

**“Claim What Is Yours”: August Wilson on African  
American Identity in *The Piano Lesson***

「自らが持てるものを誇りとせよ」：『ピアノ  
レッスン』にみるオーガスト・ウィルソンの  
アフリカ系アメリカ人としての  
アイデンティティー論

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**SUMMARY IN JAPANESE:** オーガスト・ウィルソンは1990年代初頭にアメリカ演劇界で注目を集めるようになり、アメリカ演劇の新たな方向性を示した。ウィルソンは、歴史的、文化的視点からアフリカ系アメリカ人の体験を顧みて、彼らが持つアフリカ系アメリカ人としてのアイデンティティーとアフリカの血を賞賛している。この点で『ピアノレッスン』(1990年)はウィルソンの傑作の一つに数えられるだろう。アフリカ系アメリカ人に対して冷たい白人優位のアメリカ社会において、アフリカ系アメリカ人が自己のアイデンティティーを持ち続けることは可能なのだろうか。この問いにウィルソンははっきりと「イエス」と答える。だが、どうしてそれが可能なのだろうか。本論では『ピアノレッスン』において、ウィルソンが、自らの成長と文化的アイデンティティーの形成に重要な役割を果たした南部をテーマとし、これらが南部を通してアフリカにつながっていると見ている、ということを論ずる。まず、作品の中で南部がどのように描かれているか(南部の文化、過去、神話、そしてアフリカとのつながり)を詳しく見てゆきたい。その上でアフリカ系アメリカ人のアイデンティティーについてのウィルソンの問題意識が、文化的、政治的課題としてだけでなく作劇法上も意義に注目する。そして最後に、基本的にアメリカの黒人の未来の可能性を保証するものとしてウィルソンがアフリカ系アメリカ人のアイデンティティーを賞賛しているという結論を導き出したい。

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## Introduction

Widely acclaimed as the most outstanding African American playwright of the past few decades, August Wilson produced a cycle of plays in which he explored the historical and cultural experience of blacks in each decade of the 20th century. This strategy, explains Mary Bogumil, aims at "focussing attention on the long journey with little progress and change, one that so many African Americans have taken" (Usekes 119). Hence, the success Wilson enjoys among blacks. But his drama transcends racial boundaries: he is successful critically and commercially among whites as well (Plum 561).

The critical reception of August Wilson has gradually and steadily grown since the inception of his career in the late 1970s. A few voices question his originality. Thus, maintains Robert Brustein, his foremost critic, Wilson's dramaturgy is conservative; it operates along the American realist tradition; it is monotonous and limited in scope as Wilson pursues "a single-minded documentation of American racisms" (Usekes 119). But for most critics, Wilson stands as tall as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, or Arthur Miller. They see his dramatic vision and practice as fresh, novel, and complex. They investigate his themes and technique, the performance of his plays, his vision of his role as a black writer, his writing process and the influences bearing on his practice, etc.

Wilson's portraiture of the black American fate is a central thematic concern in his plays, and he focuses on the everyday lives of those who, he says, have not found their way into history books (Bigsby 297). "Those who would deny black Americans their culture would also deny them their history and their inherent values that are part of all human life," Wilson writes (*The Ground* 15). In response to this denial, his stance is clear: "The message of America is 'Leave your Africanness outside the door.' My message is 'Claim what is yours'" (Freedman 39-40). Wilson's dramaturgy reveals a concern for the survival of black culture in the midst of a hostile white environment—but it is not just white hostility that worries him. For him, blacks compromised their already compromised situation by massively migrating to the North at the turn of the 20th century: "[We] left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people" (Shannon, "Transplant" 659).

The theme of the American South runs through Wilson's cycle of plays,<sup>1</sup> and

the playwright clearly indicates the need to connect with its culture and history. One way to make this connection is through the blues. Studying three of Wilson's cycle of plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*, critic Jay Plum (1993) perceives the blues as a matrix of African American culture and history, "a connective force that links the past with the present, and the present with the future" (561). Though Sandra Shannon does not specifically investigate this connection, she perceives and praises "Wilson's efforts to infuse his plays with recognizable images of Africa" ("Transplant" 665); she also notes that "Wilson, in honor of his African ancestors, preserves the folklore and the wisdom he learned while sitting at the feet of his elders" ("Transplant" 668). Reading Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* through antebellum slave narratives, Devon Boan argues that the play fulfils the same purpose metaphorically: a memory function and a self-identity empowerment function (2-4). I too concentrate on *The Piano Lesson*, but I take a larger view of the theme of connection by looking at the characters and their choices, the thematization of African Americans' cultural and religious expressions as well as their historical visions. In three of the cycle plays, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley II*, and *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester, the 285-year-old black lady, plays the role of a spiritual connector, helping troubled black characters to re-establish contact with their ancestors, their origins (the South or Africa). In the plays where she does not appear, the connection, the celebration, acceptance and awareness of the Southern identity take various other forms that I present in the course of the paper.

In exploring Wilson's representation of the South, critics tend to focus on his notion that "the transplant did not take," that is, his portrait of the tragic fate of blacks in the North.<sup>2</sup> This paper, however, argues that tragedy is not the last word for Wilson; hope is.<sup>3</sup> It is hope springing from his peculiar perception of the South, the African heritage, and ultimately Africa—home, as he calls it (Wilson, *The Ground* 38). Wilson sees the African Americans' connection to the "ancestral homeland" (Wilson, *The Ground* 37), "who we are" (Freedman 40), as running to Africa by way of the American South. Focusing on *The Piano Lesson*, I contend that August Wilson celebrates the South (its culture and history) as the fulcrum of the future of African Americans in America.

## I. The American South and African American Identity

America appears in Wilson's plays schematically as North and South, terms that he uses rather loosely. But his representation of the South is complex and thorough; the South is both the homeland of blacks and the seat of white violence. Yet it seems that the image of the South that he foregrounds is that of the homeland.

The South is for Wilson the foundation of the African American soul, which stretches across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa: "Our blood is soaked into the soil and our bones lie scattered the whole way across the Atlantic Ocean, as Hansel's crumbs, to mark our way back home" (Wilson, *The Ground* 38). Wilson invokes this soul as a means of self-determination. He uses the South as a cultural and historical trope to awaken the consciousness of blacks, to show them the way to self-realization and self-definition. Studying his *Seven Guitars*, Shannon interprets Hedley's cutting the throat of the rooster before his friends in terms of "Wilson's effort to infuse his plays with recognizable images of Africa." And on the ground that the group has deplored Hedley's gesture, she then goes on to construe it as "a paradoxical 'wake-up call,' a ringing alarm to those who have been lulled into a similar rejection of their immediate Southern past and familiar rituals of a not-so-distant Africa" ("Transplant" 666). Such calls abound in *The Piano Lesson*.

Like in his other plays, the South appears in *The Piano Lesson* in terms of everyday life expression, memory, history, mythology, and images of culture. And Wilson's concern with these boils down to providing African Americans with the knowledge necessary to transcend their present situation of economic, cultural, and historic bondage. Dramatically, setting, characterization, language, symbols, metaphors, etc., support his complex representation of the South.

The larger setting of *The Piano Lesson* is Pittsburgh—taken as a Northern city. Specifically set in a domestic environment, Berniece's house, the play breathes the atmosphere of African American life, which informs us of the characters' Southern culture and history. Images of the South and its African extensions appear significantly in the setting. The piano stands evocatively in Berniece's parlor: "Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems" (*The Piano Lesson*, The Setting). A sense of communal life pervades the play as a culturally distinctive feature. Regularly, the characters gather, ritual like,

just getting together, telling anecdotes about life in the South, or singing blues songs, etc. They assert their mental and emotional links with their Southern origins, through evocation of life down there. Boy Willie and Lymon physically arrive from the South, carrying along its distinctiveness and enhancing its atmosphere with their language, mentality, and worldview. Boy Willie “hollers,” insisting on greeting everybody. His discourse is replete with references to “home.” Manifestations of, references and allusions to, the ancestral and supernatural worlds also abound. We imagine the ancestors and ghosts moving, interacting with the humans, and determining their lives. Berniece refuses to play on the piano for fear of waking them up. Wining Boy explains how he once talked to the Yellow Dog Ghosts and drew some benefits from their contact.

The cultural dimension of the South as represented by Wilson is prominently translated into the form of blues music. Critic Jay Plum maintains that Wilson shares Houston A. Baker’s definition of the blues: “Like Wilson, Baker provides a broad and open-ended definition of the blues, describing them as an amalgam of work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more” (562). It is therefore easy to agree that Wilson indeed creates a “blues landscape” (Shannon, “Transplant” 660), which informs his plays. His *Seven Guitars* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* portray protagonists who try to transplant blues music in the North. In *Two Trains Running*, the protagonist, Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton is also a blues artist trying to become a star in Chicago. *The Piano Lesson* features a failed professional blues artist Wining Boy who would not admit that his time is over. Doaker explains: “He made one or two records a long time ago. That’s the only ones I ever known him to make. If you let him tell it he a big recording star” (1.1.8).\*

Wilson has a highly cultural, symbolic and almost religious vision of the blues singer: “Blues is the best literature we have. If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa, and various other parts of the world. They are carriers of culture, carriers of ideas—like the troubadours in Europe . . . I’ve always thought of them as sacred because of the sacred tasks they took upon themselves—to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people” (Shannon, “Blues” 540). In *The Piano Lesson* through their musical performances Wining Boy, Berniece, Doaker and Boy Willie live up to Baker’s definition of the blues. They carry their Southern culture whose

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\* As for the citations from *The Piano Lesson*, numbers in the parenthesis refer to acts, scenes, and pages respectively.

values Wilson seeks to disseminate, for as he claims, in blues music he finds “an image of myself, but also the lives of my ancestors” (Freedman 70).

Wining Boy and Doaker sing individually in the kitchen and parlor, and join in the various group singing. Both in their nature and contents, their songs evoke their Southern culture and experiences. When the action of the play moves toward a close, all the characters walk into the parlor. A ritual moment quickly mounts and establishes itself. Wining Boy starts playing on the piano. Berniece retrieves the ability to use it. For the first time too, she starts a song:

It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to sing that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents. (2. 5.106)

Berniece’s song establishes the connection with Africa. It helps her get rid of the white man’s ghost, a symbol of her pain and her ancestors’ suffering. She retrieves her selfhood. She can now hold her head high and face the future with certainty. She is thankful to both Boy Willie and her ancestors.

The South is present in Wilson’s dramaturgy in the form of history, the past. This past has to do with slavery days, the ancestors, memories of the middle passage, of Africa. This history, Michael Morales reminds us, has a mythic quality, that is, it underscores “the relationship between the living and the dead” (Boan 266). In *The Piano Lesson*, the anecdotes, stories, etc., that each of the characters tells inform us about this mythic history. The piano dominating the setting is also an embodiment of the past. It is iconographic history narrating the fate of Berniece’s grandparents in the days of the peculiar institution. Doaker spells this out in his own narrative (1.2.42-46). At the end of the play, when Berniece finally resolves to put the piano to some use by playing on it, it is this past that she invokes.

For Wilson, historical knowledge “is the first step in transcending marginal existence” (Plum 665). In one of the most important moments of the play when Wilson expatiates on the importance of historical knowledge, Boy Willie insists on Maretha being told the story of the piano, the history behind it. If Berniece taught it to her “she wouldn’t have no problem in life. She could walk around here

with her head held high" (2.5.91). Boy Willie's own knowledge of this history underlies his concern with the land, returning to the South. Berniece rekindles her atavistic knowledge of it after reconnecting with her ancestors.

Another significant aspect of Southern—and African—value that Wilson underscores in *The Piano Lesson* has to do with the sense of community,<sup>4</sup> the community as synonymous with strength. Two times, Lymon reminds Boy Willie: "It's gonna take more than me and you to move that piano" (2.4.84). At the end of the play when confrontation with the ghost becomes unavoidable, the whole family gathers, the humans and the ancestors. The humans, through music and communal energy, create the ritual atmosphere conducive to, and necessary for, the presence of the ancestors. Acting as ritual protagonists entering in trance, Boy Willie confronts Sutter's ghost, and Berniece's voice crosses over to Africa to summon the ancestral power, energy.

A sense of African American culture unquestionably pervades *The Piano Lesson*; and overall, Wilson portrays it as alive and vibrant, because it is his belief that this culture is still very much alive and strong in America:

Growing up in my mother's house [ . . . ], I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain that my mother had learned from her mother and which you could trace to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands today on these shores as a testament to the resiliency of the African American spirit. (Wilson, *The Ground* 15-16)

Wilson explains the purpose of celebrating and upholding this spirit as a way of resisting cultural annihilation: "We cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as cultural imperialism. We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America" (Wilson, *The Ground* 28). But beyond the contributions he wants blacks to make to American culture, Wilson offers his play as a source of culture and selfhood to African Americans themselves. He invites them to engage their individual responsibilities for the becoming of their culture in America.

## II. Identity, Becoming and Individual Responsibility

For Wilson, the South is that which gives the African American a sense of origin, dignity, and identity. To embrace its values is a way of realizing self-determination. To keep it alive is synonymous with self-assertion in the face of Eurocentric American imperialism. His plays comprise two broad categories of characters in that respect: those who scorn and reject the South, and those who accept it (readily or reluctantly) and uphold its existence.

Wilson's characters that reject their Southern background have particularly concerned critics who generally treat them in the larger perspective of Wilson's idea that the migration was a tragic mistake, if not a sin. Thus, writes Sandra Shannon, Wilson's "characters are often portrayed as wide-eyed optimists who, despite their earnest attempts to determine their destinies, either perish in the city or become part of its human refuse" (Shannon, "Transplant" 660). For his part, Jay Plum, maintains that "Wilson's dramaturgy specifically resists the egalitarian myth of America as a land of endless opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on the social and economic displacement of African Americans" (Plum 563). While there is much truth in this analysis, it fails to take account of the subtlety of Wilson's position on what he sees as possible relationships of African Americans with their native culture.

Trumpet player Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* has widely been singled out as the best example so far of the category of blacks who reject their Southernness. Sandra Shannon's study of him is commendable (Shannon, "Transplant" 666-68). Levee's dream of becoming a celebrity is shattered and he ends tragically. However, in *The Piano Lesson*, tragedy is not spelt out in terms of physical death for Wilson's characters living in Pittsburgh. This is perhaps because in this play, none of the characters actually rejects their Southern culture as such.<sup>5</sup> If anything, some illustrate Wilson's idea that "the Alabama or Mississippi roots have been strangled by Northern manners and customs" (Shannon, "Transplant" 662). And as such, they may be said to be part of the city's "human refuse" (Shannon, "Transplant" 660), or on their way to being so. They are prostitutes, alcoholics, gamblers, etc., like Grace, Wining Boy, and Lymon. Wining Boy, a once promising blues singer, has turned gambler, alcoholic, and vagrant. Lymon, Boy Willie's friend who arrives in Pittsburgh with him and decides to stay North, seems to be on the right track to becoming part of the city's human



dump.<sup>6</sup> He is a very easy prey to the lure of city life, squandering his money thoughtlessly on suits and shoes, going for easy sex, etc.

In the first part of the play, Berniece comes close to Levee. She literally reproves Boy Willie's way of being and his avuncular interest in her daughter Maretha. Her lack of belief in the ghost surprises Boy Willie and leads Wining Boy to assimilate her to white people: "she ain't got to believe. You go ask them white folks in Sunflower County if they believe" (1.2.34). However, the most compelling image of Berniece as a cultural denier comes out through Boy Willie's reaction when she asks Reverend Avery<sup>7</sup> to rid her house of the ghost, by which time she has come to accept the reality of ghosts: "... if you gonna agree with part of it you got agree with all of it. You can't do nothing halfway," observes Boy Willie (2.5.89). Boy Willie's point is that she cannot believe in the ghosts and think that the Christian God can chase them away. And by the end of the play he is proved right as Avery flatly resigns: "Berniece, I can't do it" (2.5.106).

Wilson seems to suggest that, more than the influence of the Northern environment, it is the African Americans' own mental state about the South that is more determining in their attitude to their Southern identity. Again, he makes this point through Boy Willie as he complains to Berniece about her dissatisfaction with Maretha's identity as a girl:

If you teach that girl that she living at the bottom of life, she's gonna grow up and hate you . . . . If you believe that's where you at then you gonna act that way. If you act that way then that's where you gonna be. It's as simple as that. Ain't no mystery to life. (2.5.92)

His criticism of Berniece's refusal to teach Maretha about the piano is as valid. If she taught it to her "she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high" (2.5.91). At the end of the action, when he invites Berniece and Maretha to "keep playing on that piano," he warns them that if they failed to do so, they would face the same problems (2.5.108).

Wining Boy's experience with the piano in his career as a blues singer also indicates that the efficacy of culture depends much on how it is used. For having let the piano shape his life instead of him using it to shape his existence, Wining Boy ends up destroying his life on alcohol and women:

I give that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me,

getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I'm carrying it around on my back. I don't wish that on nobody. See, you think it's all fun being a recording star. Got to carrying that piano around and man did I get slow. . . . You look up one day and you hate the whiskey, and you hate the women, and you hate the piano. But that's all you got. You can't do nothing else. All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me? Or am I the piano player? Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he the cause of all the trouble I'm having. (1.2.41)

That his life did not get any better after giving up the piano indicates that the problem was not the piano but he himself.

The fate of African Americans, suggests Wilson, partly depends on their attitude to their native culture. Because he believes in culture's efficiency and power to ensure the survival of blacks in America, he champions the fundamental idea of accepting and maintaining it.

### III. Wilson's Fundamental Idea: Accept and Maintain Your Culture

Despite their shortcomings and inappropriate choices, some of Wilson's characters seem able to remain in the North and maintain their culture, accepting their identity. In *Two Trains Running*, Aunt Ester epitomizes Southernness. Though displaced in a Northern city she remains intact in her command of spiritual forces. That she has been able to live that long indicates the efficacy of her African American identity and the quality of her own attitude to it. What is more, Aunt Ester exists in the play as a source of regeneration for those who still believe in their African American origins or want to acknowledge them. In *Two Trains Running*, says Wilson, “There are three ways in which you can change your life. You have Prophet Samuel, Malcolm X, and Aunt Ester” (Shannon, “Blues” 544). Holloway, Memphis, and even Sterling visit her to seek directions for their lives. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis's experience is also illuminating as to the efficacy of his native culture: “Of all of Wilson's characters, Herald Loomis [ . . . ] most noticeably achieves a new social status through self-knowledge . . . . He ultimately receives strength and vision from the Juba dance, reminiscent of the dance of African slaves. Empowered [by] his African ancestry, he begins to shine” (Plum 668).

Devon Boan has interpreted Doaker's attitude to the piano in *The Piano Lesson* as a renunciation of his past (268). This interpretation does not do justice to Doaker who, as an uncle to Berniece and Boy Willie and behaving as a surrogate father, has wisely decided to abandon any claim on the piano so as not to complicate the situation further. "You need to bless that piano . . . . It ain't done nothing but cause trouble," he observes to Avery (2.5.104). Wilson also tells us that he "has for all intents and purposes retired from the world" (1.1.1), thereby indicating his resignation from personal ambition. But Doaker has remained spiritually attached to the family (he is father-like to everyone), the piano and its background. He is the one who is responsible for narrating its story. Campbell reminds us what "Doaker's narrative has done for the rest of the family—communicate a mythology of black potential to succeed within the confines of, and by the rules of, a white world" (Boan 265). Doaker is also a key participant in the storytelling sessions and blues music singing that dot the action. He is the one urging Avery to tell Boy Willie the story of his transformation (1.1.24), aware that there is meaning to draw from it.

So, even Avery<sup>8</sup> has not totally cut himself off from his Southern culture. In allowing him to narrate his transformation, Wilson asserts the efficiency of the belief in dreams, the supernatural. Like the myth which empowers its believer, the dream operates on Avery as a guiding force. Wilson presents it as an element of African American culture. Telling it, showing its efficiency, is a way of keeping culture alive. Also Avery had been urging Berniece to sell the piano and help him set up his church. But then, he explains to Boy Willie, "After she told me about it . . . . I could see why she did not want to sell it" (1.1.26). He never bothered her again, because he understood the cultural and historical significance of the piano. Later on, Boy Willie follows his example when he realizes how useful the piano is to Berniece. Also, woman and land echoing one another symbolically, his desire to marry Berniece may be construed as a parallel to Boy Willie's longing for land in the South: connection with identity.

Neither is Wining Boy totally alienated from his Southern culture: he believes in the ghosts and their efficacy; and Wilson allows him to tell his experience with the Yellow Dog Ghosts, thereby making him function like Aunt Ester in *Two Trains Running*. Despite his desolate state, Wining Boy remains aware of the importance of the family, which he joins when the times are hard. Moreover, albeit not a star, he remains a blues singer, a carrier of culture that Wilson exploits in his play.

Berniece's relation to the piano has been interpreted as paradoxical, selective (Boan 267). It is above all complex. Her emotions about the pain of her grandparents' suffering and her husband's death seem to foreground her attitude to the South. Yet her spiritual and mythic link to it is hard to question, otherwise it would be difficult to justify her change at the end of the action when she calls on her ancestors for help. Her categorical refusal to let Boy Willie sell the piano evinces an uncompromising attitude to her past, her identity. Wilson suggests this deep-seated self-awareness by naming her after her grandmother who was traded against the piano (1.2.43). Her deep and almost paralyzing reverence for her ancestral figures carved on the piano indicates her awareness of the profundity of her identity.

From Berniece's point of view, the resolution of the issue of the piano shows that Wilson accepts that it is possible to stay in the North and keep black culture alive. After reconnecting with her ancestors, she remains with the piano (her past and identity) in Pittsburgh where she owns a house and is most probably going to re-marry. On leaving for the South, Boy Willie indicatively urges her and Maretha to continue maintaining the contact.

Wilson believes that it is important for black Americans to define themselves "in their own terms rather than being defined" by whites (Shannon, "Blues" 560), which is what Berniece eventually achieves. He seems to accept staying in the North and maintaining the African American identity as a valid substitute to returning to the South.

#### IV. Wilson's Other Idea: Return to the South

Returning to the South is crucial for Wilson and his characters who make this choice: "When we left the South we left people back there . . . [the] connection is broken, that sense of standing in your father's shoes . . . . What I'm trying to do with my plays [is] make the connection. Because I think it's vital" (Bigsby 298). In *Two Trains Running*, despite the sad memory he has of the South, Memphis contemplates returning there, even if for a short time. And indeed after he gets the money from the sale of his restaurant, he visits Aunt Ester who advises him to return to the South for a new direction to his life (*Two Trains Running* 109). Perhaps, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* best illustrates Wilson's idea that part of the solution for the African American resides in returning to the South.

Though they retain some form of mental or spiritual links with the South, of all Wilson's characters in *The Piano Lesson* only Boy Willie establishes and maintains a physical relation with it. Berniece and Avery have settled in Pittsburgh and are probably going to marry and remain there. Doaker makes it clear that only niggers (meaning stupid blacks) and "dumb white men" remain in the South (1.2.36). Dodging the Sheriff and Stovall, Lymon wants to "stay (and) [S]ee what it's like up here" (1.1.3). As a result, while for Doaker<sup>9</sup> and Lymon the South is invariably "down there" (1.1.9), for Boy Willie it is always "down home" (1.1.2). The first expression indicates a desire to create geographic distance, and the second the opposite. Boy Willie indeed can only envisage his life down South. He gets literally mad at Lymon who suggests that he stay up North with him:

You stay! I'm going back! That's what I'm gonna do with my life! Why I got to come up here and learn to do something I don't know how to do when I already know how to farm? You stay up here and make your own way if that's what you want to do. I'm going back and live my life the way I want to live it. (1.2.46)

Boy Willie's attachment to the South may be clarified through his perception of the piano (the past) and the land. His relation to his past is perhaps the most intricate in the play because of his initial desire to sell the piano in order to buy Sutter's land. As I argue elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> though this may smack of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist philosophy, Wilson's treatment of Boy Willie's attitude to the piano and the land is very complex. It goes beyond Washington's scheme of self-renunciation and involves DuBois' notion of preserving blackness (Williamson 69). It is not simply a desire to have his share of the American pie; it is also and much more a search for self-determination. Devon Boan has elaborated on this in a compelling manner (226-69), though some of his conclusions raise some questions.

Boy Willie arrives from the South, seeking to sell the piano. He thus demythologizes it, argues Boan, by making it a mere economic object, a mere "piece of wood" that he can trade (1.2.50). Boy Willie justifies his position as a way of making good use of the only legacy his father left him. He contends that his father would have endorsed his position. His line of thought is forceful and logical. For Boan, Boy Willie's economic perception of the piano reveals his sense of the "pre-eminence of present over past, utility over tradition, freedom over commu-

nity" (Boan 268). But Wilson does not allow this to happen. Instead, the mythological dimension of the piano prevails. He leaves it to Berniece and returns to the South.

Though he seeks to sell the piano, Boy Willie carries an intimate awareness of its historical, cultural and symbolic significance. Doaker reminds us that he was named after his grandfather who carved the figures on the piano (1.2.43). Like his grandfather who as an artist wrote history into the piano, Boy Willie revives, or better re-creates, history through it by helping Berniece and Maretha rediscover and rekindle their historical knowledge. He insists that Berniece tell Maretha the story of the piano, because it is part of her and there is nothing shameful about it. Knowing its history, he contends, would make Maretha proud and aware of who she is and where she comes from (2.5.90-91).

Boy Willie's awareness of the symbolic significance of the piano also comes out through his linking it with the land. He does not want to purchase just any land: it is Sutter's land in the South, the land on which his ancestors toiled to death. Furthermore, he associates the land with his father, seeking to acquire what constituted his identity and to fulfill his dream:

See now . . . if he had his own land he wouldn't have felt that way. If he had something under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller. That's what I'm talking about . . . . You just got to go out and meet it square. If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. (2.5.92)

Land is synonymous with dignity, pride, and self-fulfillment, a sense of place, time and identity (Boan 267-68); and it is a means of determining one's future. For lacking his own land, all his father was ever able to do in life with his "big old hands" was to "make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall" (2.5.91), the white man. Boy Willie wants the land to make something better with his own hands. He sees no future in life without land, which alone can allow him to offer his offspring "the advantages" with which to start life: "What I want to bring a child into this world for? Why I wanna bring somebody else into all this for?" (2.5.91). Through the land, Boy Willie seeks his own way to self-realization.

This is the meaning of land which leads Boy Willie to seek to return to the South. But having failed to sell the piano, he can only return after confronting and defeating Sutter's ghost, the mythical owner of the land he wants to acquire.

Shannon argues: "Once Boy Willie engaged the ghosts of the past, he had cleared the very hurdle for which he sought to sell the piano" (Boan 269). And Wilson himself confirms: "Blacks in America have been wrestling ghosts of the white man for decades, trying to exorcise them from their lives" (Bigsby 296). Like Berniece, Boy Willie frees himself from the white man's ghost and can envisage a more peaceful and hopeful life.

Land and the South resonate with selfhood and origin. The return to the South is part of an essential quest, a quest for Mother Africa, for identity. It symbolizes Boy Willie's acceptance of his identity, of "who he is." The whole point about the South is that knowing and accepting one's identity—who one is—is a source of life, dignity, and power. It gives purpose, hope and direction to one's life; it is liberating.

## Conclusion

Representing the South through the notions of history, identity, and culture, Wilson's central concern is how best to use these, because he believes that "the black community currently is floundering because it has failed to turn to its history for strength or guidance" (Plum 561). He offers guidance in *The Piano Lesson* through portraying the potentials of African American culture and the attitudes of his characters to their Southern identity.

Accepting the African American identity is a form of resistance and self-determination. And Wilson offers two possibilities in which this may happen in the context of the American reality: You may remain in the North and keep the culture alive, determine yourself by your African American values: Berniece discovers this. Or you may return to the homeland, like Boy Willie.

Wilson indicates that he cannot separate himself as a black man and as an artist (Wilson, *The Ground* 13). The worldview he lays out in his plays is his own. What he does in *The Piano Lesson*, he also does in his life as an artist in general, as a black man. He strives to act like Aunt Ester (*Gem of the Oceans, Two Trains Returning*), to serve as a link with the ancestral world, its wisdom, resiliency, and mysticism. He seeks to offer his plays as "a potential source of empowerment that helps African Americans shape their future by becoming informed cultural historians" (Plum 669). And he believes in the potential of the theater to achieve this: "It can disseminate ideas, it can educate even the miseducated, because it is

art" (Wilson, *The Ground* 44).

Wilson sees his theater as belonging, not to the tradition of black art "conceived and designed to entertain white society," but to the one that "feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" (Wilson, *The Ground* 18). He seeks to exploit the cultural, psychological and intellectual potential of that theater (Wilson, *The Ground* 44-45) to help black Americans get insights into their history and identity, and achieve self-determination.

Shannon writes that at public forums Wilson has made a "very calculated and choreographed invitation to both [white and black] audiences to share and experience that same blues landscape that informs his plays" ("Transplant" 660). Indeed Wilson has a culturalist agenda, which he spells out using the musician as a model.<sup>11</sup>

He has even sometimes called for a physical relocation of African Americans (Shannon, "Transplant" 660). He believes in the symbolism of the return to the South, if only temporarily. In 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University, he made the following declaration: "I further think we should confer in a city in our ancestral homeland in the southern part of the United States in 1998, so that we may enter the millennium united and prepared for a long future of prosperity" (Wilson, *The Ground* 37-38).

What Wilson ultimately seeks is recognition of blacks as Americans: people who have contributed to the history, development, and culture of America; and acceptance of their distinctiveness: people who came to America with a specific culture, which they have shaped into something unique by the grace of the uniqueness of their experience. Altogether, it seems that Wilson's efforts have begun to bear fruit. His plays, asserts Jay Plum, "have transcended cultural boundaries and found commercial as well as critical success in the white theatrical mainstream" (669).



## NOTES

- 1 These are, following the order in which Wilson wrote them: *Jitney!* (1979) set in the 1970s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) set in the 1920s, *Fences* (1987) set in the 1950s, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) set in the 1910s, *The Piano Lesson* (1990) set in the 1930s, *Two Trains Running* (1992) set in the 1960s, *Seven Guitars* (1996) set in the 1940s, *King Hedley II* (2001) set in the 1980s, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) set in the 1900s, *Radio Gulf* (2005) set in the 1990s.
- 2 See for instance Sandra G. Shannon, "A Transplant That Did Not Take: August Wilson's Views on the Migration," *African American Review* 31.4 (1997): 659-66.
- 3 Jay Plum takes a similar perspective in his "Blues, History and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson," *African American Review* 27.4 (1993). But as the title of his paper indicates he focuses on the blues and history.
- 4 In Bissiri, "Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson's Drama: Reading *The Piano Lesson* through Wole Soyinka's Drama," *African American Review* 30.1 (1996): I argue that Wilson's sense of the community is typically African, as it involves, beside the humans, the ancestors and the unborn.
- 5 Lymon's flight evokes the runaway slave's: he flees the South primarily for security reasons; Doaker believes there is no more good land left for someone to fare on (1.2.36). But all of them, including Wining Boy and Avery Brown, demonstrate in their everyday lives that they maintain symbolic ties with the South.
- 6 We may argue that Lymon is not a good representative of Southern culture because, of all Wilson's characters in *The Piano Lesson*, only he cannot play the piano and acknowledges this (1.1.31). He hates rural life, and is perceived as lazy (1.2.39).
- 7 On the other hand, Boy Willie believes that though he does not agree with him, Avery has made a clear choice: "I will say this for Avery. He done figured out a path to go through life. I don't agree with it. But he done fixed it so he can get right through it real smooth" (2.5.90).
- 8 In Bissiri, "Aspects of Africanness," I make the point that as a Reverend Avery embodies "white American cultural spirit" (107).
- 9 Doaker refers to the South as "down home" only once, in 2.5.90. But then he is taking Boy Willie's perspective, urging him to go out in the street so that he can "have something to tell the fellows down home." It is Boy Willie's home; not his.
- 10 Bissiri, "Aspects of Africanness," 101-02.
- 11 "I have always been chasing the musicians. Their expression has been so highly developed, and it has been one expression of African American life. It's like our culture is the music. And the writers are way behind the musicians I see. So I'm trying to close the gap [ . . . ]. I think writers need consciously to be aware how our expressions as writers achieve the quality of the musician's expression" (Shannon, "Blues" 567).

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