

Melancholic Hope

— A Study of the Echo of Slavery in the Works of August Wilson —

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The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of.

Toledo in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*¹

That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn't want to accept that song. I tried to find my daddy to give him back the song. But I found out it wasn't his song.

Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Introduction

In Wilson's plays, the past intrudes into the characters' experience in the form of horrifying ghostly visions embodying unpleasant memories. Among his ten plays of African American experience in the twentieth century, August Wilson assesses the influence of the past in the present.² *The Piano Lesson*, (1987, the fourth play in August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle), for instance, is haunted by ghosts: the ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the ghost of the recently deceased white landowner searching for the piano (Sutter), the ghosts of the ancestors, and the ghosts of Crawley and Cleotha. We see some characters in Wilson's plays struggle with the haunting ghost or ghostly figures as traumatic memories.

This kind of traumatic experience does not only belong to each character's own individual past but also to their ancestors as well. Their traumatic experiences are transgenerational, and this element makes Wilson's works extraordinarily compelling and controversial. These inflicted wounds are embodied in the manner of textual excessive repetition, disjointed temporality, and the impossibility of the effects of trauma (often manifest in the form of melancholy).³ The subsequent effects of transgenerational trauma, caused by centuries of injustice and violence, remain at the center of the dramatic intensities of the plays I examine, resulting in the characters' psychological wounds.

Focusing on these traits of Wilson's works, several scholars have regarded Wilson's works as neo-slave narratives. Bernard W. Bell, for instance, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, defines the genre as one that combines "elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people" (285). Elaborating on fictional representation of the antebellum South, contemporary writers like Wilson employ the historical era of slavery to problematize the status of race relations and comment on current racial politics in the United States. As Isiah Lavender

contends, neo-slave narratives are “widely read and have become an important tool in revisiting history, literature, and the promise of freedom” (58). Black authors use the neo-slave narrative form by emulating its structure and appropriating its conventions. Neo-slave narrative, then, can work as a “repository of cultural memory as they witness and testify to the dehumanization process and our negligent attempts to forget” (ibid). Acknowledging the slave narrative’s reflection on oppression and thirst for freedom, the neo-slave narrative provides a medium for a speculative excursion into the traumatic experience in the past as well as afterlives of slavery and future visions. Through the characters’ journey into the past, like *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, and the characters’ encounter with the ghostly figures in *PL* and *JT* by Wilson, neo-slave narratives allow us to reconsider historical facts, invigorate our dialogue about them, and change our views toward them.

Based on these studies, I will investigate the function of haunting transgenerational trauma through the analyses of the effects of violence inflicted upon the characters of Wilson’s works, especially focusing on the interlocked relationship among ghosts, (transgenerational) trauma, and hauntology. In order to clarify how Wilson’s plays dismantle the oppressive racial ideology, this paper seeks to illuminate the way in which characters strive to gain hope and healing and reinvent their own identity by embracing African spiritual traditions through music and other ritual sessions.

1. Melancholic Hope

[T]he fact of slavery is something the blacks do not teach their kids---they do not tell their kids that at one time we were slaves.

Wilson in David Savran (295)

When asked how his series of plays can be interpreted as rediscovering and rewriting history, Wilson himself emphasizes the problem of not telling the history of slavery to the following generations. He is concerned about the fact that “the history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks,” claiming the significance of knowing their own past.

This is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage, that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history? If we did that, we would recognize our uniqueness in being African. One of the things I’m trying to say in my writing is that we can never really begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans. (Savran, 1998, 295–96)

As Jermaine Singleton clarifies, Wilson’s plays align well with a psychoanalytic trajectory of *Black studies*: Claudia Tate’s *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998), Anne Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race* (2000), and David Eng’s *Racial Castration* (2001).⁴ Across these psychoanalytic writings, Black subjectivity is constituted by various interactions of lack inflicted on by racial injury like the absence of the (normative white) phallus in Eng’s case and melancholia in Cheng’s. These critics observe that psychoanalytic insight and criticism are crucial in any investigation of the intricacies and possibilities of African America’s unclaimed cultural experiences.

In the analysis of ghosts and their haunting in the context of racialization, Cheng illustrates that only by identifying invisibility can we begin to understand the melancholic condition of race in America: “*American culture gags on what it refuses to see*, for ‘American culture’ is confronted by ghosts it can neither emit or swallow” (133, italics in original). Interpreting Freud, Cheng highlights that “Freudian melancholia designates a chain of loss, denial, and incorporation through which ego is born.” Cheng adds that the spectral embodies the nexus between psychic and social spaces and “uncanny” experiences of the internalization and repression of haunting. In contrast to mourning, Cheng explains, “[t]he melancholic eats the lost object---feeds in it” and “the melancholic subject fortifies him-or herself and grows rich in impoverishment.” Then, one can say that the “history of the ego is thus the history of its losses,” and that “melancholia alludes not to loss per se but to the entangled relationship with loss” (8). In Avery Gordon’s terms, “the uncanny is the return, in psychoanalytic terms, of what the concept of the unconscious represses: the reality of being haunted by worldly contacts” (55). Admitting the importance of drawing attention to redressing historical injustices in the political and legal realms, Cheng is engaged with exploring “experiences, struggles, and losses that cannot be resolved or fixed through juridical institutions” (Joseph Winters 19). Cheng underscores the way in which black Americans have endured a history of inappropriate death and suggests that “melancholy is a strategy that involves wrestling with death, suffering, and absurdity while also affirming moments of freedom, joy, and pleasure.”⁵

In this section, the paper delves into a complex grid of themes surrounding Black identity formation and co-constitutive realities of melancholy and hope. Against the rhetoric of racial progress that is likely to silence and minimize the history of racial violence in the name of American exceptionalism, Winters attempts to correct the optimistic discourse of unity, coherence, reconciliation, and progress. In his *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*, informed by Judith Butler’s interpretation of Freud’s description of melancholy in “Mourning and Melancholy” (1917), Winters coins a term “melancholic hope.” Melancholic hope offers a transformative experience, a form of self-affirmation and historical agency born out of painful experiences. Winters provides a compelling critical frame of reference to explore the need for disavowed history and its devices.

In Winters’ understanding, Freud’s depiction of melancholia can be taken as a sort of hope – which he terms “melancholic hope.” by which he means Black racial subjects are laced with unfinished struggles yet hopeful because of their melancholia. In “Mourning and Melancholy,” Freud defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁶ Melancholia, on the other hand, refers to the debilitating and pathological reaction to a real loss of a loved object. Winters explains that while Freud matches “the work of mourning” with “a sign of hope,” he suggests “a different kind of hope is opened up when we confront the intractability of loss or the ways various forms of unrecognized loss both shape and puncture our social worlds and relationships” (19). This “different kind of hope” can be translated into “melancholic hope” for Winters. Then, melancholic hope becomes an umbrella term for confronting “the intractability of loss or the ways various forms of unrecognized loss . . . shape and puncture our . . . relationship” (ibid). It makes invisible Blacks’ past and harsh experiences visible.

Whereas Freud notes that “the completion of the work of mourning is a sign of hope,” for Judith Butler, a different kind of hope can be possible when we are faced with the “intractability of loss or the ways

various forms of unrecognized loss both shape and puncture our social worlds and relationships” (Winters 19). Freud believes that “[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself,” yet, Butler writes “Freud’s early hope that an attachment might be withdrawn and given anew implied a certain interchangeability of objects as a sign of hopefulness” (21).⁷ She writes: “I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place, as if full substitutability were something for which we might strive” (ibid). Butler believes that “an alternative to violence and perpetual war involves developing forms of solidarity and community that affirm our shared vulnerability to injury, loss, and death, a shared quality that proponents of empire and war tend to disavow” (Winters 19). Based on the work of Judith Butler, David Eng, and David Kazanjian, Winters claims that melancholy is “a continuous commitment to “loss and its remains” and this commitment provides “sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future” (ibid). Though progressive narratives and linear version of historiography erase and repress catastrophes of history, the engagement with melancholy can generate chances to unsettle and open up “painful, fragmented accounts of war, genocide, and racial and gender violence” (ibid). Winters writes:

This melancholic attachment to the losses and remains of history makes possible a different kind of future than the one imagined by the proponents of progress. Similarly, these attachments reshape our relationship to the past (and the evanescent present). (19)

Then, drawing on Winters’ insight, I will probe into the dynamics of how the characters in the works of Wilson confront the “losses and remains” of traumatic history to make possible a different sort of identity and their future. At the historical moment bounded by the loss of stable identities because of slavery and its aftermath, the melancholic symptoms the characters have can become performative and deliver a new attitude to history that becomes both passionately engaged and painfully withdrawn.

In order for Black Americans to “flourish and prosper (and escape death and its various intimations)” in society, they must embrace the ideals of American Republicanism and “direct their desires and aspirations toward the venerable ideals of American democracy and the broader modern world.”⁸ This kind of assimilating rhetoric, based on American exceptionalism presenting America as a land of liberty, freedom and democracy, entails “the dangers involved in imposing unity and coherence onto experiences, phenomena, and expressions that are diverse, pluralistic, and scattered.”⁹ In Blacks’ sorrow songs as a legacy, both melancholy and hope are embedded, which then enables one to be aware of past violence that does not surface in American exceptionalism rhetoric. In other words, it is “loss, death, disappointment, suffering” and melancholy that are the some of the key ugly aspects of American society which the discourse of progress constantly sweeps under the rug (Winters 62).

In order to interpret how the characters in Wilson’s plays resist the persistent racial discriminatory ideology, one needs to heed the musical aesthetics like literary tropes such as “improvisation, dissonance, and breaking” to clarify the way that they dismantle the silencing of racial violence imposed by the traumatic American southern racial events. Instead of ignoring history, *PL* makes us recognize the importance of looking at traumas of racial history to find hope: “Hope is not defined by evading the traumas of history but

by swinging, or working, through the breaks and cuts of our social worlds” (Winters 88). Thus, the image of Blues? sung by Boy Willie and music played by Berniece in *PL* (both of which are significantly placed in the play) can help us readers keep memories of the past embedded in the present as it breaks down the silencing discourse that dismisses the past.

2. Ghosts in August Wilson

It is Joan Harrington in *The Playwright's Muse* who points out that the action of *PL* centers around the presence of ghost(s). Harrington further contends that Wilson’s other works also contain “a presence from another world” and that “Wilson’s characters battle not only ghosts, but death” (in *Fences*) and God (*Ma Rainey*) and Jesus Christ (*JT* 59). In *JT*, Herald Loomis, for instance, is haunted by the traumatic memories of vicious bounty hunter Joe Turner, who illegally enslaved him and made him lose his song and identity. The absent presence of the eponymous character Joe Turner is repeatedly mentioned by Herald Loomis as a haunting ghost, and even one minor character Reuben Scott (who is the boy next door and who befriends Zonia) mentions a ghost that tells him to honor his friend Eugene’s wish, and later Reuben lets pigeons go. This ghostly figure of Joe Turner as transgenerational trauma emerges as a result of untold and unnarrativized representations of the experiences of Middle Passage and slavery. Qun Wang also stresses the importance of using metaphors of unworldly presences in Wilson’s works:

Wilson’s use of metaphors in his plays is accurate, precise, and powerful. It demonstrates the writer’s awareness that to poetize the dramatization of the African-American experience is to identify images that can bridge the gap between the visible and the invisible, between permanence and the impermanent, and between the physical world and metaphysical world. (30)¹⁰

Levee Green in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, for example, vehemently rejects the idea that Black Americans need to come together and recognize and face their traumatic pasts in order to make a place for themselves in American society. Levee is almost always angry throughout the play, and this is one of the examples of such loss of subjectivity. There can be seen a profound disconnect between Levee’s emotions and the violence inflicted on him: The world has been too harsh for him to take in and all he can do to confront this pain is let it out in the form of anger towards people surrounding him. This feeling of horror he suffers is beyond his anger and Levee starts to lose control of himself. His anger and suffering posit the questions of mourning and melancholia about the traumatic past. Troy Maxson in *Fences* has been haunted by discriminatory traumatic experiences of the Jim Crow past that mirrors not only his personal experiences in the past but those inflicted upon his ancestors. Berniece in *PL* is trapped and haunted by the “inherited” piano and the lurking spirits of their ancestors. All of these characters angrily separate themselves from their cultural heritages, (un)consciously complaining about their lack of opportunities of pursuing their dreams.¹¹

Critics have different interpretations about the function of ghosts. Referring to the characters’ “struggle to accept or deny the African heritage and religion and embrace Christianity,” Amanda M. Rudolph holds that “The ghost of a dead White slave owner, Sutter, oddly enough, represents ATR (African traditional religion)” (571).¹² For Michael Morales, “The ghost of Sutter becomes the disembodied embodiment of the slaveholder’s historical perspective (and perhaps even the dominant culture’s control of history)”

because the “lineage kinship bond” itself works as a metaphor for the “historical connection between black Americans and their past” (111).¹³

As I have quoted at the beginning, Toledo, an old musician in *Ma Rainey*, says, “The white man knows you [black people] just a leftover.” This is because, he continues, “he the one that done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don’t know that we been took and made history out of” (*Ma Rainey* 57). Responding to this in the interview with DS (*Conversation with August Wilson* 27), and recounting how his parents covered up and concealed the “wrongs and indignities” African Americans suffered, he contends:

We’re leftovers from history — history that happened when there was a tremendous need for manual labor, when cotton was king. But history and life progress, you move into the industrial age, and now we’re moving into the computer age. We’re leftover. We’re no longer needed. At one time we were very valuable to America — free labor. (Ibid)

Then, Wilson underscores the importance of recovering history, and rewriting history. He claims that the “history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks” and that if they move forward, the fact of slavery is the very thing that should be taught to children to recognize their own uniqueness as African Americans: “the fact of slavery is something that blacks do not teach their kids — they do not tell their kids that at one time we were slaves” (ibid).

3. Ghost in *The Piano Lesson*

As Shamal Abu-Baker Hussein contends in the quote, the analysis of how Black characters in Wilson’s plays strive to “regain and revive such a spirit, culture, and legacy” reveals the importance of revisiting and scrutinizing their own historical struggles in history. Wilson prompts Blacks to “learn choice-recognition for self-affirmation at their current epoch, and to have a vision for their future in American society and culture” (Hussein 152). Following this insight, this paper tracks the characters’ struggle over their voices in history: Those by the ancestors of Charles’ family in *The Piano Lesson*, Troy Maxson in *Fences*, and Herald Loomis in *JT*. They encounter real death in different ways on both a personal and communal level, yet, despite terrors, they pass on their legacy to the following generations and attempt to “exceed the limits of choices out of a given choice” (ibid).

In *PL*, we encounter the ghost of a murdered white slave owner who haunts the descendants of his slaves and the spirits of the protagonists’ ancestors. This drama opens with the Doaker Charles’ home in Pittsburgh in 1936 and delineates both the Antebellum period and the Great depression. *PL* highlights the relationship between the Charles siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie, especially their different attitudes towards the piano (Berniece and Boy Willie’s father was killed retrieving the piano), the emblem of their family history. They battle over whether they should sell their piano: Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to acquire a patch of land in the South, which was originally part of the plantation where his ancestors worked as slaves. However, Doaker informs Boy Willie that Berniece has no intention of selling the piano though she has not been played it since the death of her mother Mama Ola several years ago. As David Krasner observes, “[t]he ideological separation of Boy Willie, the Southern brother, from Berniece, the Northern sister, becomes the site for a practical, spiritual, and ontological reconnection” (327).

In *PL*, the Charles family's piano incarnates the history of African American struggle and survival. It has meant different things to different people over the years. The piano sits in the Pittsburgh home of Doaker Charles at present, while, early on in its history, the piano was bought by the Sutters. Robert Sutter traded Doaker's father Boy Willie (at age 9) and Doaker's great-grandmother for the piano as a wedding gift for his wife Miss Ophelia. After Miss Ophelia became tired of the piano, she started missing her slaves. Then, Sutter ordered Doaker's grandfather, the carpenter Willie Boy, to carve the facial images onto the piano. He carved not only the enslaved man and woman but generations of the family's history onto the wooden upright. Berniece; their son, Doaker's father; his own parents (Mama Esther and Boy Charles), his marriage, his son's birth, his mother's death and funeral, and departures. Therefore, the piano even embodies the family's joys and hardships. For Berniece, the piano symbolizes her ancestors' history itself. Berniece is traumatized by the death of her mother and has never played the piano since then:

BERNIECE. You ain't taking that piano out of my house. (She crosses to the piano.) Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. (*PL* 52)

Both Boy Willie and Berniece are at odds, yet why are they so angry? As to the relationship between Black rage and its representations, which remains at the crossroads of the racial subjugation of African Americans and the individual/communal resistance and healing, Randall Robison observes as follows:

From slavery we have sublimated our feelings about white people. We have fought for our rights while hiding our feelings towards whites who tenaciously denied us those rights. We have even . . . hidden those feelings from ourselves. It is how we have survived. Black folk of my time talk about white people and their predilections at least once daily. But never talk about or with anger. It seems unnatural. Where have we stored the pain and at what price? (4)¹⁴

Between two of the main characters, who struggle to get rid of the haunting memory of the past memory, Berniece Willie is a case in point. Berniece, the sister of Boy Willie and a thirty-five-year-old mother, is still in mourning for her husband. As their names show (Boy Willie was named after Papa Willie Boy and Berniece after Mama Berniece), they carry with them a transgenerational legacy including memories of traumatic slavery. She accuses her brother of causing her husband's death.

In a way, Berniece is an "exile" herself because she keeps her distance from and hides from the memories of her ancestors' Southern experiences of slavery. She is always distrustful of Boy Willie's boastfulness and rebukes him for his defiant and bellicose ways. She stores her pain of being haunted by the ghost of a former slaveholder and sacrificing her tie with her ancestors.

Though depressed, melancholic hope offers Berniece a transformative experience, a kind of self-affirmation and historical agency born out of agonizing experiences. Confronted with the ghosts, at first, she asks Avery, a Christian preacher, to banish the ghost, but ultimately, he fails. Berniece must do it herself. It

is only after she calls upon her ancestors (a community of the dead) and relies on their strength that she can exorcise the ghost. Through reconnecting herself with her ancestors Berniece can surmount her fear and face the traumatic past and gain spiritual and social regeneration. Wilson describes this in the following:

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 song 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. (*PL* 106)

Just like Ma Rainey, Berniece can surmount her traumatic past because she recognizes that the blues can be both a self-affirming song and an appreciation of the collective and cultural legacy of African Americans. Eventually, Berniece, Boy Willie, and the other family members come to terms with the piano, that is, their legacy, both the anguish of the past and the hope for the future. All of these experiences become the piano lessons for them that turn the Charles family to their ancestors. When they implore the ancestors for help, they are finally able to find peace of mind. They exorcise the ghost of slavery and find a way to deal with the past and to move forward through melancholic hope. They can “connect the present to the past and also find a way to locate themselves within a dominant society that alienates and pushes them to the fringe” (Amy Sickels 94).

4. Trauma in *Fences*

In August Wilson’s *Fences* (the time is set in 1957 and the place is Pittsburgh), the protagonist Troy Maxson is a fifty-three-year-old African American who works for the sanitation department. His immediate family is his wife Rose and his son Cory, with his older brother Gabe sometimes mentioned though not living with them (Gabe is a World War II veteran with his brain damaged). Troy (born in 1904) with dreams of becoming a former Negro League baseball player failed to achieve the American Dream like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller. One can say that Troy’s personality develops as he was systematically rejected, but his fundamental need for self-fulfillment and self-actualization in a harsh society remained. He has been marginalized and ousted from mainstream society and experienced racial exploitation and discrimination based on the color of his skin all throughout his life.

We are informed that the Maxson came to Pittsburgh as part of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West at around 1915.¹⁵ It was the period before the Civil Rights movements in the 1950s and 60s, when African Americans confronted the challenges of racism and discrimination. In a note preceding the play, Wilson explains the differences between European immigrants and African Americans:

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. . . . The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar-paper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream. That they

could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.¹⁶

These descriptions exactly match Troy's life. As Patricia Gantt notes, "[b]y the decade explored in his 1950s play . . . Wilson's characters are more concerned with coping with the present than looking to their southern past," and the play has many reminders of the South in Troy's "recollections of coming to manhood on his father's Alabama farm, in the collard greens and cornbread Rose" cooks in their kitchen, "in Troy's yearning for the exoticism of 'one of them Florida gals.'"¹⁷

This sort of psychological attitude toward the South reflects the theme of the need to sing one's own song (echoing in *JT* and *Ma Rainy*). In *Fences*, Troy sings a Blues song "The Old Blue Song" (a traditional folksong which Troy hears in his childhood) to express his emotion and the melody enters the play at the end of Act 1.

Wilson uses this song as a representation of the harmony and disharmony in Troy's life, while the genre of "The Old Blue Song represents the social injustice that Troy experiences. As Sandra Garrett Shannon indicates, while Troy sing Blues and "pauses long enough to contemplate his tragic plight, he lovingly evokes the memory of canine companion named Blue."¹⁸ During the song, he insinuates the dog's presence: "Hear it ring! Hear it ring! I had a dog his name was Blue You know Blue was mighty true You know Blue was a good old dog Blue treed a possum in a hollow log" (99).

This song, filled with Blue's memories, signifies the sentimental relationship between a man and his faithful dog, yet it also indicates the romanticized dead time from which mourning Troy can move on. In this way, Troy's father's song survives through Troy to his children Cory and Raynell (Troy's illegitimate child, who is mothered by Troy's former lover Alberta and has been adopted by the Maxson). Cory and Raynell sing the song and take over the heritage of the Maxson.

Troy deconstructs the stereotypical image of the African American male "the lazy, shiftless, inarticulate, and irresponsible man who abandons his family" (Mary L. Bogumil 36). Indeed, Troy's friend Bono introduces to us a typical male image: "Searching out the New Land. That's what the old folks used to call it. See a fellow moving around from place to place . . . woman to woman . . . called it Searching out the New Land" (*Fences* 48). In contrast to this, Wilson expresses his intention to overcome such a stereotypical view: "I know there are not strong black images in literature and film, so I thought, why not create them? . . . Troy Maxson is responsible. Those images are important. Every black man did not just make a baby and run off."¹⁹ As a normal human being, Troy does have some flaws, yet Troy shows another aspect of the African American images, attempting to hold responsibility to his family with a heroic spirit and role. In Susan C. W. Abbotson's terms, "Troy, the father, makes mistakes but takes responsibility for his actions in a way Wilson asks the entire African American community to consider" (12).

As Abbotson contends, Troy's life can be interpreted as "a metaphor for the enduring, life-affirming African American spirit" that he can hand down to his children, to the coming generations, as his legacy. He grew up in harsh surroundings and later spent time in jail for murdering a man, though this can, without doubt, be considered as an act of self-defense from the present viewpoint). Abbotson is correct in describing Troy's "captivity in jail" as "tribulations of *slavery* that he needs to get beyond" (*italics mine*, 13). The only choice he is given about a job is to do the vilest jobs while his two sons pursue their careers in sports

and music respectively. These jobs are, for Troy, emblematic of the economic and racial exploitation of African Americans. For instance, Troy rebukes Cory for going to football practice instead of helping him build a fence around the yard. Troy refuses to support Cory's pursuit of his dream when they start talking about Cory's winning a football scholarship. Troy just tells him to stop thinking about it because the white people aren't going to give him any chances. Even though Lyons (Troy's son from a previous relationship with a woman Troy met before he was a baseball player and met Rose) tried to be a professional musician against the wishes of his father, Troy reprimands Lyons for being lazy and poor and refuses to listen to his music.

In the following scene, Troy, provoked by the white dominance of the garbage truck drivers, makes a case against the white management and claims that he will take the case to the garbage workers' union.

Troy: I ain't worried about them firing me. They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That's all I did. I went to Mr. Rand [Troy's white boss] and asked him, "Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?" Told him, "What's the matter, don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?" (*Fences* 106)

Pointing out the fact that Troy employs the phrase "watermelons" (apparent black simpletons) before this quotation, Michael Awkward reads this scene as an instance of a black "deformation of mastery" based on "a tradition of minstrelsy that . . . is characterized by 'nonsense, misappropriation, or mis-hearing'" (164). Through this device, it works to "introduce both Troy's subversive act and Wilson's own afrocentric the-matics" (ibid).

Thus, threatened by the lingering horrors of traumatic slavery, an ex-con black man (Troy) needs to performatively reinvent himself "like the blues musician or the trickster figure" (Harry Justin Elam 150). Later, he successfully makes his career as the first Black driver. After this conversation with his colleague Bono, Troy is interrogated about his lack of a driver's license. Still, just like a trickster figure, Troy resourcefully refutes Bono by improvisation.

Bono: Do Mr. Rand know you ain't got no driver's license? That's what I'm taking about. I ain't asked if driving was easy. I asked if Mr. Rand know you ain't got no driver's license.

Troy: He ain't got to know. The man ain't got to know my business. Time he find out, I have two or three driver's licenses. (*Fences* 143)

Troy fights against "the limitations imposed on him by a hostile world and thus avoids engaging in cynical devaluations of self-esteem that might reduce him to a victim" (Paul Carter Harrison 303).²⁰ What he reaffirms to himself and to the viewers/readers is that the limitations to blacks' achievement are not within them internally developing but externally imposed. As Elam and Harrison suggest, Troy utilizes the spirit of the trickster to avoid being victimized, to survive in the harsh discriminatory world. In the Wilson saga, Troy (*Fences*), Loomis (*JT*), Berniece (*PL*) and other characters similarly struggle against systematic oppression and racial profiling as they desire to redefine themselves against a victimizing ideology that does not dehumanize them and depreciate their value.²¹

Fences' final scene depicts the morning after Troy's death, and this carries hope for the future. As for Raynell, despite grieving over her father's death, she takes care of her garden, which symbolizes her vigorous and nurturing attitude toward the world (as given to her by Rose). The garden represents a new life and growth for Raynell and her family. As the scene symbolizes where both Raynell and Cory sing the complete song together before they depart for the church for their father's funeral, Cory finally comes to understand his father's spirit and comes to terms with his father.²²

5. Strange Fruit in *Ma Rainey*

Set in Chicago in 1927, a period of significant cultural change, *Ma Rainey* unfolds a tragic story of African Americans striving to make it in a society that hinders them from achieving the American dream. The film probes into transgenerational trauma that has left deep scars on the characters.

In the process of recording, Black musicians are always under constant surveillance by the white producer and manager "who economically govern the recording session." Black people are deprived of "the power, access, and agency" (Elam 146) and are "spooked up with the white men" (55). *Ma Rainey*, an openly lesbian Black woman, learns how to avoid being dictated to by any man (White or Black). She acknowledges her own worth, especially her voice and musical talent. Levee (who is the young Mississippi-born Black trumpet player and songwriter in *Ma Rainey's* band and is desperate for recognition and fame) always clashes with Toledo. Toledo encourages the other black man to rise up. As an intelligent "philosopher" and the voice of Black Nationalism, Toledo claims that "if 'every living colored man' works together, their lives will improve and that it is a mistake to look for the white man's approval."²³

It is not just Levee's age and musical preferences about rhythm that put him apart from his fellow musicians but also his self-centered ambition, his abrasive impatience, and his way of speaking. Toledo asserts that Black Americans should bond together and recognize their traumatic history to become solid members of American society, while Levee disregards the significance of the history of tradition, instead ambitiously prioritizing his personal dream and success. As Kim Pereira contends, "Their personalities reflect their attitudes toward music: the older three favor the more plaintive, deeply emotional sounds of the blues; Levee, the flashier rhythms of swing" (14).

As if to trace the tradition of the blues, *Ma Rainey* resonates as a traumatic lament, and immediately, readers can tell that these characters are at odds. Soon after, Levee shows up and trots in wearing fancy clothes and his new pair of shoes, which he starts showing off to his fellow musicians. He asks Cutler to take a look at them, but Cutler blatantly rejects his request, saying "Nigger, I ain't studying you" (*Ma Rainey* 23). The other members tease him, and the situation worsens as they are not treating him seriously. Readers witness Levee's brash demeanor causing the rising tension with others, and it sets the cacophonous tone for the rest of the play. During a break in their recording, the band starts rehearsing and making jokes to each other while Levee removes himself from them believing that he is a better musician than anyone else. Levee is always isolated not only from the rest of the band but from society.

Levee's mental frustration and its deadlock situation represent his failure to work through his traumatic memories. After being fired by *Ma Rainey*, Levee suffers a mental breakdown. When Toledo inadvertently steps on Levee's shoes, despite Toledo's apologies, Levee becomes irate, succumbing to his violent past, takes his knife, and fatally stabs him to death in the back. As Alan Nadel notes, "When Toledo accidentally

steps on Levee's new shoes, that trivial incident becomes the focus for Levee's frustration, disappointment, and rejection" (103).

What is worth noting is how easily Levee kills Toledo. Levee's violence is triggered by the deep psychological traumatic wounds. Levee has suffered from systemic racism through entire his life, without finding a proper way to channel his frustrations. Internalizing the oppression and pain, he lashes out and reenacts violence to his fellow musician in such a way that leaves the audience stunned. The play ends up as a tragedy in which the band never "finds its way out of the rehearsal room and on to the stage of history" (ibid). Ironically enough, the band performatively embodies the spirit of the blues. The implications of the blues orchestrate a critical arena where "an ever-changing set or series of arrangements and rearrangements" of racial trauma and its aftermaths is dramatized (Nadel 102). In Pereira's terms, "[Wilson's] characters, Levee, Troy and Boy Willie, in their separate plays, are merely destructive forces at odds with their world instead of agents of change challenging the status quo and reordering the universe" (65).

Levee erupts twice in the play. At the end of the play's first act, he reveals to his bandmates how he got his physical scars through racial violence (at the same time, these scars are psychological ones). The second outburst happens when he interrupts his mother's rape by a gang of white men in the family kitchen. Afterward, we are told that Levee's father was lynched for getting revenge on the white men who raped Levee's mother. In terms of the descriptions of racial terrors, it is only slightly mentioned through the police officers' eyes and the white producers' arrogance.

As Gaylord Brewer mentions, Levee is ruptured between Ma, ("linked with black roots and the blues) and "the white 'father,' Sturdyvant (the white producer who promises to help succeed), who promises to let Levee record a new kind of music" (133). This stems from Levee's resistance against all the institutions of the past including Christianity. Though Levee repudiates the "white man's God," a god that "ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers" (*Ma Rainey* 98), he still believes in Sturdyvant. Yet, at heart Levee believes:

Levee: He's a white man's God. . . . God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God take a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage. God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you nigger! Jesus hate your black ass! Come talking that shit to me. Talking about burning in hell! God can kiss my ass."
(*Ma Rainey* 98)

As Pereira indicates, Levee's image of Jesus as a repressive White man echoes with that of Loomis's in *JT*, Jesus as a White overseer.²⁴ This hatred against Jesus as a white oppressor is linked with his traumatic memory of his mother's rape and the subsequent event of his father's revenge and his death by lynching. What he learns from his father is the lesson of revenge that determines his life from that moment.

Levee: Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my mama! I heard her when she called you! I heard her when she said, "Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!" And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back?
(*Ma Rainey* 99)

Thus, the play seems to present Levee as an exile, who is left “cut off from his spiritual moorings, bereft of religion, tradition, and friends—with no recording contract, no job, and virtually no future” awaiting him (Pereira 32).

Behind Levee’s desperate demeanor, there is an urge in him to find his own song “in order for his cry to be heard and answered.”²⁵ When his call out and prayer to the higher power falls short like a violent and empty rant, Levee feels dejected. In Downing’s words, Levee “experiences extraordinary confusion concerning his psychic identity, his personal god.” Black band members are invisible and insignificant to Levee, and he just turns to the whites to obtain a contract to change his destiny, only in vain. He has no choice but to relive it without making any reconciliation with his outrageous past memory. As Krasner contends, “the significance of finding one’s cultural and spiritual regeneration through the blues song” becomes apparent through the opposing views of Ma Rainey and Levee. Levee cannot appreciate his relationship to the music, and “never realizes his blues song,” while Ma Rainey, contrarily, “recognizes that the blues can become both a self-accentuating song and a declaration of the collective, cultural memory of African Americans” (322–23).

6. Trauma and Loomis’ reinvention of identity

In the case of *JT*, traumatic events in the lives of the characters’ ancestors come back to haunt the characters of the play, especially that of the terror of the Middle Passage and slavery that denotes the inception of African American experience in America.²⁶ *JT* entails conflicts, as we have seen in *Ma Rainey*, that take place between “a religion that was forced upon Africans upon coming to America and their own belief systems that survived the Middle Passage” (Shannon, *Modern American Drama*, 146). This echoes Wilson’s often quoted belief “God does not hear the prayers of blacks.” In this play, the tension between “slave owner’s Christianity and African spirituality” results in the play’s significant topic of the danger of “erasing aspects of one’s culture and replacing them with those of another” (ibid). Cynical views toward Christianity can be found in the scene where Loomis finally meets saved Martha (who has been separated from him for eleven years because Joe Turner illegally enslaved Loomis), when Loomis depicts Jesus Christ as being only a “Great big old white man” (*JT* 92). Joe Turner is the infamous plantation owner, who is introduced as a legendary brother of Tennessee governor Pete Turner (as Krasner indicates, the “actual twenty-ninth governor of Tennessee from 1893 to 1897 was Pete Turney as well as his brother Joe Turney” [323]). This trauma haunts Loomis all through his life, while Marth Loomis seems to be able to establish a new identity herself.

This traumatic haunting of ghosts produces ontological rupture. The recognized and unrecognized traumatic wounds are unwittingly transmitted to the coming generations in the forms of mourning and melancholia in the characterization of Herald Loomis (an ex-deacon who has lost his faith because of his painful and traumatic experiences) who spent seven years in bondage under Joe Turner. He is a man who is “stalled at the crossroads of negation and actualization.” To regain his wholeness, he must “remember to himself the divine birthright bequeathed to him by the ‘Bones People’ who reside in his soul” (*JT* 235).²⁷ Loomis comes up to a Pittsburgh board house in search of his wife (he was looking for her to say goodbye). Loomis pays Rutherford Selig to locate his wife now called Martha Pentecost. Martha, unlike Loomis, decides not to bring a ghost around her “So I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you”

(*JT* 129). Loomis is helped by Bynum and finally becomes able to talk about his trauma, that of being captured and detained as a slave. This experience strips him of all sense of his personal identity but as we shall see later, *JT* traces the process of Loomis's reunification with his wife and reaffirmation of his new identity as an African American.

Before we encounter the episode of the City of Bones, Bynum (an African conjure man or root worker living in Seth and Bertha's boarding house) talks about a strange vision of a Shining Man, who lets him know the "Song of Unity."²⁸ He has the power of the Binding Song, which allows him to bind Loomis and Zonia to Martha. According to Bynum, he met a Shiny Man in the road, and the Shiny Man and Bynum walked along:

[H]e had a voice inside him telling him which way to go and if I come and go along with him he was gonna show me the Secret of Life. . . . Got around that bend and it seem like all of a sudden we ain't in the same place. Turn around that bend and everything look like it was twice as big as it was. The trees and everything bigger than life! Sparrows big as eagles! I turned around to look at this fellow and he had this light coming out of him. I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. He shining until all the light seemed like it seeped out of him and then he was gone and I was by myself in this strange place where everything was bigger than life. (*JT* 9)

In this magical encounter, Bynum also meets the ghost of his father, who tells him that if he ever sees a Shiny Man again, he will realize that his song is accepted. He also tells Bynum the importance of finding his song, his identity. Then, with this vision in mind, he becomes a shaman and serves the other characters as someone who can literally bind people together (Bynum corresponds to "bind 'em"). He is also an adviser to Mattie, a counselor to Jeremy, and a spiritual guide to Loomis.

As Bynum sees Herald respond terribly to Bynum's song of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," Bynum comes to know that Herald has been enslaved by the man. Bynum has Loomis tell his story and lets him calm down by telling him it is because Joe Turner captured Loomis for stealing his song and his identity. Then, Bynum tells Loomis to sing his song to be free and regain his own identity, adding that Loomis is shining.

Bynum functions as the intermediary who helps Loomis discard "the shackles of Turner's white Christian oppression" and find their song (Brewer 130). This song reflects their destiny, which constitutes a shared past, and shared memories of the City of Bones. This song is a mixture of African traditions with call-and-response song and dance. hybrid of traditions and invokes the name of the Holy Ghost. Bogumil contends that the juba dance symbolizes a "remote ancestral ties — a paternal, cultural legacy from the characters' African forefathers" (465).²⁹

The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of *the African slaves*. It is a call and response dance. Bynum sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap their hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as *African* as possible, with performers working themselves up unto a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost. In the middle of the dance HERALD LOOMIS enters. LOOMIS: (In a rage.) Stop it! Stop it! (They

stop and look to him.) (emphasis added, *JT* 52)

Marc Maufort argues that the “ritualistic resonances of this scene” reminds readers of “mythic magic realism” and it works as if it “penetrates an essentially American environment.”³⁰

In both *The Gem of the Ocean* and *JT*, water functions as a source of rebirth. As for *JT*, Loomis remembers the City of Bones. Anissa J. Wardi contends that “the bones in Joe Turner . . . illustrate Wilson’s concern with the history that is buried in the water” (158). In *JT*, Loomis is urged to look back and confront his own past. This is a site, which even through storytelling, the revisiting of the Middle Passage enables Loomis to reunite with ancestors and “re-members the collective black body, those lost old bones, making them into a unified structure, a communal site” (Elam 236). In a magic realist description by Wilson, a surreal vision of bones walking out of the water, Loomis can face his traumatic past, talk about and work through it.

(LOOMIS starts to walk out the front door and is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by vision. BYNUM crawls to him). BYNUM: what you done seen, Herald Loomis? LOOMIS: I done seen bones rise up out of the water. . . . Bones walking on top of the water. . . . I come to this place . . . to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out . . . and I seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it. (*JT* 53)

After this scene, when the bones suddenly transform into people, Loomis says: “They got flesh on them! Just like you and me! They black. Just like and you and me. Ain’t no difference.” To calm him down, Bynum tells him “They walking around here now. Mens. Just like you and me. Come right up out the water” (*JT* 56).³¹ When Loomis has a vision of his ancestors during a juba dance ceremony, he got overwhelmed by the song played by all the board-house residents in a call-and-dance style and faints on the ground. Though he realizes that he belongs to these wondrous Bones People, owing to “enslavement, oppression, and ostracism,” his legs “won’t stand up” (he has no “spiritual foundation” with himself (Washington, “The Sea Never Dies,” 235).

Gradually, though, at the beginning of the play, Loomis fails to appreciate the significance of African American culture (literally his legs fail him in his earlier vision), and Loomis grows to embrace his own ancestors’ inheritance and legacy. It means Loomis realizes that Martha is not his salvation as he anticipated till he finally meets her. Instead, Loomis struggles to confront Bynum’s song about Joe Turner and his past by monologuing his own connections to the past and where he comes from. Loomis, then, is directed toward the future through this process of healing.

That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. I tried to find my daddy to give him back his song. But I found out it wasn’t his song. It was my song. It had come from way deep inside me. I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. And that song helped me on the road. . . . All the time, that song getting bigger and bigger. (*JT* 71)

When Martha mentions the blood of the Lamb, Loomis slashes his chest with a knife to become whole as an act of sacrifice. He abandons his Christian background. In Prayer P. Elmo Raj's terms, "Loomis' shedding of his own blood is a sacrament (baptism and resurrection) that encompasses him with a transcendental force to set him free."³² Just like a Christ figure, Loomis exclaims that he does not need anyone's help ("I don't need anybody to bleed for me" [*JT* 93]). Thus, Wilson presents the case of Loomis who, caught in an ambience as a disillusioned man, struggles to battle with his traumatic estrangement by rejecting "Great big old white man . . . Mt. Jesus Christ," the Christian promise of salvation, and Joe Turner (*ibid*). Loomis has found the "song of self-sufficiency."

Having found his song, song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contradictions. (*JT* 94)

Thus, through the strange encounter with the ghostly figure, Loomis regains his identity through the journey and the ceremony. The play ends with Bynum shouting "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (*ibid*). Wilson presents Loomis as "an alternative African American Christ-figure" (Maufort 48), and through this ritual cleansing, he transforms himself into a rejuvenated African who ascertains his song and emanates his own light of self-fulfillment" succeeding in acquiring self-recognition and subverting his traumatic experiences (Raj 42). Loomis grows to recognize his search as a "spiritual and practical quest to find his 'song,' a connection to a past lost while enslaved by Joe Turner."³³

Conclusion:

Based on the analyses of some characters' attitudes toward past traumatic events in Wilson's works, I have delved into the way in which each character attempts to reinvent a different sort of identity and future. Their new identity. Quite often, their trauma is revealed through textual cracks and fissures such as textual excessive reiteration, incongruous temporality, and the impossibility of being aware of traumatic effects (which often manifest in the form of melancholy). These lingering effects of transgenerational trauma, caused by centuries of injustice and violence, result in the characters' psychological wounds. As epitomized in *JT*, it is revealed that "Joe Turner imprisoned Herald Loomis and other black men to capture their 'song'" (Krasner 323).

At the historical moment bounded by the loss of stable identities because of slavery and its aftermath, however, the melancholic symptoms the characters develop can become performative and deliver a new attitude to history that becomes both passionately engaged and painfully withdrawn. Loomis in *JT*, for instance, regains his identity by facing traumatic events in the past while Troy's legacy and the Maxson's spirits in *Fences* are passed onto the next generation through song. Berniece in *PL* overcomes traumatic event and ghostly intrusion by playing the piano and connecting with the ancestors. Levee in *Ma Rainey*, unfortunately, does not make it as he is overwhelmed by the lurking repressive intensity of his traumatic past.

Yet, as Grant notes, the ending of *JT* also brings to the fore the difficulty of escaping the loop of trans-

generational trauma. While Loomis's rebirth and his departure are often highlighted by the critics like Elam and Shannon, one cannot forget another lingering effect of transgenerational trauma on Loomis's daughter Zonia. Despite the fact that she was also finally united with her mother, Martha, she is now facing the unavoidable fact of losing her father. Therefore, *JT* is overshadowed by the lingering traumatic ambiance oozing on the stage, with Zonia as another victim of transgenerational trauma assuming the onus of paternal separation.³⁴

[Notes]

- 1 This work is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (c) [19K00460]. The term *The Piano Lesson* is hereafter, *PL*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* as *Ma Rainey*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as *JT*.
- 2 One of the most important studies on this point is Harry J. Elam's *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (2006).
- 3 I referred to Sinikka Grant, 112.
- 4 Singleton, 50.
- 5 Winters, 20.
- 6 Freud, 243. This is also quoted by Winters (18).
- 7 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 246. This is also mentioned by Winters.
- 8 I referred to Winters, 39.
- 9 Winters, 16.
- 10 Harrington also mentions this, 60.
- 11 Harrington, 60.
- 12 This is also mentioned by Junwu Tian and Na Li, 272.
- 13 I referred to the discussion by Junwu Tian and Na Li.
- 14 Singleton also refers to this part (49). Specters haunting African American Literature can be found in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).
- 15 August Wilson is the son of a white father (German immigrant) and a black mother (a sharecropper who migrated to a Pittsburgh slum from North Carolina).
- 16 *Fences*, 17.
- 17 Marilyn Elkins, 82. I disagree with Gantt in her argument that "[t]hese southern echoes are secondary." For my discussion, this traumatic memory matters to the characters of Wilson's works.
- 18 See Shannon, 147.
- 19 Quoted by Hussein, 140.
- 20 Also quoted by Elam, 151.
- 21 I referred to Elam, 151.
- 22 I referred to Abbotson, 14.
- 23 J. R. Bryer, 346.
- 24 Pereira, 32.
- 25 Downing, 83.
- 26 I referred to the discussion by Grant.
- 27 I referred to Teresa N. Washington, "'The Sea Never Dies.'"
- 28 Marc Maufort, 46.

- 29 Bogumil, “‘Tomorrow Never Comes.’”
- 30 Maufort, 47.
- 31 As Washington observes, through the exchange of oracular utterance by Bynum and Loomis in *JT* conveys “the history, genealogy, and destiny of every member . . . the Bones People, the ancestors, the survivors, the Gods” (169).
- 32 I referred to Raj, 43.
- 33 Krasner, 326.
- 34 This point is also mentioned by Grant, 115.

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