

Approaches to Africa: The Poetics of Reconnection August Wilson's Fences and Joe Turner Come and Gonne

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ABSTRACT

August Wilson's *Fences* (1985) and Joe Turner's *Come and Gonne* (1986) highlight the metaphoric relationship between African American history and the black body. Wilson extensively explores static and dynamic relationships to that history and, by refocusing on the black body as a locus for a new and dynamic metaphoric of African American history. He attempts to reformulate the African American poetics of Memory. Tracing both personal and racial history, the poetics of memory functions as a dialectic of recalling reminiscent of the African American tradition of call and response. Bringing the past into the present as a vivid and active component of people's daily lives, it also attacks the linearity of time and, as a result, often leaves people trapped in a sense of futility...

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1. DEVELOPMENT OF THOUGHT

Troy's frustrated rage made him whip his father to his endless cataloguing in his stories of imaginary and real abuse of himself and his people. The generational pattern of abusive parenting increases the impression of repetition and paralysis. In Joe Turner's *Come and Gonne* this paralysis is further concretized in Loomis's inability to stand up. His nightmare vision of the bones expresses the horror of the middle passage and the anguish of a dislocated African American identity all too firmly shaped in response to an exploitative alien white culture. In both plays the fabric of memory is stitched together by domestic details such as Bertha's biscuits and Rose's chicken, Seth's pots and Troy's fence. Hermeneutically, these details indicate the various protective limits which the characters attempt to draw around their lives. The constant focus on the importance of a home-a house, a room, a roof, a fence-indicates how difficult the characters' struggle for a decent existence in America.

This implies a spatialized metaphoric. The two plays, especially Joe Turner's *Come and Gonne*, the spatial at times even geographical, view of history traps the characters in a nostalgic and static metaphoric of history. On the one hand, in contrast to a temporal sense of return, the spatialization of history strongly suggests that the distance as well as the need to approach Africa is equally vital for each new generation of African Americans. On the other hand, it contains a warning to become a dynamo of change, each such approach must involve a fresh revision of the metaphoric relationship between the black body and its history.

The recurring dialectic in the poetics of memory between a static and dynamic presentation of the black self develops into a strong metaphoric which is both referential and self-reflexive. It belongs both to life and art. In this way, Wilson's plays keenly illustrate what Linda Hutcheon terms the politics of postmodernism and defines as a mode which juxtaposes and gives equal value to the self-reflexive and historically grounded: to that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to 'real life' (such as history). The tension between these apparent opposites finally defines the paradoxical worldly texts of postmodernism. (2)

Hutcheon emphasizes the contemporaneousness and newness of the postmodern mode which, in her view, constitutes a break with the introvert mode in the earliest part of the century. But the dual quality of worldliness and artistry in Wilson's plays does not so much constitute a break with an earlier literary mode as it represents an ongoing, strong characteristic of African American literary tradition. This tradition is too complicated and too many-faceted to discuss in detail, but pervasive aspects are there to indicate the range of complexity involved. On the one hand, the consistent lack of historical data about the fate of African American people before, during, and after the middle passage.

has necessitated a unique attention to the creation of imaginary artistic supplements of historical events. On the other hand, historical documentation, for example, the brutality of slavery such as in the genuine slave narratives, has produced a respectful silence or a tenuous resistance against efforts to recreate that history in art. The metaphoric of Wilson's plays partake in these complex traditions. It clearly places the plays in the world and ties them to the history of African American people. It also strengthens the notion that African American postmodernism will continue features specific to its tradition.

The metaphoric of Wilson's plays is worldly, historical and contingent. It illustrates the inexpugnable reality of history and inextricable relationship between histories and stories, life and art. In "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" Jacques Derrida supplies a description of metaphor within the western tradition of metaphysics as a palimpsestic layering which reveals its root system and its history. A metaphor, Derrida argues: Implies a continuity presupposition: the history of metaphor appears essentially not as a displacement with breaks, as inscriptions in a heterogenous system, mutations, separation without origin, but rather as a progressive erosion, a regular semantic loss, an uninterrupted exhausting of the primitive meaning: an empirical abstraction without extraction from its own native soil. (215)

This description eloquently captures the value and function of Africa as native soil and empirical abstraction, as geographical and metaphorical space, in African American literature. The poetics of memory and the various notions of home coming present in Wilson's plays are so many metaphorical versions of that space and various approaches to Africa. In both *Fences* and Joe Turner's *Come and Gone* Wilson strengthens the spatial metaphoric by flattening and conflating the time continuum so that past is continuously present in the now. *Fences* flattens the dimension of time by bringing to the surface of the present an acute sense of the closeness of personal experience and by drawing a parallel between past and future generations. Situated in the yard outside of Troy Maxson's house, the play creates an intense tension between a sense of unchangeability in life coupled with a pervasive restlessness which demands more than status quo. Troy becomes the central focal point of his tension as he, more than any other character, denies the possibility of change in life for him and his people, yet he becomes the most active agent both at workplace and at home. Trapped in the situation which in so many resembles that of his father, Troy works hard to provide for his family but gets little or no pleasure out of his life. His main concerns are the condition of roof of his house and the fence he wants to build around the yard. At the same time, he raises the question why he, as a black man, is not permitted to drive the garbage trucks, and he fathers a child out of wedlock. These changes of his social and familial situations are both vitally connected to his body. Symbolically, the tension between status quo and the change ultimately seems projected in the juxtaposition of Troy's house and Troy's body, which to both his wife and his son too large for the house.

The juxtaposition of fact and fiction, past and present, tends to erase the validity of such distinctions in the poetics of memory. This becomes evident from the stories Troy tells about his house. He says that if his brother Gabriel hadn't suffered a severe head injury during the Second world War and hadn't even paid 3000 dollars because of it, Troy, in spite of his hard work, "wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of" (128) He claims that, even though he was working every day, he could not any credit to buy some furniture until one day a white man offered him furniture on interest. "Man, what drove the truck give me a book. Say send ten dollars, first of every month, to the address in the book and everything will be all right. Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay. That was fifteen years ago." (117)

Troy's poetics of memory has its origin in a dual sense of abandonment and commitment. Troy owes both his feelings of homelessness and his pride over taking responsibility for his own family to his father. A poor, hardworking man who raised his eleven children picking cotton for Mr. Dubin, Troy's father was trapped in a circle of debt and deprivation. He saw his children mainly as helpers: "Sometimes I wish I had not known my daddy. He isn't cared nothing about no Kida kid to him wasn't nothing. All he wanted was for you to learn how to walk so he could start you to working. (147) Troy's memories are regretful, yet he seems proud of his father for having stayed with his family instead of "searching out of the new land." (146) Troy finally rebelled against his father when he was fourteen and the father caught him fooling around a girl instead of working. Troy realized the father wanted the girl for himself. He was dissing illusioned. He started whipping his father the way the father whipped him. At that moment the father turned "and when my daddy turned to face me, I could see why the devil had never come to get him, because he was the devil himself" (148) As a man who has faced the devil, Troy is opposed to Gabriel and Rose. His story of that moment draws the parameters of his existence as clearly as Gabriel's belief in St. Peter and Rose's belief in Jesus identify them. Abruptly cut loose from his home, Troy spends his life trying to recreate a sense of home and to relieve that moment when he lost that sense through the poetics of memory. As a father, Troy very much repeats his father's behavior, especially towards Cory, Troy seems determined to give his son the same sense of loss of –and the desire for–a home. When Troy and Cory fight, however, the focus remains on Troy's inability to get beyond that moment by the creek when he saw the devil. Looking at his son some thirty years later, he repeats himself when he tells his son "You got the devil in you" (180) The poetics of memory in *Fences* illustrates the strong influence of a past which remains a vital or even controlling part of the present.

The poetics of memory functions in the same way to erase the passing of time in Cory's feelings about his father. When Cory returns home for Troy's funeral, he does not want to go to the funeral because he feels that he "can't drag Papa" with him everywhere. (188) He fears that the presence of his father has inescapably located itself in his own body:

Papa was like a shadow that followed 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 you anyway. That shadow digging into your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked. Troy Maxson was staring back at me..... hiding under the bed.....in the closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama. (188-9)

Cory corroborates his father's identification with the house he once lived in, but he subtly moves from the house which was once so important to his father, to a discourse about the body. Cory's mother enhances this shift when she emphasizes that Cory must "grow into" the shadow or "cut it down to fit" him. "But that's all you got to make like with. That's all you got to measure yourself against the world out there" (189) Ultimately, the body becomes the primary locus for the poetics of memory and the struggle to change. The play ends with Gabriel's soundless and terrifying dance which is both "eerie and life-giving" (192) In a silent pantomime Gabriel presents his version of the intolerable and dynamic relationship between the poetics of memory and body.

In an analogous way, Joe Turner Come and Gone exposes the movement from a spatialized poetics of memory towards a dynamic one which centralizes the black body as the main metaphor for change. In this play, Wilson builds up a comparison between parallel systems of meaning. Seth Holy is a man who tries to make it in America and who upholds American values and means of existence. He is making fun of Bynum, who is out in the garden preparing a chicken for voodoo slaughter and burial. He does not care for "that mumbo jumbo nonsense." (205) Instead, he thinks of his vegetable garden, and when Bynum begins a ritual dance outside, Seth gets worried that he will step on his plants. His fear indicates how strongly the old stuff can still threaten Seth. It shows how past is woven into the present. The closeness of the past is also strongly connected to the absent person in the scene, the young man Jeremy, who has spent the night in jail for drunkenness. Seth complains about his backward behavior too:

These niggers coming up here with that old backyard country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there aren't been nothing but foolish –acting niggers. (209)

In his attempts to separate himself from fellow men like Bynum and Jeremy, Seth really tries to drive a wedge between the past and present so that he can go on with his life without the burden of the past. The play shows, however, that in viewing the past as a burden and hinderance, Seth is wrong. The deeply rooted ability to overcome linear time is a gift which Bynum got when he found his song. It is a source of power that neither Seth nor anyone else would desire, or could afford, to lose. For most of the characters in the play, the regaining of power involves a reformulation of the spatialized metaphoric the poetics of memory.

Bynum also represents personal relationships within the spatial metaphoric of the play. When talking to Mattie Campbell, who wants her lover back, Bynum makes it clear that those who live without a sense of time are lost. He tells her that he can bring back her lost lover, but not all people are supposed to come back:

And if he isn't supposed to come back then he'll be in your bed one morning and it'll come up on him that he's in the wrong place. That he's lost outside of time from his place he's supposed to be in. Then both of you be lost and trapped outside of life and isn't no way for you to get back into it. Cause you lost from yourselves and where the places come together, where you're supposed to be alive, your heart kicking in your chest with a song worth singing. (223)

To Bynum, time and space are contiguous. He does not need Heisenberg and the laws of quantum physics to explain the nature of a universe where time and space are inseparable. Yet, his descriptive terms reinforce the spatial metaphoric of the play. Later, when he tries to make Jeremy think a little before he takes up with Mattie, Bynum uses a geographical imagery that clearly enhances the spatial metaphoric of the play:

Now, you take a ship. Be out there on the water travelling about. You out there on that ship sailing to and from. And then you see some land. Just like you see a woman walking down the street. You see that land and it don't look like nothing but a line out there on the horizon. That's all it is when you first see it. A line that cross your path out there on the horizon. Now, a smart man knows when he sees that land, it isn't just a line setting out there. He knows that if you get off the water to go take a good look.....why, there's a whole world right there. A whole world with everything imaginable under the sun.(245)

The geographical imagery of Bynum's poetic vision of the way people meet strengthens the spatial metaphoric complementing it with a spatial vision of personal relationships.

Spatial metaphoric also contributes to the understanding of death as can be seen in Reuben's experience with Miss Mabel's ghost and Loomis's vision of bones people. Through the untimely death of his "best friend" the young neighboring boy Reuben has learned an early lesson about the linearity of human time. The return of Miss Mabel's ghost teaches him, however, that in some mysterious way the dead are alive. For him the fate of his dead friend becomes a locus of desire as he wishes that his dead friend might return so that they can play together again. But as soon as he contemplates the possibility of a return, it attracts a sense of lack and insatiability as Reuben envisions the return not only of Eugene, but of all dead people, who then make the world grotesquely crowded. The horror of that vision makes Reuben all the more keen on listening

to Miss Mabel's message from Eugene:

She says Eugene was waiting on pigeons. Say he couldn't go back home till I let them go. (276)

The introduction of a notion of a kind of "home space" after death, a clear indication of the end of dislocation, also functions to reinforce the spatial metaphoric of the play.

Bynum, too, labors the sense of dislocation which has become so strong as to virtually paralyze Loomis. Even though Bynum continuously participates in and strengthens the more static poetics of geography and historiography, he privileges the dynamic image of black body as the vehicle for each person's song and metaphor for change. In the second half of Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, the fate of the black body becomes the strongest sign for the spatialization of time and history in the play. When Loomis hints that he has seen "some things he isn't got words to tell you" (250) Bynum begins to pull the story out of him. Slowly, Loomis describes his meeting "the bones people":

"I come to this place.....to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out....and I see these bones rise up out of the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it". (250) Loomis shares with Reuben the horror of the return of the dead, but his image changes the focus from the geographical space where history occurred, the ocean of the middle passage and the coastline of new continent, to the black bodie that walk away from that space. The two men share a short coming together during this transitional moment in the play when Loomis tells Bynum that he is one of the bones people.

The story of Loomis shows that history, when it is seen as a spatialized metaphor, can entrap people in a futile nostalgia for the moment of transformation itself. This moment of transformation, which occurred during the cruel days of the beginning of the Diaspora, was initiated with the enforced deracination from one continent and the arrival at the other. Bynum suggests that the trope of Diaspora prolongs the process of dislocation by trapping the mind in the moment transformation. The black body may be the alternative route which might finally provide the path to Africa, a direct link home beyond the moment of dislocation. In Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, the black body then becomes the utopian home space, the suggestive new image for change, the mobile body which ultimately transcends the static metaphoric of a spatialized history.

2. CONCLUSION

Fences and Joe Turner *Come and Gone* testify to Wilson's attempts to inspire a recording of the African American poetics of memory in various ways. In the overall realistic plays, the poetics of memory introduces different kinds of literary styles and levels of discourse. The stylistic shifts juxtapose the mimetic and the metaphoric, and they disturb the pervasive realistic impression of the plays. They also constitute a major contribution to the postmodern qualities of the play. The recording of poetics of memory shifts the attention from a spatialized, often static, metaphoric of past towards a dynamic metaphoric of black body. By centralizing the black body as mainly unexplored and unknown metaphorical space in *Fences* and by opposing the metaphoric of black body to a spatial historiography in Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, Wilson certainly participates in a post structural movement which makes the writing of the body a central locus of difference. Simultaneously, and more importantly, he opens a fresh avenue to a progressive revision of the African American poetics of memory where each approach to Africa is of vital significance

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