature, its power to uncover the troths we wrestle from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities. All art is a search for ways
of being, of living life more fully. We who are capable of those noble pursuits should challenge the melancholy and barbaric, to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we all stand. ("The Ground…" 10)

With this statement, Wilson continues to appease both sides within American theatre culture and to prove, as Herrington notes, his keen understanding of the mores of mainstream theatre and how to survive within its culture, but also his constant challenging of this system: "Thus Wilson has come to terms with the existing American theater and learned to work within it. But he has not done so without question—not without calling for change"(146). It is because of these challenges that Wilson has gained his controversial reputation in American theatre. However, in spite of his controversial position, he continues to have a large and growing following.
CHAPTER 5
THE DANGERS OF ONE VOICE, ONE HISTORY

Johnson suggested that when the Negro artists learned to create works that would simultaneously appeal to both black and white audiences, then they would have solved the double audience problem and achieved success (481). Arguably what Johnson proposed as a solution is admirable, but I am uncertain if Johnson was aware of the dangers involved in this unanimous approach to audience. Wilson’s dramaturgy offers an example of this successful navigation of both audiences—black and mainstream—by the African American artists. Conversely, it also proves that once universalism has been achieved in the audience, theatre audiences discontinue their search for other artists of color and focus their attention on the one who has met their needs. August Wilson is that person, and his depiction of the African American experience has become the definitive African American story.

While the present position of August Wilson should be celebrated, there is cause to examine what the consequences of Wilson’s success have had and may have on the African American theatre as we know it. From my own random experiments and discussions with persons about African American theatre, persons outside of academia and the dramatic arts usually have heard the name August Wilson. Either they viewed Hallmark Classic’s presentation of The Piano Lesson on television or video, or they heard about the success of Fences. However,
when I mention the name Bullins, only those persons steeped within the dramatic arts or who were students during the 60s and 70s Black Power Movement recognize the name. This, arguably, is an illustration of the one of the consequences of Wilson's success. I say this with caution, for although other African American playwrights have experienced great success and acclaim from mainstream theatre critics, few have maintained the vanguard position as long as or with as great notoriety as has Wilson. Hence, playwrights such as Bullins, Suzan-Lori Parks, and others are not getting the attention that they justly deserve. Moreover, the depiction of African American culture offered by these overlooked playwrights are oftentimes ignored as well.

The African American experience is a shared one, to a certain extent, by the persons of the culture. Yet, within this shared experience may be found different versions of the same story. For example, from Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's research on African American female playwrights we have been able to learn about the contributions of these women to African American drama. Furthermore, as we learn of their contributions we have also been privileged to witness the history of African American female culture re-evolve. However, few of these depictions of this sector of the African American experience find their way onto the stage. Instead, what predominates, or so it seems, are versions of the African American experience that remain primarily
patriarchal and cognizant of the majority audience’s preferences. I return to Wilson.

Currently, Wilson is the guru of African American drama. The September 2001 issue of *Ebony Magazine* poses the question “Is August Wilson America’s Greatest Playwright?” (Whitaker 85 and cover) and makes one wonder whether he has also become the guru of American theatre. The version(s) of the experience he presents in his plays are largely the accepted version of the African American experience. Although his African America contains characters from the both sides of the tracks, the north and the south, and male and female, his characterizations represent a class of African Americans who have goals and will attain them. His entrepreneurs and reformed convicts are pleasing pictures and “role models,” if I may, for any stage to present and uphold. The didactic and historical values they convey are more in tune with theater patron’s tastes. Seldom does one leave a Wilson play disturbed, except for *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, or appalled. Instead, most persons probably exit the theater with a feeling of closure, a lesson learned, and a pleasing perspective of the African American culture.

Conversely, Bullins presents the version of the African American experience that many persons—black or white—do not wish to acknowledge or to accept. His black America is like the distant cousin to Wilson’s, for he forces African Americans to ask the question “are we
really like that?,” and he awaits the “yes” that indicates our acceptance of ourselves. Bullins populates his stage with the con artists, prostitutes, and winos of black America as a reminder to those persons who have made it out of the ghettos that they have not really evolved that much. Although many members of the African American community may say that they never experienced any of the critical points in Bullins’s dramas directly, they are certain to have some relative who did. Hence, what Bullins does within his black America is preserve and record this particular aspect of the culture for future generations. Wilson does the same thing, but Bullins takes it a step further by preserving that chapter in the history that many would prefer to erase. It is no surprise to find plays in his dramaturgy that take on the issues of interracial relationships amongst the greatest taboo of all, black men and white women, or delve into an African American lesbian relationship, or if that is not enough, introduce a character who is not “ghetto” in an educational sense, but rather an active one. Therefore, it is no surprise that Bullins’ work does not meet the criteria, whatever they may be, for mainstream staged work. His plays are written to make audiences uncomfortable, but they also have a didactic and cathartic element that many don’t experience in a Wilson play, cathartic in the sense that the theatre patron leaves play uncomfortable and angry, and coerced into lingering on it and eventually coming to
terms with the reality that the experience, or crisis, in the play is not as foreign to him as he would like.

Returning to the thesis of this chapter, one voice, one history, this study, while examining the differing versions of the African American experience presented by Wilson and Bullins, must ask the question “Is Wilson the newest African American race leader?” Although many may shirk at the mentioning of such a term as “race leader” as we sit one year past the millennium, it is a term that can be used to describe Wilson and his success. Interestingly, Wilson christens himself in this manner in his TCG speech when he states, “I am what is known, at least among the followers and supporters of Marcus Garvey, as a ‘race man’”(Wilson “The Ground…”2). He places himself in this category, not in the manner in which this study is advocating by him being “chosen” and elected to this position by fractions from outside of the culture, but rather because he, himself, emphasizes race in his plays and his own personal agendas, or as he states:

[t]hat is simply that I believe that race matters---that is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality...Race is also the product of a shared gene pool that allows for group identification, and it is an organizing principle around which cultures are formed. (Wilson “The Ground...”2)
Not unlike the early race leaders Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, Wilson’s plays and their histories are quickly becoming the standard and accepted historical records of the African American experience (just as Washington and Du Bois’s uplift theories became representative philosophies for African Americans). Granted, his work is phenomenal and extremely helpful to one who needs or would like to know about the history of African American culture, but his histories are not the only versions of the truth. I am not suggesting that Wilson, himself, is claiming to be the only griot of African American theater; however, it is quite apparent that someone or some group has. Hence, August Wilson has quickly become a familiar name.

When questioned by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. about his contradictory position in American theatre Wilson openly admits that he is teaching a history lesson to theatergoers and benefiting financially from it:

...And among white theatres...the rush is now on to do anything that’s black. Largely through my plays, what the theatres have found out is that they had this white audience that was starving to get a little understanding of what was happening with the black population, because they very seldom come into contact with them, so they’re curious. The white theatres have discovered there is a market for that. (qtd it Gates 48)
Because Wilson is solely providing his version of the black culture for this audience leads one to question the danger in this action.

It is enough that African Americans, as well as other minority groups in America, are still struggling to identify and to individualize themselves as members of a culture, but with different backgrounds. Thus, when one faction or sub-culture within a group is represented, this representation may quickly become the norm and accepted view. For example, the media has been under critique for decades for its negative representations of various minority, political, and social groups. However, in spite of the criticism the negative images it presents helps to create, many of the stereotypes are perpetuated and encouraged by these groups themselves. Thus, arguably what Wilson is doing through his drama is arguably beneficial for the African American culture, but then again, maybe it isn’t. Although both Hay and Gates credit Wilson’s work as being an “amalgam” of the Du Boisian and Lockanian themes and characters, and “black vernacular, American naturalism, and high modernist influences” (Wilson 55), his work continues to be representative of what one may consider a more socially acceptable sector of the African American society—the portion of black culture that will not make theater ticket buyers uncomfortable.

The danger in allowing one voice and one history to represent the race is made even greater when the representative voice is contradictory. Although Hay calls Bullins contrary, Bullins, like the
Socrates portrayed in Plato’s *Defense of Socrates*, is contrary constantly and in spite of the criticism. Wilson, on the other hand, says one thing and does another.

As noted by Gates, Wilson has several clear goals in mind. They are: 1) to present the African American experience in his drama; 2) to catalyze the re-establishment of an “autonomous black theater”; and 3) to write serious drama, as Gates terms it (Gates “The Chitlin’ Circuit” 44). However, it is with goal three that the contradiction of Wilson presents itself. Wilson, in goal two, called for the establishment of an all black theater in his TCG speech, yet he continues to present his works in largely white theaters. Also, as Gates states “Wilson may talk about cultural autarky, but to his credit, he doesn’t practice it. Inevitably, the audience for serious plays in this mostly white country is mostly white. Wilson writes serious plays. His audience is mostly white”(55). I must concur with Gates when he asks the question does “[Wilson’s] argument do disservice to his plays?” (44), and does his argument do disservice to the position to race leader which he, arguably, has been placed into?

celebrate Wilson's revolutionary perspective and to chart a course for African American cultural determinations into the year 2000. With speakers and presenters ranging from Dwight Andrews who has worked on several of Wilson's productions as musical director to Robert Baum, the August Wilson fellow at the University of Minnesota, the conference presentations did meet the goal of the conference; however, as with any conference of a celebratory nature little was said about the contradictions Wilson raises in this speech.

Dwight Andrews, the keynote speaker for the conference, delivered an excellent perspective for the rest of the conference as he posed and answered the main questions of what is African American culture and how to define African American culture as a unity?" The term unity is important here, for Andrews advocates in his address that the African American culture in its entirety should be defined holistically and without stratification. One of his most illustrative examples of the stratification within the culture that needs to be eradicated includes Wilson himself when he asks "Is August Wilson representative of black theatre or is *Mama I Want To Sing* (a gospel musical) black theater?" Although Andrews meant no attack on either work, it is clear that he had an understanding of Wilson's position in black theater.

However, what Andrews and many of the other persons at the conference did not say about Wilson spoke loudest of all. The "August
Wilson is...but” atmosphere was quite pervasive and indicative of the true position Wilson holds amongst theatre scholars. For example, Andrews stated that while Wilson is an advocate for black theater [as found in his speech], he is presented in white theaters. Hence, this presentation in white theaters has enabled Wilson to be “validated”. Yet, Andrews posed the question, “When do we define for ourselves who our spokesmen are?”

Wilson’s validation by the powers that be of major theater has both established and separated him from African American theatre. In most circles, he is revered as the dramatic spokesperson for the culture. This reverence has not come from his own culture, as Andrews and the conference itself suggests, but from those outside factors who Wilson and many of the participants and attendees at this conference wish to eliminate. I, like most Wilson scholars, can celebrate his work; however, a well-articulated evaluation of any person, place, or thing should always adhere toward balance. Hence, the proverbial “but” when it comes to Wilson needs to be thoroughly examined, especially in lieu of the fact that so many other African American theatrical voices remain silent, un-funded, and uncelebrated.

It is interesting to note that at the aforementioned conference and in several articles/discussions on Wilson’s work, Wilson is compared to Baraka. This can be understood, for Baraka is considered by many scholars to be the father of black revolutionary theatre. However, from
Baraka have come other playwrights, namely Bullins, who I believe make better comparative contemporaries for Wilson because they are not as well known as he or Baraka. These are the persons who African American theatrical scholarship needs to excavate and celebrate. These are persons who could enable the scholars and inhabitants of the culture to begin the selection of their own “spokespersons” and to determine the criteria for the selection of their spokespersons. As opposed to standing on the ground already paved by the validation of Wilson, it is high time that African American theatre find its own ground, pave it, and cultivate and celebrate all of its playwrights. The presentations of one should not outshine the others.
CHAPTER 6  
AUGUST WILSON AND ED BULLINS: THE PLAYS—ANALYSIS AND RECEPTION

Audience, as this discussion has attempted to disclose in the dramatic worlds of August Wilson and Ed Bullins, is an important factor in the creative processes of both playwrights. Their characters, themes, and subjects, despite what they may say, are influenced by the tastes of the audiences from whom they—consciously or unconsciously—create their works. This chapter will illustrate how audiences, particularly those composed of mainstream theatre critics, interpret the plays of Wilson and Bullins—African American male playwrights writing in within, but also against the traditions of American theatre.

The Plays of August Wilson

To begin a discussion of the dramaturgy of August Wilson return back to his days as poet and short story writer. Before becoming a Broadway success, Wilson wrote plays such as *Recycle* (1973), *The Homecoming* (first produced play by Kuntz Theater, an amateur Pittsburgh group) and *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1976), *Jitney! and Eskimo Song Duel* (1979) and *Fullerton Street* (1980), and several children’s plays for the Science Museum of Minnesota (1978-1980). His first produced play was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* in 1981. In 1982, Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was accepted by the National Playwright’s Conference of the O’Neill Theater Center, and the Wilson success story begins.
The critical reception to Wilson’s dramas has, overall, been favorable. All of his plays, with the exception of Jitney!, have been staged on Broadway with fairly successful runs. Interestingly, King Headley II, his most recent play, has had the shortest Broadway run. Although earning outstanding reviews for its script, direction, and cast during both its preview and official runs at Broadway’s Virginia Theatre, King Headley II closed its curtain on July 1, 2001 after twenty-four preview stagings and seventy-two regular performances (Renner 1).

Much of the praise of Wilson’s dramaturgy has centered on his gift for language and the melodic phrases and powerful monologues he places into the mouths of his characters. From his first commercial success, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, to his latest and arguably best work, King Headley II, Wilson has perfected and elevated dialogue and casual banter to an anticipated art form that has continued to attract patrons to his plays. For example, New York Times theatre critic Frank Rich praises Wilson’s linguistic abilities demonstrated in the 1982, pre-Broadway performance of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom at The Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center. Rich notes the lengthiness of many of speeches spoken in the play (which will become a Wilson trademark) and how they express the “blacks’ perceptions of their place in society” and share their deferred or “busted dreams”, but he concedes that: “None of the speeches could exist anywhere but on the stage, and they couldn’t
exist on the stage if Mr. Wilson hadn't the talent to go all the way and
write them like music" (11:1:1). Hence, from his introduction to
mainstream theatre venues, Wilson has captured the critical eye and,
as Rich's review illustrates, has begun to introduce a new voice into
American theatre.

 Critics have also applauded Wilson for his examination of the
racial conflicts experienced by African Americans without violence and
largely off-stage. This praise is imperative to an understanding of
Wilson’s African America and its critics, for it again proves that Wilson
has learned the tenets of American mainstream theatre. Wilson,
through the assistance of Lloyd Richards, has honed into the tastes of
his audience and knows what mainstream audiences will comfortably
tolerate on its stage. As illustrated in *Fences*, Wilson’s second and most
critically successful work, Wilson has created a verbally acceptable
method of indicting mainstream culture for the second-class citizenry
of African Americans. Instead of adopting the physical and verbal
confrontations between black Americans and white Americans of his
dramatic influences Baraka (and Bullins), he uses the one weapon
African Americans have had at their disposal since American slavery,
the tongue, to remind his mainstream audience members that the black
experience has been shaped by the racism demonstrated by white
Americans. In *Fences*, he places these verbal bullets into the mouth of
Troy Maxson, the embittered garbage man:
I ain't worried about them firing me. They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That's all I did. I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, Told him, “what's the matter, don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting? He told me “take it to the union.” Well, hell, that's what I done! Now they wanna come up with this pack of lies. (*Fences* 2413)

Instead of coming across to the audience as threatening, Wilson composes Troy's monologues to be sympathetic and tragic, as well as indicting. However, the bitter edge is displaced by the sadness of the reality of this garbage man as he struggles to be a man in 1950s America. *Sports Illustrated* theatre critic, Robert Creamer, identifies Troy's speech about racism on his job as an example of the “subtle” approach to racism that Wilson takes in his plays as he states “[t]hese outbursts against racism do not dominate the play but pulsate below the surface, shaping and influencing but not necessarily creating the character Troy Maxson”(2).

Arguably, Clive Barnes’ (*New York Times*) review of *Fences* demonstrates how even in spite of Wilson's protests against racism and his insistence that he writes from the black experience, his plays are genuinely not “political” but, rather, realistic portrayals of the African
American experience: "This is in no sense a political play—but quite dispassionately it says: This is what it was like to be a black man of pride and ambition from the South, trying to live and work in the industrial North in the years just before and just after World War II" (C:16). Hence, even the seemingly cruel protests against mainstream America are powerful, but overshadowed by Wilson's ability to infuse his plays with other traits—craft, themes, etc.—that will quail any discomfort that his mainstream audience members may experience.

Critics have also responded favorably to the universality of the themes in Wilson's dramaturgy. Although situated and based upon the people and experiences of the African American culture, Wilson's plays reflect ideas common to every culture. *The Piano Lesson*, the fourth play in Wilson's twentieth century cycle, presents several themes common to world literature and drama such as sibling rivalry, the importance of ancestry and knowing family history, and economic stability. As Wilson colors these themes with the hues of the African American experience, he accomplishes two things—he teaches the mainstream audience that African Americans have families and the trials that come along with being a member of a family, and secondly African Americans also have dreams. Boy Willie illustrates the latter lesson (dreams), for it is his desire to attempt to attain financial stability that supports that main conflict in the drama—the battle with his sister, Berneice, over the piano.
Frank Rich's review of *The Piano Lesson* does not remove Wilson from the African American sphere for its thematic approach and subject matter but, instead, comfortably situates Wilson's message within the African American experience as he notes that although he won the Pulitzer Prize for this play "no one need worry that he is marching to an establishment beat"(C13:4). He continues to say that the play "is joyously an African American play," and it has its own "sharp angle on a nation's history"(C13:4) but that it also speaks to both its mainstream and African American audience members:

Like other Wilson plays, *The Piano Lesson* seems to sing even when it is talking. But it isn't all of America that is singing. The central fact of black American life—the long shadow of slavery—transposes the voices of Mr. Wilson's characters, and of the indelible actors who inhabit them, to a key that rattles history and shakes the audience on both sides of the racial divide. (C:13:4)

Rich's review places Wilson's *Piano Lesson* in a position to be appreciated for what the author says it is be and how the audience interprets it. By pointing out the American and African American approaches found in this work, Rich situates Wilson's work in a universal sphere that is accessible for all.

Structurally, critics of Wilson's dramaturgy have complained about the lengthiness of his plays. Usually running three hours,
Wilson’s plays are a workout, but from my experience having seen *Jitney* three times and *King Headley II*, one does not realize how long one has been in the theatre until one looks at her watch on the way out. There is so much to take in when viewing one of Wilson’s play, the time does pass quickly, except during those few anti-climatic melodramatic moments that seem to drag on. Gwen Ifill questions Wilson about his three-hour works stating that with plays of this length he “demand[s] a lot of his audience”(4). Wilson’s response is that theatre is not television, and “audiences should bring something with them [to the theatre]...It’s theatre, of course, that’s why you’re here, you know. So if it’s three hours long you get your money’s worth”(4). Wilson contends in this interview that he gives his audiences what the should expect and what he would appreciate in a play, even if it is three hours: “When I go to the theatre, that’s what I would want. I would want to be challenged, I would want something intense. I would want something going on, you know, going on the stage. So that when I walk out of the theatre, I take it with me” (4).

One of the most scathing indictments of Wilson’s African America has come from critic Richard Brustein. Comparing Wilson’s approach to drama, specifically the play *The Piano Lesson*, to “McTheater” (the process that Brustein uses to categorize works that use “non-profit institutions as launching pads and tryout franchises for the development of Broadway products and the enrichment of artistic
personnel"), Brustein uses his review of this work ("The Lesson of The Piano Lesson") not only to point out flaws in the production, but also to point out that Wilson’s proposed twentieth century cycle, "like O’Neil['s proposed American cycle], has epic ambitions, handicapped by repetitiousness, crude plotting, and clumsy structure" (28). Moreover, Brustein questions the "relatively mild" approach that Wilson takes when handling the effects of racism in his works, and concurs with this study’s contention that indirect approach “may further explain Wilson’s astounding reception” in American theatre circles (28). Brustein’s review of The Piano Lesson concurs with most of Wilson’s critics up to this point where the play’s length and conclusion come under review, but Brustein goes a step further and concludes that Wilson is not really as good as a playwright as his audiences and critics think he is. Instead, Wilson like O’Neil, has received “premature acclaim”:

To judge from The Piano Lesson, Wilson is reaching a dead end in his examination of American racism, though another play on the subject (appropriately titled Two Trains Running) is now gathering steam at Yale on its way through the regional railroad depots to its final Broadway destination. It will probably be greeted with the same hallelujah chorus as all his other work. But if Wilson wishes to be a truly major playwright, he would be wise to
move on from safe, popular sociology and develop the radical poetic strain that now lies dormant in his art. (29)

This scathing review of *The Piano Lesson* and Wilson began a print debate between Brustein and Wilson that would culminate in a face-to-face debate between the two and lead dramatic audiences, critics, and scholars to re-examine the agendas of both men. Wilson, as this study will demonstrate, comes under particular scrutiny as others begin to interpret his work similarly to Brustein.

Rich language, non-violent protests, universal themes, and lengthy performance times are just four of the characteristics that critics—both mainstream and African American—recognize and discuss in Wilson's dramaturgy. Through a brief discussion and critical analysis of each play in his dramaturgy, this study will attempt to trace the development of Wilson’s African America and its effect on its audience.

Chronologically, an analysis of Wilson’s plays would begin with *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, for it was his first successful venture. However, with the recent revision and staging of one of his earliest scripts, *Jitney* (1979), this discussion will begin at what can literally be considered Wilson’s beginning.

*Jitney!*

*Jitney!*, first produced by Pittsburgh’s Allegheny Repertory Theatre in 1982, made its off-Broadway debut in 1999 at the Second
Stage Theatre. The first Wilson play not to run on a Broadway stage, *Jitney!* followed a different path than his other plays, with its pre-New York staging in Baltimore, Maryland at the Centerstage Theatre. This is also the first play that Wilson produced without the guidance of Lloyd Richards. Richards was replaced by playwright, actor, and director Marion McClinton who, along with Wilson, honed *Jitney!* into its final stages during the winter of 1999.

*Jitney!* chronicles the lives of several Jitney car drivers and their struggle to exists in a changing economy. Set in 1977 in the Pittsburgh Hill District (Centerstage Playbill 1999), this play focuses on the central story of Becker, the boss of the car company, and his severed relationship with his recently released murderer son. Infused again with Wilson’s signature soundtrack, this time rhythm and blues serenades the audience, with Marvin Gaye’s classic “What’s Going On?” reminding the audience of the perils of the world—black and white.

Although *Jitney* ran off-Broadway, critics did not ignore it. Opening like most of Wilson’s plays to favorable reviews, *Jitney* impressed audiences/critics and earned Drama Desk and OBIE Awards for their performances. Moreover, McClinton was awarded an OBIE for his direction of the play, and Wilson won The New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award for the best play. Critics applauded Wilson’s use of language and its poetic tones, especially in the discussions between the
cab drivers, but they also note Wilson’s tendency to be “overdramatic” in his works. Charles Isherwood in his review of Jitney! mentions how Wilson’s “uncanny ability to replicate the easy ebb and flow of life onstage” made dramatic moments in his play seem outplace (2).

Isherwood, and I agree, critiques the presence of a gun and the melodramatic relationship between Youngblood and Rena as not conforming to traditional or expected Wilson theatre. In the 1999 CenterStage presentation, the conflict between Rena and Youngblood was not effective in the play. More interesting was Turnbo’s, the company’s gossip, role in perpetuating the melodramatic relationship between the couple and innocently justifying his “gossiping” as simply telling the truth. Although the overdramatic moments are sub-texts to the main issue of the play, they tend to make the play a little heavy. However, they never severely divert the audience from the father-son conflict between Becker and Booster.

Jitney! returns to the father-son struggle presented in Fences, but this time the son ruins his opportunity to beat the system of second class citizenry by murdering his former white girlfriend for hollering rape after her father learned of their relationship. In Jitney!, Wilson writes creates a child who has the opportunity to attend a university with the support of his parents, unlike Cory of Fences, who is denied this opportunity because of his father’s fear that he will succeed. Again success is the subject of the conflict between father and son, but in
*Jitney!* it is the throwing away of success that embitters Becker and separates he and his son, like the bars of the prison, for twenty years.

*Jitney!* ends with a sad, but hopeful scene where Booster answers the phone in the seemingly dismantled Jitney cab hub with the words “car service” letting the audience know that he will continue his father’s business, and that this action will allow him to make amends for his crime and the disappointment he caused his parents.

Isherwood and *Theatre Reviews Limited* critic Carolyn Albert observed the audience of *Jitney!*. Albert notes how the play “has attracted a sizable black audience,” and says that someone must have mentioned how well black people are presented in this play. Isherwood comments on the play’s ability to make its audience recognize the importance of everyone’s life, regardless of race or class:

Its characters grab and hold our attention through the force of their homely eloquence and the pungently particular experience it is used to evoke. Where others might see only small lives of dissipation and disappointment, Wilson finds nobility and beauty, and he makes the audience see them too. (3)

*Jitney!*, if it had not been shelved, may have prepared American theatre for Wilson’s dramaturgy, but he left it behind after its first staging to work on *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. 

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Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Although Jitney! was one of the first plays written by Wilson, it was shelved as Wilson achieved national success with Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom began its journey to success in 1982 when it was accepted by the O'Neill Center for workshopping. It was here that the play caught the attention of Wilson's long time director/collaborator Lloyd Richards, then head of the Playwright's Conference and Dean of the Yale School of Drama. Under the tutelage of Richards, Ma Rainey found itself through various changes and stagings and ultimately onto the Broadway stage in 1984. Winning the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, this play placed its playwright on the road to success. The first of Wilson's award-winning, successful dramas, Ma Rainey, set in 1927, explores the plight of the embittered black male and the "true" power of the female black, blues musician.

The embittered black male is featured first as opposed to the titular character, Ma Rainey. Notably because Wilson's dramas from Jitney to his latest King Headley II mainly focus on the black male. In summary, the play discloses the stories and bickerings of a group of four musicians and impending recording session that is to take place once Ma, the group's vocalist, leader, and Mother of the Blues, appears. Toledo, the philosopher-griot; Cutter, the band's leader; Slow Drag, and the young Toledo converse and taunt one another as they attempt to rehearse before the recording session begins. However, the
pre-and post-recording conversations and tensions arise in the crux of the drama’s plot.

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was not only Wilson’s first commercial success, but also his first critically successful work. Frank Rich of *The New York Times* found this play (in its fledging state during its performance at the Eugene O’Neil Theatre Center’s Playwrights Conference?) to be the work of an up and coming playwright with a gift for language (a talent that future reviewers of Wilson’s work will also note):

The play has all the ingredients to be a conventional, well-made message drama—but Mr. Wilson, through the sheer force of theatrical drive, flies higher. “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” it turns out, has virtually no story, and it has some speeches that run, I would guess, ten minutes in length. Some of the speeches deal metaphorically with the blacks’ perceptions of their place in America (“The colored man is the leftover on the white man’s plate.”); in others, the characters recount their busted dreams and their gruesome encounters with racist violence . . . In a sense, the monologues become the blues that the musicians hunger to record on their own—if only they were stars like Ma Rainey and not menial recording-studio hacks. (11:1:1)
He continues to praise *Ma Rainey*, especially focusing on Wilson’s talent for language and says that although “there’s nothing novel about rich language in the theater, it is quite unusual in 1982 to find a playwright who is willing to stake his claim to the stage not with stories or moral platitudes but with the beauty and meaning of torrents of words” (11:1:1). He concludes his review of Wilson’s workshoped *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* crediting it and its author as they type of talent that “fulfills the Conference’s goal to replenish our theater’s future” and by comparing Wilson’s debut play “eerily” to the work of the Eugene O’Neil. Thus, August Wilson’s celebrity status in American mainstream theatre would begin.

Audiences responded and continue to respond favorably to *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Particularly he subject matter, the plight of the black musician, both African American and mainstream audiences from my observations appear to sympathize with the realities of racism and how its “evils” penetrated every facet of African American life—from the home to work place.

*Fences*

Wilson’s next success came with *Fences*. Opening on Broadway in 1987 and earning Wilson the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Tony Award for Best Play, *Fences* received almost unanimous favorable critical reception, and to date has had the longest run of Wilson’s plays on Broadway (Tynan 1). Centering on the

Wilson’s Troy Maxson is the African American everyman of the 1950s. As the African American everyman he is surviving in the midst of northern segregation and racism, and has now arrived on the periphery of black, working class society. Although still relegated to the scraps of life, Troy has a job, a home, and family whose members he loves to the best of his ability. However, Maxson also has a deferred dream that has festered and crusted over so much so that he cannot accept the possibilities of the present or the future.

Troy, in an earlier life, was an excellent baseball player; however, he never had the opportunity to benefit from his talent the way other gifted ball players, black or white, did during this period. He, like many African American men, could only play on farm teams and within the Negro leagues during his youth. By the time Jackie Robinson desegregated baseball, and Troy could have possibly had a chance to prove his abilities to the world, he was too old. Hence, Troy’s views on sports and the black male have been skewed since his shunning from the sport he loves so much:

*TROY.* I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football...He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living. (*Fences* 2416)
Wilson's uses this "slap in the face" to fuel the conflict that arises between Troy and his son, Cory. Cory, ironically, is an outstanding athlete as well. However, his sport of choice is football. Troy is against Cory's participation in the sport, for he believes that Cory will benefit more from a job and work around the house than playing ball, but more so because he is afraid that Cory's athletic abilities may not work out in a successful career in sports. Troy's fear, however, does not manifest itself in a loving conversation between father and son, rather it presents itself in Troy's passionate refusal to allow Cory to be recruited by university's football program. Although this opportunity would allow Cory to leave his present restricted environment, gain a free education, and benefit from his talents on the field, Troy intends to and succeeds in stopping his son before he can buy into this "pipe dream" of success.

To read of Troy's dissolution of Cory's chance may cause a reader to view Troy as envious of his son, but really Troy is afraid that his son will be used and abused by the same system that refused his participation—American sports teams. Because Troy never learned to love or how to be a loving or compassion father, he does not know how or understand why he should express his concerns about athletics and the discrimination or feelings toward his son in kind words and fatherly advice. Instead, he argues that he loves or rather "likes" his son by the daily actions he performs to insure that he, Cory, eats, is clothed, and
sheltered; therefore, Cory should accept his demand and re-focus himself on life’s realities—hard work, not football.

Troy is human, thus flawed. One of his flaws is his inability to accept the possibilities of the present and the future. Instead of looking at how far he has come and seeing the chance for a better life for Cory, he constantly lives within the confines of his past struggles with life and uses them to color his and his family member’s experiences. Granted he does not apologize or make excuses for his past, but it surfaces several times throughout the play as a crutch for his flaws, his mistakes.

Clive Barnes, who found Wilson’s Broadway debut drama, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, to be flawed, says of *Fences*, “I wasn’t just moved. I was transfixed—by imitations of a life, impressions of a man, images of society...”Fences” gave me one of the richest performances I have ever had in theater”(484-85). In this same review, Barnes also alludes to the universal nature of Wilson’s work in *Fences* as he situates the play as “Greek tragedy with a yankee accent” and “American realistic drama”:

Had Wilson been white, his plays would have been different—they would have had a different fire in a different belly. But calling Wilson a “black” playwright is irrelevant. What makes *Fences* so engrossing, so embracing, so simply powerful, is his startling ability to
tell a story, reveal feeling, paint emotion. In many respects *Fences* falls into the classic pattern of American realistic drama—a family play, with a tragically doomed American father locked in conflict with his son. (484)

Also appealing and universal about *Fences* is Wilson's casting of James Earl Jones in the role of Troy Maxson. If any African American actor is viewed by both Broadway and Hollywood as universal, it is James Earl Jones. Like Paul Robeson and even arguably Bill Cosby, Jones added just the dimension to *Fences* needed to secure financial backing for the play, and promise a packed house. Although *Fences*, to date, has experienced the longest and most critically acclaimed run of all of Wilson's plays, this success was not solely because of the play itself, but because of its star—Jones.

Jones's dramatic career began on stage where he played numerous characters in Shakespeare's dramaturgy. Like many African American artists, he also participated in the black theater movement of the 1960's, but he did not participate in the revolutionary Black Arts Movement founded by Baraka. In an interview in the documentary "Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement", Jones comments on the Black Arts Movement and appears to suggest that he recognized that this movement would not only be detrimental for black theatre, but also for black actors attempting to gain a long lasting role in mainstream American theatre. Interestingly concurring with Wilson's advocation
that his theatre is for all audiences, Jones believes that a theatre by black people and about black people is a good thing, but that theatre should be “for all audiences”. Like Wilson’s break with Baraka, his dramatic mentor, Jones separates himself from the exclusiveness inherent to the Black Arts movement which is probably one the reasons—outside of his success as an actor—for his position in American film and theatre.

Jones, the universal actor, praises Wilson as the universal playwright. He says of Fences: “Like Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, August didn’t just write a great play, he has written volumes of good, better and best plays. Fences was the third in his series about blacks in each decade of the 20th century. But August’s plays transcend race” (1).

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone

The following year, 1988, earned Wilson another successful Broadway play and a third New York Drama Critics Circle Award. One of Wilson’s most controversial plays, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone received mixed reviews from both critics and audiences alike. Set in 1911 Pittsburgh in a boardinghouse owned by Seth and Bertha Holly, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone came under fire mainly because of the abstractness of its ending.

Herald Loomis, the play’s main character, is searching for his wife whom he was kidnapped from seven years prior as he was on his
way home. Along with his young daughter, the two literally walk though the country and end up in Pittsburgh at the boarding house of Seth and Bertha Holly. The play climaxes several times, with the final climatic event occurring before its curtain. Herald Loomis, after shrouding his song in sorrow, anger, and self-pity is finally able to as Bynum the philosopher/conjure man of the work says, “shine like new money”after he symbolically slashes himself across the chest and smears the blood on his torso.

During the play’s regional run, Frank Rich, applauded Joe Turner’s Come and Gone for its language, its musical qualities, and its story line calling it “potentially its author’s finest achievement yet.”(C17:2). Rich also noted that in the midst of the wonderful story being told, the play’s ending was a “let down” because it did not appear to flow in the order of events presented and then concludes with Loomis bloody slashing of his chest. Rich’s disappointment with the play’s conclusion is an illustration of what can happen when a mainstream critic is offered non-universal material. Although Rich found Joe Turner’s Come and Gone to be possibly Wilson’s best work, Wilson’s blending of African and African American histories within the plot of Joe Turner’s excluded and confounded many of his mainstream audience members.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone cannot be considered one of Wilson’s completely universal plays, for it differs from his previous works by
casting, for example Bynum, as more than a mere philospher-griot teetering on the edge of sanity, but rather as a wise, old, conjure man, or a stereotypical African witch doctor. Moreover, he infuses the play with African retentions such as the juba ring shout dance; the belief in Bynum’s binding powers, and the ritualistic bloodshed. The use of these elements aligns Wilson with Locke’s belief that black theatre can only survive if its dramatists and actors return to those things African for material. However, Rich’s review of the play suggests that even though Wilson continues to reap positive reviews, mainstreams audience members and critics are well aware of his deference from his traditional universal themes.

In 1996, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was revived off-Broadway at the Harry De Jur Playhouse under the direction of Clinton Turner Davis. Again, the play received favorable reviews for its characters, language, and for Wilson’s flair for universalism in his work of which Vincent Canby states, “As Mr. Wilson continues to explore black lives in America in the 20th century, which is the subtext common to all his work, he is also exploring the lives of everyone else. Make no mistake about it. Great plays are like that” (11:5:5). However, Canby makes a poignant observation in his review of this revival that illuminates a truth about the distribution of Wilson’s dramaturgy, and also foreshadows the off-Broadway staging of the seventh play in Wilson’s twentieth century cycle, *Jitney!*: 
It may be time for him to go the somewhat less financially risky Off Broadway route of Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Mr. Wilson's plays deserve to be able to hang around awhile without worrying about the overhead. In the meantime, the revival of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" on the Lower East Side allows you to appreciate the playwright's singular gifts without having to worry about either ticket prices or overhead. (11:5:5)

Inherent in Canby's observation of where Wilson's plays traditionally run, is an example of the exclusivity of an August Wilson audience—largely mainstream theatre patrons who can afford a Broadway ticket. This study agrees that moving Wilson's plays to more affordable venues is a positive step toward acquainting all theatre patrons with the voice of August Wilson and truly shaping his dramaturgy toward "everyone," not just a selected few. Canby also raises a second point about the exclusive members of Wilson's audience and points out that although theatre critics love Wilson's work, each of his plays, "with the exception of 'Fences' "has had to struggle to find black as well as white audiences"(11:5:5).

After a lengthy study and discussion of Wilson's reviews up to this point, Canby is probably the first critic to pay attention to the make-up of Wilson's dramatic audience, particularly its small size. Traditionally when one envisions a Broadway play and its audience, she
envisions a sell-out crowd for each of the show's performances. Yet the reality, at least when it comes to Wilson's work, is that many of these plays are not sell-outs. Hence, favorable reviews and stagings do not always equal to financial success. It is surprising to read a complete review of Wilson's work—the play and its audience—for many critics have adhered to their job descriptions and focused on the merits/demerits of play while forgetting the audience response (attendance wise) is just as important as the opinions of the critical audience.

The Piano Lesson

The Piano Lesson, opening two years later (1990) on Broadway, earned Wilson his fourth New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the American Theatre Critics Award, and the 1990 Pulitzer Prize. Along with these awards, this play also found its way from Broadway to the primetime screen when Hallmark presented it on national television. The first and only Wilson drama to reach what may be considered the ultimate form of universal distribution, television, The Piano Lesson introduced Wilson and his version of the African American experience to those persons who traditionally cannot afford a Broadway ticket. Surprisingly, many people have seen this work, especially because of its airing on newly formed cable channels PAX and Hallmark's own network. Thus, it may become Wilson's most popular and universally recognized work.
The Piano Lesson, set in 1936 Pittsburgh and continuing Wilson’s look at African American heritage and experience, centers around the Charles family and its members’ memories and battles over a piano. This piano, which surfaces as a main character in the play, has found its way into the Charles family by way of Boy Charles’ “returning” it to his family after years of its residence in the home of the Sutter’s, the white family that owned and traded members of the Charles family during slavery.

The themes of the play come from Wilson’s stock themes—the black family, the Great Migration, black male issues, and the importance of heritage and ancestry. The dynamics of the black family are explored in this play through the extended family of Berniece, Doaker, Whining Boy, Boy Willie, and Lymon. Although bound by blood and a strong heritage, the family has its share of problems—which revolve around the piano. Sibling rivalry abounds in the relationship between Berniece and Boy Willie; however, this rivalry is not spurned by money or intelligence, but rather by a debate over the death of Berniece’s husband, Crawley, and over the sentimental versus monetary value of the piano. These debates are fueled by the lack of real communication between the siblings and agreement as to what value family history has in a changing society.

While Frank Rich (New York Times) found The Piano Lesson to be overall a good play and praised Wilson’s talent for language, The
Thomas Disch found the play lacking any resolutions and the one of the main characters, Boy Willie, to be like Wilson’s Troy Maxson (Fences) “self-righteous” and unable “to hear any voice but [his] own…”(832). Moreover, he found fault with what he interpreted to be the play’s moral, particularly when in regards to Boy Willie, that “murder is O.K. if you can get away with it and have the grit to resist the urge to confession” Disch writes,:

My problem with this moral is not that I disagree with it but that the playwright avoids examining his premises, an avoidance motivated by his determination to show all the characters as essentially good and guiltless people whose conflicts arise from differences of temperament and circumstance, not from oppositions of right and wrong.

(833)

Disch identifies a flaw in Wilson’s writing that is indicative of Wilson’s determination to write universal works. By focusing on individual difference in “temperament and circumstance,” Wilson is able to avoid any direct altercation between issues of right and wrong that Disch says “equate with black and white” in Wilson’s dramaturgy. Disch, unlike, Rich states that he “did not much like the play,” but as most reviewers of Wilson’s work he concludes his review encouraging others to attend The Piano Lesson “if only for the music of the dialogue” (833).
Two Trains Running

In 1992, Wilson’s fifth play opened on Broadway. *Two Trains Running*, earning Wilson another New York Drama Critics Circle Award, opened to mixed reviews. Set in 1969, *Two Trains Running* delves into the lives of a non-biologically related family whose lives and stories are shared in the soul food restaurant of Memphis Lee. Following the deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, this drama examines the effects the social/political changes have had on the lives of ordinary people. The personalities that convene in this “home” daily are extensions of Wilson’s black men and women striving to make it in the face of their daily extensions. Memphis Lee, the restaurateur, is the entrepreneurial cousin of Seth Holly, the boarding house owner in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. He, like most of Wilson’s characters, has migrated to the North from Jackson, Mississippi after the white power structure confiscated his land. Like Seth, he has very definite opinions on the work ethic and ability of blacks in society. His role in this family is patriarchal in the sense that he owns the restaurant and, financially, has more power than the other characters; however, he is not very nurturing. Hence, he can be read as uncle, a cynical uncle, with his own interpretation of the world.

The mother-sister character is the only female character (with a speaking role) in the play, Risa. Also the cook-waitress at Memphis restaurant, Risa story goes beyond her position as the domesticated and
only woman in the play to that of an anti-"every woman" position. Tired of being viewed as a sexual object (according to Holloway she’s been objectified in this manner since the age of twelve), Risa has marred her legs and possibly some other place on her person with a razor in order to force men to see her as a person and not a sexual object. Risa’s self-mutilation may be read as an act of self-preservation that enables her to be the understood mother-sister figure needed in this family.

With Risa occupying the dual roles of mother-sister, a father figure should be found in the play as well. Holloway is the father figure of this extended family as well as the griot. Holloway he knows the backgrounds of most the play’s characters. Along with this knowledge, he also possesses a philosophical wisdom that shares with his family members, whether they are willing listeners or not.

Then there are Sterling, the recently released convict, and Wolf, the numbers runner. These two comprise the wayward brothers of the family who respect the views of Holloway, tolerate Memphis’s criticisms and chastisements, and appreciate Risa. Again stock characters in Wilson’s dramaturgy, Sterling and Wolf connect the family to the unattractive realities of the outside world. Sterling, akin Wilson’s young, renegade characters aspires a better life, but believes that obstacles such as race and lack of money prevent him or, in the opinion of Memphis, justifies his convict status. Meanwhile, Wolf takes part in something knowingly illegal as his means of survival. Refusing
to subject himself to the menial tasks many African American found for employment, Wolf makes his money the same way the fastest and easiest way he knows how—he runs numbers.

A second entrepreneur/uncle is introduced in this play in West, the funeral home owner. Clearly the wealthiest of all the family members, has made money off of blacks killing one another. He tells his story of going from being a craps player to a business owner and justifies his beating of the odds of life:

WEST. I looked up one day and so many people was dying from the fast life I figured I could make me some money burying them and live a long life too. I figured I could make a living from it. I didn’t know I was gonna get rich. I found out life’s hard but it ain’t impossible. (Two Trains Running 93)

Lastly, Wilson introduces Hambone. Mentally-ill and able to utter only two phrases, “He gonna give me my ham” and “I want my ham!,” Hambone represents the oddest, but strongest character in Two Trains Running, for he refuses to accept what has been given to him by the white man. Nine and a half years prior to the opening of this story, Hambone was promised a chicken for painting Lutz’s (the white butcher) fence and a ham if he did a good job of it. Although Hambone thought he did a good job, and, thus, deserved the ham, Lutz disagreed with him and gave him the chicken as payment for his services.
However, Hambone wants his ham; thus, the origin his two utterances. Hambone is accepted by everyone in the family, except Memphis. Memphis believes he is just plain crazy; however, after Hambone’s death and at the play’s end Memphis realizes that he, like Hambone, should not simply accept what the white world has offered him. Instead, he as a final tribute to Hambone’s determination, pays for Hambone’s funeral expenses and insures that he has proper burial.

David Richards begins his review of *Two Trains Running* by saying that this “is a play you wouldn’t have expected August Wilson to write,” but with this assessment of the work I must disagree. Richards notes how although *Two Trains Running* is set in the 1960s, the play does not reflect any of the passion, emotion, or activism of this politically charged period in American culture. Richards says of the play, that is Wilson’s “most benevolent work to date” especially in comparison to his previous works where mainstream cultural is indicted—always off stage—for restricting African Americans from participating fully and equally in American life. Instead, as Richard observes and I concur, “none of the regular customers of Memphis Lee’s restaurant in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, . . ., is out to flail ‘whitey’ [...] no one’s mounting a demonstration on raising a clenched first” (C18:1). The story revolves around the patrons, employee, and owner of Memphis’s restaurant and their hopes, dreams, and fears being discussed within this place. The only time we hear of what of what is going on outside of the restaurant is
in Sterling’s commentary on Prophet funeral and his invitation to Risa to attend the Malcolm X rally and dance. Like the rest of Wilson’s dramaturgy “[a]lmost all the significant events in ‘Two Trains Running’ occur off stage,” and if it were not for the dialogue exchanged by the actors, nothing really happens in the play:

For the most part Memphis Lee’s is haven in the storm. Not that there’s so much evidence of a storm. The inflammatory 1960s are happening elsewhere. In “Two Trains Running”, the loudest explosions are produced by the restaurant door slamming shut every time someone comes in for company or heads out into the street and distant fray. (C18:1)

Richards’ review of Two Trains Running proves two things about August Wilson’s playwriting. First, he continues his focus on universal themes in his work, even in the midst of a social upheaval in the culture. And, secondly by the time of his writing of Two Trains Running, Wilson demonstrates that his understands the dynamics of Broadway financing and patronage, especially when it comes to his discussion of the uncomfortable climate of the 60s. Wilson could have written this play in manner of his dramatic mentors Amiri Baraka (and Ed Bullins), but just as he has stated and proved in interviews and his dramaturgy, he did not completely align himself with the “kill whitey” thematic approach advocated by the Black Arts Movement form. This
digression from anticipated 1960s black theatre form prompts Richards to say: “Mr. Wilson’s play about the 1960s recognizes that there weren’t militants everywhere and that two blocks away from the big protest march life tends to its homely course, anyway” (C18:1). This digression prompts this study to contend that Wilson, at this point, is well aware that Broadway will not accept a 1960s toned play about the 1960s from a black playwright. Hence, he writes within the tradition instead of, like Baraka and Bullins, challenging the tradition.

As stated at the beginning of this discussion, I disagree with Richards’ contention that this play is one that would not have been written by Wilson, for this play best exemplifies Wilson’s full acceptance of mainstream values as an influence on the shape of his dramaturgy. He recognizes the tastes of his audience members, and writes to appease their palates. Through *Two Trains Running*, Wilson escapes Locke, except in characterization, and Du Bois in protest, and creates a drama that is truly Wilsonesque. That is he, a black playwright,” falls between the two stools” (Johnson 477) and becomes apolitical and universal, but financially successful.

*Seven Guitars*

*Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in 1996, received eight Tony nominations, and won another New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Wilson. Set in 1948, *Seven Guitars* returns to the theme of the disenfranchised blues musician through the characters of Floyd
“Schoolboy” Barton and his friends/fellow band members Canewell and Red Carter. Similar to *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in theme and protest against the white establishment’s exploitation of African American musicians, *Seven Guitars* takes a different turn as Floyd appears to defend and accept this misuse as a consequence of being in the music business.

*Seven Guitars* moves Wilson’s dramaturgy into the murder mystery genre. Influenced by the work of his literary mentor, Jorge Borges, Wilson for the first time frames the plot in the work with the action actually beginning at the end of things. Told through a series of flashbacks, *Seven Guitars* retraces a week in the life of Floyd Barton and his friends. During this week, the reader/viewer learns not only about Floyd, but also about each of the other six characters in the play, and also about the person behind Floyd’s death.

During its regional run, particularly at the Goodman theatre in Chicago, *Seven Guitars* received mixed reviews from *New York Times* theatre critic Vincent Canby and *Time* magazine critic Willam Tynan. Echoing what other critics have said about Wilson’s talent for language as demonstrated in his previous six plays, Canby says of *Seven Guitars*: “It displays a narrative sweep and an almost biblical richness of language and character that distinguish Mr. Wilson from virtually all other contemporary American playwrights”(C13:1). However, Tynan
notes the flaws in the play, particularly its anti-climatic plot, and the lack of power Floyd’s death has on the audience:

But though full and strong in its buildup, the play loses its potency as it reaches its climax. Floyd’s death may be plausible, even inevitable, but it becomes tangled in a confusing thicket of mysticism and subplots. Though Floyd is as charming and sympathetic a protagonist as we could want, the surprising truth is that his death has little effect on us. We leave the theater entertained and admiring but not truly moved. (1)

I appreciate and concur with both Tynan and Canby’s reviews of the work, for again, the language Wilson creates is lyrical and pays homage to his prior career as poet; however, the play does just end. The most interesting event in the play is learning of Headley’s murder of Floyd, but possibly because this information is revealed after Floyd’s funeral, it is now, anticlimactic. Tynan was also correct in his observation of the numerous sub-plots in this play. There are so many stories being told (hence, the seven guitars playing seven different songs), that is hard to maintain focus on Floyd’s story. For this reader, the women’s stories, for example are the most interesting part of drama.

Although Seven Guitars explores the reality of the blues in the lives of these male characters in Wilson’s African American, the play
also delves more fully into the lives of Wilson’s female characters than any of his other works. Vera, Louise, and Ruby figure prominently in this work as their stories mesh with and complete the blues filled life of this community of friends and lovers. Along with the struggles of the men, Vera, Louise, Ruby have struggles and deferred dreams of their own which manifest themselves just as strongly as the woes of these blues men.

Fittingly, Vera’s story is the first to discuss, for the play begins and ends with her mourning Floyd’s death. However, as the play progresses from act one, scene two, we learn that Vera has mourned for Floyd before, but this mourning was because of his absence and not his death. When Floyd leaves Vera for Chicago with another woman, he leaves Vera with a broken heart that time has tried to heal. Hence, when he returns to her after his release from the work house, he re-opens those wounds that have begun to fester only to tempt her to want to pick at them and expose them to his salve and offer to go to Chicago with him, as his woman. Yet, Vera tries to fight off the temptation and to follow her mind instead of heart, but in the end she fails and against her better judgment and the advice of Louise, purchases a return ticket from Chicago to Pittsburgh just in the event Floyd deserts her again.

Wilson has Floyd defend his taking up with another one by pointing out that Vera is partly responsible for his infidelity. Echoing Troy Maxson in his fervor and passionate plea to Ruth to understand his
infidelity and fathering of his outside child, Floyd espouses Wilson’s signature expression of the defeated and disenfranchised African American male and his sometime need to have someone to believe in him, for he can not always believe in himself:

FLOYD. You was there too, Vera. You had a hand in whatever it was. Maybe all the times we don’t know the effect of what we do. But we cause what happens to us. Sometimes even in little ways we can’t see. I went to Chicago with Pearl Brown cause she was willing to believe that I could take her someplace she wanted to go. That I could give her things that she wanted to have…She didn’t know if I could do that. If I could have a hit record. But she was willing to believe it. Maybe it was selfish of her. Maybe she believed for all the wrong reasons. But that gave me a chance to try. So yeah…I took it. (Seven Guitars 92)

Thus Floyd points out Vera’s role in his abandonment of her, for her disbelief that he could and would make it as a musician.

Louise is also a woman who has been scorned, but unlike Vera she does not hold on to hopes of a true love returning to her again. In response to Hedley, her boarder, who says that he knocked on her door the night before saying, “You know a woman need a man” She replies, “I got me a thirty-two-caliber pistol up there. That be all the man I
need” (*Seven Guitars* 19), and that has been the only man she has had since, Henry, her significant other of twelve years left her. Louise shares this story with Vera as she tries to fortify her against falling back into the charms of Floyd. The pistol is the one thing that she asked Henry to leave her so that she would have protection and also as a reminder to herself not “let a man use you up” (*Seven Guitars* 32) as she advises Vera. Louise is emotionally stronger than Vera, for her vision of love lacks the idealism of Vera’s youth. As she states, she is “forty-eight” going on sixty” and Hedley, her boarder, is “the closest [she] want to come to love…” (*Seven Guitars* 31). In spite of her hardened position on love and her claim that the day “[t]hat man walked out on me and that was the best thing that happened to me,” (*Seven Guitars* 31) one can gather from her recollection of the day Henry left, she knows the strength that love can have on a person; hence her decision that “If you have to say hello before you can say goodbye I ain’t never got to worry about nobody saying goodbye to me no more” (*Seven Guitars* 31).

Once *Seven Guitars* reached Broadway’s Kerr Theatre, it received the same mixed reception. David Sheward of *Back Stage*, praised the language of the play, but also noted that many of the speeches could have been cut, “but the vast majority of it is compellingly real and, like a great symphony, builds to satisfying climax”(1). Again Wilson’s panache for language saves him from complete critical ruin.
King Headley II

The latest installment in Wilson’s African American cycle, King Headley II ushers Wilson’s dramas closer to the twenty-first century. Set in 1985, King Headley II is the first play in the cycle to feature characters found in two previous plays. The titular character, King Headley, is the unborn child of Ruby from Seven Guitars. Named after the “spectacle character” Headley, from the drama, this story focuses on the black family (a consistent theme in Wilson’s dramatic structure) and its “so called break down” (Wilson 15). The other characters from Seven Guitars are featured in the play as well such as Red Carter (whose wife has a son named Mister), Headley (King Headley’s name sake), and Elmore who murders King Headley’s father, Leroy, in Alabama.

The conflict in the play arises in the fact that three murders occur. The first murder is a continuation from Seven Guitars with Hedley’s murder of the blues musician/singer. The second murder, Leroy’s murder, is actually the first. This murder occurs before ‘s demise and is the reason why King Hedley’s mother, Ruby, migrated North to Pittsburgh. The most recent homicide is to be discovered in this play when it is learned that King Headley II has followed in the footsteps of his namesake and has also killed a man. According to Wilson, this trilogy of murders takes place over a 47-year period of time (1930s, 1948, and 1977). By connecting these murders, Wilson continues his linkage of decades within African American history, especially with
the black family. He says of this continuation: "I found that so much conflict is rooted two or three generations back. If you look at the 1980s, you have to go back to the 1950s and 1960s to see where these things started to happen" (15).

When asked if *King Hedley II* should be considered a sequel, Wilson responded: "I don’t like the idea of sequels. The play just makes use of one of the same characters [Hedley] and then other characters that are mentioned in stories. But it’s an entirely different play" (15). Hence no sequels here, but rather a continuation of the life of one unborn fetus. According to the editors of *Theatre.com*, *King Headley II* offers the story of King, the refrigerator salesman, and the challenges he faces as he attempts to make a living for his pregnant wife Tonya and his mother Ruby. Wilson adds that in this play he (as mentioned) is returning to the theme of the black family and its "so-called breakup", and he is "looking at the violence of the 1980s, where these kids run around killing one another. Where does this come from? It doesn’t come from a vacuum. I’m trying to get to the root cause of the breakdown that we have in the black community in the 1980s" (Theatre.com).

Interestingly, what Wilson is attempting for the first time in *King Hedley II* is what Ed Bullins accomplished in the '60s in his twentieth century cycle. The character, Steve Benson, shows up in several of these plays that also should not be regarded as sequels, but rather as
continuations of one’s man’s story. This type of character recycling, in both Wilson’s and Bullins’ cycles gives the personalities a chance to exist beyond the one play and maybe answer some of the unanswered questions raised by the plays themselves.

Previewing at Broadway’s Virginia Theatre April 10 through April 28, 2001, *King Headley II* received favorable reviews. Emily Nunn in the May 2001 issue of *Vogue* magazine discusses the universal appeal of the play’s titular character King Headley II:

> . . . as with so many of Wilson’s characters, King’s love, humor, and unexpected lyricism force spellbound audiences, black and white alike, to ask a universal question: how to live a life of love, honor, and dignity—a life in which flowers grow—when the walls of society are built against it. And that’s what makes Wilson not just America’s greatest black playwright but possibly one of the greatest playwrights of the century. (186)

After viewing the April 13 preview of the show, this writer left the Virginia simply stating “Mr. Wilson has done it again.” What surprised me the most was the unexpected ending of this drama; however, it solidified the character of King Headley II as the most tragic of Wilson’s tragic heroes.

*King Headley II* opened officially on April 29, 2001, to rave reviews. As posted on the *King Headley II* website, the critics found
Headley to be another great play by August Wilson. The website quotes Ben Brantley of The New York Times writes of Headley:

Voices go hurtling to heaven in August Wilson’s underclass, filled with a ferocity and passion rarely found in new plays today. You will hear some of the finest monologues ever written for the American stage, speeches that build gritty, often brutal details into fiery patterns of insight. It seeks—and often finds—the heights of tragedy and mysticism in the life of the common man. And while only God may strike the chords that reverberate through the scheme of life, Mr. Wilson renders the human notes with more than a touch of divinity.

Clive Barnes, of the New York Post and John Lahr of The New Yorker, praise Wilson’s role as “storyteller” in Headley with Lahr summing up the talent of Wilson’s orality best:

In the age of the soundbite, August Wilson has become the most endangered or rare birds—the storyteller. His plays are not talking textbooks; they paint the big picture from the little incidents of daily life. And in telling the story of African-Americans in the 20th century, he has become one of our greatest playwrights. (53)

Barnes believes that King Headley is “Wilson’s Best.”
King Headley II is a finalist for this year’s Pulitzer Prize (Wilson has earned two of these prizes to date), and it and its cast members were nominated for six Tony awards and earned two Drama Desk awards for Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play (Charles Brown) and Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play (Viola Davis). Ms. Davis, for her role as Tonya, King’s wife, also earned the Tony Award for Best Actress in a featured play.

Interestingly, as he does in Seven Guitars, Wilson’s women in King Headley II almost steal the show from his male characters, even the complex King Headley. Tonya, King’s wife, delivers a powerful speech in which she attempts to persuade King that their unborn child will just be another victim for an unfair and unjust society. Hence, she wants to have an abortion instead of bringing another victim into the world:

I don’t want to raise no more babies when you’ve got to fight to keep them alive. You take little Buddy Will’s mother up on Bryn Mawr Road. What’s she got? A heartache that don’t never go away. She up there now, sitting in her living room. She’s got to sit down because she can’t stand up. She’s sitting down trying to figure it out, trying to figure out what happened. One minute her house is full of life, the next minute it’s full of death. She waiting for him to come home and they bring her a corpse, saying,
“come down, make the identification, this your son? Got a
tag on his toe, say John Doe.” They’ve got to put a number
on it, John Doe number four. (qtd. in Ifill)

King Headley II should not only be considered Wilson’s best work, but
also the first work where a both the male and female voices are allowed
to almost equally articulate the state of affairs in the African American
community. King Headley commands all of the attention in the play,
but Tonya’s speeches echo in the minds of King Headley II’s patrons
leave the theater.

Wilson’s African America has received accolades and critical
reviews unsurpassed by any other African American playwright in
history. His audiences applaud his work, and investors and theaters
(both regional and major) await the opportunity to place his works on
their schedules. Overall, one can consider Wilson an African American
dramatic success story, but upon closer examination of the plays
themselves and their mainstream reviews, this chapter has hoped to
disclose that Wilson’s dramatic success has come at a price. Like Ma
Rainey, as suggested by LaJuan Simpson, Wilson in his efforts to have
his plays produced, appears to control the art (his drama) but actually
as the reviews of his plays help to prove, he does not control the
production—the mainstream audience’s taste determine and control the
representation of African American culture and mainstream culture
played out on the stage. Returning to James W. Johnson’s discussion,
Wilson's price for his success is to appeal to the taste of the mainstream audience. In his dramaturgy, he, like Bullins, selects his audience and writes for its members.

The Plays of Ed Bullins

Bullins's plays have received critical responses from both mainstream and African American critics despite the fact that he staged his works for primarily black audiences. Much of the criticism included in this chapter comes from mainstream critics, particularly the theatre critics of The New York Times. Interestingly, although one would think that the reviews of Bullins’s work coming from the very mainstream New York Times theatre critics would be negative (and much of it is), many of the reviews of Mr. Bullins’s work are favorable and credit him with being (at the time) one of the greatest and most artistic African American playwrights in American theatre.

While an examination of the approximately 101 plays of Ed Bullins’s dramaturgy (according to Hay's estimate) and their critical responses deserves a book into itself, this study will focus on several of those plays that Bullins has identified as his part of his twentieth century cycle, those featured in the collected works The Theme Is Blackness: "The Corner" and Other Plays, Four Dynamite Plays, the tragic-comedy How Do You Do: A Nonsense Drama, We Righteous Bombers (the play suspected to have been written by him using the
pseudonym Kingsley Bass), his children’s dramas, and his latest work *Boy X Man*.

Bullins’ Twentieth century cycle plays—in *In The Wine Time*, *In New England Winter*, *The Duplex*, *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, *Clara’s Ole Man* and *Daddy*—according to Bullins “deal with an extended family of modern African Americans from the underclass of America’s ghettos” (“Two Days Shie” 67). As Wilson is doing and Eugene O’Neill set out to do, Bullins has also attempted this task in these plays by presenting the “underworld” of African American culture. Bullins explains that these works “are an attempt to illuminate some of the lifestyles of the previous generations of the black underclass, some of whom were the forbears of today’s crack, ice, and substance-abuse victims” (67). Bullins’s twentieth century cycle was also designed to prove that in spite of the self-imposed victimization many members of this group did “intentionally and unwittingly . . . escape the cycle of destruction with dreams of building a better tomorrow” (67).

Although noble in plan, Bullins’s twentieth century cycle did not elicit the applause of many black, middle class theatre attendees. This is what makes the audience response to Bullins’s dramaturgy interesting, for unlike Wilson and O’Neill Bullins’s own cultural group found disfavor in his work. Mainstream audience members and critics, however, appeared to have appreciated his dramatic talents, thus awarding him several OBIE awards and grants.
The Twentieth Century Cycle Plays

*In The Wine Time*

*In The Wine Time*, the first play of Bullins' twentieth century cycle, delves into the heart of the black underclass as it exposes the intoxicated lives and the deferred dreams of what may be considered the members of the generation X of the 1950s. Cliff and Lou Dawson, Ray, their nephew, Bunny Gillette, Doris, Red, Bama and Tiny are all members of this sub-culture of the larger African American world whose lives are bordered by "The Avenue" and the steps of the Dawson home. It is on these steps that the nightly wine times, the communal gathering of this motley crew, take place. The steps serve as the seats, the soapboxes, and the end tables upon which the members of this group define their individual realities, which are not strong enough to separate them from the common link of alcoholism, unemployment, and indifference that so often plagues the members of this world. The gallons of cheap wine that the members share each night symbolically represent the sameness of their lives and the impossibility of escape, for no one is strong enough to leave the confines of the group, that is, except the youngest member of the group, Ray.

It is in Ray that Bullins implants the possibility of a life that does not exist within the wine times of his family and friends. Ray, "adopted" by his Aunt Lou and Uncle Cliff upon the institutionalization of his mother, also an alcoholic, has been a unwitting victim of the wine
times since his youth. Although only sixteen, he is able to drink as much as any adult around him, and he is just as familiar with smoking and women as the men are he has befriended. Hence, with the exception of age, he is just as much an adult member of this family as are the other members who frequent the Dawson home nightly. However, present in Ray’s youthfulness is the chance for escape from the confines of the wine times. Ray aspires to join the Navy, yet he is legally too young to join without the consent of his guardian, Lou. His Uncle Cliff says “I’ll sign for you” and encourages Ray to go, for he wants him to see the world and have a chance to get beyond “The Avenue.” Lou, on the other hand, opposes Ray’s enlistment for fear of losing him and the even greater fear that he will return just as Cliff has, an unemployed, cussing, drunk, who as he says “refuses to work for a dollar.”

The argument over of Ray’s fate stems from Cliff and Lou’s unconscious attempts to live their unfulfilled dreams through Ray, who is essentially their last chance at success. Lou, who loves Cliff, is disappointed in her the choice she has made in him. She claims to have only married him to have kept him out of the brig and compares his slovenly state to that of her hard working father. Yet, she continues to live with him and support him in spite of the fact that he abuses her verbally and physically, and he sleeps around with their female friends and other women in the community. She defends his antics to their
group, and willingly walks around hearing and seeing none of the evil that Cliff does. Her hopes are for Ray to be a better man than his uncle is; hence, she does not approve of his camaraderie with and participation in the male rituals that Cliff teaches and encourages Ray to participate in.

Cliff, however, should not only be viewed as the notorious, insensitive ringleader of this group. Yes, he holds court nightly on his steps, and he is training his protégé, Ray, but Bullins creates Cliff with a complex mixture of street intelligence and academic intelligence that may leave a reader/viewer confused as to how to judge him. Cliff is a former Navy enlisted man who spent more time in the brig than he did in duty. After the completion of his tour of duty, he returns home and utilizes the GI Bill in order to attend college and to study business. This plan sounds and is admirable for a person from the black underclass to aspire toward; however, instead of forging toward this goal, Cliff continues to set himself back with his abuse alcohol, what Bullins calls “the drug of choice” (67) for the black working class of the fifties.

It is the fatal mixture of alcohol and academics that makes Cliff a dangerous entity in this world, for he has the natural leadership abilities and the “smarts” to motivate others, yet he uses these talents to continue the characteristic antics of members of this sector of the African American world—drinking, smoking, spousal abuse, promiscuity, swearing, and unemployment. Hence Lou, and Ray, and
the all other members of the wine time imitate and perpetuate what they believe are the expected norms of the black underclass.

The climax of the play occurs as Cliff “jumps into” a fight between Ray and Red. In this brawl, Red turns out to be the unlucky victim at the hands of Cliff or Ray, but when the police arrive it is Cliff who martyrs himself so that his nephew may forge a new path through the Navy and “escape the cycle of destruction” Bullins discusses in this cycle of plays (67). Before exiting the play and the wine times for jail, Cliff asks Lou to let Ray go:

    CLIFF. Lou…Lou, I want one thing from you…(In The Wine Time 181).

This last request settles the debate Ray’s fate, for his Uncle Cliff, who is seemingly selfish and insensitive to others, sacrifices his freedom for the life of Ray.

*In the Wine Time* offers a look into those trapped into the lives of the black underclass and the one that manages to escape. It is with the suggestion of Ray’s escape that Bullins proves that the cycle can be broken, even from within by those very persons, those Cliffs, who appear to be the contradictions to escape.

*In The Wine Time* includes many presentations of the live of the black underclass that are unappealing to many members of the black middle class and mainstream audiences. For example, the vulgar language the characters use, the alcohol abuse, and the “party house”
on the block, are images of black America that many African Americans and mainstream audiences wish to ameliorate by eradication. However, Bullins points them out without censure, for these images were and remain a reality for many persons residing in African American ghettos.

*New York Times* theatre critic Lindsay Patterson applauded Bullins’s *In The Wine Time* and spoke to its universal quality, although all of the characters in the play are black: “‘In the Wine Time’...should be seen by white as well as black audiences. It is not only relevant to the black experience, but to all experience. It has a quality called universality”(11:7:1). Patterson’s entire review of the play is interesting, for she points that during the time of this play, 1968, most black playwrights were writing against white America and forgetting about their own culture as relevant material while white playwrights were composing works that were identifying “black heroes”; however, Bullins’ *In The Wine Time* contradicts that anti-mainstream focus and focuses on the black culture:

That is why it is particularly pleasing to see a play by a young black author that makes little or no mention of whitey, but presents a slice of black life as it is actually lived; and in a curious way, Ed Bullins’ “In The Wine Time” turns out to be a far more serious indictment of white society than any polemic on the subject. (11:7:1)
Patterson continues in this review to compare Bullins’ playwrighting to Eugene O’Neill, but also points out that Bullins “has quite a lot going for himself on his own terms. He has a deep sensitivity, love and understanding for his characters that enable him to present a rare thing, a truthful presentation of ghetto dwellers” (11:7:1).

Patterson’s only criticism of In The Wine Time was its ending: “ . . Mr. Bullins must have been thinking of a different play or, more likely, he did not trust his own instinct to let the play flow to a natural conclusion. He chooses suddenly to become melodramatic, and the shift does not fit the piece” (11:7:1), and I concur with this critique for although Cliff becomes the hero of the piece, it comes at the expense of a Ralph Ellison styled “battle royal” scene between Cliff’s hopes and dreams and the reality of the lifestyle that he has chosen. By confessing to his nephew’s crime, Cliff acquiesces his dreams and “throws the fight” so that the next generation may have a chance.

In New England Winter

The second installment in Bullins’ twentieth century cycle follows the path of Steve Benson, the character many critics believe to be Bullins’ stage persona, from one side of the country to the other and in two different time periods. Steve is found in this play alongside his half-brother, Cliff Dawson, introduced in the first play of this cycle, In The Wine Time. A further examination into the character of Cliff, In New England Winter begins at the end of things, in 1960, with an AWOL
Steve hiding out in the apartment of his partially insane girlfriend Liz. Bullins then inserts the flashback technique, as the reader/viewer encounters a familiar character, Cliff Dawson, Steve, and a childhood friend Bummie in 1955 planning the robbery of a finance company.

Again alcohol, violence, and illegal actions permeate the background of this discussion of the black middle class; however, Bullins inserts the problem of self-hatred possessed by many members of this class. This self-hatred, as discussed by Richard Scharine, is illustrated by Steve throughout the play as he attempts and succeeds for the most part to destroy all those things that strike him as being more powerful than he, or simply put all those things white (106). According to Scharine this contempt for both whom he is—a black man—and whom he wishes to be—white or powerful, are demonstrated from his initial act of forcing Bummie to dress in pink female mask and blond wig during the rehearsal of the robbery, to his slaying of Bummie for telling Cliff about his affair with Cliff's Lou (remember Lou is pregnant in In the Wine Time) and the possibility that he, Steve, is the father of her child (106). As stated by Scharine:

To be white means, in Steve’s terms, to be favored in all things—from the love of Liz, who lapses into insanity dreaming of a baby, white “like the winter’s face,” to being the first and favored son in place of Cliff.” You know I always win, Cliff...One day even mom will like me more
than you.” The New England winter is a vivid metaphor for white America, and, as Steve half-consciously realizes, for death as well: It’s snowing up there now. Snowing...Big white, white flakes. Snow. Silent like death must be.” It is Steve’s tragedy that both betrayal and murder have been pointless, but Cliff’s forgiveness [he already new about Steve and Lou’s affair] has a least brought him to self-revelation: “You love me so much...and I hate both of us.”(106)

A depressing play from beginning to end, In New England Winter reflects the emotions of many members of the black underclass as they lash out against each other while they pretend to lash out against what or whom they really despise the most, the mainstream culture that they believe ostracizes them and prevents them from full participation in life. In New England Winter also sets out to prove to the members of this world that self-pity is not the answer to their discouragement, and mainstream America is not the only or always the problem. As proven by Steve’s actions, oftentimes, members of this group are their own enemies who limit themselves to the confines of the black underclass and its rites of passage and methods of survival. Both Steve and Cliff had the Navy and its opportunities as their way out; however, they cannot pull themselves far enough away from the black underclass.
There is no point of no return for them, for they restrict their own barriers on themselves.

Mel Gussow begins his review of *In New England Winter* by observing that Bullins “is one of the most interesting of American playwrights” and predicting that he would probably become “one of the most significant” (28:1). He continues his praise of Bullins by comparing his dramatic abilities those of Clifford Odets, but he makes certain to point out that Bullins does not imitate anyone, “certainly not a white playwright” (28:1). Moving from Bullins the playwright to his impression of the work, Gussow observes that despite the technical, staging, and character flaws of the play that the work “is a strong one” and when coupled with is predecessor, *In The Wine Time*, *In New England Winter* challenges its audience to redefine the meanings of the works as offered by their titles and to interpret them through the opposite lenses of the black experience. Gussow also applauds Bullins for continuing the character of Cliff in this work, for he contends that it allows previous viewers of Bullins’s earlier twentieth century cycle plays to further understand his character.

Conversely, Walter Kerr, does not critique the drama because he claims that he could not understand it. Instead, he focused on Bullins’s overuse of props or “toys” as he called them in this play, in particular a tape recorder. Kerr says that these “toys” and the information conveyed on the tape should have been included within the work and
spoken by the characters, not before the plot unfolds. Kerr saw this as Bullins's attempt to do what he wanted to do on the stage, and found this to unacceptable (11:3:1). Kerr's assessment of Bullins in this case is accurate, but should not have been surprising to him because Bullins had always done what he wished to do on the stage, especially when his actions contradicted expected theatre techniques.

*The Fabulous Miss Marie*

*The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1974), the fourth installment in Bullins’s African American cycle, places its readers/viewers in the middle of an urban party. Continuing what appears to be Bullins’s knack for mixing various personalities, this party hosted by Miss Marie represents a cross-section of this underclass culture. Again featuring the character of Steve Benson, Bullins continues to follow this young man’s life through his various trials and tribulations.

*The Fabulous Miss Marie* picks up where Bullins’s *Duplex* leaves off, but not as a neat sequel to the play, but rather as a continued docudrama into the lives of the characters. Set within a modest middle class, suburban home and amongst a medley of twenty-something and forty something individuals, *The Fabulous Miss Marie* presents another side of the black underclass found in Bullins’ twentieth century cycle—the aspiring middle-class that can not escape its dark, or rather “niggerish” past.
The play begins in the midst of a three-day Christmas party at the home of Bill and Marie Horton. A pornographic film, bottles of alcohol, a dog in heat, and a sleazy, but festive atmosphere greet the reader/viewer as he/she meets the world of the fabulous Miss Marie. The inhabitants of this world, however, are not those persons whom one would typically find in attendance at this type of party. Instead, Bullins’ guest list for this blasphemous celebration of Jesus’ birth includes Miss Marie, the hostess and a Negro club woman; her parking attendant husband Bill; Bud a junior high school math teacher; Toni, his social worker wife; Ruth a commercial seamstress; and Wanda, Marco, Gafney and Steve, all university students (at one time or another). These character types are those that Du Bois called for and appreciated as representations of the way blacks should be presented; however, he would have been incensed by the “reality” that Bullins calls their lives.

Samuel Hay compares the characters and plot of this play to a jazz composition with Marie Horton, the titular character being the band’s leader who introduces each character and his/her respective monologue/solo. He observes that “[e]ach singer [speaker], additionally, helps to develop Miss Marie’s character by telling stories that connect the soloist to Miss Marie. . .”(Hay 191). The first solo is her own, of course, where she her discusses her affinity for Ambassador scotch and her wild life as a “slick little chick”(15) growing up in Buffalo. She only discusses this portion of her life, but it is Wanda, her
niece, who tells the rest of Miss Marie’s story life story from her illegitimate birth to her marriage to Bill:

WANDA. She had quite a reputation for being wild...They said that her mother died in childbirth, she being the child and nobody knowing who was the daddy...And Aunt Marie was brought up by her mother’s mother...who was one of the first colored teachers in Pottstown, Pa. And they said that Aunt Marie was very spoiled from receiving almost anything that she wanted...They said that Aunt Marie used to drink corn whiskey and smoke cigarettes in public and cuss and race in cars with their tops rolled back and she wouldn’t go to school...”Look what school did for my poor little mamma,” she would say. And she was a showgirl and went to Philly and New York ...and somethin’ happened that nobody ever talks about and she ended up out here with Bill. (The Fabulous Miss Marie 50)

Although Miss Marie’s story does not completely unfold from her mouth, the stories of the other characters and their dealings with Marie (directly or indirectly) unfold upon her calling. Hay’s analysis of The Fabulous Miss Marie as a jazz ensemble proves how each character’s life is affected and connected to Marie: “Thus, each person’s stories and/or actions contribute to the arrangement which could be titled “Marie’s Secrets”:
Miss Marie's arranger and bassist is her husband Bill, whom she never lets solo, although the story of him and his white woman gets told. The tambourine player/songstress is her niece, Wanda, whom Miss Marie dismisses as dumb. Wanda pays Miss Marie back by having affairs with her husband Bill and her [Marie's] secret love Marco Polo Henderson. On drums is the young Art Garrison, Miss Marie's main rhythm "piece." Art's young cousin, Steve Benson, sits in sometime guartist, although he has his eyes drumming on Miss Marie. Leading Miss Marie's front-line section is her "cut-buddy" Ruth. ..Ruth's best friend is the alto sax player and Miss Marie's homegirl, Toni, who is so jealous of Miss Marie that she had an affair with the drummer Art. On trumpet is the "revolutionary" Gafney, whose shrill notes are counterpoint in the band, causing most members to ignore him. Playing bells is Marie's invisible lap dog, Whitie. (H 190)

In each monologue/solo the ugly "reality" of these seemingly middle class persons' true stories and perspectives unfolds, thus proving that what Wanda says near the plays end, "Ahhh...this is such a miserable, mean existence"(The Fabulous Miss Marie 49). Hay contends that the body of this musical composition called The Fabulous Miss Marie "elaborates the theme, which is that mankind's search for self
completion is an infinite cut-throat game”(190). This is proven as the solos unfold and we learn of the adultery, deceit, incest, psychological and physical abuses these middle class characters use in order to attempt to make themselves and their lives complete.

Critically The Fabulous Miss Mariefaired well in the eyes of Mel Gussow. He found the play to be “probably the most composed of the [twentieth century] cycle” plays and “more of a comedy than its predecessors”(28:1). Moreover, Gussow notes how The Fabulous Miss Marie and its examination of the black middle class is an interesting one and that the play’s characters trace the evolution of African Americans from the black under class to the black middle class:

Before the breed vanishes, Bullins captures it completely, as if for a time capsule. In each play of his cycle—I have seen two and read two—the playwright is viewing a different area of black society. The style varies; the author is stretching his estimable talent. These are works progressing towards something cumulative: a composite, yet highly individualized, portrait of black America. (28:1)

The Duplex

The Duplex (the third play in the twentieth century cycle) should be regarded as one Bullins’ best plays. Set within a duplex, Bullins tells a tale of the interwoven lives of its tenants and their visitors with a complexity that proves that even this sub-strata of urban, African
American life has a defined order and set of rules that must be followed and acknowledged. Similar to In The Wine Time, The Duplex has a group of characters who navigate through life together. Drinking, eating, partying, and advising one another, this amalgamation of different personalities finds itself in the midst of a constant chaos that, again, the character of alcohol allows chances them to escape.

The Duplex was also one of the reasons for Bullins’s contrary position in American theatre. The Lincoln Center presentation of The Duplex caused Bullins to separate himself from the work, for its director did not stage the play the way Bullins intended it to be staged. Clive Barnes observed that this production of Bullins’s work was a good one, and he praised Bullins’s talent for dialogue and his keen observations of humanity: “Mr. Bullins is a playwright with his hand on the jugular vein of people. He writes with a conviction and sensitivity, and a wonderful awareness of the way the human animal behaves in his human jungle” (46:1).

Home Boy

Home Boy, the fifth play in Bullins’s twentieth century cycle continues to explore the idea of the African American victim, but moves the primary setting of the cycle from the city to the country. Bullins uses his trademark flashback playwrighting style to move the play between the 1950s and 1960s, and the north and the south. Featuring two main characters, Dude and Jody, Home Boy follows their decision to
move to the north from the south and the migration’s effect on them and the people around them.

Mel Gussow found the work to fall short of Bullins’s cycle plays, especially in comparison to *The Fabulous Miss Marie*. Dude and Jody, in Gussow’s opinion, were merely “sketched” in “outline” and not left the audience (in this case critic) wanting to know more about them and “the people who touch their lives” (335). Gussow also notes the resemblance of Jody and a secondary character, Uncle Clyde, to “a character in one of his [Bullins’s] other plays” and to Cliff Dawson (335). With this observation, I concur and contend that although Bullins moves his discussion of the black underclass victim from an urban setting to a rural setting, he remains true to his cycle by presenting visages of past characters. As he traces the evolution of African Americans from the underclass to the middle class, or in this case from south to north, he reminds his readers/viewers that all stratas of the African American culture are related.

*Daddy*

In *Daddy*, Bullins focuses his plot lens on the African American absentee father. Bullins uses the work to indict black men who walk away from their families under the guise of bettering themselves, the men who replace them in the home through the what we now call common-law marriages, and I contend to point out how the broken black family is not just a self-imposed black problem, but a direct by-
product of racism (particularly economic) in America. However, in true Bullins-style, he writes this play for an audience who experience this problem everyday—the black audience.

Thomas Lask did not find any merit in Daddy, except for Bullins’s “natural way with black speech patterns” infused into the drama’s dialogue. He says that the play fails because it appears unclear if Bullins was “torn between making a play and making a point” (C12:1).

Bullins’s twentieth century cycle plays, at least as far as publication and critical responses, appear to conclude with Daddy. I have not been able to locate any other works in this cycle, so this discussion will now focus on other works in Bullins’s dramaturgy.

The Gentleman Caller

Bullins’s The Gentleman Caller received mixed reviews from New York Times theatre critics. Presented along with three other plays (authored by Ben Caldwell, Ronald Milner, and Leroi Jones) in a 1969 production called “A Black Quartet,” The Gentleman Caller struck Richard Shepard as a “black comedy, in whichever sense of the word one prefers” and “a short play that holds the viewer from start to finish.” Conversely, Clayton Riley viewed this work as non-representative Bullins, but still a good play, saying that “bad Bullins is better than is better than no Bullins at all”:

“The Gentleman Caller,” by Ed Bullins is a minor disappointment, not so much for what the play itself is, but
rather for the absence of those ambitious qualities that generally characterize this man’s work. (There are, incidentally, so many excellent ones I won’t attempt even a partial list.) Had this been the first effort of a new playwright, I believe I would have been distinctly impressed. For Bullins, however, this is “light stuff.”(28:1)

Riley, like many of Bullins mainstream and African American critics, recognized the genius behind Bullins’ work even if it was militant and violent, thus, when Bullins authored a play that lacked his usual “in your face punch” it does not go unmissed.

*The Taking of Miss Janie*

*The Taking of Miss Janie* is probably one of Bullins’s most highly criticized works. Beginning after the rape of the titular character Janie (Miss Janie) by her platonic black, male friend Steve, the plot is relayed through Bullins’s signature theatrical flashback scenes. *The Taking of Miss Janie* revisits the events leading up to Janie’s “taking” by Monty, and concludes with her “re-taking” by Monty. Rape, Bullins’ most politically and morally charged action, is the central focus of much of the criticism surround this work, particularly from female viewers and critics of the play. Hay discusses how *Village Voice* critic Julius Novak echoes Erika Munk (a woman Bullins is rumored to have had an affair with) as she interprets the rape of Janie as Bullins’ fantasy. He quotes her as saying of *The Taking of Miss Janie*:
Is it possible that this moral indignation of mine conceals a psychological hangup? Was I made angry by Miss Janie because I suspect the humiliating women really is a satisfying and rewarding thing to do, and that I may be missing something by not trying it? Perhaps, a little; I think most men have a rape fantasy down in there somewhere. (The question is what we do, or don’t do about it.) Or could I really be angry because Mr. Bullins celebrates a black man humiliating a white woman? Am I really reacting as a racist? Again, perhaps; but frankly I doubt it. And if I am a racist, it seems clear that Mr. Bullins is even more of one, and particularly vicious sexist to boot.

(Munk qtd. in Hay 50)

While Novak focuses on the sexist and racist content of the play, New York Times critics Walter Kerr and Clive Barnes focus on the structural incongruity of the work. In Kerr’s review titled “A Blurred Picture of a Decade,” he discusses the “wandering” recollection of the 1960s that Bullins offers in The Taking of Miss Janie and notes that the play raises the question of the purpose of Janie’s rape:

... we are left wondering why Janie’s “taking” should be made to serve as summary of a decade’s mishaps and misapprehensions. Is physical conquest the only answer to the thousand questions raised; was “rape” the resolution
the '60s ought to have been seeking? Or is Janie no more than a nitwit, making impossibly childish demands in a situation too grave for children? (11:5:1)

Kerr observes that the rationale for the rape is not justified or even explained by the play's disjointed structure. Thus, the audience is:

forced to weave spider-webs of meaning for ourselves out of random snatches of biography, period echoes, interpolated monologues close to harangues. No one likes having to finish—or trying to finish—an author's play for him; but that's the effort asked here, and you'll have to put yourself through it if you want to take something home from "The Taking of Miss Janie." (11:5:1)

Barnes agrees with Kerr's assessment of the complex structure of The Taking of Miss Janie but commends Bullins' writing, especially for the characters of the play: "Each of the characters has a soliloquy—chiefly satirical in tenor, particularly when it comes to whites, who are depicted as even more stupid and venal than the blacks—and these, and the quick dissolving scenes, do offer the image of a period seen through the distorting glass of a special mind." (40:1)

Clara's Ole Man

Clara's Ole Man, one of Bullins' most successful and controversial plays, is not considered a part of his twentieth century cycle: however it serves as an important example of Bullins' genius.
First staged in 1968 with two other works (that will be discussed) *The Electronic Nigger* and *A Son Come Home, Clara's Ole Man*, according to New York Times theatre critic Clive Barnes demonstrates Bullins artistic “range”(23:2). Of this play Barnes says:

The range of Mr. Bullins is made apparent and his potential made clear by the evening’s final playet, “Clara’s Ole Man,” a chilling domestic scene that has a Pinteresque menace about it. A girl brings a boy home to her strange and aggressive family. Gang kids come in, and the pressures on the boy, completely out of his depth in a strange society, mount up until the play explodes in a final burst of violence. (23:2)

In this play Bullins continues his examination of the black underclass and their relationship with persons whom they consider others—the black educated class; however, he explores a taboo subject in African American culture—homosexuality. This drama focuses on the world of Clara, her big boned, street wise lover Big Girl, Big Girl’s mentally retarded sister, Baby Girl, their sick aunt and a small group of local gangsters who frequent Big Girl’s home. The nuclear family, as the reader/viewer notes, is composed only of women who look to Big Girl as the matriarch of the family. Thus, this world, Clara’s female centered universe is thrown off balance when a suitor, Jay, finds himself in her home. Little does Jay know that Big Girl is Clara’s Ole
Man for when he meets Clara she does not appear to be a lesbian, nor does she tell that she is involved with one. She simply instructs him to come by on Wednesday before her “ole man” gets home from work. He follows instructions and finds himself face to face with Clara’s Ole Man, and thus the play begins with the conflict. Jay’s main problem is that he is no longer a member of this black underclass, although he mentions that he was reared in the area and even a gang member at one time; however, after joining the Army and benefiting from the GI bill, he has now separated himself from the people of Clara’s world by not only his experiences outside of the community, but also because of his college education. Jack separates himself from the characters early in the play by what big calls the “horseshit doctor words”(256) he uses as they discuss Big Girl’s treatment program for her sister Baby Girl, teaching her to “cuss”:

BIG GIRL. Well, it was to give her freedom, ya know?
You see workin’ in the hospital with all the nuts and fruits and crazies and weirdos I get ideas ‘bout things. I saw how when they get these kids in who have cracked up and even with older people who come in out of their skulls they all mostly cuss. Mostly all of them, all the time they out of their heads, they cuss all the time and do other wild things, and boy do some of them really get into it and let out all of that filthy shit that’s been stored up all them years. But
when the docs start shockin' them and puttin' them on insulin they quiets down, that's when the docs think they're getting' better, but really they ain't. They're just learn'n like before to hold it in...just like before, that's one reason most of the come back or are always on the verge afterwards of goin' psycho again.

JACK (Enthusiastic). Wow, I never thought of that! That ritual action of purging and catharsis can open up new avenues of therapy and in learning theory and conditioning subjects...

BIG GIRL. Saaay whaaa...? What did you have for breakfast, man? (Bullins 257)

Bullins uses the contrasting dialects and word choices to further emphasize the differences between Big Girl and Jay. Because Jay has moved outside of the barriers of the black underclass he has forgotten the language of the streets. This linguistic elevation not only prevents him from understanding the relationship that exists between Clara and Big Girl, but it also poses a threat to the order that Big Girl and others like her fight to maintain within the black underclass. Thus, he must be punished or reminded where he is and how he should behave in this world.

Clara's Ole Man reverses the order of things, especially inside of mainstream American culture, because in this world the power is
possessed by a woman, a lesbian woman, who in both mainstream and African American culture would be alienated because of her sexual preference and oppressed because of her gender. Moreover, Clara's Ole Man allows the members of the black underclass to indict the black middle class and its aspiring members like Jay for "forgetting where they have come from." It reminds these persons that their culture is not the only, nor the most important aspect of African American culture, nor is their language the correct means of communication in this culture. The black underclass has a lexicon and a constitution of its own, and once one of its members crosses over into the middle class world, he can no longer recall of the values of this black underclass social system. Instead, like Jay, he has to be reminded and then placed back into the other social sphere.

A Son Come Home

In this work Bullins explores both the mother-son conflict and the father-son conflict. When Michael returns home to visit his mother, he becomes acquainted with her new and devoutly religious life and reacquainted with a past that he does not appear to appreciate or remember. Throughout the exchange between the mother and son, two mime-like characters pantomime the speeches and emotions of the characters. Probably one of the most uneventful of Bullins works, A Son Come Home examines the character Son's life, both then and now, and concludes with him walking away from his home, his heritage, his
mother, as he’s done before. Although a very simple play, *A Son Come Home* best one of the clearest illustrations of the “you can’t go home again” theme Bullins explores in his work.

Clive Barnes noted the “cinematic freedom” of the work, but said the drama’s plot or rather exchange “between a guilty son and a sacrificing mother, seemed too conventional in its attitudes to make much of an impact” (23:2).

*The Theme Is Blackness: The Corner and Other Plays*

The works featured in *The Theme Is Blackness* represent two modes of Bullins’ infamous political/artistic expression. In Part one of this collection, Bullins places works that reflect the changing black theatre of the 1970s. In the second half of this collection, Bullins presents the play *Street Sounds* and seven short one-act dramatizations that he calls and designed as “black revolutionary commercials”. These works were composed during his tenure with The Black Arts Alliance in San Francisco (1967). According to Bullins, these commercials came about as a response to the taste of the audience—urban African Americans—that The Black Arts Alliance were trying to reach in order to acquaint/motivate/teach them about the struggles of blacks and how unification was the only way that blacks could fight the majority society—white America. Bullins and his colleagues, particularly Baraka, knew as he said that blacks would respond more to television; thus the idea of the dramatic commercial was best:
We knew that the major means of communication to Black people in America is television. Then film. And we realized that the technical form of the television commercial was recognized by this Black audience on a mass subliminal basis and that we could utilize the forms but change the content, thus producing a revolutionary mass communications tool. (Bullins 129)

The plays included in this collection span the gamut from Bullins’s observations and analyses of the black martyrdom demanded by the black revolution, the interaction of black men and white women as a metaphor for the interaction of black people and white America, the black intellectual’s form of rebellion against white America, the experiences of the black underclass, to revolutionary commercials and one-act plays featured in part two.

_Dialect Determinism (or The Rally)_

_Dialect Determinism_ was presented in 1972 with three other works under the name “Short Bullins.” In his review of these works, Clive Barnes compared Bullins writing to “the way Charlie Parker played,” “easy and effortless”, and states that the work included in Short Bullins are “all concerned with the black position”(59:1). In _Dialect Determinism_, Bullins invites his audience into a meeting, similar to a black power or nation of Islam gathering, in which an outsider is able to challenge the understood leader and disrupt the meeting. Of the
work, Barnes simply stated that "the satire" of a "black man's determination to find both leader and scapegoat, martyr and victim" was "urbane but barbed" (59:1).

*It Has No Choice*

In *It Has No Choice* Bullins explores a common, but tabooed relationship between a black man, and a white woman. In traditional Bullins style, force is a factor in this relationship especially because the woman wishes to end the affair with the man. The man, who understands her reasons for wanting to end the relationship, verbally and psychologically berates the woman for her decision; thus, refusing to allow her to end the relationship.

Barnes argues that this scene or rather situation does not work, unless one was to read the "black-and-white affair" as a symbol of the racial situation of the 1970s with the couple serving as an example of the "inevitable" in the resolution of racial conflicts in American society. For this reason Barnes observed that *It Has No Choice* was "the most ambitious" of the playets presented in "Short Bullins" although it was the "least successful" (59:1).

*The Theme is Blackness*

Audience, as in *It Bees Dat Way*, is important to the performance of *The Theme Is Blackness* for as the stage directions state it is "(a one-act play to be given before predominantly white audiences)" (Bullins 84). However, in *The Theme is Blackness* the message of the play is not
reinforced by verbal or physical attacks on the white audience members. Instead, the one character, the Speaker, announces, "The theme of our drama tonight will be Blackness. Within Blackness One may discover all the self-illuminating universes in creation. And now BLACKNESS—" and the lights in the performance space are shut down for twenty minutes after which the Speaker returns and states "Will blackness please step out and take a curtain call?"

Clearly an interactive "performance" piece, Bullins's The Theme is Blackness is selective in its audience as the play It Bees Day Way because it asks that white Americans, or rather mainstream audience members, experience blackness on a level that goes beyond stereotypical representations and ideologies. Instead, blackness in this works is presented as in a way in which the audience is forced to try to discern the meaning and the theme of the black experience not by living it, but sitting through it and awaiting the presence of light.

The Man Who Dug Fish

In The Man Who Dug Fish, Bullins offers a revolutionary clothed in the garb of mainstream America. Featuring two to four players, for the fish and hardware clerks and asst. to the asst. manager of the bank can be played according to script directions "by the same white actor, or Black actor in white mask or makeup" (Bullins The Man...85), The Man Who Dug Fish takes place in three different places, a fish store, a hardware store, and finally a bank. At the fish store the The Man,
described as “[a] tall, heavy Black man in his midforties, [I]mpeccably dressed in the clothes of a financier [with]a fake Oxford or Cambridge accent, and carries and attaché case”(*The Man* 85), wishes to purchase a fish that will fit into his attaché’ case:

Man: (Holds up attaché case) You see...

Clerk: Yeah, a briefcase.

Man: But...

Clerk: We get our carp fresh from the creek in back of here.

Man: I want a fish...

Clerk: A little old lady catches it and sends it in to us...

Man: ...with head and tail...

Clerk: ...by her grandson.

Man: ...a fish that will fit comfortably in this satchel.

Clerk: He rides a bicycle

Man: Can you find me a carp which will meet these requirements?

The Man then moves to a hardware where he purchases a shovel that is “[s]omething not too big” and that cannot be “mistaken for anything other than a shovel...”(91). The action then moves to the bank where The Man purchases a safe deposit box that as the Asst. to the Asst. Manager reminds him is tamper proof:
By all means, sir. They are moth proof, radar proof, fire-proof, earthquake proof, drop proof, heist proof, dirt proof, atomic-blast and dust proof, water free, airless, and they cannot be touched by another human hand besides yours...unless you die or we have a court order...naturally.

(92)

Upon purchase of the pocket, The Man places the shovel and “the still wet but very dead fish” into the box and “locks it with the key”(94).

The conflict of the play begins here, for The Man places these bizarre items into the box while the asst. asst. is away checking to see if it is okay to accept the $1100 in cash that The Man pays for ten years of safe service. The asst. asst. attempt to pick up the box and immediately notes how heavy it is, but the man denies placing anything into the box. Instead, he allows the asst. asst. to believe that he is coming down with an ailment of some sort and should rest. The play ends with The Man leaving after disposing his catch at the bank, but the smell or for the audience the thought of the smell lasts long after The Man’s exit.

_The Man Who Dug Fish_ may be interpreted as another Bullins black revolutionary drama, but this time the revolutionary does not wield a gun, but rather a stink bomb against white society. The irony is that this very assimilated looking and sound black man, has purchased all of his materials from white America and even uses its financial venue as a place to produce his weapon. This intellectual and non-
violent revolutionary, poses an interesting contrast to his more violent counterparts for he poses a challenge to them to take up other arms against white America, and stop killing.

The Corner

In *The Corner* Bullins continues of his excavation into the black underclass with Cliff Dawson and Bummie from the twentieth century cycle's *In New England Winter*, showing up again. This time they are joined on a street corner outside of a liquor store by characters Slick, Silly Willy Clark, Blue and Stella. Divided into three short scenes, the action takes place on a the corner as the characters first await the coming of Cliff, and lastly witness the transformation of Cliff from corner dweller to as he calls himself “Daddy Cliff”(126).

Black Commercial #2

In this commercial drama, Bullins’s goal is to teach his audience about the importance of black unity in order for black people to successfully fight and defeat mainstream, white culture. Set as the scene directions state in a black environment, “Saturday night. “The Place,” a pig-feet emporium and whiskey, beer, and wine joint in the Black community. Black people so close that the air can be sliced in squares, packaged, and shipped north, as “soul” Black Commercial #2 opens with a fight between two black men, Rufus an Blue in the middle of crowd on a dance floor. The climax this commercial drama occurs as a young, neatly dressed black man (script note) “steps out of the crowd”
and addresses the sparring men as “Brothers.” The men cease fighting and Blue asks the man “You mean you think him and me is brothers?” The crowd, acting like a Greek chorus, moves the unification along while chanting the word BROTHERS! in unison. As the commercial ends, Rufus and Blue understand the significance of the word Brother and “clasp hands and speak of their mutual plans for the future, working in unity” (134).

Street Sounds

Bullins’ Street Sounds is a more of a dramatic platform than a play, for its forty characters speak to the audience from their individual perspectives on various issues affecting them personally, socially, politically, and intra-culturally. Bullins peoples this work with the Lockanian folk, the Du Boisian characters, the revolutionaries and just the everyday people whom would could encounter walking down a busy, urban street. Of course all the people in this play are black, although Bullins does not offer this parenthetical note. Instead, he parenthetically subtitles this piece Street Sounds: (Dialogues with Black Existence), I contend, to remind directors and audiences that the people in this play, Bullins’ black America, are black.

All of the characters are interesting, but several of Street Sounds’ characters stand out not only because of what they have to say, but because of the character types they represent. For example the Dope Seller was a controversial character for Bullins to present on stage in
1968, and presently is still a questionable character to use; however, his speech or rather justification for his trade is what demonstrates Bullins' connection with black reality, especially the black underclass. The Dope Seller says:

Sure I sell shit...pure junk with only a little talcum and other stuff in it to whoever wants to buy it. I can't see anything wrong with it...if that's what they want...I have it for them. So what if it's poison. So what if it destroys lives and turns the community into a spiritual ghost town. It's what they have to have...and I'm the dude who's got what they want. e Yeah...anything for any kind of high...Sure I sell shit...every day of the week. I know what everybody says...but if I don't get their money somebody else would move in and take care of grand theft business...and besides...I know I can do'em some good. (Street Sounds 147-48)

Another interesting character is The Black writer. With his dialogue echoing the centuries of deferred dreams of black men, this writer's story is both sad and tragic for his dreams of becoming a writer are thwarted by lack of support from his family, and girlfriend, and friend. Finally, succumbing to the pressure to be normal, the writer returns to the normal world, but drowns his dream of writing along with the rest of his dreams of the drug of choice for Bullins' Black America—alcohol:
So I went out and got a job at the post office...I drive a Mustang now...with only thirty more payments on it to go. And I locked up the room where I used to write. Didn’t touch anything in there. Just locked it up with all my notes, papers, and books in it...Maybe it’ll become the nursery...now that I’m married to my girl; and my mother is smiling...but I drink myself into a stupor each night with my dad as we sit in front of the TV...I guess I’m happy man... cause I don’t dream at all...no more. (Street Sounds154-55)

Although often criticized for his portrayals of women, the women in Street Sounds are noble and reflect the stories of women from every walk of life and every culture, especially the black culture. The Black Student identifies the benefits of education, critiques the black student movement on the period, and reminds the reader/viewer of Street Sounds of the predicament that many black, female student activists found themselves in while becoming “leaders”:

School’s okay. It has its advantages. Can’t complain about it really...Work in the Black Students’ Union; started it and run it, really. That’s right, I’m a pretty together sister...The Black Power came on campus...that was fight...then black studies...it’s a long story...and it’s been a hard fight. We lost some brothers and sisters. A few got shot by National
Guardsmen and State Troopers...sixty are in jail...and one of our main revolutionary brothers blew his thumbnail off tryin' to activate a bomb in the women's gym...It's good to be a Black Student these days...never a dull for a second...and it has so many advantages. Makes a leader out of you...Currently, I'm pregnant. But next semester is another semester. Right on, brotherman! Just tryin' to be Black, yahwl...that's all. (*Street Sounds* 162-63)

Bullins inserts his most interesting character about two-thirds into the play. The twenty-eighth character of *Street Sounds*, the Black Critic, illustrates Bullins' understanding that just because he writes about black people, all black people do not appreciate his work. Bullins uses the character as both a reflection and indictment of the black bourgeoisie and its hypocritical standards, especially in the last lines spoken by the Black Critic as Bullins has him slip back into the language and dialect(s) of the black underclass. The Black Critic states:

What you do is not art, not playwrighting or theater or anything worthwhile...Look at what you are doing to yourself and the negative image of the race you create. We've had it hard enough. We don't need to be showing them that side of us...I wasn't raised that way. Nobody I knew was. We were refined, man. And here you are, at this
late date, creating profanity, filth and obscenity and displaying it to the masses,...This so called artist cannot continue doing just as he pleases with our Black Art. He's immoral...Those dirty things he does and says up on stage can't even be mentioned by responsible Black people and critics, like me. Black people, we are the ones to lose in this situation. *Sure is a heavy game. I wanna thank you. Just doin' mah thang. Salaam, ahki. Kill the night blackness and groove* (emphasis mine). (*Street Sounds* 168)

Although Bullins reviews his own play(s) through the character of the black bourgeois theatre critic, and gives it the extremely negative review that many black critics gave/give his work, *New York Times* theatre critic Mel Gussow noted the “humor of the urban ghetto” and the realistic depictions of urban Black culture Bullins offers in *Street Sounds*. Gussow says of *Street Sounds*, “What is refreshing about “Street Sounds” is the originality and specificality (which is not to say topicality) of the material. These are real people with real problems” (32:1). He also recognizes the universal quality of Bullins's *Street Sounds* as he did in the 1968 review of *In The Wine Time*: “The play, as well as the street, sometimes seems chaotic. It could use cutting, tightening, perhaps some reordering. But even as it stands, it is a powerful, wise and informative work, one that should be of equal
interest to blacks and white, to the first for recognition, to the second for
discovery” (Gussow 32:1).

Bullins’s *Street Sounds* is further testament to Bullins’ ability to
tell a story to all, even as he excludes whites from predetermined
audience. It appears, that because of his ability to focus on one
audience he is able to craft his work more carefully for that stage, and
thus, reap positive reviews from mainstream venues although not find
his work presented on mainstream stages.

*How Do You Do?: A Nonsense Drama*

*How Do You Do?: A Nonsense Drama* is a work in both
colorization and message that is directly addressed to the black
community, particularly the black middle class. In this drama, Bullins
holds a mirror up to members of this group and ask that they look at
themselves from all angles, and hopefully as the character Paul, the
Image Maker attempts to make them discern, realize the farce behind
their bourgeois persona. Using Bullins representative script “The
players are black” (1), *How Do You Do*, sets its audience in the midst of
this particular black experience.

The main characters of this brief drama, Dora Stereotype and
Roger Stereotype are surnamed “Stereotype” to signify their
relationship to and representation of the black middle class sense of
materialism, title, and prestige. Paul, while an important character,
comments more on the action, like a Greek a chorus, and moves this
one-act play along with more commentary and questioning than background information. His character represents the so called "real" black American in Bullins's Black America in search of some truth or "song", or rather as he states at the play's beginning, "I must make music today, poet music. I've sate here too long making nothing, and I know I've been born to make song" (2).

Dora and Roger Stereotype then enter the drama and illustrate, through their actions and speeches, the pettiness of those persons unlike Paul, who instead of searching for a truth, search for acceptance or assimilation into the mainstream culture. Bullins emphasizes the materialism of the Stereotypes early in the drama during Dora and Roger's discussion of Roger's wardrobe:

DORA. Do I know you? I has assumed as much. That suit fits you so well. How much did it cost?

ROGER. One hundred and fifty dollars. One of my cheaper numbers. I have sixty-two of them. All exactly like this one. I only wear them on Wednesdays. They were made especially for me. I look so beautiful in my clothes.

DORÁ: You sho does.(4)

Comically, Bullins also uses this exchange to connect the black middle class to the culture (language, mores, values, vices) of the black underclass. In the afore citied passage, Dora slips into the language of the stereotypical black underclass as she mixes standard English "Do I
know you?” with what some linguists today call Ebonics “I has assumed as much” and “You sho does” (4).

The titular question How Do You Do? serves as an introduction to the next dialogue exchange between Dora and Roger with each getting more superficial, but humorous:

DORA: I’m in the society pages of THE COLOURED COURIER every day. I’m a debutante. (15)

ROGER: I pay fifty-two fifty for my shoes. I don’t support my bastands. I drink forty per cent of the scotch imported in dis great country of my fantasies. I’l work for a white man, when I works. A black woman can’t do nothin’ fo me ‘cept lead me to a white one. I hate myself. (16)

As the drama progresses, Dora and Roger begin to reflect in both actions and words the stereotype of the black underclass. For example as their conversation continues, Dora and Roger, according to stage directions claw and pet each other until finally near the play’s end Dora “(smooths her dress and pulls up her stockings)” (28).

In the midst of this chaos of bragging by the Stereotypes, Paul, comments at first sporadically with short outbursts such as “Oh Fuck!” (8) and “Shut up!” (10) which he says to Paul, until he becomes a part, although ignored by Dora and Roger, of the conversation:

ROGER: What are you hanging around here for? You’re not of our class and quality.
PAUL: No, I’m not. (14)

The question of “How do You Do?” that follows this exchange then becomes Paul’s opportunity to enlighten the Stereotypes as to how they are doing and how they should be doing. Some of Paul’s lessons to them are:

Paul. Build into the black/white consciousness of the Western Judeo-Christian culture, the reality of the diabolical black socio-path that it has made.

Know that man can philosophize himself into any and all positions to justify his greed for power and his cowardice ()

What makes Paul’s statements powerful is the banter that is exchanged between Roger and Dora:

Roger: I’s a boss nigger. I’m so hip I can’t talk. It ain’t mah language anyways, so dat’s why I talk in an Oxfordian accent...Yawhl.

Paul: Scratch your head, shuffle, pray to his gods until you decide what day you’ll call judgment. (20)

....

Paul: Don’t rape his women seduce them—you don’t have to rape anybody—everyone wants to screw your black ass.

RIGHT!

Roger: I wonder if that white bitch will say yeah if I put ah one-hundred dollar bill on the table?
Dora: I've been to every white hotel in town.

Paul: Don't blow up good technology (cough cough) and them there institutions at your disposal. Infiltrate his ranks with Ph.D’s. (25)

Paul the Imagemaker, through his words, appears to offer to the Stereotypes an alternative and revolutionary basis for the attempt to assimilate white culture. He encourages Dora and Roger to use the advantages afforded by their kinship to white America and “Kill him in the mind—the age of the body is done; imitate the State, it kills its questioners in the cerebrum. Become a guerilla warrior of ideas” (26). Paul then dismisses Roger and Dora and encourages them to “go out and play” and “Go out and burn and turn and learn. Go spread the word” (28), or in other words use the mask the wear as weapons instead of mere garments. However, as the play’s end implies Paul’s message has to been of no avail, for as Roger states, “I have great empathy with the cause of human rights. But I’m so refined that I can never get any farther than a white bar in spreading brotherhood” (30).

Paul the Image maker, at the play’s end, now, however, has a song to compose. The play ends with him repeating the words of the exchange between the stereotypes and the idea that Paul will use their lack of song to create his text, his “poet music” on the role of the stereotype.
Charles Marowitz reviewed "How Do You Do?" during its run in England and noted that the powerful language spoken by Paul the Imagemaker to Dora and Roger should not only have deeply affected them, but the mainstream audience "mind" as well:

Throughout an over-explicit commentator (called the "Image-Maker") peddles advice and exhorts the characters to execute the primal strategy of black morality: i.e., seduce and destroy. The play consists mainly of word-music and seesaw shifts in the relationship of the black couple. But during these shifts, insights, like white hot coals, glower out of the play's hearth, illuminating mucky corners of the white mind. (11:3:3)

He also notes how Bullins's (like Baraka's) works place white, or mainstream, theatre critics in quandary when it comes to a fair and/or favorable assessments of their works for they beg the mainstream critic to admit to the crimes of racism, elitism and oppression:

Actually what can one say about writers like Bullins and Jones? They spell out the details of the white man's corruption of their race, and remote white critics in America and England sit back and sift their perceptions as if artifacts were immune from the terrible social indictments they contain. How can you tell a man he has
written a good diagnosis of your criminality and keep a straight face?(11:3:3)

Marowitz raises questions in this review that not only prove his respect for Bullins’ work, but also reflects the truth behind how black drama, especially works like Bullins that as he states earlier in this review “are composed like effigies, specifically designed to torture his enemies, and based on the magical assumption that if one destroys the symbol often enough, the reality will also get impaired,”(11:3:3) challenge the mainstream theatre critic to evaluate black theatre on its own merits.

*Four Dynamite Plays*

The plays found in Bullins’s *Four Dynamite Plays* are probably four of his most controversial works. Each work in some way includes violence, either intra-racial or inter-racial warfare, a critique of both black American and white American culture, black revolutionary rhetoric, and lastly the drug of choice for Bullins black underclass, wine with the addition of marijuana and speed (in *Pig Pen*). Also, Bullins introduces more interesting female characters in these works, especially the character of the black woman in the play *Death List*. Through her character, Bullins offers the feminine experience within the black revolutionary movement of the 1960s. Well received, Bullins with the publication of *Four Dynamite Plays* according to Look (magazine), “is writing what could not have been written before him:
the emotional history of his own era” (book jacket), and produces four of his most interesting and avant-garde works.

It Bees Dat Way

Bullins takes the interactive experience of theatre to the extreme in It Bees Dat Way, for although featuring six black characters, the play or rather interactive performance piece depends heavily on the participation of its audience members. Bullins is specific, however, as to who these audience members should be. According to the script, “Only twenty-five people are allowed into the play during a performance. And these people must be predominantly white” (5). These audience members, unknowingly, become part of the play, for Bullins’ stage directions precede to situate them in the middle of the action: “The people are let in. They are a regular theater audience and they look about for seats, try and distinguish the set from the real things in the room and wait for the play to go on as they uncomfortably stand around and whisper to themselves” (5). Then the main characters—Jackie, Poppy, Outlaw, Trigger, Corny and Sister—drunkards, a prostitute, a junky, and two juvenile delinquents, enter the play space as if they are audience member as well.

The physical interaction between the regular theater audience members and the actors begins with the first line of the play as Jackie (“forty-five. A bleary-eyed, nappy-headed, drunken, black woman)(3) bumps into a white person and ask “Hey...do you know what’s goin’
on?" (5). The black characters in the play converse throughout the play using the slang of the time and profanity, however, this play is more about performance than words. The stage directions provide the real plot and movement of the play, while the words only represent the stereotypical language and subject matter discussed by members of the black underclass. For example, Outlaw's first line in the play is addressed directly "to somebody white", "Hey what's happenin'? What's goin' down?" (6), but the stage directions illustrate how this question should be acted out through more than mere words:

(Whenever one of the ACTORS start a conversation with one the audience THEY take it as far as it can possibly go in vocal and physical action. THEY follow the situation to its most absurd conclusion:

Whichever way the audience goes, the ACTORS go counter to it or with it, whatever is most unlikely and threatening, even into physical abuse: scuffling, rape, strong-arming and beating the audience) (6)

The rest of the action of the play involves the actors addressing the white characters closest to them and making them feel uncomfortable and accosted. Sister offers her services several times to white men "You like ta have a nice time, baby?" (9) while Poppy and Trigger steal an audience member's purse or wallet, Outlaw attempts to "feel" on
one of the white, female audience members and asks “Hey baby..why don’t you let me help you step out of your drawers?”(11).

The play ends as Jackie advises the white audience to leave, “You better get out while you can, folks”, and as the stage directions instruct they are allowed to leave in twos and threes. As they exit the theatre, Corny espouses the most political sentiments of all the characters as he shouts to his fellow actors to cease their attack on the audience members and join the revolution and attack the real enemy—the government itself:

**SHOOT THE PRESIDENT...HE'S CUTTIN' OFF WELFARE AND PUTTIN' PEOPLE OUT OF WORK AND TRYIN' TO DESTROY YOU WITH BIRTH CONTROL PILLS AND WORMS IN YO' WATER...AND SENDIN' YOUR BOY TO VIETNAM!**

**GET YOUR GUN AND JOIN THE REVOLUTION BROTHERS...AND CHANGE, CHANGE, THIS SHIT! ...AND CHANGE THIS SHIT!** (15-16)

Jackie, again, urges the last audience members to “Now be smart and get in the wind” as they exit to chaotic sounds of war or “revolution sounds” as Bullins calls them. The play concludes with Corny realizing that he has survived this attack on both white people and black people, “AIN’T DIS A BITCH, MAN...I’M STILL ALIVE”(16) an uncommon outcome for a black man in the 1960s.
Death List

Death List, Bullins’ most anti-revolutionary play, points out the hypocrisy of many black revolutionaries, and how these persons who claim to be defenders of the black race are really the enemies of their own people. Featuring two characters, simply named Black man and Black Woman,

Death List is Black Woman’s attempt to educate Black Man on what his mission to destroy sixty Negroes really means—genocide, and Black Man’s reminder to Black Woman that she is powerless in this revolution. Bullins symbolizes this by his direction that “(Blackman ignores her [Blackwoman] throughout her speeches and remains preoccupied by his preparations)” (22). Black woman, while aligning herself with the revolution questions Blackman on the revolution’s beliefs and ideals and asks him who made him (or the rest of the revolutionaries) the person who decides who is black or not:

Blackwoman: I believe in revolution. I even go along with terrorist tactics and strategy…But you are preparing to murder more than sixty Black People…or Negroes…whatever you want to call them. (22)

Blackwoman: Who entitled you to designate the enemies of the Black people? Because they don’t fit into your narrow conception of what Black people should be doing and representing. All Black people are Black in one way or
another, brother. Can we afford to lose any? Can we afford to destroy and alienate our own? Will your destroying them unite the Black People? Will it? (34)

Blackman continues to ignore Blackwoman, as she accepts his silence, for she understands her position in the revolution, “But I am a woman...and we women know nothing of revolution and death, or so you tell us, as we stand behind you, dressed in black” (27). However, she does not cease in her arguments against his mission. Instead, she continues in her attempt to dissuade his from his task:

BlackWoman: A brother of poetic nature once said that the metaphor of our times is revolution. Are you a poem of death, my Blackman? How will you feel after murdering your father? His name is on the list. He is a prominent, reactionary Negro who was once a raving militant and radical. (36)

Blackwoman: Are you not the true enemy of Black People? Think hard now. Are you not the white-created demon that we were all warned about? Is it far more than superstition that you accuse me of to say that you are of greatest threat to survival now, in these times? (37)

Although asking valid questions and making important points as to the hypocrisy of her “Black lover/husband/warrior” (26), Blackwoman’s comments are only met by Blackman’s packing and loading of his
arsenal and his scathing comments on persons on his alphabetized death list:

Shirley Chisholm...U.S. Congresswoman, 12th District, New York...You have no male equivalent...Super Tom...Super Nigger woman traitor to the Black nation of America and our Third World brothers and allies...Black people had such hopes for you...you Goldberg lover...and you will not even know why you'll die. (21)

Hugh M. Gloster...President, Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia...one of the first to hip me to Afro-American literature...a man who I respected and admired as a Blackman who had visions to pass on his knowledge to we Black generations who followed him...a man who I once thought was Black...in the best traditions of Black thinking and vision...Hugh M. Gloster...Enemy of the Black People. (24)

John H. Johnson...Publisher, Ebony, Jet, Tan and Black World...You are extremely dangerous and resourceful stooge, Mr. Johnson. Dangerous to Black People and resourceful in acquiring a place at your master's feet, the whiteman. You have poisoned Black People's minds for decades with skin-whitener-straightened-hair-bad-body-odor ads. You have aided niggers in seeking their most
depraved desires...to be second-class slaves! ...with your best-dressed-nigger-of-the-year articles, and your richest-nigger-parasite-of-the-decade features, and your greatest Uncle-Tom-in-Show-Business reporting...You'll have an extravagant funeral, I know. (26)

*Death List* concludes with Blackwoman being left alone by Blackman, and as the stage directions note “(a single shot) Blackness” (38).

**Pig Pen**

Clive Barnes, in his review of *Pig Pen* entitled “Night of Malcolm X's Death is Examined,” begins his evaluation of the play by asserting his ability as a white critic to evaluate Bullins’ work “Mr. Bullins is black and beautiful, but he need not think that he will get any guilt credits on that account. I am prepared to say that a whit man can evaluate his vision”, and sets the tone for the unfavorable review of *Pig Pen* that follows. In summation of his analysis of *Pig Pen*, Barnes attacks the absence of plot, “nothing happens,” and the lack of structure of the play and states, “The play is not one of Mr. Bullins’s best. But, like LeRoy Jones, Mr. Bullins gives me the impression of a man too busy to write best plays. What he offers here is a strangely authentic tape recording of history”(47:1). Barnes does offer a sarcastic attempt at finding a positive in *Pig Pen* as he states “Mr. Bullins’s play is the most meaningful nothing experience—and I intend this as a compliment--of the season.”
Barnes concludes his evaluation of Bullins’s party where nothing really happens, by pointing out the different receptions that white audiences and black audiences will have of the work. He says, “but I consider that whites will find it interesting, and that blacks will note with kind concern what Mr. Bullins has found fit to tell Whitey. This was the night it possibly all broke up [the party shared between liberal whites and educated blacks of the 1960s], and Mr. Bullins tells it with the objectively lowered tone of and indecently well-placed order. Don’t go for fun—but for information

*We Righteous Bombers*

Written by Kingsley B. Bass, suspected to be Ed Bullins, *We Righteous Bombers* returns to Bullins examination of the black revolutionary and his/her struggles both inside and outside of the black revolutionary movement. Set within a prison cell and the offices of a black revolutionary group, *We Righteous Bombers* is told in both the past and present through a series of flashbacks inserted amongst the present experience of black revolutionary bomber, Jackson, awaiting his execution for murdering an actors posing as The Grand Prefect and his wife. Through the flashbacks we learn of Jackson’s association with the black revolutionary experience and, interestingly, his sense of morality that many people including black revolutionaries themselves, believe does not exist. What makes Jackson’s character interesting, however, is that although we learn of his humane side as he clearly
identifies the problem with the revolution, for the revolutionaries actually commit genocide as they attempt to help black America:

Jackson: Harrison, I am ashamed of myself—yet I can’t let you go on. I am ready to shed blood, so as to overthrow the whiteman. But, behind your words, I see the threat of another sort of oppression which, if ever it comes into power, will make of me a murderer—and what I want to be is a righteous Blackman, not a man of blood. (592)

However, we still see him conform to the revolutionary manifesto and throw a bomb, the bomb that kills his own people:

The Revolutionaries: (Together) ...THE OATH: We Righteous Bombers...Righteous in the Grace of the Supreme Black Spirit, Oneness. Allah. We do His bidding so as to liberate the BLACK PEOPLES of the Conscious Universe, of this planet Earth...by any means necessary.
(562)

_We Righteous Bombers_ echoes the subject and theme of echoes all of Bullins’s black revolution examination plays; however, it appears to be an extension of Death List (discussed earlier in this study), especially where the female character is involved. Like Blackwoman in _Death List_, Bonnie of _We Righteous Bombers_ is another sister in the struggle who articulates the true hypocrisy of the black revolutionary movement. As Jackson’s execution time nears, Bonnie takes center
stage and attempts to teach her male counterparts the error of their ways and how Jackson is just as much a victim of black revolutionary thought as the persons whom they kill are victims of their own people's anger:

Bonnie: Why lie, niggers! Why hide behind the Black Revolution when it is your dry, flaking lips that wait to taste blood and bone splinters whether they belong to a Grand Prefect...or a brother. Admit it, weak, selfish, cowardly nigger men...Murder is your last resort. You throwers of paper bombs and exploding bullshit. Your best you lead out into the monster's jaws and then desert him...your best! Jack is nothing. But a poor, scared nigger boy like yourselves...just an unambitious soul brother who scribbled poems...not a Malcolm...or Martin Luther King even...or a LeRoi...just a poor beaten Black boy who should have been busy giving me babies so that he could have someone to listen to his poems. That's all he was...and how he will end is part of the sport of defeat...a martyr to the God of Vengeance...a sacrifice to the God of Assassination...a victim, my poor victim. (611-612)

Bonnie brilliantly preaches to the brothers, but she, like Blackwoman, knows that she is just a woman in the movement and she must follow the rules set by the brothers.
Children’s Dramas

Like Wilson, Bullins has also tried his hand at dramas written for children. *I am Lucy Terry: Historical Fantasy for Young Americans* (1976) and *The Mystery of Phillis Wheatley* (1976) not only found themselves onto the stage, but also received favorable reviews from *New York Times* critics. *I am Lucy Terry*, as the title discloses, examine the life of Lucy Terry (considered to be the first writer of African descent in America) and as suggested by Mel Gussow, the relationship between enslaved, colonial African Americans and Native Americans. Bullins, according to Gussow’s review of the play, does a good job of teaching the “young audience” about this important person in African American history, but thinks that because Bullins clearly appreciates and applauds her contributions as “an original American pioneer, freedom fighter and revolutionary” he creates a character that is too perfect and “casts her in a halo”. For Gussow this over creation of Terry’s character is advantageous for the audience because Bullins offers them a new piece of African American history, but artistically Gussow contends that Bullins’ enthusiasm for Terry’s character thwarted his usual talent for language and “restrict[ed] the playwright’s natural gift for realistic dialogue and for expansive humor”.

Gussow also reviewed Bullins’s *The Mystery of Phillis Wheatley*. In this play, just as in *I am Lucy Terry*, Bullins highlights the life an African American historical figure; however, in this work he takes a
more critical approach to the character herself. Bullins presents the
truths about Wheatley, the literary shero of African American culture,
but he also casts her as one who loses a piece of herself as she becomes
a published poet. According to Gussow, Bullins creates this work for
children, and he "does not lose sight of his young audience, " as he
indicts Wheatley. However, the adult audience will discern that Bullins
regards Wheatley as many African American critics as a "sell out" to
her culture:

But Mr. Bullins sees Phillis Wheately as a much more
complex person. From his iconoclastic point of view, she
was unfaithful to her roots, a black African who learned to
write verse "like a gentle Englishwoman." Manipulated by
white values and aspirations, she abandons her people and
becomes something of the Jack Johnson of poets. (42:3)

Continuing his adherence to black pride and black power, it
comes as no surprise that Bullins take this stance in The Mystery of
Phillis Wheatley. It is interesting that he brings this element of truth to
his children's dramas while so many other dramatists, as Gussow
suggests, use drama to merely entertain their young audiences. As
Bullins does with his entire dramaturgy, "his approach" to The Mystery
of Phillis Wheatley both "is serious and thoughtful". He does not talk
down to his youthful audience, but as in all of his plays he challenges
his audience to learn something from his work.
The only negative concern expressed by Gussow about the play was the "shorthand" approach to Wheatley's work and life, but that does not destroy the merits of the drama. Instead, for Gussow, it adds to the "mystery" of Wheatley and makes him—the audience—want to know more about her life (42:1).

Recent Works

Although he has never stopped writing, Bullins's name resurfaces in the *New York Times theater* section again in the 1990s. His 1991 production of Salaam, Huey Newton, Salaam brings Bullins back into the critical eye. In this work Bullins returns to his revolutionary roots through an examination of the post-black revolutionary period in America. Through the titular character, Huey Newton, former leader of the Black Panther Party and revolutionary leader, Bullins offers insight into the whats of hows of the demise of the black revolution and its leaders. Mel Gussow praises Bullins for the "street knowledge and authenticity" of the work. However, he notes like several of Bullins's earlier works the play lacks a definitive shape.

In 1997 Bullins's play *Boy X Man* (the x means times as in a multiplication equation), earned him a review by Times critic Anita Gates. In this work Bullins continues his examination of the black family. Again, through flashbacks, Bullins creates a story that focuses on three members of a family straining to maintain some since of order to their lives in the midst of unpleasant memories. In her review
entitled "A Family Ever on the Verge of Emotion", Gates praises
Bullins’s language calling it "down-home poetry". Gates, like several
of Bullins’s earlier Times reviewers, even notes the universal quality of
his work as she states of the dialogue and theme of the play that
"[p]lenty of families, black and white, in parts of this country still know
that 'Don’t let the cooties bite' has to be singsong, not serious advice,
and 'It's just not right' is rarely a thoughtful comment" (C16:4).

Although Bullins has challenged the theatrical work in his choice
of subject matter, themes, and depictions of life—both black and
white—he from an analysis of his reviews appears to have earned a
solid and appreciated footing within African and African American
theatre. His choice of audience may have not been a nail in his coffin as
some critics and reader/viewers of his work may have thought. Instead,
it appears to have served as a point of reference for Bullins, the
playwright, to situate himself as a dramatist. In this manner, he does
not fall into the quandary discussed by Johnson that some many African
American writers have fallen into. Bullins, from the beginning has
taken up his pen in order uncover the life of the African American
others—the black underclass—and it appears that even at this writing
this is world that he continues to present on the stage. Hence, Bullins
answers the question of how should the African American be presented
on stage through his Lockanian presentations of the urban, African
American everyman. In response to the question to whom should
African American theatre be addressed Bullins's work appears to state, in the 1960s and 1970s a black audience; today, anyone who wants to know about the other side of the African American story.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION: SAME SUBJECT, DIFFERENT AUDIENCE

To compare the presentations of the now famous August Wilson and the then infamous Ed Bullins may seem like an unbalanced comparison. Yet, upon closer analysis the works of these two playwrights the reader/viewer should understand the influence of audience selection upon the way an artist/playwright presents and creates his work. In the cases of Wilson and Bullins, it is obvious that both of these men feel compelled to write about the African American culture; yet their differing representations of this same culture could lead readers/viewers to question whether this is truly the same culture? Are these the same people? The answer to these questions is yes, and what Wilson and Bullins have done is chosen to depict different classes of this sub-culture of American society. However, the choice is not only fueled by artistic choice or preference, but it is also based upon the audience(s) to which each playwright wishes to focus his work.

In the case of Bullins whose many works contain the declarative stage direction “The people in this play are black,” there is an undoubted or challenged focus as to whom his plays are to depict and written. Bullins writes within the Du Boisian-Barakanian call for a theatre for, by and about black people, or as Lance Jeffers offers, Bullins writes “like Elder and Baraka, [he] simply sets the white man aside and writes honestly of black reality”(33) or at least one facet of black reality, for as the reader/viewer knows there is not one simple
formula for black life. In making the choice to write about black life in this crude fashion, Bullins chooses to alienate a white or mainstream audience in favor of a one filled with persons who have both a melanin and cultural connection to his work. Bullins's black underclass and its reality inhabit a world that many persons—black or white—wish to ignore, forget, or believe does not exist, but that has not stopped him from presenting its stories and holding them up for others like them and any other interested party to view. He practices the preachings of Locke and Baraka as he depicts black life as it is, as well as Du Bois's contention that it be presented for his own people. Moreover, Bullins's works and characters live up to the responsibility that Jeffers argues is the "responsibility of the black writer to depict and analyze every aspect of black life—the lives of the pimps and prostitutes, of black saints like Malcolm and Tubman and Carver, the lives of the upper reaches of the black bourgeoisie" (Jeffers 33).

By presenting black life in this manner, Bullins summons an audience of African Americans who are curious about the various personalities of the culture and who wish to be enlightened as to how the "other black folks" really live. For non-African American persons his work serves as both an examination into and an indictment of the world that these African Americans have created for themselves because of their self-imposed fear of white America. The alcoholism, drug abuse, aborted educational attempts, and infidelity are all
repercussions of living in the black underclass without the financial means or psychological self-preservation needed to escape being pulled back into the world of "niggers." Bullins's *The Fabulous Miss Marie* is an example of these repercussions, for although Marie and Bill live in middle-class lifestyle, their continuous partying and adulterous ways would not sit well in the eyes of the members of the true black bourgeoisie. They, like their neighbors and friends in Bullins black underclass, aspire toward the top, but they will never quite get there because as Marie and Bill's motto says:

> Bill brings home two hundred seventy-five stone cold dollars a week...to me, Miss Marie...and puts it in my hand. And the tips he makes parkin' cars out to the studio in Beverly Hills is more than that. We make almost as much as some colored doctors make...'n we spend it too. 'Cause its party time every day at Miss Marie's house. (Bullins 67)

Moreover, as Don Evans points out Bullins's theatre "is the theater of confrontation." It is this confrontation that makes the audience members of a Bullins play—both black and white—uncomfortable and remain uncomfortable even after the dramatic experience. Evans discusses the effects of Bullins's disconcerting experience best as he notes while Bullins has been accused of perpetuating negative images of the black experience, he has really been unveiling that ugly reality of
the black underclass experience in hopes that someone, somewhere, will begin to heal from recognizing himself/herself on the stage:

Ed Bullins has often been accused of being negative, of fostering negative images of Black people. His characters are men and women who don’t make it, who drift through life using and abusing each other. The unerring honesty of his realistic style makes it impossible for the ugliness of their activities to be obscured or for the viewer to be comfortable. The final act of an Ed Bullins play always takes place after the fact, after the play is over and the audience has separated into individuals who must deal with their collective fate. It is over when we have dealt with ourselves and the characters and found the distasteful elements in both. (16)

Although Bullins, like a skilled psychologist, forces his audience members to face themselves through non-upstanding characters, plots, language, and actions, he is deemed a pariah by many in the theatrical world. But as his prolific dramaturgy and his continuing affiliation with theatre prove (he is presently at Northeastern University in Boston, MA), Bullins is as Evans calls him, “an old street fighter”(19) who has fought himself into the pages of African American and American theater history.
Conversely, Wilson’s audience choice comes from a keen and learned understanding of the economic side of theatre. Initially like most playwrights, Wilson appeared to have written art for art’s sake. Granted not as revolutionary as Bulins or Baraka, and by his own choice, Wilson’s initial works were (and still are) written according to the guidelines of the godfathers of African American theatre—Locke and Du Bois. However, it was with Wilson’s acceptance into the O’Neill Playwrights workshop and his theatrical apprenticeship with Lloyd Richards that Wilson’s playwrighting began to encompass the oldest teaching of any composition course, know your audience. As he learned to understand to whom his work should be directed to earn positive critical response and success, Wilson’s talent for writing universal characters and themes emerged even more and resulted in offering his audience a picture of African American life devoid of extreme stereotypes or indictments of white America too powerful to brand him as a threatening playwright. Instead, what has emerged are works that find themselves to the Broadway stage, local and regional theatre houses, television (The Piano Lesson), and optioned for film (Fences).

However, in the midst of Wilson’s success, both critically and historically, he remains a controversial figure in American theatre and film. When asked by about the still unfilmed Fences, Wilson still holds fast to his position that the film should be made by a black director:
Ifill: You’ve been described as a man on a mission, and we can go in a million different directions with that. But one is that your play “Fences”—one of your best-known plays—has been in search of a film outlet for, what 15 years now?

August Wilson: Mm-hmm.

Gwen Ifill: Because you want a black director.

August Wilson: Yes.

Gwen Ifill: Explain why that’s important and where it stands now.

August Wilson: Well, you know, I think, it’s important that you have a black director because “Schindler’s List” had a Jewish director, because “The Godfather” had an Italian director, you know. I think when you have a work of art that deals with a culture that’s so seminal through black American culture, that you just simply have black sensibility behind the artistic development of the project.

Audience, as the African American writer has probably always known, has been an issue that has plagued his/her writing for centuries. Going back to the African American colonial writers, Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley, or even their predecessors, those “black and unknown bards” as James Weldon Johnson calls the anonymous writers of the Negro spirituals, the African American writer
has always known that he/she must write in what can be considered a version of the "master's text”—that language that the slaves were forced to learn in order to survive in North America. Because of the historical nature of this plague, it as Johnson suggests in 1928 and as C.W.E. Bigsby recognizes in the chapter "Black Theatre" has always been a theatre of accommodation to white audiences:

A principal problem for the black writer in America has always been the nature of audience. For a long while the simple facts of literacy, the economics of publishing, the realities of the theatre business ensured that the audience would be predominantly white. As a consequence, the black writer had to make certain adjustments, accommodations. It was not the white ego that had necessarily to be flattered but that certain forms, styles, treatments and characters had a life sanctioned as much by literary and dramatic tradition as by social reality. (Bigsby 390)

That is until the 1960s with the founding of black repertory theatre companies and when LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Ed Bullins entered the theatrical world began to focus black theatre toward a black audience. As discussed by Bigsby, performance was the mechanism that was able to help the move from black theatre written in the "forms, styles [and] treatments" of white theatre to those for black audiences because of its
inherent connection to African American culture and because it allowed the important issue of literary or rather illiteracy to be hurdled:

Performance, in a broad sense, had always been an important element in the black community—from the communal experiences in the store-front churches through to the dance halls. If there was no tradition of theatre-going [in the black community] there was a strong sense of community (partly because of the external pressure of discrimination) which the writer and black drama group could appeal to. (391-92)

What Bullins and Wilson have both done is present the black American experience on the American stage; however, the specific audiences to whom their work has been geared is what separates these two phenomenal playwrights. With more similarities than differences, their work and their vision seems to be same—to share the stories of African American culture. Yet, the manner in which these playwrights present their work and the critical responses to their work is what makes them different. While Wilson writes as black nationalist and politics like a cultural activist, he still writes for a mainstream audience.

Conversely, Bullins began writing as black nationalist, politicking as a cultural activist, and writes for a black audience. Yes, mainstream audiences, particularly critics, viewed his work and found
artistic merit in it; however, Bullins, in both his and their visions, has remained in the black. Thus, of the two he appears to be the more self-representative artist. Instead of compromising his artistic vision for success, he has demanded that those critics—African and African American—evaluate his work on his terms, not their own. He appears to reflect Locke's suggestion that "Negro theatre" will only evolve once its dramatists reflect and utilize those things culturally relevant to him. In doing so, he, along with Baraka's guidance, has been able to help transform theatre from a mere sub-strata of American theatre into a definite extension of American theatre. His dramaturgy has challenged critics and theatre patrons to witness black life through a set of black lenses without the presence of any tinting, and to seek the message that this perspective can offer to the American stage. Bullins's unyielding approach to drama proves that the artist can be in control of his medium, even to his own detriment; and although the audience is important, the audience must, at times, surrender to the vision of the artist.

Again as Johnson concluded, the African American artist has always struggled with the problem of the "double audience". This problem, like the "two warring souls" this person has experienced because of his ethnicity, has become an inherent part of his character, his psyche, and ultimately determines his level of acceptance within American culture. Until the dramatist, can honestly ignore the power of
the audience, he can never be in control of his medium. As this study has attempted to show, even dramatists as popular as Wilson and prolific as Bullins, as dogmatic as Wilson and political of Bullins, and as culturally aligned as both Wilson and Bullins claim to be to the African American race and the importance of sharing its stories, even these dramatists have to succumb to and/or be judged by the audience, the mainstream audience. Ultimately, it is this audience that determines how these dramatists will be remembered in the histories of American drama. Thus, the Negro artist still in the new millennium remains choiceless, even in the midst of his success.
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