

THE BLUES AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY: A STUDY OF AUGUST WILSON'S *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

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Abstract

This article examines a major African American play to show how the African American minority, through the theatre, resists the impositions of the authoritative culture in order to maintain their own cultural identity. To establish the centrality of their role in American society on one hand and to maintain their cultural identity on the other, African American playwrights have contributed successfully in raising a resistant tendency among their people against the dominant authoritative culture and the negative effects of the dominant (white) cultural discourse on the main cultural aspects of their identity. Historically, the African Americans are those torn from their motherland and taken to America by force to be sold as slaves. They had been subjected to brutal behavior and severe authoritative discourse for several generations. This article presents a representative African American playwright whose works encapsulate a variety of African American experiences during the 20th century. It discusses August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) through which Wilson promotes the importance of foregrounding these subordinated and marginalized cultural aspects in order to produce and maintain an African-American cultural identity. Specifically, the article will discuss the cultural devices represented here by blues music as a discursive means used by the African Americans theatre to resist authoritative culture.

Keywords: The blues, cultural conservation, African American, minority, assimilation, integration

In a 1991 interview by Susan G. Shannon, playwright August Wilson raised a controversial question about maintaining one's culture: "What are we going to do? Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values?" (Shannon 1995, p. 234). Wilson's question raises a controversial issue that has long been a matter of discussion among African Americans. The question reflects the conflicts and tension between two possible paths. The first path moves quickly towards assimilation into the dominant society, while the other path leads to suffering as individuals struggle to resist domination, in order to define their own cultural identity and balance the pulls of different cultures. Through his dramatic works, Wilson argues about this controversial situation. His vision about the production and maintenance of the cultural identities of the African Americans can be seen in his rejection of assimilation as a choice. This absolute refusal is revealed through the character Ma Rainey in his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984).

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was first named for his father Frederick Kittel, a white German immigrant who worked as a baker. His mother was Daisy Wilson, a cleaning woman (Wang 1999, p. 17). Wilson was very close to his mother because his father never lived with the family. Denying any ties to or support from his father, Wilson "embraced the culture of the mother he admired and loved" (Bogumil 1999, p. 1). Wilson was a bright student, but due to racial discrimination, he dropped out of high school at age 15 when he was accused of cheating in writing a term paper about Napoleon Bonaparte (Wolfe 1999, p. 2). From the very beginning of his life, Wilson was subject to racial discrimination. He was a victim of racism when the family moved to live in a white suburb. He once told *The New Yorker* in 2001 that there was a note on his school desk every day saying 'Go home, Nigger'. Despite this, however, education and reading remained centrally important to him. Wilson spoke in a 1987 interview about the importance of black writers for him and for black people as well: "these books were comfort ... just the idea black people would write books. I wanted my book up there, too. I used to dream about being part of the Harlem Renaissance" (quoted in Bogumil 1999, p. 2). Thus, as a dramatist, he felt he should use the only weapon at his disposal, the arts, in order to protect his people's identity, which experience had taught him was under threat from racism. He is referred to as his people's prophet: "He is a prophet of his race, resurrecting crucial moments in African American cultural history to inspire healthy spiritual and attitudinal adjustments within his people" (Shannon 1995, p. viii). This ambition enabled him to work hard to highlight the central, rather than marginal, role that his people have played as a large and influential minority in the United States.

Culture for Wilson should not only be maintained but it should be developed; as he said in an interview, "This is our culture. . . How can we develop it?" (Shannon 1995, p. 234). This aim cannot be achieved when African Americans have been losing their cultural aspects gradually through assimilation. Therefore, maintaining culture should come first before thinking of developing it. This article will be concerned with one of his prominent plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in which he concentrates on the characters' reactions to assimilation and change on the one hand and the importance of the cultural identity of the African Americans as represented by blues music on the other hand.

The blues, which is undeniably African American music, is a major element in the struggle to foreground and maintain an African American identity. It is a cultural record of a heritage that extends back about four centuries. It reflects a social and historical background of the African Americans which was almost erased by the strictures and privations of slavery. Josephine Wright defines the blues as a "musical history of African Americans, a cultural record that spans over 400 years. Created largely within a social and historical context, the African American musical repertory encompasses a broad range of forms and styles that reflect the cultural heritage and diverse interests of black artists and musicians" (Wright 2009). According to this definition, the blues can be seen as a historical, cultural and social record of the black artists who use its various forms to record their cultural identity. This kind of music, however, also embodies the traditional values that identify the African Americans by linking them back to Africa and its ancient culture and traditions. Such cultural elements served to give them a worthy and independent cultural tradition, in the face of institutionalized racism which defined them as savages. In his preface to *Three Plays*, Wilson concentrated on the importance of

the blues as a way of 'thinking' and 'being': "I saw the blues as a cultural response of a non-literate people whose history and culture were rooted in the oral tradition" (ix - x).

In his preface to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson states that the blues is a type of music "that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other" (xvi).² Thus, he suggests, the blues can help in the production of a cultural identity which is not primarily decided or dominated by the hegemony of White American culture. He promotes the 'sacred' role of the blues singers as they help in conserving their people's cultural legacy. So he says:

the [blues] music has cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in. Blues is the best literature we have. If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa and various other parts of the world...They are people who are carriers of the culture, carriers of the ideas...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. (Shannon 1995, p. 204)

In this play, Ma Rainey serves as the sacred singer who, by holding true to her cultural values, is able to connect her people back to their long and established traditions, thus giving them pride in what is theirs. Actually, the blues music aims at reminding people of their troubled past and the culture that has arisen directly from that. Wilson usually makes a connection between the past and the present and thus never allows the past to be forgotten at all. But some people, represented by the character Levee - as we will see later on - do not understand the point of Blues music and are shown as being divorced from their culture. Wilson believes in the past as a powerful support in producing a cultural identity. Thus, the blues keeps people's stories alive by reminding them of their past.

August Wilson's first success was his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984). It was his first play in a ten-play cycle, each chronicling a decade in the African-American experience. It has been considered his first major play and helped to fix his reputation as an important American dramatist. This play was first performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984. After listening to the blues for more than a decade, Wilson began writing his play in 1976 (Shannon 1995, p. 66). The final version of the play opened at Broadway's Cort Theatre on October 11, 1984 and subsequently was published in 1985. It signaled Wilson's success as it paved the way for him in the playwright's workshop at the Eugene O'Neill Center and then at the Yale Repertory Theatre. The success of this play netted Wilson the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and gave him his first experience on Broadway. Later, Wilson received two Pulitzer Prizes.

The play sets two white men, Sturdyvant and Irvin, symbols of greedy, dominating white culture, against the strong-willed blues singer Ma Rainey, who refuses to compromise her culture for their wishes. Sturdyvant and Irvin have financial control, and therefore try to also control this expression of cultural identity in order to appeal to a wider white audience and make more money. The play presents the role of the blues singer in not succumbing to the dominant culture. The blues that permeates *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and her stubborn response to the two white men, symbolizes the black performers' means of responding to and rebelling against not having sole authority over their music; it also celebrates their unwillingness to surrender their talents to the white power structure. Not all African Americans, however, have this focus and strength of

purpose – Levee is a band member who works hard to change the mood of Ma Rainey's songs for the benefit of the white people. Ma Rainey refuses all his attempts to change her style and the contexts of some of her songs. Her refusal embodies Wilson's purpose in the play as he is against the idea of diluting these forms of cultural expression and their distinguishing aspects, especially if the intention behind this dilution is to fit into the white-dominated mainstream.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom proved to be not only the play that secured Wilson's future as a playwright but was also the first-full-blown public demonstration of his newly formulated artistic agenda. Wilson appears as the voice who calls his people to return to their unique cultures, based on African heritage and the experience of slavery and discrimination, and not to commit the mistake of assimilating into mainstream culture. He told Shannon that his concern is "to keep all of the elements of the culture alive in the work" (Shannon 1995, p. 202). Wilson adopts certain areas of black consciousness and transforms them into the core of his drama by focusing on the blues, the cultural medium which traces its roots "all the way back to Africa" (Shannon 1995, p. 204). The focus in this play is on the blues, which sets an appropriate tone of despair as his characters struggle against narrowing cultural spaces on the one hand, and the attempt to foreground African American culture by showing its importance in shaping American society on the other hand. Downing quotes Jay Plum as the latter refers to Wilson's use of the blues in his dramatic works: "For Wilson, the blues is a supportive force that allows listeners to transcend their hardships; the blues reawaken cultural consciousness and provide a new understanding of life" (quoted in Downing 2003, p. 1).

The play is based on the real life of the blues singer Ma Rainey, but both the setting and plot of the play have been imagined by the playwright. The play begins in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927, on the day of Ma Rainey's recording rehearsal. Ma Rainey and her band have not arrived yet. Two white men first appear on the stage. One of them is the manager, whose name is Irvin, and the other is Mel Sturdyvant, the owner of the recording studio. Irvin enters the band room while Mel Sturdyvant sits in the control booth. Wilson presents these white men as arrogant, as they deal with all black musicians as if they are a commodity. Their main concern is how to control Ma Rainey and her band members. In his first stage direction, Wilson describes Sturdyvant's arrogance as he deals with the black performers: "*Preoccupied with money, he is insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm's length*" (17). As the lights come up, Sturdyvant warns Irvin that he will not put up with any of Ma Rainey's "shenanigans." Irvin's assurances that Rainey will show up on time do not sound convincing for Sturdyvant and also for the audience as well. Sturdyvant characterizes Ma Rainey as a *prima donna* who expects the world to follow her orders. Although Sturdyvant puts a negative spin on her character, the audience comes to realize that she is in fact proud of herself as an artist and a black woman as well. Despite all Sturdyvant's attempts to subdue her, Ma Rainey refuses to surrender to Sturdyvant's demands. Both Sturdyvant and Irvin consider her a stubborn woman for she never yields to their desires. Thus Wilson, from the very beginning of the play, prepares the audience for the main conflict of the play – the conflict between the push towards surrender and assimilation, and the urge to reject assimilation as a reductionist and marginalizing move. The more Sturdyvant warns Irvin that he will not put up with Rainey's attitude, the more prepared the audience becomes for an unavoidable conflict when she does appear.

STURDYVANT: Listen, Irv . . . you keep her in line, okay? I'm holding you responsible for her . . . If she starts any of her . . . Listen, Irv . . . you're her manager . . . she's your responsibility . . .

IRVIN: Okay, okay, Mel . . . let me handle it.

STURDYVANT: She's your responsibility. I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit! (18)

However, Ma's strength of character is not necessarily reflected in the behaviour and attitudes of her band members. The members of Ma's band are Cutler (guitar and trombone player), Slow Drag (bass player), Toledo (piano player), and Levee (trumpet player). Cutler is in his mid-fifties. He is also the leader of the group, perhaps because of his stable, traditional sensibility. Wilson classifies Cutler's music as "*solid and almost totally unembellished*" (20). His style is traditional. As a member of a blues music band, his contribution can be seen in playing repetitive chords to show the melodic line and the general form of the blues. Then, Slow Drag is introduced as "*perhaps the one most bored by life*" (20). His interpretation of the blues clarifies the essential rhythmic and harmonic tones of the blues which returned to African music style. The audience then meets Toledo, the piano player, who controls his instrument competently. He is the only musician in the band who can read music. He understands fully the importance of his traditional music. Therefore, he supports all Ma's stances and beliefs concerning the ideas of imitating the dominant society blindly and also the idea of maintaining their own culture. Wilson presents Toledo as an influential member in the band. Thus, Toledo is "*in control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself*" (20). Wilson states that: "To Toledo, style is indistinguishable from content; it is a manifestation in the artist's fidelity to the main musical idea or theme, whatever his improvisations" (Pereira 1995, p. 15). If the style changes, then, the implication is that content will also change, thus undermining "fidelity to the main musical idea or theme". This suggests that in some way, the blues tradition will be compromised. Toledo believes strongly in the fact that their music resembles their personalities and history – unlike Levee's belief, the fourth member of the band. Wilson describes Levee as the opposite to Toledo. Levee cannot read music and what is more he "*plays notes wrong frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other*" (23). So, he does not have any control over the idea of 'self'. This, definitely, leads to uncertainty in his character. Levee dreams of transforming what he describes as an old style of music. He wants to adopt a new style for the blues as far as both the rhythm and the form of the music are concerned.

In Act one, the audience is informed that the southern blues style of Ma Rainey is selling well in the southern cities (which have large black populations) but not in the northern (which are more white-dominated). Therefore, Sturdyvant tells Irvin that "times are changing" and "we've got to jazz it up . . . put in something different" (19). Thus, the number of the songs that are supposed to be recorded by Ma Rainey has been reduced. The young musician Levee, who has been drawn in by Sturdyvant and Irvin's talk of updating and making sales, proposes updating the old standard 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', and generally changing the musical style by dropping "that old jug band shit" (26). The song 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' is a traditional blues number which Levee intends to 'renew'. Levee, like many other young musicians during the same period, has been influenced by the new movement of change. There were many waves

of change among the blacks including a move towards imitating the white's culture or whites' style. The Harlem Renaissance movement, which came to the fore in the 1920s, worked against this change by unifying the majority of the African American writers about their cultural identity. Levee, however, has clearly not been touched by the aims of the Harlem Renaissance.

Thus the first Act clearly demonstrates the idea of clash of cultures as Ma Rainey fights against any change in her songs. The audience meets Ma Rainey as she quarrels with a policeman about a car accident that she was involved in. The audience meets a strong and confident black woman who speaks confidently.

In the second Act, Rainey asserts her rights by insisting on having Sylvester do the introduction to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," even though the band members and Irvin think it is a bad idea because of his stuttering. Rainey's insistence symbolizes the duty she feels in giving powerless blacks a voice, both literally and figuratively. She wants to show that black people must be given a chance to show themselves and their abilities. This insistence, and also her refusal to sing unless she gets a Coca-Cola, illustrate the almost stereotypical behaviour of *prima donna* celebrities. However, Rainey's motivation for behaving this way is more closely related to her desire to let her white producer and agent know that they cannot take advantage of black people in general and her in particular without giving them their rights. Ma shows implicitly that this concept of 'rights' also includes the right to maintain and express their own cultural heritage. This also explains her refusal to accept any change to the old version of her song. Accordingly, the characters, including Rainey, give speeches about white exploitation and mistreatment of blacks through the play. For example, Levee, whom Sturdyvant had promised could record some of his own songs, is humiliated by the producer, who now tells him that his music is not what people want. Meanwhile, the playwright highlights the gap between the blacks on one side and the whites on another side.

Through his characters, Wilson intends to enlighten his people in general about the dangers of unquestioning assimilation into predominantly white American society. Levee, the ambitious trumpet player, for example, exemplifies this danger in his attempts to replace Ma Rainey's "Old jug band music" with his jazzed-up arrangements, attempts which could lead to a kind of cultural death or attrition. Ma Rainey's refusal to change is important because the two white men are demanding changes to satisfy a white audience. These are not the kind of natural, organic changes that can lead to the development of culture. They are imposed by the dominant and oppressive regime. Levee's struggle to get rid of Ma Rainey's brand of music and supplant it with his own is one of several variations of Wilson's theme of maintaining and preserving one's cultural heritage. Levee's opponent is Ma Rainey, whom he sees as an agent of the past, struggling against all attempts to dilute the cultural elements of the blues music. She revolts against changing anything in her original version of any song. Levee tries to convince her that the new version is more acceptable than the old one. Levee wants to use the new style to appeal to both the whites and the young blacks. Levee needs the new style because he is ready for assimilation. His desire for change is not about natural development, but about imposition of cultural values and the suppression or marginalisation of black culture, just to gain more acceptance from the white-dominated majority. But Ma Rainey refuses and insists on retaining the old version. It becomes clear that the threat to African American culture comes not only from the dominant white

society but also from assimilationist young blacks who are willing to do whatever the dominant society demands:

IRVIN: Ma, that's what the people want now. They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee's arrangement gives the people what they want. It gets them excited... makes them forget about their troubles.

MA RAINEY: I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. Carry my nephew on down there ... and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song my way. (62)

Levee foolishly sells out on his cultural heritage for the price of a couple of songs. He declares proudly that he can develop his own style: "I know how to play real music. I got style" (26). However, he is cutting himself off from his roots, and his style is therefore unlikely to be authentic. He represents those people who work hard to achieve assimilation by getting the support of the dominant people regardless of the price they have to pay.

On the other hand, we see that Ma's music has its basis in the South and in Africa as well. She conveys the oppression of her southern audience. Her style of singing is not only a product of the South, but it also conserves certain folk elements of African American culture that extend as far back as Africa. Her singing is a symbol of the African continuum and a strong reminder of her people's heritage. She is "their queen" (Shannon 1995, p. 83). Irvin tries to justify the idea of substituting the old version with the new one by saying that the new version makes people forget their problems and troubles. Levee also tries to convince Mr. Sturdyvant about the importance of the new version. Levee does not stop at praising the new version but he goes further, belittling the old one. "Mr. Sturdyvant" Levee says, "you got to understand about that music. That music is what the people is looking for. They's tired of jug-band music. They [want] something that excites them. Something with some fire to it" (107); he implies that the old music has run its course, and lost its relevance.

By characterising Ma as a 'queen' of her people, Wilson turns her into a symbol to remind his people of the importance of holding on to their own cultural identity. Wilson includes her name in the title of the play because she provides a powerful symbol of the tensions felt by thousands of African Americans who migrated north. Her popularity was supported by southern blacks who found in her blues songs a relief from the alienation and disillusionment of city life (Shannon 1995, p. 85). This importance comes from the influential role she plays in showing her people's culture, foregrounding their rich culture and expressing and describing the various types of discrimination she and her people suffered from. This is clearly presented in the conversation between Cutler and Slow Drag:

Cutler: The white man don't care nothing about Ma. The colored folks made Ma a star. White folks don't care nothing about who she is ... what kind of music she make.

Slow Drag: That's the truth about that. You let her go down to one of them white-folks hotels and see how big she is.

Cutler: Hell, she ain't got to do that. She can't even get a cab in the North (95).

Being in this position, where in the North her voice is not even strong enough for her to be able to hail a cab, it is deeply important that, through her song and her insistence on doing it her way, Ma makes her voice heard both in terms of voicing her experience, and in resisting white domination.

Ma Rainey reveals her preference for the South and her important role in maintaining as well as promoting the elements of African American culture. She refers to her readiness to go back to dwell with her people in the South as she tells the owner of the recording studio: "... if that don't set right with you Sturdyvant ... then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I don't like it up here no ways" (63). Ma Rainey appears here as a strong and confident person whose power exists in her songs and also in her strong southern roots. When Ma realizes that her songs might be changed and modified, she mentions her readiness to go back to the south as an attempt to protect her cultural heritage and this is what Wilson concentrates on as a revolt against the idea of assimilation. Wilson is sincerely worried about the future of his people. In a conversation between Ma Rainey and Irvin, Ma Rainey's confidence helps her to be a symbol of any strong man and woman who refuses to be subjugated in any way by the hand of the white man:

MA RAINEY: I'm gonna tell you something, Irvin ... and you go on up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma.

IRVIN: Okay, Ma ... I don't care. I just thought...

MA RAINEY: Damn what you thought! What you look like telling me how to sing my song?

IRVIN: Okay, Ma. Have it your way. We'll be ready to go in fifteen minutes.

MA RAINEY: We'll be ready to go when Madame says we're ready. That's the way it goes around here. (63-64)

Ma Rainey is well aware of the importance of her roots in leading her way forward. She gets a kind of cultural power from her own people in the South and her ancestors in Africa. She is considered the bridge that makes a connection between the past, the present and then the future. Through her blues she transmits "the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation they find themselves in" (Moyers 1989, p. 168). Ma's music is a continuum of the African tribal drums, the slave songs, and the spiritual aspects of their culture, as distinct from white culture. Wilson concentrates on the importance of working together and following a direction that helps in conserving their cultural identity. Any attempt at being assimilated will weaken the chance of maintaining their original culture. Toledo announces that the colored men need to work as a group to achieve that aim in America:

TOLEDO: It ain't just me! 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. That's what I'm talking about, nigger! (42)

This call for unity, however, is undermined by Levee's actions and opinions. Through his play, Wilson presents a disintegrating world where a group of black musicians are caught uncertainly between two cultures: one, they disown; the other, they fear. Wilson speaks through his character Toledo, who rejects the dominance of white culture, about the benefits of being separated from the white man and never surrendering to him. He wants to stop being a follower and accepting the identity which he believes white culture is constructing for him.

TOLEDO: 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. (37)

Ma knows that singing the blues in its traditional form needs a deeply personal experience, accompanied with a full understanding linking the music, the performer, the audience and the pain of these experiences (Bogumil 1999, p. 22). Ma Rainey proves this fact as she tells Cutler about the idea of understanding culture. She believes in fact that when man understands his culture, he will strengthen his cultural identity. Ma Rainey comments on that by criticizing the white people who cannot really understand this kind of music although they seem to want to absorb it into their own culture (in an adapted shape); she also shows that singing the blues in the traditional way is a meaningful exercise in cultural maintenance because it links modern blacks to the pain and struggle of their ancestors through the music:

MA RAINEY: White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's 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 else life got to offer. (82-83)

Wilson portrays Ma Rainey as a strong character who is not ready to follow others blindly. She appears in control of the situation and insists that the band go on according to her orders. Wilson, here, wants to show that understanding the white man enables Ma Rainey to succeed. This is presented clearly in the dialogue between Ma Rainey and Cutler. Ma Rainey is aware of the white man's need. She knows well that the white man used to exploit the colored man. Here she informs Cutler that if Irvin wants her voice, he should pay the price of putting up with her 'arrogance'. This is her way of asserting an identity at odds with and in conflict with the dominant white identity. If her voice is going to be heard, she insists that it be heard the right way, not in the way which will make the white men more money:

MA RAINEY: They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them.

CUTLER: I know how they do.

MA RAINEY: If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. (79)

Wilson also concentrates on the importance of the African Americans in forming American society by shedding light from time to time on their influential role as an important minority in American society. Their importance and prominence can be traced in various fields of culture like their music, language, family and traditions. The music of African origin including mainly the blues represents one of the cultural aspects that thrives within and has been highly influential for the wider American music scene. By highlighting the importance of such influences, Wilson gives African Americans a chance to recover some pride in a cultural heritage which has been severely marginalized. Most of those who sang and played the blues could neither read nor write (Palmer 1981, p. 117). Their music spoke for them, and Wilson, by putting that music on stage, now allows it to speak for the African American community at large.

One of the cultural themes discussed through *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is: "the potency of the African continuum as a psychic and spiritual repository of values and survival strategies" (Harrison 1991, p. 316). This theme emerges most clearly in the comments made by Toledo – the self-educated pseudo-philosopher – whose comments show harsh criticism of the other men in Ma's band: "We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes" (94). He believes that black people need to maintain what distinguishes their own culture from dominant or mainstream culture. This can be achieved by reviving the most prominent aspects of their cultural identity.

The play declares that if the African Americans continue in repressing their African roots, they are fated to live troubled and difficult lives. So, racial exploitation, Ma's band's own ignorance, their own apathy and their own denial of their past, all lead to the possibility of losing their own culture, and thus their cultural identity. Wilson suggests that the way of avoiding this fate is to remain very close to the original roots. He concentrates on the power of their culture that strengthens people and protects them from losing their cultural identity. In their attempts to save that part of their identity, they must at the same time reject the possibility of assimilating in mainstream American society. Toledo, like some of the characters, relies heavily on everything referred to as African. He explains that some of their behavior can be seen as African especially when they "name the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve whatever" (32). Some others, like Levee, decide instead to "sell their souls to the devil to get ahead in America" (Shannon 1995, p.70). On the other hand, we find characters like Slow Drag and Cutler who choose light humor or denial rather than acknowledgment of and engagement with Africa's cultural possibilities. In other words, each one goes his own way to express his ideas about the past and in particular about Africa. While Levee, Slow Drag and Cutler neglect their past, which has the potential to give them power, we find Toledo on the other side trying to show them the importance of relying on their African origins. During a discussion between them in act one; Toledo informs them that they need to take their past and ancestors into consideration. They try to argue that it is more important to deal with the current situation than to remember their African roots and past, but Toledo feels the opposite. He believes that their African traditions must go on with them. They need that continuum of African traditions even if those traditions seem to be what Slow Drag terms 'African nonsense':

TOLEDO: That's African.

SLOW DRAG: What? What you talking about? What's African?

LEVEE: I know he ain't talking about me. You don't see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose.

TOLEDO: ...what I was saying is what Slow Drag was doing is African.

That's African. An ancestral retention. Only you forget the name of gods. (32)

Wilson intends to encourage his people and in particular the young modern blacks to go back to Africa, at least metaphorically. He is against those among the modern blacks who support the idea of anti-African or anti-southern sentiments. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, there is an implicit appeal to African Americans to embrace the African continuum.

Wilson thinks that integration rather than assimilation is the only way of finding a balance between cultures. He is aware of the horrible results of uncertainty especially when some of blues performers (black musicians also) have deserted the southern farmland, have cut their ties with their families, the church, and their cultural roots. Wilson wants to show them that they can make a balance between their own culture and the dominant one. This is achieved in the play by Ma Rainey, who knows how to deal with the white man. Therefore, Toledo and Levee conclude at the end of the play that they should consider again the importance of their own culture and pay more attention to their African origins.

TOLEDO: We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed ... That ain't African. That's the white man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We's imitation white men.

SLOW DRAG: You can't change who you are by how you dress.

TOLEDO: It ain't all how you dress. It's how you act, how you see the world. It's how you follow the life. (94)

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* Wilson shows that holding on to and maintaining cultural elements will help people to consolidate their identity and establish their role in the society. Wilson uses the play to enlighten his people about the dangers of neglecting their own culture and heritage. Ma Rainey realizes that submitting to white domination will weaken her and that over time it might result in her music being assimilated into that mainstream, cut off from its context and unavailable to African Americans as cultural ballast. She knows that her power exists in her traditional music. Imitation and assimilation can be traced among the young generation rather than the old one. In the play, Levee represents the young ambitious generation who dreams of gaining fame and financial status regardless of the price that must be paid. Ma and Toledo stand for the old generation who understand that assimilation will lead to loss of the ancestral culture. Levee cannot understand the fact that Ma's power exists in her music and in the southern audience who understands fully that kind of music because her music and songs express their own experiences and make life meaningful:

MA RAINEY: The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's 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 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... And now they can't be without it. (82-83)

Conclusion

Wilson uses the theatre as a powerful space within which to highlight black culture and to reject discrimination. He is proud of himself as an activist and dramatist who calls for an independent black theatre. He supports the achievements of black theatre professionals. He calls on all black actors to reject nontraditional or 'color-blind casting', assimilation and imitating the white man blindly. He encourages them to insist on asserting their cultural power as represented in various aspects of the culture, including of course blues music.

The paper tries to establish that the Blues, being one of the cultural codes of the African Americans, fundamentally functions as a catalyst and reminder of their rich cultural heritage especially that which united them in America as a segregated and marginalized group. Elijah Wald (2010) observes that the blues were quite significant in the lives of the African Americans since the vast majority of black Americans had arrived in the United States as slaves without any possessions, and most continued to be extremely poor even after emancipation; singing was one of the few pleasures that enabled them to have a common voice to be enjoyed while alone or while working (12). To Ma Rainey and Toledo the blues music signifies this common bond that binds the African Americans emotionally and culturally. The conflict of the play can be summarized by saying it is a matter of conserving culture against any attempts at reconstructing it to the extent of losing its original spirit. As a participant in the black arts movement of the 1960s, Wilson remained opposed to assimilation. In his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he shows the history and cultural heritage of the African Americans through which he demonstrates the importance of not being assimilated completely. In this play the protagonist suffers a lot from two forces. The first one is represented by the dominant people who work hard to erase the minorities' cultural identity, and the other force is represented by some African Americans who are ready to adjust to the discursive practices of the dominant society. In other words, Wilson compares the authoritative discourse of the white people and the minority discourse and highlights any means of resistance which can be marshaled by the African Americans to protect their cultural identity.

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Notes

- ¹ Nahidh F. Sulaiman is a Ph.D candidate at the English Department, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya.
- ² August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York: New American Library, 1985. (All the quotes from the play are taken from this edition).