

The Souls of Black Folk Adrift in August Wilson's Drama

By Stephanie Larkin

How do African Americans connect to a deep spiritual heritage when their roots are neither Christian nor African Traditional Religion (ATR)? Having had ATR virtually erased from their daily lives through bondage and separation, and having the religion of their enslavers thrust upon them, the struggle to find an African American religious identity has often been the issue in the forefront of racial liberation. In terms of August Wilson's characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, he portrays them as being both liberated and oppressed in their search for spiritual connection.

And even though these plays can be viewed as commentaries on the search for black spirituality, some of the characters are unaware of their involvement in the search. From close textual analysis, it becomes apparent that those characters whose only connection to spirituality is Christianity (whether embracing or rejecting it), typically find their souls adrift from themselves and their community in Wilson's drama.

Thus, Wilson depicts four spiritual stages for his characters: those who are disconnected from spirituality, those who accept Christianity and the "white motifs" that underpin it, those who reject Christianity and seek a deeper spirituality, and those who have reconnected to and embody African Traditional Religion. The characters that best represent these stages are Levee, Toledo, Loomis, and Bynum. Levee and Toledo begin Wilson's examination of the attempt to recognize that one's soul *is* even adrift, and Loomis and Bynum bring those recognitions full circle to the reconnection to ATR.

The character Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* can be characterized as one who represents a disconnection from spirituality, and Toledo becomes in many ways his attempted liberator. Levee runs a dominant energy that at times becomes erratic and violent, and two of the instances when the reader finds these expressions most prominent are when he discusses his heritage and Christianity. However, before entering into further analysis of these issues it is important to note the relationship established by Wilson between the characters Levee and Toledo. Toledo in many ways represents the ancestral knowledge of ATR that has the potential to liberate Levee from his aggression and spiritual ignorance. However, it will be argued that Toledo's knowledge of ATR is in many ways tainted by his reliance on "white thought" and literacy. Levee is, on the other hand, indifferent to his rejection of both Christianity and ATR, and relies solely on his anger and manipulation of whites as means of identity.

Early in the play, Toledo attempts to enlighten his band mates about their unconscious expressions of African retentions; a conversation however, not well received. When Toledo shares his perception that a conversation among the group exhibits African retention of bond of kinship, the men are outraged rather than intrigued (32). Levee exclaims, "You don't see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose" (32). His comment, along with the comments of the other musicians, exhibits a great disdain for being associated with Africa, as well as, an ignorance about what Africans are actually like. It is obvious that Levee views Africans as savages, yet he himself is at times savage. It is through Levee's recounting of his

violent childhood, and his aggression toward God, that we truly begin to see the spiritual turmoil he suffers from, and the misguided attempt Toledo makes to enlighten him.

In one of the earlier debates the men engage in, Levee mocks Toledo for forgetting how to have fun due to the fact that he reads too many books like the white man (42). This comment not only exposes Levee's prejudice against whites, but also his prejudice against literacy. Literacy, like religion, is often seen as a liberator of the oppressed. However, before entering into the discussion of literacy as a liberator of African Americans, Levee's adrift soul must be further analyzed. The audience becomes aware of the root of Levee's anger when he recounts the experience of stopping his mother's gang rape by white men, as a young boy. He is violently slashed across his chest during the rescue, a symbolic sacrifice, and his father is subsequently lynched when he seeks his own form of mortal justice. However, it is not so much the explanation for his distrust of whites that is intriguing, but rather the way he chooses to interact with them. He states,

My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man... taught me how to handle them... grin in this cracker's face...all the while he's planning how he's gonna to get him and what he's gonna do to him...I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please (70).

It is obvious that Levee's soul suffers from the violence perpetuated against him by white men, yet he appears to be quite content with this anger and distrust. He seems unaware that he lacks connection to his own community, and that he subjugates himself in a sociopathic way to whites, to feel like a liberated individual. The glimpse into this aspect of his psyche allows us to see why he would reject Toledo's attempts to raise his awareness of anything intellectual or spiritual. As Levee becomes more and more agitated near the end of the play, he curses God and blames God for his mother's rape (98-99). According to Sandra Shannon it is in this moment that, "Levee has concluded that God and the white man are one and the same" (143). So why is Toledo, as the potential "ATR shaman figure" unable to save him?

In an interview with Bill Moyers in 1989, August Wilson commented that salvation for African Americans rested solely on their ability to read (qtd. In Shannon 141). However, Wilson expounds, "You cannot liberate yourself by learning the oppressor's language because all the things that oppress you are built into the linguistic environment" (Moyers 170 qtd. In Shannon 141). Wilson further states that one must have a "warrior spirit" which is the ability to read, but the courage to refuse to accept imposed limitations (Moyers 179 qtd. In Shannon 141). Shannon further analyzes, "Yet, for all of his [Toledo] eloquences, he lacks the necessary impetus to effect any change in the status of his career. He does not have the 'warrior spirit', which transcends imposed human limitation," (142). This "warrior spirit" can be interpreted as a liberating or shamanic energy that has the possibility to grant salvation, but is not fully recognized in Toledo. It is for this reason that his attempts to raise intellectual awareness of heritage and spirituality in Levee not only fails, but leads to his murder. His own personal connection to ATR is purely cerebral, and his pontification on this subject, as well as, any other intellectual discussions, cause his mates to ridicule him as an anomaly. Toledo's discussions of Africa or Christianity resign him to being "outdated" like his "clodhoppers". One can then deduce that Levee's shiny, modern, expensive shoes represent his achievement in the world, his ability to make a living despite the white man's oppression. The only "spirituality" he knows is that of

materialism, and when Toledo “tramples” the symbol of his self-liberation Levee stabs him. Though Toledo’s blood is spilled, it is not apparent as to whether this is a moment of salvation. Unlike the blood shed at the close of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, it is this author’s opinion that Toledo bloodletting represents neither a Christ figure nor a ATR ritual cleansing.

The incongruence between Christianity and ATR is further represented in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* through the characters Loomis and Bynum. Loomis is a soul adrift from spirituality, searching for a connection and somewhat disillusioned about Christianity. Unlike Levee’s unawareness of his disconnected spiritually and heritage, Loomis is consciously searching for his lost wife, and his place in the world. Having once himself been a Christian preacher, “Loomis lost his religion when Turner captured him, depriving him of his family and his freedom. Loomis now recognizes the collusion between religion and the racist state and cannot bring himself to celebrate the white man’s God, who has demanded such sacrifices of him” (Keller 472). Just as his name suggest, Loomis (looming) is a shadowy form robbed of his communal family connection, and trust in a Christian god. It is only through the shamanic figure Bynum that these rifts begin to heal for Loomis, and he unwittingly opens himself to ATR.

Bynum is arguably a character created within the context of ATR. Though it is difficult to generalize ATR as one coherent religion (as it encompasses an entire continent), Bynum’s characteristics can be traced to religions of Yoruba and Bantu. At the beginning of the play Bynum recounts his experience meeting the “shiny man” on the road. This man tells Bynum that he will tell him the “Secret of Life” and then, “everything looks as twice as big as it was” (Wilson 9). This connotes a shift in Bynum’s perception of the world, and in that moment he sees his deceased father. His father warns him that he is carrying other people’s “songs”, and that he must find his own song. Bynum discovers that his song is one of binding, thus rebuilding connections of family and heritage. According to Sandra L. Richards, “the story of a ‘shiny man’ – suggestive of the Yoruba gods Ogun and Esu- who encourages fellow travelers to claim their predestined ‘song’ in life” (92). As Bynum comes to understand the importance of one finding their song, he recounts to Molly how there are different kinds of songs. His father had the song of healing, but Bynum possesses the song of binding people together. This can be seen as Wilson’s attempt to “posit a holistic view of life, implying thereby a link between individual spirituality and collective” (Richards 93). Rebuilding the spiritual collective can be seen as a primary objective of ATR retention and a means to heal oneself in terms of spirituality and identity.

In terms of a Bantu belief system, Bynum also encompasses several traditional beliefs. This complex religion bases many of its ideas, feelings, and rites on belief in a seen and unseen world that are both involved in community, and that these two worlds intersect. In addition, the shaman of this tradition would coordinate initiation of clan, spirit, the blood pact, rites of purification, etc. (Mulago 119-124). Several of these ATR aspects can be seen in the interaction between Loomis and Bynum. As mentioned earlier, Bynum’s interaction with the “shiny man” and his father, reflect the Bantu belief of the intersection of worlds. However, this can also be seen in Loomis’s vision of the “bones people”. During the Sunday night ritual of the Juba dance (which is known in North America as the Ring Shout), Loomis is uncontrollably thrust into a sort of vision quest. In the midst of mocking the Holy Spirit (which can be seen as a renunciation of Christianity), Loomis has a terrifying vision of bones walking on the surface of

the ocean. The vision of the bones people is transformative, and he realizes that he's been laying down all his life, and he must finally "stand up" (52-55). This vision is a regression of the Middle Passage, and it is an event that also closely aligns with ATR beliefs. According to Mulago, the unity of life does not distinguish between the living and dead. "Two beliefs underlie veneration of the dead: survival of the individual after death and the interchange of relationships between the living and the dead" (120). Therefore, it can be argued that as a shaman figure Bynum's binding ability goes beyond the community of the living, and encompasses the ATR belief of the ancestral community as a the holistic aspect of spirituality. "The members of ...the family know that they live not by a life of their own but by that of the community. They know that, if separated from the community, they would lack the means to survive; above all, they know that their life is a participation in that of the ancestors" (Mulago 120). In many ways this is Loomis's first step in receiving the salivation of ART, but the complete transformation only occurs when Loomis fulfils the rite of purification of the blood pact.

The transformative culminations of Loomis's reconnection to his song and spiritual roots or community occur in the closing scene of the play. When finally reunited with his wife Martha, that he has spent years searching for, he finds that he is not satisfied. It is not the reconnection with one individual that he needs to feel at peace, but rather the reconnection to himself and his ancestral song that he needs. Loomis, like Levee, escalates to a violent transformation in this scene. Martha, acting as the catalyst, recites passages from the bible and accuses Loomis of turning to the devil (91). Unlike the Levee's rejection of a superficial intellectual argument, Loomis shuns a deeper threat of Christian "enslavement". He rants that he sees Christ standing with a whip like a slave master, while niggers swim in a sea of cotton (92). As the tension rises, the knife in Loomis hand is not turned against a fellow community member, but rather on himself. He verbally rejects Christ's symbolic bleeding, announcing the he does not "need nobody to bleed for me!" (93). With a symbolic slashing of his chest (mirroring Levee's attack by the white man), Loomis claims his own salvation. He declares that he is able to stand, and the audience is left with the awareness that he has found his song as Bynum shouts, "You shining like new money!" (94).

Unlike Levee and Toledo, Loomis finds his unique song of self-sufficiency of his own heart (Keller 475). Wilson's skillful creation of Bynum as a typical all-encompassing figure of ATR shamanism speaks volumes to his desire for African American communities. Though Wilson valued literacy as a liberator, her realized that true spiritual liberation for African Americans, as well as, claiming their independent and collective identity, could only occur when returning to the beliefs of the ancestors. Though it may seem somewhat ironic that the musicians Levee and Toledo are the ones who cannot find their song, Wilson reminds all individuals that it is through finding our internal vibration of harmony, claiming our own salvation, and standing within the collective that truly brings about liberation.

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