

The Significance of the Blues as a Cultural Expression in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom^(*)

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Abstract: August Wilson's first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* brings several issues on stage that reflects his whole contour of theatre such as the blues, and his interest in both factual and fictional history. *Ma Rainey* (1886-1939), 'Mother of Blues' was the acknowledged blues singer in African American folk culture. It is an integral part of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in which the blues is defined as 'a cultural expression and an understanding of life' for African American community throughout their painful history in the U.S. The blues primarily refers to African American culture, and it reminds the characters of their past history; through the music the characters tell their stories, and through this try to understand life itself, as the title character of the play defines that the blues is 'life's way of talking.' The intention of this article is to analyze the relations of the blues music and its significance as a cultural expression on characters as both musicians and African Americans in the play. The blues reflects the emotional content (sorrows, joys, plights and affairs, etc.) of African Americans, their experiences, their traditions and culture, at large.

Key Words: African-American, Culture, The Blues, History

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom'da Blues Müziğın Kültürel İfade Biçimi Olarak Anlamı

Özet: August Wilson'un Broadway'de sahnelenen ilk oyunu olan *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, yazarın daha sonraki tüm tiyatro oyunlarında uygulayacağı blues müziği, zenci toplumunun Amerika'da gerçek ve öyküsel tarihi gibi önemli bazı konuları içerir. "Ma Rainey" (1886-1939), Afrikalı Amerikalı folk kültüründe bilinen bir blues sanatçısıdır. Oyunun önemli bölümünü, bu toplumun blues müziği kültürel ifade biçimi olarak algılaması ve Amerika'da yaşadıkları acıları blues müzik yoluyla aktarmaları oluşturmaktadır. Blues müziği karakterlere geçmişte yaşadıklarını öykülemekte ve yaşamlarını anlamlandırmada yol göstermektedir. Bu makalenin amacı blues müziğın hem müzisyen hem de Afrikalı Amerikalı karakterler üzerinde kültürel bir ifade biçimi olarak anlamını araştırmaktır. Blues müziği genel anlamda Afrikalı Amerikalı toplumun duygusal yapısını (acılarını, neşesini, arzu ve beklentilerini), deneyimlerini, gelenek ve kültürlerini yansıtmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrikalı Amerikalı, Kültür, Blues, Tarih

*) This article is a revised version of a paper, delivered in 34th International American Studies Conference sponsored by American Studies Association of Turkey, and American Embassy, Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, Alanya, November 3-5, 2010.

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The blues that is developed out of African-American sorrow songs constitutes the essential part of August Wilson's plays¹, and provides a ground where cultural experiences of the community might be resolved. Wilson's dramaturgy contextualizes African-American cultural experiences through his interest in both factual and fictional history and the blues in order for the community to redefine itself. Numerous critics have acknowledged the special functions of the blues in Wilson's plays: Kim Pereira, in his *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*, spends significant time in reflecting the relation between the blues and the African-American identity; David Arnold, in his article, "Seven Guitars: August Wilson's Economy of Blues," underscores the connection of the blues and choric expression in *Seven Guitars* which begins and ends with a group of mourners listening to a singer. He goes on to note that "the blues is both a musical and a discursive tradition and implies a community cohesiveness and an African-American sense of self and place in America" (Arnold 2000:202). Harry Elam interprets the blues as the matrix of all of Wilson's plays that reflects the complexities of African-American culture, and he notes that Wilson's "artistic orientation is toward the past; he sees the early blues of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey as the foundation for his art" (Elam 2004:82). Wilson himself admits that "the music has a cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in" (qtd. Shannon 1995:204), in an interview² with Sandra Shannon, and he adds "the blues I would count as my primary influence" (228).

The blues is a starting point for the debate on Wilson's plays, either as dominantly or at the "bedrock" as a choric expression. Wilson invokes the cultural past through singing the blues in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), playing the piano in *The Piano Lesson* (1987), and searching for the song in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986). Sturdyvant (white studio owner) who buys the music of the singers in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Joe Turner, who has taken Loomis and imprisoned (enslaved) him for seven years to steal his 'life song' in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), the white man who offers to buy the piano in *The Piano Lesson* are all asking, in fact, more than the music and/or musical instrument. They are personifications of white oppression of African-Americans, and they want to buy the cultural memory of African-Americans through the means of music. Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Levee in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* are represented as the victims of white men; all three characters deny their ties with the African-American past, (or at best see the sentimental value of the past) and look forward independently. Yet, Bynum in *Joe Turner*, Toledo in *Ma Rainey* and Bernice in *The Piano Lesson* remind these victim characters of their

- 1) For more on August Wilson and his plays, see my book: *Monologue in Contemporary U.S. Drama: Exposing American Voices*, Atatürk University Publications No: 961, Research Series No: 107, Erzurum 2007.
- 2) This interview with August Wilson was conducted on Friday, September 26, 2003 at the Edison Hotel in New York City. See in Shannon, Sandra G. and Dona A. Williams (2005). "A Conversation with August Wilson," in *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*, Eds. Dona A. Williams and Sandra G. Shannon. New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

community consciousness, cultural past and memories; their roots which seem to be necessary for advancement, and necessary to survive in the U.S. Loomis, in search of his wife Martha who connects him to his past, finds his 'life song' (his identity) when he meets Bynum; Bernice plays the Piano at the end of the play, and thus connects the family to past memories; Levee who does not accept to turn to his roots kills Toledo in rage (black-on-black violence), thus he both committed crime against his fellow band member and a member of his community, and thus is perished himself.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom stands beside these plays and offers the blues as a cultural expression of the characters as Arnold notes; "Wilson's conception of the importance of music in African-American culture is perhaps most obvious in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*" (Arnold 2000:200). Thus, it is an integral part of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in which the blues is defined as 'a cultural expression and an understanding of life' for African-American community throughout their painful history in the U.S. Sandra Shannon says that "*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* proved to be not only play that secured Wilson's future as a playwright but also the first full-blown public demonstration of his newly formulated artistic agenda" (Shannon 1995:75). August Wilson's first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* brings several issues on stage that reflects his whole contour of theatre such as the blues, and his interest in the history of the African-American community in the U.S. The function of the blues in the play varies in terms of the ideas and ideologies of the characters as both musicians and African-Americans. It reminds the characters of their past history; functions as a symbolic way of finding one's place in life; and through the music the characters tell their stories, and try to understand life itself. The title character of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* defines that the blues is "life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding life"³ (67). This article is intended to observe the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* both as musicians and African-Americans, display how these characters reflect the blues as their cultural expression. The play centers on Ma Rainey⁴, a famous blues singer who is called 'Mother of the blues' in history, and her band (four black musicians): Cutler, the guitarist and trombonist and the leader of the band; Toledo, the pianist and the only literate among the band; Slow Drag, the bass player, and Levee; the youngest of all others is the trumpet player.

3) *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom in August Wilson Three Plays*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991. All future citations from this play refer to this edition and page numbers will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

4) Wilson fictionalizes Ma Rainey, being faithful to history. As a real person in history, Gertrude Ma Rainey (1886-1939) was accepted to be the first female Blues singer who was called "Mother of the Blues." Ma Rainey achieved national fame in 1923, at the age of thirty-seven, and made a recording contract with Paramount Records. She recorded ninety two songs for Paramount between 1923 and 1928 including the song, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." For further details see Qun Wang (1999). *An In-Depth Study of the Major Plays of African American Playwright August Wilson: Vernacularizing the Blues on the Stage*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press., pp. 46-48.

There is close link (an indexical sign) between the characters as musicians and the way they produce black music, as if each is constructed in some way by the blues, and thus produce the blues. If stage directions are taken into consideration this connection becomes apparent. Levee's voice, for instance, "is strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath. He plays wrong notes frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other" (16). He is characteristically arrogant, and his narrative is crude as the sound of his trumpet. He is also confused personally just as his wrong notes. Cutler "plays guitar and trombone and is the leader of the group...His playing is solid and almost totally unembellished" (13). Cutler is personally sensible, steady and somewhat basic and conservative character just as his playing the instruments. As both his name implies, and his playing the bass with an ease reflect that Slow Drag is calm, natural and quite indifferent to the events around him. Toledo, the piano player, is "in control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself" (14). Toledo's undeveloped philosophy and racial ideology in the play is the indexical sign of his misjudges the potential of his instrument. "Toledo can play and read and decode some of the complex messages in human relationships in many of the same manners as blues narratives" (Crawford 1994:44). "Their personalities reflect their attitudes toward music: the older three favor the more plaintive, deeply emotional sounds of the blues; Levee, the flashier rhythms of swing" (Pereira 1995:14). It is not only Levee's age and rhythms that set him apart from his fellow musicians, but also his ambition, his impatience, and his speech. He is determined to make his own version of the song, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, "with some fire" (90) and with a lot of rhythm, which causes the main dramatic conflict of the play. Ma Rainey's insistence on the original version of the blues and her resistance to sign release in any way other than her own style, however, shows her subjectivity in the same way.

The action in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in Chicago in 1927, and the set is two rooms: the upstairs recording studios where Sturdyvan and Irvin stay, and the band room in the basement where black musicians come together. The play opens in a basement band room where the musicians wait for Ma Rainey, and two white man in an upstairs recording studio, Sturdyvant, the owner of the record company, and Irvin, Ma Rainey's (so called) manager. Ma Rainey comes to the recording studio with Dussie Mae, her lover, and Sylvester, her nephew. We learn that the three have been involved in a car accident, and that they could not get a cab service as the driver did not want to serve them because of her race, as Ma Rainey says: "Said he wasn't gonna haul no colored folks.... if you want to know the truth of it" (41). At the very beginning of the play the audience sense that there is discrimination in the society. This sense heightens in the course of the play with the attitudes, treatments and approaches of white owners of the recording company.

As a recording artist (Blues singer and Blues writer) Ma Rainey has a respectful title, 'Madame Rainey,' a title of power not given to black women of the 1920's. As an entertainer, however, "she is subject to whites who own the recording studios and

the rights to her songs, her words” (Green 2004:148). The band members including Ma Rainey depend on two white men (Irvin and Sturdyvant) who buy and market their music. “Through Ma Rainey’s struggle to keep her voice – the mouthpiece of the culture – free from the control of others, the play becomes a statement about white executives’ exploitation of black entertainers / black voices, and it demonstrates the need for the culture’s protection” (Green 2004:148). When Ma Rainey mentions about her inner voice to her manager, Irvin: “Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That’s what counts with Ma” (52), Wilson points out the subjective voice of a black woman, the voice of the culture’s female consciousness. “Ma Rainey’s appearance in the play, thus, works very well with Wilson’s intent to reproduce on the stage African-American musicians’ struggle for control and autonomy in the 1920s” (Wang 1999:37).

The other important focus in the play is on Levee, a trumpet player, who is eager to make an arrangement of urban jazz out of Ma Rainey’s country blues, and thus establish his own band. The conflict is that the ambitious Levee has written a new version of Ma Rainey’s song and asks white owners of the company (Sturdyvant and Irvin) for having permission to make the song, recording. John Hanlon in his interpretation of the play asserts as follows: “We learn early on that Sturdyvant is interested in Levee solely because he’s experimenting with a new sound” (Hanlon 2002:104). Yet, it is not only the experimentation that matters for Sturdyvant than it is business, and good deal of making money. Levee, however, seeks recognition as well as financial gain by having his own band, as he tells his expectance: “As soon as I get my band together and make them records like Mr. Sturdyvant done told me I can make, I’m gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave...and Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and beg her to stay! That’s the way I’m gonna be! Make the white man respect me!” (78). “Levee is defiant, but he is also still dependent on the studio owner for the resources required to do it his way” (Hanlon 2002:111). Although Levee admires the way Ma treats the white man, “he does not realize Ma’s power comes from being true to herself and her music” (Pereira 1995:19), and a deep understanding of the sensibilities of the blues. Her speech to the leader of the band in appearance, to whole band and to the audience in essence shows Ma Rainey’s acknowledgment between her and her relation to Sturdyvant and Irvin: “They don’t care anything about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them...They ain’t got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on” (64). Although both Levee and Ma Rainey have similar racial problems to face with, Ma Rainey is well aware of the financial interest of white managers, and Levee does not. Ma Rainey throughout the play reaches self-awareness of her ‘voice ownership.’

The conflict in the play, then, quest for a new identity with the new rendition of the music against the old or original version. It is again Levee’s need for recognition, and establishment of his identity as he reacts the criticism to be “spooked up with the white

man” by Toledo, his fellow band member. His reply to his friends shows his anger: “I studies the white man. I got him studied good. The first time one fixes on me wrong, I’m gonna let him know how much I studies. Come telling me I’m spooked up with the white man. You let one of them mess with me, I’ll show you how spooked up I am” (56). It is not, however, totally the new version of the music that Levee is denied for, yet it is his rejection of the debt to the past. His rejection of the old music comes to mean a denial of his cultural identity as an African-American among his fellow musicians in the band. Moreover, he expects the approval of his version of black music not from his own community but from a white record producer. It is Toledo again who comments on such a serious act of denial, or, ‘selling out’: “As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he says...as long as he looks to white folks for approval...then he ain’t never gonna find out who he is and what he’s about. He’s just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That’s one sure thing.” (29).

Toledo is Wilson’s mouthpiece when he stresses the idea that the colored man should make the world better for the colored people, as Hanlon notes, “Toledo’s rhetoric would have us endorse a separatist black politics, or at least unified black social action, as a way out...” (Hanlon 2002:114). Levee is far from having lessons Toledo’s stories would teach. “Story-telling and the performance of the blues-particularly in its improvisatory aspect-are part of this [the African American] tradition in which cultural values and codes are transmitted from generation to generation, and where older performers are looked upon as gurus from whom the younger aspirants may learn and then forge their own artistic destinies” (Pereira 1995:17). Levee, however, does fit into this tradition with his rebellious and impatient personality. It was not easy for him to cultivate the modes of introspection and self-analysis.

It is Toledo’s stepping on Levee’s shoes in appearance; his rhetoric throughout the play in essence causes his death at the end of the play. Although Levee wants to change Ma Rainey’s music, and he is promised to make a recording contract and at the end of the play, rejected to do so, the main challenger to Levee in the play is Toledo with his verbal assaults. First promised by the white managers, then, rejected at the end of the play, Levee is crushed and in rage stabs Toledo, and kills him for accidental step on his shoes. Toledo’s narrative throughout the play is a real obstacle against Levee’s swing style. Since Levee connects, in his mind ‘to look good to play music well,’ Toledo’s coincidentally stepping on his shiny shoes just after Sturdyvant’s rejection of his songs is the last assault that snaps Levee’s control. “Trapped by social hatred and discrimination, and out of step with the times, he [Levee] is alienated from everyone around him, including himself” (Pereira 1995:16). This becomes clear in Levee’s speech in rage: “Look at that! That’s my shoe! Look at that! You did it! You did it! You fucked up my shoe! You stepped on my shoe with them raggedy-ass clodhoppers!” (92).

Levee kills Toledo partly because Toledo steps to his version of music, partly because Toledo’s challenging narrative which presents Levee as a traitor to his own culture, and

thus makes him guilty inside. When Toledo steps on one of Levee's shoes, it is not only the value of the material that angers Levee and thus leads him to violence, but the series of disappointments. "In Wilson's most poignant and insightful social commentary, the disappointments and frustration of oppression divide the race-and the class-as Levee's anger is thoughtlessly directed against (or "transferred" to) a fellow black man-and a fellow worker" (Hanlon2002:113). Wilson treats such themes as lack of a clear identity, dislocation of the self, and black-on black violence in his later plays. The theme of (black-on-black) violence among African-Americans becomes most obvious in Wilson's latest play, *King Hedley II* (2001) in which rap music replaces the blues in contemporary cultural terms, and in the ghetto environment.

Black music has been changed throughout the history parallel to the mode of expression in life styles of African Americans. They have added their evolution to their rhythm, diction and mode of expression in the music "and, just when it seemed that the only possibilities were a reworking of old styles, rap emerged with its hard, driving rhythms, staccato at once fluid and robotic, and lyrics that recalled the blues in their cries of protest" (Pereira1995:13). Like the blues in Wilson's plays, rap as black solitary speech enables his latest work, *King Hedley II* (2001), to reflect the power of black expressive culture, and oral tradition. Wilson himself believes that rap music is very similar to the blues, as he defines it in an interview with Shannon and Williams; "the words and the music ... where you have words to provide you with the information and music to give you the emotion" (Shannon1995:189), and rap provides the combination similar to blues. Like the broad definition of the blues as work songs, sacred harmonies, folk philosophy, political commentary, humor, elegiac lament, and much more, Elam evaluates rap music in connection with black cultural tradition in terms of "essence of reality" and "truth telling"; he explains that "this black expressive oral tradition is found at spiritual and social gatherings in black churches, in verbal signifying games in black barbershops, in the dozens played by young black men or urban street corners, in historic resonances, and in contemporary American cultural practices" (Elam 2004:82).

If it was the blues in his first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, in his latest work, *King Hedley II*, Wilson refers to contemporary milieu, 'the ghetto,' its authenticity and its aesthetics. "The ghetto constructed within the dominant culture as a pejorative site of danger and threatening blackness becomes re-imagined within rap music and hip-hop culture as a space of black creative possibility, of survival through determination and innovative creativity, the ability as Wilson would suggest to improvise on a theme" (Elam 2004:85). Related to this theme, however, Levee is neither a traitor to his own culture nor guilty as he experience the pains of dislocation. On the contrary he represents the new generation in search of discovery of the (unstable) self without keeping the past history in mind. "Wilson contends that the black community currently is floundering because it has failed to turn to its history for strength or guidance" (Plum 1993:561). His duty (functional aesthetic) as a dramatist can be evaluated as a warning of such dangers as social and economic displacement of African-Americans and reawaken

cultural consciousness through the process of empowering the community with their distinctive cultural experiences as a positive force. This process might be found in the strong ties of African-American heritage and history both for strength and guidance and for determination of the future.

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