

THESIS

THERE AIN'T NO PLANTATIONS IN PITTSBURGH: GLIMPSES OF THE
AFRICAN DIASPORA IN THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON

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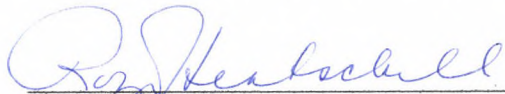
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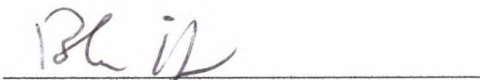
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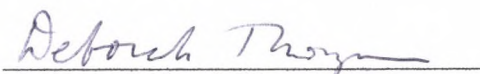
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
OUR SUPERVISION BY BRIAN J. HULL ENTITLED THERE AIN'T NO
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THERE AIN'T NO PLANTATIONS IN PITTSBURGH: GLIMPSES OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON

“There Ain’t no Plantations in Pittsburgh” addresses questions of African identity versus European identity for African Americans as addressed by the plays of August Wilson. Whereas characters who embrace an African ethos in Wilson’s plays are prominent, they are not necessarily more enlightened than their apparently less African counterparts. Instead of resorting to overly simplistic formulas for black liberation, Wilson, in plays like *Seven Guitars*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *Two Trains Running*, depicts the complex psychological landscape of twentieth century America where African roots prove elusive and the “names of the gods have been forgotten.” In Wilson’s dramaturgy echoes of the brutal history of slavery and the Middle Passage coincide with the burgeoning possibilities of renewed dignity and a distinctive African American voice. History constantly interacts with the present and cannot be seen as finished or insignificant but instead is a vital part of an ever evolving reality where the past must be confronted to make room for the future.

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Chapter I: Wilson's Hedley and the 20th Century Slave Master

In many ways, King Hedley, in Wilson's *Seven Guitars*, embodies the very ethos that August Wilson seems to admire as a thinker and advocate of American blacks rediscovering their Africanness. Of all the characters in the play, King Hedley is the most overtly connected with Africanness. He champions Marcus Garvey, one of the premier apostles of Black Nationalism, and derives personal pride from triumphant black military figures like the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture. He is attuned to blood ritual and represents a shamanistic character typical of August Wilson plays (Murphy 126-127). However, Hedley, from the play's outset, proves to be anything but easy to characterize. The line between unpredictable mystical shaman and pathological madman wears precariously thin and by the end of the play madness seems to prevail over ancestrally-inspired wisdom. In short, the reader of *Seven Guitars* confronts something of an interpretive conundrum.

If Wilson interviews can be trusted and his sincere encouragement of African Americans to embrace their roots can be taken at face value, what did Wilson have in mind when creating King Hedley's enigmatic character? Though he is arguably the play's most "African character," he is simultaneously misguided and out of touch with the ongoing evolution of African-American culture. Similarly, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the musician Toledo demonstrates a cultural literacy and intellectual grasp of African carryovers of which his peers seem willfully oblivious. In the end, however, it is Toledo who falls prey to the knife of the trumpeter Levee, a victim of his own unwanted eloquence. Conversely, deracinated and shiftless characters like Sterling in *Two Trains Running* or Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* turn out to discover the keys to their own liberation. A commonality binding all of these characters is a history of victimization and violent oppression. Beyond that, Wilson

refuses the temptation of any prescriptive roadmap for black liberation. Any would-be reductive equations fail to provide insight into the inherently complex challenges of recovering a viable selfhood in the aftermath of the dehumanizing slavery and the subsequent humiliation of Jim Crow apartheid. Just as African-derived self-knowledge falls short of providing a panacea for Wilson's characters, similarly, attempts at indiscriminate assimilation into a European-derived culture prove foredoomed to failure. It is my contention that Wilson wished to demonstrate, by referencing pervasive pitfalls of oppressed and colonized peoples, that neither striving to maintain the old paradigm nor fully embracing imposed cultural mores would prove sufficient. If tradition is valued in Wilson's oeuvre, it is not a static tradition of ossified givens but an ever-evolving tradition in which new truths must be sweated, bled and forged into being to adapt to the shifting realities confronting the African Diaspora.

In many of Wilson's plays, musicians and spiritual seekers are given the consequential role of carrying folklore and collective memory into a changing landscape. They operate in the nexus where syntheses take place. Constantly deprived of steady ground or reliable foundations, their discoveries take place in marginalized spaces and the interstices of culture, where men and women severed from their heritage risk psychological and spiritual dissolution in order to break through to new ways of being. These seekers and bearers of tradition operate in a new landscape that is neither entirely African nor entirely American. Relying wholly on one or the other without self-knowledge of how their disparate roots intertwine can leave devastating gaps in their consciousness. Similarly, the specters of slavery have left psychological wounds that more often than not have festered rather than healed over time. Despite the fact that slavery has been abolished in the twentieth-century that Wilson depicts, the internalization of the slave master's deprecating voice stubbornly persists. It

resonates across generations, breaking families apart and often turning blacks against themselves. In fact, an inferiority complex has become so internalized that, as the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon explained, an “epidermization” of inferiority has occurred. Fanon contends that the black man, whether in colonial Africa or immersed in American bigotry, has been beaten down to the point where he yearns to become white.¹ This internalized inferiority haunts Wilson’s characters and lies at the heart of many of their miscalculations and tragedies.

In the case of King Hedley from *Seven Guitars*, the perceived threat of the white man provides a nagging source of anxiety. Throughout the play Hedley’s negligence towards his declining health accentuates his inherent mistrust of everything white. Louise, his landlord, urges him to seek medical help and be tested for tuberculosis. Hedley responds that he’s been seeing Miss Sarah, a traditional healer, who cures patients through root teas and powders. Later in Act two when he receives a board of health letter asking him to go to a TB sanitarium Hedley refuses. Louise denounces his refusal as another example of his “plot-against-the-black-man-stuff” (77). As Wilson’s cast of characters bemoans his passing up an opportunity to be healed, the young guitarist Floyd stands up for Hedley emphasizing that he doesn’t trust the system. In the historical context of the play set in 1948, Hedley’s distrust is not unfounded. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, which took place between 1932 and 1972, provides a poignant example of how black men in the 1940’s could harbor legitimate grievances against their mistreatment in the hands of American medical professionals. The clinical study recruited impoverished African American sharecroppers infected with syphilis for research relevant “to the natural progression

¹ It is worth mentioning that this reduction of African Americans to the “black man” results in a consistent omission of women from the race relations discussion. The impact of this omission creates an essentializing of blackness that emphasizes masculinity and male perspectives. This tendency is both problematic and beyond the scope of this thesis to adequately address.

of the untreated disease” (CDC Tuskegee). Even after penicillin was validated in the 1940’s as an effective cure for the disease, information and the drug were both withheld from test subjects. Participants were denied access to other treatment programs and often died from the unchecked disease. In light of this heinous contemporaneous example, Hedley’s “plot-against-the-black-man” tendency does not seem paranoid but rather a legitimate wariness that typifies those in the know about mistreatment or shoddy healthcare.

However, Wilson does not provide sufficient clues as to what specifically motivates Hedley’s fears to go beyond mere speculation. Are his fears well founded or is he rather consumed by a generalized paranoia brought on by a lifetime of oppression? The question deserves further attention, but first I would like to consider Hedley’s dual persona and the ways that Wilson suggests that his character has internalized a value system that is totally at odds with the Black Nationalist agenda Hedley ostensibly admires.

Towards the end of Act One, a rooster is crowing in the neighbor’s yard. Floyd, a blues guitarist who has gained renown through a hit recording, claims that he would like to shoot the rooster if he had a BB gun. Canewell uses the occasion to deliver a folkloric monologue in which he recounts the different types of roosters whose traits vary according to which Southern state they come from. The descriptions are clearly anthropomorphic references to Southern black men. Canewell claims that the crowing rooster in question is an Alabama rooster known to “fall in love with the way he sound and want to crow about everything” (60). Such a rooster, according to Canewell, just confuses people and only serves for making stew. For obvious reasons, Floyd, a blues crooner himself, rejects the depiction of a rooster in love with his own voice. Hedley goes on to explain that the rooster is the “king of the barnyard” and

royalty like the black man. However, Hedley's overt words of praise for the black man's regal nature prove radically incongruous with his actions as he subsequently steps out of the yard, retrieves the rooster, whom Wilson has clearly established as a trope for the black man, and sacrifices it in an impromptu blood ceremony. Before drawing his blade across the rooster's neck, Hedley explains that "God ain't making no more niggers" and that "this rooster too good live for your black asses." The passage is rife with references to the black male stereotype as pathologically libidinous. If it were not for the warning provided by the rooster's early morning crow, the black man could not avoid being caught in the inevitable act of promiscuity. Thus, in a sudden and violent reversal, Hedley's characterization of being African-American shifts unaccountably from the self-aggrandizing language of royalty to the self-deprecating language of the oppressor. The result is unsettling, to say the least.

Wilson's portrayal of a dual nature in the African-American consciousness invokes a theme that has preoccupied many black thinkers of the 20th century. The activist and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois saw black modernism as essentially characterized by this very doubling and dichotomy. As such, Du Bois argued that the duality imposed by attempting to be both African and American, which he referred to as a "double consciousness," provoked a debilitating internal conflict. In the article "August Wilson, Doubling Madness and Modern African-American Drama," Harry J. Elam says "this double consciousness is a form of racial madness that has a direct impact on modern African-American cultural production" (613). Elam explains that this specifically African-American madness defines itself in terms of dichotomy, "ruptures and loss, inclusion and exclusion," in short a "maddening experience." Though the conditions that have provoked madness have been ubiquitous for African Americans, Elam insists on the marginalized and idiosyncratic nature of Wilson's mad

characters, of which Hedley is included. Rather than portraying these characters as manifesting extreme symptoms of an extreme oppression, Elam suggests that they “exemplify subjectivity and interiority run amok” (615). As such, these characters are anomalies that exist on the “periphery of their plays’ central conflicts.” He also seems to point towards a particularly African-American “racial madness,” despite the fact that many of the conditions of oppression that marked America’s history also characterized the colonized world.

Though I agree with Elam that ruptures such as the Middle Passage and the slave trade have differentiated the African-American experience, I would argue that many broader colonial parallels can be drawn, thereby inviting a more inclusive and transnational discussion. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon posits the notion that the colonizer and the colonized are derivative of the master/slave relationship. Rather than defining colonialism as disparate from slavery, Fanon argues for the two institutions’ parity. As such, for Fanon colonialism is merely another stage of slavery (Bulhan, 116). The internal duality that plagues characters like Hedley can find its origination in the very external duality Fanon saw at the heart of the colonial world:

The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of niggers and dirty Arabs. The look that the native turns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession--all manner of possession: to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, ‘They want to take our place.’ It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place. (39)

The envy that permeates Fanon’s colonized man similarly defines Wilson’s King Hedley. His most cherished hope rests upon a delusional fantasy that the New Orleans trumpeter Buddy Bolden will bring him his father’s money and that in turn he

will become a “big man” and a plantation owner. No sooner does Hedley make these bold proclamations than his landlord Louise dismisses him offhandedly: “There ain’t no plantations in Pittsburgh, fool!” (24) The reader of Wilson could similarly be tempted to relegate Hedley’s fantasy to the incoherent ramblings of a madman, but doing so would gloss over the profound psychological implications of Hedley’s condition. When it comes to hope for the black man’s eventual indemnification, Hedley places the lion’s share of his faith in the bible and the notion drawn from scripture that “every abomination shall be brought low.” The fact that Hedley invokes Christian ideology rather than the Black Nationalist movement, in justifying his hopes, is revealing. Essentially, Hedley’s notion of liberation defines itself through the very power relations that characterized black enslavement by Europeans. While Elam portrays this aspect of Hedley’s vision as essentially ironic, the dynamics of oppression, as defined by Fanon, suggest something more complex. Most likely the son of an ex-slave, Hedley has an understanding of power relations, which, while disturbing, resonates as consistent with the power/knowledge framework of his background. In his debut book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon describes the dual disasters provoked by the perpetual conflict between oppressed and oppressor. For Fanon, the white man’s disaster originates from his having killed. The black man’s disaster derives from the fact that he was once enslaved (115, Bulhan). Faced with a society where whites masquerade as demigods, the black man “wants to become white or, this wish frustrated, reacts with envious resentment” (115). Fanon refers to this rigid dichotomy between white and black as a Manichean opposition in which different races are seen as different species. In such a world, the implicit superiority complex of whites and the inferiority complex of blacks insidiously permeate all relations between the two sides. “The white master imposed his language and culture

on the black slave. The latter subsequently strove to adopt the master's diction, outlook and behavior" (115). In such an scenario, Hedley's framing of ultimate liberation in the very lexicon of the white slave master can be seen, not merely as irony, but as a foreseeable symptom of prolonged exposure to institutionalized violence.

An experiment, which repatriated ex-American slaves to the African nation of Liberia beginning in 1822, serves to illustrate how historically these psychological dynamics have played out in nearly identical fashion. I would argue that this lesser-known chapter of African-American history serves to validate Wilson's depiction of the plantation-obsessed Hedley, not as the fanciful play of abstractions but as the outgrowth of verifiable psychological phenomena that former slaves embodied. As their unlikely return to Africa illustrates, these former slaves had been so thoroughly inculcated by the denigrating process of slavery that the modern African American ideal of embracing their Africanness was as remote as it was inconceivable. Hedley, although raised a century later, represents a character plagued by similar traumas incurred during his upbringing in a racist society. The principal difference being that in Hedley's lifetime historical figures like Marcus Garvey and Toussaint L'Ouverture had offered him glimpses of a more uplifted vision of African American selfhood.

In 1822 the American Colonization Society founded the nation of Liberia. By 1900 its population consisted of about 15,000 black immigrants from America, principally freed slaves (American Colonization Society). Initially, the Liberian settlements were regulated by white American governors, who were in turn managed by authorities in Washington D.C. However, by the 1840's this system fell into decline. As white governors faced high death rates, it became increasingly clear that the management of Liberia would be "left to the Liberians themselves" (A.C.S.).

Liberia declared independence in 1847. At that time African-American settlers took on the roles of the legislative and judiciary officials analogous to the way French and British settlers governed their respective African territories. The Nigerian historian M.B. Akpan explains that the settlers who governed Liberia were essentially American rather than African in their “outlook and orientation” (219). They maintained strong sentimental bonds to America, which they considered their “native land.” This attachment manifested itself in every aspect of the settler’s demeanor. However unsuitable to Liberia’s tropical climate Western dress might have been, the settlers insisted on dressing as such. The men wore long black silk frock coats and women dressed in silk “Victorian” gowns (Johnston). They constructed homes with stone or brick porticoes that resembled those of plantation owners in the American South. Similarly, they shunned typical African food staples like cassava, plantains and yams and preferred American foods like flour, cornmeal, butter, pickled beef and bacon. “They were Christians, spoke English as their ‘mother tongue,’ and praised monogamy” (219). Their conceptions of land ownership being held individually as opposed to communally contrasted with African tradition. Similarly, their government was modeled after the American system. Despite the color of their skin, these Liberian settlers were equally foreign and devoid of “sentimental attachment to Africa as were European colonists everywhere in Africa...” (219).

Once established in Monrovia, the settlers set out to increase their “sphere of influence” in the region by trading, evangelizing and purchasing land from the nearby African chiefs (A.C.S. Twenty-third Annual Report). Governors and leading settlers nurtured hope that territorial expansion could foster a great, “civilized” nation that would in turn “diffuse ‘light’ and ‘knowledge’ over the ‘barbarism’ and ‘paganism’ of Africa” (A.C.S. Tenth Annual Report). Much in the same way as European powers in

Africa, the settlers obtained land through their purchasing power with European trade goods often of dubious worth, and also through voluntary cession of land, by tribes seeking protection. Lastly, land was acquired by forceful acquisition achieved with the aid of American naval officers (225). Relations between Africans and settlers were characterized by the same superiority complex by which Fanon defines relations between colonizers and colonized. The settlers looked disparagingly at the scanty clothing typical of many African tribes. Their semi-nude attire earned them the moniker of “untutored savages” (Jones). Similarly, in the same way that Europeans in the Americas disdained African-derived spirituality such as voodoo, Akpan points out that the Liberian settlers stigmatized local African religions as paganism and heathen idolatry. As such, marriage between colonists and any local tribes “was considered exceedingly disreputable” and was met with contempt (Archibald). During the early 1830’s, “at least one colonist openly maintained that the Africans ought to be slaves” (Repository X).

Hedley’s insistence that he wants to be a “big man” who will buy a “big plantation” suggests that he, like these Liberian settlers, had interiorized the white man’s system of values and cultural norms (24). But what is to be made of Hedley’s outward show of solidarity with the black man’s suffering and his acknowledgement that “Hedley know the white man walk the earth on the black man’s back” (40)? From Fanon’s perspective the answer could be in part traced to the splintered nature of the oppressed psyche. Because oppressed peoples have to live with the constant fear of death and simultaneously under narrow and repressive rules of conduct, they are forced to use coping mechanisms that require both repression and constant adaptability. This complex play of repression and subjection to omnipresent evaluation by controlling authority figures necessitates the wearing of a variety of

masks (Bulhan 123). “They develop skills to detect the moods and wishes of those in authority, learn to present acceptable public behaviors while repressing many incongruent private feelings, and refine strategies for passive-aggressive behavior” (123). The result of this pattern inevitably exacts an enormous psychological toll and increases the likelihood of psychopathological illness. With an individual who manages to subjugate outward appearances, these “incongruent private feelings” can be held at bay, whereas in the case of Hedley one clearly sees a man no longer able to rein in the incompatibilities of his dual self. His sudden violent sacrifice of a rooster, an animal that had just been referred to in decidedly anthropomorphic terms, at the end of Scene 1, seems to suggest that he has reached a certain threshold where his capacities for coping have been pushed too far. As a result, when, during Act Two, Scene Two, Hedley begins warning Floyd that the white man has singled him out for his excellence and that his life hangs in a tenuous balance, as a sort of marked man, one cannot help but wonder whether it is Hedley the Black Nationalist who is speaking, or rather the Hedley who suffers from an inferiority complex and a burning desire to lay claim to the white man’s power. As Hedley consistently invokes the heroes of black resistance such Toussaint L’Ouverture and Marcus Garvey, one senses that in any case it is the site of earlier victories over white oppression that informs his *raison d’être*.

If it is power of the white man that Hedley craves desperately, it is also that same power that he distrusts and fears. After his landlord Louise informs health authorities that Hedley is sick with tuberculosis, a letter arrives in the mail summoning him to a sanatorium. Hedley refuses, violently crumpling the letter in front of Louise’s face. He then recounts the story of his own impoverished father, a stableman for a white doctor and a shoemaker. Hedley describes him as having been so poor that he

walked “with nothing but the tops of his shoes” (76). Falling sick one day, his mother had called for the doctor, Hedley’s employer. Unconcerned, the doctor arrived three days later. Hedley’s father had been dead for two days. The racist implications of his father’s treatment embittered Hedley with a gut-wrenching irony: he had been a shoeless laborer working for a shoemaker, a neglected patient working for a doctor. As Hedley grinds the letter from the board of health into the sand he shouts, “It is a plot against the black man! Hedley don’t go nowhere!” (76) At the conclusion of Act Two, Scene Four, Hedley, in a particularly exuberant mood, reveals that he’s gotten himself a machete which he plans on using when the “white man comes to take him away” (87). Ironically this weapon, emblematic of a Caribbean plantation, is eventually employed not against the white man but in striking down the blues musician Floyd.

At this point, it is worthwhile to consider Wilson’s choice of prominently invoking the presence of the historical jazz musician and “King” Buddy Bolden. In fact, King Hedley’s name derives from his father’s admiration and obsession with the former New Orleans cornet player, who had earned a rare title of royalty in an era when African Americans had only recently been freed from slavery. Furthermore, throughout the play Hedley and Floyd banter back and forth about the precise lyrics of the song “Buddy Bolden Blues.” Floyd claims that the lyrics are phrased that Buddy Bolden should, “Wake up and give me the money.” Hedley counters that the line is phrased, “Come here, here go the money” (70). This seemingly insignificant quarrel foreshadows the more pernicious envy that will eventually result in Floyd’s death by Hedley’s hands.

The inclusion of Buddy Bolden is consistent with Wilson’s thematic palette as music plays a central role in many of Wilson’s plays. Paul Carter Harrison, in his

“Afterword” to *Three Plays*, describes the playwright as a chronicler of the Afro-American ethos who, like the “Black Arts Movement” of 1968, sought “to speak directly to the needs and aspirations of Black Americans” (298). Musical traditions like blues, jazz and gospel are considered for their specific contributions to spiritual illumination. Similarly vernacular traditions like signifying, boasts, the dozens etc. are not denigrated but embraced as edifying components of the “blues matrix” and the African American ethos (299). While African American music has provided a haven of inexplicable healing and community, its musicians have often proved extraordinarily vulnerable to the contingencies of a precarious existence. If the African American experience has been a tumultuous and turbulent passage, its musicians have been lightning rods fully exposed to the brunt of the storm. King Buddy Bolden, the namesake for King Hedley, was no exception.

In light of the fact that Bolden spent the greater part of his adult life confined to a mental institution, Hedley’s association with the New Orleans jazzman and his own mental dissolution cannot be regarded as mere coincidence. Wilson was not just namedropping or adding a needless flourish to his theatrical canvas but instead was pointing towards the essential roots of Hedley’s character. Both Hedley and his namesake represent tragic examples of a downtrodden African Diaspora. As a turn of the century black New Orleans community exalted Bolden with a royal moniker, he rose onto a pedestal of collective African American hope. Like so many African American jazz musicians to follow, such as Charlie Parker and Bud Powell, Bolden’s meteoric rise to fame was only matched by his Icarus-esque plummet into the abyss of substance abuse and madness. Between the years 1900-1906, Bolden was the undisputed superstar of New Orleans black musicians. His glory was not to last. “By 1907, though he was not yet thirty years old, his music career, and for all practical

purposes his life, was over” (Marquis xv). Despite the ephemeral nature of his career, in an era that predated widespread phonographic recordings, Bolden’s story lived on as one of New Orleans’ most lasting legends of jazz. Whereas Louis Armstrong would eventually bring the sound of the New Orleans cornet to a worldwide audience, Bolden was restricted by an era in which a wider public was as of yet unwilling to embrace the boisterous, unrestrained sounds called jazz (xvi). His limitations were not self-imposed but rather the result of a stratified society in which mobility between the worlds of the black, Creole and the white upper class were extremely limited. This same lack of social mobility characterized Hedley’s father’s life as a stableman in the South working for wealthy white men. His admiration for Bolden likely stemmed in part from the fact that the jazzman was able to carve out his own niche, regardless of white society’s approval. Since Bolden’s music was snubbed by high society white New Orleans, he opted for a different kingdom, a black one where he played “the dances, the picnic grounds, the parks, the streets, the barrel houses” (xvi).

Similar to Floyd in *Seven Guitars*, Bolden’s musical career was beset with uncertainties, professional and otherwise. Wilson portrays the fictional Floyd as having succeeded in recording a hit blues song “That’s All Right.” However, like many black blues musicians of the era, Floyd is misled and exploited. Instead of being paid royalties for each record sold, Floyd allows white, big city studio owners to swindle him into getting paid one time fees and then subsequently reap the benefits of his talent as record sales mount. Though the history of the early 20th century jazz scene in New Orleans was not documented properly until thirty years after Bolden’s career had ended, one can presume that the livelihoods of black musicians of his era were even more precarious. Because a wider audience largely rejected the music, avenues towards larger material success were routinely closed to jazz musicians. The

glory days of jazz's early years were short lived and after the Great Depression many jazz musicians in New Orleans were forced to make their living principally as laborers. Legendary local musicians like Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet left seeking greener pastures. Another "king" of New Orleans fame, King Joe Oliver, brought droves of Chicago fans to his performances in Chicago in the 1920's but the end of his career was anything but befitting a member of jazz royalty. Routinely cheated by booking agents and managers and forgotten by his fans, King Oliver, the once great jazz bandleader, ended his life as a toothless janitor sweeping out pool halls (Marquis, 144). His unmarked grave is in New York City.

Though historians are deprived of many of the biographical details that could provide clues to some of the root causes of King Buddy Bolden's demise, his unraveling itself is well documented. In 1906, he was still considered the King of New Orleans black music but the position proved precarious. In the constantly shifting sands of this innovative new musical idiom, competitors consistently picked up on his ideas and revamped them, which made him seem outmoded in comparison. As the musically unschooled Bolden became more self-conscious of his limitations he turned to drinking to quiet inner demons. In describing Bolden's descent, Donald Marquis, in his book *In Search of Buddy Bolden First Man of Jazz*, says Bolden began to blame everyone including friends, strangers, and "sometimes even his cornet for his imagined shortcomings" (112). He began to suffer from severe headaches in March of 1906 (112). His sister-in-law "recalled that Buddy's playing seemed to cause him anguish-seemed to tear him up- and his headaches gave him so much pain that he would play wrong notes" (112). Similar to the way the fictional King Hedley becomes convinced that any supposed treatment for his illness was a thinly veiled "plot against the black man," Bolden became increasingly paranoid and belligerent. He was

described by friends as imagining everyone was his enemy and out to get him (116). During this same period Bolden would sometimes fail to recognize even his closest friends (115). These occurrences of misrecognition are poignant when considering the climatic scene of *Seven Guitars*, in which the drunken Hedley mistakes Floyd for a long awaited Buddy Bolden and strikes him down with a machete.

The ironic fact that an incident of black-on-black violence, ushered in by paranoid delusion, resulted in the only occasion for Bolden to receive newspaper coverage in his entire life also serves as a striking parallel to Hedley's tragic black-on-black killing of Floyd. In March of 1906 Bolden's headaches had become so debilitating that he was confined to bed for several days. His wife Nora and his mother-in-law attempted to nurse him to health. However, over the course of his illness Bolden became delusional and convinced that his mother was attempting to slip him a lethal drug. In the throes of the delusion, he leapt up and violently struck his mother-in-law's head with a water pitcher injuring her in the process. Fearful that the episodes might recur, Bolden was taken into custody until "his fit of insanity passed" (113). The incident was the beginning of the end for the legendary Bolden. At the mental institution in Jackson, Louisiana, where Bolden eventually would be confined for the rest of his life, it would take ten years before he was given any other identification other than: "Colored Male from Parish of Orleans; Reason for insanity: alcohol" 123).

While the details of what led Bolden to lose his grip on reality are partially shrouded in mystery, the psychological history of his namesake, King Hedley, can be traced through Wilson's revelations of traumatic moments that scarred the young character. What Freud called *Erlebnisse*, or sites of traumatic lived experiences, can be seen as the events that formed Hedley's character. One of the principle examples of

Erlebnisse that marked Hedley came while studying in elementary school under a teacher named Miss Manning, who praised the Haitian general and revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture while simultaneously denigrating her students.

“Listen you black-as-sin niggers, you never each and none of you amount to nothing, you grow up and cut the white man’s cane and your whole life you never can be nothing as God is my witness, but I will tell you of a black boy who was a man and made the white man run from he blood in the street” (Seven Guitars, 86).

After hearing about the heroic Haitian general the young Hedley went home to his overworked father and confronted him asking why he didn’t stand up to the white man like Toussaint L'Ouverture had? Hedley’s upstart admonishment brought his father’s frustrations over a lifetime of humiliation to the surface. He responded by kicking his son in the mouth. Hedley says that from that day forward he shut up and that it wasn’t until he heard the Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey speak that he was given back his voice to speak up against injustice (87). Thus, Wilson seems to suggest that the one viable path to black redemption that had presented itself to the young King Hedley, namely violent resistance, was closed to him in a traumatic and humiliating act of repression. The violence the young upstart hoped to inflict upon his family’s oppressors instead turned back against him. For Frantz Fanon, Hegel’s master/slave dialectic takes on paramount significance in such colonial situations. The colonizer and the colonized “become locked in a deadly combat that affects all aspects of life” (Bulhan, 116). In this inescapable gridlock, the colonized eventually realizes that the only redemption lies in the greater exertion of counter-violence (116). The colonizer manages to justify his oppression by convincing himself that he is the ultimate embodiment of good and that the colonized is the veritable “incarnation of evil.” However, the stakes are high and if the colonized accepts his miserable conditions for fear of losing his life, as Hedley’s father does, then rage accumulates

and can only find release by deflecting it from its intended target, the oppressor. Instead, as in the case of the father kicking his insolent son in the mouth or the son Hedley destined to murder a fellow black man, rage turns against fellow blacks and is passed unresolved from generation to generation.

A similar story can be found in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* when the young Malcolm is told by his middle school teacher to give up dreams of being a lawyer, “which is no realistic goal for a nigger” (36). The teacher proceeds to patronize Malcolm suggesting that he is more suited to do something with his hands like carpentry. The incident would mark Malcolm X permanently. “The more I thought afterwards about what he said the more uneasy it made me. It just kept treading around in my mind” (36). Just as the young Hedley was unable to stomach his teacher’s suggestion that he was destined to live in servitude to the white man, Malcolm X faced with the same racially demarcated world was no longer capable of brushing off the racial epithets in his school hallways. It was a pivotal moment, the very moment that he says he “began to change- inside” and become the revolutionary activist that would go on to challenge the paradigm of a segregated America (37).

Because the recognition of being circumscribed by racist societal limitations is so pivotal, the fact that Wilson shows Hedley subsequently punished for the mere suggestion of rebellion makes it all the more traumatic. The young Hedley is silenced on the race question but his silence is untenable. In fact, neurosis takes root in the moment that the path to liberation is closed to him by his father’s violence. As such, the event becomes repressed into Hedley’s subconscious and the only possibility for healing, once his father has died, occurs in a dream in which his father returns to him offering reconciliation. Years of unresolved guilt hang in the balance as Hedley witnesses his father return in the dream to say “he was sorry he died without forgiving

me my tongue and that he would send Buddy Bolden with some money for me to buy a plantation” (87).

The dream’s intergenerational healing suggests a much-needed salve for Hedley’s psychological wounds, but Hedley’s imagined cure is peculiarly cut from the European slave owner’s cloth. Thus, the resolution of his trauma reveals yet another repression, that of his African spirit. For Fanon, the meaning behind the repression of these traumas will remain elusive to blacks unless they see it in light of Jung’s concept of the “collective unconscious” (*Black Skin*, 144-145). Fanon believed that the surrealist and philosopher René M  nil had it right when he explained such situations in Hegelian terms. M  nil suggested that the internal drama of the African Diaspora was “the consequence of the repressed [African] spirit in the consciousness of the slave [replaced] by an authority symbol representing the Master, a symbol implanted in the subsoil of the collective group and charged with maintaining order in it as a garrison controls a conquered city” (*Leiris*).

Though his thinking differs greatly from a Hegelian model, the concept of power as defined by Michel Foucault proves useful in analyzing the dynamics of Hedley’s simultaneous resistance and acceptance of the white power structure. The fact that Hedley’s worldview gets shaped by a schoolteacher and then violently driven home, not by a nightstick-wielding Southern cop or a bigoted redneck, but by his own flesh and blood corresponds with M  nil’s vision of an internalized Master. In such circumstances an actual slave master becomes superfluous. Historically, the ultimate seat of power is seen as the nation-state. Foucault challenges this assumption. He posits that power is not predominantly exercised through the destructive force of the nation-state, as exemplified by the rare cases of public executions, military occupations, or suppression of insurrections (*Cambridge Companion*, 94). Instead

power is more inherently linked to the uninterrupted discipline and training that takes hold in “multiple and indefinite power relations that supply the necessary basis for the great negative forms of power” (The Foucault Reader, 64). Foucault regarded the heterogeneous actors that evolved in modern history to carry out surveillance and documentation as initially coalescing to deter and control individuals that posed a threat to society. Initially their methods were applied in specific institutions such as schools, prisons, hospitals etc. but techniques gradually came to be applied in other contexts, a technique that Foucault referred to as a “swarming” of disciplinary techniques (Cambridge, 97).

Clearly in the case of Wilson’s Hedley and the young Malcolm X, the danger that schools attempted to mitigate was that of young upstart blacks who did not properly understand their “place” in a white hegemony. But power does not rest solely in the hands of schoolteachers and official authority figures. It is no accident that Wilson depicts Hedley’s father as being the ultimate source of authority that silences his son’s desire for racial justice and reparation. Just as Foucault suggests, the state’s power cannot “secure its footing” without the participation of a population that does its bidding. Wilson, like Foucault, doesn’t describe a world in which power descends from on high to impinge upon the lives of the powerless. Instead there are “infinitesimal” methods, practices and techniques enacted in families, classrooms and neighborhoods that combine to further colonial mentalities and subjugate those who might wish to disturb the balance of power. Power is not unidirectional but part of a matrix of complex relationships.

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. In other

words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application (Power/Knowledge, 98).

For Hedley, institutions such as schools, hospitals, and ironically the black community itself constitute the threads in this Foucauldian mesh of power structures that as a matter of course denigrate African Americans and traditions perceived as African in origin. Just as the mechanism of ranks serves to stratify power in the military, early 20th century American school systems, convinced of the “truth” of black inferiority, used their position of power to inculcate racist sentiments that discouraged blacks from attempting to “jump rank.” In Hedley’s case, his elementary school teacher acknowledged the elevated status of the black liberator Toussaint L’Ouverture, but by framing him as a demigod, unattainable for ordinary blacks, she serves to deprive Hedley of a tangible role model. In the illustrative case of Malcolm X, his teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, discouraged him from aspiring to be a lawyer while simultaneously engaging in a double standard of zealously encouraging his white students to pursue their dreams. In hindsight, however instrumental Mr. Ostrowski’s role might have been in discouraging the young student, Malcolm X did not see the incident as an isolated event and understood that oppressive racial dynamics did not hinge entirely on one door being closed or open. Whether attempting to advance in education or in the workplace, blacks who wished to overcome perceived limitations in the early 20th century were under scrutiny, and the ultimate prerequisite for advancement was adopting the appropriate worldview, or, as Frantz Fanon might have said, the appropriate mask, to secure entrance into a white- dominated world. Those, like Malcolm X and the fictional Hedley, who entertained aspirations for a truly radical redistribution of power, were not to be ingratiated in a society that was perfectly content with the status quo at a historical moment when Jim Crow legislation

still loomed over the American South and the civil rights movement had not yet shaken the country's foundations.

Malcolm X, when hypothetically considering what might have happened had Mr. Ostrowski encouraged him to be a lawyer, does not naively envisage that the change would have led to an idyllic ending. Instead he suggests he would have ended up a "brainwashed black Christian." "I would today probably be among some city's professional black bourgeoisie, sipping cocktails and pawing myself off as a community spokesman for and leader of the suffering black masses, while my primary concern would be to grab a few more crumbs from the groaning board of two-faced whites with whom they're begging to 'integrate'"(38). The implication being that ultimately American blacks who attempt to climb up the societal ladder are forced to choose between two families, namely the white European family and its accompanying values or an African family that is portrayed by the larger society in films, literature and even cartoons as being as inferior, savage and devoid of culture. For Fanon the nuclear family proves instrumental in structuring the way humans go on to relate to a larger world. "The family is the institution that prefigures a broader institution: the social or the national group" (*Black Skin*, 149). Therefore, in a society in which whites dominate, blacks are essentially "shaped and trained" for life according to a white value system.

In *Seven Guitars*, Wilson surrounds Hedley with everything that was symbolically and metonymically associated with black African roots and the African family. Hedley is the only character that carries out blood rituals recognizable as part of his African spiritual inheritance. Musically, he also sets himself apart from his contemporaries. As Floyd and drummer Red Carter play modern rhythm and blues in an impromptu jam session, Hedley abruptly enters into the session with a "one string"

guitar that he fashioned out of a two by four, a nail and chicken wire. Wilson's inclusion of this one stringed instrument is anything but incidental. In fact one-stringed instruments represent an African carryover that has survived in the American South up until contemporary times (Kubik, 16). Their names range from "diddley bow," "bo diddley," "unitar," "jitterbug," or simply "one stringed guitar." All of them hark back to the "remembrance and development of central and west-central African monochord zithers" (16). When Floyd scoffs at the primitive instrument, Hedley claims the instrument's sound had the power to recall the praying voice of his long lost mother. The moment resonates with the type of ancestral worship typical of the African Diaspora. Similarly, when Canewell buys a goldenseal plant, renowned for its healing properties, it is Hedley who possesses the knowledge to plant it correctly before its roots dry out. Interestingly, Hedley's hero, the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, "who led the world's only successful overthrow of a white colonial regime by slaves," came to renown on a plantation through a similar knowledge of herbal medicine "passed down from his African father" (Barnard). He then supports Canewell's belief that the plant is "all the doctor" you need (27). Hedley goes on to recall how his grandmother used to rub goldenseal on her chest. In a later scene resonant with meaning, the plant, symbolically linked to his ancestry and heritage, becomes uprooted when Floyd returns and buries the money he had stolen from a pawnshop in his desperation to get to Chicago and revitalize his blues career.

Because Hedley's beliefs about traditional medicine remain inextricably tied to ancestral memories and wisdom, the fact that they are rejected offhandedly by characters like Louise shows a strong example of the societal pressure to reject his African heritage as being inherently inferior. Louise suggests not only that Hedley's grandmother's remedies are outdated and anachronistic but also ineffective. She states

that by going to a conventional doctor he could get some “real medicine” (27). Similarly, Hedley’s choice not to see a doctor, other than an herbalist who makes root teas, negatively affects his chances at making headway with Louise as a potential mate. When he mentions to her that he had knocked on her door the previous night without response she retorts, “You go knock on the doctor’s door before you come knocking on mine” (19). Considering that Hedley has likely contracted tuberculosis, her advice is worth heeding, but logic does not always prevail in the throes of an internal power struggle of conflicting self-images and doubleness. Hedley remains insistent because he intuitively associates modern medicine with another site of trauma, namely the deplorable conditions in which his father, a browbeaten servant, had died. The fact that his father was neglected and allowed to die by the very white doctor, for whom he was both employed and relied heavily upon, plays into this ongoing dialogue that pits two world visions against each other.

If blood ritual, herbal remedies, ancestral worship, and black heroes surround Hedley in an aura of Africanness, his cupidity and belief that money will ultimately provide the means for his salvation undercut the possibility of spiritually grounded and right-minded action. As in many of Wilson’s plays, money, that elusive god of capitalist America, symbolizes an extraordinarily dangerous and alluring prize. Those who fall under its spell, like Hedley and Floyd, inevitably invite treason, greed, and bloodshed into their lives.

Symbolically, Wilson depicts money paradoxically as both the means to escape the ghetto and the filthy lucre that corrupts everything that it comes into contact with. To obtain it, characters in *Seven Guitars* must either collaborate with a value system completely at odds with their ancestral values, or risk life and limb to

steal it, their eventual reward being an ephemeral prize of crumpled bills destined to “fall to the ground like ashes” (107).

Georg Simmel, the early-20th-century German sociologist, argued that a money economy “exacerbates tendencies to calculation and abstraction in human activity” (Beasley-Murray, 64). He also maintained that it fosters “indifference and characterlessness” (64). For Simmel, character is acknowledged when people are differentiated from others and recognized for their individuality. The intellect, however, as an “indifferent mirror of reality,” has the tendency to see all things as equal or characterless, just as one monetary unit, such as a dollar, cannot be differentiated from another. As Simmel says in his seminal book *The Philosophy of Money*, “Just as money is the mechanical reflex of the values of things according to which all parties are treated the same, so in money-society all people have the same value- not because every person has worth, but rather because no person has worth since the only thing that has worth is money” (594-595). Examining Wilson’s ethical concerns in the context of Simmel’s philosophy proves fruitful, since for Wilson tragedy is often directly linked to avarice and the subsequent devaluation of human life that it brings about. The fact that Hedley does not recognize Floyd in *Seven Guitars*’ climax because of his delusion that Buddy Bolden would be coming to deliver him money seems to echo Simmel’s fear that the perception of money’s absolute value trumps that of the individual. Misrecognition is linked doubly to Hedley’s deteriorating mental health and also to Simmel’s notion that money crushes difference and renders everything surrounding it colorless and vapid. In Hedley’s desperation to retrieve his lost dignity through the promise of money, everyone and everything else become overshadowed. Innocent humans eventually pay the ultimate price for Hedley and Floyd’s myopic relationship to money. In Floyd’s case, Willard

Ray Tillery, a twenty-seven-year-old neighbor and accomplice in his robbery, takes a fatal bullet while fleeing the scene of the crime. In Hedley's case, Floyd becomes the tragic victim as Hedley mistakes him for Buddy Bolden and strikes him down in a drunken stupor.

Floyd regards money as an elusive panacea to all his life's challenges. If he can lay his hands on it, money will help him get his guitar out of pawn, and then get his fellow musicians and Vera, his girlfriend, to Chicago where he hopes to once again record hit blues songs. In the recent past, he was arrested there for charges of vagrancy and spent ninety days in jail as a result. In his assessment, the arrest directly resulted from "not having enough money" (42). Past humiliations, such as this one, drive Floyd to a state of desperation and he eventually resorts to robbing a loan office at gunpoint and getting away with \$1,200. Like Hedley, who articulates success in a decidedly materialistic manner, Floyd's vision of realization and self-worth is dominated by financial status symbols. He describes Chicago as a veritable Promised Land where the opportunities for acquiring material wealth will be unlimited. "I leave here on the Greyhound and I bet you in one year's time I be back driving a Buick. Maybe even a Cadillac" (80). Furthermore, just as Hedley's drive for material success is rooted in envy and an inferiority complex, Floyd's motivation derives from a profound sense of society's inequity. "The white man ain't the only one can have a car and nice furniture" (80). Whereas Hedley's utopian vision originates from anachronistic slave plantations where his father might have once worked, Floyd's vision is a modern one saturated by flashy neon advertisements in a new era of American consumerism. Regardless of epochal differences, both visions incorporate cultural values and norms antithetical to a healthy African American community where overall health would prevail over individualistic visions of grandeur. Whereas

African spirituality emphasizes ancestral connections and social obligation, American capitalism places emphasis on profit and the individual. And while on a superficial exterior level Hedley and Floyd seem to be diametrically opposed, internally both, on some level or another, have repressed a communal African spirit and replaced it with an individualist Master that exacts significant sacrifices in its insatiable lust for financial gain.

Though Hedley attempts to embrace all that is African and positively associates African Americans with royalty, ultimately he is unable to achieve a cohesive sense of self. Tragically, he remains fundamentally splintered to the end, and the incongruous messages that he sends about being black serve to heighten the sense that all is not well within his soul. His attempts to heal and connect with his ancestors come from a legitimate inner need that he and other Wilson characters have similarly grappled with more or less successfully. In fact, spontaneous acts of ritual healing have been one of the prominent means that Wilson's characters have invoked in order to transcend pain and reunify their fragmented spirits. In one prominent example, Herald Loomis, the troubled protagonist in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, engages in a spontaneous blood ritual in which he slashes his chest with a knife. Preceding the act, Loomis denounces the notion that Jesus was the only Lamb of God whose sacrifice ostensibly stood in for all of mankind so that no one else would have to sacrifice himself. In a Bonnie Lyons interview Wilson explains the significance of the liberating act: "Loomis is not only illustrating his willingness to bleed but saying that if salvation requires bloodshed, he doesn't need Christ to bleed for him on the cross. He's saying something like, 'Christ can do some stuff I can't, but if it's about bleeding, yeah, I can bleed for myself'" (10). In contrast to African Americans who follow Christian doctrine through a European lens, Loomis defines spirituality on

personal and African terms and by doing so recaptures his spiritual sovereignty. This transformed and syncretistic outlook on African American spirituality characterizes much of what Wilson admires about the church. His perception of African American Christianity is one which blacks have transformed “with aspects of African religion, African style, and certainly African celebration” (Lyons, 9). At the same time, Wilson acknowledges that Christian churches have given birth to organizations such as the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and that they continue up until the present day in the sanction of inequities.

Keeping this historical backdrop in mind, clearly the spirit and intention of the ritual act, rather than any inherent truth embedded in the act, are the ultimate arbiters of value in Wilson’s conception of spirituality. In one of the play’s most jarring moments, Hedley does enact a spontaneous blood ritual in which he sacrifices a neighbor’s rooster. Wilson’s audience is thrown off balance by a non sequitur and seemingly nonsensical taking of life. Is the act inspired by some ancestral wisdom difficult for the uninitiated to fathom or an outburst brimming over with pure madness? On close examination, the ritual reveals itself as anything but spiritually illuminating. It comes on the heels of a vituperative denunciation of black males in which he assures that “God ain’t making no more niggers.” More than anything, the sacrifice symbolically demonstrates Hedley’s self-loathing while simultaneously foreshadowing Floyd’s murder. Tragically, King Hedley, like his namesake Buddy Bolden, proves unable to recover from the cumulative traumas of his youth. Like the historical ex-slave Liberians who modeled themselves after Southern plantation owners, he harbors an unhealthy obsession with recreating the slave master’s paradigm. Similarly, as he warns Floyd at the end of Scene 1 that the white man has a big plan against him, one is reminded of Hedley having once been held in check by

his own father who supported his white teacher's repressive agenda. The Foucauldian way that power relations reverberate across generations and across racial lines underscores the tragedy of the *Seven Guitars*. For Hedley, unresolved trauma and a shared sense of communal debasement eventually lead to mental illness and pathological behavior as evidenced by his delusional killing of the promising blues guitarist Floyd Barton.

Yet, in depicting the pre-civil rights era America of the 1940's, Wilson overtly avoids any simplistic formulations of good versus evil or African genuineness versus the adoption of compulsory European mores. Pride in African origins and achievements certainly inform Hedley's quest for self-knowledge, but it does not however provide a panacea from which crystal clear truths can be gleaned. The ethical implications of *Seven Guitars* would have been elementary had Hedley been able to conveniently pin the blame on a white overseer brandishing a whip of oppression. Instead the play's drama unfolds around Hedley's confronting a much more elusive and slippery opponent, namely the master within and the internalized power structures that have permeated his thinking and turned him against his own brothers.

Chapter II The Smile: *Navigating the Nebulous Borderline Between Uncle Tom and the Trickster Figure in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Set in Chicago in 1927, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place at one of the many crossroads of African American music. Traditions such as blues that had their origin in the rural South were evolving in urban centers into music such as jazz, swing and big band orchestras. The time was ripe for an explosion of musical innovation and 1927 proved to be a launching pad for many members of the jazz pantheon. In the same year, Duke Ellington inaugurated his legendary Cotton Club in Harlem, Count Basie, the big band maestro, started his legendary career and Louis Armstrong made a name for himself as a band leader with his "Hot Five" and "Hot Seven" recordings (Southern 382-385). These evolutions and metamorphoses would continue throughout the 20th century, dividing African-inspired musical genres into such widely divergent streams as bebop, free jazz, electric jazz, rock n' roll, R & B and even hip hop. At the same time, blues purists and gospel musicians have weathered capricious shifts in public taste and continue to make valuable contributions to the ever-evolving African American musical conversation. Careful consideration of this perpetual aesthetic evolution provides a valuable vantage point from which to consider the larger evolution of African American culture. And as Wilson honed in on this particular era in *Ma Rainey*, a historicist perspective of how the black community interpreted the cultural signs and epochal meanings of their evolving music is unavoidable.

Similarly, the mechanisms of political and economic power, in an era when white businessmen dominated the record industry, deserve consideration. The historically recent commodification of music, achieved through newly arrived breakthroughs in sound recordings, created an atmosphere where what was once the stuff of traditional ritual and ceremony now became standardized, stereotyped and

destined for consumption by a mass market (Atalli, 3-4). Caught in the shifting sands of heterogeneous European and African influences, the play takes place in a decisive moment that fostered tradition for some musicians while propelling others towards change and evolution. This hybrid African American culture portrayed in *Ma Rainey* goes beyond mere aesthetic questions of style and influence and demonstrates how probing musical identity engenders fundamental questions of essence versus adaptability and survival.

In *Ma Rainey*, a primary source of divergence between the era's evolving swing music and the blues has its roots in a perceived dichotomy between urban and rural. As many blacks in postbellum America had abandoned the primarily rural and agricultural South in favor of new possibilities in industrialized Northeastern cities, they simultaneously sought to differentiate themselves from southern black culture. Emancipation from slavery had not delivered on its promise of equality or racial harmony but instead saw the rise of the Klu Klux Klan and inhumane practices such as lynching and mob justice. As a result, the exodus to the urban North became linked with hope for a fresh start for African Americans longing to distance themselves from a humiliating past. For many, the North represented a place where blacks could recover their dignity. In *Blues People*, LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka, describes how in that era of Southern exodus the North represented a sort of Promised Land not only because of the promise of jobs, "but because the South would always remain in the minds of most Negroes...the scene of the crime" (95). Levee, the troubled protagonist of *Ma Rainey*, carries a significant burden from traumatic lived experience as a child in the rural South. Only eight years old, Levee witnessed a group of white men gang rape his mother. When he tried to defend her with a knife, the knife was turned against him leaving a "long ugly scar." Southern experiences such as these inform the way

that Levee, Ma Rainey's strident and brash trumpeter, metonymically associates traditional blues with a pejorative world of barn dances, countrified rhythms and jug bands. However, as Levee is young and still evolving as a musician, he is in no position to shun the opportunity to play with Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues and an esteemed member of the musical genre's elite. He begrudgingly accepts the job in the hopes that by getting exposure to the studio's white producer Sturdyvant he'll be able to launch his own career playing modern swing music, the erstwhile avant-garde of jazz. For Levee, playing the blues is merely a means to an end, and his blatant disrespect for rural blues rests at the heart of the play's unfolding conflict.

For Jacques Attali, the author of *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, the history of how African American music became commodified and colonized by the "American industrial apparatus" constitutes the paragon of how a broad market was created for popular music (103). Attali argues that the demand for records did not exist when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, but was fabricated through the media. The political nature inherent in the sale of this newly fashioned commodity becomes evident when considering how blacks themselves did not initially benefit financially from the very music that they themselves had created. Ironically, the first jazz musicians to achieve widespread fame were white musicians like Paul Whiteman, elected "King of Jazz" in 1930, and Benny Goodman, the proclaimed "King of Swing" (104). "Starting in the 1930's, when the demand for blues became heavy enough to incite hopes of a profit, production was systematically developed through the prospecting and pillaging of the patrimony of southern blacks: the idea of paying royalties to blacks did not occur very often to those who recorded their songs" (104).

The era was also typified by the advent of the "race record," or commercial recordings "aimed strictly toward the Negro market" (Jones 99). An early success

story came in 1926 when Victoria Spivey recorded a record with the hit single “Black Snake Blues.” The album sold 150,000 copies. In referring to such financial coups Jones says, “So it is easy to see there were no altruistic or artistic motives behind the record companies’ decision to continue and enlarge the race record category. Race records swiftly became big business” (100). Contemporaneous with the early stages of this concerted effort to turn African American musical prowess into financial gain, the play’s prominent inclusion of white record producers highlights the politically and economically charged atmosphere the musicians were working in. Throughout, Ma Rainey proves very conscientious of the way her music and image have been commodified and the consequent devaluation of her humanity in a milieu dominated by white businessmen. After years of working as a team, Irvin talks about “sticking together” but Ma Rainey sees through his patronizing behavior. “As soon as they got 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” (64).

The historical singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey played a pivotal role in creating classic blues, a genre that differentiated itself from primitive blues by emphasizing a more formalized and polished style (Jones, 89). According to Jones, Rainey more than anyone else can be seen as the link between “the earlier less polished blues styles” and the smooth theatrical style that characterized the more modern urban blues singers (89). “Ma Rainey’s style can be placed squarely between the harsher, more spontaneous country styles and the somewhat calculated emotionalism of the performers” (89). Singers like her and her protégé Bessie Smith brought a professionalism and polish to blues unknown to the country blues that had been performed in a more informal setting to audiences that did not pay to witness performances. “It was the first Negro music that appeared in a formal context as

entertainment though it still contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms” (86). In essence, Rainey walked the aesthetic tightrope between tradition and modernity. In the context of the play, placing Rainey historically as part of an evolutionary link in a transforming genre will help to avoid venerating her as the mythological *source* for the blues with direct ties to a strictly African infused blues sound.

The backdrop of *Ma Rainey* resonates with this volatile historical moment in which financial pressures constantly called black musicians’ artistic sovereignty into question. In addition to pressure to shun “outdated” musical forms from younger musicians like Levee, Wilson suggests that Sturdyvant and Irvin, the managers of Ma Rainey’s affairs, also strove to ride the wave and profit from the era’s shifting musical landscape. From early on, Sturdyvant complains to Irvin that Ma Rainey’s music is no longer selling well in Harlem, the heart of the African American community. Irvin, a character who “prides himself in his knowledge of blacks,” downplays Sturdyvant’s concerns by reminding him of southern cities like Memphis, Birmingham and Atlanta, where the records sold well. The developing rift between a traditional style evocative of a rural South and a new style that seduced urban listeners with fresh modernity was not lost to the business-savvy Sturdyvant. The discussion between the two producers also puts the spotlight on the fact that while black musicians proffered their talent and wherewithal to create innovative music in the 1920’s, overwhelmingly it was white businessmen who reaped the financial rewards. Sensing Sturdyvant’s skepticism, Irvin boldly reminds him of their success selling Ma’s albums in the Deep South. “Christ you made a bundle” (13). Cognizant of this injustice, Ma unabashedly voices her resentment of the fact that her good standing hinges on making them fortunes, “Otherwise you just a dog in the alley.”

As these producers' pecuniary concerns set the play's tone, the implications of blues as a commodity reverberate throughout *Ma Rainey*. In the article "'They Cert'ly Sound Good to Me': Sheet Music, Southern Vaudeville and the Commercial Ascendancy of the Blues," authors Lynn Abbot and Doug Seroff aptly argue that a dynamic tension between two separate impulses shaped the evolution of the blues in the 20th century. These impulses were further complicated by a substratum of "commercialization in a racist society" (402). Firstly, there was an impulse to carry forward the blues and other African-derived musical forms, that had coalesced from a synthesis of indigenous African cultural carryovers and that would go on to form "the cornerstone of an independent black cultural heritage." A second opposing impulse sought to "demonstrate mastery of standard Western musical and cultural conventions" (403). Though written music ran counter to African oral tradition, this impulse brought about the conditions necessary to standardize and formalize the structure of new musical forms, the very requisites that made composition, development and dissemination of blues, jazz and ragtime possible (403).

The fact that Levee himself is the only member of Ma Rainey's group who can read and write formal music aligns him with this latter impulse. Levee's insistence to include his own written arrangements into Ma Rainey's songs becomes a major source of contention. His efforts are unwanted by musicians who prefer to play a blues style more aligned with instinct than with written notes. Wilson's description of Slow Drag, the group's bass player, as having "innate African rhythms that underlie everything he plays" and playing with a "startling" ease highlights the cultural fault line that divides the play's musicians. Furthermore Levee's written arrangements are deemed particularly onerous by his fellow musicians because of the fact Irvin tries to muscle them into playing the parts without their bandleader's approval. At the time Ma

Rainey had been delayed by a traffic incident and was running late to the rehearsal. Cutler, the group's guitarist and trombone player, takes the opportunity to underscore Ma's autonomy and the fact that she does not plan on relinquishing artistic control to a white man: "Levee, the sooner you understand it ain't what you say, or what Mr. Irvin say...it's what Ma says that counts" (28). Levee's arrangements are perceived as an arrogant break with tradition and a symptom of alignment with a white power structure that was overstepping its bounds and meddling in a black musical world.

For Attali, such transitions, like the rift between blues and swing that dates to the late 1920's, have been "occurring in music since antiquity and have led to the creation of new codes within changing networks" (34). Such a transition in musical production, particularly when its transmission engenders the influence of a dominant culture, constitutes subversion in the sense that the "existing syntax" becomes opposed by a "new syntax." For Attali, the modern transformation of music from its ritual origins to a means of earning capital has hastened the destruction of codes and the "emergence of new networks" (36). Whereas music's use was once linked intrinsically to providing the order and heartbeat of ritual, since its commodification "music has become unmoored, like a language whose speakers have forgotten the meaning of its words but not its syntax" (36). Even if unmoored from her African roots, Ma Rainey seems acutely aware of the stakes at hand. Intuitively she understands that the impulses and origins that gave birth to her blues music face a serious threat from the implacable demands of a capital-starved musical machine insensitive to the value of tradition.

When Ma Rainey finally does arrive at the recording session the power struggle between Levee, aligned with Irvin and Sturdyvant, and Ma reaches a fevered pitch. As Ma walks into the studio, the band rehearses her song "Black Bottom." She

can't believe what she hears. In her eyes, the song has been bastardized by Levee's arrangement. When she protests, Irvin pleads Levee's case saying, "Ma, that's what the people want now." He urges her that "the times are changing" (51). Ma immediately perceives the forceful introduction of the arrangements into the recording session as a threat to her sovereignty. She explains in no uncertain terms that she is the only person who has the right to alter the musical content of her songs. Ma Rainey not only takes the question of her artistic sovereignty seriously, but she also understands her music as an essential outgrowth of her being, a defining element that constitutes her as an African American blues singer. She rebukes the white producers saying that what they say "don't count with me" because she prefers to listen to her heart and to the "voice inside of her" (52). As for her opinion of standard Western musical notations and conventions, Ma sums up her staunch resistance in a pithy proclamation that "Levee ain't messing my song up with none of his music shit."

If modern swing music reverberates with capitalism's unspoken mandate of always pushing the envelope in search of new sounds and codes, the blues harks back to an older world of African roots. And if anyone in the band gives the appearance of knowing African roots, it is Toledo, the group's pianist. Musically he is described as being in "control of his instrument," which contrasts with the flamboyant Levee, who frequently plays "wrong notes" on his trumpet. Wilson characterizes Levee as confusing his skill and his talent. As a result, Levee shuns practicing the group's blues repertoire he deems too rudimentary to bother with. As *Ma Rainey's* plot unfolds, the control or lack thereof that each character manages to exert over their instruments serves as an extended metaphor for their lives. Echoing this sentiment, Kim Pereira deftly points out in his book *August Wilson and the African American Odyssey*, the personalities of each of the play's musicians "reflects their attitude toward music: the

older three favor the more plaintive, deeply emotional sounds of the blues; Levee the flashier rhythms of swing.”

The allure of everything flashy and superficial for Levee contrasted with Toledo’s relative earthiness and unpretentiousness will eventually exacerbate a growing tension between the two characters. During Act One, Wilson foreshadows the play’s tragic ending by highlighting Levee’s unreasonable attachment to his newly purchased Florsheim shoes. When Slow Drag accidentally steps on Levee’s shoes he gets angry, prompting a conversation about the shoes that Cutler condemns as an unnecessary luxury: “Any man who takes a whole week’s pay and puts it on some shoes- you understand what I mean, what you walk around on the ground with- is a fool!” (31). Prodded by his colleagues’ jabs, Levee attempts to deflect criticism from himself by berating Toledo and the clumsy farming boots that he wears along with a suit and tie. “Nigger got them clodhoppers! Old brogans! He ain’t nothing but a sharecropper” (31). Musically and aesthetically Toledo’s identity resonates metonymically with a grounded earthiness and the South, the very birthplace of *Erlebnis* and trauma that Levee desires more than anything to distance himself from.

While Levee reads and writes music, Toledo is the only musician in the group who can read books. Autodidactic and proud of it, Toledo’s knowledge does not come without its inherent pitfalls, particularly that of provoking envy. By positioning himself as a savant of African tradition and African carryovers, Toledo sets himself apart from the rest of the musicians, who are uneducated and seemingly uninterested in such matters. Harrison accurately describes him as a “singular choral figure, an unofficial griot or chronicler of the collective history” who “identifies the deities responsible for the altered universe of black experience” (308). However admirable Toledo’s self-knowledge might be, Wilson makes it clear from the outset that the

book-savvy Toledo “misunderstands and misapplies” his knowledge. He doesn’t stop at sharing intellectual gems with his illiterate band mates, but flaunts his knowledge and often denigrates the younger Levee in the process. Eventually, the flawed approach will prove fatal.

In one of the play’s most telling scenes, Slow Drag, the group’s bassist, attempts to acquire a marijuana reefer from Cutler by persuading him based on their shared past experiences, a method Toledo characterizes as establishing a “bond of kinship.” Toledo characterizes Slow Drag’s manner of persuasion as African and based on an “African conceptualization” (24). He goes on to say that this “ancestral retention” takes place when one calls on the names of the gods or the ancestors in order to fulfill a desire. Here Wilson, like Attali, calls attention to the fact that culturally rooted behavior, just like musical syntax derived from a ritualistic heritage, can become unmoored from its original usage. Toledo clearly recognizes the unmistakable vestiges of an African way of being, but in America, removed from his African roots, Slow Drag no longer remembers the names of the gods.

Toledo’s observation, however profound and accurate it might be, is far from well received. It results in a veritable shootout of repartee and bitter denial. Levee disparages his African heritage, retorting, “You don’t see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose” (24). In response, Toledo harshly rebukes Levee saying that he is “ignorant without a premise.” Slow Drag similarly disavows his Africanness: “Nigger I ain’t no African! I ain’t doing no African nothing!” Toledo responds to this by suggesting that Slow Drag is blind to an entire world that goes on around him. Toledo’s undeniable accuracy in perceiving his band mates’ use of African carryovers becomes tarnished by the fact that he belittles them in the process of teaching them. Toledo’s slight of Levee was not without precedent. Earlier he had

already embarrassed Levee by showing everyone that the brash trumpeter was illiterate and unable to spell the word music correctly; calling him “ignorant without a premise” added insult to injury.

Both Levee and Slow Drag’s disavowal of Africanness can be seen as a direct symptom of a racist society that consistently disparages everything African while associating it with the savage Other. Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* describes an analogous process in the French Antilles where schoolboys are taught to identify themselves with the lineage of “the explorer, the bringer of civilization, [and] the white man who carries truth to savages” (147). Ironically, the young black students’ complete identification with a European- derived sense of self goes as far as speaking about “our ancestors the Gauls” (147). The result, for Fanon, is that young blacks adopt a white man’s perspective. When the black Antillean hears the word savage, he immediately imagines the Senegalese, whose customs have been demonized by French colonizers. Similarly inculcated in the American South, both Levee and Slow Drag rapidly attempt shake off any insinuations of Africanness. For the two musicians, Africans are not associated with the rich musical tradition that permeates their beings but rather invoke “savages” in the jungle with bones stuck in their noses.

Over eighty years after the play’s fictional blues men denied their Africanness, Wilson’s portrait of African Americans remains strikingly up to date. In a 2004 study observing interactions between African and African American students in an urban American high school, Rosemary Lukens Traoré found that the negative stereotypes that Levee and Slow Drag had of Africans still remain pervasive in the twenty-first century. Traoré says, “The misperception by many Americans that Africa is a jungle and all Africans are savages thrives in our homes, schools and in the media” (349).

Traoré attributes these negative stereotypes to omnipresent media images such as the ubiquitous Tarzan swinging from tree to tree in the African jungle and a total void of African history as told from an African perspective in American school curricula. Mirrored in the Fanon's *Antilles*, in modern American schools and even in Africa itself, the play's characters' severance from their heritage is part of the fallout of the larger imperialist onslaught that Kenyan writer Ngugi describes as a "cultural bomb" that was dropped on the African peoples along with its Diaspora:

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from the wasteland (3).

However, many aspects of Levee's behavior belie his external rejection of his heritage as a wasteland. If Toledo's Africanness is an articulated one achieved through intellectual acumen, Levee's, while less apparent, is an embodied Africanness worthy of consideration. On the surface, Levee seems to have anything but an African sensibility. Of all the play's musicians only he unabashedly seeks the white man's approval in his quest for professional success. Not content playing with a group whose music he considers backward, Levee gives his compositions to Sturdyvant in hopes that the producer will take him under his wing and finance a recording with his own band. As the play unfolds, Levee reveals himself increasingly anxious to hear Sturdyvant's opinion of the songs. Sensing the emerging complicity between the two men, his band mates perceive him as a sycophant and an Uncle Tom caricature pandering to Irvin and Sturdyvant's agenda. When Sturdyvant mentions that he's happy to see the group rehearsing, Levee cannot contain his exuberance regarding the fate of his songs and his resounding "Yessir" seems overdone. Cutler interprets Levee's enthusiasm as kowtowing to the white producer and losing his dignity in the

process. He parrots Levee, adding the humiliating overtones of a subservient house servant: “You hear Levee? You hear this nigger? ‘Yessuh, we’s rehearsing, boss’” (55). Toledo is similarly vocal in his critique of Levee’s apparent submission. “As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say...as long as he looks to white folks for approval then he ain’t never going to find out who he is and what he’s about. He’s just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about” (29).

Levee rejects his band mates’ assessment of him outright, and proceeds to explain to them why things are not what they seem. To do so, the trumpeter has to delve into his troubled past in rural Mississippi where his successful father had provoked the envy of neighboring whites. His father had earned the reputation of being an “uppity nigger” by men who were jealous both of his independent spirit and his accumulation of “fifty acres of good farming land” (57). One year, as planting time approached, the eight-year-old Levee is left with his mother while his father travels to Natchez to purchase fertilizer. Seizing upon his father’s absence, a gang of eight or nine white men terrorizes the family by savagely gang raping his mother. One of the men also slashes the young boy’s chest when he attempts in vain to defend her. Levee recalls that the men only stopped their spree of violence because they feared the young boy would bleed to death. When his father returns, Levee describes how his father acts as though he fully accepts what had happened. Outwardly, he gives the impression of subservience and in an ultimate gesture of compliance he sells the family’s land to one of the rapists while smiling in his face. Inwardly, however, Levee’s father maintains a diametrically opposite agenda. The smile is a mere mask; a decoy offered as temporary appeasement for the oppressor. Surreptitiously, operating from the woods, he begins stalking the offenders one by one until he manages to kill four of the men.

Finally, he is caught and hung. Levee's father's behavior marks the young boy permanently. Even if his father's rebellion failed in the end, Levee fully identifies with the necessity of furtive resistance in a world where open resistance is doomed to failure. Where overt rebellion reveals itself tantamount to suicide, one can feign obedience, politely smiling and plotting vengeful murder in the same breath.

My daddy wasn't spooked by the white man. Nosir. And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face...smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please (58).

Knowing this, Levee's actions cannot be taken at face value. His submissive attitude towards Sturdyvant proves equally disingenuous as the smile his father flashed towards his wife's rapists. He is a quintessential trickster, even described as a "buffoon." Despite the word's pejorative connotations, Wilson clarifies that Levee is not to be taken as clown: "it is an intelligent buffoonery, clearly calculated to shift control of the situation wherever he can grasp it" (16). Paul Carter Harrison, commenting in "August Wilson's Blues Poetics," suggests that there is a mythic aspect to Levee's character. Harrison aligns Levee with the Yoruba trickster Esu, known to "mediate the obstacles that threaten survival and harmony with wit, cunning, guile and a godly sense of self-empowerment that affords him extravagant transgressions" (301-302). Esu is known for providing a reminder of the unpredictability of human experience, a characteristic that definitely proves analogous to Levee's role in the play. However, whereas in Yoruban cosmology Esu serves as a sort of oracle known to carry sacrifices from Earth to Heaven and intermediating between man, the *orisa* and other spirits, Levee seems to have an overwhelmingly earthly charge (Drewal et al, 71). The unresolved burden of his family's past

humiliation has rendered him suspicious of spiritual endeavors. Rather than being an intermediary for the gods, Levee seems resolved to spit in the gods' faces audaciously. His rancor is reserved particularly for the Christian God whom he characterizes as a white man's, unresponsive to the plight of the black man.

If anything, rather than a kindred spirit of Esu, Levee is more appropriately aligned with Brer Rabbit and the Signifying Monkey, other tricksters of African American folklore whose origins are similarly linked to West Africa. In *The River Flows On* Walter Rucker examines the way these animal trickster stories "gave slaves a sort of psychic relief and were metaphorical assaults on the powerful" (201). Brer Rabbit represented the enslaved, whereas more powerful animals such as Brer Wolf, Brer Bear, and Brer Tiger stood in for the "oppressive planter aristocracy" (201). Rucker suggests that the tales' conflicts, commonly portraying fights over access to food, mirrored the social conditions in which slaves lived. They also transmitted "survival tactics and encouraged subversive activities" necessary for survival. And while it would be tempting to presume that the behaviors and narratives of such tricksters came into being as a result of contact with European slave traders, Rucker suggests that Brer Rabbit's origins have deeper historical roots.

Henry Louis Gates, in his seminal book of African American literary criticism, *The Signifying Monkey*, investigates how this monkey trickster profoundly influenced black artistic forms. Gates points to the way that African American language and texts originate from an essentially hybrid or "two-toned" heritage. Through a process that Gates argues was a conscious "articulation of language traditions aware of themselves as traditions" these tricksters engaged in patterns of repetition and revision, which became "fundamental to black artistic forms from painting to sculpture to music and language use" (xxiv). As such the Signifying Monkey serves as "a metaphor for

formal revision, or intertextuality, within the African American literary tradition” (xxi). The fact that this intertextuality is not limited to the written word and is also prevalent rhetorical device utilized by jazz and blues musicians makes this aspect of the trickster particularly suited to interpreting *Ma Rainey’s* characters, who are immersed in the call and response realm of repetition and revision. As Pereira astutely observed “Wilson uses the structure of a jazz piece” to tell his story (34). Like an initial melody that sets the mood for a jazz composition, the characters’ dialogue become starting points from which each musician “solos” talking about past experiences and riffing off the conversational motifs that the other speakers have introduced. In jazz performances, as in literature or “playing the dozens,” Gates argues, the participants depend on tropes and their response and revision rely on pastiche turning upon “repetition of formal structures and their differences” (52). The trickster’s use of pastiche will turn out to be revealing as later in this chapter I will consider one of Levee’s most intense monologues as a Signifyin(g) revision of a canonical text.

Animal trickster stories do have African analogues that predate African American versions and interestingly they share some of the same meanings and functions (204). As such, Rucker argues that it logically follows that the stories continued to be culturally viable on the American side of the Atlantic because of common “social, political, and environmental conditions in Africa and in the Americas” (204). “Well before rural Africans became victims in the Atlantic slave trade, many had already experienced oppression from powerful African political and economic elites” (204). Thinkers such as John Thornton have demonstrated that in Atlantic Africa unique systems of land tenure existed where rural villagers paid tribute to a “mostly urban-dwelling elite” (Thornton). As such, control of food availability

and distribution constituted a nexus of power that characterized relations between peasants and rulers in Atlantic Africa (204). Those who failed to pay tributes were certainly among the most vulnerable to being swept away into an emerging European slave trade.

In this sense, the story of Levee's father using subterfuge to outsmart his more powerful oppressors places Levee in a lineage of tricksters that dates back not only into slavery days but all the way to the African continent where a different sort of oppression and social power had once reigned. The tales' overriding themes of what was official versus contraband and concealment versus display give evidence of a distinctly class-related consciousness fully aware of the "degraded status" resulting from unequal power relations. "If the animal trickster was truly a metaphor for slaves in North America, then it has to follow that Brer Rabbit, Anansi the Spider and others had been reflections of African rural peasants at some earlier point" (205).

Poignantly, agrarian origins and rural resistance lie at the heart not only of Levee's relation to his father but also to his African fictional counterparts, whose tales mirrored the socio-economic conditions faced by an oppressed African rural class. As such, the earthiness and countrified qualities that Levee despises in Toledo and his band mates are undeniably braided into the very fabric of his past. His self-conscious efforts to adopt refined urban mannerisms and elegant clothing only serve to accentuate the doubleness of a persona desperately fleeing a traumatic past. LeRoi Jones addressed this doubleness when describing how rural blacks that had migrated to the North faced disorientation in the urban centers of the North.

They had come from all over the South, from backwoods farms as sharecroppers who had never even been to the moderately large cities of the South, into the fantastic metropolises of the North. It must have been almost as strange as that initial trip their ancestors made centuries before into the New World. Now the Negroes had not even the land to walk across. Everywhere were cement, buildings and streets filled up with automobiles. Whole families

jammed up in tiny, unbelievably dirty flats or rooming houses. But the sole idea was to “move,” to split from the incredible fabric of guilt and servitude identified so graphically within the Negro consciousness as the white South. However, there was a paradox, even in the emotionalism of that reasoning. The South was *home*. It was the place that Negroes knew, and given the natural attachment of man to land, even loved (105).

In *Myth, Literature and the African World* Wole Soyinka speaks about what constitutes tragedy in Yoruban drama. For Soyinka, its essence is “the anguish of severance, the fragmentation of essence from self” (145). Levee’s tragedy is certainly linked to an analogous fragmentation. In a very real sense, Levee’s eventual stabbing of Toledo symbolically represents a rejection of his own Southern rural self, or the once vulnerable, hapless child who proved unable to protect his mother. And it is this doubleness along with the irreconcilable chasm between Levee’s forgotten roots and his tenuous becoming that constitutes the real tragedy of *Ma Rainey*. Whereas tradition provides a refuge for Toledo, a place symbolically linking him to a past of African ascendancy, Levee has no such historical mooring. For him, Africa is out of reach. Bereft of the ability to read and discover anything other than the pejorative “bone in the nose” stereotypes ubiquitous in the American South, a symbolic return to Africa, such as the one Toledo has embarked upon, is closed to him. Similarly, his rural past does not offer any semblance of dignity. In the North, as Jones pointed out, there was “nothing quite as disparaging as to be called a ‘country boy’” (106). “To the new city dwellers, the ‘country boy’ was someone who still bore the mark, continued the customs, of a presumably discarded Southern past” (106). For Levee, the only option was acclimatization, shucking his country past in order to give the appearance of sophistication and urban savoir-faire. Both literally and figuratively, he cannot go back to rural Mississippi, the scene of a heinous crime where a white God failed him and ignored his desperate prayers.

In fact, Toledo's journey of self-discovery and recovered self-knowledge seems to mirror that of August Wilson himself. In the playwright's 1996 address "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson urged African Americans to unapologetically seize their birthright of a proud cultural identity. During the speech Wilson, like Toledo, champions "self-determination, self-respect and self-defense." He identifies himself with Marcus Garvey as a "race man:" a thinker who regards race as the "most identifiable and recognizable part of our personality" (13-14). Similarly, Wilson recognizes the danger of cultural imperialism and a white power structure that would prefer blacks remain ignorant of their own culture's worth or preferably its very existence. "Those who would deny black Americans their culture would also deny them their history and the inherent values that are a part of all human life" (15).

Toledo is similarly concerned about the fate of the culturally unaware African American. During a lunch break, Toledo makes a snide remark that there won't be any "leftovers with Levee around." Toledo then segues into an elaborate historical metaphor in which he says African Americans have become the "leftovers of history." Communicating through poetic imagery, his monologue suggests that the various African tribes and peoples have been thrown into the American landscape like so many vegetables into a stew. As slaves they provided the sustenance by which a vast society was able to thrive and profit, and now Toledo says they are still walking proof of a history that they themselves have forgotten. They are leftovers, taken advantage of and tragically unaware of themselves as such. A weighty question looms over the black man's uncertain future but for Toledo it cannot be answered if he is unaware of from whence he came, of his status as an historical leftover from a once proud African lineage. "You find me a nigger that knows that and I'll turn any whichaway you want me to. I'll bend over for you. You ain't gonna find that" (47).

Painfully aware of the confusion that comes from not knowing one's origins, both Wilson and his character Toledo point towards the fulcrum of identity that can provide guidance and self-empowerment for African Americans. The overwhelming majority of what Wilson defines in *The Ground* as his artistic ground gets described in decidedly African American terms. He cites an all-black cast of historical figures like Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey and Elijah Mohammed. He then accentuates the importance of African origins, "That is the ground of the affirmation of the value of one's being, an affirmation of his worth in the face of society's urgent and sometimes profound denial" (11). However, it is worth noting that Wilson first acknowledges that his writing career derived sustenance and grounding from a heterogeneous heritage. Though his recognition of classic European dramatists, Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles and William Shakespeare, amongst others, seems overshadowed by his prominent emphasis on black heritage, their inclusion in Wilson's definition of ground negates the possibility of any sort of absolute essentialism.

The black artist writing plays or composing music in America must contend, as the characters of *Ma Rainey*, with a hybrid and evolving sense of self. What's more, the musical era Wilson describes characterizes itself as an unpredictable world of shifting sands. Ma herself, the play's matriarchal figure, does not make her dramatic entrance in firm control of the situation but rather in a frantic state of disarray, having just been wrongfully accused by police of assault and battery. Though she bears the prestigious moniker "Mother of the Blues" and "carries herself in a royal fashion," outside of the studio her authority has no jurisdiction. Outside, on the streets of Chicago, she bears the brunt of unfair and prejudiced treatment like any other black woman of the era might expect. Analogous to the opening scenes of *Macbeth*, in *Ma Rainey* tropes of royalty are interspersed with those of precariousness. With a tenuous

authority, not extending beyond the narrow confines of the recording studio, ironically Ma has to beg for her authority to be recognized. “Tell the man who he’s messing with!” (39). Even the producers, whom she relies upon to defend her threatened dignity, have just been heard bickering over her viability in a changing musical world. In short, stable ground is proving hard to come by.

When adapting to confront shifting power relations, merely hanging onto tradition for tradition’s sake is not always expedient. When Walter Benjamin speaks in *Illuminations* about the challenges facing historians who wish to articulate the past, he suggests the elusiveness of trying to explain “the way it really was.” In short, encapsulating or embodying the past proves an unwieldy proposition. Benjamin’s vision of this challenge can be seen as analogous to the situation confronting Ma Rainey’s musicians. Certainly, they are bearers of tradition but a tradition threatened by a system that dictates success in definitively modern economic terms: “brevity (reduced labor costs), quick turnover (planned obsolescence), and universality (an extensive market) (68, Attali). Tradition, in this case, is the stuff of museums, ossified even before the dust begins to collect on the vinyl’s jacket cover. Clearly, Ma Rainey’s musicians wish to retain a connection with the past but they are singled out like Benjamin’s historian in a “moment of danger.” “The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (257).

In this sense, Levee’s penchant for the avant-garde comes from a keen instinct for musical survival. Similarly, Lawrence Levine makes a strong case that an aversion for tradition characterizes Levee’s mythological patrimony. “The one central feature of almost all trickster tales is their assault upon deeply ingrained and culturally

sanctioned values” (104). Similarly, as described earlier by Rucker, trickster tales mirrored the conditions of social hierarchy that marked Atlantic Africa and encouraged the adaptation of survival tactics to resist an oppressive elite. Resistance, that fundamental foothold that characterizes Levee’s innermost self, proves incompatible with following a well-worn path of formulaic musical expression. Instead, as Kim Pereira eloquently puts it, Levee finds “such coercive stipulations discordant with the inner rhythms urging him along an unrestricted individual path” (17).

Like Miles Davis, the jazz trumpeter par excellence whose career embodied perpetual reinvention of self, Levee prefers riding the wave of jazz’s latest incarnation in his historical moment. Because Miles Davis and the fictional Levee’s histories reveal numerous parallels it is worth considering how the trumpeter recounts his own family history in the autobiography *Miles*. Remarkably, Davis came from a family whose members distinguished themselves by playing classical music during the era of slavery. He quotes his grandfather, who spoke about the racist musical ambiance of the rural South, where “[t]hey only let black people play in gin houses and honky tonks” (12). According to Davis’ father, the post-slavery era was one in which whites were no longer willing to listen to blacks play anything other than spirituals or the blues. The implications are clear. The parameters laid out for black musicians of the era reveal how music and power relations have always been interwoven. Driven black musicians, like Davis, who went on to study at Julliard and master European musical notation, posed a threat to a white hegemony that wished to differentiate between “serious” music and the class and race-specific music of gin houses and honky tonks. However, artificially imposed barriers were unable to withstand the floodgates of African American innovation. In the 1920’s, artists like Duke Ellington composed

music that diverged from the conventional trajectory of dance music or rudimentary blues. Like the music of Mozart or Beethoven, Ellington's compositions demanded a seated and attentive audience and exacted critical attention as an African American equivalent to the European classical tradition.

Pereira argues that Levee is too immature to "perceive the understructure of blues" in the new form of swing and that as such he is unconscious of his role as a torchbearer of tradition (17). However, given his nature as a trickster who eschews overt attachment to established models, it is arguable that Levee recognizes the roles of blues in the evolving codes of swing. Rather, it is his fear of not being counted among those that Attali designates as the "innovators and heralds of worlds in the making" that drives Levee to disparage a blues genre he fears destined for history's dustbin. Miles Davis himself was definitely a "herald of worlds in the making" and his eventual inclusion in the emerging bebop movement of the late 1940's signaled an abrupt change in the way black musicians approached their audience. Whereas swing tempos readily lent themselves to dancing, the burgeoning form of bebop maintained a blistering pace that rendered dancing unthinkable. Bebop unapologetically played black music for black audiences making no attempt to cater to white critics of the era who roundly criticized the new genre. According to Davis, "They didn't understand the music" and "hated the musicians." Just as in Levee's case, pushing the envelope provoked friction and widespread misunderstanding while simultaneously positing a new standard. Both trumpeters can be seen as part of a lineage of tricksters and non-conformists that strove to avoid becoming "a tool of the ruling classes."

Interestingly, the similarities between the fictional Levee and Miles Davis do not end with a shared affinity for innovation. Like Levee's father, Davis' grandfather

had been a successful bookkeeper in Arkansas who had managed to buy five hundred acres of land at the turn of the twentieth century. As Davis recounts:

When he bought all that land the white people of the area who had used him to straighten out their financial matters, their money books, turned against him. Ran him off his land. In their minds, a black man wasn't supposed to have all that land and all that money. He wasn't supposed to be smart. Smarter than them. It hasn't changed all that much; things are like that even today (12).

Considering the uncanny resemblance to Levee's story, one is tempted to imagine that Wilson might have used Davis' story as a template for sketching the broad strokes of his brash trumpeter. However, the truth, more likely, is that many African American family histories are rife with tales of similar oppression at the hands of white landowners unwilling to compete on a level playing field with recently freed slaves. Davis, like Levee, carried the scars of racial injustice, and often wore his indignation on his sleeve, which sometimes earned him a reputation of being surly and disdainful. The roots of Davis' views on race span across generations and link him to a collective African American memory. In *Miles* he describes an historical incident that occurred in 1917 in Saint Louis in which white meat packers, angered at the prospect of losing jobs to black workers, "went on a rampage" killing black people. Davis attributes hearing the story told and retold, to a lifelong distrust he held towards whites.

Anyway maybe some of remembering that is in my personality and comes out in the way I look at most white people. Not all, because there are some great white people. But the way they killed all them black people back then- just shot them down like they were out shooting pigs or stray dogs. Shot them in their houses, shot babies and women. Burned down houses with people in them and hung some black men from lampposts. When I was coming up in East Saint Louis, black people I knew never forgot what sick white people had done to them back in 1917 (15).

Whereas Levee's trauma came from direct personal experience, Davis' came predominantly from a shared recounted history. Regardless, both men were forced to

come up with strategies for dealing with a white world in which neither of them believed he could fully trust. Perhaps the most telling difference between the two men hinges upon each man's diverging perspective on the smile, that seemingly benign display of emotion. Benign or not, Miles Davis refused to indulge his audiences in the beaming smiles that typified entertainers of his day. In one of his autobiography's most striking passages, Davis sharply rebukes Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, two of the instrument's most accomplished players, for the way in which they always smiled for audiences.

As much as I love Dizzy and loved Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, I always hated the way they used to laugh and grin for the audiences. I know *why* they did it- to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players. They had families to feed. Plus they both liked acting the clown; it's just the way Dizzy and Satch were. I didn't have nothing against them doing it if they want to. But *I* didn't like it and didn't *have* to like it. I come from a different social and class background than both of them, and I'm from the Midwest, while both of them are from the South. So we look at white people a little differently. Also I was younger than them and didn't have to go through all the shit they had to go through to get accepted in the music industry. They had already opened a lot of doors for people like me to go through, and I felt that I could be about just about playing my horn- the only thing I wanted to do. I didn't look at myself as an entertainer the way they both did. I wasn't going to do it just so that some non-playing, racist, white motherfucker could write some nice things about me (83).

For Davis smiling at audiences and producers was tantamount to demeaning oneself. Every forced smile was paid for in lost dignity. The smile embodied the ultimate gesture of the Uncle Tom caricature, the same ubiquitous one that permeated the mass media with subservient cardboard cutout blacks redolent of Blackface, Buckwheat and *Gone With the Wind*. Pertinently, for Davis the image of the smiling black performer also harks back to the South, borne out of its shameful slavocracy. Not smiling was a refusal, a refusal to be needy, and a refusal to seek a white society's approbation. Davis boldly let the critics know that his success was in no way

dependent upon their approval or disapproval. Regardless, the public remained enthralled with both his playing and his audacious individualism.

Though flamboyant and rakish like Davis, Levee's audaciousness is in its larval stages in comparison. He brags suggesting a superior musical intellect than that of his colleagues, yet outside of vaunting arrogantly and strutting around like a self-proclaimed "king of the barnyard," he has yet to achieve any kind of serious professional recognition. Though Cutler attempts to bring the young trumpeter down to earth, his efforts are of no avail. "You wanna be one of them...what you call...virtuoso or something you in the wrong place. You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver...you just an old trumpet player come dime a dozen" (19). Confusing his skill and talent, he has yet to deliver on the visions of grandeur that he shamelessly flaunts around his more experienced band mates. "If my father knowed I was gonna turn out like this, he would've named me Gabriel. I'm gonna get me a band and make me some records" (19). When Davis speaks of Dizzy and Satchmo and the "shit that they had to go through to get accepted in the music industry," one is easily reminded of Levee's precarious status, and his borderline sycophant behavior. Decidedly, Levee has not achieved the star status he brags about and he cares deeply what Sturdyvant thinks of his new compositions. As such, his band mates monitor the trumpeter's subservient behavior towards the white producer carefully.

As Toledo levels piercing criticisms suggesting the folly of the black man waiting for the white man "to put the crown on what he say," the comments go beyond mere verbal jousting. On some level, Levee feels the venomous sting lurking behind Toledo's remarks. Coming from the South, the trope of Uncle Tom and the weakness it implies proves all too familiar. After all, when his own father gave up his land to one of his mother's rapists, it was likely presumed that he did so out of the

same stereotypical and fearful self-preservation. The brutal honesty of Toledo's remarks cuts through revealing the ugly possibility of sycophancy. Toledo sees things sharply, perhaps too sharply, because his commentary wounds Levee deeply. In describing his character, Wilson says Toledo "misapplies his knowledge" and it is perhaps this lethal combination of bluntness and penetrating awareness to which Wilson refers, a quality that will eventually place Toledo in mortal danger.

After watching Levee speak to Sturdyvant, Cutler and Slow Drag join in the melee, alluding that Levee is the quintessential Uncle Tom. Levee can no longer ignore their taunts. The long self-justifying monologue that follows begins with the assertion that they don't know who he is or where he comes from. "You don't know nothing about Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got!" (56). Knowing that nothing less than his reputation is at stake, Levee goes to great length to justify not only his own behavior towards whites but also that of his father. The story of his family's humiliation at the hands of racist Southerners, recounted earlier, is chilling. No matter how arrogant he might have come across prior to the story's revelation, Ma's musicians cannot remain indifferent to such heart wrenching tragedy. A grave silence follows as the trumpeter concludes, "You all just leave Levee alone about the white man" (58). Through his tragic story, his smile is justified. Yes he smiles, but the smile is only a decoy, the smile of a trickster who has revealed his mask for all to see. And if only for a moment, Levee's deepest sincerity seems irrefutable. Following the silence, Slow Drag picks up his bass and sings a blues, "If I had my way, I would tear this building down." The song, recorded by Blind Willie Johnson in 1927, resonates with the empathetic anger tinged with impotence that all of the men feel upon hearing of Levee's mother's rape. As the curtain falls on Act One the questions ring out successively, if Levee had had his way, if his father had had his

way, such questions emerge along with the lingering taste of bitter gall and a gathering cloud of unexpressed violence.

Moving into Act Two, unresolved trauma hangs thick in the air. The tension between Ma and the producers continues to erode trust between them. After they botch recording a successful take on the song “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” Ma boldly proclaims that she’s leaving. Meanwhile Levee is provoked by Toledo, who suggests that African Americans have become “imitation white men” who measure their sense of self worth on white men’s terms, even when it comes to their clothes. Having just witnessed Ma’s haughty disdain towards the producers, Levee boldly retorts that he, like Ma, is going to make the white man respect him. For Cutler, it’s a respect not worth bothering with, for in the end, Cutler argues, whites have zero respect for the black man. Cutler illustrates his point by telling how a well-respected Reverend by the name Gates had gotten stranded at a Southern train depot, left behind as a result of there being no restrooms provided for black travelers. Soon the minister found himself abandoned in an unfriendly town where a gang of whites surrounded him and forced him to dance in a humiliating mockery of his religious authority. Directly attacking Levee’s claim that he will make the white man respect him, Cutler shows “how the white folks don’t care nothing about who or what you is” (80). Even the pillars of the community can be stripped of their basic human dignity. As such, Wilson’s implicit message about post-slavery America is unequivocal: the very fact of becoming a leader esteemed by the African American community assured becoming a target for white aggression. Whether it is Ma being hassled by the police, Reverend Gates having the cross ripped from his neck, or Levee’s mother being brutally raped, the affronts to the dignity of *Ma Rainey’s* characters prove relentless.

The sense that no one is immune from the assault upon African Americans continues to erode characters' trust and provokes a divisive dialogue that pits them one against the other. Levee, true to his trickster self, turns the tables on the band mates whose commentaries have consistently hit too close to home. Cognizant of Cutler's Christian faith, Levee smells blood and proceeds to level a verbal assault upon Christianity. Riffing off of the other characters' penchant for portraying him as a submissive tool of the white producers, Levee suggests that Christianity itself is the symbol, *par excellence*, of submission to the white man. If the Reverend Gates' God was so powerful then "why didn't he strike some of them crackers down?" (81). In a spirit of mockery, Levee pulls out his knife and challenges "Cutler's God" to save him. For Levee, the reason for God's impotence is clear, namely that he's a white man's God, unresponsive to the needs of the black people. As an insubordinate of the white power structure, Levee seems to intuitively realize, like Fanon, that "the colonizer and the colonized are locked in a deadly combat that affects all aspects of life" (Bulhan, 116). Power is equally linked to violence as it is to a European derived religion. The religious conversion of African Americans, though not achieved outwardly through violence, can be seen as part of the same process of subjugation that imposed European values and beliefs on the African Diaspora.

However, Levee by daring "Cutler's God" to save him is not merely pointing towards the political nature of Christianity as a subjugating force. Here it is worth recalling Henry Louis Gates description of signifying in the African American trickster tradition as repetition and revision often characterized by pastiche. At one point, Levee lifts his knife to the heavens and boldly questions God, "Did you turn your back?" in reference to the prayers that went unanswered as his mother suffered. The moment undeniably brings to mind the crucified Christ calling out desperately,

“Oh Lord why hast thou forsaken me?” In the book of Matthew, some onlookers interpreted the provocative statement as a bold challenge to God to demonstrate his purported power: “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him” (Matthew 27:49). With this intertextuality in mind, Levee’s charade of defying God directly becomes an act of Signifyin(g). He posits himself as a Christ-figure audaciously foregoing the supplicating gesture of prayer in a brash demand for God’s immediate attention. The fact that Wilson describes Levee’s actions as “clearly calculated” reinforces the notion that this parody was fully intended, the clever manipulations of a trickster shifting control of a situation that had turned against him.

Levee’s rejection of Christianity is also intensely personal. “God ain’t never listened to no nigger’s prayers. God take a nigger’s prayers and throw them in the garbage.” Boiling under the surface of Levee’s scathing diatribe burns the fire of his anger towards God’s unresponsiveness to his prayers for his mother. Blaming God’s impotence reveals a masked self-hatred, because if there is anything that Levee has come to hate, it is impotence and the inability to defend oneself against the scourge of racism. The truth that Levee’s hatred of the Christian God stems directly from his own lived trauma becomes starkly evident when he goes on to hold up a knife daring Cutler’s God to save him, “like you did my mama!” As such, any examples of other African Americans’ inability to defend themselves, such as the Reverend Gates’ story, become unbearable reminders of his own weakness at the hands of the oppressor.

Ultimately, one cannot help but wonder why Toledo, ostensibly the play’s most grounded character, falls prey to Levee’s knife. His attunement to African carryovers within the African American landscape, his hard earned self-knowledge and his intellectual acumen are impressive traits. Toledo seems to embody everything that Wilson hopes African Americans can aspire to. However, all of these intellectual

achievements seem ill equipped to address the daily realities of African American suffering. Wilson seems to emphasize that his erudite language, while impressive, flies over the heads of his band mates and fails to speak to their needs. What's more, on a certain level Toledo fails to recognize the gravity of Levee's angst. He is too clever and his insights hit too close to home. Even if twenty years have passed since the violent assault on Levee's family, the wound remains open and he remains susceptible and highly vulnerable.

In the end, Levee has been separated from his band mates by a veritable minefield of dichotomies: Africa/Europe, blues/swing, North/South, city/country, literacy/illiteracy, substance/style. On the surface, his is the flash of image, urban panache and the latest sounds, whereas his band mates subsist on a simple diet of roots-oriented music and utilitarian clothing. Less conveniently, as a trickster from a legacy of tricksters, he resists such superficial analyses. Throughout, Wilson germinates a seed of doubt in the spectators' mind. Could anything have been different? Even as Toledo slumps to the floor slain by Levee, one wonders how could he have left such a tragic beginning without anything but a tragic ending?

Despite these lingering questions, Ma Rainey proves undeniably more grounded and real than her young trumpeter. Like the haughty and disdainful Miles Davis, she eschews forced smiles or anything that could be interpreted as fawning behavior. Her authenticity comes from an artistic and aesthetic self-knowledge and a staunch resistance to anything that might diminish her autonomy. She refuses to submit to the fickle demands of the white producers and in doing so affirms the blues as an expression of her innermost being. Yet, characteristic of Wilson's oeuvres there are no clear-cut paths to authenticity. The classic blues genre itself, which Rainey had pioneered, felt the incessant tug of change. Undeniably, the blues represent one

pathway to authentic being, but it is by no means the only path for a constantly evolving African American culture. In the 1927 of Wilson's play, change was the only constant, and certain spirits, such as Levee's, were pulled by an equally authentic path of resisting the dominant African American musical paradigm.

Just as important as the play's depiction of music as a barometer of authenticity and identity, was its treatment of the inherent risks of negotiating doubleness and the life of a trickster. Like Hedley, in *Seven Guitars*, Levee simultaneously resists and internalizes the oppressive messages of white supremacy. Convinced that his smile is merely a mask, Levee fails to recognize that it has become internalized. As such, his resistance proves just as real as his desperation to become accepted by white society. In the end, Levee resists any convenient monochromatic labels of authentic or counterfeit and instead embodies a being in turmoil, heaved in the storm of his own powerlessness.

The ultimate reminder of Levee's impotence is revealed when Sturdyvant rejects Levee's songs as being unmarketable. Unceremoniously he announces, "They're not the type of songs we're looking for." When Levee begs Sturdyvant to reconsider, he falls back on his businessman's instinct explaining that Levee's music will not be able to sell as well as Ma Rainey's albums. Grasping for straws, Levee once again attempts to disparage Ma's blues, reiterating that the people are tired of that "jug band music." It's too late for his antics. Stripped of the approval he had so desperately longed for, Levee clings to his last bastion of dignity: the superficial shine of his newly purchased Florsheim shoes. Desperate to find an outlet for his frustration, it becomes clear that the fact of Toledo stepping on his shoes is merely a pretext and not a justification for his violent response. Though wearing a mask has proved expedient, internally Levee has suffered the consequences of consistently suppressing

irreconcilable emotions. Maintaining a smiling façade, while internally harboring bitter resentment, has finally exacted its enormous psychological toll. Whereas at the end of Act One Levee reveals his own mask as a self-avowed trickster, here as his ruse fails he is unmasked, stripped by Toledo's piercing observation that he has been looking for the white man's approval to justify himself all along.

The unmasking puts things in perspective. Ma Rainey's refusal to fawn insincerely stands in sharp relief against Levee's deceptive ruse. Ultimately, in attempting to distance himself from the pain of his Southern rural roots, Levee has tried to demarcate the line between himself and the other: the sophisticated swing musician versus the barnyard blues man. The biographer of Fanon, Hussein Bulhan, describes such an effort by the oppressed psyche as the search for "a convenient line of demarcation, a tangible anchor for an ever-shifting boundary" (125). Unable to direct his negative emotions toward Sturdyvant, the real source of his disappointment, Levee impulsively seeks out a convenient scapegoat. Typical of victims of oppression, as internal conflicts "threaten disintegration" he resorts "to disparagement and persecution of others in the hope of obtaining a semblance of cohesion" (125). He stands unmasked and stunned by the possibility that he is not Gabriel at heaven's gate but perhaps "just another trumpet player come dime a dozen." In this vulnerable moment, he desperately needs to differentiate himself from that which he has come to despise. And what more convenient line of demarcation could present itself than that of his city slicker shoes being stepped upon by the uncouth country clodhoppers of Toledo? In one moment, the accumulated rage of a lifetime flashes out not against the Southern racists who oppressed him but against a fellow black man whose roots strongly resemble his. His knife plunges into Toledo, but it might as well have gone into his own back.

Chapter III A Herald of Things to Come? : *Wilson's Vision of a Reconfigured African American Spirituality in Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

If *Ma Rainey's* Toledo comes across as the quintessentially articulate African-American, possessed of self-knowledge of his origins, Herald Loomis, the protagonist of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, seems to be his antithesis. Rude, unschooled, uncouth and unkempt, Loomis gives the impression of being distinctively inarticulate. In fact, Wilson's protagonist confides his inability to articulate certain experiences. Speaking of himself in the third person he confesses, "Loomis done seen some things he ain't got words to tell you" (250). From early on, this inarticulateness seems to be a liability. Considering the fact that King Hedley of *Seven Guitars* demonstrated intimate knowledge of the history of African American resistance, and Toledo of *Ma Rainey* eloquently described African cultural carryovers in America, Loomis appears profoundly lost in comparison. From the outset, if any of Wilson's characters seem unlikely to arrive at self-understanding, it is Loomis. However, if there is any hope for Loomis and the play's other characters plagued by loss and separation, it is embodied in memory, specifically a memory that transcends the individual and embraces the collective spiritual experience of the African Diaspora. As Harry Elam poignantly remarks in "*The Past as Present*:" "Wilson's African-influenced spirituality fundamentally concerns processes of healing as it connects to the everyday trials and tribulations of black life to the forces of the divine" (167).

By addressing cultural memory rather than book knowledge, Wilson succeeds in portraying Loomis as an everyman who embodies his Africanness not through erudite intellectualism but through African carryovers that have survived in the repository of collective memory. Throughout the play, Wilson disseminates the cultural markings and tropes suggestive of the African sources that have sculpted and

molded the African American experience. In an interview with Samuel Freedman, “A Playwright Talks About the Blues,” Wilson spoke directly about the problem of blacks trying to worship a decidedly white God.

I think it was Amiri Baraka who said that when you look in the mirror you should see your God. All over the world, nobody has a God who doesn't resemble them. Except Black Americans. They can't even see that they're worshipping someone else's God, because they want so badly to assimilate, to get to the fruits of society. The message of America is “Leave your Africanness at the door.” My message is “claim what is yours.”

In *Joe Turner* the European religious impact on African American experience is manifest, yet even the play's spiritual metaphors that seem exclusively Christian in origin can be traced to the African roots that made syncretistic fusion of Judeo-Christian and African spiritual beliefs possible. Whether it is through the spontaneous Juba dance, the trance-like possession and vision of Loomis or the way the characters carry themselves in ordinary situations, Africanness is ubiquitous. Late in the play when the character Bertha moves about the kitchen “as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness,” Wilson's stage directions make explicit her direct link to an African way of being. “It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and blood's memory” (283). By suggesting these connections through stage directions rather than expressing them overtly in dialogue, the characters of *Joe Turner* embody rather than explain Africanness.

In delving into the themes of African American memory and loss, the questions are numerous. How can one identify the traits of African gods and their acolytes in a land where descendents of Africans have “forgotten the names of the gods?” In a hybrid culture braided with Christian and African beliefs is it possible to untangle roots that have mingled for centuries? Where does one belief system end and another begin? Has syncretism rendered such distinctions implausible? And for those

inveterate skeptics of cultural carryovers, was African spirituality even able to withstand the assault of the Middle Passage and arrive intact on North American shores? In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson, by alluding to both the trials endured by the African American Diaspora along with its cultural carryovers, seems to maintain the position that Africanness indeed survived and that its reality has transformed the New World culture that it has come into contact with.

In the play's prologue, we learn that the action will take place in Pittsburgh in 1911. We arrive in the midst of an exodus in process, in which freed slaves from the South are arriving in droves wandering into the city. The arriving Diaspora is disoriented, flung like spinning tops careening into a foreign land, deprived of all sense of bearings and spiritual mooring. "Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrived dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing" (203). The description encapsulates Loomis perfectly, a hapless drifter, whose only hope lies in Wilson's vague suggestion of a "song worth singing." Unable to speak eloquently for himself, to a large degree the audience is left to interpret his mysterious ways through the eyes of others. And with the exception of Bynum, a conjure man, the eyes looking upon Loomis are decidedly unsympathetic.

Seth, the owner of a boardinghouse where the play's action unfolds, is particularly convinced of Loomis' suspect nature. On numerous occasions he suspiciously confides in his wife Bertha that "something ain't right with that fellow." Similarly, Loomis is portrayed as a wild man who looks like he has been sleeping in the woods. As the play's intrigue builds, Seth's increasingly imaginative conjectures go beyond mere wariness by insinuating Loomis had led the life of a hardened criminal. "He's one of them mean looking niggers look like he done killed somebody

gambling over a quarter” (222). But Bynum, the play’s hoodoo man and spiritual guide, remains unconvinced by Seth’s accusations. He sees in Loomis, instead, a traveler whose rough appearance comes as a result of many hard miles on the road. His down to earth logic seem to counter Seth’s worries and suspicions, at least temporarily. “He ain’t no gambler. Gamblers wear nice shoes. This fellow got on clodhoppers.”

As a Northerner, Seth is highly conscious of the gap between himself and the Southern-born Loomis. As LeRoi Jones points out deftly in *Blues People*, blacks raised in the North were never exposed to a black culture that remained as undiluted as the distinctly black culture that had survived in the South. “Before the great movements north, many Northern Negroes were quite purposely resisting...their cultural heritage in an attempt to set up a completely ‘acceptable’ route into what they had come to think of as the broadness of American society” (109). As we’ve seen in *Ma Rainey*, the South became synonymous with backwardness. Seth’s strong prejudice towards Southern mores similarly comes out when he speaks about the boardinghouse guest Jeremy who has arrived into Pittsburgh with a guitar on his back.

These niggers come up here with that old backward country style of living. It’s hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain’t been nothing but foolish acting niggers. Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads...and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom...But these niggers keep on coming. Walking...riding...carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina. What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This is the city (209).

If Seth is unforgiving towards Jeremy, who looks for work, his assessment of the shiftless Loomis, who arrived from the South with no intention of seeking gainful employment, is acerbic and marked by the presumption of Northern superiority. Forgoing the widely variant interpretations between Seth and Bynum, there are some facts about Loomis that Wilson unveils from the outset. Loomis has arrived at Seth’s

boardinghouse with Zonia, his eleven-year-old daughter. He claims to be looking for his wife, a woman named Martha Loomis. When asked by Bynum where he's from, he responds nebulously that he "comes from all over." He's the quintessential traveling man. "Whichever way the road take us, that's where we go" (217). Though Seth immediately recognizes the resemblance to her mother in Zonia's face, he refuses to reveal the whereabouts of Loomis' wife, a woman who has changed her name to Martha Pentecost. Seth argues that, "the way that fellow look I wasn't going to tell him nothing" (223). Nevertheless, Loomis remains obstinate in his quest to find Martha. He hires the services of a white peddler named Rutherford Selig, who is renowned as a People Finder, to go about seeking Martha out in the city. Similarly Seth sees him hovering outside the neighborhood church, giving the distinct impression of being a stalker. However, when Seth goes as far as claiming that Loomis looks as if he were interested in robbing the church, his reliability as an objective witness becomes called into question.

From the beginning, Seth concerns himself exclusively with outward appearances, whereas Bynum treats Loomis as a complex human being worthy of respect. As the owner of a boardinghouse, and a skilled craftsman contemplating starting his own business making pots and pans, Seth is described as having a "stability that none of the other characters have" (205). Whereas the other characters carry the scars of slavery and forced labor in the South, Seth is born of Northern free parents, a fact that renders him myopic when considering Loomis' behaviors. Essentially, he relies on an arsenal of black male stereotypes to pigeonhole Loomis' marginality. As a result of Seth's advantageous beginnings, tropes of migrancy versus stability color his perspective on life. Seth is undoubtedly proud of his stability and the solid reputation it has earned him. The upshot of this "ornery" pride being that

Seth is repelled by Loomis, a character that is everything he is not. Loomis' unkempt appearance and road-weary stare become metonymic triggers that activate both an undeniable paranoia and a host of perceived dichotomies: Stability/mobility, employed/shiftless, family/criminal, North/South, integrated/marginalized, Christian/Pagan, forthright/sneaky, chaste/lewd. In each binary distinction Seth finds confirmation that Loomis is unsavory, untrustworthy and, in short, condemned. Ultimately though, Seth's frame of reference resonates far more with European sensibilities than African ones. And through Eurocentric lens the character of Loomis remains unfathomable, a cryptogram whose erratic behavior appears shrouded in an impenetrable fog. In order to approach Loomis, it will prove considerably more revealing to consider the African scaffolding that Wilson erected throughout the entire edifice of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

The first clues to the play's African spiritual heritage are revealed in Wilson's prologue, where he emphasizes the steel industry of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is described as a bustling city in the throes of transformation and constant motion. "Men throw countless bridges across the river, lay roads and carve tunnels through the hills sprouting with houses" (203). The men and women who arrive here are "marked" by the same road weariness and travails that provoke men like Seth to be suspicious of their intentions. Nevertheless, there is hope, they are "seeking to scrape from the narrow cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth" (203). Undeniably the Yoruba god Ogun, god of steel, warfare, hunting and transportation comes to mind. As a deity, Ogun achieved renown by discovering how to change ore into iron. His adherents similarly quench their spiritual thirst by attending to "that which thrusts into new realms, breaks new ground, and

achieves the ordinarily unachievable” (Barnes, 28-29). Wilson’s aforementioned emphasis on the newly arrived characters’ “bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves” clearly resonates with the metaphysical and metaphorical charge of Ogun. As such, Loomis favors spirituality as supernatural transformation and intensely personal revelation as opposed to established dogma and religious doctrine.

In addition to the spiritual heritage of iron in Yoruban cosmology, archaeologists have linked some of the earliest historical examples of iron to African origins. Whereas the Iron Age began in the 8th century BC in Central Europe and the 6th century BC in Northern Europe, by contrast in 1500 BC Sub-Saharan Africa had already undergone an iron revolution in which the discovery of iron smelting made an enormous impact furthering agriculture, weapon production and the beginnings of industry (Bocoum, 94). This makes Sub-Saharan Africa one of the world’s “oldest metallurgies.” So in addition to referencing the spiritual lineage of Ogun, Wilson’s emphasis on iron and steel points to the historical presumption of Europe being the cradle of industry and innovation which is belied by the fact African ingenuity was crucial to its actualization.

The spiritual activity of Bynum also points towards a distinct Yoruban presence in the play, a presence that has been remarked upon by Kim Pereira, Paul Carter Harrison and Sandra L. Richards. From the play’s outset, Bynum can be seen in the boardinghouse yard carrying out the ritual sacrifice of a pigeon. For Seth, Bynum’s activities are nothing more than “heebie jeebie” stuff that he would rather ignore. However, Bertha, his wife, seems more attuned to Bynum’s activities and even proceeds to explain to Seth the nature of Bynum’s ritual and how he will “pray over that blood...mark out his circle and come back into the house” (207). Bertha’s insistence on attending a Christian church while still sprinkling salt around the house

to dissuade evil spirits points to the syncretism of African and Judeo-Christian spiritual beliefs that permeates the characters' worldviews.

In addition to carrying out rituals, Bynum also has been marked by experiences, which transcend ordinary understanding and explanation. When speaking to Selig, an itinerant peddler, Bynum describes an experience with a Shiny Man who had light coming out of him. The Shiny Man performed a blood ritual that transported Bynum to a world where everything was bigger than life. In the article "Yoruba Gods on the American Stage," Sandra Richards compares Bynum's Shiny Man to Esu, a divinity who is regarded as an intermediary between the gods and man, analogous to Hermes in Greek mythology. The enormous size of everything in Bynum's vision corresponds with Yoruban praise songs for Esu that describe him as "having difficulty sleeping in a house because it was too small but finding comfort in a hut in which he could stretch out" (94). Similarly, Richards conjectures that the character's shininess is suggestive of metal, the hallmark of Ogun. In the vision, Bynum is lead to his father, who speaks to him with a huge mouth, perhaps indicative of the importance of the words he utters to his son. The father then teaches Bynum his song, a "binding song" that will forever distinguish him as someone destined to bind people together. Since Esu interprets the will of the gods to man, Esu is particularly concerned with hermeneutics or the art of interpretation. As such, when the Shiny Man suggests to Bynum that he will show him the Secret of Life and how to sing his own song, the story enters the Yoruban realm of divination and interpretation of signs that characterize West African spiritual tradition.

Analogous to Loomis' commentary, Bynum says the Shiny Man showed him something "that I ain't got words to tell you" (212-213). The fact that both characters profess having been exposed to a realm both unintelligible and indescribable deserves

attention. In *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates speaks about the Fon equivalent to Esu, a messenger god named Legba. Legba is also an interpreter who specializes in unraveling “abstract indirect utterances or riddles” (24). According to Robert Pelton, Legba “is a creator of discourse, for his every movement is, in T.S. Eliot’s phrase, a ‘raid on the inarticulate,’ a foray into the formless, which simultaneously gives shape to the dark and fearsome and new life to structure always in danger of becoming a skeleton” (Pelton, 94). In *Joe Turner*, these commonly experienced “forays in into the formless” mark both Loomis and Bynum as characters that have faced what Wole Soyinka refers to as the chthonic realm, a realm of becoming on the borderline of life and death (439). In both Fon and Yoruba traditions, oracles are responsible for interpreting the will of the gods through divination. In Ifa divination, which utilizes 256 cryptograms and sixteen sacred palm nuts, Ifa is described as a god of determinate meanings while Esu, “god of indeterminacy, rules the interpretative process” (Gates, 20-21). Ifa demands that the signs be read, but it is Esu who decodes them. Considering this, Bynum’s consistent role as an interpreter of visions and signs for Loomis and others, places him firmly in the lineage of the *babalawos*, or oracles charged with interpreting the mystical meanings inscribed in the transcendent. Even for himself, a seemingly enlightened visionary, the job of interpreting proves endless, and like the other characters his destiny remains unresolved. With Selig’s help, he is still seeking out his Shiny Man in the hopes of verifying that he correctly ascertained his own destiny and song.

The reoccurring theme of learning to sing one’s own song represents a prominent motif running throughout *Joe Turner*. Loomis repeatedly speaks about the need to “make his own world.” Shorn of cultural references and the stability that comes from having a permanent home, characters like Loomis, Jeremy, a wandering

blues guitarist and Mattie, a resident of the boardinghouse searching for her lost husband, are all marked by bewildering loss and the daunting prospect of trying to build a new life for themselves. For Bynum, in order to regain their spiritual moorings the characters need to learn their “song,” a unique song of destiny just like the one his father taught him in the vision of the Shiny Man, or the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. As Richards points out, Esu, as a mediator between the human and divine, proves prominent at the “crossroads where men and women must make decisions” (94).

According to Yoruban cosmology, when humans are born into the world they forget everything regarding heaven and their destiny on earth (Ademuleya, 216). In order to retrieve this memory a person must gain access to his *ori-inu*, or inner head. “[To the Yoruba] the word *ori*, in contrast to its English meaning as physical ‘head,’ or its biological description as the seat of the major sensory organs, connotes the total nature of its bearer” (Ademuleya, 214). As such, the physical *ori* merely constitutes a symbol, whereas the “inner person” can only be accessed through the *ori-inu* or inner head. And it is through a diviner or *babalawo* that humans can regain access to their *ori*, which in turn will “remember the course and content of their chosen destiny” (Ademuleya, 216). As such, Bynum’s notion of discovering one’s own song reveals itself analogous to *ori-inu*, as both are innately linked to reconnecting with one’s destiny through the means of a supernatural communion with the divine will.

However idyllic this may sound, the spectator/reader is still left to grapple with troubling evidence suggesting that Seth’s suspicions of Loomis might be justified. Walking in on a spontaneous session of Juba, a circle dance with links to African traditional dance ceremonies, Loomis behaves in an alarmingly erratic manner. The mention of the Holy Ghost, accompanying the dance, triggers a violent reaction in

Loomis. He vehemently protests, demanding, “Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me?” (250). Emphasizing the carnal rather than spiritual aspect of his questions, Loomis begins unzipping his pants, enacting a sardonic pantomime of measuring his sexual member against that of God’s. Nowhere in the play do his actions seem more outlandish, and nowhere does it raise the ire of Seth with more efficacy. Taken aback, Seth shouts, “Nigger you crazy!” and the next day Loomis is told that his days in the boardinghouse are numbered. In the article “Doubling, Madness and Modern African American Drama,” Harry Elam speaks about the way that Wilson’s oeuvre both “comments on and repositions black masculinity” (622). Loomis, though not addressed specifically by Elam in this article, provides a perfect example of Wilson’s aforementioned commentary on the black male. Loomis’ lewd suggestiveness makes him extremely vulnerable to a reading of “black masculinity [that] has been associated with bestiality, criminality, and uncontrolled sexuality” (622). And while Seth, as a black man, is not overtly part of the white hegemony, which historically has promoted this stereotype and subsequently criminalized black males, his elevated societal position makes him susceptible to engage in the same racial profiling that he himself is subjected to from whites.

Following this highly charged scene, the temptation to follow Seth’s instinct and label Loomis as a lascivious and unstable lunatic cannot be denied, but such a reading would be hasty. What’s more such a reading would fail to take into account Yoruban cosmology and the very different assumptions on which West African spirituality is grounded. In the book *Africa’s Ogun*, Sandra Barnes speaks about the way that Ogun’s devotees engage in rituals that “emphasize emotions and personality traits” (3). Convulsive displays of anger occur to such an “extent that they may heedlessly injure innocent bystanders” (3). Similarly the concept of God as absolute

perfection and humanity as conversely fallen from grace and lost to sin is foreign to the West African Weltanschauung. “To a great extent, whether it is in thought, deed, or mood, humans and deities mirror one another in West African philosophies.

Therefore, character strengths and character flaws are as divine as they are human”

(3). Similarly, rather than hinging on the binary oppositions of good versus evil or God versus Satan, in West African philosophies power is neither good nor evil, but simply exists in a singular continuum (19). As such, these deities who resemble humans are inconceivable as one-sided entities capable only of good or bad actions. Their devotees must therefore embrace all aspects of their supernatural counterparts and bring them “into balance through sacrifice and other ritual ministrations” (19). In such a cosmology, the line between the divine and the worldly is blurred. By saying, “Why God got to be so big?” Loomis protests a theology that posits God as an otherworldly being whose certitude and infallible nature seem far removed from the troubled crises that torment those in the human realm.

Human beings, in contrast to omnipotent white-bearded gods, must struggle with tensions created by the simultaneous forces of freedom and restraint. It is this struggle with mastering contradictory impulses that comes to define Ogun’s charge. Binary oppositions such as erotic/ascetic impulses are brought together in the figure of Ogun to demonstrate the tension between worldly and spiritual realms. And as power cannot be divided into dualities such as positive and negative forces, all of its traits exist simultaneously in a singular “supernatural representation” (19). Ogun himself is described as having many faces. He is considered as a terrifying warrior who uses weapons and magic charms to subdue his foes. At the same time, Ogun wears the guise of “society’s ideal male,” a leader renowned for his sexual prowess as well as being a defender of truth, equity and justice (2). Like Shiva, he is both creator and

destroyer. For Wole Soyinka, Ogun is a tragic figure “because he presides over humans’ struggle to master themselves” (Barnes, 18). Poised at the edge of the void, the devotee of Ogun must struggle with the implications of being and nothingness. Reestablishing balance and harmony can only be achieved by passing through this transitional gulf with the aid of a “titanic resolution of the will” (Soyinka, 441).

Considering this West African concept of divinity, casts Loomis’ behavior into a completely different light. As such, when Loomis unzips his pants outrageously demanding, “Why God got to be so big?” the comment can be considered from multiple registers. In one sense, the statement is quite literal. Loomis mirrors both Ogun and Esu as men characterized by sexual prowess. This is confirmed later in the play when Loomis and Mattie feel a spark between each other and he makes overt advances on her. In response, Mattie seems awed by his apparent prurient vigor. “I ain’t got enough for you. You’d use me up too fast” (273). In Gates’ *Signifying Monkey*, Esu is described as an “inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis,” whose roles include that of connecting “truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, and text with interpretation.” Furthermore, Loomis’ outlandish statement can be considered from a metaphorical standpoint. As a kindred spirit of Ogun, Loomis’ violent emotional outburst demonstrates clearly that he is a soul in turmoil, struggling to master himself in the throes of contrary impulses. Lastly, considering the African origins of the Juba dance, and its emotional intensity it is conceivable that the ritual jarred Loomis’ ancestral memory, repressed and forgotten after generations of suffering and separation. Sandra L Richards, in her article “Yoruba Gods on the American Stage,” suggests that Loomis, “under the propulsive call-and-response rhythms and invocation of the Holy Ghost, is shocked into

remembrance” (97). However, from the perspective of Seth, his explosive behavior is seen as totally aberrant and grounds for dismissing him from the boardinghouse.

Following the outburst, Loomis becomes possessed by a trancelike state in which he speaks in tongues while dancing around the kitchen. The ensuing vision unveils a world in which bones rise up out of the water and begin walking on its surface. Redolent of both Judeo-Christian tropes and African spiritual traditions, the scene serves as a perfect reminder of the difficulty of interpreting African American spiritual experience as singularly European or African. In one sense, the image of bones becoming reanimated and recovered with flesh, harks back to Ezekiel 37 where Yahweh breathed the “breath of life” into many bones strewn across a valley. However, the fact that Loomis’ bones sink into the water and then return covered in flesh, seems to simultaneously suggest a full immersion baptism (Joe Turner, 251). “We were buried therefore with him through baptism unto death...so we also might walk in newness of life.”² In the ecstasy of Loomis’ vision, the spirit of the evangelical preacher resonates with a peculiar hybrid of Old and New Testament metaphors. But what to make of these Judeo-Christian references, considering that Loomis will go on at the play’s end to denounce Christianity as the white man’s religion? Similarly, if Loomis is supposedly grounded in a distinctly West African spiritual orientation with direct links to Yoruban cosmology, why would his vision be so easily recognizable as a series of tropes usually associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition? Should the exigent literary critic not then expect Loomis’ trancelike vision to be festooned with palm nuts, Ogun’s almighty sword and a *babalawo* consulting riddles pronounced from a definitively Yoruban pantheon? Fortunately, Wilson depicts the African American landscape as distinct from that of continental Africa.

² From Romans 6:4, American Standard Version of the Bible.

Had he not, *Joe Turner* would not have accurately mirrored the evolutionary process of cultural carryovers and would have been little more than a haphazardly stitched up cultural patchwork quilt. It is important, therefore, to consider Wilson's Africa as a metaphor even as it flows from the wellspring of his characters' beings. As Elam describes it, "The idea of Africa as a metaphor...is crucial as it enables Wilson to escape the romanticization and essentialization of Africa, but rather allows his Africa to be constructed, to be (w)ritten within the context of the moment" (*Past as Present*, 8).

Answers to these aforementioned questions come more clearly into focus when considering the complex syncretism that characterizes African American Christianity. To begin with, the Juba dance, or ring shout with which Wilson begins the scene, is derivative of African traditions. In *Exchanging Our Country Masks*, Michael A. Gomez discusses the long historical process of African Americans becoming converted to Christianity. According to Gomez, many of the African American population did not initially convert to Christianity during the colonial period but continued to secretly carry out African-derived rituals, their continuation representing "a manifest rejection of white cultural hegemony" (259). One of these secret traditions was the ring shout, a dance characterized by turning loose and getting into the Spirit. In Gomez' book he quotes a Virginian by the name of James Smith whose nineteenth century autobiography, gives a detailed description of the ring shout. "The way in which we worshipped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation for about half an hour; one would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus. The old house partook of the ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints" (Smith, 27). In *Slave Culture*,

historian Sterling Stuckey utilizes folklore and contemporary accounts, to make the argument that the “ring shout was one of the most important vehicles for the perpetuation of West Central African religious beliefs” (Gomez, 264). The region’s religion and culture identified strongly with movement in a ring during ceremonies designed to honor the ancestors. According to Stuckey, the ring shout acquired such prominent significance for African Americans that it is appropriate to conjecture that “it was what gave form and meaning to black religion and art” (11). Such religious oriented ring ceremonies, danced in counterclockwise motion, have also been found “wherever people of African descent are found in the Western Hemisphere” (Gomez, 264).

The same emotional experience, so prominent in the ring shout, was also associated with accounts of baptism given by African Americans. Gomez argues that this experiential emphasis, prominent baptismal ceremonies, “could be understood as a continuation of the shout” (273). Witnesses to 19th century baptisms spoke about participants losing control of themselves, “falling out,” and being “struck” by the Holy Spirit. The trancelike references, common to both ring shouts and baptismal ceremonies, also coincide with Wilson’s Loomis, as the Juba dance seems to transport him into an altered state.

Though suggestive of Christianity, the allusions to full immersion baptism that color Loomis’ Dry Bones vision cannot be limited to Christian origins. In fact, numerous West African traditions held spiritual beliefs related to rivers. Here, it is worth anticipating objections that might be made to my subsequent inclusion of references to multiple African ethnicities. However, a strong justification for the forthcoming examples lies in the fact that African Americans are demonstrably Pan-African in the way their worldviews have assimilated numerous traditions. Similarly,

the specific origins of North American slaves have been rigorously documented.³

The mass enslavement of West Africans, while undeniably tragic, marked an unprecedented historical moment, in that never before had so many previously isolated African ethnicities come together, a phenomenon that exponentially increased possibilities for cultural exchange. The seminal work *The Myth of the Negro Past* by anthropologist Melville Herskovits, demonstrated Yoruba, Fon and Akan as all having spiritual affinities for rivers (110-113). Herskovits writes, “In ceremony after ceremony witnessed amongst the Yoruba, the Ashanti, and in Dahomey, one invariable element was a visit to the river or some other body of ‘living’ water...for the purpose of obtaining liquid indispensable for the rites” (qtd. in Stuckey, 34). Similarly the Bakongo, who came from what is now the Congo, held beliefs that their ancestors inhabited an underwater realm (Gomez, 273). Stuckey, whose work built upon Herskovits, argues that this predilection for coupling rivers with the spiritual realm, “casts additional light on why water immersion has had such a hold on blacks in America and why counterclockwise dance is often associated with such water rites” (13-14).

What’s more, the existence of a pre-Christian Bakongo cross sheds additional light on another site of syncretism, where meaning for African slaves was influenced by previously held beliefs. The Kongo cosmogram, known as *tendwa nza Kongo*, consists of a cross within an ellipsis (Gomez, 148). According to Wyatt MacGaffey, this meaningful symbol existed for the Bakongo prior to the arrival of Europeans (MacGaffey, 45).

³ In *Exchanging Our Country Masks* Gomez traces the origins of slaves in North America. “The Bight of Biafra and West Central Africa remain far and above the principal sources for North America” (28). The Bight of Biafra, which contributed 25.6 % of N. American slaves, comprised “contemporary southeastern Nigeria, Cameroon and Gabon (with ethnicities ranging from Fon, Yoruba and Akan). West Central Africa, which contributed 25.3 % of N. American slaves, includes Congo (formerly Zaire) and Angola. Sierra Leone contributed 16.6% of N. American slaves. The source of these statistics is from studies done by Phillip D. Curtin and David Richardson (27-28).

The *tendwa nza Kongo* also refers to the West Central African notion of death and is therefore closely related to the experience of the slave trade. Given the belief that the worlds of the living and the dead are likened to mirror mountains separated by water, the rising and setting of the sun was seen as the exchange of night and day between these worlds (Gomez, 148).

There are four discs at each point of the cross, which correspond to “moments” of the sun’s movement. The top disc of the cosmogram symbolizes the world of the living, the bottom disc symbolizes the realm of the dead, and the horizontal line that separates the two is symbolically comprised of water or *kalunga*. Notably, analogous to the ring shout, the movement of the sun from dusk to dawn is counterclockwise (149).

As such, the elements of Loomis’ trance and subsequent vision, all seem to have Central West African counterparts and antecedents. The other characters’ mention of the Holy Ghost seem to spur Loomis into protest while simultaneously coinciding with the onset of his hypnotic trance. This same Holy Ghost, though present in Christian liturgy, is an Africanized Holy Ghost that draws its force from the ancestors and the gods even as it masquerades as the third constituent of the divine Trinity. In fact, Gomez argues that the ecstatic component that came to characterize African American Christian denominations has its origin in African tradition. As Gomez puts it, “Europeans may have provided the skeletal framework of Christianity, but it was the African who introduced the ways of the Holy Ghost” (253). Similarly, the Juba ring shout was known to be derivative of West African rituals, which called on the spirits of the ancestors. Loomis’ vision, with its ancestral skeletal figures that undergo full immersion baptism, resonates with the Bakongo notion of the water being the home of the ancestors.

Returning to the Bakongo cross, Gomez goes on to speak about how the cosmogram was utilized in ritual. Adherents who traced the cross on the ground

believed that doing so brought about the “descent of God’s power upon that very point” (MacGaffey 108-110). From this sacred vantage point practitioners stood on the “ground of the dead” and made oaths before “an all-seeing God.” The visual expression of the cosmogony suggested the strong connection between “West African cosmogony and ritual involving circular movement” (149). Stuckey, in fact, argues that this West Central African symbolic representation of the relationship between “the living, the dead, and the divine,” became embodied in the ring shout, “a ceremony in the American South in which participants move counterclockwise in a circle during religious worship” (149).

In light of this symbolic foundation of West African spirituality, that the ring shout would have jarred Loomis’ consciousness into confronting a vision incorporating “the living, the dead, and the divine” seems altogether fitting. In addition to its spiritual symbolism, historically, Loomis’ vision of a funerary oceanic crossing by bones that become re-embodied as black individuals walking onto a shore seems undeniably linked to the Middle Passage of slaves across the Atlantic. The event represents the paragon of collective trauma experienced by all Africans brought into slavery in the Americas, and like personal sites of trauma, it has often been collectively suppressed and erased from memory. Elam writes, “As he returns to the past that is his present, Herald Loomis’ vision of the Middle Passage is a site not only of contested histories of African Americans, but also of historical amnesia” (*Past as Present* 9). As Wilson’s introduction describes the play’s characters as “cut off memory,” the reconnection to their past and their culture can only come about by confronting what has been suppressed or forgotten, namely this historical moment in which Africans were literally “ripped out of time” and stolen from their homeland (*Past as Present* 5). Going back then becomes the only means of advancement. By

going back and re-imagining this rupture as a place of collective healing and rebirth Loomis goes beyond his personal need for healing and situates him as a representative for the African American community as a whole. As Elam says, “Loomis’ odyssey, his desire to stand and walk along with the bones people, symbolizes the need of African Americans to reconnect with their past and each other, to renegotiate their perceptions of and relationships to history” (3).

With the constant call-and-response interpretive aid of Bynum, the spectator bears witness to a line of skeletal figures who walk along the waters’ surface only to sink down “like anybody else” (251). Described as such, they are beings simultaneously touched with the divine, and pulled down by the ordinary weight of mortality. The enormous wave that results from the skeletons’ fall emphasizes the epochal repercussions of the Middle Passage. And the fact that the black figures go on to rise up and walk on a new land emphasizes the trope of ritual death and rebirth so strongly associated with Christianity. Once again, the spiritual metaphor is not without West African antecedents. According to Gomez, ritual death and rebirth, the very cornerstone of understanding water baptism, “were conventional concepts to those from Sierra Leone who had participated in the activities of the Sande and Poro societies” (278). Sandra Richards concurs that the vision symbolizes the Middle Passage from Africa into the Americas. However, since no geographical direction is proposed in the narrative, she argues, “in addition to looking back to a past history, this story, as Loomis eventually enacts it, simultaneously looks *forward* to a return to Africa” (Richards 98). Richard’s interpretation of a return to Africa draws strength when considering Wilson’s propensity for giving his characters’ names indicative of their inner being. Bynum takes on his name when he finds his life’s path of binding people together. Similarly, Rutherford Selig is referred to by his surname by many but

is more commonly known as the People Finder, an essential name that reflects his predestined role in life. The name Herald Loomis is similarly charged with meaning. In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, herald is defined as a person who carries important news, a messenger or harbinger; a perfect name for a character whose actions are meant to demonstrate a (re)membering of a severed past.

In order to metaphorically return to Africa in a journey that will mirror Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalist calls for a physical return to Africa, Loomis must return to the place where he lost his song or his *ori-inu*. As it turns out, through Bynum's guidance, Loomis comes to realize he lost his "song" the day he was abducted and driven into forced labor for seven years in a chain gang that worked for Joe Turner. Deeply disturbed by the questions related to his capture and forced enslavement, Loomis demands what Joe Turner had wanted out of him. "I asked one of them fellows one time why he [Joe Turner] catch niggers. Asked him what I got he want? Why don't he keep on to himself?" (269). Seth, ever the embodiment of common sense, responds that he just wanted Loomis' work, but Bynum is unsatisfied with Seth's literalness. Typical of an acolyte of Esu, he sees beyond the surface of things and into the metaphysical realm. For Bynum, Turner was seeking more than just mere labor. He was a sort of hungry vampire who craved the essence of the men he enslaved.

What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he's looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song. Couldn't sing it them seven years because you was afraid he would snatch it from you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it (270).

In the article, "Blues, History and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson," Jay Plum points out how Wilson's calling attention to the under-acknowledged history of post-slavery chain gangs represents an attempt to correct the oversights of American

History. “Although the chain gang affected the personal lives of many African Americans, traditional histories of the United States make little or no mention of the phenomenon; historians have in effect written this experience out of existence” (562). For Elam, the fact that much of the African American experience has been omitted from the standard versions of history has created a unique relationship between African American artists and performance. Lacking a text from which to reconstruct history, “performance becomes a subversive strategy and agency that acts as resistance to the omission of the black presence from history” (10). This theme of historical paucity becomes prominent in the drama of Suzan Lori-Parks who takes a creative stance when faced with an incomplete historical record:

I take issue with history because it doesn't serve me-it doesn't serve me because there isn't enough of it. In this play I'm simply asking, “Where's history?,” because I don't see it. I don't see history out there so I've made up some (qtd. in *Past as Present*).

In this sense, Wilson in *Joe Turner* also can be seen as an inventor of a figurative history who blends the historical reality of Joe Turney, the brother of Tennessee governor Pete Turney (1883-97) with the fictional version of WC Handy's song “Joe Turner's Come and Gone,” the play's namesake. According to Handy, the song was originally sung by women mourning the fact that their men had been stolen away by Turney into an anachronistic post-Emancipation enslavement (*Past as Present* 11). Both through his vision of the Middle Passage and his seven-year imprisonment at the hands of Joe Turner's chain gang, Loomis' performance gives voice to the voiceless. In doing so, he is not polite or genteel but screams that these historical atrocities should not and cannot go unremembered.

Before the play's conclusion, Bertha moves about the kitchen blessing it in a “centuries old” spontaneous ritual “to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory” (283). We are reminded that Africanness exists for

Wilson's characters as something more essential than book knowledge or learned behavior, it is literally imprinted in the "blood's memory." Similarly, Loomis himself, having gone through a dark of the soul from which he emerged paralyzed and unable to stand on his own two feet, realizes just as intuitively as Bertha that something must be done. And as the thread of Ogun and Esu have consistently run through the warp and weft of the play's action it is unsurprising that ultimately a sacrifice must be made. Whereas Christianity puts emphasis on transubstantiation and Christ as a proxy sacrificial lamb for all of mankind, West African religion emphasizes "sacrifice, divination and possession" as the principle means of establishing contact with the deities (Barnes 3). And whereas throughout the play Christianity and African spirituality have coexisted in harmony, here Loomis becomes possessed by the conviction that a rupture must take place. As Martha Pentecost, formerly known as Loomis, finally arrives to recover their child Zonia, Loomis must face the woman he has search for, for over ten years.

At this critical juncture Loomis becomes suspicious of Bynum's powers and accuses him for being responsible for binding him to a life on the road, a life of spiritual and physical homelessness. With Loomis' knife drawn and hovering over the scene, Bynum makes it clear that his intentions were to bind Zonia to her mother. Bynum then points the blame for his inability to act directly back at Loomis himself. "You binding yourself. You bound unto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It's right there kicking in your throat" (287). Clearly Bynum, as a *babalawo* figure, is urging Loomis to do what is necessary to bridge the gulf that has arisen between himself, a man lost in time and cut off from his origins, and his *ori inu* or inner self. As Soyinka argues in "The Fourth Stage" the root of tragedy in Yoruban drama rests in the primal severance that has cut the links between the

Yoruban and his ancestors, “the unborn and his reality” or “between himself and the deities” (439-440). “This gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf” (440). And since the fetish of Ogun was iron-ore “symbol of the earth’s womb-energies, cleaver and wielder of life,” it is entirely apt that Loomis should strive to conquer his own separation with the aid of a steel blade (440).

Before Loomis carries forward with his sacrificial act, he must face the denunciative voice of Martha who scorns him for having strayed away from the Christian faith. “Herald... look at yourself! You done gone over to the devil. Put down the knife. You got to look to Jesus” (287). Hoping to coax him back into the flock, Martha begins reciting “The Lord’s Prayer,” a proverb that posits God as a protector and shepherd and man as his obedient sheep. For Martha, the proverb reinforces the way the church has provided her a source of refuge and guidance. “He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still water.” For Loomis the Christian church has provided no such sanctuary. In fact, for him it is tantamount to the scene of the crime. Years before, traveling near Memphis Loomis had stopped to preach to some gamblers beside a church, when Joe Turner’s men harshly abducted him. The church did not lead him to still waters or green pastures but rather into the brutal hands of the white slave master. As such, the scene highlights the vastly different conceptions of spirituality that divide Loomis and Martha. For Loomis, a kindred spirit of Ogun, spirituality has become synonymous with ritual and a spontaneous apprehension of his own destiny. Identifying himself metaphorically with Christ as a sacrificial lamb, as Martha has done, will no longer suffice. He must subject himself to the extreme heat of the blacksmith’s furnace in order to “bludgeon and shape the malleable parts of [himself] into a new identity” (203).

The tension between these two spiritual visions brings the scene to a crescendo of essential difference. The two engage in a contrapuntal call and response, Martha's almost robotic liturgical repetition of the Lord's Prayer clashing violently with Loomis' spontaneous renouncement of his old life as a deacon and affirmation of his new song. The scene's call and response pattern recalls the scene where Bynum helped guide Loomis through the unfolding vision of the Dry Bones, each response furthering Loomis' understanding. Whereas the two men had fused their observations in total synchronicity, the language of Loomis and Martha clash unremittingly. Like a true Esu trickster, able to turn words on their proverbial heads, Loomis improvises and signifies in a dazzling array of counterpoint that uncovers the disquieting ironies behind each of the biblical verses. Implicitly, through his response, the "rod and staff" that have protected and comforted Martha become the blunt instruments of the chain gang that in former times had beaten him into submission. Whereas, Martha speaks of the cup that runneth over, Loomis describes the "niggers swimming in a sea of cotton" as a cruel foreman cuts their rations for picking "only" two hundred pounds of cotton in a day. In essence, Loomis equates Martha's God with nothing less than the white oppressor, "Great big old white man...your Mr. Jesus Christ" (287). The eloquence and verbal acuity of the empowered Loomis stand in sharp contrast to the downtrodden and hapless soul that had arrived at Seth's boardinghouse only a week before.

Called by a connection to his ancestors who have spoken to him through the vision of the Dry Bones, Loomis' awakening spirituality is evocative of Soyinka's description of the Yoruban concept of time. Because "past, present and future" are woven into the Yoruban worldview, Soyinka argues that "the element of eternity, which is the god's prerogative, does not have the same remoteness or exclusiveness"

that it does in Christianity (439). Soyinka's observation also resonates with the Bakongo notion of utilizing river water in ceremonial rituals in order to facilitate communion with the ancestral spirits. In essence, for the West African, the present moment "contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (439). In contrast, the sentiment that Christianity is only accessible through abstract conceptualization becomes a primary site of contention for Loomis. Unsatisfied with the remoteness of a Christ figure who vicariously bled for all of mankind, Loomis counters that he can bleed for himself. As Loomis slashes the blade across his chest, the moment is ripe with epiphany. In contrast to his paralysis following the Dry Bones vision, he realizes that he is standing once again as a whole (re)membered being. He has groveled his way through the abyss and faced the grim possibility of "aspirituality and cosmic rejection," yet in the end Wilson describes the transformed Loomis as "free to soar" above that which had weighted his spirit down with terrifying force (289). As Bynum comments that Loomis is shining "like new money," the presence of Ogun, or, he who conquers the primal severance with steel, cannot be denied. Nor can it be denied that Bynum has finally found his Shiny Man.

Chapter IV Marginalization as the Norm: *Refiguring the Center in Two Trains Running*

With few exceptions, to be black in August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* is to struggle and fight against a cruel economic reality that turns every day into a scrapping, hand to mouth existence. The play's action unfolds in a small Pittsburgh restaurant where Southern specialties like collard greens and short ribs are the chosen fare. In one sense, the café's atmosphere is convivial, a place where old friends gather to gossip and shoot the breeze, but in another a burgeoning storm cloud darkens the mood as the wrecking ball of "urban renewal" looms in the background of every conversation. In 1969, the year the play takes place, Pittsburgh's Hill District residents faced a relentless local government, which seized and destroyed countless buildings destined to be replaced by a Civic Arena and several housing projects. For the thousands of displaced, the period is remembered as one of the most devastating examples of urban development in U.S. history. Faced with imminent expulsion, the tenacity of the underdog marks the play's characters. Memphis, the café's owner, resists by stubbornly demanding that he should be reimbursed \$25,000 for his building, despite the city's meager offer of \$15,000. Unyielding, he shouts at the end of Act One, "they got to meet my price" (60). Hambone, a mentally ill character, who constantly repeats, "I want my ham" is similarly a paragon of obstinacy. A neighborhood grocer named Lutz, who had promised Hambone a ham if he painted his fence well, slighted him, and the denial becomes the defining moment of his life. Unsatisfied by the job, which by all accounts was done properly, Lutz offers Hambone a chicken for his work. The affront paralyzes Hambone, whose life becomes a perpetual protest against the under-valuation of his work.

In fact, monetary worries seem to insidiously work their way into every aspect of *Two Trains* characters' lives. In many ways, the play invokes a world similar to that envisioned by Georg Lukács, in which the commodity structure has managed "to penetrate society in all its aspects" remolding society in its own image in the process ("Reification"). Sterling, an ex-con, still decked out in prison-issued threads, seems spellbound by a capitalist utopian vision of Cadillacs and Las Vegas gambling spree. Wolf, the neighborhood numbers runner, preys on his and others' hopes of somehow hitting it big to escape the grim realities of the street. West, the local funeral home owner, was once a gambler himself, but now gets rich off the surest and steadiest sources of income imaginable in an imperiled African American community plagued by poverty and high incarceration rates, namely, burying fellow blacks in the cemetery. And the Prophet Samuel, whose funeral takes place during the play, became renowned in his lifetime not so much for his spiritual wisdom as for his miraculous powers of financial divination. Facing prosecution for income tax evasion, the Reverend Samuel is said to have helped Andrew Mellon, the Pittsburgh industrialist and banker, avert financial disaster through his divinely inspired predictions (26). Impressively, Samuel forewarned Mellon about a crash in the stock market, which was followed by a recovery that found Mellon's Gulf Oil in better financial shape than ever. The coup reestablished the reverend's good standing with the law and transformed his status from an ordinary reverend to that of a prophet. In such a money-driven environment, the zealous devotion of the followers who line up for blocks to pass his casket and rub Prophet Samuel's head are justifiably suspected of being less than pious. The gesture seems to have less to do with God than with the hopes that a rich man's good luck would rub off on them.

For Holloway, man who has spent his life speaking out against injustice, the only antidote for this spiritual materialism comes from Aunt Ester, a 322-year-old healer. In a neighborhood where everything boils down to harsh economic realities, her extravagant age adds a mythical dimension to *Two Trains*. For the play's characters who are willing to transcend ordinary logic, she is a bridge between an urban battlefield, where prison is only one misstep away, and the ancestral homeland of Africa. Holloway counsels Sterling, a shiftless character seemingly doomed to incarceration or an early grave, to seek out her advice. According to Holloway, "Aunt Ester give you more than money. She make you right with yourself" (22). In a Wilson play, where African roots and rhythms seem silenced by the constant drone of the capitalist machine, Aunt Ester provides a direct link back to an African ethos. Whereas the Prophet Samuel urges his congregation to tithe generously, Aunt Ester refuses payment for her services. Counter intuitively, she counsels those who seek her advice to throw a twenty-dollar bill into the river, a test clearly designed to separate those too attached to material goods from those genuinely receptive to the spiritual realm. Without her corrective vision, connected to a wider notion of ancestry and communal relations, the dehumanizing power of commodity relations seems poised to poison all human relations in the play. Whereas African carryovers figure prominently in most of the plays of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, their conspicuous absence in *Two Trains* become mitigated by the metaphorical presence of Aunt Ester and Malcolm X, who mobilize imperiled characters like Sterling to assert the inherent worth of every member of the community and the dignity of being black.

If money has turned men like the Prophet Samuel, whose casket brims over with jewels and hundred dollar bills, into legends, its lack has conversely turned men like Hambone into ciphers who die left with nothing other than the ignoble prospect of

having their funeral bill picked up by welfare. He is the product of an unfeeling and racist capitalist system in which labor is not only exchanged for an abstract money currency but also for the very life force that gives human beings dignity. Hambone exemplifies the ubiquitous process of reification that can reduce humans to the status of things. He has quite literally become a commodity, a hambone, exploited for his labor without remuneration. The dehumanizing process erased his past and all traces of familial ties. When news of his death arrives at the cafe, Holloway explains how little anyone actually knows about his origins. “Hambone ain’t had no people. Most anybody know about him is he come from Alabama. Don’t nobody even know his right name” (90). Undoubtedly, the reification of blacks as commodities is not a new concept. It is as ancient as Aunt Ester, the play’s mythological matriarch. Through references to Hambone’s mistreatment, Aunt Ester’s age and Holloway’s commentary, *Two Trains* harks back to the era of slavery prodding its readers to examine what has and has not changed since. In a sort of Economics 101 monologue for African Americans, that alternatively could be called “Stacking Niggers,” Holloway explains the inhumane and callous calculations that were required to exploit black labor through the slave trade.

If you ain’t got nothing...you can go out here and get you a nigger. Then you got something, see. You got one nigger. And if that one nigger go out there and plant something...get something out of the ground...even if it ain’t nothing but a bushel of potatoes. Then you take that bushel of potatoes and go get you another nigger. Then you got two niggers. Put them to work and you got two niggers and two bushels of potatoes. See, now you can go and buy two more niggers. That’s how you stack a nigger on top of a nigger. White folks got to stacking...Stacked up close to fifty million niggers. If you stacked them up one on top of the other they make six or seven circles around the moon (35).

With Holloway’s gut wrenching diatribe in mind, Hambone’s mental dissolution is put in perspective. On the surface, his endless repetition of “I want my ham” may seem ridiculous, but his demand to be paid correctly is serious business, no

less than Memphis' demand for fair treatment with regards to the city's purchase of his building. And although their unflagging efforts to get what is rightfully theirs make Memphis and Hambone kindred spirits, Memphis refuses to acknowledge their connection. As a middle-class property owner, Memphis looks down on the impoverished Hambone as undeserving of compensation. "Lutz ain't gonna give him no ham...cause he don't feel he owe him. I wouldn't give him one either" (28). For Memphis, Hambone is childlike and pitiable. Whereas Memphis has suffered at the hands of Southern whites who once stole his farmland and burnt his fields forcing him into a Northern exile, he, unlike Hambone, has not succumbed to madness, and in that he feels himself superior. In an interview conducted by Bonnie Lyons, Wilson discusses this conflict between the middle class and the underclass in the African American community. For Wilson the conflict originates from the ultimatum white America has presented blacks, namely that, "If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture you can participate" (3). Wilson asserts that most blacks have rejected this "sort of con job." On the other hand, he argues that those, like Memphis, who have accepted the mandates of the dominant culture, have gone on to join the ranks of the middle class. For Wilson, the price to be paid for such integration is dear. Becoming successful in a white world implies giving up an essential part of themselves. "They are clothed in different manners and ways of life, different thoughts and ideas. They've acculturated and adopted white values" (4).

Essentially, Memphis equates Hambone with an aspect of the black community that is shameful, an eyesore that upwardly mobile blacks would prefer sweeping under the rug. However, Hambone is not without allies. Befriended by the play's most marginalized characters, he sparks an ongoing debate between the café's regulars. Is he, as Wolf, the local numbers runner, suggests, totally insane and lost to

the world? Or does his vehement protest make him a model of sanity? For Holloway, who holds the latter perspective, Hambone has more sense than anyone because “he ain’t willing to accept whatever the white man throw at him” (29). Whereas Memphis would prefer throwing Hambone out on the street, characters like Risa, the café’s cook and waitress, and Sterling, bond with him in solidarity.

Harry Elam, in *The Past as Present*, examines the unique role Wilson gives children and madmen in his plays. Though these characters provide easy targets for characters whose lives are seemingly more together, they embody the pith of Wilson’s oeuvre. For Elam, underneath the façade of madness and infantile behavior lies an openness that gives them greater access to ancestral connections as well as contact with the supernatural. “These children and madmen may appear marginal figures, but in Wilson’s dramaturgy the marginal refigures the center. In an intriguing parallel Wilson, once a high school dropout, has written himself into the center of contemporary American theatre” (5). As such, the marginalized and the downtrodden are given a particularly prominent role in *Two Trains Running*. And though Memphis could count himself amongst their ranks, considering his history of unjust treatment in the South, Wilson seems to suggest that by placing financial aspirations ahead of community, Memphis has strayed from his cultural roots.

If Wilson’s children and madmen are the characters most attuned to all that is ancestral and supernatural, they are also simultaneously the most vulnerable to a system that systematically devalues the intangibles of humanity. Throughout, Sterling, the play’s unlikely hero, walks the razor’s edge, having just returned from the penitentiary and seemingly unconcerned that he might be locked up again. After observing Sterling’s nonchalant flirtations with scams and petty thievery, Memphis becomes convinced that Sterling is doomed to recidivism. “I give that boy three

weeks...And he gonna be laying over there across the street or back down there in the penitentiary. You watch. Three weeks” (68). Analogous to Seth’s role criticizing Loomis in *Joe Turner*, Memphis repeatedly calls Sterling’s character into question reiterating, “That boy ain’t got good sense.”

In reality, Sterling does seem to be flirting with disaster. Raised as an orphan, poverty’s grind has marked his consciousness with a perpetual dissatisfaction. He is also marked by his status as an ex-con, which will follow him throughout his life and limit his opportunities to find work, vote or get a loan. His conversation is peppered with dreams of driving a Cadillac and getting “one of them white folks’ jobs making eight or nine thousand dollars a year” (52). Though his dreams seem naïve and stereotypical, his exception to the trifling rules of society proves to be well thought out and reasoned. As Wilson puts it in the play’s stage directions, “Sterling appears at times to be unbalanced, but it is a combination of his unorthodox logic and straightforward manner that make him appear so” (16). His very existence provides a poignant critique of the exchange economy and the idea of ownership. As he walks by the Prophet Samuel’s funeral, he gathers stolen flowers for Risa, which he offers in an attempt to woo her. When Risa refuses saying, “I don’t want no flowers you stole from a dead man,” Sterling replies cleverly that since a dead man cannot enjoy them she might as well (61). Besides, for Sterling, a bona fide trickster, buying flowers is something that “white folks do.” Emphasizing the copious amounts of flowers in the Prophet Samuel’s funeral procession coupled with the fact that the flowers will soon die if not placed in water, Risa finally gives in to Sterling’s impregnable logic. By emphasizing life’s ephemeral nature Sterling makes a convincing case that his theft represents a genuine act of appreciation that transcends petty qualms over whether a dead man owns the flowers at his own funeral or not.

The budding love between Risa and Sterling hinges, in part, on their mutual respect for Hambone. Sterling says of Hambone, “We got us a thing going” (45). The remark inspires Risa to similarly show her solidarity with the misunderstood Hambone. She argues that people fail to understand him because they “don’t take the time.” “Most people think he can’t understand nothing. But he understand everything what’s going on around him. Most of the time he understand better than they do” (45). Risa herself is largely misunderstood by the play’s male dominated cast. She is beautiful but aloof. Independent and proud of it, the café’s cook consistently rebuffs the clientele’s advances, perplexing them in the process. For Memphis, her independence is threatening. “Something ain’t right with a woman that don’t want no man” (31). Beyond merely asserting her independence, she goes as far as scarring her legs, in an act reminiscent of the ritual scarification that typifies many African ethnicities. However, whereas African participants used scarification to accentuate beauty, Risa’s stated intent was to repulse the men that leered at her over the café’s counter.

However, the ruse is insufficient to repel Sterling. Considering the soul connection that has been sparked between the two, Sterling proves unable to relent in his quest to win her over. Finally, she must respond to his advances. Her response is revealing. In a heavily policed world where young black men walk the streets like endangered species, it is better to remain in solitude, free from costly emotional involvement. Risa’s fears are not unfounded. As Wolf recounts from personal experience, getting locked up does not necessarily require committing a crime when one can literally stumble into the arms of the law haphazardly. According to Wolf, “every nigger you see done been to jail at one time or another” (54). In fact, the fictional world of 1969 that Wilson’s depicts in *Two Trains* mirrors the realities facing

African Americans today. In the article “Incarceration Versus Education,” Manning Marable cites the grim statistics on incarceration of blacks. “In practical terms, by 2001, about one out of every six African-American males had experienced jail or imprisonment. Based on current trends, over one out of three black men will experience imprisonment during their lives” (Marble). For Risa the instability inherent in getting entangled with a free spirit like Sterling’s is prohibitive. “You ain’t got no job. You going back to the penitentiary. I don’t want to be tied up with nobody I got to be worrying is they gonna rob a bank or something” (100).

Nevertheless, she admires Sterling for his childlike ability to pull Hambone out of his shell. In one of the play’s most telling moments, Sterling engages Hambone so thoroughly that he is able to coax the words “black is beautiful” out of his mouth. The moment is poignant. Considering, that at all other times Hambone only manages to utter his monosyllabic utterance, “I want my ham,” the aforementioned phrase, taken from the era’s Black Nationalist movement, seems to embody the self-empowering message that he is most in need of. Similarly early on in Act Two, Sterling tries to rile Hambone up by shouting his phrase, “I want my ham!” What follows is a humorous call and response between the two men. At first the two merely parrot each other in a seemingly idiotic game of mimicry. However, when Sterling adds the phrase “Malcolm lives!” into the mix, suddenly Hambone’s repetitive words receive validation, encompassing his demand into the wider struggle of all African Americans struggling to be heard in the turbulent 60’s. As simple as their call and response might be, in it contains the essential seed-syllable of African culture indicative of African American gospel, preachers and their congregations, blues refrains, dueling jazz instrumentalists and urban rap artists. However, the ecstasy of a spontaneous call and response revival holds no appeal for Memphis, who quickly puts an end to the ruckus.

More interested in maintaining decorum than in getting swept up by the Spirit, he shouts, “Stop all this hollering in here! This is a business” (65). The implication is clear: Sterling’s exuberance is child’s play, the stuff of the street, his business requires stern sobriety and makes no allowances for the ecstasy and trance typical of African-derived traditions.

In fact, Memphis’ rejection of the black power movement can be seen as an extension of his conservative business ethic. He mocks Sterling’s and the late Malcolm X’s calls for justice, and in the sense that he is an experienced business owner operating from a relative position of power, the spectator is tempted to give credence to his world-wise wisdom. He has earned the respect of the community, whereas Sterling has earned the ignominy of being an ex-con. And as the scam artist Sterling comes into the café with a can of gas that he “found” in the alleyway, Memphis’ efforts to discredit him as a recalcitrant troublemaker seem well grounded. In the same breath, Memphis’ grim assessment of the state of justice for blacks in America is redolent with authority. To the believers in black power, Memphis’ rebuttal is somber and marked by personal experience.

These niggers talking about freedom, but what you gonna do with it? Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom. Put your shoulder to it and hope your back hold up. And if you around here looking for justice, you got a long wait. Ain’t no justice. That’s why they got that statue of her and got her blindfolded. Common sense would tell you if anybody need to see she do... Jesus Christ didn’t get justice. What makes you think you gonna get it?

However authoritative the voice of Memphis might seem, his conclusions are difficult to accept. He belittles the empowering phrase “black is beautiful” suggesting that it comes from a position of weakness. “These niggers around here talking about they black and beautiful. Sounds like they trying to convince themselves. You got to think you ugly running around shouting your beautiful” (42) Similarly, he scoffs at

cries for justice, spurring the question, should young black Americans in the ghetto abandon all hope for a more equitable society? The stance seems particularly ironic when Memphis himself is engaged in a monumental struggle to make sure that he is not undercut by city officials who would prefer undervaluing real estate in Pittsburgh's Hill District. What's more, Wilson constantly threads inconsistency into the fabric of Memphis' behavior. While he seems without reproach, his ordinary greed reveals otherwise. In truth, Memphis is someone who has cultivated his public image carefully. The incident of the stolen gas can makes this all the more apparent. Whereas he clearly recognizes how Sterling acquired the gas can, the temptation of being able to buy fuel cheaper than at a filling station proves too much to resist. He buys the gas, but makes Sterling bring the empty can back so as to avoid it being traced back to him. The incident brings Memphis down to earth while showing the relativity of his moral posturing.

The struggle between the older Memphis and the young Sterling evokes the classic battle of the old conservative, who has "seen it all," and the young idealist, who still holds onto hope for a better future. Walter Benjamin, in his description of the German word *Erfahrung*, which implies an experience transmissible from generation to generation, nails down precisely the type of bitter and conservative viewpoint that typifies characters like Memphis.

In our fight for responsibility, we fight against someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called experience [*Erfahrung*]. It is expressionless, impenetrable all the same. The adult has already experienced [*erlebt*] everything... We have not yet experienced [*erfahren*] anything... That is what they have experienced, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of Life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward looking? Oh no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. (Beasley-Murray 73).

The fact that Memphis comes from a harsh Southern past in which his land was stolen from him, confirms the type of hardened realism that Benjamin was so

distrustful of. Memphis' total rejection of the black power movement also represents a rejection of the youthful dreams that have died inside of him. Sterling becomes a reminder of the youthful spirit that almost certainly once captivated his imagination and stirred his hopes for a more just world. By giving in to this conservative process of ossification, Memphis aligns him not only with black conservatives but also with the mainstream white society of the era who dismissed Malcolm X's political movement as illegitimate. In asserting that, "Niggers killed Malcolm...and now they want to celebrate his birthday," (41) one would be hard pressed to differentiate Memphis' comment from that of the typical white supremacist of the day.

In the end, the life affirming and empowering words "black is beautiful" stand in sharp contrast the humiliating conditions of Hambone's death. Deeply concerned that Hambone should be buried with dignity, Risa pleads with West, the funeral director, to make up the price difference for an upscale casket to avoid having his life finish in a "welfare casket." For Risa, seeing him buried in a pine box would make it seem, "Like his life ain't meant nothing" (92). West, the ever-calculating businessman, proves unsympathetic to Risa's pleas and coldly explains that if he were to bury him in a different casket that he would be "out seven hundred dollars." Besides the exorbitant cost, West argues that Hambone "wouldn't look right laying in a bronze or silver casket" (91). Once again, Hambone's condition becomes reified. He not only *appeared* poor in life, but also *was* poor. West's comments attempt to justify an essentialization of poverty that both ignores Hambone's difficult circumstances and makes him less of a man.

In such a scenario, where money overshadows human value, the fact that the impoverished Risa and Sterling take a genuine interest in Hambone accentuates his tragedy. Risa would love to pay the seven hundred dollars for an upgraded casket but

is unable to on her waitress' salary. Nevertheless, with no one else claiming kinship to Hambone, Risa and Sterling become his de facto family. It is up to them to try and restore meaning to a life seemingly devoid of meaning. The task is not easy. His found corpse, as it turns out, reveals a body covered in scars. The scars are reminiscent of the scarification that typifies ethnicities such as the Yoruba. But whereas Yoruban scarification provides a wealth of signification capable of indicating "indelibly an individual's place and condition in a broad cultural and ontological system," Hambone's scars are untraceable (Richards, 244). Far away from their cultural moorings, they suggest an Africa that is deracinated and no longer decipherable. What was beautiful in an ancient culture, here in an American setting becomes grotesque and unfathomable. Though the signs of Africa are manifest, the gulf between Africa and Pittsburgh proves vast. The mysterious scars suggest that Hambone, like Aunt Ester, is ancient and beyond the ordinary constraints of space and time. As such, he enters into the symbolic realm and the loss of his scars' meaning or accountability suggests the extent of which a once proud African man full of history can be reduced to a shell of a man whose very life force is measured against that of a ham.

Risa and Sterling's concern that Hambone receive the dignity in his death denied to him during his lifetime provides links to a historical African American tradition that delves back well beyond the modern black power movement and into the era of slavery. After all, Wilson's Hambone has been treated, for all practical purposes, like a slave. And analogous to the passing of fellow slaves for blacks, Hambone's death takes on enormous significance for the marginalized characters of *Two Trains*. In *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, Michael Gomez argues that funerals for slaves represented "far more than marking the passing of an individual; it was a collective, salutary proclamation of resistance and defiance in a number of ways"

(274). Discussing what things were like during slavery days, “Ed McCree, age seventy-six in 1936, related: ‘when folks died den, Niggers from miles around went to the funeral. Now days dey got to know you mighty well if dey bothers to go a t’all’”

(275). Similarly, Gomez cites an account of a funeral in which 28 carriages and “upwards of a hundred” on horseback took part in a long and extravagant funeral procession held for a slave. Slaves also held all night vigils in which mourners would stay up with the body singing and praying throughout the night (276).

As the preceding testimony demonstrates, it was not necessary for the deceased to have been a relative or even a personal acquaintance. What mattered was that someone of like fate had passed on, and it was vitally important that she or he be remembered. It was important that the person be remembered by the community, because “the world” would not remember. It would not have mattered to most white folk that the deceased had ever lived; her life was of no special significance in the overall scheme of things. So it was critical that black folk pay respect to their own. It was essential that as many as possible come out, for in honoring the deceased, they validated their own worth (276).

If slave era funerals were sites of defiance for black slaves, as Gomez argues, Sterling’s reaction to Hambone’s death could definitely be seen as part of a long lineage. Indignant over the fact that Lutz never gave him his ham, Sterling decides to take the matter into his own hands. After the sound of breaking glass and alarms ringing fill the air, a bleeding Sterling returns to the café with a large ham in his arms. Determined that Hambone should finally get what he deserved he says, “Say, Mr. West, that’s for Hambone’s casket” (110).

It is no accident that the play’s most heroic action proves to be an illegal act that could easily become grounds for Sterling’s arrest. In a system where laws are kept in place to perpetuate an unjust playing field, refusal to obey becomes the only legitimate option. In an ironic twist on the trope of the reformed criminal, Sterling’s evolution spits in the face of the system that he would normally grow to respect in a less uncompromising text. He evolves not from a life of petty crime to the straight and

narrow but from selfish crime to the selfless “crime” capable of restoring the dignity of a battered member of his community. Like Thoreau, or Martin Luther King, his becomes a higher law that follows the dictates of conscience over that of an oppressive system. Whereas initially Sterling seems naïve and gullible, for example in his unquestioning acceptance of Aunt Ester’s dubious age, in the end it is this same capacity for belief that gives him the courage to resist. Sterling’s faith becomes contagious, and Memphis, who had earlier derided Aunt Ester’s purported powers of divination, visits her and returns rejuvenated with a sense of purpose and revived tenacity to keep fighting the city for his just rewards. Just as it delivers a message of hope, *Two Trains* serves as a warning. It depicts a society in which the ubiquity of financial calculations can turn people into commodities. As broken characters like Hambone fade into the background of everyday life, sadly the process is normalized and the temptation to view the human element as marginalized and out of step grows disproportionately. Sterling, Risa and Aunt Ester all strive counteract this normalization. By encouraging *Two Trains* characters to let go of their attachment to money, Aunt Ester provides a bridge to an African cultural heritage in which ancestors and community are still the ultimate measure of human worth.

Conclusion

From *Seven Guitars*, to *Ma Rainey*, to *Joe Turner* and *Two Trains*, Wilson depicts the African Diaspora in America in all of its complexity, doubleness, struggle, and tragedy. While Africanness is present in all of these plays, to a greater or lesser degree, its meanings constantly prove to be elusive and resistant to essentialist dichotomies. And even as Wilson, the individual, championed the cause of African Nationalism and black pride, as an author he avoided reductive formulas that might have portrayed Africa as the ultimate embodiment of good and conversely European values as evil incarnate. Characters like Hedley who embrace African-derived culture overtly do not necessarily prove exempt from vicissitudes and tragedies that have marked African American life. Similarly, characters like Loomis who outwardly seem oblivious as to the significance of their origins later go on to reconnect with a genuine African-inspired spirituality that somehow survived despite the ruthless uprooting of slavery.

The past is constantly present in Wilson's plays. Chronologically, even if the characters of *Two Trains* are further away in time and space from the slave ships and the brutality of the Middle Passage, tragically they still endure its aftermath with equal proximity as the characters of *Joe Turner* situated at the turn of the century. For Wilson, such trauma will not soon be forgotten. The reverberations of the slave ships will go on, even if not recognized as such. Precisely because this grave historical moment has been collectively repressed and denied, its strength has not diminished and can only be vanquished if confronted directly, as Herald Loomis does in his vision of the *Dry Bones*.

What's more, Wilson describes a world in which slavery did not disappear with the Emancipation Proclamation but has found a myriad of new forms by which to subjugate African Americans. As W.E.B. Du Bois says in *Black Reconstruction in America*, "[T]he slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again towards slavery" (Du Bois). Here Du Bois refers to the way in which slavery was quickly followed by the disenfranchisement of Jim Crow and the segregated South. Wilson, by referencing the post-emancipation chain gangs of Joe Turner, the traumatic past of Levee in *Ma Rainey*, and the psychological wounds of both Hedley and Hambone, similarly warns that the struggle for African American equality is an ongoing struggle, one that is far from being relegated to the dusty annals of history.

While this seemingly endless fight provides a somber undercurrent throughout Wilson's dramaturgy, his plays constantly stave off hopelessness. By depicting the rich tapestry of African American culture, its history of resistance as well as its extraordinary cultural innovations and creations, Wilson shouts like Sterling in *Two Trains* that "black is beautiful." Even as some of his characters equate everything African with savagery and the jungle, Wilson dispels the myth of the untutored savage who arrived in the New World as a *tabula rasa* completely dependent upon his European master for obtaining the keys to civilization. Through characters like Toledo he suggests the empowering possibility that hundreds of years of monolithic propaganda can just as easily be dismantled in one generation through an enlightened education. By referencing African-inspired music that gave birth to the blues, gospel, jazz and rock n' roll, embracing the unique poetic rhythms of African

American speech, and by bringing to light the cultural carryovers that have transformed the American cultural landscape, Wilson scoffs at the notion that black is anything other than beautiful. Yes, the deprecating voice of the slave master still haunts his characters, yet, in the end, the proud voice of characters like Risa and Ma Rainey ring out forcefully challenging the notion that blacks should accept anything less than sovereignty and dignity. Though embracing Africanness does not provide a readymade panacea for his characters, awareness of African reverberations more often than not uplifts Wilson's characters giving them grounding, self-awareness and even spiritual revelation. Ultimately, it is through going back that his characters find the courage and strength to move forward to embrace new possibilities free from the constraints of dogma and oppressive ideologies.