SUFFERING IN ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES

Edited by MARTINA DOMINES and CHARLES I. ARMSTRONG

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Contents

Chapter 7

Dark Material and Radical Healing in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Jovana Pavićević

AUGUST WILSON'S DIALOGICAL CULTURAL ACTION

Toni Morrison's "Foreword" to the posthumous publication of August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* seeks to flesh out the playwright's method of capturing the authenticity and fullness of black American life (2007, vii). From his breakthrough with the Broadway production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984[1] until his untimely death in 2005, Wilson examined black America's social, political, and cultural fabric throughout the twentieth century, producing a series of ten plays collectively known as *The Century Cycle*. Each play of the *Cycle* arises from Wilson's active and intimate involvement with the black cultural environment with which he identified as a biracial individual. He emphasized this aspect on numerous occasions, most notably in his 1996 speech entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand," given at the eleventh biennial Theater Communications Group National Conference:

> When I say culture, I am speaking about the behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought as expressed in a particular community of people. [. . .] Growing up in my mother's house at 1727 Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain. (Wilson 1997b, 494–95)

In keeping with Wilson's insistence on the "specific cultural ground," the *Cycle* has been frequently said to represent a repository of African American life and history. Responses underscoring historical and sociological

aspects of the *Cycle*, as Morrison rightly observes (2007, viii), have tended to overlook Wilson's dramatic strategies and aesthetic qualities of the plays. Nevertheless, the considerable amount of literature dedicated to scrutinizing history, mythology, African oral tradition, blues, jazz, and black nationalism as the bedrock of Wilson's *Cycle* has prompted scholars, particularly in the last decade, to shift the focus toward examining how the rich tapestry of events, beliefs, and practices shaped the strategies Wilson employed in crafting his drama-world.

Morrison's admiration for *The Piano Lesson* stems from her choice to engage by reading the play rather than witnessing a staged performance. She identifies the intrinsic qualities of dialogue as central to shaping the reader's interpretation and engagement with the text:

> August Wilson's dialogue, dramatic and informative, is also "hyper-naturalistic" and reads in some places like lyrics. He teases from African American vernacular its most salient elements: loaded metaphor, nuance, clever use of the unsayable and the resonant spaces in conversational exchange. (Morrison 2007, x)

This observation applies to this specific play and, more generally, to the entire *Cycle*, providing a conceptual framework to comprehend the playwright's method.

The large body of Wilson's interviews shows him deeply engaged with the testimonies imparted by the blues and the elders of his community, whom he metaphorically describes as "walking history books" (Wilson 2006, 101). To become an immediate receiver of these testimonies, he cultivates a habit of attentive listening to another's language (107), conveying stories through words and polyrhythms, repetitions, transitions, pauses, silences, and absences. In other words, he seeks to detect the variations in stories and how they are told (Bigsby 2007, 209) while meeting what is unspoken and unspeakable.

In addition to the condensed forms, lyrical expressions, and nonverbal cues, as Morrison notes, the *Cycle* features protracted speeches delivered by single characters. These solos are not mere instances of verbalism but purposeful passages relying on storytelling as a distinctive strategy within black expressive culture. By incorporating and expanding upon the salient elements mentioned earlier, these prolonged passages aim to arouse a response and continue the dialogue, as Wilson explains: "I just hope the audience listens. There is a black person talking, and he is talking a lot, and I think that we have not heard black people talk. [. . .] I think the long speeches are an unconscious rebellion against the notion that blacks do not have anything important to say" (2006, 104).

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