

The playwright August Wilson often discussed *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as a pet project, a manifesto wherein the ideas which suffuse the other nine plays of his Pittsburgh Cycle are concentrated. My goal in this project was to name and examine a specific philosophical element forwarded in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in order to gain insight into the way Wilson's philosophy manifests throughout his cycle. Self-definition in relation to embodied history was a recurring theme throughout his works; I sought to understand how Wilson amalgamated his various literary and philosophical influences with his personal experience to craft the archive of selves which the Pittsburgh Cycle holds.

“A Wail and a Whelp of Joy”: The Song as Self in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

In *Dream of a Common Language*, a lyric exploration of feminist autonomy, Adrienne Rich laments the struggle of building a life outside of traditional paradigms: “the maps they gave us were out of date/by years.” The poem aptly sums up the struggle faced by many marginalized people seeking self-actualization. Most narratives of personal fulfillment depict someone following a scripted set of steps—provided by organized religion, cultural tradition, or even, as in many Bildungsromans, art- or media-defined keystones. What happens when one doesn't have the resources, or the capacity, to follow the map? What does one do when one knows the map was built specifically for one's exclusion? The characters of August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle are acutely familiar with this question—and nowhere is the conflict so concentrated as in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The Black migrants of August Wilson's 1911 are surrounded by useless maps. As Alan Nadel theorizes, they have been betrayed by “the governing metanarratives of white Western culture” (Nadel 97). They seek new life in the “strange land” of the North, like Moses, but find “no promised land” (Nadel

97): as shown throughout the cycle, the North is rife with insidious new methods through which white institutions curtail the freedoms and human rights of Black citizens. At the same time, “unlike Odysseus, [they have] no homeland to claim” (Nadel 97), no ownership of the site of their history. The position they occupy demands new legends. This task of mapmaking is what Wilson undertakes in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Specifically, Wilson forwards a theory of the “song” as a dynamic, embodied alternative to the Western concept of the soul, one which redefines self-actualization with attention to the specific concerns of Black Americans post-emancipation.

On the most fundamental level, Bynum’s characterization of a person’s “song” situates it as analogous to the Western concept of the soul, which is defined as “that which confers individuality or humanity.” Like the soul, the song harbors identity: “[The song] tell you what kind of man he is in the world... A fellow forget that and he forget who he is” (Act 2, Scene 2). This estrangement from the self is the condition Herald Loomis faces. The trauma of his enslavement under Joe Turner has caused him to lose access to his song. If the song, like the soul, is a repository of a person’s humanity<sup>1</sup>, Loomis has hidden his away past the reach of white violence, but also past his own reach. The circumstances of this estrangement form the crux of the song’s departure from the definition of the soul. Where the soul is immaterial, the violence Loomis faced was physical; the loss of the song in response to bodily trauma situates the physical and metaphysical as inextricably intertwined in Wilson’s theory of selfhood. Furthermore, in contrast to the soul’s individuality, the song is a site of both collective and individual history. While each person has their own song, there is also a communal song specific to those grappling with the shared history of slavery: Wilson’s prologue describes a group of migrants carrying a singular collective “heart kicking in their chest with a song

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<sup>1</sup> As Alan Nadel puts it, the song “is the authority upon which rests Loomis’ claim to human rights... To steal that song is thus to deprive Loomis of the claim and thereby to legitimize the treatment of him as property.”

worth singing” (Prologue). Finally, the song, unlike the soul, is dynamic rather than static. It is not inherent from birth—in order to inhabit it, an individual must assume self-accountability, confronting their personal histories no matter how difficult the process. (Bynum’s pursuit of fulfilling his song, for example, requires him to perform the intricate and complex work of “binding” people, though he says that it “costs me a piece of myself” every time (Act 1, Scene 1)). Thus, the song encompasses three core elements: dynamic selfhood, embodied history, and collective history.

The Juba ritual performs all three elements of a fully-realized song. As an improvisational group form of music-making, it requires its participants to invent unique rhythms and melodies, expressing their dynamic individual selfhood; dance and keep time with their hands and feet, connecting to an embodied tradition which arises from the specific shared history of slavery; and harmonize with others to build a collective performance which both honors and transcends each individual contribution. Furthermore, it enacts the meeting of the physical and the metaphysical: the art form, grounded in the body, leads the dancers to a “near frenzy” (Act 1, Scene 4), a sublime state which opens a portal to other planes of consciousness. Given these aspects of the Juba’s composition, it is not surprising that Loomis, who is estranged from his song, finds himself alienated by the Juba. His blind focus on its mention of the Bible—he describes the ritual as “sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost” (Act 1, Scene 4), ignoring the dance and other improvisation—illustrates the degree to which the unscripted elements of the ritual are inaccessible to him. He cannot join in because improvisation demands connection with one’s song, one’s selfhood. Bynum describes the finding of his own song as an improvisational process: “I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself” (Act 2, Scene 2). Bynum’s words echo Rich’s description of creating within maplessness—“everything we do... is

pure invention”—or the poet Shira Erlichman’s contemporary take on the same idea: “this road invented itself.” Bynum’s sentence construction implies that the space “long back in memory” (Act 2, Scene 2) is *within* Bynum’s self—refraining from specifying whether he speaks of his memory or the collective’s, he suggests that he assembled his song out of personal *and* collective memories he carries. Improvisation, then, is the act of connecting to those histories, fashioning out of them the map that society has denied one. This act is what Loomis is not ready to do at the time of the Juba. Instead, he fixates on the Holy Ghost. Interestingly, even though he does not literally contribute a voice to the Juba, the Juba is a catalyst for his first step towards reclaiming his song. His reaction to the mention of the Holy Ghost allows him to access his suppressed memories, connecting him to himself through his vision of the City of Bones.

Like the Juba, Loomis and Bynum’s confrontation with the City of Bones is a call-and-response. Through this structural echo, the confrontation provides an alternate avenue for Loomis to perform the self-expression which was not possible for him in the context of the Juba. Bynum’s affirmations support and guide him into verbalization of his experiences. The vision also collapses collective and individual histories: Loomis witnesses the horrors of the Middle Passage while experiencing himself as one of his ancestors’ number. He is physically “thrown back” (Act 1, Scene 4) by the vision—his inability to stand at the end of the scene forms a physical manifestation of his psychological trauma, externalizing it so that it can be addressed. Thus, the City of Bones connects Loomis to the three elements of his song (the self, the embodied personal history, and the collective history).

Wilson’s theatrical decision to bring the history of slavery’s origin directly into the narrative, into direct contact with the main character, suggests a reckoning: what will Loomis do with this history of ineffable suffering? With pain in the form of memory, individual and collective, finally visible and

externalized, how will it be addressed? When Loomis finds the voice to declare what he sees, how will he be answered?

Loomis's ultimate resurrection through the reclamation of song is Wilson's response to these questions. However, given that the play is suffused with Biblical elements, it is worthwhile to consider the response which Wilson departs from—the perspective of Western Christian theology. Under this perspective, extreme suffering is often followed by a rebirth into salvation. Christ's resurrection is one such example. Salvation is characterized as a state of total healing, a merging of the *soul* with an abstract higher power. The resurrected are absorbed into a blissful state of eternity, the magnitude of which eclipses past suffering.

Wilson and Loomis alike recognize the ways in which this narrative does not serve the condition of the post-emancipation Black citizen. First of all, the concept of the soul upon which salvation is based is fundamentally ahistorical. The soul is eternal—unmarked by the trials of the flesh. This schematic's assumption that a person's spiritual core is static, constant, and separate from experience proves plainly wrong in the context of Wilson's characters' lives. If the soul or spiritual core is the repository of one's humanity, how can it be unaffected by horrific mass violence dependent on the *denial* of humanity? For Wilson's characters, history ruptures the wall between the spirit and the external world. Some, like Loomis, find their selfhoods tucked out of their own reach in response to inflicted trauma. In other scenarios, as seen with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog in *The Piano Lesson*, spirits of the past return and linger, bound to the physical location of the wrongdoing against them. Or apertures open through which mortals can, through interpersonal relationships, briefly access the spiritual world, as Gabriel does when he blows the trumpet to let his brother into heaven. In all of

these examples, the spirit is acted upon by history and acts in response to it—it does not exist independent of the past.

Secondly, salvation narratives posit an all-or-none approach to multiplicity. There is the individual and there is the merged, homogeneous higher state of being, in which each soul is identical in its experience of bliss. The idea of the collective, central to both of the primary spiritual experiences of the play (the Juba and the City of Bones) lies between these two options: a space comprised of distinct individuals who harmonize towards a whole. The collective as a schematic of multiplicity honors interpersonal bonds and debts, the intricate networks of families and communities split apart and searching for wholeness. Because salvation narratives cannot imagine these networks of history and care, they cannot address them. Salvation does not bring estranged families together, remedy intergenerational histories, or fulfill lost promises. This is a scale of healing it overlooks—the scale that is most urgently important for the characters of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Rather than addressing history, a salvation narrative looks past it. Loomis identifies this problem: “Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is ‘cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here” (Act 2, Scene 5). The abstract magnitude of salvation’s grandness acts as an avenue to dismiss the embodied suffering of enslavement. A theological view which separates the body from the soul absolves accountability for the violence enacted upon the body—the soul, salvation narratives insist, will be saved, and the body forgotten. In resisting this line of thinking, Loomis asserts the worth and humanity of his body and his particular selfhood. It is not enough, he posits, to offer a grand and abstract salvation to all: he demands recognition of the unique and specific trials of his living.

The Black migrants of Wilson's 1911 carry a history of displacement, separation, and loss, but also seek a path towards wholeness. Describing the legacy of Joe Turner, Martha says: "My whole life shattered . . . When it go like that there ain't nothing you can do to put it back together" (Act 2, Scene 5). Her words point to an irreparable rift. It is *not possible*, she suggests, to create wholeness by undoing the damage—she lives with damage that defies restoration. Her condition demands a new definition of wholeness. This alternate definition is what Wilson's song provides. Where salvation narratives promise wholeness through the disavowal or dismissal of traumatic history, Wilson's theory of the song offers a schema of self-actualization which incorporates "shattered" pieces into self-definition. Considering the work of reckoning with the legacy of slavery, the theorist Ren Ellis Neyra writes: "[T]here are impasses. Signs can grow from breaks . . . I offer a potential ethics of *besideness*, a possibility of being broken together that does not rush to repair." This idea of thinking *beside* and *with*—instead of *past*—the irreparable is what provides the foundation of Wilson's song. The lives of Wilson's characters are full of impasses and breaks. On an interpersonal level, each character is cut off from loved ones, whether the gone are family, lovers, or even the child Reuben's lost friend Eugene. They are also collectively "cut off from memory" (Prologue), from the gods, from ancestry, from stable community infrastructures. Martha explains that Reverend Tolliver's church had to evacuate to the North because of "all the trouble" (Act 2, Scene 5) it faced, hinting at a long history of white violence towards the Black church—as a conduit for community-building, it is constantly under attack, with white society refusing to allow Black citizens to build stable ground under their feet. The methods by which slavery and its aftermath dissolved family structures function the same way. Furthermore, the North poses its own impasses when it comes to the pursuit of stability. Jeremy is cheated out of a job and even the proudly successful Seth cannot get the support he needs to lead his own business. Thus Wilson's characters are denied continuity and stability in both past and future.

Still, “signs can grow from breaks”—songs can grow from breaks. Within Wilson’s schema, the song is a way of life that folds the grief, trauma, and displacements of history into the pursuit of futurity—simultaneously a “wail and a whelp of joy” (Prologue). I read this alternate philosophy in Wilson’s description of Bertha. In response to the “huge sadness that seems to envelop” (Act 2, Scene 5) the kitchen, she performs “a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood’s memory” (Act 2, Scene 5). This concept of an ancestral dance ties to the Juba, which combines ancestral African spirituality and Black American culture, as well as other dances within the cycle—for example, the “atavistic dance” Gabriel performs in *Fences* to usher Troy’s spirit into heaven. This dance is Bertha’s song: it forms at the meeting point of dynamic selfhood, embodied history, and collective history. Wilson’s choice of the phrase “muscles of the heart” (Act 2, Scene 5) physicalizes an often abstract phrase, grounding the heart as a mortal and embodied life source. The body, here, is the portal to ancestral wisdom. Bertha accesses memory *through* the tangible physical materials of blood and muscle—her body is inherently dignified and worthy as prerequisite to a higher knowing. As such, echoing what Loomis declares of his own body, wrongs against the body cannot be dismissed in the name of salvation—“the flesh” (Act 2, Scene 5) is not subordinate to the spiritual core, but in fact a conduit to it. Viewing Loomis’ lament that he “done forgot how to touch” (Act 2, Scene 3) through this lens resituates it as a form of abject tragedy: his alienation from the body translates to an alienation from his selfhood.

The same description of Bertha also forwards hope for Loomis in its positioning of the body as a site of *remedy*. In traditional narratives, remedy comes from outside the body, often from a magical source—a witch or sorcerer; a fountain of youth; a saint’s blessing. The site of illness or pain and the

site of remedy's creation are separate. The remedy is powerful in its purity, its quality of being untainted by the poisons of illness. Here, in contrast, remedy grows from the same site as grief's memory, the same body which carries collective history. In other words, remedy is born *of* history, *of* displacement and loss—the song grows from breaks.

Loomis' ultimate reclaiming of his song enacts this method of remedy in its most concentrated form. Eschewing salvation narratives, his resurrection departs from tradition by refusing to magically heal all: this is not a story of a divine touch restoring a pain-wracked body to perfect health. In fact, Loomis' song emerges out of his verbalized resistance to that metaphor. His dialogue with Martha takes on the same call-and-response form which structured the Juba and the vision of the City of Bones. However, instead of singing her own song in her side of the exchange, Martha recites the Bible's script—verbally conjures the map which Loomis cannot follow, forcing him to construct his own in response. When Martha recites the phrase “[e]ven though I walk through the shadow of death,” Loomis's retort that “[t]hat's just where I be walking” (Act 2, Scene 5) allows him to claim his loss. Rejecting her “even though,” he insists upon sitting with the irreparable rather than looking past it. If Nadel reads Black American life as outside of “white Western metanarratives,” Loomis' description of “wandering ... in somebody else's world” (Act 2, Scene 2) appears as a realization and affirmation of this fact of outsiderdom. Through his dialogue with those narratives as represented by Martha, he recognizes her world as not his own and rejects it in the first step towards making his own world. In direct nods to Nadel's “metanarratives,” he dismisses the River Jordan and the Holy Ghost, along with the stories of purity and salvation they carry. Interestingly, he also rejects scripts of African spirituality: “I been wading the water ... what it get me,” (Act 2, Scene 5) he says, referencing a spiritual hymn created during slavery. This dismissal prevents his awakening from simply being a swing from Christian theology to African spirituality. Instead, it is a coming into the

self, a process through which he defines himself in relation to history. Even the Juba, a ritual based in African spirituality, requires that each individual improvise their own contribution, being in conversation with the “wade in the water” script rather than reciting it. Loomis’ angry rejections, his assertion of an *I*, a selfhood independent of the script, is the first step toward his development of the capacity to improvise.

What follows is his step-by-step reclamation of each element of the song. He steps into his dynamic selfhood by assuming self-accountability, reuniting his daughter with her mother. Through this act, he affirms himself as part of an interpersonal network of responsibility—he is a member of a family and a community, someone who directs himself within a localized region of control. In other words, he wields his power to enact repair on a local, interpersonal scale. Like Memphis in *Two Trains Running*, he goes back to “pick up the ball” (Act 2, Scene 5). His reunion with Martha also allows him to say goodbye on his own terms. He closes the loop or picks up the ball on an internal scale as well as an interpersonal one. Having confronted internal and interpersonal history, he also turns to collective history in a reference to the City of Bones: he is “given breath,” (Act 2, Scene 5) as he was when he had a vision of being stranded on the shore and waiting for the wind to enter his lungs. His fresh starting point is born of the origin point of his collective history.

The song as embodied history manifests itself in Loomis’ act of slashing his chest. As Wilson explains in his description of Bertha, blood carries memory. When Loomis rubs his blood onto his face, his hands and face come into literal physical contact with the memories his blood holds. This moment is a reunion of Loomis with his selfhood: what was tucked out of his reach is now externalized on his skin. His history and selfhood, which cover his hands, now literally mark everything he touches. The act of slashing himself is a displacement, a break, a loss [of blood]. As

such, it functions as a ritual acknowledgement of both the personal and intergenerational displacements Loomis carries—Loomis refuses ahistorical, immaterial salvation and replaces it with an homage to embodied history. This acknowledgement draws attention to the body and its memories as dignified and worthy site of transformation.

In order to finally stand up, Loomis must claim his song. The song—an embodied, historicized concept of the self—being Loomis’ key to freedom suggests the idea of historical thinking as repair. “When it go like that there ain’t nothing you can do to put it back together,” (Act 2, Scene 5) Martha says, but acknowledging and facing the shattering becomes a starting point to the creation of a new song, a new map for self-actualization. Consider *Two Trains Running*, in which characters who visit Aunt Ester—the symbolic “ancestor,” or connection to history, of the community—find their fortunes turned when they place twenty dollars in the river (a significant number because it is believed to be the number of people on the first slave ship brought to Virginia in 1619). Like Loomis, they must perform an act of acknowledgement of a core displacement before they can craft their futures. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen Barlow, like Loomis, must visit the City of Bones and recognize his own personal past as well as the collective one in order to be reborn. In *The Piano Lesson*, Berniece must face her family history of breaks and displacements as embodied by the piano before she can live fully. Repair, these examples suggest, is not a disavowal of the past but the creation of a way to live in generative relationship to history. As Loomis’ search for his song echoes across time through the myriad characters seeking wholeness in Wilson’s cycle, his narrative arc forms a new mythology, a new map written out of the collective history which runs in each character’s blood.

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