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Alternate History and Afrofuturism: A New-historicist Reading of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

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Abstract

Various envisioned futures have been presented in the canonical literature by portraying connections between the present and future. However, for canonical literature imagination has been restricted to futuristic imagination only. In contrast, Afrofuturists often return to the past and reconstruct their history to imagine a fully liberated future. This paper analyses The Piano Lesson as a rewriting of the history of black Americans via a new historicist lens. The present research argues that even if the categorical oppression caused by slavery might have ended in the past, the psychological threats caused by oppression still exist and continue to affect the lives and relationships of people of African descent in America. The analysis illuminates how August Wilson rewrites the history of the African American people by equipping his characters and ghosts with self-fashioning and self-cancellation to imagine a better future.
Keywords:Afrofuturism, alternate history, counter-discourse, self-cancellation, self-fashioning.

Introduction

August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Century Cycle* is a ten-play series presenting a "Dramatic history of black Americans" (Shannon, "Blues" 557). Each play in the cycle is set in a selected decade of the twentieth century, which is why it is sometimes referred to as a "history cycle" (Shannon, "Blues" 542). Wilson employs "time travel, immortality, reincarnation, and parallel universes to create wormholes to supersede limitations of history" (Womack 118) in his plays. When asked about his goal to write the *Century Cycle*, Wilson stated that:

> His goal was to present the unique particulars of black American culture… through profound moments of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we thought of ourselves. (qtd. in Wilson XII)

African-Americans have been looked upon with multiple socially and historically constructed prejudices imposed upon their identities. To eliminate those prejudices seems to be indispensable to look forward to a better future. Hence, Afrofuturistic works focus on rebuilding the past, which "has been deliberately rubbed out" (Dery 180) before reimagining a more promising future. Afrofuturism, alternate history, fantasy, and speculative fiction are some of the genres

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that strive to reconstruct the distorted narratives of historical exploitation. Afrofuturism, as defined by Eshun, is "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures" (301).

The aforementioned framework of Afrofuturism infers that Wilson's plays are fundamentally Afrofuturistic. Afrofuturism, when coined by Mark Dery, was limited to science fiction, but as it grew, it superseded all the boundaries of fiction, fantasy, horror, science, speculation, and even history. In addition to any which has always been questioned as follows: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out… imagine possible futures" (Dery 180)? To understand Afrofuturism in a more recent context, we can refer to its definition given by AL-Shawaf. He proposes that "In Afrofuturism 2.0, history is revisited, re-examined, and rewritten through a critical lens that imagines a different type of future for African Americans" (128).

> Men make their own history… The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves, they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past. (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 209-210)

History, which most of its readers consume to be the absolute truth, is nothing more than a factual product of some dominant groups to establish their superiority and power structure over others. Likewise, the four hundred years of history of the enslavement of African American people on American land is a history that has been "whitewashed" (Yaszek 49). That's why the alteration of the whitewashed history is quintessential for imagining the optimistic future of the oppressed. For Yaszek, Afrofuturism itself is "An extension of the historical recovery project" (47). Unlike futurism, Afrofuturism always finds a connection in the past to draft a better future. Be it *Kindred and Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler, *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, and the most recent and eminent Afrofuturistic movie adaptations such as Wakanda Forever and Black Panther. All of these works present the ancestral connection of the protagonists as essential for their prosperous present and flourishing future. It is effectively expressed by Def Jef (American hip-hop musician and rapper) in his lyrics "Black to the future back to the past, History is a mystery because it has all the info you need to know" (Jef, par. 3). Hence, African Americans endeavour to expose the mystery of the past to challenge the whitewashed future.

> Afrofuturism fills the gaping hole of history and knowledge with fantasy. (Womack 119)

Establishing the counter-discourse in defiance of the dominant discourse led to the foundation of an Afro-American-centric alternate history. The present research aims to employ new historicism to read the alternate history written by Wilson via his *Century Cycle*. New historicism, as described by Greenblatt, is about "Investigating both the social presence to the world in the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 5). The New Historicist study fuses with Afrofuturism to rewrite the history of the margin that was erased by the mainstream discourse. To rewrite history is to reiterate the counter-future and to "say no to these whitewashed histories of the future predicated on the erasure of black subjectivity" (Yaszek 47). The goal is to institute the subjectivity of the black people in the history of the nation, which was built on their shoulders, burdened with four hundred years of free labour. Wilson, in a similar pursuit, fashions a counter-identity and cancels the imposed identities of the African American people.

Fighting the threats constructed via Hegemonic/Dominant Discourse

Power's quintessential sign is the ability to impose one's fictions upon the world: the

> more outrageous the fiction, the more impressive the manifestation of power. (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 13)

The imposed fiction of the powerful leads either to submission or defiance of the marginalised. It produces fear to sustain its relatability. In Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, the piano itself is a tool to narrate the history of the marginalised. The pictures of the slavery period carved on it are "graphic narratives" (Shannon, "A Conversation" 140) of the history of suffering and exploitation. In addition, the piano "serves as hereditary altar bridging the world of the living to that of dead" (Shannon, "A Conversation" 140). However, the connection is hindered by Berniece being transmitted to the next generation and to her daughter Maretha. Berniece neither lets her brother sell the piano, "which symbolizes their history of slavery and freedom" (Muhammed 181), nor does she introduce it to her daughter. Rather, she "motivates her daughter to adapt to white anticipations" (Muhammed 181). She just wants to keep it hidden in a corner of her house because she is afraid of the interaction of her daughter with the dark history of slavery that the piano carries. Berniece wanted to preserve it but not to publicise it, which alluded to her feelings of shame and fear associated with the piano. She is the victim of the inferiority and shame spread by the dominant discourse about her communal history. She doubted herself and her brother in every situation because she believed in the dominant discourse, which accused black people of being criminals. When Boy Willie and Lymon arrive at her home with a truck full of watermelons, she doesn't believe that it belongs to them. She believes they have stolen it from somewhere, and she questions them multiple times about the ownership of the truck and finally says, "Sheriff might be looking for him about that truck. He might have stolen that truck" (Wilson 7).

When she sees Sutter's ghost, she accuses her brother by saying, "Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells" (Wilson 69). The scepticism, threat, and shame Berniece experiences associated with her community are not hereditary but rather socially constructed. She is afraid of defying the identity prescribed by central discourse because of her desire to own a relevant identity to survive in society. However, she is unaware that her desire itself is shaped by the hegemonic narratives of an ideal life because even "reality is a construction" (Greenblatt "Renaissance" 63). Boy Willie alludes to Berniece's acceptance of the dominant discourse when he says: "The world ain't wanted no part of me… The world say it's better off without me. See, Berniece accept that." (Wilson 93). By addressing the fears in Berniece's character, Wilson highlights the need for counter-discourse and self-fashioning.

The ghosts in *The Piano Lesson* are the representation of the past threatening the present of the African-Americans. The presence of the ghost, be it the Sutter's ghost or the Ghost of the Yellow Dog, shows the entangled psychological threats caused by slavery as its aftereffects. By portraying these ghosts, Wilson criticises the idea that slavery is over. Berniece seeks "escape from the brutal past" (Wilson XIII) and becomes afraid when it is incarnated in Sutter's ghost. Boy Willie, who dismisses the dominant discourse, says, "Ain't no ghost in this house. That's all in Berniece's head" (Wilson 96). Sutter's ghost is the metaphorical representation of the burden Berniece carries about the history of her family. Berniece is afraid because she has accepted the dominant discourse to be the absolute truth. When Boy Willie accuses her of filling Maretha's head with the same shame and threat produced by the dominant discourse which says that "she living at the bottom" (Wilson 92) she replies by saying "I'm gonna teach her the truth. That's just where she living" (Wilson 92).

Fear is a double-edged sword because it threatens not only the victim of the discourse but also

the producer of it. The producer is afraid of the counter-discourse being established. Because "one man's authority is another man's alien" (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 9). The fear of the producer is captured in the following words by Doaker:

> When Mr. Sutter seen the piano with all them carvings on it he got mad. He didn't ask for all that. But see . . . there wasn't nothing he could do about it. (Wilson 44)

Mr. Sutter is afraid of the slave-centric history inscribed on the piano in the images carved on it by a slave. Once the oppressed will establish his/her side of the story the powerful loses its power to rule them. While the fear threatens the producers of the sustainability of their power, it completely consumes the oppressed by pushing them to deny their identity. The fear of consumption can be witnessed when Boy Willie asserts, "If you believe that's where you at (at the bottom) then you gonna act that way. If you act that way, then that's where you gonna be…" (Wilson 92). That's how the play puts forward the need to write their own story. The need for an alternate history is announced by Doaker in the following words: "It was the story of our whole family, and as long as Sutter (the slave owner) had it… he had us" (Wilson 45).

Self-Cancellation via Counter Discourse

> The margins of the society, the blacks, have their own discourse as the whites do. (Sepehrmanesh 211)

In the above-mentioned statement Sepehrmanesh alludes that contrary to the dominant discourse prevalent in the white-centric society, there exists the marginalised discourse of the African American people. The discourse of the marginalised community can be suppressed but cannot be erased. The dominant discourse depicts the idealised image of the people living on the margins of the society which they combat by defying the imposed identities. The cancellation/rejection of the self which is influenced by hegemonically constructed ideological social identities is called self-cancellation. While existing in a society where "Fashioning oneself and being fashioned-by cultural institutions- family, religion, state- were inseparably intertwined" (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 256), it is the subject's responsibility to preserve its subjectivity. In the process, firstly, the subject needs to recognise if the identity it is pursuing is merely a social construction. It becomes toughest while living in a society where "even in the absence of social pressure, people lie readily about their most intimate beliefs" (Greenblatt, "Invisible" 22).

In *The Piano Lesson* Lymon and Doaker are the characters who withdraw from playing the roles the mainstream assigns to them. Despite living in an atmosphere of "unembarrassed repression" (Greenblatt, "Invisible" 22), they recognise that they are just contributing to the oppressor's story while not building anything of their own. They learn how to maintain "self-interest prior to social identity" (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 235). Like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, they "say no to all those whitewashed futures that deny the complexity of their history and identity" (Yaszek 50). Lymon denies going back to the South because he mentions:

The sheriff looking for me (Lymon). All because they gonna try and make me work for somebody when I don't want to… when he don't pay nothing. (Wilson 76-77)

Doaker first corrects the whitewashed history by fashioning his identity as a builder of the railroad. He dismisses the historically imposed identity of being just victims to black people and rebuilds it as builders of the nation's railroads and economic development.

Doaker: I'm cooking now, but I used to line track. I pieced together the Yellow Dog stitch by stitch... I lined track all up around Sunflower and Clarksdale. (Wilson 18)

He cancels the identity of the 'nation's builder' just before establishing it by saying "I'm cooking now" (Wilson 18). This statement by him implies that he will prefer being at home and cooking for his family rather than contributing to the growth of the oppressor based on the free or cheap labour of African American people.

Self-fashioning via Counter Discourse

> To abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom. (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 257)

In the statement referenced above Greenblatt highlights the need for fashioning one's identity out of the light of the dominant discourse. While recognising the socially constructed self and cancelling it is an essential step towards self-fashioning the ultimate objective is self-fashioning. In *The Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie practices the power of self-fashioning and fashions a boy who feels pride in his ancestral history. He challenges not only the established mainstream discourse but also the threats created by it. His pride supersedes the shame associated with his identity as an African American constructed by the hegemonic discourse experienced by many like Berniece. While analysed in a historical context (*The Piano Lesson* was set in the 1930s), the pridefulness displayed in Boy Willie's character speaks of the presence of the values taught by The Nation of Islam in the 1930s. The Nation of Islam's promotion of pride and dignity can be witnessed in the following speech by Malcolm X:

> We are still negotiating something (the right to education) that should be ours. So what's the solution? Pride and dignity within the self. Caring about who we are and when we understand our worth and have pride within it, so too will everyone else. (Who We Are 22:20)

Boy Willie wanted to change history as well as his future by owning the land where his ancestors were enslaved. He wanted to transmit the sense of pride to the next generation through his niece Maretha and that's why he narrated to her the counter-history of the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog" (Wilson 46). Boy Willie is the producer of the counter-discourse which claims that the slave masters in the South are being killed by the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.

> Boy Willie: (To Maretha) Them white folks down around there started falling down their wells… Couldn't nobody figure out too much what was, making these fellows fall own their well . . . so everybody says the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog must have pushed them. That's what everybody called them four men what got burned up in the boxcar. (Wilson 85)

While the dominant discourse which is believed by Berniece claims that black people are living at the bottom of life he refuses to accept it. He describes to Berniece "This might be your bottom but it ain't mine. I'm living at the top of life" (Wilson 92). Boy Willie is 'the other' who is otherised by his own family because of his distinct belief system via which he is "changing generations of servitude into ownership" (Wilson XIII). He becomes a threat to his sister when he narrates the history of slavery to his niece Maretha. Boy Willie's otherness is the evidence of his successful self-fashioning because, as described by Greenblatt, "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile" (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 9). Throughout the play, Berniece believes in the presence of Sutter's ghost which is awakened whenever someone goes near to the piano and Boy Willie believes in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, who returned after their death to kill the oppressors (slave masters). The ghosts of the

Yellow Dog are presented as the guides for their subsequent generations. It is established when Maretha asks Boy Willie if anyone has ever seen the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, and Boy Willie replies: "Sometimes you be in trouble they might be around to help you" (Wilson 86). Even at the end of the play, when Sutter's ghost goes out of control Berniece starts playing the piano to summon the spirits to come and help them by singing the song "That is both a commandment and a plea" (Wilson 106):

> I want you to help me Mama Berniece
> I want you to help me
> Mama Esther
> I want you to help me
> Papa Boy Charles
> I want you to help me
> Mama Ola. (Wilson 107)

As their ancestors return to help them even after their demise, Boy Willie's sense of pride asks not only to be proud of their history of resistance and survival but also to embrace it and celebrate it for the psychological well-being of the upcoming generations. He requests Berniece, "To mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house… and every year throw a party. If you did that she (Maretha) could walk around here with her head held high" (Wilson 90-91). Eventually, Boy Willie proclaims his counter-discourse in the following thunderous words:

> Hell, the world a better place cause of me. I got a heart that beats here and it beats just as loud as the next fellow's. Sometime it beats louder. When it beats louder, then everybody can hear it. Some people get scared of that. Like Berniece. Some people get scared to hear a nigger's heart beating. (Wilson 94)

Conclusion

Hence, August Wilson reconstructed the history for the upcoming generations of people of African descent by travelling back to history in his plays. In addition, he warns about being victims of the dominant discourse and losing one's self. He displays the cultural anxiety of preserving or consuming the past via Berniece and Boy Willie, respectively. Both of them are depicted as having different types of connections to their past. Boy Willie believes that he can own a better future by owning the land where his ancestors were enslaved. Whereas Berniece believes that she can move to a better future by preserving the piano that symbolizes the history of slavery. For Berniece, the history is dark and full of exploitation and victimisation, which she should hide and be ashamed of. That is why Berniece does not even touch the piano, as she expresses "I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake their spirits" (Wilson 70). On the other hand, Boy Willie wanted "To build on what they (his ancestors) left me" (Wilson 51). Hence, challenging Berniece's attitude towards their history through Boy Willie, Wilson reestablishes that their history is evidence of the resistant spirit of their ancestors, which they should always celebrate. As aptly indicated by Greenblatt:

> The human… marked by rational thinking/intelligence, who is able to plot his/her own course of action depending on his/her needs, desires, and wishes, and, as a result of his her actions, produces history. (Greenblatt, "Renaissance" 15)

Similarly, building on the capacity of every human to fashion their history and Wilson writes

the alternate history of the African American community in his plays.

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