

Blues, African legacy and Blacks' identity in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

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Abstract: In most August Wilson's plays, the issue of Blacks' identity research is a subject developed. In his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Blues and African values are shown as the right path to make Blacks respected and recognized as full citizen in the American society. In this paper we show the link between the three elements which are Blues, African legacy and Blacks' identity. This analysis uses the Blues as a fundamental tool of African's roots which allows them to be independent and develop ideologies that can help them establish their real identity in America. The blues is thus a mean for them to promote the African values they have inherited from and reappropriate their real self and place in the American society.

Résumé: Dans Presque toutes ses oeuvres, August Wilson fait allusion à la recherche identitaire des noir Américain. Dans la pièce théâtrale, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, le Blues et les valeurs Africaines sont montrés comme des éléments importants pouvant aider cette communauté dans sa quête. Cet article met en exergue le liens entre ces trois éléments que sont, le Blues, l'héritage Africain et la recherche identitaire des noirs. l'analyse de *Ma Rayney's Black* sous cet aspect, démontre que le Blues est un outil fondamentale dans la lutte dess noirs pour leur reconnaissance en tant que citoyens Américains à part entière. En effet, cette music à elle seule véhicule des valeurs Africaines et permet aux noirs de developper des stratégies pour être indépendant et rétablir la vérité sur leur identité réelle. Le blues est finalement, un moyen pour les noirs Americains de faire la promotion des valeurs hérités de l'Afrique et de se réappropriier leur identité et leur place dans la société Américaine.

Introduction

Black Americans' fight for the recognition of their real identity is still a debate in the American society. Many Blacks' writers have tackled the issue through their literary works under several aspects. August Wilson is one of these Blacks playwrights whose work is essentially dedicated to the Blacks' research of identity in America. Music and especially the Blues is an aspect of Blacks' culture that is predominant in all the writers' plays. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is the perfect illustration of the place given to the Blues in Blacks' affirmation

of their identity in America. The play presents the life of the members of a black blues' band trying to record a song in a studio belonging to a white man. The obstacles, problems and dilemmas faced by these Black American in the 1940's..... are the issues that allow us debate the matter of Blues as an African legacy and its place in Blacks research of their real identity. In this plot, Ma Rainey, a dominant black woman and a Blues singer, is the main character endowed with the responsibility to make her community respected through her art. She firstly keeps connected to the roots of Blues by not distorting it by adding foreign connotations. Then, she recognizes her African heritage through her music. This research paper will highlight the link between the blues and African legacy. And also show how this music can be used by Blacks to establish their real identity in America.

Blues, African legacy and Blacks' identity

For August Wilson, the blues plays a role in destructuralizing whites' way of seeing Blacks by bringing back African Americans' customs. The playwright gives his own definition of the blues . In his preface to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he writes: "It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other. This music is called blues" (*MRBB*, xvi). The blues, as it is defined by August Wilson, helps black Americans to be connected to their African customs. Nahidh Falih Sulaiman sees the blues as a musical form that brings back African Americans' customs. He writes: "Ma's music is a continuum of the African tribal drums, the slave songs, and the spiritual aspects of their culture, as distinct from white culture" (Sulaiman, 2012: 53).

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey mentions the connectivity that the blues brings to African Americans:

I'm gonna tell you something ... and you go on up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma. Now, you carry nephew on down there ... tell Cutler he's gonna do the voice intro on that 'Black Bottom' song and that Levee ain't messing up with my song with none of his music shit. Now, if that don't set right with you and studyvant ... then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I din't like it up here no way. (*MRBB*, 63)

The fact that Irvin and Sturdivant's voices, two white producers do not count to Ma Rainey, shows that blues is not about white Americans. It does not concern white Americans' culture. It rather concerns African Americans' customs.

What Ma Rainey rejects Levee's attempt to modernize the blues songs. This strongly shows that the blues is Ma Rainey and her African community's custom. It is their ancestral African way of living, thinking and doing that they carry with them in America. In this vein, Mahdi Sepehrmanesh writes: "Music, especially Jazz and blues, is the embodiment of African culture through which one can come to get familiar with their culture" (Sepehrmanesh, 2015: 214). If reference is taken from the antagonistic position between Ma Rainey, the leader of the blues, and Levee, it can be said that African Americans brought from Africa were first singing in their mother tongues but as time passed, after the death of the first generations of slaves, the new generation in the image of Levee tries somehow to be cut-off their African roots. They did not know a lot about Africa and its custom because of the several displacements due to slavery. Levee's great desire to change the traditional blues brings him to be considered as a lost African in the American society. He can be perceived as an African who even loses his mother tongue.

Ma Rainey's angry rebuttal to Irvin and Sturdyvant shows that if her traditional blues does not fit them then she can carry her music on back down South. At first, disparities between Ma Rainey and the white producers Irvin and Sturdyvant shows the North as an American community replete with white Americans. As such the blues cannot work in this part of America because it does not reflect their history and customs. As well, Ma Rainey's depreciation of the presence of the blues in the North is an evidence that the community in this part of America is not her traditional community. She does not mirror herself and life in this North of America.

The discordance between Ma Rainey and the white Americans Irvin and Sturdyvant gives a strong illustration that the blues carries African American's past. The eagerness of the blues leader to carry the blues to the South is due to the fact that it is in the south that the mass of black Americans live. It is in this part of America that the deported Africans were made slave in the plantations. Mahdi Sepehrmanesh writes: "African Americans show their resistance through songs which will be heard in the country, and they demonstrate that they have their own discourse as well. Ma Rainey, as said, is very popular" (Sepehrmanesh, 2015: 213). Mahdi Sepehrmanesh's insight into African Americans' music shed further light on the importance of

music in empowering African Americans: “Music acts as a means of power for the black community.” (Sepehrmanesh, 2015: 14)

Ma Rainey likes the South of America because it replete with her community which empowers her. And the Blues represents Africans’ roots and past. As Nahidh Falih Sulaiman contends: “the blues is a way of ‘thinking’ and ‘being’: “It is a cultural response of a non-literate people whose history and culture were rooted in the oral tradition” (Sulaiman, 2012: 47). In this context, Ralph Ellison contends that blues is a sort of externalization of black people suffering experience in America. He writes: “The blues as a form is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (Ellison, 1945: 78). The history of Blues is very important because it brings African Americans to connect to their African’s path.

The blues has a historical function in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and Ma Rainey is visibly trying to combine those concepts of historical background and cultural heritage of the Blues. That is why Ma Rainey keeps her originality through her musical style which is at least the traditional forms of the blues music. She uses the old version of the blues. The following conversation between Ma Rainey and Cutler is a blueprint:

CUTLER. I been meaning to ask you, Ma about these songs. This ‘Moonshine Blues’ ... that’s one of them songs Bessie Smith sang, I believe
 MA RAINEY. 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 sells 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! (*MRBB*, 78)

Ma is irritated to hear that her companion may think that she is singing a song already played by her best rival Bessie. She does not really care about that because she sees things differently and believes in her originality. She is looking for authenticity. She is black and sings for Black people who still feel linked to their ancestors. Ma Rainey sings for Blacks who still believe in the magic of the lues.

As a defender of the African customs, August Wilson’s addiction to the blues begins with his discovery of Bessie Smith’s music. In fact, the first contact of the playwright with Bessie Smith’s music was at the age of twenty. Sillman recalls this encounter in an interview she realized with Wilson:

As a young man, Wilson haunted Pittsburgh’s thrift stores, buying staffs of old albums for nickel each. One day he came across a record by Bessie Smith ... ‘I put that on; it was unlike anything I’ve ever heard before,’ somehow all that other

music was different from that. And I go, wait a minute. This is mine, there is a history here. (Sillman, 2004: 7)

This was the beginning of a long story between August Wilson and the blues. It is visible in all his five plays under study. Wilson is always deeply involved in blues when dramatizing life of Black people. The author even calls his muses the four “B” meaning Amiri **B**araka, Jorge Luis **B**orge, Romare **B**earden and **B**lues. Nahidh Falih Sulaiman’s reflection goes in this line. He writes: “The Blues are one of the cultural codes of the African Americans which fundamentally functions as a catalyst and reminder of their rich cultural heritage especially that which united them in America as a segregated and marginalized group” (Sulaiman, 2012: 57). If blues music reveals African Americans’ customs, it also highlights their identity.

August Wilson reveals the identity of the African Americans through the blues. The dramatist shows that one of the greatest element brought from Africa that Black Americans really cherish is music. Arguing about the importance of music in August Wilson’s plays, Elham Jalali Karveh writes: “In Wilson’s plays, music and song act as metaphors for African American identity, spirit, and Soul” (Karveh, 2019: 186). Music plays an important role in revealing the African identity of the Black Americans. August Wilson shows it in almost all his plays. This is the case of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in which the plot turns around music, especially Blues. Referring to Toledo, the stage direction mentions: “TOLEDO is the piano player. In control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself” (*MRBB*, 20). The blues is mentioned by the stage direction as the extension of the African identity of the African Americans.

The mastering of such a music brings the African Americans to be in control of their life as it is the case with Toledo. But the loss of the blues brings the African Americans to lose control of their life in the United States of America as it can be demonstrated with the case of Levee. Levee’s loss of the traditional blues lies in his following address to Slow Drag: “You ain’t gotta rehearse that ... ain’t nothing but old jug band music. They need one of them jug bands for this (*MRBB*, 25). Levee is not for the old blues. He is for the transformation of this music to fit white Americans’ need. Levee in such a context distorts the blues music in the favor of white Americans putting himself into trouble with the society. Levee is one of the members of the blues band of is mostly in trouble both with white Americans and with African Americans.

Levee is not only dominated by the white producer Sturdyvant but he is also in trouble with his blues band. Sturdyvant's power domination upon Levee lies as follows:

LEVEE. Mr. Sturdyvan, Sir. About them songs I give you?

STURDYVANT. Okay, Levee. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you five dollars a piece for them. Now that's the best I can do.

LEVEE. I don't want no five dollars, Mr. Sturdyvant. I want to record them songs.

STURDYVANT. Well, Levee, like I say ... they just aren't the kind of songs we're looking for.

LEVEE. Mr. Sturdyvant, you asked me to write them songs. Now, why didn't you tell me that before when I first give them to you? You told me you was gonna let me record them. What's the difference between then and now. (MRBB, 108)

Levee in the above passage is completely dominated and exploited by Sturdyvant. Sturdyvant controls Levee's music and benefits from them. Such a domination rises from Levee's loss of the traditional blues. By losing the traditional blues, Levee loses any sense of conduct and attitude to hold before the white producer. If a stand is taken from Ma Rainey, it can be understood that Levee lives in trouble because he loses his blues. Contrary to Levee, Ma Rainey is not dominated by the white producer Sturdyvant. The following passage is an illustration:

I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. Carry my nephew on down there and introduce him to the band. I promised my sister I'd look for him and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song my way. (MRBB, 62)

Such a response of Ma Rainey is addressed to the white manager Irvin. Ma Rainey in this passage is not dominated by Irvin. She has control of herself and fight for the interest of her African American relatives. Ma Rainey is in such a self-control because she has a mastery of the blues which connects her to her African custom. As Nahidh Falih Sulaiman contends:

The blues can be seen as a historical, cultural and social record of the black artists who use its various forms to record their cultural identity. This kind of music, however, also embodies the traditional values that identify the African Americans by linking them back to Africa and its ancient culture and traditions. Such cultural elements served to give them a worthy and independent cultural tradition, in the face of institutionalized racism which defined them as savages. (Sulaiman, 2012: 47)

The plays such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Seven Guitars* and *The Piano Lesson* which contain the names of musical instruments in the titles are appealed in revealing the African identity of African Americans. The titles of the plays already reveal blues through which the

African Americans connect to their African identity. Angela Davis gives an insight into African American willingness to be connected to their African identity. The critic states: “Perhaps we have an obsession with naming ourselves because for most of our lives we have been named by other people” (Davis, 1998: 10).

“Other people” as mentioned by Angela Davis refers to white Americans. White Americans identify African Americans as slave, barbarian and inferior race. The assertion of Angela Davis leads to wonder the trouble with being named by other people. In fact, African Americans find it to be a real problem that their identity is given by white Americans. This accounts for the fact that playwrights such as August Wilson find it important to write to define African American within African identity.

Like August Wilson, Black nationalists such as Amiri Baraka founded the Black Art Movement with specific rules which have to be followed by the black community to assert their identity in America. Larry Neal gives an overview of the rules of “The Black Art Movement” as follows:

The Black Art Movement proposes a radical recording of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics ... Poet Don L. Lee expresses it: ‘We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil. It’s time for du Bois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: destroy the culture and you destroy the people. This must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilizers; bringing back old values, and introducing new ones. Black art will talk to the people and with the will of the people stop impending “protective custody. (Larry Neal, 1968: 1)

This movement understands blackness as the protection of African identity of black American for their own survival in the American’s society. From this, one can stress on the fact that Levee’s trouble in America is perfectly linked to his distortion of the traditional Blues in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. As a follower of the ideas set by Amiri Baraka, August Wilson respects in his literary productions the rules dictated by the Black Art Movement. Thus, in his plays Wilson does the promotion of Blacks’ identity’s recognition through their African heritage mainly Blues. Black Americans’ solidarity is also unveiled by blues.

August Wilson represents in his plays the blues as musical form that brings African Americans in solidarities. In his play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the playwright brings the blues singer Ma Rainey to tell the white manager Irvin:

I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. Carry my nephew on down there and introduce him to the band. I promised my sister I'd look for him and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song my way. (*MRBB*, 62)

Ma Rainey's fighting for her nephew is significant in different ways. At first it stands for the solidarity that the blues brings to the African Americans. It is a means for the African Americans for getting together and helping each other no matter the difficulties.

Though Sylvester stutters, as Irvin reminds Ma Rainey: "He stutters, Ma ... the boy in the band" (*MRBB*, 74), the blues band is willing to bring him to sing like all the members of the band. On the one hand, the stuttering of Sylvester is a metaphor of the difficulties that the African Americans undergo in America. On the other hand, Black Bottom is the blues that helps the African Americans to overcome their difficulties in the American society.

Like Ma Rainey, Cutler shows his willingness to bring Sylvester to be developed in the American society. He tells him:

I don't think nobody too much give a damn! Sylvester, here's the way your part go. The band plays the into ... I'll tell you where to come in. The band plays the into and then you say, 'All right, boys, you done seen the rest ... Now I'm gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom.' You got that? (Sylvester nods). Let me here you say it one time. (*MRBB*, 65)

The solidarity among the African Americans is brought by the blues music. It is due to the blues that the African Americans build strong bonds to help their relative Sylvester. In this context, the blues is an instrument of solidarity for the African Americans.

The solidarity brought by the blues helps the African Americans to be developed socially and economically. This can be seen with the case of the solidarity of the blues band toward Sylvester. Ma Rainey tells him:

Well. Come on over here and introduce you in a minute ... Have Culter show you how your part go. And when you get your money, you gonna send some of it home to your mama. Let her know you doing all right. Make her feel good to know doing all right in the world. (*MRBB*, 61)

With this strong connection generated by the blues music, Sylvester is going to grow economically and socially. Not only is he going to make money for himself but also for his community in Africa. August Wilson clearly shows that the blues is actually not only about life

as Ma Rainey says, but Blues for August Wilson is more than that. For the dramatist, the blues is life itself. Life represents for Blacks an area whereby they could identify themselves, propose and elaborate strategies to overcome white system which only sought to oppress and asphyxiate them. Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class* explains that the Blues “makes abundant use of humor, satire, and irony, revealing ... historic roots in slave music where in indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced” (Davis, 1981: 10)

As well, the solidarity brought by the blues music is going to help him leave his social status as a stutter and become a fluent singer. His change of social status lies in the conversation between Ma Rainey and Cutler as follows:

MA RAINEY. (To Sylvester.) See! I told you. I knew you could do it. You just have to put your mind to it. Didn't he do good, Cutler Sound real good. I told him he could do it.
CUTLER. He sure did. He did better than I thought he was gonna do.
(MRBB, 86)

In this passage, Ma Rainey and Cutler present the success of Sylvester brought by the solidarity of the blues. Sylvester in this circumstance moves from his position of stutterer to be a blues singer.

Sylvester's new social status provides him with money. He gets money by singing blues songs. Ma Rainey discloses Sylvester's wealth brought by the blues solidarity as follows:

MA RAINEY. Sturdyvant, I want you to pay that boy his money.
STURDYVANT. Sure, Ma. I got it right here. Two hundred for you and twenty-five for the kid, right. (STURDYVANT hands the money to IRVAN, who hands it to MA RAINEY and SYLVESTER). (MRBB, 105)

Sylvester has got money due to the blues. He does not depend for his livelihood. He lives of the fruit of his labour. The solidarity brought by the blues music thus sets Sylvester independent in the American society. August Wilson sustains in an interview with Bill Moyers:

The Blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of Blacks in America. The Blues is a philosophy system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of people as part of the oral tradition. That's a way of passing along information.... This 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. (Moyers, 1988: 1)

August Wilson uses music in general and the blues in particular to express White's oppression over Blacks like in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* when the famous black blues singer Ma Rainey is being obliged to cooperate with the white producers who owns the recording studio. Sturdivant makes money on Ma Rainey's back by exploiting her voice as she confesses in the play:

If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. I done made this company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them. (MRBB, 79)

The white man by offering to buy the piano in *The Piano Lesson* is also trying to exploit Blacks through their music and take profit from their African heritage. Doaker mentions it as follows: "Some white fellow was going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments. He'd buy anything. Drums. Guitars. Harmonicas. Pianos ... offered her a nice price (TPL, 11). Face with white Americans' exploitation, no one can deny the importance of music, especially the blues which allows African Americans to overcome their difficulties. Nahidh Falih Sulaiman writes: "Actually, the blues music aims at reminding people of their troubled past and the culture that has arisen directly from that Thus, the blues keeps people's stories alive by reminding them of their past" (Sulaiman, 2012: 48). Blues expresses finally black Americans' African customs, their identity and the solidarity in their community.

Conclusion

One of the aspects of Blacks' identity promotion developed by Black authors is music mainly the blues. It is the case of August Wilson's plays in general and particularly *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* which is full of metaphors permitting to highlight Blacks real identity and pass on a message about their origins. Indeed, Blues has a first capacity which is to remind Blacks' historical background, their history as slave deported from Africa. Blues texts recalls or retells Blacks' travel from Africa to America on the sea road. It also tells their ancestors life in the American land. Their very first fights for liberation and slavery's abolition. It is blues which has helped Blacks support their hard work in the plantations and it plays the role today of keeping Blacks' past alive. Ma Rainey fights to keep this heritage original and intact for the coming generation. She finds in this battle the affirmation of her identity. In opposition to the character of Levee who is lost when he loses and reject his African belonging. Blues continues his role of retelling Blacks' life and culture in today's America. It denounces Blacks'

oppression by Whites at several level and the disparities in the social tissue. This music becomes then a ground for Black to promote values such as solidarity to permit to their community to experience an economical independence. Blues has the capacity to empower Blacks and make them able to control their life and be respected.

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