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The Sense of Blackness in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

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Introduction

The streets that Balboa walked
were his own private ocean,
and Balboa was drowning.
August Wilson

The title itself may suggest different and puzzling interpretations to the reader who approaches this August Wilson's play for the first time. At a quick look we might ask ourselves what the author is hinting at and whether there is a meaning, a message August Wilson wants to convey by using the piano as a sort of metaphor. Should this be the case, we feel the need for investigating further and try to get the gist out of it, beyond all appearances.

The idea of the present thesis came after reading Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, first published in 1990, assuming to follow a fascinating, self-contained story and finding, instead, that we were just at the beginning of a path which was to lead somewhere unexpected. The impression is that blackness is a fundamental part of Wilson's literary work as well as the struggle for identity which we understand being both collective and individual. His sister, Freda Wilson Ellis, when asked by her interviewer Christopher Reynolds about the recreation of hometown memories in Wilson's plays, importantly remarked:

I think the neighbourhood is still in his plays. Because all the plays are grounded in the idea of a person coming into themselves. The process of learning who you are. When you think about all of his plays, the underlying question is: Who are you?
(Qtd. in Reynolds 3)

From a social – psychological point of view the sense of identity is closely related to the so called “sense of peoplehood”. In other words, individual and group categorization is strictly interwoven. As Will Herberg pointed out in his study *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, “The way in which one identifies and locates oneself (‘Who, What, am I?’) is closely related to how one is identified and located in the larger community (‘Who, what, is he?’)” (Qtd. in Gordon 29).

Apparently, Wilson has been aware of this since he was a young boy in Pittsburgh, where he grew up in a mixed community of blacks and Syrians, Jews and Italians, in a single-parent household. His white father, Frederick August Kittel, an Austro-Hungarian baker, deserted Daisy Wilson Kittel, a black

domestic worker and his family, soon after the birth of his son August in 1945. Wilson recalls:

When I was about 7, I began noticing that all the people who were in positions of authority were white. The landlord was white, the person who owned the store was white, the teachers were white, the bus drivers were white, the people at the welfare office were white. And then you discover that anytime you are giving your money to someone, you're giving it to someone who is white. You begin to notice these things. (Qtd. in Rothstein 4)

Yet, if black people living in America are to be considered Americans, what does this mean and what about their *history*? According to the American sociologist Milton M. Gordon, there is a strong, “ancestral” identification with the group we feel we belong to:

These are “the people” of my ancestors, therefore they are my people, and they will be the people of my children and their children. With members of other groups I may share political participation, occupational relationships, common civic enterprise, perhaps even an occasional warm friendship. But in a very special way which history has decreed, I share a sense of indissoluble and intimate identity with *this group* and *not that one* within the larger society and the world. (Gordon 29)

Under the influence of black novelist James Baldwin and artist Romare Bearden, Wilson aimed at writing a ten-decade play cycle exploring manners and cultural commonalities in order to strengthen black citizens’ sense of peoplehood. As Wilson himself said to Mervyn Rothstein, “You have to know who you are, and understand your history in America over more than 300 years, in order to know what your relation is to your society” (Qtd. in Rothstein 2) Wining Boy Charles, the retired pianist in *The Piano Lesson*, asks himself:

Who am I? Am I me? Or am I the piano player? (Wilson P.L. 41)

Significantly, Wining Boy is seeking here to know himself as individual as well as Black American. We will start our work from this ultimate question, looking for the clues in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* which – apparently at random – hint at *blackness* and make sense of it.

1. The question of black American culture

“I want a black director”

Discussing the possibility of Paramount Pictures’ purchasing the rights to his play *Fences* with Eddie Murphy in 1990, Wilson repeatedly stated that he wanted a *black* director. At Murphy’s response “We don’t want to hire anyone just because they are black”, Wilson immediately replied “Neither do I” and tried to explain what he meant by that in his essay “I Want a Black Director”¹.

At first glance, Wilson’s assertion might sound racist towards *white directors*, a sort of discrimination on the grounds of race coming – for once – from a black playwright. But racism, Wilson explained, has nothing to do with his choice. Although the whites are people who would insist that “their ideas about the world and how to live in it were the only correct and valid ideas about human life”, they all together, as Americans, share a broad cultural ground and a “cohesive whole”:

White American society is made up of various European *ethnic* groups which share a common history and sensibility.[...] As Americans of various races we share a broad cultural ground, a commonality of society that links its various and diverse elements into a cohesive whole that can be defined as “American”. We share certain mythologies. A history. (Wilson 1994, 201)

Nevertheless, within these commonalities there are specific ideas and attitudes which are shared by black Americans only:

Black Americans are a *racial* group which do not share the same sensibilities. The specifics of our cultural history are very much different. We are an African people who have been here since the early seventeenth century. We have a different way of responding to the world. We have different ideas about religion, different manners of social intercourse. We have different ideas about style, about language. We have different aesthetics. Someone who does not share the specifics of a culture remains an outsider, no matter how astute a student they are or how well meaning their intentions. I declined a white director not on the basis of race but on the basis of culture. White directors are not qualified for the

¹ The essay was published in *Spin*, October 1990 and *New York Times*, 26 September 1990. The quotations cited below are to be referred to Alan Nadel, ed. *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994, pp. 201-203.

job. The job requires someone who *shares* the specifics of the culture of black Americans. (Wilson 1994, 201-202)

The repetition of the adjective *different* is not casual, but underlines the importance of belonging to a specific racial group, beyond all stereotypes.

The suggestion that Paramount Pictures simply hire a “human being”, notwithstanding if white or black, implies – according to Wilson – something very *old* which has to do with how Africans were first viewed in America: “*primitive*” and “*dull-witted*”.

People who might be considered rather sub-humans, almost Joseph Conrad’s “black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom” as they appear in *Heart of Darkness* at the horror struck eyes of the sailor Marlow, who after a long trip up the river Congo in Africa in search for Kurtz, finally reaches the company station; the black men he meets seem “black rags” and “unhappy savages”, not even identified by names and yet almost dying under the pressure of hard work:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...] The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die [...]. These moribund shapes were free as air and - nearly as thin. (Conrad 35–36)

These men in King Leopold of Belgium’s Congo Free State seem to have lost their human traits: they are referred to as “shapes” that do not stand but crawl; they have a connotation of passivity, exhaustion, suffering and death. They have been reduced, as Conrad himself suggests, to mere *shadows*, objects in the name of economic profit disguised as light of “civilization”.

Even Conrad’s most pitiful eyes seem not to go any further than a sense of compassion: what these men are beyond their “shapes” does not seem of much interest.

A similar attitude is, Wilson argued, to be found in the early plantation owners:

The shortsightedness of the plantation owners must be thought of as wilful. While viewing African slaves with curiosity, they did not allow that curiosity to lead to an examination of the people of their culture. (Wilson 1994, 202)

By wilfully denying them the status of humans, the ideas of “white supremacy” were more easily diffused: notions of *black* as opposed to *white* have gradually become part of “the society consciousness”. If we look up in dictionaries, such as *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, we find – as Wilson himself argued – the following character definitions:

White: free from blemish, moral stain, or impurity; outstandingly righteous; innocent; not marked by malignant influence, notably pleasing or auspicious; fortunate; notably ardent; decent; in a fair upright manner; a sterling man; etc.

Black: outrageously wicked; a villain; dishonourable; expressing or indicating disgrace, discredit, or guilt; connected with the devil; expressing menace; sullen; hostile; unqualified; committing violation of public regulations. Illicit, illegal; affected by some undesirable condition; [...] (Wilson 1994, 203)

“No wonder”, Wilson concluded, “I had been greeted with incredulous looks when I suggested a black director for *Fences*”. If someone “was affected by an undesirable condition, [...] sullen, unqualified”, it would certainly be more convenient finding “a sterling man who was free from blemish, notably pleasing, fair and upright”.

Despite cultural and linguistic stereotypes, Wilson’s idea was simply to hire somebody talented, who would approach his work with “the same amount of passion and measure and respect” he approached it. Somebody who was “a product of black American culture – a culture that was honed out of the black experience and fired in the kiln of slavery and survival”. (Wilson 1994, 201)

But does black American culture exist? The question - as Wilson himself seems to argue - is far from being banal:

Some Americans, both black and white, do not see any value to black American lives that do not contribute to the leisure or profit of white America. Some Americans, both black and white, would deny that a black American culture even exists. (Wilson 1994, 203)

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, August Wilson’s popular play first performed in 1982, Ma Rainey’s band players, Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag and Levee turn up to record a new album of Ma Rainey’s songs. While waiting for her to arrive, they banter, tell stories, joke, philosophise and argue.

We progressively understand that there is tension between the young, hot-headed trumpeter Levee who dreams of having his

own band and the veteran, professional players Cutler and Toledo. They are all aware of their particular situation as black musicians; they know very well that being an entertainer is a luck as “that’s the only kind of job for the colored man” (Wilson M.R. 93) and that Ma Rainey is “just another nigger they [the whites] can use to make some money”. (Wilson M.R. 97)

As Sandra G. Shannon argued in her *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, black musicians were mainly migrants from the South who had abandoned their farmlands in the early 1920s merely to line “the pockets of those who controlled the music industry. Thus, their only means of breaking the cycle of poverty from which they fled too often became someone else’s financial gain”. (Shannon 87-88)

But if to the white producers Sturdyant and Irvin Ma Rainey’s music is just a *commodity*, valuable to derive benefit from, to Ma Rainey, as to Wining Boy in *The Piano Lesson*, “the blues help you get out of bed in the morning [...] this be an empty world without the blues”. (Wilson M.R. 83)

Ma Rainey’s words remind us that the blues did not originate with her: “The blues always been there” (Wilson M.R. 83) and that the way black people sing is *different*:

White folks don’t understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life.”(Wilson M.R. 82)

For Ma Rainey and, ultimately, for Wilson, the blues are deeply rooted in the souls and the life of American black community and tell their specific, sorrowful story.

We can find numerous blues references in Wilson’s works; Tonya Hedley, for instance, is very fond of rhythm and blues queen Aretha Franklin’s singing in *King Hedley II* (1999). The title of another play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1988), is actually a line from the refrain of a very popular blues song (Joe Turner was an historical figure in the South who imprisoned black males for his personal enrichment). Blues great singers Muddy Waters and Buddy Bolden became role models of success in *Seven Guitars* (1995) while Marvin Gaye’s 1971 classic “What’s Goin’ On” influenced *Jitney* (1982). James Brown’s “Say it Loud: I’m black and I’m Proud”, a joyous song from 1968, inspired his *Two Trains Running* (1991). There are characters who dance and

sing to Aretha Franklin's music or others who admire Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie or Lena Horne.

But it is primarily the music of the African-American communities of the so called Deep South of the United States of the 19th century and it carries all the melancholy and the suffering of the slaves working their white owners' fields. For African Americans – as Sandra Shannon argued – the blues actually expressed their *different history* so well that they “filled in the broken history of a people who lacked opportunities to *develop* their own culture”. (Shannon 44)

2. Beyond the black mirror in Bearden's *The Piano Lesson*: filling the emptiness

“What I saw was black life presented on its own terms”

One source of inspiration for August Wilson's plays was, on his own admission, the artist Romare Bearden. Apparently, they were very different, as Joan Fishman argued in her essay “Romare Bearden, August Wilson, and the Traditions of African Performance”:

Romare Bearden and August Wilson. Perhaps with nothing in common. Romare Bearden grew up among the elite, acquainted with Duke Ellington and Eleanor Roosevelt. August Wilson grew up on the street. Bearden is schooled. Wilson is self-taught, a high school dropout[...] And yet, as if they stood side by side peering through the same window on life, Romare Bearden and August Wilson created art that similarly presents the human condition: art that simultaneously captures the energy of the African American experience and releases it back into the world, art that speaks clearly to African American experience and releases it back into the world, art that speaks clearly to African Americans and is heard clearly by all audiences, and art that speaks for a generation and to a generation. (Fishman 133)

The capacity of creating an art which represents African American experience is – according to Fishman – what brings the playwright and the artist together. The same concept seems to emerge from August Wilson's own words. Discussing the history of his playwriting he notes, very emotionally:

My friend Claude Purdy had purchased a copy of *The Prevalence of Ritual*, and one night in the fall of 1977, after dinner and much talk, he laid it open on the table before me. "Look at this," he said. "Look at this." The book lay open on the table. I looked. What for me had been so difficult, Bearden made seem so simple, so easy. What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence. It was the art of a large and generous spirit that defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience. I don't recall what I said as I looked at it. My response was visceral. I was looking at myself in ways I hadn't thought of before and I have never ceased to think of since. In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvasses. (Qtd. in Fishman 134)

But how is black life actually being presented in Romare Bearden's collages, especially in the one which bears the same title as Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* ?

If we have a close look at Bearden's works, we are struck – first of all – by the vividness of the colors and the variety of found objects from the ordinary world: pieces of wood, fragments of photographs from old catalogues, fabrics, pieces of furniture, African masks and African American faces cut out of magazines. There is an attention to daily life, such as scenes of eating and cooking, sketches of people preparing to bathe, to hang clothes on the line or to play an instrument.

In Bearden's *The Piano Lesson* we find all these elements taken, as said, from the ordinary world: a lamp, a table, a wardrobe; bright colors such as yellow, green, blue defining found objects from everyday life. Yet, the figure of the piano, so massive, dominates the scene and draws our attention together with the piano player, a young girl, and the figure of a woman standing next to her.

The presence of a black mirror, hanging on the facing wall, is intriguing: the golden frame (so ornamental in its shape) stands out clearly on the light blue color of the background. Certainly we cannot help looking at it, as its position is central, and we cannot avoid asking ourselves what it actually represents.

If the function of the mirror is to reflect the image of a person or an object, the color black does not really work in that sense.

Nevertheless, as a color, it is authoritative and powerful and may even represent a lack of something, the primordial *void*.

Or, simply, Bearden is trying to speak to black audiences directly, in order to invite them “to take a closer and more personal look at how they have fared in America’s exclusionary history.” (Shannon 163).

The impression is, again, that both Bearden and Wilson want to convey a message which goes far beyond the *piano* and the black mirror itself.

If August Wilson’s aspiration was, on his own admission, to make his plays the same as Bearden’s canvasses, we now have to look at the *strategies* he uses in order to “present black life on its own terms” in his play *The Piano Lesson*. As we will see, there are dispersed elements which hint at the peculiarity of the characters themselves, to their being black Americans and African people at the same time. People who speak English, but whose world view is - deeply inside - African, too.

3. The Piano Lesson

The magic of an old, upright piano

The Piano Lesson, the fourth in Wilson’s series, *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, premiered on 26 November 1987 at the Yale Repertory theatre and debuted on Broadway in 1990. The author received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize for Drama for the work.

At first glance, the play concerns a brother and a sister who argue about whether they should sell their family piano. Boy Willie, a sharecropper from Mississippi, wants to sell his family’s ancestral piano to buy land that his family worked on as slaves. His sister Berniece, who lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, insists on keeping it. The piano has the carved faces of their grandfather’s wife and son, who were sold in exchange for the piano during the days of slavery. Yet, we understand, already in the setting, that there is much more to be told and that the piano is not a simple piece of furniture:

The action of the play takes place in the kitchen and parlor of the house where DOAKER CHARLES lives with his niece,

BERNIECE, and her eleven-year-old daughter, MARETHA[...] BERNIECE and MARETHA occupy the upstairs rooms. DOAKER'S ROOM is prominent and opens onto the kitchen. Dominating the parlor is an old upright piano. On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. (Wilson P.L. 1)

As we can see, the piano is *dominating* what normally is the centre of the family life: the parlor; next to it, the kitchen underlines the everyday life of an ordinary family. Finally, the *blackness* comes out from a few elements such as the mask-like figures carved on the legs of the piano which are “in the manner of African sculpture” and resemble totems.

The information we get from the description of these “mask-like figures” make us understand they are far from being just *found objects*. We are told by the playwright himself (and this is certainly significant) that they are rendered so gracefully as to be defined pieces of art rather than just ornaments. They hint at Africa, with its magic world of totem and spirits.

We know that masks, generally speaking, are an essential feature of African culture; they have a spiritual-religious meaning and are used in a lot of social-ritual events, such as initiations or weddings ceremonies.

They are believed to facilitate communication between people and supernatural forces or beings; they might often represent the spirit of an ancestor or deity. In rituals, the person who wears a mask conceptually loses his or her identity and turns into the spirit represented by the mask itself.

This idea has been portrayed in the well-known novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, set in the fictional town of Umuofia, Nigeria, at the time of the encounter between colonialism and Christianity towards the turn of the 19th century, followed by the crumbling of the traditional African society. In Achebe's novel the spirits of the ancestors are often summoned whenever important decisions concerning the life of the community are to be taken. In chapter 10, for instance, the mask-spirits or *egwugwu* have to decide whether Uzowulu, a man of the village who has been accused of beating his wife regularly, should be sentenced not to see her anymore. Interestingly, when the members of the clan wear their masks,

the *egwugwu* appear and they are referred to as distinct subjects:

And then the *egwugwu* appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together: it was a terrifying spectacle. (Achebe 80-81)

As we can see, the connection with Africa and the historical background of *The Piano Lesson* is already being introduced here and will become clearer and clearer with the unfolding of the play.

A land of one's own

As the lights come up on the first scene of *The Piano Lesson*, the audience is confronted with a sort of magic atmosphere; the hint is at the time of the day, the dawn, that particular hour, suspended between night and day, which Wilson himself considered *magic*. In his interview with Mervyn Rothstein in April 1990, when asked about his next play to be called *Moon Going Down*, Wilson argued:

When I finish one play, I don't get up. I stay there until I get an idea before the next one. There's something wonderful about that time of day, just before the dawn, when the moon is going down (Qtd. in Rothstein 4)

At "that time of the day", everything may happen: the visit of a ghost (as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) or even an unexpected, troublesome event, as suggested here by "something akin to a storm":

The lights come up on the Charles household. It is five o'clock in the morning. The dawn is beginning to announce itself, but there is something in the air which belongs to the night. A stillness that is a portent, a gathering, a coming together of something akin to a storm. There is a loud knock at the door. (Wilson P.L. 1)

The stillness and the quiet of the hour will, in fact, soon be broken by Boy Willie, Berniece's brother who has just arrived from the South with his friend Lymon. The two men have a truck, most probably stolen, and have hauled a load of watermelons in it.

Interestingly enough, the author here refers to the specific old commonplace that associates African Americans with watermelons and – generally speaking – with stealing. It may have begun as a Southern stereotype and then evolved into an anti-black stereotype during the antebellum period. Black people were often portrayed as lazy, easily frightened, good-for-nothing buffoons. Most probably, these stereotypes go back at least 200 years to slave times; we have pictures that refer to the 1890s and continue all the way down to the present day. Unexpectedly, you see it even in a nineteen-eighteen poem by Carl Sandburg:

Does a famous poet eat watermelon?
Excuse me, ask me something easy.
I have seen farmhands with their faces in fried catfish on a Monday
morning.
And the Japanese, two-legged like us,
The Japanese bring slices of watermelon into pictures.
The black seeds make oval polka dots on the pink meat.
Why do I always think of niggers and buck-and-wing dancing whenever
I see watermelon? (Qtd. in *Watermelon*)

Given all this, the way Wilson uses the watermelon stereotype here is quite surprising as he practically inverts it; as Felicia Hardison Londré argued, we hear how white (not black) folks hurried to buy the watermelons from Boy Willie and Lymon at cheap prices. One lady even believed Boy Willie's story about putting sugar in the ground to make them sweet:

BOY WILLIE: One lady asked me say, "Is they sweet?" I told her say, "Lady, where we grow these watermelons we put sugar in the ground". You know, she believed me. Talking about she had never heard of that before. Lymon was laughing his head off. I told her, "Oh, yeah, we put the sugar right in the ground with the seed." She say, "Well, give me another one". Them white folks is something else....ain't they, Lymon? (Wilson P.L. 59)

At this point we understand that Boy Willie and Lymon plan to sell the melons and split the profits evenly. Boy Willie greets his uncle Doaker exuberantly and, although it is only five o'clock in the morning, he soon raises the whole household from sleep. Berniece sounds very annoyed by that and is afraid they will wake her eleven-year daughter Maretha up:

BERNIECE:[...]Come in here disrupting the house. I don't want all that loud carrying on around here. I am surprised you ain't woke Maretha up. (Wilson P.L. 7)

Soon the audience learns that Boy Willie's motives for driving to Pittsburgh are by no means innocent and involve the piano:

LYMON: (*Noticing the piano*) : Is that the piano?

BOY WILLIE: Yeah..look here, Lymon. See how it got all those carvings on it. See, that's what I was talking about. See how it's carved up real nice and polished and everything? You never find you another piano like that.

LYMON: Yeah, that look real nice.(Wilson P.L. 9)

He plans to take the family heirloom, the antique piano, from his sister Berniece and sell it in order to buy a piece of land:

BOY WILLIE: Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part. (Wilson P.L. 9)

At this stage we don't know yet who Sutter's brother actually is, but we understand that Boy Willie is really keen on buying *the land* from him for two thousand dollars cash money and change his life completely, reaching the status of plantation owner:

BOY WILLIE: [...]This time I get to keep all the cotton. Hire me some men to work it for me. Gin my cotton. Get my seed. (Wilson P.L. 11)

The issue of the *land* and of its importance for Boy Willie comes up frequently in the play and sounds almost visceral, as "land is something under your feet. Land the only thing God ain't making no more of" (50) and – according to him – the only thing which would allow them to live a life of integrity and personal fulfillment:

BOY WILLIE: [...]If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton. (Wilson P.L. 92)

Boy Willie's dream of farming his own land may hint, as Felicia Hardison Londré suggested in her essay "A piano and its history: family and transcending family", at Scarlett O'Hara's memory of her father in *Gone With the Wind* (1939):

As from another world, she remembered a conversation with her father about the land and wondered how she could have been so young, so ignorant, as not to understand what he meant when he said that the land was the one thing in the world worth fighting for. 'For 'tis the only thing in the world that lasts ...and to anyone

with a drop of Irish blood in them the land they live on is like their mother... 'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting' for, dying for. (Mitchell 426)

Boy Willie, like Scarlett O'Hara, shares this idea of "redemption", but his dream goes further: it is, as we will see later in the play, the dream of purchasing the land upon which his family had lived as slaves:

BOY WILLIE: I told you. See how it's polished? My mama used to polish it every day. See all them pictures carved on it? That's what I was talking about. You can get a nice price for that piano (Wilson P.L. 9)

Berniece will also refer to Mama Ola's polishing the piano, adding:

BERNIECE: 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. [...] Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. (Wilson P.L. 52).

It is relevant to note that both Boy Willie and Berniece, when mentioning the piano, point out its having been polished every day by Mama Ola; but while Boy Willie focuses on its sale value, which might be increased by its condition, his sister Berniece is more concentrated on the "blood and tears" the piano cost her mother. They are two sides of the same, redolent dream.

The sense of ownership

How is it like to live without having been allowed to have anything of one's own? Doaker Charles, Berniece and Boy Willie's uncle, makes us understand this clearly when he tells Lymon the story of the piano:

DOAKER:[...] See, our family was owned by a fellow named Robert Sutter. That was Sutter's grandfather. Alright. The piano was owned by a fellow named Joel Nolander. He was one of the Nolander brothers from down in Georgia. It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary and he was looking to buy his

wife...Miss Ophelia was her name...he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him...he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. So he asked Mr. Nolander to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano. (Wilson P.L. 42)

It is shocking to hear that the price for the piano was “one and half nigger” to be chosen out of a “bunch” of black people lined up for the purpose and how the picked ones happened to be Doaker’s grandmother Berniece and his father Boy Willie, who was at the time only a nine-year-old boy. In the white man’s logic, “a deal is a deal” and niggers are valued according to their being “one full grown” and “one half grown”. When Miss Ophelia “got to missing” them it is only because she “missed the way” Doaker’s grandmother “would cook and clean the house and talk to her and what not”. As to the boy, Doaker’s father, “she missed having him around the house to fetch things for her”. As it was not possible to have the “niggers back”, Mr Sutter found a way to please his wife: he would have the pictures of them carved on it by grandfather Boy Willie who was a good worker of wood. As Doaker himself explains:

DOAKER:[..] He could make you anything you wanted out of wood. He'd make you a desk. A table. A lamp. Anything you wanted. Them white fellow around there used to come up to Mr. Sutter and get him to make all kinds of things for them. Then they'd pay Mr. Sutter a nice price. See, everything my granddaddy made Mr. Sutter owned cause he owned him. (Wilson P.L. 43)

But Papa Boy Willie was not just a clever carver, he was the husband and the father of those “niggers” who had been traded off for the piano; when asked to make the pictures, he did not stop with them:

DOAKER: Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That's how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born... and here he got Mama Esther's funeral...and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what happened with our family. (Wilson P.L. 44)

Doaker’s words do not go any further than just reporting Lymon the “true” story of the piano; yet, he makes us dwell on concepts which are normally taken for granted, as the sense of ownership. According to psychological theories, the process of

self-understanding and self-identity are strictly related to the importance society normally ascribes to possessions. William James argued in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) how it is difficult to “draw a line” between what a man calls “me” and what he calls “mine”, as these two concepts are somehow interwoven:

A man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down. – not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all. (James 188)

Russell W. Belk in his article “Possessions and the Extended Self” suggests that the development and the cultivation of one’s identity is due to the interactive process with one’s possessions, as they become a sort of the so called “extended self”. In other words, what we own becomes part of what we are and therefore we tend to desire the things which have been ascribed social value to, hence expressions like “status symbol” come from.

But if possessions are to be considered “markers for success” or “symbols of the self” how can this be applied to black people when they have been historically denied (at least for a long time) any right to own anything, not even their own “self”?

From this point of view, Papa Boy Willie’s desire of carving pictures of his family on the piano may sound as the desperate attempt of claiming the right to exist, saying to the world: these people are my family. They are *mine* and therefore I do exist as an individual.

Years later, his grand-grandchildren (meaningfully named after their ancestors Boy Willie and Berniece) will be confronted with the urgency to fill in their place in the world, which reminds us of that empty space left in the mirror in Bearden’s painting, and to collocate themselves in the society as free individuals and not mere “commodities”. Therefore, ownership becomes an essential issue; having money in a “whole sack” (Wilson P.L. 32), as Boy Willie says, is a way of reaching the white man’s position in the same society where they had lived as slaves. They are aware that it will not be easy; Boy Willie knows it very well, when he tells Lymon:

BOY WILLIE:[...] I am going back and get Sutter's land. You think you ain't got to work up here. You think this the land of milk and honey. But I ain't scared of work. I am going back and farm every acre of that land. (Wilson P.L. 17)

Yet, if money and belongings are important, it appears that the rules are the same they used to be in slavery times: the more you have, the better. The only difference now is that black Americans seem to be part of it.

When Lymon and Boy Willie sell all their watermelons they are "happy and excited" and "they have money in all their pockets and are anxious to count it" (Wilson P.L. 59). As to the white people who bought all the watermelons, they "[...]go and get their neighbours. Look like they having a contest to see who can buy the most." (Wilson P.L. 60)

Money can make Lymon wear "a fifty-five-dollar suit" which is "the kind of suit the bigshots wear" as well as good shoes. According to Wining Boy, Lymon looks "the King of the Walk" (Wilson P.L. 62) in such an outfit and is "ready for whatever's out there", women included:

WINING BOY: You look like a million dollars. Don't he look good, Doaker? Come on, let's play some cards [...]You got a magic suit there. You can get a woman easy with that suit.... (Wilson P.L. 64)

While Wining Boy thinks that women would "fall out their window when they see Lymon", Doaker is convinced women would rather get something tangible:

DOAKER: [...] These women these days ain't gonna fall for that kind of stuff. You got to buy them a present. That's what they looking for these days. (Wilson P.L. 65)

We understand Doaker here is hinting at the function of money as a medium of exchange in a society where black Americans are still trying to live up to the standards white people had fixed beforehand. This is, of course, a step forward if we compare "these days" to the old slavery times, as Boy Willie himself recalls:

BOY WILLIE: [...] Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring off at his hands. I got a little older I know what he was thinking . He sitting there saying, "I got these big old hands but what I'm gonna do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall. Got these big old hands capable of doing anything. I can take and build something with these hands.

But where's the tools? All I got is these hands. Unless I go out here and kill me somebody and take what they got...it's a long row to hoe for me to get something of my own".(Wilson P. L. 91)

These words convey a sense of hopelessness, underlined by the despairing question: "But where's the tools?" We cannot help sympathize with Boy Willie when he further says:

BOY WILLIE: See now... if he had his own land he wouldn't have felt that way. If he had something under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller. That's what I am talking about. Hell, the land is there for everybody. All you got to do is figure out how to get you a piece. Ain't no mystery to life. You just got to go out and meet it square on. If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton... the weather, and anything else you want to talk about. (Wilson P.L. 92)

Things would have been different, then, if only his father "had his own land", as having something that belonged to him would have meant being a person, a respectable individual who could speak up and demand attention to whatever he would talk about.

Ownership and respect appear strictly connected to one's place in the world. However, in Boy Willie's words there is more than that: a cry for justice which seems to come to us from the past, from the "old slavery times".

Living at the bottom of life

As the play unfolds, we see how Boy Willie and his sister Berniece often tease each other and we understand that selling or keeping the piano unveils their different attitudes towards life. There is a lot of enthusiasm and determination in Boy Willie which we do not find, at least at first glance, in Berniece. Even a simple gesture, like combing Maretha's hair, might trigger her brother's impatient reaction:

BERNIECE: Be still, Maretha – if you was a boy, I wouldn't be going through this.

BOY WILLIE: Don't you tell that girl that. Why you wanna tell her that?

BERNIECE: You ain't got nothing to do with this child.

BOY WILLIE: Telling her you wished she was a boy. How's that gonna make her feel? (Wilson P.L. 90)

Here Berniece is only telling her daughter not to move while she is doing her hair, a thing she would unlikely do if Maretha were a boy. Boy Willie does not let it go: Maretha's hair is just another excuse to start his personal contention about the piano:

BOY WILLIE: [...] Sitting up there telling Maretha she wished she was a boy. What kind of thing is that to tell a child? If you want to tell her something, tell her about that piano. You ain't even told her about that piano. Like that's something to be ashamed of. (Wilson P.L. 90)

Truly enough, Berniece has never told her daughter about the piano; yet, we perceive the expression "ashamed of" somehow inappropriate, although we understand the point Boy Willie is trying to make:

BOY WILLIE: [...] You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it... and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life She could walk around here with her head held high. I'm talking about a big party! Invite everybody! Mark that day down with a special meaning. That way she know where she at in the world. You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her. (Wilson P.L. 91)

Here again, in Boy Willie's words, the sense of ownership comes up to mark one's identity and one's place in the world which cannot be "at the bottom of life":

BOY WILLIE: If you teach that girl that she living at the bottom of life, she's gonna grow up and hate you.

BERNIECE: I am gonna teach her the truth. That's just where she living. Only she ain't got to stay there.[...]

BOY WILLIE: This might be your bottom but it ain't mine. I'm living at the top of life. I ain't gonna just take my life and throw it away at the bottom. I'm in the world like everybody else. The way I see it everybody else got to come up a little taste to be where I am. (Wilson P.L. 92)

Of course, “the truth” Berniece is referring to, is her condition of black American; her passive, sorrowful acceptance of it culminates in her following comment:

BERNIECE: You right at the bottom with the rest of us. (Wilson P.L. 93)

Boy Willie cannot feel the same as his sister: he “was born to a time of fire” and his words are , once again, a claim for justice which recall Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream*:

BOY WILLIE:[...] I got a heart that beats here and it beats just as loud as the next fellow’s. Don’t care if he black or white. Sometime it beats louder. When it beats louder, then everybody can hear it. (Wilson P.L. 94)

Going back to the interview with Mervyn Rothstein, it is worth noticing how August Wilson’s words sound similarly so full of “resiliency” and dignity:

[...] Despite the conditions we have known, despite all the horrors of slavery, despite the sometimes brutal mistreatment blacks have received in this country, we’re still here, still managing through it all to find a way to live with dignity a certain amount of nobility. (Qtd. in Rothstein 4)

But if Berniece does not, at least apparently, share her brother’s *romantic* view about life, what does she *really* think and what lies behind her attitude?

The place for love: Berniece

In the first few lines of the setting we are given indirect information on Berniece:

The house is sparsely furnished, and although there is evidence of a woman's touch, there is a lack of warmth and vigor.(Wilson P.L. 1)

The moral code which sees the house as the most convenient place for a woman, the so called "angel of the hearth", is somehow at work here; yet, "the lack of warmth and vigor" suggests the idea of unhappiness. Berniece is soon introduced as a woman "still in mourning" for her husband, although he has been dead three years at the time being. It seems that, under many aspects, she is pushing everybody away, because she is still wracked with grief. Her first reaction at her brother's arrival is negative, as she does not like "all that hollering" at five o'clock in the morning. Even if we understand that it is early and she has "got to work" later in the morning, we cannot help side with what Boy Willie says to Doaker at the door:

DOAKER: Berniece up there sleep.

BOY WILLIE: Well, let her get up.... Hey Berniece!

DOAKER: She got to work in the morning.

BOY WILLIE: Well she can get up and say hi. It's been three years since I seen her. Hey Berniece! It's me...Boy Willie.

DOAKER: Berniece don't like all that hollering now. She got to work in the morning.

BOY WILLIE: She can go on back to bed. Me and Lymon been riding two days in that truck... the least she can do is get up and say hi. (Wilson P.L. 2)

Berniece keeps on telling her brother off and, at the end of Act One, we see this grief explode when she physically attacks Boy Willie who she blames for the death of her husband Crawley:

BERNIECE: All I know is Crawley would be alive if you hadn't come up there and got him.

BOY WILLIE: I ain't had nothing to do with Crawley getting killed. That was his own fault.

BERNIECE: Crawley's dead and in the ground and you still walking around here eating. That's all I know. He went off to load some wood with you and ain't never come back

BOY WILLIE: I told you woman...I ain't had nothing to do with...

BERNIECE: He ain't here, is he? (Wilson P.L. 53-54)

We are told Berniece continues to hit Boy Willie , who does not even try to defend himself, “other than back-up and turning his head” in order to avoid, at least, the most of the blows.

As to Avery, her fiancé, she just cannot make her mind up and marry him. When he proposes, her denial sounds almost final:

AVERY: Anytime I get anywhere near you... you push me away.

BERNIECE: I got enough on my hands with Maretha. I got enough people to love and take care of.

AVERY: Who you got to love you? Can't nobody get close enough to you. Doaker can't half say nothing to you. You jump all over Boy Willie. Who you got to love you, Berniece? (Wilson P.L. 66-67)

When Avery reminds her that “life's gonna be gone out of” her hands and that he does not know “how much longer” he will be standing there waiting on her, we feel that she is trying to find a good excuse for her hesitation. Even her passionate speech on “womanhood”, sounds like it:

BERNIECE: You trying tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But . you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me – without a woman –and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, “Avery, who you got to love you?” That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. “How Berniece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?” Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I got a man. Well, you tell me, Avery – you know – how much woman am I? (Wilson P.L. 67)

From Avery's reaction we guess he knows very well that Berniece's point rather than a “quest for self-expression” is a scream of anguish:

AVERY: It wasn't me, Berniece. You can't blame me for nobody else. I'll own up to my shortcomings. But you can't blame me for Crawley or nobody else.(Wilson P.L. 67)

In Act Two, we see Berniece, at least for a moment, come out of her shell. Lymon has his “magic suit on” that Wining Boy sold him saying it would “bring him a woman”. She has just told her brother to take his occasional girlfriend Grace out of the house:

BERNIECE: Boy Willie, I don't allow that in my house. You gonna have to take your company someplace else.

BOY WILLIE: It's alright. We ain't doing nothing. We just sitting here talking. This here is Grace. That's my sister Berniece.

BERNIECE: You know I don't allow that kind of stuff in my house.

BOY WILLIE: Allow what? We just sitting here talking.

BERNIECE: Well, your company gonna have to leave. Come back and talk in the morning. (Wilson P.L. 74)

When Lymon arrives, they talk nicely about women and love:

BERNIECE: [...]I don't know what them women out there be thinking about.

LYMON: Mostly they be lonely and looking for somebody to spend the night with them. Sometimes it matters who it is and sometimes it don't. I used to be the same way. Now it got to matter [...] I just dream about women. Can't never seem to find the right one. (Wilson P.L. 78)

There is a tenderness in Lymon's words which seems to impress Berniece. When she replies, we feel she is speaking to herself, too:

BERNIECE: She out there somewhere. You just got to get yourself ready to meet her. That's what I am trying to do. Avery's alright. I ain't really got nobody in mind. (Wilson P.L. 78)

All the rest of the scene suggests an increasing sensuality as well as intimacy between them, although Berniece tries, somehow, to cool down the magic in the air:

LYMON: You got on that nightgown. I likes women when they wear them fancy nightclothes and all. It makes their skin look real pretty.

BERNIECE: I got this at the five-and ten-cents store. It ain't so fancy.

LYMON: I don't too often get to see a woman dressed like that.
(Wilson P. L. 79)

Lymon then takes off his suit coat and lets Berniece smell a nice perfume:

LYMON: I wanna give it to you. Make you smell nice. (*He takes the bottle and puts perfume behind BERNIECE's ear*) They tell me you supposed to put it right here behind your ear. Say if you put it there you smell nice all day. (Wilson P.L. 80)

We are told Berniece stiffens at his touch; nevertheless, he kisses her and she even kisses him back. As the lights go down on the scene, we are left with the tender image of Lymon "lovingly" stroking his suit, thinking to himself that "it is indeed a magic suit".

The past as a burden

Although Berniece lets herself go in the scene mentioned above, we notice that she is not usually like this in the play: she is, most of the times, very self-controlled. It is interesting to note what Sandra G. Shannon argued in her essay "The Ground on Which I stand: August Wilson's Perspective on African American Women":

Berniece Charles is a woman whose identity is linked to several-never-to-be-recovered images from her past. Her present life is thus filled with self-denial and frustration as she plays warden over a two-hundred-year-old-piano, dodges marriage proposals from a love stricken minister, and perpetually grieves for her murdered husband and murdered father. The conflict in her life extends beyond marital concerns, however. In fact, Berniece carries the weight of several generations of her family on her shoulders, as symbolized by her attempts to preserve and idolize

an old piano anointed by the spirits of her slave ancestors.
(Shannon 1994, 159-160)

Certainly, the past fills Berniece's present life with grief and her "self-denial" and "frustration" have much to do with that "two-hundred-old-piano". We can try to understand what it means going back to Doaker's talk with Lymon:

DOAKER: [...] Alright...now see, our brother Boy Charles...that's Berniece and Boy Willie's daddy... he was the oldest of us three boys. He's dead now. But he would have been fifty-seven if he had lived. He died in 1911 when he was thirty-one years old. Boy Charles used to talk about that piano all the time. He never could get it off his mind. Two or three months go by and he be talking about it again. (Wilson P.L. 44-45)

While reporting the story, Doaker himself hints at the importance of the piano, suggesting that his father "never could get it off his mind". If we can call it "obsession", he gives an explanation for it by saying "it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it.... he had us". He recalls farther how the piano has been taken out of Sutter's house:

DOAKER: [...] We seen where he wasn't gonna get it off his mind... so, on the Fourth of July, 1911... when Sutter was at the picnic what the county give every year... me and Wining Boy went on down there with him and took that piano out of Sutter's house. We put it on a wagon and me and Wining Boy carried it over into the next county with Mama Ola's people. Boy Charles decided to stay around there and wait until Sutter got home to make it look like business as usual. Now, I don't know what happened when Sutter came home and found that piano gone. But somebody went up to Boy Charles's house and set it on fire. (Wilson P.L. 45)

At this point Doaker's reporting starts hinting at a sort of "collective" story: this "somebody" who went up and set Boy Charles's house on fire reminds us of horrible scenes of lynching or race riots which were unfortunately quite common in those

days. We are told briefly that Boy Charles and four “hobos” were found on the 3:57 Yellow Dog train² and killed:

DOAKER: [...] Must have got mad when they couldn't find the piano cause they set the boxcar afire and killed everybody. Now, nobody know who done that. Some people say it was Sutter cause it was his piano. Some people say it was Sheriff Carter. Some people say it was Robert Smith and Ed Saunders. But don't nobody know for sure. (Wilson P.L. 45)

Doaker is here just trying to make Lymon (and the audience) understand “how all that got started”. Even when he tells about Ed Saunders falling down his well two months afterwards, he is not “investigating”, as the truth would hardly come out, anyway: all that matters is that Berniece “ain't gonna sell that piano. Cause her daddy died over it.”(Wilson P.L. 46)

If Berniece, as S. Shannon suggests, carries the weight of her family's memories on her shoulders, supposedly the piano is part of it: it has the *history* of generations carved on its surface but, at the same time, it is a redolent symbol of “never-to-be-recovered images” of their past. It becomes a sort of burden to Berniece: she is not free to go on with her life: her past is always there and somehow, through the family piano, still alive.

The Supernatural at work

As noted earlier, Wilson sets the first few scenes of his *The Piano Lesson* at a particular time of the day, the dawn. We recall how that is by many authors considered a “special hour”, suspended between night and day, when anything may happen. An easy association might be with Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Hamlet* (1602). We know that Hamlet's father has been dead only two months when a ghost (initially referred to as “this thing”),

² The Yellow Dog was a vernacular name for the Yazoo Delta Railroad. “Dog” or “Short Dog” was railroad slang for a local or branch line. It opened in August 1897 and by 1903 was part of the Illinois Central Railroad System. It also provided the lyric content for a popular song *The Yellow Dog Blues* (1903) by W.C. Handy

that looks like the late king of Denmark, appears to the sentries at the castle of Elsinore and to Hamlet himself:

Enter GHOST

HORATIO: Look, my lord, it comes!

HAMLET: Angels and ministers of grace defend us!-

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,

Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,

Be thy intents wicked or charitable,

Thou comest in such a questionable shape

That I will speak to thee: I'll call thee Hamlet,

King, father, royal Dane. O, answer me! (Shakespeare 66)

Hamlet is very cautious, as he does not know whether to believe it or consider “the apparition” simple fantasy. Yet, his “prophetic soul” (72) knows the ghost of his father is there to ask him to avenge his unnatural death. We want here to focus on the reaction the ghost causes: *fear* and *bewilderment*. Horatio and Marcellus tell their friend not to go with him: he might “tempt you toward the flood” or “to the dreadful summit of the cliff”. Hamlet cannot tell whether the Ghost is mere appearance or reality: how does one separate what appears to be real from what actually is so? Whatever illogical or deceitful it might be, he must go:

HAMLET: My fate cries out,

And makes each petty artery in this body

As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.

Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen;

By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me:

I say, away! – Go on; I'll follow thee. (Shakespeare 68)

Going back to *The Piano Lesson*, we find a different atmosphere which has nothing to do with the major question between “appearance and reality” as in Shakespeare. We just suspend our disbelief. Harry J. Elam, Jr., in his study *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (2004), interestingly suggests:

The dead speak in Wilson's plays, the ancestral voices are present and inevitably the action reveals death as part of life. (Elam 196)

Elam then continues, explaining how in Western cultural traditions faith in ghosts and supernatural spirits is considered "unreasonable and irrational" and can be seen as mere "folk superstition", whereas in African American world this is just a "manifestation of African spirituality." (Elam 196). Wilson, interviewed by Harry J. Elam, seems to agree with it:

It's the same people practicing – exercising their spirituality, but it's got a different cover to it. But it's the same people. The same people that believe in tree spirits in Africa. I don't know anyone here believe in tree spirits, but they believe in ghosts. (Qtd. in Elam 197)

If we look up in old pre-colonial legends, we find tree spirits normally referred to as living souls, usually connected to the ancestors: it is to them that the natives go, whenever advice or help is needed. We might think, for instance, of John Davis's *Captain Smith and Princess Pocahontas* (1607); the story of the beautiful and sensual Indian princess who offers herself in a sort of "foundation myth" of the New World. When she dies, on the ship back to the forests which gave her birth, we feel her longing for a "living" nature where oaks are "venerable" and the moss "murmurs":

Here – resumed Pocahontas, I shall be buried in the land of strangers, and though marble may rise over mew, yet that is more the attribute of riches than virtue. It melt no breast to sympathy. Whereas, where I to be interred in my native land, the grief of the traveller would be moved at the little hillock that covered my remains; it would ascend with the venerable oaks of the lofty forest, extend with the surrounding hills, and ally itself closely with all the effects of nature; the dawn of the morning, the murmuring of the moss that floats in streamers from the trees, the setting of the sun, and the darkness of the night. (Davis 146)

Can we perceive this spirituality in *The Piano Lesson*? We do not find any "venerable oaks", but beyond doubt how the

characters approach the other world is not to be easily explained and has something to do with the way natives see Nature .

Let us, for the time being, concentrate on how “the supernatural” actually enters the play and how people react to it.

Berniece’s role seems to be pivotal. While, at the beginning of the play, Boy Willie and Doaker talk about Sutter’s death, they see things different from her:

BOY WILLIE: [...]We fixing to have a party. Doaker, where your bottle? Me and Lymon celebrating. The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter.

BERNIECE: Say what?

BOY WILLIE: Ask Lymon, they found him the next morning. Say he drowned in his well.

[...]Everybody say the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog pushed him.

BERNIECE: I don’t want to hear that nonsense. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. (Wilson P.L. 4 – 5)

The fact being reported here is the death of one descendant of the former slave owners, apparently by accidental drowning in his property well; Boy Willie believes that the “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog” did it, like “everybody” says. As mentioned above, Doaker and Wining Boy stole the piano on Independence Day in 1911 and took it by wagon across the Sunflower County line; this set off a chain of crimes, including arson and seven deaths. We already know that Boy Willie and Berniece’s father died, together with four hobos in the burning of the boxcar of the Yazoo Delta railroad. A few months later Ed Saunders, a suspect, fell down a well and Sutter’s grandson, whom Boy Willie and Berniece are talking about, is just the last on the line. The African American residents of Sunflower County began to attribute these well “accidents” to the so called “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog”.

This might be considered, as sociologists would, a manifestation of “the sense of peoplehood” (Gordon 24) or a shared belief, at the same time, that accounts for “controversial” facts for which no simple explanation presents itself.

According to many authors, like Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* (1890), the origins of myths or legends is a cultural response to our primordial need to control natural phenomena: they authorize the cultural institutions of a tribe, a city or a nation by connecting them with universal truths. And, we may add, help us to live.

If the faith in “The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog” is “a manifestation of African spirituality”, Berniece does not seem to share it. A few moments later her “I don’t want to hear that nonsense” (Wilson P.L. 5), we hear her cry:

BERNIECE: (*Offstage, hollers.*) Doaker! Go on get away. Doaker!

DOAKER: (*Calling.*) Berniece?

(DOAKER and BOY WILLIE rush to the stairs, BOY WILLIE runs up the stairs, passing BERNIECE as she enters, running.)

DOAKER: Berniece, what’s the matter? You alright? What’s the matter?

(BERNIECE tries to catch her breath. She is unable to speak.)

DOAKER: That’s alright. Take your time. You alright. What’s the matter?

(*He calls*) Hey, Boy Willie?

BOY WILLIE: (*Offstage.*) Ain’t nobody up here.

BERNIECE: Sutter... Sutter’s standing at the top of the steps.
(Wilson P.L. 12–13)

Berniece tells Doaker and Boy Willie she saw Sutter’s ghost standing at the top of the stairs: holding “his hand on top of his head” as if his head “might have fallen off”. The way she describes him sounds so “normal”: we are not being introduced to a terrific ghost, although his apparition does scare Berniece; nevertheless, he “just had on that blue suit”. And no hat. Irrational and real here seem to merge. While Doaker is listening carefully, Boy Willie makes fun of her:

BOY WILLIE: Sutter couldn’t find his way from Big Sandy to Little Sandy. How he gonna find his way all the way up here to Pittsburgh? Sutter ain’t never even heard of Pittsburgh.

DOAKER: Go on, Berniece.

BERNIECE: Just standing there with the blue suit on.

BOY WILLIE: The man ain't never left Marlin County when he was living and he's gonna come all the way up here now that's he's dead? (Wilson P.L. 14)

When Berniece says the ghost called Boy Willie's name, substantially accusing him of his own death, Boy Willie's reaction is more concerned:

BOY WILLIE: What he calling my name for?

BERNIECE: I believe you pushed him in the well.

BOY WILLIE: Now what kind of sense that make? You telling me I'm gonna go out there and hide in the weeds with all them dogs and things he got around there...I'm gonna hide and wait till I catch him looking down his well just right...then I'm gonna run over and push him in. A great big old three-hundred-and-forty-pound man.

BERNIECE: Well, what he calling your name for? (Wilson P.L. 14)

The explanation which follows, "the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog got Sutter", does not work for Berniece, as she "knows better". And she takes the opportunity to blame her brother for her husband's death, too:

BERNIECE: Boy Willie, I want you and Lymon to go ahead and leave my house. Just go on somewhere. You don't do nothing but bring trouble with you everywhere you go. If it wasn't for you Crawley would still be alive.

BOY WILLIE: Crawley what? I ain't had nothing to do with Crawley getting killed. Crawley three time seven. He had his own mind. (Wilson P.L. 15)

Is Berniece perhaps trying to find a motive for what is presented as a chain of unfortunate events? We suggest that she would desperately need it, in order to go on in her life.

The Piano as a shrine?

We have already underlined how the piano dominates not only the stage, but also what we might call the core of the play itself.

The “blood and tears” which, in Berniece’s own words, Mama Ola shed when polishing the piano every day, are part of it, as well as the masks of the ancestors, engraved on its surface.

At first glance, then, the piano might function as a source of inspiration and teaching for the living, similarly to Foscolo’s *Dei Sepolcri* (1806) or Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751). If in the Western world tombs, generally speaking, have the affective role of linking the dead with the living, the past with the present, certainly we find this connection in *The Piano Lesson*, too.

Yet, it does not seem to work in the same way: there is no “passeggier solingo” (or “solitary wanderer”, lingering upon an epitaph in some “neglected spot”. The link between the dead and the living acts through a different code and the piano seems to catalyze it. Not easily to be ignored, its presence is perceived, more or less, as “intrusive” by everyone.

When telling Wining Boy that he has seen Sutter’s ghost before Berniece did, Doaker adds:

DOAKER: [...]I heard him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don’t play that kind of music. I come out here and ain’t seen nobody, but them piano keys was moving a mile a minute. Berniece need to go on and get rid of it. It ain’t done nothing but cause trouble. (Wilson P.L. 57)

It is worth noticing here how Doaker “knew” it was Sutter and not Berniece playing the piano: “she don’t play that kind of music”. We understand that the piano keys had been moving by themselves, as if animated, playing a *different* type of music, in part recalling Ma Rainey’s comment on music as “a way of understanding life” and not simply notes “coming out”, we mentioned before.

Also Wining Boy thinks that Berniece had better to get rid of the piano. He even says he does not mind where Sutter’s ghost is, as long as he carries the piano out of the house:

WINING BOY: [...] Sutter dead and in the ground... don't care where his ghost is. He can hover around and play on the piano all he want. I want to see him carry it out the house. That's what I want to see. What time Berniece get home? I let her get away from me this morning. (Wilson P.L. 58)

Not easily to be disregarded, it cannot be “removed”, either. When Boy Willie finally succeeds in selling the piano for “eleven hundred and fifty dollars” (Wilson P.L. 82) and asks Lymon to help him to get it out of the house, before Berniece arrives, we are told it “will not budge” (Wilson P.L. 83), no matter how hard they try:

LYMON: Man, this piano is heavy! It's gonna take more than me and you to move this piano.

BOY WILLIE: We can do it. Come on – we did it before.

LYMON: Nigger- you crazy! That piano weighs five hundred pounds!

BOY WILLIE: I got three hundred pounds of it! I know you can carry two hundred pounds! You be lifting them cotton sacks! Come on lift this piano!

(They try to move the piano again without success.)

LYMON: It's stuck. Something holding it. (Wilson P.L. 82-83)

The impression is that the piano, rather than rising a contemplative, melancholic mood, demands *something* from the living. It cannot be “pushed aside” and people must come to terms with it.

Very much to this point, Elam suggests:

In Wilson's play, ghosts from the past, both white and black haunt the world of the living, seeking restitution and only the enactment of certain ceremonies grants their release or enables their exorcism. (Elam 198)

We suppose the “restitution” Elam is hinting at is to be referred to something controversial or left unfinished. Let us turn, for instance, to what Wining Boy says to Doaker about the ghost's appearance:

WINING BOY: I agree with Berniece. Boy Charles ain't took it to give it back. He took it cause he figure he had more right to it than Sutter did. If Sutter can't understand that ...then that's just the way that go. [...] (Wilson P.L. 57-58)

If the question is whether Boy Willie or Sutter has more right to the piano, Wining Boy sides with his nephew; however, we cannot help thinking it has something to do with a form of "restitution".

Much to the point, it is interesting to note what Wining Boy tells Boy Willie, earlier in the play, about the difference between "the colored" and "the white man":

WINING BOY: Ain't no difference as far as how somebody supposed to treat you. I agree with that. But I'll tell you the difference between the colored man and the white man. Alright. Now you take and eat some berries. They taste real good to you. So you say I'm gonna go out and get me a whole pot of these berries and cook them up to make a pie or whatever. But you ain't looked to see them berries in sitting in the white fellow's yard.[...]Now the white man come along and say that's my land. Therefore everything that grow on it belong to me. (Wilson P.L. 38)

According to Wining Boy, then, the white man can *adjust* even the law for his own benefit, while the colored cannot but only accept whatever is decided:

WINING BOY: Alright. Now Mr. So and So, he sell the land to you. And he come to you and say, "John, you own the land. It's all yours now. But them is my berries. And come time to pick them I m gonna send my boys over. You got the land... but them berries, I'm gonna keep them. They mine." And he go and fix it with the law that them is his berries. Now that's the difference between the colored man and the white man. The colored man can't fix nothing with the law. (Wilson P.L. 38)

When Boy Willie replies, he is determined to get what he regards as *unjustly* taken from him:

BOY WILLIE: I don't go by the law say. The law's liable to say anything. I go by if it's right or not. It don't matter to me what the law say. I take and look at for myself. (Wilson P.L. 38 39)

As to Berniece, we understand there is a strong connection between the piano and the pain she "holds" inside; the piano, then, would appear to be a sort of "receptacle of pain". Pain that, apparently, generates ghosts. She must be well aware of this, when she tells Avery about her decision not to play the piano after her mother's death:

BERNIECE: [...] When my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never opened it since. I was only playing it for her. When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She used to have me playing on it ... had Miss Eula come in and teach me ...say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in the house. (Wilson P.L. 70)

Remarkably, if Berniece seems to deny her past, we understand better why: it "haunts" her, with all its redolent memories: she even dreams of "them pictures" coming alive and of her mother "talking to them". She does not play the piano, as she is scared of waking "them spirits". We can sense a deep grief in her words which goes *through* and *beyond* the piano itself. The past of the Charles' family, with all their suffering, is there, reclaiming the space that is rightfully theirs. Yet, it expresses a sentiment which, as suggested by Elam, is reflective of Black America in general. We find it emotionally expressed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987):

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. (Morrison 5)

At the top of the stairs

If we go back to the first few pages of the play we might focus our attention on one particular element which – in our opinion – is not insignificant: the staircase. When Wilson introduces the setting of *The Piano Lesson* gives a few hints at the location and tells us where the characters' rooms are:

[...]BERNIECE and MARETHA occupy the upstairs rooms.
Doaker's room is prominent and opens onto the kitchen[...]At left
is a staircase leading to the upstairs.

Normally staircases on stage have the function of articulating the setting of the action into different locations, thus broadening the spatial as well as the situational perspective. As in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) by Tennessee Williams, where Stanley and Blanche's flat is separated from Steve and Eunice's one by stairs:

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamental gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down.
(Williams 1)

The “flat upstairs” will be the place where Blanche and Stella disappear whenever they argue with Stanley, as in the well known “poker night” scene:

BLANCHE: I want my sister's clothes! We'll go to that woman's
upstairs!
MITCH: Where is the clothes?
BLANCHE : [...] Stella, Stella, precious! Dear, dear little sister,
don't be afraid!. (Williams 36)

Our suggestion is that “the upstairs”, generally speaking, is often used as an instrumental division which may hint at

different issues or lead to the outcome of the dramatic events. In Williams's play, for instance, the contrast between Stanley, his wife Stella and her sister Blanche goes beyond the confusion caused by the men playing poker and drinking. It might be seen as a conflict between the "coarseness" of a vital working class, represented by Stanley Kowalski, and the "kindness" of the dying aristocracy Stella and Blanche belong to: the old South, which prefers to live in a fantasy world of past glory and magic, rather than face life's unpleasant realities. The hint at the "faded white stairs" adds a touch of fascination to the scene and underlines the sense of melancholic decline:

Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both. It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. (Williams 1)

In *The Piano Lesson* "the upstairs" is where Berniece's and her daughter's rooms are and where they go back to. And, moreover, the place where the Ghost is heard. Most of the times, the Ghost appears when Berniece or Maretha "enter[...] on the stairs", as the stage directions tell us. Is it just by coincidence?

We might at this point recall old stories where ghosts appear or frightening events take place: the usual setting is a secret chamber at the top of the stairs. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) Jane is often disturbed by strange noises coming from the "wild animal" (Brontë 292) Bertha Mason, living on the upper floor of Thornfield Hall; in Perrault's *Bluebeard* (1697), the man who married several women and killed them, then kept their bodies hanging in a room in the attic of his castle.

There is a whole literature where recurrent images of otherworldly spirits or ghosts are to be connected to rooms "at the top of the stairs". We are not surprised to see that in *The Piano Lesson* even the final confrontation between Boy Willie and Sutter's Ghost will take place there. What is unexpected is our reaction: we do not ask ourselves whether Berniece or Boy Willie really see Sutter's ghost. We could agree with what David Lodge argues in *The Art of Fiction* (1992):

[...] We suspend our disbelief, because it so powerfully and poignantly expresses the emotion that has been built over the preceding pages. (Lodge 115)

Here Lodge refers to a passage from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) in which the author claims to have seen a circle of dancers rise into the air and fly away. He describes the scene very emphatically:

[...] I ran after that voice through the streets in the hope of keeping up with that wonderful wreath of bodies rising above the city, and I realized with anguish in my heart that they were flying like a stone, that they had wings and I would never have any. (Qtd. in Lodge 113)

The dancers who rise from the ground and float into the sky is absolutely an impossible event; nevertheless, it works as if it were real. Is it the same effect we find in *The Piano Lesson*? As a matter of fact, Sutter's Ghost, who appears when Berniece goes upstairs or fights with Boy Willie in "a life-and-death struggle" (106) are not credible circumstances. Yet, they are real to the protagonists and, ultimately, to us.

Avery and "his" church

Wilson's stage directions introduce the character of Avery quite early in the play:

There is a knock on the door. DOAKER goes to answer it. AVERY enters. Thirty-eight years old, honest and ambitious, he has taken to the city like a fish to water, finding in it opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South. He is dressed in a suit and tie with a gold cross around his neck. He carries a small Bible. (Wilson P.L. 22)

The first hints we get at Avery's personality are already here: "honest and ambitious". We are told he has found in Pittsburgh

“opportunities” he would not have found in “the rural South”. Both Boy Willie and Lymon are quite surprised to see him dressed as a preacher and in their words, especially in Boy Willie’s, we feel a note of unconcealed mockery:

BOY WILLIE: Doaker say you are a preacher now. What ... we supposed to call you Reverend? You used to be plain old Avery. When you get to be a preacher, nigger?

LYMON: Avery say he gonna be a preacher so he don’t have to work.

BOY WILLIE: I remember when you was down there on the Willshaw place planting cotton. You wasn’t thinking about no Reverend then. (Wilson P.L. 22–23)

Avery used to be just one of them, “down there on the Willshaw place planting cotton” and now he has a “good job”:

DOAKER: Avery got him one of them good jobs. He working at one of them skyscrapers downtown.

AVERY: I’m working down there at the Gulf Building running an elevator. Got a pension and everything. They even give you a turkey on Thanksgiving. (Wilson P.L. 23)

In just a few lines we are told, through the characters’ words, what it was going on in Pittsburgh at the time of the play: the construction of the Gulf Building. We know it was the tallest building in Pittsburgh from 1932 till 1970: 44 floors, 582 ft height, built on the site of the first oil refinery in the country. For the curious reader, an occasion to learn how the sprawling city of Pittsburgh, with its industries and the increasing number of people employed in manufacturing, steelworks, mining, construction and service occupations, had been playing an important role in the growth of the so called American Industrial Economy, especially in the last third of the nineteenth century. *The Piano Lesson* is set in 1936: historically, the bulk of the northward drift of the Negro population had occurred earlier; Maldwyn A. Jones, in his study *The Limits of Liberty*, collocates it in the years between 1877 and 1914. Nevertheless, Northern industrial cities experienced increases in black populations from the rural South also in the following years, as Wilson himself recalls here. And Avery’s words suggest he is happy enough with his “pension” and his “turkey on Thanksgiving”. Rather than a

preacher, he sounds like a businessman, especially when he mentions his appointment at the bank:

DOAKER: Berniece say you all going down to the bank.

AVERY: Yeah, they give me a half day off work. I got an appointment to talk to the bank about getting a loan to start my church. (Wilson P.L. 23)

When Berniece asks him whether he found the place he was looking for “his Church”, Avery replies with the same businesslike attitude shown above:

BERNIECE: What Mr. Cohen say about letting you have the place?

AVERY: He say he'll let me have it for thirty dollars a month. I talked him out of thirty-five and he say he'll let me have it for thirty. (Wilson P.L. 65-66)

We realize Avery is a practical person who bargains for what he wants and successfully achieves it. As far as Berniece is concerned, he seems to care for her, although he worries about settling down “profitably” for his congregation:

AVERY: Berniece... I be at home and I get to thinking you up here an' I'm down there. I get to thinking how that look to have a preacher that ain't married. It makes for a better congregation if the preacher was settled down and married. (Wilson P.L. 66)

Avery's words might echo similar “proposals” in literary works we are familiar with, like Mr Collins's to Elizabeth in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), who also has “good reasons” to marry:

[...] Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying [...] My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. (Austen 285)

Although in different contexts, Avery and Mr Collins seem to be looking for the right woman who would be exemplary for their congregation. Avery expresses it very well:

I need somebody on my bond side. I need a woman that fits in my hand. (Wilson P.L. 66)

And what about the calling from God?

When Boy Willie asks him to explain how you “get to be a preacher”, Avery recalls how he decided to become a Christian preacher after a dream:

EVERY: It come to me in a dream. God called me and told me he wanted me to be a shepherd for his flock. That’s what I’ m gonna call my church. The Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ. (Wilson P.L. 24)

Avery tells how he dreamt about three hobos who got off a train and people who “looked like anybody else except they all had sheep heads and was making noise like sheep make”. He then continues:

EVERY: [...]They told me to take off my clothes and they give me a blue robe with gold thread. They washed my feet and combed my hair. Then they showed me three doors and told me to pick one. I went through one of them doors and that flame leapt off that candle and it seemed like my whole head caught fire. I looked around and there was four or five other men standing there with the same blue robes on. Then we heard a voice tell us to look out across this valley. We looked out and saw the valley full of wolves. The voice told us that these sheep people that I had seen in the other room had to go over to the other side of this valley and somebody had to take them. Then I heard another voice say, “Who shall I send?” Next thing I knew I said, “Here I am. Send me”. That’s when I met Jesus. (Wilson P.L. 25)

According to Elam, Avery’s dream is quite bizarre, being a “syncretic mélange of references, from the stories that appear more African in nature, to those that appear merely ridiculous”. (Elam 182)

As a matter of fact, in Avery’s dream there are elements which we could hardly define “Christian”, like the three hobos who got off a train; yet, they were on “their way to Jerusalem” and the valley “full of wolves” as well as the “sheep people” remind us of Saint Matthew’s words in the *Holy Bible*:

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves [...] (7:15-20)

Avery then says he “knew right then” that he had been filled with the Holy Ghost and “called to be a servant of the Lord”; we feel he is sincere. However, the impression is that his Faith has somehow to come to terms with his blackness.

When interviewed by David Savran, Wilson argued – as reported by Elam – that African Americans “have taken Christianity and bent it to serve their African-ness”.(Qtd. in Elam 182).This would account for the originality of Avery's calling to the priesthood, his placing African elements within a Christian framework.

There is a conversation between Berniece and Avery about the so called “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog” which, in our opinion, shows how Avery is actually “suspended” between two cultures:

BERNIECE: Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. They ain't just upped and fell. Ain't no wind pushed nobody in their well.

AVERY: Oh, I don't know. God works in mysterious ways.

BERNIECE: He ain't pushed nobody in their wells.

AVERY: He caused it to happen. God is the Great Causer. He can do anything. He parted the Red Sea. He say I will smite my enemies. Reverend Thompson used to preach on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as the hand of God. (Wilson P.L. 69)

To Berniece, who sceptically suggests God has nothing to do with pushing people into their wells, Avery replies saying: “He caused it to happen” and refers to Reverend Thompson's words about the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog being “the hand of God”. If we are looking for a synergetic “mélange of references”, we can find it here: Avery the preacher believes in the Christian God who parted the Red Sea but, at the same time, he is convinced, as the African residents of Sunflower County are, that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog did it. How does this “synergism” work in *The Piano Lesson*? The outcome, as we shall see, is far from being easy.

When you marry, marry a railroad man

In August Wilson's plays we often find references to the railroad and to its value to blacks. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) the Illinois Central Railroad is mentioned in Bynum Walker's song; in *Jitney* (1982) Doub, a long time jitney driver and war veteran, is a retired rail worker with twenty-seven years of service; he is not worried about his future as he has his "railroad pension" and "got nobody" but himself. (Wilson J. 67). Similarly, Doaker Charles in *The Piano Lesson* is a former railroad man with twenty-seven years of service, too. We understand the railroad has been very important in his life, as Boy Willie recalls:

BOY WILLIE: Doaker can't turn that railroad loose. He was working the railroad when I was walking around crying for sugartit. My mama used to brag on him. (Wilson P.L. 18)

When Doaker describes the hardship of laying track for the Yazoo Delta link between Clarksdale and Sunflower County, Mississippi, we feel he is really proud of having been there and contributed to making the Yellow Dog a reality:

DOAKER: I'm cooking now, I used to line track. I placed together the Yellow Dog stitch by stitch. Rail by rail. Line track all up around there. I lined track all up around Sunflower and Clarksdale. Wining Boy worked with me. He helped put in some of that track. He'd work it for six months and quit. Go back to playing piano and gambling. (Wilson P.L. 18)

Doaker's comment on Wining Boy who worked "for six months and quit" underlines the value he ascribes, differently from Wining Boy, to his experience in the railways. At a certain point Doaker even sings out cheerfully the route the railroad used to go, from station to station, between Clarksdale and Jackson, in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, and the return loop north:

DOAKER: Gonna leave Jackson Mississippi
and go to Memphis
and double back to Jackson
Come on down to Hattiesburgh
Change cars on the Y.D.
Coming through the territory to
Meridian

and Meridian to Greenville
and Greenville to Memphis
I' m on my way and I know where

Change cars on the Katy
Leaving Jackson
And going through Clarksdale
Hello Winona!
Courtland!
Bateville!
Como!
Senitobia!
Lewisberg!
Sunflower!
Glendora!
Sharkey!
And double back to Jackson[...] (Wilson P.L. 55-56)

If trains offer regular employment and the prospect of a good retirement, this concept somehow becomes a sort of “shared” belief which music seems to encompass, as in the song Doaker and his brother Wining Boy sing merrily together:

When you marry, marry a railroad man oh-ah
When you marry, marry a railroad man, well
Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand oh-ah
Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand well (Wilson P.L. 40)

Trains are also considered very reliable means of transport. When Boy Willie decides to leave, returning to Mississippi, his friend Lymon suggests he had rather take the train than his unreliable truck:

LYMON: I told you I ain't going back down there and take a chance on that truck breaking down again. You can take the train. Hey, tell him Doaker, he can take the train back. After we sell them watermelons he have enough money he can buy him a whole railroad car.

DOAKER: You got all them watermelons stacked up there no wonder the truck broke down. I am surprised you made it this far with a load like that. Where you break down at?

BOY WILLIE: We broke down three times! [...] (Wilson P.L. 3)

To some extent, the railroad may be seen in August Wilson's plays as a sort of metaphor for the journey of human life. In *Two Trains Running* (1991) one character, Memphis Lee, flees by train to Natchez, after the racist Jim Stovall slew his mule and burnt his crops. In Pittsburgh, where he lives, Memphis recalls the circumstances of his flight north and comforts himself thinking about "the two trains running everyday". The train, he suggests, will continue to run the same circuit until the time he will be able to return and possibly reclaim his old farmland. The train route becomes a sort of "circle of life", thus setting his mind to rest:

MEMPHIS: I been up here since '36. They ran me out of Jackson in '31. I hung around Natchez for three or four years, then I come up here. I was born in Jackson. I used to farm down there. They ran me out in '31. Killed my mule and everything. One of these days I'm going back and get my land. I still got the deed. [...] I ain't even got to know the way. All I got to do is find my way down to the train depot. They got two trains running every day. I used to know the schedule. They might have changed it ... but if they did, they got it posted up on the board. (Wilson T.T.R. 30-31)

Significantly, in *The Piano Lesson* Doaker reflects over the needs which make people travel and his "summary" hints at the events and the mishaps in human life:

They got so many trains out there they have a hard time keeping them from running into each other. Got trains going every whichaway. Got people on all of them. Somebody going where somebody just left. If everybody stay in one place I believe this would be a better world. Now what I done learned after twenty-seven years of railroading is this...if the train stays on the track...it's going to get where it's going. It might not be where you going. If it ain't, then all you got to do is sit and wait cause the train's coming back to get you. The train don't never stop. It'll come back every time. (Wilson P.L. 19)

The train, Doaker suggests here, similarly to the journey of our existence, does not always go "where you going", but it will "come back every time", thus sometimes presenting or representing opportunities and bringing serenity upon the troubled hearts.

Voices from the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta

The railroad which is often being mentioned in *The Piano Lesson* is, as said above, the so called Yellow Dog, the railroad branch line where Papa Boy Charles and four hobos were killed in 1911. It is a fairly known railroad, which blues singers like W. C. Handy with his “Yellow Dog Blues” (1903) made popular. Handy himself related how he heard a lean, ragged black guitarist in Tutwiler’s railroad depot, singing of going to where the “Southern cross the Yellow Dog”. The location is Moorhead, where the eastbound and westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains at least four times a day. It is a spot which, even today, conveys a sense of mystery and fascination. Wining Boy appears to be aware of it, when discussing with Lymon and Boy Willie Berniece’s attitude towards the so called “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog:”

WINING BOY: She ain’t got to believe. You go ask them white folks in Sunflower County jf they believe. You go ask Sutter if he believe. I don’t care if Berniece believe or not. I done been to where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog and called out their names. They talk back to you, too.

LYMON: What they sound like? The wind or something?

BOY WILLIE: You done been there for real, Wining Boy? (Wilson P.L. 34)

Both Lymon and Boy Willie are impressed by Wining Boy’s words; emotionally, Wining Boy continues:

WINING BOY: Nineteen thirty. July of nineteen thirty I stood right there on that spot. It didn’t look like nothing was going right in my life. I said everything can’t go wrong all the time ... let me go down there and call on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, see if they can help me. I went down there and right there where them two railroads cross each other... I stood right there on that spot and called out their names. They talk back to you, too. (Wilson P.L. 34-35)

We do not know what Wining Boy means when he says “nothing was going right in my life”; yet, the actual fact that he was at that crossing at Moorhead, looking forward to receiving consolation or help from the “Ghosts of the Yellow Dog”, reveals how inspirational the place is to him:

WINING BOY: A lot of things you got to find out on your own. I can't say how they talked to nobody else. But to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. I didn't want to leave. I felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. I seen the train coming and it seem like I was bigger than the train. I started not to move. But something told me to go ahead and get on out the way. The train passed and I started to go back up there and stand some more. But something told me not to do it. I walked away from there feeling like a king[...] (Wilson P.L. 35)

“Something” told Wining Boy “to go ahead” and leave the spot right when the train was approaching, although he was feeling “bigger” than the train itself. This “something” would fill up his soul with courage and save his life. The crossing is not a church or a sanctuary where religious believers would go and say a prayer to their God, but it works all the same: we are told Wining Boy, after this experience, “had a stroke of luck that run on for years” (35): his moment of spirituality could not be expressed more poignantly. Still, when Lymon, referring to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, asks “What do they sound like? The wind or something?”, we wonder if the hint at the region of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta is intentional.

John C. Willis in his study *Forgotten Time, The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (2000), focuses on the extraordinary nature of the area around the banks of the Mississippi, Yazoo, and Sunflower Rivers in the years following the Civil War. Despite miles of inland forests, the Delta proved to be, between the war's end and the turn of the century, the best place in the country for the cultivation of cotton. As the region's labor-poor landowners needed workers after emancipation, by the early 1870 planters started encouraging black initiative; African Americans came from across the South to the Delta, seeking opportunity for property ownership:

White landowners, clinging to their riverside plantations, offered rental or sale of backcountry acres on unusually generous terms in those days. The first generation of freed African Americans thus enjoyed rare opportunities to purchase their own farms in the 1870s and 1880s, and they built communities where black men and women were the focus of authority and emulation in the pioneered interior. (Willis 179)

Some succeeded, although many others reported difficulty in gaining equitable labor contracts or claimed being the targets of violence: most former slaveholders, in fact, acted as if freedmen were still their property to “abuse”. Even those whites who tried to deal fairly with ex-slaves happened to be subject to physical violence and destruction of their property; those blacks who were successful one year might lose everything the next. In *The Piano Lesson* there are hints at this troublesome situation in the Mississippi area; Boy Charles, as mentioned above, at one time looked at his hands and said: “Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall” (Wilson P.L. 91). If Stovall is here the white landowner for whom Boy Charles sharecropped, in the next generation, Stovall tries to take advantage of Boy Willie and his friend Lymon who had been sentenced to jail for their part in petty thievery of wood. Lymon explains:

LYMON: Fined me a hundred dollars. Mr Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that.(Wilson P.L. 37)

To some extent, Boy Willie attempts to accumulate two thousand dollars in order to buy Sutter's property and keep Stovall from doing it. This purchase would mean for the white landowner another piece of land to be added to his extensive holdings; for the black farmer, the end of his dream of becoming an entrepreneur himself:

BOY WILLIE:[...]I know what the man told me. Stovall already done tried to buy the land from him and told him no. The man say he waiting on me... he waiting on me. Hey, Doaker... give me a drink. I see Wining Boy got his glass. (Wilson P.L. 36)

Mr. Stovall is just a name (the same we find in *Two Trains Running*) but, we may suggest, in *The Piano Lesson* it becomes a “face”, a persecutor who stands amidst the many white ones who remain unidentified. On the other hand, there is a name which is well known and cannot be overlooked here: Parchman Farm. It is an historic two-thousands-acre penal plantation created in 1901 in the Mississippi Delta region and operated by inmate labor. Boy Willie Charles finds it difficult to forget his three-year sentence there and his “sense of justice” makes him likely to go back there soon, as Lymon suggests:

BOY WILLIE: I don't go by what the law say. The law's liable to say anything. I go by if it's right or not. It don't matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself.

LYMON: That's why you gonna end up back down there on the Parchman Farm.

BOY WILLIE: I ain't thinking about no Parchman Farm. You liable to go back before me. (Wilson P.L. 38-39)

Wining Boy later describes how he once managed to take Lymon out of jail:

WINING BOY: [...]He got in a tussle with one of them white fellows and the sheriff lit on him like white on rice. That's how the whole thing came out between me and Lymon's mama. She knew me and his daddy used to run together and he got in jail and she went down there and took the sheriff a hundred dollars. Don't get me to lying about where she got it from. I don't know. The sheriff *looked at that hundred dollars and turned his nose up*. Told her, say "that ain't gonna do him no good. You got to put another a hundred on top of that". She come up *there and got me where I was playing at this saloon...* said *she had* all but fifty dollars and asked me if I could help. Now the way I figured it.. . without that fifty dollars the sheriff was gonna turn him over to Parchman. (Wilson P.L. 63)

Wining Boy's words hint at the "shady" nature of the rules at Parchman Farm and at its world of blacks incarcerated under the infamous Black Code system for misdemeanours and felonies. According to David M. Oshinsky, a history professor at Rutgers University and author of *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1997), in the post-Civil War justice system convict leasing was typical in the South, although it was later replaced by penal farming, a form of convict bondage so harsh to be often compared to medieval fiefdoms. Prisoners at Parchman Farm slaughtered cattle, grew vegetables or gathered cotton; they could run a sawmill or a cotton gin, often being exposed to diseases and cruel punishments. In *The Piano Lesson* Lymon recalls his work at Parchman Farm to Wining Boy:

LYMON: They work you too hard down there . All that weeding and hoeing and chopping down trees. I didn't like all that.

WINING BOY: You ain't got top lile your job on Parchman. Hey, tell him , Doaker. The only one got to like his job is the waterboy. (Wilson P.L. 39)

Then Lymon, together with Boy Willie, Wining Boy and Boy Willie start singing an old Parchman song:

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal well

Raise them up higher, let them drop on down oh-ah
Raise them up higher, let them drop on down well
Don't know the difference when the sun goes down oh-ah
Don't know the difference when the sun goes down well

Berta in Meridian and she living at ease oh-ah
Berta in Meridian and she living at ease well
I' m on od Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah
I' m on od Parchman, got to work or leave well (Wilson P.L. 40)

Stage directions tell us that they sing in harmony, stamping and clapping, with “great fervor and style”; despite the joyful rhythm of the music, the song conveys a sense of melancholy and the words “Don't know the difference when the sun goes down” are somehow pictorial: we can nearly see the convicts at Parchman Farm working so hard they can't even tell the night from the day!

John C. Willis further reports in his *Forgotten Time* how the dream of starting a better life or purchasing their own farms in the Delta region, which at least the first generation of freed African Americans seemed to grasp for a while, faded gradually away. For the “grandchildren” of that generation the Delta's region became more and more a scene of frustration:

Instead of offers for lucrative rental or land purchase they found only sharecropping or wage labor. Neither of these options now seemed steps on the road to landlording; their likeliest destination was inescapable debt. Little but inertia and the proximity of relatives remained to hold the third generation in the Delta, not while lynch mobs swelled, creditors pencilled down a poor man's profit, polling places were closed to the black majority, and their forebears dreams of independence twisted into nightmares. (Willis 179-180)

No wonder, we might say, that the Delta became a site to be escaped, a jumping off place for the so called Great Migration North during and after World War 1.

Going back to *The Piano Lesson* and to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, when Wining Boy talks to them at Moorhead, we feel that their voices are “blowing” in the wind, together with the ghosts of those who tried to flee Mississippi racism: “countless men and women for whom change was the clearest certainty” (Willis 185). The iron rails bear a sense of promises betrayed: the depths of their disappointment is only comprehended, as Willis suggests, considering the intensity of their hopes.

A commandment and a plea

When analyzing the role of Avery on his first appearance in *The Piano Lesson* we noticed how his attitude towards Christianity is somehow mixed; he believes in the “Great Causer” who, in line with Christian doctrine, “parted the Red Sea” and said you “will smite your enemies”. (69) Nevertheless, he is also convinced that “his” God has something to do with the so called Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Although Avery does not openly say anything definitive, his “He caused it to happen”, makes us understand how he feels about it. Finally, he believes in the same Christian Lord who offers refuge and consolation to the afflicted, as he says to Berniece :

EVERY: The Bible say, “The Lord is my refuge... and my strength!” With the strength of God you can put the past behind you, Berniece. With the strength of God you can do anything! God got a bright tomorrow. God don’t ask what you done...God ask what you gonna do. The strength of God can move mountains! God’s got a bright tomorrow for you...all you got to do is walk over here and claim it. (Wilson P.L. 71)

Avery the preacher is trying to help Berniece to put all her past, Crawley included, behind and, hopefully, open up her heart to him. While speaking words likely to be found in any Christian sermon, he wears a suit and tie with a gold cross around his neck and carries a “small Bible” with him. The fundamental symbols of the Christian tradition are there, showing that a different code has been adopted. August Wilson knows very well that one of the main tenets of Christianity is the reliance on the written word (the Bible), whereas the African tradition is mainly oral. When interviewed by Bonnie

Lyons in February 1997 about the role of black literature, he posited:

[...] And it's important to remember that blacks don't have a long history of writing. We come from an oral tradition. At one point in America it was a crime to teach blacks to read and write. So it's only in the past 150 years that we've been writing in this country. (Lyons 2)

Slave education, the “crime” August Wilson refers to, has been severely punished all round mid-eighteenth century in many parts of the South, as a response to the slaveholders’ general concern about offering the blacks, through literacy, a means of emancipation.; apart from some tolerance, usually for religious purposes such as the reading of the Holy Scriptures, to exclude the slaves from the benefits of literacy meant confining them to an oral tradition marked by a “stain” of subalternity. It is worth mentioning that South Carolina passed the first laws prohibiting slave education in 1740, following the Stono Rebellion³ . As fears spread among plantation owners regarding the diffusion of abolitionist materials, forged passes, and other incendiary writings, the need to restrict slaves’ ability to communicate with one another became then more pronounced. Considering all this, Avery’s “small Bible” can also be seen as a sign of “appropriation”, a claim for something (the Written Code) which had been long denied to black Americans. But how do their African roots and their “oral tradition” fit in?

If orality is to be associated to fluidity and transience, writing should stand for its opposite, durability and tangibility. Alessandro Portelli in his book *Il testo e la voce* (1992) explores the connections between oral and writing traditions in America and, interestingly, discusses the rigidity of the interpretation of reality as something defined once for all:

L'idea di fondo è che tanto la democrazia quanto l'oralità e la scrittura sono significanti mobili, non ancorati a paradigmi fissi una volta per tutte. Oralità e scrittura si scambiano

³ Stono's rebellion was the largest slave uprising in the Colonies prior to American Revolution. Early in the morning of Sunday , September 9, 1739, 20 black slaves met in secret near the Stono River in South Carolina to plan their escape to freedom. The group of slaves grew in number as they headed South ; when the slave owners caught up with the rebels from the Stono river a massacre on both sides took place. As a result, South Carolina's lawmakers enacted a harsher slave code.

continuamente i ruoli, funzioni, significati, intrecciando un rapporto di mutuo desiderio e ricerca, più che di esclusione e polarizzazione. (Portelli 11)

From this point of view, the relationship between orality and literacy can be defined “subsidiary” rather than merely contrastive:

La scrittura è materiale, visibile, segmentata, riproducibile, analizzabile, relativamente a-contestuale, mentre l’oralità appare incorporea, labile, mutevole, irriproducibile, continua, soprasedimentale, dipendente dal contesto. Ma proprio queste diverse caratteristiche permettono a ciascuna delle due modalità di fare cose che l’altra non può fare: affidarsi al tempo o resistere ad esso; interagire in tempo reale con un interlocutore empirico, o predisporre per destinatari futuri, empirici o ideali; adattarsi alle circostanze, o adattarle a sé. In questa complementarità e tensione, anche al di là delle rispettive autorappresentazioni, ciascun atto consapevole di parola, orale o scritta, reca in sé la traccia della propria incompiutezza e l’anelito verso la propria metà mancante. (Portelli 25)

If oral cultures, as Portelli underlines, are always on the brink of disappearing, the written code stands for the authority of the word which is to resist this implicit precariousness. More than any other nations, the “new” America, separating itself from the British Crown, experienced the urge of laying its foundations on the written compact of the Pilgrim Fathers of the *Mayflower*, on the Declaration of Independence as well as on the Bible. After blaming the State of Great Britain and namely the King for “repeated injuries and usurpations all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States” (Qtd. in Bonazzi 72), the voice of the people becomes a founding text:

WE, THEREFORE, THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, In General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection

between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with the firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.(Qtd. in Bonazzi 82)

Going back to Avery's role in *The Piano Lesson*, we would hazard the guess that his adopting the written code, rather than conforming with the dominant culture behind it, questions its authority. When Wining Boy and Doaker, for example, discuss Berniece and Avery's relationship, they make a comment on Avery's new status as a preacher which sounds quite derisive:

DOAKER: She stuck up with it. She think it's better than she is. I believe she messing around with Avery. They got something going. He a preacher now. If you let him tell it the Holy Ghost sat on his head and heaven opened up with thunder and lightning and God was calling his name. Told him to go out and preach and tend to his flock . That's what he gonna call his church. The Good Shepherd Church. (Wilson P.L. 29-30)

The impression is that it is not just Avery's calling from God being debated, but the main articles of Christian Faith as well. At a certain point we hear Wining Boy say:

WINING BOY: They had that joker down in Spear walking around talking about he Jesus Christ. He gonna live the life of Christ. Went through the Last Supper and everything. Rented him a mule on Palm Sunday and rode through the town. Did everything...talking about he Christ. He did everything until they got up to that crucifixion part. Got up to that part and told everybody to go home and quit pretending. Had a whole bunch of folks come down to see him get nailed to the cross. I don't know who's the worse fool. Him or them. (Wilson P.L. 30)

What to Christianity is to be considered one of the most important celebrations, Easter, becomes in Wining Boy's words a sort of a foul play for "a whole bunch of folks" who want to see a

spectacle performed by a “joker”. Significantly, Wining Boy continues:

WINING BOY: Had all them folks come down there ... even carried the cross up this little hill. People standing around waiting to see him get nailed to the cross and he stop everything and preach a little sermon and told everybody to go home. Had enough nerve to tell them to come to church on Easter Sunday to celebrate his resurrection[...]. Ain't nothing wrong with being a preacher. You got the preacher on one hand and the gambler on the other. Sometimes there ain't too much difference in them. (Wilson P.L. 30)

The irony reveals Wilson's attitude towards Christianity. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984) the newly freed Herald Loomis who arrives at a black Pittsburgh boarding house after the seven years' breathless labour on Joe Turner' chain gang, speaks out:

LOOMIS: You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost. What's so holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming? You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your woolly heads? You gonna tie onto the Holy Ghost and get burned up? What you got then? Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want? (Wilson J.T. 52)

Most noticeably, Herald Loomis intervenes in the middle of a Juba dance which is, as the playwright himself underlines in his stage directions, “a call and a response dance”:

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 hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mentions of the Holy Ghost.(Wilson J.T. 52)

The repetitive use of the auxiliary verb “should” shows the importance Wilson ascribes to the matter: the African Juba has

to be accompanied by “words” (written code) which have to include the Christian Holy Ghost. The same synergism we noted in *The Piano Lesson* is at work in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*: if the newly freed blacks come to the North “carrying Bibles and guitars” (6), Bynum’s experience with his “Shiny Man” who has “this light coming out of him” (9) reminds us of Jesus or John the Baptist. Certainly, all this is telling us that religion, for African Americans, has become a syncretism, an attempted union or reconciliation of diverse tenets. Wilson himself posited, in his interview with Lyons:

The Christianity that blacks have embraced, they have transformed with aspects of African religion, African style, and certainly African celebration. (Lyons 5)

Can we find further evidence of this in *The Piano Lesson*? Our assumption is, generally speaking, that Christianity in August Wilson’s world provides a sort of “frame” to the real content which is meant to be truly black American. Like the black mirror in Bearden’s painting or Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) against white background, we are confronted with blackness which rather than an “empty square” is the substance, the sensation which pervades everything. It is the core, the feeling which, according to Malevich and his Suprematism, “after all, is always and everywhere the one and only source of every creation”. (Malevich 2). In this perspective, we may suggest that the images of African traditional religions in *The Piano Lesson* are “framed” into more conventional Christian forms.

Let us focus on one of the most significant moments in the play, when Avery tries to exorcize the spirit of Sutter. He asks Berniece to get some water from the kitchen (supposedly plain running water from the tap, not holy water brought from the church); then Avery lights a candle from his pocket and gives it to Berniece. He prays as follows:

AVERY: O Holy Father we gather here this evening in the Holy Name to cast out the spirit of one James Sutter. May this vial of water be empowered with thy spirit. May each drop of it be a weapon and a shield against the presence of all evil and may it be a cleansing and blessing of this humble abode.

Just as Our Father taught us how to pray so He say, “I will prepare a table for you in the midst of mine enemies,” and in His

hands we place ourselves to come unto his presence. Where there is Good so shall it cause Evil to scatter to the Fourth Winds. (Wilson P.L. 104-105).

We are told that Avery throws water at the piano, then he opens the Bible and reads from it, while Boy Willies bursts out:

BOY WILLIE: All this old preaching stuff. Hell, just tell him to leave. [...]

AVERY: I will sprinkle clean water upon you and you shall be clean: from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them. (Wilson P.L. 105)

The sacredness of the moment, with a minister of God performing an exorcism in order to drive out an evil spirit, is being demolished by Boy Willie who “grabs a pot of water from the stove and begins to fling it around the room”:

BOY WILLIE: Hey, Sutter! Sutter! Get your ass out this house! Sutter! Come on and get some of this water! You done drowned in the well, come on and get some more of this water! (Wilson P.L. 105)

While Avery continues reading from the Bible, Boy Willie engages himself in a “life-and death struggle” with Sutter’s Ghost upstairs. Most noticeably, we are told that it is a fight “fraught with perils and faultless terror” and the fighter can only be Boy Willie, who “was born to a time of fire” (93) In this moment something amazing happens: Avery soberly admits his incapacity to exorcise Sutter’s Ghost, Berniece crosses to the piano and begins to play. Wilson’s stage directions underline the significance of the moment with powerful words:

AVERY: Berniece, I can’t do it.
There are more sounds heard from upstairs. DOAKER and WINING BOY stare at one another in stunned disbelief. It is in this moment , from somewhere old, that BERNIECE realizes what she

must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. (Wilson P.L. 106)

We understand that the climax of the play has been reached at last; the conflict between two worlds, two ways of experiencing religion and spirituality is there. Berniece realizes that Avery, with all his words and bibles, simply cannot drive the ghost of the white man Sutter away. “The Bible is an antique Volume, written by Faded Men” said Emily Dickinson (Qtd. in Portelli 130) and has nothing to share with the voices who, as Boy Willie explains to Maretha, are “like the wind. Can you see the wind?” (86) Yet, they are there. She *must* intervene and the call comes “from somewhere old”. There is all the power of spirituality in these few words: the spirits of the ancestors, Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Mama Ola and Papa Boy Charles are all “summoned” in this hour of need. Those “pictures” which used to scare Berniece “sometime late at night” (70) are not a problem anymore; they come from the world of the dead and become voices of the soul: past and present merge. Berniece becomes one with all the living and the dead:

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. (Wilson P.L. 106)

We are reminded of the oral tradition and its precariousness; following Portelli’s suggestive metaphor in *Il testo e la voce*, the repetition is functional to the survival of the oral cultures which need to repeat themselves in order to exist.⁴ (Portelli 24) The strength which arises from Berniece’s song comes, as August Wilson himself said in his interview with Lyons, from “inside herself, not something outside herself” (Lyons 9) and this is why it is found “piece by piece”. Like a priestess or a vestal, she enacts and makes possible what Avery, the Christian preacher, could not do.

After removing her voluntary restrictions that stopped her from touching the piano, Berniece then calls on her ancestors

⁴ On this issue see also the seminal work by Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982).

and a reconciliation with her brother (and herself) takes place. Brother and sister fight the same battle, although at two

different levels: Berniece downstairs, playing the piano, and Boy Willie “at the top of the stairs”, the location symbolizing the supernatural, the other world to which ghosts belong. Both Berniece and Boy Willie can win at last:

BERNIECE (*Singing*):
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
I want you to help me
Mama Berniece
I want you to help me
Mama Esther
I want you to help me
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me
Mama Ola
I want you to help me (107) [...]

(The sound of a train approaching is heard. The noise upstairs subsides.) (Wilson P.L. 106)

Going back to Malevich’s *Black Square*, we might argue that the “frame” of Berniece’s song appears to be Christian. If we consider *The Litany of the Saints*, one of the oldest prayers in continuous use in the Catholic Church, we see how linguistic devices such as repetition, call on God, Holy Virgin and the Saints are largely applied:

Lord, have mercy on us, Christ, have mercy on us, Lord,
Have mercy on us,
Christ, hear us. Christ, graciously hear us.

God, the Father of heaven, *have mercy on us.*
God the Son, Remember of the world,
God the Holy Ghost,
Holy Trinity, one God, *have mercy on us.*

Holy Mary, pray for us.
Holy Mother of God,
Holy Virgin of virgins,
Saint Michael,
Saint Gabriel,
Saint Raphael,
All ye holy angels and archangels,
All ye holy orders of blessed spirits,
Saint John the Baptist,
Saint Joseph,
All ye holy patriarchs and prophets,
Saint Peter,
Saint Paul,
Saint Andrew,
Saint James,
Saint John,
Saint Thomas [...]
All ye holy virgins and widows, *pray for us.*
All ye holy men and women, saints of God, *make intercession
for us.*

The litany above, as a liturgical prayer, consists of a series of petitions or invocations, gaining strength with each repetition or addition of new elements. The “frame” we find in *The Piano Lesson* is similar to it, although some significant differences are to be noted. First of all, Berniece calls on her ancestors, as Wilson said, and not on God; her invocation is addressed to her own flesh and blood. She begins her exorcism, relying on her inner strength which comes from her roots only, whereas the litany is a humble prayer to God; the Holy Virgin and the Saints are invoked in order to intercede on behalf of the believers. The sound of a train approaching is heard: we cannot help thinking about those voiceless men and women who lost their lives in their attempt to flee racism. Certainly, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are part of it: the “rustle of wind blowing across two continents” comes from the world of the dead to support the living and make their voices still heard. Interestingly, it is the music which “starts” the whole process, as it is for the blacks “a way of understanding life” (Ma Rainey 82): the lightness and the incorporeity of the sound become expression of Berniece’s song. It is the music which gradually turns into a chant, a kind of melody the Psalms are usually sung to. But it is an “old upright piano” and not an organ which accompanies it.

We are reminded of the touching dialogue between Herald Loomis and his wife Martha at the end of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, when they meet again after the seven long years Loomis has spent working forcedly for Joe Turner. Martha is a member of the Evangelical church now and has changed her name into "Martha Pentecost" and no longer wishes to be his wife:

MARTHA: You got to open your heart and have faith, Herald. This world is just a trial for the next. Jesus offers you salvation.

LOOMIS: I been wading in the water. I been walking all over the River Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (Wilson J.T. 93)

Loomis's harsh words express all his frustration as well as his distance from the Christian God who, he feels, has not been there in his hour of need, when his enemies were all around him "picking the flesh" from his bones. Rather than a blasphemy, Loomis's speech sounds like an anguished cry:

MARTHA: You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb.

LOOMIS: Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?

MARTHA: Jesus bled for you. He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

LOOMIS: I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself. (Wilson J.T. 93)

Loomis slashes his chest in a sort of inverted religious gesture; he "bleeds" for himself and, as Wilson tells us, finds his "song of self-sufficiency". Similarly, Berniece in *The Piano Lesson* comes to the same realization: her song arrives from inside herself, where her ancestors, her own "blood" are still alive and speak to her. When the Ghost is exorcised and the calm is finally restored, the response of the rest of the family is surprising:

A calm comes over the house. MARETHA enters from DOAKER's room. BOY WILLIE enters on the stairs. He pauses a moment to

watch BERNIECE at the piano.[...]MARETHA crosses and embraces BOY WILLIE.(Wilson P.L. 108)

The solemnity which lacked before, when Avery was trying to conjure up the Ghost of Sutter, is now palpable; an exorcism has been performed and the black tradition prevails because it is, as James Baldwin explained, that “field of manners and rituals of intercourse that will sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house” (Qtd. in Lyons 10). Boy Willie understands his sister has found “her own song” and, before leaving, reminds her to hold on to it:

BOY WILLIE: Hey Berniece...if you and Maretha don’t keep playing on that piano...ain’t no telling...me and Sutter both liable to be back.

(He exits.)

BERNIECE: Thank you.

(The lights go down to black.) (Wilson P.L. 108)

Berniece’s final “Thank you” uttered to her brother express all her gratitude which goes beyond his role in exorcising the white man’s ghost. Boy Willie helped Berniece to find her place in the world which somehow recalls Emerson’s conception of “That Unity, that OVER-SOUL, within every man’s particular being” to which every part and particle is related, “the eternal One”. For Berniece, this means re-affirming herself as an individual by her union with her “historical” past.

In his interview with Bonnie Lyons mentioned above, August Wilson significantly said about the genesis of *The Piano Lesson*:

I went into this bar-restaurant on writing the play, I thought, if we do this right, people in the audience would call out the names of their ancestors--“Sadie Smith, Cousin James, I want you to help me.” It would take a lot of trust because that name is sacred to the person, but through that the audience would feel like a community. I can see it happening with a black audience, because black people do that in church all the time. (Lyons 10)

If Berniece’s song is “both a commandment and a plea”, the place where it is performed is not a Christian church. Yet, the feeling, the atmosphere which fills in the scene, makes us, at least for the time being, think of it. A mystical encounter has

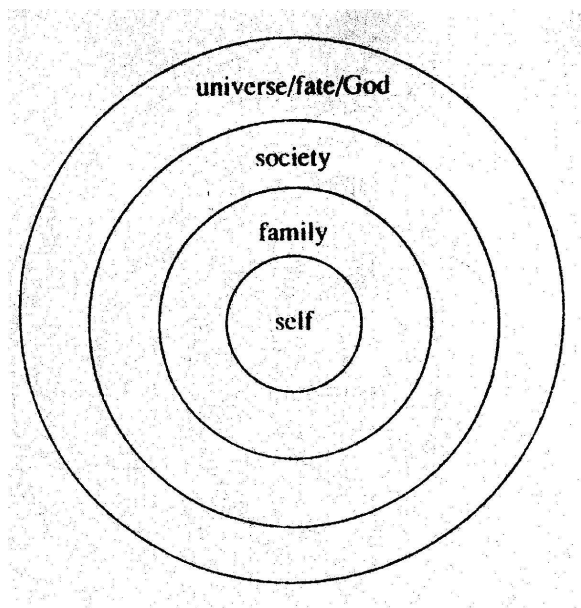
taken place, the boundaries between the living and the dead cancelled; the voices of the past will be kept alive. As long as Berniece maintains this historical consciousness, she will be able to “penetrate into that region where the air is music”. (Emerson 322)

4. Conclusion

Relatedness

At this point of our work we feel we need to look back at blackness, the substance, the core of August Wilson’s world and to re-consider it from a different, wider point of view.

Donald P. Costello in his essay “Arthur Miller’s Circles of Responsibility: A View from the Bridge and Beyond” (1993) poses a very interesting question which applies to Miller (and to us as well): “Where, and for whom, does – must – a person live? Where is a human being to find a home?” (Costello 444). At least once in our lives we have asked ourselves the same question, trying to understand to what extent our “inside world” was to be related to the “outside world”. The sociologist Helen Fein coined the suggestive expression “universe of obligation” to define the circle of individuals we must take into account and to whom we must account: they are the individuals and groups towards whom obligations are owned and rules apply. This suggests the idea of “relatedness”: a man’s place in the world depends on the interconnections among what Costello defines “the ever-widening circles of responsibility: self, family, society, the universe” (Costello 444). The diagram he presents in his essay to explain this web of relationship in Arthur Miller’s plays is enlightening and gives us the opportunity to move on to further reflections:



How does this account for August Wilson? Do the characters we got acquainted with so far fit in this diagram? It is not by chance that our speculation starts from Miller, a playwright whose motifs are often to be found (and revisited) in Wilson's plays.

There is a passage from a John Donne "Devotional" essay, often quoted in the history of literature, which is worth mentioning because it highlights the relationship between the individual and society:

No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a Clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontory were, as well as if a Manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"
(Donne 86-87)

The vision of reality which is being represented above denies the identification of the individual with an island and sees him in relation to the universe, as a part of mankind, proposing the themes of brotherhood and solidarity. Significantly, this idea expressed by John Donne, poet and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral whose sermons made him famous and respected in the Puritan London of the 17th century (and beyond), has become the epigraph to Ernest Hemingway's fourth novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1941); Robert Jordan, an American college teacher from Montana who volunteered his services to the Loyalist cause in

the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), learns after three days' fighting with the guerrilla band how human beings are all connected. He is eventually reminded of it at the end of the novel, when he is left alone, seriously injured, with "his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest" (Hemingway 490) while the fascists are coming up the road to catch him.

This idea of "relatedness" immediately recalls Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* (1947) and its "universe of obligation". The protagonist is Joe Keller, a manufacturer of aircraft parts, who under the pressure of wartime production, lets a number of faulty cylinder heads be shipped to the Army Air Force, disregarding the fact that they would have possibly caused a disaster and endanger life. He admits having done it to save his business and pass it on to his sons. But who are his sons? We understand that in Miller's web of relationship (as shown in the diagram above) "the family circle" comes first. Joe Keller says it clearly to Kate in *All My Sons* when discussing Chris's attitude:

KELLER: There's nothing he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he 's my son.

MOTHER: Joe, I tell you...

KELLER: Nothing's bigger than that. And you're goin' to tell him, you understand? I'm his father and he's my son. And if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head! (Miller A.M.S. 77).

He does not hesitate, in the court case, to deny his responsibility and to blame his employee and neighbour, Steve Denver. But Joe Keller's crime goes further, as Christopher Bigsby suggests in his introduction to *All My Sons*:

Joe Keller's crime is that he has sent defective cylinder heads for use in aircraft engines, has committed perjury, and has allowed others to bear responsibility rather than accept the consequences of his own actions. But this is not primarily a play about a crime. *It is about a man's failure to understand the terms of the social contract.* (Bigsby 10) (My italics) ⁵

⁵ The so called Social Contract Theory is based on the idea that individuals' moral and political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them in order to form the society they live in. A very famous example of this theory is to be found in the early platonic dialogue *Crito*, where Socrates explains why he must stay in prison and accept the death penalty rather than escape: he must obey the Laws because they have made his entire way of life possible, therefore he cannot step outside that social contract, even to save his life.

We understand that the key concept is “responsibility”: Joe Keller cannot see himself as part of the whole, an “incorporated member” and not simply a “partner” in society, as Arthur Miller himself explained in an interview with Christopher Bigsby in 1999:

The concept behind it was that Joe Keller was both responsible for and part of a great web of meaning, of being. He had torn that web; he had ripped apart the structure that supports life and society... that web of meaning, of existence. And a person who violates it in the way he did has done more than kill a few men. He has killed the possibility of a society having any future, any life. He has destroyed the life-force in that society. (Qtd. in Bigsby 22)

In Miller’s world responsibility is connected to the sense of identity (Self): if Joe Keller can still live after having denied the truth it is because he needs to do so in order to survive. And it is the same for his wife Kate and for his son Chris, respectively mother and brother to Larry who died in a plane crash, most probably because of Joe’s deed. It is Larry’s letter to his fiancée Ann before going out on his last, fatal mission, which unveils everything:

CHRIS: [...] “My dear Ann: ...” You listening? He wrote this the day he died. Listen, don’t cry... listen! “My dear Ann: It is impossible to put down the things I feel: But I’ve got to tell you something. Yesterday they flew in a load of papers from the States and I read about Dad and your father being convicted. I can’t express myself. I can’t bear to live any more. Last night I circled the base for twenty minutes before I could bring myself in. How could he have done that? Every day three or four men never come back and he sits back there doing business.(Miller A.M.S. 83).

Business and money, which are part of the American dream of success, have to be confronted in Miller’s world not so much with morality in terms of “right” or “wrong”, but with the idea of a society where there is no connectiveness, where men can simply walk away from the consequences of their actions. For Joe Keller, this means the end of his life. When Chris reads Larry’s last words, Joe knows what to do:

CHRIS:[...]I don’t know how to tell you what I feel.. I can’t face anybody..I’ m going out on a mission in a few minutes. They ‘ll probably report me missing. If they do, I want you to know that

you mustn't wait for me. I tell you, Ann, if I had him here now I could kill him." [...]

KELLER [...]Sure he was my son. But I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were. I'll be right down. (Miller A.M.S. 83)

We are told that a shot is heard in the house and we understand Keller has killed himself: he cannot face neither reality nor Chris's words of disrespect as they shatter his own sense of identity:

CHRIS: I know you're no worse than most men but I thought you were better. I never saw you as a man. I saw you as my father [*Almost breaking*] I can't look at you this way, I can't look at myself! (Miller A.M.S. 82).

What could easily be taken as family play expands itself outside the family circle into society and beyond: it acquires a universal connotation which we can find in other important Miller's plays, such as *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Here the conflict between Willy and Biff Loman⁶ is certainly due to Willy's incapacity of seeing his son as he is and not like "a young god. Hercules- something like that [...] God Almighty, he'll be great yet". (Miller D.O.S. 54). Biff will state that clearly, striving to make his father understand he is no young God, but "just what [he is], that's all":

BIFF (crying, broken): Will you let me go, for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? (Miller D.O.S. 106)

If the tragedy of Willy Loman, to go back to Costello's essay, expands itself toward the universal fate of man, it is, we would add, also because of "that phony dream" of his. Willy is a dreamer: he still believes in the Frontier, in the American Dream of success which was his father's, as his brother Ben recalls:

BEN: Father was a very great and a very wild-hearted man. We would start in Boston, and he'd toss the whole family into the wagon, and then he'd drive the team right across the country; through Ohio, and Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and the Western

⁶ Chris Keller, Biff Loman and Cory Maxson: three sons who need to separate themselves from their fathers in order to find their place in the world. As George Simmel argues in his essay "Bridge and Door" (1994), "We [as human beings] experience as connected only what we have previously isolated in some way. Things first have to be separated from each other so as to be united later on". (Simmel 1)

states. And we'd stop in the towns and sell the flutes that he'd made on the way. Great inventor, Father. [...]

WILLY: That's just the way I'm bringing them up, Ben- rugged, well liked, all-around. (Miller D.O.S. 38).

We feel all the greatness and the frailty of Willy's dream: how can it resist the modern American world of business, where there is no "territory" to explore and where, as the young boss Charley tells him, "the only thing you got" is "what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that." (Miller 76-77) And how can *we all* live in a society where there is no place for dreams? Willy, as Jay in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), retains the same innocence and the same capacity for wonder of the Dutch sailors who, "for a transitory enchanted moment" must have held their breath at the sight of the new continent, "the last and the greatest of all human dreams". (Fitzgerald 187-188).

The motif of father-son conflict and the death of an average American head of household is also Wilson's. If we turn to *Fences* (1985) we see how the relationship between Troy Maxson and his son Cory is very tense. Troy will not let Cory live his own way if this means playing football professionally and leaving his job. Society is still a hostile place, where colored people have to struggle to fit in:

TROY: The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't use them. [...](Wilson F. 34)

Troy's attitude towards his son is somehow motivated by his dramatic relationship with his own father who "stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be" (Wilson F. 51). To his friend Bono who suggests his father should have gone away, Troy replies emotionally:

TROY: How gonna he leave with eleven kids? And where he gonna go? He ain't knew nothing but farm. No, he was trapped and I think he knew it..but I say this for him... he felt a responsibility for us.[...](Wilson F. 51)

We understand the key word is "responsibility" rather than "tenderness" in the intimate relations, as it becomes self-evident in the play:

CORY: How come you ain't never liked me?

TROY: Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you [...] Like you? I go out of here every morning...bust my butt...putting up with them crackers every day... cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw *(Pause.)* It's my job. It's my responsibility. (Wilson F. 37-38)

As to his wife Rose, things are no better: Troy is convinced that by sleeping every night at home and turning over his weekly pay to Rose is enough to meet his marital duties:

TROY: Woman... I do the best I can do. I come in here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them. We go upstairs in that room at night.[...] That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else.(Wilson F. 40)

Although disrupted, family relationships are important; similarly to Miller, they come first; nothing, not even a love affair with another woman (Alberta) who dies giving birth to a baby daughter can change this reality. If Rose is not “a wife” to Troy any more after her husband's unfaithfulness, she will still accept to be a mother to the little Raynell:

TROY: She is my daughter, Rose. My own flesh and blood. I can't deny her no more than I can deny them boys. *(Pause)* You and them boys is my family. You and them and this child is all I got in the world. So I guess what I am saying is ... I'd appreciate it if you'd help me take care of her. (Wilson F. 79)

The “family circle” extends itself, as in Miller, but rather than society in general, we find “community”. If the codes of family are violated, there is still the idea of “responsibility” which keeps everybody together: you cannot walk away from your actions. If an innocent child is born, she must have a mother, because “a motherless child” has a hard time in life and Rose, in her generosity, knows it very well:

ROSE: Okay, Troy...you're right. I'll take care of your baby for you ...cause...like you say...she's innocent...and you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time[...] From right now... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man. (Wilson F. 79)

But to what extent is Troy really responsible? What role does society play in this? If, as John Donne preaches, “No man is an

island”, Troy’s words “I ain’t got no tears; done spent them” may hint at a personal as well as at a collective grief in a society still marked by inequality, where colored people are offered few opportunities to rise socially or are “trapped” in the same roles, like Troy’s father who “knew nothing but farm”. The impression is that the “wounds” of the past still affect the present and “entrap” it. The “outside world” influences the “inside world”. When Troy tells his older son Lyons about his life, we can still feel the suffering behind it:

LYONS: That’s a heavy story Pop. I didn’t know you left home when you was fourteen.

TROY: [...] I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got here and found out...not only couldn’t you get a job... you couldn’t find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tar paper. Messed around there and went from Bad to worse. Started stealing. (Wilson F. 53).

But Troy is not playing the victim here; although he seems to use his past to justify his actions, he wants to “tell” his story which is not so different from stories which other black people would tell. We might think, for instance, of Holloway, Sterling and Wolf talking in *Two Trains Running* (1990) about buying “guns” which implies the possibility of being taken back to jail:

STERLING: I know what I’m doing. I’m gonna get me two or three Cadillacs and everything that go with them. If I can’t find no job I might have to find me a gun. Hey, Wolf, you know anybody got a gun they want to sell? [...]

HOLLOWAY: I see where you want to go back down the penitentiary. I thought you was trying to stay out.

STERLING: You subject to end up there anyway. You don’t have to do nothing to go to jail.

WOLF: You right about that. I know. [...]I’ll give you a dollar for every nigger you find that ain’t been to jail. Ain’t that right, Sterling. I been to jail [...] Ain’t done nothing but walk down the street. (Wilson T.T.R. 53-54)

When Wolf adds: “you always under attack”, we understand why colored people can still find, as Costello would say, “no clear and comfortable home” in Wilson’s world.

The sense of community is very strong in Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1955)⁷ where everything which happens to Eddie Carbone is understandable only if related to Red Hook neighbourhood in Brooklyn and to its social situation. Here the community helps shelter illegal immigrants from Italy; silence is an unwritten law, but fundamental, as Eddie states at the beginning of the play to his wife Beatrice and his orphaned niece Catherine:

EDDIE: [...] This is the United States government you're playin' with now, this is the Immigration Bureau. If you said it you knew it, if you didn't say it you didn't know it.

CATHERINE: Yeah, but Eddie, suppose somebody-

EDDIE: I don't care what question it is. You- don't -know nothing They got stool pigeons all over this neighbourhood, they're payin' them every week for information, and you don't know who they are. It could be your best friend. You hear? [To Beatrice] Like Vinny Bolzano, remember Vinny? (Wilson A.W. 23)

When Vinny's story is told, we shiver as it foreshadows what Eddie will do to separate his niece from Rodolpho, Beatrice's own cousin just arrived from Italy whom Catherine falls in love with:

BEATRICE: Oh, it was terrible. He had five brothers and the old father. And they grabbed him in the kitchen and pulled him down the stairs - three flights his head was bouncin' like a coconut. And they spit on him in the street, his own father and his brothers. The whole neighbourhood was cryin.

CATHERINE: Ts! So what happened to him?

EDDIE: [...] Him? You'll never see him no more, a guy do a thing like that? How's gonna show his face? (Miller A.W. 23-24)

Catherine and Rodolpho's love story finally reveals Eddie's "ambiguous" attachment to his niece and triggers a series of actions which will violate all the "laws" or, as Costello argues, all

⁷ In "*A View from the Bridge*" there is a sort of claustrophobic atmosphere which is underlined by the spatial collocation of the story: Red Hook Community in Brooklyn. Eddie Carbone is introduced as a "longshoreman" who works at the docks from Brooklyn Bridge to the breakwater "where the open sea begins". The connection with Italy is instrumental to describe the social situation; if "the open sea" begins in the play, this is due to the tragic nature of the events. In "*All my Sons*", instead, Miller's view is open to society in general ever since the beginning: Joe Keller is a "man among men" and a successful business man of an "unknown" American town; the temporal setting is "August of our era" and his wife Kate is generally referred to as "Mother".

the circles of responsibilities: self, family, society, universe. Eddie betrays Rodolpho and his brother Marco to the Immigration Bureau; we are told Marco, at the moment of his arrest, looks for Eddie and spits into his face: it is the biggest expression of disrespect a man could have in the Red Hook community. In vain Eddie will claim his “name” back from Marco:

BEATRICE: What do you want! Eddie, what do you want!

EDDIE: I want my name! He didn't take my name; he's only a punk. Marco's got my name - [to Rodolpho] and you can run tell him, kid, that's he's gonna give it back to me in front of this neighbourhood, or we have it out [...]

MARCO: Animal! You go on your knees to me! (Miller A.W. 82-84)

The fight between Eddie and Marco which follows is inevitable: Eddie dies, stabbed to death, without having “his name” restored:

EDDIE: You lied about me, Marco. Now say it. Come on now, say it!

MARCO: Anima-a-a-! (Miller A.W. 84)

The Red Hook community witnesses the tragedy of one man who dies after having violated the “code of honour”, those rules which, if broken, shatter the foundation on which the community itself is built.

If Miller turns Eddie Carbone into a sort of “Greek tragic hero”⁸ and his fate acquires a universal connotation, Wilson's vision concentrates more on the family-community circles. Although in different contexts, we find similarity in the social situation: the Red Hook community in Brooklyn is “displaced”, far away from home (Italy) and, as in Wilson's plays, needs to work out strategies in order to survive.

In Wilson's *Jitney* (1982) we find a black community living in the Pittsburgh Hill District of the 1970s, where regular cabs will not travel. Displaced and cut off from the white American society, residents turn to each other for support. The five drivers who run the cab station succeed in leading productive lives and

⁸ Eddie Carbone harbours an undisclosed passion for his niece Catherine. He is doomed to self-destruction as he has lost control over his life and his death, like in a Greek tragedy, is a “foregone conclusion”; yet, we now have the grief and the disaster of an ordinary man.

providing a service to the community. This implies responsibilities, shared values and rules, as the owner Jim Becker states clearly to his fellow drivers:

BECKER:[...] The people got a right if you hauling them around in your car to expect the brakes to work. Clean out your trunk. Clean out the interior of your car. Keep your car clean. The people want to ride in a clean car. We providing a service to the community. We ain't just giving rides to people. We providing a service. That's why you answer the phone "Car service". You don't say Becker's Cabs or Joe Jitney's. (Wilson J. 86)

The theme of solidarity comes up in family relationships as well. We hear Fielding tell Booster, Becker's son just released from prison:

FIELDING: You got to have somebody you can count on you know. Now my wife...we been separated for twenty-two years now...but I ain't never loved nobody the way I loved that woman. You know what I mean?

BOOSTER: Yeah, I know. (Wilson J. 52)

As to Becker, he says about his wife Lucille:

BECKER: [...]Come November it'll be seventeen years that me and Lucille been together. Seventeen years. I told her say, "Work with me". She say okay. I wasn't sure what he meant myself. I thought it meant pull or push together. But she showed me one can push and the other can pull...as long as it's in the same direction. You know what I mean? It ain't all gonna flow together all the time. That's life. As long as it don't break apart. When you look around you'll see that all you got is each other. There ain't much more. (Wilson J. 78)

From family to community: the circles of responsibility expand and the key word becomes "together". Becker and his son confront each other about Booster's past which saw him in prison for killing a white woman (and her father). We learn that they falsely accused him of rape; yet, Becker comments:

BECKER: What you had to do! What you had to do! What law is there say you have to kill somebody if they tell you a lie on you? Where does it say that? If somebody tell a lie on you , you have to kill them?[...] Go on and throw your life away. But it was a lie! We could have fought the lie. I'd already lined up a lawyer...together we could have fought the lie.(Wilson J. 55)

When Becker gathers all his drivers to tell them about the city's demolition plans which concern many buildings in the area as well as their jitney station, they all follow Becker's decision to *fight* because, as Fielding says, "If everybody stick together they can't do nothing". (Wilson J. 86). *Together* you can learn how to "make something" of your life, as Doub says to Youngblood who seems to have lost "his song", his place in the world, running around with his wife's sister, apparently neglecting his two-year-old son and his responsibilities. At the end of the play, after Becker's accidental death, Youngblood is the one who significantly says:

YOUNGBLOOD: I'm ready if everybody else is. If not I'll find a job somewhere. Go to school. Raise my family. Do whatever I have to do. You know. (Wilson J. 95)

But it is with the father-son relationship that, in our opinion, this play goes beyond the microcosm of the community to reach a wider dimension. In their final confrontation they mutually accuse each other of having caused Becker's wife (and Becker's mother) to die. Becker's words are very harsh:

BECKER: I was there! I was holding her hand when she died. Where were you? Locked up in a cage like some animal. That's what killed her. [...So don't you say nothing about turning my back when I nursed that woman, talked to her, held her hand, prayed over her and the last words to come out of her mouth was your name. I was there! Where were you Mr. Murderer? Mr. Unfit to Live Amongst Society. Where were you when your mama was dying and calling your name? (Wilson J. 60)

Self, family, community and society: the circles of responsibility finally merge. When Becker accidentally dies, Booster goes back to the cab station to thank the men who have just returned from Becker's funeral for all they have done. He tells them he is proud to be his father's son:

BOOSTER: I never knew him too much, you know. I never got to know him like you all did. I can't say nothing wrong by him. He took care of me when I was young. He ain't run the streets and fuss and fight with my mama. The only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard. It didn't matter to me too much at the time cause I couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways. I guess everybody do. The only thing I feel sorry about ...is he ain't got out of life what he put in. He deserved better than what life gave him. I can't help thinking that. But you are right...I'm proud of

my old man. I'm proud of him. [...] And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. (Wilson J. 96)

When Booster picks up the receiver and answers saying “car service”, we understand he does not only pick up the phone but the life and the values his father left him. Like Cory Maxson in *Fences*, the relationship with his dad and his own world is restored. Similarly, Berniece in *The Piano Lesson* reconciles herself with her past in the powerful last scene of the play, where everything seems to lose a precise temporal connotation and to acquire a tone of universal truth. And her past becomes her present: Mama Berniece, Mama Esther and Papa Boy Charles are there to help her not to forget *who* she is: the song brings along the voices of the ancestors and not the Holy Spirit, together with the unheard voices of those who died in the attempt of fleeing slavery. This is where her and (their) strength comes from.

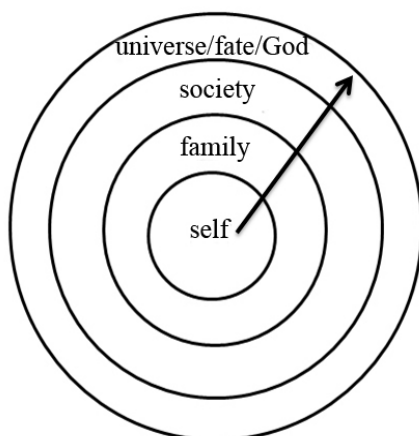
In Wilson's “circles of responsibility” we have reached the last one. We may ask ourselves with Wallace Stevens in *The Idea of Order at Key West* (1936) where the “inhuman song”, uttered word by word, comes from:

Whose spirit is it? We said, because we knew

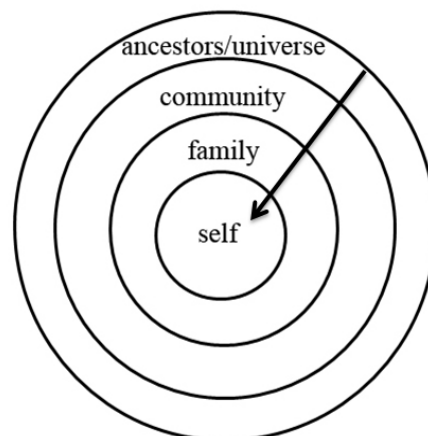
It was the spirit we sought and knew

That we should ask this often as she sang.

A final comparison between Miller's and Wilson's diagrams will now be useful:



Arthur Miller's



August Wilson's

circles of responsibility

If in Miller's world the sense of personal identity expands itself from the Self towards the outer circle and acquires a universal value, in Wilson's world the progression is reversed: from the outer towards the inner circles, where the sense of personal dignity and self-awareness lies. As to us, even when similarities of themes are to be found, we understand the society which Wilson refers to is Afro-American. Linda Loman is not Rose Maxson, nor Biff is Booster. Still, Miller's concept of socialness includes us all; Linda's cry over her husband's grief sounds like John Donne's warning: he is a human being and "attention must be paid. He is not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog." (Miller D.O.S. 44). If Wilson's vision is not so wide this is because he has a purpose, a lesson to teach. We have read it in the words uttered by all the characters we have met so far, from Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* reminding Berniece not to live "at the bottom of life" to Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* who says to his wife Martha: "I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together" (Wilson J.T. 89). And the examples might continue.

Significantly, in *Jitney* Doub tells Youngblood something which, in our opinion, sums up Wilson's "social" message:

DOUB: That white man ain't paying you no mind. You ought to stop thinking like that. They been planning to tear these shacks down before you was born. You keep thinking everybody's against you and you ain't never gonna get nothing. I seen a hundred niggers too lazy to get up out the bed in the morning, talking about the white man is against them. That's just an excuse. *You want to make something of your life, then the opportunity is there.* You just have to shake off that "White folks is against me" attitude. Hell, they don't even know you alive. (Wilson 64-65)[My italics]

If you "don't always have the kind of life that you dream about" (Wilson J. 81), it is nevertheless worth fighting for it.

At the end of our work we are left with the impression that there is still so much to be said about August Wilson: every issue we have been discussing so far may as well be expanded, like an endless river flowing into the sea. Most probably, no word can really be exhaustive because Wilson's theatre is a sort of "soul-

searching theatre”: it defines itself in the process of doing, in the attempt of awakening, as we have been discussing above, the minds and the hearts of Black Americans. They are “different”. And they need to repeat it in order to be heard and, ultimately, to exist.

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