

# TRANSGRESSING AND TRANSCENDING THE AMERICAN IDENTITY WITH AUGUST WILSON'S "BONES PEOPLE", GHOSTS AND AUNT ESTER<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In Wilson's drama we find a world full of non-naturalistic elements moving away from traditional Western forms and traditions, and connecting Africa and America and presenting some of the Afro-Americans' cultural contributions. This article aims to study how Wilson's "Bones People", ghosts and the over 300 year old Aunt Ester transforms the different characters, and how these non-naturalistic elements make the true turning point in the play.

**Key words:** Identity, non-naturalistic, African-American, August Wilson, Bones people, Aunt Ester, ghosts.

**Resumen:** En la obra dramática de Wilson encontramos un mundo lleno de elementos no naturalistas que se alejan de las tradicionales formas y tradiciones occidentales y que conecta África y América y que presentan algunas de las contribuciones culturales afro-americanas. Este artículo se centra en cómo los "Bones People", "ghosts" y Aunt Ester con más de 300 años, transforman a los distintos personajes y como son precisamente estos elementos no Naturalistas son decisivos en el desarrollo de las obras.

**Palabras clave:** Identidad, no Naturalista, Afro-Americano, August Wilson, Bones People, Aunt Ester, *ghosts*.

"The streets that Balboa walked were his own private ocean,  
and Balboa was drowning"

August Wilson

## 1. INTRODUCTION

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and he died in 2005 in Seattle, Washington. He was largely self-educated and an active participant in the black aesthetic movement, he also was a cofounder and director of Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theatre and he published poetry in African American journals, and produced several plays, before his *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* opened on Broadway in 1984. Strongly inspired by blues, folklore, and the storytelling tradition of African Americans, he produced a cycle of ten plays, each set in a different decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1986, Pulitzer Prize), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *The Piano*

<sup>1</sup> Date of reception: May 2007.

Date of acceptance and final version: July 2007.

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*Lesson* (1990, Pulitzer Prize), *Two Trains Running* (1992), *Seven Guitars* (1996), *Jitney* (1985 and revised in 1996), *King Hedley II* (1999), *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), and *Radio Golf* (first produced 2005).

In Wilson's 10 play-cycle we find a world that is a combination and a connection of non-naturalistic elements moving away from traditional Western forms and traditions, and speaking through racial and cultural lines. August Wilson connects Africa and America presenting the Afro-Americans' aesthetical and cultural contributions as art always communicates the values of its culture.

Wilson works with the benefit of the historical perspective when writing about the Afro-American's experience, reexamining their common history and analyzing what choices the Afro-American's have made. Even though Wilson's plays are set in the past, the problems his characters encounter are contemporary and universal as: what to do with one's culture and heritage? What to do with your legacy and how do you best put it to use is a recurrent theme in Wilson's work. Blacks and Whites have a different universe of perception of history. Through his drama, Wilson pursues to maintain their culture separate from the white dominant cultural values and to participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values. Afro-American values are without doubt connected to their African and American cultural heritage. We have to remember that even though Afro-Americas history is unique it obviously also has some characteristics common to the Western culture. What Wilson does is to present the often forgotten or silenced echoes of slavery, the searches for pride and the desire for strong roots to present universal problems and to confront an always uncertain future. Although Afro-Americans are different from whites in many aspects, they also share many similarities, but these similarities should never leave out the differences.

Wilson blends the marvelous, the fantastic and the detective, presenting the process of discovery in the course of the play. Wilson has often stated that his major influences have been four, what he has called his four B's: Blues, Bearden, Baraka and Borges.<sup>3</sup> In his plays, we find the process of story telling, the unreal and magic surroundings as well as the importance of myths, which is all very characteristic in the Afro-American tradition.

What this paper aims to study is how Wilson's "Bones People", ghosts and the over 300 year old Aunt Ester transforms the different characters, and how these non-naturalistic elements make the true turning point in the play. These symbolic and fantastic elements help the characters in their quest to reconnect with their roots, culture and traditions, in other words, their identity. In August Wilson's plays, the characters have to make that connection with the past, with their African past, in order to recognize their roots and who they are.

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<sup>3</sup> The blues music contains the Afro-American's response to the world, and is therefore present in Wilson's work. The painter Roman Bearden has inspired several of Wilson's plays and both artists explore themes universal to all human beings. Baraka influenced Wilson mainly through his political ideas; Borges has influenced Wilson in his capacity to create suspense and intrigue. For further reading: Jensen: "Across August Wilson's Four B's: Creating Theater with Blues, Bearden, Baraka and Borges" (2000: 325-334).

## 2. SPIRITS AND THE AFRICAN TRADITION

We trace numerous links between the African background and the American experience: music, dance, rituals, myths, proverbs, legends or folk stories. In early Africa, religion can be described as ancestor worship, whose spirits had unlimited power over their lives. The spirits that lived in a relative was idealized upon death, (considered as a god) continuing living with the family. The family patriarch, who entered in contact with the souls of their ancestors, conducted the ceremonies. Holy objects such as bones, pieces of metal, wood or rock would be worshipped, and blood of chickens, goats, lambs or even human were offered to gain the good will of the gods. There was a considerably reliance on the magical powers of talismans or amulets. Hood has mentioned that ghosts and spirits are a feature of the African worldview, and he further states that: [Spirits] “have been demonized as evil by the Christian tradition. Yet belief in good and evil spirits as a vital part of God’s creation is an African legacy familiar also in African-American culture and tradition” (1991: 301). The idea of ghosts, the conjure woman or ‘bones people’ are all part of the African-American culture, and they can be directly traced across the ocean to the African continent. We have to remember that at least some survival of African culture is obvious and beyond questioning; as Franklin and Moss have mentioned, “African slaves came from a complex social and economic life and they were not overwhelmed or overawed by their New World experiences” (1994: 25). They all shared a deep rooted African culture sufficiently firm for some customs, beliefs and traditions to persist. Although the Black experience in America exhibits a wide range of both class as well as regional diversity, there is sufficient commonality of collective response to African retention to construct a culturally specific mythos that reveals ethnic authenticity, as Harrison has commented (2002: 2).

Wilson’s characters have to reconnect and redefine their African identity, transcending and even erasing some of their American identity in order to form their African-American identity.

## 3. *JOE TURNER’S COME AND GONE*

The play is set in a boarding house in 1911 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it deals with a time in American history when recently freed slaves journeyed North to the booming industrial cities in search of an opportunity, prosperity, a new way of life, and, essentially, their own identities as free men and women.

The play’s protagonist, Herald Loomis, is a tall man of thirty-two, wearing a full-length wool coat and a hat in August, who arrives with his daughter Zonia at the boarding house. Loomis has released from seven years of forced labor on Joe Turner’s chain gang, and he is now searching for his wife, Martha, and his place in the world as a free man. Loomis struggles to function normally, and he occasionally becomes possessed by unseen forces and therefore draws the suspicion of the owner of the boardinghouse, Seth Holly, and of the other residents. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, the boardinghouse is full of people who are either lost or trapped in their past, and their present is incomplete because of the drastic social change they have lived. Seth’s boardinghouse becomes a temporary refuge and a starting point to their new Northern Urban life. Almost all characters have been co-

ming and going, they are seeking to reorient themselves and to find their identity. The new social conditions, the social changes that have made them free men and women imply that they have to shape and form their new identity. Their identity, individual and collective, (or as Bynum calls it, their *song*), have almost been forgotten. They all have a fragmented memory of their common past and it is not until they fully embrace their American and African past that they can find any meaning to their present and future. Thus, their main quest becomes to redefine their African-American identity to the new circumstances, that is, from slavery to free men and women. As Wilson says in the introduction:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of their gods and only guessing their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. (1997: 133)

They are all searching for a reunification of their identity, to reconnect with their roots, culture and traditions and the new social conditions.

The religious practices were often a blend of pre-colonial African belief systems and Christianity, therefore it is no surprise that it is at this moment that Loomis has his vision that paralyzes him. As Sandra L. Richards mentions, it is: “Through the Juba dance, African spirits, masked in the discourse of Christianity, force a crisis of consciousness in Loomis” (1999: 98). Loomis’ has his vision of the Bones People at the end of the first act when all the characters are doing the Juba dance and the Holy Ghost is mentioned. The bones rising out of the ocean in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, symbolize the unknown Africans who were lost during the Middle Passage. In the play, the bones are resurrected and washed upon land, and empower Loomis to respond to a world where he does not find himself in. Loomis, (as well as the rest of the characters but on different levels), is displaced, alienated and isolated from the world. His quest through the play is to find something that will make his life complete, something that makes life worth living and something that he belongs to. Loomis needs to reconnect with a collective identity, and to do that he has to embrace and accept his dual heritage and it is not until he can assume full responsibility for his actions, that he can walk again, and as in his vision, not until that the bones people again are of flesh and blood. The vision of the Bones People as well as the juba dance works as a bond of cohesion not only individually but also collective, becoming a powerful self-esteem bonding for the community.

#### 4. *THE PIANO LESSON*

This play is set in Pittsburgh in 1936, and all the action takes place in the house of Bernice Charles and her uncle Doaker Charles. A 137-year-old, upright piano, carved with totems in the manner of African sculpture, dominates the parlor. The play opens at dawn when Boy Willie (Bernice’s brother) knocks at the door and enters with his partner, Ly-mon. The piano has a special value for the Charles family, as during slavery Robert Sutter owned the Charles family. Sutter wanted to make an anniversary present so he traded a full and half-grown slave –Doaker’s father and grandmother– for the instrument. Though

initially Sutter's wife loved the piano, she eventually came to miss her slaves, so Sutter asked Doaker's grandfather, Willie Boy, to carve the faces of his wife and child into the piano. But Willie Boy did not only carve his immediately family, he included various scenes from the family history all the way back to Africa. After slavery, Berniece and Boy Willie's father, Boy Charles, developed an obsession over the piano, believing that as long as the Sutters' had it, the family was held in bondage, so he decided to get the piano back. Sutter then set boy Charles's house on fire, so he fled to catch the Yellow Dog railroad, but the mob stopped the train and set his boxcar on fire. Boy Charles died along with three hobos, all of whom became the ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

Now, Boy Willie is back as he intends to sell the piano and use the money to buy Sutter's land, the land his ancestors once worked as slaves. For Berniece the piano is their legacy and the memory of the sufferings of her mother. While Boy Willie argues that their legacy has to be put to use. When Boy Willie and Lymon begin to move the piano an unseen force drives them back. Boy Willie then engages with the ghost of Sutter in a struggle off stage. Suddenly, Berniece realizes what she must do and begins to play the piano and calm comes over the house.

In *The Piano Lesson*, the legacy, which is represented on stage as a piano, is what disturbs the peace and calm of Bernice's home. While Boy Willie wants to sell the piano to buy some land, and in this way use the legacy, his sister Bernice wants to keep the piano in order to remember the past sufferings of their family. The tension runs higher and higher through the play as more and more characters have seen the ghost or at least heard strange noises in the house. The tension between the two siblings grows steadily, until Boy Willie finally confronts physically the ghost and Bernice again plays the piano. In this play, it is not until the ghosts are defeated that the problems are settled. The piano is the family's heirloom with figures that are carved in the wood by Boy Willie and Bernice's grandfather during slavery. The characters have to reconnect with the past, and the piano has to be used to reconnect and reassemble not only the Charles's family but also to give meaning to the past's deaths and fighting. Hood has mentioned that: "Wilson's play celebrates obligatory filial piety to ancestral spirits and the legacy of a land where family members survived and died" (1997: 299) The piano cannot be kept it as a mere relic of past sufferings. The piano, which symbolizes the past and has become a legacy of fighting for freedom, has to be used.

In this play however, the ghost, does not appear until the end of the play, and as in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the ghost (the memories of the past) are what triggers the resolution of the play. It is what makes Bernice play the piano and in this way what makes her accept the importance of the piano, what the piano stands for, and its value. It makes Bernice confront the past and make her reconnect with the roots, culture and traditions that she had tried to avoid and ignore. The past, even though painful, should be used to build and create a better future.

The appearance of the ghost on stage, and the fighting between Boy Willie and the ghost, makes the true turning point in the play as it is then when Bernice realizes that unless she plays the piano again, unless she reunites with the past, the ghost will not leave her house. It is, however important to notice that the mere playing of the piano is not enough, Bernice has to invoke her ancestors for help so the ghost disappears.

The ancestors, the people that once were oppressed, are the only ones that can help the Charles' family with the current oppression of the ghost that hunts them. The ghost appears the moment that the piano is going to be pulled out of the family, to where it belongs, removed of where it really has value. The piano has become, as Boan (1998) has remarked, the Charles's "family slave narrative". The piano has carved all the Charles family's history all the way back to Africa, it is the account of their life.

Bernice plays at the end of the play a chant, a repetitive song that that brings peace and harmony back to the Charles' home. The chant connects with the past, with the ancestors and with the members of the Charles' family that fought and died for their culture and values. Hood has further mentioned that the spirits in Wilson's work continues "the [African] tradition of spirits as guardians of morality between the world of the living survivors and the world of the ancestors" (1991: 299). The piano has become an oppressing force and a psychological enslavement for Bernice. But after Bernice has assumed the past, playing and valuing the piano, the past becomes empowering and a celebration of the spirit of the Charles's family and of the African-Americans.

In this play, we also find another non-naturalistic element that helps and transforms the characters: the magic place where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog. In that spot Wining Boy talked to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and that mystic place seems to give supernatural powers. Wining Boy is said to be filled with confidence and luck during the next three years. This place is magical and it has actually been an important blues inspiration:

"Railroads have always been an integral part of the blues; not only in inspiring the boogie rhythms of countless rural guitarists, barrelhouse pianists and harp blowers, but also the lyric content of the blues singer. The earliest blues that has been noted featured one of the most famous railroads: Mississippi's "Yellow Dog." (...) The "Southern" was the Southern Railway which began 1894. "The Dog" was the Yellow Dog, a vernacular name for the Yazoo Delta Railroad. "Dog" or short-dog was railroad slang for a local or branch line. (...) The Southern cross the Dog at Moorhead, Handy (...) composed his "Yellow Dog Rag" in 1914 which later became "The Yellow Dog Blues". (Haymes 2002)

Several jazz bands and vaudeville-blues singers in the 1920s recorded this form of tune. In 1925 Bessie Smith recorded, the probably most famous version accompanied by Fletcher Henderson's Hot Six. Wilson thus takes a classic blues inspiration as the yellow dog, including its strong African American roots and tradition in his work.

As seen this is the case of Sutter Ghost that appears in *The Piano Lesson*, it is an unsettled problem that needs to be resolved. The spirits of the Charles' family that Bernice calls for in her chant not only helps them in their battle against Sutter, but they also act as bond of cohesion for the family.

##### 5. TWO TRAINS RUNNING

Set in Pittsburg in May, 1969, *Two Trains Running* takes place in Memphis Lee's restaurant. After years of being a successful, vibrant business, Memphis' restaurant, as well as the rest of the neighborhood, will be torn down for urban renewal. Memphis is determined

to get a fair price for his business refusing nothing less than 25 thousand dollars. The rest of the characters are steady customers still drift in to eat, run numbers, philosophize or just hang out. One of the most important characters is never on stage: Aunt Esther, who is said to be 345 years old. Aunt Esther is a spiritual adviser, shaman and primal mother. Just about everybody has been to see her when they need their luck changed. All of the characters seem to be in search of something: love, employment, justice, meaning, or just a better life.

In *Two Trains Running* we again find a group of characters in a quest of defining themselves where Aunt Ester, the 345 year old character is the only one that can help them to establish a reconnection with their past.

All the characters are in a quest of finding and defining their identity in order to understand the present and future. As Aunt Ester clearly says in the play, "You have to pick up the ball", the characters have to reconnect with their past, their roots to redefine their identity. Aunt Ester is the joint between Africa and America, and she becomes the turning point in the play. Both Sterling and Memphis undergoes a profound transformation after their meeting with Aunt Ester. Sterling whose behavior and thoughts through the play may sometimes seem outrageous, understands, after having talked with Aunt Ester that he has to act in order to give Hambone's long struggle a meaning. Memphis, after his meeting with Aunt Ester, realizes he has to return to the South to fight for his lost property. Aunt Ester helps the other characters reconnect with their history and their past and gives in this way a meaning to their quest. As Hood has mentioned one of the functions of Spirits in Africa is to "act as bonds of cohesion, community stability, and self-esteem in their bonding with individuals and the community" (1991: 305). Ancestors are bearers and beacons to the living community, it is through her experience that the characters can reunite and reconnect with their traditions and roots. Aunt Ester becomes the spiritual healer of the community, she is the conjure woman, with her advices that comes as riddles, she is, like the African traditions, immortal.

In Wilson's drama, we find a continuity of the African complex legacy of ancestor spirits and ghosts. In the African tradition, we find different kind of spirits: we have the spirits of the ones that died violently, who are called "bad deaths", and who return from the grave to haunt their survivors. These ghosts become the link between the living world and the ancestors, and they are often back because the need to settle an old problem that caused deaths and sufferings. These spirits are back bringing good luck or helping the survivors solving past problems, acting this way as bonds of cohesion for the community.

In all of Wilson's plays, the ghost, spirits and other non-naturalistic elements remains the characters of how their ancestors had their identity rooted in the courage to fight for freedom. The question of self-identity is a major force in the plays and the characters often suffers a sense of lost and misplacement in the world.

The characters have to break the metaphorical or psychological enslavement, reuniting with their past and ancestors. The character's burden gets much lighter the moment they recognize and reestablish links to their spiritual and ancestral inheritance. These ancestral characters and spirits are what triggers the action and they are the true turning point in each play.

In Wilson's plays we find that the song, or identity, both individual as well as collective, has always to be found within themselves, their tradition and cultural roots. The past

can be understood or misunderstood either as a source of spiritual power or as a burden that dominates every present and future step taken. In Wilson's plays, the past becomes empowering and a celebration of the spirit of African-Americans. Wilson celebrates the warrior spirit of the ancestors and the legacy of a land where family members fought and died. The characters find the force, the strength, within themselves and what triggers it, are these non-naturalistic elements characteristic to African American culture.

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