

Jazz, a Being-in-the-World: Music and African American Theatre

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Abstract:

The acceptance of black music contributed to breaking down barriers between white and black culture. Despised and even rejected by the whites, the blues and jazz were eventually recognized as components of the Southern heritage of the African Americans. Jazz may be seen not only as a musical fact but also as a cultural fact, the artistic manifestation of a community linked to a set of uses, experience, beliefs, and conceptions forming a representation of the world. This essay follows the presence of different forms of music in theatrical representations of the African Americans, with examples from three playwrights: Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, and August Wilson.

Keywords: African American, drama, Hansberry (Lorraine), jazz, music, Shange (Ntozake), Wilson (August)

موسيقى الجاز ، ووجوديتها في العالم: الموسيقى والمسرح الأمريكي الأفريقي

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المستخلص

ساهم قبول الموسيقى السوداء في كسر الحواجز بين الثقافة البيضاء والسوداء. تم الاعتراف بالبلوز والجاز، المحترق والمرفوضين من البيض، على أنهما من مكونات التراث الجنوبي للأميركيين الأفارقة. قد يُنظر إلى موسيقى الجاز ليس فقط بوصفها حقيقة موسيقية ولكن أيضاً بوصفها حقيقة ثقافية، مظهر فني لمجتمع مرتبط بمجموعة من الاستخدامات والمعرفة والمعتقدات والمفاهيم التي تشكل تمثيلاً للعالم. يتبع هذا المقال وجود أشكال مختلفة من الموسيقى في التمثيل المسرحي للأميركيين الأفارقة، مع أمثلة من ثلاثة كتاب مسرحيين: لورين هانزبيري، و نتوزاكي شانج، وأوغست ويلسون.

الكلمات الدالة: أمريكي من أصل أفريقي، دراما، هانزبيري (لورين)، جاز، موسيقى، شانج (نتوزاكي)، ويلسون (أغسطس).

1. Introduction: jazz as a cultural paradigm

Prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865), black music was made and heard only by blacks. It was created and inspired by the cultural heritage by the African slaves brought to America against their will. Whites despised it and rejected it for its lyrics. Some considered it obscene and therefore offensive and illustrative of the poor civility of blacks. With the exodus from the South, the blues were gaining recognition, ending up being recorded and commercialized in the Northern cities. Despite this acceptance, the Southern blues were imbued with somewhat different characteristics since they were not scrutinized by the white producer responsible for their commercialization. These functioned as a sieve, changing the lyrics, making them less explicit at the sexual level, for example, and even influencing the musical construction itself (eliminating, for example, some of the characteristics of African roots to please more northern white audience). However, the acceptance of black music is still an essential first step in breaking down barriers between white and black culture.

Jazz music is a kind of music that originated from the musical heritage of African-American communities in the United States in the early 20th century. This music resulted from the fusion of European and African musical traditions in the southern states of the United States. He was also influenced by American popular music. Today, jazz is an exhilarating mix of all these musical styles. Jazz is an ever-evolving music that has a rich history spanning over a hundred years.

Jazz is a music that surfaced when African communities that migrated to the United States confronted European music. It's a kind of music that isn't constrained or rigid like other musical schools or traditions, and there's a lot of improvisation in jazz. It is a genre of music that has contributed significantly to the world of art and culture, especially American music.

Following a critical perspective recognized today, we consider jazz not only as a musical fact but also as a cultural fact, that is to say, a phenomenon linked to a set of uses, of experience, beliefs, and conceptions forming a representation of the world. This approach is based on the words of many musicians, for whom jazz goes beyond the limits of "jazz." In an interview with Arthur Taylor, African American singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone explains:

"Jazz is not just music, it's a way of life, it's a way of being, a way of thinking. I think that the Negro in America is jazz. Everything he does – the slang he uses, the way he walks, the way he talks, his jargon, the new inventive phrases we make up to describe things – all that to me is jazz just as much as the music we play. Jazz is not just music. It's the definition of the Afro-American black." [1: p.56]

Already present in 1925 in Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro* – "Jazz isn't music merely, it is a spirit that can express itself in almost anything" [2: p.216–217] – this position was famously upheld by Amiri Baraka in the 1960s. In 1968, LeRoi Jones gave up his "slave name" and renamed himself, Amiri Baraka. Without an established convention regarding his name, we will use the one he chooses, including for publications before 1968, while respecting the choice of the commentators quoted. In "Jazz and the White Critic," it is stated that: "Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude

about the way music is made” [3: p.17]. As jazz proceeds from a symbiotic conception of art and life which sometimes may oppose the Western tradition, where these are separated, it is inseparable from a cultural and social intention intimately linked to the vision of the specific world of blacks.

It is not a question of considering black music or identity as the fruit of an essence linked to color, but to recognize despite everything, following the founding work of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the existence of specificity of the black experience on the modern scene, which is rooted not in an African or another essence, but an experience of subordination and its techniques of daily resistance. In “The World and the Jug”, Ralph Ellison, commenting on Howe’s position on being black, and states his view on “Negroness” as follows: “It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience.” [4: p.131]

This position was taken up and developed in a diasporic context in *The Black Atlantic* by Paul Gilroy at the end of the 20th century. Drawing on Foucault’s thought, he argues that black identity is “lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires” [5: p.102]. In other words, if the “dark soul” is a construction, we should not in return underestimate the power to act that it conceals. Once “built,” it occupies the land, acts and makes people act.

This middle path between essentialism and anti-essentialism makes it possible to think that musicians have claimed black music to express their experience. Black music reflects their experience as black people, blending all styles from blues to jazz, from salsa to reggae. All these forms combined, and mingled precisely express the condition of the black people. There is nothing essentially “black” in black Music, but it has sometimes been defined by artists eager to represent and promote their culture.

This approach makes it possible to envision jazz as a cultural paradigm and to include in the space of thought elements that remain outside the musicological entrance. It also urges us to break down the enclosure of stylistic definitions of music that has never ceased to question them and has always been one step ahead of criticism. Let us quickly review the consensus that has developed around three defining qualities of jazz understood as a musical genre: the particular treatment of sound, the specific emphasis on musical time, and the presence of improvisation.

First, sound refers to the personalization of musical expression and the individuation of performance, born out of the historical desire to transpose the effects of the human voice and natural sounds onto the instrument. Hence, many growls, glissandos, strong inflections, squeaks, vibratos, and sounds outside the range: all these effects commonly qualified as dirty effects were used more or less depending on the period and currents. This “expressionism” marks the presence behind the musician of a human being, of his body, and it expresses a constant desire to make physical jazz music, sometimes close to a state of trance.

The second element is an unprecedented enhancement of musical time called *swing*. The term, which is said to have appeared in 1907 with Jelly Roll Morton’s “Georgia Swing,” literally means “swing,” and was recognized as a founding element of

jazz in the 1920s. However, it is impossible to note it on a score or to give a precise scientific definition. Swing is, indeed, first and foremost a sensation, and its perception is subjective. Attempts at a musicological definition revolve around the idea of emphasizing weak beats in four-beat measures and of ternary perception of the eighth note, but such explanations are pretty insufficient. As a result, not everyone agrees on the presence of swing in a particular song.

Swing is a kind of rhythmic music that is part of the jazz genre that became popular in the thirties and continued well into the forties. It was improvisational and performed by large groups of 10-20 members in front of large audiences many of whom were dancing. This is also the reason why the swing era is also called the big band era. Swing is also considered a rhythmic style within jazz that forces the listener to swing. It all started when jazz artists experimented with the double bass and eighth note and adopted a laid back, more relaxed rhythmic feeling. Louis Armstrong was the most important jazz musician to initiate this style during the 1930s. Although jazz has always been great to hear and very relaxing, it was the swing era that transformed jazz into upbeat music, a style that required people to take to the dance floor to dance and groove...

The third element is *improvisation*. Many commentators relativize its importance and refuse to make it a hallmark of jazz-like sound and swing. However, it is undeniable that it occupies a capital place there, and this, first of all, jazz is a music of oral tradition. Of course, there are musical scores, but not everything can be written down in them. In general, they are mainly used as a reminder. Many pieces are entirely written, but, on the one hand, they are relatively rare.

On the other hand, the interpretation of a musical piece as written is usually reserved for the composer and his appointed orchestra. In all cases, putting it into play (improvisation or interpretive flexibility) is necessary for the completion of the work. This particular relationship between oral and written characterizes jazz and, depending on the period and the styles they consider representative, leads commentators to favor or reduce the importance of improvisation. Geneviève Fabre concluded: “It is no surprise that blacks – who invented such definitively American forms as the spiritual, jazz music, and dance, as well as expressions associated with the cultures of rags, blues, bebop, hip hop, and rap – have had such a potent impact on America’s cultural life and history. What would American culture be without their presence?” [6:p.4–5]

2. African American theater: some benchmarks

In *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theater*, Douglas A. Jones, Jr. traces the earliest forms of black American stage expressions to the boat trip across the Atlantic: “Indeed, European captors often forced the African captive to sing and dance on the decks of slave ships in order to preserve the health — and therefore value— of their human cargo” [7:p.16].

Thus, the captives were faced with an impossible choice: either they danced and contributed to maintaining or even increasing their market value as slaves, or they refused, and they were whipped to submission. According to Jones, this impossible situation helped strengthen, beyond their respective origins, identities and languages, bonds of solidarity between the captives who endured in the plantations.

The custom of bringing blacks together to ask them to sing, dance, improvise a dramatic performance spread very early on in the plantations. Beasts of burden in the fields, they were promoted at such times to the role of entertainer. In the eyes of the masters, these were innocent shows that confirmed their expectations and their image of blacks, burlesque, comic, sometimes pathetic, rarely tragic. However, it was really about ridiculing whites for blacks, reproducing their manners (accent, gestures, steps) to make fun of them without their knowledge. In the form of mimed songs, these entertainments presented a satire of white that had all the appearances of praise. They allowed public criticism without it ever being direct or explicit.

The slaves could thus express their dissatisfaction or their discontent without risk of being punished for their insolence. This game of pretense comes under little marronage – the slaves' flight, self-liberation and survival. This expression designates all the strategies of resistance intrinsic to the economy of the plantation, which allowed the slave to be reluctant and play the master. In the speech, we speak of the process of Signifyin(g) by which we mean the transmission of a double message: an apparent one for whites and one hidden for blacks. Born from the need to survive but developed and cultivated after that, this aptitude for pretense and double play, which is often based on humor, has left its mark on African American culture, especially on jazz and theater. At the same time, the minstrelsy (or the minstrel) was born in the North at the beginning of the 19th century, while the slave system was still in force in the South. Invented by whites for whites, it has had a lasting and profound impact on the way blacks are represented in the United States until today.

The first genuinely American spectacular form, the blackface minstrel, was the most popular entertainment of the 19th century in the United States and went to achieve international significance [8:p.39]. In a mixture of theater, music, and comedy acts, white men, caricature blacks for their amusement and profit. The ancestor of modern entertainment, the minstrel, crystallized several stereotypes about black people and conditioned how the black body was portrayed on stage, in theater, and in music. For George C. Wolfe, “minstrelsy is an astonishing metaphor for America’s fractured cultural identity and also the DNA for all the theatrical forms that have evolved in America since”[9:p.401].

“Minstrel” is the translation of the French word “ménestrel”; “Blackface” refers to the black makeup of the performers. By extension, the blackface is the actor, the mask, and the performance itself. In the early 1830s,¹ minstrel blackface shows hijack plantation-grown black cultural elements (gestures, dance steps, songs, accents) to pastiche and mock them. According to Annemarie Bean, minstrels do not rely on actual anthropological sources. Originating in the urban North, minstrelsy only spread to the South later. Invented by men who had never set foot there, it is based on a fantasized vision of the plantation world [10:p.172].

Furthermore, let us not forget that the parodied gestures were themselves parodies. Thus, in the minstrel, whites imitate blacks who imitate whites. If we consider

¹ The origin of minstrel shows is uncertain, but there is a myth that T. D. Rice invented the genre in Pittsburgh by imitating a street performer. See Harvey Young, *Theater and Race*, op. cit., p. 37–39.

that all this was associated with multiple elements of European culture, we begin to glimpse the play of mirrors that presided over this theater's birth.

At the height of its popularity, in the late 1840s and early 1850s [11:p.9], the minstrel adopted a codified three-part form. In the first form, the performers, arranged in a semicircle, sing, dance, and exchange typically "Negro" jokes. Among the typical functions, we distinguish the endmen (black characters, named thus because of their position in the semicircle) and the interlocutor (a white character who gives them the answer). The second part, or olio, presents comic dialogues or parodic speeches (stump speeches), delivered by characters disguised (wench) or falsely learned. The third part consists of a short play: the parody of a classic (often a Shakespearean drama), the adaptation of a novel or a popular theme (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, is the subject of many pastiches), or an original creation supposed to represent life in the plantations. The number of performers varies from three to five or more, but they are almost always white men (women are extremely few), coated in black makeup often done with burnt cork, and dressed in costumes of "blacks" patched up and/or too tall for them [11:p.6]. The minstrel also has its typical characters, of which the two most emblematic are Jim Crow, the clever jester who gave his name to the eponymous laws, and Zip Coon, the goofy and ridiculous dandy.

Although this codified form is mentioned most of the time in minstrelsy literature, the genre has evolved constantly – arguably the most significant development being the gradual appearance of black performers on stages. Rare in the 1850s, black minstrels grew in number after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery:

"The popularity of blackface performance was so tremendous that black artists who wanted to perform on the stage frequently discovered that they too had to apply burnt cork. . . . black artists embraced the conventions of white blackface minstrelsy in their stage appearances." [8:p.42].

Their performances, presented as more authentic, are very successful. African American artists take the opportunity to change the genre; they introduce new characters, sometimes partially stripped of the blackface mask [8: 43-44], and develop other songs and dances (softshoe, cakewalk). From black minstrelsy is thus born ragtime, a pianistic genre with "chopped" rhythm (rag) very popular from the very end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Without entering into interpretative debates, let us note that the black minstrelsy redoubles the game of mirrors already at work in the first minstrel. As Terry Waldo puts it in his book, *This Is Ragtime* (1991), "By the time the ragtime era began in 1896, the cakewalk was being performed by blacks imitating whites who were imitating blacks who were imitating whites." [12:p.25].

3. Protest Drama vs. Art-Theatre

Historians of African American theater generally distinguish three significant periods: The Harlem Renaissance, which corresponds to the 1920s; the 1960s, with the Black Arts Movement; and the 1990s, which saw the emergence of a generation of playwrights, mentioned above, which embraces and transcends the legacies of its elders in one movement, and of which Parks is one of the spearheads. Samuel Hay and Henry Miller have shown that the development of black theater throughout the twentieth century

remained linked to the debate which, in the first decades, was polarized around two central figures: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) and Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954).

For the author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, whose school dominates early 20th-century theater production, it is clear that black dramaturgy must serve a strictly political purpose. The theater must raise awareness and stimulate reflection. Du Bois is speaking out against the grotesque tradition of minstrels and musicals and wishes to present serious plays to rehabilitate the image of blacks in America. Through a new theater, he wishes to teach African Americans themselves “the meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life” and “reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing” [13: 171].

In 1916, during a dramaturgy competition, the Washington branch of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a national association for the defense of civil rights founded in 1909, Du Bois and Archibald Grimké) selected and produced *Rachel* [14]. Written by Angelina Grimké (1880–1958, daughter of Archibald), it is the first black play to be staged in the 20th century and the very first to be written by an African American woman. Intended to awaken the empathy of white progressives, *Rachel* inaugurates the tradition of Protest Drama: a young woman, Rachel, dreams of becoming a mother, but gives up her dream when, following several revelations (the lynching of her father and her half-brother; the racial insults to which the neighbor’s son is the victim; the unemployment to which, despite her diplomas, her brother is condemned because of his color), she understands that her future children could only lead a life of misfortune. In a naturalistic setting, the characters evolve in a stereotypical and Manichean manner. The events that cause Rachel to change her mind are systematically reported, all information passes through speech, and there is no actual action. Several characters are assigned one or more didactic tirades on the plight of blacks in the United States. The play is a pro-black propaganda tool: anything that could cast a cloudy light on the community has been removed, blacks are idealized and presented as victims. When the piece is chosen, Locke, who is on the selection committee, resigns. The ensuing controversy is the starting point for the official development of the two schools detailed above [15:p.44].

Ten years later, Zora Neale Hurston (1901–1960) published in the only issue of the journal *Fire!* a play titled *Color Struck*, which depicts the devastating effects of the color hierarchy on the privacy of African Americans. On her way to a cake-walk contest in the South, Emma, a black woman, blames John for his attraction to Effie, a light-colored beauty. Out of jealousy, she goes so far as to refuse to participate in the dance, and John does end up competing – and winning the prize, a gigantic cake – with Effie. Twenty years later, he returns from Philadelphia, following the death of the woman he had married there. Her identity is not specified). He intends to pick up Emma, who remained alone in the countryside with a mulatto girl, whom we do not know if she is the result of love or rape. At first delighted, Emma finally drives him out of her house, suspecting his attraction to the young girl. Sick, the latter is declared dead at the end of the play by the doctor, the only white character in the play [16].

What is striking about reading *Color Struck* is the profusion of material from black popular culture. Anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston recounts the daily life of a rural population that she will continue to observe throughout her life, and draws attention to the plight of people, especially women, left alone by the Great Migration to the North of the years 1910-1930. The dances, songs, cries, language, or gestures carefully recorded by the specialists immerse the reader in the African American world; the doctor does not stay on stage long enough for a meaningful racial relationship to take place. The play was written for black audiences, the only ones able to understand and appreciate all the vernacular elements it contains [17:pp.118–119]. Through her desire to transcribe African American life for herself, Hurston fits in with Locke's Art-Theater movement.

This polarization of the debate around the two schools initiated by Du Bois and Locke should not mask the fact that the majority of the plays produced by black American playwrights of the twentieth century combine the two visions, in both substance and form, and often bring an original answer to the questions mentioned above. Works can tilt to one side or the other, but there is no hermetic demarcation between the two. It is, however, interesting to note that the questions which are at the heart of the quarrel "Art versus Protest" according to Henry Miller's formula are reactivated with each time, in new forms. In both cases, the root of the problem is to know what black theater is and how can it be developed, structured in order to gain legitimacy in a political context where the Whites control the scenic image of the Blacks.

4. Music and the playwright

Now that the terms of the debate are in place, the researcher may offer a brief tour of three critical works, chosen for their historical importance and representativeness – two women (Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange) and one man (August Wilson). It is not a question of establishing a line of dramatic black authors because essential names are missing, but of highlighting the fact that, since Grimké, women have participated in a black theatrical production on an ongoing basis. In his classification of African American theater according to the two Du Bois / Locke schools, Samuel Hay, who wrote in the early 1990s, points out that the era was one of a lull in debate and a tendency to a merger (since 1975).

4.1. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

The 1920s witnessed a revival of African-American writing. The new writers variously mix the teachings of Du Bois and Locke; for an accurate chronology, the researcher would like to refer to the works of Samuel Hay and Henry Miller. However, despite some successes, it was not until 1959 that a black play reached a national audience, both in the theater and cinema. For the first time, a writer, Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965), and a black director, Lloyd Richards, make their way to Broadway. Considered a classic today, the play launched nearly all of its actors, including Sydney Poitier. Geneviève Fabre (1983) underlines the complete novelty of Hansberry's success: "Written just before riots broke out in the ghettos, *Raisin* seemed to appease liberals who feared such a violent uprising. The play also proved that ghetto life did not necessarily

lead to crime or disgrace. [It] used the tradition of social realism to show an idealized image of the working class.” [18:p.30]

In conventional linear dramatic form, *A Raisin in the Sun* is the story of a black family in Chicago’s Southside ghetto after World War II. When the play begins, the Younger eagerly awaits the life insurance money from the father, who has just died. The son, Walter Lee, wants to invest it in a liqueur store; the daughter, Benethea, wants to finance her medical studies; and the mother, who is called Lena but everyone calls Mama, wants to buy a house. At the end of the vicissitudes, she buys the house but in a white district. Walter Lee wastes two-thirds of the money giving it to an associate who disappeared with it, and Benethea announces that she is going to Africa. All the while, the spectators do not leave the cramped apartment shared by Lena, her children, Ruth (Walter Lee’s wife), and Travis (their son); from the outside world, we only know what they say about it. When the curtain is drawn, they are on their way to their new life [19].

The reception is diverse: acclaimed by white critics, some black critics rejoice to see an African American author succeed on Broadway, while others, like Henry D. Miller, see in this tale of social advancement only of “pure integrationist propaganda” [15:p.168]. Indeed, Lorraine Hansberry promotes conservative middle-class values, including religion, abortion, and education, and her play advocates inclusion. It would be legitimate to worry in the 1950s in the United States about an isolated black family in a white neighborhood, whose representatives had already tried to dissuade them from settling there. However, Hansberry does not show us the consequences of the accession to the American dream, only its pursuit. Her characters treated psychologically and realistically and the reader is invited to identify and sympathize with black Americans’ plight in the ghetto – whose rough edges have been carefully erased. The play was, therefore, successful with those to whom it was addressed: white people. If it shows the life of a black family, a subject a priori to Alain Locke’s Inner Life theory, then, its members are idealized in the tradition of Du Bois’ Outer Life theory. Above all, they sacrifice their ethnic identity for integration into the middle class. Moreover, Geneviève Fabre reports that “Hansberry herself declared that she did not write a black play with *A Raisin* but a play about an American family in conflict with the market values of society”[6:p.61]. Contrary to Locke’s ideas, Hansberry tends to erase elements of African American culture rather than to highlight them, which the example of music will show.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, jazz and black American music are kept at bay, and their rare occurrences are stereotypical, even disqualifying. As a black culture, it is African music that is put forward. In the second scene of Act II, Walter Lee Younger, devastated by his mother’s choice to buy a house instead of financing her business, has been off work for three days. When asked what he has done with his days, while a “steamy, deep blues pour into the room,” he describes the music that can be heard every night at the Green Hat. It becomes the backdrop to his depression: “You can just sit there and drink and listen to them three men play, and you realize that don’t nothing matter worth a damn, but just being there —”[19:pp.105–106].²

² “don’t nothing” – grammar error in the original.

The other significant occurrence of black music in *A Raisin in the Sun* goes further. In the first scene of Act II, as Ruth listens to the radio while ironing, her sister-in-law Beneatha parades in a traditional Nigerian dress, a gift from her African suitor. “She promenades to the radio and, with an arrogant flourish, turns off the good loud blues that is playing,” exclaims: “Enough of this assimilationist junk!” [19:p.76], and replaces it with African music, on which she dances and sings, soon joined by her brother. Here, the blues, and therefore America, is disqualified in favor of Africa, the original land fantasized by Beneatha. In addition, the blues is considered alienating music, a breeding ground for unwanted integration in Beneatha’s eyes.

Finally, as Henry Miller’s analysis, “for the Youngers themselves, all the artifacts of African American culture have been wiped clean from the play, which will, no doubt, allow the Youngers to be more easily integrated into mainstream American society” [15: p.170].

4.2. Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

A black woman, poet, playwright, novelist, dancer, and mother, Ntozake Shange, the “high priestess of black nationalism,” explores life’s “nappy edges,” the metaphoric terrain just beyond neatly fixed social definitions. There, the sweat of pursuing an intimate, humane connection with the world and one’s innermost selves is manifested as a dynamic, affirmative rawness. Her vision is a holistic one within which language, music, movement, icon, and time and space are manipulated so that poetry becomes drama and dance. The political is simultaneously aesthetic, and the personal experience and spirituality offer insights that ultimately empower one to grapple with a complex social world.

After *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) by Ntozake Shange (1948–2018) is the second play by a black woman author to make it to Broadway. They could not be more different. Shange gives voice to the African American feminine experience, particularly from the perspective of the relationship with men. While some poems give a positive image of love and sexuality, others show the violence that pervades gender relations. “A nite with beau willie brown” in particular, in which the character of Beau Willie Brown, back from the Vietnam war, beats his partner and ends up killing her children, has captured the attention and fueled the controversy sparked by this play. Through this work, Shange sharply breaks with the militant theater of Baraka by highlighting his great forgotten ones and with the propaganda art of Du Bois, supposed to give a positive image of the community. What may strike the reader unaccustomed to Shange’s spelling is the oral quality of her language, her insistence in preserving the spoken features of her African American female characters, Black English:

- Phonetic spellings abound, and there are no capitals.
- There is a “call-and-response” quality about it.
- One can almost hear the rhythm of a sermon in a black church.

While *A Raisin in the Sun* follows the dominant model of the well-made piece, *for colored girls* radically questions it. The text is presented as a choreopoem (a choreographic poem), a term that designates a theatrical form that combines poetry, prose, song, dance,

and music. This mixture of genres is against the Western separation of the arts and is in line with African syncretism. At the same time, Ntozake Shange does not consider herself as a playwright but as a poet:

“as a poet in american theater/ i find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow/ stilted & imitative, that is probably one of the reasons i insist on calling myself a poet or writer/ rather than a playwright/ i am solely interested in the poetry of a moment/ the emotional & aesthetic impact of a character or a line. for too long now afro-americans in theater have been duped by the same artificial aesthetics that plague our white counterparts/ the “perfect play”.³ [20: Foreword p. ix].

The characters of *for colored girls* are exclusively women, and one of the great merits of this play is to have drawn attention to gender as early as 1975, a question that, we remember, developed on scenes during the 1980s and 1990s. In the preface to the play, Shange talks about black women for black women. “The show was literally for colored girls, which to me meant women-centered” [20: 10]. The point of view of the speech on stage, like the one it is addressed to, is overly focused. For this reason, as well as for his celebration of the African American idiom, Shange instead fits in the continuity of the Inner Life championed by Locke’s school.

4.3. August Wilson, *Fences*

August Wilson (1945–2005) is one of the most influential American playwrights of the 20th century, along with Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Between 1973 and 2005, he wrote sixteen plays, ten of which constitute the Pittsburgh Cycle or Century Cycle, which aims to show the lives of African Americans during each of the decades of the twentieth century. Suzan-Lori Parks, who has often expressed her admiration for him, prefaced the last one, *Radio Golf*. His works are family dramas that involve realistic black characters, often from working-class backgrounds, grappling with the limitations imposed by white America.

In *Fences* (1986, Pulitzer Prize) – the 1950s play in the cycle – we see, among other things, how a father, Troy Maxson, who had to give up a career as a baseball player to become a garbage collector because of his color. The play reproduces the oppression he suffered on his son by preventing him from becoming a footballer twenty years later. Thus, the play presents less the story of a black man in a situation of explicit racial subordination and more the consequences of this annoyance on his desires and family ties. Wilson’s language is both literary and popular; the characters are not idealized but willingly take on political issues. Troy asserts his right to become a garbage truck driver from the first scene, a position hitherto reserved for white employees and which he will obtain throughout the play. Unlike *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fences* is far from advocating integration: later, Troy admits that becoming a driver isolated him from the rest of the group, and in particular from his teammate and friend, Bono – many commentators noted that the disintegration of the community was the price to pay for the integration.

If Wilson associates blues with the theater, the two genres interact with an audience. They are preoccupied with the same objective: to let the speech to a minority. Blues and theater are inseparable from performance because it is the latter that will

³ No capitals in the original.

influence the performer and bring nuances to the text. It is challenging to acquire the total experience of blues, the musical experience of jazz, or other rhythms from the printed page because the lyricist is deprived of the blues singer and the musician's embellishments. Also, the interpreter has a close relationship with the audience when he expresses himself in public, and that the text is generally modified. Wilson emphasizes specific characteristics of black culture in his characters, especially the blues. In *Fences*, they sing to express emotions, announce the sequel or advance the plot. So when Troy wants his wife, Rose Maxson, to adopt his illegitimate daughter, he sings a lullaby to her: "Please, Mr. Engineer let a man ride the line / I ain't got no ticket please let me ride the blinds" [21:p.79]. Here, the lyrics are as meaningful as the simple act of singing; the lullaby is not directly addressed to Rose, by the way. Wilson uses the language of the blues: "ride the blinds" is an expression that refers to sneaking between two sets of trains on the dangerous outer platform. Another song, "Blue Song," which Troy inherited from his father and passed on to his children, is used repeatedly in different contexts. The lyrics tell the story of an old dog, Blue, who serves as a metaphor for Troy throughout the play. When his wife rejects him for his infidelity, the latter sings it like a lament: "Old Blue died, and I dig his grave / Let him down with a golden chain" [21: p.83]. We understand then that he buried himself in his misfortune. But, after his death, the exact words, slightly revised, are used by his son Cory to accomplish his mourning. In the last scene, he, who still resents his father, refuses to attend his funeral. It is Raynell, the little sister Rose raised as her daughter, who convinces him. "Old Blue died, and I dug his grave / [...] Go on Blue, you good dog you" [21: p.89], they sing together.

The question of finding one's voice is central to Wilson because, in all his plays, the characters seek to bring out their voice by expressing their cultural and social identity. The music constantly associated with themes of expansion and contraction runs through his work. The song seems to produce a phenomenon of physical dilation on specific elements and characters: Bynum, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, meets trees and birds larger than life at the moment when a giant apparition transmits to him a song which rises higher and higher. In *Fences*, Gabriel says: "It's time to tell St. Peter to open the gates. Troy, you ready? You ready, Troy. I'm gonna tell St. Peter to open the gates. You get ready now" [21: p.100].

With his painting of a complex and anti-Manichean Black America, Wilson leads viewers, white and black, to identify with black figures and thereby recognize their humanity while celebrating the richness of African culture. American. In this sense, he connects elements of Inner Life and Outer Life inextricably and achieves a synthesis of the two schools. He adopted a naturalistic form in favor of a postmodern game in which humor occupies a central place.

5. Conclusions

Following the guiding principles previously set by Du Bois and Alain Locke, all African American playwrights have endeavored to answer the question of identity through their works. On the Protest Drama side, the emphasis was on the place of blacks in predominantly white society (Outer Life); on the Art-Theater side, it was more about showing the life and culture of the community (Inner Life). This propaganda theater must

show reality as it is, but also as it should be. Preference is given to “characters and situations that depict the struggle of African Americans against racism” [22: p.3], which Du Bois calls “Outer Life.” The characters are idealized. Model human beings or historical figures express themselves in literary and didactic language and face the obstacles of white society. Du Bois himself applies his theory in *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), a pageant that tells a mythologized story of black Americans, from ancestral Africa to Emancipation. Very fashionable at the time, pageants were not plays but monumental parades; the text is presented in the form of a description of what is to happen on stage. In six paintings, he shows in a glorious light the cultural, artisanal, political, and philosophical heritage of African Americans; slavery is thus introduced as proof that blacks can survive the worst [23:p.89–92].

To this Protest Drama, Locke opposes an Art-Theater that is flourishing among the generation of the Harlem Renaissance. For him, the theater must give a realistic representation of black life and experience and present “believable characters and situations that sprang from the real life of the people” [22:p.3], regardless of what white people think of them. This is what Du Bois calls “Inner Life.” It is addressed primarily to blacks. The dramatic plots are inspired by African American popular culture (traditions, stories, myths, tales); the characters express honest and personal emotions, represent only themselves, and speak a vernacular language sometimes accompanied by songs and dances. It is about deploying all the resources of black culture in the service of the stage to contribute to art distinct from that of whites. According to Alain Locke,

“The newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art. [...] In flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose, verse and music, color and tone of imagery, idiom and timbre of emotion and symbolism, it is the ambition and promise of Negro artists to make a distinctive contribution.” [2:p.51]

For Locke, blacks are inevitably united by the shared experience of social domination, but the black experience as a whole is not reduced to it [2:p.47–48]. Instead of focusing exclusively on racism and its struggle, the theater must reflect the diversity of the lives of the black community. Despite his opposition to that of Du Bois, Locke’s school also has a socio-political aim: by highlighting his culture, he intends to create in the black public “more positive self-respect and self-reliance” [2:p.48], and gradually rehabilitate its image in the eyes of America. The Outer Life theater would thus show the lives of black people as Americans, while the Inner Life theater would lift the veil. Two examples will shed light on the concrete applications of the theorizations of Du Bois and Locke.

However, this distinction has been questioned, and the terms of the debate have evolved. Reading the book by Samuel A. Hay reveals that the Du Bois school instead reflected over time the ideas of the working classes and separatists, while Locke’s school rather those of the middle classes and assimilationists [22: p.121–122].

Any theatrical innovations brought about by African American playwrights find their source in the popular tradition in general and in music in particular. Music provides the most eloquent model: it is “a debate and a celebration, a wail of despair and a song of hope” [19:p.420], while “the blues singer becomes a prototypical creator” [19: p.420]. Music gives black people a voice. When it is inserted in the plays, the theatre itself turns

into the means that allows African Americans to express themselves and discover and assert their unique identity. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the blues is immediately associated with the wandering and despair of the black man, according to the traditional stereotype denounced by Albert Murray [24:p.45]. In the play, African American music is either used as an element of stereotypical folklore or delegitimized. Ntozake Shange's work, like that of African American women writers such as Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison, creates discourse on the black female body that defies ideals and stereotypes of beauty repressing black women's looks and intelligence. In August Wilson's plays, each of the characters seeks the path that would give them a social identity, but they also strive to make their voices heard.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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