

# 行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫 成果報告

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### 壹、報告內容

#### Chapter Two:

#### The American Dream in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

##### I. Introduction

Among major American ethnic groups, African Americans are probably one of two most afflicted minority groups in America.<sup>1</sup> According to the scholar, from the seventeenth century in Africa, native Africans were captured by slave catchers, and they were chained together and marched long distances, often hundreds of miles, to the European forts near the coast and then they were forced onto ships headed for America (Banks 199). Because of the brutal treatment and inhuman condition on board, “Some historians estimate that one out of every eight captives died in the middle passage and never reached the Americas” (Banks 200). Once they were in America, blacks encountered even harsher treatments, sold to be slaves toiling all their lives, their children forever slaves. “By the end of the seventeenth century, slavery existed in fact as well as in law in Colonial America” (Banks 200). Despite of the fact that their legal status as slave was abolished after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, blacks did not enjoy freedom and equality. As James A. Banks states, “American slavery was a unique institution in human history that was designed to dehumanize Blacks and to convince them that they were inferior and deserved the treatment they received” (200). As a consequence, even after the Emancipation, this detrimental and demeaning ideology about blacks remained virulent and blacks were still exploited and discriminated against. Such racial inequality was not redressed until the Civil Right Movement, or Black Power Movement, in the 1960s.

Louis Althusser poignantly states that Repressive State Apparatuses are state sanctioned agents that regulate and discipline us “by violence” (145); however,

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<sup>1</sup> The other major ethnic group is Native Americans, or American Indians. All the minority groups have suffered great pains adapting themselves to the new country; however, in my opinion, Native Americans (Native Hawaiians too) and African Americans have been through more miseries than other groups who have come to America willingly. Native Americans have been deprived of their land, life style, and culture. Many of American Indians were extinguished because of genocide. African Americans, as mentioned earlier, were forced to come. Many perished before their ships made it to America.

Ideological State Apparatuses are more vehement tools in confining us because they condition our ideas and mindsets “by ideology” and “by repression” (145). Accordingly, because of the attenuated, concealed, and symbolic functioning (145), ISAs can be thus more damaging to our views on people and life. As mentioned before, whites’ subjugation of blacks continued after the Emancipation because it could “enable Whites to make maximum profits from Black labor and to reinforce ideals of supremacy” (Banks 201); whites not only exploited blacks but also justified their act instilling the demeaning theory of black inferiority. This distortion has unfairly done a great damage to blacks in physical and spiritual aspects. Many black intellectuals feel it urgent and necessary to write their own history and rebuild their own image in their works. One can find such common concern in the legacy of African American drama in the works of Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, Alice Childress, and August Wilson.

Among these playwrights, August Wilson (1945-2005) certainly is the most prominent one because of his continuous dedication and contribution, his militant publicity, and his outstanding accomplishment.<sup>2</sup> He has also been acknowledged as one of the great dramatists in twentieth-century America. Many scholars have paid attention to Wilson’s family background and his self-taught high school life.<sup>3</sup> Although he was born to a white German father and African American mother, Wilson had a strong identification with his mother’s ethnic background, and he remained throughout his life championing for blacks’ rights and advancement.

Acclaimed as “America’s Shakespeare” (*Oregon* 51), or the Bard, by theatrical professionals, Wilson has garnered countless praises for his project to write the decalogy that would chronicle the twentieth-century African-American experience.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he rarely portrays controversial political events directly in his plays, believing depicting ordinary blacks’ daily life more relevant. In spite of his said belief, his plays are indicative of the positive impact of the Civil Right Movement because embodied in his plays is a strong sense of pride in being blacks, which is the most

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson is definitely the most significant African American dramatist. He has aroused great attention because of a ground-breaking record in the history of African American drama; that is, in 1988, he had two plays running simultaneously on Broadway—*Fences* (first performed in 1985) and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986). To be able to have prominent performances in white dominated Broadway marks a new history for the presence and eminence of African American culture.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson dropped out of high school at age fifteen after refusing to defend himself against false charges of plagiarism on a history paper. For further information about the life of August Wilson, see “August Wilson” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, or “August Wilson” in *Contemporary Author Online*.

<sup>4</sup> For each decade of the twentieth century, Wilson writes a play. The ten plays are set in different decades: *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, *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.

crucial issue in resisting against white racist distortion. Although Wilson endeavors to convey his views on African American aspiration in all the ten plays, *The Piano Lesson*, premiered in 1987, published in 1990, and the fifth of his ten-play decalogy, appears to carry a strong message to African Americans as is suggested from the title itself. It has also won Drama Desk Outstanding New Play Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Best Play Award, Tony Award Nomination for Best Play, American Theatre Critics Outstanding Play Award, and Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Set in 1936, a time of the Depression, *The Piano Lesson* depicts the physical journey of Boy Willie from South to Pittsburg. Boy Willie wishes to set up his own farm just like his former white plantation owner Sutter. The capital he relies on is the antique family piano passed down from his father at the expense of his life, now kept by his sister Berniece in Pittsburg. Regarded as the heirloom and history of their family's (African) past, the piano means more than its antique value, since it is carved with the stories about the life of Boy Willie's ancestors as slaves. After the battle of life and death with the Ghosts of the Yellow Fog against their white master bound in the piano, Boy Willie finally realizes the worth of his own afflicted past and learns to stand on his feet to raise money on his own to buy his farm. If he wants to own a farm, he has to first have a clear vision of what his American dream exactly entails. Wilson in this play does not discourage blacks from embracing their economic success; nevertheless, he warns them from being deluded by a kind of dream celebrated by whites but actually misconceived for blacks at this stage.

## II. The Misconceived Version of Whites' Material Dream

When the play begins, all the characters in *The Piano Lesson* have some awareness of the American dream they are seeking, but their dreams are all the misconceived version of white's material dream. Major characters like Boy Willie and Berniece and minor characters like Avery, Lymon, Doaker and Wining Boy, are greatly influenced by whites' dream, which illustrates their unwitting assimilation. Lost in the material world, they place more emphasis on the economic success than the spiritual needs.

### A. Major Characters' Dreams

Boy Willie, a man working for white landowners most of his life, aspires to become a landowner, to be the master of his own farm. His aspiration is a good dream but at this stage he sees the material worth of everything, including his dream. The most expedient way to realize his dream is mainly by selling his family piano, i.e. selling out his ancestors' suffering past and ethnic pride. To fully grasp the spiritual value of his dream and to use the dignified way to make the dream come true is a lesson he needs to learn.

According to the stage direction, Boy Willie “is brash and impulsive, talkative and somewhat crude in speech and manner.”<sup>5</sup> As suggested by his name, he is still boyish or idealistic in his concept of the American dream and in his understanding of how to realize his dream. At the beginning of the play, he straightforwardly announces his dream and his plan to carry it out to his uncle Doaker: “Sutter’s brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That’s why I come up here” (9). Boy Willie has a simple dream—to buy the land he and his ancestors used to work on, and he has all the determination to pursue his dream. Among all the characters in the play, Boy Willie is the only one full of vitality, determination and action. He is also the only man who clearly knows what he wants to do. When he has a chance to realize his dream, he seizes it right away. He has three weeks to collect the money (\$1500 to \$2000). He also has a perfect plan to get his money: “I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Bernice to sell that piano and I’ll have the third part” (9). He has been working hard to save some money and is also quick in finding other capital, shipping watermelons to Pittsburg for sale and selling the family piano. Unlike the rest of the characters, he will not stay in the North, and he is going back to the South to work. He says, “I ain’t scared of work. I’m going back and farm every acre” (17).<sup>6</sup> But he’s now still unaware of how untried his American dream is and how he should better acquire his capital.

At this stage, Boy Willie, though endeavoring to improve his social life and status, still does not know how to connect his material dream with his ancestors’ past. He may have a very correct and admirable idea of his or blacks’ position and rights in this world, which we will discuss in the following part, but his persistence to seek the material dream is so strong that he is blinded by the luring material glamour of the dream and is willing to sacrifice his cultural heritage and dignity. When others ruminating on the doleful past of the piano, he tells Doaker and others land is more useful than the piano:

If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn’t be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else’s land. I ain’t gonna do that. See, he couldn’t do no better. When he come along he ain’t had nothing he could building on. His daddy ain’t had nothing to give him. The only thing my

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<sup>5</sup> *The Piano Lesson*, (New York: Plume, 1990), pp. 1-2. All subsequent references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text.

<sup>6</sup> August Wilson in fact proposes that blacks stay in the South to engage in what they and their ancestors have known for hundreds of years—farming (Bissiri 4; Rothstein 2). Even if they remain in the North, Wilson maintains, they are “tied to the South” (Harris 370) and should still connect themselves to the South, and they should not forget about their agrarian life in the South before (Plum 3).

daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died over giving me that. I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it. If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half.  
(46)

Boy Willie believes blacks toil their whole life only for the sake of the material provision of life. He sees nothing but the exchange value of the land and the piano. He does not think high of his father's sacrifice in securing the piano and the symbolic value of the piano; instead, he tends to be practical about the value of the piano. Hence, he would rather sell the piano, erasing the historical and ethnic significance of the piano. This warped vision about the piano and the past reveals the strong influence of the material American dream.

Whereas Boy Willie wishes to be a landowner, Berniece annihilates her subjectivity, projects her dream onto her daughter Maretha, and wishes her to be a model minority. After her husband Crawley has been shot by the white sheriff, Berniece moves to the North in the hope of staying away from the South, which is to her a place filled with endless killing and sorrow. In Pittsburg, she chooses to be evasive and submits herself completely to white domination by burying herself in the mourning mood and passivity. As a habitual and involuntary surrender to black's doleful past, Berniece refuses to accept Avery's proposal, or rather, to change her life pattern.<sup>7</sup> Avery then questions her with this willful self-sacrifice by saying, "How long you gonna carry Crawley with you, Berniece? It's been over three years. At some point you got to let go and go on. Life's got all kinds of twists and turns" (66). Berniece's refusal to move on with life parallels blacks' passivity. As Harry Elam aptly points out, "Wilson depicts Berniece's commemoration of and mourning for Crawley as retarding agents restricting her progress in the present" (367). She in this sense recoils herself in the white dominant northern city, erasing her subjectivity.

The same evasive mindset makes her alienated from playing the family piano. As Doaker says, "I ain't never know her to touch [the piano] since Mama Ola died. That's over seven years now"(10). She herself tells Avery, "I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake the spirits" (70). Although she remains passive about herself mingling with the world, Berniece wishes her daughter to have a better life in this world. In other words, she projects her dream onto Maretha, a dream imbued with her assimilation ideology. As Doaker explains Berniece's plan to Boy Willie, Berniece "got Maretha playing on it though. Say Maretha can go on and do everything she can't do ... She wants Maretha to grow up and be a schoolteacher. Say she good

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<sup>7</sup> The playwright seems to suggest that Berniece has indulged in such evasive self-pity by this excessive mourning because the stage direction for her first appearance instructs, "She is still in mourning for her husband after three years" (3).

enough she can teach on the piano” (10).

Berniece intentionally runs away from her family’s past because she only sees the destructive part of it. She also deliberately keeps the past from Maretha’s knowledge: “[Maretha] don’t know nothing about it. Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don’t have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn’t have. I ain’t gonna burden her with that piano” (70). Berniece simply wants Maretha to have nothing to do with her black ancestors and to forget her cultural roots. This indicates Berniece feels detestable about her ethnic roots and wishes to be like whites. Such self-hate is what Franz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* has effectively pointed out. In the chapter of “The Fact of Blackness” Fanon analyzes how blacks are locked in their “crushing objecthood” (109) and how they have to spend their life crawling, “being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes” (116). “Shame and self-contempt” overwhelm blacks about themselves (Fanon 116). Therefore, Berniece tells her daughter to hide her color when she is out (26) and she makes effort to iron her daughter’s curly hair into straight hair (89-90). This act to erase her (daughter’s) black feature is exactly like what Fanon describes about the mentality of the self-loathing Antilles—“Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me” (116). Berniece’s behavior shows the deep impact of the assimilation. “Because the cultural experiences of marginalized groups like African Americans have been interpreted by historians according to the values and ideals of a white male culture” (Plum 561), Berniece is accustomed to identifying with whites’ ideology and looking down upon blacks’ culture and history. Fanon in the chapter of “The Negro and Psychopathology” also explains how imminent such inculcation is at school (147) and how powerful such collective unconscious is everywhere (188). Hence, it is only natural for Berniece to conceive that kind of whites’ dreams and to project it to Maretha.

Neither Boy Willie nor Berniece has a correct vision of the American dream yet at this stage. Boy Willie internalizes the American capitalist dream and would like to realize his dream in exchange of his family piano and his ancestors’ history of blood and tears. Berniece internalizes the white lens to view herself and her people and would like to project her dream onto her daughter making her a submissive black piano school teacher content about “staying low at the bottom of society” (94), ashamed of her skin complexion, and oblivious of her ancestors’ past.

## B. Other Minor Characters’ Dreams

Though not as important as the sister and the brother, the minor characters in *The Piano Lesson* also play a crucial part to support Wilson’s manifestation of the American dream of African Americans. Like Boy Willie and Berniece, the minor

characters—Wining Boy, Lymon, Doaker, and Avery have their dreams greatly impacted by their white counterparts; they either look up to the capitalist dream or choose to embrace their assigned, subjugated lot.

Among the minor characters, Wining Boy and Lymon pursue a life of affluence in big cities, which is a capitalist dream more like Boy Willie's. Wining Boy, gifted in music, makes money by playing the piano; however, no matter how much he earns, he squanders it on gambling. Young and preoccupied with finding a mate, Lymon focuses on making quick money and spends it on getting a woman for him. As a critic notices, these two, who actually could be father and son, are more trapped by materialist temptations.<sup>8</sup>

While Wining Boy and Lymon are assimilated into whites' capitalist value judgment, Doaker and Avery represent two other kinds of blacks deeply influenced by the dominant white discourse in their vision of dream. Confronted with the debate between Boy Willie and Berniece over the piano, Doaker only stays away from it, refusing to have any say to it. "Ain't nobody said nothing about who's right and who's wrong" (46), defends Doaker. As Berniece tells Avery, "Doaker don't want no part of that piano. He ain't never wanted no part of it" (69). His philosophy of life is to remain passive and invisible, more like Berniece's escapism. When Boy Willie questions why he or Berniece has not told Maretha about the piano's story, Doaker replies, "I don't get in the way of Berniece's raising her" (22). When Boy Willie retorts against Berniece's theory of blacks living at the bottom of society, Doaker comments, "I'm just living the best way I know how. I ain't thinking about no top or no bottom" (93). When he sees Sutter's ghost in the house, he makes no noise about it and lives with it. Doaker's determination to mess up with nothing attests to a very salient mindset of many African Americans—passivity.

Avery is the most obvious example of assimilation. Beneath his dream to have a church of his own lies a black man that has been completely converted, physically and spiritually. After moving north into the big city, Avery has been working at a skyscraper running an elevator. He expresses his satisfaction with his job because it "got a pension and everything;" then he adds a further illustration, "They even give [him] a turkey on Thanksgiving" (23). Meanwhile, he was inspired in a dream and is now trying to get a loan to start his own church. Boy Willie detects some slave mentality in Avery's words when he tells about his determination to work his way up, not to be simply silenced at the bottom. He criticizes Avery's complacency: "Avery think cause the white man give him a turkey for Thanksgiving that makes him better

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<sup>8</sup> Susan C. W. Abbotson derives from Wining Boy's recount of Lymon's parents' affair that Wining Boy may very much likely to be Lymon's real father (87). The fact that Lymon buys the suit and shoes from Wining Boy and later dresses himself up in Wining Boy's outfit also strongly suggests a close resemblance, or tie, between these two men (Abbotson 87).



than everybody else. That's gonna raise him out of the bottom of life. I don't need nobody to give me a turkey. I can get my own turkey" (93). As a contrast to Boy Willie's aspiration to define himself and to be on his own feet, Avery obviously appears to be too complacent leading a life whites assigned him to have. As the case of Bernice, Avery is presented as a docile body and subject in a world dominated by whites' ISA and RSA.

Avery's dream to have a church of his own also reveals the playwright's distrust with Christianity, a religion set up by whites inculcating the black to be meek and humble even in their affliction. As Sandra Shannon contends, Christianity in Wilson's plays is often under interrogation because the ideology like the one in the Book of Job has been appropriated to teach blacks what "humility" is and to be subjugated without rebellion (127-28).<sup>9</sup> In the first place, the other black characters in the play seem to doubt Avery's motivation to serve God because they all deem the reverend's job an easy one as Lymon comments, "Avery say he gonna be a preacher so he don't have to work" (23). They have the reasonable doubt because back home in the South "plain old" Avery never aspired himself to be a reverend. As a critic has pointed out, they consider that "Avery is a shyster" and they don't believe he was "called" to the ministry, "choosing instead to believe that, like them, Avery has found a lucrative scheme to support himself" (Shannon 142?).<sup>10</sup> Secondly, in his dream Avery was called by God and told to be shepherd for God's flock, and this is why Avery will name his church "The Good Shepherd Church of God in Christ." It is true that the Bible has the shepherd and the sheep as a metaphor for God or the church and the people. However, humility and subservience have also at the same time been used by the people at the top of society for those at the bottom of society. Hence, Avery's dream to start his own church to look after the black souls is a not only a replica of whites' religion, but it is also an institution to inculcate whites' idea that blacks should be content with their life at the bottom. Not yet challenged by the big test, Avery as well as other minor characters all have their dreams misguided.

### III. The American Dream to Be Fulfilled by African Americans

August Wilson in *The Piano Lesson* shows his audiences that the most pertinent and urgent concept when African Americans would like to realize their dream is to

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<sup>9</sup> Like many other African Americans who noted "that their white oppressors often quoted the scriptures to them to justify so-called 'ordained' subjugation," Wilson also maintains that "God does not hear the prayers of blacks" (Shannon 127).

<sup>10</sup> In the play Avery's pious vision and mission is marred by a story told by Wining Boy, in which a guy in Spear claimed himself Jesus Christ and attracted a huge crowd for his enactment of Jesus' life. When people gathered to see the part of crucifixion, he stopped everything and told people to go home and go to his church on Easter Sunday to celebrate his resurrection. Wining Boy thus comments, "I don't know who's the worse fool. Him or them" (30). This story indirectly satirizes people like Avery who think themselves justified to lead the people as a Christian (church) leader.

face their past, to be proud of their ancestors' suffering past, and to make efforts to win recognition and respect. Unfortunately, most of African Americans have been acculturated and they look at their ancestors' past from whites' perspective. It is this wrong attitude the playwright would like to redress in the cause of realizing their American dream.

#### A. The Wrong Attitude towards the Past

The blatant message in the play, conveyed through the cheerful young man Boy Willie, is not to be ashamed of their past, but to embrace their past. As many critics argue,<sup>11</sup> the piano symbolizes the past, or the legacy. Berniece's attitude to turn away from the piano, not to touch it and not to tell about its story, parallels most African Americans' attitude towards their ancestors' past, a past too humiliating and too miserable for them to look upon.

To Berniece, the piano is an embodiment of the family's sad history and she cannot make out why a piece of wood would cost many men's lives, which in turn afflict their women's lives. She draws the men's attention to its ominous significance:

Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in [...] you ain't never stopped to look at what this foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you'll all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley ... you're all alike. All this thieving and killing and killing and thieving and killing [...] It don't never stop. (52)

With her mother's and her own miserable lives scarred in her mind, Berniece treats the piano as a piece of wood whose value is for men to exert their masculinity and self-worth and whose lot would always bring misfortunes to especially the female members of the family. It is simply a burden too heavy for her to bear; consequently, she respects the historical value of the piano but she will never touch that piano.

Berniece sees the soul in the piano but she cannot bring herself to face the piano. Unlike his sister who refuses to remember and recognize how those blacks die over the piano, Boy Willie looks straight into the lives accorded to the piano and has no sentimental indulgence in it. However, his excessive rational attitude amounts so

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<sup>11</sup> See Abboston 83-84, 98; Boan 3; De Vries 25; Bissiri 29; Elam 374.

strongly to practical calculation that he can sacrifice the piano for the capital he needs in order to purchase Sutter's land. When the practical brother is determined to sell his share of the piano, the sentimental sister tells him, "Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer" (50). When she insists on leaving the piano sit in the house just for look, Boy Willie explains his view:

The only thing that makes that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what makes it worth something. [...] Now, I'm going to build on what they left me. You can't do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house. That's just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot. I'd be a fool. (51)

From the viewpoint of utilitarianism, he thinks Berniece's leaving the piano there without playing it or giving lessons on it is but a waste. He thinks it is wrong for Berniece to only see the "sentimental" value of the piano because without its productive use the piano will not yield any profits. To him, the piano equals the key to buying Sutter's land which will guarantee land, crop, cash, seed and maybe more. In other words, Boy Willie has commercialized the piano. Boy Willie has a more open and positive attitude towards the piano's gloomy past than Berniece. But when it comes to weighing between his capitalist dream and disposal of the piano, his openness and grand talk about celebrating the life-and-death acquisition of the piano are completely shattered and replaced by his material aspiration.

In his desperate and determined search of the capital, Boy Willie sees only the cash value of the piano and sacrifices his family legacy. In addition to this wrong attitude towards the piano and blacks' ethnic legacy, there is also another misrecognition of Boy Willie, which is lightly censured by the playwright; that is, Boy Willie intends to sell the piano to a white collector of blacks' musical handicrafts. According to Doaker, "Some white fellow was going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments" (11). In fact, it looks like this white buyer, like old-time slave owners making profits through black slaves' labor, is also making money out of blacks' ingenuity. We cannot know whether blacks' ingenious artistic talent will be made renowned through the white broker's marketing strategy or not; however, a parallel between the white slave owner and the white collector hints at a new kind of exploitation of blacks by whites.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the playwright suggests Boy Willie not only has a wrong attitude towards blacks' past, but

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<sup>12</sup> This kind of exploitation is well depicted in another play by Wilson—*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. In this play, the blues singer Ma Rainey and her band musicians make a lot of money for their white bosses but the good profits do not bring any improvement on the white oppressors' racism.

he might very likely cause their ancestors' affliction exploited again in his wrong vision of the American dream.

The other characters' attitude towards the piano either resembles Boy Willie's or remains passive. Avery also sees the commercial value of the piano. Indeed, it was Avery who first sent for the white collector for appraisal because he was hoping that Berniece would help him start his church by selling the piano. Both Boy Willie and Avery tend to be practical about the use of the piano but the difference between them is that while Avery has no emotional attachment to the piano, Boy Willie has his family's story engraved or carved on the piano. This connection makes Boy Willie's attitude towards the piano appear to be even more cold, rational, utilitarian, and nothing else. As to Doaker and Wining Boy's attitude, they seem to be so passive that they don't want to be involved with the piano affair.

When analyzing the characterization of Doaker and Wining Boy, Susan C. Abbotson thinks that they "provide contrasts which emphasize their nephew's vitality" (91). But she disagrees with Corlis Hayes (253-254) and Kim Pereira (96) who think Doaker as a man "at peace with himself." I agree with Abbotson because they confuse peace with passivity. Doaker and Wining Boy have less a say in the disposal of the piano because the legitimate owners of the piano are the brother and the sister. But they once participated in the "thieving" act to move the piano together with Boy Willie's father from Sutter's house to his own. But now they renounce their claim to the piano, maybe because they belong to the older generation. However, facing Sutter's appearance in his house, Doaker prefers to first keep quiet. Later, when he finds Sutter's ghost is caused by the piano, he would rather have no piano in his house. Though they can talk about their past, these people prefer to have nothing to do with the piano, or the past, if it brings "troubles" to them. It is this wrong attitude the playwright would like the audiences to forsake. Being evasive, being utilitarian, or being passive is all incorrect when dealing with their family's past, or blacks' legacy.

## B. The Right Attitude

Berniece comments, "Boy Willie ain't nothing but a whole lot of mouth" (26); however, August Wilson conveys his idea about the correct attitude towards the piano, the family legacy, and the blacks' past through Boy Willie. This kind of mixing positive and negative aspects in one character is Wilson's consistent technique of characterization.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in this play we see Boy Willie and Berniece make

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<sup>13</sup> In his plays, Wilson likes to make his protagonists flawed with some blind spots and his low-born characters distinguished by their accidental remarks of wisdom. For example, Troy Mason in *The Fences* is rebellions against white subjugation but is blind to his own extramarital affair and his son's self-realization through playing college football. Another character, Gabriel in *The Fences*, Toledo in

biased judgments but both of them also have their points in defending their view with respect to the piano. Apparently Boy Willie's more celebrating and militant attitude towards the piano offers a stronger illumination because it is a new and necessary one for blacks to embrace no matter what dreams they pursue.

Instead of realizing the material dream, African Americans should first realize their spiritual dream. They should understand that without seeing straight and clearly what their spiritual dream is, they can never fully attain the material dream. To have their spiritual dream fulfilled, they have to recognize their past. "Pivotal to the theme of reunion in Wilson's plays is the underlying premise to which he constantly returns that the solutions for the future lie in the past" (Pereira 4) Susan Abbotson also believes, "The past provides a sense of connection, both temporally and personally. Also, it assists in self-definition and offers empowerment to those who freely embrace it" (83). As Abbotson observes, "All must come to terms with the piano, which symbolizes their past, in a way that will allow them to progress to a brighter future" (84). African Americans need to confront themselves; they should no longer have the sense of inferiority when looking inward.

Boy Willie first advises Berniece not to be ashamed of their ethnicity, then tells her to celebrate for it. Wilson illustrates this claim—feeling proud of African Americans' ethnic background—through the incidence of Berniece ironing Maretha's hair. When Maretha utters, "Owwwww" to indicate hurt, Berniece, who is ironing and fixing Maretha's hair, answers, "Be still, Maretha. If you was a boy I wouldn't be going through this" (90). Boy Willie thinks Berniece wrong to say such a thing to Maretha because it will only make Maretha feel bad. Likewise, it is useless to think it a misfortune to be born black, and it is even worse if blacks simply accept whites' idea that they should reside in the bottom without doing anything.

Boy Willie's attitude towards their ethnic roots is to embrace them, not to be ashamed of them. Wilson himself asserts, "Without knowing your past, you don't know your present—and you certainly can't plot your future" (De Vries 25). Boy Willie criticizes Berniece's not telling Maretha about the piano, "Like that's something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano" (91). Boy Willie, on the contrary, advocates a welcoming approach. He asserts,

You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. [...] and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. If you did that [Maretha] wouldn't

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*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean* are also good examples of such characterization. By mixing the two natures together, Wilson makes his characters more humane and closer to us.

have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. (91)

This is the right attitude Berniece should have about the piano—to cherish it and to feel proud of it. It is also the right attitude Maretha and all other blacks should have about their ancestors' past and their ethnicity.

Similarly, blacks should not feel ashamed about themselves. Boy Willie condemns Berniece's shame and escapism because such thinking and behavior are self-denigration and self-denial. Disagreeing with Berniece's way to educate Maretha, he explains, "You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her" (91). Wilson himself has also pointed out that blacks would do themselves and the world a great contribution if they look at their past without humiliation. "If black folks would recognize themselves as Africans and not be afraid to respond to the world as Africans, then they could make their contribution to the world as Africans" (qtd. in Bigsby, *Modern* 293). Indeed, African Americans should not feel ashamed of their past or their ethnic background.

When Michel Foucault dissects history, he never trusts the legitimacy and continuity of history. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," he particularly questions the unity and absoluteness of traditional history and warns us to read against the grain. Inspired by Nietzsche's criticism, Foucault proposes genealogy for people to read and right/write history. He believes a knowledge of traditional history "easily disintegrates this unity [...] It easily seizes the slow elaboration of instincts and those movements where, in turning upon themselves, they relentlessly set about their self-destruction" (153). He argues, "'Effective' history differs from traditional history in being without constants" (153) and teaches us to read into the interstice of such traditional history. This is his counter-memory against mainstream history, or the grand narrative. Furthermore, he detects three uses that oppose and correspond to the three Platonic modalities of history: the parodic, the dissociative, and the sacrificial (160). "They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time" (160). This counter-memory is how the marginalized or oppressed people whose history was silenced or distorted should approach their past. When white oppressors write history and prescribe it for both whites and blacks, that history is not the correct or authentic version for blacks. Blacks should resort to a more constructive way to revisit their past.

Such a new way to read history and to write/right history is what August Wilson has engaged in for years. In an interview Wilson laments, "The fact of slavery is something that blacks do not teach their kids—they do not tell their kids that at one

time we were slaves. That is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage, that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history?" (Savran 295-96). Wilson endeavor to instruct African Americans to face their past in a way totally different from the way whites see them. Therefore, in his plays he faithfully and positively presents ordinary blacks' life. As one critic notices, Wilson's counter practice works "by documenting and celebrating black historical experience and by showing that embracing the African spiritual and cultural heritage can bring individual and collective healing for people" (Little 2). This is the counter-memory strategy Wilson employs when he writes his plays and he wishes to let his fellow people know they should discard the self-hate and feel proud of themselves. African Americans should feel proud because the prosperous country all the Americans have today owes a tremendous part to blacks' hard work and their (ancestors') much toiled struggle is worthy of respect.

Wilson reiterates the importance for the blacks to recognize their past and to embrace their ethnicity. Furthermore, he also instructs them to fight for what they deserve. They should not allow whites to write, claim, or own their past. In *The Piano Lesson*, the one to execute the counter-memory strategy for him is Boy Willie. Boy Willie is the one who has a clear vision of fighting for his due share on his own feet without surrendering to whites' subjugation or ideology. His central belief at the current stage is to buy Sutter's land. He asserts, "Hell, the land is there for everybody. All you got to do is figure out how to get you a piece. Ain't no mystery to life. You just got to go out and meet it square on" (92). He is quite correct in pointing out Berniece's problematic way of educating Maretha. "If you teach that girl that she living at the bottom of life, she's gonna grow up and hate you" (92). What Berniece is doing is internalizing what whites think they should be. She tells her brother, "You right at the bottom with the rest of us;" however, Boy Willie retorts, "If you believe that's where you at then you gonna act that way. If you act that way then that's where you gonna be. It's as simple as that. Ain't no mystery to life" (92). Boy Willie is poignant in criticizing most blacks' voluntary self-denial and submission to whites' domination.

He keeps emphasizing that there is no "mystery" about such mandate domination, so blacks should not give up upon their life and they should try their best to fight for their share. While Berniece keeps quiet about her life at the bottom, Boy Willie rebels against such an allocation. When "The world say it's better off without [him]," Boy Willie retorts,

Hell, the world a better place cause of me. I don't see it like Berniece. I got a heart that beats here and it beats just as loud as the next fellow's. Don't care if he black or white. Sometime it beats louder. When it beats louder, then everybody can hear it. [...] Some people get scared to hear a nigger's heart beating. They think you ought to lay low with that heart. Make it beat quiet and go along with everything the way it is. But my mama ain't birthed me for nothing. So what I got to do? I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, "Boy Willie was here."  
(94)

In this proclamation, Boy Willie shows his determination to realize himself and to get recognition. Instead of laying low with the heart beating noiselessly, blacks should make efforts to show they are worthy of recognition and respect. Boy Willie might sound like a braggadocio, but he definitely touches upon the quintessential key to success for African Americans; that is, not to be afraid of defeat or even death. He states, "a nigger that ain't afraid to die is the worse kind of nigger for the white man. He can't hold that power over you" (88). Boy Willie names this "the power of death." Critic Harry J. Elam Jr. has pointed out that this incredible power totally subverts the whites traditional concept of master/slave dialectics (373-75). With this mindset to defy even death, blacks should be able to change their old fate. However, *The Piano Lesson* also has an important message: to actualize their American dream—to get what they deserve and to win over recognition, blacks should also fight together.

#### IV. The Solidarity

A new teaching in the play is that blacks should not only fight but they should also fight together. Few critics have noticed that in this play Wilson has also indicated this very important concept of solidarity for blacks to realize their spiritual dream. The only two critics are Susan C. Abboston, who points out in conclusion that the brother and the sister have to be united (100), and Mei Ling Chin, who only mentions in passing about the joint effort of brother and sister to exorcize the past (71).<sup>14</sup> I think this message of solidarity for the oppressed is an invaluable notion from this wise playwright. In addition to recognizing their past and to fighting for their respect, African Americans should fight together.

The ending of *The Piano Lesson*—the fight between Boy Willie and Sutter's

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to these two critics' comments on working together, Amadon Bissiri also emphasizes the importance of the chorus, which is not exactly the same as solidarity. He uses the example of an occasion when Boy Willie starts singing and Lymon, Wining Boy, and Doaker join in. "In this way—through music, oral culture—they live out their identity, tell of "who they are," and preserve their culture" (11).



ghost—best exemplifies Wilson’s concept of fighting together. After Sutter is dead, his ghost begins to haunt the Charles family in Pittsburg to “claim the piano.” It is very difficult for audiences who are accustomed to western realistic aesthetics to accept the fight between Sutter’s ghost and Boy Willie, and at the end of the play, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.<sup>15</sup> However, most academic critics regard such a supernatural device valid so that history and culture can be restored and connected (Little 10). Moreover, scholars who have done research on black history and literature have found that in black literature, “history often assumes a mythic quality in order to respond to questions of identity raised by a history largely told by and focusing on whites” (Campbell 155). Hence, African American history has to be structured as a continuing relationship between the living and the dead (Morales 106).

August Wilson calls the spectators’ attention to the fact that this symbolic wrestling between black (Boy Willie) and white (Sutter’s ghost) can only be resolved by the cooperation of the brother and the sister in evoking their ancestors’ spirits. Obviously, Sutter’s ghost is too overwhelming so Avery’s Christian exorcism fails, and even the young and self-confident Boy Willie fails to defeat Sutter’s ghost single-handedly. The fight begins when Sutter, upon Avery’s Christian exorcism, makes his presence felt and menaces Boy Willie by choking him. As Boy Willie struggles, he frees himself, and then dashes up the stairs. The stage direction instructs, “There are loud sounds heard from upstairs as Boy Willie begins to wrestle with SUTTER’S GHOST. It is a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror” (106). It is at this moment Avery gives up his help as a Christian reverend because he sees Boy Willie defeated. “Avery is stunned into silence” and he tells Bernice, “I can’t do it” (106). Avery is not the only one stunned; Doaker and Wining Boy stare at one another in stunned disbelief, too. Seeing her brother pick himself up and dash back upstairs, Bernice, all of a sudden, realizes what she must do. I think “the power of death” Boy Willie mentioned earlier and here concretely embodies has affected Bernice. Furthermore, she has an epiphany because the stage direction writes, “It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that Bernice realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play” (106). The music she plays is a repetitive, simple, but powerful improvisation evoking their parents and grandparents’ help. As Jonathan Little states, the blues song Bernice is “redemptive and empowering” (9). The spirits carved into the piano are released and “The sound of a train approaching is heard. The noise upstairs subsides” (107). The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog finally overpowers Sutter’s ghost thanks to Bernice’s timely

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<sup>15</sup> The most violent and repulsive reaction came from the famous Jewish theatre reviewer Robert Brustein, who denounced such supernatural device and called it “unplayable,” “forced,” and “contrived” (30). The bitter and harsh criticism also ignited the tensed confrontation between him and Wilson for years.

enlightenment. With their past and ancestors evoked, Boy Willie and Berniece finally succeed. In other words, this victory also indicates that, without Berniece, Boy Willie might not be able to survive.

The brother and sister both come to recognize the power of the piano, and most important of all, “the piano must remain as a living symbol of the family’s painful, yet proud heritage” (Anderson). As Yvonne Shafer states, “in the final moments [Boy Willie] and Berniece achieve a closeness which seemed impossible early in the play and the mystical ending gives the audiences a sense of elevation and hope” (276). Wilson clearly shows that, through the ending of this play, both Boy Willie and Berniece have to acknowledge their ancestors’ past and legacy and they have to fight together. Susan C. Abboston, the only critic who brings forth the importance of cooperation, states, “A lesson the piano teaches this family is that they must be united before they can turn their former bondage into a full sense of freedom. The piano leads Boy Willie and Berniece to team together against their real enemy, Sutter, rather than fight each other” (100).

In *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe propose a new strategy for all the oppressed—*alliance*. These post-Marxist scholars revolutionize not only the concept of the working class but also the methodology the working class should undertake. They expand the base of the working class in present day capitalist society and foreground the heterogeneity and fluidity of the working class, which should include all the oppressed in “*mélange*” (38). Moreover, when discussing new socialist movements, Laclau and Mouffe very clearly point out no social movements are monads; “each movement cannot be indifferent to what takes place outside it” (141). Analyzing the new social movement, they observe that “the forms of this struggle undertaken by anti-racist movements will in part pass through the autonomization of certain activities and organizational forms, partly through system of alliances with other forces, and partly through the construction of systems of equivalence among contents of the different movements” (141). In other words, one has to work with others so as to gain power in one’s struggle for “the two great themes of the democratic imaginary—equality and liberty” (164). Although Laclau and Mouffe place their argument on the large scale blocs, their theory of solidarity can also be utilized in the cause of blacks’ American dream. If individuals work hand in hand, they should not be afraid of being discriminated against. Wilson himself strongly supports the idea of working together. In his famous but controversial speech “The Ground on Which I Stand,” he concludes “with an appeal to work together to create a common ground and to use the universal truth-telling power of the theater to improve all lives across the lines of culture and color” (Little 14). Although he does not

particularly stress solidarity, one finds this common tendency not only in *The Piano Lesson* but also in many of his other works.<sup>16</sup>

## V. The Conclusion

The symbolic lesson in *The Piano Lesson* is that all blacks have to know the true value of their history and their cultural heritage and they must all work together to actualize their spiritual dream first. Critic Jay Plum maintains,

Wilson's dramaturgy challenges the secondary position of African Americans within American history by contextualizing black experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself. Rather than writing history in the traditional sense, Wilson "rights" American history, altering our perception of reality to give status to what American history has denied the status of "real." (2?)

African Americans shouldn't use white aesthetic to look at themselves (Plum 2). Hence, Wilson's way is to present in his play a genuine rendition and interpretation of African Americans. At the same time, he successfully shows us that blacks can have their own history independent of whites' value judgment and distortion. This act and this play offer a counter strategy against dominant whites' hegemony over history and subjugation. The autonomous power from Wilson and the black characters in *The Piano Lesson* should also enlighten all other marginal groups to voice themselves. This is why the critic would regard Wilson a master transcending "the categorizing of 'black' playwright to demonstrate that his stories, although consistently about black families and communities, speak to the entire U.S. culture" (qtd. in Shafter 277).

August Wilson has a vision: he wishes that blacks can see that their American dream can only be fulfilled through two praxes: one is to eradicate the distorted self-image imposed by whites, to rebuild themselves; the other is to do the regeneration/reconstruction job together. Highly inspired by the 1960s Black Power Movement (Ambush 581?), Wilson has a strong conviction in blacks' power. Indeed, blacks are powerful people. But many blacks still do not recognize this point. Therefore, Wilson uses his drama to instruct them that blacks not only need to exorcize the white spell, rebuild their own self-value, but they also need to work together. The famous historical event of 200,000 people participating in the March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs in 1960 and the success in boycotting racist buses across the States in 1960 precisely reaffirm the immense black power. With these

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<sup>16</sup> For example, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Loomis achieves psychic unification and communal empowerment with Bynum's help (Little 8). Likewise, Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean* also gets redeemed through the help of Aunt Aster and three other blacks.

events and many more in his mind, Wilson in *The Piano Lesson* imparts a critical message for blacks—to stand up to fight together, if blacks wish to realize their American dream.

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參、計畫成果自評

(一)研究內容與原計畫相符程度

本專書研究計畫與原計畫完全相符。全書共分為五章，第一章為緒論、第二章為非美裔美國戲劇中的美國夢、第三章為華裔美國戲劇中的美國夢、第四章為西裔美國戲劇中的美國夢、最後一章為結論。

(二)達成預期目標情況

本專書研究計畫已達成原設定研究目的，具體分析三少數族裔代表戲劇，證明少數族裔巧妙運用其族裔文化，不但豐富美國戲劇並改寫族群歷史，贏回該得的尊重。

(三)研究成果之學術或應用價值

目前美國、台灣學術界尚無一本專書單獨研究美國少數族裔的戲劇中的此點共同性—以戲劇方式重建族裔史及認同價值，並得透過少數族裔本身與其他族裔的同盟或團結來爭取其平等地位及應得權力。

(四)期刊發表適合性

本計畫為專書寫作，已與台大出版社及書林書局接洽出版事宜。

(五)主要發現及其他有關價值

除了發現各少數族裔有強烈的主體意識及行動力重塑自我及歷史之外，並發現三個主要少數族裔一個共同的反抗主流白人文化霸權的有效策略—聯合陣線。此應為本研究結果對各個美國少數族裔戲劇研究的正面貢獻和價值。

