

WRITING HOME:  
THE POST COLONIAL DIALOGUE  
OF ATHOL FUGARD AND AUGUST WILSON

BY

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Paul Prece

Submitted to the graduate program in Theatre and Film,  
and to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
John Gronbeck-Tedesco  
Chairperson

Committee Members:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka

\_\_\_\_\_  
Henry Bial

\_\_\_\_\_  
Iris Smith Fischer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jack B. Wright

Date defended: \_\_\_\_\_

The Dissertation Committee for Paul Prece certifies  
that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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This is dedicated to the memory of  
my Father and Mother  
James and Lorraine Prece  
and  
Quentin Young  
a former student

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**Table of Contents**

<b>Preamble</b>	vi
<b>Chapter 1</b> Introduction: Demons and Necessity	1
<b>Chapter 2</b> The (K)not of Contra(diction): Dancing the Black Bottom <i>The Blood Knot</i> and <i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i>	34
<b>Chapter 3</b> White Benches / Black Fences <i>"Master Harold" . . . and the boys</i> and <i>Fences</i>	86
<b>Chapter 4</b> Crossing Boundaries <i>The Road to Mecca</i> and <i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>	132
<b>Chapter 5</b> Writing the Margins: Listening for Voices <i>Boesman and Lena</i> and <i>Two Trains Running</i>	172
<b>Chapter 6</b> Statements and Lessons (Dis)membering and Remembering the (G)host <i>The Statement Plays</i> and <i>The Piano Lesson</i>	213
<b>Conclusion</b> Channeling the Griot	261
<b>Works Cited</b>	267

*Talent alone cannot make a writer. There must be a man behind the book.*

*-Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## **Preamble**

The endeavor of this writing, in essence, began for me on July 4, 1987 with a New York performance of *The Road To Mecca* by Athol Fugard at New York City's Promenade Theatre with Yvonne Bryceland, a frequent Fugard collaborator, as Miss Helen, American actress, Kathy Bates as Elsa and Athol Fugard, himself, the author and director of the production, as Marius. After the performance which was alternately stunning, confusing, warming, and ultimately transcending, I emerged from the theatre numb, changed, flushed and altered in a way that I was unable to identify. My mind teemed with the world and words Mr. Fugard presented, the plight of the artist, and question of madness and the world of the outcast, the elderly and the fascinating woman at the center of the conflict. I reminded myself that I was in New York on a balmy July night. Darkness was enveloping the Upper West Side and the crackle of fireworks echoed in the distance as the sky erupted in fiery colors of a display over Central Park. It is truly this precipitating experience that led me to Mr. Fugard's work which I began to realize nourished me like no drama – storytelling – had before.

Strangely, similarly my subsequent readings of Mr. Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* brought back and resurrected the memory of the *Mecca* experience. *Joe Turner* amazed and 'spoke' to me like the fireworks of Fugard's deceptively simple but pinpointing dramas. My reading of

Fugard and Wilson prompted my direction of productions of *Fences* (1990), *Master Harold...and the boys* (1991), *The Road To Mecca* (1992) and *Joe Turner's Come And Gone* (1999). Their writing also inspired an enlivened interest in African and African American studies at the University of Kansas while pursuing an advanced degree. A trip to several African countries (Kenya, Zaire, Nigeria and Ghana) in 1991 exposed the people living there and for me was an enlightening and life-changing event. A second trip in July 1995 to South Africa was equally confirming. I was invited to attend a special anniversary performance of *The Island* with John and Winston re-creating their roles. Mr. Fugard was not present but in a reception that followed John and Winston were both warm and responsive in conversation, even inviting me for an after-theatre drink and light meal. The information and the memories they shared related directly to the development of the piece years before, to their collaborations with Fugard and to South Africa during and post-apartheid. In planning my South African itinerary I had sent a letter to Mr. Fugard through his New York agent and in his timely response from *The Ashram*, his South African home, he informed me he would be out of country but that he was more than willing to meet, we had to only to determine a time and place.

I first met August Wilson at the William Inge Theatre Festival in Independence, Kansas in April 1996 where he was being honored by the Inge Foundation. In an hour and a half "Conversation with August Wilson" the playwright spoke openly and fielded questions from an eager audience. Quite forthright and very personable he seemed at ease and comfortable, if a tinge shy, with an understated

humility. He spoke about growing up African American, his neighborhood, the Hill District of Pittsburgh, his mother, Daisy, his longing from a young age to be a poet, and the writing process for him. Audience questions primarily dealt with his plays, his plots, his writing and the planned play cycle. Later that day or the next I was able to speak with him privately but given the fact that he was the “man of the hour” the conversation was brief. I asked if he would be willing to sit and talk at length at a future time and he referred me to his agent through whom he would arrange a meeting, time and place to be determined. Subsequently several requests made through his agent were unsuccessful. As he continued writing and new work was produced and his plays were receiving numberless productions, he was in great demand.

Then in 1999 while attending a National Association of Schools of Theatre (NAST) meeting in Pittsburgh, I took advantage of the opportunity to walk the Hill District neighborhood where all but one of Wilson’s plays are set. Realizing that the Pittsburgh Public Theatre was showing *Fences*, I decided to attend. What better place to hear a Wilson play. The production, the first I had seen, other than my own, was beautifully acted and played like an old familiar song to me. Just as it began I noticed a figure I recognized in the audience moving toward an upper loge seat. Mr. Wilson was in attendance at his homeplay in his hometown. At intermission as I passed him in the lobby we shook hands. “You look familiar” he said. “I met you a few years ago in Independence at the Inge festival.” “Oh yes, you wrote me a poem” he remembered. Later after the performance we found a spot to the back of the theatre



and we spoke for an extended time until he had to leave to meet friends. I told him of my writing project dealing with his and Fugard's work. He remarked that it was interesting, that Fugard's work had affected him and was an influence and that it was an honor just to be mentioned in the same sentence. He asked me to send him a copy when the writing was completed.

Planning a New York trip in 2001 to see Wilson's *King Hedley II*, I learned that Fugard's new play *Sorrows and Rejoicings* was set to premiere at Princeton's McCarter Theatre, under his direction. I booked both tickets, a flight and hotels and e-mailed Mr. Fugard. "Call me when you arrive," he e-mailed back including the phone number where he was staying. When I arrived in Princeton and had settled in my hotel I dialed his number and left a message and a number. I attended the premiere/preview of the play that evening anxious and excited. I was not disappointed. As I was leaving the theatre I recognized him at the back of the house but did not approach. After all it was his opening night. I headed back to my room, made some notes over a glass of wine and slept soundly. When the phone rang at 7:45, Mr. Fugard was my 'wake-up call.' We met later for breakfast which stretched until lunchtime. After introductions ("Please, call me Athol.") and the initial moments of studying each other, he was like someone you have always already known. He is warm, friendly, and passionate about the theatre, current events worldwide and South Africa specifically. He has a canny sense of leading the conversation just where you would like it to go and at the same time is a very good listener. We talked of the theatre, playwriting and performance. I spoke of his plays and questioned him about

his writing rituals, the autobiographical elements in *Master Harold, The Captain's Tiger* and of several stories from his memoir *Cousins*. He was curious of me – my history, my work and interestingly enough of my reaction to the performance the night before. We talked at length about the new play. He asked me to go first, give impressions, gut reactions. He wanted to get to know the play from someone outside the play. I mentioned my intention to write about his work and that of August Wilson. And as in a *deja vue* his response was that he was honored and privileged to be included in the same sentence and interested in the results of the “dialogue.” He was “keenly” interested in the results and for me to feel free to contact him if I had questions and that we could continue our dialogue by e-mail. Before we parted I told him I planned to see the performance that night before heading to the city. “I believe you understand my work and I believe you are interested. You have taught me some things today, too.”

**Postnote:** August Wilson’s passing in October 2005 deeply saddened me. I will miss his voice. Struggle, survival and recognition seems to be the subtext of most of the characters he breathed his life into. August might say he is on a new “road.” Athol might say his ‘mecca’ is complete. ‘The struggle continues’ is how August signed the script I had bought for a friend.

AUGUST: To whom?

PAUL: To Peter, my teacher.

AUGUST: Peter who?

PAUL: Peter U . . .”

AUGUST: African?

PAUL: Yes, from Nigeria.

AUGUST: It’s good you’re his student. And you are?

PAUL: Paul, from Boston.

\*\*\*

We are all *from* some/place, *of* some/place, *in* some/place

Our days write our plays

With and without knowing.

Athol, August . . . my two As.

*No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.*

*-T.S. Eliot*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Demons and Necessity**

Athol Fugard and August Wilson are two of the most prolific, respected, and artistically and commercially successful playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century. Both are “traditional” according to Eliot’s specific description in his essay *The Sacred Wood*:

[C]ompel[led] . . . to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature . . . has a simultaneous order. This historical sense . . . a sense of timeless as well as temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time and of his contemporaries. (1)

Fugard and Wilson have written texts for the theatre “acutely conscious” of their place and of their time. They depict life fully aware “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (1) in the personal histories they imbue with stage life. They have been contemporaries, writing and re-writing personal histories. For Fugard the endeavor began in the middle of the twentieth century, telling the stories of South Africans during and in the aftermath of apartheid. Wilson’s appearance as an

American playwright in the early 1980's began a dramatic chronicle that re-visions American life in the twentieth century, after slavery and emancipation, through African American eyes. Wilson's and Fugard's writings mirror one another's attempt to articulate the voices of the disenfranchised. When integrated and read collectively their plays possess the potential to evoke themes and issues for collective interpretation.

### **Purpose**

The task of this dissertation is threefold: first, to examine a selected number of dramatic works by playwrights Athol Fugard and August Wilson; second, to analyze the texts as responses to the effects of colonization; and third, to articulate the dialogue of issues which is engaged and addressed by both men through their playwriting. The discussions that emerge will demonstrate the synchronicity, timeliness and similar pre-occupations of both writers with the themes and enacted strategies that articulate such issues as crisis of identity, cultural subordination and repression, place, alterity/outsiderness, the censure or stifling of 'voice,' and ultimately the need to 'speak back.' Given the playwright's intent and ultimate goal is live performance, the writing creates words to be uttered and stories to be told. The power of orality in their shared stories is a feature which emphasizes the post-colonial impulse to transmit and re-iterate what is likely to be erased or overlooked.

What my study will attempt is a variation on Edward Said's development of contrapuntal reading or analysis. Said's prescription, applied to the novel, presents a reading and analysis and an interpretation of colonial texts focusing on the

perspectives of both colonizer and colonized. Said's method allows for illuminating different perspectives based on differences in power while simultaneously making connections. How the text interacts and is supplemented by biographical and historical contexts addresses both the perspective of the power which subordinates and the resistance of the subordinated. My own turn on Said involves a bit of Bakhtin's thinking. As Michael Holquist in *Dialogism* explains:

Art and life are two different registers of dialogue that can be conceived only in dialogue. They are both forms of representation; therefore they are different aspects of the same imperative to mediate what defines all human experience . . . The chronotope provides a means to explore the complex, indirect and always mediated relationship between art and life . . . Chronotope: a means for studying the relation between any text and its times and thus a fundamental tool . . . for social and historical analysis. (111-113)

Reading the play texts of Fugard and Wilson through the "chronotope" of their histories and in the cultural worlds that their writings observe will suggest reciprocal pre-occupations which play to each other, the similarities and differences in the experiences of the undervalued and oppressed in the South African and American worlds. This reading of their work will as Gilbert and Tompkins suggest "teach readers and audiences to re-see or re-read texts in order to recognize their strategic political agendas," (11) and to expose as Ian Steadman proposes "the real potential of dramatic art . . . in its ability to teach people how to think widely" (78)

and “beyond the narrow parameters of the status quo, of political oppressiveness and even of political correctness” (Gilbert 12).

In a speech delivered in March 1900 entitled “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind,” W.E.B. Du Bois, African American sociologist, civil rights activist, writer, poet and educator declared:

Indeed a survey of the civilized world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but confirms the proposition with which I started – the world problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the problem of the Color Line – the question of the relation of the advanced races of men who happen to be white to the great majority of the underdeveloped or half developed nations of mankind who happen to be yellow, brown or black . . . . (Sundquist 6,7)

DuBois, in his writing and public speeches can be identified as a man of ideas who inspired many to remember the past, question the status quo, and fight for a just tomorrow. His concerns, as John Cullen Gruesser suggests in *Confluences:*

*Postcoloniality, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* were “about many of the same issues being addressed by writers and theorists designated as postcolonial today” (130). Salman Rushdie in 1983, some 20 years after DuBois’ death, in his essay ‘*Commonwealth Literature*’ *Does Not Exist*, “anticipates postcolonialism and seeks to move beyond the boundaries that some critics would come to establish for the field, including a reluctance to engage fully with the experiences and cultural productions of African Americans” (Gruesser 131). In the

essay Rushdie envisions what Gruesser terms a “deterritorialized literary critical approach.”

It is possible, I think, to begin to theorize common factors between writers from these societies – poor countries, or deprived minorities in powerful countries – and to say much of what is new in world literature comes from this group. This seems to me to be ‘real’ theory, bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative. (69)

Homi bhaba (sic), some ten years later in *The Location of Culture*, seems to agree when he describes texts in which “postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geographical divisions of East, West, North and South” (171). The author/critics of *The Empire Writes Back*, the seminal tract/text/hand book for the inauguration of postcolonial studies as an area of study and writing, in an added chapter to the second edition, acknowledge the postcoloniality of minority discourse.

Can we really say that slavery and its effects (e.g. the black diaspora) are not a legitimate element of the colonial and should not be part of what we study to try and understand how colonialism worked? . . . Like the question of slavery itself, this field emphasizes the flexible boundaries of the post-colonial, for while the phenomenon of African American society is not specifically a consequence of colonization, it is a consequence of colonialism. (Ashcroft et al. 200, 202)



There is knotted contradiction, it seems, as to how, whether and why to integrate when identifying and analyzing “minority” writing, or in the case of Fugard, writing that addresses the condition of minority populations. Gruesser’s *Confluences* seems to elicit a response to these contradictions at the same time it presents the potential for forms of analysis that are in themselves hybridized. He is clear to suggest that his 2005 study in no way attempts or suggests a conflation of African American studies and postcolonial studies, but rather that in the literary study of minority texts, specifically African American, there is confluence with the postcolonial. Citing Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* and his employment of postcolonial terminology for analysis of African American literature, he concurs with Gilroy’s conclusion “to renounce the easy claims of African American exceptionalism in favor of a globalised, conditional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not fuse” (4). By employing the focus of postcolonial critique it is possible to re-imagine the playwriting of Fugard and Wilson as a strategy to widen the parameters of what is considered postcolonial in intent.

### **Value of the study**

Juxtaposing the work of Fugard and Wilson offers an “interanimation” of their plays which positions and illuminates their postcoloniality. It suggests a reconsideration of how comparative reading might enliven one work against another with the potential to clarify and amplify meaning and dominant perspectives. Critics have written about Fugard and Wilson independently. None have placed them side by side as though in correspondence with one another. They are successful mainstream

artists whose work has been performed internationally. Wilson's Century Cycle, a re-imagining of Twentieth Century African American experience in the U.S finds a natural corollary in Fugard's canon, a re-rendering of South African racial history and memory. Fugard's ability to write for the repressed majorities of South Africa during apartheid created his place in theatre history. Some critics have suggested that Wilson has written himself into African American theatre history in his ten-play chronology. Both have written on the shoulders of their forbears finding and expressing unique individual voices to express the yearning of nations of voiceless 'others.' The dialogue which ensues between, around, and through their dramatic renderings is illuminating and consciousness-changing. To hear their plays "speak" is to enter into the dialogue. As they are put into play with each other, the conversation is magnified. Presenting Fugard and Wilson together, as they recapture the histories of those living under South African apartheid and American racism, reveals them as dramatists whose words "speak back" as they speak to each other and thereby reveal the postcolonial dimensions of the plays. Simultaneously, placing their writing in biographical context suggests the playwrights themselves as artists/reactors in the aftermath of colonialism.

### **Themes**

The performance texts offer a dialogue of issues shared, studied and originating in experience. Content, story, character and dialogue are amplified and re-assessed under the magnification of a postcolonial lens. Placed side by side the amplification is further illuminated and enhanced by a communal consideration of the

conditions which permeate the postcolonial landscape and subject: place, displacement, subjugation, oppression, marginality, otherness, and the need to speak back.

### **Sources**

Two texts have been useful in determining a ground on which to plant my reading and a comparative analysis of Fugard and Wilson. Both studies investigate and analyze drama in a post-colonial context: *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins and *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* by Brian Crow with Chris Banfield. These are, in fact, the only published works I have found which deal expressly with drama, performance and the post-colonial. One volume makes no mention of Wilson and provides merely a brief descriptive example of counter discourse in Fugard's work in *The Island* (Gilbert, Tompkins) while Crow's *Introduction* of seven chapters includes one chapter for Fugard ("Athol Fugard and the South African 'workshop' play") and one for Wilson ("August Wilson's theatre of the blues"). Crow seems to take a stand in advance of the authors of *Empire* as he identifies Wilson's work. What is primary in both works is how elements in both playwrights' work coincide and abide by the criteria of post-colonial critique. Gilbert and Tompkins suggest definitions of post-colonial performance and writing for performance that broaden the spectrum through which identification can be attached to texts, and how, and for what purpose performances respond to colonialism.

Post-colonialism addresses *reactions to colonialism* in a context that is not necessarily determined by temporal constraints . . . [It] is both a textual effect and a reading strategy . . . [Its] agenda is to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and determinants that create unequal relations of power based on binary oppositions such as ‘us and them,’ ‘first world and third world,’ ‘white and black,’ ‘colonizer and colonized’ . . . to destabilize the cultural and political authority of imperialism . . . [There is] no attempt to homogenize their texts, histories and cultures. (3)

Considering that “readings” of Fugard and Wilson have not incorporated the possibility of their texts as reaction to what were colonially imposed structurations of specific populations (the importation of slaves and institution of slavery in North America and the laws of apartheid in South Africa which prevented free expression and movement of identified classes) it is perhaps possible to revisit and re-read these texts through a lens which uses the tools of the post-colonial. It appears this potential form of analysis of dramatic texts may open some boundaries. The goal in such reading results in an “intersection of dramatic theory with theories of race” (12). Through such reading and viewing of performances, readers and audiences re-experience texts and performances in a new light with an added emphasis which enhances the richness and potential power of the performance. Creating a dialogue between the works of these writers about race and reactions to colonial repression and subordination is another attempt to re-read and re-see the work of each writer

individually and analyze a correspondence of conditions in their writing and their provocations to write.

*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin is a source guide specifically because these authors respond to *writing* which they study and analyze to explicate or define what characterizes post-colonial writing. The practice of writing and ‘*the writing*’ are a key to their theories and assumptions. This post-colonial primer first published in 1989, as its publisher describes “opens the debate about the interrelationship of these literatures” (cover note). It is persuasive in its grounding and a claiming strategy especially in studying the works of playwrights whose *writing* is with the intent of performance. The postcolonial subject finds resolution in speaking and creating a voice, where colonial *voice* was limited, un-tapped, non-existent, and unheard. The dramatic texts presented by Fugard and Wilson are but the precursors to performances which have played in theatres worldwide. Their voices offer theatergoers and readers the experience of hearing stories from the inside by subjects who have lived outside, silenced by the rules of status.

I place the voices and words under a microscope and find how the works release and reveal the condition of life “after colonialism.” I will illustrate how the works *play* to each other, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of reciprocal “interanimation,” creating a cultural dialogue and interrelationship which illuminates similarity and the simultaneity of experience. I will analyze several texts by both writers. In Fugard’s canon I have chosen what have been referred to as his

“apartheid” plays: *The Blood Knot*, *The Statements Trilogy* (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island*, *Statements After An Arrest Under the Immorality Act*), *Master Harold . . . and the boys*, *The Road to Mecca*, and *Boesman and Lena*. With Wilson I have selected from across the spectrum of his recently completed Century Cycle: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, and *The Piano Lesson*. In the body of writing created by both authors, I have chosen plays that are the most popular, the most widely produced and studied in dramatic literature courses, and the most frequently published in contemporary anthologies and introductory texts. The selection of specific plays resulted from the connections or correspondence which I detected in the strategies and topics employed by each writer that join the thought and experience of their plays as communicating texts. These cultural texts, composed after colonialism, resonate in the conversations they share in the theatre.

“Culture,” Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another” (xiii). His metaphor is apt and suggestive. It calls to mind a site of meeting and interaction. It imagines culture as the arena where wars are fought and the ground on which warriors traverse and strategize. It suggests the operating room theater where under bright focused light an anesthetized body is exposed, examined, diagnosed and reconstructed and/or repaired. It describes a stage framed by a constructed or metaphoric arch where the politics of representation perform and negotiate meaning with an audience through a shared experience. Said continues, “stories become the

method colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their own history” (xiii). Ashcroft, Giffiths and Tiflin in *The Empire Writes Back* concur:

Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions (the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples) are expressed and it is in their writing, and through other arts such as painting, sculpture music and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential. (1)

It is through traditions, narratives and discourses that marginalized and colonized peoples can recuperate their own histories. This quest for “racial self-retrieval” and “cultural certitude” as identified by Wole Soyinka in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* resonates with James Baldwin’s claim in *The Fire Next Time* of cultural struggle fueled by, “a reaction to social context in which an alien power controls, defines and judges” that seeks to “confirm a vital sense of identity” (12). What recourse or route, then, does a people, a culture, have that can alleviate the messages and stories undermining its history and identity? There is protest, violence – an attempt to galvanize groups of people in numbers – to create with physical force a “voice” for a people’s response, and there is the “voice” of the eloquent, the educated and humane spokesperson. There is the rhetoric of the politician, the prophet, the radical, or the disingenuous opportunist. And there is the artist. The power of art creates a chance to capture, preserve and transmit a vision and a new confirmation of presence. It is as Albert Murray so aptly describes “an elegant extension, elaboration,

and refinement of the rituals which reenact survival technology” (Gelburd 53). The work of art be it dance, music, painting or piece of writing is the conduit by which the raw materials of human existence are processed, which is to say *stylized* into aesthetic statement: the work of art is the aesthetic statement. “It’s a form of communication . . . it’s not a verbal statement, a report as such, it’s a visual statement . . . more concerned with connotation than with denotation” (Gelburd 53).

In the signification resides the power of the articulation that the work of art attempts to “retrieve” and elucidate. While giving breath and communicating the unexposed and unexplored it countermands the counterfeit, the adulterated. And in its process, how it is perceived and created (rendered), whatever form the work of art takes, and in how it is re-enacted and experienced that specific and more universal implications emerge. One comes to realizations and new knowledge or understanding about people, struggle, history, cultural identity, and authenticity in the creative ritual of art. There is a ritual in its creation, in its rendition, and in its transmission of ideas or, as Fugard describes, “truths the hand can touch.” These “truths” so vividly depicted in the drama of Athol Fugard and August Wilson have much to do with the “texture of existence.” Theirs is indeed a “theatre” in which “political and ideological causes engage.” Their renditions have become in theatrical terms the “keepers” of history and their canons consist of stories that frame and originate an untold and unimpeachable history of twentieth century African America and South Africa. Their writing and the physical performances evoked by the stories they tell are exemplary



(covert) “strategies” to recreate historical voices in dramatic literature “in the process challenging prevailing conceptions and understanding” (Beasley 9).

The need to interrogate existence, and identity – what it is to be human, what it is to be born thus, how things are, why things are, why and how things came to be as they are – has always been the pursuit of thinkers, writers and poets. The purpose in the exploration of these questions in the realm of art and especially in the overtly public manifestations on a stage, in a theatre witnessed by audiences, has probably as much to do with revelations of a longstanding inner dialogue on the part of the playwright as with an attempt to share it publicly. The play texts created by Fugard and Wilson are personal responses to memory, events from the past, from what has been reverberated in “stories” from their past. As Robert Scholes declares in *Semiotics and Interpretation*: “I am the texts that I produce.” Scholes continues by articulating the significant complexity involved in receiving and producing a text: “Producers of literary texts are themselves creatures of culture, who attained a human subjectivity through language . . . an author is not a perfect ego but a mixture of public and private, conscious and unconscious elements” (14). Fugard and Wilson dramatize activated by the architecture of psyche and through experience and involvement in specifics of the cultural worlds depicted. For both playwrights knowledge or understanding is reflected through experience. Foregrounded in their renderings is the search and quest for validation as a means of empowerment. Fugard and Wilson have articulated the provocation or necessity to write. Fugard characterizes the engagement in no uncertain terms: “The daemon of creativity is a

selfish cannibal who can also be, when necessary very cruel” (*Cousins* 42). In the introduction to *Three Plays*, Wilson concurs with artist Romare Bearden: “Art is born out of, among other things, necessity” (vii). Wilson continues:

Each of these plays was a journey. At the end of each, out of necessity, emerged an artifact that is representative, the way a travel photo is representative, of the journey itself. It is the only record. An artist stands before a blank canvas . . . ha[s] the same tools, color, line, mass, form and their own hearts beating, their own demons and their own necessity. (vii)

Who or what are these demons? Where do they originate? What gives them power?

What is the necessity? Dennis Lee in “Writing in Colonial Space” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* simply and eloquently describes the necessity:

Recogniz[ing] that you and your people do not in fact have a privileged authentic space just waiting for words: you are, among other things, the people who have made an alien authenticity their own . . . under the surface alienation and the second-level blur of our words there was a living barrage of meaning: private, civil, religious – unclassifiable finally, but there, and seamless, and pressing to be spoken and I felt that press of meaning. I had no idea of what it was but could feel it teeming towards words . . . Any man aspires to be at home where he lives, to celebrate communion with men on earth around him, under the sky where he actually lives. And to speak from his own dwelling – however light or strong the inflections of that place – he

will make his words intelligible to men elsewhere, because authentic.

(Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiflin, eds. 400, 401, 398)

Unmistakably woven into the fabric of Fugard's drama are the people and landscape of a turbulent, restless and disenfranchised South Africa having lived under the domination of the demonizing effect of apartheid. Wilson recuperates African America from the distortions and erasure of slavery and all its residual and remnant formulations. Both are men and artists striving to bring clarity and focus to existences and individuals clouded, undermined, and obscured from view. Inscribed in them and on the bodies of their writing is the struggle to illuminate, explore, and decipher "codes" which have operated within their respective histories and the complicitous antecedents of that history. Given the "half-shared histories of South Africa and American race relations" (Attridge 221) their concerns reflect a conscious position from which to redress and address existing constructs fully cognizant that, as Dennis Walder suggests, "rewriting history is dependent upon the gradual accumulation of evidence about its badly known past and proceeds despite the distortions, gaps and fissures inevitably attendant upon its present" (209). As two of the pre-eminent playwrights of the latter half of the twentieth century, Fugard and Wilson stand side by side in the struggle for significance. Their work and writing is "in dialogue" syncretically. Elegant storytellers each, they transmit and transmute history in the way art can, reckoning the limited options for dialogue with historical context. The

politics of their writing is transformative. As South African author Nadine Gordimer asserts in her essay, *Three In A Bed: Fiction, Morals and Politics*:

So if my fiction and that of other writers has served legitimately the politics I believe in, it has been because the imaginative transformations of fiction, in the words of Per Wastberg, “help people understand their own natures and know they are not powerless . . . Every work of art is liberating,” he asserts, speaking for all of us who write. That should be the understanding on which our fiction enters into any relationship with politics, however passionate the involvement may be. The transformation of the imagination must never ‘belong’ to any establishment, however just, fought-for and longed-for.

*(Living in Hope 15)*

The conflation between politics and the fiction of representation so often a subject of Gordimer’s essays, becomes the site to present alternate histories and a re-assessment and reclaiming of the past. The past is always made present in the theatre. Often the distant past functions as the basis for conflict which arises and is played out. In Ibsen it is often, if not always, the substance on which his dramas rely. In *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam Jr. investigates the strategies of Wilson’s composed chronicle of twentieth century plays as a way to re-visit, recreate, and re-orient the past simultaneously offering the stage characters and African Americans in general, a position in that past that leads to a specific identity in the present. The conjunction in his title which ties the present to the past is exactly what the literature of the post-colonial excavates and interprets: how history and its

disruptions must be defined and reconciled to recreate a familiar and recognized “past” and a true sense of, if not liberated, visible present free from the erasure of the past.

Albert Wertheim’s thorough and well researched *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World* is an in-depth and analytical study of the playwright, the man and his identification with his work. Much like Sandra Shannon’s *The Dramatic Imagination of August Wilson*, life events and biography are explored in light of the plays written. Their ‘life stories’ or ‘histories’ are correlated with and through their written works and their theatrical experiences. Both playwrights, as these authors astutely and strongly observe, intimate the existences of those forgotten, left behind or erased from history. They “give voice” and they “talk back.” It is in this voicing and talking that dialogue as discourse begins. It is within that realm that I investigate the conversations that ensue. Although poststructuralism de-privileges authorial intent and presence, its inscription on the performance texts of both playwrights strongly suggests a post-colonial intent. Ashcrofts, Griffiths and Tiflin suggest the possibility.

However one of the several points at which post-colonial theory announces its separation from poststructuralism is in the acceptance of ‘voice.’ Post-colonial writing represents neither speech nor local reality but constructs a discourse which may intimate them. This distinction ought to be made as clearly as possible, because although writing is a new ontological event it does not cut itself off from speech. In fact, in post-colonial texts the inscription or

intimation of the vernacular modality of local speech is one of the most important strategies of appropriation. (221)

Fugard's theatre writing attempts to bear witness to what was occurring *in historical time* under apartheid rule in South Africa. His texts written and performed became an ongoing narrative of life for non-whites under the severe constraints imposed upon their existences. His plays write and perform history. Wilson's chronicle re-imagines time in each decade and establishes his version of history creating in Harry Elam's words "a historic site of loss but also a critical location of struggle and survival for African Americans" (3). In this attempt "August Wilson (w)rights history" (3). Both writers rebel against documented and accepted histories of their respective countries. The sites they imagine are "the ultimate unveiling and ultimate rebellion performed by post-colonial literatures: The center of order is the ultimate disorder" (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 90, 91).

Fugard's pen and Wilson's typewriter are used as enlightened "weapons of resistance." Bell hooks (sic) has written extensively on the subject. She believes that her feminism is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture, to de-center or off-center accepted strategies of written constructions. As a black woman, her ideas are even more persuasive. In *Postmodern Blackness*, a seminal text, she advocates the viability, indeed, the need for new forms of literary engagement and the "space" for such dialogue and "critical exchange" in the postmodern horizon.

Postmodern culture with its de-centered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding . . . It is exciting to think, write, talk, about and create art that reflects passionate engagement with popular culture, because this may very well be the central future location of resistance struggle, a meeting place where new and radical happenings can occur. (1)

If Edward Said imagines culture as “a kind of theatre,” hooks imagines an arena and potential place for “meeting” and exchange. The theatre is a “meeting place” as well as an arena for cultural and artistic dialogue where discourse has the power to dismember old constructs and where “new and radical happenings can occur.” The drama of Athol Fugard and August Wilson can be comparatively examined as works that engage in elucidating conditions after colonialism in a postmodern context. Their words, using hooks’ terms, “talk back,” about racism, repression, and the vigilant need for resistance. Psychiatrist Franz Fanon’s description of “combat breathing” – the stress and commitment to the struggle – and his activism, can be detected in the literary activism of both playwrights expressed through their simple and enlightened dramas. They set the record straight. The plays they have written offer *re-iterations* or versions of another heretofore unheard story spoken on very public stages. From first person perspective these authors re-play words heard, situations observed and the experiences of those without pen, paper or the ability to write a record. Fugard and Wilson are revolutionary writers and their agenda is unmistakable.

Their biographies bear out their activist positions. Fugard, a white South African, who continued his self education, after a stint in university, was enlightened while working a tramp steamer at sea and through the voyage he was able to observe, and understand the lives of his non-white “brothers.” His “memoir for the stage,” *The Captain’s Tiger* dramatizes the journey and the awakening. Returning to Port Elizabeth he made it his mission to explore the lives, experiences and dreams of those in his community who were non-white. Under apartheid’s strict and coercive strategies for separation, his color placed him in legal jeopardy and the performances which he created with his non-white collaborators ran them all the risk of government censure and imprisonment.

Wilson, having been accused of plagiarism in a high school history class, left the halls of his Pittsburgh high school and entered the Negro section of the public library. It is here that he encountered the texts of resistance by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and W.E. B. Dubois among others. Prompted by his reading, his education and maturity were fired in the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, the Black Nationalist movement, the playwriting of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and the Back to Africa movement. All were awakening events for young Wilson as he began writing poetry and eventually began experimenting with playwriting.

The performance texts and theatrical renderings of Fugard and Wilson provide “a rustle of wind blowing across two continents” (*The Piano Lesson* 106) – in late twentieth century South Africa and America. Fugard and Wilson have similarly armed themselves by visiting and re-visiting historical sites of difference and



meaning, to transact an “occasion” for new ways of understanding the condition of the disadvantaged, repressed and subjugated.

Post colonial writers, novelists, poets, songwriters, visual artists and filmmakers have attempted to de-center influences that colonialism has empowered while bringing a light to shine on the exile within their own countries: the subject in process in the post-colonial. Pairing the plays of Fugard and Wilson, chapter by chapter, is a strategy for just this kind of illumination. Resonance occurs as characters move to act, to speak, and to proclaim identity amidst the confusion caused by a colonially imposed history. Fugard and Wilson, themselves, are revealed in the ambiguity of colonizer/colonized and as subjects in a process striving to dismember subjective ideology by their playwriting.

Chapter 2, *The (K)not of Contra(diction): Dancing the Black Bottom* investigates *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, works by both playwrights which brought them to international prominence. These are works people ‘heard’ and responded to, modern dramas grounded in a people’s response to a cultural center. Although both playwrights had previously authored performance texts, it is with these two plays that their voices began to be heard. The pondok in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1961 where Morris and Zachariah engage each other in “identity” games is a world away from the recording studio in Chicago, Illinois, USA in 1927, but issues of self-worth and entitlement in both plays stage a strange polarity. In the course of Wilson’s recording session there is much to dispute and much to accomplish; so too in the conversations between Morris and Zach. The issue of race

and mobility is central in both dramas. The post-colonial voice responds and reacts to the misunderstanding white world which seeks only to classify and commodify. Published communications, a recording session in *Ma Rainey* and a letter in *The Blood Knot*, become a disconcerted connection to a white world which only seeks to appropriate what neither these Chicago musicians nor the brothers of Port Elizabeth can provide. The record producers in Chicago want Levi's version of the popular 'Black Bottom' because it is new and danceable but Ma's version is saleable. She is a popular artist. Levi's "voice" is untried and unsure. Her "version" will become their version as the recording sells. Commodification will put money in their pockets. Zach and Morris are brothers forced to confront their differences. They must "play" to the white world or remain disconnected. The voices of brothers questioning the viability of their identities and relationship ring with simple truth. Wilson's "band" records Ma's voice for consumption. Her blues confirms and shares the status of her people, but the unrecorded voices in the band room reveal much more. The violence which erupts within both dramas finds recognition in the potential impulse to self-absorb and self-destruct.

Chapter 3, *White Benches / Black Fences* explores the postcolonial with issues of patriarchal hegemony prevalent in both plays and their insistent influence in the biographies of both playwrights. In "*Master Harold*" . . . *and the boys* more than anywhere else in his canon, Fugard exemplifies and excoriates the postcolonial. The play is elemental to Fugard's playwriting biography. Its rendering is for Fugard an exorcism of demons. The moments at the climax of the action are as real as Fugard's

personal history. Fugard's appropriation of personal experience is a post-colonial statement of the deferred colonizer, an admission as well as a post-colonial "voicing" of the colonizer. Hally *is* the playwright. Fugard's memory recalls and re-writes himself the high school boy of an alcoholic father he detests. His trauma and dissembling is at the expense of Sam the black surrogate father whose skin receives the spit of apartheid's curse. Misunderstood but learned and engendered ways of dealing with what one doesn't understand but has been taught emerge when anger exacerbates Hally's situation. Generational misunderstanding, misplaced anger and the cycle of repressivity are also visible and operative in Wilson's *Fences*. In fact, they are key. Wilson's "challenge" to write a well-made play produced one which is keenly observant, unconditionally realistic and drawn from his own autobiography. Troy Maxson is son *and* father. His life has been a series of missteps and poor choices. He lives the legacy of a father he could not know, or be. The concept evades him. Troy is a black man whose black son is doomed to suffer the selfsame struggle of existence. Troy, as son, believed for a time in the possibility of change but after being chased from his father's house learns that being black in America is a curse. The whip was his father's weapon of education. The oppressor was his father. Troy learned the hard way. Years later, parenting his son would prove no different. But by 1957 life was changing. Opportunities available to Cory, Troy's son, seem too good to be true or to be trusted. Troy warns Cory even as he covets Cory's opportunity. Wilson's biography bears out the possibilities of his play's originating influences. Fugard "confesses" seeking to rectify gross errors in judgment as he presents a text

with first person authority. Fugard writes in a post-colonial context. Wilson's playwriting challenge, a successful Pulitzer Prize winning drama, reverberates a similar context.

Chapter 4, *Crossing Boundaries* examines protagonist characters in contestation with their own fate. In Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, an elderly white South African widow and in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, an adult black husband and father share the position of "outsider." Fugard's central character, Miss Helen, has created a "mecca" in her hometown. Animal statues, owls, angels, cement and mud earth gargoyles, and "wise men" border her home and fill her yard. Hundreds of pieces of broken glass and mirror glued to the walls and ceilings of her shack-like home reflect the candles she kindles for fear of the dark. She is a suicidal, desperate woman on the verge of ending her life. She is barely able to control the urge to end her search for self. Her road has come to an end. Herald Loomis, Wilson's protagonist, on the road and traveling arrives at a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1911, searching. Dressed in darkness with his daughter in tow, he seeks her mother, his wife, to see if life can again have a starting place. Caught by Joe Turner's men, seven years of indentured servitude and four years of searching have taken their toll. He is filled with hatred – for the world and for himself. He knows why he has come to this place but cannot find resolution. His search is a road to self-discovery. The self-defeating darkness prompts a vision of the past which becomes a source of strength and ushers him to a new status. *Crossing Boundaries* "talks" or "speaks" to those who might identify or have not heard the

voice of psychological exile with dramas of disconnection and exorcisms of darkness. The experience of regeneration and re-birth for each character comes in self discovery. Helen's art is her true self expression. Herald's conversion allows him to recognize his life as truly his own. Their status as outsiders in two different historical spaces and of different races prompts them to actions of affirmation in choosing to "go on."

Chapter 5, *Writing the Margins: Listening for Voices* presents the choric voices of the disenfranchised and marginal. Fugard writes and performs *Boesman and Lena* in 1969, the same year in which Wilson's *Two Trains Running* is set. Both plays expose and explore those who inhabit the fringes of life. Boesman and Lena are displaced coloureds who traverse the South African karoo in an attempt to make sense of the absurdity which has cast them adrift. As displaced and misplaced figures, they argue and fight to contest their own presence. Where their journey began is as uncertain as their destination. They sleep the induced sleep of their *dop* of homemade rancid liquor with the warmth a makeshift shelter will provide before moving again. Wilson's travelers, conversely, are sedentary as they occupy the chairs and stools of Memphis' restaurant. Still, their journey is as wandering and insecure as the South African coloureds. As residents of a Pittsburgh ghetto, due to be demolished in urban renewal, the folk who congregate at Memphis' dispute why change has been and is slow to come, and if the "power" of a diffuse Black movement will energize change. On the outskirts of both societies, in the margins, Fugard's couple wanders homeless, while Wilson's characters tenaciously resist the

possibilities of change that will not include them. The characters of both dramas long for the security of a world that places them at its center, that understands or at least listens, and one in which they can truly be citizens. They have wearied of exile. The day to day travails of millions of existences are embodied in Wilson's Pittsburgh people. So too Boesman and Lena replicate the lives of hundreds, thousands of displaced coloureds. The specifics of their struggles are indeed different. But there is convergence in their resistance. The questions they ask clearly articulate a post colonial condition.

*Statements and Lessons*, Chapter 6, is subtitled *(Dis)membering and Remembering the (G)host*. Dismembering the beliefs and narratives installed under colonial rule in the laws which predicate and subjugate is a difficult and perhaps endless process. Lessons must be learned by all. And new lessons must be taught. Statements must be made by those under suppression that further generations might understand and hear in the resounding sound of cultural struggle. These lessons and statements are yet another strategy for "speaking back" to a dominating and controlling center. Fugard's *Statements* trilogy is a theatrical triptych and series of snapshots of existence under the apartheid system. Developed and performed by Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, these relatively short one-act plays, originally unpublished, played to audiences in covert performances. The activism of Fugard and his fellows is evident. The mere collaboration of Fugard, Kani and Ntshona was suspect and unlawful. The black African actors *are* the texts for two of the plays. Fugard's participation is that of scribe-director. Issues of suppressed

identity and the Pass Laws are the basis for *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. The Robben Island prison, a monument and lasting symbol of apartheid domination, is the text and setting for *The Island*. The clandestine relationship and coupling of a white woman and coloured man, taboo under the Immorality Act, is the subject of *Statements after an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, scripted and originally directed and acted by Fugard. Questions of self-worth are prevalent in all three plays. The ghosts of Robert Zwelinzima, Sizwe Bansi and all disenfranchised South Africans under apartheid haunt Fugard's trilogy of resistance, reacting and speaking back to a dehumanizing system. If Fugard presents figurative ghosts, Wilson imagines their palpable presence in *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson's "lesson" of living life after the stigmatizing effects of slavery is about seeing through and beyond the subjectivity created in the experience to a boundless universe and place of ancestral connection. His lesson is taught around a family heirloom piano. Set in the 1930's in Pittsburgh, Wilson's statements are reflective of a people seeking identity in the aftermath of emancipation. The Charles siblings contest the value of a piano. Berniece refuses to play for fear of waking sleeping spirits. She is wary of a past that might only re-colonize. Willie Boy needs the capital the sale of the piano will provide in order to purchase the land his ancestors worked as slaves. Carved into the wooden structure in deep relief is the Charles ancestry, washed with the tears and polished with the blood of their forbears. It bears witness to the slave past and is simultaneously a vehicle of renewal and remembrance. The playwright has placed center stage an instrument for re-connection. If music, specifically the blues and church hymns of affirmation are the

dialectic by which black Americans speak and are heard, the Charles family must find a reason to *play* the piano for all that it is worth. The ghosts who haunt the Charles' home seem to become active in Boy Willie's return north. Have they accompanied him from the south as threatening presences? Or are they the ancestors seeking to be heard? Are the black men who died in southern slavery speaking again? Or is it an embodiment of the white plantation owner's son who seeks some figurative retribution in the sale of slave land? The possibilities speak against the Charles family fear to 'play down' their history, dismembering its power. In the affirmation of remembering the ancestors, the music fills the house and is reconstitutive and recuperative. *The Piano Lesson* remembers as it dismembers control. Similarly, the *Statement Plays* at the time of initial performances acted as dismembering tools and rallying texts for non-whites under apartheid. In contemporary revivals and performances the *Statement* trilogy remembers the laws that exerted power in an alternate history.

### **Choosing the Frame**

Playwriting, all writing for that matter, "frames" experience. Just as the frame of a house serves as its infrastructure or the human skeleton gives shape and strength to the body, the framework fashioned by the playwright is crucial in defining the shape drama will take to direct and intensify audience perception. In facilitating a dialogue between Fugard and Wilson, I have chosen a diptych "frame" where the images exist in separate frames but are joined; attached because of the spatial relationship they share. They exist independently but linked. As in the double frame



which holds the photographs of my parents, my father a dashing young sailor, on the left, my mother in her bridal gown, on the right, separate photographs, but conjoined. Or the frame that displays my significant other in a candid and smiling moment, on the left, attached to that of our offspring at the beach building his first sand castle, on the right. I chose this way of displaying these images. They are framed for me in this fashion by the nature of my relationship to them, in their relationship to each other and in the definition I attach to the relationship. They exist angled out and looking back at the world, images of separate lives, unique existences and special histories – individual and independent yet connected and representative in my experience of them and with them. They also give shape and structure to my identity. They frame the margins of my existence. They confirm meaning and resonance in each other through me. They are in Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms “interanimating texts” (345-346) in my autobiography. They participate in their own relational way “dialogically” through this “framed” connection in a status of interillumination or mutual illumination, through me. They are, if you will, the *agent provocateurs* of my placing them in this conjunction – authentic lives in dialogue by relationship.

Such is the frame in which I have chosen to discuss and analyze the playwriting of Fugard and Wilson: linking them together in a dialogue so that they speak together through me – the one who has performed the linkage and examination through close reading and analysis of their plays. They have encountered the territory of their history and have been compelled to speak the inequality, the instability, the deprivation loudly on public stages. Their personal journeys and development have

differed. The land and the people they represent through their writing are thousands of miles apart and have different histories. There is no ambiguity in their common commitment to testify and give witness to the demons who have stalked them and forced them to “speak” out of necessity. Demons and necessity – the motivations that frame their writing. Slavery and apartheid – two words that frame the struggle. America and Africa – two worlds that frame a dialogue of cultures in the playwriting of both men, remaking them as they imagine remaking their homes.

Wilson’s words:

To write is to fix language, to get it down and fix it to a spot and have it have meaning and be fat with substance. It is in many ways the remaking of the self in which all of the parts have been realigned, redistributed, and reassembled into a new being of sense and harmony. You have wrought something into being, and what you have wrought is what you have learned about life, and what you have learned is always pointed toward moving the harborless parts of your being closer to home. To write is to forever circle the maps, marking it down, the latitude and longitude of each specific bearing, giving new meaning to something very old and very sacred – life itself. (*Three Plays* viii)

Fugard’s words:

TIGER: Life, Liberty and Love! That’s what it’s all about. That’s the battle cry! You think I’m mad, don’t you? I can’t help it man. It’s just so damned exciting, you know this huge adventure we call Life. Look out there Donkeyman . . . an ocean for God’s sake! Look up . . . the

heavens! You ever seen so many stars! And here in the middle of it all, me and you, sailing through a sultry tropical night into the future. And that future? Who knows what it holds. I'm telling you man, I get drunk just thinking about it . . . if somebody had told me back home, in little old Port Elizabeth, that one day I would be sitting here on number four hatch of the *SS Graigaur*, next to "Donkeyman," headed for Aden, then Colombo, then Singapore, then Japan, and after that God alone knows where . . . I would have said they were crazy. But here we are! And we're in good company you know. Melville, Conrad, Hemingway, Faulkner, Twain – they all did it. Cut loose and took their chance with fate. There's no other way. You can't play it safe if you want to be a writer. (*The Captain's Tiger* 15-16)

Whether Fugard and Wilson have ever met is unknown to me. Their plays have been produced worldwide and performances of the works of both writers on several occasions have filled the theatres at Yale at the insistence of their mutual colleague, theatre director Lloyd Richards. In 1992, when asked by interviewer David Savran about strong influences in his writing, Wilson relates his limited play-going and play-reading experience, mentions Baraka's *Four Revolutionary Plays*, and playwright Philip Dean Hayes – for their realistic sounding dialogue, a high school class reading Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and a production of *Othello* he attended at Yale. He then goes on to describe his introduction to Fugard:

But something happened when I saw *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* at the Pittsburgh Public Theater in 1976. I thought, “This is great. I wonder if I could write something like this?” Most of the plays that I have seen are Fugard plays, so he’s probably had an influence on me without knowing it. Among the fourteen or so plays I’ve seen have been, *Blood Knot*, *Sizwe Bansi*, “*Master Harold*” . . . and *the boys* and *Boesman and Lena*. (292)

The fact that Wilson was influenced in viewing Fugard’s plays is interesting and forges a connection. Whether there is a direct influence is irrelevant. But it does open possibilities for reading their plays intertextually. Fugard, himself, commented to me that he had read Wilson and was impressed and moved by the writing.

The playwriting, the stories and words of Athol Fugard and August Wilson play on in theatres worldwide. They speak to a world that looks to them for confirmation of the threads they write and weave in order to authenticate lives.

*Standing between [black and white] is a chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, division, illusion and hostility. It highlights the national tragedy of people who have lived long together, but could do no better than acknowledge only their differences.*

*-Njabulo Ndebele*

*Lincoln: I know we brothers, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me, whatduhyahtink?*

*Topdog/Underdog- Suzan-Lori Parks*

*The single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue. Life by it's very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue.*

*-M.M. Bakhtin*

## **Chapter 2**

### **The (K)not of Contra(diction): Dancing the Black Bottom**

#### ***The Blood Knot and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

In a 1998 interview, former President of the South African Writers Congress and University of Cape Town Vice Chancellor, Njabulo S. Ndebele described the chasm or gap between whites and blacks in South Africa. He characterizes the interstitial space and fissures that postcolonial critic homi bhabha has pointed to in postcolonial societies. This gap, this space of difference and division is, indeed, the place where the postcolonial subject takes root and the postcolonial writer is grounded. African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' dramaturgy and dialogue in *Topdog/Underdog* seems to ask the question implicit in Ndebele's appraisal, why "people who have lived long together" through the "engineered division" in the colonial insistence to control, find it imperative to ask. Fugard and Wilson stand with

their playwriting, “between,” proffering the possibility of suturing and repairing the “illusion and hostility” developed after years of colonial “misunderstanding and division.” They, like Parks’ character, ask the question of their countrymen and each other. The plays of Fugard and Wilson float as intertexts in Parks dramaturgy, as her plays do in readings of their work. Fugard and Wilson are predecessors, if not influences. They, too, interrogate race and its formulation in history as they posit questions concerning how the present, the past and postmemory, perhaps, continue to re-play the record of race as stigma. Fugard and Wilson are well aware “that history is and always has been as much enemy as ally to the collective memories and shared secrets of a black people jettisoned into a white world” (Garrett 6). They write ‘after’ colonialism, in the sense of ‘post’ and in the sense of ‘pursuit,’ a colonialism which implicates and facilitates race as a formulation. They write to de-mystify and to “describe it.” Wilson’s writing re-encounters the issue and broadcasts voices to fill the silence and “the muteness of slavery.” By “reclaiming those things lost” and giving voice, he historicizes with “a lyrical theatrical naturalism” as New York Times drama critic, Frank Rich describes “conveying the African as well as the African American experience and, most of all, an insistence that black characters be their full selves . . . rather than domesticated symbols enacting a pro forma liberal civics lesson for the delectation of white audiences” (Foreword *Ma Rainey* x). Fugard’s process strikes a slightly different chord as it attempts to interrogate issues of racism under apartheid for white audiences in South Africa and America. His stance appears that of a moral man who refuses to remain disaffected. His investigation is that of an attendant

psychologist who sifts information as he observes how people react and live within a system and under the treatment to which they are subjected. He is a man of conscience examining his own racial behavior in the light or within the roles he creates and performs for and with his non-white “brothers.” Appropriating moral concern into his examinations may not be a strategy as much as the effect of his dramaturgy as it plays out. He digs the ground and sweeps the deep waters of South African racism and listens with a dramatist’s ear and eye conveying his work through a style which most approximates a similar kind of ‘lyric realism.’ As Jeanne Colleran suggests – and Fugard would agree – his plays receive appropriate reception as they play in theatres worldwide but especially in the United States where

a discussion of racism cannot be broached without resurrecting, in white liberal circles, similar specters of shame, and in conservative ones, explosions of white outrage over affirmative action privilege. But while the subject of racism cannot be broached directly, it is everywhere articulated, inflected in the ostensibly colour-blind yet racially divisive tracts that range from legal to literary expression. Marked most by unacknowledged but perceptible dread and fear, the agonized conversation about race in America is particularly receptive to . . . Fugard’s iconic figures . . . Dissembling our own history of violent racism, Fugard’s . . . South African heroes are welcomed . . . to remind us that despite our tepid political response to both apartheid and to domestic racism, our capacity for moral outrage is still intact. (“South African Theatre,” *Writing South Africa* 228)

“Race” as a trope becomes more negotiable to consider and diffuse, if not discuss, as these playwrights attempt to engage it in their theatre works. Fugard’s *The Blood Knot* explores race in the confines of the South African “pondok” location through the relationship and communication between two biological brothers. Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* looks and listens through the lens the blues provides at a musical “family” birthed and fed through Ma’s intervention in America in 1927. “Brothers” by race the men who do her bidding make up her accompaniment band. These plays represent the beginning of an endeavor on behalf of writers, an agenda and writing mission crucial to both playwrights’ careers. As Edward Said, the precursor to postcolonial studies outlines in *Beginnings*: “Beginning is not only a kind of action: it is also a frame of reference, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness. It is pragmatic (xi) . . . beginning is making or producing difference” (xiii). *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* are plays which succeed in beginning to make or produce difference as they offer sites and stories which examine the disconnection and disorientation of life and livelihood of human beings under the thumb of the resistant and ongoing colonially created figure of race.

### **Beginnings**

*The Blood Knot* first produced in 1961 was Fugard’s introduction as playwright, actor and political activist on the South African and international scene. Similarly, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* produced at the Yale Rep was Wilson’s initiation to a place of significance in the American and international theatrical sphere. Their playwriting advanced their personal careers and their political agendas.



Their theatre writing would distinguish and characterize them both as writers of singular quality, commercially successful and artistically stimulating. Their voices and those of the characters they have scripted have captured attention and claimed audiences throughout the second half of the twentieth century to the present. Though their respective politics point toward certain goals and reach for significance in different ends, their work seems to engage in the united conversation of voiceless millions about race, oppression, disenfranchisement, inequity and identity. Dubois' prediction of the "world problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" was unfortunately correct. Fugard and Wilson have engaged the "problem" as their works have impacted theatre audiences and perhaps caused them to consider, think and ask questions about race and possibly the nature of being human while struggling under South African apartheid and the long lingering after-effects of slavery in America. Fugard's work can be considered postcolonial, writing as he did during and after the legislated colonizing of apartheid, despite or rather in spite of his race and position as a descendent of one of the Dutch colonizing families. Wilson's writing has not been categorized postcolonial but the issues and subjects which become overarching substance in his revision of African American history have much in common with the results of life after the invasion and the figurative dismantling of a colonial power. Side by side these two writers have brought attention and distinction to the populations they examine. They have laid claim to place, purpose and potential for their subjects. They prompt us through their dialogue to enter the conversation,

participate and leave changed. They are tied inextricably as Zach and Morris or Ma Rainey, her bluesmen and their music.

*“Together On The Stage,”* one South African newspaper headline proclaimed, “Theatre history was made in Johannesburg . . . when a White man and a Black man acted together publicly in the same play . . . about race in South Africa” (Wertheim, 18). Historic as heralded by the press, the performance was even more politically provoking to government agency and scrutiny. *The Blood Knot* by Athol Fugard which premiered on September 3, 1961 at Dorkay House, Johannesburg, South Africa was the beginning of a conversation he would carry on in the theatre about identity, race, culture and the condition of being human, which continues in his playwriting to date. Fugard, in self-reflection in *Cousins: A Memoir* characterizes this moment of “The Bloodknot – the watershed play” one of “dark epiphanies” (Fugard 83). It is probably no coincidence that Fugard’s published *Notebooks*, begin:

1960

*London. Notes for a play*

. . . like a scab on the hill rising from the water – is Korsten location a collection of shanties, pondoks and mudhuts. . . . In one of these shacks . . . are the two brothers. Morris and Zachariah. Morris is a light skinned coloured . . . Zach is dark-skinned coloured, almost African...Morris is a man who has discovered the subtleties to colour . . . but Zach can never be anything else, he is black and that is that . . . his one reality is the brutality of a dark skin, which allows no subtleties . . . the blood tie linking them has chained

them up. They are dead or dying because of it . . . The situation – the imprisonment in a blood tie. (Fugard 9-10)

A self described “bastard white South African,” (Fugard, “Scenes from a Censored Life” 33), son of an Afrikaner mother and Irish, English-speaking South African father, Fugard speaks and writes in English because of its scope and power as an instrument for communication. Even in claiming “my soul is that of an Afrikaner” (“Scenes” 33) he admits “I couldn’t write now in the Afrikaans language if I wanted to . . . In that sense, my identity is an English-speaking writer although I know my soul is that of an Afrikaner” (“Scenes” 33). In a 1990 interview for American Theatre he describes the experience of his writing practice prior to *The Blood Knot* and how it was instrumental in formulating the “voice” which would characterize and style his drama. Prior to his involvement with the Serpent Players he expresses a writer’s struggle of “groping for clarity” (“Scenes” 32) by attempting to master craft in the imitation of “masters,” his models: O’Neill, Williams and Odets. With his early dramas *No-Good Friday* (1958) and *Nongogo* (1959) he was trying to assert a discipline to his craft in dramatic structure, but as he began *The Blood Knot* his focus shifted. “Somehow the question of dramatic structures was, after I’d written those two plays, not exactly solved, but I was able to find it instinctively . . . But a different apprenticeship started with *The Blood Knot* and continues. . . . I see this apprenticeship in terms of working on the *word*, making that line as spare as it needs to be” (Raine, *Quarto* 3). He also describes how working with the indigenous people of South Africa, was an eye-opening discovery from which emerged a new-found

understanding of the possibility of speaking about the world which he called home.

He insists:

Through them, I have been able to witness to the most extraordinary thing you can see if you are a practitioner of the spoken word. A people who had been silenced and gagged – who had endured throttles of every conceivable form, legal and physical, from prison cells and banning orders to legislation on statute books – discovered a voice through theatre. They discovered a way of speaking . . . the opportunity to talk aloud instead of whisper secretly to each other. (“Scenes” 32)

Bertolt Brecht has suggested that human beings begin to understand and conquer their fate the moment they begin to make “noise” about it. Fugard extends the assertion suggesting that “the most supreme noise a human being can make is the spoken word . . . after the crying comes the word, the articulated word” (“Scenes” 32). Fugard’s *Notebooks* identify the struggle to articulate “about silence, about protest, about making a noise so that ‘they don’t forget we’re here’” (69) with Milly, the heroine of *People Are Living There*. “Ultimately – Pessimism. But heroic. Heroic pessimism. ‘Courage in the face of it all’ . . . Surrender? Never!” (96). Millie, the character he breathes life into later articulates this directive in his 1968 drama: “There must be something we can do! Make a noise! . . . Lest they forget, as the monument says. I can still do that. I’ll make it loud, make them stop in the street, make them say: People are living there!” (167-168). With *The Blood Knot*, Fugard began to make “noise.” He began experimenting with a practice that he labeled “play-

making” which would be instrumental in his theatrical endeavor.

In the Introduction to *Statements* (1974) Fugard quotes an introductory note to an extract of *The Blood Knot* published in 1961, writing about what he calls “the pure theatre experience” :

This experience belongs to the audience. He is my major concern as a playwright. The ingredients of this experience are . . . the actor, and the stage, the actor *on* stage. Around him is space to be filled and defined by movement and gesture; around him is also silence to be filled with meaning, using words and sounds, and at moments when all else fails him including the words, the silence itself . . . It is partly for this reason also that I have directed most of my plays in their first productions; not because I felt as the author I was in possession of *the* interpretation either of the play as a whole or the specific characters, but because I have always regarded the completed text as being only a half-way stage to my ultimate objective – the living performance and its particular definition of space and silence. (Introduction *Statements*)

In his introduction to the acting edition of the play, published later, his notes address his creative process and involvement:

If there’s a human predicament this is it. There is another existence and it feels, and I feel it feels yet I am impotent . . . I don’t feel innocent. So then how guilty am I? . . . Maybe guilt isn’t all *doing*. Maybe just *being* is some sort of sin. I’m sure Morris says that somewhere. If he hasn’t he should.  
  
(Introduction *Samuel French* edition)

Taken together, Fugard's comments can frame our reference for understanding his process and position. As originator and primary "voice" of the text, Fugard's comments explain the dialogical nature of his text in the context of his theatre work which is itself a dialogic process. His multileveled involvement and participation as playwright/director/actor in the performance of his play text ties him to *The Blood Knot* in an inextricable way.

### ***The Blood Knot***

*The Blood Knot* revolves around the relationship of two coloured brothers, Morris, a light-skinned man who has "passed" for white and Zachariah his dark-skinned black brother who share a small, sparsely furnished one-room shack in the non-white "location" of Korsten, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The brothers are as different as siblings could be. Zach is brooding and gentle with a childlike sense of humor. He is an uneducated man of few words, passive but quick to anger and has lived in Korsten his whole life and is resigned to remain. He works as a park guard in the city. Morris has traveled and has been back in Korsten for about a year. He is educated, aggressive, talkative but now wary of the world and insecure. He remains at home, prepares the meals, tends to domestic chores and reads from the Bible at bedtime. Morris dreams of a "two-man farm" in one of "the large blank spaces" that will be bought with the savings from Zach's earnings. Zach is skeptical and more concerned with his lack of female companionship. He has tired of Morris's presence. "I'm sick of talking. I'm sick of this room" (12). To placate him Morris concocts a plan to find Zach a woman pen-pal. Zach reminds him that he cannot read or write.

Morris will provide the words. Ethel Lange from Oudtshoorn is chosen from the newspaper personals. Morris writes for a tongue-tied Zach. Ethel's letter and photo response a few days later panics Morris. "Ethel Lange is a white woman" (27). Zach is delighted. "And . . . [she] has written to me, a swartgart . . . [she] thinks I'm a white man, that I like" (27). Zach continues to revel in the fantasy as he urges his brother to read the letter and the inscription on the back of the photo "To Zach, with love . . ." (29). He dictates his response to Morris who warns "I'm telling you it's a dream and the most dangerous one . . . on . . . paper . . . evidence . . . you're playing with fire" (33). Ethel's next letter requests a meeting. Zach decides to reveal that he is black. Morris cautions that his admission will only cause greater problems. "They don't like these games with their whiteness" (41). Zach wonders what wrong he has done. "What have you thought! That's the crime" (41). Morris is shaking, emotionally angry. "All they need for evidence is a man's dreams. Not so much his hate . . . They can live with that. It's his dreams that they drag to judgment" (42). Zach accepts his brother's warning but as they undress for bed Morris's light skin inspires him. Their savings will buy clothes to dress Morris as "gentleman" Zach. Zach leads Morris in a rehearsal for the meeting and the following day Morris "dresses" for white in the costume Zach has purchased and practices a walk, a voice, a manner. Zach is delighted until the 'white' Morris addresses him "swartgart" (51). Time seems to stop and in its ellipse Morris admits that his guilt 'passing' in the world outside as his black brother rotted in Korsten was the reason for his return. It is time for bed. Morris sleeps soundly as Zach wakes, dons the 'white' suit and poses. Thoughtful and sad he

invokes the spirit of his mother asking “I got beauty . . . too . . . Haven’t I?” (59). Another letter from Ethel arrives announcing her engagement. She must end the correspondence. Morris is relieved; Zach despondent. To lift his spirit Morris dresses in the suit and begins an improvisation which turns deadly serious. Zach is at his workplace; Morris the ‘Baas.’ Zach gathers trash. Morris addresses him “I thought I left you behind . . . the sight of you . . . makes me want to throw up” (67). Although he realizes he has gone too far, Zach prods him to continue but not before both brothers chase “mother” from their midst, pelting her with stones and epithets. The scene continues: Morris taunts Zach with his umbrella “What sort of mistake is this? A black man? . . . You’re horrible . . . you stink . . . I hate you, do you hear? Hate! . . . Hate! . . . Hate!” (70). Despite Zach’s supplications Morris attacks. His fury spent he starts to leave realizing the gate is locked. Zach stands in his way. Morris panics and falls to his knees. Zach is above him ready to strike. Time suspends. Morris crawls away, removes his jacket and stares out the window. Zach on his cot wonders what happened. “It was only a game. Other men get by without a future,” Morris explains. Zach is confused. “What is it, Morrie? . . . The two of us . . . in here?” (73). Morris answers: “Home . . . We’re tied . . . It’s what they call the blood knot . . . the bond between brothers” (73).

Fugard has written a play which functions on several levels. It is realistic, symbolic and political. It is not a parable or fable. It is not inconceivable to imagine Fugard’s “brothers” borne to the same mother of different fathers resulting in a difference in skin color. Fugard’s setting in the Korsten, Port Elizabeth dumping



ground is as he journals in his *Notebooks* “a world where anything goes – any race any creed” (9). The play depicts a pattern of survival strategies in the domestic setting of poor and displaced South African male siblings. The dream of a better life and memories of the past are played out literally in improvisation games of escape which become hurtful reminders of a past that leaves them more destitute in the present. Conflict arises in the pressurized space of the small pondok in the greater nexus of the prohibitive space of South Africa, a world dangerous and delimiting to both men because of the skin they inhabit. The competition and disagreement between the two brothers to engage or retreat from the danger inherent in connecting to a forbidden white world becomes the vehicle by which individual animosities emerge. Simple games of diversion turn violent. Revelation and relationship reverberate in the brothers’ confrontation with each other and the failure to achieve any identifying structures, a lack of pride and inability to assume purpose. In their admissions the “knot” tied by family, by blood, by brotherhood is tightened and ruptures. There is no resolution to the dramatic action or solution to the dramatic questions and the dialogue which has occurred, only a final statement. What transects and illuminates the drama is a negotiation of symbols which capture significance as they articulate the simple truths which play out in context. The author employs a strategy in which the practical (alarm clock, footbath, bible, bed, lamp, window) the spiritual (prayers, bible stories) engage the physiological (memory, dreams, anger, violence, sleep) and intermingle to produce a naturalistic situation in which both men seek to find resolution in their co-existence and co-dependence. The life they share

and the daily rituals, which give shape to time, are too thin a connective tissue to solidify brotherhood. The blood that ties becomes the blood that separates.

*The Blood Knot* mimics in its representation as it plays against the historical reality of the South African location. The mere fact of interracial co-habitation is transgressive, to suggest relationship is a direct manipulation and inversion and tantamount to obstruction of apartheid ideology.

Fugard describes his characters as light skinned and dark skinned and he identifies them as brothers. Writing from his white South African perspective his “politics” is clear. His initial casting of himself with a fellow black African actor as “brother” establishes his political stance. The “knot” is perceptibly a clot in the administration of the restrictive racial policies of government which have conveniently misconstrued the articulation of “separate development.” In the original production the words of Morris and Zachariah emanated from actors of different races. Fugard (Morris) is a white Afrikaner. Zakes Mokae (Zachariah) is a black South African. In several subsequent productions (London, the U.S. revival) the cast remained the same. The style of their working process as described by Fugard also grafts both actors to their roles. Fugard and Mokae became as identified in their race and roles as Zach and Morris are identified by their color. Neither Zach nor Morris possess an inherent, or innate identity. Against the backdrop of apartheid, Zach/Mokae and Morris/Fugard struggle no more “separate but equal” than any individuals under the South African systems of control. Fugard’s allusion to the biblical Cain and Abel of Genesis prompts an allegorical reading and understanding.

But here too there is inversion. Morris, the light skinned imagines himself the ungrateful, retributive, selfish Cain. Zach's purity in his dark skin is Abel.

August Wilson in an interview with Bill Moyers articulates the issue of color and identification in America:

I challenged my host to pull out his dictionary and look up the words "white" and "black." He looked up the word "white" and came up with things like "unmarked by malignant influence, a desirable condition, a sterling man, upright, fair an honest." He looked up the word "black" and he got "a villain, marked by malignant influence, unqualified, violator of laws." So that when white Americans look at a black, they see the opposite of everything they are. In order to be good, the black has to be bad. In order to be imaginative, the black has to be dull. This is what black means. We are a visible minority in this linguistic environment, and we are victims of that. (Moyers 16)

Zach and Morris are identified by color. Their mobility and livelihood has been proscribed by hue. They are brothers with nothing in common except in genetic transcription of blood facts. The play enacted by and on racialized bodies in the "located" space representative of South Africa, 1961, is an exercise in excoriation as much as the struggle with strategies of control that function in diffusing and corrupting identity. It describes "other"-ness as it pinpoints "not"-ness. Is there brotherhood? How can there be? Understanding their experience and purpose is thwarted as they attempt to exchange roles. They simply cannot find each other's perspective. Their relationship is filled with dialogic complexity. The dynamics of the

interaction as they strive for autonomy or connection creates tension. The boundary of their relationship plays in the nexus of the larger social system in which they are embedded. The play presents a spiraling action. Although inversion is experienced in the “role-playing” and “floating” control exchanged by both brothers, the result is of increased separation, one from the other, and individual dissociative pathologies within each brother separately. The “supra” text of Fugard as Morris adds another level and is challenging in its diametrically reverse effect: a white man “passing” or “playing at” light skinned coloured. Is this not more an exercise in “contra”-diction in which a kind of meaning is revealed? Or is this simply a playwright-as-actor strategy to experience and live the “other”-ness re-imagining his discourse with new eyes?

*The Blood Knot* is both a performance and a political act. Morris and Zach never manage to reverse roles. They try-on each other’s clothes always finding them ill-fitting and unsuitable. They *exchange* control or alternate in it. Control floats. The play tests the charged ground of race in a secluded space where deeply covered and learned animosities become visible through games. Finding meaning for each brother or in their bond is as elusive as the memories or games which are temporary moments of innocent play that evaporate quickly. The thought of Ethel is stimulating to Zach but frightening to Morris. As object of desire or sexual conquest she is no more than a fantasy. She signifies from a world in which even her letters contaminate the possibility of connection. This Ethel, searching for connection, liaison, and romance writes and is representative of the world which has already de-privileged. Her letters precipitate much of the play’s action but her role is peripheral. The act of writing to

Ethel is problematic and transgressive because she is white and female. The conflict between the brothers escalates as they negotiate the potential for meeting. For Zach it is a latent and encrypted desire to conquer or experience “whiteness.” Franz Fanon in Chapter 3 of *Black Skin, White Masks* analyzes the relationship between desire and manhood as it relates to black men and the desire for white women.

Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind,  
Surges this desire to be suddenly *white*.

I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*.

Now – and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged –  
Who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I  
Am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.

Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . .

I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white  
civilization and dignity and make them mine. (63)

The reversal in Fanon’s implication of colonial desire suggests much more than the coupling with the female. Zach perhaps imagines a kind of freedom from his dark skin as Morris trembles at the encounter. Zach’s inferiority seems to dissipate in the imagined meeting. His longing for acceptance is satisfied as long as his blackness isn’t revealed in their correspondence.

The brothers riff on the idea of their beginnings and the parents that created

them brothers. They have no modeling center in the father who engendered them. He is alien and dismissed as irrelevant. Mother surfaces in reminiscences and in the final scene where she is stoned and chased away because her vague spectral presence provides no answers. She is described as “brown.” She signifies from a place where neither brother can imagine originating. Alien to each other the brothers exist a step away from the dumping ground where even a sea of expectation and renewal only smells of rot and waste, each in his chrysalis awaiting a metamorphosis which refuses to begin. They are exiles not tied but knotted in blood. The allegorical space, these bodies, this blood encourages Fugard’s mapping and orchestration of their dual-voiced dialogue on Morris’s map of “blank spaces.” Charting the history and geography of these brothers against the landscape of socio-political forces in South Africa is an historical rendering as dramatic exploration. It is with this map and the text which accompanies this “travel photo . . . of the journey . . . a record” as August Wilson suggests, (Preface, *Three Plays*) that Fugard begins a searching journey through the psyches of human souls repressed and confused, longing for authentication.

Exploration and journey is what playwriting is about as well as confronting ghosts and demons. The performance text is the site where the record of the journey is held, the performance, where meaning is captured. “The theatre,” David Savran in *The Playwright’s Voice* describes as “a site for remaking and re-imagining the self . . . a place where we meet both our own past and that of our culture . . . a point of intersection between memory and history” (xviii). The role of the playwright is to

frame “patterns and moments of clarity in human history” which become a kind of “time capsule or tomb . . . in which are interred both his or her own ideas, predilections and emotions and the remains of a vanished time and culture” (xvii). Its performance in the theatre renders it perpetually present. The play text in performance serves as a discourse representative and fulfilled in its “interpenetration of the present by the past . . . still [a]live with the demons, spirits and ghosts of those persons and oppressive social constitutions we thought we had put behind us” (xix). The demons that Athol Fugard seeks to exorcise but which persist in the dialectical tension of his drama become “ghosts” in Savran’s formation, connecting to and illuminating the past. Fugard’s writing observes dramatic conventions. His construction tells a story as it suggests a cultural narrative, enabling the audience to experience both in the theatre.

August Wilson is only too aware of the ghosting presences which haunt the African American experience in the American topography. Wilson is an African American of mixed race born in 1945 and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Street hustler turned poet Chawley Williams, Wilson’s best friend during his formative years describes: “August wasn’t really black. He was half and half. He was too dark to be white, and he was too white to be dark. He was in no man’s land. I knew he was lost. I was lost. Kindred brothers know one another. We were trying to become men. We didn’t even know what it meant” (Lahr, Introduction *Century Cycle* xix). Wilson’s manhood began to take shape as he embraced the black culture of his mother and in his self-appointed mission as a writer “to articulate the cultural

response of black Americans to the world in which they found themselves” (*Three Plays* xi). His struggle, self-expressed, is that of “a poet . . . wrestling with the world and his place in it” (*Three Plays* viii). His playwriting investigates and (re)imagines moments in an historical past where African Americans struggle to understand and (re)claim ghosted spirits by (re)connecting with the authenticating structures of their African legacy. Wilson describes his personal investment in the gestation and construction of his plays:

Writing a play is for me like walking down the landscape of the self, unattended, unadorned, exploring what D.H. Lawrence called “the dark forest of the soul.” It is a place rife with shadows, a place of suspect quality and occasional dazzling brightness. What you encounter there are your demons . . . You find false trails, roads closed for repairs, impregnable fortresses . . . armies of memory and impossible cartography. It is a place where the cartographers labor night and day remaking the maps. (*Three Plays* vii)

Wilson’s “re-mapping” of the African American experience has taken form in a ten-play chronology, one play to represent each decade of the African American experience in twentieth century America. Coming to the theatre almost by accident, he describes an epiphany that was to inspire the development of his dramatic voice:

One night in the fall of 1965 I put a typewritten yellow-labeled record titled “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine,” by someone named Bessie Smith, on the turntable of my 78 rpm phonograph, and the universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place . . . I cannot describe or even



relate what I felt . . . it was a birth, a baptism, a resurrection, and a redemption all rolled up into one. It was the beginning of my consciousness . . . With the discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues, I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and pressed it from every conceivable angle . . . my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues provided me with an aesthetic with which to frame my growing ideas as part of something larger. (*Three Plays* x)

Soon after, Wilson recognized in the collage canvasses of artist Romare Bearden's similar mode of translating the oral nature of the blues into visual narrative. This model proved instructive for the young poet searching for form to express in writing what others had in painting and song. Wilson's readings of Amiri Baraka's drama in the sixties and seventies and the metaphysical fiction of Jorge Luis Borges would also become influential in the development of his voice. The direct or indirect influence of "the four Bs"—Bearden, Baraka, Borges and the blues (Herrington 20) are evident in Wilson's dramaturgy. They can be read intertextually in the collage constructions of his playwriting, the blues "voicing" in the dialogue of his characters, the anger and angst articulated by his conflicted protagonists and the metaphysical encounters and struggle with the white man's God and ghosts.

"With Pittsburgh Black Horizon Theater as backdrop and the revolutionary plays of Amiri Baraka as his textbook, he took his first awkward steps away from writing poetry toward composing one act plays" (Shannon 26). The theatre founded

by Wilson and his friend Rob Penney in 1968 would prove the beginning of Wilson's metamorphosis from poet to playwright. *Recycle* (1973), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1976) and *The Homecoming* (1976), a script which eventually became *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1976, revised 1981) were written for Black Horizon hometown audiences. At the suggestion of a friend, Claude Purdy, Wilson converted a previously written series of poems into another sprawling drama *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1977). It was also here at the Pittsburgh Public Theatre in 1976 where Wilson attended his first professional theatre production, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* by Fugard, Kani and Ntshona. A job writing educational plays for the Science Museum and collaboration with Claude Purdy prompted a move from Pittsburgh to St. Paul, Minnesota. His encouragement from Purdy gave the burgeoning playwright inspiration to compose *Jitney* (1979) for which Wilson received a Playwright's Center grant, and *Fullerton Street* (1980). Seeking recognition and professional development as a playwright he had submitted *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* and *Jitney* to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwright's Conference in Waterford, Connecticut. Both were rejected. Wilson's association with the Playwright's Center in Minneapolis was fruitful. *Jitney* received staged readings, while there he wrote *Fullerton Street*. Feeling that his work had grown from the workshop experience in Minneapolis, he submitted his most recent *Fullerton Street* and a revised and reworked *Jitney* once again to the Eugene O'Neill Center. Again, both were rejected. "*Jitney*, was too slight . . . *Fullerton Street* was unworkably big" (Brown, C. 125). If "third time's a charm" then Wilson's career would be completely

“charmed,” and transformed with the acceptance of his third submission to the O’Neill Center, the script to *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. His involvement with the O’Neill Center would begin an apprenticeship and collaboration, with stage director Lloyd Richards, Director of the O’Neill Playwright’s Center and Dean of the Yale School of Drama that would be instrumental in the development and professional production of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and the staging of his next five dramas.

After the O’Neill Center experience and major revisions *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* premiered in April, 1984 at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Wilson recalls, “When the lights went down on the opening night performance of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at the Yale Repertory Theatre . . . I marked it more as an accomplishment than a point of departure for a journey through the landscape of the American theater” (Preface to *Three Plays* xiii). By October, 1984, Wilson’s *Ma Rainey* was playing Broadway. Frank Rich, in his New York Times review of the play described the experience: “In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the writer August Wilson sends the entire history of black America down upon our heads. The play is a searing inside account of what white racism does to its victims – and it floats on the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates” (Rich, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* C19). August Wilson sets the scene and climate for his drama in poetic terms:

It is early March in Chicago, 1927. There is a bit of a chill in the air . . .  
Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city . . . Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking.  
Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty

pieces of silver . . . Sleepy eyed negroes move lazily toward their small coldwater flats and rented rooms to await the onslaught of night . . . It is with these negroes that our concern lies . . . their values, their attitudes . . . their music . . . a music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being separate and distinct from any other. The music is called blues.

(Prologue *Ma Rainey* 9)

### ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

A white record producer and Ma's white agent set up the studio for a recording session. Sturdyvant, the producer, warns "I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit" (12). "Mother of the Blues," Irvin, the agent, corrects. Sturdyvant is not looking forward to the diva's arrival, "Times are changing . . . We need to jazz it up" (13), he tells Irvin. He plans to record a new 'dance' version of the "Black Bottom" scored by Levee, Ma's new horn player. Toledo, the piano player, Cutler, the guitar playing bandleader and Slow Drag the bass player straggle in and set up to play. Levee arrives, late, sporting shiny new Florsheims, bragging about plans to get his own band and record deal. The men rehearse Levee's version of the song, despite their objections. Ma arrives with her companion Dussie Mae, her nephew Sylvester, an Arkansas country boy who stutters, pursued by a white policeman threatening jail for assault and battery after a minor auto accident on her way to the studio. He departs after Irvin slips him a bribe. Irvin tries to convince Ma to sing Levee's version. "Ma, that's what people want . . . something they can dance to . . ." (51). Ma refuses.

If he got what people want he can take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's . . . my nephew . . . he gonna do the voice intro on that *Black Bottom* . . . if that don't set right . . . I can carry my black bottom . . . South to my home, cause I don't like it up here no ways.

(51)

The band rehearses Ma's version, as Sturdyvant appears to retrieve another of Levee's songs. Mocking his subservient behavior with the white man/producer the band strikes a chord in Levee. He becomes angry and emotional as he describes his mother's rape and his father's lynching when he was a child. The scar he reveals, cut across his chest in his attempt to intervene, is his warning to the other men "back up and leave Levee alone about the white man" (58). In the studio Ma tells Cutler that she wants Levee replaced. Speaking from experience, she knows he is "Nothing but bad news" (63). In the band room Levee flirts with Dussie. She studies him wondering "How you get to be so crazy?" (67). Sylvester catches them kissing. Dussie makes a quick exit as the band assembles in the studio to record. The session is proceeding when Sturdyvant is heard cursing. The equipment has malfunctioned and the recording is incomplete. Ma threatens to leave. The band retreats to the band room warning Levee not to "mess with Ma's gal." While they wait the room is filled with stories. Cutler's tale of a minister assaulted in a small white southern town causes Levee to launch into a rant against "the white man's God." His arrogant outburst angers Cutler, provoking him to attack Levee. The other men attempt to separate them when Levee brandishes a knife and begins striking outward in circles

calling for Cutler's God to save him. The outburst ceases just as suddenly as it began as Levee folds his knife declaring "Your God ain't shit, Cutler!" (83). The darkness, filled with Ma's singing, leads into the final scene. The recording session has ended and Ma compliments the band and fires Levee. She is paid and she, Dussie, and Sylvester are gone. Sturdyvant pays the players. When Levee inquires about his songs Sturdyvant explains that he has changed his mind, but offers Levee five dollars per song. Levee refuses. Sturdyvant leaves. The musicians are silent as they pack up their belongings. As Toledo starts out, he steps on Levee's shoe. Levee snaps. Toledo's apology has no effect in the heat of Levee's growing fury and as he moves to the door Levee lashes out with his knife stabbing him in the back. Toledo slumps to the floor. Levee realizes what he has done, but it is too late. Cutler calls for Slow Drag to find Irvin.

### **Dictating the Blues**

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a realistic play as well as a jazz composition. The world and time it characterizes focuses on the perceptions, observations and philosophy of the black men and women musicians who populate Wilson's studio in Chicago, 1927. The recording session for which the musicians and producers are assembled is not documented in Wilson's text. It is peripheral and alluded to, the premise which brings the characters together. What *is* recorded is a persuasive narrative and the dialogue of a group of early twentieth century black American entertainers and their white record producers. What Wilson "records" are authentic voices not in the act of song but in the prose of his play's written "score." His

characters are his instruments in the dramatic formulation. His structuring of scene and incident is an orchestrated plotting. Characters “sing” in solo moments, in duets and in trios. The band which accompanies operates throughout as a quartet. They balladize the stories of their lives. They argue, bicker and at moments come together in harmonized understanding. They tell stories that transmit simple human truths. They describe a world in which they exist separated as black Americans. They speak their blues. It is their negotiation of life and a source of strength. Clearly drawn by the playwright, the characters’ individual traits and internal conflicts drive the rhythms of the text as they engage each other. These unrecorded voices are the substance of Wilson’s playwriting “session.” What plays dramatically through Wilson’s play text almost mimics the “feel” of jazz improvisation. In “The Charlie Christian Story” Ralph Ellison describes the technique which supports what Wilson seems to be trying to achieve.

For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazzman moment . . . springs from a contest in which the artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (Ellison 234)

Arlene Keitzer in *Black Subjects* takes Ellison’s formulation of improvisation in jazz music and extends it to life within the cultural realm of African America, as a practice

for human agency and survival.

The refigurative and collage techniques of improvisation in African American culture make it an apt metaphor for human agency-in-resistance in general. The stages of improvisation can serve as a model of how a resistant human subject comes into being: first by learning what the dominant ideology expects of her/ him and performing it “properly”; then by disrupting the expected performance with non-traditional elements and . . . by integrating the hegemonic and the non-traditional elements into a new identity with the structure of a free jazz composition. *This subject is neither seamlessly whole nor completely dispersed into separate subject-positions. Being resistant to ideology does not place this subject outside ideology; she/ he must improvise continually to challenge the ideological injunctions of the dominant culture. This is a subject consistently in process, recognizable as a distinct entity both to herself or himself and to others, caught up in compliance and resistance, obedience and contradiction.* [Emphasis added.] For this subject and for communities of resistant subjects artistic creation . . . can facilitate effective resistance to hegemonic ideologies. (47)

The band members engage in what can only be described as improvisations as they wait for the recording session to begin. Their perspectives and stories enlighten former experiences. The “accompaniment band” members are not as outstanding in their individuality as characters. Cutler, Toledo and Slow Drag speak almost, “banded,” as if one voice. They are the “strings.” Levee, the “horn,” brash and



abrasive is several years younger than the other players. His childhood experience is a memory he cannot forget. It defines and frames his obsessive need to be center, to be heard and recognized.

Ma is the “Mother of the Blues,” and self-proclaimed Madame Rainey. She commands and demands respect. It is her popularity and the potential for sales that drives the producers to record her “Black Bottom.” She may transmit codes of meaning in the blues she sings but for them her record is a product. Ma’s traditional blues are set in direct conflict with Levee’s rhythmic “dancing” jazz rendition of experience. Their interaction in the studio and band room though limited is adversarial from the start. Ma has assembled the band. She depends on them for accompaniment. They depend on her for their livelihood. As entertainers they have been spared from, as Toledo puts it “hauling wood . . . the only kind of job for the colored man” (77). The older band members represent a cross-section of ex-slave southern sharecropper’s sons who migrated north. Cutler is the leader of the band and father figure. Toledo, self-taught, is the only literate member of the group, a philosopher of sorts and a thinker. He is the *raisonneur*, objectifying practical methods of negotiating a present reality even as he realizes his own subjective experience in it. He is the only one even remotely aware of an African past. Slow Drag, the aging ladies man, remains a sexual figure. Levee, younger than the others by twenty years, represents a new generation and is motivated by ambition without the resource of sense or political savvy. It is in the band members’ interaction that the play is situated.

Irvin and Sturdyvant, the white producers, exhibit very little dimension. They hold the keys to the industry but not to the music. It is their world but not their story. Their relationship with Ma and her band is the business of commodification. They are there to make money. Much of their stage time is relegated to the elevated, sealed off, control booth. They communicate from behind a glass, through a synthetic speaker system. Irvin interacts with Ma and the band, Sturdyvant doles out their pay. They are interested in making records but not in hearing the music. Their control, though implicit, appears superficial and irrelevant in Ma's presence. The music of Wilson's language and diction fills the studio without need of accompaniment. In the musical moments of "Black Bottom," the only extended and complete rendition performed, we are made profoundly aware of the implication of transferred meaning and deferred significance: the contradiction of commodification. Simultaneously the moment speaks of connection in the expression of the black performers who render music as testament. In the moment even Sylvester's stuttering ceases.

Wilson's re-enactment is persuasive and relevant. His appropriation of the historical Gertrude "Ma" Rainey as the title character ties his fictional dramatic construction to black performance musical history. The legendary Gertrude Rainey born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1886 began her career in 1900 and experienced her peak in 1928. Wilson's play is set in 1927. Whether significant or coincidental, Wilson's first successful drama is consequential in its portrayal and casting of a female blues singer. Wilson's poetic sensibility informed by the musical blues styling

of Bessie Smith finds embodiment in Ma Rainey's stage life and presence. Musical historians have pointed to the connection between the two:

There is a possibility that she taught the blues to Bessie Smith, who certainly worked with her at one time. The younger and beautiful Bessie was her only serious rival . . . Bessie's majestic style had earned her the name "The Empress of the Blues" but to rural blacks the homely "Madame" Gertrude Rainey as she styled herself was "Ma" the "Mother of the Blues." They called her the "Paramount Wildcat" and later when she became famous and carried her wealth in gold dollars on a chain, the "Gold Necklace Woman of the Blues" . . . (she) was the short, dark skinned, wild-haired bi-sexual, who unexpectedly chose to record with a roughhouse "jug band." (Ma Rainey)

In an Act II exchange, Cutler is confused by Ma's choice of "Moonshine Blues," "That's one of them songs Bessie Smith sang, I believes" (64). Ma's response is defensive but absolute.

MA: Bessie what? Ain't nobody thinking about Bessie. I taught Bessie. She ain't doing nothing but imitating me. What I care about Bessie? I don't care if she sell a million records. She got her people and I got mine. I don't care what nobody else do. Ma was the *first* and don't you forget it! (64)

Ma *is* her own person developed through years of honing her craft.

Documented music history attests to this fact. She is a receptacle, transmitter and cultural signifier. She resists the demands of the white producers challenging them. She is distinct as she upholds her subjectivity, compliant and resistant. Levee whose

musical voice is “strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath” and who frequently “plays wrong notes” is an opportunist seeking to find recognition or monetary reward from his own rendition and translation of a blues tradition to rhythmic “dancing” musical compositions. He, too, represents the struggle of subject in process. His ambitious desire for personal gain marks no recognition of the blues language and his appropriation of it as a conveyance of his own life experience or its significance in cultural identification. He misreads content for form. He is using the white man’s tools of commodification. His apprenticeship has been limited. He is willing to “sell out” in order to self-promote, and in Wilson’s telling scenario self-destruct. Levee’s presence creates the conflict which spins the action of the plot in his attempt to secure a recording contract for his music. Ma arrives, performs and departs unaware of the full measure of Levee’s brewing animosity and latent rage. His firing exacerbates this condition even though he claims “Best thing ever happened to me!” (85). Levee’s volatility is further fueled by the rejection of his songs by the white producer. In this pressurized and suffocating racial space Toledo becomes the casualty of his misdirected fury. Toledo is a casualty but so is Levee. Simultaneously, oppressor and victim, Levee exemplifies the subject in process of Keitzer’s formulation “challenging the ideological injunctions of the dominant culture . . . caught up in compliance and resistance, obedience and contradiction” (49). In “acting out” rage which has lain dormant he determines his fate. His misdirected retribution is a tragic consequence of a racialized condition where behavior cannot always be modulated and becomes pathologized.

Athol Fugard in *The Blood Knot* and August Wilson in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* write in separate historical spaces about life in their respective homelands. In both sites explored by these playwrights there seems to be a clearly stated understanding of the way life works or is for blacks in America and South Africa. The blues which soften the edge and give voice to the experience of domination in the public arena of the studio are coping mechanisms and connect these musicians in their history and in their daily struggle to function as “half men and women.” The “playing with whiteness” which occurs between Zach and Morris is a game with no conclusion and no winner. Dormant and repressed anger surfaces in both plays with dramatic and catastrophic results. The hatred for the controlling other is turned inward and directed toward a brother, a fellow, the ideologically defined ‘other’ and the venom of discrimination attacks within the social group of already partialized and weakened men.

Brothers knotted by blood, Zach and Morris seek to negotiate their present condition through answers to questions of origin. How have they come to their present position? Where did the road diverge to lead them to such miserable and unrealized states of being? Memory has atrophied and yet momentary recall, when the pressure of living in their dismal surroundings exhausts and depresses, offers them their only sense of freedom. As they remember, they improvise childhood games. Momentary salvation and peace occurs when they conjure “mother” and connect with the consciousness of being an unfettered and lively child. Their

combined reminiscences played out presents, in the play's most theatrical moments, a youthful sense of wonder in freedom and possibility. Conversely these moments of imaginative release and fantasy play, alas, only seems to exacerbate their current displacement. Reality and play crystallize in the ultimate confrontation of the brothers where their ability to negotiate their subject status cannot be justified except in their mimicry of their perception of the dominant powers that control.

The black Americans in Chicago are also lifted from their reality in the playing and singing that frees them, for the moment, of their subjective status. They commune with the music with which they can identify and it provides livelihood. Shared stories fill the space in the time they wait to perform. The background of their life experiences, shared, is an attempt to confront the state of inferiority to which they seem bound in a northern state that held promise. Memory and telling stories fill the band room. Resurrecting and reiterating the past is crucial to both playwrights as it focuses the dramatic line of each play. As Wilson himself suggests, "If you don't connect to the past, then you don't know who you are in the present. You may prove to be unworthy of the past" (Lahr Introduction xiv). For both sets of characters memories are tied alternately to happier or unhappier times.

The dialogue in which Fugard and Wilson engage through *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is the exploration of cultural subjection and subordination and the crisis of identity that arises within the sets of black characters that inhabit spaces controlled by or legislated by a white world. Although "not a single unitary experience, the same in all contexts" (Crow 5), they dialogue on this

level contextually. Both sets of characters inhabit peripheral space in respect to the mainstream culture. The white world remains 'outside' in the case of Zach and Morris or separated by a literal 'control booth' in Wilson's Chicago recording studio. The characters in both dramas have developed survival strategies in order to live in "the fragmented and even distorted consciousness of the black people in the midst of a domineering culture" (*Art* Soyinka 52). The black musicians accompany Ma Rainey in the music which exemplifies their condition as it springs from it. Encoded and encrypted in these "blues" and the vernacular nature of their verbal exchange is as Ashcoft, et al. delineate in *Empire* "one of the most important strategies of appropriation" (221). Their form of self-expression encodes and explores the physical and psychological condition of their lives. Similarly in *Blood Knot*, Zach and Morris speak a rudimentary vernacular. Afrikaner expressions surface in their improvisatory interactions as the white *baas* or as they try-on the character and clothes of the white man. In both play texts "the day to day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been powerfully encoded" and prove "powerfully influential" (*Empire* 1). Wilson's musicians have their music. Fugard's brothers have memory and their improvisation "games". These are texts and lives that they own. They are cultural receptacles. Both exist as touchstones for personal and cultural resonance. This "music" and these "games" is what also leads to the climax in both dramas where the control of the outside world pressurizes both spaces and violence erupts; the stabbing murder in Wilson's play and the physical confrontation which stops short of deadly physical assault in Fugard's play. In these climactic moments both plays respond and

talk back to the prevailing white culture as “reactions to (apartheid and post-slavery racism) and products of it” (Crow 99).

### **Living in black and white**

Fugard and Wilson engage issues through the voices and experiences they set forth in *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Much of the substance of the playwriting dialogue as it is exposed by characters in action is in the relationship between South African brothers, one black and one white, and the correspondent lack of relationship between the African American musicians with their white producers. Although the worlds where the transactions occur are quite different and the plot issues are dissimilar, the underlying and motivating factors which drive the composed and crafted dramas of both playwrights have all to do with racial recognition of difference and unequal balance. In the presence of white hegemony and control, Zach and Morris struggle with their own individual subjectivity, cast(e) as they are as light and dark skinned, and the mobility it permits. So, too, Levee's rhythmic compositions challenge the status of Ma's blues rendition. His ability to succeed, in recording his musical voice is challenged in Ma's control. Character subjectivity and status are tested and become the overwhelming mitigating factor which drives the action in both plays. As accurate representations of reality in both societies, they evoke time, place and situations that place racial issues in historical perspective. They pinpoint the kind of interaction and questions that occur at the locus that Toni Morrison has identified in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as the interracial “borders.” For Morrison, slavery with its “terror of whiteness” defines the notion of



freedom itself provoking some of the same questions Fugard and Wilson seek to address. How black presence survives in a predominant white history, how the hegemony of racist status and the history of slavery as well as modes of transformation and regeneration are all at stake in a vision of racial equality and the mutual acceptance of racial difference (Booker 31). Although Fugard and Wilson may strive for different ends in their own personal politics or vision of racial harmony, their dramas do not play at cross purposes. Fugard seems intent on eradicating viewpoints that differentiate in favor of those that incorporate. His preference would be as Sam describes in *Master Harold . . . and the boys* for “a world without collisions.” He would prefer an interconnectedness and understanding for all men, regardless of racial difference. Wilson tends to favor the idea of rejecting the dominant culture and for American blacks to discover and celebrate their own unique identity as descendent Africans with all that it offers for cultural recognition and formation. As Toledo suggests in the play, “As long as the colored man look to the white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . He’s just gonna be what white folks want him to be about” (29). And in both *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* the sub-textual struggle of both sets of black characters is in refusing the description that Toledo suggests “of half men and women” against the very real tension wherein issues of survival live. If Fugard’s Morris and Zachariah look to the Bible for some sense of understanding of a chaotic world which mystifies and resists order, Ma Rainey and her band “study” and replay the book. Wilson explains: “So it [the blues] is the Book. It is our sacred book. Every other people has a sacred book,

so I claim it as that. Anything I want to know, I go there and find it out” (Livingston 32). It is in how Wilson’s appropriation and understanding of the potential in his “blues poetics” coalesces with Fugard’s existentialist notion of conditions of experience that the playwrights reflect one another as they excavate the postcolonial in their dramas. Elements and images of the postcolonial abound in the simple lives of Wilson’s post-emancipated twentieth century musicians and in Fugard’s tale of fractured brotherhood.

The premise of *The Blood Knot*, a dark African and his very light skinned brother, one educated, one illiterate inhabiting a one room shack in Port Elizabeth presents a pressurized space where interaction occurs. The room, the world they inhabit (South Africa) is devoid of extravagances and marked only by items essential to sustain life. Zach the ‘black’ brother works as a guard at a park to which he is not allowed entrance. Morris the ‘light’ brother remains at home. Morris has traveled and returned home out of guilt and to reclaim relationship with his brother. Zach has never been beyond the boundary of the village. Morris has been schooled. He reads Zach the bedtime Bible passage and the newspaper that advertises for pen pals. He writes the letters to Ethel, Zach’s pen pal. Zach can neither read nor write. The implication is clear. One brother is intelligent, worldly. One brother illiterate, deprived of experience. In vague attempts to reconstruct the past they engage in improvisatory games, much like boys at play. It is their best guess at their beginnings. They find no evidence in their “games” to connect them to each other or the past. They play at what they know, what they have witnessed and how they have lived:

black men in a white man's world - or more accurately a black world controlled by white men where all is predicated by racial caste and skin color. Apartheid, the rule they are forced, in fear, to live by, enters even into their private games. In their mimicry of the white world Morris the lighter skinned is always cast as the white man. Zach plays himself, the dark skinned African. Flirting with the idea of coupling with Ethel, the white woman, Zach takes pleasure almost sadistic enjoyment. Ethel's letters engage the brothers in a correspondence that illicitly implicates them in a penetration into the white world of which they are not a part. Her response to Zach is an invitation to participation in whiteness and privilege. For Zach it is a fantasy come true. For Morris it is a pleasure in which he has more than likely already indulged. It frightens him for the penalty it could incur. His light skinned appearance has allowed him "to pass," in the past. It has become a source of shame as he attempts to reconcile an identity based in lies. He no longer cares to "flirt with whiteness," although his brother Zach seems to relish the validation that Ethel's letters of response provide. Morris is fearful insisting how his brother's desire is unlawful and tantamount to a deathwish. Zach's despondency and dependency has increased since Morris' return. He misses his simple "freedoms" in the presence of his light skinned brother. His dreams have ceased and Morris' dream of a new life hold no fulfilling prospect. He will live and survive on his own terms, in the place he was planted. He, as well as Morris has realized that there is no mobility where race controls the road and skin color is the monitor. There is little identification in their brotherhood only in what they assume are blood facts. Mother, framed as she is in the memory of her very

different sons, emerges first as a loving and hard-working figure “soapsuds on brown skin,” and as an addressee in Zach’s wakeful night dreaming of some “beauty” within, and finally as a villain they chase away, hurling imaginary stones at the woman who bore them. Both Mother and Ethel present challenges to the subconscious anger and resentment that the brothers, bound together, are forced to confront. Ethel’s invitation for response is an approbation Zach has never experienced. She signifies potential in the fantasy, the danger, and the taboo that an actual encounter presents. The challenge to Morris to take on whiteness and meet Ethel might, for the moment, satisfy Zach’s curiosity and vicarious desire to couple with whiteness. Or is it not perhaps a challenge to Morris’s reclusive and fearful nature, of late, to act out successfully as he has in the past? In his courtship of the white Ethel, Zach willfully defers to his lighter skinned brother to connect their worlds. Faced with an obliterated past, prospects for futures are decidedly unstable. Zach and Morris are subjects in a controlling maelstrom of power where they feel voiceless. Although domestic rituals give shape to the day and night and an alarm clock marks the time, control is in someone else’s hands. The Bible reading at bedtime is calming but hardly a religious exercise. The existential reality they live proceeds directly from their colonized state and subjugated reality. Posed to implode they teeter between an irrational hope of something better and the destructive admission of endings. Fugard’s writing is spare yet hardly minimalist. He pierces South African space with word, action, condition and response of the colonized.

Commodification as colonization seems to be the obvious strategy of the white record producers poised on recording the *Black Bottom*, of celebrity singer Ma Rainey in Wilson's vision of a possible scene from the African American past. Wilson's 1927 Chicago scenario, imaginative and replete with testimony of its subjects harkens to another kind of colonization and its effect. His play text is concerned with setting the record straight, not merely making a record. These black Americans, hardly a half century away from Emancipation, continue to experience the psychological condition of their elders as they harbor doubt about their reversal of fortune in freedom. The law has changed their status but has done little to emancipate them from a subjectivity that claimed them in the slave past. Their conditioned response is a passive articulation of negotiating freedom rather than an active approach of possibility as with Ma and Levee. These musicians have emigrated north in hopes of greater opportunity and seeking dis-identification with roles which cast them as sons and daughters of slaves. Ma Rainey and her musicians gather to play a job for which they will be paid but it is truly the record producers who will profit a hundredfold. But that *is* history and not really Wilson's focus. As the animator of the action, his purpose is to story tell how they have come to be in Chicago, how their music earns them a wage, gives them strength and is their basis for an identity. The African Americans who pass through the recording studio have come there as amalgams of and representatives of past experience and that of their forbears. The stories they share and tell bear that out. The subjectivity of the slave past did not dissipate with Emancipation. It adheres and becomes substance in their present and is

re-constructed in the blues they sing and play and the structure that Wilson uses to tell his story. Survival is key for these singing/playing gypsies who travel the road, follow the jobs and barter to play through to their next engagement. Their livelihood assumes their nomadic wandering. Their identification in a kind of rootlessness is synonymous with a restless inability to retrieve and capture identity for themselves. They, too are exiles, from the South and ultimately in Wilson's iconography from Africa. As headliner, Ma's vocal renditions and celebrity from years of traveling and singing have parlayed her to a position in which her popularity and vocal stylings have created an identity to which she gives full vent. She is "known." But she is an anomaly. Her talent and strong headed resolve have invented/created the diva she has become "Ma, Mother of the Blues". That she well knows. Levee, her contested rival for a similar re-invention of self becomes stymied and minimized in Ma's strong presence. Ma Rainey, the figurative mother of the small tribe of musicians is dominantly present in Wilson's play to which he assigns her name. Ma functions as an agent for the male players. They are her "back-up" and her popularity keeps them employed. As a small time celebrity of the Paramount "race" division, her records sell in the south and her recording career along with her performance "gigs" keep her active. She arrives late, makes demands and draws the lines in a contract she establishes. The producer and her agent are helpless without her cooperation. She determines the way she will be treated in deference to an activity in which she clearly realizes she is being used. As she waits for her Coke and for the machinery to be repaired she imparts the wisdom of the way she has found to survive, Ma's blues. Her

“Black Bottom” is a version that represents much more than a jug band philosophy. It is her “bread and butter.” More importantly it preserves and “records” the postcolonial voice for the white world to hear. The “voice” of her blues holds the possibility that Levee’s rendition cannot. When the recording is “set,” she demands her pay and leaves. She may be the figurative “Mother of the Blues” but her presence as cultural signifier informs the action and the play itself with an example of self-preservation as resistance. Levee’s challenge to improve and change her styling is an attempt at achieving a status of importance as he strives to close the deal with the white producers. He is on the road Ma has already traveled. His action is his resistance and a mimic of Ma’s own ethic. Not unlike Zach, he strives for significance. He is willing to engage the white world and see what happens. What might seem unreasonable appears potentially viable to him. He, too, takes little time to qualify the consequences. His attempt at seducing Ma’s young companion Dussie, is tantamount to betrayal. His already strained relationship with Ma becomes instantly untenable. The band members are left to weather his firing and dismissal which comes from the white producer. Levee’s youthful arrogance and amateur playing does not qualify him for headliner status. He has failed to “study” the book of his past. He wears the scars but cannot remember how they feel. He attempts to construct and claim an identity for himself in a new kind of music, as if to eliminate the memory of the past. His erratic behavior and insecure psychological and musical grounding cause the producers to re-think their offer. They will pay him a token amount for his arrangements but his songs won’t be played, and he will not be leading the next band

they record. Levee's "dancing blues" will have to wait. Levee cannot. His anger flares and he unwittingly wounds and kills. The scar with which he was branded as a child opens and releases its fury. The white producer, his hope and his nemesis, remains safe in the control booth while his fellow player lies dead from his hand. The sound of Levee's trumpet, "*muted . . . struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning*" (93), the author's final stage direction, duly and elegantly expresses the psychological cry of Levee's blues music, enmeshed in the post colonial.

### **Racial divides**

Fugard's brothers exist in Korsten a poor township far from the city. Wilson's characters populate a studio in the busy city of Chicago. The locations could not be more dissimilar yet in both spaces the discourse of race is active. Zach negotiates daily with the oppressor which has marked him because of his color. Morris "hides" in the shack which they share. The white record producers open their doors to Ma and her troupe of musicians for the time it will take to capture their song. Once Ma's version of the song is recorded they are paid and sent on their way. Zach's participation with the white world is as limited as the several hours these musicians spend to be recorded. It is in his interactions, at home with his brother and in the musicians' private conversations in the band room that issues of racial divides are discussed, examined and made visible. There is a palpable sense in both locales of powerlessness. Yet, the animating voice of dialogue between brothers and band members are the voices heard "speaking back" in the theatre. In both locales, it is a



balm to soothe the burn of racial disregard. In the theatre it is the testimony of the post colonial subject attempting to reconcile a condition of existence. The hegemony of whiteness is an invisible force which seems to threaten sanity and action. In both spaces reaction to the very insidious fear of its power provokes and results in the articulated action that the characters take. The brothers battle against each other because they cannot engage with the source of their frustrated conditionality. The white world and the controlling center of apartheid seem miles away yet is actively present in the psychological prison it has created of the small pondok where the bond of brotherhood is challenged. The anger and distrust they harbor for the white world plays out in the mounting antagonism and self-hatred which escalates and finds them battling with each other. The blood which identifies them biologically is at odds with the skin they inhabit, and proves, ironically, the impasse where role playing ceases just short of violent and irreversible results. Similarly, the violence of the band room flashes when Levee is fired and his opportunity is terminated. His uncontrollable rage and lashing out is reaction to long held animosity against white domination pointed outward yet striking inward.

What both writers seek to address is in reaction to imposed and governmentally advocated racial separation. As men of different race, these playwrights each struggle with a mode of transmitting an idea and context that will serve to illuminate conditions of existence which they themselves struggle to understand. The “stories” they tell are those they have heard, witnessed, and imagined. Their individual styles though quite different have much in common. Both

write with ears tuned to idiom and concerns of a segregated mass of the disenfranchised. The words that are spoken by their characters reflect the sound of the populations where their plots evolve. They present characters in situations of strong and powerful credibility, characters who speak candidly and passionately about their condition in arias and scenes which are rich in metaphor and that capture a naturalistic idiom and realistic sense of style. The subjects of their dramaturgy are modeled on those they have encountered, those segregated and de-privileged by racial domination struggling for recognition, understanding and authentication. Their plays present microcosms of experience which are re-iterations of the world experienced by non-whites in South Africa and America. *The Blood Knot* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are theatrical dramas which deliberately engage questions of race and expose the condition of those who experience discrimination, limitation, and fragmentation as a fact of life. They are plays by two evolving dramatists, early in their careers and development as playwrights, who would continue to investigate the lives of those under racial duress for years.

### **Formations**

Fugard, a white South African, liberally educated at university, left school before graduation. He brings to his craft a reading of American and European master playwrights and the ideologies espoused in the existential writing of French writer Albert Camus and the Irish born Samuel Beckett. *The Blood Knot*, Dennis Walder suggests, “reveals the impossibility of segregating, without cruelty and violence, people arbitrarily defined as ‘different’ . . . it also suggests an acceptance of

inhumanity and prejudice as permanent features of life . . . It is not so much that change is too frightening to contemplate . . . but rather [Fugard's] own sense [that] the individual's relationship to society and history is pessimistic" (Walder 62).

August Wilson, an African American of mixed race, never completed high school and claims his own formation and influences:

Fired in the kiln of black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties . . . the ideas of self-determination, self-respect and self-defense which it espoused are still very much a part of my life . . . I stood them up in the world of Bessie Smith . . . I saw the blues as a cultural response of a non literate people whose history and culture was rooted in the oral tradition.

(Preface to *Three Plays* ix)

Wilson biographer Sandra Shannon describes *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* as presenting "a crumbling world where black musicians are caught precariously between two cultures: one they disown; the other they fear . . . the fruits of their talents and ambitions . . . line the pockets of those who control" (Shannon 88). For Ishmael Reed it is ultimately a study in black people's "deprivation of possibility" (Reed 93).

As Wilson and Fugard dialogue through their playwriting the voices of other influential collaborators may be detected. Both playwrights with ears tuned to the populations of their respective countries also benefitted from countrymen collaborators and mentors. Wilson's road as a writer for the theatre was influenced in his repeated forays and "preview" productions of his work in American regional

theatres that allowed him to experience his plays performed and offered him the luxury to write, revise, and see his work play before audiences before it arrived on Broadway. The mentorship of colleague Lloyd Richards who believed in the raw material of Wilson's vision cannot be underestimated. He assisted in the development of the playwright's first five plays from his position as director. *Ma Rainey* began its journey to Broadway and the mainstream repertoire from beginnings at the workshops supervised by Richards at the O'Neill Center. Curiously, *Ma Rainey* is the only one of his ten-play Century Cycle to be set outside of Pittsburgh. Some critics have pointed to his return to the Pittsburgh "home turf" setting for the remainder of his cycle as a more protected location from which to address his history. The plays that followed *Ma Rainey* have clearly addressed the race questions in more aggressive and emphatic ways. This may have to do with the decade that he was examining or may have much to do with Wilson writing from a place of familiarity where he was "at home." His maturation as a playwright and a growing sense of confidence in the reception of this work by black and white audiences alike could also account for this. It is important to note that when Wilson's *Fences* played Broadway it was the most successful non-musical play of all time. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the first play by a black playwright to play Broadway since Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, also directed by Richards, was the beginning of a process and career writing for the theatre which would be prematurely cut short after completion of the ten-play Century Cycle before his death in 2005.

Fugard's play, identified as a township play and one of his Port Elizabeth Plays is set as most of his other works somewhere on the Western Cape, South Africa. The creation and appearance of *The Blood Knot* "was to the stunted South African theatre what O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon* was to the American theatre in 1920" (Vandenbroucke 48). Fugard had been working in the theatre but *The Blood Knot* marked the beginning of a playwriting and producing career for which he would be held in high regard. It is "a significant marker both in the development of Fugard's thinking and in the development of a theatrical style not divisible from that thinking" (Wertheim 17). If Wilson was mentored by Richards then Fugard was truly informed in his working collaboration with fellow actor and black African, Zakes Mokae. The collaboration which began with Mokae grew into Fugard's contact with other black Africans and would eventually find voice in the *Statements* trilogy. *The Blood Knot* in its original presentation was daring and unheard of in South Africa. Not four years later, the use of mixed race casts was pronounced illegal by the South African apartheid government. What can be considered the beginning of Wilson's and Fugard's theatrical careers though occurring a little over twenty years apart bears strong resemblance. How they chose to tangle with the divisive issue of race within their work is testament to what they had witnessed and were not content to keep at bay. They began to engage the issues directly as they found their way into lives which it held hostage. All of their plays present questions and provide issue for thought. Fugard, as he has catalogued lives during and after apartheid, has fashioned what amounts to a canonical discourse on race in South Africa. His popularity has enabled

it to be shared worldwide. Wilson's self-directed chronology accomplishes a similar feat as it explores twentieth century lives under the oppression of race. Presenting the struggles and confrontation of racial issues in the lives of "real" people was taken by each as his necessity. They continued as they began with a firm belief in the idea that witnessing and representing realistically the power of oppression was one way of "beginning to make a difference" much like Lorraine Hansberry's landmark work, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Fugard and Wilson also intersect in the production history of a number of their plays in the figure of director Lloyd Richards, Dean of Yale School of Theatre where their productions premiered. Richards referred to Wilson and Fugard as two of the three most important and influential playwrights with whom he was proudest to have been associated. The third was Lorraine Hansberry.

Fugard and Wilson write to describe the post colonial subject in process. What characterizes the dialogue in which their plays engage is an articulation of the determinism of their subjects toward surviving through and in their condition as inhabitants of exile in South Africa and North America. The authors are linked in their causality which evolves from the historical realities of the past which their playwriting stamps "perpetually present" in performance in the theatre. Both writers evolved and emerged in countries where the politics and economics of egalitarian practice, though espoused, are denied *de facto* or *de jure*. Their writings exist as Peter Brook suggests depictions of real literal experiences do, as "parallel metaphors" (Brook *Between* 81). Their plays engage in dialogue as they pinpoint moments of

experience which depict understanding of the levers of power within and around racial divides in an exchange not unlike Bakhtin's formulation of "reciprocal recognition" that reveals the challenge of what Franz Fanon terms "the certainty of one self." In both dramas the search for authentication is dramatized in controlled sites of subjugation and objectification. Both writers have created cultural texts which reveal and examine how race limits "voice," the price of personal and public freedom and "the complex of cultural prejudices and categories of alterity that govern . . . cross-cultural communication and understanding" (Balme 275). Both texts foreground black figures struggling to survive in a landscape of white control. If Athol Fugard as Walder suggests "discovers the source of creativity rooted in the mundane, the trivial, and the 'rubbish' of life," August Wilson's discovery stems from what Paul Carter Harrison describes as his "Blues Poetics" – "an authentic reclamation of the blues voice" from the "leftovers of history" (*Three Plays* 316). Their characters' voices resonate as they illuminate, contradict and question. Fugard and Wilson have traversed different soil but have walked the same charged ground. They explore, expose and identify meaning as they textualize human experience. Bakhtin writes, "A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another foreign meaning. They engage in a kind of dialogue which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings" (Bakhtin 7). In just this kind of exchange, Fugard and Wilson's writing dialogize attempting to capture "those elements which render . . . societ[ies] unique in [their] own being, with a potential for . . . progressive transformation" (*Art*, Soyinka 18). These writers

tangle with a struggle in which they are enmeshed: Wilson attempting to resolve the rupture of race in America as he ennobles the struggles of blacks to find a renewed level of hope in how the past can be put to work to improve the future; Fugard as a white South African exception, who though belonging by race to the dominators has in his practice and politics consistently taken the side of the oppressed. They have no hard, fast answers. The result of what they produce and write is not teleological but indeterminate. There is not the comfort of resolution, perhaps “only a question mark that has the solidity of an answer” (Brook, *Between Two Silences* 162). This loud but silent question mark, “this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority yet contains for all its horror, something very beautiful” (Baldwin, *Fire* 84). This “question” like the one asked by playwright Parks in *Topdog/Underdog* in the opening citation reverberates through Fugard and Wilson and through time, as Lincoln asks his brother about relationship and connection. South African writer Njabulo Ndebele cited earlier and repeated here now in his entirety suggests the ‘beginning’ of an answer.

Standing between [black and white] is a chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, division, illusion and hostility. It highlights the national tragedy of people who have lived long together, but could do no better than acknowledge only their differences. They have done so with such passion as would suggest that perhaps they sensed something in common, between them, which neither of them was prepared to acknowledge. (*Liberation and the Crisis of Culture* 22)



*Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.*

*-Stuart Hall*

*The organizing center . . . of any experience is not from within but outside - a social milieu surrounding the individual being*

*-M.M.Bakhtin*

**Chapter 3**  
**White Benches / Black Fences**  
***“Master Harold” . . . and the boys and Fences***

According to Stuart Hall writing in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” cultural identity can be conceived in two different ways. The first defines identity that emerges from shared culture and finds its affiliation in a collective understanding of ‘one true self’ within a group. This sense of identity may exist hiding inside other, superficially or imposed ‘selves’ but is grounded in cultural recognition and support. People with shared history and ancestry which provide unchanging frames of continuous reference and meaning experience this sense of identity formation. The second is a ‘negotiation in progress’ a developing identity “what we really are” or “who” we are becoming because of history’s intervention which leaves us ‘what we have become.’ Cultural identity is a sense of ‘becoming as well as being.’ It is not static. Identity, Hall is convinced, belongs as much to the future as it does to the past. It is not something that exists autonomously in the present. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories and undergo constant transformation. They are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power and are far from being grounded in the mere ‘recovery’ of the past. Recovery, he seems to suggest is only

the beginning of a process which shocks identity into its possibility for transformation or the act of transforming which makes up a human life's movement toward meaning. In plotting his own identity formation as a, Jamaican-Caribbean-African, Hall favors the second form of definition which enlightens an understanding of "the traumatic character of colonial experience" (*Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 435) and "very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation" (435).

Playwrights Fugard and Wilson have searched the "narratives of the past" in their individual biographies and those of the countries where they lived. They have appropriated them as the basis in their authoring of both "*Master Harold*" and *the boys* and *Fences*. Both plays vibrate with biographical reference and insight and provide an access to the mind and experience of these men *as* they developed their identities. These are not "memory" plays as much as the re-constructed compact facts of memory, history, and past personal narratives. They are fundamental in the identity formation of two young teenagers, Fugard/Hally and Wilson/Cory. Fugard's life experience serves as the prototype for his play. Wilson's is a less direct rendering of his experience than an inversion/conversion as he mixes facts and events from his past in his manipulation of character and plot. Fugard's memoirs are quite clearly articulated "by the book" in his recollection of the seventeen year old Hally's relationship with Sam Semela. As a young boy Fugard notes many hours spent with Sam and Willie in the Jubilee, a boarding house run by his mother. Subsequently, the St. Georges' Park Tea Room became the venue where Sam and Willie were employed by Mother Fugard and where a seventeen year old Hally assisted her in its

management. Wilson's mixture of fact and fiction comes primarily from the several 'father-son' relationships that he drew on as source material as Samuel Freedman describes:

While a white father failed August Wilson, a series of surrogate black fathers sustained him . . . Charley Burley, a former prizefighter turned garbageman . . . Chawley Williams, a poet who had transformed himself from a man of the streets. The most enduring and influential of the father figures was David Bedford, who married Daisy Wilson in 1957, when August was 12. [They] were not close . . . August especially incensed Bedford by quitting the high school football team . . . [Bedford] . . . had been a high school football star in the 1930's . . . no Pittsburgh college would give a black player a grant . . . to get the money, he decided to rob a store, during the theft, he killed a man. For twenty-three years before he met Daisy Wilson, Bedford had been in prison. By the time he was free, only a job in the city sewer department beckoned.

(Freedman, Foreword *Fences* x)

The details of Wilson's upbringing and the several "fathers" all come alive in the character composed as Troy Maxson. Cory's character is 'recovered' in Bedford's high school self. The plays of both men resonate in the genuine nature of the surface structure with which past history has provided them. Hall's ideas are especially convincing as they apply to the development of both men as writer/activists exploring and exposing the potential of the past in their dramatic narratives and in how their

politics of representation ‘play’ in and through their developing identities. Hall continues:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in the mere ‘recovery’ of the past which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, *identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.*[Emphasis added] (*Post-Colonial Reader* 435)

Fugard and Wilson, it is evident, were subjects in a process of transformation in their search for a sense of “one true self.” Each man evolved in a culture that was not shared or transmitted in an ancestry or history that provided a clearly defined frame of reference. The country to which each was born(e) was marked by the dysfunction of a past distorted by colonial control. Reference for their understanding of even the vaguest sense of “shared history” within a cohesive cultural group was dependent on a matriarchal familial structure. They found self-definition in the modeling of supportive mothers who became influential in their own determination and negotiation of “who” they would become. Disconnecting themselves from the image of a father, as they assumed their professional roles as writers, bears witness to the fact. Each man’s restlessness and dissatisfaction with the cultural world in which he was growing to adulthood demanded negotiation. It became the goal of their

respective writing. That they chose the theater and the action of creating dramatic worlds to counter-illuminate those they observed suggests their strong desire to speak and to be heard creating a perspective to make their worlds visible – to give them identity. Fugard and Wilson, both, experienced a “negotiation in progress” in their individual identity formation. ‘Becoming’ finds a natural extension in the “subjects in progress” who fill and fulfill their drama. As Hall suggests, their “recovery” of history was elemental and vital to their own sense of personal identity, and becomes the transformative power of their drama in a “movement toward meaning.” To shed light in the enveloping dark understanding of their cultural worlds is an action in which these men perform. Hall’s definition of the transformative journey of identity is evident in the development of Fugard and Wilson as playwriting figures and within and through the work that has simultaneously documented their individual/personal ongoing ‘narratives.’ Prior to his death, Wilson’s completion of his Century Cycle culminated with a simultaneous return to a similar form of Black Nationalism and activism that marked the beginning of his writing career. In recent years, Fugard’s writing agenda became less critical of the South African system of control with the demise of Apartheid. *Playland* (1993), *Valley Song* (1996), and *Sorrows and Rejoicings* (2002) are works that speculate on how the new South Africa might consummate its relationship with egalitarianism. *The Captain’s Tiger: A Memoir for the Stage* (1999) and *Entrances and Exits* (2004) mark a movement in his work toward reflection, the autobiography of experience and the remembrances of an artist toward the end of a long career.

## **Post colonial sons**

Fugard and Wilson have experienced living in colonized worlds in post-colonized time. Fugard's writing bears out his reaction to life in a South Africa where "ruthless economic exploitation and social control of the native peoples culminate in the Nationalist government official policy of apartheid" (Crow 2) in 1948. August Wilson, as a descendant of the peoples forcibly transported to the plantations of the southern United States and displaced in their double migration north after emancipation, has recognized the "widespread racial discrimination . . . severe economic disadvantage" (Crow 2) that he inherited. His writing responds to "the traumatic social and cultural disruptions of forced migration" (Crow 2) in the lives of American blacks as he looks back at twentieth century America. Fugard and Wilson experienced and bear witness to the worlds of colonized peoples.

Harold Athol Lannigan Fugard was born 11 June 1932, near Middleburg in the semi-desert Karoo region of South Africa of an Anglo-Irish father, Harold Fugard and Afrikaner mother, Elizabeth Magdalena Potgieter, descended from one of the Voortrekker families of three centuries, responsible for the settling of the Transvaal. Of 'mixed descent' in white South African terms (Raine 9), he is a combination of "the two major European strains in South Africa" (Wertheim 1) but as Fugard explains "because of the strength of my mother's personality the Afrikaner culture was more dominant" (Benson, *Athol Fugard and Barney Simon* 77). The dropping of his surname is representative of coming of age as a writer as much as a decision to dissociate from his crippled and alcoholic father.

Frederick August Kittel was born on April 27, 1945 on “The Hill” in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of Frederick Kittel, a German baker and Daisy Wilson, an African American. Frederick’s white father never lived with the family. Wilson “embraced the culture of the mother he admired and loved, adopting his mother’s maiden name” (Bogumil, *Understanding August* 1) after the deaths of his father and stepfather, David Bedford, in the early 1970’s. His choice to use his middle name reflects a move similar to Fugard in distancing the father.

The beginnings and birthrights of both men attest to a condition of conflicted familial and parental realities. The identification of the self in both men was a matter of a conscious choosing. Both men, influenced strongly by matriarchal foundations, chose the adaptive strategy of living as writers strongly connected to country and region. Fugard is a South African, has a home in Port Elizabeth, and until recently has resided there exclusively. He assertively refers to himself as a “regional” writer who cannot exist and continue his craft independent of his home. It is the source of his inspiration and the fount from which springs the personality of his characters’ lives. August Wilson born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has always resided in the United States. After *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson’s work centered around the city of his history. A regional writer, of sorts, he was also responsive to the idea that it is from the familiarity of that rooted place and its “voices” that his inspiration came. Both sons of mixed heritage, they are also natives of not quite native lands. They are formulations in a colonial condition which their writings so vividly depict. They are discourses in and of themselves. On the one hand they are in the broadest sense the

colonizer-colonized, on the other, they are enemies of their countries' racist afflictions.

Fugard's concern as a writer swiftly turned to the situation of the colonized black South Africans. His encounter with Catholic existentialist Professor of Ethics, Martin Versfeld at the University of Cape Town influenced this development. "The notion of dialogue is central to Versfeld: how it might be possible to communicate with, indeed love, one another without exploitation. Like Fugard, Versfeld is obsessed with love in a hate-ridden country" (Walder 21). Here also began Fugard's reading of Camus and other existentialist writers. The "absurd" man and Sisyphean depiction of life seem to capture realities too closely resembling that of Fugard's own developing philosophy and the premises of South African existence. Two months before final examinations, Fugard decided life experiences rather than a university degree were what he craved and would be needed to lead him in his life writing. It is this journey that would instill in him the position or "place" from which and about which he would write. He hitchhiked up the continent with a fellow student, Perseus Adams, a poet like himself, in search of adventure, new worlds and the future. Upon reaching the Sudan, Fugard signed on as a deckhand on the British trampsteamer *SS Graigaur*. Much like the young Edmund in Eugene O'Neill's "play of old sorrow," Fugard would sail the seas to exotic ports in search of himself. In *The Captain's Tiger: A Memoir for the Stage* (1998), Fugard animates moments of memory clearly identifying himself as the writer in the act of destroying a manuscript in which he



attempts to rewrite family history and consigning it to the sea. Albert Wertheim characterizes this acceptance and rejection as a double dying:

It dies first for the twenty-two year old Athol Fugard, for whom its destruction implies acknowledging hitherto ignored questions of race and politics. It dies a second time for Fugard the established playwright in 1998, this time bringing to the fore the tabled and/or previously suppressed questions about his relationship with parents. (Wertheim 223)

Dennis Walder also notes Fugard's regard for the actual ten-month journey at sea, a formative moment of devastating clarity:

[The] experience of living and working side-by-side with men of all races on the *Graigaur* liberated him from the prejudice endemic among those with his background. Nadine Gordimer claims that every white South African needs to be born twice: the second time into an awareness of racialism . . . for Fugard this has meant turning against his own people, becoming a traitor to his mother's, if not his father's race. This helps explain the painful, guilt-ridden intensity with which the racial issue is treated in most of his plays: and his re-iteration that he is an Afrikaner, with no other home than South Africa. (Walder 22)

If Fugard's resolution and resolve were fired by his exotic and enabling exploits at sea, Wilson's formulative arrival at the juncture of independence and choice of writing as a career came out of almost reactionary experience and the blatantly endorsed self-appointed need to achieve. Dealing with the onset of

adulthood in the early 1960's in Pittsburgh was not so decidedly different than in the apartheid installed political climate of Fugard's South Africa of the 1950's. An African American youth, in public school, regardless of or perhaps because of the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision of 1954, was still a pariah. Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. characterizes "The decade between Brown and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 . . . a time when the Negro felt more optimism than would have been justified in any other single decade of our century" (*Future* 13), he also describes the rural West Virginia of his upbringing in the 50's and 60's as "a place where "nigger" was hung on me so many times that I thought it was my name" (4). Gates, a high school graduate of high academic standing, left his racist junior college experience and headed north to Yale. (Wilson, too, would eventually find a place at Yale years later not as a student but as an artist.) Wilson's high school career was short-circuited when, in his freshman year he was accused of plagiarizing a term paper on Napoleon Bonaparte.

Although exceptionally bright, Wilson was bored with school and entertained early thoughts of dropping out . . . Mr. Biggs, his black history teacher, considered the paper to be too well researched and written to have been authored by Wilson, gave it an "F," and charged the young student with cheating. Wilson reportedly tore up the paper, dropped the pieces into the garbage can and never again returned to this class or, for that matter, to Central Catholic High School. (Shannon 18)

Wilson walked out of Central High and into the “Negro section” of the Pittsburgh Public Library where his true self-education began in reading the works of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, among others. Wilson reflected on this introduction to the black master writers: “These books were a 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” (Freedman, “A Playwright Talks” 49). Wilson’s search through the library stacks was as purposeful as Ellison’s own search “trying to reach for a new sense of Negro insidership for a distinctive cultural personality that asserted its legitimacy” (Graham, *Conversations* 68), and similar to the rejection of his history teacher’s accusation in Ellison’s dictum to not “allow anonymous people to give me a sense of worth” (108). He eventually moved from his mother’s house, took on odd jobs to pay his boarding house rent, bought a typewriter and schooled himself in the lives of the men and women of the Pittsburgh “Hill.” He frequented places where people congregated, watching and listening to this world in which he found himself adrift. It is in the streets of this Pittsburgh district that Wilson’s eyes were opened to “a nobility to the lives of blacks in America which I didn’t always see” (Moyers 10). His eyes opened, his ear became tuned in Bessie Smith’s “blues.” He became confirmed by her song and the voice which felt itself full of meaning. Hers was a sensibility he understood. It would influence his poetry and eventually his plays. His soul became a vessel in acknowledging “There is no idea in the world not contained by black life” (Moyers 10). Encountering his muse he felt equipped to proceed.

The craft I knew was the craft of poetry and fiction. To my mind they had to connect and intercept with the craft of playwrighting at some point, and all I had to do was find that point. Fiction was a story told through character and dialogue, and a poem was a distillation of language and images designed to reveal an emotive response to phenomena that brought it into harmony with one's knowledge and experience. Why couldn't a play be both? I thought in order to accomplish that I had to look at black life with an anthropological eye, use language, character, and image to reveal its cultural flashpoints and in the process tell a story that further illuminated them. That is what the blues did. (*Three Plays* xi)

The blues is cornerstone and foundation for the building of Wilson's drama. The blues seem "always to have been in motion in America – always becoming, shaping, transforming, and displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World" (Baker 5). If "signifying," an African-American rhetorical practice, "the slave's trope, the trope of tropes" (Gates, *Race* 286) is a dialogic or dialectic strategy which allows the "signifying" voice or "loud-talker" to "argue indirectly (through innuendo, humor or riddles) and sometimes, to undermine and to imbalance a master discourse" (Fuss 84), then the blues provides a release and response valve of understanding conditioned by personal experience that allows acceptance. "Like signification itself, blues are always nomadically wandering . . ." (Baker 8). Ralph Ellison has noted: "There is an existential tradition within American Negro life and, of course that comes out of the blues and spirituals" (Graham 84). This explanation

suggests another link in the connective tissue between the worlds of Wilson and Fugard. Fugard's pervasive and obvious backgrounding or contexting of South Africa as a miasma of absurd and even "godless" existence is confluent with Wilson's appropriation of the blues to express and respond in an America where African Americans exist as invisible women and men.

### **Place**

"Place and displacement are crucial features of post-colonial discourse" (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Reader* 391). They figure prominently in the playwriting of Fugard and Wilson. Place becomes a figurative and literal center in their dramas as they echo each other and respond to a controlling dominating center of power. Writing the margins is successful in humanizing their subjects subverting and replacing the images provided by the colonizer.

Art is often called revolutionary if it represents a radical quality in style or technique; but there is a more important sense in which it can be revolutionary – or, as I would prefer to call it subversive. This lies in its potential to undermine the status quo, a potential revealed in its tendency to make us realize that things need not be the way they have been, or the way they are. If racialism and exploitation seem natural as "the growth of leaves in spring," then it is in the capacity of art to show us that this is not so. (Walder 10-11)

The art which Fugard and Wilson practice is a craft developed in time and prescribed by the specific incidents of biography. The voices of their playwriting emanate from the South African and American worlds. Neither writer has

experienced displacement geographically. For both men discourse, dialogue and dialect refer to and proceed from cultural homes which have been referred to as “Third World in First.” Dutch and European colonial settlement of South Africa resulted in the displacement of the black African majority to the townships and homelands. Imported African slaves shipped to America experienced total displacement. Their progeny and descendants remaining in an America as freed men and women still maintained a dispossessed identity and subjectivity originating in the slave past. In South Africa the non-white population, under apartheid, was relegated to the homelands, reminiscent of the reservations of the indigenous Native Americans, and the townships, partitioned spaces or “locations.” In America a pattern emerged in which blacks became situated on the fringe of certain American cities, and in slum areas and ghettos. Both “placements” and the physical experience of living separate can be considered displacing. But it is in a condition of psychological displacement that the language and strategies of “place” are generated, in the “remembering and dis-membering” (Savran, *Playwright’s Voice* 160), the centers of political and psychological control. Their concern, Fugard and Wilson each as playwright is truly “with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be constructed” (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Reader* 392).

Athol Fugard's most well-known and widely produced drama "*Master Harold*" . . . *and the boys* was first produced at Yale in 1982. In one hour and twenty-five minutes of real stage time inside the St. Georges Park Tea Room, on a windy, wet and rainy afternoon in 1950 in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, we encounter Fugard's metaphor for the land of the colonized and the world of the colonizer. The play is funny, clever, poignant, and confrontationally dramatic. Inspired by several autobiographical moments Fugard sought to "exorcise his own furies" (Vandenbroucke 87). It is an authentic animating text in Fugard's biography. The play about sons and fathers, familial responsibilities, human integrity and growing pains clearly illustrates that adulthood is not simply acquired but achieved and that respect is not a birthright but must be nurtured, cultivated and earned. At its core it deftly describes and dramatizes the social world and the post colonial climate of South Africa in 1950, two years after the mandated installation of apartheid policy. The struggle of the colonized oppressed and the righteous privileged oppressor, are illuminated in this deceptively simple drama. The polemics of place dance with the conditions of displacement. The surrogacy of Sam's modeling as father figure challenges Hally's natural development, as white, South African. The title of the play, itself, suggests segregation, slavery, power and imbalance. It categorizes, and defines a power relationship. The drama with a running time of approximately eighty-five minutes may seem abbreviated by most standards but it is hardly slight. It is quintessential Fugard.

*“Master Harold” . . . and the boys*

Sam, a black man, 50 years old and Willie, a black man, younger than Sam, both waiters, and Hally (Master Harold), a 17 year old white boy, son of the proprietress of the St. Georges Park Tea Room, are the characters. The play written in a single act can be divided into three movements: Sam and Willie’s opening scene and rehearsal for the dance contest (prologue); Hally’s entrance, the conversations that lead to confrontation with Sam, and Hally’s departure; Sam and Willie’s dance (epilogue).

The play begins with Sam coaching Willie as he practices for the upcoming Eastern Province Open Ballroom Competition. He urges Willie to “relax . . . glide . . . make it smooth . . . give it more style” (7). Willie is frustrated by his inability to demonstrate the finesse his friend demands and upset that Hilda, his partner, is missing rehearsals. Sam suspects the reason for her absence from their rehearsals, “Hiding on Sunday night . . . and she doesn’t come to practice . . . and you asking me why?” (9). As Sam is demonstrating the two-step, Hally enters soaking wet from the rain, observes Sam and applauds his ending flourish. Despite the stormy weather, Hally’s mood is bright. He feels at home here with Willie and Sam. “Lousy day . . . bad for business, chaps . . . we’re in for a nice quiet afternoon” (13). Sam tells Hally that his mother called having been summoned to the hospital to fetch his dad. Willie resumes washing the floor as Sam returns with Hally’s lunch joking about Willie’s “lame” dancing partner. Willie angered lets fly with his slop-rag, missing Sam but hitting Hally who reacts hurling the rag back at Willie, “Act your bloody



age!”(15). A phone call home by Hally yields no result. As Hally eats his soup Sam asks about the school day. Hally complains about the “hiding” he received from the math teacher for an unflattering caricature scrawled in a notebook. Sam is curious and tells how the punishment is different in “gaol.” “One policeman pulls your shirt over your head . . . one pulls down your trousers” (17). Hally has heard enough. “It’s a bloody awful world . . . one day somebody is going to . . . give history a kick up the backside” (17). The need for social reform is evident. The idea of a social reformer as a man of “magnitude” fuels a lively debate which engages Hally and Sam as they argue their favorites from history. Sam names Napoleon. Hally cites Waterloo. Sam tries Lincoln. Hally condescends, “Don’t get sentimental . . . You’ve never been a slave . . . we freed your ancestors here in South Africa long before Americans” (22). Finally agreeing on Sam’s suggestion of Sir Alexander Flemming, Hally admits “It’s . . . gratifying . . . to know that I haven’t been wasting my time . . . Tolstoy may have educated his peasants, but I’ve educated you” (26). But it is Hally that should be grateful, Sam suggests, from their years of co-education. “That’s how you started passing your exams. You tried to be better than me” (26). They laugh together and as Willie joins with them the room seems to transform in their memories to Sam’s and Willie’s room at the Jubilee. The servants quarters, though off-limits, are Hally’s remembered refuge from “the bloody misery . . . of an unhappy childhood . . . I spent more time in there with you chaps than anywhere” (27). A particular incident sparks Hally’s memory of flying a crudely constructed kite during an afternoon with Sam and later sitting alone on a bench. “. . . Strange . . . little white boy . . . and a black

man, old enough to be his father, flying a kite” Hally ponders. “. . . Why strange? Because one is white and the other black?” Sam asks. Hally’s daydream dissipates “ Would have been just as strange . . . me and my dad . . . cripple man and little boy!” (34).

When the phone rings it is Hally’s mom calling from hospital explaining that his dad is demanding to return home. Hally will not hear of it. Sam and Willie are transfixed by Hally’s commandeering and insensitive tone. He orders them back to work and attempts to justify his temper and mood. Sam tries to change the subject as he inquires about Hally’s homework. Hally wants to be left alone. Sam waltzes over to Willie re-setting the tables and chairs. Willie imitates. Sam demonstrates and coaches. Sam suggests Willie find a new partner. Willie tiring of Sam’s suggestions chases him away. When Sam uses Hally’s table as an obstacle, Hally explodes, grabs his ruler giving Willie “a vicious whack” on the bum. “How am I supposed to concentrate with the two of you behaving like bloody children! . . . Get back to work! . . . What really makes me bitter is that I allow you chaps a little freedom in here . . . There’s more to life than trotting around a dance floor” (42). Sam grabs the moment defending dance as art and describes the upcoming championship. The room transforms in Sam’s and Willie’s rendition of the proceedings and participants. The vision of the dance floor is idyllic, utopian and “A World without Collisions” the title Hally adopts for his essay, subtitled “Ballroom dancing as political vision.” Another telephone call interrupts. Hally is no less than vehement as he forbids his mother to allow his dad’s return home. His tone changes considerably when he speaks to his

dad pretending his homecoming is good news. Hally is emotional and shaking as he hangs up. Nothing Sam can say or do will alter Hally's mood or the vitriolic swearing and epithets that erupt from him. Sam gestures to Willie and they return to their chores. Hally proposes a new contest, the "All Comers-How-To-Make-A-Fuckup-of-Life Championship." Sam warns "It's your father you're talking about" (56). Hally cautions "Leave me and my father alone" (57). Hally turns his anger on Sam, baiting him cautioning him to remember that he is "only a servant" and demanding to be addressed as "Master." Sam answers the command "If you make me say it once, I'll never call you anything else again" (59). Hally laughs and refers to a joke his father shared about a nigger's arse "not being 'fair.'" The tension of the moment suspends as Sam turns his back to Hally, lowers his pants and exposes his backside. "Have a good look . . . as nigger as they come." He covers himself adding "It's not fair . . . if it will give him an even better laugh . . . I'll also let him have a look" (61). As he moves away Hally speaks his name. Sam turns and Hally spits in his face. Willie groans. Sam's speech striving for control is direct "You've hurt yourself, Master Harold . . . The face you should be spitting in is your father's . . . but you use mine, because you think you're safe inside your fair skin . . . Should I hit him, Willie?" (61). Willie insists it will not help. Sam only wants to hurt. Willie rationalizes "you also hurt yourself . . . he's . . . a little white boy. Long trousers . . . but he's still a little boy" (62). Sam is angry but he speaks in measured tones. "You've made me feel dirtier than I've ever been . . . how do I wash off your and your father's filth?" (62). He recounts his memory of a little white boy begging for him to help fetch his Dad from the Central

Hotel Bar and carrying him home, “little white boy following his drunk father on a nigger’s back” (63). Sam explains he “felt” for Hally, for his father. And he could read Hally’s shame. He continues, “That’s why I made you the kite . . . I couldn’t sit down . . . and stay with you. It was a whites-only bench. You were too young . . . to notice then . . . not anymore. If you’re not careful . . . you’re going to be sitting there by yourself . . . You don’t have to sit up there . . . You know what it means . . . and you can leave it anytime you choose. All you have to do is stand up and walk away from it” (65). Hally exits into the pelting rain. Willie tries to console Sam and promises he won’t beat Hilda again. He reaches into his pocket and uses his bus fare to play the jukebox. The voice of Sarah Vaughan fills the room as Willie offers his arms “You lead, I follow” (66). Between the tables and chairs and around the room the men dance. They glide relaxed and smooth with style. Outside the rain pours down. Inside in muted colored light the men partner each other in a dance of solidarity as Sarah sings “Little man you’ve had a busy day.”

### **Re-activating memory**

In *Cousins: A Memoir* published in 1994, Fugard remembers the St. George Park Tea Room as the place “where we all c[a]me together to tie and untie the rosary of knots that is every family’s unique story” (80). Conflicted memories abound in Fugard’s autobiographical texts. *Master Harold*, the *Cousins* memoir, his published *Notebooks* and *The Captain’s Tiger*, a subsequent “memoir” for the stage, all testify in some way to an abiding love and respect for his father despite his rejection of him as an alcoholic cripple collecting disability payments leaving his wife to support the

family. In *The Captain's Tiger* in the dual role as Author/Tiger, Fugard, the playwright, realizes that attempts to re-write" family and history are futile. Tiger (Fugard) struggles with the idea of erasing his father from his mother's "story," "It's not going to happen again. He's my father and I love him, but . . . No! Not in here! (*He indicates the manuscript*)" (56).

BETTY: Are you ashamed of your father? . . .

TIGER: I'm not! . . . I just don't want you to make the same mistake . . .

There's no escape . . . for me or for you. (*His manuscript*) I thought I could at least give you one on paper, but even that won't work. I can't make a happy ending out of my dad. (*He throws the manuscript overboard. . . .*) (56-58)

But perhaps with Sam it is a different story. In the final scene of *Captain's Tiger* Betty confronts Author (Fugard) urging him "to try just once more" to tell her story.

BETTY: Look at all the others you've already told.

AUTHOR: Acts of contrition . . . When I aborted your story that

night . . . I was left with the feeling that I had committed a terrible sin. . . and I threw it to the sharks! All the others I've told since then . . . attempts at penance. (61)

Fugard's play *Master Harold* is just such an "attempt." A March 1961 entry in *Notebooks* describes in a "string of memories," Sam Semela, a waiter at the Jubilee and later the St George's and a ballroom dancer as "the most significant – the only – friend of my boyhood years." He recalls the kite of Sam's construction, "bewildered

that he had made it for me,” his “haunting” of the servants’ quarters and “the terrible windy days when no one came to . . . the park, we would sit together and talk.” He goes on to recount the incident that strongly resonates in the play.

The rare quarrel between Sam and myself . . . In a truculent silence we closed the cafe, Sam set off . . . on foot . . . I followed . . . on my bike. I saw him walking ahead . . . and coming out of a spasm of acute loneliness, as I rode up behind him I called his name . . . he turned . . . to look back and as I cycled past, I spit in his face. Don’t suppose I will ever deal with the shame that overwhelmed me the second after I had done that. (26)

Autobiographical presence and connection are central in the climactic moments of Fugard’s *Master Harold*, and serve as principle interpretation by most critics – Fugard “exorcises his furies” in an “act of contrition.” But as John Jordan points out rather than “a retreat from social concerns” the play is an attempt “to dramatize the connection of the two . . . his efforts to locate questions of power, privilege, autonomy and transformation with reference both to South African history and to his own work in the theatre.” (Jordan, *Twentieth Century Literature* 462) Jordan’s point is well taken. Rather than consider *Master Harold* a relinquishment of his role in what critics categorize as his political “theatre of protest” and township collaborations of earlier work, he brings his own biography together with history. The power of the play speaks to exactly that dynamic.

Fugard makes us aware . . . that the same tacit understanding of a fiction based on assigned roles played out by real people (John and Winston in *The Island*)

is what constitutes the performance of the South African apartheid system. Revealing the scaffolding of theatre art and acting . . . Fugard allows us to realize how theatre craft, dramaturgy, can be and is employed to create the theatre of apartheid; but he demonstrates as well how that same dramaturgy, in his hands, can also be employed as a forceful weapon against apartheid. (Wertheim 29)

There is solidarity in the dance that ends "*Master Harold*." Willie has learned the virtue of non-violence. Sam has retained a dignity that many like him might have easily jeopardized. The solitary image of Hally sitting on the "Whites Only" bench holding the string of the primitive, delicate, lifeless, homemade kite surfaces as an image of displacement, separation. It is, if you will, the quiet statement of the child of the colonizer – colonized, unsure of place, uncertain of role, seated on a labeled bench not of his making, waiting for winds to blow.

Troy Maxson's final moments onstage in August Wilson's play *Fences* create an impression equally distinct, severed and isolated. Troy, bat in hand, in batting stance taunts "Death, the fastball in the outside corner." He has exiled his son from his home. He has fathered an illegitimate child whom he has remanded to his wife, Rose, for nurturing. He has committed his mentally disabled brother Gabe to an institution and alienated Bono, his best friend of many years. His stance on the dirt ground of his fenced yard is unwavering, firm, defiant, determined, arrogant – if not assured – an image of man facing the odds of battling with mortality, another struggle

to defy a life void of recognition. Bono's simple dictum "Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in" (67) resonates in this capitulating moment and continues the metaphor of Troy as "absurd" hero, victimizer and victim, surrounded by a fence of his own making. He has preserved and marked ground which has excluded, isolated and protected him from everyone except himself.

*Fences* is set in 1957 some thirty years after Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Where *Ma Rainey* situated the search for self-authentication in the plight of a group of black musicians in the studio, *Fences* presents a family unit engaged in a continuation of the self-same struggle. It is a pivotal play in Wilson's chronology. Set mid-century in an America responding to the "first Civil Rights Acts since Reconstruction era . . . protest, hope, skepticism are all present . . . We glimpse the gargantuan effort by a race of people who . . . try to drag themselves into the mainstream to stand up and be counted" (Perreira 26, 37). The play represents a fulcrum in the movement of African Americans as acknowledged participants in America. It is in Gates' term a "narrative of ascent." He suggests the double bonding of the term. "Blacks are wedded to narratives of ascent . . . but narratives of ascent, whether or not we like to admit it are also narratives of alienation" (3). Troy systematically, if unwittingly, alienates all who surround him, "clearing the field" for his ultimate confrontation. His attempt to improve his life fails miserably as the family unit is decimated by his self-centered actions, his restless spirit and errors in judgment. Troy's identity exists as a reaction to the past rather than his assessment of



transformational modes to shape the de-centering accumulation into a future. Anxious to be a man, his own man, Troy was unable to discard the scarring remnants of his father's influence, realizing "I could feel him kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing separating us was the matter of a few years" (53). He *is* his father's son much like Cory proves to be Troy's. His action in the drama demonstrates his fluctuating nature, ambivalence and inability to capture an understanding of his role as son-husband-father. His perception of himself as a black man in the fifties is not ill conceived but does not allow for the possibilities of the changing time. Gates personally describes the dilemma. "My grandfather was colored, my father was negro and I am a black . . . those appellations . . . did not contain who I was or even serve to limit who I thought I could be . . . black was from the start a restrictive covenant that one could run from or live with, but that one could not escape" (*Future* 18).

### ***Fences***

Wilson's well made domestic drama is written in nine scenes divided into two acts. All scenes take place over an eight-month period in 1957 except for the final scene which is set in 1965. The setting as Lloyd Richards suggests in his introduction to the play text "one might correctly mistake for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania" (*Fences* vii). A sturdy-roofed porch runs the width of the house. In the small partially fenced dirt yard building materials, a sawhorse and some lumber lie opposite a tree from which hangs a ball made from rags. A well-worn baseball bat leans against the tree at its base. Wilson's prologue keynotes the time and place:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with

tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them . . . The city grew . . . nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work . . . The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation . . . The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow ramshackle houses . . . They collected rags and wood . . . They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies . . . They cleaned houses . . . washed clothes . . . shined shoes . . . in desperation and vengeful pride, they stole and lived in pursuit of their own dream . . . They could breathe free finally and stand to meet life with the force of dignity . . . By 1957, the hard-won victories of the European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America . . . Life was rich, full and flourishing . . . the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow. (Prologue *Fences* xviii)

The play revolves around Troy Maxson, a 53 year old garbage collector, ex-convict and former baseball player, his wife Rose, ten years younger and their teenage high school athlete son, Cory. Lyons, Troy's musician son from a former marriage, and Troy's mentally disabled younger brother, Gabriel, are frequent visitors at the Maxson's, along with Jim Bono, Troy's co-worker friend and follower of thirty years. Much of Troy's stormy history is told from the porch/ stage which fronts the house. As he reflects upon the past, he is confronted by a present and future which are

becoming increasingly elusive. He has filed a complaint for job inequity, his son is being recruited to play college football, he is preoccupied by a secret liaison with another woman, and his disabled brother Gabriel's erratic behavior needs his attention. Troy's 'drinking on the porch' and the "tall tales" after work inform of his struggling existence and history. These personal narratives are Troy's keys to who he is but have not unlocked his ability to become. His relationship with his own father was stormy and ended in violent confrontation. His characterization and casting of "white man as devil" has as much to do with the repression of the 'color bar' that prohibited him from playing baseball, though a qualified contender, to the furniture salesman who profited from his time payments. His encounters with Death, "the fastball in the outside corner" also function prominently in his search for identity which Troy has always read as fated and non-existent for a black man in America, mid-twentieth century. Advocating with Rose on Cory's behalf Bono suggests "Times have changed . . . You just come along too early" (9). Troy's answer sums up his feeling for access denied. "There ought not never have been no time called too early." (9) Rose humors Troy even as she tries to redirect his thinking, not easy when the man she married is single minded, strong and resistant to ideas that he has not himself originated. Troy's errors are not in thinking but in judgment. Rose allows him the escape of his Friday drinking and storytelling where his presence dominates, while she waits for him to complete the fence that will surround the yard, the family and protect the small part of the world that they own. As Troy works the fence with Cory, the dialogue between father and son speaks volumes about relationship and

their differences. “How come you never liked me?” Cory asks. Troy’s response is advice he has long been ruled by. “Don’t . . . go through life worrying about if someone like you or not. You best be sure they doing right by you” (38). Whether the conversation shifts to baseball or household chores, Cory’s opinions are disregarded and the dialogue is strained and one-sided. A metaphorical “fence” materializes in the alienation between father and son. The physical structure remains the same as when they began. Within the next few days, Troy is promoted to driver but refuses to sign the papers for Cory’s football scholarship, which exacerbates the rift between father and son. Rose’s intervention holds no currency. Cory, shaken, lashes out “Just cause you didn’t have a chance! You just scared I’m gonna be better than you . . .” (58). Troy warns: “That’s strike one. Don’t you strike out!” (58). Working the fence, Bono tries to talk sense into Troy about his need to commit to Rose, his wife and strength, and to cease the unwise affair with the Florida gal. Troy’s dalliance with Alberta, consummated, has consequences. Troy tells Rose about the affair as he announces that he is going to be a “daddy.” Unable to conceive Troy’s action Rose’s only question is “Why?” Emotionally wounded she reveals, “I took all my feelings, my wants, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you . . . planted them inside you . . . It didn’t take no eighteen years find the soil was rocky and it wasn’t never gonna bloom” (71). Their confrontation escalates and becomes physical. Cory enters grabbing Troy and knocking him down. The moment is stunning for all three. Troy gets to his feet shaking a warning hand toward Cory “That’s strike two . . . You living with a full count. Don’t you strike out” (72). Rose’s tie to her husband severs in his

infidelity, another “fence” of estrangement, the antagonism between father and son escalates. Six months pass. Gabe has been confined to a mental institution, committed there by Troy’s signature. Alberta dies in childbirth. Shaken and uncomprehending, Troy turns on invisible Mr. Death challenging “I’m gonna take and build me a fence around what belongs to me . . . You come up and knock . . . I’ll be ready for you” (77). Troy returns from the hospital with his child. His infant daughter is the only listener as he reveals “A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do . . . I ain’t sorry for nothing I done . . . You’re daddy’s a big man . . . But sometimes he’s scared . . . we . . . ain’t got no home” (79). He asks Rose to care for the child. Rose reaches for the baby with “She’s innocent . . . and you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child.” She accepts the child as she rejects the man. “From right now . . . This child got a mother. But you a womanless man” (79). Two months pass. The fence is almost complete. Bono stops by but has no time to drink with Troy. Baby Raynell sleeps as Rose leaves for church. Cory comes into the yard and a confrontation ensues. An intoxicated Troy blocks Cory’s entrance to the house. Cory lashes out “You ain’t gave me nothing! You ain’t done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was going to be better than you. All you ever did was make me scared of you . . . And Mama, too” (87). Troy advances but Cory does not back down. “You can’t whup me no more . . . you’re just an old man” (87). Troy pushes at Cory beginning a physical assault and taunt “Nigger! . . . You just another nigger on the street to me! . . . You got the devil in you . . . Get away . . . get the hell out of my yard . . . Get your black ass out of my yard” (87). Cory grabs the bat and Troy catches it mid swing. The struggle is fierce.

Troy subdues Cory and stands over him bat poised to strike. The memory of a fourteen year old Troy beaten and bloody on the ground beneath his father's whip stops him. He orders Cory to leave the yard. His things will be waiting for him "on the other side of the fence" (89). Adrenalin rushes through Troy, he is in a state of conscious shock. Assuming a batter's stance he prepares for the pitch— "Death, the fastball in the outside corner." He is an image of pain, impatience and enduring loss but willful spirit "Come on! I be ready for you . . . but I ain't gonna be easy" (89). Years pass. It is 1965, the day of Troy's funeral. Rose cries as she embraces Cory, now a Marine. Lyons introduces young Raynell to her brother as he and Cory, brothers of different mothers, catch up on each other's lives. Lyons is finishing a three-year term at the workhouse. Cory with six years of service is thinking about marriage but not sure of much else. Cory, alone, wanders the yard. The rag ball still hangs from the tree, Troy's bat still propped at its base. The fence is complete. Rose sits with her son and tells how Troy died swinging his bat. Cory has decided not to go to the funeral and attempts to articulate the effect his father had "like a shadow that followed you everywhere . . . trying to live through me. Everywhere I looked . . . staring back at me" (96, 97). Rose refuses the idea even as she understands, recognizing her husband in her now grown son. "You just like him . . . all over again . . . You can't be nobody but who you are . . . that shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself." (97) Young Raynell joins him as Rose leaves to prepare for the funeral. In a moment of remembrance marking his passing, brother and sister of different mothers sing together their daddy's song "Blue laid down and died like a

man . . . Blue's gone where the good dogs go" (99). Gabe enters the yard anxiously calling to Troy asking if he is ready for St. Peter to open the gates. Though his trumpet has no mouthpiece, he lifts it to his lips and blows with great force. There is no sound. He repeats the exercise a second and third time. Realizing there is no sound he begins to dance and howl. He "feels" the result of his ritual as the sky illuminates and he "sees" that the gates have opened. Confident and self-satisfied he smiles in elation as Rose, Lyons, Cory and Raynell look on.

The final scene of *Fences* serves as epilogue to Troy's story. Set eight years after the action of the plot, it offers a distinct closure to Troy's story even as it continues the lives and experience of the remaining characters in a time reflective of new and major legislative change for the lives of black Americans. Cory returns a man, a Marine, cut from the same warrior cloth as his father. The G.I. bill, not a football scholarship, will pay for his education. Lyons, on leave from the workhouse, has realized that music and not crime, is the answer to his simple questions of existence. Jim Bono, ever-faithful friend, is present to escort his friend's body to rest. Raynell's presence and her garden suggest possibility for the future. Rose certain in her heart mourns the mystery of the man she loved but never fully understood. In the moments before he is set to rest Troy is celebrated and eulogized. Cory joins Raynell singing "Papa's song." The lesson of his conflicted life becomes a testament to his resistance and struggle. His absence reverberates the strength and size of his former presence. Rose's simple description of his final moments suggests a peace and

resignation that Troy could never find in his life. It is a description of an acceptance and an embrace of a long awaited freedom, from toil, from disappointment and from a history never fully understood or self-conceived. It is an image of a player who played the game through to the final inning, relentless and persevering always ready for the next pitch. Troy's fence is constructed and complete. Gabriel "now prophet and miracle worker rather than . . . marginalized madman" (Nadel 94) with his silent trumpet and incantatory dance ushers Troy's confined spirit through another kind of gate.

*Fences* is pivotal in Wilson's process and development as a playwright. In his earlier plays *Jitney* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* "Wilson wrestled with unfocused plots and shallow characters . . . critics charged that his scripts lacked discipline and that his casts of characters were too crowded to allow three-dimensional explorations . . ." (Shannon 90). Wilson was challenged by professional colleagues to write "a more commercial conventional play with one main character and others supporting him" (Watlington 110). *Fences*, the product of Wilson's challenge, proved his adaptability. It is ironic that he cites it as his least favorite play. It is a determination or assertion Troy, as playwright, might make.

Wilson has repeatedly asserted his mother Daisy's strong and pervasive influence in his life. It exists confirmed in the female characters he creates. "My mother's a very strong, principled woman. My female characters like Rose come in large part from my mother" (Nadel 151). But it is in his troublesome relationship with stepfather David Bedford that Wilson found the paradigm for the relationship



between Troy and Cory. Bedford, himself, serves as the inspiration for his principle character. The resemblance is undeniable. “Bedford never realized his athletic aspiration, which he then hoped his stepson would achieve. Wilson failed to meet his stepfather’s expectations . . . when he quit his high school football team. Wilson wanted to be a writer” (Bogumil 2). But as Shannon points out

the most important parallels between Wilson’s memory and *Fence’s* conflict are the eventual epiphanies that both Wilson and Cory experience about their father’s integrity. Both of these young men mature to some extent when they learn the entire scope of their fathers’ actions and are led to understand the many reasons for the older man’s callous behavior” (92).

Autobiographical “ghosts” seem apparent in Wilson’s construction. The alienated contact between Wilson and his biological father and the tenuous connection with his stepfather both suggest a father-son relationship at odds. The confrontation and dismissal from the family home for the teenaged Cory may indeed reference Wilson’s relationship with his stepdad. Cory’s battle with his father and estrangement in *Fences* resonates with the moment Troy depicts after being beaten by his father “I didn’t know what I was going to do. The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy’s house. And right there the world suddenly got big” (*Fences* 53). Both father and son in different historical moments sing the “walking blues.”

In interviews, Wilson has consistently stressed the importance of his blues rhetoric in its formation and preservation of the ongoing narrative of African American experience.

The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the idea and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition . . . a way of passing information. If you're going to tell someone a story, and if you want to keep information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone else. This is how it stays alive. The music provides you an emotional reference for the information and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive. (Moyers 14)

The blues begets tradition even as it sustains life. Whether sung or spoken the blues voice provides the speaker and the hearer with information to impart, lessons to be learned and a powerful force of life and strength of spirit to be reckoned with. It is sympathetic and comforting, warning and forbidding, inviting and cautionary. It is a code to live by and not feel oneself alone. Lyons, Troy's musician son in *Fences* echoes Ma Rainey as he invokes the place of the blues. "I know I gotta eat. But I got to live, too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world. I don't bother nobody. I just stay with my music cause that's the only way I can find to live in the world. Otherwise there ain't no telling what I might do" (18). Troy's "music" lies in the stories he tells from his porch on Friday nights and in his rendition of "Blue . . . the good old dog . . . my daddy's song," later sung by two generations of Maxsons. Troy's stories, masterfully

told, are steeped in superstition and distrust of the present, filtering and making bearable experiences of the past. In his stories, boundless imagination and fancy mesh with the external manifestations of reality. The white man as “devil” and Mr. Death animate Troy’s vision of the past and pre-figurement of the future. His vision of the past is sustaining in its patterning of experience. Rife with inequity and paradox, his imprisoned past, and failed marriages are less contentious to him than his baseball career. His success at baseball in the Negro leagues and failure to matriculate or warrant consideration in the Major leagues is a substantial motivator in Troy’s biography. It is a chance he never was permitted – a fenced-off playing field to which he remained unprivileged. It is a pre-occupation and a source metaphoric construction in Troy’s blues. It authenticates and describes Troy’s “place” in the world. His vision of the past seems more significant than the present. Troy’s blues much like those of Levee in *Ma Rainey* articulate Ralph Ellison’s formulation of the blues as “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 consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism” (*Shadow* 78-79). Troy’s revealing confession of his final encounter with his father, a climactic moment in Act I is endemic, if not ironic, as it prefigures the confrontation between he and his son in Act II, a foreshadowing as self-fulfilling prophecy. Rose’s biblical axiomatic “signifying” “. . . you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child” (*Fences* 79) as she accepts to be mother to Troy’s child, goes unheeded where her son is concerned.

Stuart Hall writing about ethnicity in his essay *New Ethnicities* acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time. (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Reader* 226)

Representation within discursive formation can impart meaning or can be “how one images a reality that exists ‘outside’ the means by which things are represented” (226), mimetically. Hall continues by affirming “regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive . . . role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life” (224). Hall’s formation and description of the functionality of representation in contextualizing the playwriting of Fugard and Wilson is helpful and directive. With *Master Harold* and *Fences* it is especially persuasive and useful given the autobiographical roots that anchor each play. That each play “imitates” an historical time, place, experience, and situation, though not vital to the discursive “edge” which each as a representation harbors, it indeed enforces the nature of the play as discourse that is credible, authorial/authoritative and representative.

With both Fugard and Wilson, these realistic dramas are multi-leveled

communicating texts, dialogues within the cultures in which they reside, and with the world at large. That they both draw from autobiographical resources makes them even more relevant in deciphering their individual formations as artists. As they endow their characters with meaning they also present them with the obstacles of existence. Their own personal situations, reflected in the past, become political in their historicizing and in the metaphorical constructions of the playwriting. The “pull” of history is pitted dialogically against a centralizing vision of individual consciousness with the effect of “unsett(ling) the comforts of identity politics in the very space of enactment” (Ashcroft *Post-Colonial Reader* 176). Fugard and Wilson’s dramas can be considered “counter narratives” which challenge “fundamental systemic discourse through which the world is represented.” They are successful in re-installing stories crucial to resistance, thereby “recuperating and contesting profile(s) of identity in political and cultural space” (73-74). Simultaneously both plays reveal as they assert formation stories in the central characters – Hally in Fugard, and in a cross – combination, Troy and Cory in Wilson.

If identity *is* constructed, the identities of Fugard and Wilson intersect in obvious ways in the case of Fugard and in veiled ways with Wilson through the characters they have written. Both plays present a struggle of identity in the portrait of the central character. If, as playwright Tony Kushner explains in a 1997 interview with David Savran: “Memory is where lost history begins” (111), then it is possibly in the negotiating of the two in a present moment that some portion of the developing identities of both playwrights surface and becomes visible in plays that they have

prompted to speak out of the biography of experience. Both playwrights investigate the relationship of a father and son. The situation in both is familial and literal. The dramas are situated in highly charged colonized space — South Africa, under Apartheid and in an America of the 1950's, negotiating a Civil Rights movement. The patriarchal hegemony of nation overarches and influences in specific, endemic, although seemingly peripheral ways. The character motivations and ideologies have been constructed while identities are in a state of "flux." Hally and Cory are both teenagers in the midst of adolescence and defining an adulthood that they seek to model from male "father" figures. Troy's formative years bear witness to a similar disruptive family history. The political climate of family structure and past family history converge in ways which unsettle and dismantle systems of familial and parental function. The father/son "dyad" has not been formed naturally or wholesomely. It has been adversely affected by a hegemony of disruption. It is within the charged tension of this reality that both dramas capitulate. Hally's dad and Troy's father, although they do not appear in the dramas, are distinct manipulative forces. Their absence makes the power of their influence and control that much more insidious. Their influence persists and pervades in the psyches of both lead characters and within the dramas as they play out. The influence they impart is patriarchal and hegemonic in its insistence. The stranglehold they exert subsumes dialogue and infuses both dramas dialogically as the principal characters are unable to negotiate authentic response.

Fugard's play depicts the relationship of Hally, a white South African

teenager with Sam, a black African, his mentor and “spiritual” father. It simultaneously documents the tenuous tie between Hally and his biological father, an alcoholic and crippled man whose presence only manifests itself as a “voice” on the other end of a phone line and ideologically at times in Hally’s behavior. Sam, a waiter in the tea room establishment run by his mother is considered for all practical purposes an employee. To Hally, he is friend, mentor and surrogate dad. Their relationship is symbiotic and positive. Hally is a bright lad who is temperamental, restless and moody. In Hally’s super-critical perception of his natural father he finds little good or useful. He is disrespectful and even hateful. Attempting to disengage or separate himself or ignore his father’s presence is fruitless. Mother is the dominant parental figure and breadwinner pre-occupied with keeping the family intact and she seems as fearful of her husband as her son is of his father. As the rain pelts down on the roof of the deserted tea room, Sam and Hally play out their typical roles as Willie, another African man, scrubs the floor of the establishment. Memory and reminiscence of years of acquaintanceship present images of safety and security for Hally apart from his dad in the company of Sam and Willie. The Jubilee Boarding House was a refuge and the two black men have been constants in his life. Their commitment to his well-being cannot be challenged. They respect him as equal and he regards them as “chaps.” Hally’s lack of control in keeping his father hospitalized and the potential for his return home fuels the tension of the play. It precipitates his anger and exacerbates the hatred he harbors for the man who is his father. Fearing that he is losing control he attempts to retrieve it demanding to be addressed as “Master

Harold” by Sam and Willie. In an unmasking moment of reaction and revelation Hally, like a provoked and trapped predator vents his rage by spitting in Sam’s face. Offensive and venomous the poison of apartheid attacks Sam as prey. In the absence of the object of his hate, a fulcrum shifts and he targets the ideological “other.” Sam recovers seeking confirmation in Willie’s observation of the event. Hally leaves after Sam reminds him of his isolated presence the day of the kite flying on the “whites only” bench. Hopefully “Master” Hally will internalize and begin to understand the reasons for his action, the inheritance of an inbred hate unconsciously aroused and consciously acted out. The play and the actions it portrays are literal in the adaptation of Fugard’s memory. Its metaphorical proportion expands as it implicates its characters in a discourse of colonizer and the colonized. Viewed as inversion, Sam is central; “Master Hally,” adolescent, immature and insensitive, has ostracized himself. Captured by guilt and fear he has become “other” and alone, relegated to a “whites only” bench.

Set in 1957, *Fences*, is a portrait of family struggle and the drama of its larger-than-life, anti-heroic, tyrant father and survivor, Troy Maxson. The possibility for African Americans in the United States is set for change. Troy exists in the vacuum of his past. The world is re-forming. He cannot. He has been “fired in a kiln” of personal and family oppression. But the fire that strengthens also burns. Having been burned by racism and inequity his psychological skin has been scarred. He feels and sees himself differently and is over sensitized to his life experience. Having experienced literal imprisonment for his crimes and figurative imprisonment inside



his scarred skin, his life has been a series of “resistances” and survival strategies. He perceives himself, and is, a wary warrior figure of a man, guarding and providing for his family as he ravages the field of battle. His life has been a series of misdirected disappointments. His have not been happy blues. “Leaving his father’s house” at age fourteen unformed and deeply disillusioned by a father he could not understand, he wandered. Haunted by the ghost and shadow of his father’s image, Troy’s life has been a struggle to negotiate his own meaning and significance in the midst a world where he perceives himself expendable. His sense of self remained illusory. He has never accepted responsibility in his identification as a black man in mid-twentieth century America, regarding it a curse. His job as garbage collector perhaps mimics his own sense of self, as the *Ma Rainey* character describes as “leftovers.” Limited by color, he has unwittingly colluded with the discrimination of racism in his own failures. His “escape” from home and family is perpetuated in his inability to sustain stable relationships and bond to the security of family. He has allowed his failed attempt to play baseball to prefigure his failures in life. The rag ball suspended from the tree in the Maxson’s yard is a potent symbol of the unformed and tethered Troy hanging from a rope, an imitation and reminder of unfulfilled action and impotency. The fence that surrounds is equally symbolic. Troy has had to contend with numerous “fences” in his struggle to survive and decipher an authentic self with nothing to example. His inability to penetrate the world of professional baseball, though a worthy contender, the failure of his first marriage and the time spent in prison, his appropriation of Gabe’s disability pension, his fathering Alberta’s illegitimate child,

all represent barriers to Troy's development to assured adulthood. The fencing of the yard, on the other hand, at Rose's request, is an attempt at defining a boundary in which the Maxson's can exist safely, securely. It is a possessive and identifying construction. It encloses Troy within the family and marks his territory. The fence structure, itself, as the action of the play develops signifies in both positive and negative ways, simultaneously. It is a "form" in contestation even as it is constructed. The fence, a symbol of secure embrace, ultimately becomes a barrier of exclusion for Cory and then for Troy himself. Troy and Cory's ultimate confrontation toward the end of the play distinctly duplicates the battle between Troy and his father. The whip has been replaced by the bat, but both resonate as tools complicit and representative of the punishment of subjugation. Troy, both son and father, is unable to identify himself in either role even as he is forced "to act." The demons which haunt have caused him, by necessity, to act out the repression he has never been able to escape. He exiles his son from his home, protecting himself from the realization of his own failure to "father" him. This act of power and control though enacted in self-preservation is as insidious and paternalistic as hegemony.

Patriarchal structures of control reverberate in the action of both plays. The hegemonic is domestic yet reflective of the world, time, place that surrounds. The colonizing is retributive. The hegemony of racism and the mimicry of nation as weapons of control are turned inward and imitated in character response in moments in which the dramas find their center. Inherited traits proliferate. Hally, Troy, Cory, all respond in the context of conflict by behaviors learned, observed or taught by

those who came before. They speak their fathers' voices. They replicate remembered words, actions and acculturated norms of behavior. And their judgments and pronouncements emerge in action as already spoken or installed responses. In an attempt to preserve or arrest control the colonized or its victim (Sam/Cory) and victimized (Hally/Troy) are rendered voiceless. The "dialogue" which ensues appears and is for the moment limited and one sided. As in an act of aggression the results countermand the condition creating a conflicting resistance and animosity which structures the exchange. Conflict in the drama arises when within Hally/Troy the dialogue is unresolved and cannot be justified. Conditioned responses of control are the only action that can be considered a viable voice, ironically authentic but installed, reproduced, a mimic of some controlling center. It is a trope of re-articulation and parallelism.

Both plays present a vivid and descriptive imaging of isolation-resistance and the individual "other", a young Hally sitting alone on a "whites only" bench, the high flying tomato paper kite, of memory, tethered lifeless on the brown earth; Troy defiant and combative with bat poised, surrounded by a fence of his own construction and design. Mimetically, "*Master Harold*" . . . and *the boys* and *Fences* play in theatres as sound, stimulating and thought provoking realistic dramas. Each play presents a set of characters in domestic settings that illuminate issues of family and race. Set mid-twentieth century (Fugard was seventeen/Hally is seventeen. Wilson was twelve/twenty/Cory is seventeen/twenty-five) these dramas discourse on identity formation as they reveal conditions in both locations where the action plays against

the condition of racism. Both plays detail a dysfunctional relationship of father and son. They are metaphors for the colonial imperative of hegemony as it functions in both societies, represented by and within the relationships explored. In so doing the plays operate as discourses and colonial and post-colonial footnotes. Inherited traits of indoctrinated mis-understanding emerge and are acted out in the climactic moments when control seems to be slipping from the protagonist. Encoded and latent conduct surfaces as the son, an image of the father, repeats and recycles behaviors of the former. Intentionally or not the action is as retributive as it is misdirected. This learned behavior, dormant and untapped, activates the intent to wound, destroy and break all bonds of understanding. The rupture is decimating and potentially irreversible. For Hally, it is in fact the ideological “other” and his surrogate father, Sam. For Troy it is a duplication or replaying a “forming” event in his past that was imprinted in his consciousness. He imitates his father as he re-plays and attacks the son he could not be. Stopping short of beating and bloodying him he does, as his father before, exile his son. The hegemony of the father magnified, mimics the hegemony of nation. The biographies of the playwrights vibrate in this action as their “demons” are revealed. Both dramas play in selected sites of memory purposefully and vividly constructed.

Racist ideology is alive and evident in the South African tea room. Hally accesses and employs it readily in veiled ways and most directly in his confrontation with Sam. The remnants of Jim Crow law and practice continue to torment Troy and his fellows as they seek advancement and acceptance as black men in America. The

words and ways of fathers re-play themselves in the actions of sons. The re-source of patriarchy does not indemnify but continues the cycle. Two generations of Fugards, two generations of Maxsons echo and reverberate as they demonstrate how firmly ideology lodges itself and how quickly it is accessed and plays out in the lives of simple men. Hally's rejection and objectification of Sam is misappropriated, or is it? His anger as Sam suggests is truly directed at his biological father. Similarly, Troy's battling and exile of his own grown son is re-appropriation in a battle lost years before in the encounter that severed him from his father's house. Hally leaves the Port Elizabeth tea room but not the "whites only" bench, a bench that signifies simultaneously as a seat of power as well as a place of judgment. He seems bound to it as he returns to the home of his father, a man that he hates because of all that he represents. Troy disappears in the darkness of the theater with bat raised, facing an invisible pitcher, preparing to engage the absurdity of futures in which he imagines himself, alone. The image is echoed in Rose's description of his final moments. Cory's return home as "Troy all over again" in the coda to *Fences*, and singing "his daddy's song" is as acknowledgement and in respect, even if he refuses to attend the funeral. The final moments of both plays suggest the attempt at understanding, if not reconciliation. Cory pays his father the respect he deserves. Sam and Willie realize that Hally's behavior is a product of immaturity and the mis-application of instinctual response. What Sam and Cory wisely know and are confounded to understand is that the confrontations that have occurred have been programmed for years in both the father and the son. Wilson's epigraph to *Fences* warns in its enlightened simplicity:

When the sins of the father visit us

We do not have to play host.

We can banish them with forgiveness

As God, in his Largeness and Laws.

*I must create a world, or be enslav'd by another man's. I will not reason and compare: my business is to create.* -William Blake

*The unconscious is pure nature and like nature, pours out its gifts in profusion. But left to itself and without the human response from consciousness, it can (again like nature) destroy its own gifts and sooner or later sweep them into annihilation.*  
-Aniela Jaffe

*Imagine a factory whistle blowing through your spine, and consider how long you could stand this shrill discordance.* -Romare Bearden

*This is my World.* -Helen Martins

*All of us write such texts, a text that is then called our life.* -Mikhail Bakhtin

## **Chapter 4**

### **Crossing Boundaries**

#### ***The Road to Mecca* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone***

Visionary poet and painter, William Blake's quotation which leads this chapter can be read intertextually with the assertion of ownership, "This is my world," inscribed in wire relief on the gate to Helen Martin's sculpture garden that borders her former home in New Betheseda, South Africa. Helen, the inspiration and heroine of Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*, like Blake, was considered mad, by many, as she sculpted her home and yard as the embodiment of her consciousness upon the world. Aniella Jaffe's articulation, after Jung, of the condition which devolves from the lack of human response from "consciousness" is precisely the motivator in Miss

Helen's unbridled creative subconscious impulses. It also imagines the limitation and the destructive possibilities which can come from the lack of correspondence. Herald Loomis, Wilson's tortured and confused antiheroic protagonist of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is precariously balanced in finding and accepting such correspondent response in a series of life events which have driven his spirit to within a breath of "annihilation." His spirit has suffered "enslav'd by another man's" world. He has withstood the "shrill discordance" of the "whistle blowing through his spine" as an indentured "free" man identified in his years on the chain gang. Fugard and Wilson become entwined in the struggles of their protagonists. Bearden's "shrill discordance" refers to the position of the human in the midst of finding resonance and response in the act of expression and enlarging the self. "This shrill discordance" suggests the impetus of the unconscious as it enlivens the conscious and "is tantamount to the effect of intense creation" in an artist. "This whistle and steam blowing their insides apart a little while longer than others . . . destroy[s] form after form, constantly seeking the unique twist that will appear in the end as if he *owned* the entire array" (Schwartzmann 44). It is in the conscious "making" of these plays that the authors find constituent resonance and affinity for the consciousness in a struggle that embroiled them in their respective cultural worlds. They are "subjects in process" much like their protagonists. As they validate the efforts of Helen and Herald to achieve self-consciousness, the playwrights imagine the balance that evolves in experiencing the conscious self and the life-struggle that it often takes to achieve it. As Jaffe describes for Carl Jung in *Man and His Symbols* "It is consciousness that



holds the key to the value of the unconscious . . . only in an interplay of consciousness and the unconscious can the unconscious prove its value and perhaps even show a way to overcome the melancholy of the void” (Jaffe). William Blake, a mystic visionary, who abhorred slavery and believed passionately in racial and sexual equality, was an artist among many who have faced the “void” and declared the value of artistic creation for the inner life of the soul. “The imagination is not a state; it is the Human existence itself” (*Milton: Book the Second*, Plate 32[35] line 32). The visionary work carried out by Fugard and Wilson lies in the powerful reach of their dialogue into human experience in the process of achieving awareness. Defenses for self-preservation and sanity may exist as barriers to realization of the conscious self, but it is in the eradication of such self defenses that the sense of “one true self” can be experienced. Fugard and Wilson configure a geography of being through the dramatic lines they construct for the characters of *The Road to Mecca* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. When analyzed, the constituent elements, events, circumstances and plot interaction, within the dramas, function in an arrival at consciousness or coming to terms with self- knowledge for characters who have been impaired. Helen’s transformation and acceptance of the “light” within herself correlates with Herald’s recognition of his “song.” They succeed, Helen and Herald, in their search for identification by accessing consciously chosen identities. Self-discovery and the choice it presents becomes enabling and the stimulus for Helen and Herald’s self-acceptance. The dramaturgy of both plays enlightens what Hall suggests as “routes not roots” in the ever evolving formation of identity. The “road,” much like a play

itself, is the route, the space between departure and arrival and the pilgrimage evident in the subtext of both playwrights.

### **Journey**

Athol Fugard's playwriting has taken him on journeys with many of the peoples who share his homeland. The plays which have consistently captured and engaged critics are those which have dealt specifically with the lives of the coloured and black South Africans during the apartheid regime which existed between 1948 and 1991. *The Blood Knot*, "*Master Harold*" . . . and the boys, *Boesman and Lena* and the *Statements Plays* trilogy share position as plays of response to racist ideology or the inhumane treatment and unjustified regulation imposed on the non-white population of South Africa primarily due to colonial and postcolonial exigencies. The motif of "control" as an imperialist strategy of suppression is echoed in the "othering" of subjugated lives which Fugard places center stage. "*Separate and unequal*" is probably a more appropriate translation for the Afrikaner term "apartheid" as it also managed to label a class of South African poor whites alongside the non-white population. It can be argued that although the non-white populations were targeted by apartheid, poor white populations were not entirely unaffected by the limitation and inequity of apartheid legislation. Separation occurred on both sides of an experiment and legislation, which proved hardly equalizing. It became reflected in the censure and censoring of artists whose discourse attempted to indict and make the condition known. Amidst the egregious limitations the separation laws placed against the non-white populations, the poor whites were subject to a conditionality which they

experienced alongside their non-white counterparts. The effect of the laws was conditional, not merely exclusive. Fugard a white South African playwright was himself investigated and censured. His belief in the power of art to enlighten and characterize 'conditions of being' figures strongly in the subjects he has been directed to interrogate in his dramas. Fugard finds an affinity with Helen Martins, the elderly white South African sculptor, in his own personal struggle as a playwright battling alcoholism and depression. He explores and writes her experience to explore his own understanding of self and place.

The inspiration for Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* (1985) was a photograph image of Helen Martins with a young female social worker friend in a snapshot given to him by the young woman after Helen's death. He had learned of Helen Martins several years before as he surveyed the isolated Karoo landscape for a house to purchase in New Bethesda, South Africa. The village locals referred to Helen as a strange, crazy recluse whose eccentricity displayed itself in the numerous statues that she had sculpted filling the yard surrounding her home. From the age of fifty, for some seventeen years, Helen labored filling the yard and her house with her art, a permanent installation christened *Owl House*, which she considered her 'mecca.' Much like the most holy city in Islam, Helen's 'mecca' is a memorial to self-actualization and a trope of self-identification. It represents the period in her life where she was able to move from voiceless wife to resourceful creative artist, her creations articulating a freedom of spirit and a search for identification and meaning which emerged in her older years. Fugard's play chronicles a day of watershed events

in which she is forced to resurrect and confront the darkness of old demons in order to take charge of her life. *The Road to Mecca* played in two acts with three characters is another of Fugard's "miniaturist" dramas which sheds light on a world of issues.

### ***The Road to Mecca***

The setting for Fugard's play is the small house which Miss Helen occupies in the Karoo village of New Betheseda, South Africa. Helen's "mecca" is the home the frail and elderly woman has painted in brightly colored paints and adorned with thousands of pieces of broken mirrors, colored glass and found things. It is surrounded by a sculpture garden of figures and animals, owls and wise men molded of mud and cement. All that surrounds her has been made by hand, the product of her imagining and crafting, a way of negotiating the world and her own life since her husband's death. It is the labor of years but is viewed by the villagers as hideous, grotesque and a practice akin to idolatry. Her reclusive state has desensitized her to the ostracism of the village but over sensitized her to the re-living of her past, which she only remembers in its constant paralyzing fear of darkness. Her few social contacts come from local natives, the occasional visit from Elsa, a young female schoolteacher friend or the local church pastor, Marius Byleveld. The action encompasses a day in which Miss Helen's choice for her own independence becomes the salvation and solace she has not experienced for years. The play imagines the landscape of Helen's soul and spirit "coming to terms" with the realization that her fate and the remaining years of her life are in her control. Pastor Marius, having insisted that it is in her best interests, has left papers which would have her consigned

to a home for the elderly. Elsa arrives having driven several hundred miles in response to a suicidal letter she received from Helen. She has come not to visit but to determine to what extent Helen's mental state is placing her life in jeopardy. The young woman and the elderly pastor become pitted against each other in a debate over the fate of the elderly woman. They are both concerned with Helen's safety and well-being. Marius' longstanding acquaintanceship and secret attraction to Helen disguise his true intent in committing her to the home. That he is merely attempting to placate the village by ridding it of Helen's "idolatrous" creations does not occur to Helen. The rebellious and outspoken Elsa is adamant and direct in her contact with the pastor as she suggests his true motive. Elsa wants nothing more for Helen than that she be allowed the freedom to choose. Her friendship with Helen is based in trust and openness and she demands this of the pastor. Recognition is rekindled slowly but with an ever-increasing passion for existence in Helen. As night falls on a long sometimes-embittered day, she lights the candles and lamps which are reflections of the light she carries within. Elsa and Marius have functioned to force her to focus on herself. Through Helen's "mecca," they, too, grow to a new level of consciousness in understanding how liberty enables survival and how intimately the human mind and soul are connected.

Helen's freedom and autonomy are at stake but she seems incapable of making a decision for change. The debate between Elsa and Marius that ensues renders Helen voiceless until she is able to harness thought and the light within her to understand and choose the road she must continue to make for her life. The creations

which compose her “mecca” wrought from bits and pieces of discarded things and the clay mud figures of the world that surrounds her have provided solace and endeavor. It is where she feels safe. Through them, she gathers the strength to choose to remain where she has created home.

Fugard’s text imagines the contingency of Helen’s existence in the village as it enlightens the struggle within the elderly woman for articulation and voice in expression of artistic and personal freedom. The debate provides the dramatic line which enables revelations of truth as Helen questions her sanity and reconciles her past. The artist’s eccentricity and the sculptural menagerie of the yard pointing east provide rich and imagistic ground for Fugard to explore the freedom of speaking, choosing and moving with personal pride and conviction.

The work of another artist, *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket*, a 1978 collage by Romare Howard Bearden similarly provoked and inspired the first of several of Wilson historicizing explorations. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986) set in 1911 is an eleven character, two act, nine scene drama offering a multiplicity of voices to speak for this era in the Wilson chronology. Against the backdrop of the burgeoning industrial Northeast, the haven and hope for the freed grandchildren of Southern plantation slaves, Wilson sets in relief a community of disparate individuals, travelers all, seeking the road to a better life. In a poetic short essay preceding the play text the playwright describes the cultural background of the time:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned . . . carrying bibles and guitars . . . marked men and women seeking . . . a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect. (Prologue *Joe Turner*)

***Joe Turner's Come and Gone***

A boarding house on the outskirts of Pittsburgh is the setting for Wilson's play for the second decade. Seth and Bertha Holly, proprietors and permanent resident Bynum Walker welcome fellow black Americans as they travel in their migration north. Room, board and a sense of family is what they offer to young guitar-playing Jeremy Furlow and Mattie Campbell, estranged wife in search of her husband and an independent, attractive young woman named Molly. They cannot seem to provide comfort for Herald Loomis, a man desperate to find his wife. Distraught and driven, Loomis has arrived accompanied by his young daughter, Zonia. He decides to stay once Rutherford Selig, a white peddler with the reputation as a 'People Finder,' agrees to attempt to locate her as he travels and sells his wares. Although wary of Loomis' suspect and eccentric behavior, Seth rents him a room. Zonia will help Bertha with the chores to pay for the room and board. Within the days

that pass the residents share their dreams, doubts and fears about the future. Loomis continues to be an enigmatic figure. He communicates very little but his weighty presence suggests a mystery he is not willing to divulge. Zonia finds friendship with Reuben, a neighbor boy, who shares stories of Bynum's "conjuring" and of his own fear of her father who seems to see through "mean-looking" eyes. The Sunday evening meal of fried chicken and brotherhood segues into a spontaneous celebratory song and dance, a Juba, interrupted by the dark, frightening figure of Loomis castigating and cursing the invocations of the Holy Ghost. He is a man possessed, it seems, by forces which none around can fathom. Bynum moves in and guides Loomis in a vision of "bones people" rising from the water. As they materialize on land Loomis, on the ground unable to stand, recognizes them as "Mens. Just like you and me" (56).

The following day, members of the house dismiss Loomis' confounding display except for Seth who informs Loomis that his behavior will not be tolerated and he needs to leave. Loomis has paid for the week and for Selig's services. He will remain until Selig returns. Jeremy and Molly depart together and Mattie Campbell starts to feel herself drawn to Loomis. After dinner that evening, Bynum and Seth are playing a game of checkers when Loomis returns. Seth directs him to his dinner waiting on the stove. As Loomis sits alone eating in the kitchen, Bynum sings, "They tell me Joe Turner's come and gone/Ohhh Lordy/Got my man and gone/Come with forty links of chain/Ohhh Lordy" (69). Loomis is irritated by the song and warns him to stop. Seth is worried that Loomis may act out again. Bynum seems to know exactly



what he is doing as he draws Loomis into a dialogue where Herald reveals his past working on Joe Turner's chain gang. He speaks haltingly describing the darkness that seems to follow and surround him. As he details his past experiences, it is clear that his has been a disconcerted effort of an existence "wandering a long time in somebody else's world" (72). Loomis no longer appears a mysterious crazed figure, only a confused soul whose life has not been in his own. His intimate exchange with Mattie the next morning re-iterates his need for human contact and the love of a "full woman." Herald cannot seem to connect even though he feels attracted by her as he realizes "I done forgot how to touch" (77).

Saturday arrives and with it Selig and Martha Loomis (Pentecost). The scene of reunion devolves into one of disruption. Martha explains that she joined with the church in its move north, leaving Zonia with her mother. After five years of searching for Herald she resigned herself to the fact that they would not be reunited. She explains simply: "I killed you in my heart. I buried you. I mourned you" (90). As Loomis presents Zonia to her mother the child becomes distraught in the idea of separation. When Martha thanks Bynum for finding her child, Loomis reacts by blaming Bynum for his condition. He pulls out a knife. Martha attempts to quell the storm rising in Herald. Invoking the Twenty-Third Psalm does nothing but incite his wrath and rage as he refutes her ministering with a litany of the injustices which he has had to endure. He cannot abide "Mr. Jesus Christ . . . Great big old white man . . . with a whip in one hand and tote board in the other . . . tallying up the cotton" (92). When she pleads that he seek salvation in the "the blood of the lamb" Herald tears his

shirt open and slices across his chest declaring “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me” (93). He washes his face in the blood and a calming transformation occurs. He has found his “song.” He crosses the threshold of the boarding house to the awaiting road “shining” as Bynum describes, “like new money” (94).

Before Herald Loomis, freed from Joe Turner’s chain gang, can find his “song” he must justify his existence and claim his place in the world. He has been too long confined and protracted. Wilson’s characters, in dialogue, create a sense of place and time where shared stories and questions about the future provide a resonant background for Herald’s search for self. His ability to reconnect is challenged in his own desperate inability to find his connection to the world that surrounds him. During a mystical trancelike moment there is transference and recognition. Through the darkness covering his spirit Herald bleeds the blood of his ancestors as he cuts into his flesh. Exorcism as baptism. Cleansed and revitalized in and by their blood, mingled with his own, he is becomes reconstituted. Claimed by recognition of his place in the world, and his “song” defined, he embarks on the road.

Wilson’s setting is a place of transition. It is at once an arch between the past and future and a liminal gateway in the lives of most of the residents. Seth and Bertha, the children of freed Northerners have inherited the house and their roles as nurturers. Bynum has come to reside permanently in his latter years, a guardian of the past in the present. The boardinghouse is a “safe” house from which a new and stronger self-confident society will emerge. In the exchange of shared stories and

personal histories recognition occurs. The residents, pilgrims all, will search for their songs as they proceed on the road.

### **Navigating Trust: Faith, Hope and Patience**

It is not surprising that Fugard's original title for *The Road to Mecca* was to be *My Christian Name Is Patience*. Patience is the "woman on the road" that Elsa provides with food and a ride en route to New Bethesda. Her presence and example loom spectacularly in Fugard's explorations into the natures of Miss Helen and Elsa and of Fugard himself. After her husband's death, Patience, a South African coloured, is ostracized and dislocated and sent on her way. Bearing her young infant child on her back she travels, barefoot, carrying her only possessions in a plastic sack to an unknown destination where she hopes to find relatives. She embodies the resiliency and tenacity that seems to evade both Helen and Elsa. She is another Lena without Boesman, Helen without Stefanus, Elsa without David and Katrina without Koos. She signifies through the vast Karoo in her journey. The baby who gives her the focus of purpose could be named "Hope." It is not serendipitous or a playwright's manipulation that Elsa encounters her on the road. Fugard's *Notebooks* allude repeatedly to the disenfranchised coloureds walking and wandering the roads loaded with meager possessions. *Boesman and Lena*, an earlier play was inspired by such observations. Here, though, Patience, the woman, the virtue, resounds quietly symbolic as the playwright figuratively places her in the iconography of Helen's "garden" of pilgrimage.

In an enlightening and descriptive essay entitled *Over There: Plastic, Glass and Dust*, Dennis Wilson elegantly describes his encounter with Miss Helen's "Owl House" and sculpture garden. Situated as it in the ageless, unchanging landscape of the arid and sunbaked Karoo he describes: "An entire jaunty universe of deviant statues, a fervent elegy that stands and runs and weeps and laughs and reaches and asks only that you do the same inside yourself . . ." (Dennis Wilson). In the South African landscape, the "real" Helen's art "plays" as a moving and active form. It is as endemic to its originator and place as it is ironically planted. The same might be said for the playwright challenged and inspired by the now known and celebrated artist. Fugard fulfills and completes Helen's form providing her a "road" for recognition. What Dennis Wilson observes about the sculpture garden may be said for Fugard's play as well.

The play examines old age, impotency, emotional and artistic, and the depths to which darkness can sink the spirit. It flirts with the idea of rebellion, blasphemy and the subversive nature of art and centers on the place or role of its female subject(s). It privileges freedom of spirit over the stricture of norms in order to explore what the ravaging encounter with personal demons can be. It attempts to reconcile disengagement spawned by living as an outsider at the same time that it champions "The [real] freedom consist[ing] of the inward submission to a value which defies history and its successes" (Fugard, *Notebooks* 61). Albert Wertheim describes the play in the context of Fugard's political stance in South Africa of the 1980s: "Although *The Road to Mecca* focuses on the situation of the artist, it is also

rather more obliquely about South African political and racial dilemmas . . . the commitment of the artist to the freedom of her art . . . is at one with commitment to freedom in the sociopolitical arena” (167). Helen finds company and friendship with the coloureds since her departure from her church brethren of years before. Elsa’s encounter with Patience also supports the idea of Helen’s “othering” in her village and country. The black woman ‘on the road’ is an allegorical encounter for Elsa. Patience represents the resilience in Helen, Elsa, and all South Africans toward resolution and arrival at a destination. After offering a ride to a solitary black female figure on the road, much like the character in Elsa’s story, Fugard reflected:

The enigma, of course was the bundle on her head – an old bath, a blanket, a three-legged cast iron pot – all that was left of her life, but no – Using her as a metaphor – I think Life is asking you, telling you, to take that walk. Like you are crying. But walk . . . put your life on your head and walk . . . The walk is long, bitter, barren, full of pain, but it is the only way to live. (Benson 25)

The allegorical underpinnings of Helen’s artistic journey and Elsa’s literal travel to give and seek counsel both play out in Patience the solitary figure on the road. “She is my sister, you are my mother.” Elsa’s clear sighted identification of their relationship is not simply poetic license. It is an articulation of their connection in a world and journey they share. Although they are different they have a common bond. It is an emotional utterance at the end of a long day of undiluted soul searching. It ties the women to Fugard’s political agenda even as it suggests the author’s ability and interest in examining feminist iconography. Janet Ruth Heller has observed that “it is

unusual to find a man exploring the complexities of a woman's relationship" (473). The same might be intimated in Fugard's examination of his non-white countrymen.

*The Road to Mecca* plays in two movements. It contains "arias" for each of the three characters and is operatically scored in its emotional indulgence but successful and convincing. Ironically, Jean Carlo Menotti, former artistic director of the Spoleto festival opted to bring the play to the Spoleto rather than attempt to musicalize it as a libretto. The first act of reunion and recognition serves as prelude for the heated debate and the obligatory conversation of the second act which capitulates in a poetic lyricism reminiscent of the best in opera. The revelations and realizations which occur bring as much light to the darkened spirits of all three characters as is possible. Paradoxically, Helen, suffering, anxious and despondent at the play's onset becomes the most transformed and resilient presence. Elsa and Marius have also encountered darkness on their personal roads to self-discovery and have had it dispelled, at least for the time being, in the artist/mother's home.

Fugard has plumbed his own psyche as an artist and creator of the Karoo and transmits through Helen the very finite realities of the difficulty and relevant legitimacy of true and individual artistic expression in the midst of alienation and ostracism and political pressure. He, himself, has occupied the place of artist as outsider. His *Notebooks* pose the problem early in his career after the success of *The Blood Knot*. "Can I anymore work in a theatre which excludes 'Non-Whites' . . . I think my answer must be No" (59). Some thirty years later, Fugard spoke freely about his own experience in the macrocosm of South Africa.

The reality of censorship was three-pronged: Ideas of political nature were obviously dangerous. But in some senses, the control over political content paled in comparison to the absolute frothing at the mouth and rabid detestation of anything that was – blasphemous or pornographic. In final analysis, I think I ran into more trouble because of deliberate crudities in language and my questioning of the Calvinist religious ethics of my country than I did for the political content of my plays. (“Scenes” 33)

His description, later in the same article, “In South Africa, art through the dark years was a survival kit” (34) also aptly refers to Miss Helen. Fugard’s artistic vision and psychological make-up seem to coalesce in Miss Helen as he conjures her spirit. His feminist stance though understated is evident. She is the Patience he meets on the road in his own evolving text which seeks to bring light to the darkness which for him is South Africa. Miss Helen’s daily ritual of “light,” which has been the source of her survival, has brought a renewed sense of understanding to Marius, Elsa, Helen, and Fugard, himself. He joins Helen and Patience in the “song,” on his/their “road” to Mecca, in a theatrical diorama and palimpsest.

### **Larger than life**

The stages of African American history are revisited and revised as Wilson writes everyday life in each decade of the twentieth century. Of the ten plays in his cycle Wilson has cited *Joe Turner* as his favored play. “My signature play would be *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Most of the ideas of the other plays are contained in that one play” (Bryer 251). Recognizing a model in twentieth century African

American painter and collagist Romare Bearden, Wilson was stimulated and it is in his work that Wilson found inspiration.

Bearden for me is very important; because it's the first time I encountered anyone who dealt with black life in a large way. He shows through his work a black life that has its own sense of self, its own fullness, and he does this in terms of myth and ritual . . . I try to define the ritual that's attendant on everyday life to uncover and expose it. (Bryer 17)

Harry Elam concurs as he extends Bearden/Wilson's metaphor describing the embodied ritualized action in the plays as practical sites for personal and social transformation . . . Wilson's dramaturgical style . . . has evolved to a place where the symbolic becomes the methodology for conjoining the past and the present, the self and the surrounding sociopolitical environment. (25)

Originally planning to title his play after an influential Bearden collage Wilson explains the event which germinated the play and brought it into focus. "I did not quite understand what the play was about until I was listening to a song by W.C. Handy called *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in which Handy said that the story of the blues could not be told without the story of Joe Turner" (Bryer 54). Fortified in his "blues aesthetic" and the visual stimulation of Bearden's collage, Wilson chose to explore the northern migration of blacks some 45 years after emancipation, the diaspora which occurred, and its effect in the lives of a group of individuals in search of identity, place and purpose.



### **Crossing the threshold/Passage**

In the final moments of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* after reuniting his daughter with her mother, rejecting the white man's God and "bleeding" for himself, Herald Loomis washes his face with his blood and steps into a world which, until now he has been ill equipped to encounter. He is spiritually connected to something which gives him the power to stand. He is revitalized, free from psychological bondage. He has found his "song" and is "shining." The darkness which for so long has imprisoned his spirit has been dispelled in his acceptance of personal power. He is no longer an indentured, impotent half-man. His new "road" is the challenge of a freedom he had anticipated but never thought possible. He has weathered his own great migration and his own personal middle passage. He has taken light into his soul, in the inheritance and ancestry he recognizes in the vision of the "bones people." And, like the "shiny man" in Bynum's story, Loomis is gone. Herald Loomis has come and gone in an inverted formulation of the play's title with quite different significance. Loomis, the father, ex-con, preacher, "one of Joe Turner's niggers," and outcast "other" is revitalized in his American African-ness. The Pittsburgh boarding house and way station has functioned as a liminal space as well as a portal. The provocation of the shaman who has guided his transition functions in his renewal, but it is in his connection to a greater cultural reality and the identification of self directed responsibility that his spirit coalesces.

Wilson's play limns the realities of the sons and daughters of freed slaves in their search for place and self-identification at the beginning of the Great Migration.

Although the boarding house suggests transiency and the temporary, it offers cultural solidarity and a sense of family. Bertha feeds this diasporan family biscuits and grits with a mother's concern and care. Seth dispenses practical advice and instills discipline as he models a progressive business ethic. Bynum, the spiritual grandfather and link to ancestral African ways, is priest, counselor and provocateur. Jeremy, the young musician, Mattie, the childless deserted wife and Molly, the independent single female have all stopped in their travel north. Jeremy and Molly represent the younger generation not overly concerned with the future as much as participating in a viable present. Mattie's bereaved search for re-connection with her husband most closely approximates Herald's passionate and obsessive need to locate his wife. Zonia, Loomis' daughter and Reuben represent yet another generation. There is knowing innocence as they mimic the behaviors of their elders. Life for them is an active adventure. Death is a mystery. Reuben mourns Eugene. Zonia is assured her father will find her mother. Selig, in the business of selling, trading and finding, is a link to the white world but more importantly, as the People Finder, his role resonates as an agent of re-connection for separated families and relatives. Martha (Loomis) Pentecost, a former boarder, traveled on and found solace in the church. Faith and Jesus have been her sustenance. The characters that people Wilson's construction are a diverse collection of individuals, a cross-section of the numberless who have migrated north. Employing the collage technique of one of his mentors, Wilson seems to draw Loomis' dramatic line against an interactive background of varying forms. Simultaneously, Herald's search is the connective tissue which links and informs the

others. Set amidst the transiency of the boarding house, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a "place" play for the displaced. It is enlightening and more than constructively aware as it juxtaposes the dreams, hopes, needs and wants of its characters in a collage of the experience they share. The play distinguishes itself within the chronology in this construction and articulation.

### **Bones People**

Herald experiences his vision of "the bones people" after he has interrupted the Juba celebration. The figures he sees in his vision emerging from the ocean begin to walk on land. In his confused and highly excited state, he does not and cannot comprehend their significance. They are vivid and active in his waking dream. The playwright himself seems to have been captured by the spectral presences of his invention. Some twenty years later he introduces The City of Bones in *Gem of the Ocean*, which represents the first decade of the chronology and is set seven years before *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. In the set piece and climax of the second act, Aunt Ester, the 285 year old matriarch, freed slave, soothsayer and ancestral link, leads Citizen Barlow on a mystical pilgrimage to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. The ceremony which will free Barlow from his past crime and escort him to a realization of self and purpose plays as séance, journey and ritual, complete with chanting and masks. Aunt Ester fashions a paper boat, the *Gem of the Ocean*, from her own Bill of Sale into slavery. Aboard this boat Barlow journeys to the bottom of an ocean graveyard city. Ester navigates the ocean voyage assisted by Black Mary, her young protégé and housekeeper and Solly Two Kings, her suitor and a former

Underground Railroad conductor. During the sea journey, a storm arises in Barlow's refusal to confront his own failure of spirit and he is shackled in the bowels of the slave ship where recognition begins. "They all look like me. They got my face" (66). In his acknowledgement of his sins he is able to break the chains that bind him and the City of Bones materializes in a vision. The under ocean city "a half mile by a half mile" of "pearly white bones" (52) is constructed entirely of the bones of Africans lost at sea during the Middle Passage. Barlow approaches the gatekeeper and identifies himself and admits his crimes and as the gate begins to swing open Barlow wakes as from a frenzied dream. Wilson has travelled backward in time within his own constructed chronology to tie Herald and Barlow in powerful moments of recovery.

There is recognition and community as the residents of the boarding house are similarly joined in a ceremony the Sunday evening *Juba*. The *Juba* in *Joe Turner* acts in its catalytic power in much the same way as Aunt Ester's sea voyage ritual and it is successful in extending and elaborating on her metaphor. The *Juba* is a shared life-giving celebration in its improvised dance and shouts of praise. It is an overt expression of community and belonging. It is a spontaneous "happening" in which participation equals presence. For Herald it amplifies his exclusion and rejection. It is a barrier he is incapable of negotiating, an ocean, if you will, he is unwilling to cross. His angered condemnation and rejection of all it represents provokes the psychic break which occurs in him and, ironically, enables vision. "Breaking and building/In the progression of this world go hand in hand" Christopher

Frye's shepherd explains in his modern miracle play of self-trust and enabling (Frye 22). So, too, the darkness in Herald Loomis' soul must be dispelled and he must be broken before he can build a new life. The theatrical ritual which Wilson orchestrates in the *Juba* and Herald's contentious rejection and condemnation of it is efficacious. The *Juba's* incantatory power has called forth the ghosts of ancestors from their watery graves and enabled Herald "to see" the "bones people" reconstituted and made flesh as they moved across the surface of the water and stepped onto the land. The *Juba* and Herald's paralyzing vision at the end of Act I serve as prelude to the exorcism of renewal which ends the play. Molly and Jeremy have already traveled on. Zonia has a mother to nurture and guide her. Mattie realizes the kind of man she needs. Seth and Bertha and Bynum wait to welcome the next group of travelers on the road.

### **Inspiration/provocation**

Fugard and Wilson are joined in a dialogue with Helen Martins and Romare Bearden, the artists who inspired them. They are provoked and passionate in their choice to write stimulated by the work of artists in other media. As they imagine and give breath, and have responded to these artists they explore their works as they create their own. The characters placed in action in both Fugard's and Wilson's constructions live and move in peripheral spaces of experience. They are identifiable as outsiders. The protagonists of both dramas inhabit marginal space in search of authentic meaning. Helen's New Bethesda "mecca" home and the Pittsburgh boarding house where Herald arrives in search of his wife serve as both harbors and

havens. They are, if you will, liminal spaces in each character's journey to self-understanding/actualization. In their 'othered' existences and objectified lives their response has been to self-surrender. It is in these spaces that the past plays out in order for a stable present to come into focus. It is within these places and in their psychological states that the decision to complete or continue each one's life journey is determined. The simple ritual of existence becomes monumental as both characters face the realization that positive action requires their participation. They can no longer linger or be relegated to the margins. They realize they have no reason to remain physically, mentally, and more importantly spiritually subjugated by a life which has held them apart or in conflict with whom they must become. It is only through the exorcising of past ghosts and patterns of action that renewal will begin. The exorcising of demons is as unconscious in these plays as it is deliberate. For Helen and Herald it has taken a lifetime to become activated. Their search for purpose has been lived in a wakeful fiery nightmare, a fire that eventually fuels their spirit and leads to epiphanies of understanding.

Helen's art gives her life a shape and her soul a way to understand its solitary existence. It confirms her solidarity and kinship with the monsterly creations into which she breathes life. She has populated her world with inanimate creation to keep her company, to guard her, to ward off the world which has ridiculed and ostracized her. She has come to the end of a road even as her yard sculptures point their noses and wings to the East and urge flight. Helen's death wish and suicide may be her ultimate act of freedom and choice. Since she has lived as an "outsider" her direction

toward self-actualization has gradually become crystal clear. Her self-christened “mecca,” imagined and built to her own design, is a never land she will only have hoped to have known.

Herald, much like Patience, ‘the woman on the road,’ who Elsa meets, is traveling on foot, his young daughter in tow. He is ‘the man on the road.’ He passes through the Pittsburgh boarding house ancestor to Troy, father to Boy Willie, brother to Levee. Where these others assert and shout their presence, however, Loomis shuns contact and the commerce of words. He has been made dumb, if you will, or is unable to articulate. His experience of darkness in prison and indentured servitude has made him incapable of retrieving a thread of connection to the world in which he finds himself. In a symbolic dialogic connection Helen and Herald begin their plays at different points on the road, but their journeys can be perceived as synergistic.

Using a post-colonial lens, Helen and Herald are both ‘other,’ and in their reaction to their ‘othering’ lies their conflict. As the dramas play out, they voice their opposition within condition, choose to accept personal responsibility and are “heard.” The ultimate positive understanding of self and the boundary which presented the rupture is substantively the discourse of both plays. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* label the condition of otherness and difference as alterity.

Alterity is derived from the Latin, *alteritas*, meaning ‘the state of being other or different . . . In postcolonial theory, the term has often been used interchangeably with otherness and difference. The self-identity of the

colonizing subject, indeed the identity of imperial culture is inextricable from alterity of colonized others, an alterity determined according to Spivak, by the process of othering. (12)

Colonized subjects are identified as ‘other.’ The label often becomes the ideological framework for how he/she understands the world. This subject, located in the eye of some center of control or figure of power, is simultaneously *compared* and *distanced*. History, life experience, biography, and location, mix and mingle in the condition and identification of “other.” These elements are instrumental from the perspective of power which defines the cause and creates the label of separation. Defining the cultural “other” sets in motion a series of assumptions as it separates an individual or group socially, politically, economically and strategically. Herald’s indentured servitude and identification/recognition as “one of Joe Turner’s niggers” doubly defines him by power structures of control in the wake of emancipation. In fact, through much of the action he is held to ridicule and kept ‘at arms length’ by the other members of the household, suffering a pseudo inscribed ‘othering’ within and among his own cultural group. All of the residents of the boarding house exist marginally. Herald is “other.” Helen though located within the village has existed as an outcast. Her decision not to return to the church congregation and her artistic creations have caused her to be ostracized by the village. She presents, in the eyes of the villagers, a similar double ‘othering’ as an elderly female widow and as unconventional artist.



*The Road to Mecca* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* purposefully “play” to each other in their common agenda. They are examples of self-reflexive intertextuality. Herald Loomis and Miss Helen are central to the cross cultural dialogue they share. They speak to each other as beings formed by a dark confounding and confusing past. They emerge in both texts enlightened by newly staged experience. The characters of *Joe Turner* in their portraiture exist as a gallery of experience. They share to varying degrees the insecurity and instability that Herald desperately epitomizes. Miss Helen exists polarized between what is reasonably conventional and acceptable behavior and what expresses her personal stake in the world. She is a woman born too late to understand what Elsie realizes but is too fearful to act on. What both characters, Helen and Herald, have lived and been pressured to believe has been the only reality they have known.

Herald Loomis is intent on finding his wife to partner him in raising the child left to his care. His daughter represents the fruit of a life lived temporarily. Although a symbol of his fertile manhood, her age reminds of the exigent need for Herald to re-discover and re-install “self” and deliver his daughter to a mother who can counsel her to adulthood. His search is for self-recognition and completeness. He must know that the road he next chooses, re-establishing a life with his wife, once found, or moving forward on his own, will lead to that fulfillment. Helen has come, as she says, to the end of her road, a road on which she embarked after the death of her husband. She, too, is at a crossroads. Both characters live a present without recognition. Both realize the potential of that future. They are unable to accept the options that life has

to offer them or to trade it as currency in renewal. If Helen is at the end of her road, Herald is late to begin his road. As evening falls, Helen's candles light the way and her statues point to the East. Confirmation of the potential "light" within him, Herald knows himself a freed man, although continuing to feel fettered by darkness. He chooses to travel east. Helen's sculpture is synergistic with Herald's nature. He is a statue she might create, an anomaly, a gargoyle, a roughhewn sculpted man corralled in the small courtyard of her world. The elegance of her acceptance of her position is his simple understanding of his humanity. As Helen fears and attempts to avoid conflict Herald invites it. Both refuse to accept limitation.

Helen's home and yard is a gallery composed of found things, broken pieces and parts of simple objects re-cycled to create a world and a life. It is an articulation and "fence" which protects, surrounds and keeps her safe even as it keeps others at bay. It is her communion with and manipulation of the world in which she finds herself. Although vital, and perhaps, a desperate expression of her condition, it is a psychological manifestation of her presence. Herald's presence though noted by the boarders, is peripheral. He comes and goes with very little interaction. The proprietors and residents are of little interest to him except in how they might assist him in locating his wife. The residents who have stopped for a time in the Pittsburgh outskirts display as sketches. These are unfinished, incomplete and searching, portraits in process, figure drawings in relief, which, as they dialogue with each other reveal lives lived as marginal descendants of outsiders. Herald's "stop" on the road is to rest from travel and gain information. He wants family for himself and daughter. He is

fully aware of his need for the intervention which will allow him a life and humanity he can own in the world. His interaction with the other residents is limited and deliberately tentative. He is unable to pass time with idle chat and conversation. He is viewed as a dark foreboding figure. Seth is concerned only with the welfare of the house. He rents to Herald as he would any other traveler enforcing the rules and demanding the fee for the shelter. Bynum, the architect and prime motivator in Herald's transformational vision sculpts and forces the dark mystery of Loomis to a psychic break of realization and understanding. Bynum's "voodoo" persuades Herald to experience the vision, which enables the subsequent blood baptism and regeneration.

### **The Road**

The "road" is employed in both plays as a leitmotif and constructed metaphor. Herald is traveling by foot on the road. The road has been the route all of the residents have taken as they emigrated north. Bynum relates meeting the Shining Man "on the road." Selig, the People Finder, works "the road" peddling and reuniting separated family members. The title *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* suggests arrival and departure on a metaphorical level. Where movement on the road in *Joe Turner* is communal and that of diasporan separation, with all it entails, physically and psychologically, it is, ultimately, a procession to possibility. The road in *Mecca* presents a solitary route of wandering through doubt and insecurity that transitions in a pilgrimage of renewal. *The Road to Mecca* includes the reference in the title even as it suggests the yearly pilgrimage to the holy place. Elsie drives 800 miles, by car, to

visit Helen. Her encounter with Patience is “on the road.” Patience, much like Herald, travels by foot on the road, her child strapped to her back. She has been displaced and her travel like Herald’s is in search of family. Helen, severely depressed, is about to relinquish control of her life as she imagines herself at the end of her road. Miss Helen’s “mecca” and the boarding house location on the road in Pittsburgh are parallel sites, dis-places of experience that, ironically, become sites of recognition and “place-ment” that signify movement and possibility. Much like Helen Martins and Romare Bearden, the artists who inspired the creation of *The Road to Mecca* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Fugard and Wilson have grafted their own experiences in modern South Africa and America to the emotional and psychological journeying of Miss Helen and Herald Loomis. This molding and re-imagining of experience becomes activated in the drama of crafted playwriting as it presents voices that fold and reflect upon one another in a refractive dialogue of connection.

### **Other voices**

With visual artists and the medium of artistic creation as inspiration both Fugard and Wilson have found connection in a wealth of surface structure and material. Helen Martins, the artist Fugard never met, became the character he draws in Miss Helen. Helen Martins, who died by suicide and has since been immortalized by the Fugard play but more importantly by her home, Owl House, “once an object of derision and embarrassment (that) has become the single most important asset of the village of Nieu-Bethesda” (Miss Helen). The house and yard are now visited by thousands, a tourist and artist destination in New Bethesda. The primitively rendered

work of her hands that draws people to Owl House can be categorized as Outsider Art. Rooted in its “otherness” the work is fresh, original, unexpected. Outsider art is synonymous with visionary art, intuitive art and has much in common with grassroots art. The term Outsider Art, coined by art critic, Roger Cardinal in 1972 is derived from French artist Jean Dubuffet’s identification of Art Brut or Raw Art in the 1940s. Dubuffet suggested that art falling into this category was immune to the influences of the mainstream and defied those definitions because the artists themselves were unwilling to be assimilated. Their work defied categorization and was regarded as “other.” His justification in singularizing this original brand of art production is an enlightened aesthetic statement about self-taught artists who create with immediacy and honesty. The art of outsider “others” emerges unadulterated and subconsciously as a product and response to their “othering.” The deeply personal and visionary work of non-mainstream “culturally alienated and asocial artists,” like Helen, is without formal training and often derived from bits and pieces of easily obtainable recycled materials. The organic nature of the simplicity of the statements made by the work, itself, *is* its negotiation and dialogue with the world. With metaphorical motifs drawn directly from experience, Helen’s purpose in creating was expression, finding with the visual, a voice to articulate her presence. What is most compelling in understanding the purpose in the creation of work by artists like Helen is that their art exists and persists as a product of expression – personal, private and outside of what is acceptable as normal, produced as it has by an “other.” The work exists due to a desperate need to articulate and work out the expression of something for which there

are no words. Their recognition for what they create comes from the stories their art “tells” and the mere fact that they produce art with no expectation beyond the personal satisfaction, pleasure and identification it provides for the artist herself. This art does not simply create ‘place’ and ‘role.’ It dialogues with a misunderstanding world that has not provided placement. The artist/person wrestles with the primitivism of form and style to create images which are comforting and familiar, an exercise resulting in art which defines and creates “home.”

Wilson refers repeatedly to the artistic provocation of Romare Bearden’s work, specifically his collages, as an influence for *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson* as well. “In Bearden I found my artistic mentor and sought, and still aspire, to make my plays the equal of his canvasses” (Schwartzman 8). The drama of Bearden’s collage compositions inspired in the passion of the artist’s depiction. Wilson adapted the technique to his playwriting. Structure, composition and practice imitates his mentor as he constructs his drama.

I work like this – in collages. I just write stuff down and pile it up and when I get enough stuff I spread it out and look at it and figure out how to use it. You get enough stuff and you start to build a scene and you don’t know where the scene’s going, and you don’t have any idea what’s going to follow after that . . . Just like working in collages, you shift it around and organize it . . . very much like Romare Bearden, you move your stuff around on the pages until you have a composition that satisfies you, that expresses the idea of something and then – bingo – you have a play. (Parks Interview)

Though Bearden was a trained and educated artist, it is in his more organic and original collage work of the mid twentieth century that the images and style influence and capture Wilson's eye.

A world of flesh and muscle and blood and bone and fire. A world made of scraps of paper, of line and mass and form and shape and color and all the melding of grace and birds and trains and guitars and woman bathing and men with huge hands and hearts pressing on life until it gave back something in kinship. A spirit conjured into being unbroken unbowed. (Schwartzman 9)

Bearden's materials are the raw bits and pieces of the human and natural world experience. His compositions are constructed of scraps and torn images of men and women through whom he creates an inclusive world of wholeness. He, too, is dealing with remnants, pieces of things. His presence and creative output on the art scene although more mainstream in much of his opus, remained "outside" the norm. Though not categorized as Outsider Art, his work, that of an American black artist, original and un-imitative, in the first half of the twentieth century, clearly defines, even proclaims itself the Art of the Outsider.

Martins and Bearden both were artists seeking to give shape and meaning to their existence, striving with their art to create a context in which they might experience connection and an understanding of "place." With simple and recycled material they sought to mark personal space. Like their influences, Fugard and Wilson listened for the words the pictures and the statues provided; how art "speaks" and tells us about life. Characters emerge and become refracted symbols of the art,

images and words that have somehow coalesced to create them. Miss Helen steps onto the stage in a world that includes her and has been constructed with her center stage. Herald Loomis arrives at the Pittsburgh boardinghouse only to depart wholly changed. They reference the history of others. Their dialogue is that of conversions.

Martins, the artist on whose experience *The Road to Mecca* is based, was able to decorate a mosque of communion and plant a garden of pilgrims where *she* made sense. For a few moments at the dusk of day, Fugard's Miss Helen experiences her place in a world she has defined. The world controlled by the Church and by men is ineffective and cannot motivate her or make her feel guilty. Even Elsie's aggressive scolding and unwillingness to act for Helen is not strong enough to touch her where she resides. Her 'mecca,' although not quite what most would imagine, is, indeed, her own. Her disordered existence has led her to a peace, induced by the labor of her own hands. She is home, her spirit re-made, in the very human trek of survival.

Romare Bearden inspired Wilson with his collage *The Millhand's Lunch Bucket*, framed in a series of works entitled *Pittsburgh Memories*. Bearden's collage depicts a man in workman's clothes descending the stairs of a boardinghouse reaching for his lunch bucket. Visible through a window is an industrial city where white smoke billows from a factory mill. The focal figure is headed to work while another man seated and slumped by exhaustion has recently returned. The common room is occupied by another man at a table and the proprietress surveying the scene. It is an active and many layered composition. It is the seated man who claimed Wilson's attention.



I began to wonder, who was this figure of the abject man sitting in a posture of defeat. It occurred to me that all the people in the painting were going out, and they were going to leave this man alone just when what he needed most was human contact. (Three Plays, ix)

Wilson constructs Herald Loomis' fractured reality against the backdrop of Bearden's collage and at the suggestion of it. Bearden working with varied media arranges the visual ground to tell a story and depict a moment. The silent hopelessness and resignation of the slumped man in the foreground informed and stimulated Wilson's imagination to create a play to tell the story.

Fugard and Wilson have looked to the work of outsider artists as inspiration and perhaps as context in scripting *The Road to Mecca* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. They are by no means "outsider artists" by the definition accorded the work of Martins, though they are "self taught." In these plays as well as in many of their produced works they have achieved artistic acceptance if not commercial success. They are regarded as sensitive and articulate mainstream artists when writing of worlds they have observed. Their success has come from mainstream productions playing before audiences on Broadway and in London theatres as well as other venues around the globe. Yet the implication of paradox is evident. Fugard, as white South African rendering the experience of what it is to live as marginalized, whether black, coloured, or poor white, seems an anomaly. August Wilson, though raised and nurtured in his black mother's culture, is the son of a white man. Both men bear witness to the worlds they depict from the inside out as they observe the sites of their

subjects from the outside in. They are artists who have stepped across thresholds of opposition to communicate stories that attempt to touch the organic nature of life. In the reality and world to which they were born Fugard and Wilson have encountered boundaried existences and they know their heroes well. They intelligently refuse to purport happy endings. Miss Helen and Herald almost defy the images that the writers have been successful in capturing. They contain and form the dramatic line of each play driven by the choices with which they are confronted. Their outsider status paints them as characters displaced from self even more remarkably than from location or a position of belonging. The dialogue which flows through the protagonists is simple. Herald is a man of few words because he does not trust their viability. Miss Helen speaks afraid her words are unworthy. The biography of each character demonstrates their nominal connection to their own past and confused present. They suffer from the condition of “othering” existing in what Spivak calls “a space of difference.” They do not meet societal norms and are perceived abnormal and ‘other’ by the privileged society which brands them as outcasts. As Pierre Clastre writes: “Cultural alterity is never thought of as a positive difference but always as inferiority on a hierarchical axis” (*Archeology of Violence* 3). As Foucault insists they are excluded from positions of power, ‘other,’ and are thus often victimized. Their alienation condemns them much like the resistance of Camus’ anti-hero in *The Stranger*:

Because he does not play the game . . . foreign to the society in which he lives: he wanders, on the fringe, in the suburbs of private solitary and sensual

life . . . he refuses to lie. To lie is not only to say what isn't true . . . (but) to say more than is true and . . . to express more than one feels. (Preface *The Stranger*)

In Helen and Herald's resistance inversion takes hold. Their status as outsiders and "others" breaches a condition of alterity and pushes them to the center in a battle for recognition. Their alienation is a role they have subsumed due to circumstances of the past and perhaps passive political exigencies. As worthy heroes both Helen and Herald present images of individual resistance as a definition of freedom. It is simultaneously a breaking free from what might be conceived as "imperial" perceived racial and societal rules. Elsa's quoting of Camus "rebellion starts with one person standing up and saying 'no'" is apt. The evolving phenomenology of self-awareness and recognition which arcs in both dramas proceeds directly from the principals' stoic survival in an environment barren of support and encouragement.

Herald Loomis finds his "song" in his ability to stand and take his place in the world, a cognitive realization of his freedom. Helen's consciousness is heightened in the moment she takes a stand and asserts her independence and selfhood. Helen and Herald as apart in worlds as the playwrights who have animated their spirits, somehow share the exchange of, yes, a qualified misunderstanding of their reality and a moment in which they speak knowledgeably from the center of it about their experience, rejecting the labels pressed upon them as 'others' by others. Herald and Helen share a conversation about understanding situations which promote misunderstanding, about the scourge of not only living at the whim and will of others

but also about the need to self-express or self-destruct. Helen is as white in South Africa as Herald is black in America. But the conversation is clearly not that simply black and white. They exist in “other people’s worlds.” Helen is old, frail yet luminous. Herald is strong, broken but fiery. Both fear the responsibility of being center as they anticipate the recognition of possibility. In their present filled with too much past both Helen and Herald capitulate.

Options of escape are not acceptable where deeper truths have lived dormant and demand recognition. This is only possible if boundaries are crossed. Helen’s condition though prompted by different circumstances is no less insidious a form of discrimination. She, too, is a prisoner within her elderly skin. Though she may be labeled by others as crazy, eccentric and daft, she is not recognized in what fundamentally prompts and directs her spirit. Herald is perceived as sinister and dangerous. He shares with Helen the failure of a misunderstanding society. Even in the temporary community house of passage he is regarded suspiciously. Helen has been shunned and avoided for years. She has retreated into the garden where her sculpture grows, a substitution/ communication of her dismantled psyche. Since her husband’s death she has been mourning her life. She has attempted to stifle the jeers of the villagers while deaf to the call of the church and pastor Marius. She will not be disquieted by her past or the village’s scorn. Threatening to implode, Herald has kept his hatred of the white man for controlling him, at bay. His rejection of formalized religion, and a God he can only identify as “the white man’s” has caused him to recede into the depths of his own unfathomable reality. Both Herald and Helen have

balanced their claimed identification between a secular and singular survival and a condition which finds no comparison. In that, they are comparably similar. Their individual experiences play to and dialogue with each other. They are pilgrims both journeying in foreign lands to the holy place that can only be found inside themselves. Their road of pilgrimage leads from darkness into light, from self-doubt and self-hatred to a recognition of their own personal power. Recognition comes for both characters in the transformations that the dramas activate and narrate. Bynum, the conjurer, is awestruck as a strong, standing Herald proudly exits the boarding house “shining like new money.” Marius, the minister, cannot ignore a Miss Helen he has never seen as confident and at peace: “I’ve never seen you as happy as this. There is more light in you than in all your candles put together.”

Helen and Herald cross boundaries in the dramas that place them center. They are two characters created by playwrights intent on exploring the lives of the exiled outsider. The necessity to write, by which both writers were claimed, was prompted and found resolution in the path their dramas lead us down. The roads *they* traveled became their maps, and dramas formed from the material of personal journeys of observation. What might appear to be impossible has occurred. A white man in South Africa has been a voice for disenfranchised South African blacks, coloureds and non-whites. A mixed race African American has re-imagined a century of history for Americans of African descent. Audiences have traveled to where they have led. Captured and connected boundaries are crossed. Audiences are never more aware than when truly listening how the experience of good storytelling has the

power to engage and offer a vision of things other than how they have thought them to be. The power of purposeful art is in hearing what has been beyond our understanding or what we have not only been ignorant of but perhaps what we have been taught or thought to fear. Crossing boundaries is threatening and requires the ability to negotiate. Crossing boundaries can become fulfilling and a re-imagining of self. It can determine the degree to which an individual has the potential to think about what was unavailable before. Recognition comes in the lifting of boundary and limitation. The vocabulary of thought and action is altered. A new realization of order is set in motion. Such is the case in the journey of Miss Helen and Herald.

Fugard in *The Road to Mecca* negotiates artistic freedom as it plays through Miss Helen's conflicted misunderstanding of her own self-worth. Herald Loomis, Wilson's heroic anti-hero of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, succeeds in beginning to recognize himself as truly valuable. These protagonists cross boundaries of misunderstanding as they access new worlds of possibility. Helen has spent years attempting to dispel a darkness which has enveloped her spirit, her soul. Herald finds the glimmer in his to begin the process. A black man in America, a white woman in South Africa and the journeys of countless others continue through these plays. What the playwrights give us are, as Susan Imrie Ross describes Helen Martin's oeuvre, "works of imagination, passionate . . . through which runs a cohesive and thematic thread of yearning; a quest for meaning and wholeness, conceived with a commitment which makes [the] work unique . . . and profoundly moving" (258). What they point to, with hope, are her candles, his spirit, the mother, the child and the road.

*Man's isolation, his lonely search for warmth, intelligibility and meaning in an alien world, his avowal of human dignity, affirmation of his identity, and temporary recourse to dreams and illusions before embracing a present bereft of consoling myths – these are the themes so fundamental they cannot be delimited to a single society that will someday crumble from its inherent contradictions.*

*-Russell Vandenbroucke*

*The margins, our sites of survival become our fighting grounds . . .*

*-Trinh T. Minh-Ha*

*There is no alibi in existence.*

*-Mikhail Bakhtin*

## **Chapter 5**

### **Writing the Margin: Listening for Voices**

#### ***Boesman and Lena and Two Trains Running***

Vietnamese filmmaker and author Trinh T. Minh-Ha's work focuses on the positioning of the marginalized 'other' in her postcolonial critique. She views her practice as "processes of transformation" which reflect her social position and as an approach to a reading or viewing audience. Her work addresses "the orientation of individuals towards both their own and the non-marginal group and the concept of a barrier" (Dickie-Clark 364). "To use marginality as a starting point rather than an ending point is also to cross beyond it towards other affirmations and negations. There cannot be any grand totalizing integration without massive suppression, which is a way of re-circulating the effects of domination" (Minh-Ha "No Master Territories" 197). Fugard and Wilson have observed the "margin" in their lives and

writing and have articulated the plight of marginal men and woman in the transformative process and effect of their playwriting. Marginality defined as “the temporary state of having been put aside, of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic)” (IGU 2), can further be described conceptually as societal and spatial. Societal exclusion occurs in a form of psychological segregation due to differences in culture, class, ethnicity or gender and results in states of inequality, separation and social injustice. The spatial is derived from the geography of location.

Colonization, apartheid and ethnicity can be taken as examples of situations where one group assumes superior status. In this process marginalized people are often condemned for making their living in marginal environments, despite the fact that they are unlikely to have access to resources needed to overcome restrictions imposed by marginal environments. (Gurung 11)

The effects of marginality are physical as well as psychological. The concept of marginality often includes a psychological state at the edge of consciousness. “The marginal person is poised in the psychological uncertainty between two (or more) social worlds; reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, the repulsions and attractions of these worlds . . . within which membership is implicitly if not explicitly based upon birth or ancestry . . . and where exclusion removes the individual from a system of group relations” (Stonequist 8). The “marginal man,” as American sociologist Dr. Everett Stonequist describes displays “a duality of personality – a divided self” (217). This suggests by its very nature a segmented human position, one



of peripheral rather than central importance, as well as one existing outside mainstream thought and activity. In that, it echoes W.E. Dubois' claim of "double consciousness." The inhabitants of the margin 'border' on significance. Within a society marginalized groups and individuals exist powerless and virtually invisible. Mobility atrophies in the virtual disappearance of economic and societal structures other than those devised or improvised to sustain livelihood. Sense of self and worth erode in increments as visibility becomes more and more indistinct and the energy and invention of self-promotion dwindles. Thought as subtext replaces words as 'voice' is rendered meaningless. Physical displacement instills and creates a psychological condition, a state of mind and being, where the marginalized is capable of sustaining life but not able to move beyond the condition which seems to paralyze and immobilize. Viewing oneself as the opposite of powerful is not as inhibiting as losing sight of oneself or standing and watching the gradual disappearance of self.

Athol Fugard in his *Notebooks* in its published form recounts the gestation of the play that would become *Boesman and Lena*. For several years in the late 1960s before the appearance of the play text and the first production in 1969 that would tell the story of nomadic and ostracized travelers, Fugard details the difficulty of making their plight sensible and understandable in its absurd reality. Boesman and Lena's predicament he posits is "neither political nor social but metaphysical . . . a metaphor of the human condition which revolution or legislation cannot substantively change . . . (168) depict[ing] the power of apartheid laws in determining the *pattern*

of individual existence” (141). His commitment to his journey with Boesman and Lena comes in January 1967.

Finally, it comes down to the ultimate – a gesture of defiance in the face of nothing – and nothing will win. Time will efface us, our meaning, our value, our beauty. There are no victories. Outside our human environment is the world of stones. Hopeless innocence. Innocent loss. Boesman and Lena. Yes.

(148)

He journals about how he observes and studies the people that surround and those that he encounters in his daily existence.

Fishing on the banks of the Swartkops River: saw her . . . Lena. Either drunk or a hangover . . . doek on her head . . . barefoot. She stood to one side and let us go first . . . Unseeing eyes, focused . . . on the ground. We were merely ‘white men’ – nothing could have been more remote from her life. Walked like a somnambulist. A face shriveled and distorted by dissipation, resentment, regrets. Bloated stomach . . . Another coloured woman . . . Lived somewhere in the bush . . . Sense of appalling physical and spiritual destitution, of servility . . . without the slightest flicker of ‘self.’ (166)

[And] another Boesman and Lena . . . Side-by-side . . . Lena was leading a dog. Typical location mongrel . . . The man had a large sack (provisions?) slung over his shoulder. Hatless – head shaven bald. (Jail?) They talked to each other as they walked along. Another encounter . . . we passed them on the road . . . Both obviously very drunk. The woman had fallen and was rolling around on the ground . . . he was trying to help her to her feet . . .

in the rear view mirror . . . when we passed, I saw him pick up a large stone and threaten to throw it at her. (178)

*Boesman and Lena* has been characterized by some critics an *hommage* or rescripting of Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* in a South African setting. It is hardly that. Craig McLuckie in *Twentieth Century Literature* categorizes the play "a response to the institutionally created absurdity inherent in the lives of Africans, Coloureds, and Indians under the policy of apartheid" (4). He continues citing the essential difference Fugard's text presents.

Both Fugard and his influence Becket follow Camus' path into the absurd.

Beckett creates a stark world that becomes a universal metaphor for the absurd nature of existence in both the physical and metaphysical realms. Fugard, less rooted in the metaphysical, provides exact information on his characters' spatial locale and thus defines absurdity as a condition resulting from the human power structures that govern life, not as the condition of life itself. (5)

If Fugard's scenario is effective, it realizes and makes visible the very human struggle of a man and woman on the road in the landscape of a domination that if not understood is accepted and against which the freedom of marginality becomes a persistent source of autonomy. Fugard's play informs and characterizes in humane terms the psychological pathology of living and surviving despite conditions.

Boesman and Lena do not "wait", they go on. "It is the walking . . . that is most important" (5). Survival for them becomes an unqualified statement of a different kind of freedom from domination. Boesman and Lena alter, yet continue despite the

deterioration of their wills, their bodies and their spirits. Lena strives to remember past locations as Boesman forces them to continue to move from place to place. They cling to each other and the fading memory of where they began. There is no conceit in how they may end. Dramatizing the plight of these marginal figures, “Fugard extrapolates from the situation under apartheid to more universal concerns about the relationship of human beings to each other” (McLuckie 4).

*Two Trains Running* presents characters who occupy an American landscape in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The play originally produced at Yale in 1990 is Wilson’s (re)vision of the 1960s. The setting is Memphis Lee’s small unassuming restaurant in a Pittsburgh borough on the verge of urban renewal. The concerns of the proprietor, his employee and his “regulars” stretch well beyond the borders of Pittsburgh or any American city for African Americans who have continued to seek identity and place in a country where their marginality has been noted but not rectified by any act of government. In the nexus of Civil Rights legislation several years earlier lays the circuitous road to total reconciliation and fulfillment. The play “set in 1969 . . . presents the debris of an explosive era in black awareness . . . a smoldering reaction to a series of unforgettable cataclysmic events that occurred in 1968 . . . the assassinations . . . of key civil rights figures – the Reverend Martin Luther King, and Senator Robert Kennedy” (Shannon, 166-169). In *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, Sandra Shannon also writes, the play’s “very premise suggests what happens when there are no heirs to carry on the legacy established by past Black activists, too many of whom now exist only as martyrs” (166). The world

of these searching souls after the riots following King's death and the death a few years earlier of Malcolm X and the rise of the Black Panther party is as private and privileged a vacuum as that of Boesman's world. Their worldview and functioning within it is as misunderstood and challenging. Wilson has cited Baraka and Borges as influences and "sees his own roots within the Black Power movement of the 1960s and identifies himself with black cultural nationalism of that time and the processes of black revolutionary theater" (Elam 26). *Two Trains* is the play of his time. The malaise or stasis of the condition dramatized specifically responds to the deaths of black luminaries and revolutionaries and the sixties moment in which energy for resistance fails as the mourning of possibility has cast its pall. Within the framework of this play the metaphysical seems to connect on an almost revolutionist/revisionist level as Mark Rocha describes in his essay "American History as 'Loud Talking'" published in *May All Your Fences Have Gates*. He regards the play "a textbook for signifyin(g)" as the characters "loud talk" and "signify" in response to their condition and make the audience aware of the historical subtext they may not have been privy to before. It is representative of the development in Wilson's dramaturgical style to which Elam points "where the symbolic becomes the methodology for conjoining the past and the present, the self and the surrounding sociopolitical environment" (25). As in *Boesman and Lena* these characters own their condition, and ownership (Memphis' restaurant, West's Funeral home, Lutz's Meat Market, Risa's body) is as much at issue as the personal right to it and the privilege of

sharing it, for all the characters Wilson has written in his iteration of a Black American late sixties sensibility.

Fugard and Wilson's dramatic investigations are more than notes in the margins. They are plays that point toward the value of human hope and the precarious psychological balance between acceptance and self-worth by inhabitants relegated to life in the margins. Kerkoff and McCormick in "Marginal Status and Marginal Personality" delineate four identifying elements in defining the marginal personality: the marginal status, the individual's attitudes towards his own and the non-marginal group, the more or less permeable barrier between groups and the marginal personality traits which could be the outcome of the interplay among the first three factors" (Dickie-Clark 365). Fugard and Wilson plumb these psychological realities in plays where the emotional and psychological content of what they both explore seems of much greater consequence than what is physically happening. Where voices speak resilient and vigilant, the subordinated, already/not heard, create a dialogue with their condition. The mumbled mutterings of Outa in *Boesman* and the endless looping repetitions of Hambone in *Two Trains* may speak of them as casualties of their condition but serve reflexively as potent reminders of the complicit human need for response, reconstitution and answers. They seem to point to an unhearing world and the disappearance of voice when it is eventually silenced by a correspondent lack of response or a misunderstanding of language. The centrality of the marginal nature of the lives Fugard and Wilson capture onstage is existence, plain and simple, formed and framed by control. The voice of doubt, dissatisfaction and confusion is raised in

both plays in segregated space. The wandering identity and nomadic nature of the marginal dweller resists capitulation, yet the existential nature of their experience defines them as residents of marginal space without recourse to power. The playwrights focus to these post colonial sites in order to overhear the words with which these margins have been successfully constructed. Therein these subjects who voice yearning and a dissatisfaction for an ever evasive recognition are stalled in their self-definition and route to advancement by ever present ghostly myths created in a slave past or the action/inaction of a government that continues to exert control, enslave and exile.

### ***Boesman and Lena***

The original production of *Boesman and Lena* was presented at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa in July 1969. As in many of Fugard's premieres, the author served as director and cast himself in a principal role. Fugard portrayed Boesman opposite Yvonne Bryceland, a frequent collaborator, as Lena. The role of Outa was filled by Glynn Day. Less than a year later James Earl Jones and Ruby Dee would assume the title roles with Zakes Mokae, another Fugard collaborator and South African, as Outa. The performance is played in two acts.

A coloured South African man and woman burdened with all their worldly possessions appear on "an empty stage" that represents the mudflats of the South African veld. Boesman and Lena exhausted from their journey on foot have been evicted from the location where they had been living, one in a series of disruptions which appears to be endless. They stop by the side of the road where Boesman begins

erecting a crude shelter as Lena prepares food for a meal. Lena's voice fills the air with her complaint and dissatisfaction at having to move again. Boesman ignores her endless chatter as he continues his task. He has been hardened by their repeated displacement and appears inured to it. He laughs out loud remembering and mocking Lena's behavior as they were forced to evacuate their pondok. She curses him for the beating he gave her for breaking bottles which might have brought them a few cents and in the same breath appears confused and disoriented unsure of where the day's travel has brought them. "I want somebody to listen" (150), she begs. Boesman unpacks his sack and leaves to find firewood ordering her to build a fire. She does so talking to herself trying to re-map the route they have taken. He returns taunting and confusing her and laughing "One day you'll ask me who you are" (157). "Lena . . . Lena" (157), she intones as if to remind herself. Drawn by something moving, Lena peers into the darkness beyond their camp area. Boesman joins her as she calls out. An old black African man emerges from the darkness and Lena addresses him "Outa" [Xhosa/Zulu – "old Father"] and invites him to the fire. As she bombards him with questions he murmurs in Xhosa, relentlessly, unintelligibly. Frustrated by his inability to communicate or hers to understand she paces and demands liquor. Boesman refuses and warns her to keep away from it as he leaves to scavenge the surrounding area. Alone with Outa, Lena recounts her day. She reveals and counts her bruises seeking sympathy. As she prepares the bread and stirs a pot of tea, she tells Outa about the death of one child and of the others who were born dead. He begins to move but she prevents him "You can't . . . walk away like you didn't hear . . . this is what



I'm left with . . . Lena!" (170). He speaks her name in repetition and she is pleased. She will ask Boesman to give him a "dop" [liquor]. Boesman returns insisting that she tell the stranger to leave. She will not. She will share her bread, and when Boesman refuses the shelter to them she grabs a blanket that will keep her and Outa warm. Pouring two mugs of tea she joins Outa at the fire, "Bitter tea, a piece of bread. Bitter and brown. The bread should have bruises. It's my life" (175). Boesman with liquor in hand looks on, his food untouched. Time passes in the interval. Boesman, now drunk, is well into the second bottle of wine. He taunts her to repeat the scene of the morning begging the *bassie* to let them remain imitating her servile and demeaning posturing. Morphing into the white man's bulldozer he mimics the flattening of their "slum" village. In the fires that ensued he remembers "Our sad stories, our smells, our world . . . a pile of ashes . . . Freedom! That's what the White man gave us . . . that's why I laughed . . . I was happy" (179). Deflated and empty he wanders the space aimlessly. As Lena relates her version, Boesman, focused on Outa, interrupts "We're whiteman's rubbish!". (181) His jealousy of the old man is obvious. Boesman retreats to the shelter refusing to let her in. She pulls Outa close as she sings and chatters under the blanket they share. Eventually across the darkening space Lena and Boesman talk to each other. She presses him with questions. Outa is her witness. The old man is nodding as Boesman warns him to close his ears. The admonishment is fruitless. The old man is dead. Boesman warns there will be inquiries. They imagine a scene with the 'baas' accounting for Outa's death. Lena searches for a pulse as Boesman nudges the man with his foot hoping that he might still be alive.

Boesman begins to kick the body until he is beating the corpse violently with his fists. He returns to the shelter dismantling it and gathering his things calling for Lena to help. She insists she will remain. Once he has loaded himself, a human packhorse, they face each other. She is unable to say good-bye. She approaches him ready to share his load and to follow, again. But where? He recites the itinerary, the locations of their past and their future. They survey the space for a long few seconds and then exit into the dark.

### **Playing through the Dark**

For a period of under two hours Fugard gives Boesman and Lena a stage to speak and ‘voice life’ under apartheid. In his pinpointed theatrical microcosm the evicted travelers stop for the night on a journey that they can’t recall beginning. Their marriage and relationship has been marked and scarred by a series of repeated displacements. As South African coloureds they exist “poised midway between the white civilization that they seek to escape and the black primitive bush that they fear . . . indissolubly [bound] together . . . in a world that presumably can never change” (Angotti 468). From one location to the next they have managed a survival through movement and re-location but it has taken its toll. As ‘coloureds’ in South Africa in 1969, they have been legislated barely human and entitled to less by the dominating structuration of class designations. What the system has achieved is to cast them as co-dependent co-conspirators in their own limitation. Their ceaseless movement has become an aimless wandering. Remnants of their former selves, they have lost sight of all hope of freedom and permanence. The text explores life in the margins – of

society, of the townships, of their vision and of their tenuous sanity. Fugard has placed this slice of humanity under a microscope and examines the condition of the subordinated. In his magnification of the character exchange and roles he is able to retrieve the reflected image of the dominator and the subordinated. Boesman leads. Lena follows behind. Oppressed and evicted by the white man, Boesman assumes “control” as he oppresses Lena, psychologically and physically, attempting to eradicate subjectivity. He drinks to forget and escape. She ‘talks back’ to Boesman to remind of her presence, her subservience and her dependence and her need to be answered, to remember her role. Fugard’s text works as a slowly developing and evolving image of how the power of separation, subordination and transiency creates psychological and spiritual prisoners of those devalued by the system where spirits are diminished and scarred and where disruptions never heal. Disorientation is not a momentary lapse but a pervasive condition they inhabit as it becomes the nightmare which is their life. Confrontation between these married characters expresses more than a recognition of their condition. It scores a precarious balance in which dependency is confirmed, and existence and purpose are partially eclipsed by the ability to continue. As allegory and in their choric presence, Lena and Boesman speak the conscience and noise of resistance they own.

Ownership and the freedom it provides is very much a central issue in Wilson’s *Two Trains Running*. For the regulars of Memphis Lee’s small way station of a restaurant, validation, confrontation and ‘talk’ might well be chalked on the

blackboard menu. The negotiation within the community to be heard, is mirrored in the internal struggles of the play's characters. Although Jim Crow laws were pronounced illegal fifteen years earlier and Civil Rights legislation passed within the last five years, enactment is slower than action here and curiously throughout the United States. The fictional Pittsburgh borough is in a marginalized 'location'. Wilson, himself, in a 1987 interview with David Savran draws the corollary to South Africa in speaking about poverty, neglect and segregated existence

where you have a huge percentage of blacks living in the equivalent of South African townships, in housing projects. No one is inviting these people to participate in society . . . 85 or 90 percent of blacks in America are living in abject poverty . . . crowded into what amount(s) to concentration camps. The situation . . . is worse than it was forty years ago. (31)

The ghettoized neighborhood of *Two Trains* clearly presents a microcosm of black life in late sixties America. Here, day after day, the citizens are challenged by their potential against their possibility. In a series of eight scenes and in three hours of stage time the voices of black America, 1969, create a choric response to the lives they have been bound to. In the dissonance and occasional harmonic exchange they emerge representative of a time, a place and a people bartering for reconstitution. In a 1993 interview with Richard Pettengill marking Chicago's Goodman Theatre production of the play, Wilson spoke of the play's ideas and the derivation of its title.

The title came from a blues song called *Two Trains Running* . . . that phrase is in several blues songs. It's commonly followed by the line "two trains running, neither one going my way. One running by night, one by day."

There were two ideas in the play . . . that have confronted black America since the Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism.

These were in my mind, the two trains . . . (and) a character for whom neither of these trains were working . . . I ended up saying you need both Malcolm X and Aunt Ester in order to change your life. (Bryer 155-56)

### ***Two Trains Running***

First produced at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1990, *Two Trains Running* was directed by Lloyd Richards, who had previously directed *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The action of the play is set in a modest and independently owned three-booth restaurant located across the street from West's Funeral Home and Lutz's Meat Market in a neighborhood one imagines modeled after the Hill District of Pittsburgh. It is 1969. Memphis Lee, the proprietor runs the place with Risa, waitress and cook, an attractive single woman and his only employee. He is a self-made man who shepherded his small business for eight years, in a building he owns, but times have become increasingly more difficult. His humble establishment is the gathering place for a number of "regulars": West, the owner of the local funeral home, Holloway, a retired man, Wolf, the neighborhood numbers runner and Hambone, a mentally disabled middle aged man. They come for coffee and conversation, cornbread, beans, fried

chicken, pie and to hash out current events, politics, and the deterioration of their small borough bound for urban renewal. The timbre of their exchange resonates in issues of race and violence, entitlement, exclusion and what it means to be black in mid-century America. Unrest and violence have escalated and signaled a neighborhood in decline. “Ain’t nothing gonna be left but niggers killing one another . . . West gonna get richer and everybody else gonna get poorer” (9). Memphis sees the writing on the wall and is determined to sell his building to the city getting the price he feels it is worth. Wolf stalks the community soliciting bets, convinced “It’s the same thing as putting money in the bank . . . If it wasn’t for the numbers all these niggers would be poor” (3). Poverty is certainly not the issue where undertaker West is concerned. The prophet Samuel, dead of a stroke, is laid out attracting a crowd lined around the block. The men speculate who is worth more. Holloway’s suggestion is pragmatic “Everyone know West got money. He get more business. More people dying than getting saved” (7). Salvation and peace is one thing Hambone has not experienced since Mr. Lutz’s promise of a ham as payment for painting his fence some ten years before. Muttering the “looped” repetition “I want my ham. He gonna give me my ham,” (9) Hambone repeats his days away stopping by the café until he becomes too annoying to bear. Into this society of cronies enters Sterling, an ex-con recently released. He is young and hungry for food, feminine companionship and leads on finding work. He is directed to Aunt Ester, three hundred and twenty-two year old matriarch with special powers who “give you more than money. She make you right with yourself” (22). Although Memphis is skeptical of her power, Sterling

decides to give her a try. Over the next few days, Sterling determined to get to know Risa begins to court her. Independent female that she is, Risa ignores his advances as she has with those of West who has been pursuing her. Gradually, she begins to enjoy Sterling's bravado and charm even offering him a few dollars to play the lottery and suggesting the number he choose. Sterling 's number "hits" just as Memphis, fresh from Aunt Ester's, is victorious when City Hall finally agrees to pay him more than he was asking for his property. Hambone after years of repeating his demand and remaining unanswered, dies quietly in his sleep. Although Risa's attempt to persuade West to upgrade Hambone's pauper burial is not successful, the sound of breaking glass and an alarm bell coming from Lutz's Meat Market precedes a bleeding, grinning Sterling who sweeps into the restaurant with a ham he ceremoniously presents to West for Hambone's casket.

### **Restitution/Recognition**

The concluding moment of Wilson's *Two Trains Running* presents an event of understated clarity and ironic balance. Hambone's repeated demand for payment and justice is realized. And the folks that surround truly see Hambone's relentless quest as an embodiment of and element in their own need for recognition. Hambone's death much like Outa's in *Boesman and Lena* provides a opportunity for the surviving community to reflect and ponder the death as a reminder of life, significance, and of opacity. It demands sympathetic recognition. If Outa and Hambone are martyrs to the dominance of a racist condition, or merely unable to withstand the pressure of repeated and never ending unanswerability, they surely are pawns to a state in which

their recognizability (visibility) and significance (value) have been obstructed in and by their subordinated status. Voice ceases in their deaths. Outa and Hambone may be deceased but they are not the only casualties. Both plays dialogize this inability to communicate and to be heard as they explore the issue of cultural opacity and the commonality of just such a condition in the South African coloureds, Boesman and Lena and the blacks in America embodied in Memphis, Holloway, Risa, Sterling, West, and Wolf in 1969. Both plays concretize the rituals of daily existence. The miles of travel by foot, the construction of shelter, Lena's preparation of food and her 'breaking of bread' and sharing of water, the 'dop' of survival and the repeated bickering and battering are the daily rituals and way of life for Lena and her Boesman. Risa's cooking, serving, providing 'sugar,' Memphis' ordering others about, Wolf's 'numbers' game, West's burial of the dead, Holloway's stories and remembrances and Hambone's repeated re-articulation are the rituals of their day-to-day existence. The action in both dramas can be tied syncretically. What both playwrights have managed to imagine is action and experience *in* and *of* historical time. The plays dialogue on this level as well as in a ritual performative sense. As Wole Soyinka writes in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*:

Ritual Theater . . . establishes the spatial medium not merely as a physical area for simulated events but as a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope within which man – no matter how deeply buried such a consciousness has latterly become – fearfully exists. And this attempt to manage the immensity of his spatial awareness makes every manifestation in



ritual theater a paradigm for the cosmic human condition. (41)

*Boesman and Lena* clearly reflects the fringe existence and wandering of numberless South African coloureds. Poor and powerless, Boesman and Lena are forced to drift as the white man's bulldozer moves in and destroys their home. They have been marginalized because they have no access to power to prevent their dislocation. Fugard focuses his three-person play on another "road" of experience in South Africa, mid-twentieth century, that of the marginal traveler. The excluded position of Boesman and Lena due to their status and classification as coloureds limits as it prohibits them. In their search for a new location they wander the countryside. They inhabit the margins, figuratively and literally, and fear to call that place "home."

The clientele who frequent Memphis' small gathering place restaurant have not been driven there by the "white man's bulldozer" but they are clearly cognizant that their segregated neighborhood community will soon be affected by changes which might not include them. As black Americans in the late sixties they continue to experience marginality, a condition directly related to ethical questions of how race matters when it comes to issues of being able to participate fully in society and live productive lives.

*Boesman and Lena* occurs in *exterior* space while it clearly expresses the play of unexpressed interiority. The characters' communication and dialogue has become limited through their repeated dislocations and meaningless wandering. Remaining centered (located) is not an option, for their identification as coloured brands them

*without* identification but only *stipulation*. Their ‘location’ physically and categorically is marginal. They embody marginality. Their presence on the stage represents as it characterizes the masses who travel the mudflats searching for the next place of implausibility. Plot is as irrelevant in *Boesman* as the characters’ regard for their own status. The play’s plot is loosely tied by the appearance and death of the old African. His presence as yet another of the marginal natives of even lower classification displays further deterioration of language and understanding and is not merely the provocateur for the tangled and jarring ‘dis-dialogue’ between the two principal characters. Fugard seems to be challenging audiences to speak or certainly to understand Boesman’s inability to listen when Lena talks endlessly on, or to witness Lena’s anger and hurt at Boesman’s drunken mimicking improvisation, a distraction and the only kind of response he can provide. Outa does not speak or answer. He mimics his late night “host.” He has lost the ability to speak coherently or does not know what the language is telling him. He cannot comprehend. Fugard prompts us without answers.

*Two Trains Running* is set *inside* Memphis Lee’s restaurant. Within the walls of this humble establishment the characters congregate and converse. Interior worlds are revealed as this community of folk justify their present against the past and attempt to understand and negotiate the world outside. They are fed from the simple menu and in the collective experience and wisdom of their fellows. There is shared solidarity in their quiet protest of the status quo and their examination of the inequitable circumstances and episodes of the past which find them in their present

reality. Each one harbors a private interiority which challenges as it prompts revelation and true self expression. They are, one and all, demanding their “ham.” The script of *Two Trains* communicates a truly invisible world that finds its perspective *from* the margins. As much as it refuses that identification, one understands the vital importance status and survival have for each and every character.

### **Interior worlds**

The dialogue between these plays is of the muddled condition of characters who speak branded by condition and the resulting absurdity which sets existence adrift in a storm of human power structures that govern lives. Characters live, move, express, anger, and dream informed by an interiority that has been installed by their marginal status. Christine McCarthy examines and defines the physical and psychological components of interiority in *Toward a Definition of Interiority* with “*Containment, confinement, enclosure, imprisonment, privacy, protection, security, shelter*. These are the words to which understandings of interiority adhere” (112). She continues by pointing out that “Interiority understands that interiors are controlled and potentially controlling, environments” (113). It materializes in

[a] transferable and reusable condition of control . . . an action of exclusion as much as one of inclusion . . . it is the opposite of explicit democracy, free speech and open access . . . [and] requires a controlled crossing of a boundary, a change of state or status, and the possibility of exclusion or denied entry. . . The boundary . . . conditions how interiors are and can be

occupied. It is a point of decision rather than indecision . . . [an] incorporation of mechanisms of control that enable interiors to contain, protect, imprison, secure and shelter. (113)

The state of personal interiority presents a paradoxical condition where control is exerted and experienced. Potentially, and in most cases the one proceeds from the other. The one balances or negotiates the other. The condition of interiority originates in the separation that margin/boundary exerts and thus “controls.” The separation, physical, psychological or even emotional determines the state wherein the interior human subject is able to begin to find some equilibrium in the physical and psychological space that the gap fosters. McCarthy continues: “Interiority is a regulation. It regulates the exchange across a boundary” (114). McCarthy’s paradigm is instructive and useful when applied to the description of the architecture of the psychological states of subjects in the process of negotiating meaning within a colonially driven margin of difference, a place outside and separated from the mainstream. It presents the potential for “sights of survival” as “fighting grounds.” It suggests options in the coping mechanisms of interior subjects. The imprisoning or confined nature of the marginal state simultaneously offers a privacy and a shelter drawn from within.

Wilson’s characters struggle within their sixties moment, representative and iconic of the masses of black Americans who have sought to articulate their condition. Malcolm, and Martin have been silenced and their world is bereft of an articulate voice. Wilson’s play “talks,” as his characters do, framed in a vacuum of

cultural opacity, revealing the eccentricity and mundane of everyday existence in a Pittsburgh neighborhood. The action loosely driven by sub-plots (Memphis' property sale, Risa and Sterling's courting, pronouncements of the absent Aunt Ester, the lottery outcome) and the daily encounters between the neighborhood cronies relating events from the outside world situates it as a "place" play. Ironically, the events and personages who have ultimately the most impact on any perceived action or change within the lives of Memphis and his customers exist outside the restaurant walls. The prophet Samuel, Aunt Ester, City Hall, Lutz, the Funeral Home, all enter the play in the dialogue of these characters about the outside world. So too, Boesman and Lena are forced to compete with each other in the shadow of the ground-moving bulldozer, the white man and South African government rules of influx control, containment and restriction. These forces of empire from outside ultimately control each one's battle with interiority. In the dialogue that transpires the playwrights, both, have managed a somewhat remarkable feat: defogging the window to the American restaurant and uncloaking the darkened South African mudskops sky. What is revealed and shared needs no explanation. The opaque has been made translucent and transparent. The experience of marginality emerges as the clouds pass and window clears. The dialogue of few becomes a chorus for the many.

Probably the most outstanding and salient feature that emerges from both plays is the agency and specificity of 'voice' and the positive value of dialogue to create community and promote understanding. Although each play has a loosely driven plot, it seems that both employ stories within stories and testimony that draws

attention to these sub-dramas. The characters living Wilson's 1969 reality have little to do but speak their displeasure with the status quo without much hope of resolution. Fugard's travelers stop to eat, to drink and for restless sleep. They address the horizon or the confused, aged African in an attempt to re-connect with their own sanity and each other. Though they are 'voices in the wilderness' they live in a 'wilderness' of unheard, unanswered voices

The African 'kaffir' Outa in the South African landscape is Hambone in the North American city. Both characters exemplify diminution, a recessive example of the disappearance and loss of voice. Outa emerges out of the darkness for warmth. Lena cares and holds him close. He is object of her attention and care, a listener, a child, an aged parent. In him she is reminded of an identity she has misplaced, forgotten. Outa mumbles, not understanding. His rote repetition "Lena" is recognition that she needs and demands. This aged and weary black African validates the coloured woman's existence. He repeats when prompted but speaks what can only be interpreted as mumbling.

For more than nine years Hambone has been stalking Lutz for his promised reward. Lutz is deaf to his demands and ignorant of his own promise. Hambone is identified by his request. His name has become synonymous with the sought after reward. He plods on relentlessly never losing sight of his goal. Risa watches and cares for him. His condition though never explained reveals a mental disability and an obsessive compulsion which has caused him to become fixated. His affect is that of an overgrown demanding child or senile adult. Lutz's refusal to provide the ham,

exerts a power that Hambone cannot countermand. Lutz's refusal to fulfill his contract, in effect, negotiates and maintains his control over Hambone. Hambone's unwillingness to be silenced results in his fixation. In his middle age, the source of his trauma has rooted itself in a fruitless demand. His recessive and repetitive behavior and 'voicing' of his demand have cast him as "fool" and neighborhood joke.

Outa dies. Hambone dies. Both go quietly, in their sleep, weary of their condition, too tired to try anymore to understand. They are victims, as well, of the refusal of others to understand and act.

The exhausted but ever vigilant Boesman survives through the pattern of repeated displacement by movement. Memphis, a small business owner for several years, recounts in detail his own experience with displacement from his Tennessee farmland. His simple food establishment serves a very basic menu, the result of depleted resources and an ever dwindling customer base. The regular clientele are served beans, biscuits, coffee and an occasional piece of chicken or wedge of pie. Boesman's rations, limited to bread, water and the anesthetizing "dop" of liquor, are the only sustenance afforded the traveling émigrés. He builds a pondok for shelter. Memphis opens his doors a gathering place for the community. Both men are driven, outspoken, volatile and proud. They bear the tattoos of past history on their psyches, permanent reminders of their status as disposable and invisible. The control they exert is limited to those around who are already/again inscribed by the displacement of a marginal condition. Where Memphis verbally orders Risa to her tasks, Boesman's look, gesture or short command orchestrates Lena in her routine. Although Memphis'

wife has left him after many years of marriage, the potential for reunion is poised on a horizon created by the building sale, the intercession of Aunt Ester and the moment of recognition in Hambone's pursuit. Boesman's jealousy and self-hatred revealed in the presence of Outa spur re-connection and acceptance of Lena as partner. Boesman and Memphis "run the show" although the characters that surround give focus and shape to the cultural responsibility they share. Memphis and Boesman, most importantly, refuse victimhood. They are in the broadest of terms self-made men who are somehow able to deflect the outside forces from slowing their action. They force movement by their own strong wills. Boesman loads himself up, a human packhorse, and journeys on, albeit in fear of accusation in Outa's death. Memphis insists and waits for his due. His plan to reclaim his farmland is only one of the possibilities that city hall's decision has afforded him.

Within their respective societies both Risa and Lena are more limited than their male counterparts by their gender and by a structure that labels them as female and other. They suffer from what may be considered an inscribed marginalization. It is hardly ironic that they have both been scarred, figuratively and literally, in an attempt to eradicate their objectification. The effects of Boesman's repeated beatings show the physical wounds and the psychological bruises Lena has suffered. Risa's self-mutilation, the scars remaining from the cutting of her legs, bear witness and warning. She discourages advances even as she advertises her own realization of her delimited position. Both women serve accessory functions: Lena as "packhorse" rather than companion/wife/mother; Risa as waitress/servant/female in the diner. Both



women endure the indignity of slight recognition aware of their roles in the lives of the male world that surrounds. Both women find solace or “voice” in the “loving resistance” they offer. Lena’s attraction and investment in the black African Outa is syncretic with Risa’s solicitous involvement and tenderness for Hambone.

Lena talks endlessly as though she refuses to hold a thought within her head. There is nothing private or privileged in what she has to say. She wants and must be heard to the exclusion of all else. Risa, conversely, speaks very little. Her movement, affect and languid almost defeated demeanor speak volumes. As characters they are enigmatic yet resourceful. As representative of time and place they are not tokens. They stand out in their respective positions. Dialogically they represent the counter other within the structure which has already also limited. It could be that their intentionality as created is no more than to present the female of the species but doubtful. Intentionally and purposefully their positioning provides a nexus which echoes the greater reality which both writers attempt to elucidate. The positioning and control of these women challenges and privileges the actions contained/determined by the male figures in both texts. Strangely, subtly, *Boesman and Lena* is Lena’s play. *Two Trains Running* derives its significance in Risa’s participation. Lena voices her subtext of interiority while Risa’s quietude embodies it.

The remaining characters in *Two Trains* also fulfill a function in defining the the experience of marginal status. Sterling, the ambitious ex-con, represents the brash and ambitious voice of a younger generation in Wilson’s play. His repeated visits to Memphis’ place are two-fold: to court (‘get with’) Risa and to network with the older

established community of men to find a job or become ‘connected.’ He is vibrant, outspoken, impetuous and intent on making money. He embodies a foolish fearlessness and a sense of danger tempered by restless but hopeful impatience.

Wolf is a salesman, businessman and opportunist. The ‘numbers’ is his game and livelihood. He makes the gamble available as he panders to the community’s belief in the chance he offers them. Where there is no upward mobility, nor jobs for minimum wage he represents the dangling possibility of ‘luck’ or diminishing returns. His name suggests the wild predator he is. Luck or chance is all he can offer with no guarantees.

West has made his fortune in the business of death. Given the temper of the time and the attrition of all things human, he has managed in his profession to claim success. The ‘deathwatch beetle,’ West’s presence signals the end of life and the ritual of death.

Holloway is griot, raisonneur, and storyteller all rolled into one. As the retired ‘senior’ he is the keeper of local histories. Like Bynum in *Joe Turner*, Bono in *Fences*, Doaker Charles and Wining Boy in *The Piano Lesson*, he is the vestigial presence and spiritual connection to a significant past. He embodies remembered history. He is a pseudo-counterpart onstage to the absent Aunt Ester. His leadership is practical, spiritual and sage. He listens, reflects and counsels in the stories he tells.

Sterling, Wolf, West and Holloway serve as a quartet not unlike Ma’s back-up band in *Ma Rainey*. They prompt the discourse with issues of youth, chance, death and lived experience. They echo the voices of thousands of African Americans as

they experience their condition. They are cast by Wilson to enlighten each other by means of the dialogue they share. They represent values Boesman and Lena have moved through and can no longer reason. Where Wilson's chorus commiserates and offers respite, Fugard's nomads are coherent and aware but travel silently alone.

The dialogue crafted by both playwrights is orchestrated with the specific intent of revealing the interior worlds of characters striving for meaning. Where in most dramatic texts dialogue glosses the meaning and provocation for action, the exchange and statements articulated in these plays is a laying bare of character motivation and determination to action. Fugard and Wilson present subtext as dialogue as it emerges from character interiority.

### **Revealing (Sub)text**

(Sub) text is considered the unspoken motivation prompting character action and dialogic exchange. It is stimulus as well as hidden/covered text. (Sub)text in these plays adheres to the standard definition but also expands by the nature of the texts to include: (sub)ordinated, (sub)missive, (sub)ject, (sub)jugated and in the case of *Boesman and Lena*, (sub)altern. And it is in these hidden underlying and revealed (sub)texts that the dramas play out their meanings and with the sharing of unique cultural experiences through spoken thought that they gain significance. The condition of cultural opacity floats as a "framed" intertext in both dramas.

Jonathan Cullar, literary theorist and critic, suggests in order to analyze intertext it must be framed in "an interpretive imposition that restricts an object by establishing boundaries" (Cullar 196). Once this is accomplished and the text is held

constant the boundary itself disappears as it becomes part of the text. Cullar clarifies his process by asserting the frame does not merely circumscribe but is one and the same with the text. Jacques Derrida refuses the notion of boundary with his term “invagination” making the text “fixed” or framed in his concept of the parergon: isolating a text as an entity. The “frame” folded in on the text becomes essentially indistinguishable. The frame that appeared to be exterior is now interior and central. “While the intertext may have first seemed to exist on the margins of the text, it now can be found at its center, part of the text itself” (Harker 3). Terry Eagleton takes the endeavor one step further as he investigates subtext. The result of framing a text within its intertext is the revelation of the subtext, which I prefer to think of as central intertext. The subconscious is revealed in the subtext, what is written, ‘between the lines’/below the conscious revelation or ‘in the margin’ of the writer’s intent or thought.

It is as if the text reveals fault lines, fissures on its surface. Where these fault lines appear – at these points of disjunction, rupture and stress – the consistencies, contradictions, evasions. And obfuscations of the text show themselves, however unwillingly, as clues to a meaning which the text forbids itself, at least on its surface. (Harker 3)

In *Boesman and Lena* and *Two Trains Running* the authors have managed to accomplish something akin to what these critics describe. The boundaries or margins folded onto the text adhere revealing the subtexts of marginality *as* text. The characters speak with a perspective to and from this vantage point as the playwrights

*write* the margin “in.” Characters express their condition as they explore personal interiority. They articulate awareness in the discourse that their (sub) text provokes. In privileging ‘voice’ over plot the authors acknowledge the primacy of individual viewpoints and the value of multi-vocality in the expression of subordinated status.

We have numerous examples of shared spoken subtexts in the drama from all periods. The Greek choruses often speak shared feelings and thought directed to the attending audience. The soliloquies of Shakespeare’s most notable characters share openly as they express their deepest thoughts and attempt to balance motives. They tell us what they’re thinking so we might validate the action which follows. Even in the comedies of the British Restoration period characters make it unmistakably clear what it is that “makes them tick.” Moliere’s comic foils, saucy maids and villains as well as the sometime caricatured characters of twentieth century melodrama speak in “asides,” complicating the plot and action by revealing their feelings, biases and strategies and thoughts. Subtext reveals itself in these instances motivationally, explanatorily even conspiratorially. In the contemporary repertoire the practice of performance artists purposefully constructs text on sub-textual frameworks, often in the form of biographical stories both as fundamental and central intertext to the performance as it is being enacted. Interiority is explored by Fugard and Wilson in the shadow of their history and at the moment of performance. In all these instances, to some degree or other, the opaque, clouded or unseen is made transparent and clear. The impossible to explain becomes negotiable.

In the original productions of *Two Trains Running*, Lloyd Richards' direction called for the characters to step downstage into a charged space and address their stories to the audience. On the perimeter of the stage space shared with other characters, personal interiority and history is revealed, expressively, directly and without hesitation. This directorial choice suggests a presentational style imposed on a moment in what is considered a representational play. But there is method in Richards' brilliant "madness." The characters commune with the audience in the theatre, simultaneously sharing with those present in Memphis' establishment. It might be that Memphis' crowd already knows the stories and serve witness to an audience that is being entrusted with a heretofore unknown history. Or that confronted directly the audience might better hear and understand. Wilson's characters in this staging serve as intermediaries between the stage, the work, the text and the audience in attendance. Equally involved and simultaneously they explain the "why" of the "who" they have come to be and are. Their subtext thus delivered is laid bare for all to consider.

Fugard has Boesman and Lena enter "onto a stage." Their presence reflects and reminds of the thousands of rootless wandering coloureds in South Africa even as the actors who portray the title characters have a role beyond tracing the journey of the ostracized couple. *Boesman and Lena* is the title and could be the subtitle. Outa emerges "from the darkness." He signifies in his blackness as well as in the voided darkness from which he is wrested at Lena's provocation. He enters "onto a stage" seeking food, care, liquor, companionship or possibly a place where he will not die

alone. He has emerged from the kind of darkness that envelopes the theatre audience who have come to hear a play, to laugh, to cry or possibly to take part in an experience where they will not be alone. Outa's inability to understand and his confusion in listening and acting on what he is told is a strategy Fugard has harnessed in order to address those others "in the dark." Boesman insults Outa with the derogatory "kaffir" inflicting the same verbal abuse directed toward him and Lena. The audience though not subject of the abuse must observe and endure. The subtext of subjugation slowly and methodically begins to unravel and manifest itself in Boesman's erratic drunken rants and insults and his loud silence. Lena's endless complaining and plaintive confusion find no comfort or understanding. Outa marshals what strength of will he still possesses to mimic and mirror. Neither man hears or listens or provides answer. The audience alone/together in the dark listening begins to understand Boesman and Lena as more than representations but rather embodiments of the greater reality of South Africa. The subtext of the subjugated, subaltern voice has been methodically revealed.

What has been interior and hidden is shared in dialogue and formation stories. As the characters address each other and the darkness of the auditorium what is opaque or invisible is brought to light and made visible in the channeling of the reality to stage life. There is no superficiality in the audience's ability to access subtexts made textual. The authors have managed a sensitive/sensible articulation of condition. Characters modeled on those who have lived marginally crystallize in subtexts which reveal the centers of their being. These stories are about them, surely

and finally about them. The center has been moved to the margin. Margin becomes center. The intertext of “margin” has been “arrested.” That of “center” has collapsed upon itself in light of text explored. The “subtexts” have succeeded writing the margin “in.” The voices of the oppressed and dominated are heard. Domination is a source of government and imperial control. It is an objective edict of condition. Inherent in subordination is subjective tolerance – the coping mechanism in the failure to be heard. Domination is re-enforced and finds power/control in the passive agreement of the subordinated. Survival, itself, can be a powerful form of resistance. Marginality is written in this action and accommodation.

Gayatri Spivak, feminist, literary theorist, third world woman and member of the American academy has written extensively concerning the degree to which marginalized peoples are enabled to “speak back” and, speak *about* their experience in their own words from their marginal space. The appropriation of centrist/imperial language though employed does not qualify, she contends. Her well-known and often cited essay “Can the Subaltern Speak ? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice” suggests that “speaking” is a transaction between speaker and listener. For dialogic exchange, to occur, as with Bakhtin, both sides of the exercise must be fulfilled. Utterance does not occur if response is absent. Without response it is as if nothing has been spoken. She has written about the subaltern marginalized and is very explicit to whom the description “subaltern” should refer suggesting that it is specific to postcolonized, marginalized populations and, “everything that has *limited* or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that’s just the



oppressed?” (DeKock). Her writing explores “the margins at which disciplinary discourses break down and enter the world of political agency” (*Spivak Reader* 270) “interrogating the politics of culture from a marginal perspective while maintaining the prerogatives of a professional position within the hegemony (Spivak english/emory).” Her position defines a placement in which the center is also a margin. Her “re-centering” alters both the position and status of the margins, with a language of its own. Re-locating the margin “center” is logistical and figurative in essentializing the cultural dialogue that might evolve. Fugard and Wilson “write the margins” in *Boesman and Lena* and *Two Trains Running*. The words have originated *from there* about that place. The discourse in which both playwrights join is that of a *depiction* of margin that they have placed center in the intervention of their own dramatic imagination and in the experience of observation. In their attempts they give the silent a voice. Fernando Coronil, historian and anthropologist, observing a 1989 protest and uprising in Caracas, Venezuela was prompted to interrogate Spivak’s claims in his essay, *Listening to the Subaltern*. He counters Spivak’s claims of the voiceless dominated with an analysis and proposition which is useful in understanding the space from which playwrights Fugard and Wilson write and what gives their “voices” from the margin credible potential. Through Coronil’s analysis of Spivak’s thesis he proposes “a mode of listening to subaltern voices that challenges rather than confirms the silencing effect of domination” (1). In a moment central to his discussion he states:

The locus of enunciation is inseparable from the enunciation of a locus; analysis must comprehend them as interrelated dimensions of a single historical process. A subject position . . . is not a structural location of enunciation, but a topos partially defined by a positioned subject through speech which in turn makes speech possible . . . [And] restricting analysis to the study of mute subject position continues a history of silencing such voices. Engaging with subaltern subjects entails responding to their presence within silenced histories, listening for voices – and to silences – within the cracks of dominant histories, if only to widen them” (16) .

In Coronil’s re-envisionment the issue seems to come down to one of two possibilities: whether speech is uttered or not, place and voice are one, and response to silence can precipitate and encourage a dialogue in defying oppression. Spivak’s claim of the subaltern is tenable and figurative; Coronil’s counter encourages the potential in engagement of “silent histories.” Given that one of the resistance strategies employed in writing the margin is the use of the language of the native subject, responding as a presence is essential in order to subvert the power and influence of the controlling center. Fugard and Wilson have lived within the boundary zones of such silent histories, have watched and sat among the native and the silent. The demon of such silence urged these writers to imagine the words to fill this space. The necessity has helped them claim their own as well as the recuperated voices which find their way into their dramas of the marginalized in African and American life.

In *Boesman and Lena* probably more than in his other stage works Fugard has his principal characters speak Afrikaans at numerous moments. This has a twofold effect as it plays to English speaking audiences. It informs of a personal exchange in a foreign environment and it privileges the relationship of the title characters. Paradoxically, they speak the language installed by government agency. The suggestion is, perhaps, that when his characters are speaking English, they are actually speaking a native tribal tongue, and when they employ the Afrikaans language, more often than not in moments of cursing, frustrated complaining, name-calling and criticizing, they have chosen to mock the language they have been issued to appropriate. They are using the legislated 'installed' language, which has been dictated to them by the oppressor. They mock their oppressors in his language as they denigrate each other and curse the oppressor- a pseudo double-edged vindictiveness. They "play" the master's game. Fugard has always referred to his playwriting work as "witnessing" and in *Boesman and Lena* he bears witness for these characters as he does for others. His relationship to the depiction he retrieves has the effect of reportage, the relaying of experience, speaking, perhaps, for those subalterns who do or can not. His manifestation of a Boesman and a Lena "on a stage" is credible and representative of the imagined existence in the margin.

Wilson writes in black American vernacular. His characters speak a transculturated English, if you will, or an adapted form of standard English. It is simultaneously colloquial, colorful and musical. It is not grammatical but that is as it should be since his intent is scoring his text with a spoken/heard form of expression.

This, in itself, as part of his historicizing project is a challenge for an English speaking or 'white' speaking audience, more so for his reading audience. His scripting and appropriation of black conversational dialect which some label derogatorily as 'blackspeak' is fundamental to the black American voice which he attempts to amplify. The characters he presents may be for the most part formally uneducated but they are certainly schooled and aware in the way they understand and see themselves in the world they inhabit. Ntozake Shange, in her plays and 1975 landmark choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* employed a resistance strategy with similar intent and very obvious in its rendering on the page. As poet and playwright her ear was tuned to the sound and tone of black America much like Wilson whose work did not appear until several years later. Shange's feminist/resistance strategies are evident *on* the page in her appropriation of a printed language that simply and intricately attempts to capture the way words sound. How they display in print is a further elaboration of difference from "Standard" English in spelling, lack of punctuation and capitalization, syntax and grammatical "rules" which govern written text. She re-writes the "imperial tongue" of white (masculine) American control, translating and liberating it from stricture which makes it inaccessible to black "voice." Wilson, although not as radical in form, employs a strategy to the same effect. The rhetorical "topos" and placement of speech within their constructions, both Shange and Wilson prompt what might sound to the ear as merely realistic depiction, which it very well is, a reading of sound created by the mode of expression as a strategy of definition and deferential "voice."

They both write to repossess language as representative and reconstitutive and to, in Shange's word, "deslayverize" it. Wilson's attempts to duplicate and recreate black voices in America though not subaltern by Spivak's definition are decidedly voices of marginal Americans. His colorful and distinctive use of language and figures of speech makes available the language of a race of people living the fringes of society. He gives voice, in his witnessing and provides access. Conversely, his deployment of a vernacular that is recognizable points directly to the misperception and disregard/denial of issues expressed and the ultimate question *why* this people, though readily understandable, have not been heard. Wilson's endeavor to enlighten his peoples' "silent histories" through speech modality and Fugard's appropriation of the oppressor's "tongue" both appear to be strategies which require listening as they demand response. Listening for voices in their experience and imagining of the margins has leveraged their response as it has had the effect of "widening" the cracks in the dominant history in order to "widen" thinking.

Boesman and Lena are married in/to their marginal state. Their survival depends on the unexpressed reliance and need for each other. He is defined by his power over her. Her status is derived from her missed understanding of her subservience. She is outspoken. He is silent. She follows. He leads. She is object. He is subject. He is in control. Their rootless wandering epitomizes their status in subordination. Their dialogue exemplifies the response in and of the margin. They inter-play and play out their individual subtexts which reveal them as metaphors in/of the condition of dominated peoples.

The characters of *Two Trains* have been abandoned at the station. And as the song suggests they will have to walk. They have learned that existence is a lottery in late sixties America and that death is the only train they know for certain will arrive. They are realistically aware of the pipe dream of prosperity promised yet withheld. As in Boesman's world, the parasitic nature of domination rears its head 'acting out' and infecting the community, spinning a cycle of violence and parasitic opportunism directed outward but striking inward. These marginalized Americans suffer the mental and political oppression of an unresponding nation.

There is a dialogic sense in both dramas of experiencing a "condition in play" rather than "a play of conditions." These authoritatively privileged dialogues operate as counter dialogues. Writing in the respective sites they explore is only credible if you've been there or have lived observantly nearby. Writing there, convincingly, is as unsettling and unsatisfying as living there. At the same time it is never/not as difficult as formulating words that have already been spoken or lost. Fugard and Wilson's rhetoric comes in the form of a question: How do you write what hasn't been spoken or say what refuses to be heard? And so in 1969 in *Boesman and Lena* and *Two Trains Running* in South Africa and America, the chronotope of marginality is active, in and between both plays. Fugard and Wilson have mediated the relationship between art and life offering texts that dialogue on historical and social levels. It is persuasive and enlightening how seemingly disparate worlds share the dialogized condition and authentic struggle of the dispossessed.

Fugard and Wilson have known and examined these regions of purported 'peripheral significance' and assembled them and placed them central in the texts which they author as eyewitnesses of the vulnerability and disintegrating human action which proceeds from the condition. The poetry of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged rings out loud and clear in the desperate yearning and dissatisfaction. Human feeling and care distorted and manipulated by the condition deliberately address the centers of power which attempt to subvert the possibility of equality and equilibrium. The previously unspoken is emboldened in the ink of their pens. This ink, like blood, flows freely and gives life in the stories they tell about people and place. Through their authorship and shepherding they are successful, at least for the moment, in abrogating the margins of invisibility.

*The imagination, freed in time, never forgets what the projection, bound in history, constantly re writes and erases.* -Nadine Gordimer

*Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption.* -Ba'al Shem

*Until we excavate our history, we will never know who we are.* -James Baldwin

*For in the ideological horizon of any epoch and any social group there is not one but several mutually contradictory truths, not one but several diverging ideological paths . . . the ideological horizon is constantly developing . . . Such is the dialectic of real life.* -M.M.Bakhtin

## **Chapter 6**

### **Statements and Lessons**

#### **Dis)membering and Remembering the (G)host**

##### ***The Statement Plays and The Piano Lesson***

Writing of South African novelist Nadine Gordimer, in recognition of her 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature, Swedish Chairman of the Nobel Committee and colleague Per Wastberg asserts that it was in her tenacity and commitment to black liberation in South Africa and for her own creativity and that of black African writers who were silenced that she realized that “she had to speak.” Dubbing her “the Geiger counter of apartheid for 50 years” he continues, “[She] is the writer that most stubbornly has kept the true faces of racism in front of us, in all its human complexity” (Wastberg). Gordimer, a white South African writer, like Fugard, explores the issues of her homeland in the daily lives of its citizens. She, if you will,



comments and elaborates ideas in a counter history as she establishes “sites of memory.” He, like she, in his plays and personal memoirs, “fits together the shapes of living experience, his own and others” in order to arrive at consciousness. Fugard and Gordimer “excavate” the South African experience. Their writing careers began before apartheid and continue in the aftermath of its dismantling.

Arriving at an understanding and definition for himself and other black Americans in the century following Emancipation in America is the discourse which pervades the texts of James Baldwin. His personal “excavation” into race and an unwelcoming, inhospitable and intolerant homeland is an ever-present beacon that signals through his writing. He, like Gordimer, sought the potential for transformation and for self-recognition in his writing. Baldwin, an African American novelist and playwright in mid-twentieth century America, lived the turbulent era of Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement and the ghostly legacy of slavery, dis-remembered but ever present. Searching for identity amidst the misconstrued nature and relationship of integration and segregation, his novels and plays reflect the social pressure in an America claiming to accommodate and legislate but unwilling to act beyond what the laws demanded in the “acceptance” of black Americans as fully vested citizens. His definition of history is adamantly clear. “If history were past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present . . . you and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history” (*A Rap on Race* 25). His directive “until we excavate our history” is preceded by a preposition which is also a challenging proposition. One cannot help but wonder how his warning percolated in the mind of the young African American

high school dropout August Wilson as he looked for ‘his’ story in the books of the Negro section of the Pittsburgh library. Wilson seems to have taken Baldwin’s directive to task. His *Century Cycle* is in many ways an uncompromised attempt at excavating twentieth century lives “acting their history.” Fugard and Wilson describe and animate character lives in regions of the world that they’ve called home. Their playwriting explorations and the experience of these dramas live, on stage, have communicated and identified a dramatic history of a people, a place, and a time. These playwrights have sought to set records straight while simultaneously searching for personal significance in the consciousness that prompted them in their endeavor. In her Harvard lectures entitled *Writing and Being* (1994) Gordimer elegantly articulates and emphasizes the importance of place and history to writing.

Only through a writer’s exploration could I have begun to discover the human dynamism of the place I was born to and the time it was to be enacted. Only in the prescient dimension of the imagination could I bring together what had been deliberately broken and fragmented; fit together the shapes of living experience, my own and that of others, without which a whole consciousness is not attainable. I had to be part of the transformation of my place in order for it to know me. (130)

Gordimer and Baldwin echo the same self-expressed imperative of the necessity to write as Fugard and Wilson. “A writer is selected by her subject, which is the consciousness of her own era” Gordimer contends. “Does freedom consist in losing the past bit by bit? Why is there always someone who cannot afford to

remember and others who are incapable of forgetting . . .” (Wastberg). Fugard’s biography attests to his active involvement as he narrates his personal and professional history. He forged connection with his black and coloured countrymen in and through his play making. To the issue that his race disqualifies him from writing truthfully about others, Fugard’s response was simple: “If the nature of human experience changes with a man’s skin color, then the racists have been right all along” (Coveney 35). Apartheid and its “law” proved empowering to him and his fellow actors as it held itself up for their scrutiny and examination. The *Statements* theatre pieces of Fugard, Kani and Ntshona at the time they were devised, operated as discursive *counter* constructions. They “spoke back” with the audience participants in response to the condition. They “play” back, in post-apartheid time, as alternate/insider stories, thumbprints in time and imagined life moments in South Africa under apartheid rule. Wilson’s *Century Cycle* as a whole and *The Piano Lesson* in particular serve as reconstitutive narratives within a history in its aftermath. Wilson’s “400-year autobiography” tied as it is to constructions of his own imagination and rendering, functions as credible *reconstruction* of personal histories. The performance texts of both writers play in the theatre in the way Gordimer’s novels enlighten and in ways Baldwin may have applauded – “painted social backgrounds subtler than anything presented by social scientists . . . providing an insight into the roots of the struggle and mechanisms of change that no historian could have matched” (Wastberg). Framed by the re-plotted and re-lived experiences of their theatre pieces, previously omitted, obstructed, or misconstrued perspectives

seek to dismember the manner in which history has settled issues of culturally missed justice. The theatrical and literary constructions of both playwrights create sites and reference in histories as they imagine and appropriate, sites of memory uncompromised and negotiable. As their plays remember, the seeds of new understanding emerge and may just be as Ba'al Shem suggests "the secret of redemption."

### **The Statement Plays**

*Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona were first performed in October 1972, and July 1973, respectively at The Space, Cape Town, South Africa. Kani and Ntshona were the principal actors under Fugard's direction. *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London in January 1974 again with Fugard directing. Fugard cast himself in the role of Errol, the coloured principal and Yvonne Bryceland, a frequent collaborator, played the white librarian, Frieda. The three plays were subsequently published under the title *Statements*. When viewed as a collective work they provide a theatrical triptych which informs and responds to the prohibitive nature of life and movement under South African structured apartheid laws. They are in Albert Wertheim's aptly expressed description [Fugard's] "witness to apartheid" plays . . . forcing its audience to confront the terrible effects of the South African law" (Wertheim, 69).

"Apartheid" a term of Afrikaner derivation, came into use in the 1930's. Literally translated as "separatehood," it has been synonymous with "separate but

equal,” “parallel development,” “multinaturalism” and “cultural pluralism.” It was, in fact, a policy of segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups in the Union of South Africa. Although prejudice based on race and color began with the European settlement of South Africa in the seventeenth century, it was not until the Nationalist Party government came to power in 1948 that legislation began to actively affect policy to nurture and assure white prosperity. In order for the white minority to maintain control and racial supremacy a series of laws were passed, “a womb to tomb surveillance plan for the subjugated population” (Norval 104). Primary to the domination procedure was the 1950 Population Registration Act. Under this law every South African was classified as one of four racial categories: White (European ancestry), Coloured (racially mixed), Indian (“coloured,” Indian, Asian), Black (of African descent, natives, Bantu, “kaffir”). The creation of artificially designated regions as “homelands” for blacks was established by the Group Areas Act (1950). The Native Resettlement Act of 1956 cancelled property rights for blacks in the cities. Shanty and ghettoized neighborhoods called “townships” or “locations” sprang up on the fringes of the larger industrial centers. The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1945) and the subsequent Immorality Act (1957) forbade and criminalized sexual contact between persons of different races. A series of enacted Pass Laws led in 1952 to the ruling that every African sixteen years and older must carry a passbook containing a photograph, identification number, name, address, employment address, tax history and permitted “areas” of access.

Viewed some thirty years after their appearance in the context of the post-apartheid Fugard's *Statements* plays continue to exert power in remembering the effects of systems of control on the very human characters that inhabit them as well as the play makers under the direction/authorship of Fugard. In a true sense the three minimalist or "miniaturist dramas" as Fugard has characterized his own work, speak volumes as snapshots of historical recuperation. Viewed as plays of resistance and political protest and "agitprop" they remain in Fugard's canon, vital and enlightened dramas which remind and reinforce the power of identity, brotherhood, and understanding in the face of the subjugated reality which inspired and informed their creation. They are authentic theatrical documents produced in the early nineteen seventies. Fugard in his introduction to *Statements* details the germination and development of a process which the three collaborators employed in the creation of *Sizwe* and *The Island* and which he continued in *Statements after an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*. He notes "an obsessional concern with the actor and his performance" and his regard for the text as "a half-way stage to my ultimate objective – the living performance and its particular definition of space and silence." His experience and experiments with improvised theatre with the Serpent Players, an African drama group in New Brighton, South Africa and his reading of Grotowski's *Towards A Poor Theatre* promised the potential of much more than "the orthodox experience I had been retailing for so many years since *The Blood Knot*" (Introduction *Statements*).

The starting-point to our work was always at least an image, sometimes an already, structured complex of images . . . In the case of *Sizwe Bansi* our starting-point was my fascination with a studio photograph . . . a man with a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in the other; *The Island* began with the notes and ideas I had accumulated over many years relating to Robben Island; *Statements after an Arrest* started with my image of six police photographs of a White woman and a Coloured man caught in the act of lovemaking.

(Introduction *Statements*)

The first play of the *Statements* trilogy, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, is an indictment of the South African Pass Laws under apartheid. It presents the reality of passbook identification for mobility and worker verification through a scenario in which a man must figuratively die for his survival and that of his family. The title is derived from a moment in the play in which Sizwe writes to his wife Nowetu, in the homelands, attempting to explain that from a dead man's passbook he has secured the right to remain and work in the city.

### ***Sizwe Bansi is Dead***

Styles, factory worker turned independent photographer, begins the performance reading and commenting on articles from a Port Elizabeth newspaper. He speaks directly to the theatre audience as he dissects politics, world affairs and local news. Describing the route that has brought him to independent business ownership he re-affirms pride and potential in his new profession and his "studio" as a "strongroom of dreams." His job is to capture and preserve the "dreamers . . . the

simple people who you never find mentioned in the history books . . . [p]eople who would be forgotten” (13), if it were not for his trusted camera and lens. He is proud of the achievement in starting his own business, with a shingle that advertises his name, because, he explains “We own nothing except ourselves. This world and its laws, allows us nothing, except ourselves. There is nothing we can leave behind when we die, except the memory of ourselves” (16). Styles’ opening monologue serves as prelude to Sizwe’s predicament. A customer, Robert Zwelinzima, interrupts needing a photocard to post to his family in the homelands. Styles “shoots,” the lights flash, a photo emerges as Robert dictates his letter home. “My troubles are over . . . Sizwe Bansi, in a manner of speaking . . . is dead!” (22). Robert is in fact, Sizwe. He explains, in flashback, that his passbook had expired and he will be forced to return to the homelands. He details seeking out Buntu for advice and a place to stay. Hours later, Sizwe and Buntu, their senses softened by the home brewed alcohol of Sky’s place, the local shebeen (saloon), heading back to Buntu’s place’s come upon a dead black man by the side of the road. Buntu urges a hasty retreat home. Sizwe insists they identify the man and report the death. Buntu, ever vigilant, explains to Sizwe the potential for accusation by authorities if they report the death. Retrieving the dead man’s passbook and finding it in order inspires Buntu. At home, Buntu exchanges the photos of Sizwe and Robert between passbooks. The meaning in Buntu’s reconstruction is devastating to Sizwe. “I don’t want to lose my name . . . How do I live as another man’s ghost?” (38). Buntu reminds that his re-invention can only benefit the confused and “illegal” Sizwe. Robert’s name under Sizwe’s photo will be



his license and “pass” to remain and work. Buntu admonishes Sizwe/Robert to stay out of trouble or discovery of the falsified passbook will mean deportation. “Our skin is our trouble” (43), Sizwe, now Robert, postulates, studying his ‘dumbbook’ and finding a pool of light to finish the letter to his wife. As he resumes his pose in Styles studio the camera and the lights flash to a blackout.

### **What’s in a name?**

In a crucial sequence in *Sizwe Bansi*, Buntu teaches Sizwe, who cannot read or write, the number on Robert’s passbook. Sizwe must learn and remember the number accurately if stopped or questioned by influx control police. Buntu rehearses the inquisition which Sizwe will surely encounter taking on the role of a variety of authority figures. Sizwe fears he will not be able to memorize the long number. “Burn that into your head . . . It’s more important than your name” (39) Buntu urges. In this moment realization sets in for Sizwe. He is only a number where the law of influx control is concerned. He is defined and limited by the number that identifies him. His name and all it represents has been Sizwe’s objection all along. Clinging to his name is worthless if he wants to work and remain in the township. He realizes that his name is meaningless in South Africa. His number is his only currency and liberty. Buntu is a savvy guide as he has manipulated Sizwe’s objections into realizations which he can’t deny. Buntu, like Styles, has lived in the township longer and has acquired the skill to survive. Sizwe, uneducated and from the country, can only blame his ignorance of the law for his predicament.

Styles, the photographer and social critic, manipulates Robert (Sizwe) to pose for the photocard to send home. Buntu manipulates photos and Sizwe's "image" as he excises that of Robert and replaces it with Sizwe's in Robert's passbook. Both characters serve a function in the creation of Sizwe's guise as Robert. Styles and Buntu are played by one actor. This doubling subliminally serves to re-iterate and echo Sizwe's dilemma in dual identity in the context of performance. Styles "remembers" in the photograph he shoots. As Buntu "dis-members" the passbook to include Sizwe's image, he "re-members" Robert. Like an organ transplant, new life, new possibilities will exist once Buntu's operation is complete. The face changes, the name and number remain the same in the reconstituted passbook of Sizwe as Robert. Sizwe's struggle to accept the adaptation he must make is as difficult for him as his crisis of identity. He has little to his name *but* his name to understand place and purpose. Sizwe fears the figurative death of transition. It demarcates the passing of all that is unique to him even as it points to his disposability. It is only in remembering Nowetu and his children and their dependency that his acceptance comes. If he cannot live as himself, he can live as another in order to care for those he loves. In remembering his role as husband, father and provider, purposes he can understand, Sizwe's passbook is destroyed and Robert's number is committed to memory. Nothing human has changed only the identifying structures of control. His children will call him "Daddy." Nowetu will call him "Husband." His life and his past will be Sizwe's. His future will be Robert's. Sizwe lives as Robert and for Robert in

brotherhood, a Lazarus renamed in an understated redemption and resurrection. Sizwe Bansi may be dead but Robert Zwelinzima lives.

*The Island*, the second and central play of the trilogy refers to Robben Island prison off the Western Cape shore. The prison is emblematic of punishment and inhumane treatment exerted under the apartheid system, the Auschwitz of South Africa. *The Island* manages in its four scenes performed by two actors in a little over an hour to encapsulate a prison experience and system of punishment which dehumanizes, punishes and denigrates its inhabitants. But this “island” becomes one on which Donne’s admonition that “No man is an island” has never proved more true. It is a testimony to the brotherhood of native countrymen, a banner statement of solidarity and quiet revelation of the transcendence of the human spirit. The play-within-a-play, John and Winston’s enactment of the obligatory scene from Sophocles’ *Antigone*, is a stroke which fuels the play to its climax and resonates eternal questions. “Nyana we sizwe” translated “brother of the land” is its slogan and its theme.

### ***The Island***

A roughhewn and undecorated platform represents the prison cell where the majority of the action transpires. Two black South African actors, John and Winston, were dressed identically in the original as well as in the revival, both sported shaved heads. Only their individual characteristics and “names” differentiate them. The performance begins with a pantomime of “backbreaking” physical labor of digging and moving wheelbarrows of dirt and rock from stage right to stage left. A siren

sounds and the men meet center stage and, in pantomime, are shackled and handcuffed and begin the struggle to run tandem. The performance catalogues several days in the lives of these prisoner cellmates as they live through the hard labor imposed by guards, the nightly ritual of storytelling before sleep, the daydreaming and speculation of realities they are not allowed to experience in their incarceration. What gives them direction and focus and the simple plot movement are the preparations for an upcoming prison concert where they will perform an adapted version of Sophocles' *Antigone* – the confrontation scene. John has cast himself as Creon and Winston despite objections will play Antigone. John is informed by prison authorities that he is to be released in three months. This night their bedtime stories try to recapture their first meeting on the 500 mile journey to the island. “It almost looked pretty” John recalls reminding Winston of his words: “Farewell, Africa” (67). Although Winston’s initial reaction to John’s news of liberation is joyous his bedtime story imagines John’s release and the luxuries of real living that will accompany it. John becomes anxious begging Winston to stop. Winston’s envy erupts “You stink, John . . . Your freedom stinks and it’s driving me mad” (71). Winston mourns John’s departure, three months hence, as if it were the next day. He imagines his unending labor on the island. “Nyana we Sizwe . . . it’s all over now . . . Forget me . . . I’m going to forget you . . . Others will come . . . I will forget them . . . one day it will be over” (72). The men gather their props, don their costumes and begin “The Trial and Punishment of Antigone” the confrontation scene. Winston’s Antigone questions Creon’s authority and refuses to admit the unlawfulness of her action in the burial of

her brother. John turns his attention to the prison audience ordering “Take her to . . . to the Island” (77). Winston in turn addresses the audience accepting Antigone’s fate “to be lost between life and death . . . my everlasting prison” (77). Tearing off his wig he pronounces his final line “God of our Fathers! My Land! My Home . . . I go to my living death because I honored those things to which honour belongs” (77). The men remove their costumes and take their place center stage side by side. They are shackled, handcuffed and they begin to run together accompanied by the loud abrasive sound of the prison siren.

### **Why the caged bird sings**

Stories and memories of incarceration shared by ex-prisoners provoked Kani, Ntshona and Fugard to create a performance to bring the prison into being in a staged experiment in the theatre. Robben Island, now a museum, was a notorious and threatening destination for incarceration under apartheid. *The Island* serves as the centerpiece in the *Statements* trilogy. It is at once the most spare in its use of action and dialogue and the most resounding in message. It demonstrates the tension, stress and inhumanity of incarceration inherent in the notorious prison’s de-humanization. *The Island* devised by Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard evolved from the shared experiences of fellow black South Africans, primarily from the Serpent Players group. Armed and inspired by stories of actual experience, Fugard and his actors improvised the daily routine of prison life as they activated the strategies for withstanding the physical and psychological press of torturous confinement. The hell that was Robben Island was clear from these first person accounts. The existential

“cell” and abyss that was Robben Island had always loomed large in the nexus of apartheid legislated restriction and punishment. It began to take on even greater significance as a text to question liberty, justice and God given right with the inclusion of *Antigone* as ‘concert performance’ and climactic focus. The choice reflects what Werner Sollars terms a “monumental metaphor” (Fabre, *History and Memory* 11). Maintaining a “sanity for survival” became the everyday focus of prisoners. Retrieving a sense of self through reflected memory and in the eyes of a cellmate/countryman took on new dimension. Kani and Ntshona’s struggle to create the sense of just such consciousness for their prison characters drew on their self-imagining as South African black men and became an insistent energy in the role-playing. As Albert Wertheim notes, “*The Island* is indeed an actor’s play, for acting is its central metaphor and idea: acting as a means for the acting out of one’s life, acting as a form of survival, and acting as a basis for (political) *action*” (Wertheim 88). The psychological underpinnings of these actors were challenged as they were forced to confront issues much like other men who had survived the experience as South African poet Dennis Brutus’s short poem entitled *Prison* describes.

The “Abyss” is their word for time  
Time in prison – any kind of prison  
They can see time as a devouring maw,  
A vortex that sucks away their lives  
But in that vision they assert themselves

Seeing the abyss and themselves as separate

So they take on, once more human dignity. (Kofi 227)

Fugard as director/scribe and his actors listened to those who emerged from incarceration and attempted to understand the ability to transcend the experience in order to animate what would eventually become the performance. Fugard, a white director working with black actors and Kani and Ntshona were all three scrutinized, threatened and questioned about the nature of their endeavor, their relationship and the possibility of the political implications of the entire enterprise. The text: Two men, a cell, no bars, limited space, memories, pantomime, the antagonism of nation, the prison floating away from shore. The process: Fugard shapes the play watching and listening to help give the actors form and focus; Kani and Ntshona “act” the story. The work: The way in which its formulation as a performance embeds its meaning in context. John and Winston are black South Africans and actors. The same John and Winston are prisoners in/on *The Island*. The actors, in life, were identified as they were classified by skin color. There was no need to create “character” names. Hodoshe, the guard, makes an “appearance” but is as invisible as the undisplayed prison bars, by convention. The fourth and looming allegorical character in the drama is South Africa, dressed as apartheid. Initially, the script was not written but memorized by the director and performers. This choice was made in order to protect them from censure and the evidence a documented script might present for scrutiny and imprisonment. Fugard, Kani and Ntshona’s formulation *The Island* is not an allegory. The reality which *The Island* presents is distinct, identifiable, remembered

history in its psychological construction and the story it tells of two imprisoned inmates. It is “poor theatre” by Grotowski’s definition and resonates with his production of *Akropolis*, the revisioning of the Wyspianski text set in a Polish concentration camp. It is “rough theatre” evolving to “holy theatre” in Peter Brook’s terms and calls to mind his production of Peter Weiss’ *The Investigation*, the courtroom testimony play witnessing German war crimes. Yet it challenges those comparisons created as it was in the center of the context of events and structures it was critical of and addressing. Initially, it was a rallying force for South Africans in covert performances which were advertised by word of mouth. It voiced once and for all the realities of the offshore prison and its subjugated and mistreated inhabitants. It emphasized the importance of brotherhood and solidarity and its appropriation of the Antigone legend provided a legendary tragedy and fiction where questions of liberty and justice could be articulated. Gilbert and Tompkins in *Post Colonial Drama* agree. “The difference between two systems of justice and the triumph of the stronger over the weaker can easily be articulated in a colonial context” (42). The resituating of *Antigone* on Robben Island with its state versus moral/legal principle was well-chosen for the ‘concert’ performance and play-within-a-play. The authors continue: “Their endeavor (Kani and Ntshona) must always be read in the context of their location: any freedom that these men may obtain from incarceration is mediated by their release into the ‘prison’ of Apartheid” (42). The strength of *The Island* has as much to do with its “statement” as the specific location in South Africa. The power



that the two person drama exerted and continues to in its dismembering of the island prison after apartheid makes it unique and singular in dramatic literature.

*Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* written by Fugard completes the *Statements* volume. Derived through performance techniques evolved in his earlier *Orestes*, the play is similar in presentation to *Sizwe* and *Island* as it attempts to deconstruct another reality of the unreasonable and unjust South African laws of limitation. It is a play of darkness and light. Naked human emotion is revealed in the face of justice cloaked in law. And the transgressive nature of these revelations under the pressured harsh half-light of the law suggests irrationality in the act of confession.

***Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act***

The third “statement” play begins with a white woman and a coloured man in post-coital embrace. Naked and vulnerable they lie close to each other speaking quietly and sharing the intimacy of lovers. The moment of tenderness, inexplicable attraction and sexual longing, which developed in less than a year’s time, is discovered and arrested under the spotlight of police surveillance in their transgression of apartheid law. Shattered in the aftermath are the identities of Frieda Joubert, a middle-aged unmarried white librarian and Errol Philander, a coloured man six years younger, married with one child and principal of a location school in Bontrug, several miles away. They have committed a crime against the state according to the Immorality Act. The statement of an informant and reporting witness is read. The police detective reports the results of his surveillance which has led to the

discovery and arrest. A photographer documents the scene. Flashbulbs and flashing stage lights strobe as the couple attempt to recover from the invasion of their private liaison. In “split second exposures” like the disconnected frames of a warped silent black and white film the flashes subside as the man and woman invent an excuse for their presence together in the backroom of the library. The half light of their improvisation is immediately invaded by the bright search lights of the police. The couple is separated and isolated and they confess their transgression referring to each other in the third person. The affair thus documented becomes objectified, a coupling which they know should never have occurred. Their testimony indicts the legitimacy of how the relationship moved to the sexual dimension. They realize themselves pawns to a system and cannot admit/commit to the very human needs which propelled them to each other. The policeman completes the narrative of charges against the criminals Frieda and Errol have become and exits leaving them alone with their conscious thoughts. Frieda bemoans the future “All of me that found you now must lose you” (105). Errol realizes the inescapable guilt imposed by others. “At the end as at the beginning, they will find you again. Guilty . . . There is only emptiness. They arrest it all the same . . . There is nothing here. They can’t interfere with God anymore” (108).

### **Lovers as strangers**

*Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* was written in a more conventional manner than *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, the other plays which make up the theatrical triptych. Haunted by front page newspaper images of an

incident in which a colored man and white woman were caught by police in the act of lovemaking, Fugard put pen to paper to develop his script. He began to envision the casualties of such a liaison and the psychological marking of the lovers for their transgression in stepping over the line drawn in apartheid law. A spectacle is created of the transgression which only moments and days before was an intimate act of ultimate freedom and release from the rule of apartheid that dictated the lawlessness of such freedom. The photos will warn others and will serve as evidence. The subsequent self-doubt and self-loathing which emerges is testament to the usefulness and success of the system's tools in exposure. The law arrests. Time stops. Frieda and Errol were prey and are the victims and examples. They are arrested in all senses of the word. Separated and questioned individually, the lovers ponder how their discovery is connected to their relationship of only hours before. Figuratively frozen by the guilt of exposure they question the motive in their intimacy under the harsh light and power of the law. Aware of the possibility of discovery they continued their affair. They were not intentionally tempting fate but committed in the connection which charged their bodies and souls. The arrest and indictment for lovemaking and racial intermingling is truly a paradox to them as they realize to what extent life and love are edited and de-valued in the name of legislated morality and government censure. Their lives are truly not their own. And by reduction their coupling can only have been false, a strategy to rebel against a system. Convicted of a love that could only have been false their crime is exposed. Naked before the world they are guilty and examples of unlawful action. The words of spoken and inner dialogue reveal their

psychological nakedness. They are casualties, unnerved and apart, two of millions adrift, faultless, yet judged guilty in the swollen sea of apartheid.

### **Statements**

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead, The Island* and *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, though based on the facts of life for non-whites in South Africa under apartheid are dramas in the fictive sense. They create a dialogue with the actual conditions. Fugard and his actors play out the experiences of thousands of South Africans re-creating, remembering, and simultaneously responding publicly to injustices perceived under apartheid policy as double-blind matters of law, equity, and justice. History is enhanced and re-iterated in Fugard, Kani and Ntshona's unequivocal tapping of the human pulse and in Fanon's terms "combat breathing." The ghosts of all subjugated South Africans under apartheid haunt the fictive spaces of the *Statements* stages.

### **Lessons**

The ghosts which stalk the halls of Doaker Charles's Pittsburgh home, those encrypted in the totemic carvings on the wooden piano, and those associated with the Railroad Yellow Dog in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, also hearken to a dispossessed past. The three remarkable sets of images presented as they are in almost symbolic triangulated regeneration present a triptych of a much different sort. They vie for significance even as they present the challenge to the Charles family of how best to recognize a past, the cost of preservation, and the challenge of brokering a future. Wilson's two-act domestic drama was inspired in part by a Romare Bearden collage

of the same name. Wilson's characters occupy the ground of their history almost as a segmented collage unified in and by the piano and the music of their ancestry.

Bearden's "Lesson" depicts a young girl seated at the piano as an older woman bends to her in instruction. The image is one of the passing of information and teaching the song and developing the skill to render it to a younger generation. The piano console itself in Wilson's formation is a receptacle and representation of the Charles family history. Although the debate and its issues are clear – whether to preserve and keep an un-played history intact, housed by a sympathetic caretaker, or to “use” the instrument to barter for a future – is a decision worth deliberating. The playwright himself had no question which is the right choice. In a question and answer, *Meet the Playwright* session at the William Inge Festival in the Spring of 1998 as the festival honoree, when asked given the choice he was quick to answer: Sell the piano.

Memory exists in the mind and heart.

### ***The Piano Lesson***

*The Piano Lesson*, Wilson's second Pulitzer Prize winning drama premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre under the direction of Lloyd Richards in the fall of 1987 after initial readings at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's Playwrighting Conference. It then made its way to New York after production at Boston's Huntington Theatre. It opened on Broadway in April, 1990 to enthusiastic critical praise. Carved into the body of a stately wooden upright piano are the figures and likenesses of the Charles family forbears. Centrally positioned in Doaker Charles' parlor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it anchors the home and its residents, Doaker, his

niece, Berniece and her young daughter Maretha and is the central image for Wilson's play for America in the 1930s. Boy Willie, Berniece's brother has travelled north with a buddy, Lymon, presumably to sell a truckload of watermelons. In actuality he has come to claim his portion of an inheritance. He hopes to convince his sister to sell the piano. The profit from his share in the proceeds will enable him to purchase the land down south where his grandparents and ancestors worked as slaves. Berniece is adamantly against the sale even though the piano sits idle. She refuses to play. It is an inheritance, a family heirloom and must be kept, preserved, and guarded by family. Boy Willie is pragmatic. What good is a piano that nobody plays when the proceeds from the sale will provide him the money to buy the land and create a future for himself? As the discussion escalates to debate and emotional argument the Charles house is gripped by unworldly supernatural forces. Berniece is confronted first by the ghost of Sutter, the white Mississippi landowner and grandson of slaveholders who years before kept the Charles family as slaves. His presence suggests his recent death was anything but peaceful. Hearing him call Boy Willie's name, Berniece is quick to accuse him of Sutter's murder. Her charged emotional state even leads her to suggest that he is implicated in her husband Crawley's death. Boy Willie denies involvement and points to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as responsible. "Sutter was looking for that piano . . . he had to die to find out where that piano was . . . If I was you I'd get rid of it. That's the way to get rid of Sutter's ghost" (15). Berniece though fearful at the apparition for her daughter, herself and her home is unbending. "I ain't selling that piano" (27). Boy Willie's arrogance after she departs with the Rev. Avery

Brown, her would-be suitor, makes it clear that this family dispute will not be settled peacefully. "If Berniece don't want to sell . . . I'm gonna cut it in half and . . . sell my half" (28). As the days pass the ghosted presence seems to become more invasive. Brother and sister are at odds. Berniece needs to reckon with her brother and the ghost that she believes accompanied him north. She confides to Avery why she refuses to play the piano. "When my Mama died I shut the top . . . I was only playing for her . . . I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house . . . late at night I could here my Mama talking to them . . . I don't play that piano cause I don't wanna wake them spirits" (70). Avery agrees to bless the house which might exorcise the ghostly presences. Boy Willie intent on following through with his plan fashions a dolly to move the piano. As he and Lymon attempt to budge the heavy instrument Berniece emerges from her room with Crawley's gun. Sutter's ghost is heard. Avery, reading from the Bible sprinkles holy water as Boy Willie in mockery enacts his own parodic exorcism demanding that Sutter leave the house. Charging up the stairs toward the ghostly sounds he is violently thrown back. The others are speechless, stunned. Boy Willie resumes his assault wrestling with the ghost-devil, the palpable representation and memory of things past come to roost in Pittsburgh. Berniece moves by some other-worldly force toward the piano, sits and begins to play. Brother and sister are joined together in common pursuit, finally they are in sync. Berniece plays and begins to sing invoking Mama Berniece, Mama Ester, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola. It is praise song as plea "I want you to help me. I want you to help me. I want you to help me" (107). The song and playing becomes louder,

stronger and more self-assured. As it reaches a crescendo a train is heard approaching, passing, departing. The ghost has left the house. Berniece continues to play and as she chants her thanks the house quiets. Boy Willie departs as well but not before admonishing that he and Sutter may well return unless she continues to play.

### **Tuning the piano**

*The Piano Lesson* is not a ghost story. The spirit of Sutter's ghost may be palpably present but it is primarily a provocation to renew connection to ancestral ties wherein the Charles family will find purposefulness and peace in selfhood. In the endeavor and belief in its effecting possibility they will thrive. Recognition of the lineage to which they belong and have the responsibility to transmit will assert their independence from the historic ghost of enslavement which haunts and paralyzes them. In (re)membering and (re)playing and acknowledging the carved piano totem of their genealogy, personal history is revealed and the burden of the past (dis)membered.

The shuddering sounds of spirits as Willie Boy and Lymon attempt to move the piano from what has truly become its repository, although attributed to Sutter, might very well emanate from the Charles forbears through the instrument itself. Boy Willie's battle with Sutter's ghost ceases only when the ghost is chased from the house in Berniece's "playing" and entreaty to the ancestors to "Help me." Wilson's message seems clear. Engagement in the battle against the ghostly forces of enslavement which hang as a haze in the lives of these folk is worthwhile, admirable and necessary. But it is only through the intercession of the ancestors and the



(re)playing and (re)membrance of the strength of the tissue that connects to the past that (g)hosts will haunt no more. Berniece is drawn to the piano which she has refused to play by a force from outside herself in the moment when her brother's battle seems to be defeating him. She plays and begins to sing, an invocation and a plea. Memory and shared history converge in her song and her need for renewal and a means to rid her spirit of the ghost which haunts her. It is a ritual of renewal in a parlor in Pittsburgh. Avery's bible and holy water have not had the impact of Berniece's simple song. Her chant for renewed strength and clarity is efficacious. The ghost departs and the haunted spirits are freed as the Charles family commune spiritually with their forbears through Berniece's voice lifted in song. Berniece has pressed her fingers to the "keys" of their history for all it might provide. The piano resounding through the house and through time insists: Play me. Hear me. See me.

**"To see and to describe"**

Polish poet and Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz, in his Nobel lecture delivered in December 1980, illustrates concisely and accurately the brand of endeavor with which artists and writers, in particular, mark the territory of their constructions. Though he speaks of time and memory he centers his proposition on the very human activity of writing as reminding and the mandate or necessity in which this must persist in order to preserve essential elements of cultural history.

"To see" means not only to have before one's eyes. It may also mean to preserve in memory. "To see and to describe" may also mean to reconstruct in memory. A distance achieved thanks to the mystery of time must not change

events, landscapes, human figures into a tangle of shadows growing paler and paler. On the contrary, it can show them in full light, so that every event, every date becomes expressive and persists as an eternal reminder of human depravity and human greatness. Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were, and by wresting the past from fictions and legends. (Milosz)

Milosz, a Lithuanian Pole, regarded his writing mission as mandate for a culture that was slowly slipping into obscurity. It was a necessity for him to capture in his writing the essence of a time, a place and a culture that it might be preserved. If the human arts are as some believe the receptacles of a peoples' culture the contribution of human artists is inestimable. Along with informing and enlightening, artists who produce sustainable work as resource become a link between the present and the past. They clarify and shed new light, "full light" as Milosz posits, as they suggest options for reconsideration of what has been singularly rendered in an historical perspective.

Fugard and Wilson have dealt with their own history and lived in and with the history they were "dealt." As they have lived, they have made it their work to attempt to construct the insight of their observations *in living* and personal experience to enlarge and widen the perspective of that history in South Africa and America and to share it with the world. It has been for each a life's work. They offer created theatre pieces which dialogue with the conditions of living specifically in the locations of their birth. Their endeavor has been to create a consciousness and awareness within

audiences of the lives which may have slipped “under the radar” of historical pronouncement. Their scenarios evolve simply as realistic and representational ‘slices of life’ and they are credible in that. Yet there is urgency in their engagement with the “unseen” and sometimes mystical which is infectious. As writers from their respective cultural worlds, I believe, this is exactly what they would have hoped. Their plays dialogue on a plane and in a continuum that they have embraced about Africa, people and predecessors, nowhere more than in the *Statement Plays* and *The Piano Lesson*. As representative works by both playwrights they are eminently successful and have been lauded by critical praise. It is in their universal applications where they release the power of their “statements” and “lesson.” This, in turn, has a reflexive effect as it strengthens the original intention of either writer to struggle through to text for the confirmation of some understanding of a condition of living.

These “reconstructions” by Fugard and Wilson were created through very different processes. *The Island*, for example, was partially based on the prison experience of Welcome Duru but Fugard also drew on the detailed stories of Serpent Player, Norman Ntshinga and the memories that his wife recalled about her annual trip to the prison and her allowed half-hour visits. Ntshinga’s experience was the most informative in the vivid description it provided. “Ten days after [his] release he visited Fugard and acted out his “hilarious-terrible” stories of life on The Island. He described the “chain of sympathy,” that developed as men tended one another’s injuries and tried to raise one another’s spirits . . . [he] also told Fugard about imaginary phone-calls to the outside world and about improvised movies . . . that

helped pass the time” (Vandenbroucke 127). The play that emerged was called *Hodoshe Span* eventually renamed *The Island* and played for three weeks in covert performances due to the Prisons Act, Section 8 of 1959 which forbade public discussion of the prison system and proof of accuracy of any statements made under penalty of – imprisonment. Fugard according to his “mandate” worked in a rehearsal space improvising with actors, conceptually.

My work with the actors during one stage of the rehearsals is for both rehearsing and improvising. With *The Island* . . . with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, I always came prepared with questions, ideas, provocations. This would set them up; they are both consummate personal storytellers who love acting out their lives. I fed them a constant stream of provocations relating to the idea on which we had decided. (Richards, Lloyd, “Interview with Fugard” 147-148)

Kani’s description echoes Fugard’s:

Fugard, Winston Ntshona and myself had actually begun a process in the sixties which we called an Experiment in Play-Making, where together we would find, through trial and error, a subject that we wanted to deal with or talk about. And then we as actors would improvise situations in the investigation or exploration of the subject. And Athol would be making notes of what had happened, and at the end of the day we would discuss it. And then take it up again and try to move the story . . . it began actually by the imitation

of space, and identifying that limited space as being that particular prison cell on Robben Island. (Solberg 223)

The laws of limitation and memories were deconstructed to find the human subjects at their center. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* were evolved in just this kind of exploratory dramaturgy. Fugard's collaborative work with Kani and Ntshona on the first two plays of the trilogy and his sole authoring of the third took place during a time in which apartheid was an active element in the legislative practice of South Africa. This first person accounting on behalf of Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona cannot be underestimated. This trilogy of plays "spoke back" in the time of their origination and as time has passed have moved to new status as they remind of time, a place and the "silent ones" they have preserved in plays which spoke for them. Fugard is informed in his collaborations with Kani and Ntshona. They provide him with the lifeblood which surges through these pieces. The unwritten subtext is theirs created in and of actual experience. Fugard observes, "I would now find it impossible to say at what point did John Kani's autobiography end and did I then embellish and elevate and at what point did Winston Ntshona's contribution in terms of facts turn into what he, in fact, turns *Sizwe Bansi* into" (Coveney 35). From his position as scribe/director Fugard's notation and scripting of *Sizwe Bansi* and *The Island* intersected in the process of "play-making" and became informed "telling and describing" through a dual lens. It melds his observation and experience of South African life with the involved active exploration of ideas in the rehearsal space. Capturing the play on paper for Fugard was "very very hard because one of the results of working in this

collaborative way is that you . . . generate a very special life and vitality for which there is no way of recalling, no way of notating” (BBC “Life and Works”). His endeavor was to truly script life as it played out in the rehearsal room and performances.

The actors/characters who inhabit the *Statements* trilogy, in the playing and at the time of their devising were citizens of the South African Republic under apartheid rule. Their dramas suggested by and adapted from true life experiences encapsulate and react to actual experience as they mimic it. These two and three character “case studies,” if you will, pinpoint human experience credibly and humanely, interrogating the laws and holding them up to scrutiny in the historical moment which prompted their construction. They exist “after” history in response to and because of it. They are authentic in their documentation of the lives of characters bound by an annihilating and unjust system. In *Statements* as in *The Blood Knot*, the brotherhood of countrymen is the tie that binds. The literal truth posited in these created scenarios offers more dialogic currency for understanding in what history has silenced. As Peter Brook describes in “The Holy Theatre” in *The Empty Space*, Fugard, Kani and Ntshona make “the invisible visible.” As their simple stories and souls are exposed to the light of the stage, the past is enlightened in their humanity and the theatre becomes a space where the life force, the polemic and the fictive engage. *Statements* informs of apartheid in the gesture and word of its captives much like Anne Frank’s diary reflects and reminds *through time* of life during the Holocaust. *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*, authored solely by Fugard several years later,

emerged out of the solitary writing experience of putting pen to paper. Here, too, Fugard as Errol in the original performance provides another aspect of his penetration and exploration into the heart and mind of the subjugated. Today, the *Statements* trilogy continues to affect audiences reminding and re-phrasing the dialogue of apartheid in human terms.

Wilson's playwriting process, although more traditional was nevertheless as successful in producing results. Feeding his vivid imagination with the everyday experiences of those around him he proceeded to re-script the dialogue of life with his ever tuned ear. Basing his dramaturgy on the people of the Pittsburgh Hill district, he worked from notes and scraps of paper and eventually rendered his text in type. The relationship of these plays to the times they "see and describe" is also interesting in its contrast. Wilson's ten-play cycle was created with intuitive and sustained attention to the time within each decade he was in the process of describing. His recognition and re-creation/re-construction of undocumented lives rings true, almost familiar, as Toni Morrison and others have suggested in "the authenticity of his work based on his intimacy with black American life . . . and on the mixed race, working class elements in his interesting biography" (Foreward *Piano Lesson* viii). Wilson's own subjectivity is brought to bear as he dissects and re-orientes the cultural space of his own personal experience. As an observer in and of the world he would reflect, he was both participant and observer, adapting sounds and figures of many present moments in an unraveling and explication of a not dissimilar past, a past where the names may have changed but the faces remained the same. Invisible truths are brought to light in

Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. Several decades after the freeing of the slaves and the elimination of the practice from American soil, a family seeks to free themselves from its pervasive psychological control. The Charles' heirloom piano, a symbol of the family's slave past, is an object of contestation. Although a potent reminder of that history, decorated as it is with the carved images of those long dead, it sits idle. Berniece, the caretaker refuses to play for fear of "waking spirits." Boy Willie sees the sale of the unplayed piano as an opportunity for him to purchase land down South where his ancestors were slaves. The piano and its disposition is totemic to the choices the Charles family makes. It stands as repository to their history and is the instrument with which to access the future and extinguish the hold of the past. The debate between Berniece and Boy Willie which fuels the play becomes the catalyst to rouse Sudder's ghost and the "ghosts of the yellow dog." History re-visits the Charles, slaves to a past they cannot put to rest. Although Berniece instructs her young daughter on the piano, she will not sit to play. She passes on instruction, refusing to commit to remembrance. For her the piano has become an inactive symbol, a piece of furniture she continues to polish and groom. Only in her fear of history's palpable presence does she violate her oath not to play. Her staggered fingering gains confidence as her soul and song becomes one with her history and the memories she so feared. Spirits surround and resound in the hymn that chases the demons away. In concert with the ancestors she has managed to "play" history down. In that moment the past becomes present for the Charles' family and in its recognition



a new sense of self order. As the title to Harry Elam's book length study describes Wilson has re-figured *The Past as Present*.

For both writers the experience of their writing "process" was a constant source of discovery and an innovative exercise in cultural extrapolation. The work of both men stands as dramatic fiction that mimics as it interrogates and reminds of former time. They "wrest the past from fictions and legends" creating, if you will, a new template for considering and understanding that past. As Walter Benjamin suggests in *Illuminations*:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. (255)

These playwrights "seize hold of memory" as they "refigure" past lives in a present moment and find correspondence. Contained in their constructed scenarios the past sheds its skin in a present and points toward a future. Fugard and Wilson become historical links of recuperation. Like the African griot they hold history in their hand

and dole it out in stories which preserve, recall, and memorialize time, place and people within a culture that they warn must not be forgotten. In accessing memory they bear witness to sites where the dismemberment of oppressive forces literally or figuratively tied to memory can occur. As their works dissect and imagine a past in constructed play formations, sites of memory are revealed and the struggle, physical and psychological, with the ghosts that accompany, present much like Toni Morrison's novels a "haunting" of that history. The ghosts which haunt Fugard's "statements" and Wilson's "lesson" are related. The plays join in the struggle to eradicate forces seared into memory which have limited freedom of thought and mobility of action. They pit the historical against the personal realities that they observe. They engage their cultures in specific moments of historical time in order to suggest an authentic lens through which to view conditions of life and living against the background of South African apartheid and American slavery. The result from re-lived moments and the struggle with the hosts which have been dominant and pervasive offers a re-thinking of perspectives for audiences and readers, alike of personal lives, the victims in remembrance. This engagement by both writers also leads to establishing the threads of memory as objects of mediation, even meditation, transforming instruments that operate in the re-imagining of identity and social functioning. Calling on the ancestors, re-tracing the steps of those who have come before connects to the "blood memory" of reconstitution in which Wilson finds cultural resonance and of which young Zonia sings in 1911 in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as she intones "Tomorrow, tomorrow/Tomorrow never comes/The marrow the

marrow/The marrow in the bone” (27). This marrow, this central regenerative substance of life links Wilson’s characters with those of Fugard in another knot of connection.

The anticipation of a “tomorrow” which appears evasive is the substance of the dialogue which flows between *Statements* and *The Piano Lesson* though subtle and unassuming. It is derived from characters in action and in response. When Sizwe balks at losing his name and asks “How do I live as another man’s ghost?”

Buntu answers pragmatically

Wasn’t Sizwe Bansi a ghost? . . . When the white man looked at you at the Labour bureau what did he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number? Isn’t that a ghost? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out “Hey, John! Come here” . . . to you, Sizwe Bansi . . . isn’t that a ghost? Or when his child calls you, “Boy” . . . you a man, circumcised with a wife and four children . . . isn’t that a ghost? Stop fooling yourself. All I’m saying is be a real ghost, if that’s what they want, what they’ve turned us into. Spook them into hell, man. (*Sizwe* 38)

Sizwe is forced to adopt a new name in order to insure his livelihood in the township, but more importantly for him to provide support for his wife Noweto and his family in the homelands. His sacrifice lies in relinquishing his name as he assumes the identity of Robert in a passbook which will allow him to remain and to work.

Boy Willie drives north to Pittsburgh from the South, what might be regarded as the “homelands’ of black Americans from the time their ancestors were brought to

America as slaves. (Wilson, shortly before his death referred to the South as such suggesting that had blacks remained in the South it might have become a place of cultural solidarity and political clout.) Boy Willie has an ulterior motive and a plan. Once profit has been made in the sale of the watermelons and the truck bed is free it will serve as a vehicle to transport the family piano to its new owner. The profit from the sale will enable Boy Willie to purchase the farming land down South. By selling the piano, the vessel of memory, he will figuratively own his history which will then become the beginning of a future. He will return south no longer a “ghost.” Boy Willie’s intention to “give up” the heirloom piano resonates in Sizwe’s difficult decision to “bury” his name and to make use of the found passbook and answer to Robert’s name. His family will be fed as he carries Robert’s spirit into the future. Objects, namely, the passbook for Sizwe and the piano for Boy Willie serve as a kind of currency for continued growth and well being.

Berniece is not eager to embrace Avery in his courtship and proposal of marriage. Similarly she stifles her attraction to Lymon believing it is too sudden and ill-advised. She refuses his advances. He comes to her in a vulnerable moment when her fears of the interfering house presence have frazzled her nerves and planted suspicions concerning her husband Crawley’s death. The mourning of his passing refreshes itself in her mind and her brother’s involvement complicates the matter. Conversely, Boy Willie and Lymon, both, are eager to engage in feminine companionship. They are two country boys visiting the big city, their pockets laden with cash from the sale of their cargo. When Boy Willie’s attempt at coupling is

thwarted in Berniece's interference, Grace eagerly embraces Lymon and departs with him. Fugard's lovers of *Statements After an Arrest* have grown in their sexual liaison despite the fact that it is unlawful. Frieda, although never married, occupies a position of vulnerability and reminds of Berniece's insecurity. She is fearful of many things she does not understand and has engaged in a relationship with Errol despite its disregard for the law. The revelations which are recorded as her "statement" in the play are the expressions of grief that prevent Berniece from moving forward as she continues to mourn for her deceased husband, rendering her unable to accept or consider a subsequent relationship. Berniece fears finding herself in the past and tries to forget. She is afraid to wake spirits. Frieda insists on negating the past even though she cannot forget. The spirit of her former lover is one she cannot put to rest.

The prisoner's on Fugard's *Island*, bound in brotherhood, survive their travails and the endless days of their Sisyphean labor with the knowledge that they are supported by the millions of South Africans on the mainland who remember and await their return. There is the sense that all of their lives are connected in the struggle that is played out in Fugard's scenario. The "games" of remembrance that occupy John and Winston before sleep exemplify their hope in the ability to continue to survive until release, whether to return home or to be consigned to the grave. The prison experience counts them as two among the thousands who have paid the price of oppression and have stood to speak back. The prison "concert" is a highlight as they simply but eloquently express their distressed yearning for justice. Their adaptation of the classical Greek tragedy resurrects these questions in twentieth

century South Africa. The bond of brotherhood and blood tie of memory resonates in the Charles's house some thirty years earlier and is one of Wilson's "lessons," learned and remembered by the Charles men sitting around the table drinking whiskey and contemplating the potential problems with the white man should Boy Willie secure ownership of Sudder's land. Boy Willie is adamant that it is his lawful right to own what he can afford. Wining Boy and Doaker, the elders, shrug to think that Boy Willie has not grown to understand the way the world works and recognize the white man who controls it. Lymon suggests that Boy Willie "gonna end up back down there on Parchman Farm" (39). Boy Willie suggests Lymon will be back there first. Then, he begins singing the prison song. One by one, he is joined by Wining Boy, Lymon and finally, Doaker, two generations of Charles men singing and sharing the "survival blues" learned and practiced during the incarceration they have all experienced and the "prison" the outside world sometimes seems to be. The sound of the blues resonates among them and is a reminder for all who have passed that way and a rejoinder to those who know little of an imprisoning injustice. The past struggles into the present as the "ghosts of the Yellow dog" come to roost by their sides. Flesh on wood, metal on metal, the ancestors vibrate in the cadence and repetition of blues lyrics, the table drumming and the syncopated rhythms that fill the kitchen. The melody becomes harmony as they join in song. It is the rhythm of living and the warmth of breath, the survival song in a long line of brothers. There is an affinity, even kinship, in the grouped black men who intone the prison work songs around the Pittsburgh kitchen table and the two black men who run chained in the pantomimic

opening and closing of *The Island*. The image they bring to mind and that they share is of shackled existence and resistance. It is figurative and fictive but in both instances replicates and remembers those who have come before. It also fuses the depiction of real world experience with the metaphoric imprisoning nature of racial disparity.

Where Fugard's characters speak at an historical moment Wilson's act as if possessed by a history which makes their response difficult and seemingly meaningless or ineffectual. Boy Willie's threat to cut the piano in half in order to access his inheritance is unreasonable and untenable but a fitting metaphor for dismembering. Fugard's secretly performed "underground" *Statements* besides creating a forum for solidarity are aptly seen as attempts at dismembering tools of a political system or as performed today dis-remembering. The debate between Boy Willie and Bernice about how best to broker their common history and the engagement with the "ghost" is dialogically syncretic and reminds of the conflicting struggle singularized in Sizwe, Buntu, John and Winston, Frieda and Errol. The personal and inner lives of characters revealed fly in the face of historical pronouncement. Inner worlds respond to defining centers of control as they respond voices of authentic experience.

### **The island and the piano**

Fugard and Wilson have both created "monumental" metaphors as central images in their plays. They invest their dramas with symbolic and political significance. As they narrate a history of life in South Africa and the United States of

America they assume the role, as have other artists, of historians. They are storytellers in the theatre but as the French term “histoire” signifies “story” and “history” are but alternate translations. It is equally worth noting that alternate versions of history emerge depending on who is telling the story. The central images and material metaphors on and around which Fugard and Wilson sculpt their plays emerge as sites of memory as much as the plays themselves. The paradigm presented in Pierre Nora’s useful and imaginative rendering of history through remembered sites of significance is an appropriate way to ascribe to their constructions the ability to create a place of memory and re-imagined history. Whether in quiet reading or public performances the metaphoric and material constructions activated in and by their playwriting qualify as sites of memory as described by Nora in his landmark study in French historiography titled *Les Lieux de Memoire*. In his study Nora poses questions of how history and memory can creatively interact. These “sites of memory” that are the products of the interaction between memory and history engage in an interplay between the personal and the collective.

Lieux de memoires (sites of memory) exist where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular 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 as to pose the problem of embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (7)

Fugard and Wilson have both dealt with repairing ‘torn’ histories in their playwriting work. Fugard sought to voice and confirm solidarity among the non-white majority



within the historical rupture which insisted in undermining cultural development through his *Statement* plays when they first played before South African audiences. They continue through time to remember and historicize, if you will, the individual within the system. Wilson's Century Cycle seems to suggest by its very nature an attempt at re-creating sites decade by decade where African Americans can "remember" and where others can observe the way Wilson's "reading" of each decade re-inforces a time forgotten, a place remembered. In their introduction to *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally suggest the importance of just such endeavor: "The artist is a maker of traditions: a historian of the textures, shapes – and perhaps – sounds – of epochs gone by and yet vividly with us" (14). In excavating and re-writing a history which has failed to account for certain populations, sites of memory can be extremely potent monitors for authentic recuperation. For "in the great quest for identity and assertion of birthright and ancestry, sites are anchors and frames . . . Memory ultimately becomes the essential metaphor, a means to confront the troublesome past and the uncertain present" (10). Each play, by either playwright, it might be argued, can be considered as a site of memory wherein the past might be recaptured.

Fugard's *Statements* create a set of frames wherein history is enlightened through the manipulation of memory. Each play in the *Statements* trilogy is anchored by a touchpoint or signifier for remembrance, a site of memory. The passbook in *Sizwe*, the *Island* prison/space representing Robben Island, and the appropriation of *Antigone*, and the intimate darkness/invasive spotlights of the police in the *Statements*

*After an Arrest* all function in just this way. The Robben Island prison now serves as a museum. There is irony in its transition. History will probably accord it the distinction of having been a prison preserved for posterity as a museum, an exercise in historicizing. In remembering it will always be a prison representative of the larger macrocosm of the country itself for blacks, coloureds and non-whites under apartheid. It will transcend its reality into legend. The cells are empty. Remnants and artifacts remain but the prison has been dismembered. Its museum status privileges its past importance. It “remembers” so that no one will forget the not so past “past.” Prison turned museum in its transition has been re-imagined and is a dedicated and tangible site of memory.

The “lesson” taught in Wilson’s drama is taught *through* the piano, the instrument of contention on which the plot turns, in all the ways that it signifies – music, family, ancestors, ghosts. In the ultimate moment of action it is through Berniece’s intervention and accessing of the piano and its usefulness as an instrument of change that recovery takes place. The Sutter family and the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog might also be considered sites of memory for the Charles family. Sutter, himself, and the ghost that embodies the southern slave past is indeed the catalyst which spins and drives the plot and eventually resolves the issue of the disposition of the piano. The sites these playwrights have created and/or accessed and enabled serve as the centers of the dramas and function in revisiting, re-viewing and remembering the past through their incorporation.

The climactic moments to *The Island* and *The Piano Lesson* resonate and rely on the central metaphors and sites of memory which give the dramas their power. Indeed, both dramas capitulate as a result of their incorporation and through their enabling. Kani and Ntshona's performance of the confrontation scene from *Antigone* is the climax which *The Island* plays to. Apartheid speaks through John's Creon. All South Africans are addressed and/or echoed in Antigone/Winston's refusal to submit. His/her words resound through time about the tragic nature of failed justice. Boy Willie battles an unseen foe that exerts palpable presence. The ghost of Sutter cloaked in the slave past is his opponent. Berniece is drawn by instinct to the piano. She plays and sings. The voices of millions of African and African Americans are raised and unite in her song. The spirits of the ancestors intercede. The cloak is drawn back. Boy Willie falls. The ghost is vanquished. The spirits remain. The piano, played, becomes a vehicle for renewal as it gathers the Charles' family to battle, "speak back" and confront their history through the intercession of the ancestors just as the *Antigone* performance allows John and Winston to utter truths about justice denied emanating from their own experience, as they impersonate the classical Greek characters. In the initial secret performances of *The Island* in the township one can only imagine the import of the confrontation scene and the passionate reactions that were evoked. Viewing the anniversary production at the Baxter Theatre in July 1995 it was clear that the performance had not lost its power. As the Charles family joined in their communion with spirits, the "prison audience" became committed, once again, to the struggle for all South Africans. In these climactic moments the island prison in South

Africa and the piano in Pittsburgh are confirmed as lieux de memoires (sites of memory). History dissipates as memory aligns its representative spaces with metaphor to negotiate renewed space for cultural understanding. Historical markers are dis-membered in the remembrance of words, music and the sound of voices raised on theatre stages in recognition. Both playwrights ultimately shed light and give breadth to cultural worlds that fall parallel to the mainstream world. Issues of the past and the present in both envisionings have everything to do with the “counter” existences of American and South African blacks and non-white peoples. Given the reluctance of the controlling primary culture to recognize or demonstrate equity and a sense of uniform equality, life under apartheid rule and Jim Crow laws is not so disparate. The men and women who populate and are given stage life by Fugard and Wilson dialogue about their lives as conditionally as they perceive this objectified reality. They are barely nominal participants where the mainstream culture is concerned and this is revealed in candid and very knowing perceptions of the outside world. Then, there is the sense of sharing which comes effortlessly as the past comes to bear on decisions and possibilities for the future. If dialogue is the beginning of understanding or presents the option for the possibility, the characters that Wilson and Fugard animate offer it up for consideration.

### **(G)hosts**

In the waning years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Henrik Ibsen, the reputed father of realism, authored a play text which dealt with disease, inheritance, family and insanity. There is a moment of horrific fire, an orphanage burning and it ends with an

anguished young adult man fevered, blind, and insane, dying. There is no exorcism although there is fire. There is no forgiveness just a question of the future. The son dies innocent, yet guilty of many of the same behaviors as the father. His fate is determined by genealogy. There are important lessons to be learned from Ibsen's moral and cautionary tale. The play has much to say about passage, inheritance and the power of past actions to exterminate futures. The microbes of Ibsen's *Ghosts* are biological. They engage, multiply, and grow to devastating proportions. They are passed on. The son dies of his father's disease. He holds no culpability but heritage; yet he is victimized. If the play is a crucible, the lesson is the pure message which remains. It is a warning. It is a statement which should cause us to reflect on the responsibility we must own for moral choices and how our present and past impacts our own and the future of others. In some ways the play defines the idea of authentic expression tragically. Dismantling and eradicating a past series of events is not possible. The ghosts of past happenings, choices and actions reside in the inheritance of future historical epochs. The power they exert can be as devastating as the fate suffered by Ibsen's protagonist.

Wilson's and Fugard's ghosts may be psychological or metaphoric but they are every bit as insidious and invasive. While Ibsen demonstrates the decimating physical and mental effects of a microbiological disease, both Fugard and Wilson show us the paralysis and breakdown that emerges from an inability on the part of individuals to express and live authentically. The limitation exerted by cultural hosts is inestimable. There is nothing illusory in these crafted dramas. The choices of

site/subject/object present reality as a fiction which attempts to interrogate and examine the reverberations. Wilson and Fugard might well echo James Joyce's assessment of history as "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" insofar as how history has inhumanely documented cultural oppression. But as Fugard and Wilson wisely realize, history is past politics and that the politics in their respective writings have the potential to stimulate recognition, insight and unsung history.

Chinua Achebe, Nigerian scholar, critic, novelist, and poet, in his essay *The Truth of Fiction* describes the power of enlightened writing and "imaginative literature."

It does not enslave, it liberates the mind of man. Its Truth is not like the canons of an orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience. (Achebe 153)

Athol Fugard and August Wilson have enlightened audiences with truths their dramaturgy has provoked them to articulate. The stories, the voices and the images are solidly woven into a texture of imagined existences. I repeat Ba'al Shem's epigrammatic caution which introduces this chapter: "Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption." Fugard and Wilson are not "healers." By their own acknowledgement they are men of the theatre and playwrights. In their individual expressive attempts in the construction of performances they speak to audiences. They activate and orchestrate words and action to capture sites of cultural recuperation. They present memory and the past as a place

of reflected and reflexive history encouraging the (re)membering of their subjects as 'exiles' in their attempts to dismantle and (dis)member the pressurized presence in memory of that which has exiled and controlled. They refuse to forget. The redemption and 'healing' they offer is the quiet understanding that comes if they succeed to sing and play the (g)hosts away.

*They re-discovered old songs – they had never completely lost touch with . . . and reshaped them to meet the new needs of their struggle . . . created new songs and dances with new rhythms where the old ones were found inadequate.*

–Ngugi wa Thiong’o

*A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings.*

–Mikhail Bakhtin

## **Conclusion**

### ***Channeling the Griot***

The final analysis and judgment of any work of drama or literature must be if and how it is successful in humanizing and making its subject(s) visible. It is valued in how, through its determined scope, it speaks to the world at large and proposes universal issues for thought, meditation and action. Remembering is as vital in writing as dismembering the forces that seek to off-balance and discredit whatever the discourse might be. Dismembering lays the subject open to scrutiny and the vulnerability of the writing itself to criticism which, at times, imagines its task is only to discredit the enterprise. Authentic structures for understanding and analyzing texts exist in the histories and writings of any era. The dialogue that occurs through the playwriting of Fugard and Wilson is one form of analysis to widen thinking and reveal the resonance in the subjects they dramatize and place in action.

Fugard historicizes what he has lived. He remembers what he has keenly observed and has been compelled to write about it. A white South African and



descendant of the colonizing Dutch families, he has written about whites, blacks, coloureds, his brethren and the people of his land, as authentically as he can endure. His words are not his own but theirs' in his imagining. His dramas place two or three characters in a single setting for sometimes less than an hour of stage time, but they are hardly small plays. Like a pebble thrown into a deep pool the reverberations flow outward in wide circles. The stories he tells are ballads of the countrymen and women he truly treasures as brothers and sisters of the land called South Africa during tumultuous and repressive times and in the aftermath. All of his writing speaks to the idea of voices being heard. He has laid bare his own soul in his writing, continually exhausting and revitalizing his spirit. It has been a mission which claimed him early on. It is his authentic reality. And it is palpable in the meaningful messages and shared experience he has consistently attempted to impart. His plays absorb the relentless striving to reveal the "trueness" of experience in a world, time, place that he has lived as fully as he has been capable. What more is there to authentic rendering or response?

Wilson, an African American of mixed race embarked at a significant moment in his life on a journey of his own design. Having embraced his black roots, discovering in its rich heritage and customs personal essence, he became focused on the lives of black Americans. Through self-education and much reading of black authors and listening and absorbing the ethos of the blues, he decided to write. His personal mandate: to write a drama cycle observing and dramatizing the lives of twentieth century black Americans. A poet from an early age, it is no surprise that the

music of the blues became his muse. Finding recognition and a foundation for his personal reality in the music, he had only to create the words. Driven by a desire to imprint on his own soul, perhaps, he has managed to make visible and give a voice to black America through the characters who have prompted him in their fashioning. It is a play cycle and a song cycle, if you will, in the way the blues sing of what it is to be black in America in the twentieth century. There is more historicity than history but that is as it should be for Wilson considering the former was missing and the latter was incomplete, and history was not his intent. One play for each decade was an intrepid agenda, but it became a lifelong enterprise for a playwright, a man whose wingspan widened to major proportions, a man whose acceptance of self never quite seemed complete. The voices which guided him in his writing are authentically imaginative. The odyssey he traveled decade by decade became his world to seize and share. The stories he tells in the dramas that he formulated reveal much. In them one man's journey becomes tied to that of millions, shedding light and significance on lives seldom heard from. His is an endeavor to voice a past, reclaim a present and challenge a future.

When the works of both writers are read in tandem they exhibit similar preoccupations with the societies from which they emerge. Their use of dramatic form and the manner and style in which they (re)present an unsung history seems to suggest a collective perspective and animus for their writing strategies and almost ideological approach. Their common concerns are especially coherent and well-formulated with respect to history and the relationship between their own literary

efforts and the collective record of the past. When one puts aside the common critical thread that history as it plays out in these dramas is just a tool and that plays are too subjective to be serious history, one can consider them non-traditional histories in dialogue with each other and the more traditional and dominant forms of history. Their work frames a perspective for hearing what has been uttered but hitherto not repeated in documented history. If history validates and proves, the plays of Fugard and Wilson authenticate by their recreation of experiences that have shaped their own. They have inhabited the history they dramatize but not the books that claim to tell the story. In this sense their work provides a new framework for hearing and understanding the authentic voices of those muted by apartheid and racism.

Fugard and Wilson have spent their professional careers writing for the theatre. Unknowingly allied, they have both gone about creating theatre with a common agenda. The writing that emerged from their endeavor: to give visibility to the subjugated, has found a place in dramatic literary history. As political beings and men tuned to the cultures from which they emerged, their dramatic renderings investigated and have managed to bring voice to the voiceless, reveal the exile in his own country and to make tractable histories for those populations laboring and living under the influence of a colonialism which continued to linger well into the twentieth century and whose physical and psychological effects, in some instances, continue to this day. The dialogue I trace between the works of these playwrights, through specifically chosen plays, is an attempt to illuminate the pervasive and continued effects of colonial structures on Africans and African Americans in the twentieth

century who continue an unresolved process. It is also to ally and connect them in their respective discourses. The characters, modeled of human observation, and given stage life by these playwrights are indeed subjects who continue to strive to define and claim privilege and the rights of possibility that freedom must allow. As characters dialogue on these issues in the context of the plays, their authors have grappled with the selfsame issues. They address the world at large, calling attention and presenting a discourse to be pondered and considered. I refer to the “dialogue” of these authors as post colonial since the writing of both men situates itself in locations where centers of power have exerted and continue to manipulate control. Neither writer has referred to their dramaturgy as post colonial, nor have many critics of their writing. But the work of both men finds its core in the state of being which is identifiable in the post colonial status of subjugated individuals. And it is in finding work with common threads and investigative connection that the purpose and clarity of the worlds they enliven come to be and make themselves discernible. They have written for those who do not, cannot or are unable. They mark and attempt to define authentic space, to replicate voices that speak out and to each other in conversations that needed to be heard. Like the village griot, they remember, sing and teach so that no one will forget. How perfectly focused have been the life-giving writings of these playwright storytellers! As part of a canon and a repertoire of dramatic rendering, these works continue to enlighten and speak alone/together as if there was never a time before.

Fugard writes on and teaches. Wilson has passed, his cycle complete. Their writing creates frames in which to visualize the people and hear the voices of nation and country. Together their dramas create a frame in which authentic voice supersedes the power of nation in explicating the personal and public demons of slavery and apartheid which continue to exert influence. Their work reverberates worldwide in their ability to identify, capture and re-play openly and honestly the voices which emanate from the experiences of their lives. Both write of where they have lived. They have written what they have observed acknowledging humanity in the midst of oppression where there seems to be no answers. They have asked themselves the same kinds of questions about inequity and freedom and they have encountered the ghosts which fuel and exhaust the human spirit. They have absorbed the world around. Their attempt has been to write to re-iterate the images and voices which came to roost in their souls and to connect them to the world, to give them to the world, authentic voices of understanding, shared uncompromisingly.

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