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A Fence, a Pair of Shoes and a Piano:  
The Legacy of Memory in *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's  
Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*

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- Abstract -

This study explores the importance of memory for African Americans in three major plays by the American playwright August Wilson. Central to Wilson's theatre is the idea that it is possible to move forward into the future only after having remembered the past. However, the dissertation stresses that dealing with memory can be quite complicated. In fact, both its absence and presence can have far-reaching consequences. The thesis demonstrates that Wilson's theatre offers a solution to the dilemma: you have to learn how to use the remembrance of the past in order to shake off its weight.

By adopting the technique of close reading, I analyze the main passages of each play in order to highlight the relationship between the characters and their past. Each chapter is devoted to the analysis of a single play and they are arranged in the following order: *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *The Piano Lesson*. The analysis of *Fences* points out that the rejection of the past can turn into a haunting presence that troubles your existence. The Maxson sons, unable to negotiate with the memory of their fathers, become victims of their past compromising both their identity and familial unity. Only after accepting their father as part of their story, will they be able to re-member the scattered pieces of their lives. Shifting from a personal dimension to a collective one, the analysis of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* points out that the absence of a cultural and historical past weakens the ties of the band in addition to weakening the identity of the characters. Each musician of Ma Rainey's band corresponds to a different way of valuing black heritage. Eventually, the cacophony of voices facilitates their exploitation by the dominant (white) world. Even worse, the rejection of his origins makes the young musician, Levee, unable to bear the weight of discrimination. Tragically, his frustration is turned into the murder of one his own companions. Finally, the analysis of *The Piano Lesson* provides the 'lesson' underlying Wilson's theatre: the past has to be acknowledged and "resized" in the present in order to heal the flawed identity, family and community. In this play, Wilson objectifies the past in an inherited piano. Berniece fights with all her strength to prevent her brother from selling the instrument. Nevertheless, its presence turns into an oppressive burden that prevents her from moving toward the future. Much as the characters who reject or disown their past, she falls victim of her own memories. The spell is broken when she finally learns what to do with her inherited piano.

After comparing the plays, it has been possible to observe that the inability to deal with the past causes similar side effects in the characters: it destroys their own Self in addition to destroying the relationship with others. Only the characters who learn to enclose the past within their present, will be finally able to overcome such divisions. The dissertation shows that central to these plays is the idea that people have the responsibility not only of remembering but also of turning the past into a useful tool to create their present. Your inheritance can consist of a pair of old brogans, some Blues, an unfinished fence or an old piano: it is up to you to use them to illuminate your present. As Harry J. Elam observes, “one must go back in order to move forward” but “the past will lead us if we force it to”.

Underneath Wilson’s project lies the belief that the disease affecting African Americans communities stems from an “unfinished business with the past”. Through the life of his characters, he provides a site of memory where the audience can confront and learn to value a historical and cultural legacy that concerns all Americans.

I. *Memory and History entwined in Lieux de Mémoire*

The quest for memory is the search for one's history  
-Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History*

This thesis aims at exploring the implications of the relationship between African Americans and memory in three major plays by the playwright August Wilson. We should first clarify the concept of memory before proceeding in the analysis. In several interviews, August Wilson claims that his cycle of plays is meant to reconstruct history out of memories. For a long time, history and memory have belonged to different fields of knowledge. Only in the twentieth century, have scholars and intellectuals “attempted to reexamine the complex relationship between history and memory” (Fabre, O’Meally, 6). Amid the results of these studies, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* invented by the French historian Pierre Nora proves particularly helpful to understand August Wilson’s statement. It can be argued that Wilson’s theatre corresponds to a *lieu de mémoire* where history and memory blend together by overcoming their apparent antithetical nature.

If we browse through dictionaries, we can notice that history is commonly defined as a scientific knowledge that deals with a critical search of past events in order to produce a formal record; memory is defined as a subjective psychic act of recollection of past events or experiences. Both processes involve the retrieval of the past; however, history is considered closer to a scientific field; memory, instead, is considered closer to a subjective activity. As O’Meally and Fabre point out in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, memory is commonly recognized as “a personal activity, subject to the biases, quirks and rhythms of the individual’s mind” (5). As a consequence, memory has been considered for long time “something less” than history since it cannot give a reliable account of the events. Late

twentieth-century historians, philosophers and literary critics have attempted to reconsider the history-memory dichotomy by suggesting that the boundaries between history and memory are not so definite. The study conducted by the historiographer Pierre Nora is commonly recognized as a landmark of this research. After analyzing the dichotomy between “intellectual history” and “the stuff of memory”, he eventually claims that they interact in the so-called “lieux de mémoire”.

In his study *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Nora claims that modern societies have been experiencing an “acceleration of history” that made them lose touch with the past. According to the scholar, the phenomenon of secularization broke the temporal equilibrium: the linear passage from past, to present, to future has been replaced by a “rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good” (7). The break corresponds to the disappearance of those social or ideological realities for instance peasant culture that allowed “a smooth passage from the past into the future” because they “indicated what the future should keep from the past”:

We have seen the end of societies that had long assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state; the end too of ideologies that prepared a smooth passage from the past into the future or that had indicated what the future should keep from the past- whether for reaction, progress, or even revolution. (284)

Therefore, past societies did not experience the sensation that something had been lost in the process. Modern societies, instead, have realized they have lost a “memorial consciousness”. Locked inside a history that has become a rapid succession of events, “every social group” felt the necessity of retrieving its own origins and identity from the past (15). Hence, modern society has developed a pathological compulsion to produce archives and recordings that might serve as material traces of memory. The combination of the fear of a rapid oblivion with the anxiety about the meaning of the present and “the uncertainty about the future” brings about the tendency to delegate to the archive “the responsibility of remembering” (Nora, 13). According to the scholar, archives are the last expression of an era where history tries to master memory, long perceived as a threat to the reliability of history. The “modern memory” ends up relying only on the “materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording and the visibility of the image” (13) since it mirrors the historical search. Yet, the “archival-memory” cannot satisfy the search and safeguarding of memory because archives are not the expression of “true memory”

but “historicized memory”, as a consequence the exterior scaffolding and outward signs” cannot help increasing the obsession for memory. In order to satisfy their yearning for true memory, modern societies should learn to recognize where true memory has taken shelter. Nora tries to provide a solution by explaining that memory can be found in what he calls *lieux de mémoire*:

mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with *time and eternity*; enveloped in a Mobius strip of the *collective and individual*, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. For we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to *block the work of forgetting*, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial [...] all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest signs, it is also clear that lieux de mémoire only exist because of their capacity for *metamorphosis*, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications. (296, *emphases mine*)

Moreover, the critic highlights that they can be recognized because they always feature three main characteristics: they are material, symbolic and functional. They are material since they take place when memory enters the historical time and space; they are symbolic since they have to be meaningful for both the single person and the collectivity; they are functional since they aim at prompting people to remember and raising historical consciousness. Then, true memory might be concealed inside gestures, habits, skills handed on through unspoken traditions (Nora, 13), events, calendars, books, places or ideas, even archives if they are invested with symbolic meaning (Nora, 19).

Although Nora’s study concerns a general revaluation of the relationship between history and memory, his definition of *lieux de mémoire* provides the right perspective to evaluate August Wilson’s works. The playwright puts into practice what Nora has expressed in theory: August Wilson understands that “new categories of sources”, in particular cultural sources, have to be reevaluated in order to recompose African American history. He recognizes that language, skills, dances, clothes, music etc... are sites of memory “where memory has crystallized” in order to escape the oblivion of history. For this reason, his theatre focuses on African American culture: he wants to reveal how much history is concealed inside African American gestures, linguistic expressions, human relationships and artistry.

Through his theatre he creates a lieu de mémoire where *time* encounters *eternity*, *individual* becomes *collective*, *forgetfulness* is blocked thanks to the *materialization of the immaterial*. The Past represented in his plays enters the eternal dimension of the stage: separated from the flowing of time, the

events performed are going to live in an eternal present. Moreover, actors, objects and setting provide a material embodiment to past (hi)stories and memories. In this way, unspoken or forgotten people and happenings from the past are subjected to a process of materialization that provides resistance to forgetfulness. Finally, his plays represent individual and collective acts of remembering. The reconnection of the characters with their past becomes a symbolic act of remembering that should involve both the single person and the whole community in a cathartic recollection of the past. Through the subjects of his plays, the playwright wants to force black people to reconnect with the past and “address the unfinished business of the past within the circumstances of the now” (Elam, 237). As Pierre Nora notices, traumatic events can bring about traumatic breaks between past and present. If the French historian recognizes the process of secularization as the main cause of the break with the past, August Wilson recognizes the historical and psychological oppression of black people as the main cause of their tendency to forget their origins. According to the playwright, there are two main events that determined the split: firstly, the Middle Passage was the cause of “the profound disconnection with the past” (Elam, 3); secondly, the great migration of black people from the rural South towards the northern American cities. Last but not least, racism has been an oppressive psychological force that has prompted black Americans to forget their roots. Eventually, this disconnection with the past has caused a flaw in black identity, it has turned into a profound disease that negatively influences black people’s lives and the possibility of having a future. Hence, Wilson’s project to create the twentieth-century cycle of plays: they serve as lieux de mémoire that have to bring about a collective cathartic act of remembering where past and present merge in a single ground where the future can grow.



## II. *Art and Memory: the preservation and doing of Memory through Art*

Somewhere along the way it dawned on me that I was writing one play for each decade. Once I became conscious of that, I realized I was trying to focus on what I felt were the important issues confronting Black Americans for that decade, so ultimately they could stand as a record of black experience over the past hundred years presented in the form of dramatic literature.

-August Wilson, *The Past as Present*

Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn- but torn in such a way to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.

-Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History*

According to Pierre Nora, traumatic historical events have to be blamed for bringing about an “irrevocable break” in the temporal continuity. As he explains, memory of the past proves to be ostracized from the present historical sensibility when past and present lose touch with each other. Nevertheless, memory does not get lost but takes refuge in sites of memory. In particular historical moments, when people become aware of “a break with the past”, they try to reconnect with it by looking for the sites where memory is concealed. As far as African Americans are concerned, it might be said that they have been developing an increasing awareness of the split between their present and past since the early decades of the twentieth century. Since then, many African American intellectuals have been querying where it is possible to retrieve the past. During this research, the Arts have been universally detected as a crucial *lieu de mémoire*.

The entanglement of black arts with memory is quite complex. It can be argued that the function of African American artworks is twofold: they act both as *lieu de mémoire* and creator of memory. On the one hand, African American artistic and cultural legacy can serve as shrines of the historical past. As Fabre and O’Meally point out, music, dances, paintings and most of all, novels, poems, slave narratives, autobiographies are “crucial parts of the historical record” (Fabre, O’Meally 9). Furthermore, the artworks not only give back to African Americans part of their past, but also reintroduce African Americans inside the American historical account by showing that they have contributed to shape American history and identity. On the other hand, the arts can function as creator of memory. In this

case, both the content and the aesthetic features of the artworks are called to participate in the process of remembrance in order to fulfill the missing parts of the African American history that both Americans and African Americans have suppressed. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, African American artists and intellectuals, such as W.E.B Du Bois, Alan Locke, Ralph Ellison have recognized the artistic and cultural expressions of blacks as the “sacred past”. Subsequently, through the 1970s, the concern of proving the existence of the past developed into the concern of discovering how to re-member the past. One could generalize by saying that the interest in the past has gradually developed side by side with African American artistic movements: the Harlem Renaissance started considering black heritage in order to raise a common racial consciousness; the Black Arts started questioning the construction of history by asserting that it was necessary to introduce black voices in the historical account; in the late 1970s, the burning spirit of the previous decade gave way to a more meditative attitude. Despite the achievements of the 1960s, the black community seemed to lack the energy to face the future. The “unfinished business” of the past was blamed for their condition: African Americans had to heal their historical scars in order to move on. Thence, the aim of many artists became to re-member the missing pieces of African American history in order to confront it.

Since the late 1960s, African American artists have begun to be more and more concerned about the relationship between the artistic creation and the historical creation. Accordingly, it is possible to observe a general tendency to align both the content and the aesthetic canons of literary, visual or theatrical arts with a definite aim: to re-member the past. As far as literature is concerned, the rise of Neo-slave narrative represents a meaningful example of the entanglement between art and the process of rewriting the past. In his study *Race, Form, and Intertextuality in the Field of Cultural Production*, Rushdy attempts to delineate the connection between a specific literary form and social events. Focusing on the analysis of the authors of the Neo-slave narrative of the seventies and the eighties, he points out that they raise questions about the power of literary structures to construct or dismantle a historical subject or ideology such as racial identity (8). They decided to use the first literary form in which “African American subjectivity was articulated” in order to recollect the concealed information and give voice to the unspoken events at the same time. As Rushdy explains:

The social logic of the Neo-slave narrative form is twofold: first, the form evolved from a change in social and cultural conditions in the late sixties; second, later deployments of the form have engaged in dialogue with the social issues of its moment of origin. Believing that no form “loses its ancestry,” that the form “whistles and hums with this history” of its origins even as it accumulates new meanings “in layers of tissue as the form evolves,” the authors of the Neo-slave narratives engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origins in the late sixties and early seventies. (7)

It might be paraphrased that the literary *structure* becomes itself a lieu de mémoire whose threads get history entrapped. As a consequence, content and aesthetic become strongly committed to each other. To re-write a literary genre entails (w)righting history. Hence, the boundaries between historical and fictional narrative gradually blur up to the point that the writer is not only a storyteller but a historian responsible for the reconstruction of the past. One of the most representative authors of the this genre is Toni Morrison. In her essay *The Site of Memory*, the writer claims that authors of slave-narratives were “silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (91) in order to ingratiate the white audience. Therefore, she feels responsible as a writer to “fulfill the blanks” and “part the veil that was so frequently drawn” (92). Most of all, she is interested in reconstructing the interior life of slave narrative’s authors. Here comes the first problem: how is it possible to “move the veil aside”? According to Morrison, the combination of your memories with the act of imagination provides the solution. When she talks about memories, she refers to images floating around the memory of her father or grandmother, such as a room, a color or the image of her relatives itself. These images, she explains, are “the remains”, “the archeological sites” that spur the imagination to remember. In short, she starts from a remembered image to arrive at the text. Then comes the second problem: how can a text drawn from imagination be considered something different from mere fiction? How can it express the “true” interior life of people? Morrison points out that the *nature* of the act of imagination makes the difference. Generally, people believe in the separation between facts and fiction: facts are reliable because it is possible to retrieve a credible source; fiction, instead, corresponds to fantasy because it lacks such sources. For Morrison, instead, the separation lies between “fact” and “truth”. The latter is the focus of her search and it can be reached through a specific kind of imagination that she calls “memory from within” or “emotional memory”. Emotional memory allows the writer to start from the images, the archeological sites and leads the writer to the “reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was no written and to the reconstruction of a kind of truth” (95). The emotional memory of the writer can be compared with the

memory of water that cyclically floods the land because it “tries forever to get back to where it was” (99): “Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory –what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our flooding” (99).

For this reason the reconstruction of the past is “bound up with memory”: it is a voyage that starts from personal memories led by emotional memory. However, the process of re-membering influences not only the “destination” of the voyage, namely the past, but also the aesthetic features. As was mentioned above, the process of remembrance permeates both content and structure. Once again, it is possible to rely on the novelist Toni Morrison to find an example. In her novel *Beloved*, she adopts a deconstructionist technique. The narration is literally dismembered by means of a “shifting focalization” in addition to a shifting chronology. The plot develops through many perspectives: the perspective of the omniscient narrator is alternated with the perspectives of the characters whose voice and thoughts are expressed by means of free indirect discourse. Furthermore, the sense of fragmentation is increased by the time shift: the free indirect discourse of the characters represents the access to the past since their present thoughts merge with the memory of past events or stories belonging to a forgotten (mythic) past. A whole thesis would not be enough to explore in depth the reasons concealed in the narrative strategy adopted by Morrison. Suffice it to say in this general analysis of the relationship between art and memory that there is the wish to show how the narrative construction can mirror the difficulty of re-membering the past. As Kathie Birat argues in *Stories to Pass on: Closure and Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved*, the author provides the reader with the fragmented pieces because, on the one hand, the fragmented narration corresponds with the protagonist's refusal to remember a painful past (324); on the other hand, she wants the reader to experience the difficulty of re-membering. He has to strive in order to organize “the pieces of a puzzle” in a coherent plot (331). Furthermore, the multiplicity of perspectives does not aim at “complexifying the process of telling”, it aims at showing that the story can be remembered only if all the voices of the community are involved in a “collective and conscious activity” (329).

To a certain extent, it can be said that Romare Bearden's paintings are the visual representation of Morrison's disruptive narrative. Bearden's "collagist sensibility" visually represents Morrison's statement that "remembering is also literally an act of remembering, of putting together the dismembered body and the 'dismembered' story" (qtd. in Birat, 328). By using a collagist technique, he recreates piece by piece black characters and environments out of his personal memories. As the painter claimed, he "felt that the Negro was becoming too much of an abstraction, rather than the reality that art can give a subject... What I have attempted to do is establish a world in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic" (qtd. in Powell, 240). Then, his canvas becomes a site where African American reality is given materiality. Both the content and the aesthetic of his paintings are related to African American culture. In fact, if the subjects of his paintings narrate African Americans' way of living, his style visually objectifies black music. Following the tradition of painters such as Aaron Douglas, he transforms the tones of the blues and the riffs of the jazz into collaged figures defined by bright colors even as the memories carried by its notes become an inspiring source for his paintings. To use Powell's definition in *Art History and Black Memory: Towards a 'Blues aesthetic'*, Bearden is literally a "cultural remember" whose aim is to create lieux de mémoire where cultural, historical and spiritual legacy of black people are objectified into artworks.

The page is the site where black writers re-write (hi)stories, the canvas is the site where black painters draw (hi)stories and the stage is the site where black playwrights bring back to life (hi)stories. All these artistic genres prompt historical consciousness by recollecting the past. However, it can be noticed that theatre features a peculiar characteristic: it physically allows the audience to experience the past in the temporal theatrical dimension. August Wilson's cycle of plays can be used as a meaningful example of the entanglement between theatrical performance and the remembrance of black history. If its content provides a (hi)storical record of the twentieth century, the nature of the genre allows to experience the events represented on stage. Toni Morrison wrote in her essay *The Site of Memory* that the black writer has to "journey to a site to see what remains where left behind" in order to "reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (92). By applying this statement to the work of Wilson, it can be said that he recognizes black culture practices and beliefs as the site where it is possible to find the "remains of the past". In particular, after analyzing his works, it can be argued that there are three main aspects of

black culture where it is possible to find them: language, music and human relationships. All of them are inspiring sources that allow the playwright to rewrite the past. For this reason, his theatre could be compared to a collage where language, music and personal stories are equally fundamental components whose interaction allows to weave the threads of the plot. As far as the use of the vernacular is concerned, it represents a source of inspiration since its rhythm and structures are the result of a language that has been developing through centuries of African Americans history. August Wilson remembered that he was able to write his first plays only after realizing the existence of a linguistic world inside the black community (Shannon, 2007). Secondly, he dedicates a fundamental role to language since it has been a crucial vehicle for the oral transmission of African American history. For this reason, many of his characters are remarkable storytellers: their speech ability refers to the importance that the oral tradition has had in the transmission of African American (hi)story. Then, in Wilson's dramaturgy, the music plays a pivotal role as well: sometimes even more than language, it represents an invaluable source as it transports black personal and collective (hi)stories. As Elam notices in *The Music is the Message*, the music is an inspiring source because "the music provides him [Wilson] with clues to the lives of people" (38) since it contains the "archeological remains" of black emotional experiences. Finally, even human relationships are fundamental lieux de mémoire: as the analysis of the three plays aims at proving, the relationship between father and son; wife and husband; friends; brother and sister are sites where the past lie in disguise affecting both the relationship among people and the perception of their own identity. For all these reasons, Wilson theatre uses black culture as lieu de mémoire whose exploration allows him to rewrite the past.

However, the main concern of these artists devoted to the past is not only to provide a historical record, but to force their readers or spectators to negotiate their present with the rediscovered past. Theatre, in particular, seems to provide this contact between past and present by allowing the audience to relive the past in the present through performance. Theater has always played a crucial role in the preservation of African American history. As Elam points out in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, performance arose among slave quarters in order to preserve their experience and express their identity (10). It was an invaluable tool that helped black Americans to write their perspective of

history as well as a safety valve that allowed them to shake the oppressive burden of their condition through buffoonery. Therefore, black performance rose as

a subversive strategy and agency that acts as a form of resistance to the omission of the black presence from history.[...] Even as they performed for the entertainment of the white master, slaves could ridicule or potentially undermine his control simultaneously through the mechanism of performance. Everyday survival on the plantation also necessitated the employment of certain coded performances. Thus, the history of African American performance is always already implicated in the history of African American social, cultural and political struggles for freedom. In addition, through performance African Americans can and do make history, and these performances constitute history in themselves, historical records, or what Nadel calls 'a truer form of history than white historical discourse. (10)

Wilson's aim is to perform the stories that have been lost in order to get them recorded in the artistic archive. With his theatre, he merges history and memories, but history provides just the frame for collective and personal memories of the characters on the scene. As Bigsby put it in *An interview with August Wilson*, Wilson aims at "recovering people" in order to recover the past (207). History provides the background where Wilson can explore black people's lives "in a certain social condition that could not have existed other than in those particular decades" (Bigsby, 206). In this way, he rewrites history. However, the matter is not only to provide the past, but also to negotiate its trauma. Besides providing a historical record, theatre should provide a collective cathartic experience of the past.

In addition to re-writing the past, theatre gives the audience the possibility of participating in the re-remembering process. It provides a space and time dimension where the past can be reshaped and relived. Philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben or Henri Lefebvre agree that the human mind tends to picture "time by means of spatial images" (Elam, 8). Accordingly, it can be argued that Wilson's theatre provides spatial images through the setting and the actors in order to both re-create the past and help the audience to understand that definite period of time. Theatre features its own time dimension as well. As long as the performance lasts, the past represented on the stage is turned into "the performative now". As a consequence, the audience re-lives the past in the present. Thence, the past becomes part of their life experience triggering the cathartic re-connection with a missing part of their history and identity. Interestingly, George Houston Bass in *African American Theatre the Rite of Being*, defines playwrights as mythmakers that provide a "forum for communal rites of regeneration, transformation, and re-creation" through their plays (61). By attending the performance, the audience undergoes singularly and

collectively a process of regeneration of their history and eventually of their identity. Finally, one must consider the cathartic effect of August Wilson's theatre. A complete cathartic experience can occur only after black Americans have understood how to overcome the burden of the recollected past. Thence, Wilson's aim is not only to make his audience recover the past but also teach them how to overcome its trauma. If the first aim is achieved by re-writing history through a cycle of plays, the second goal is achieved by performing stories of people affected by conflicting relations with their history and memories. In this way, character's right or wrong attitudes towards the past should provide a paradigm to help black audience learn how to negotiate their past. As Joan Fishman argues in *Romare Bearden, August Wilson, and the Traditions of African performance*, "the final outcome will be determined by the learning the performance has hopefully inspired in its audience" (147). In other words, a final real catharsis can be achieved if the audience transform the "performed rites" into real actions.

In *The Piano Lesson*, Papa Boy Charles carves his memories in the wooden legs of an old piano leaving a remarkable artistic legacy by means of which his descendants will overcome their traumatic past. In my view, a parallel could be drawn between this character and black artists. Like Papa Boy Charles, writers, painters and playwrights such as Morrison, Bearden and Wilson etch memories in pieces of paper, canvasses or the stage by transforming raw materials into meaningful pieces of art. Their artworks are vehicles that accomplish a double function: they allow the reader or the spectator to remember; secondly, they provide a useful tool to overcome the oppressive past. Toni Morrison claimed that "stories which escape the control of the community have the potential to destroy not only the community, but the selves within that community" (qtd. in Birat, 329). Therefore, artists have the responsibility of retrieving the forgotten stories whose "present absence" can eventually turn into a personal and collective "disease eating the fabric of black American lives" (Elam, 5). Only after the community have faced them, will it be possible to let go of the past and construct new stories in their present and future.



## - Introduction -

The African American artistic environment showed a vivid interest in the historical past in the 1980s and the 1990s. From the social, historiographical, and intellectual change in the late 1960s emerged the increasing interest of African American artists in exploring the interconnections between past and present. It might be speculated that this interest in the past is due to the paradox concerning African American history: on the one hand, African Americans are oppressed by the absence of the past because of their slight inclusion in the American historiographical account; on the other hand they are oppressed by the plaguing presence of a past that “has never passed” since their socio-economic condition seems doomed to stillness. Therefore, the retrieval of the past is reckoned as the solution to solve the presence-absence afflicting African Americans. On the one hand, the past needs to be rescued in order to fill the “spaces” of their personal and collective history, on the other hand, its recovery would force African Americans to face the haunting legacy of slavery. It is in this context that the task of the artistic creation is turned into the task of re-writing the past.

Aligned with the concerns of the 1980s and the 1990s, August Wilson dedicated his twentieth-century cycle of plays to the reconstruction and exploration of African American history. In the late 1970s, he decided to write a play for each decade of the twentieth century: *Gem of the Ocean*, 1910s; *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1920s; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1930s; *The Piano Lesson*, 1940s; *Seven Guitars*, 1950s; *Fences*, 1960s; *Two Trains Running*, 1970s; *Jitney*, 1970s; *King Hedley II*, 1980s. With his cycle of plays he aimed at providing a cultural and historical past where African Americans could negotiate their present. As he often clarified, he is not a historian but a playwright committed to recomposing African Americans' identity. In order to achieve this goal, he wants to make African Americans aware that they are the heirs of a secular and breathing culture. Accordingly, in Wilson's theatre, the historical events serve as a context for the lives of characters but the real focus of each play is on everyday customs and beliefs that conceal layers of history. In *August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision: An interview* by Sandra Shannon, August Wilson compares his artistic project to a four-hundred-year-old autobiography of black experience (203) and declares that the source of his four-hundred-year-old memory resides in black “mythology, history, cultural organizations, [...] economics, all of these things that are part of the culture” (Shannon,202). Therefore, it

can be inferred that the past has survived concealed inside the language, the gestures and the habits of common people. Thence, his theatre starts from exploring the lives of black people in order to reveal its existence. To recollect the missing pieces of their identity and to redress “the unfinished business of the past”, as the critic Harry J. Elam put it, can be a traumatic event, nevertheless the past needs to be remembered. So, through his theatre, the playwright not only wants to invite African Americans to recollect the past, but also help them to learn how “to integrate their past in the circumstances of the now” (Elam, 237).

It would be reductive to claim that the only aim of August Wilson’s theatre is to reconstruct the historical past by means of a monumental artistic project. Obviously enough, he is strongly concerned with proving that African Americans have a common past that would offer a solid background where they could root their identity. However, after analyzing his plays, I have reached the conclusion that the peculiarity of his theatre consists of highlighting how the process of remembering can be riddled with difficulties and turmoil. In this way, he wants to force the audience to ponder carefully on the question: why should we remember given that remembering is painful? My dissertation aims at exploring what are the implications of dealing with memory and the solutions that Wilson’s theatre suggests to overcome its weight. Accordingly, I will try to demonstrate that both the absence as well as the presence of the past can entail a dislocation in time and space that dooms the characters’ destiny. In the preface, I provide a theoretical frame to Wilson’s theatre by briefly considering the involvement of the arts in the reconstruction of the past. Then, in the following chapters I will proceed to analyze three major plays by August Wilson by using the technique of close reading: *Fences* (1987), *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), *The Piano Lesson* (1990). Rather than following the chronological order, I opted for arranging the plays in order to obtain a comparative perspective of the features of memory and the consequences of its presence and absence. Accordingly, chapter one is mainly concerned with the exploration of *personal memory* and the implications of the *presence* of the past for the individual; on the contrary, chapter two is mainly concerned with the exploration of *collective memory* and the implications of the *absence* of the past both for the collectivity and the individual. Finally, the third chapter recomposes the dichotomy personal and collective memories, absence and presence of the past and the correlated consequences in a story that covers four generations reaching back slavery times.

In detail, the first chapter is dedicated to the analysis of *Fences* and it is arranged in two sections. In the first section, I explore the concept of personal memory concealed in the relationship between father and son. I argue that the presence of the past dooms the protagonist, Troy Maxson, to live in an anachronistic dimension that prevents him from finding self-definition in the present. The second part is dedicated to exploring how the haunting presence of the past can be overcome through an act of remembrance and self-responsibility. The second chapter is dedicated to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and it is arranged in three sections. Given the importance of music in Wilson's theatre, I decided to dedicate the first section to explaining why music, in particular the Blues, can be defined a shrine of collective memories. The two following parts are dedicated to proving that to ignore or reject the cultural and historical past can have far-reaching consequences for both the collectivity and the individual. Finally, I chose to conclude my dissertation with the analysis of *The Piano Lesson*. This play synthesizes the concept of personal and collective memory as well as the consequences of the absence and presence of the past in the story of the Charles family. In the first section I will argue that the story of the Charles and their inherited piano is metaphor of African American history and their cultural and historical legacy. Then, I will try to recompose the dichotomy of personal stories and collective history by showing that they are strictly intertwined in the African American recollection. Moreover, I will point out that the play not only shows why African Americans should accept the legacy of their past but also teaches how they should put that legacy into use. Finally, before drawing my conclusions, I considered it important to contextualize August Wilson's cycle in American theatre. I will try to demonstrate that his theatre proves that the process of recollecting African American cultural and historical past is fundamental for healing both African American identity and American identity since it involves in a process of recollection a society that the philosopher Cornel West has defined "infamous for its brash will to historical forgetfulness" (Fabre, O'Meally 3).

- Chapter 1 -  
*Fences*

1.1 *Locked inside the Past*

You just be out on the road by your lonesome and you  
see one of them trains coming and you just kinda go like this...  
-August Wilson, *Fences*

In Wilson's theatre, the railroad is a metaphor that black characters usually employ to describe their lives. As if they were trains, they feel doomed to follow a definite path, devoid of the possibility of deciding their own destination. Consequently, they experience a feeling of entrapment and bewilderment that make them "go like this", to-and-fro along an alien path. In *Fences*, Wilson investigates the origins of this condition by trying to explain why some African Americans perceive their existence as trapped. The story of Troy Maxson, protagonist of the play, suggests that this condition stems from the inability to negotiate with the legacy of the past. In the specific case, Troy's inability to confront the psychological scars left him from his father prevents him from finding self-definition in the present. Tragically, instead of tracing his own path, he feels bound to cover again the same paternal path from which he wished to escape. In so doing, he locks himself in an anachronistic dimension.

In *Fences*, we are spectators of the everyday life of an African American family living in a two-story brick house, whose yard is partially fenced, in Pittsburgh in the late 1950s. The characters are Troy Maxson, a garbage man in his 50s; Rose, his wife; Cory, their son; Lyons, Troy's son from a previous marriage; Bono, Troy's best friend and Gabriel, Troy's brother, who is mentally impaired after being wounded in the Second World War. The play spins on the figure of Troy who is commonly defined as one of the strongest characters created by Wilson's artistry. It might be suggested that Troy's impact on the audience is due to his "largeness": his character embodies the opposite extremes of humankind by gathering great strength and great weakness. For this reason, he has often been compared with heroes of

ancient Greek theatre, whose stature cannot leave the audience indifferent. Much like the tragic heroes, Troy Maxson is likely to raise extreme reactions in the audience: on the one hand, his courage and determination in life make people admire and love him, on the other hand, his mistakes make them strongly disapprove him.

From the very beginning of the play it is possible to perceive Troy's determination and strength. He is defined by the playwright as an exemplary man that should be admired because of his "honesty", "capacity for hard work" (F, 1) and determination to right wrongs. He works hard as garbage man and every Friday evening he hands in his paycheck to his wife who cares about domestic issues; he loves his wife and he likes manifesting his affection for her in public, although his appreciation can be vulgar or just "gin-talk" as his friend Bono says. Furthermore, he takes care of his brother, who has been permanently injured during the Second World War, and his two sons. In particular, he is concerned about the eldest, Lyons, who wishes to become a musician but, as a matter of fact, he does not strive to achieve his goal and prefers taking advantage of others instead of working. Then, Troy tries to get him straight and teach him what he has learned from life: his warning is that you have to learn to take care of yourself and learn your mistakes because "Life don't owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself" (18). It can be implied that Troy is a self-made man, who knows how tough life can be since you cannot get "something for nothing" but you have to strive hard to achieve anything and improve your condition. For that reason, he is not scared of complaining about discrimination at work and claiming equal rights for black workers. He strongly believes that everyone deserves a chance in order to prove their skills, even though to obtain your chance means "driving the truck" instead of picking up garbage by hand.

Apparently, he seems a man who has learned from his mistakes and acknowledges his responsibilities towards his family. After paying for his youthful mistakes by spending fifteen years in jail, he seems to have learned how to move on in life: he finds a job, he tries to be a good husband for Rose and he takes care of his relatives. However, this portrait gradually appears to be incomplete. The stormy relationship with his younger son reveals some scars of his past that have not healed yet and negatively influence his existence and the relationship with his family and his friend. The argument with his son Cory is triggered by Troy's refusal to let Cory play football. According to Troy, his son has to

give up his dream of playing football because he is doomed to have no satisfaction in sports, even worse he might end up “hauling people’s garbage” if he does not learn how to earn a living by getting a good job. Underneath his tirade, there is the belief that race discrimination affects the lives of black people. Then, Troy strongly claims:

[...]The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you can have something can’t nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how you to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people’s garbage. (F, 35)

Essentially, he wants to prevent his son from suffering, as he explains to Rose: “I got good sense, woman. I got sense enough not to let my boy get hurt over playing no sports” (39). His thought roots in his own past experience: in fact, he painfully regrets that he could not pursue a career as baseball player because of race discrimination.

Their dispute brings up the issue of race discrimination and segregation, which is still part of black history in the 1950s. As Harry J. Elam observes in *The Doing and Undoing of History*, Wilson’s cycle interrogates the condition of “African American freedom” from the Emancipation until modern times. According to the scholar, Wilson’s theatre “recognizes the racism that persistently keeps blacks at the bottom of the economic system in America” (245). The introductory section of *Fences* underlines the social inequality experienced by black workers. The playwright recalls that the northern American cities used to attract both “the destitute” from Europe and the African American from the rural South at the turn of the century. Thanks to the hard works of all immigrants, the cities grew in the following decades. Nevertheless, the European and the African American experienced a different treatment: as far as the European were concerned, the city “offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true”; as far as the African American were concerned, “they were no offered such welcome or participation. The city rejected them [...] They sold their muscles and their bodies” by accepting humble jobs (F, xvii). By means of the characters, Wilson’s plays show difficulties and obstacles that blacks had to face in order to make a living and improve their conditions. If the character of Troy Maxson in *Fences* exemplifies the unequal treatment reserved for blacks in the 1950s; the characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black*

*Bottom* exemplify the exploitation of black musicians in the late 1920s; finally, *The Piano Lesson* correlates with the first play by showing that black people were given the humblest jobs even in the 1940s. Since Wilson's cycle shows the unfair and difficult work conditions of each decade, it was accused of featuring a "tone of victimization", as the critic Robert Brustein put it. However, it can be objected that Wilson does not represent black characters defeated by a racist environment; on the contrary, his characters embody "warrior spirits" who are able to endure the difficulties of a racist socioeconomic system. As Elam claims in *Men of August*, Troy strives all his life enduring poverty, prison and discrimination thanks to his ability to reinvent himself (105). In the same way, Berniece in *The Piano Lesson* manages to find a job and provide for her family despite the fact she is a black young widowed woman in the 1940s. Therefore, without diminishing the issue of racial discrimination, it can be argued that Wilson's theatre aims at spurring black audience to reflect upon what really influences the condition of their lives. Thus, even though Troy blames discrimination, the analysis of his character will show that the main obstacle to his realization is due to his inability to shake off the burden of the past.

The dispute with his son over baseball serves to cast light on Troy's attitude towards his past. Troy denies his son the opportunity of playing football because he does not believe that blacks can have equal opportunity of making a career as sport players, as his personal experience should exemplify. However, his words deserve to be carefully considered. Troy keeps on complaining about the fact that he could not become a professional baseball player because blacks were not allowed to play in Major League at that time. However, as John Timpane points out in his essay *Filling the Time: Reading History in the Drama of August Wilson*, Troy's statement is not completely correct. As a matter of fact, Troy did not play baseball when there was a strict segregation in sports. Indeed, he used to play baseball in the late 1940s in jail, where he actually learned to play it, which corresponds with that period when Major Leagues started accepting some black players. In any case, even if Troy had been right and his career had been wasted because of racial discrimination, there would have been another obstacle to his dream: his age. In fact, when he was the right age to play baseball, he did not play that sport; when Troy was released from jail, he was thirty-seven; then he was too old to play baseball as Rose points out:

ROSE: Troy, why don't you admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once... why don't you admit that?

TROY: What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me I was too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!

ROSE: How's was you gonna play ball when you were over forty? Sometimes I can't get no sense out of you. (F, 39)

In addition to rejecting his wife's arguments, he denies the changes occurred until then. Both his wife and his son Cory try to persuade him that things are slowly improving for black people, as Rose says: "Times have changed since you were playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then" (9). Not only Rose but also Cory tries to persuade him by reporting a number of black players who regularly play in major leagues. Last but not least, football represents a real possibility for Cory to have a chance in life because it would be his passport to college. Then, Cory desperately shouts at his father: "I get good grades, Pop. That's why the recruiter wants to talk with you. You got to keep up your grades to get recruited. This way I'll be going to college. I'll get a chance..." (36). Sadly, his plea is silenced by a sturdy answer: "First you gonna get your butt down there to the A&P and get your job back" (36). Thus, he refuses to give heed to the reasonable arguments supported by his relatives and remains stubbornly stuck to his belief. Therefore, it might be argued that Troy seems unable to acknowledge or accept the facts. What is left to understand is what causes his blindness.

It can be argued that his inability to recognize changes in history is due to inner scars. His painful past has caused a resentment that blinds him to a new reality where tiny socio-historical improvements are possible. Although Troy relates his resentment to his adulthood when he had lost his dream to become a baseball player, his behavior has far deeper origins. He inherited these scars from his childhood, when he happened to be the victim of his own father, a black poor sharecropper brutalized and dehumanized by an unequal system during the Reconstruction. Unable to come to terms with his own experience, he has developed a resistance to change: he seems unable either to recognize a new reality or to evolve along with it. Tragically, he seems to have internalized his own father's story to the point that he re-lives it instead of travelling a new path. Then, burdened by a past that never seems to pass, he carries his life on:

ROSE: Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it.



TROY: (Slow, methodical.) Woman... I do the best I can do. I come 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. 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... and I fall down on you and try to blast a hole into forever. I get up Monday morning... find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday.

(Pause.)

That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else. (F, 40)

The last line portrays the human fragility of a man who is trying hard to take on his responsibility and perform his duties as father and husband. By reading and listening to Troy's words, it is possible to perceive the burden of his existence. Even from a syntactical point of view the lines are quite telling: they are composed of short sentences, separated by full stops, which convey a flat and monotonous rhythm. The rhythm mirrors the meaning of Troy's discourse: he is portraying a tedious and flat life, where the same recurring images return day after day. He pronounces his discourse as slowly as he carries his life on. An invisible burden, which marks the rhythm of his voice as well as his steps, is slowly depriving him of the necessary energy to move on in life and eventually, draining him of his vital spirit. It can be argued that an oppressive feeling of responsibility is gradually forcing him to be the person he actually is. His role as father and husband is so exhausting that he is completely worn out both physically and spiritually, neither blood nor tears are left inside him. Even the sexual intercourse with his wife becomes a quite brutal event, deprived of any feeling except the willingness to get *forever* lost.

Therefore, the matter of responsibility increasingly becomes central to the play. Slowly, the audience is led to ponder on the question "What does being responsible mean for Troy?". In particular, the matter is directly approached in the dialogue he exchanges with his younger son. Once again, Cory tries to persuade his father to let him participate in the football training, but after receiving the same frustrating and disappointing answer, he discloses his inner thought by making a simple and clear question: "How come you ain't never liked me?"(37). Abruptly, the question casts on the stage the conflicting relationship between father and son; it is the first time that Cory has talked back to his father and gone straight to the point. In this scene, the tension between them reaches one of the highest points in the play; Cory's question seems to tear apart the curtains of the stage by leaving the sound of his voice echoing through the silent room, where the audience stays still, suspended in a timeless illusion that precedes Troy's answer:

Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you? What law is there say I got to like you? [...] (37)

Like you? I go out of here every morning... bust my butt... putting up with that crackers every day... cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw.

(Pause.)

It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house... sleep you behind on my bedclothes... fill you belly up with my food... cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not' cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you!

Let's get this straight right here... before it go along any further...I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't gives me my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives me cause he owe me. I done give you everything I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and your mama worked that out between us. And liking your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't try and go through life worrying about if somebody like you or not. You best be making sure they doing right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy? (38)

Without any doubt, Troy's words are tough. He looks like a strict father who wants to get his son ready to face the world outside. However, it is possible to detect something anomalous in his discourse. Indeed, there is something disturbing about his definition of responsibility. After listening to his words, it can be implied that to be responsible for someone means providing for him or her as far as material goods are concerned, such as food or bedclothes; accordingly, he uses the commercial meaning of the verb "to owe", as if a father owes his son a material reward just as an employer owes a paycheck to his employee instead of using such a verb to express moral obligation (Bogumil, 48). Therefore, he places the relationship between father and son and that between employer and employee on the same level, as if these two types of relationship shared a common nature. In this way, he deprives his relationship with his own son of any kind of feeling. As he claims, there is not a law that forces you to love someone who shares your flesh and blood, the only thing that requires you to take care of your son is a sense of responsibility. The same kind of responsibility that rules the relationship with his wife.

At this point, another question spontaneously follows the previous one: "From whom does Troy inherit his idea of responsibility?". The answer to this question seems to be: from his father. Thanks to Troy's narration of his childhood, it is possible to draw a parallel between his present attitude and his past life. His memory is haunted by the figure of his father, a black sharecropper, bent, brutalized and finally, dehumanized by the hard life that blacks experienced during the period of Reconstruction. Let's consider some meaningful extracts drawn from Troy's memories:

TROY: Sometimes I wish I hadn't known my daddy. He ain't cared nothing about no kids. A kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. When it come time for eating... he ate first. If there was anything left over, that's what you got. [...] (50)

[...]

The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin.[...] (F, 51)

Accordingly, it is possible to detect some correspondences between Troy's behavior and his father's. First of all, both cases feature the idea of relationship between father and son based on a commercial level: "all he wanted was for you to learn how to walk. So he could start you to working" (51). Despite his father's inhuman treatment towards his children, Troy refrains from giving a totally bad judgment of his father's behavior. In fact, his father is acknowledged for staying instead of walking off. Unlike Troy's mother, he did not have the so-called "walking blues":

TROY: [...] He ain't knew how to do nothing but farm. No, he was *trapped* and I think he knew it. But I'll say this for him... he felt a *responsibility* toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have... but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us... made his own way.(F, 51, *emphases mine*)

And he adds:

TROY: My daddy ain't had them walking blues! What you talking about? He stayed right there with his family. But he was just as evil as he could be. (51)

It might be argued that his sense of responsibility towards his wife and his son is based on his father's example. What matters for Troy is the act of staying and giving the essential supplies; to establish loving, respectful or at least, human relations seems not to be part of the deal or to put it in another way, to supply for your family can finally justify your mistakes. Last but not least, the extracts above provide another clue that helps us to draw a parallel between past and present, between his father and Troy, and get a more completed portrait of Troy: Troy feels entrapped just as his father was "trapped".

He eventually looks for an escape. He finds it in an extra-marital relationship that he justifies by saying that he is "responsible for it. I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself" (69). Later in the play, this feeling of entrapment arises again in his answer to Rose who pleads with him not to push her away: "I ain't pushing nobody away. Just give me some space. That's all. Just give me some room to breathe" (69). These last lines seem to confirm that Troy correlates the idea of self-responsibility with the idea of imprisonment. In other words, the act of taking on his own responsibility implies becoming a prisoner of his role and sacrificing his life, or the best part of his life. As he explains to Rose, to have a chance of moving out from their house allows him to have "a different

understanding about myself. I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems... be a different man. I ain't got to wonder how I'm gonna pay the bills or get the roof fixed. I can just be a *part of myself* that I ain't never been" (69, *emphases mine*). Probably, this is why he keeps on postponing the construction of the fence: it embodies the physical representation of that familial responsibility that is slowly choking him. As his son notices, as soon as Troy starts building the fence up, he feels the need to move out and visit his lover.

Finally, the clash between father and son draws the last connection with Troy's past. The fight between Cory and Troy mirrors the fight between Troy and his father by suggesting that the Maxsons are unable to escape from the circle of their (hi)story. The stormy relationship between father and son proves that the figure of his father keeps influencing Troy's behavior. At the end of Act 1, while Troy and Bono are discussing their childhood, Troy recalls the tragic moment when he became a man: he was fourteen years old and he had, for the first time, the strength to fight against his father. He did it in order to save his girlfriend from his father who was going to rape her, as he narrates:

[...] When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man... at fourteen years of age.

(Pause)

Now it was my turn to run him off. I picked up them same reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him. The gal jumped up and run off... and when my daddy turned to face me, I could see why the devil had never come to get him... cause he was the devil himself. I don't know what happened. When I woke up, I was lying right there by the creek, and Blue... this old dog we had... was licking my face. I thought I was *blind*. I couldn't see nothing. Both my eyes were swollen shut [...]. (F, 52, *emphasis mine*)

After this episode Troy is left with one single choice: he has to start his new life somewhere else. In order to do it, he has to set as much distance as he can between himself and his father. Tragically, that fourteen-year-old boy who has walked so many miles to separate himself from his father seems to have travelled a circular path that has led him to the starting point: in fact, the further Troy is separated from his father both in space and time, the closer he gets to him by acting like him to the point that he eventually rejects his own son. Despite the fact that he interposes so many miles between himself and his father, he feels that his father is inside himself and the only thing that separates them was "the matter of few years" (52). His words suggest that he feels doomed to become like his father because of a destiny inherited through blood. As Elam argues in *Men of August*, the renewed fight between Troy and Cory

suggests that the Maxson sons are “irrevocably caught in the cycle of history” (132). The destiny of Maxson fathers is doomed to repeat itself with that circularity that curiously echoes the circular destiny of the members of the Oedipal myth, where the crimes of the ancestors inevitably affected the lives of their descendants. In addition to the matter of the culpability of fathers, the ancient myth might provide interesting insights concerning the issue of blindness. Indeed, the myth allows one to speculate on the meaning of the blindness affecting Troy after he had fought against his father. It is commonly known that Oedipus blinds himself after discovering he has killed his father and slept with his mother. Besides being an act of punishment, it symbolizes the limited power of human knowledge confronted with the merciless divinity called Tuke, namely Destiny (Lauriola, 240). What can be interesting for our analysis is the belief that the act of seeing is associated in ancient times with the capacity for knowing and learning. The most popular example of an ancient mythological figure that exemplifies this belief is Ulysses, a name that has the same root as Oedipus: indeed, their names stem from the verb οἶδα, which literally means “I know because I have seen”. Therefore, if sight is associated with the capacity for learning and improving your knowledge, it might be speculated that Troy has been affected by a partial blindness that has prevented him from learning from the trauma of his childhood and moving on in his life. The burden of his memories keeps him entrapped by forcing him to find a pattern of behavior in his past instead of becoming aware that there are other choices and opportunities. Therefore, it is no wonder that the gap between father and son increases to the point that they cannot understand each other anymore. They embody two opposite positions: on the one hand, Troy exemplifies the past that keeps you static, on the other hand, Cory embodies a hopeful and dynamic future.

At this point, we can understand why Troy refuses to listen to his son. He remains stuck to his past and he does not manage to “see” his present. It looks like his discriminatory and painful past is the only lens he handles to scrutinize life. According to Timpane, even Troy’s language proves that he keeps living outside the present. The critic points out that his language is riddled with metaphors concerning baseball: for instance, he compares his family to the condition called “safe” in a baseball match; instead, he compares an affair to a thrilling challenge. To use Troy’s words, an extra-marital relationship means “to be able to steal second. Do you understand after eighteen years I wanted to steal second” (70). Thence, the critic argues that Troy’s baseball obsession proves that he lives in a regretful never-to-be life

instead of the present. In the same way, he keeps complaining about his daily life by experiencing that feeling of oppression, as his father did, instead of placing a fence between his past and his present, instead of recognizing how much his life is influenced by discrimination and how much it is influenced by his own choices. It can be concluded that ,underneath his dissatisfaction for having lost the chance of becoming a great baseball player, there is a resentment that is rooted in a past further back than his own childhood, a past when blacks were forced into slavery: his anger stems from the fact that there should not have been a time called too “early” either to be allowed to play baseball or to be considered a human being. Burdened by the inability to deal with this inherent scar of African American history, he is locked inside the circle of the past.

### 1.2 *Exorcizing the Past through remembrance and self-responsibility*

The story of *Fences* shows that the fragmentation of the community is the final result of a fragmentation that has very deep roots: it mirrors the fragmentation of familial ties, which mirrors the fragmentation of the individual. Even though Wilson acknowledges that the socio-historical background has to be blamed for the disruption of black identity, he does not aim at performing a painful history that can justify the unrealized life of his black characters. On the contrary, he wants to teach that the legacy of the past can be overcome by re-remembering it, facing it and getting it “embodied or resized” in the present (Elam, 145). This is the lesson that he wants to convey through the story of the Maxson sons: only after they have recovered and faced the figure of the father, will they re-remember their identity. If Cory “embodies” his past by learning what to accept of the memory of his father, Troy exorcizes the presence of the past by physically embodying the paternal figure. Curiously, Wilson chose Rose, a female character, in order to teach Troy the meaning of being a responsible father.

In *August Wilson Explains his Dramatic Vision: An interview*, Sandra D. Shannon asks August Wilson what attitude he has towards female characters and why they have not been the focus of his dramas. Then, he answers:

[...] I doubt seriously if I would make a woman the focus of my work simply because of the fact that I am a man, and I guess because of the ground on which I stand and the viewpoint from which I perceive the world. [...] I try to portray them from their own viewpoint as opposed to my viewpoint. I try to, to the extent that I am able to step around on the other side of the table, if you will, and try to look at things from their viewpoint [...]. (222)

Despite the playwright's apologetic answer, I would suggest that the role of women is quite central in Wilson's plays. Accordingly, when women appear on the scene, their characters often stand out, even though they are not the protagonists of the play, through their powerful voice and thought; in addition, they usually expound relevant points of view concerning the themes of the play; take for instance the feisty character represented by Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, or Risa in *Two Trains Running*, a very intriguing character that stands out in the scene with her silent presence. I would suggest that this is particularly true with regard to the role of Rose in *Fences*. Throughout the play, Rose's function is to mediate between Troy and Cory and to right Troy's tendency to exaggerate by embellishing or denying the truth when he narrates some events that occurred in his life. She could be defined as a complaisant woman who fits well her role of wife and mother, who has patiently tried to get him addressed in the right direction for eighteen years of marriage. The role of Rose is also stressed by the wise voice of Bono, who repeatedly makes Troy aware of the role that Rose fulfills in his life. Take for instance the following extracts: "Rose'll keep you straight. You get off the track, she'll straighten you up" (55); "Troy... I done known you seem like damn near my whole life. You and Rose both.[...] You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That the first time I knew you had any sense" (62). However, it is when she stops being comprehensive that her voice comes out for real and one realizes Rose's importance: Rose is the component of the family who strives to live the present by balancing the weight of the past.

If we consider the role of Rose on the literal level, it can be claimed that she has a middle position since she has to mediate between father and son. However, if we analyze her role on the metaphorical level, her position does not change. Accepting that Troy metaphorically embodies the past

and Cory, instead, embodies the future, Rose who stands between them represents the present. Even Rose, as well as Troy, has to live side by side with the burden of a troubled past. Nevertheless, she does not deny that past, but she keeps it in mind as model of comparison to create a better present. Neither does she allow the past to spoil her life nor to compromise the future of her son or the future generation. Thence, Rose's decision to keep Troy's child, born from his extra marital affair, is coherent with her attitude towards life: by accepting Raynell, she strongly claims that you have to be responsible for both your role and the future of your beloved. Raynell symbolizes a burning defeat for Rose since her birth smashes into pieces that kind of life she had been trying to achieve for eighteen years. Furthermore, it represents something even worse than a defeat because it dramatically materializes her past made of "half-families", as she desperately recalls Troy:

[...] And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers...my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and your mama and my papa and your mama...

[...]

I ain't never wanted that for none of my children. (F, 68)

Therefore, when Troy asks for Rose's help in bringing the baby up, the scene is inundated with pathos not only thanks to the artistry of Wilson, who manages to create a poetically moving picture of a father, whose big hands clumsily handle the baby and whose "largeness engulfs and seems to swallow it" (79), but also because Rose's positive answer reveals the powerful message that lies inside the play: "you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child" (79) as she says; in other words, you cannot let your past affect your present and future.

As August Wilson claims in *August Wilson Explains His Dramatic Vision: In Interview* by Shannon, there are "twenty-six years of writing poetry" underneath his way of writing plays (202). According to the playwright, thanks to poetry "one thinks differently than one thinks as a playwright", in particular, one learns to think by means of metaphors. The analysis of his plays confirms that "the idea of metaphor" has a central position in his theatre: metaphors serve to grasp the message of the play. The peculiarity of this artist is that he uses as metaphors very simple and quotidian images belonging to everyday life. Thus, even a quite complex issue can be expounded and exemplified by means of simple images that can be easily visualized and understood by the audience. As far as this play is concerned, the



image inspiring the title itself is quite telling. Indeed, the fence is closely connected with the lives of the protagonists. By analyzing its metaphorical meanings, it is possible to get a more complete picture of the characters. Moreover, it casts a light over the pivotal matter of self-responsibility. From the beginning of the play Rose has been bothering Troy in order to get a fence built around the yard. Initially, she is the only one, except for Bono, who is concerned about it. Neither Cory nor Troy seem to understand the importance of a fence, as the following lines highlight:

CORY: I don't see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.

TROY: Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain't got nothing nobody want.

BONO: Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on you all. She loves you. (F, 61)

For Rose, the wish to have a fence around the house is a way to valorize what she has achieved in life. That fence marks a separation between her past and her present for which she has decided to be responsible. As Bono keenly observes, she wants it to protect what she cares for most, her family. Thus the fence marks the territory where she can breathe and reap the seeds of her commitment. Rose does not deny that it can be hard to choose to be responsible, since it means you have to be able to balance your “wants” and “needs” most of all, if your responsibility concerns marriage. Nevertheless, her character wants to show that being responsible means that you have a chance to direct your life and destiny, even though it means having just “an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big city neighborhood”. Unlike Rose, Troy considers responsibility a commitment that drains life out of yourself instead of enriching you. The image of the unfinished fence is aligned with his reluctance to take on his responsibility as father and husband. Troy cannot stand working at the fence for more than a few seconds before moving off the yard and escaping to take shelter in his lover's house as if the materialization of a fence around his yard were a more concrete obstacle to the escape from his heavy responsibility.

Through the example of Rose, Wilson shows that it is possible to break the “cycle of history” by learning how to use the past. By remembering the painful events of her childhood, she commits herself to creating a present different from the past. She decides to recover her life by investing in the family even though it represents the most painful memory of her childhood. Taking on her responsibility as mother

and wife is her way of facing the haunting shadows of the past. Thus she manages to transform her family into her present, her fenced yard to hold on to:

I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn't take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn't gonna bloom. /But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. (71)

For Troy, the painful past is embodied by the paternal figure. Then, in order to break the spell of the haunting past, he should take on his responsibility as father and husband. However, unlike Rose, he seems to be unable to re-start from the past. His memories cause an inherent laceration that influences the perception of himself and ruins the relationship with his family. Thus, instead of using a fence to gather what he cares for most, he builds a fence between himself and his beloved. It can be speculated that he wants to keep them away from him because he feels that his destiny is to become like his father. For this reason he desperately confesses to his wife: "I don't want him [Cory] be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get" (39). Through the play, Troy narrates that he has already fought against Death and he stands ready to fight again. I would argue that the image of Troy engaged in a battle with Death stands as metaphor of the battle that Troy fights against what he perceives as an unavoidable destiny written in the blood. Thus, rather than indicating physical death, the figure of Death could be related to Ananke, the term that ancient Greeks used to indicate inescapable fate. Tragically, the further he strives to distance himself from what he perceives as ananke, the more he gets locked inside it, blind to changes and deaf to people who surround him, as Cory says: "You don't want to listen to nobody!" (57).

Even Cory has inherited the same conflicting relationship with his own father, which has eventually troubled the perception of himself. Much like Troy, he desperately wants to run away from Troy as far as possible but he feels fatally linked to him. And so he confesses to his mother during Troy's funeral:

CORY: The whole time I was growing up... living in his house... Papa was like a shadow that follows you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was anymore. That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama.

ROSE: You just like him. You got him in you good.

CORY: Don't tell me that, Mama.

ROSE: You Troy Maxson all over again.

CORY: I don't want to be Troy Maxson. I want to be me.

ROSE: You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. *That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there.* Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't... and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong... but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm. He wasn't always right. Sometimes when he touched he bruised. And sometimes when he took me in his arms he cut. (F, 97, *emphases mine*)

Cory wishes to shake off his father's shadow because he perceives it as a negative presence that will swallow him up. Once again, it is Rose who helps the troubled son to look at the shadow from a different perspective. She explains that the shadow is "the legacy left him by his father" (Elam, 145) and it is a fundamental part of his own identity. Rose admits that it is difficult to grow surrounded by the shadow of your father; nevertheless, he has to accept it in order to strengthen his own Self and be ready to face "the world out there". To translate the metaphor of the shadow to African American history: Wilson invites African Americans to face the shadows of their history. Wilson does not deny that accepting the past can be a painful and traumatic experience: developing your identity surrounded by the haunting past implies a vigorous effort in order to *cut* your space and find your room in it. Nonetheless, the past needs to be acknowledged because you cannot have a solid identity if you lack a piece of your story. Even worse, the forgotten or denied past can turn into a haunting legacy that prevents you from living your present and future. According to Elam in *Men of August*, "Wilson's cycle suggests that the tensions between father and son [...] must be addressed by confronting the past, finding room for forgiveness as well as resistance, re-membering the 'father's story' in ways that allow one to hold on but also to let go" (145). In the same way, African Americans are invited to remember the painful historical past, to negotiate with it, to get it integrated in their memory and finally, to let it go in order to move on.

Finally, both father and son seem to have learned Rose's lesson. Following his mother's teaching, Cory stops rejecting the legacy of his father and gets it integrated in his story. Once again, Wilson uses a meaningful image to suggest the process of re-membering of father and son's stories. During his father's funeral, together with his sister Raynell, Cory completes the song whose single stanza

used to be sung by Troy. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the music is a *lieu de mémoire* that transmits African American (hi)stories from one generation to another. Therefore, by completing his father's song, Cory accepts the inheritance of his father's story and becomes ready to add his own story. Even Troy seems to have learned how to deal with the legacy of his past: he finishes building the fence for his daughter Raynell. Therefore, it can be assumed that he has finally won his fight against destiny by taking on his responsibility as father. The retrieval of the paternal figure allows both characters to recompose their identity: Cory recomposes his inner laceration by accepting his legacy, to use Wilson's metaphor, by making an accommodation inside the shadow of the past; Troy embraces the present by enclosing himself inside the fenced yard where he agrees to be Raynell's father. Through the recovery of the paternal figure, the familial unity is finally recomposed. According to the ancient Greek, your Fate is not written until you are given a name. Troy's name recalls high, insurmountable, indestructible walls that keep people out. Nonetheless, the final act of fencing his own yard lets the audience think that he has been able to change that destiny that he thought was written in his blood. Through the story of Troy Maxson, Wilson wants to point out that there exists neither such a concept called *ananke*, nor blood destiny, nor fixed railroad that determines your path. Instead, there are painful scars that risk haunting your present if you do not come to terms with them. As *Roses* teaches, an act of remembrance together with an act of self-responsibility represent the first step towards the construction of a new path.

- Chapter 2 -  
*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

### *2.1 A voyage through the Blues*

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* introduces the reader to the complex issues concealed in the notes of the Blues. August Wilson started working on a play about the exploitation of black musicians in 1976. This early idea would reach its final shape several years later in 1984, when inspired by some blues singers, he decided to blend the issue of black exploitation with the importance that the Blues have in black people's life. The play was named after a song whose title intrigued him: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. He chose a recording studio as setting to present tricky issues such as the value of the Blues as lieu de mémoire, the relationship between the black and white world, the tensions within the black community and last but not least, the search for identity of the characters on the stage. All these themes are linked to the fascinating world called the Blues, whose protection, Wilson seems to suggest, is required to save black history, culture and identity. Therefore, our analysis will start by exploring the music that represents an invaluable means to discover and understand numerous issues concerning black history and identity.

Music is a fundamental element of Wilson's theatre since it usually plays crucial roles: on the one hand, it offers insights into the play by helping the audience to achieve an utter comprehension of the character or the event on the stage; on the other hand, it serves as lieu de mémoire that should reconnect the audience with the past. As far as *Fences* is concerned, it can be noticed that blues songs are often related to crucial or intense scenes. For example, Troy sings his beloved song "Old Blue" when he realizes he has lost his familial affection, in particular his wife's love; later, the same song is sung by Cory and Raynell during their father's funeral. Therefore, it can be speculated that the song fulfills two important functions: in the first case, it serves as a way to express a pain that words can neither explain nor convey; in the second case, the song becomes the ground of reconciliation between the new generation and the old generation. As far as its function as lieu de mémoire is concerned, it can be

suggested that the music provides another connection: the blues song links Troy's pain to a collective past dimension. As Ralph Ellison put it, the Blues is a music that contains a permanent note of pain that makes you feel part of a continuum:

The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (qtd. in Elam, 38)

Aligned with Ellison's definition, Harry J. Elam in *The Music is the Message* defines the Blues a music that becomes "a conduit for connecting past and present" thanks to its form and content (18). Considering the previous definitions, Troy's pain expressed by the song could represent both a personal feeling related to his own story and an inner pain linked to a continuum of physical and psychological suffering unraveling through African American history from slavery times until the present, of which the blues represents both its manifestation and the spiritual healing. Therefore, his song would provide a common ground where the audience unconsciously recover and experience the past.

Historically, the blues originated from spirituals, work songs and chants sung by southern African American communities around the end of the nineteenth century. Although it evolved and became an independent genre, it still contains the overtones of its origins. That is the reason why blues music is commonly recognized by many African American artists and thinkers as the depository of their culture and history and it is charged with sacred value. Furthermore, it might be argued that music has always been highly valued by African Americans since slavery times as the musical dimension occurred to replace the linguistic one. As Douglass writes in his autobiography *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, slaves could not freely express their thought, but they had to learn quickly that "a still tongue makes a wide head" (20). As a consequence, they elaborated a new way to secretly express themselves by using slave songs. Later, the ex-slave narrates that "the thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound; [...] they [slaves] would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone" (Douglass, 11) in order to disguise their real feeling and get their thoughts misunderstood by their masters who would interpret these songs as "rude and incoherent" sounds sung in an "unmeaning

jargon". On the contrary, this music was extremely meaningful to people who were able to catch its secrets to the point that Douglass affirms that listening to it could be more useful to understand the horrible character of slavery than "the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject" (12):

[...] they were tones loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery. [...] To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. [...] I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrow of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. (11-12)

Aligned with Douglass's thought, the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois claims that the soul of these songs kept flowing through time until they turned into a sort of archive "full of the voices of the past" (Du Bois, 121). In chapter XIV entitled *Of the Sorrow Songs*, drawn from his work *The Souls of Black Folk*, the scholar considers these songs as a living memory of past times that keep living in the heart of the Negro People. In fact, although he was a free-born northern African American and he did not experience slavery directly, he claims to perceive these songs as echoes of his own past. Since he was a young boy, these songs had been raising a sense of belonging to a world that he felt very close to, as if African American people had always shared a common soul within their music. To quote his own words: "Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine" (121). Over the centuries, he explains, African music underwent a gradual transformation and finally, the original African songs became African American songs by blending African and Caucasian elements. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that "the music is far more ancient than the words" as a consequence, even if the very few original African words left in the songs became obscure to the new generations or eventually, they got completely lost, people could always rely on the music to understand the meaning of their fathers' words.

Since the Blues stems from the evolution of these first African American songs, it inherited the peculiar task of preserving old history and gathering the new one. For this reason, August Wilson defines the Blues "as the best literature we have" (Shannon, 204) by designating it an important source of inspiration and a necessary archive that needs to be consulted in order to reconstruct African American history. In addition, as Elam observes, not only the music content but also its "form" plays a fundamental

role. In fact, it might be speculated that music features an incorruptible but malleable essence that can both preserve old history and get it enriched by the new stories of black people. Therefore, people who perform their own version of a blues song, like Troy Maxson, add their personal story to the continuum of history that keeps flowing and living through the music. In this sense, music represents a shrine of history as well as a creator of it. For this reason, he claimed that the discovery of the Blues represented a “watershed event in my life. It gave me history” (Fishman, 139). If music is considered the historical archive of African-Americans, it follows that the musicians take on a quite peculiar role, as Wilson points out:

They are people who are carriers of the culture, carriers of the ideas- the troubadours in Europe, etc. Except in black America- in this society- they were not valued except among the black folks who understood. I’ve always thought of them as sacred because of the sacred tasks that they had taken upon themselves to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people. (qtd. in Shannon, 204)

Therefore, the choice of placing exploited musicians at the core of the play implies exploring crucial issues related to the survival of black culture and history.

Particularly relevant to understand the value of the Blues is the leader of the band Ma Rainey. She is inspired by a Blues singer who reached fame in the 1920s, who was born in Georgia in a family of black minstrel performers and gained popularity as a singer in F.S. Wolcott’s Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Thanks to recordings, Ma Rainey was the first female blues singer to enjoy widespread popularity. Nevertheless, her popularity in northern cities faded quickly and her career lasted just from 1923 to 1926. As Timpane observes in his essay *Filling the time*, Ma Rainey innovated her style, whose main features derived from the southern sideshow such as the “tent call” that consisted in introducing the singer, by pitching the blues against a large band accompaniment” (74). However, this innovation did not prevent her music from being eclipsed by another singer, Bessie Smith, whose style allowed for “greater possibilities of the singer” since “the vocal line was freed from the accompaniment” (74). Indeed, people preferred the latter to Ma Rainey who died forgotten. Nevertheless, August Wilson did not forget this singer and decided to give her voice renewed power and meaning. In the play, she represents the defender of the Blues against the economically, socially, historically dominant (white) world. A recording studio in Chicago in the late 1920s is turned into the battle field where the Mother of the Blues



clashes with the white managers in order to preserve the soul of this music. As August Wilson writes in the introduction to the play “It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches, that connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other” (MRB, xvi). It can be inferred from his definition that this kind of music allows one to reconnect and at the same time to express who you are and how you deal with life. His definition is further developed in some lines exchanged between Ma Rainey and Cutler, one of the components of her band:

MA RAINEY: White folks don’t understand about the blues. They hear it to 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.

CUTLER: That’s right. You get that understanding and you done got a grip on life to where you can hold your head up and go on to see what life has to offer.

MA RAINEY: The blues help you to get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There is something else in the world. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and I try to fill it up with something.

TOLEDO: You fill it up with something the people can’t be without, Ma. That’s why they call you the Mother of the Blues. You fill up that emptiness in a way ain’t nobody ever thought of doing before. And now they can’t be without it.

MA RAINEY: I ain’t started the blues way of singing. The blues always been here.

[...]

MA RAINEY: They say I started it... but I didn’t . I just helped it out. Filled up the empty space a little bit. [...] (MRB, 82-83).

It might be claimed that Ma serves as a tool by means of which the *flowing continuum* called the blues finds expression. As Ma points out, you cannot invent the Blues, you can just help it to come out. From that continuum you can learn how to go forward in life and how to move on in the emptiness of existence. After reading the passage above, one realizes why Wilson considers it difficult to get a definition of this music. The complexity of the concept is due to the fact they are not talking about music, they are talking about human existence and the tools of survival. The Blues gathers and collects the continuum of voices that go back to the first song, as Du Bois put it. Thus, thanks to that ensemble of sounds you remember your inherited culture and history and you are no longer alone in the emptiness of life. In conclusion, you realize you are part of a community that has handed down its feelings and teaching for centuries. This valuable inheritance becomes a unique support that helps you “get out of the bed in the morning” (F, 18). The feisty character of Ma Rainey should spur the black audience to fight to

preserve the soul of the Blues since to turn it into a mere commodity would mean selling the lieu of mémoire where black people have been singing their (hi)stories until now.

## 2.2 *The leftovers from history: carrots and potatoes*

We come from a long line of honorable people with complex codes of ethics and social discourse who devised myths and systems of cosmology and systems of economics, who were themselves part of a long social and political history.

-August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*

In *Fences* August Wilson deals with a familial history concerning the stormy relationship between father and son. It was argued that the protagonists of this play, Cory and Troy, seem to be entrapped inside a (hi)story that has already been written and is doomed to be repeated. Aligned with Elam's argumentation in *Men of August*, the analysis of *Fences* shows that "the repetition of behavior patterns by father and son" through generations proves that Maxson sons are "irrevocably caught in the cycle of history" (132). Furthermore, this difficult relationship forces the figures of the son "to constantly negotiate with the father's absence and presence within their own sense of self" (Elam, 134). Eventually, the analysis of *Fences* reaches the conclusion that to know your own father's history and accept it as part of your own story represents a first stage to break the circle of history made by generational clashes between father and son. Only in this way can the son shake off the burden of the past and get his identity strengthened. Moreover, even the father can integrate his own identity through the reconciliation with his son. As Elam put it, Wilson aims at making the classical figure of the absentee father reenter history by reestablishing his role:

they [Wilson's plays] repeat the narrative trope of the problematic father, they do not attempt to absent the father or to vilify him for the family's tragic demise. Instead, even as they reveal the faults and frailties of the father, the underlying objective is to reconcile and restore the position of the patriarch within the fabric of family, precisely because the black father seems so apparently lost. (131)

Thus, the recovery of the paternal figure is fundamental in order to reconcile the identity of the sons as well as the unity of the family. As *Fences* exemplifies, familial unity starts undergoing the healing process when Troy decides to take on his role as father holding in his arms the newborn Raynell.

In order to draw a parallel between *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, it might be speculated that familial unity represents a smaller projection of the black community. If *Fences* urges the

black audience to retrieve the paternal figure in order to save familial unity, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* urges the same audience to revalue the figure of the musician in order to save collective unity. If Troy has to become responsible of his role in order to prevent the historical role of the absentee father from spoiling his present, in the same way, the black musician has to become responsible for the Blues in order to avoid the role of absentee from history. In his speech *The Ground on Which I Stand*, August Wilson urges the community to guard its artistic products as they represent the evidence of the community's existence in history:

So much of what makes this country rich in art and manner of spiritual life is the contributions that we as African-Americans have made. We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservation, any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so as to deny us the rewards of our spiritual labors and to become the cultural custodians of our art, our literature, and our lives. To give expression to the spirit that has been shaped and fashioned by our history is of necessity to give voice and vent to the history itself. (12)

Accordingly, to protect the Blues has a twofold achievement: on the one hand, it means recognizing that your history needs to be preserved, on the other hand, it means taking on an active role in dominant (white) history, which prevents you from being a leftover from history.

Wilson's artistry translates the separation between official history and African American history in a recording studio whose structure symbolizes the opposition and separation between the white and black world. Since history unravels through different levels, Wilson decides to stage the play in two different levels by physically separating white actors from black actors. The latter rehearse in the band room "in the basement of the building", instead, the white managers work in the recording room upstairs where they can communicate with the band room only through a horn. Such a structure suggests the subjection of black people to the white world and materializes the connection between the present exploitation of the black musician and the past exploitation of slaves. Recording the Blues in order to make money seems to be the historical development of a form of enslavement that has lasted for centuries; the only difference between these two periods is given by the object that enriches white owners: once it was cotton, nowadays it is music. By analyzing the text, it is possible to observe this link between slavery and the exploitation of black musician from the very beginning. Accordingly, it can be noticed that the manager considers the act of playing an instrument only as physical work, it could be

said, just like the act of picking cotton. Therefore, their major concern is having well-fed and physically healthy musicians, as can be deduced from the manager's obsession with Ma Rainey's recovered throat and the sandwiches that Irvin keeps on offering to the band because only after eating are they ready to "make some music", as if they had to *produce* some commodity. In addition, it can be speculated that Wilson's choice of making Sturdyvant compare his job with that of a merchant dealing with a "shipload of textiles" is not fortuitous but a subtle way to slide into the scene the ghost of the slave trade by talking about a business that implies the buying and selling of objects coming from the other side of the Ocean. Not only that, the manager's words devalue musicians to a lower condition than objects since he affirms that trading textiles is a more respectable activity than working with black musicians. It can be deduced from their statements that blacks belong to an original category of beings with whom you have to learn to deal. As far as Sturdyvant is concerned, he prefers dealing with them at arm's length and getting rid of them as soon as possible in order to "get into something respectable". Irvin, instead, boasts about his "knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them" and he is charged with the "strenuous" role of being "responsible" for them.

After analyzing the lines of the white characters, it can be noticed that their concerns pivot on three definite issues: money, clockwork, being responsible for blacks. In short, they exemplify the capitalist world interested in making money. As Wilson underlines, they are "insensitive to black performers" and they care about black musicians as long as they represent a source of profit. Once they get the music and Ma's voice, they can get rid of them. The Mother of the Blues is perfectly aware of it, as her bitter statement shows: "They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice.[...] As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't no use for me then. I know what I'm talking about" (MRB, 79). As she says, blacks are "everything but child of god", they are more likely to be considered as objects or beings devoid of the ability to take care of themselves than human beings. As has been argued above, the latter concept becomes a refrain for the white characters. Take for instance Sturdyvant, who repeats to Irvin that Ma "is your responsibility" four times in a few lines, but also the white policeman who considers his job done when Irvin reassures him he is responsible for the black singer, only then does the policeman conclude "Well... I guess that's all right. As long as someone is responsible for

them” (52). Finally, the obsession with clockwork completes the picture of the exemplary white capitalist. In fact, by considering some lines exchanged not only with the musicians but also between them, it can be noticed that the sentences are short and broken because of a hectic rhythm and they do not seem to have time to listen to the answer of their interlocutor. So, they end up repeating the same sentences as if formulating a new one would rob their time and they do not care what they are asked since their thoughts focus just on the three matters explained above. Take for instance the following lines as an example of their way of talking:

STURDYVANT: (Over speaker.) Irvin, what’s happening? Where’s Ma?

IRVIN: Everything under control, Mel. I got it under control.

STURDYVANT: Where’s Ma? How come she isn’t with the band? (MRB, 21)

IRVIN: Uh... Ma, the boys say he can’t do it. We’ll have to do Levee’s version.

MA RAINEY: What you mean he can’t do it? Who say he can’t do it? What boys say he can’t do it?

[...]

IRVIN: Ma, we don’t have time. We can’t...

[...]

STURDYVANT: All right, Ma... we’ll get him a microphone. But if he messes up... He’s only getting one chance...The cost...(MRB, 74)

Even the issue of time can be used to go back in history and make a parallel between the present and the past when slaves used to boycott their owner’s business by slowing down their work. Thus, the naughty behavior of the singer can be compared with slaves’ subterfuges as it aims at delaying her manager’s business. She knows that her only power lies in her voice, once they get the voice caged in their machine, she is not worthy of respect anymore because only if “you are colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the ally” (MRB, 79).

From the beginning of the play, it is possible to perceive a clear division between the white and black world; nevertheless, by focusing our attention on the band it also becomes clear that the black world features inner divisions as well. Although the white managers refer to blacks as a homogeneous group, the latter is composed by a polyphony of voices: each member presents his own ideas concerning the value of black music, African culture and history. Thus, after analyzing the idea of the white managers about the Blues, it is interesting to explore the relationship between the band members and their music. Let’s start our analysis by considering the attitude of the oldest members of the band: Cutler and Slow Drag. Both of them share the same concern: they wish to get the songs recorded as soon as

possible in order to slip away. In particular, Slow Drag urges the members of the band to play and get the work finished; the following lines exemplify his impatience: “Damn the door and let’s get set up. I wanna get out of here” (MRB, 25); “Come on, let’s rehearse the music” (MRB, 25); “I’m with you on that score, Cutler. I wanna get out of here. I don’t want to be around here all night. When it comes time to go up there and record them songs... I just wanna go up there and do it. Last time it took us all day and half the night” (MRB, 24). Cutler’s attitude echoes Slow Drag, who is concerned with time as well: “Well, come on... let’s get it rehearsed. Time’s wasting” (MRB, 33). In addition, both musicians consider their ability to play as a mere economic advantage, just like the managers. However, along with the capitalist corruption, it can be speculated that their attitude stems from the belief that they are powerless against their condition. They feel subjected to a socio-economic system from which they cannot escape. Inevitably, there comes a clash with Levee, the young member of the band, who does not agree to be ruled by such a system. Instead, he thinks he can exploit the system itself to change his own condition. Furthermore, their argument is sharpened by another matter: Levee considers the act of playing music as art. Consequently, Levee’s enthusiasm clashes against the disillusionment of the other musicians. On the one hand, the older musicians are interested in playing to get a wage, on the other hand, Levee is interested in playing music because he considers it a creative deed that proves his talent. Therefore, when Levee suggests playing his version of the songs, he bumps into Slow Drag’s indifference: “Don’t make me no difference. Long as we get paid” (MRB, 25), and Cutler’s disenchanted attitude, which makes Levee notice that he is just a musician for rent:

Slow Drag’s all right. It’s you talking all that weird shit about art. Just play the piece, nigger. You wanna be one of them... what you call... virtuoso or something, you in the wrong place. You ain’t no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver... you just an old trumpet player come a dime a dozen. Talking about art. (MRB, 26)

Obviously enough, the musicians’ objections are followed by Levee’s outburst, who does not agree to be defined a day laborer and considers his talent the passport for leaving his present condition and entering the “dominant” world.

At this point, it is possible to better understand Wilson’s short but allusive descriptions of the musicians. The playwright describes Cutler as a man whose “understanding of his music is limited to the chord he is playing at the time he is playing it”. It can be speculated that he wants to point out that

Cutler's limit consists in considering the Blues a useful means for a definite aim. Despite the fact he recognizes the powerful value of this music, as the dialogue with Ma shows (p. 83), he does not commit himself to the safeguarding of its value. On the contrary, he uses it for its commercial value. As far as Slow Drag is concerned, he is described as "the most bored by life" and he lacks "Cutler's energy" to the point he plays without being aware of his gift and the implications concealed in playing the Blues. Finally, the group is completed by Toledo who considers the Blues part of that black legacy that "flavored" American culture and history. However, Toledo points out, black Americans seem to be unaware of their role as cultural builders as well as historical builders. As a consequence, they are turned into leftovers from the musical environment as well as from history. In opposition to the other members of the band, Toledo seems to have a clear idea about the role of the black man in history and he tries to share his knowledge with the others by using the original metaphor of the stew:

Now, I'm gonna show you how this goes... where you just a leftover from history. Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soonawhile they began to make one big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn...and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together... then you got one thing. You got a stew.  
Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. All right. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew. But you look around and you see some carrots over here, some potatoes over there. That stew's still there. You done made your history and it's still there. You can't eat it all. So what you got? You got some leftovers. That's what it is. You got leftovers and you can't do nothing with it. You already making another history... cooking you another meal, and you don't need them leftovers no more. What to do?  
See, we's the leftovers. [...] (MRB, 57)

By using a quite unusual metaphor, Toledo aims at explaining African American history. Thanks to their physical and spiritual labors, African Americans have contributed to developing the American soil and enriching American culture as well as the ingredients of a stew. For this reason, it can be said that Toledo's words reveal two of Wilson's major concerns: firstly, he wants to educate the audience to a new concept of history. Both the white audience and the black audience have to become aware of black people's participation in history by recognizing that official history often forgets its builders. Secondly, by claiming that blacks are part of history, he actually gives them a history, a past and a present where they can insert their lives. However, as Toledo claims, you first have to recognize you are a leftover in order to become aware of the existence of "another history". By means of the four musicians, Wilson exemplifies some different answers to such a teaching, that it is possible to observe among the African



American population. On the one hand, it is possible to bump into people like Slow Drag, who seems neither to fully comprehend the matter nor to be particularly involved. Without bothering about the past or the future, he focuses on the “note he is playing” in that definite moment and he is apparently uninterested in changing his present condition. On the other hand, there are people like Cutler, who comprehend the matter but do not believe in the possibility of changing things. Cutler’s submissive attitude stems from the premise that history never changes and you are locked inside its circle. This belief emerges when he narrates the story of a black priest who risked being lynched:

That’s the only way he got out of there alive... was to dance. Ain’t even had no respect for a man of God! Wanna make him into a clown. Reverend Gates sat right in my house and told me that story from his own mouth. So... the white folks don’t care nothing about Ma Rainey’s. She’s just another nigger who they can use to make some money. (MRB, 97)

In so doing, Cutler draws a parallel between past and present and show that white people have had no respect for blacks neither in the past nor in the present. In addition, his tale highlights another correlated issue: African Americans have always had to accept the role imposed by the white man. The image of the priest who saves his life by dancing for the mob draws a connection with their present condition as musicians “for rent”. The priest could survive thanks to his performance just as they can survive by performing their music. Finally, there is a third way of dealing with the matter. People like Levee, who feel confident about their position in history and refuse to look at themselves as disliked carrots and potatoes. The far-reaching consequences of Levee’s attitude will be explored in the last section dedicated to the analysis of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Along with the idea of music and history, it is possible to observe different reactions within the band to the concept of Africanness. According to the playwright, it is fundamental that African Americans recognize their African origins in order to strengthen the idea of sharing a common history and culture. Even in this case, it is Toledo who introduces another central idea that underlies Wilson’s thought, namely the Africanness that should join together African Americans. Curiously enough, Wilson’s major themes enter the scene on tiptoe to the point that the audience can enjoy the play even when tricky issues are discussed among the characters. Accordingly, if the dialogue concerning the leftover from history arises from a funny sketch where the band discusses how many sandwiches Levee can eat, the question “What is Africanness?” arises from a playful dispute over a reefer. Slow Drag tries

to persuade Cutler to give him a reefer by recalling some episodes they have shared in their twenty-two-year-old friendship. Given his “superior” knowledge, Toledo interprets Slow Drag’s deed as an “ancestral retention” by comparing the wish of getting a reefer with the African naming. As he explains, the latter was a practice consisting in naming the gods or calling “on the ancestors to achieve whatever you desires are”. He also adds: “Naming all those things you and Cutler done together is like trying to solicit some reefer based on a bond of kinship. That’s African. An ancestral retention. Only you forgot the name of the gods” (32). At this point, his statement causes different reactions: Slow Drag refuses it by firmly claiming “Nigger, I ain’t no African! I ain’t doing no African nothing!” (32); Cutler pretends to be interested in Toledo’s words, by increasing the hilarity of the scene; finally, Levee appears to be the least involved. In fact, there is no possibility that Toledo is talking about him since he associates the adjective African with the typical idea of the savage: “I know he ain’t talking about me. You don’t see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose” (32).

The matter of Africanness brings along the thorny matter of cultural assimilation. According to the playwright, race matters since it influences the perception of yourself, it represents an “organizing principle around which cultures are formed” and it allows for “group identification” (TGS, 3). In his speech *The Ground on Which I Stand*, he defines in depth what he means when he talks about culture:

When I say culture, I am speaking about the behaviors patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought as expressed in a particular community of people. There are some people who will say that black Americans do not have a culture. That cultures are reserved for other people, most notably Europeans of various ethnic groupings, and that black Americans make up a sub-group of American culture that is derived from the European origins of its majority population. But black Americans are Africans, and there are many histories and many cultures on the African continent. Those who would deny black Americans their culture would also deny them their history and their inherent values that are a part of all human life. (TGS, 3)

It can be inferred from the passage above that the playwright has no doubt about the importance of Africanness. However, it might be argued that his theatre does not put on stage his firm belief; on the contrary, it can be suggested that his theatre seems to question the major issues underling his own creed. Although Wilson is openly against what is commonly known as cultural assimilation, his play deals with the matter from different perspectives, shows its complexity without giving a definite solution to the riddle. The four musicians embody different approaches. Thus, when Toledo affirms that blacks have “sold Africa for the price of tomatoes”, his statement raises different way of looking at the matter. As far

as Cutler is concerned, his question “What else we gonna be, living over here?” seems to echo George Samuel Schuyler’s position expressed in his often criticized work *The Negro-Art Hokum*, where the scholar argues that “the Africanamerican is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white Americans” (52), therefore it is nonsense talking about the existence of African culture.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Slow Drag seems to oppose Cutler/Schuyler’s standpoint, by saying that your identity is not influenced by superficial matters, such as clothes. Behind the reference to clothes, it is possible to speculate that Wilson wants to object once again to Schuyler’s argument where he claims that wearing the same clothes as whites, speaking the same language, having a similar schooling, living in similar houses are evidence of the absence of “racial differences between the American black man and the American white man” (53). Finally, Levee refuses such a dispute. He does not accept the possibility of being influenced by external values, particularly if these values concern the white world. As far as Toledo is concerned, his voice seems to be very close to Wilson’s thought. Nevertheless, Wilson does not lead the audience to easily identify with him. On the contrary, although the character often echoes his own idea of history and culture, he devalues his point of view by making him relate important concepts, such as Africanness, to a peculiar context, in this case to a dispute over a reefer. Even in this case, his description gathers useful information that provides insights into his character. Wilson writes that “He is self-taught but misunderstands and misapplies his knowledge, though he is quick to penetrate to the core of a situation and his insights ate thought-provoking” (MRB, 20). In other words, Toledo is able to understand reality and his insights would be listened to more carefully as useful suggestions and valuable teaching if their efficacy were not limited by his misleading standoffishness.

Although Wilson has definite ideas about matters concerning history and culture, he does not let his ideas reach the spectator directly. Indeed, he does not create coherent and perfect characters who become his spokesperson; on the contrary, his characters end up being definitely human in their difficulty of understanding and assimilating troubled issues. Since the solution of crucial matters are not solved by a single character, but the possible solutions arise from the dialogue between the musicians, it

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<sup>1</sup> George Samuel Schuyler (1895-1977) is one of the most important voices of the Harlem Renaissance. This period is commonly recognized as the blossoming of African-American culture, in particular, the creative arts. One of the main concerns of the period was to re-conceptualize “the Negro” apart from white stereotypes that had influenced black people’s relationship to their heritage and to each other. Schuyler’s thought can be contextualized in the dispute over the relationship between art and race. He resisted the idea that racial background should determine artistic expression.

can be argued that Wilson exhorts the members of the community to confront each other in order to find a unity in that polyphony of voices. As far as *Fences* is concerned, the family's members played a fundamental role in balancing Troy's attitude; in the same way, each member of the band helps to balance the portrait of African Americans' music, history and culture by giving his own perspective. In *Fences*, the matter of dealing with your own (hi)story had a more personal dimension. The play shows how personal responsibility affects your position in history, your own story and your familial environment. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, instead, explores the importance of retrieving your past in a collective dimension by shifting from the question "How can *I* break through the cycle of history?" to the question "How can *we* break through the cycle of history?". At stake, there is collective responsibility, as Toledo's words suggest:

It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you think... I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. Go to do his part. I ain't talking about what I'm gonna do... or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I'm talking about all of us. What all of us is gonna do. That's what I'm talking about, nigger! (MRB, 42)

Nevertheless, in order to achieve a collective responsibility, each individual first has to realize that he has a self-responsibility. Even in this play, Wilson does not forget to remind his black audience that they have a chance of changing their condition. The playwright does not deny the difficulty of being satisfied with your own life, most of all if you are subjected to oppressive socio-economic forces, as Levee says: "Niggers got a right to be dissatisfied. Is you gonna be satisfied with a bone somebody done throwed you when you see them eating the whole hog?" (93). Nonetheless, Toledo's remark: "A nigger gonna make his own dissatisfaction" (93) seems to balance Levee's point of view by banning victimization and urging people to be responsible for themselves. If African Americans become aware that they can influence their life, they can eventually escape from a condition that risks being considered pathological not only by the white world, so concerned about being "responsible for them", but also by the black world that risks experiencing a powerless feeling, as the four musicians who agree to be a gear in the unchangeable mechanism of history. In conclusion, it can be inferred that the commitment of the whole community can make difference in history. However, it is not possible to talk about a community, a "we", until they achieve a shared awareness about the legacy of their history and culture. As the condition of the four musicians exemplifies, divisions within the community increase the risk of being

banished inside a little room, devoid of your own voice and value. Furthermore, in order to overcome the inherent fragmentation of the *we*, it is necessary to heal a deeper fragmentation concealed inside the *I* of the black man. In the following chapter, by analyzing Levee's character, it will be argued that the importance of understanding your position in history joined with the knowledge of your own culture affects the survival not only of your community but first of all, the survival of your own Self.

### 2.3 Do you really need new shoes to play the Blues?

It can be inferred from the previous analysis that Wilson's play points out a historical division between the black and white community, whose consequence could be the overwhelming of the black community if it does not struggle to reconcile its inner divisions. Exploring the matter more deeply, it can be speculated that the inherent split of the community mirrors a deeper fragmentation of its members' identity, as Levee's case exemplifies. Accordingly, it can be said that the younger member of the band has unconsciously internalized this historical laceration between the white and black world. Tragically enough, he seems to have assimilated that very way of thinking inherent to the world he claims to struggle against, the white world. The band, in particular Toledo, interprets Levee's behavior as evidence of his actual submission to the white environment. The piano player claims that Levee is as "spooked with the white man" as the whole band, including himself, by implying that the young musician complies with the capitalist white world's requests. Not surprisingly, Levee cannot accept Toledo's statement, and so he furiously remarks that it is he who rules the relationship with the managers by means of his apparently obsequious "yessir". His warrior spirit concealed in a compliant behavior brings to mind a literary comparison with the protagonist of one of the most popular works written by Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. In the book, the protagonist cannot forget the words whispered by his grandfather on his deathbed, who urges the nephew to keep fighting against the white oppressor: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swollen you till they vomit or bust wide open" (*Invisible*

*Man*, 15). Levee learned a similar lesson from observing his father who avenged his wife's rape. The tragic events of his childhood are vividly stuck in his mind and he can still share the details preceding his father's lynching with the band:

My daddy came back and acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened. But he got the names of them mens from mama. [...] My daddy went and smiled in the face of one of them crackers who had been with my mama. Smiled in his face and sold him our land. [...] My daddy wasn't spooked with the white man. Nosir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face... smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. [...] (MRB, 70)

The ability to hide your true feelings and thoughts might be defined a *fil rouge* unraveling throughout African American literature from the very beginning. One might generalize by saying that it is possible to understand the origins of this attitude, turned into a literary trope, by going back to slavery time, when slaves had to develop a system of physical and mental survival to overcome their inhuman conditions. Broadly speaking, it might be said that Douglass's saying "A still mouth makes a wise head" underwent a sort of development over the centuries by creating a split inside the minds of black people, who had to learn to conceal their thoughts and say what they were expected to say. It is Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* who first theorized and described what can be seen as the resulting condition of this process. Accordingly, he defines the Negro as

a sort of seventh son, born with a Veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world- a world which yield him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls. Two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (15)

Therefore, as Du Bois explained, African Americans own a double-consciousness. Even though they have their thoughts and feelings, they are forced to conceal them behind a Veil in order to learn to act and think in the same way as the world from which they feel ostracized. Thanks to the Veil they can have a chance of hiding their true identity and feelings, ranging from desperation, to sadness, to amusement, to rage, in front of the eyes of others and finally, they can know their "enemy" by spying him from a privileged position. Nevertheless, living behind the Veil can be quite dangerous for your own identity. In fact, in order to know the way of thinking of "the other", you are forced to put yourself in *his* shoes, as a

consequence, you learn to look at yourself through the eyes of people who possibly feel pity, indifference or even worse, contempt towards you. In this way, you are liable to undergo a sort of schizophrenia.

In the same way, it can be argued that Levee becomes gradually subjected to the white world after wearing its shoes, as his attitude towards the Blues reveals. Accordingly, he transforms his musical talent into a mere tool that should allow him to reach fame and success, but he forgets that the music is part of his cultural inheritance; consequently, he does not understand that he sells not only music but also part of his identity. He does not realize how much of his identity he jeopardizes during his social climbing and he eventually transforms his talent into a commodity that the white man can exploit. By wearing the mask of the black musician who used to be greedily wanted by managers in the late 1920s, he ends up transforming himself into that figure and finally, he is overwhelmed by his own mask. At this point, it becomes evident how important it is to know your own cultural and historical past: it can serve as a shield to protect your consciousness and identity. By rejecting his own past, Levee loses the possibility of strengthening his own identity and overcoming the polluting effects of his role as musician for rent. His separation from the past is underlined by his attitude towards the “old way” of playing music. The young musician does not have any respect for the Blues coming from the deep South since he considers it as an obsolete music. Instead, he strongly claims the need to play a new and fresh music suitable for modern times. However, even though he asserts the wish of playing *his* music, he makes a tragic mistake by deciding to align his way of making music with Irvin’s taste, by forgetting that the music should express his own way of looking at life. As a consequence, the music is devoid of Levee’s personality, and instead, it conveys Irvin’s voice. By losing his own voice, he ends up silencing himself inside the circle of history.

If Levee stands for a new generation who tends to forget their past, his opposite is embodied by the character of Ma Rainey who does not deny her southern origins. On the contrary, she clings on to her southern audience by firmly refusing to change her way of making music in order to pander to Irvin’s desires. To use Wilson’s metaphor, she does not need to wear modern shoes in order to play the Blues. Unlike Levee, she prefers singing shoeless, since she cannot wear “sharp-toed shoes”. On the contrary, the young man affirms “Yeah! Now I’m ready! I can play some good music now!” (24) only after putting

on his new shoes. If *Fences* pivots on the metaphor of the fence, *Ma Rainey's* play pivots on the metaphor of the shoes. It can be speculated that the shoes symbolize the compromise of the black musician who sells his culture for “the price of tomatoes”, in this case, it would be better to say for the price of shoes. Consequently, the image of shoes correlates with the issue of cultural assimilation and the loss of memory. Curiously enough, the opposition between the modern northern cities and the old rural South, between the new black generation and the old black generation, between the buzzing present and the half-forgotten past is summed up in the opposition between Levee's new Florsheims and Toledo's old brogans. By wearing his new shoes, suitable for the city, Levee feels up-to-date, destined to succeed in life, far from that southern past where blacks were just mere sharecroppers. The following line provides an example of his contempt for that rural past that belongs to his experience as a child: “Nigger [he refers to Toledo] got them clodhoppers! Old brogans! He ain't nothing but a sharecropper” (40). He strives to be part of the modern North that is “supposed” to offer possibilities in life to people like him to the point that he forgets that the nourishment of his music stems from what those old brogans symbolize.

The playwright wants to stress the importance of the past in black people's lives. Probably, if Levee had recognized the value of his origins, he would have had more chances of preventing the “white consciousness” from polluting his way of looking at himself. To look for the white man's approval implies to affect your own self-definition, as Toledo claims:

See, now...I'll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say... as long as he looks to white folks for approval... then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing. (MRB, 37)

To sum up, the rejection of your own past allows the capitalist and racist forces to influence your self-consciousness. However, if on the one hand Levee's blindness concerning the white capitalist and racist environment is to blame, on the other hand, it is also possible to underscore the community's faults. According to Elam in *The Music Is the Message*, Levee becomes a victim of his own individualism. By rejecting the band, he isolates himself from “systems of African American communal empowerment” (46). Much as it was pointed out for Troy Maxson, the voice of your family/band/community has a significant impact on defining yourself. As the critic points out, Wilson's theatre firmly believes in “communality” and seems to reject individualism. Nevertheless, it should be argued that if his theatre



rejects individualism, since it implies denying your own community, it does not condemn individuality, meant as an expression of your identity, by suggesting that individuality has to succumb to community. This assertion is borne out by an analysis of the band's errors. Unlike Levee, Cutler, Slow Drag and even Toledo seem to accept compliantly the course of their lives by taking for granted that the living condition of black people will never be different from the past. Accordingly, they let other people mold their voice, as their attitude towards music proves. In fact, even though they prefer playing Ma's version of the music, they finally agree to play Levee's version in order to obey Irvin's orders, and so they do not impose their voice. As far as Ma Rainey is concerned, she seems to be more coherent with her own position, nevertheless, she betrays the very concept underling her own music: the Blues does not belong to her, but she belongs to the Blues. She gives her contribution to the flowing continuum of this music by adding her way of understanding life. However, she seems to forget it when she forbids Levee to express *his* way of understanding life. In fact, when Ma furiously scolds him by recalling that: "You supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it. You ain't supposed to go off by yourself and play what you want" (101), Levee claims the right to give his own contribution to the music by replying "I was playing the song. I was playing the way I felt it" (101). Ralph Ellison wrote that changes inside the Blues mirror changes inside the African American society, in the same way, a different way of playing the music can be interpreted as a different way of feeling life due to a generational change. Therefore, it can be implied that Ma and the band members make a mistake by forbidding Levee to create music since they betray the essence of the Blues meant as *lieu de mémoire* where past and present compensate each other. If on the one hand Levee's rejection of his past leads to a troubled identity, on the other hand, the band and Ma's refusal of the new music exemplifies the risks of being entrapped in the past and losing touch with the present. First of all, if you do not believe in the possibility of changing the course of history, you lose the possibility of creating a different present; an example can be seen in the band members who seem to surrender to the dominant forces by accepting their role as leftovers. Secondly, if you strive to keep the past alive but you forget the existence of a present, you risk losing the present part of your communal history: see Ma Rainey's attitude, for instance. By denying Levee the possibility of playing the music, she contributes to the fragmentation of the community and she does not realize she is locking herself in a past dimension that makes her lose touch with the present; as she says,

she eventually cannot “keep up with what was going on” anymore. It can be concluded that all members of the band, as well as all members of the community, both the old generation and the young generation, should be involved in the construction of the community. Therefore, it does not make sense to talk about Ma’s music or Levee’s music; instead, it can be inferred that both old and new generation have to learn to talk about *their* music just as they have to learn to talk about *their* history.

It can be concluded that Levee’s identity undergoes a double oppression. On the one hand, the racist forces of the capitalist world, on the other hand, the lack of comprehension from the members of his own community. Eventually, his lack of self-definition increases his frustration that results in a burst of violence against Toledo. The piano player’s murder becomes a warning for the black community as well as the single person: to heal your own identity is unavoidable in order to avoid both self-destruction and the community destruction. At stake there is the urging of remembering people self-responsibility in order to gain true self-consciousness, associated with the urge to make the community realize that they are all responsible for the healing of the single individual. As the case of Levee exemplifies, the black individual needs to recognize his position in history and recover his bond with his own origins; only in this way can he strengthen his identity and be able to deal with the racist forces that lacerate his self-consciousness. In addition, the lesson of self-responsibility concerns the other members of the band as well, since it urges them to take on an active role in history rather than living as permanent victims of history. Finally, in order to achieve self-determination, all the members of the community have to intervene in order to help each other to integrate the missing pieces of their identity. The music is charged with the power of healing lacerations within the community as well as the laceration inside the human soul of the single man: on the one hand, the act of playing music gathers together the members of the community physically, mentally and spiritually. As long as the music is played, incomprehension and divisions vanish; on the other hand, the music make individuals accomplish a voyage through their own history by means of which they can recover the past and recompose inner lacerations. In the prologue of Ellison’s work *Invisible Man*, thanks to the music, the protagonist embarks on a dreamlike voyage over the centuries, that makes him physically travel through space; as he narrates, “I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into his depth” (9). During the voyage, he meets a black primordial Mother to whom he asks existential questions.

However, he is eventually urged to ask himself in order to solve his identity troubles. In the same way, by means of a play entangled with the Blues, Wilson leads the spectator through time and space in order to make him ponder on major issues: his position in history, the value of the past and the role of self-responsibility. In particular, he urges people to call into question their own identity by accomplishing an act of responsibility towards themselves and the whole community.

- Chapter 3 -  
*The Piano Lesson*

*3.1 The burden of legacy*

Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in... mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece." Every day. "I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece."

-August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*

In *Fences*, memory corresponds to a haunting "shadow digging in your flesh" passed on from fathers to sons. Despite its immateriality, it manages to force its way through your veins and become part of your blood. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, memory corresponds to music and it flows through time concealed in its notes. In *The Piano Lesson*, memory corresponds to blood and music at the same time. Their combination undergoes a sort of objectification that results in a musical instrument: the music is turned into the ivory keys of a piano; the blood is turned into the unguent that drenches the piano's wood fibers. By analyzing the relationship between father and son, musician and the blues, it was possible to explore the effects of the absence as well as of the presence of memory. *The Piano Lesson* concludes this research dramatizing the tricky relationship between African Americans and the legacy of the past by means of a dispute about an inherited piano. The final fate of the piano will finally provide an answer to the question concealed within Wilson's theatre: what do you do with the legacy of your past?

*The Piano Lesson* dramatizes the dispute of the Charles family over the fate of an old piano. The dispute arises when Boy Willie, a young man from Mississippi, bursts into his sister's house in order to persuade her to sell the piano they inherited from their father. Thanks to the trade, he can gain the amount of money that he needs to purchase the land of Mr. Sutter and start his activity as a farmer. The obstacle to his plan is Berniece, his widowed sister, who lives and works in a northern city to provide for her daughter Maretha. Boy Willie accuses her of spoiling his dream of owning his own land because of

the mere “sentimental value” of the piano. However, the story of the instrument shows that the dispute is far more complicated. As uncle Doaker explains, the story of that piano is closely entangled with the story of the Charles family: during slavery times, the Charles were owned by a slave owner called Robert Sutter who wished to give his wife a wedding-present. Thus, he traded off Doaker’s grandmother and nine-year-old father for the piano. Despite her first enthusiasm, Miss Ophelia started missing her slaves to the point she fell seriously ill. Mr. Sutter, therefore, asked Doaker’s grandfather to carve into the piano the face of his wife and his son. Obediently, he carved Berniece, his wife, and Boy Willie, his son, but he did not stop there and kept carving the relatives from the older generations like his mother Mama Esther and his father Boy Charles. The owner got mad when he saw the carvings; his wife, instead, got so excited at having her slaves back that she recovered immediately and kept playing the piano until her death. The years passed by, nevertheless, Doaker’s eldest brother Boy Charles, who was Berniece and Boy Willie’s father, was obsessed with the piano and decided to steal it because “it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it...” he had them (45). So, the fourth of July, the brothers Boy Charles, Doaker and Wining Boy stole the piano. Doaker and Wining Boy kept the piano and hid it, instead, Boy Charles jumped into a boxcar of a train called The Yellow Dog where he died after Sutter’s gang set fire to the boxcar. Since then, The Yellow Dog has been said to be haunted by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

The story clarifies that this piano is the objective correlative of their familial story. The relationship that each character establishes with the piano becomes a visual metaphor of the possible ways of dealing with familial memory. Much like for the Blues music, even for the piano, it is possible to detect different attitudes among the characters: Doaker dismisses it, his brother Wining Boy gives it up, Boy Willie reclaims it and Berniece rejects it even as she holds on to it. By analyzing their lives, it is possible to highlight the shortcomings of their attitude as well as the consequences. As far as Doaker is concerned, Berniece explains that he does not “want no part of that piano. He ain’t never wanted no part of it. He blames himself for not staying behind with Papa Boy Charles. He washed his hands of that piano a long time ago” (69). His rejection of the piano is aligned with his rejection of life. After working twenty-seven years for the railroad, he seems to have learned that there is no chance to address your own life because it is your life that decides for you. He reaches this conclusion observing the railroad: he

claims that people keep travelling by train because they “think the train’s supposed to go where they going rather than where it’s going” (18), as a consequence, they do not realize their existence is trapped within a compulsory path. The metaphor of the railroad correlates Doaker to the character of Troy Maxson. It was argued in the analysis of *Fences* that Wilson uses the metaphor of the railroad to describe people who lack the chance to find their own destination in life since they are forced to follow a definite path; eventually, they end up wandering to and fro along the railroad condemned to a permanent search for their destination. Troy Maxson, cuddling his newborn child, confesses that he used to “just kinda go like this”, namely “them trains”, during the most difficult period of his life, when he did not know what to do and where to go. Doaker might be defined the embodiment of this condition: his job as a railroad cook compels him to go to and fro all his life. However, unlike Troy Maxson who strongly wishes to succeed in finding his own way, Doaker intentionally gives up striving by literally allowing the train to carry him. He severs every bond that can compel him to reenter life: he abandons his wife, he refuses to remember his southern mates who keep recalling him and he also decides to take no part in the discussion about a piano that would raise the memory of his past. In conclusion, as Wilson writes, Doaker “has for all intents and purposes retired from the world” (1). With regard to his brother Wining Boy, his rejection of the piano is due to a different reason. He used to be a great piano player but he gave it up after realizing that the piano was swallowing him up. To a certain extent, Wining Boy can be defined a sixty-year-old version of Levee. In fact, Wining Boy embodies the final result of that kind of “pollution” that was pointed out in the analysis of Levee. Thus, when he is asked to play the piano, he declines by saying that:

I give that piano up. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I’m carrying it around on my back. I don’t wish that on nobody. See, you think it’s all fun being a recording star. Got to carrying that piano around and man did I get slow. Got just like molasses. The world just slipping by me and I’m walking around with that piano. Alright. Now, there ain’t but so many places you can go. Only so many road wide enough for you and that piano. And that piano get heavier and heavier. Go to a place and they find out you play the piano, the first thing they want to do is give you a drink, find you a piano, and sit you right down. And that’s where you gonna be for the next eight hours. They ain’t gonna let you get up! Now, the first three or four years of that is fun. [...] But that only last so long. You look up one day and you hate the whiskey, and you hate the women, and you hate the piano. But that’s all you got. You can’t do nothing else. All you know how to do is play that piano. Now, who am I? Am I me? Or am I the piano player? Sometime it seem like the only thing to do is shoot the piano player cause he is the cause of all trouble I’m having. (PL, 41)

It can be inferred from the passage above that Wining Boy became prisoner of the role that he was given by the dominant (white) society. His close entanglement with the piano makes him question his own identity. Much like the musicians analyzed in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in particular Levee, Wining Boy, as a young man, was fascinated by the possibility of gaining fame and money by means of his ability to play music. However, he differs from Levee and the members of the band because he gradually develops the awareness of the consequences of his condition. As he says, he felt that the piano was getting wider and wider to the point that he could not move since he was oppressed by its weight. His words suggest the image of a man who undergoes a sort of spell: he perceives he is stiffer and stiffer as if his legs were being replaced by the wooden legs of the piano. The story that Wining Boy narrates suggestively recalls a late nineteenth-century African American author, Charles W. Chestnutt, who used to narrate the effects of slavery by means of conjuring stories. He used the idea of conjuring as a metaphor of the consequences of slavery: his short stories featuring slaves transformed into objects aimed at denouncing the use of black people's bodies as if they were mere objects. In the same way, Wilson wants to point out that the exploitation of the black musicians is a new form of slavery entailing its own consequences. As the stories of Levee and Wining Boy exemplify, you jeopardize the wholeness of your identity if you agree to identify with the role you are given by society. Thus, although Wining Boy voluntarily took on the role as musician that he was offered as a young man, he finally realized that he was jeopardizing the perception of himself. Nevertheless, he was unable to pinpoint the cause of his sickness and he wrongly inferred that he had to get rid of the piano in order to be relieved from its oppressive burden.

Even Berniece considers the piano an oppressive burden, but her rejection of the musical instrument results in a fairly complex behavior: on the one hand, she rejects the piano, on the other hand, she does not want to be separated from it. For Berniece, the piano represents the memory of her familial past, characterized by suffering and loss. Therefore, she thinks that if she played the piano she would literally bring back to life past memories embodied by the spirits living inside the piano:

I done told you I don't play on that piano. [...] 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 could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't want to play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking in this house. (PL, 70)

Nevertheless, she strongly disagrees with his brother who suggests selling the piano. Despite her rejection, she cannot help recognizing that the piano is part of her life. After her husband's death, it is she who strives to bring it to her new home in the North even though her uncle Doaker suggested that she had to leave it behind in the South. It can be argued that she feels endowed with the duty to protect the piano since it conceals the legacy of her family, as she reminds her brother: "Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money" (50). Yet, although she recognizes its invaluable price, she is torn by conflicting feelings. By making a parallel with *Fences*, it can be suggested that Berniece considers her familial memory as a "haunting shadow" that dooms the descendants of the Charles to the same bloody and unhappy destiny. According to Berniece, the Charles's history shows that the men are doomed to pass on an-already-written destiny. So, she says to her brother:

You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley... you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don't never stop (52).

As a consequence, the women, like her or her mother, are doomed to mourn all life "in cold nights and empty beds" (52). Thence, she refuses to pass on the memory of her family to her daughter Maretha. Berniece endures to carry with her "the stones" of her past, but she is determined to save her child from the same destiny: "She don't know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don't have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn't have. I ain't gonna burden her with that piano" (70). In conclusion, it can be argued that Berniece embodies the diatribe unraveling through Wilson's theatre, expressed by the questions: should people remember or forget their legacy? Is it worth remembering?

Boy Willie seems to know what to do with his legacy. Unlike the other characters, he is not scared of being involved with the piano. By means of this character, two of Wilson's main concerns are introduced: the role of the South in the cultural and historical re-membering process and the need to face the past. Through the plays analyzed, Wilson shows a fairly balanced perspective of northern American cities and southern American cities. As far as *Fences* is concerned, the play focuses its attention on the



northern environment of Pittsburg, where the play is set. In the prologue of *Fences*, the northern cities are described as demons that used to “devour” their immigrants. At the turn of the nineteenth century, they appealed to “the destitute” from Europe as well as the “descendants of African slaves” coming “from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee” (F, xvii). However, black Americans were treated differently from European immigrants and had to accept the humblest jobs, as the story of Troy Maxson points out. As far as the South is concerned, it is possible to grab an elusive hint: thanks to Troy’s memories, it is possible to infer that the South used to offer only hardship and turmoil to freed slaves who wished to farm. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* deepens the representation of the northern urban environment that becomes closely involved with the events of the play. By means of a story concerning the exploitation of black musicians, the play depicts Chicago as an exploitative and racist environment where there is no room for the dreams and ambitions of African Americans. As far as the image of the South is concerned, the play sheds light on both its negative and positive aspects. The play does not deny the brutality that occurred in the past, however, it introduces the relevance of the South by questioning how it affects the characters’ identity. *The Piano Lesson* reaps the critique against the North and deepens the exploration of the South by means of the figure of Boy Willie. As Shannon highlights in *August Wilson as Teacher: The Piano Lesson*, the North usually betrays Wilson’s characters’ expectations. Referring to Wining Boy and Lymon, the critic points out that “the North did not fulfill [Wining Boy] dreams” of becoming an acclaimed blues musician (154). On the contrary, it induced him to turn into a wandering alcoholic. Boy Willie’s friend, Lymon, came to the city drawn by “the deceptive lure of the North”, nevertheless, like many other blacks who escaped the South, he is not aware that he could be “consumed and discarded by this same society to which he feels such misguided attraction” (Shannon, 154). To quote Boy Willie’s reproach, Lymon thinks that the North is “the land of milk and honey” (17) and people treat you better. Doaker seems to prefer living in the North as well, since he relates the South to sorrowful events of his life, like the period spent in jail and the loss of his brother. Furthermore, as Wining Boy and Lymon point out, a black man cannot “fix nothing with the law” down there, “that’s the difference between the colored man and the white man” (38). Yet the playwright seems to support the choice of Boy Willie who is eager to go back and purchase Sutter’s land. For Boy Willie, the South is the site of memory where he can reconnect with his ancestors, confront with

the historical past and give meaning to the present. By living there, he honors his own family recognizing he belongs to the same land and place where they have been living for more than a hundred years; he overcomes the specter of slavery and finally, he realizes himself as a farmer. Therefore, the interest reserved to the South in this play has a definite aim: bringing back the memory of the past onto the stage. As Wilson said, he needed a character who forced Berniece “to confront her past, in the person of her brother, who was going to sweep through the house like a tornado coming from the South, bringing the past with him (qtd. in Shannon, 147). Boy Willie’s behavior echoes Wilson’s thought about the role that the South plays in the process of reconnection with the past. According to the author, recognizing that the cradle of African American people is the South represents a crucial step towards acknowledging a common African American culture, history and memory. In *An interview with August Wilson* by Bigsby, the playwright claims that looking back at the South is necessary in order to establish a reconnection:

**Wilson:** I think this is the theme that I keep coming back to over and over again: the need to reconnect yourself. Having been uprooted from Africa, an agrarian land-based society, and taken into the South, the blacks created a culture which was a very separate culture from that which had existed in Africa. They were then uprooted again and attempted to transplant that culture to the pavements of industrialized cities in which there was no housing. The cities were not welcoming. I think it was a terrible mistake. I think that we would have been better had we stayed in the South. I think our culture would have been stronger if we had stayed in the South. It would have continued to grow and develop along the lines that it was going. When we left, we left people behind there. We left old people who were unable, or unwilling, to make the trip north to the new life. They died.

**Bigsby:** So you left history behind?

**Wilson:** Yes. No one bothered to tell them. These kids today in 1991 don’t even know about those people. They know nothing about that part of their lives and their connection to it. I think this is a flaw in African American culture. That connection is broken. I’m standing in my father’s shoes, you see, but people don’t realize that. This is what I am trying to do with my plays: make that connection [...]. (212)

For Boy Willie, buying some land means not only strengthening the reconnection with his own past, but also using his own legacy. As Shannon argues in *August Wilson as Teacher*, although his wish to sell the piano could appear quite selfish, as a matter of fact, it is very instructive: his character spurs black Americans to force their way into “the American Dream that has historically excluded them” (148) by inviting them to put on use their legacy. According to Boy Willie, the best way to prevent his legacy from rotting is trading off the inherited piano for some land, as he claims in an enraged voice:

Some people get scared to hear a nigger’s heart beating. They think you ought to lay low with that heart. Make it beat quiet and go along with everything the way it is. But my mama ain’t birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, “Boy Willie was here.”

That's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. (PL, 94)

His arrival forces the members of his family to reconsider their relationship with the past. All of them tend to refuse the piano, but, as Wilson says, it is not possible to “acquire a sense of self-worth by denying their past” (qtd. in *August Wilson as Teacher*, 146). Thanks to Boy Willie, they begin to re-acquire a sense of self-worth since he forces them to be concerned with the fate of the piano. If we consider Doaker for instance, it can be speculated that he undergoes a sort of awakening throughout the play. At the beginning, he lives retired from the world and refuses to be involved with what is happening around him. For this reason, he does not take sides when Berniece and Boy Willie argue about the fate of the piano. Slowly, he (un)consciously begins getting more and more involved in the dispute until he makes his position and judgment clear. His initial neutral position expressed by the statement “ain't nobody said nothing about who's right and who's wrong” (46), is first transformed into a wise teaching “one of them ought to respect the other's one wishes” (99), and eventually he supports Berniece and says to Boy Willie: “You just can't take the piano” (98). Since Doaker finally recognizes that he is responsible both for the piano and for his family, he reenters life by reestablishing ties with his family and his own past. Much like Doaker, Wining Boy seems to reconsider his life and the relationship with the past. Even though he claims that he is no longer interested in any kind of piano, as a matter of fact he seems to be unable to stay away from his family's piano so that he cannot help playing it when he enters the parlor. Thanks to this gravitational attraction toward the piano, he seems to make peace with the music and his family. His growing concern about the fate of the instrument makes him reacquire his familial and cultural base. Finally, his desire to strengthen his renewed familial and cultural ties is confirmed by his final choice to leave for the South with Boy Willie.

With regard to Berniece, she needs more than a gravitational attraction to get closer to the piano. She believes that she must not get rid of the past, and yet she does not want to remember it. As Elam claims in *The Woman Question*, her refusal to release the spirit of his husband and the painful memories of the suffering that her family endured paralyzes her and “make her unwilling to embrace fully the family's past and move on with her life” (106). Paradoxically, the more she strives to go ahead in life the more she seems to be still. In the analysis of the previous plays, it was argued that the burden of memory

can lead the characters to live in a particular temporal condition: on the one hand, there are people like Troy Maxson, who seem to live in a past dimension although they strenuously struggle to create a present dimension different from the past; on the other hand, there are people like Cory or Levee, who struggle to live in the present but ignore the influence that the absent past can have on their existence. To a certain extent, Berniece joins these conditions: she strives to plunge into a present dimension, and yet she seems to be rolled up by invisible threads that are dragging her towards the past. Consequently, she seems to live in a sort of limbo where she is suspended between past and present, unwilling to go back and unable to go ahead. Her rejection of the past combined with her inability to put it to use implies far-reaching consequences both on the personal and on the collective level. With regard to the personal dimension, not unlike Troy and Cory Maxson, Berniece's behavior prevents her from living fully her role in the family as sister, niece and finally, woman. Furthermore, she resigns herself to living as second-category citizen since she is African American. Not unlike Ma Rainey's band, centuries of oppression seem to persuade her that things will never change. It is her brother who recalls her the role of self-responsibility by scolding her:

I'll tell you this...[...] If you believe that's where you at then you gonna act that way. If you gonna act that way then that's where you gonna be [...]. Papa Boy Charles and Mama Ola wasn't living at the bottom of life. [...] They would have taken a strap to you if they heard you say something like that. [...] Hey Doaker...Berniece say the colored folks is living at the bottom of life. I tried to tell her if she think that... that's where she gonna be. (PL, 92)

Accordingly, Berniece's situation shows that the past can be turned into a negative and psychological force that prevents you from living your present and believing in your future. In the play, this negative force is literally represented by Sutter's ghost who haunts the piano. It can be argued that his spirit represents the familial past that affects the present life of the characters since they are unable to come to terms with it. Moreover, it is possible to give a broader connotation to the figure of the ghost: it represents the trials and tribulations of the whole black community. Given that the 135 year-old piano brings the ancestors to the scene, it correlates the Charles' story with the story of the black community.

As Morales notices in *Ghosts on the Piano*:

it is easy to imagine a number of possible correlatives to the situation of the family, especially in regard to black American cultural identity vis-à-vis the dominant culture of the United States. The lineage kinship "bond, which is literal within the world of the play, becomes a metaphor of the historical connection between black Americans and their past, and "kinship" in general becomes a metaphor for the historical connection among all

black Americans. The ghost of Sutter becomes the disembodied embodiment of the slaveholder's historical perspective (and perhaps even the dominant culture's control of history). (111)

Therefore, the play suggests that the rejection of the past can bring about negative effects to the whole community. If African Americans keep rejecting the presence of their past, they are likely to get the past transformed into a haunting shadow and their culture, history and memory assimilated by the dominant (white) "ghost". The end of the play shows that both the individual and the community have to lay claim to their past in order to break the spell. In the final scene, Boy Willie has the strength to chase away the demonic presence only after Berniece has intervened in her brother's "life and death struggle" by playing the piano and invoking her ancestors: she accomplishes a sort of purging experience that frees herself from the burden of her legacy and her brother from the haunting ghost. In this way, the fratricidal struggle between Berniece and Boy Willie turns into a struggle against a common enemy: the scars of their historical past as family and community, which keep haunting their present. After the cathartic performance, she has finally understood what to do with her legacy: she has to embrace it in order to go ahead.

In conclusion, *The Piano Lesson* can be compared to a didactic play whose aim is to teach how to deal with the legacy of your memory. As Shannon notices in *August Wilson as a Teacher*, Wilson usually privileges a thought-provoking theatre rather than a theatre that provides straightforward solutions. If we consider the previous play analyzed, it can be noticed that the playwright spurs the audience to ponder upon several issues by concealing possible solutions inside metaphorical clues, such as a fence or a pair of shoes. This play, instead, privileges a didactic solution: the piano becomes a visual metaphor of the issue at stake and, at the same time, it represents the solution of the issue itself. Inspired by the powerful images drawn from Romare Bearden's paintings, Wilson thought to turn the burden of memory into a hardwood and thick piano that looms at the core of the scene dominating the parlor of the house in the same way as the (hi)storial legacy looms at the core of the character's lives. If on the one hand, it represents the story of a family, the history of a community that weighs upon the characters' lives, on the other hand, it represents a solution to the issue itself: it shows what to do in order to unburden memory. Clearly, the play points out that ignoring the presence of the piano cannot be the solution to shake off the oppressive burden. The analysis of the characters shows that rejecting the

memory of the past can cause a dislocation in time and space: Doaker and Wining Boy are affected by a sort of “walking blues” that condemns them to a permanent wandering; Berniece, on the contrary, appears to be paralyzed in a still dimension. Furthermore, their existential condition seems to sever them from the past as well as from the present since they are unable to establish familial or emotional ties. Only after learning to treasure the piano, do they find their place in the present. Yet, the play highlights that the past cannot be transformed in a sort of untouchable shrine to worship. On the contrary, the recovery of the past is a starting point that needs to be integrated with the action in the present and the hope in the future. It is Berniece who finally reveals the answer to the question “what is memory?” and “how can you put it into use?”. Memory is a vital heritage that flows unbroken from the past to the present, which needs to be played day after day as the keys of a piano in order to keep it alive. As Boy Willie says, you have to face your memory, be proud of it and build on it, only in this way can you learn where “you at in the world” and find self-definition as person, as family and finally, as community.

### *3.2 A Legacy embracing Blacks and Whites*

#### *3.2.1 Historical background: the search for black self-definition through Art*

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*.

-August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*  
(emphasis mine)

Blacks see the content of their life elevated into art. They don't always know it is possible and it is important for them to know that.

-August Wilson, *Interview by Lyons & Plimpton*

The image of the piano suggests interesting insights about the role of the arts in the process of remembering the African American identity. Although it is an object, the piano serves as an active agent on the scene: it spurs the characters to remember, it preserves and defends the family's memories and finally, it teaches the characters what to do with their legacy. In short, it achieves the same goals that

Wilson wants his theatre and generally the arts to accomplish. Therefore, if on the literal level the author aims at showing the central importance to the family of the piano, on the metaphoric level he spurs the audience to reflect upon the value of the arts for the African American community. August Wilson acknowledges and celebrates the idea of the arts committed to improving black people's condition, for this reason he strongly claims the need to treasure black artworks, such as an old piano.

The relationship between the arts and African Americans' search for self-definition has been raising numerous debates concerning black aesthetic. Questions like "Does a black art exist?", "What is the role of the black artist?", "Can the black artist create art disentangled from his *blackness*?" have been commonly addressed by scholars and critics. It hardly needs saying that these tricky questions have resulted in different conclusions. One could generalize by saying that there are critics and artists that completely reject the notion of art subjected to race and others that embrace this notion, such as August Wilson. The Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937) is usually recognized as the cradle of the debate about the notion of black art. During those decades, scholars and artists tried to re-conceptualize the idea of "the Negro" by means of literary, musical, theatrical forms. In particular, they aimed at shattering old stereotypes that influenced black people's perception of themselves and their relationship to their heritage. Thanks to a conflation of historical, sociological and artistic events through the 1920s, the Renaissance found a fertile ground to turn into a peculiar artistic movement. In fact, the increasing interest in black heritage was fostered by the new sociological thinking of the time promoting cultural pluralism and the so-called Negro Vogue. The notion of cultural pluralism, a term that was coined by Horace Kallen in 1915 even as the United States were trying to outline an American identity independent from Europe, promoted the idea of a nation where different cultures could develop side by side. In addition, the international resonance of Jazz music, black stage humor and the avant-garde called Primitivism contributed to spur both blacks and whites to revalue black heritage. Jazz music, in particular, became an inspiring and encouraging source for black artists who decided to experiment new aesthetic forms. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance coincided with the development of numerous civil rights and reform organizations devoted to the uplifting of African Americans, therefore the exponents of the movement joined together their artistic and sociopolitical commitment by transforming the black arts into a tool to revolutionize black conditions.

Alain Locke was one of the major exponents of the Harlem Renaissance. He strongly believed in the involvement of the arts with the African American uplifting. As Powell notices in *Art History and Black Memory: Toward a 'Blues Aesthetic'*, the philosopher hoped for “an African-American art that would seek visual nourishment from its legacy” (229). According to Locke, the flourishing of African American art would be twofold: first, through the Arts the Negro people would attain self-awareness and self-consciousness as a people; secondly, not only would the arts help African Americans discover themselves but also they would allow Americans to recognize African Americans as valuable contributors to the American culture. Thus, in *The New Negro* (1925), he spurs black artists to cling on to their cultural heritage in order to strengthen their self-awareness:

Recalling how suddenly the Negro spirituals revealed themselves: suppressed for generations under the stereotypes of Wesleyan hymn harmony, secretive, half-ashamed, until the courage of being natural brought them out- and behold, there was folk music. Similarly the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. Until recently, lacking of self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others. [...]

With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without. (24)

Furthermore, a black art can help blacks and whites acknowledge blacks' contributions :

[...]for the present, more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, not only in his folk-art, music especially, [...], but in larger, through humbler and less acknowledged ways. For generations the Negro has been the peasant matrix of that section of America which had most undervalued, and here he has contributed not only materially in labor and in social patience, but spiritually as well. (31)

Aligned with Locke's thought, the critic and writer Langston Hughes claims in his manifesto *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926) that the black artist should not be “afraid of being himself”, he should give literature and drama “his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears” (57). He encourages black artists to find inspiring material in “the folk” migrating to the urban areas from the South since they still preserved their “individuality” as black people and they had not undergone white standardization yet. Hughes suggests as example, which should be emulated, the African American writer Jean Toomer whose work *Cane* exemplified a new way in writing about black life both for the contents



and for the structure, which was molded by the rhythm of black folk music and jazz. However, the Harlem Renaissance was far from being dominated by any particular school of thought. In contrast to the scholars cited above, artists such as Countee Cullen and George Schuyler reject the idea of “the Negro artist”. Cullen believes that art, in his case poetry, should transcend racial identity and so does Schuyler. Furthermore, the latter argues in *The Negro-Art Hokum* (1926) that talking about negro art is nonsense since black and white Americans of “the same cultural and economic level” share the same environment and education, and therefore he doubts they can produce different art. He concludes by claiming that the negro art is the sheer invention of “Negrophobists” who firmly believe that racial differences should emerge in the arts as well:

This nonsense is probably the last stand of the old myth palmed off by Negrophobists for all these many years, and recently rehashed by the sainted Harding, that there are ‘fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences’ between white and black Americans. [...] On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. (54)

Although the movement lacked a cohesive vision, it should receive recognition for raising international consciousness about the condition of the black artist. Furthermore, it laid the ground for a prolific aesthetic debate that would develop over the twentieth century. In particular, the ideas formulated by Locke and Hughes laid a fertile ground to further speculations about the entanglement between black aesthetics and African American self-definition, which would reach one of its pugnacious expressions through the 1960s.

In those years, supporting a different black aesthetic became a political claim advocating separatism between black and white Americans. As Neal explains in his manifesto *The Black Arts Movement* (1968), through the 1960s the political movement called Black Power became the nourishment for the Black Arts. Rejecting the idea of “protest literature” whose aim was raising white awareness of black condition, black artists believed in the need to address black audience in order to bring about a concrete political and social change. As one of the most popular poets of the Black Arts, Brother Knight, wrote:

Now any man who masters the technique of a particular art form, who *adheres to the white aesthetic*, and who directs his work *toward a white audience* is, in one sense, protesting. And implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protestor's "grievance" (the very

word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin. (qtd. in Neal 30, *emphases mine*)

In order to revolutionize the black condition, not only had the artist to address the black audience directly but also he had to create a kind of art that was responsive to the “needs” and “aspirations” of black people. Therefore, the main tenet of the Black Arts was that it was possible to revolutionize black culture and ideas through an aesthetic revolution. Moreover, they thought it was compulsory to make up aesthetic forms and canons that could express and contain black ways of thinking. Western aesthetic canons, instead, not only failed to represent the black world but also prevented them from shaking off the white way of thinking and defining “the world in their own terms” (29). In order to unwrap the black mind from the suffocating white case the black artist needed to:

[...] destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil. It's time for Du Bois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: de-stroy the culture and you destroy the people. This must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilizers; bringing back old values and introducing new ones. Black Art will talk to the people and with the will of the people stop impending “protective” custody. (qtd. in Neal, 30)

To define an artist a “culture stabilizer” meant making a strong claim for his social and political commitment. Not only was he required to give voice to his cultural heritage but also to spur his people to translate his art into action. During these decades, ethics and aesthetics were joined together by the same goal: the Black Arts and Black Power aimed at creating self-determination and nationhood for black Americans. For this reason, Neal defined poems as “physical entities” such as “fists, daggers and guns” that should be used by the black community to fight their battle to achieve freedom from the spiritual and political white oppressor. The Black Arts aimed at succeeding in creating a “cultural nationalism”, “a *nation* within the belly of white America” (Neal, 39) which, according to Neal, the Harlem Renaissance failed to create.

It was through this period that there was a blossoming of theatre, a genre that was defined “the most social of all the arts” and a suitable tool both to give voice to black people and to urge the audience to revolutionize their personal and social condition. In particular, the controversial figure of LeRoi Jones advocated the idea of theatre as a genre strictly involved with change. His article *The Revolutionary Theatre* is considered a manifesto of the Black theatre:

Our theatre will *show victims* so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims, if they are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that *pre-revolutionary temperaments* will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of *what the world is, and what it ought to be*. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and *a natural sense of the self in the world*. All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live. (2, *emphases mine*)

Analyzing the whole manifesto, it is possible to pinpoint some main concerns. Firstly, Black theatre aimed at making black Americans aware of being the victims of American (white) society; secondly, it aimed at looking “inside the black skulls” (Jones, 1) in order to show the neurosis inherited from the interaction with “the white thing” over the centuries; finally, it wanted to teach Blacks how to mold the world and fight back, after pointing out the ways to overcome black inherent neurosis. Through the analysis of the most representative plays of the time in *The Black Arts Movement*, Neal provided examples of these neuroses and the ways to overcome them. As examples of neuroses, one could cite *The Slave* and *The Dutchman* by LeRoi Jones; these plays exemplify how the dominant white psyche can pollute the black mind by molding it as *clay* and making the black man wish to be like whites; *Whos’s Got His Own* by Ron Milner that deals with the disruption of the black family because of the violent paternal figure, as Neal explains, “lacking the strength of being a man in the white world, he turns against his family” (37). Examples of plays inspiring revolutionary change are, for instance, *Jello* by LeRoi Jones, which presents the figure of the “Uncle Tom Clown” who skillfully undermines the “white master” by pretending to be the stereotyped black man; *Black Mass* and *Slave Ship*, both by Jones, the first one invites a rejection of scientific western knowledge opposed to the spirituality of blacks; the second one represents a voyage through the centuries by showing the need to reconstruct history from the point of view of the oppressed. *We Own The Night* by Garret, which spurs black men to regain their manhood and criticizes the figure of the woman whose aspirations and values are closer to the whites than to her own man (37). To sum up, it can be deduced from the analysis of Neal’s manifesto that black theatre focused mainly on the pathological condition of blacks, in particular black men, and aimed at smashing the cause that had led to such a condition, in other words, the white world.

It can be concluded that both the Harlem Renaissance and The Black Arts shared the idea of using the arts to change the perception that blacks had of themselves. By placing the “black world” at the

core of the artworks, the artists aimed at developing black self-esteem and self-awareness. However, if the Harlem Renaissance supporters of the Negro artist aimed at obtaining recognition of the black contributions within the American culture, the Black artists of the 1960's were more inclined to highlight the opposition between the "black world" and the white American world since the survival of the former depended on the clear separation from the latter.

### 3.2.2 *A Black Piano? Or an American Piano?*

August Wilson forged his thoughts in the late 1960s. In *An interview with August Wilson* by Bigsby, he claims that, as a young man in his twenties, he considered it "a duty and a honour to participate as we black Americans were debating the character of our culture and seeking ways to alter our relationship to American society" (204). Aligned with the Black Arts' creed, he points out that he completely agrees with the idea of using the arts as a "weapon" to "participate more fully" in the socio-political debate. Some ideas concerning the black arts, most of all black theatre, are expressed in his controversial keynote address at TCG Conference *The Ground on Which I Stand*. Although his speech found numerous supporters, it also received numerous critiques. Amid the opponents, there is the popular theatre critic and playwright Robert Brustein who defined Wilson's speech an anachronistic manifesto of the 1960s. Flabbergasted by Wilson's statements, the American critic said that Wilson's thought echoes the radicalism of the 1960s since it advocates separatism as well as self-segregation both in the American artistic environment and American society. In particular, in his article *Subsidized Separatism*, he focuses his critique on "Wilson's insistence on black culture, particularly theatre" as "an unparalleled achievement but also a singular and discrete experience of life" (26) as if, Brustein explains, white people could not fully participate in black theatre because they respond to a different philosophical, historical, mythological and cultural system. In addition, he strongly disapproves of Wilson because he maintains that colorblind casting should be abolished since it does not promote black cultural development, on the contrary, it serves as a "tool of the Cultural Imperialists" to promote the idea of cultural assimilation that "black Americans have been rejecting for 300 years" (26). Brustein, who defines himself a supporter of the universality and "transcendence" of theatre, cannot help asking "Do

not all artists belong to the same family?“, “Why should only the black experience inspire black artists?“, “Why should not people who have a different historical background understand black culture?“. Brustein concludes his response to Wilson’s tirade by saying that Wilson’s rejection of colorblind casting and his stale belief in the importance of preserving black theatre from assimilation “represent a reverse form of the old politics of division, an appeal for socially approved and foundation-funded separatism” against which people like Martin Luther King fought.

In short, according to Brustein, Wilson’s thought is aligned with “the rabid identity politics” and the “poisonous racial consciousness” that echoes rebels and separatists from the 1960s (29). Consequently, his theatre ends up focusing only on the unhappy and unequal conditions of blacks as shows the “pervasive tone of victimization” characterizing his plays. Accepting Robert Brustein’s critique would imply recognizing that Wilson’s theatre does not represent an evolution of black theatre, but a faint imitation of the agitprop of the 1960s. It cannot be denied that much of Wilson’s thought is rooted in the tenets of The Black Arts as the playwright himself points out; nevertheless, I would suggest that the black theatre of the 1960s and Wilson’s theatre differ not only in their contents but also in their aims. Neal’s manifesto *The Black Arts Movement* claims that black theatre had to recreate a common cultural and historical ground in order to promote “the interaction” between “brothers” and the white thing (Neal, 34). Such interaction would occur by showing “victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are blood brothers” (qtd. in Neal, 34). In this way they would fight back “confronting” the white thing that has made “black people powerless”. In that simple act lies the “salvation” of the black man (Neal, 34). Wilson’s theatre diverges from these last tenets of the Black Arts. Wilson’s theatre aims at re-membering black culture and history in order to get black brothers to interact with their own selves and reunite the members of the community; secondly, it aims at reconstructing black culture and history in order to enrich the cultural and historical legacy of all Americans. Neither does he aim at presenting black people as victims of history in order to fuel their anger nor does he present “the white thing” as the crucial problem of the black community. With regard to this last statement, it might be objected that even Wilson’s theatre features negative allusions to “the white thing”. In *Fences*, the playwright highlights that the play is contextualized in a socio-historical period when whites had more possibilities than blacks

and black people's lives were actually affected by racism; in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* as well as in *The Piano Lesson*, the characters who want to take advantage of blacks by selling their artistic products are white; finally, in *The Piano Lesson*, the haunting presence is white. Nevertheless, I would argue that it would be reductive to claim that the difficulties concerning black characters' life are merely due to the white racist environment or the white presence on the stage. Accepting that the characters' troubled existence is caused by "the white thing" would imply accepting that Wilson's theatrical project only concerns the representation of "the oppression of black people through each decades" characterized by a "pervasive" and "monotonous tone of victimization" (Brustein, 27). Obviously, it cannot be denied that there is a white (negative) presence, yet Wilson's characters turn into "troubled" characters because of their own choices and their wrong way of dealing with their memory, culture and history. As was argued in the previous analyses of *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, characters like Troy Maxson or Berniece fall into the role of victims because they are not able to face their past memories. As far as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is concerned, by means of Levee's character, the play is correlated to the theme of "the white mask" in vogue through the 1960s whose aim was to show the destruction following the acquisition of white symbols. Yet, I would argue that the theme of the polluting white mask is integrated with a clear call: re-collecting and being responsible for black culture and history in order to strengthen their identity as both single person and community. Only in this way can blacks support whatever external pressure imposed by life and avoid being victims of themselves. *The Piano Lesson*, in particular, educates the playgoers to the importance of fighting for their history and culture. In the original version, the play ended when Boy Willie and the ghost were engaged in a "life-and-death struggle" since Wilson considered that moment "the important thing". However, even in this case, the fight does not stand for a bloody revolution that should be fought against the white oppressor. Instead, it aims at developing black awareness about their role in preserving their memory. As Shannon points out in *The Piano Lesson: August Wilson as a Teacher*:

This revolutionary temperament surfaces but it is clearly redirected in Wilson's work in general and *The Piano Lesson* in particular. He avoids the hardcore agitprop that characterizes black theatre of the turbulent 1960s and replaces it with more soul-searching theatre- that which invites black audiences to take a closer and more personal look at how they have fared in American's exclusionary history. *The Piano Lesson* shows the Boy Willies and the Bernieces, who are preoccupied with coming to terms with the forces shaping their family's history and with deciding to accept the inherited responsibility of sustaining their legacy. Wilson examines a neglected area of concern for black Americans' present and future well-being: their cultural past. (163)

In the final scene of the play, both brother and sister finally learn the lesson of the piano: it is fundamental to fight for your legacy, both cultural and historical, in order to “know who you are”, “where you have been”, and where you want to go. Furthermore, after all the members of the family have recognized the value of the piano, only then do they acquire self-awareness and self-realization and strengthen their familial ties. It can be inferred that Wilson’s theatre aims at showing that “a sense of cultural-worth” can heal the single individual as well as the “debilitated communities” ( as Wilson called the latter in his answer to Brustein *August Wilson Responds* ) whose sense of familial unity or sense of belonging to a community have been forgotten. Following the example of Boy Willie and Berniece, black Americans are invited to remember the “vestiges of their past” in order to re-establish familial and collective ties fundamental to recover the black communities.

Finally, *The Piano Lesson* encourages not only the black audience but also the white audience to recognize the importance of preserving black culture and history. It can be argued that the play shows that recollecting black history implies integrating American history. As Londré notices in *A piano and its history: family and transcending family*, the play “pieces together” the parallel histories of a white family and a black family (106). Therefore, it can be speculated that the piano becomes a metaphor of the American soil where African descendants and Americans have been intertwining their stories. For African descendants in particular, shaping their history in such a soil was as hard as making some carvings in the woods. Nevertheless, the two (hi)stories have finally resulted in a common historical legacy embracing all Americans. Furthermore, the image of the piano suggests that African Americans have participated in enriching not only American history but also American art and culture. As Wilson affirms in his response to Brustein’s article *August Wilson Responds*, preserving Black culture and art is fundamental in order to keep faith to the American beliefs (107). As he explains in his article, the “truly American theatre is not the property of any race or culture”, its existence requires the “contributions” of artists performing their ethnic and racial backgrounds (102). Therefore, Wilson neither rejects the American context nor advocates separatism; instead, he supports the idea that the very nature of Americanness is cultural pluralism. As Bigsby emphasizes, he does not deny that his characters belong to the American context, he knows that “We got the American part together the first hundred years that we were here” (qtd. in Bigsby, 21). However, since the American part is “the known”, he is interested in

revealing “the unknown”: the African American “contributions” that have been developing over the centuries in the American ground. Wilson aims at teaching black and white audience that acknowledging cultural differences is fundamental for the survival of American society. As Bigsby argues:

His argument about strengthening black theatre, which some took to be a defence of separatism, his fanciful notions of a mass return to the South, were never designed as a rejection of an American identity. They were aspects of his desire to embrace that identity from a position of strength, of the need to acknowledge, indeed, that the American identity already bore the impress of those who had always been the protagonists not only of their own drama but of the drama of a society whose amnesia was a threat to its own future. (25)

For this reason, I would argue that Wilson’s theatre is closer to the tenets of the Harlem Renaissance than the tenets of The Black Arts. As Locke argues in *The New Negro*, the racial problem between blacks and whites is due to the fact that “they have touched too closely at the unfavorable level and too lightly at the favorable ones” (24). A black theatre, and the black art in general, would provide a common ground where blacks would know “who they are” and the American audience would realize the contributions of African Americans. For this reason, both blacks and whites are called to fight for what that piano symbolizes: a legacy of art, history and soul.



- Conclusion -

The analysis of the three plays shows that central to Wilson's theatre is the idea that it is possible to move forward into the future only after having remembered the past. However, the dissertation stresses that dealing with memories can be quite complicated. In fact, both their absence and presence can have far-reaching consequences for people's existence. Wilson's theatre provides a solution by teaching how to use the memory of the past.

After analyzing the story of the Maxson sons in *Fences*, Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wining Boy in *The Piano Lesson*, the musicians in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Doaker in *The Piano Lesson*, it can be concluded that underneath the absence of memory lie different motivations. Nevertheless, the result is negative for all of them since their identity turns out to be inevitably flawed. Troy and Cory reject their past because they relate it to the figure of the father. Tragically, the more they try to escape the more they feel entrapped in an already-be-written destiny: despite their efforts, they feel doomed to inherit their father's identity and life. Much like Troy and Cory, Levee escapes from his past. The young musician associates the old way of playing music and the rural South of his childhood with a destiny devoid of possibilities for blacks, riddled with discrimination and injustice. For this reason, he wastes his talent by pandering to the white managers and he eventually disowns his own origins. In so doing, he gets his identity weakened and finally choked by the Du Boisian Veil. To a certain extent, Wining Boy's rejection of the past is connected to the story of Levee. Both characters become victims of the dominant (white) socio-economic system because they do not realize that they are selling more than music, they are selling a part of their identity. Unable to pinpoint the cause of his emptiness, Wining Boy wrongly infers that he has to get rid of the music in order to find relief. The troubled relationship with the Blues also concerns the band in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. As has been argued, black music, in particular the Blues, stands for a shrine of the past. The notes of the music have been picking up personal stories over the centuries by transforming them into a collective history concerning all African Americans. As Bigsby argues in *August Wilson: the ground on which he stood*, each song stands for the expression of the identity of the single individual as well as for expression of the cultural identity of the

group (12). Therefore, by selling the blues, the members of the band not only unconsciously lose their past but also deprive themselves of a fundamental tool to express themselves. Doaker, instead, consciously rejects any memory of his past. A feeling of resignation makes him sever any links with it. Disenchanted with life, he feels that black people are constrained inside a definite path therefore there is no point remembering a painful past nor striving for the present. Thus, he decides to live “retired from the world”.

To sum up, among these characters, the complicated relationship with the past makes them experience entrapment (Troy, Cory), exploitation (Wining Boy, Levee, the band) and resignation (Doaker). Furthermore, their “unfinished business with the past” troubles not only their relationship with their own Selves, but also their relationship with others. In *Fences* and in *The Piano Lesson*, the inability of the characters to heal the laceration with the past damages the familial unity, in the same way as in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* it damages the unity of the band. Only the characters who learn to re-member the past with their present, will finally be able to re-compose their identity and recreate their affective ties.

However, dealing with the presence of memory can be as hard as dealing with its absence. Thence, Wilson’s theater stresses that it is fundamental to understand what remembering means. It can be said that the story of Berniece exemplifies the negative effects caused by a wrong way of using memory. Unlike the other characters, Berniece clings on to the memories of her past by guarding her familial history. However, she perceives her role of custodian as a painful condition that keeps inherited scars alive. For this reason, she refuses to pass on the legacy of the past to her daughter in order to spare her the same destiny. To a certain extent, Berniece’s condition can be compared to Troy’s condition. For both of them, the unhealed scars of the past are turned into a paralyzing force that prevents them from living the present. The spell will be broken only after they have learned their lessons: first, the memory of the past should serve to strengthen your identity; secondly, it should be used as “active agent” that “illuminates the present action” (Elam, 15). Berniece eventually learns that the past serves to give you the strength to construct your story, to use Wilson’s image, to add your stanza to an inherited song. As Elam writes in *Ogun in Pittsburgh*:

Berniece constructs the song from her memory and yet also constructs memory through the song, for memory is never simply about what happened but what one *wants to happen as well*. Drawing back on her ancestors

whom she knew as well as those she never knew, her construction of memory galvanizes her as it releases the *power of the past*. (202, *emphases mine*)

Memory of the past can help you construct your present since it gives you self-definition. As Wilson said in the interview led by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton, “a repudiation of the worth of the self” is implicit in the denial of the past (6). However, even the present is strictly involved in the act of remembrance. Memory does not correspond to a mere recollection of past (hi)stories; it also corresponds to what “you want to happen as well”. Paraphrasing Elam’s words, it is up to you to transform the past from a paralyzing entity into a useful tool to construct your present. In other words, you have to use it to recompose your story, but you do not have to consider it your unavoidable destiny. For this reason, memory can be defined a vital continuum where past and present have to constantly interact with the presence of each other.

Together with his characters, Wilson invites the black audience to reconnect with their past. Underneath his project lies the conviction that behind the disintegration affecting African American communities there are flawed identities that have lost their culture and history. Through the personal stories of his characters, taken together in an epic project, he recreates the collective culture and history of African Americans. However, even though his theatre focuses on the life of African Americans, he shows that the recollection of black history can heal American identity as well. So, if on the one hand, he aims at making black Americans change perspective over themselves through the recovery of their (hi)stories, on the other hand, he aims at helping black Americans and white Americans alike to change perspective over their common history. As Bigsby argues in *August Wilson: the ground on which he stood*, Wilson’s theatre provides the space where history has to be “confronted and acknowledged, [...] a triumphant history, not merely one of survival but achievement” (19). So, through his plays, the black audience is forced to confront personal and historical scars, but also to acknowledge black contributions to the construction of America. Moreover, not only do African Americans improve the knowledge of their own identity, but also other Americans can recognize how African Americans have contributed through the big hands of the Troys, the “warrior spirit” of the Boy Willies, the great voice of the Ma Rainey, the talent of the Levees to construct the American historical and cultural identity. Through

Wilson's theatre, the American audience is joined by a cathartic act of remembrance that heals the inner scars of a whole nation.

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