

行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫 成果報告

威爾森《海洋寶石》的問題化和再現 研究成果報告(精簡版)

計畫類別：個別型
計畫編號：NSC 97-2410-H-004-160-
執行期間：97年08月01日至98年07月31日
執行單位：國立政治大學英國語文學系

計畫主持人：姜翠芬

計畫參與人員：此計畫無其他參與人員

處理方式：本計畫可公開查詢

中華民國 98 年 10 月 27 日

The Diasporic Memories and Representations in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

I. Introduction

How does one retrieve one's racial history more than three hundred years ago? How can one reconstruct this history if it is lost due to diaspora? Why are these diasporic memories still important to one's existence? These are the crucial questions African American playwright August Wilson (1945-2005) always asks in his decade-by-decade chronicle of dramas.¹ He particularly stresses the imminence of these diasporic memories in *Gem of the Ocean*, chronically the first play of his ten-part cycle.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson depicts a young black man Citizen Barlow's journey of redemption through the help of a spiritual adviser Aunt Ester. Set in 1904 in Pittsburg, *Gem of the Ocean*, however, is imbued with the memories of the black slaves' forced migration in the 17th century and after the Emancipation. Citizen Barlow is filled with guilt because he stole a bucket of nails from the tin mill he worked for but another man, wrongly accused, was drowned in the river when evading the pursuit by a local constable. With the help of other black characters, Aunt Ester takes Citizen on a ritualistic journey, first on an imaginary slave boat named "Gem of the Ocean," where they re-enact the torture of the slaves, then to the City of Bones, where Citizen visualizes his ancestors in the otherworldly glory. This paper intends to employ Pierre Nora's view of memory and history and Wilson's own special idea about how African Americans should make good use of their diasporic memories to analyze how *Gem of the Ocean* teaches blacks to see through their problems and to rebuild themselves and to reconnect themselves with their history of the slaves' voyage in the Middle Passage three hundred years ago.

II. Problems

As critic Richard Noggle has aptly pointed out, the victimization of African Americans by whites is not August Wilson's primary concerns (64). Rather, in this plays, Wilson reveals his deep concerns over the problems African Americans are confronted with. The problems of African Americans come from the African American community itself: "an inability to come together, to discover power from

¹ Within twenty-three years before he died, Wilson wrote ten plays, one for each decade of the twentieth century. The ten plays are *Gem of the Ocean* (2004) set in 1904, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) 1911, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) 1921, *The Piano Lesson* (1990) 1936, *Seven Guitars* (1996) 1949, *The Fences* (1987) 1957, *Two Trains Running* (1992) 1969, *Jitney* (1982) 1977, *King Hedley II* (2001) 1985, and *Radio Golf* (2005) 1997. For further information about Wilson's "haphazard" project, please see Philip D. Beidler's "King August: August Wilson in His Time," pp. 580-81.

within, to respect life” (Noggle 64). Because African Americans are too much caught up with the problems they have, they seek solutions in their immediate surroundings normally without much avail. However, Wilson, as a bard, instructs his people to look back, to go deep into the very inception of their sorrow so as to have a fresh and healthy start. Hence, in *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson scrutinizes two problems blacks have: personal loss and guilt. The former is embodied in Caesar’s malice over his own people, and the latter citizen’s cowardice in confessing his transgression. Both representations are indicative of Wilson’s anxious concerns about the recurrent problems blacks face in America.

A. Personal Loss and Caesar’s Malice

Caesar Wilks in *Gem of the Ocean* is a very extraordinary person after the Emancipation; he is one of the few blacks who can make his way to prosperity through hard toils. He was once like every other black, poor and low; however, he tried everything to succeed and he later did become a self-made landlord businessman and a police officer. Most critics see the negative aspect of Caesar;² however, Wilson’s characterization is never flat. He is good at mixing both the negative and positive sides in one’s characterization. Therefore, Caesar’s hard work before he becomes the boss-man should not be downplayed.

When he is engaged in a long speech of his self-made success,³ Caesar is a man worthy of respect, and he is very proud of his achievement. “I’m starting out with nothing,” says Caesar, “so I got to get a little something” (37). He sees the disadvantage of his race but he also strongly believes that he is “a free man” (37). His business instinct sharp, he began by selling hoecakes and then beans. Having no license, he bribed to get his license. When he planned to buy property, the bank rejected him because he had no collateral.

Just when he tried harder to make more money to realize his property investment dream, he was imprisoned on the charge of shooting and wounding other blacks. However, because of his good behavior in jail putting down some riot,⁴ the mayor made him a police man, which enabled him to borrow money from the bank and finally buy a boarding house. When the play begins, Caesar is the loudest and most domineering person because he is the local constable, a boarding house enterpriser, and the owner of a bakery that sells “magic bread.”

The above mentioned detailed account of Caesar’s past shows the striving spirit

² See Jones, pp. 39-41; Zayton; and Noggles, p 72.

³ August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), pp. 37-38. All subsequent references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Caesar decides to maintain order in jail because he learns that those who break the law usually run away, leaving the rest in jail scapegoats receiving more punishment. When John Hanson plans to have a riot, Caesar takes him on one-to-one and puts down the riot.

and tenacious nature of blacks. Even Solly praises Caesar's diligence by saying, "Caesar's the kind of people I would want working for me" (14). However, August Wilson's characterization fascinates us simply because he always sees and molds the good and flawed sides of the human beings in one character. For one thing, the character Caesar manifests the diligent nature of African Americans. For another, Caesar also shows how blinded he is when he has succeeded. Wilson sees the corruptibility of the mainstream materialism, he also detects how degenerated blacks can be if they are impacted by such dominant value thinking. Caesar is right to tell blacks to work hard for a living and for earning their dignity, like what he has done, but he is very wrong in using whites' law to persecute his own fellow blacks. This loss of black's central value is what Wilson endeavors to caution and redress.

Caesar loses his sense of self because, like most of the people in society, he is driven by capitalism, materialism, and industrialism. Although he is hard working and possibly strict to himself, he is obviously too strict to others, particularly blacks, seeing everybody as a tool for production. Completely absorbing the white capitalist/employer's point of view, he lectures on work ethics and sneers at the blacks who take his money (a quarter) and "throw their money away in the saloon and get mad when it's gone" (32). He criticizes the black's stupidity, saying "he can't see past his nose" (32). His worship of white capitalism culminates in one statement: "Industry is what drive the country" (34). He cannot understand why black factory workers fuss over Garret Brown's death, convinced that this man is the thief who stole a bucket of nails from the tin mill. These black factory workers talk about not going to work and even plan to organize a riot. Caesar regards these men, whom he called "niggers," ignorant because to him "the mill is what hold everything together" (33). Caesar does not perceive how the white factory owners exploit his fellow blacks. The blacks' wages are unbearably low and some even work for nothing. In this play, the person who steals the bucket of nails is Citizen Barlow. Citizen later explains in his confession that he did it because the tin mill would not pay him (44). Caesar simply cannot find this phenomenon unfair, being himself greatly blessed from the white system.

As Wilson has pointed out at an interview with Suzan-Lori Parks, Americans have adopted "materialistic values at the expense of more human values" (qtd. in Noggle 72). Likewise, Caesar has also been assimilated into such mainstream value system, and has lost himself. The sad thing is that he prides himself on maintaining the law. "He does so with relish and a sense of moral righteousness, causing havoc in the black community by putting oppressive law before family, compassion and truth" (Jones 39-41 ?). Brainwashed by whites' racist ideology, Caesar is so blind that he cannot see this law was made by whites, the dominators, and this law is inhuman and

subjugating to blacks.

Nor can he conceive that he is, as Franz Fanon has stated, “black skin, white mask.” He despises his own people, thinking them base and low. For example, he often arrests blacks for loitering because “too many niggers breed trouble” (31). When he learns that jobless newcomer Citizen is staying at Aunt Ester’s place, he tells his half-sister Black Mary, Aunt Ester’s protégé and housekeeper, “Ain’t nothing missing is there?” He liable to steal the coffee pot” (32). Caesar seems to have forgotten that he is also black, alienated from his own people. Wilson thinks only through revisiting blacks’ first voyage and remembering their diasporic memory can these blacks know who they are and reunite and reconnect themselves.

B. Guilt and Citizen’s Sin

Most critics can immediately perceive Caesar’s personal loss as a prominent problem African Americans have; however, few critics notice that blacks’ sense of guilt is another problem African Americans need to overcome. In *Gem of the Ocean*, this concept of guilt is conveyed through Citizen’s transgression and cowardice.

Citizen is black Everyman who needs to face his life and to make a meaningful decision to live right. As Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim in *Lord Jim*, he suffers from the reproach of conscience after he failed to timely admit his misconduct of stealing a bucket of nails. The indirect consequence of his cowardice causes an innocent man Garret Brown’s life. He has never expected that with the desperate intention to prove his innocence Garret Brown would have chosen to drown himself when misaccused and chased by Caesar into the river. Hence, this is why Citizen is desperately seeking sanctuary and rehabilitation from Aunt Ester.

On the literal level, Citizen’s guilt is in that his cowardice results in an innocent person’s life. On the figurative level, Citizen’s cowardice refers to the submission of African Americans to white domination and hegemony. Just as Citizen blaming himself for his “sin,” African Americans seem to have reproached themselves, and their ancestors, for doing nothing to racism, for their timidity in rebellion or action.

How can Citizen redeem himself, now that Garret Brown is dead? How can African Americans rebuild themselves since the unfair treatment has severely denigrated their own mentality? Through his spokeswoman, Aunt Ester, August Wilson embarks a journey of redemption to tell his people that it is not his people’s fault to be abducted, to be forced to migrate from Africa to America three hundred years ago.

III. The Diasporic Memory Represented

Critics have found that August Wilson often portrays men as major characters in

his plays; however, the representative character of his mammoth cycle of ten plays is a woman, Aunt Ester. Among the numerous characters in his oeuvre, only Aunt Ester is “a fully realized black woman;” however, even so, “Aunt Ester is part metaphor” (Perry 64). According to the stage direction, she is “a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community” (5). Married and a mother of five children, she has a personal history. However, when she relates her history, telling Black Mary she is two hundred and eighty-five years old (43), the audience knows that Aunt Ester is a metaphor. Indeed, Aunt Ester is the bearer of African American diasporic memory. She embodies a personal history and a collective history (Elam 165); she is herself a *lieu de mémoire*.

Pierre Nora in his “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” stresses the importance of lieux de mémoire, “sites of memory,” where a sense of historical continuity persists” (7). Nora privileges memory over history. “History,” to him, “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (7). Memory, on the other hand, “is life, borne by living societies founded in its name” (Nora 7). Memory changes constantly, “open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (Nora 7). Therefore, these *lieux de mémoire* are especially illuminating to the ethnic group “which has no other history than its own memory” (Nora 16).

Nora contends, “The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it requires individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals” (16). August Wilson is one memory-individual and Aunt Ester is his representation of memory-individual. As “the spiritual and racial memory authority” (Hurwitt), Aunt Ester explains to Black Mary how she went to Miss Tyler’s place at the age of nine, lived with her until she died, and how the name was passed on to her. She continues to talk about how she faces such duty and legacy:

People say it’s too much to carry. But I told myself somebody got to carry it. Miss Ester carried it. Carried it right up till the day she died. I didn’t run from it. I picked it up and walked with it. I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain’t afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. [. . .] I got memories go way back. I’m carrying them for a lot of folk . . . (43)

Through this living lieu de mémoire, Wilson tells his fellow African Americans that even if their memories are mostly dark and bleak, African Americans still need to face

them. Remembering is important because “making a better future requires understanding a terrible past” (Marks). As “a nurture of black consciousness” (Marks), Aunt Ester urges blacks to embrace their ancestor’s memories, the distant diasporic memories par excellence.

From the familiarity of the characters (Eli, Black Mary, and Sally) with the ritual of sailing, one can perceive Aunt Ester must have conducted this redemptive healings for many a lost soul. For those lost souls who suffer from transgression or affliction in relation to social injustice and racism, this wise bard advises them to understand themselves by reconnecting themselves with their ancestors’ forced migration epitomized in the sailing of the Middle Passage. This “adventure,” as she calls the African American’s life of mystery, must be remembered and paid homage to.

Therefore, Aunt Ester cleanses the lost soul Citizen Barlow by putting him on a journey of redemption. She folds a boat out of her Bill of Sales, and in the poetic arias of Eli, Black Mary, and Solly, she takes Citizen in the boat sailing through the Middle Passage to the City of Bones. Harry Elam Jr. explains. “The Middle Passage has traditionally been conceived as a fixed moment in time, as a significant event in the collective memory of African Americans that marks the difficult transition from free peoples to captive Africans in America” (166). It is this particular historical significance that Aunt Ester wishes to remind Citizen of. All the confusion, misfortune, and injustice can be traced back to this perilous journey across the ocean. If blacks do not remember this diasporic memory, they will forget they used to be free and beautiful individuals, and they will easily and naturally adopt the self-loathing image and ideology whites have constructed for them. This is why the invocation Eli, Black Mary, and Solly keep singing is “Remember me” (65-66). Soon Citizen can see himself sailing on the boat called The Gem of the Ocean. Meanwhile, he can also see himself as an abducted terror-stricken African, especially when Eli and Solly impersonate themselves as white crew members on board. “I’m chained to the boat [...] Somebody help me,” cries Citizen. Guided by the conjure woman, Citizen see the people chained to the boat. Citizen recoils and utters, “They all look like me. They all got my face!” (66).

When discussing the Middle Passage, Richard Noggle points out the innate natural response and identification African Americans share. “The Middle Passage, [...], is represented as a defining moment of African American history, the original, violent movement of a culture from one place to another and a moment that [...] still exists quite powerfully in the collective unconsciousness—in the blood—of all African Americans” (Noggle 61).

By reenacting the sailing, Citizen is able to piece the fragments of his life

together and to reconnect himself with his ancestors. The stage direction writes:

Citizen struggles against the storm to reach the boat. Masked Solly and masked Eli seize him before he reaches it. They symbolically brand and symbolically whip Citizen. Then throw him into the hull of the boat. (67)

Citizen is now reliving the life of numerous blacks who either were transported to America or perished on the journey. “Them was some brave men. They left their family and didn’t know if they was even gonna see them again,” (64) says Aunt Ester, invoking the dead and reinstating their long-awaited recognition and respect.

Finally, Citizen is taken to the gate to the City of Bones. Mixing the individual cleansing and collective healing, Aunt Ester helps Citizen confess his sin to the gatekeeper, Garret Brown, also the innocent who was wrongly accused of theft. Citizen eventually learns to face his own transgression and learns his lesson from this man who would rather die in innocence than live in falsehood.

Aunt Ester purges Citizen’s soul so he, “now reborn as a man of the people, sits down and begins to cry” (69-70). Not only is Citizen redeemed, African American spectators must be empowered too. Through Aunt Ester’s narration, the beautiful City of Bones is presented to glorify those unfortunate blacks who did not make it to America. Instead of evoking terror, the City of Bones is depicted as pure and holy, as the Gem of the Ocean:

CITIZEN: There it is! It’s made of bones! All the buildings and everything. Head bones and leg bones and rib bones. The streets look like silver. The trees are made of bones. The trees and everything made of bone. (68)

At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean lie the nameless multitude of the abducted black slaves. However, through the narrative of Aunt Ester and Citizen Barlow, Wilson transforms the once tragic and bleak deaths into glorified resurrection in heaven, as well as literature. The diasporic memory is thus transformed into empowerment with the ritualistic representation of sailing the Middle Passage.

III. Transgression

The most important mission Wilson dedicates himself to is to pass the diasporic memory to African Americans so that they may be empowered through recognizing their ancestors, respecting them and reconnecting with them. This knowledge is not passive; instead, it encourages one to actively embrace themselves and to live. This is

the wisdom August Wilson wants to impart to his people in 2003 through the diasporic memory bearer Aunt Ester of two hundred and eighty-five years old in 1904. By incorporating the chronotopes of 1600, 1904, and 2003, the playwright succeeds in connecting the people of the Gem of the Ocean of the 17th century, the first decade of the 20th century, and the first decade of the 21st century, and the spectators of the future; moreover, he also succeeds in transmitting to us the diasporic memory and the active philosophy of life.

In the play, after relating to and reliving his ancestors' life, Citizen Barlow learns to appreciate his forebears, knows how to confront his own problem, and finally takes action to help others and to pass on this empowerment. As mentioned previously, he now sees his ancestors, the bone people in the City of Bones, from a new perspective of homage, so he can feel proud of his existence and legacy (Wilson). Harry Elam Jr. argues keenly, "In fact, [Aunt Ester's] name, in a riff of aural signifyin', sounds similar to 'ancestor'" (162). Enlightened by the sagacity of Aunt Ester/ ancestor, Citizen and spectators alike can appreciate African American diasporic memory.

In addition to the new appreciation, Citizen faces his transgression and cowardice, no longer running away from the problem. Like Aunt Ester says about her job and the burden of the diasporic memory, "I didn't run from it. I picked it up and walked with it" (43). Following Aunt Ester's path, Citizen confesses his misconduct to Garret Brown, overcoming his shame and cowardice. More importantly, he is empowered after the collective journey and the purgation of confession. Seeing Solly in danger on his way back south to save his sister, Citizen immediately extends his hand and offers his help in spite of looming danger ahead. Furthermore, at the end of the play when Solly is shot by Caesar, Citizen, with resolution, takes over Solly's mission to go south to save Solly's sister and to fight for one's freedom. As Elam puts it, *Gem of the Ocean* ends with the benediction and instruction (75). It is not known whether Citizen will succeed or not, but he has been transformed "from a lost soul to a community activist" (Noggle 63). From the other bookend play, *Hedley King II*, we learn that Black Mary might not take over the title of Miss Tyler, as Aunt Ester has done after Miss Ester Tyler died. However, the one who does not run away from the mission of history is Citizen Barlow. Carrying the memory of the Gem of the Ocean, Citizen

takes off his coat. He puts on Solly's coat and hat and takes Solly's sticks.
He discovers the letter from Solly's sister in the hat.

[...]

Without a word Citizen turns and exits [...] (85)

Though a very obviously didactic open ending, Citizen departs as a resurrected Solly, the Underground Railroad conductor, fighting for true freedom for himself and other blacks.

V. Conclusion

At the time of 1904, a time of broken promises of Reconstruction, Aunt Ester summons her fellow blacks to look to the past for their lost souls. At the time of 2003, a century after 1904, August Wilson instructs his people to remember their ancestors' diaspora because they can only find their center of the world by reconnecting themselves with the sailing of the Middle Passage. "One gains power through connection to the ancestors and to the community of the present" (Noggle 62). By "reconnecting African Americans to the blood memories and cultural ties of the African past" (Elam 162), Wilson also transmits the African American legacy and empowerment to his spectators through the representation of Aunt Ester and Citizen Barlow.

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