

August Wilson's Otherness in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

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Abstract—August Wilson's twentieth century cycle including "*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*" concentrates for the most part on the lives and experiences of his black characters; but because their lives are inseparable from those of white Americans, Wilson's work also consistently examines whiteness through a black perspective. This paper studies his work's deep involvement with his Racial Other.

Index Terms—August Wilson, otherness, whiteness

I. AUGUST WILSON'S POSITION IN AMERICAN THEATER

August Wilson was a major American dramatist of the twentieth century. This paper studies his work's deep involvement with his Racial Other. Nathan Huggins claims this co-dependency between white and black Americans as, "black and white Americans have been so long and so intimately a part of another's experience that, will it or not, they cannot be understood independently. Each has needed the other to help define himself" (Huggins, 1971, p. 11). So in this study, I examine how a black writer might understand and portray whiteness.

August Wilson comes from a racially-mixed family background. While he is half-white, his self-identification as "black" enables us to discuss white Americans as his Racial Other. Wilson's next instance of self-definition is more problematic; he denies the influence of any Anglo-American or European writer on his work by decidedly situating himself in African-American literary traditions. Wilson's personal experiences as a black American have also impacted his artistic outlook on life. In "Breaking Barriers," Yvonne Shafer mentions some of these encounters with the white world: "As a child Wilson suffered the effects of racism in America: when his family tried to move into a mostly white neighborhood, bricks were thrown through the windows and when he went to a largely white high school, white students left ugly, racist notes on his desk" (Shafer, 1995, p. 268). because of these and other similar enraging incidents, Wilson began identifying himself as a "race man".

The first significant August Wilson play, *Ma Rainier's Black Bottom* (1984) manifests the playwright's racial vision with more or less one-dimensional characters. Wilson's most fascinating authorial decision, however, was to broaden the scope of his white portraiture with numerous offstage white characters whose overall significance is underlined through storytelling—the narratives blacks on stage share with each other. August Wilson starts to employ offstage characters to mirror the outside white world bearing down on the blacks early before *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. It seems that Wilson intentionally restricts whiteness in order to focus on the black characters. While this strategy implies that, despite of their absence, whites still command the lives of blacks (Yvonne Shafer. 1994. p.281). Wilson interprets to Kim Powers this strategy in an interview thus:

The off-stage white characters in all of the plays should ideally make you feel this presence of white American in the play and how it affects the lives of black Americans. I think it was after *Joe Turner*, I decided, hey, I don't need white characters on stage. Once I put black Americans on stage in their cultural milieu of the particular decade, I had white America. I don't need to have any white characters because I have a representation, because the characters are continuously struggling. They're struggling for dignity; they are struggling to feed their families; they are struggling to live a clean, hard and useful life. There are all these things that are forcing their way in on them. So I don't need the white characters, and that's why they are all off-stage characters. (Power, 1984, p. 52)

August Wilson's whiteness in his plays should set to rest the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak's apprehensions about the silence of the subaltern, as Wilson exemplifies the intellectual speaking out the subordinate point of view. Wilson's political commitment to his racial community demonstrates itself particularly in the historical task he has dedicated himself to: the twentieth-century cycle of plays he intends to write which explores the African-American experience in that century. In the following parts, I will undertake a thematic analysis of August Wilson's racial vision in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

II. OTHERNESS IN *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*

A. Whiteness Means Economic Power and Economic Exploitation

From *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, we can easily see that in Wilson's drama world economic property of whites determine their economic exploitation of blacks. With economic power in hand, whites can destroy other people's lives for their welfare.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1986) presents the lives of African-Americans in a Pittsburgh boarding house in the early 20th century. The black owners of the establishment, its residents, and the travelers frequenting it while on their personal quests, frame the dramatic interest in Joe Turner. Among these displaced black characters dwells one white man, Rutherford Selig. He is a peddler, who provides raw materials to Seth, the owner of the boarding house, and sells finish products to blacks in the town. Though the business transactions between Selig and black people seem to be legitimate, the relationship between them implies the one between the capital and the labor. The main difference between the whites and the blacks lies in that the former possess property while the latter can only toil for the white.

However, we can tell Selig from other whites. He is different from other characters in Wilson's plays. He is always popular in the black boarding house. Bertha will greet Selig with warm words every time: "Sit on down there, Selig. Get you a cup of coffee and a biscuit" (7), and "You know you welcome anytime, Selig" (11). It feels like Selig is a popular and inseparable part of the black community. While there is a fact or background which should not be forgot: Rutherford Selig is one of the "People Finders", who are involved in slave-trade business or in pursuing and capturing escaping slaves. Selig keeps tracks of all his customers so as to find them one day for other whites. Selig comes from a family that has been hostile to Africans and later African-Americans. Though he seemingly turns a blind eye to this fact, his legal business has a history behind dating back to slavery. Selig's forefathers targeted blacks for their material gains. In this regard, Selig's business comes down in one line with his ancestors.

Nonetheless, August Wilson himself contends that Selig is more or less positive portrait of whiteness in Kim Powers's interview:

I like Selig. I like the idea that he's a People Finder. I think one point I like, given his history which was the history of basically whites with blacks—his grandfather used to hunt down runaway slaves—in that Selig voices this without apology, as a fact of life. This is the way things were, and he very ironically then tells Loomis, "You're in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy caught a lot of runaway slaves." I like Selig; I like his honesty; I like his straightforwardness. I like the fact that he presents himself without apology. He's also welcome into the house. "Sit down, Selig, have a biscuit. Where you going? Oh, here, I've got some cabbage and tomatoes," etc. So there's no animosity; there's no nothing coming from the black characters toward him or the fact that his grandfather used to catch runaway slaves. There's none of that. Everyone can accept people on their own term; he is a very nice man. (Powers.1984.p.55)

As the absent off-stage white characters, Selig's father and grandfather help us get some clues of the capital-labor relationship between whites and blacks. Other off-stage white characters also play inseparable roles in reflecting whiteness in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Take Jeremy for example. As a white man, he lives in the black boarding house. He shouts out his indignation when he witnesses the blackmail by the off-stage white guy in his workplace. The white blackmailer threatens that the black workers will lose their jobs if they refuse to give him fifty cents a week for no reason. Jeremy dare not to comply and stands up at the risk of losing his job. Jeremy's confront reveals that black Americans are vulnerable in this business society.

Storytelling is central to Wilson's work, as it is to African-American literature in general. Black oral narratives, traceable to Africa and later to slave communities in America, function as "communal strategies—community creating and community enhancing": they instill social values and a unique world view (Stepo 125). Most of the narratives about whiteness in Wilson's dramatic world enforce a dualistic perspective by dissociating the white from the black and underlines the negative impact of the white men in the black world.

Joe Turner is the off-stage eponymous white character who haunts the whole play, thus exemplifying once more the significance of such characters in Wilson's work. The title of the play comes from a blues song about the historical Joe Turner, who kidnapped black men to work on his plantation as slaves for seven years. Turner was said to have a close relation with the Governor of Tennessee. He could possess and exploit blacks to work for him without worrying about being punished. Herald Loomis unluckily falls into his prey list. A deacon, he has been separated from his wife and his family as well as his sense of self because of these lost years he has spent in bondage. When he arrives at Seth's boarding house with his daughter, he is, on the surface, searching for his long-lost wife; yet the ultimate object of his quest is his identity. Actually Turner stands for racism and repression. He is not just a man, but a force, looming over Loomis's past, present and his future. Loomis carries Turner with him all the way in his life journey, which extends the destructive influence of whites among blacks. Trudier Harris comments further on the role of Turner thus:

Turner looms over Loomis's past, his present, and his future. As an archetypal symbol of racism and repression, he is not simply a man, but a force. He resents the evil that takes away all the potential identified with black men, whether that evil historically took the form of slavery, sharecropping, or convict labor as a result of being jailed without any semblance of due process. He represents the collective failure of American democracy for all black people, the dismissal of the race from the American dream. It is not necessary for Turner to appear as a character in the play for the destructive history of his collective representation to be felt. As long as Herald Loomis lives, so will Joe Turner. (1994. p. 56)

The destructive history in this play is the haunting history white America has imprinted on black Americans.

Whiteness, as I will discuss in the following parts, has many evil attributes in Wilson's drama, but its predominant quality for the playwright is that of economic power derived from proprietorship and its aftereffect, economic exploitation. Whites take it for granted that blacks are free and cheap labor even after the Abolition. Even now African Americans still have a long way to go, to fight for their economic independence and equality.

B. *Whiteness Is Social Privilege*

Social privilege of whiteness is Wilson's dramatic universe extends far beyond the reach of property and capital. The white Americans in Wilson's plays also enjoy social privilege, which derives purely from their skin color. American society, while it welcomes whites with open arms, offering them a fair chance at the American dream, denies African-American opportunities simply because of their race. August Wilson has consistently criticized this social inequality, which he claims has its roots in Christianity.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson reminds his audience once again how all the privileges in American society have gone to the white men. Seth, the owner of the boarding-house, warns the others of the fate of the newly-freed blacks who "drop everything and head North looking for freedom": "They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got" (6). The American dream is thus not earned on merit, but on race. People's skills and hard work have little to do with the benefits they reap; their social success in America is purely determined by the color of their skin.

Joe Turner carries on some of the other Wilson themes from earlier plays. Like *Ma Rainey*, it upholds the view that Christianity is the white man's religion. Its protagonist Herald Loomis, who has served as a deacon before he was captured by the infamous Joe Turner, now ironically compares Jesus Christ with an overseer. Having experienced slavery firsthand, Loomis understands how Christianity has served and furthered the interests of his oppressors, as critic Kim Pereira observes. Having experienced slavery firsthand, Loomis understands how Christianity has served and furthered the interests of his oppressors, as Pereira observes:

...in Loomis's mind, it is the church, not he, that has sinned. Christianity is at the root of many of his problems and the problems of his people. White Christian men sold black Africans into slavery and the white God, Jesus Christ, in whose name and under whose protective banner plantation owners exploited their cotton-picking slaves, blessed his white disciples for their efforts. (1995. p. 78)

Worshipping the image of your oppressor puts you in a double-bind. Consequently, Herald Loomis, after he is reunited with his wife Martha, has to achieve self-sufficiency, and has to learn not to seek help from symbols of whiteness. Therefore, Loomis "*slashes himself across the chest*" and bleeds (for) himself rather than empower "the white man's God" for having suffered, bled, and died for the sake of humanity (93). If Loomis can become his own God, he will have no further use for Christianity. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* can thus be interpreted as espousing the same self-sufficiency to its black audiences by showing them how to end the social privilege of whiteness approved by the church. Sandra Shannon, too, argues that the Shiny Man whom Bynum is searching for in the play "is the African alternative to what August Wilson calls 'the white man's God'" (*Dramatic Vision* 137). To abolish the white man's privileged status in society, black Americans need to replace one of the main symbols of his power with their own God.

As seen in this play, black Americans perceive whiteness to be stickily associated with social privilege even in the absence of economic power. According to Wilson, American society is so structured that citizens with fair skins have superb advantages over those with darker skins who are harshly marginalized, exploited, and abused by the system. Race, because it is often a distinct indicator, has for a long time been used to privilege one group over another. From the beginning, Anglo-Americans have implanted this order by manipulating the teachings of Christianity to suit their own interests. For this reason, Wilson favors substituting an African God for the "white man's God"—a crucial off-stage character who, nevertheless, looms over Loomis's past and present. However, as we will see in the next part, the privilege of whiteness stretches to more than just religious or social authority, and merely replacing the white image of Christ with an African God will not once and for all eradicate the white's heightened status in America.

C. *Whiteness Stands for Law*

In his depiction of whiteness, August Wilson often underlines the legal power Euro-Americans exercise over black Americans. The white sheriffs, police officers, and judges persecute and prosecute the African-American characters mostly wrongfully. The clash between these authority figures and the numerous black characters who have been victimized by the legal system points to how law has a white and ugly face in the black imagination. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson emphasizes the fine but essential distinction between law and justice, between legality and legitimacy. What is considered lawful by the power structure is indeed unjust and erodes the black characters' faith in the system.

A temporary resident at Seth's boarding house, Jeremy in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is one of these men who run into trouble with the law for no good reason. Jeremy has been arrested by "Mr. Piney's boys" (off-stage characters) and fined two dollars for hanging around in the streets. The strict Seth decides that Jeremy must have deserved the punishment whereas his wife Bertha accepts Jeremy's explanation and comments, "You know the police do that. Figure there's too many people out on the street they take some of them off" (13). What Bertha does not state, though, is that the only people the police remove from the streets in Wilson's world are black men. These arrests reveal how Euro-Americans grip the power they have access to through the laws they have implemented in their own favor. In an interview with Bill Moyers, August Wilson remarked that "the most valuable blacks were the ones in prison." The warrior spirit they possess has landed them in jail because "Refusing to lie down and die, these men of destiny fought for what was denied them" (Pereira.1995.p.33).

Wilson's black men interpret their position as one of entrapment. They are held in invisible chains, and all of their

actions are subject to investigation by law enforcement. Any excuse can be and is used to keep them under scrutiny. The police officers with any suspicion about a black man would rather arrest him than allow for the possibility, no matter how remote, that he might commit a wrongful deed in the future. Therefore, the golden principle of the American legal system, that one is presumed innocent until proven guilty, clearly does not apply to black citizens. African-Americans are instead presumed guilty by the system until they can prove their innocence. The distrust, if not the open hostility, of the officers of the law against African-American men is met with an equal distrust of the black men for the system. The oppressive white power alienates its black citizens further by tightening its control over them by more unjust means. The plight of black Americans thus includes unlawful victimization as well as a constant panic over the probable threat of law enforcers.

August Wilson's perspective on the American legal system is fiercely negative. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is peopled with many off-stage agents of law: judges, sheriffs, and police officers, all of them white and male, none of them portrayed in a favorable light. They are representatives of a corrupt system which exploits and undermines the weak. In order to drive this point home, Wilson follows a distinctive pattern: August Wilson upholds his black characters' interpretation of events, almost the only version of "truth" the audience receives in this play. Therefore, although one might reasonably assume that the law would apply equally to both blacks and whites, that never appears to be the case in Wilson's plays. The playwright insists many times in his work that African-Americans cannot receive justice unless they can pay the right price. Law is thus revealed to be another instrument of establishment to protect the interests of the white race and to overbear its racial Other. In August Wilson's imaginative world, law is white, but it is very much stained.

III. CONCLUSION

August Wilson's twentieth century cycle including "*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*" concentrates for the most part on the lives and experiences of his black characters; but because their lives are inseparable from those of white Americans, Wilson's work also consistently examines whiteness through a black perspective. They appear everywhere and enjoy pervasive control. They are almost always evil and male. Moreover, the white characters in his earlier plays *Joe Turner* set in the 1910s, for example, do not differ significantly from those in the later plays for instance, *Two Trains Running* set in the late 1960s. In other words, the playwright sustains a homogeneous position on whiteness; he emphasizes in his plays the economic, social and judicial dominance of whites in America. Most importantly, whiteness for Wilson equals economic power and economic exploitation.

Although the basis of Wilson's white portraiture is historically accurate (After all, whites did and still do have economic power in American society; they have exploited blacks for centuries; they do have social privilege and dominate the government as well as the judicial system), it is curious why he refuses to admit any positive traits in white Americans. The closest Wilson gets to inventing a not-stereotypical white character is Selig who, nevertheless, has his own direct connections to slavery and thus inhabits a contradictory social identity in the black community of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Such labeling of whiteness positions the black against the white and hypothesizes that the (black) Self is what the (white) Other is not. One is the victim; the other the aggressor. One is vulnerable; the other is in charge. One is good; the other is evil. One racial group is thus defined and understood through its radical difference from another racial group. Of course, these stereotypes inevitably raise questions about their reliability. Despite evidence to the contrary, Wilson assured Dinah Livingston (1987. p. 31) during an interview that "I don't write from a wellspring of bitterness. I write from a very positive viewpoint of black life and black experience". African-American critics, too, maintain similar interpretations of Wilson's work. For instance, Sandra Shannon (1996. p. 6-7) declares that Wilson does not "focus upon blaming white America for the conditions under which blacks live but instead...the underlying emotional scars blacks bear". Likewise, Regina Taylor (1996. p. 23) argues that Wilson doesn't blame on American racism and claim that African Americans are victim, he just tells the facts. It is plain, nevertheless, where Wilson's indictments fall.

The misconception in white literary circles that August Wilson is a non-threatening black artist for white theater-goers is not only naïve but also perilous since it reveals a certain, maybe even deliberate, misreading. Compared to black playwright of the 1960s who produced "bitter, vituperative dramas" and "literally drove the white audiences out of the theatre" (Shafer, "New Approach" 17-18), Wilson, who claims to have come out of this tradition "chooses a toned-down version of their more sensational attempts at didacticism" (Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 6).

Although Wilson might not be as overt in his criticism of white society as Amiri Baraka is, criticism is still an essential ingredient of Wilson art. When read carefully and closely, Wilson's plays undeniably reveal a negative approach to white America. It is peculiar how white audiences can find Wilson's art safe when they are being constantly vilified by the characters on stage.

August Wilson's safety net could easily come from this dramatic device: when confronted, he or his black characters might defend themselves by claiming, "I wasn't talking to you" even when they were. Of course, this strategy serves equally well the needs of Wilson's white audience, some of whom might prefer to ignore the unpleasant remarks about themselves. Unlike other black playwrights who still haven't "made it," August Wilson's success on Broadway and in dramatic circles may be due in part to this non-confrontational writing style. Another component of white audiences' blissful reading of Wilson may be the humor Wilson so amply employs in his plays. The humor, which may not come

across as strongly on the page as it does on stage, also helps explain why audiences may be willing to ignore the bitterness hiding behind the mask of comedy Wilson's black characters adopt in order to better deal with their difficult lives.

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