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Interweaving Pittsburgh's Black Cosmogony: Transgenerational Trauma, African Cultural Affiliation and Spiritual Restoration in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)

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Abstract : In his ten-play chronicle of African American experience in the twentieth century, August Wilson examines the sway of enslavement in Black Americans' contemporary condition. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, his second play, delves into the African American experience as well as the examination of trauma in the articulation of a specific historiography. As such, the present study aims at investigating African American experience through the post Slavery era by establishing how sociological prejudiced elements such as history, culture, and race are detrimental to African Americans' identity construction. The present study also aims to demonstrate how the narrative of the traces formulated by the patterns of water and bones poetics stand as an adjustment of memories to modern contingencies. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* presents then a penetrating and impressive historiographical inferences through the prism of geographical wanderings formalized by the Middle Passage and the Great Migration which echo collective trauma and individual tumult. As such, our study shows how identity construction lies at the center of August Wilson's narrative of African American experience. As such, his quest for a culturally specific African American cosmological realm is forged from ancestral memories which inform the aesthetics of the call for the ancestors. In that perspective, the African American cosmogony and the convening of African spiritual ethos are informative in providing a clear understanding of African American racial and literary insurgence.

Keywords: Culture, enslavement, historiography, identity, spirituality, trauma.

Interweaving Pittsburgh's Black Cosmogony : Traumatisme transgénérationnel, affiliation culturelle africaine et restauration spirituelle dans Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988) d'August Wilson.

Résumé : Dans sa chronique de l'expérience afro-américaine du vingtième siècle par le prisme du théâtre, August Wilson sonde l'influence de l'esclavage sur la

condition contemporaine des Africains Américains. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, sa deuxième pièce de théâtre, examine le traumatisme en tant qu'articulation d'une historiographie spécifique. En conséquence, la présente étude vise à examiner l'expérience africaine américaine à travers l'ère post-esclavagiste en démontrant comment l'histoire, la culture et la race en tant qu'éléments sociologiques biaisés, sont préjudiciables à la construction de l'identité africaine américaine. La présente étude vise également à illustrer comment le récit des traces formulé par la poétique des motifs de l'eau et des os constitue un ajustement des souvenirs aux contingences modernes. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* présente ainsi les implications d'une historiographie atypique à travers le prisme des errances géographiques formalisées par le Middle Passage et la Great Migration qui font écho aux traumatismes collectifs et aux tumultes individuels. Faisant foi de cette historiographie, notre étude démontre comment la construction identitaire demeure au centre du récit de l'expérience africaine américaine d'August Wilson. Ainsi, sa quête pour un univers noir cosmologique culturellement spécifique forgé à partir de souvenirs ancestraux structure la poétique de l'appel aux ancêtres. Dans cette perspective, la cosmogonie africaine américaine et l'ethos spirituel africain permettent de comprendre, sans ambages, la sédition qui est à la base de la construction raciale et de la conceptualisation de la production littéraire d'August Wilson.

Mots-clés: Culture, esclavage, historiographie, identité, spiritualité, traumatisme.

Introduction

In an interview in *Washington D.C Journal* with Sandra G. Shannon, Howard University, Constanza Romero, August Wilson's widow and Director of the August Wilson Estate, assessed Wilson series of plays. In doing so, she states: "*These are American stories. These are an incredible canon of work that touches so many pieces of the 20th Century. Therefore, in its life in Pittsburgh for those nine plays and life in Chicago for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom . . . that small town of Pittsburgh represents all of America (*Shannon 2018, p.4). Very precisely, Wilson's ontological connection with the city of Pittsburgh began with his grandmother Zonia Wilson, who in 1932, came North from Spear, North Carolina. She and her family settled down in 1945, the year Wilson was born, in the Hill District, a thriving, multiethnic community.

As Wilson experienced racial prejudice, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement, he grew to be an activist, a poet and an artist producing political theater to prompt racial cognizance and sociological alertness in his community. A playwright, a master storyteller, August Wilson honed his craft by walking the streets of his Hill District neighborhood as a young man, observing, and immersing himself in Black street life, listening to older generations convey their experiences as descendants of African slaves. This specific sociology inspired what would become his vibrant characters and lyrical

language. The American Century Cycle, his ten-play magnum opus, is a breathtaking study of the African American struggle for cultural and economic conservancy through the twentieth century. The result of this hundred-year quest was and still is a literary and theatrical achievement, as August with each play calls upon the "*memory of the blood, the careful examination of history which illuminates the discovery of the self, therefore the path to the future*" (Shannon 2018, p.6).

In his ten-play chronicle of African American experience in the twentieth century, August Wilson examines the sway of enslavement in Black Americans' contemporary condition. Precisely, the issue of post slavery trauma is dramatized in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* In the play, African American residents of a boarding house in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania in 1911 endeavor to reorient, repossess, and redefine historically, culturally, psychologically and socially their trajectory as free citizens. The progenies of newly freed slaves attempt to make a place for themselves in an unfair and antagonistic society.

According to Harry J. Elam, Jr., in his book titled *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (2006), in his ten-play chronicle of African American experience in the twentieth century, Wilson examines the influence of slavery in Black Americans' contemporary lives. His plays abound with cultural traditions, music, art, and what James Baldwin referred to as "*the field of manners and rituals of intercourse*" as cultural token of a creative and ingenious absorption of the past into the present. As such, historiography, trans-generational trauma, spirituality and African cultural affiliation in August Wilson's *Joe Turner* fit in the present area of research. Wilson's plays exhibited iconic performances onstage from Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Angela Bassett, Samuel L Jackson, and many others. Viola Davis said of Wilson's writing, "*He captures our humor, our vulnerabilities, our tragedies, our trauma. And he humanizes us. And he allows us to talk*" (Denzel Washington on bringing August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" to the screen CBS News. December 11, 2020).

In many of Wilson's plays, trauma is recurrent as experienced by Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), Troy Maxson in *Fences* (1987), Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean* (2006) and Herald Loomis *in Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988). Those Black male characters are tormented both by their own individual pasts and their collective historiographical experience in the forms of trans-generational trauma.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone is the second play of the cycle, inspired by Romare Bearden's *Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket* painting (Pittsburgh Memories-1978). The picture represented a boarding house and showed a miserable and depressing man sitting in a downfall posture. Wilson re-envisioned that defeated

man in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. His fictional representative, Herald Loomis, after enduring seven years of servitude, travels from boarding house to boarding house with his 11-year old daughter in search of the wife and mother who abandoned them. Loomis confesses "*I just wanna see her face so I can get me starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That's why I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else's world. When I find my wife that be making of my own* (Wilson 1988, p.69). The title warrants an explicit historical context. Joe Turner was a plantation proprietor who, in spite of the emancipation proclamation, forced African-Americans to work in his fields. In contrast, Seth and Bertha Holly's boarding house provides room and sustenance to rebellious slaves who deserted bondage, the adequate locate to prompt trauma both collectively and intimately. Most literary critics subordinate haunting memories with psychological trauma. For example, in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Kathleen Brogan associates haunting with trauma, observing that both have to do with difficulties in remembering and retrieving the past. As Cathy Caruth points out, "*The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is experienced at all*" (Caruth 1996, p.17).

Obviously, in order to better apprehend post slavery trauma, one needs to supplement the present study with psychoanalytic theory sustained by the philosophy of Maurice Blanchot. He assessed that trauma cannot be experienced devoid of consciousness; there is no "I" no subject to experience anything (Blanchot 1995, p.17). Wilson, therefore, demonstrates how African Americans persistently contend with and escape from slavery in post-slavery America forty-eight years after slavery was lawfully abolished. The play's characters, "Joe Turner's niggers" (Wilson 1988, p.1), in the worst forms, undergo trauma and identity crisis; they have been physically enslaved, spiritually mutilated and psychologically contrived so as to consent that they are inferior and worthless.

Subsequently, the present study aims at unveiling the historiography of Wilson's plays, and the cultural African residues that lie at the center of the community's spirit and actions. Our objective consists then in demonstrating how race and culture intersect constantly to provide thought-provoking historical dynamics as exemplified in the selected play. From this perspective, our work is divided into three sections. The first section charts the historiographical context, namely the Middle Passage and the Great Migration that structure the experience of African slaves in North America. It also demonstrates how transgenerational trauma lies at the nexus of race, family and historiography. The second section measures to what extent African slaves and

their progenies are affiliated to the African cultural patterns. It discusses Wilson's characters' quest for cultural identity.

It also questions collective trauma and ritual healing in the midst of historiographical inferences. The final section emphasizes on Wilson's perspective regarding cultural identity through mentorship and spiritual connection as part and parcel of African-American cultural dynamics. It also examines issues such as African cosmogony and the narrative of resilience as the adequate site to envision the call for ancestors.

1. Conjoining Historiography, Enslavement and Family: At the nexus of Trauma

Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* prompts authentic, accurate and certifiable history. Joe Turner was a real person, a covetous and rapacious white plantation owner. As a slave holder, in a fraught effort to preserve his benefits, he compelled African Americans to work in his farm under most callous conditions long after the Emancipation Proclamation. He epitomized southern whites eager to perpetuate slavery. Here, Wilson uses the historical figure of Joe Turner so as to dramatize the historiographical continuum of slavery and the uninterrupted sociological hegemony of Americans of European descent.

As such, the forfeiture of self-determination and the enforced labor scheme are traumatic conditions enough to trigger severe psychological disturbances. As such, the historical reminisces are unswervingly linked to Loomis' ancestors. Loomis' description of what he considers the separation from his family makes references to historical insinuations. His intimate experience, equally invested with memories of separation through generations of African Americans, is the most distressing one. About Joe Turner, Loomis confesses: "*He catch you and go home to his wife and family. Ain't thought about you going home to yours*" (Wilson 1988, p, 72). For years he kept alive the expectation of being brought back together with his family. His wife's absence and his subsequent mourning make him incompetent to envision the future and construct his present. Unfortunately, when Loomis and Zonia finally find Martha, it is too late for them to reunite again.

1.1. The Middle Passage and the Narrative of the Traces: At the Node of Bones and Water

As Charles Shepherdson reminds us, "*memory is not the record of events in real, sequential time, but their symbolic organization*" (Shepherdson 1993, p.49). In other words, no matter how we conceive the past, it is always a narrative we construct from fragments of memory. Thus, memory and the construction of the past are integral to our understanding of traumatic events and disasters. As such, the play includes several passages that directly engage disaster and its inferences.

Herald Loomis' vision of "the bones people" provides an obvious and vibrant link to the Middle Passage as a historiographical disaster. Very significantly, Loomis confesses to Bynum, the black conjuror, his vision of the world through the prism of 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* " (Wilson 2006, p.52).

Accurately, Loomis recounts how the bones unexpectedly were submerged and rehabilitated from bones to bodies: "*They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference*" (Wilson 1988, p. 54). The bodies, lying on the shore, gradually start breathing again, then stand up and walk away. Loomis carries on his apocalyptic description: "*The ground's starting to shake. There's a great shaking. The world's busting half in two. The sky's splitting open. I got to stand up*" (Wilson 1988, p.55).

Significantly, the actual scattering of the bodies is heralded by a narrative of a disaster which echoes Nathan Huggins' account of the Middle Passage. In *Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery*, he provided an insightful analysis of those who survived it:

> As in an earthquake, which begins with tremors, building to a catastrophe, each stroke deeper and broader than the last, one is finally left alone among other moving creatures, stunned, wounded, and isolated amid the shambles of the known world. In such a disaster, it is impossible for the survivor to fix the pain of the most telling blow and to completely rediscover himself after its enormity has passed. So, too, the African was engulfed in a process, the end of which was impossible to see from its onset and its precise beginnings lost forever to recall (1990, p. 27).

Loomis' account of his vision the world "*busting half in two*" correspondingly calls to mind an earthquake; or metaphorically a splitting of the psyche. Huggins refers here to "*the shambles of the known world*", pointing to the fact that during the Middle Passage African slaves experienced fragmented bonds with history, culture, language, and family. Cut off from the past, unable to comprehend the present, incapable to envision the future, they were converted form subjects to objects.

This ontological transmutation still operates until the Great Northward Migration, one of the largest movements of people in American history, from the 1919s to 1970s. Very precisely, the black populations which migrated from the rural South to the industrial North underwent profound transformation. According to Robert A. Rosenbaum, in *The Penguin Encyclopedia of American History*, the black migration to the Northeast and Midwest made the struggles of African Americans for civil rights a national issue rather than a Southern dispute (2003, p.70). Fundamentally, black migration as portrayed in Wilson's plays is an

admonition of slavery through geographical dislocation along with self-construction. As Wilson puts it in his introduction to the play:

> From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the name of the Gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth (1988, p. xxi).

Subjects of an estranging geographical dislocation, for years, Loomis and his little daughter go across America in search for his wife. The geographical quest turns him into a disoriented journey by the time he moved in Seth Holly's boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. Thus, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, psychological trauma is transmitted from one generation to another, stretching back to the traumatic events of the Middle Passage and of slavery that mark the inception of African American experience in America. Significantly, Joe Turner is the archetype of the historical vicissitudes in African American experience.

In 1911, during the Great Migration, the flow of hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the impoverished, rural, and segregated South to the industrial, urban, and desegregated North, was the starting point of a historiographical shift in African American experience. At the beginning of the play, Seth Holly, the owner of the boardinghouse, pinpoints regarding the migration of blacks to the North, "*these niggers keep on coming. Walking … riding…*" (Wilson 1988, p.6). In this narrative of geographical wandering, bones and water are at the core of transgenerational trauma as well as personal tumult.

1.2. From Transgenerational Trauma to Individual Tumult

As mentioned earlier, trauma is a persistent theme in Wilson's plays; his male characters have always been overwhelmed by a sense of trauma, whether intimate or collective as epitomized by Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), Troy Maxson in *Fences* (1987), Herald Loomis *in Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) and Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean* (2006).

Trauma has a destructive impact on the psyche of victims. As Huggins reminds us, the survivor will never entirely recover from it and its effects continuously contaminate the prodigies of successive generations. As an illustration, Loomis's grief is intensified by the series of events that led him to private trauma. This latter repeats and echoes the cataclysm of the Middle Passage: he was captured, taken away from his home and family and was

consequently imperiled to compulsory labor. Loomis has not experienced the tragedy of the Middle Passage; however, he carries in his innermost being the traces of his ancestors' horrendous experiences passed on unconsciously from one generation to another, sometimes in a form of specters.

As the French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok point out in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals in Psycho analysis*, "*the concept of the phantom [or the ghost] ...suggest[s] the existence within an individual of a collective psychology comprised of several generations, so that the analyst must listen for the voices of one generation in the unconscious of another*"(1994, p.166).

Subsequently, Black male characters are haunted not only by their own personal pasts, but by unending injustice labeled as post-slavery trauma. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok expound that when a person, haunted by events from the past, has no experiential connection to those events, there is nothing he or she could have repressed. What returns from the past, they argue, is not the repressed, but the manifestation of a secret in the psyche of another person. Yet how the psychic matter of one person is actually transferred to the psyche of another individual remains imprecise. It is evident, however, as Nicholas Rand notes in his editorial introduction to *The Shell and the Kernel*, that "*the issue is the process of transmission which assures the survival of the memory traces derived from the experiences of earlier generations*" (Abraham and Torok 1994, p.168-69).

Herald Loomis, an exiled sharecropper, is one of the unfortunate victims of Joe Turner. He was enslaved for seven years within which his world was overturned, his life fragmented, and his marriage ruined. By the time he is unrestricted seven years later, Loomis is bewildered and yearned to be reunited with his family again. When he returns after seven years to what he has envisioned as his home, he finds out that his wife Martha migrated North and left their daughter, Zonia, with her mother. Consequently, Loomis takes the child and embarks on a spatial quest for his wife. That atypical human condition compels him to envision geographical wandering and spiritual recovery. Eventually, Loomis finds his "song" and his true identity as an American of African descent.

2. Gauging African Cultural Affiliation: Ritual Healing for Collective Recovery

Identity is of paramount interest in *Joe Turner.* Alen Nadel, in his article "Boundaries, Logistics, and Identity: The Property of Metaphor in Fences and Joe Turner's Come and Gone" elucidates that "*for each of the characters, the quest for humanity is for a form of completeness which their circumstances, and history, has denied them. It may be economic security or fair employment practices, or a mate, or a family*."

(1994, p. 96). Despite Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans had to repel to find their genuine identity in a strange and hostile environment. Very evocatively, the play begins by establishing the multiplicity of African American culture and experience, and the exertions to bestride different cultural influences that structure the play. As such, the struggle between Western and African cultural legacy is a central concern of the play.

As an illustration, Zonia and Reuben represent future prospects. They are inevitably positioned between Western and African influences, between money and blood. Blood, both in the sense of lineage and as an integral element of Voodoo, is crucial to Bynum's African-derived rituals which the play suggests from the very beginning. Blood takes on an array of meanings, from referring to the bloody events that mark African American history, to blood as kinship, or as a reference to African spirituality using blood sacrifice as part of rituals performed by Bynum.

2.1. Cultural Identity and Collective Trauma

Wilson's pursuit of a culturally specific African American cosmological world view forged from ancestral memory informs the aesthetics of his work. He confirms what Larry Neal suggested in the late 1960s in "Drama Review"; he proposed The Black Arts Movement as "*a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology*" (1968, p.30) that allows specific articulation and definition to black responses to the American experience.

Bertha is Seth's wife, and the co-owner of the boarding house. Although Seth doesn't like Bynum's folk magic, Bertha partakes in some of the old man's rituals. Seth criticizes her for this, pointing out that she is conjoining Bynum's spiritualism, Christianity, and superstitions. When Seth scorns her for "*going down there to the church and wanna come home and sprinkle salt all over the place*" (Wilson 1988:2), Bertha serenely answers to him: "*it don't hurt none. I can't say if it help ...but it don't hurt none*" (Wilson 1988, p.3). By providing such a mature answer, she reveals her flexibility, her inclination to embrace multiple worldviews.

At this point, Bynum's father taught him his "song" and told him that if he ever saw a "s*hiny man*" (Wilson 1988:13) again, he would know that "*his song had been accepted and worked its full power in the world and [he] could lay down and die a happy man*" (Wilson 1988, p.13). This is why Bynum has hired Selig, the town's "people finder" to track down his "shiny man". When Herald Loomis arrives at the boarding house, Bynum immediately seems to understand him, standing up for the strange and exhausted man when Seth rebukes him. Indeed, it's Bynum who speaks with Loomis when Loomis has his strange visions, and when he cuts

himself across his chest and rubs blood over his body at the end of the play, Bynum shouts, "Herald Loomis, you shining!"

Clearly, Loomis's personal traumatic experiences resemble closely the larger cultural traumas of African American experience in the U.S. Indeed, his specific trauma echoes the horrors of slavery and reaches as far back into the depths of cultural memory or rather, cultural amnesia. Besides, having taken Loomis up to his room, Bynum confesses: "*something ain't setting right with that fellow*" (Wilson 1988, p.19). When Seth claims that Loomis is "*one of them mean-looking niggers look like he done killed somebody gambling over a quarter*", Bynum immediately revises his posture, and argues that Loomis has been wandering the roads and calling for the ancestors.

2.2. The Appeal for the Ancestors

Seth, whose attitudes are more westernized than those of the other characters, scorns Bynum's hoodoo rituals. Bynum's family history, on the other hand, resonates with African culture and African spiritual traditions. His story about the "shiny man", though it may carry some biblical significance, is first and foremost a story about an encounter with ancestral spirits. Here, Blood signifies both lineage and a connection with African traditions. Bynum tells how he offers some food to a stranger he encounters on the road, and the man asks Bynum to follow him. Bynum explains that he "*was going back (his) way*" (Wilson 1988, p.14) which signifies back the way Bynum had come from.

He leads Bynum to a stoop on the road, asks him to hold out his hands, and then rubs them together with his. When Bynum looks down to his hands, they are covered with blood. The stranger tells Bynum to rub the blood all over himself. Very significantly, Bynum clarifies that: "*it was a way of cleaning myself*" (Wilson 1988, p.9). In Christian belief, the blood of Christ clears away sins, but here the notion of cleansing by one's own blood is of paramount interest as it is reminiscent African traditional rites. As a "houngan", Bynum stands as a psychoanalyst (Deren 1975: 161) who listens to Loomis' account of his vision to the voice of the ghosts from generations back. Well equipped to practice his craft, he clarifies that he selected a binding song because "*that's what I've seen most when I was traveling…people walking away and leaving one another*"(Wilson 1988, p.10). Eventually, Bynum's conjuring salvage guided Loomis' steps slowly towards Martha.

3. Identity Construction: African Cosmogony and Bynum's Spiritual Curative

Identity construction lies at the center of Wilson's narrative of African American experience. This narrative of resilience along with African American cosmogony and spirits are informative in providing a clear understanding of enslavement and its subsequent inferences.

Very interestingly, as a man who has forgotten his "song", Loomis narrates how Turner hunts and captures African Americans into his chain gang under inhumane conditions. Having undergone an African ritual, Loomis experiences an epiphany through which he recovers his will to self-acceptance and affirmation. As such, racial resilience is decisively indicative of emerging currents and structures of identity formation, dialectics of cultural dynamics and race relations in America. Seth differs from all the other characters in the play in that "*he was born of Northern free parents, a skilled craftsman, and owner of the boardinghouse, he has a stability that none of the other characters have*" (Wilson 1988:1).The difference between Seth and his wife is noticeable from their attitudes towards Bynum; watching Bynum perform his conjuring, Seth scorns Bynum, wondering out loud why he tolerates his "mumbo jumbo" (Wilson 1988, p.2).

3.1. African Temporality and the Narrative of Trauma

Loomis hears at the end of the play that Martha had asked Bynum to help her find her daughter and assumes that Bynum has bound him "to the road"; uncompromising, he asserts that "*Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis ain't for binding. I ain't gonna let nobody bind me up!*" (Wilson 1988, p, 91). He discards indignantly Martha's exertions to enforce Christianity as the retort to his predicaments. He tells her: "*I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself*" (Wilson 1988, p, 93). Meticulously, Loomis lacerates his chest, like Bynum earlier in his story of the Shiny Man, in a manner reminiscent of an initiation rite, rubs the blood over his face.

But since unconsciousness and disremembering are constitutive of trauma, its secret can never be known as such. In other words, trauma is a psychological wound that never completely heals. However, if the victim of trauma finds a way to exteriorize some of the pain, partial healing is possible. Because of its relation to time, trauma is directly linked with narrative (in the sense of organizing events in time). Blanchot, for example, describes the disaster as the un-story; that which escapes narration. Consequently, while the heart of the disaster remains unknown, a narrative, although always incomplete, nevertheless allows the survivor to begin to create for himself a sense of temporality. Therefore, in telling the story of his captivity to Bynum, Loomis has already taken a step towards what we may call a partial healing.

Throughout their quest for Martha, Herald Loomis has been incapable to even imagine a future for his daughter, Zonia. Consequently, he is constantly scared of her "*getting grown on him*". In the final scene, upon finding Martha, Loomis gives back Zonia to her mother. In doing so he creates a new trauma for his daughter, who cries in panic: "*I won't get bigger! My bones won't get no bigger! They won't! I promise! Take me with you till we keep searching and never finding. I won't get no bigger! I promise!*" (Wilson 1988, p.91). His daughter's trauma sounds a historiographical one and necessitates conjuring the spirits.

3.2. Convening the Spirits: "Shining Like New Money"

Too many years have passed, and too much experience separates Loomis from his wife. Nevertheless, the final scene promises a future for Loomis by welcoming the past. Embracing his African cultural legacy finally allows Herald Loomis to envision a future. He declares that he is now finally able to "stand" on his own. He is no longer bound to the ghosts from the past since Joe Turner is now "*come and gone*".

A "conjure man" or "rootworker" (somebody who practices folk magic and healing) in his sixties, Bynum is a freed slave from the south who lives in Seth and Bertha's boarding house. Bynum is a wise, existential man who believes that every person has a "song" he must not only identify within himself but also adapt to the external world. Bynum's own song is the "binding song", that is his capacity or skills to interconnect people together. He made that song his existential motto because, as a young man traveling from town to town, he kept seeing "*people walking away and leaving one another*" (Wilson 1988, p.95). In a conversation with Selig in Bertha and Seth's kitchen, Bynum describes how he discovered that each person has a "song", confessing that he met a "shiny man" who indicated him a spot in the road where he communicated with his dead father's spirit.

For Bynum, Loomis is now "*shining like new money*" (Wilson 1988, p.94). Loomis' "rebirth" simultaneously confirms Bynum's spiritual powers, since Bynum recalls his father's spirit telling him: "*if I ever saw [a shiny man] again before I died then I would know that my song had been accepted and worked its power in the world*"(Wilson 1988, p, 10). That African cosmogony is of paramount interest in Wilson's play. With the exception of Trudier Harris, few essayists discuss the African cosmogony that supports the spiritual influence of the past upon the present, the dead upon the living (2000, p.65). Very significantly, African American traditions favor a circular imagery, as opposed to linear (Elkins 2000: 54) suggesting a return to the origins, that is, African cultural forms that underlie African American experience.

Conclusion

August Wilson's crowning achievement is *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, his series of ten plays that charts the African American experience decade by decade throughout the twentieth century. August Wilson's ten play series is arguably one of the finest literary achievements in contemporary drama although they were not created in chronological order.

As William Couch, editor of New Black Playwrights, states: "*we are fortunate that black playwrights today with renewed strength are undertaking to reveal us to ourselves more clearly than we have been able to perceive in our troubled history*" (1970, p.xxiii).

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988) re-enacts what historians call The Great Migration of African Americans from the Jim Crow South. Wilson also pays particular attention to the socio-historical and economic forces that precipitated this Great Migration of African Americans comparable to the biblical exodus of the children of Israel. He portrays African Americans as free men and women deserting the hostility of the South in search of dignity and racial identity.

The portrayal of post slavery trauma in its full complexity and repetitive cycle is precisely what makes *Joe Turner* a powerful play. It demonstrates convincingly the repetition, the disjointed temporality and the difficulty of understanding trauma, melancholia, or the loss of black manhood. The play also suggests that some degree of healing like rediscovering one's manhood is possible and that for Wilson this healing may be achieved by embracing African spiritual traditions.

As such, Wilson captures in an exceptional approach the long history of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African Americans in America society. His narratives and settings convey a powerful vision built around cultural paradigms that move constantly from an isolating present and a disgruntling past. Marilyn Elkins, in *August Wilson: A Casebook*, recognizes the impact of Wilson's plays as being

> "the motion of history as the emergence of the African 'spirit' out of the bones of the Middle Passage, the enactment of the ritual dance in which personal experience and racial history converge, and, most importantly, the quest for one's song that is ultimately realized in the blues" (2000, p.61).

Exactly, Mark William Rocha, in *August Wilson and the Four B's*, considers blues as "*the American language for telling and confronting the tragic reality*" (1994, p.11). Equally, Patricia Gantt observes in *The Piano Lesson*: *The piano's song*

reaffirms the stories of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope (2000, p.49).

Wilson delves into the African American past, addressing and redressing the wounds of historical amnesia and social tyranny, ritualistically reconnecting African Americans to the blood memories and cultural rites of the African past. For him, black people are not peripheral to the central notion of history. The idea of going back and confronting the past initiates the redemptive power of history. As such, working through their relationship within history transforms characters. As such, Wilson yearns for his audience to sense his pride in what it means to be really an African progeny in America. This philosophical and ontological credo is the cradle of Wilson's posture as a political artist. Aligned to his political agenda, he affirms"*as African-Americans, we should demand to participate in society as Africans*" (Moyers 2005, p.39).

Wilson himself observed in an interview with Kim Powers that "*the seven years Loomis is with Joe Turner, seven years in which his world is turned asunder and his life is turned upside down, can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery, of being taken out of Africa and brought to America*" (1984, p.53). Evidently, there is no doubt that *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* dramatizes the continuity of slavery and the rites perform by Bynum epitomize the power of African cultural legacy. The "shine" Bynum sees emanating from Loomis suggests that he experiences a sort of "enlightenment", a self-knowledge and self-recognition roadmap that help transcend his traumatic condition.

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