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Racial Encounters In The American Theatre: Whiteness And Eugene O'Neill, Blackness And August Wilson

Çiğdem Üsekes

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RACIAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE:
WHITENESS AND EUGENE O'NEILL, BLACKNESS AND AUGUST WILSON

by

Çiğdem Üsekes
Master of Arts, University of Minnesota, 1995

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
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for the degree of
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1999
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This dissertation, submitted by Çağdem Üşekes in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

(Signed)

(Chairperson)

This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

Relatively few scholars have investigated racial representations in modern American drama. Even fewer scholars have undertaken to analyze depictions of whiteness in American letters, although “white studies” is slowly assuming legitimacy in the academy in the 1990s. “Racial Encounters in the American Theatre” therefore attempts to bridge this gap in literary and critical studies by examining the black portraiture of Eugene O’Neill and the white portraiture of August Wilson. The work of both playwrights attests to their deep and consistent involvement with their Racial Other, who resurfaces in play after play. Maintaining that the United States resembles a postcolonial society, I advance my critical analysis by employing current theories of race (blackness and whiteness) and postcolonial theory, specifically the contributions of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi to this field, as well as those of many contemporary scholars like Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Gayatri Spivak.

Whereas O’Neill’s earlier work (Thirst, The Moon of the Caribbees, and The Dreamy Kid) promotes stereotypes of blackness, such as primitivism and cannibalism, the Anglo-American playwright has transcended these racial myths in his later work and has discovered in the Negro a tragic character rather than an entertainer. The Emperor Jones, All God’s Chillun Got Wings, and The Iceman Cometh consequently draw attention to the economic, social, and political injustices affecting African-Americans while highlighting their ensuing psychological and mental anguish. Wilson’s fictive
black world, as seen in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Fences, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Piano Lesson, Two Trains Running*, and *Seven Guitars*, on the other hand, is peopled with many whites, most of whom remain off-stage, but nonetheless play a tremendous role in the lives of his black characters. Wilson’s vision of whiteness is homogeneous; he stresses in play after play how whiteness is associated with economic power and exploitation, social privilege, law, and terror in the black imagination. I conclude my study by demonstrating how both dramatists confirm the colonial panorama Frantz Fanon delineates. While O’Neill explores the effects of “alienation” on colonized individuals decades before Fanon articulated his theories, Wilson turns his attention to the second stage of colonization: “nationalism.”
In Memory of My Mother
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Surveys of black characters in American fiction date back to the earlier part of the twentieth century; for instance, William Stanley Braithwaite in the 1920s, and Sterling Brown in the 1930s studied the image of the Negro (a term I use here and elsewhere in historical context) in Euro-American literature only to decry the stereotypical black portraits. Yet relatively few scholars have investigated racial representations in modern American drama. Even fewer scholars have undertaken to analyze depictions of whiteness in American letters, although “white studies” is slowly assuming legitimacy in the academy in the 1990s. Among these pioneer examinations of whiteness, we can count Richard Dyer’s White, Mike Hill’s Whiteness: A Critical Reader, and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s Critical White Studies, all published in the same year, 1997.

In the light of these recent works, current theories of race, and of postcolonialism, this study will endeavor to decipher how two major American dramatists of this century, Eugene O’Neill, an Irish-American, and August Wilson, an African-American, have constructed images of their Racial Other in their plays.

I have deliberately chosen to focus on the writings of these two playwrights for a number of reasons. First and foremost, both Wilson and O’Neill’s work attests to their deep and consistent involvement with their Racial Other, who resurfaces in play after

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I use the term to refer to either the white or the black race, the two primary racial groups in America.
play. Interestingly, this is not the first time these dramatists have been compared with each other. Although he himself might not appreciate such appraisals, August Wilson, after the production of his first few plays, namely, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1985), was saluted by drama critics as the new O’Neill. A more striking tie between the two writers is their commitment to an ambitious historical project, a cycle of plays, to cover extended periods of American history. O’Neill worked for years on an estimated cycle of eleven plays, *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed*, which “was to span a period of more than 175 years [from 1775 to 1932] in the history of an American family” (Gelb 5). But O’Neill forsook his idea in a moment of despair and destroyed most of the existing drafts. While O’Neill failed to bring to fruition this monumental project, August Wilson is making consistent progress in his dramatic re-creation of the African-American experience in different decades of the twentieth century. I hope that taking a closer look at their portrayals of the Racial Other will not only shed light on the racial thinking of these two playwrights but also furnish a framework through which to reconsider racial representations in modern American literature and, more specifically, modern American drama.

“Race,” Postcolonial Studies, and the United States

An in-depth scrutiny of racialization in the United States is outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, it is essential to point out from the start that I subscribe to the well-established theory that race is not a biological (that is, “natural”) but a social

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2 For a detailed discussion of the historical development of racial theories in the Western world, please see Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formations in the United States* (1986) and Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire* (1995).
construct. I concur with scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who relegate race to quotation marks ("race"), postulating that "race" is not a "real" category other than in the reality of its pernicious effects experienced by people of color. As a sociohistorical concept, race, then, functions primarily to legitimize hegemony and racism by denoting Otherness, hence superiority/inferiority.

In her discussion of the origins of racialized thinking in the United States, AnnLouise Keating likewise maintains that race is not a "permanent, transhistorical" marker:

In fact, the Puritans and other early European colonizers didn’t consider themselves "white"; they identified as "Christian," "English," or "free," for at that time the word "white" didn’t represent a racial category. Again, racialization was economically and politically motivated. It was not until around 1680, with the racialization of slavery, that the term was used to describe a specific group of people. As Yehudi Webster explains, "The idea of a homogeneous white race was adopted as a means of generating cohesion among explorers, migrants, and settlers in eighteenth-century America. Its opposite was the black race, whose nature was said to be radically different from that of the white race" (9). Significantly, then, the "white race" evolved in opposition to but simultaneously with the "black race." (912)

AnnLouise Keating’s claim that the institution of slavery gave rise to the black and white races in the United States is not uncontested. But because of the difficulty, if not the
impossibility, of determining once and for all which originated first and instituted the other, it is more accurate to maintain, as Ania Loomba does, rather that they went hand in hand: “the relationship between racial ideologies and exploitation is better understood as dialectical, with racial assumptions both arising out of and structuring economic exploitation” (113).

Before I investigate further the links between racialization and oppression, let me establish how postcolonial theory can be usefully applied to the particular case study of the United States. Although many scholars of postcolonialism confine their analyses to Third World nations, like India and Algeria, many others have begun to include the United States as a postcolonial society in their studies. I agree with those who maintain that ongoing racial struggles and racial exploitation in America bear a certain resemblance to the tumultuous histories of postcolonial nations.

Colonies are usually defined by the presence of non-native (white) rulers (the minority) who govern the fate of the natives (non-white and the majority) by presiding over their politics, economy, and military. Anglo-Americans’ “colonization” of Africa assumed another form. Unlike other colonizing nations, instead of physically establishing their presence in a foreign land, white Americans had natives transported to America where they, being in the majority, had far better control over them than they would have had in a distant province. Although white America may not have colonized black Africa directly, the slave trade forced into migration a diverse group which was as (if not more) ruthlessly exploited and brutalized for centuries as the native populations in colonies around the world. Slavery was first and foremost an economic institution (as was the
case with imperialism) which capitalized on free labor. The economic plunder in this case pertained to the physical strength of the natives rather than their land, mines, or raw products.

Scholars of postcolonial theory take great pains to warn us that each and every colonial scenario is unique. Likewise, I am not arguing that the colonization of blacks in America fully replicates the colonial archetype. One major distinction, for example, is that in most postcolonial models formerly colonized nations have successfully ousted their colonizers as a result of the nationalist movements of the twentieth century. However, the two racial groups under investigation in this study, white and black Americans, continue to inhabit America together despite Marcus Garvey’s and other black activists’ call for a return to the motherland, Africa. This enforced coexistence has naturally prolonged the black nationalist struggle since the exploitation of this minority group has not ended with Emancipation, whereas the termination of colonial rule in other cases might indicate an end to exploitation. Another peculiar aspect of American history is the displacement of colonial subjects, which led to not only the loss of African land(s) but also cultures and tribal languages. Most colonized groups, on the other hand, have had access to these sites of resistance in their nationalist struggles. Furthermore, while we may surmise that the latter had a national or at least communal identity prior to their colonization, Africans, who came from different tribes, had to construct a communal identity after their relocation to America. Consequently, African-Americans’ claim to national identity/culture/homeland had to lie elsewhere: in Africa. Such significant
differences between the colonial history in the United States and elsewhere would obviously further complicate racial relations in this country.

But most importantly, what identifies the United States as a postcolonial society is the psychological warfare inflicted on African-Americans by Anglo-Americans, an embodiment of the same strategies colonizing nations like Britain and France have used to suppress natives in their colonies. Yet another intriguing development in the world today, neocolonialism/neoimperialism, once again draws attention to America’s direct involvement in colonization. While E. San Juan Jr. in his book *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* lays bare de facto neocolonialism in former colonies, he also sheds light on the role First World countries play in this socioeconomic scheme.

... the postcolonial state may appear independent or sovereign, but in reality its economic and political policies are dictated by the former colonizer and other foreign interests through the indigenous elite, the civil service, and the military with its network of ties with Western governments during the Cold War and after. . . . Neocolonialism designates then the persistence of economic ascendancy and cultural hegemony underneath the mask of political independence, demarcating the real democratic right of the people to exercise self-determination (which is effectively undermined by built-in mechanisms) from the formal or nominally procedural right. (24)

While former colonies, now comprising the so-called Third World, appear to enjoy “formal independence,” what they in fact experience, according to San Juan Jr., is “real
subservience," a policy carried out across the globe by the powerful First World nations, but most certainly, by the United States, the ultimate neoimperialist presence. As the American government sustains its economic hold over African-Americans today, its colonial/imperialist history has expanded to claim new "colonies" around the world. This last point, while opening up the boundaries of our discussion even further, also proves beyond a doubt that colonialism is not a thing of the past and that the prefix in "postcolonialism" does not really signify the end of an era.

I am not alone in detecting political and sociological similarities between the United States and other societies usually recognized as postcolonial. Other scholars have recognized that colonialism cannot be confined to a tidy temporality, with a definite beginning and end. Colonial histories (both of colonization and decolonization) around the world have molded each other via what Ruth Frankenberg refers to below as the "transnational traffic in modes of knowing":

Given the inception of the United States as a colony settled by Europeans, and given continued transnational traffic in modes of knowing associated with racial domination, there continue to be close ties in the United States between racist and colonial discourses, as well as between constructions of whiteness and of Westernness. (16)

Bart Moore-Gilbert, on the other hand, discloses the more recent links between the racial struggle in America and in postcolonial societies:

... while Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) disavowed the possibility of meaningful comparison between the historical and cultural
predicaments of African America and the colonized peoples subject to European control, this same text, ironically, became an important reference point for the American Civil Rights and Black Nationalism movements of the 1960s. A new generation of African-American critics, represented by figures like Henry Louis Gates, has drawn on the work of older African contemporaries like Soyinka in attempting to elaborate both a “black” poetics and literary theory. And the migration of African intellectuals as diverse as Anthony Appiah and Toks Adewale to the United States has further blurred the kind of barriers which Fanon assumed to exist, leading to a profound cross-fertilization between African-American and postcolonial cultural perspectives. (9)

As modernization brings the world closer and closer together, it becomes more and more difficult to argue with validity that colonialism has national boundaries. The globalism of this problem helps explain the “cross-fertilization” we see in the field of postcolonial studies today, with international voices and agendas coalescing. For instance, Albert Memmi, a contemporary and a colleague of Fanon, dedicated the American edition of his book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965), to “the American Negro, also colonized.” Written out of the North African context, Memmi saw that his theories on the psychology of the colonizer and the colonized applied equally well to other colonized nations and peoples, among them the American Negro.3

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3 Some of the other scholars who see the relevance of postcolonial theory to the racial context in America are Helen Tiffin, Stuart Hall, and Ania Loomba.
Current postcolonial theory traces its beginnings to the work of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a Martinican psychoanalyst educated in France who, for a considerable part of his life, considered himself “white” and French. Upon realizing that France did not regard its black subjects equal to its white citizens, he turned his back on this culture and the West in general and began his resistance work against colonialism in Algeria. Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the relationship between the Negro and his white colonizer had a profound impact on much of the more recent postcolonial studies. Ania Loomba maintains, therefore, that

In recent years, Fanon has been treated (often to the exclusion of other important figures) as the most important anti-colonial writer-activist; he has become, in the words of his comrade and critic Albert Memmi, “a prophet of the Third World, a romantic hero of decolonization.” (143)

On the other hand, scholars like Bart Moore-Gilbert claim that Aimé Césaire’s manifesto Discourse on Colonialism (1955) “locates the beginning of the movement [postcolonialism]” (172). Although Césaire’s voice in Discourse is as equally anti-colonial and anti-European as Fanon’s, Fanon moved beyond Césaire’s theories by analyzing the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized groups.

Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), another landmark in postcolonial scholarship, investigates how the Orient was constructed as a concept by the Occident to fit its colonial desires. Robert Young explains the significance of Said and his work when he states that this nominal book has initiated colonial discourse analysis “as an academic sub-discipline within literary and cultural theory” (159). Even if Said had not launched
colonial discourse analysis—Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* had already laid the groundwork for it by drawing attention to the language of colonial texts—*Orientalism* is still considered by most postcolonial scholars to be a crucial work in the field.

**The White Self and Its Non-White Other**

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon elucidates how the colonizers invent a non- or sub-human identity for the natives in order to demarcate themselves from the subservient group with the ultimate goal of establishing their “superiority” and justifying their rule. In return, the colonized respond to this process of inferiorization first by identifying themselves with their colonizers, but later, when they find out assimilation is not to be, they seek validation by insisting on the value of their native culture. Fanon based his hypotheses on the theories of the Self and the Other, according to which the Self (the white colonizer) constitutes everything outside of it, alien to it as “the Other.” Thus, the Other (the colonized black) emerges in opposition to the Self, symbolizing what the Self is not or does not have. Such opposition is, by definition, a Manichean one: one is what the other is not. This dualistic positioning, nonetheless, ensures that both groups are also locked into a symbiotic relationship; without one, there can’t be the other. Yet in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon did not merely put to use the psychological implications of these terms but redefined them to stress their political significance in the colonial context.

Likewise, in *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues for the necessity for polarized images of the Oriental and of the European in order for imperialism to survive and thrive: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40). The comparison holds true in other
colonial/racial contexts, more specifically, in the American one, as I will demonstrate later in this study. Thus, Othering, as exercised by those in power, associates the Self with positive, “superior” attributes and the Other with negative, “inferior” ones to rationalize their subordination.

Despite their ideological differences, Homi Bhabha, another principal scholar of postcolonialism, agrees with Said on this point and maintains that the “objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (23). Likewise, in The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon explains how Othering promotes colonialism:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficient powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. (41)

Colonialism mentally subjugates the natives by thus associating them with “barbarism, degradation, and bestiality” (Fanon, The Wretched 211). These representations imprison
the colonized in a less-than-human state and, thus, justify their subjugation by their “superiors;” hence, the end of colonial discourse.

Another strategy the colonizer employ to dehumanize their subjects is to represent them in the plural so as to deny their individuality and, consequently, their humanity. Albert Memmi remarks that statements like “‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same,’” constrain the colonized to an “anonymous collectivity” (85), which in return both establish and uphold stereotyping. Homi Bhabha exposes the inherent contradiction in this strategy when he says: “[The] colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (23).

Yet it is neither easy nor credible to generalize thus about the psychological and political mechanism of Othering. As Mary Louise Pratt observes, the marginalized Other fulfills diverse needs of the central Self, and depending on the variable goals of the colonizer, stereotypes of the colonized may reveal inherent contradictions. Thus, Pratt emphasizes “the multiplicity of ways of codifying the Other, the variety of (seemingly) fixed positions and the variety of (seemingly) given sets of differences that they posit. European penetration and appropriation is semanticised in numerous ways that can be quite distinct, even mutually contradictory” (141). One of the underlying reasons for the paradoxical nature of Othering is that, as Catherine Hall points out, “the projection of ‘the other’ is also always about repressed aspects of the self. Relations between coloniser and colonised are characterised by a deep ambivalence, ‘the other’ is both an object of desire and derision, of envy and contempt . . .” (70). I will consider further the problematic nature of Othering in a later part of this chapter, “Tensions Within Postcolonial Theory.”
Can the Subaltern Speak?: Whiteness and the Colonized

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, examinations of the concept of whiteness have been long in the making. Yet the reticence surrounding this until-recently taboo subject can be accounted for by the whites' direct and indirect strategies to ensure their supremacy. Richard Dyer, a pioneer in this field, has probed into these tactics and their immediate consequences. He asserts in his influential essay “White” that the dominant group presents itself as the norm, thereby making whiteness the norm, “the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human” (44). While “black is always marked as a colour . . . white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality; because it is everything - white is no colour because it is all colours” (45). Therefore, Richard Dyer argues, by rendering itself invisible, whiteness has evaded analysis, further safeguarding its indomitableness. “It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just ‘people’) in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyze their representation, whereas white people . . . are difficult, if not impossible, to analyze qua white” (46). Richard Dyer has expounded these theories in his 1997 book White: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). The misrepresentation that whites are the human race unmistakably positions nonwhites as something other or less than human.

Other theoreticians also stress the socially “unraced” nature of whiteness. For instance, Ross Chambers calls whiteness the “blank” category, the unmarked and the unexamined.
[Whiteness] has a touchstone quality of the normal, against which the members of marked categories are measured and, of course, found deviant, that is, wanting. . . . Whiteness is not itself compared with anything, but other things are compared unfavorably with it, and their own comparability with one another derives from their distance from the touchstone. (189)

Whiteness is not only invisible but also indivisible, that is, singular (whites), whereas it presents nonwhiteness as plural (blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, etc.). These diversified groups are further homogenized with the assertion that “all Xs are the same,” while the opposite applies to whites, who are all perceived as individuals (Chambers 192).

Whereas nonwhites are perceived first and foremost as a function of their group belongingness, that is, as black or Latino or Asian (and then as individuals), whites are perceived first as individual people (and only secondarily, if at all, as whites). Their essential identity is thus their individual self-identity, to which whiteness as such is a secondary, and so a negligible, factor. (Chambers 192)

What all these theories have in common is their denial of a voice and a separate consciousness to oppressed groups. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has directed our attention to this implicit premise with her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”4. In it, after...

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4 The term “subaltern” is borrowed from Antonio Gramsci and refers to subordinate groups.
answering her own question in the negative, she determines that the intellectuals should speak for the subaltern. Benita Parry, a South African critic, however, strongly disagrees with Spivak’s assertion that the subaltern is voiceless and criticizes her for not hearing their voices. Ania I oomba further complicates these issues by asking

In what voices do the colonised speak—their own, or in accents borrowed from their masters? Is the project of recovering the “subaltern” best served by locating her separateness from dominant culture, or by highlighting the extent to which she moulded even those processes and cultures which subjugated her? (231)

Professor Loomba’s question is directed not only at Spivak’s position but also at postcolonial theory in general, which sometimes declines to attribute an individual consciousness to the colonized as separate from the one imposed on them by their colonizers, a flawed stance which consigns them to an object position: people who are merely acted upon by the imperialists rather than people who can take action (subject status). Frantz Fanon introduces the so-far absent voice of the marginalized group when he states, “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Wretched 250). Formulating such a question would enable the colonized to dispute the identities and other definitions invented for them by their colonizers. This first phase of decolonization will also invalidate the absolute power granted to the colonizer in their pursuit of dominion over regions and peoples.
As the oppressed groups strive to overthrow the yoke they have been suffering under for centuries, they re-define their Other and themselves, as Catherine Hall illustrates:

For colonisation is never only about the external processes and pressures of exploitation. It is always also about the ways in which colonised subjects internally collude with the objectification of the self produced by the coloniser. The search for independence and the struggle for decolonisation, therefore, had to be premised on new identities. (69)

As the Caribbean blacks “reinvented” Africa to claim a separate and positive self-identity during the Negritude movement, so did the American blacks, especially during the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism of the 1960s. Fanon’s prophecy had been fulfilled. He had foreseen that “the construction of essentialist forms of ‘native’ identity is a legitimate, indeed necessary, stage in the emergence from the process of ‘assimilation’ imposed by colonial regimes to a fully decolonized national culture” (Moore-Gilbert 179).

Therefore, blacks or other oppressed groups have never been merely objects. They as subjects have participated, directly or indirectly, in the processes that were meant to shape them. For example, although white Americans desired to “control the black gaze,” to be invisible to black people, blacks, while seeming to have accorded with this wish out of fear, did indeed observe whites, according to bell hooks:

An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered on white control of the black gaze. Black slaves,
and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object, then, was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. (168)

bell hooks proves here that despite Richard Dyer’s insistence on the “invisibility” and alleged normalcy of whiteness, those qualities were not just handed down and accepted by non-whites. bell hooks’s contention that “black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing” illustrates the often-ignored subject-position of non-whites (170). Dyer’s and other such scholars’ analyses of whiteness exclude the perspective of non-white communities, who perceive whiteness in widely divergent terms. For blacks, whiteness is neither a good nor a benign power, but one “that wounds, hurts, tortures” (hooks 169).

Though systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, racism, actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating, and many of us succumb, blacks who imitate whites . . . continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred. This contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror. (hooks 166)
My analysis of August Wilson's plays should contribute to amending the limitations of "white studies," which has highlighted thus far only the perspective of whites themselves.

Tensions Within Postcolonial Theory

Although postcolonial theory helps us better understand racial thinking in America, we cannot disregard the various problems arising out of this theoretical framework. The polarized construction of the colonizer and the colonized, a stance Abdul JanMohamed, for instance, subscribes to in contention with most other postcolonialists, inevitably invites controversy. If we uphold these two separate categories, then Benita Parry warns us that cultural nationalism, one of the direct consequences of colonization, can lead to a "reverse ethnocentrism which simply reproduces existing categories, performing an identical function and producing the same effects as the system it contests" (91). However, denying the existence of unambiguous categories stirs up debate, too, and provokes censure by those like Ella Shohat who critique the political ambivalence of postcolonial theory since "it blurs the clear-cut distinctions between colonisers and colonised ... It dissolves the politics of resistance because it 'posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition'" (Stuart Hall, "When Was 'the Post-Colonial'?" 242). In order to resist, to oppose something (a person, notion, institution), one needs to be able to believe in its inherent Otherness from or opposition to the Self.

Stuart Hall approaches subject-formation from a slightly different angle: "we should think ... of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" ("Cultural Identity" 110). Hall
critiques concepts of fixed, stable cultural identities, and hence the basic premise of nationalist movements:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they[ cultural identities] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of selves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (“Cultural Identity” 112)

Cultural identities, according to Hall, are problematic; they are “Not an essence but a positioning” (113). Therefore, the stable cultural identity colonized groups lay claim to in their nationalist struggles is as unreal as the identity initially attributed to them by their oppressors. Stuart Hall, like Homi Bhabha, sees ambivalence in postcolonial narratives and constructions, an intellectual position which has the potential to dismiss any attempt at identity formation as artificial and arbitrary.

The study that follows juxtaposes the plays of Eugene O’Neill and August Wilson with the intention of exploring how their racial narratives can be read in relation to each other as well as to postcolonial theory in general. Members of two ethnic groups with histories both opposed and complementary, O’Neill and Wilson provide invaluable information about the nature of racial conceptualization and indoctrination in America. The political and social consequences of their racial identity, both received at birth and
deliberately chosen later in life, illumine the narratives they have constructed about their Racial Other.

Because O’Neill’s approach to blackness has undergone dramatic transformation over time, I have analyzed his plays in separate chapters except for his early one-acts, which share a somewhat homogeneous racial vision. On the other hand, I have preferred a thematic analysis of Wilson’s plays since he portrays whiteness in very similar terms in all of the six plays he has written so far. Unfortunately, I have had to limit the scope of this comparative study to the texts of the plays under consideration, thus ignoring the wider implications of performance.
PART ONE

BLACKNESS AND EUGENE O'NEILL
CHAPTER I

EUGENE O'NEILL AND THE ANGLO-AMERICAN DRAMATIC TRADITION

The endeavor to study in depth Eugene O'Neill's approach to blackness first necessitates a historical positioning of him and his work. As T. S. Eliot argues in his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” all writers partake in tradition, and O’Neill is no exception. As he has left his indelible mark on American drama, he also was shaped himself by prior traditions of American literature and, more specifically, of American theatre.

These literary traditions mainly relied on stereotypes in their depiction of non-whites. Among those attributed to African-Americans, Sambo, Uncle Tom, Jim Crow, and Mammy prevailed, with a few variations. Such stereotypes mainly served a sociopolitical objective: they reflected and confirmed the Anglo-American image of the Afro-American. Joseph Boskin, for instance, after identifying two of these familiar black stereotypes as Sambo and the Brute, explains that the Brute image was born out of the Euro-American conviction that “the black man was a primitive creature given to fits of violence and powerful sexual impulses” (166). The emergence of Sambo, the comic Negro, could be traced to 1781, according to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. Sambo was a happy-go-lucky, loyal but lazy, irresponsible, and child-like slave. George Fredrickson interprets this figure as “a direct rationalization of slavery” (41) and argues how “Sambo was the predominant white southern image of the securely enslaved Negro,
at least in the period from 1830 to 1860" (40). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) popularized the stereotype of the docile slave, Uncle Tom, who became for the Northerners testimony to the evils of slavery, whereas the Southerners saw in him an affirmation of the exact opposite, that slavery was agreeable to Negroes. A variation of the “uncle” stereotype was “Uncle Remus,” created by Joel Chandler Harris. Mainly a story-teller, Uncle Remus has experienced both slavery and its aftermath as a newly-freed slave. The Reconstruction era did not render any essential transformations of these one-dimensional representations, and William Stanley Braithwaite records how the fiction of this period likewise “refused to see the tragedy of the Negro and capitalized his comedy” (31).

Black women characters did not fare any better in the literature of the time. Deborah Gray White’s findings show that African-American women were routinely stereotyped as either Mammy or Jezebel. Mammy “Because of her expertise in all domestic matters” was “the premier house servant” (47) and was “dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family” (49). She stood for the pious, asexual, and maternal black woman (46). Jezebel, “the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady,” was also the antithesis of Mammy in her sensuality (29). She was “governed almost entirely by her libido” (29). While Mammy illustrated the indispensability and suitability of the black woman servant in the master’s house, Jezebel rationalized his sexual transgressions.

As the more readily accessible medium to American (white) audiences, American theatre upheld similar stereotypes of African-Americans. The origins of black portraiture
on the American stage date back to the minstrel shows, which Edith Isaacs in her 1947 work *The Negro in the American Theatre* calls “our first authentic American theatre form” (27). Isaacs claims that the minstrel show was born on the southern plantations and that the Northern visitors, having been acquainted with the form, brought it back to the North where it was staged by white actors in blackface. “There is little doubt that it helped to create and to fix the Negro stereotypes—passive or scheming, over-dull or overshrewd, but always irresponsible and caricatured—which have burdened our theatre ever since” (27). In the 1830s, Thomas Rice launched a new stereotype with his Jim Crow, who became a staple of the minstrel show with his funny songs and dances. The minstrel shows remained in vogue from the 1830s to the 1880s and capitalized on the comic representation of the Negro by also exploiting the black dialect. In *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Huggins discusses in greater depth black representations in these shows, which he claims were both “comic and pathetic”:

The theatrical darky was childlike; he could be duped into the most idiotic and foolish schemes; but like a child, too, innocence would protect him and turn the tables on the schemers. His songs were vulgar and his stories the most gross and broad; his jokes were often on himself, his wife or woman. Lazy, he was slow of movement, or when he displayed a quickness of wit it was generally in flight from work or ghosts. Nevertheless, he was unrestrained in enthusiasm for music—for athletic and rhythmical dance. Likewise, he was insatiable in his bodily appetites; his songs and tales about food would make one think him all mouth,
gullet, and stomach. . . . This caricature was patently the antithesis of the Protestant Ethic, as was the Negro stereotype. (251)

The premise of Huggins's argument is that the blackface represented the alter ego of whites, and therefore, more than aiming to denigrate blacks, these minstrel shows were indeed striving to satisfy an inner need of their white audience. The American Dream that Euro-Americans so eagerly clung to had demanded "self-sacrifice and self-restraint," but by hiding behind a black mask, whites could become "self-indulgent and irresponsible" (253). In other words, Nathan Huggins asserts that rather than mocking black Americans, blackface minstrelsy helped to project onto the stage a suppressed aspect of Anglo-American identity. Huggins's claims are not uncontroversial, but I think for the purposes of this study, it is more important to determine what the black stereotypes in American theatre were rather than arriving at a conclusive explanation of why they existed, an insurmountable task in itself.

The main focus of this work is not the history of American theatre; nonetheless, that history provides invaluable insights into the portrayal of the black Other on stage by Euro-American playwrights. Early attempts in the twentieth century at Negro folk plays by white dramatists such as Paul Green, Ridge'y Torrence, Dubose Heywood, and Marc Connelly "met with great success" (Sanders 20). Edward Sheldon's 1904 play The Nigger, although a melodrama, is nonetheless a landmark in American theatre history in its exploration of race relations between blacks and whites by broaching the subject of interracial marriage. (Dion Boucicault's The Octoroon, another melodrama, had tackled similar issues—miscegenation—as early as 1859.) April 1917, too, "marks an epoch for
the Negro on stage” according to James Weldon Johnson, as it records the date for the Broadway premiere of Ridgely Torrence’s *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre* that offered “the American Negro his first opportunity in serious legitimate drama” (qtd. in Bigsby 237). In 1927, Paul Green received a Pulitzer Prize for *In Abraham’s Bosom*. These dramatists’ interest in the African-American, however, was not unanimously applauded. The black intellectuals of the New Negro Movement, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and William Stanley Braithwaite, to name but a few, expressed their disapproval of these dramatists and their work and called for an end to black stereotyping. Langston Hughes, too, protested against these writers: “The stereotype of the Negro drama is the unhappy ending—spiritually and physically defeated, lynched, dead—gotten rid of to the relief of the dramatist and audience, in time for a late summer” (qtd. in Sanders 21).

The Euro-American attention to the African-American became more pronounced during the 1920s, when black writers, such as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer, contributed significantly to the flowering of black letters, the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Anglo-Americans participated in this movement not only as patrons of black authors but also as writers themselves. Nonetheless, Richard Long indicates that most of the white writers of this era were little acquainted with their subject matter (43-44), and that their written products revealed the sensibilities and politics of the group these authors belonged to and, for the most part, wrote for (48). The image of blackness that emerged from these writings was primitive. John Cooley has categorized these primitivistic stereotypes into two: savages and naturals. According to Cooley, depending on the writer’s goal, primitivism was
either elevated—resulting in the image of the natural—or denigrated—resulting in a portrayal of the savage. One explanation for the materialization of the "natural" stereotype was the disillusionment of Anglo-Americans following World War I. Disappointed in their own culture, they sought and reportedly found an alternative in the culture of black Americans, romanticized them, and forced the latter this time into the mold of an uncivilized African, a trend Robert Coles and Diane Isaacs refer to as "the Africanization of the American Negro" (5).

Eugene O'Neil occupies a distinctive place in American drama. As an Irish-American, his concern for the black American may be considered unusual. Yet some scholars cite his cultural identity as a valid reason for his interest. According to Virginia Floyd's *Eugene O'Neil at Work*, the playwright, motivated by the discrimination against his Irish-American family by "wealthy Yankee New Londoners," determined to explore and to expose injustice, especially against nonwhites (xviii). Deborah Wood Holton is one of many scholars to point out the links between O'Neil's writings and his travels, especially to the rain forests of Honduras in 1909, his experience as a reporter for the New London *Telegraph*, and his friendships with black Americans, especially with Joe Smith (32). Smith, the model for some of O'Neil's black characters, was a black gambler whom O'Neil met in 1915 at the Hell Hole, an Irish saloon in Greenwich Village. Virginia Floyd notes that they were close friends for almost twenty years (*O'Neil at Work* xviii). Louis Sheaffer describes Joe Smith as "a quiet good-natured Negro gambler" (424) who was also "an authority on the Negro community of Greenwich Village" (425). O'Neil believed Smith's experiences reflected black life in America and
relied on Smith’s stories for his plays and black characters. This exposure to black life made the dramatist “particularly aware of and sympathetic to the problems of blacks. As a result of his own experiences and those of his friends, he became a champion of victims of discrimination, the outcasts of society” (Floyd, New Assessment 521).

There is no doubt that Eugene O’Neill was genuinely concerned about the fate of the black American. While his black representations began with minor West Indian characters, as in Thirst (1913) and The Moon of the Caribbees (1917), his later plays focused more directly on African-Americans, their fates, and interactions with white society. His last one-act with black characters, The Dreamy Kid (1918) was indeed an all-black play bringing to life O’Neill’s first black American characters. His most controversial “black play” (and his most complex one) remains The Emperor Jones (1920) with its atavistic black protagonist, Brutus Jones. All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1923) was no less controversial at the time since it brought to the spotlight an interracial couple. O’Neill’s final black character emerged in The Iceman Cometh (1939), Joe Mott, who holds an important, albeit often ignored, place in O’Neill’s dramatic universe.

O’Neill’s attempts at investigating Negro life are not limited to the plays mentioned above, which only include his finished work. His notebooks allude to other projects which were never fully realized. Virginia Floyd, who edited the playwright’s notebooks, reports that “From 1927 to 1934, O’Neill worked intermittently on a play, tentatively titled ‘Bantu Boy,’ depicting ‘the Negro’s whole experience in modern times—especially with regard to America’” (O’Neill at Work xviii). Bantu Boy is about an African chief who is sold into bondage in America. The play was to enact scenes from
the ante-bellum era, about the chief's experiences at the slave auction, his conversion to Christianity, his joining of the Northern army, his disillusionment after Reconstruction, and his final return to his homeland, his roots.

[H]e dies in the wilds, alone, but out of his despair comes a vision of prophecy, he feels the spirit of Africa proud of its black God telling him that that continent is his, his people's, that the whites' attempt to own it is illusion, that they are aliens, the land hates them, it waits, preying upon them, disintegrating them, their own lusts corrupting them, their yellow bastards a sign of their eventual ruin. (176)

O'Neill's other plans for "black plays" comprised Honest Honey Boy (1921) and Runaway Slave Play (1935). His notebook contains the outline for the former: "'Joe'—the tragi-comedy of negro gambler (Joe Smith)—8 scenes—4 in N.Y. of his heyday—4 in present N. Y. of Prohib[ition]. times, his decline" (38). Influenced by Thoreau's Journal, Runaway Slave Play was conceived in May of 1935, and it was to deal with a slave trying to buy his freedom from his master.

Such evidence proves beyond doubt that Eugene O'Neill was drawn throughout his career to investigating the fate and psyche of blacks. Other questions are less easy to determine. For example, how successful was O'Neill in his depiction of blackness? The question should, in part, be considered in terms of the obstacles the dramatist had to contend with. First, O'Neill, as a white American, had to transcend the "barrier" of his own skin color and to identify with a group of people he was not too familiar with.

Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer direct our attention to the same complication: "As a
northerner with no experience in the mixed society of the South, O'Neill had small acquaintance with the black psyche and the deeper conflicts of racial antagonism and southern segregation” (252). According to Peter Gillett, though, O'Neill’s more urgent impediment would be the racial myths, the “set of received ‘truths’ about black people” (45). His success depended on his seeing through and surpassing these myths.

Euro-American critics have not hesitated to extol O'Neill's efforts and achievement. On the other hand, although African-American critics, too, commend O'Neill for being one of the first white American playwrights to treat black characters with seriousness and sympathy, he is criticized by many for being unable to shun black stereotypes in his plays. Sterling Brown may be among the very few black critics to praise O'Neill for transcending these stereotypes and introducing “a tragic Negro to Broadway” (201). More representative of current black critical attitudes is Deborah Wood Holton who critiques the “blind spot” of O'Neill regarding black culture (33) and his “inadequacy at interpreting black life” (38). The racial debate surrounding O'Neill’s canon continues today. In the next few chapters, I will respond to these evaluations of O'Neill’s black characters. Were they stereotypical, yet well-intentioned, responses to blackness, or did O'Neill surpass his predecessors and contemporaries in his understanding and portrayal of the black experience?
CHAPTER II

THE EARLY O'NEILL: THIRST, THE MOON OF THE CARIBBEES,
AND THE DREAMY KID

O'Neill's early examinations of racial relations, namely, in Thirst, The Moon of the Caribbees, and The Dreamy Kid, have been explicated by scholars who argue that these one-acts only further common stereotypes of blackness. Although Eugene O'Neill has undeniably employed several stereotypes in his early depictions of blackness, these plays deserve attention in that, while dramatically amateurish, they are nonetheless essential in charting O'Neill's evolving understanding of blackness. In fact, the seeds of his later and more successful "black plays" can be detected in these one-acts; the later works take to a new level O'Neill's analysis of black-white relations, which he had begun with Thirst.

The Irish-American playwright embarked on his probings into blackness and racial problems not through black American characters but West Indian ones who, unfortunately, remain marginal and stereotypical. (O'Neill's first African-American character did not emerge until 1918 in The Dreamy Kid.) His first one-act to include a black character, Thirst, has three characters, a white gentleman, a white female dancer, and a black sailor all stranded on a life raft without any provisions after a shipwreck. Although not in the least a successful O'Neill play, Thirst manages to raise pivotal questions about black-white relations and encourages a scrutiny of white racial attitudes.
The play brings together three characters from widely different strata to question whether they can coexist under these new circumstances. From the beginning, O'Neill insists on the Sailor's difference and distance from the white characters. The Gentleman, for example, is described as a "sorry and pitiful figure as he sits staring stupidly at the water with unseeing eyes. . . . From time to time he licks his swollen lips with his blackened tongue" (31). The woman, on the other hand, has been transformed by hunger and thirst "into a mocking spectre of a dancer. She is sobbing endlessly, hopelessly" (32). The Sailor appears to be the calmest of the three. Although "In the eyes of all three the light of a dawning madness is shining," the Sailor can at least control this madness much better than the others (32). While the white characters complain about the heat, their hunger and thirst, the Sailor merely watches the sharks around the raft and croons to himself. His stronger physique and personality, indicators of his distinction from the others, are based on the stereotype of the "primitive black" who is thus better equipped for survival than his "civilized" white counterpart.

The black man has distanced himself from the white characters both physically and emotionally; he sits on the other end of the raft by himself and avoids them. The Gentleman remarks that "He does not seem to want to speak to us" (35). In most cases, when the others discuss the black man or talk to him, he appears not to hear, or at least he chooses not to respond. When he speaks, his attitude is most often "dull" or "sullen," "apathetic"; his eyes are "expressionless." Most significant, though, is his "strangeness" reiterated many times in the text. For instance, "He is strange—that sailor. I do not know what to think of him," and "It is a strange song he sings" (35). Or the Sailor's eyes "are
horrible with strangeness” (41). The adjective “strange” is used six times in relation to the Sailor, thereby reducing him to the position of the Other in its implication of difference from the norm associated with whiteness in the play. While O’Neill himself is guilty of Othering the West Indian Sailor in his stage directions by drawing attention to his “strangeness,” the play also comments on his white characters’ racial attitudes, more and more so as the play unfolds.

The Gentleman, from the beginning, assumes an air of superiority and authority with the West Indian. When the Dancer reprehends him for bringing up ghastly topics, like the death of other passengers, the Gentleman “points to the Sailor with a sneer” and suggests the woman talk to him instead (32-33). The white man is disposed to giving orders to the Sailor, who obeys them. For instance, the Gentleman’s seeming question, “Why have you stopped singing?” is neither meant nor interpreted as a real question; the West Indian resumes singing (33). In another scene demonstrating the racial hegemony the Gentleman demands of the Sailor, “Stand up and tell me if there is any ship in sight”; the Sailor once again follows his order (36). These incidents and the others to follow highlight the whites’ disdain of the black man, whom they consider to be their social inferior.

Another racial motif emerging in Thirst is the common white response of fear towards blacks and blackness. When the Dancer admits her fear of the black man, the Gentleman, too, comes clean with his own emotions regarding the Sailor:

I think at one time I was going mad. I dreamed he had a knife in his hand and looked at me. But it was all madness; I can see that now. He is only a
poor negro sailor—our companion in misfortune. God knows we are all in the same pitiful plight. We should not grow suspicious of one another.

(35)

Even though the Gentleman strives to calm down the Dancer by asserting their sameness under these new circumstances brought about by the shipwreck, she cannot be pacified:

“All the same, I am afraid of him. There is something in his eyes when he looks at me, which makes me tremble” (35). This scene, quite stereotypical and yet revealing of white attitudes toward blacks, is reminiscent of a personal story Frantz Fanon narrates in *Black Skin, White Masks*. A child, upon seeing Fanon, exclaims to his mother: “Look, a Negro! ...Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” (112). Such racial fear only represents the tip of the racial iceberg O’Neill exposes in *Thirst*.

Another heavily-laden racial concern surfacing in *Thirst* is black male sexuality, which was (and still is) regarded as a threat to white male sexuality. Despite his hunger and thirst, the Gentleman begins worrying instead about how a black man has secured himself a place on the raft when so many others have died. The white man has arrived last on the raft and fears that anything “inappropriate” might have occurred between the Sailor and the white woman: “How do you account for your being on the raft alone with this nigger? You have not yet told me” (40). When the woman cannot furnish a logical, sufficient answer and recalls someone kissing her, the white man is even more agitated and reacts almost in a frenzy: “(reaching over and shaking her by the shoulder) Come! You said someone kissed you. You must be mistaken. I surely did not, and it could hardly have been that sailor” (40). Eugene O’Neill thus hints at the sexual taboo of the
black man and the white woman, a subject he will later scrutinize in more depth in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*.

The insanity brought on by hunger and thirst combined with racial fear induces the worst in the Gentleman, who degenerates into calling the Sailor “nigger” and “pig.”

We have no water, fool! It is your fault we have none. Why did you drink all that was left in the cask when you thought we were asleep? I would not give you any even if we had some. You deserve to suffer, you pig! If anyone of the three of us has any water it is you who have hidden some out of what you stole. (43, my emphases)

Their despondency slowly unveils their true nature. Thomas Pawley remarks that “At this point both white characters have revealed their subconscious if not their real attitudes toward blacks. Their surface civility is thus shown to be only a mask” (139). The Dancer’s statement “You would think even the most heartless savage would share at a time like this” discloses in all honesty that she regards him as even worse than “the most heartless savage” (45, my emphasis). When the Sailor insists he has no water, the Gentleman calls him “The pig! The pig! The black dog!” (46).

Not giving up on the possibility of some water the Sailor might have hoarded, the Dancer offers him her diamond necklace and finally herself in exchange for some of his water.

(. . . crawling on her knees over to the Sailor, calls in her most seductive voice) Sailor! Sailor! (He does not seem to hear—she takes his arm and shakes it gently—he turns around and stares wonderingly at her.) Listen
to me, Sailor. What is your name—your first name? (She smiles enticingly at him. He does not answer.) . . . (Putting her hand on his shoulder she bends forward with her golden hair almost in his lap and smiles up into his face.) I like you, Sailor. You are big and strong. We are going to be great friends, are we not? (47-48)

The Sailor nearly responds to her flirtations, but he manages to control himself and tells her plainly again that he has no water. His rejection once more triggers racially-charged sentiments, and the woman insults him again: “Have I humbled myself before this black animal only to be spurned like a wench of the streets. It is too much! You lie, you dirty slave!” (48, my emphases). Nonetheless, as Pawley concludes, the true racial attitudes of the white characters arise when they lose their composure and succumb to anger and despair. These examples illustrate how whites have Othered and denigrated blacks by assigning them an animal-like identity. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon claims the Manicheism of colonialism “goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms” (42). Thinking of blacks as animals helps the white colonizers to deny them their humanity, attests to their inferiority to the civilized whites, and justifies (in their own minds at least) the whites’ reign over black populations around the world. *Thirst* can thus be considered the first milestone in O’Neill’s unprecedented social critique of whites’ racial attitudes as well as of racial relations in general.
Nonetheless, I am not arguing that O’Neill himself was free of racial stereotypes or misconceptions when he wrote *Thirst*. For instance, he attributes a commonly-accepted racial trait, superstition, to his first black character by having the Sailor sing a charm to keep the sharks at bay. Another more negative racial myth O’Neill promotes, like his two white characters in this play, is black animalism; his stage directions draw attention to the “round, animal eyes” of the West Indian (45-46). Carried even further, this thinking leads O’Neill to represent the Negro as the savage, and even worse, a cannibal by the end of the play. The Sailor rejoices in the Dancer’s natural death since it is their prospect of survival. He tells the Gentleman, “We will live now. (He takes his sailor’s knife from its sheath and sharpens it on the sole of his shoe. While he is doing this he sings—a happy negro melody that mocks the great silence)” (50). The Gentleman, in trying to stop him, becomes the object of the black man’s fury and is stabbed. They both fall in the water. Thomas Pawley interprets the ending negatively when he states, “Caribbean blacks are thus made to appear less civilized or more apt to revert to uncivilized behavior than whites. In moments of crisis the veneer of civilization disappears” (138). Yet Professor Pawley might be missing a crucial point about the whites’ own barbarity. Believing the black man has some water, the Gentleman and the Dancer consider killing him to ensure their own survival.

THE DANCER—Let us get the water away from him in some way. That is the only thing to do.

THE GENTLEMAN—He will not give it to us.

THE DANCER—We will steal it while he sleeps.
THE GENTLEMAN—I do not think he sleeps. I have never seen him sleep. Besides we should wake him.

THE DANCER—(violently) We will kill him then. He deserves to be killed.

THE GENTLEMAN—He is stronger than we are—and he has a knife. No, we cannot do that. I would willingly kill him. As you say, he deserves it. But I cannot even stand. I have no strength left. I have no weapons. He would laugh at me. (44)

Eugene O’Neill regards all of his characters in Thirst with equal unsympathy, an attitude bearing the imprint of the “horror” Clayton Hamilton noticed in O’Neill’s one-acts when he reviewed Thirst and Other One-Act Plays upon its publication: “This writer’s favorite mood is one of horror. He deals with grim and ghastly situations that would become intolerable if they were protracted beyond the limits of a single sudden act” (qtd. in Gelb 258).

Travis Bogard’s interpretation of the black character suggests the possibility of another reading, exposing yet another stereotype in O’Neill’s racial delineation in Thirst. According to Bogard, the Sailor “accepts his lot and is content to drift with the sea, taking what comes. He dies because the Gentleman attacks him and both fall overboard. Yet O’Neill suggests, without the accident, he might have survived through simple acquiescence to the power personified in sea and sun” (31). In other words, if things had gone as planned (he was probably expecting one of the whites to die sooner or later), the West Indian would have been the survivor, especially given his physical and mental
strength. However, he can survive by virtue of his primitivism; because he is less civilized than the whites. In other words, whereas Thomas Pawley sees in the Sailor a “savage,” Travis Bogard spots a “natural,” both corroborating the two primary black stereotypes John Cooley detects in white American literature in his book *Savages and Naturals*.

The production of O’Neill’s one-acts unearths another dramatic controversy: who was to play the black roles? In *Thirst*, produced by the Provincetown Players in 1916, O’Neill was cast as the mulatto sailor, and his next play with black characters, *The Moon of the Caribbees*, also had white actors in blackface. It was only with *The Dreamy Kid* in 1918 that black actors were first employed, finally a step in the right direction towards realistic portrayal on the American stage.

*The Moon of the Caribbees* (1917) is set off the coast of West Indies where the steamer *Glencairn* is anchored. The full moon and the “*melancholy negro chant*” define the romantic atmosphere of the play, soon to be contradicted by the characters and the action (527). *The Moon of the Caribbees*, although it includes several black characters, marginalizes their presence and subordinates them to the white characters. The central characters are the white sailors on board waiting for rum and the company of West Indian women, whose single function in the play is to serve the needs of these men. Marginalizing the West Indians thus implies marginalizing blackness in relation to whiteness. By focusing on the white sailors, O’Neill diminishes the black women to the status of objects for the white men.
The Moon of the Caribbees echoes certain racial elements first encountered in Thirst: the negro chant and the cannibalism of the West Indians. While the Negro chant is essential to the play, cannibalism is revealed to be a racial misconception among some whites:

BIG FRANK—They bury somebody—py chiminy Christmas, I tink so from way it sound.

YANK—What d’yu mean, bury? They don’t plant ’em down here, Dutchy. They eat ’em to save fun’ral expenses. I guess this guy went down the wrong way an’ they got indigestion.

COCKY—Indigestion! Ho yus, not ’arf! Down’t yer know as them blokes ’as two stomachs like a bleedin’ camel? (528, my emphasis)

Yank later corrects Cocky that “this is the West Indies ... There ain’t no cannibals here. They’re only common niggers” (529). However, their association of blackness with animalism remains unmodified and is indeed voiced again. For instance, were Bella, the leader of the West Indian women, to fail to bring the sailors their rum, Driscoll states he would punish her much like a slave-owner punished his slaves: “I’ll skin her black hoide off av her if she goes back on her worrd” (532). Cocky compares Bella to a monkey since he finds her ugly. “Looked like a bloody organ-grinder’s monkey, she did. Gawd, I couldn’t put up wiv the likes of ’er!” (532). When he finds out Bella overcharges for the rum, Cocky refers to her as “The bloody cow!” (533). Based on what we know so far of their attitudes towards black people, it should come as no surprise that the sailors will, in their dealings with them, display no respect for the native women. whom they perceive of
only as objects offering physical pleasure. Yet this is far from claiming that these are the views O’Neill himself owns up to; they are the racial myths of a group he knew well and represented here, the sailors.

The Moon of the Caribbees explores, as Thirst does, interracial sexuality and indicates how white society views the white man-black woman physical intimacy differently from that of the black man-white woman. Sexual relations between a white man and a black woman have been socially more acceptable since the times of slavery, when the black woman was considered the property of the master, and hence, his object. However, a black man’s sexuality threatens the white man’s other object: the white woman. Thirst and The Moon of the Caribbees read together expose white hypocrisy governing interracial sexuality.

When the black women finally appear on stage (the dramatist holds off their appearance until almost halfway through his one-act), Eugene O’Neill describes them in stereotypical terms: “All four are distinct negro types. They wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothes and have bright bandana handkerchiefs on their heads” (535). Notwithstanding these invented “black” attributes, Bella is very businesslike and sets down the rules to the white men regarding how the payments will be made and how the men should behave themselves. At that moment, Bella is in charge of the situation, but it won’t be long before she loses control as the men give in to the effects of the liquor. Pearl is the only other native woman to be allowed a somewhat distinct presence in the play, mainly in her partiality towards Smitty: “Ah likes you. Ah don’ like them other fellas. They act too rough. You ain’t rough. You’re a genelman. Ah knows. Ah can tell
a genelman fahs Ah can see "im" (539). Yet Smitty rejects her advances because in his opinion, Pearl has no significance and identity other than as a cheap prostitute. Realizing his scorn, Pearl insults him: “You swine! You can go to hell!!” (540) and a bit later “slaps him across the side of the face with all her might, and laughs viciously” (541).

Pearl’s fury results from being denigrated and treated in less than a chivalrous manner. Other than Bella and Pearl, the other black women on stage are insignificant and interchangeable as objects to satisfy the white men.

As Thirst ends with a fight between the Gentleman and the Sailor cut short by their demise, so does Moon reach an intense climax as a fight breaks out among the sailors, and Paddy is knifed. The black women, their rum and presence are held responsible for the ultimate chaos on the ship, and the Mate dismisses them, without any payment, for “smuggl[ing] rum on a ship and start[ing] a riot” (543). O’Neill in these early plays appears to be implying that the intermingling of the white and the black race cannot end but in chaos, a point the dramatist will revisit in his later work.

On the whole, The Moon of the Caribbees lacks a plot; instead it is an attempt at evocation of a certain mood. Normand Berlin calls the play “a dramatic poem of great simplicity” (47). O’Neill himself regarded it as his favorite one-act. According to C. W. E. Bigsby, this was so “because it seemed to him to break new theatrical ground. It was indeed conceived as a kind of tone poem, a play of shifting moods in which silence becomes unbearable because it forces the individual back upon himself” (50). However, The Moon of the Caribbees also deserves close attention in its analysis of an interracial dynamic with its focus on white men, their approach to and treatment of black women.
O’Neill commenced his investigations into black-white relations with the West Indian characters of *Thirst* and *The Moon of the Caribbees*. Both plays deny their black characters a focal, autonomous existence and thereby represent how blacks are considered to be merely objects of and for whites. In his succeeding plays, O’Neill could finally abandon this disturbingly parochial perspective and portray black characters in and for themselves rather than relegating them to whiteness, thus resulting in a fuller and better representation of them. His future black characters were African-Americans, with the exception of natives appearing one last time in *The Emperor Jones*.

*The Dreamy Kid* is O’Neill’s last one-act exploring black-white relations before he moved on to his extraordinary studies of the black psyche in *The Emperor Jones*, *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, and *The Iceman Cometh*. *The Dreamy Kid*, his first work to introduce a black American character, is also his only all-black play. Produced by the Provincetown Players in the fall of 1919, it was one of the first American plays to employ black actors. Gary Jay Williams explains that “director Ida Rauh recruited the black cast for O’Neill’s play from a Harlem stock company” (3). According to Williams, *The Dreamy Kid* was “performed again in 1924 as part of a double bill with *The Emperor Jones* for twenty-four performances” (4). O’Neill got the inspiration for the play from a story he heard from his friend Joe Smith about a black gangster named “Dreamy.”

Set in New York City (quite unlike the natural locales of *Thirst* and *The Moon of the Caribbees*), the play deals with the oncoming death of Mammy Saunders and the expected arrival of her grandson Abe. In Mammy Saunders, we discover a pious African-American woman about ninety years of age. “I’se gwine soon fum dis wicked yearth—
and may de Lawd have mercy on dis po' ole sinner" (676). Ceely Ann, her caretaker, is equally one-dimensional as a sympathetic character who does her best to soothe the dying woman. Both women, equally stereotypical, stand for strict morality. Ceely despises Abe’s girlfriend, the prostitute Irene who is described as “a young, good-looking negress, highly rouged and powdered, dressed in gaudy, cheap finery” (677). Faced with Irene, Ceely can only utter simplistic judgments: “(almost speechless with horrified indignation—breathing heavily) Yo’ bad ’oman! Git back ter yo’ bad-house whar yo’ b’longs!” (677). Irene, on the other hand, represents a good woman gone astray, the prostitute with a good heart. Unfortunately, O’Neill once again succumbs to several stereotypes of blackness in The Dreamy Kid. Both Ceely and Mammy embody the conventional “Mammy” figure (pious, asexual, and maternal) whereas Irene personifies Jezebel the seductress, Mammy’s antithesis in her sensuality. An inevitable antagonism ensues between Ceely Ann and Irene.

However, in Abe, O’Neill seeks and succeeds in a more realistic character portrayal. Abe has been nicknamed “Dreamy Kid” by his grandmother for his dreaming eyes as a child.

Down by de crik—under de ole willow—whar I uster take yo’—wid yo’
big eyes a-chasin’—de sun flitterin’ froo de grass—an’ out on de water. . .
An’ yo’ was always—a-lookin’—an’ a-thinkin’ ter yo’se’f—an’ yo’ big
eyes jest a-dreamin’ an’ a-dreamin’—an’ dat’s w’en I gives yo’ dat
nickname—Dreamy—Dreamy—. (690)
His dreamy eyes have since then been transformed into cruel ones by the life he has led:

“He is a well-built, good looking young negro, light in color. His eyes are shifty and hard, their expression one of tough, scornful defiance. His mouth is cruel and perpetually drawn back at the corner into a snarl” (680). A gangster now, he has killed a white man in self-defense. His manner and speech are marked by fierceness, cruelty, and scorn. At first, he is unwilling to stay with his dying grandmother. “Ain’t no us’en me stayin’ here when dey’ll likely come lookin’ for me. I’m gwine out where I gotta chance ter make my git-away. De boys is all fixin’ it up for me. (his hand on the doorknob) When Mammy wakes, you tell her I couldn’t wait, you hear?” (681). The impetus behind his decision not to leave is his superstition. He believes that unless he has his grandmother’s blessing, he will have no luck for the rest of his life, and therefore, he stays.

In the course of the play, Dreamy shuffles identities, and his demeanor changes from one moment to the next. His attitude with Irene is, for example, aggressive and rough. He threatens to hit her for exposing him to danger by visiting him in Mammy’s house, which could signal his whereabouts to the police. At the same time, he wants to protect her and persuades her to leave so she would not get hurt in case of a police ambush. Moreover, even though he initially wants to desert Mammy in her deathbed, Abe also clearly respects and loves her. Gary Jay Williams points out that “Dreamy is the once innocent child of summer who is now corrupted by life, a black dead-end kid, trapped and cynical. O’Neill attempts to make him appealing, showing the boy beneath the arrogance and acquired hardness” (4). The Dreamy Kid is an attempt, albeit not a
is striking. The play’s emotional center is on the black characters and their dilemmas, and for the first time, they do not exist as details in a white universe. For instance, in *Thirst*, the black Sailor happened to be on the same raft as the white characters but was segregated from them. In *The Moon of the Caribbees*, the black women are invited to the world of whites (the ship) and have to leave at the order of the white Mate. Yet the surprising reversal in *The Dreamy Kid* gives the limelight to the black characters. Nonetheless, the off-stage white characters, for example, the white man Abe has killed and the police who are closing in on him, have a major presence even in their absence. Abe is at odds with white American society and cannot coexist with it. The invisible whites have made him who he is but now want to punish him for the consequences. Dreamy’s social entrapment has now become physical, too, as he cannot leave Mammy’s house. He has no choice left but to fight white America and lose in the end.

Critics have been hesitant to praise *The Dreamy Kid* for several reasons. According to Edward Shaughnessy, it “is dissatisfying both thematically . . . and [in] its depiction of Black character. Its only saving grace is that these Black characters are not in existence merely to provide comic decoration, as in the period’s popular vaudeville and minstrel shows” (88). But Mr. Shaughnessy does not realize what the play has accomplished: a dramatic focus on the tragic lives of black Americans. Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer argue there is nothing “that marks the play as distinctively ‘black.’ It could be done equally well with any ethnic group or, indeed, with whites” (53). While Miller and Frazer point out the tragic capacity of *The Dreamy Kid*, they do not recognize that that tragedy arises out of Abe Saunders’s black identity. *The Dreamy Kid* would not
have been the same play if Abe had been a member of another ethnic group, and it would have been much like *The Hairy Ape* if the central character had been white. O'Neill has engaged stereotypes in his delineation of blackness in this play, too, mainly in his representation of the black family and their interactions with each other; his work, nonetheless, is groundbreaking in how it portrays the interracial conflict in America.

I fully agree with Roger Oliver, who claims that "O'Neill's first three plays employing black figures . . . can be considered as secondary works, written in preparation for the more significant plays that follow" (56). They offer to theatre audiences savages, naturals, minor characters hiding behind black skins. In spite of these shortcomings, they bring to the foreground essential racial concerns by highlighting whites' attitudes towards and poor treatment of blacks. Thus, they also carry in them the seeds of the racial themes O'Neill would later delve into more successfully, such as interracial sexuality and the anarchic nature of interracial contact. However, as O'Neill refused to take seriously most of these early plays later in his life, we should approach them only as the flawed work of an ambitious writer at the outset of a very promising career.
CHAPTER III

THE EMPEROR JONES

The precursory shift in Eugene O’Neill’s black portraiture occurred in 1918 with *The Dreamy Kid* as he began to focus on black characters who had lives and voices separate from those of his white characters. These African-Americans began to dictate the plot and the content of the play, thereby signifying a crucial modification in the dramatist’s attitude. Building upon the foundation of *The Dreamy Kid*, *The Emperor Jones* (1920) presented American audiences with a strong, unconventional, and controversial black character, which also resulted in the fame of Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson as dazzling actors. Although the play has ushered in a new phase on the American stage, *The Emperor Jones* has met, since its debut, both open hostility (usually from African-American scholars) and lavish praise (usually from Euro-American critics) for the depiction of its protagonist, Brutus Jones. One explanation for the dispute lies in O’Neill’s complex vision in this work; the main character and the play itself are so multi-layered that clashing interpretations can comfortably coexist. Among the many inspirations for *The Emperor Jones*, we can count Toussaint L’Ouverture and Vilbrun Guillaume Sam of Haiti, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Strindberg, Jung, Jack London, Marcus Garvey, and O’Neill’s personal experiences in the rain forests of Honduras.
Brutus Jones, a black American from Harlem, is a self-proclaimed Emperor on a small island in the West Indies where the play is set. In America, he has first killed a black man, Jeff, for cheating at craps, and later in prison, he has killed the white guard, broken out of prison and fled the United States. On this West Indian island, he works for a white Cockney trader, Smithers, and later promotes himself to the position of Emperor by duping the natives into believing that he is more or less invincible and can only be destroyed with a silver bullet, a metal the West Indians do not possess. "And dere all dem fool bush niggers was kneelin' down and bumpin' their heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o' de Bible. Oh Lawd, from dat time on I has them all eatin' out of my hand. I cracks de whip and dey jumps through" (1036). Meanwhile, Jones knows that his reign as Emperor is limited and is soon coming to an end.

At the outset of *The Emperor Jones*, it is this image, one of a formidable ruler, that we receive of Brutus Jones. His maid, the old native woman, begs Smithers in "frantic terror" "No tell him! No tell him, Mister!," the big secret being that Jones's subjects have deserted him (1032). The woman is clearly both terrified of the Emperor and is in awe of the "Great Father," as she calls him (1032). However, her ostensible respect for the Emperor clashes with Smithers's irreverence for Jones when Smithers discovers the natives are planning a revolution to depose their Emperor: "Serve 'im right! Puttin' on airs, the stinkin' nigger! 'Is Majesty! Gawd blamey!" (1033). Smithers, the only white man on this West Indian island and in the play, resents Brutus Jones's transgression of his social status as a black man by seizing power. O'Neill thus begins his fascinating analysis of the oppressed black psyche in relation to whiteness, which he
would pursue further in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1923) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939). All three of these plays explore the viability of racial integration and the consequences of assimilation.

Before I offer a close reading of the protagonist, another character deserves some attention. Smithers, the embodiment of whiteness in this play, is the very first character to appear on stage, and the playwright describes his expression as being “one of unscrupulous meanness, cowardly and dangerous” (1031). He possesses no admirable traits and remains throughout the play a despicable character. While O’Neill’s lack of regard for his character may in part be understood as the result of O’Neill’s cultural bias as an Irish-American towards the English, it marks nonetheless an unusual authorial decision by a white writer to represent his own racial group. His insolence towards Jones derives from a racist outlook on life, which carries through to his dealings with the natives. For example, he readily accuses the fearful old woman of having stolen something, and when she denies the charge, calls her “Bloody liar!” (1032). Yet another one of his accusations, “You blacks are up to some devilment,” reveals how he has intellectually distanced himself from the black population of the island (1032). “You blacks” signals the arbitrary distinction between “us whites” and “you blacks,” a superb example of the Othering mechanism. In his blatant racism, he dismisses the old woman as “yer black cow,” a colonialist epithet for dehumanized black subjects. It is mainly on these elements of racial loathing that Smithers’s disgust with Brutus Jones is built, whereas he also fears him because of the latter’s physical strength and authority.
Opposed to this repugnant emblem of whiteness, Emperor Jones provides a welcome relief despite his many flaws. In his often-detailed stage directions, O'Neill emphasizes that Jones has "an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect," and respect he inspires because of his grandeur on stage (1033). The most innovative and puzzling element in O'Neill's depiction of this black character is the dual role Jones occupies: the colonized in America and the imperialist in the West Indies. O'Neill successfully and slowly reveals, decades prior to Frantz Fanon's theories on the effects of colonization on the colonizer and the colonized, how Jones's identity has been forged by this binary existence: "From stowaway to Emperor in two years! Dat's goin' some!" (1035). Having suffered at the hands of his white oppressors in the United States, Jones excels by learning the art of government from them. From the site of the colonized, Jones has proceeded to that of the colonizer as he masters the power game of whites. Jones owes his ascendancy over his black subjects to the white man's strategies. The black man whose ancestors were the slaves of white men now takes advantage of his own kind, "savages" living on this island in the West Indies.

Both Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi have convincingly shown in their work that the colonized group, constantly undermined by their oppressor with an ill-supported assertion of their inferiority, seek self-esteem by identifying themselves with their "superiors," those guilty of instilling in them this inferiority complex in the first place. Because no other solution is left it, the racialized social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialize itself. The "inferior race"
denies itself as a different race. It shares with the "superior race" the convictions, doctrines, and other attitudes concerning it.

Having witnessed the liquidation of its systems of reference, the collapse of its cultural patterns, the native can only recognize with the occupant that "God is not on his side." The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing.

This event, which is commonly designated as alienation, is naturally very important. It is found in the official texts under the name of assimilation. (Fanon, *African Revolution* 38)

Fanon’s theory of assimilation applies to Brutus Jones to a considerable extent. Jones is deracialized only in so far as the colonial values and strategies he has emulated and the colonial role he has appropriated. He is also alienated from his own racial group in that he has chosen to exploit them. However, Jones’s alienation is not as devastating as Jim Harris’s or Joe Mott’s because he does not go so far as to deny his blackness. Therefore, the white mask Brutus Jones wears is not a perfect fit.

*The Emperor Jones* also sheds light on colonial strategies. Jones’s conversation with Smithers in Scene 1 is revealing in many respects, because the two men, knowing each other’s schemes, can be open and honest with each other in a way they can’t be with the natives. In this scene, Jones explains to the Cockney trader, for instance, that he has put on a show of royalty for the natives only to pull the wool over their eyes in order to
attain his own goals: “De fuss and glory part of it, dat’s only to turn de heads o’ de low-
flung, bush niggers dat’s here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it
to ’em an’ I gits de money” (1035). Usually, colonizers take advantage of natives also by
burdening them with taxes, something Jones has already done, according to Smithers:
“Look at the taxes you’ve put on ’em! Blimey! You’ve squeezed ’em dry!” (1035).
Brutus Jones has also studied the natives’ language so as to be able to exploit them even
better. “And ain’t I got to learn deir lingo and teach some of dem English befo’ I kin talk
to ’em? Ain’t dat wuk?” (1036). Linguistic knowledge for Jones is merely an implement
for power, and he uses it to further his colonial interests. Finally, O’Neill comments on
the role religion plays in colonialism. When Smithers blames Jones for adopting the
natives’ religion and forsaking Christianity, Jones explains that is part of his game:

SMITHERS—Ho! You ’aven’t give much ’eed to your Baptist Church
since you been down ’ere! I’ve ’eard myself you ’ad turned yer coat an’
was takin’ up with their blarsted witchdoctors, or whatever the ’ell yer
calls the swine.
JONES—(vehemently) I pretends to! Sho’ I pretends! Dat’s part o’ my
game from de fust. If I finds out dem niggers believes dat black is white,
den I yells it out louder ’n deir loudest. It don’t git rae nothin’ to do
missionary work for de Baptist Church. I’se after de coin, an’ I lays my
Jesus on de shelf for de time bein’. (1042)

O’Neill thus exposes not only Jones’s scheme but also the colonial scheme in general.
Jones’s success is built on these tactics, but it does not come without a certain loss, either.
As Peter Saiz points out, Jones’s “tragedy lies in his succumbing to recreating the oppression of the Whites on his own people. Jones, who has the potential to be a liberator, is, after all, just another enslaver” (36). Jones has sold his soul for money, and rather than decolonizing himself or others, he colonizes an innocent group of people and is himself locked into a cruel role.

In order to function truly and successfully as a colonizer, Jones has to internalize the Manichean thinking colonization dictates. Jones’s contact with the white culture has taught him to denigrate blackness. Consequently, the Emperor has no respect for the natives of the island over which he rules. His complacency in having taken advantage of the “stupidity” of the “bush niggers,” whom he also describes as “low-flung” and “trash,” discloses his own ingestion of Euro-American values. Indeed, Jones’s approach to the West Indies, unfortunately, replicates the Western attitude to Africa Fanon discusses in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals” (211). Jones, likewise, wholeheartedly believes in his own myth that the natives are his inferiors and, therefore, deserve to be poorly treated. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi explains very well why the colonizer who accepts his role has to construct and rely on such myths:

> With all his power he must disown the colonized while their existence is indispensable to his own. . . . Having become aware of the unjust relationship which ties him to the colonized, he must continually attempt
to absolve himself. He never forgets to make a public show of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great. At the same time his privileges arise just as much from his glory as from degrading the colonized. He will persist in degrading them, using the darkest colors to depict them. (54)

As a colonizer, in order to survive and succeed in this capacity, Brutus Jones has to separate himself from his subjects. It is no wonder, then, that Jones downplays a possible racial identification with the natives and instead highlights his difference from them. He tells Smithers, “Think dese ign’rent bush niggers dat ain’t got brains enuff to know deir own names even can catch Brutus Jones?” (1040). Jones sees as the basis of his superiority to the natives his civilized nature and his intellect: “Is you civilized, or is you like dese ign’rent black niggers heah?” (1049). Brutus Jones believes he has the right to reign over the natives because he himself has learned to improve on his blackness by identifying himself with whiteness and the civilization it signifies. O’Neill’s apprehensions about colonialism differ markedly from other similar literary accounts since his protagonist is black rather than the more common one of the white colonizer. O’Neill thus also shows at work the mind of a racist black man who despises the “blackness” of his colonial subjects: hence unwittingly himself.

Jones personifies Eugene O’Neill’s critique of both colonization and capitalism. More specifically, Edwin Engel states that “Jones is the embodiment of white American materialism” (50).
Ain't I de Emperor? De laws don't go for him... Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you croaks. (reminiscently) If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years. (1035)

In his cynical advice to Smithers, Jones reveals how his role models have been the "white quality" he met during his days as a Pullman porter in the United States. He has learned the rules of the game from those higher on the social ladder of America: white businessmen. While Jones willingly submits to the authority of these "quality" white men, he scorns Smithers and has no qualms about putting him in his place: "Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I'm boss heah now, is you fergettin'?" (1034). Thomas Pawley explains Jones's contempt for Smithers as a direct result of his assimilation of white American middle-class values by whose standards Smithers is "trash" (144).

Of course, Jones has successfully emulated white values and practices because of his smartness and cunning, two traits Eugene O'Neill emphasizes in his protagonist from the start: "His eyes are alive with a keen, cunning intelligence. In manner he is shrewd, suspicious, evasive" (1033). Jones's cunning intelligence is proven, first and foremost, by his self-generated myth of the silver bullet, the only means, he insists, to kill him. Jones owes his empire to this myth which has frightened the natives into complying with
his wishes. When Smithers argues it was luck that secured Jones’s conquest, the
Emperor responds, “I got brains and I uses ’em quick. Dat ain’t luck” (1036). His
vigilance in anticipation of the natives’ revolution also proves that he can usually predict
human behavior and prepares himself for the consequences well in advance:

   Look-a-heah, white man! Does you think I’se a natural bo’n fool? Give
   me credit fo’ havin’ some sense, fo’ Lawd’s sake! Don’t you s’pose I’se
   looked ahead and made sho’ of all de chances? I’se gone out in dat big
   forest, pretendin’ to hunt, so many times dat I knows it high an’ low like a
   book. (1040)

When he realizes, though, that he has not foreseen the impending revolution, he admits,
“I overplays my hand dis once!” (1039).

At the end of Scene I, Brutus Jones leaves his palace to escape to safety.
However, the journey he undertakes, while appearing on the surface to be to the other
side of the island, is psychological as well as literal: unknowingly, Jones goes in pursuit
of his racial self and his identity. While not denying his blackness, by adopting the white
way for social success and material gain, he has forsaken his black identity and assumed
instead a white mask, representative of the immoral, exploitative, sly side of whiteness.
Jones’s appropriation of the colonizer role, a role usually associated with whiteness,
requires him to abandon his racial identity and feign to be something he is not, a strategy
that has served him well thus far. One of the prominent symbols in the play, the overt
color contrast of Jones’s white palace and the darkness of the forest, corresponds to the
tension between these two identities: his white mask and his black skin underneath.
Brutus Jones, hoping for social accomplishment, has rejected his blackness in favor of whiteness, but his journey now demands of him to face up to his betrayal. Another symbol for Brutus's transformation is his dressing down and out of his white clothes of regalia in the dark forest, as the play progresses: "Look at you now. Emperor, you're gittin' mighty low!" (1052). From the very start, Jones resists and consequently fails at this psychic journey towards the Self. The black Little Formless Fears in Scene 2 are, for example, his own fears, and when he dispels them with a gunshot, he thinks they were only "little wild pigs" (1046). Jones's self-ignorance is highlighted several other times in the play. In fact, in the following scenes Jones confronts, unsuccessfully, people and events from his own past and that of his black ancestors: his gambling partner Jeff, the chain gang, the auction block, the Middle Passage, and the Congo witch-doctor and the Crocodile God. *The Emperor Jones*, beginning with Scene 3, is the story of Jones's hounding not by the natives but by his private and racial Self. I agree with Doris Falk who says, "Jones's hopeless flight through the forest is not from the natives at all, but from himself..." (67).

One of the main attractions and pioneering qualities of *The Emperor Jones* lies in its expressionistic format; Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer, for example, have labeled it "the first important American expressionistic play" (55). Brutus Jones's journey through the forest has often been read by critics as a psychological journey occurring in the protagonist's mind. Expressionism, born in Europe, was a nonrealistic movement concerned with arriving at new and better means of representing the inner life of humans. It emphasized emotions and thoughts and sought alternative ways of bringing to life such
experiences on stage by manipulating the actor’s movement, lighting, props, etc. Given that *The Emperor Jones* is one of the ultimate American examples of dramatic expressionism, the scenes portraying Jones in the forest are not realistic, but symbolic of the events and persons from his past that he remembers and has to confront. The West Indian jungle he steps into is the jungle of his mind and of his memories. As a result, Jones’s attempt to deal with the “ha’nts” from his past with real bullets becomes an ironic act doomed to failure.

Gabriele Poole contends in her article “‘Blarsted Niggers!’: *The Emperor Jones* and Modernism’s Encounter with Africa” that the white world of the play is “governed by rationality, individualism and the ability to exert physical violence,” and the black one by “‘superstitions,’ irrationality, dreaming and the unconscious” (26). If we postulate this traditional dichotomy of white rationality and black superstition, Jones, faced with the “ha’nts” in the forest, clearly approaches his experiences with white rationality, thus further demonstrating the extent of his assimilation. For instance, he explains the visions he sees as the effect of his hunger. Consequently, Gabriele Poole argues that Jones fails at his journey because he is no longer equipped to contend with his blackness: “the black world of the forest cannot be mapped out and fixed on a page since it is not ordered according to the rational rules that Jones is familiar with” (26). The Emperor has been so removed from his racial identity that he cannot comprehend, let alone deal with, his emerging black unconscious.

Jones’s retrogression into his racial past scene after scene has unearthed heated debates among O’Neill scholars, many of whom interpret these scenes as atavistic and,
therefore, derogatory. It is undeniable that O'Neil associates blackness, at least on some level, with the jungle and witch-doctors and imposes on his protagonist the racial journey Jones would rather not carry out. Jones appears trapped in the blackness of the jungle, a space he enters on his own initiative but with different expectations. O’Neill, on the other hand, asks of him that he face his own truth. Jones is thus required to undergo a transforming experience (recognize and maybe return to his so-called “black” and primitive roots represented in the end by the witch-doctor and the African Crocodile God rather than feign “whiteness”) and fails at it.

However, these scenes are also noteworthy in underscoring the oppression African-Americans have suffered at the hands of Euro-Americans, thus, rendering the colonizer Brutus Jones a more sympathetic character. Especially the scenes at the auction block and in the slave ship reveal, as Barrett Clark calls it, “a kind of unfolding, in reverse order, of the tragical epic of the American negro” (104). To the auctioneer Jones cries, “And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I’se a free nigger, damn yo’ souls!” (1054). In the slave ship, Jones joins in with the other slaves, and “His voice reaches the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation” (1056). John Orr maintains the same opinion:

The murder of his gambling partner, his escape from a chain gang, the auction of slaves, and finally the witch-doctor and the crocodile-God, represent a backward chronological descent into the horror of suffering and of origin. It is a mimed wordless history which, specific to the descendants of black slaves, has a remarkable universality. The
nightmares actually redeem Jones as he moves inexorably towards his tragic doom, for they remind us what, in his wish for absolute power, he has tried to escape from. (172)

What scholars and critics of O'Neill refuse to see is that most of these “nightmares” hint at the crimes of whites. O'Neill seems more intent in this play on bringing to his audience’s attention how whites have abused and exploited blacks rather than criticizing Jones for becoming like one of his oppressors. In short, O'Neill condemns whiteness, not blackness.

I have been emphasizing from the start that Jones fails at his psychological quest. Ruby Cohn’s argument that “The play is a chronicle of Brutus Jones’ progress from a false white surface to his authentic black roots” is invalid due to the lack of progress in the end (13). By the time he is killed by the natives, Jones has attained neither self-understanding nor a different identity. For instance, he cannot recognize his fears shaping up in front of him as the “Little Formless Fears” in Scene 2 and calls out to them “What’s dat? Who’s dar? What is you?” and finally shoots at them while trying to reassure himself that “Dey was only little animals—little wild pigs, I reckon” (1046). When in Scene 3, he sees Jeff, his gambling partner whom he has killed, he shoots at him again, determined to get rid of his “ha’nt.” His second victim in the United States, the white prison guard, appears in Scene 4, and Jones takes aim at him, too, saying, “I kills you, you white debil, if it’s de last thing I evah does! Ghost or debil, I kill you again!” (1051). In the next scene, Jones is forced to stand at the auction block while white Southerners bid on him in mime:
Jones has been seized by the courage of desperation. He dares to look down and around him. Over his face abject terror gives way to mystification, to gradual realization—stutteringly)

What you all doin’, white folks? What’s all dis? What you all lookin’ at me fo’? What you doin’ wid me, anyhow? (1053)

As he finally ascertains the auction block, he uses his last bullet but one and ends the fearful scene and recollection. Regressing further in time, the following scene places Brutus Jones at the Middle Passage with other African slaves. “Jones starts, looks up, sees the figures, and throws himself down again to shut out the sight” (1055). But he soon joins his fellowmen in a wail of sorrow; when the images disappear on their own (the first time Jones does not have to seek refuge in his gun), he runs off once more (1056). The last scene where he is seen alive implies an African space and ritual. Jones looks around him and

passes his hand over his head with a vague gesture of puzzled bewilderment. Then, as if in obedience to some obscure impulse, he sinks into a kneeling, devotional posture before the altar. Then he seems to come to himself partly, to have an uncertain realization of what he is doing, for he straightens up and stares about him horrifiedly. (1057)

Although calling upon Christ, Jones yields to the witch-doctor and participates in his ritualistic dance, but the threat of being sacrificed to the Crocodile God sparks the survival instinct in Jones again, and he fires at the African God with his silver bullet. For
the most part, then, Jones can either not recognize, at least easily, these representative scenes from his personal and collective past, or when he does, he usually dissociates himself from them by means of his gun, the symbol of the West’s violent physical intervention. But by the end, he is a lost man (both physically and mentally) since he cannot successfully deal with his past and can attain neither self-knowledge nor enlightenment.

This ending to the play with Jones’s inability to return to his “racial roots” should undermine any criticism regarding his atavism. O’Neill does place his protagonist in these atavistic scenes, but if atavism requires that Jones, as a member of his race, has to “revert to the features and life styles of their[his] ancestors,” in the words of John Cooley, the fact that he does not should preclude us from judging him as primitive or atavistic (“Harlem Renaissance” 78). Brutus Jones’s response to being situated in primitivistic scenes is one of confusion and defiance as he aims to put an end to them with the bullets of the white civilization he has adopted.

Because of its complexity and controversial nature, The Emperor Jones has been branded nothing short of a racist play. J. L. Styan, for example, asserts, “the play is rarely played [today] because its stereotype of the Negro is unacceptable” (103). Travis Bogard shares the same opinion: “today, the ethnic and social implications of the play can no longer command respectful attention” (139). In his book Savages and Naturals, when John Cooley distinguishes between these two trends in primitivistic black portraiture, he claims that The Emperor Jones belongs in the second category, the “savage” portrayals. Cooley maintains, for instance, that the name of the protagonist—Brutus—implies the
brute nature of the hero. Also citing Langston Hughes’ account of the black audiences’
reaction to the play in Harlem, Cooley argues that the fact that Harlem audiences “howled
with laughter” at the protagonist proves that the black audiences
knew that the jungle had no connection with their lives, and they
recognized the stereotypes O’Neill was using. We share their amusement
and annoyance. Their response is profoundly revealing, for it hints at how
often whites have written to satisfy their own needs and at how they have
stereotyped and distorted black life in doing so. (“Harlem Renaissance”
81-82)

Richard Long reminds us as well that the writers writing about blacks during the Harlem
Renaissance were aiming at a white audience (48). The primitivistic Negro stereotype,
which Amritjit Singh claims was strengthened by the misinterpretation of Freud’s
theories in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, was popular with this audience. Richard
Delgado and Jean Stefancic remark that even though their intentions might not have been
objectionable, the Harlem Renaissance artists “perpetuated views of African-Americans
as the exotic other” (172). Although I concede that O’Neill’s portraits of West Indians
are primitivistic, in Jones that primitivism recedes (one may argue, with some validity,
that O’Neill expects Jones to revert to primitivism). Rather than an exotic Other, Jones is
all too human in his ambition, in his desire to transcend the menial status allowed him by
the American society.

The natives, on the other hand, since they remain in the background, cannot hold
up to any in-depth scrutiny for the most part. The natives don’t make an appearance until
the final scene of the play, with the one exception of Jones's maid who stands primarily for the fearful colonized subject. It is true that in Lem, the leader of the revolution, and his followers, we discover the primitive African: "Lem is a heavy-set, ape-faced old savage of the extreme African type, dressed only in a loin cloth. . . . His soldiers are in different degrees of rag-concealed nakedness" (1060). These characters' single connection to the "civilized" world is the guns they are carrying, and their primitiveness is also made more deliberate by their pidgin English. Regrettably, O'Neill has not made much, if any, progress in his (mis)understanding of West Indians, who are as stereotypical as they were in his earlier plays. The same is equally true of Africans; O'Neill's witch-doctor, whose body is painted, adorned with antelope horns, an animal fur, glass beads, and much more, is as unreal and exotic as an African Other might be. In comparison, O'Neill's African-American characters are more realistic.

One major accomplishment of the Irish-American writer in these portraits, despite these shortcomings, is his depiction of the West Indians as less-than-happy colonized natives who finally determine to oust their emperor. Of course, such representation plays an integral role in O'Neill's overt criticism of Western imperialism in this play. John Cooley argues, however, that the criticism is not focused on either capitalism or colonialism but on aspiring blacks (Savages 71-72).

Even though O'Neill establishes Jones as an individual with a particular past and a distinct personality, the tone of his portrait is pejorative. The Emperor Jones is more clown than hero, ultimately a laughable pretender to be pitied and dismissed. O'Neill's bias reveals itself as the play
progresses, presenting the defeat not of white colonialism and free enterprise, as some critics would have it, but of an "uppity" black man who presumed to model himself after successful white exploiters. The revenge of the play is complete as Jones reverts to a savage and is defeated, then killed by his own people. ("Harlem Renaissance" 77)

Cooley bases his theory in part on O'Neill's initial description of Jones: "Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off" (1033). This passage commenting on Jones's regalia is not racially coded; O'Neill never makes any connections between Jones's "ridiculousness" and his skin color. More than likely, he would have commented in similar terms on a white character dressed alike since his target is imperialism and whoever exercises it, not aspiring blacks. Moreover, O'Neill states that Jones inspires awe and respect among the other characters and manages to carry off the "ridiculousness" of imperialism's manifestation and goals. Last but not least, the view that Jones is an "uppity black man" is only voiced in the play by Smithers, a clearly repulsive character, and therefore, has little if any validity. Jones is no clown even if he is no hero either. He is, most of all, a tragic character. He contends with the forces in his life in the only way he knows, and the white way, because it is wrong, brings about his fall.

In addition to the essential questions it raises about racial relations and colonialism, The Emperor Jones is also significant in black theatre history. As John Cooley himself admits, The Emperor Jones was a "'breakthrough' play in American theater" because it was "the first American play to employ black actors and develop a
major black portrait” (“Harlem Renaissance” 73). The presence of a black protagonist offered the first major role to be played by an African-American actor and consequently furthered the dramatic careers of both Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson. Richard Long underlines the importance of the role for African-American actors at the time and for American drama in general:

the role is virtually a monologue. The performance requires a tour de force of the actor, serving to indicate the high caliber of black dramatic talent. Secondly Brutus Jones is a highly complex character capable of considerable introspection, and this seemed to be an improvement on the black-as-buffoon. (44)

Roger Oliver points to the positive aspects of O’Neill’s black protagonist by noting how until the end “Brutus Jones maintains his dignity and strength as the first great black American dramatic character” (58).

Even eight decades after its premiere, The Emperor Jones remains, in some ways, the most controversial and complicated play about blackness in the O’Neill canon. Because of these qualities, it has perplexed scholars who endeavor to create coherent interpretations of its disparate elements. Essentially, we need to remember that the play is a landmark in the playwright’s slow but steady maturation towards understanding blackness or rather African-Americans. His delineation of the African-American psyche, experience, and fate evolved over time, leaving a legacy of more realistic, sympathetic, and tragic black figures to American theatre. The Emperor Jones is a milestone American play in its harsh indictment of whiteness and of the abuse whites inflict on non-
whites for materialistic gain: empires, gold, land, and money. Jones is a tragic character not only because he has been personally persecuted by whites as a black man, or because he dies having failed at self-knowledge, but also because he has chosen to become a puppet in the hands of the white socioeconomic structure, which has exploited him and his own people in the past. Hoping to prevail over his tragic destiny, he assimilates and inflicts it on others like him, the West Indians. Because he has been harmed by whiteness, he adopts a white mask and strives to “pass” among other blacks, but thus trapped in a vicious circle, he ends up promoting, rather than terminating, the very white heritage which has destroyed him.
CHAPTER IV

ALL GOD'S CHILLUN GOT WINGS

All God's Chillun Got Wings (1923) owes its dramatic fame mostly to the controversy surrounding its premiere. The rumor that a black man was to kiss the hand of a white woman on stage caused an uproar among the predominantly white audiences at the time. Virginia Floyd relates the history of such strong reaction to Eugene O'Neill and his new work: “A second Ku Klux Klan had formed after World War I; by the mid-twenties it had spread throughout the North as well as the South. During the rehearsal period for the play, the Klan, numbering four to five million members, and other racist groups threatened the use of violence to halt the production” (New Assessment 257).

Amid this commotion, the play itself was overlooked.

O'Neill began conceptualizing All God's Chillun Got Wings in 1922 when he wrote in his notebook, “Play of Johnny T.—negro who married white woman—base play on his experience as I have seen it intimately—but no reproduction, see it only as man’s” (Floyd, O’Neill at Work 53). Louis Sheaffer sees his father James O'Neill’s “fondness for quoting Othello” as “among the unconscious factors behind the writing of’’ the play (58). However, probably owing to the hostile response to his play, O'Neill later decided to downplay the significance of the racial element: “The play itself, as anyone who has read it with intelligence knows, is never a ‘race problem’ play. Its intention is confined to
portraying the special lives of individual human beings. It is primarily a study of two principal characters, and their tragic struggle for happiness” (qtd. in Gelb 550).

Despite O’Neill’s insistence that All God’s Chillun is not racially-coded, the play features a black protagonist who seeks to fulfill his desire to belong in white society by marrying a white woman and attempting to become a member of the bar. All God’s Chillun Got Wings was a milestone both for the playwright’s career and for American theatre history. O’Neill manages, for the most part, to shun stereotypes in his black representations in this piece, but more importantly, the play provides a fresh and truthful look at interracial relations in America and vividly portrays the anguish of assimilation and integration. Jim Harris, the successor to Brutus Jones, is O’Neill’s second study of a black man adopting a white mask in his hope to “pass.”

The opening stage directions of All God’s Chillun Got Wings prepare the audience for the segregation of the black and the white race in the United States. “In the street leading left, the faces are all white; in the street leading right, all black” (279). Eugene O’Neill takes pains to represent the two races equally on stage so that in the first scene of Act 1, we have eight children, four boys and four girls. “Two of each sex are white, two black” (279). Although O’Neill balances the two groups, he still cannot refrain from echoing certain racial stereotypes: “the Negroes” are “frankly participants in the spirit of Spring” whereas whites are “laughing constrainedly, awkward in natural emotion. . . . It expresses the difference in race” (279). While blacks are believed to partake in the Dionysian spirit of the Spring with their reveling, fun-loving nature, whites are considered automatons, people unable to express or experience emotions. O’Neill thus
sets the public background for the private conflicts of Ella and Jim and questions the possibility of assimilation or acceptance of interracial love in a society so acutely segregated.

Scene 1 of Act 1 establishes the racial attitudes of the children to contrast them later with those of adults. Clearly, the seeds of racial thinking have been planted in the children. They refer to Jim as “nigger,” “Crow,” “—or Chocolate—or Smoke” (281). Yet except for these racial epithets, the children appear free of racism, an evil that will flower in them later in life. They all get along other than during their childish skirmishes.

Ella, too, suffers from being called names. While she considers her nickname, “Painty Face,” an insult, Jim sees behind it a symbol of beauty: “Red ’n’ white. It’s purty . . . . It’s—outa sight!” (281). As the critic Susan Tuck has noticed, Jim, from his childhood on, suffers from “white envy,” an underlying reason for his adoration of Ella because she, with her “red ’n’ white” face, represents the beauty of the white race out of Jim’s reach (51). He admits, “You know what, Ella? Since I been tuckin’ yo’ books to school and back, I been drinkin’ lots o’ chalk ’n’ water three times a day. Dat Tom, de barber, he tole me dat make me white, if I drink enough. (pleadingly) Does I look whiter?” (281). As the play progresses, Jim’s dedication to Ella and her “whiteness” is accentuated.

The most satisfactory explanation for Jim’s “white envy” comes from scholars like Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon who maintain that the colonized initially react to the colonization process by rejecting themselves and their culture, both of which have been debased by the colonizer in their objective of establishing their superiority and
authority in relation to their subjects: “The first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model [the colonizer] and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him” (Memmi 120). The oppressed group surmise that if only they turn their back on their given identity, then they can be bestowed their humanity. “The first attempt of the colonized is to change his condition by changing his skin. . . . [The colonizer] suffers from none of his deficiencies, has all rights, enjoys every possession and benefits from every prestige” (Memmi 120). In their “hopeless hope” to belong, the colonized lose themselves in the image of their oppressors. Jim Harris is the embodiment of such individuals alienated from their own cultural and racial identity who trust they will be esteemed when and only if they fashion themselves after the white man.

Jim’s “white envy” can be satisfied in a number of ways. The first one is by winning Ella’s heart and hand. Interracial marriage, according to Albert Memmi, is “the extreme expression” of assimilation (121). Frantz Fanon, likewise, points out how a white woman’s love can bleach a black man “white”:

By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like white man.

I am a white man. . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.

When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine. (Black Skin 63)

Jim’s self-loathing is so overwhelming that by marrying Ella, a white woman, he assumes he will be deracialized and elevated. Consequently, his urge to be associated with
whiteness lies at the basis of Jim’s servile behavior towards her. For example, the fact that Ella likes him “better than anyone else in the world” is “more than enough, more than I [Jim] ever hoped for” (293-94). While Jim loves Ella, it is sufficient for Jim that she merely likes him. As his “superior,” Ella does not really have to reciprocate his love, nor even be a real wife to him.

I don’t ask you to love me—I don’t dare to hope nothing like that! I don’t want anything—only to wait—to know you like me—to be near you—to keep harm away—to make up for the past—to never let you suffer any more—to serve you—to lie at your feet like a dog that loves you—to kneel by your bed like a nurse that watches over you sleeping—to preserve and protect and shield you from evil and sorrow—to give my life and my blood and all the strength that’s in me to give you peace and joy—to become your slave!—yes, be your slave—your black slave that adores you as sacred! (He has sunk to his knees. In a frenzy of self-abnegation, as he says the last words he beats his head on the flagstones.) (294)

This appalling ritual of offering his love and himself to his future wife extends beyond the requirements of “romantic” love. O’Neill, thus, painstakingly underscores the unequal nature of this alliance by having a black man offer himself in slave-like fashion to a white woman because of his feelings of inferiority to her. Jim’s love for Ella resembles the devotion slaves were expected to have felt for their masters, and in revealing such undertones in the couple’s relationship, O’Neill points out how the equality of the two races in America is unattainable because of the social teachings we are raised with. C. W.
E. Bigsby concludes, “So powerful are the myths of colour that Jim is unable to deal with the effortless superiority of whites, internalising their values and unconsciously accepting their assertions of his inadequacy” (58).

The second means for Jim to attest his “whiteness” is by his success in white society. He works towards this goal with his consistent attempts at finishing high school and later becoming a full member of the bar. In *Contour in Time*, Travis Bogard claims that “Passing the bar examination becomes for Jim a way of ‘passing’ racially” (196). However, Jim is destined to disillusionment, as not only the structures of society but also the racial attitudes he has internalized hold him back. Jim’s own belief in his inferiority is the main obstacle to his success and mental freedom. Therefore, he has to take the high school graduation exams two years in a row before he can graduate and can never pass the bar exams.

I swear I know more’n any member of my class. I ought to, I study harder. I work like the devil. It’s all in my head—all fine and correct to a T. Then when I’m called on—I stand up—all the white faces looking at me—and I can feel their eyes—I hear my own voice sounding funny, trembling—and all of a sudden it’s all gone in my head—there’s nothing remembered—and I hear myself stuttering—and give up . . . (292)

Jim’s inferiority complex, arising especially in the company of his white colleagues and schoolmates, in conjunction with Ella’s (un)conscious apprehension for his success fulfill his fear of failure. Not having had similar experiences to Jim’s, Ella initially cannot understand or sympathize with Jim’s overwhelming desire to become a lawyer. As a
white American who has not been hindered by her race, she cannot comprehend what overcoming social restrictions would signify to a black American:

**JIM**—I need it more than anyone ever needed anything. I need it to live.

**ELLA**—What'll it prove?

**JIM**—Nothing at all much—but everything to me. (293)

"Everything" imports to Jim his self-worth, his self-redefinition as a marginalized person, that he can be somebody in a world where everyone tells him he can't be anything but a "nigger." Yet Jim can neither succeed nor integrate into white society. Thus, as John Orr states, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* challenges two myths about black-white relations at the time: "the myth of black advancement" and the myth of "harmonious racial integration" (177). Jim understands in the end that his success is out of the question, an anomaly that can't be tolerated (313). In the light of this evidence, Richard Long's assertion that "With very mild editing, the fact that the protagonist is black could be expunged without materially affecting the drama" holds little credibility, as Jim's skin color—his racial identity—is crucial to the drama (45).

Ella's presence and character are of fundamental significance, too. O'Neill at first uses her to comment on the racialization of American children as they grow into adults. In the nine years that separate the first two scenes, Ella's attitude towards Jim and blackness in general changes. Ella in Scene 1 is a sympathetic, wanna-be-black girl desiring to be Jim's "girl" and asks him more than once not to forget it. Yet in the following scene, she is suddenly transformed into one with "a rather repelling bold air about her" (286). Her boyfriend Mickey tells Jim that "She hates de sight of a coon"
When Jim tries to remind her about the past, she says she doesn’t “remember nothing,” that she and Jim have “nothing in common any more,” and that he is “certainly forgetting [his] place!” “I’ve got lots of friends among my own—kind, I can tell you. (exasperatedly) You make me sick! Go to the devil!” (287, my emphasis). The missing link between the first and the second scene is the racialization process. The friendly children of both races in the first scene are replaced by the very race-conscious Ella, Mickey, and Joe, who are antagonistic towards their Racial Other. O’Neill thus implies the social nature of racialization and racism, that they are taught, and not inherent in human nature.

Ella can only begin to acknowledge Jim’s friendship again after a series of tragic events in her life (such as having an out-of-wedlock child and later losing him to diphtheria), when she finds herself friendless. Jim, with his magnanimity, is the only person to support Ella in a time of need when everyone else, including apparently her own family, has given her the cold shoulder. Yet Ella’s attitude towards Jim Harris is still governed by concepts of blackness and whiteness, “blackness” representing evil, and “whiteness” purity and goodness. Jim, she says, is the “only white man in the world! Kind and white” (291). Thus, even if Ella has re-learned to value Jim, she has not un-learned the metaphoric connotations of their skin colors.

Such statements by Ella cast doubt on the true nature of her feelings for him. If she cannot bring herself to see and accept Jim as he is (because of her race-bias), how can she love him? In his attempt to assure both Hattie, his sister, and himself that Ella loves him, Jim interprets Ella’s suffering as evidence of her love because he thinks if she didn’t
really love Jim, she would not have stayed with him and endured humiliation. However, as Edwin Engel observes, “That [Ella] is suffering is abundantly evident, but that she loves Jim is less evident . . .” (123). Ella marries Jim out of necessity, not love. As a “disgraced” woman, she really has no other option but to marry Jim. She had not given Jim any chance when she was in Mickey’s favor, but having been deserted by the latter and faced with Shorty’s proposition that she work as a prostitute, Ella chooses the lesser of two evils (that is, her social inferior, an African-American man) and from then on, struggles both with and against Jim.

O’Neill does not take lightly society’s response to Jim and Ella’s marriage in his play. He represents society on stage and its hostility towards this interracial union, the American taboo, by having two rows of people, one of each race, stare “across at each other with bitter hostile eyes” and later at the couple exiting the church. Jim and Ella have to endure the enmity of both racial groups for disturbing and threatening the status quo of segregation in America with their marriage. Unable to fight against this antagonism, the newly-wed couple relocate in France, where they believe they can leave behind all racial prejudices. At least for a while they feel more at ease and treated like human beings. Yet when Ella’s own race-consciousness resurfaces, they are shaken up once more and decide to face and hopefully make peace with their inner demons by returning to the States.

We decided to come back and face it and live it down in ourselves, and prove to ourselves we were strong in our love—and then, and that way only, by being brave we’d free ourselves, and gain confidence, and be
really free inside and able then to go anywhere and live in peace and equality with ourselves and the world without any guilty uncomfortable feeling coming up to rile us. (301)

Their arrival at Jim’s house is nonetheless marked with tension as Ella and Jim’s sister Hattie cannot contain their animosity towards each other. Hattie’s wedding gift to the couple, a Congo mask, provides Ella with an outlet for her conflicting feelings regarding Jim and his blackness. The primitive mask is “a grotesque face, inspiring obscure, dim connotations in one’s mind, but beautifully done, conceived in a true religious spirit. In this room, however, the mask acquires an arbitrary accentuation. It dominates by a diabolical quality that contrast imposes upon it” (297). Because All God’s Chillun is an expressionistic play, the African mask takes on the evil qualities Ella sees in it. Her “superiority” as a white woman is threatened by the African tradition the mask represents, and thus, her attitude towards it is “scornful . . . defiant . . . disgust[ed] . . . contemptuous . . . defiantly aggressive” (303). Virginia Floyd notes that “The mask is equated with black power, a strength that threatens white supremacy and white people’s way of life” (New Assessment 266). If Ella were to acknowledge the beauty of the mask, it would mean acknowledging Jim’s blackness and his equality to her therein. Later on in the play, Ella projects all her negativity about Jim’s blackness onto the mask and stabs it as if stabbing her husband.

Ella expresses her conviction in her racial superiority also in other contexts, for instance, in how she treats Hattie with an “indifferent superiority” and “a sort of wondering hatred” (302) because Hattie with her self-confidence and racial pride, the
antithesis of Jim, threatens Ella’s sense of security and superiority. She smiles at Jim with “a tolerant, superior smile but one full of genuine love” (302). Ella is torn by her love for Jim and her long-held belief in his inferiority, two poles she cannot reconcile. Therefore, Ella is equally conflicted in her desire regarding her husband’s success.

When Ella admits she doesn’t want Jim to take any more examinations, Hattie rightfully explains Ella’s behavior as “their[whites’] fear for their superiority!” (303). Her fear of his success derives from her fear of losing the upperhand over him, but she also wants him to succeed so that the world can see how Ella has indeed married “the whitest of the white” (304). Ella Downey is representative of her race in her assertion of her “superiority” as well as in her fear of blacks. However, she is also torn by her desire to prove her husband is worthy of her.

In the face of such multi-faceted drives, Ella and Jim cling to their fantasy that Jim is “the whitest of the white.” Hattie’s indignation at Jim’s aspirations to “whiteness” also discloses the more recondite nature of interracial marriage in the United States: “Is that the ambition she’s given you? Oh, you soft, weak-minded fool, you traitor to your race! And the thanks you’ll get—to be called a dirty nigger—to hear her cursing you because she can never have a child because it’ll be born black—!” (309). Richard Dyer sheds light on Ella’s unstated fear of having a racially-mixed child:

Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body. For all the appeal to the spirit, still, if white bodies are no longer indubitably
white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the ‘natural’ basis of their dominion is no longer credible.

If races are conceptualised as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity. (25)

Although O’Neill claimed *All God’s Chillun* was never a “race problem play,” by choosing to write on miscegenation, the playwright probed into all the troubling aspects of interracial relations. O’Neill’s initial thoughts on his work, “no reproduction,” may be read as his hesitancy to explore a more dangerous territory. Moreover, it could also be interpreted as the result of Ella’s conscious choice to preserve her and her offspring’s purity.

On the other hand, the dramatist’s decision to portray a childless interracial couple helps O’Neill to challenge the stereotype of the black man as a “penis symbol” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 159). Early on in the play, Jim strives to protect Ella’s honor by asking her boyfriend Mickey not to seduce her. The scene between the two men explores uncharted territory as a black man unsuccessfully defends a white woman against the sexual advances of a white man rather than vice versa. After Jim and Ella get married, Jim also refrains from consummating his love with his wife, and they live as brother and sister for some time. O’Neill thus disputes the myth of black male sexuality. Another plausible explanation is in line with Jim’s portrayal as “Uncle Jim,” a role Ella finds fitting for him. Such positioning emasculates the black man and is non-threatening to the white woman as well as to the white man, not to mention O’Neill’s white audiences.
Ella’s marriage to Jim finally pushes her over the edge and results in her mental disintegration. It symbolizes to her “her final degradation” (Falk 88). Her bouts of madness come about because of the blackness surrounding and menacing her, whether it takes the form of Jim, Hattie, the Congo mask, or Jim’s father’s portrait. Hattie narrates that during her illness Ella “raved on about ‘Black! Black!’ and cried because she said her skin was turning black—that you had poisoned her—” and that she had called Hattie “a dirty nigger” (308). When Hattie explains to Jim that “It’s[racism] deep down in her or it wouldn’t come out,” Jim tries to expel the accusation by putting the blame elsewhere, “Deep down in her people—not deep in her” (308). Jim cannot bring himself to concede Ella is indeed one of her “people.”

In another moment of insanity, Ella attempts to kill Jim with a carving-knife and later calls him “You dirty nigger!” (311). The hatred she feels towards Jim’s blackness is most often expressed in her reaction to the Congo mask, the ultimate personification of “blackness” for Ella:

What’re you grinning about, you dirty nigger, you? How dare you grin at me? I guess you forget what you are! That’s always the way. Be kind to you, treat you decent, and in a second you’ve got a swelled head, you think you’re somebody, you’re all over the place putting on airs; why, it’s got so I can’t even walk down the street without seeing niggers, niggers everywhere. Hanging around, grinning, grinning—going to school—pretending they’re white—taking examinations . . . (312)
At this later stage of her mental illness, Ella projects more and more onto the mask her feelings towards Jim, which she can’t utter to his face. The mask also constantly reminds her that Jim is not white, as she would have him be. "Why don’t you let me be happy? He’s white, isn’t he—the whitest man that ever lived? Where do you come in to interfere? Black! Black! Black as dirt! You’ve poisoned me! I can’t wash myself clean! Oh, I hate you! I hate you!" (312). Ella can only tolerate Jim if she can believe in his “whiteness,” and any signs reminding her of his true identity destroy the fragile happiness of their marriage. In order to abolish this reminder, Ella “kills” the mask: “Ella’s murder of the mask is symbolic genocide, just as her insanity is symbolic of all white prejudice that demands of the Negro that he become Jim Crow. In her fear, her shamed sense of uncleanness, her paranoid hostility, she fully exemplifies the hatred of one race for another” (Bogard 197). When she finally admits to Jim she never wanted him to pass his exams, Jim allows himself to acknowledge Ella’s iniquity. “You devil! You white devil woman!” (313). According to Peter Gillett, the play implies that there can be no settled love between whites and blacks except a perverted love purchased by the one partner’s abrogation of his freedom and human dignity. It implies that the white race, in its attitudes to black people, is insane beyond cure, schizophrenic—wanting on principle to permit their advancement toward freedom, forced by its own sick nature to stifle them. (52)

I concur with Peter Gillett’s evaluation. Interesting as O’Neill’s black portraits are, their true import and his intentions become more poignant in the presence of his white
characters. In *All God's Chillun*, Ella functions as the primary emblem of whiteness and white racial attitudes, and in Gillett's terms, she stands for their insanity, schizophrenia, and sickness.

In addition to their own internalized racism, Jim and Ella are thwarted also by society in their attempts at happiness and success. As I discussed earlier, reactions to their marriage (from the outside world as well as from Jim's family) play a major role in their rocky relationship. Like Ella, other Euro-Americans will not allow Jim to progress either. Early in the play, Ella's former boyfriend Mickey, functioning as the chorus, a dramatic device in ancient Greek plays mouthing social opinion, in this particular scene warns Jim that he is trespassing the entrenched boundary between black and white:

> De trouble wit' you is yuh're gittin' stuck up, dat's what! Stay where yeh belong, see! Yer old man made coin at de truckin' game and yuh're tryin' to buy yerself white—graduatin' and law, for Christ sake!... .But yuh're tryin' to buy white and it won't git yuh no place, see! (286)

Yet it is not merely white Americans who resent blacks unwilling to accept their place in society. Some black Americans, too, clearly do not approve of it, an attitude exemplified by Joe, a character I will discuss later in this chapter.

Jim and Ella's tragedy arises from the fact that neither American society nor these two individuals are equipped in any way to brave these overbearing social problems. By the end of *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, having no other avenue, the two adults are reduced to a child-like state, Ella due to her insanity, and Jim due to his wish to please and join her. The racial reality in the adult world is too much for either one of them to
confront. Yet the end is also significant in revealing Ella’s unconscious desire to reduce her husband to a stereotype, that of a non-threatening black for whites, thus denying him his individuality and humanity: “I’ll be a little girl—and you’ll be old Uncle Jim who’s been with us for years and years—Will you play that?” (310). Of course, Jim, who has played the “good nigger” so far will agree to this role, too, so as to humor his wife.

Eugene O’Neill complicates his black portraiture in this play by contrasting Jim with the other black characters in *All God’s Chillun*. Joe is one of these foils to the protagonist. On the eve of Jim’s high school graduation, Jim has to face the resentment of Joe, who sees in Jim Harris, just as Mickey does, an African-American wanting to transcend his racial identity. Joe regards Jim’s graduation “*with disgusted resentment,*” and when Jim enters the stage in Scene 2, Joe looks over him “*scornfully,*” stares at him “*resentfully,*” spits “*disgustedly*” (284). Joe cannot understand Jim’s aspirations, whether they are to “whiteness” or success—the two are almost synonymous within the context of this play. Furthermore, Joe can’t see any benefit to them. “What de hell does it git you, huh? Whatever is you gwine do wid it now you gits it? Live lazy on you’ ol’ woman?” (285). Joe’s conjecture is accurate because no matter how hard Jim tries, he can never attain the same social status as white men. For Joe, being a “nigger” is a fact of life, and Jim, in striving to overcome this racial circumscription, transgresses what is acceptable for blacks.

I don’t even know who you is! What’s all dis schoolin’ you doin’? What’s all dis dressin’ up and graduatin’ an’ sayin’ you gwine study be a lawyer? What’s all dis fakin’ an’ pretendin’ and swellin’ out grand an’
Roger Oliver sees an oversimplification in this epithet. He says, “Instead of a serious discussion of societal and racial identity, O’Neill reduces the problem to the necessity of identifying oneself as a “‘Nigger’” (59). However, this noun is as poignant and significant as Jim’s other epithets, like “Jim Crow” and “Uncle Jim.” In the end, having been confronted with the harsh reality of his identity, Jim has to admit who he is: “We’re both niggers” (288). Joe keeps Jim in check by reminding him of his social self and the restraints it imposes on him.

The other important foils to Jim Harris and his desire for “whiteness” are his mother, Mrs. Harris, and his sister. Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer note that “O’Neill’s portraits of Jim’s mother and Hattie are rather remarkable anticipations of the black struggles of the 1950s and 1960s” (66). In Hattie, O’Neill presages Black Nationalism, which he celebrates four decades prior to the movement. Hattie is one of the more sympathetic characters in the play. She has “a high-strung, defiant face—an intelligent head showing both power and courage” (297). College-educated, she teaches at a black school to serve and empower the people of her own race. Jim and Hattie Harris personify the first two stages Frantz Fanon identifies in the mentality of colonized nations. In the first stage, that of “alienation,” the native culture is “abandoned, sloughed of, rejected, despised” because of the teachings of the colonizer. In the second stage, that
of decolonization, the native culture “becomes for the inferiorized an object of passionate attachment” (*African Revolution* 41). “Tradition is no longer scoffed at by the group. The group no longer runs away from itself. The sense of the past is rediscovered, the worship of ancestors resumed” (43). Whereas Jim remains at the internalized racism stage, mouthing the politicized opinions of his oppressors, Hattie transcends it to embrace her own culture and identity. But as both Frantz Fanon and Stuart Hall warn us, decolonization is not unproblematic either. This new-found identity is “Not an essence but a *positioning,*” which serves a sociopolitical goal (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 113). Like the Black Nationalists she foreshadows, Hattie identifies with the superior native identity and culture of Africa, both of which she has constructed for her own ends, as evidenced in her pride of her “people in Africa,” who have made the mask decorating the new couple’s living quarters.

When Ella attacks her with racial slurs, Hattie states, “The race in me, deep in me, can’t stand it. I can’t play nurse to her any more, Jim, —not even for your sake” (308). Hattie’s racial pride is in contention with Jim’s lack of high regard for his blackness. Yet Hattie, concerned with decolonizing her own people, becomes as much of a racist as the white people she condemns. She is, for instance, prejudiced against Ella without meeting her as a grown-up woman, and disapproves of their marriage instantaneously. She censures Ella only because she is white, without any evidence of the latter’s racism or mistreatment of Jim. At hearing Ella’s voice, for example, Hattie “*stiffens, and her face grows cold*” (301). Hattie is a strong woman but one governed with “musts” and “shoulds” rather than “is.” As Jim says, “You’re like the doctor. Everything’s so simple
and easy. Do this and that happens. Only it don’t. Life isn’t simple like that—not in this case, anyway—no, it isn’t simple a bit” (306). While an admirable character, and the antithesis of Jim in his racial mind-set, Hattie opens up new, though imperfect, possibilities to O’Neill’s black audiences in their course to decolonization.

Although a less well-developed character, Mrs. Harris, like Hattie, deprecates the interracial marriage and believes the white and the black race should not integrate: “Dey’s o’ny one should. (solemnly) De white and de black shouldn’t mix dat close. Dere’s one road where de white goes on alone; dere’s anudder road where de black goes on alone” (298). She believes her husband has attained social success because of his submission to the white rule: “Dey leaves your Pa alone. He comes to de top till he’s got his own business, lots o’ money in de bank, he owns a building even befo’ he die” (298). Mrs. Harris recommends her children follow their father’s example and submit to white supremacy while building their own world within the confines of the white universe.

All three of these foils to Jim know who they are and value themselves. Distrusting “whiteness” and white Americans, they have chosen a separate path for themselves where they know they belong. Jim, on the other hand, “thinks he has found himself by losing himself, but he has only succeeded in losing himself forever” (Falk 90). Susan Tuck, like Doris Falk, expresses the same view:

Jim can never become a full-fledged Member, whether of the bar or of the human race. . . . Jim Harris never learns who he really is. He struggles against his color throughout the play, only to capitulate at the conclusion
by becoming an Uncle Tom in the name of love and what is surely a debased sense of religion. (54)

In his deference to Ella and her race, Jim "negates his heroic potential," according to John Orr (180). Jim's tragedy isn't owing to his failure in his search for happiness but what that search costs him: his true identity.

Any attempt to determine once and for all O'Neill's own sentiments regarding blackness and miscegenation also invites tentative and imprecise answers in All God's Chillun. For instance, his portrait of the late Mr. Harris, who is very much present in the play despite his physical absence, is troubling:

_On one wall, in a heavy gold frame, is a colored photograph—the portrait of an elderly Negro with an able, shrewd face but dressed in outlandish lodge regalia, a get-up adorned with medals, sashes, a cocked hat with frills—the whole effect as absurd to contemplate as one of Napoleon's Marshals in full uniform._ (297, my emphasis)

As Frederic Carpenter points out, O'Neill's description of Jim's father suggests Emperor Jones but is not drawn in as complimenting a tone as the Emperor's, which inspires respect. O'Neill appears to disapprove of those feigning to be something they are not. Nonetheless, we are reminded all along that it is this man who has attained the American dream.

Overall, the negative images of whiteness O'Neill depicts with characters such as Ella, Mickey, and Shorty, compare unfavorably with his more positive images of blackness, such as Mrs. Harris, Hattie, and even Jim, who is marked by his tragedy rather
than an evil nature. O’Neill’s sentiments on race and racial relations in America appear to coincide with Jim’s, who criticizes Hattie’s one-sided approach on racial matters: “You with your fool talk of the black race and the white race! Where does the human race get a chance to come in? I suppose that’s simple for you. You lock it up in asylums and throw away the key!” (309). In writing this play, O’Neill wants us, as does his main character, to re-evaluate racial mores and constraints in favor of more flexibility and humaneness. Jim’s statement, “We’re all the same—equally just—under the sky—under the sun—under God—sailing over the sea—to the other side of the world—the side where Christ was born—the kind side that takes count of the soul” reflects the playwright’s own racial stance and explains in part why O’Neill was so dedicated to broaching the race problem in America (296). As it has been pointed out by many critics, the title of the play, too, emphasizes the equality of “all God’s chillun.”

Ruby Cohn and Edmund Wilson’s respective judgments of the play, that it is “inadequate in its exploration of a black-white relationship” (21) and “one of the best things yet written about the race problem of Negro and white” (103), represent the two opposing critical responses to this play. I am in agreement with Wilson’s appraisal. O’Neill himself hoped that All God’s Chillun would “help toward a more sympathetic understanding between the races, through the sense of mutual tragedy involved” (qtd. in Gelb 550-51). Nonetheless, in writing on such a precarious topic, Eugene O’Neill refrained from pontifications of any sort. Like his earlier plays, namely, Thirst, The Moon of the Caribbees, and The Dreamy Kid, All God’s Chillun, too, features the chaos ensuing from integration. Although he might have hoped for it, O’Neill never promises
that the black and the white race will get along easily, a problem for which he mainly holds whites responsible.

In *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, O'Neill questions the viability of a black-white union and at what cost it might be achieved. Written in 1923, the play demonstrates the writer's advanced thinking, especially at the time, in tackling controversial racial issues and advocating the then-unpopular views, like the equality of races. With characters like Hattie, Eugene O'Neill espouses another course to African-Americans: decolonization. Moreover, the play, for the most part, presents realistic characters trapped in real-life conflicts and moves further away from the stereotypes of O'Neill's earlier work. For instance, Roger Oliver thinks that “With Jim Harris, O'Neill has clearly surpassed Brutus Jones. From a concern with racial unconscious and slave ships, O'Neill has progressed to a conflict that is realistically grounded in personal aspiration and the pressures and prejudices generated by race” (60). Although Brutus Jones is a very realistic and striking character fashioned after the playwright’s interest in the psychological indoctrination of blacks in America, Jim Harris carries that theme forward. Jim Harris also paves the way for another assimilated black man, Joe Mott of *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill’s last black character.
CHAPTER V

THE ICEMAN COMETH

Eugene O’Neill’s fascination with the black American experience lasted long after the pinnacle of the Harlem Renaissance, during which two of his thought-provoking “black plays” came to life. The Iceman Cometh (1939) carries on and furthers the themes the dramatist had given voice to in his earlier studies of racial relations in America. Like his antecedents Brutus Jones and Jim Harris, Joe Mott, a seemingly minor character in The Iceman Cometh, adopts a white mask for survival and success in a predominantly white world. Through these characters and their experiences, O’Neill expresses the fragility and the indignity of assimilation and of black-white integration in American society. Curiously enough, although written in the same vein as The Emperor Jones and All God’s Chillun Got Wings, an in-depth scholarly exegesis has been denied to The Iceman Cometh regarding its black representation, unlike the earlier plays. Joe Mott has been treated as an oddity, an almost non-existent character indistinguishable from the other drunks frequenting Harry Hope’s bar. Yet as O’Neill’s last African-American character, Joe contributes significantly to our understanding of the playwright’s evolving black portraiture by offering more insights into the concept of “passing.”

Joe Mott was based on Joe Smith, a black gambler O’Neill met in 1915 at the Hell Hole, an Irish saloon that closely resembles Harry Hope’s bar where The Iceman Cometh is set. A pessimistic statement written in the year World War II erupted, the play arose
out of O'Neill's reminiscences about his past at the Hell Hole and his former friends there. The tragic tone is set by the pipe dreams the frequenters of the bar rely on to make their less-than-accomplished lives palatable. The drunken stupor of the atmosphere is sustained by each and every member of the group, Joe Mott being one of them, until the men's long-time friend Hickey arrives and disrupts their personally-satisfying status quo by forcing them to shed these lies. Although Joe initially seems to be a peer in this bar crowd, the events soon draw attention to his race and, therefore, his social difference.

The opening stage directions highlight Joe's mixed racial background. He is "brown-skinned. . . . His face is only mildly negroid in type. The nose is thin and his lips are not noticeably thick" (5). Without directly saying so, O'Neill implies that Joe can "pass," and pass he does, at least initially. In the first part of Act I, Joe's blackness is completely ignored, and his uniformity with the white majority is emphasized. Joe is an alcoholic and a lost soul like the rest: "Man, when I don't want a drink, you call de morgue, tell dem come take Joe's body away, 'cause he's sure enuf dead. Gimme de bottle quick, Rocky, before he changes his mind!" (22-23). John Lovell rightly observes that Joe's "addiction to social depression, sleep, drink, shiftlessness is not a sign of his race; it is his union card in a general society. . . . Mott belongs" (48). Further corroborating his membership in this group is Joe's echo of the common sentiment regarding Hickey's expected arrival. "I was dreamin' Hickey come in de door, crackin' one of dem drummer's jokes, wavin' a big bankroll and we was all goin' be drunk for two weeks. Wake up and no luck" (18). Because Joe behaves and thinks like the rest, we are temporarily led to believe he is integrated and accepted, that he is one of them.
Halfway through Act 1, this utopian picture of black-white relations in America is destabilized as Joe’s racial identity begins to matter for the very first time. Captain Lewis’s exclamation to himself, “Good God! Have I been drinking at the same table with a bloody Kaffir?” takes us by surprise (42). Wetjoen explains to Joe that a “Kaffir” is a “nigger,” upon which remark “JOE stiffens and his eyes narrow” (42). With Wetjoen’s interference, “He’s no damned Kaffir! He’s white, Joe is!,” Lewis apologizes to Joe, explaining “Eyesight a trifle blurry, I’m afraid” and calls him the “Whitest colored man I ever knew” (43, my emphasis). Lewis’s remark is especially interesting because it reveals how Joe Mott “passes” both literally and figuratively: he looks and acts white.

Joe, in his easy going manner, accepts the apology but draws his boundaries: “I don’t stand for ‘nigger’ from nobody. Never did. In de old days, people calls me ‘nigger’ wakes up in de hospital” (43). Nonetheless, the racial slur must have hit an inner core in Joe because while the others engage in a different conversation, he has been “brooding” and interrupts the others to assert his “whiteness”: “Yes, suh, white folks always said I was white. In de days when I was flush, Joe Mott’s de only colored man dey allows in de white gamblin’ houses. ‘You’re all right, Joe, you’re white,’ dey says. Wouldn’t let me play craps, dough. Dey know I could make dem dice behave” (45, my emphases).

Although Joe insists eight times in the text that he is “white,” most critics overlook his illusion of “passing.” Ruby Cohn, for instance, wonders whether Mott means “color or character” by “whiteness” (48). The answer to that question is simple: Mott refers to the “whiteness” of his character. Even when he insists on his “whiteness,” Joe knows that he
is not really white: “All six of us colored boys, we was tough and I was de toughest” (43, my emphasis). The American Heritage Dictionary defines black as “dirty, evil, wicked, gloomy, marked by anger and sullenness, calamitous, deserving censure or dishonor” and white as “fair, decent, pure.” By asserting his “whiteness,” Joe Mott is indeed claiming these qualities associated with whiteness and dissociating himself from all the negative connotations of his blackness. Frantz Fanon discusses these racial connotations and what they imply psychologically for a colonized black: “In the collective unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality. In other words, he is Negro who is immoral. If I order my life like that of a moral man, I simply am not a Negro” (Black Skin 192). What we see at work here is Joe’s assimilation, or to borrow Fanon’s term for it, his “alienation.” His blind hope for self-esteem leads Joe (like Jim Harris and Brutus Jones) to identify himself with his social superiors. “The goal” of the colonized person’s “behavior” is “the Other,” according to Fanon, “for the Other alone can give him worth” (Black Skin 154). If Joe were to accept his blackness, then he would also have to come to terms with these less-than-desirable traits his race attributes to him.

Joe’s pipe dream is, in a way, multi-faceted and more complex than those of the others because it has as much to do with opening a new gambling house as it has with his adoption of “whiteness”:

I’ll make my stake and get my new gamblin’ house open before you boys leave. You got to come to de openin’. I’ll treat you white. If you’re broke, I’ll stake you to buck any game you chooses. If you wins, dat’s
velvet for you. If you loses, it don’t count. Can’t treat you no whiter dan dat, can I? (53-54)

Even though I agree with Timothy Wiles, who claims that Joe Mott “emerges as one of the most complexly-portrayed black men on the white stage before the Civil Rights era,” his next postulation that Joe “wants full equality with the white world without sacrifice of his black identity” cannot be farther from the truth (185). Joe desires to hold onto his illusion that he is “white,” and when he is reminded that indeed he is not, he reacts vehemently (as seen during the incident with Captain Lewis and later with the bartender Rocky). Blackness in this white-dominated world equals failure, non-identity, non-existence, and Joe strives to disconnect himself from it as best he can.

Mott’s insistence on his “whiteness” is not only a self-validating defense mechanism but also his only way to make it in the white world. For instance, when in the past he applied for approval to run a black gambling house, Joe has had to prove his “whiteness,” and this proof comes from Harry Hope who writes to the Big Chief, attesting to Joe’s character:

He[the Chief] jumps up, lookin’ as big as two freight trains, and he pounds his fist like a ham on de desk, and he shouts, “You black son of a bitch, Harry says you’re white and you better be white or dere’s a little iron room up de river waitin’ for you!” Den he sits down and says quiet again, “All right. You can open. Git de hell outa here!” So I opens, and he finds out I’se white, sure ’nuff, ’cause I run wide open for years and pays my sugar on de dot, and de cops and I is friends. (46)
Timothy Wiles contends that “O’Neill stresses Joe’s . . . ability to function in the white world without Tomming, but also without calling attention to his race” (185). But Joe’s adoption of a white mask negates this argument; Joe cannot “function in the white world without Tomming,” and all his futile attempts at assimilation constantly call attention to his race.

Virginia Floyd’s assertion that “Hope’s saloon symbolizes the American melting pot where all men are equal” (New Assessment 521) has met with acceptance from other critics, too, for instance, by John Lovell: “Joe Mott is given equality of struggle, aspiration, and failure, according to his constitutional rights. . . . [A] Negro has aspired and died on terms of equality” (48). Nonetheless, it is O’Neill who treats Joe thus, not Rocky or Chuck. Hope’s bar does not differ much from the outside world in its preconceptions about and treatment of the racial Other. If the only “equality” Joe Mott might attain in this microcosm of American society is through a rejection of the Self and adoption of values alien to him, there really is no equality, no matter how much we’d like to believe in it. I also disagree with Michael Manheim’s interpretation of the character when he alleges that Mott’s past as “an independent entrepreneur . . . suggests a self-secure independence of the restrictions placed upon Blacks in the early twentieth century by the White establishment” (149). Manheim sees in Mott “the Black protagonist, the defender of the honor of his down-trodden people” (149). On the contrary, neither Joe Mott nor any other African-American has enjoyed independence, especially “in the early twentieth century.” Joe can achieve as much success as he is allowed by the white establishment that Manheim himself refers to, and his partial success comes at a cost to
his identity and self-respect. Such readings can serve at best as optimistic interpretations of *The Iceman Cometh*.

Upon his arrival, Hickey offers Joe as well as the other barflies a chance at epiphany by compelling them to confront their pipe dreams. The Joe of Act 2 is markedly different from the Joe of Act 1. "There is a noticeable change in him. He walks with a tough, truculent swagger and his good-natured face is set in sullen suspicion" (108). He becomes more race-conscious, pointing to his racial difference from the others. Act 2 marks Joe’s attempt to relinquish his white mask, to come to terms with his black identity, and to win the others’ recognition and approval for it. Having determined that whites are not his friend but his foes, he deserts the white camp. When Rocky inquires why Joe is so enraged at Hickey, Joe responds, “Sure, you think he’s all right. He’s a white man, ain’t he? (His tone becomes aggressive) Listen to me, you white boys! Don’t you get it in your heads I’s pretendin’ to be what I ain’t, or dat I ain’t proud to be what I is, get me? Or you and me’s goin’ to have trouble!” (109). By thus declaring his “blackness,” Joe provokes the white men’s anger, and Chuck responds by “I’ll moider de nigger!” (109). He has willingly Othered himself for the first time from the white crowd and walks as far away from them on stage as he can, thereby metaphorically pointing to segregation. Joe, who has so far sought to carve out a space for himself among the dominant group, is finally compelled (presumably by Hickey) to come to terms with his true racial and social identity. All along, the us-them dichotomy has been securely in place, even when Mott refused to acknowledge it. One demonstration of his difference is
that unlike the white bums, Joe is not entitled to free drinks but has to earn them with his labor, as seen in Act 3, when he sawdusts the floors and prepares sandwiches.

Both Fanon and Memmi remind us that the assimilation of the colonized is beyond question. Although the oppressed may deny and distance themselves from their cultural/racial heritage, the racism they suffer from never lessens. "Nonetheless, the major impossibility is not negating one's existence, for he[the colonized] soon discovers that, even if he agrees to everything, he would not be saved" since he is rejected by the colonizer who ridicules his fruitless attempts at assimilation (Memmi 124). Assimilation is a dead-end street because if the colonized natives are to become like the "civilized" whites, then they cannot be held under yoke. When the oppressed inevitably find out to their dismay that they cannot lay claim to their humanity, and thus, equality, the only alternative left for them is to reject their colonizer and to rediscover the native Self and culture which has been devalued. It is to such a state of revolution that Hickey, the false Savior, drives Mott.

Joe's alienation becomes more and more acute as he gradually realizes that his assimilation is thwarted by the white inhabitants of Harry Hope's bar. At the beginning of Act 3, "His manner is sullen, his face set in gloom. He ignores everyone" (156). When he tries to prevent a fight between Chuck and Rocky, Chuck calls him a "black bastard," and Rocky refers to him as "yuh doity nigger!" (168). The stage directions emphasize their hostility towards Joe: Rocky, "Like CHUCK, turns on JOE, as if their own quarrel was forgotten and they became natural allies against an alien" (168). Joe responds similarly to the bartenders: "(Snarling with rage, springs from behind the lunch
counter with the bread knife in his hand) You white sons of bitches! I’ll rip your guts out!” (168). Joe thus assents to his role as the unwelcome black Other but is willing to fight for his sense of self-respect. Whereas the first act of *The Iceman Cometh* illustrates the initial stage of colonialism—desired association with the colonizer—the last three acts depict the second stage—voluntary dissociation of the colonized from the colonizer.

Triggered by his alienation, Joe is the first bar regular to take some action and to leave the establishment at Hickey’s promptings: “I ain’t comin’ back. I’s goin’ to my own folks where I belong. I don’t stay where I’s not wanted. I’s sick and tired of messin’ round wid white men” (170, my emphasis). He defiantly smashes his glass right before he leaves. “(With a sneering dignity) I’s on’y savin’ you de trouble, White Boy [Rocky]. Now you don’t have to break it, soon’s my back’s turned, so’s no white man kick about drinkin’ from de same glass” (170, my emphases). Joe’s parting words present a new Joe unwilling to be subordinate to the social force that has imprisoned him. Once he accomplishes his pipe dream (opening up his old gambling house for blacks), if he comes back to Harry Hope’s and anyone says, “‘Joe, you sure is white,’” Joe says he will respond, “‘No, I’m black and my dough is black man’s dough, and you’s proud to drink wid me or you don’t get no drink!’ Or maybe I just says, ‘You can all go to hell. I don’t lower myself drinkin’ wid no white trash!’” (170, my emphasis). With these words, Joe Mott walks out on the crowd he has now identified as his racial Other to attain the dream to which he has been aspiring all along.

However, Joe is soon to return, as are the others. Unable to realize his pipe dream, he has to face the fact that, as Rocky says, he “wasn’t a gamblin’ man or a tough
guy no more; he was yellow” (216). In order to finance his pipe dream, Joe briefly entertains the possibility of holding up a white person but discovers he is incapable of carrying out his plan. Even in his disappointment, Joe maintains his haughty tone a bit longer: “Scuse me, White Boys. Scuse me for livin’. I don’t want to be where I’s not wanted” (217). He sits next to Captain Lewis after asking indirectly for his permission to do so in a “servilely apologetic” tone (217).

Hickey’s arrest by the police allows everyone, including Joe, to resume their pipe dreams. Joe’s last line in the play is uttered “(With drunken self-assurance)”: “No, suh, I wasn’t fool enough to git in no crap game. Not while Hickey’s around. Crazy people put a jinx on you” (253). The end of Act 4 thus establishes a circular structure with a return to the safety of pipe dreams for everyone but Parritt, the only outsider, who arrives at Harry Hope’s saloon at the beginning of the play and who commits suicide by the end, hence becoming Hickey’s only convert.

I agree with Edward P. Shaughnessy who, while admitting that the black characters of O’Neill are much more complex in his longer plays than in his one-acts, directs our attention to the fact that O’Neill, even as late as 1939, did not completely abandon his black stereotypes.

Joe Mott is clearly identified as a human being who shares the same type of “pipe dream” that keeps all of these men alive. O’Neill undeniably reveals his conception that the Black man is deeply and intricately entwined in the human community as a whole. . . .
Here, even as O'Neill distinctly places a Black character within the human framework, he still clings to racist preconceptions. Though none of the characters are saints... Joe Mott is a gambler whose idea of working his way out of the “Dead End Cafe” is to get a gun and mug someone, and who at one point is short-tempered enough to attack Rocky with a bread knife; O'Neill, even though his sympathies are clear, seems unable to overcome his perception of the Black as a gambling, short-tempered knife-wielder, the stereotypical “nigger” of the twenties and earlier. (90)

*The Iceman Cometh* is also laden with other racial stereotypes, some of them contradicting and canceling each other out. For example, the initial stage directions refer to Joe’s “good nature and lazy humor” (5). In other words, like most other black characters Euro-American writers have created, Joe is lazy, comic, and not to be feared: a benign darky. But upon embracing his blackness, Joe becomes more belligerent, and thus, an alarming figure for the whites, for instance, when he attacks Chuck and Rocky.

Another common stereotype O'Neill promotes in his representations of blackness is that of the superstitious black man. At one point in the play O'Neill describes Joe as brooding “superstitiously” and associating Hickey with bad luck: “I’s an ole gamblin’ man and I knows bad luck when I feels it! But it’s white man’s bad luck. He can’t jinx me!” (169-70). Yet another stereotype Eugene O’Neill utilizes in *The Iceman Cometh* is the musical talent of blacks. During the preparations for Harry’s birthday party, while
Cora practices "The Sunshine of Paradise Alley," she asks for Joe's help. He hums and sings and, by doing so, "forgets his sullenness and becomes his old self again" (120).

Joe Mott, the only black character of *The Iceman Cometh*, has been, for the most part, ignored by O'Neill scholars as a minor actor in this slowly unfolding human drama. Nonetheless, he embodies O'Neill's statement on the possibility of integration in the United States by revealing at what cost it can be achieved, if at all. Black-white integration should be predicated on reciprocal acceptance of cultural differences. However, the play demonstrates during its initial color-blind stage that integration of the (white) Self and the (black) Other is often realized only when the subordinate Other acquiesces to its required sameness with the Self. Joe Mott illuminates the usual psychological process of colonization. As the colonized, Joe first denigrates his blackness in hopes to become like his Racial Other. Upon discovering the impossibility of assimilation, he rejects the dehumanizing Other and reappraises his Self, only to affirm its desirability. It would have been naïve, though pleasant, to think O'Neill would have believed in such overnight decolonization. Joe Mott will most likely reclaim by the end of the play his white mask in his "hopeless hope" to belong. *The Iceman Cometh* ends, therefore, with the indication that, as in any other O'Neill tragedy, the human spirit will fall short of achieving the greatness it yearns for.
CHAPTER VI

O’NEILL AND HIS RACIAL OTHER

The wide spectrum of O’Neill’s black characters presents a perplexing heterogeneity to scholars. Especially his earliest attempts at delineating blackness (for instance, the Sailor in *Thirst* and the West Indian women in *The Moon of the Caribbees*) promote some of the contemporary racial stereotypes; hence, the association of blackness with the jungle, cannibalism, and primitivism. Surprisingly, as early as with *The Dreamy Kid* in 1918, there came a break in Eugene O’Neill’s approach towards his Racial Other as he shifted his focus from the exotic West Indians to the burdensome fates of black Americans. From this point on, while he might have occasionally reverted to stereotypes, in general his writings began not only to dispute but also to debunk politically-motivated racial myths.

How did O’Neill manage to disown the privileged white perspective? I am not sure one can provide a definitive answer to that question. Nonetheless, it is obvious that O’Neill the man as well as O’Neill the dramatist befriended the downtrodden: sailors and prostitutes, for example. Maybe because of his sympathy for the underdog, Eugene O’Neill was able to see, more often than not, African-Americans as human beings, not as people with a skin color darker than his. His later work consequently draws attention to the economic, social, and political injustices affecting them while highlighting their ensuing psychological and mental anguish.
O’Neill’s African-American characters suffer from a sense of not belonging, of social and psychological entrapment, which the playwright represents via expressionistic means on stage. For instance, in The Dreamy Kid, the white world outside symbolized by the police forces closes in on Abe, who can’t leave his grandmother’s house. Having entered the forest of his unconscious, Emperor Brutus cannot discover a way out of the enclosing space and meets his final destiny there. Jim and Ella Harris of All God’s Chillun Got Wings slowly break down as the walls of their house shrink in. In The Iceman Cometh, Joe Mott has fenced himself in at Harry Hope’s bar, where he has to return shortly after his leave-taking because he cannot cope with the external world. The physical sense of entrapment accompanies and intensifies the characters’ social entrapment in a white-governed society, which denies them their humanity and equality. For this reason, none of O’Neill’s plays promises racial harmony as long as the white race (which the dramatist depicts less than favorably with characters such as the Gentleman in Thirst, Smithers in The Emperor Jones, and Ella Harris in All God’s Chillun) adheres to its racial insularity and hegemony; hence, O’Neill’s central critique of whiteness.

These characters and their circumstances are clearly representative of the realistic and naturalistic forms O’Neill is usually considered to have followed. Eugene O’Neill grew up in the theatre world of his father reigned over by melodrama, which emphasized stereotypical plots and characters repeated from one play to the next with minor alterations. The son distanced himself from the father’s legacy early on as it was in contention with his own world view. O’Neill appears to have found the stylistic correspondence of his tragic vision in realism and naturalism, both of which, targeting a
faithful representation of reality, accentuate individual characters and the specific forces that shape their lives.

Eugene O’Neill occupies a central place in this study because he was the first major Anglo-American playwright to consistently investigate racial problems, consequently discovering in the Negro a tragic character rather than an entertainer. His use of occasional stereotypes may be explained by his meager exposure to black people. Yet O’Neill’s shortcomings are balanced by his fearlessness in probing into socially threatening issues, like racial antagonism. Maybe Jim Harris best sums up O’Neill’s intrinsic view of humanity: “We’re all the same—equally just—under the sky—under the sun—under God—sailing over the sea—to the other side of the world—the side where Christ was born—the kind side that takes count of the soul.”
PART TWO

WHITENESS AND AUGUST WILSON
CHAPTER I

THE SUBALTERN SPEAKS (BACK): IMPLICATIONS

OF WHITENESS IN THE BLACK IMAGINATION

August Wilson and Eugene O’Neill, both major American dramatists of the twentieth century, are historically removed from each other. Yet what brings them together in this study is their work’s deep involvement with their Racial Other, a mutual concern that communicates a lot also about their own racial identity. Indeed, Nathan Huggins voices this co-dependency—a direct result of Manichean thinking—between white and black Americans (as well as between the concepts of whiteness and blackness) when he claims, “black and white Americans have been so long and so intimately a part of one another’s experience that, will it or not, they cannot be understood independently. Each has needed the other to help define himself” (11). So far in this study, I have examined how a white dramatist has approached and represented his Racial Other in his plays. The complementary question—how a black writer might understand and portray whiteness—remains to be answered.

The question itself is complicated in more ways than one, for instance, in the perspective one adopts. Richard Dyer in his book *White* (1997) maintains how white, in opposition to other skin colors, equals nothing, hence, everything. But Dyer’s perspective is one of privilege: as a white scholar, he examines how Caucasians have depicted themselves. Blacks, on the other hand, since they have been disprivileged by whiteness,
do not concur with whites on this matter; therefore, we need to bear in mind that experiential differences will mark racial representations. Consequently, Dyer’s scrutiny of whiteness is bound to differ substantially from black Americans’ perception of and response to whiteness. Alan Nadel implies this point when he says:

If adapting to white culture is the means for surviving, then the myriad sites of the black grafting onto the trunk of white America can be traced as a history of survival, but such a tracing will produce a very different picture of the tree, identified by a varied pattern of flourishing eruptions against a background trunk that is everywhere, but only in the negative.

(“Introduction” 8)

This “negative picture of the tree” is illustrated, for instance, in Tilman Cothran’s 1950 essay “White Stereotypes in Fiction by Negroes,” which proposes that white characters in fiction written by African-Americans “tend to counter the conceptions whites hold concerning Negroes” (252). Cothran suggests here that: 1) black depictions of whiteness are bound to be stereotypes, much like white depictions of blackness; and 2) the former are formulated in reaction to the latter.

However, other African-American scholars and writers appear to be in contention with Cothran’s critical analysis when they assert, as they have been doing for a long time, that blacks have a better understanding of whites than whites do of blacks. August
Wilson himself subscribes to this view. During our interview\(^5\), the playwright insisted that he does not have any misconceptions of white American culture. I know it better than the white Americans know black culture. I have been a victim of it in the sense that I'm here in America in 1998, and my mother was born in Spear, North Carolina in 1920. There's a reason how she got to be in Spear, North Carolina. So I have a very intimate relationship with that culture and that society, so I don't operate under any myths. (Appendix 201)

In general, subordinate groups claim they have to comprehend their oppressors for their own survival. The dominant group, feeling no such compulsion, can easily ignore the essence of their social inferiors. For this reason, James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1912: “I believe it to be a fact that the colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people will ever know and understand themselves” (qtd. in “White Skin, White Masks” 5). In 1927, George Schuyler confirmed Johnson’s conclusion: “The blacks haven’t been working with and for the white folks all these decades and centuries for nothing. While the average Nordic knows nothing of how Negroes actually live and what they actually think, the Negroes know the Nordics intimately” (74). Concurring with these and other black thinkers, bell hooks asserts, too, that whereas whiteness has not been “scientifically” studied by black scholars, “black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations ‘special’

\(^5\) I had the honor of interviewing August Wilson in March 1998 when he participated in the Writers Conference at the University of North Dakota. The transcript of this interview can be found in the Appendix to this dissertation.
knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people” with the purpose of helping “black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society” (165).

Recognizing the validity of these claims, one is led to believe that such well-grounded knowledge of whiteness among blacks should do away with stereotyping, but as Tilman Cothran points out, this is usually not the case:

The dominant group’s stereotypes are part and parcel of a system of rationalization which serves to justify position and behavior. The subordinate group’s unfavorable stereotypes of the dominant group show resentment and serve as support for counter-rationalizations; they are essentially defense mechanisms functioning to preserve and protect self-conceptions. (252)

According to Cothran, then, despite the opposing (yet interrelated) psychological mechanisms at work among members of these two racial groups, neither Euro-Americans nor African-Americans are free of stereotypes in their conceptualization of their Racial Other. bell hooks likewise reveals the continuum in these (literary and otherwise) trends by underscor ing how black Americans’ outlook on white Americans clashes with the latter’s self-perception. Similar to Cothran, hooks maintains that black stereotypes of whiteness “emerge primarily as responses to white stereotypes of blackness” (170).

Unlike Cothran, though, hooks recognizes these stereotypes to be “a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening” (170), a psychosocial strategy Euro-Americans have adopted for themselves in order to “domesticate” and control the concept of “blackness,” if not blacks themselves.
While there may be consensus on the stereotyped perception of whiteness in black communities and, more specifically, in black American letters, the connotations of whiteness among African-Americans have not been sufficiently examined. Although general analyses of whiteness have recently been undertaken, these studies have a very limited focus: they merely acknowledge that whiteness has evaded examination, that it is privileged, and that it lacks any permanent cultural meaning. The vacuum in this field applies equally to studies of black literature, where we only find scarce attempts at scrutinizing the implication of whiteness in the black imagination: in addition to Cothran’s work to which I have made abundant references, we can cite Robert E. Fleming’s 1975 essay “Roots of the White Liberal Stereotype in Black Fiction.”

August Wilson comes from a racially-mixed familial background. While he is half-white, his self-identification as “black” enables us to discuss white Americans as his Racial Other. Wilson’s next instance of self-definition is more problematic; he denies the influence of any Anglo-American or European writer on his work by decidedly situating himself in African-American literary traditions. While it may not be difficult to evidence how Wilson’s work also comfortably fits in with the Western literary traditions, we should nonetheless examine black American theatre history in order to evaluate Wilson’s claim. The origins of African-American theatre are traced to Mr. Brown’s tea garden, the African Grove. Opened some time between 1816 and 1817, the African Grove was the site of the first African-American production in 1821—Shakespeare’s Richard III.

During the 1920s, both Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois exemplified black scholars’ dedication to black theatre although they called for different theatrical traditions: the
Black Experience School of Drama and Protest Theatre, respectively. One of the more outstanding moments in African-American drama was in 1926, when DuBois “organized the Krigwa Little Theatre to produce plays about, by, for, and near African-Americans” (Hatch and Shine 380). Very few black plays were produced on Broadway at this time, among them being Theodore Ward’s *Our Lan’* and Langston Hughes’s *Mulatto* (1935). *Mulatto* was the longest-running black play on Broadway until Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), for which she was awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

Another milestone in African-American theatre came in the sixties with the Black Arts Movement. Aspiring to reach larger black audiences and deciding that theatre was the most accessible medium to do so, African-American artists focused their efforts on developing a black theatre. Thus, Leroi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka) founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem in 1965. Baraka, along with the other renowned black dramatist of this era, Ed Bullins, wrote fiery, polemical plays, which, despite their political complexity, also ended up promoting anti-white sentiments. Unfortunately, these plays and many others preceding and succeeding them have not received the critical attention they deserve regarding their white depictions. However, we can safely postulate that black playwrights of the twentieth century invested more in resisting and superseding in their work stereotypes of blackness that were well in place in Euro-American literature than with rethinking their white characters, most of whom, consequently, turned out to be one-dimensional. The desire to assert a positive black identity has instigated by indirect means the stereotypical evil white man in African-
American writing. Lorraine Hansberry was referring to this artistic problem when she claimed most black plays were not produced because "they show the Negro as all good and the white man as all bad" (qtd. in Abramson 260). Eric Bentley, too, complains about these white stereotypes in black drama and criticizes Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*, for example, for its monstrous white characters (141).

It is these dramatic, literary, and political traditions, especially of the sixties, from which August Wilson claims to emerge. Wilson's personal experiences as a black American have also impacted his artistic outlook on life. In "Breaking Barriers," Yvonne Shafer mentions some of these encounters with the white world: "As a child Wilson suffered the effects of racism in America: when his family tried to move into a mostly white neighborhood, bricks were thrown through the windows and when he went to a largely white high school, white students left ugly, racist notes on his desk" (268). Because of these and other similar enraging incidents, Wilson began identifying himself as a "race man" within the Marcus Garvey tradition:

... I believe that race matters—that is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men most respond. ("The Ground on Which I Stand" 15-16)

The first significant August Wilson play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) manifests the playwright's racial vision with more or less one-dimensional characters: Irvin, Sturdyvant, and the policeman. Wilson's most fascinating authorial decision,
however, was to broaden the scope of his white portraiture with numerous offstage white characters whose overall significance is underlined through storytelling—the narratives blacks on stage share with each other. It was in *Ma Rainey* that the playwright began reflecting on the external white world bearing down upon African-Americans by employing offstage characters, such as the white men who had raped Levee’s mother. Wilson has adhered to this pattern in his later work as well. Indeed, his onstage white characters are few in number: Irvin, Sturdyvant, and the policeman in *Ma Rainey*; Rutherford Selig in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*; and the ghost of James Sutter in *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson’s tendency seemingly to marginalize whiteness by restricting it, for the most part, to an offstage presence serves two purposes: the dramatic focus can remain on the black characters while also implying that whites, even in their absence, are very much present since they clearly circumscribe and govern the lives and potentialities of the black characters. Wilson explains his dramatic strategy thus:

The off-stage white characters in all of the plays should ideally make you feel this presence of white America in the play and how it affects the lives of black Americans. In *Seven Guitars*, you feel that outside world constricting, forcing its way in on these people, and I think it was after *Joe Turner*, I decided, hey, I don’t need white characters on stage. Once I put black Americans on stage in their cultural milieu of the particular decade, I had white America. I don’t need to have any white characters because I have a representation, because the characters are continually struggling. They’re struggling for dignity; they’re struggling to feed their families;
they’re struggling to live a clean, hard, useful life. There are all of these things that are forcing their way in on them. So I didn’t need the white characters, and that’s why they are all off-stage characters. (Personal interview, Appendix 202)

As early as in Ma Rainey, Wilson reinforces his estimation of whiteness with another offstage character: the generic white man who is alluded to in play after play. Thus, Wilson’s dramatic work, whose “emotional center” lies with his African-American characters, also consistently draws attention to the pervasive and negative impact of Anglo-Americans in the black community.

August Wilson’s racial agenda in his plays should set to rest the postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak’s apprehensions about the silence of the subaltern, as Wilson exemplifies the intellectual articulating the subordinate point of view. Wilson’s political commitment to his racial community demonstrates itself particularly in the historical task he has dedicated himself to: the twentieth-century cycle of plays he intends to write which explores the African-American experience in this century. So far, he has finished six of these ten projected plays: Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1984), Fences (1985), Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1986), The Piano Lesson (1987), Two Trains Running (1990), and Seven Guitars (1995).
CHAPTER II

WHITENESS AS ECONOMIC POWER AND ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

Writing in 1920, W. E. B. DuBois referred to whiteness as “the ownership of the earth forever and ever” (185). August Wilson partakes in this African-American world view which considers Anglo-Americans the economically privileged rulers of the world. According to this perspective, white Americans enslave—literally and figuratively—black Americans in an attempt to reinforce their economic power in society. In the following chapters, I will discuss how Wilson underscores the association of whiteness with social privilege, law, and terror. Yet the main connotation of whiteness in Wilson’s fictive universe is economic power with its outcome of the economic exploitation of African-Americans. Almost all of Wilson plays emphasize how property bestows power on whites in American society so that they can make decisions which determine the course of other people’s lives, and, in so doing, destroy those lives for their own economic survival.

Wilson began to inspect the nature and source of Euro-Americans’ economic power in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1984). The play, set in Chicago in 1927, exposes the exploitation of blues musicians at the time by the white-controlled recording industry by dramatizing the incidents that occur during the recording session of blues legend Ma Rainey and her band. Sandra Shannon, while historically contextualizing the play, emphasizes that during the early twenties blues musicians from the South had “the
greatest potential for economic success” in the North, but their talent helped enrich the whites “who controlled the music industry” (Dramatic Vision 87-88). It is the ensuing tensions that arise among the black characters as well as between the black and the white characters on which August Wilson sheds light.

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opens with Sturdyvant and Irvin, white characters modeled after such businessmen whom Sandra Shannon criticizes. These on-stage white characters as well as the policeman whom the audience soon meet mark the dawn of August Wilson’s white portraiture. These characters are central to the play only inasmuch as they are central to the conflicts in the lives of the black characters.

“Preoccupied with money,” according to Wilson, Sturdyvant “is insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm’s length” (17). He owns the record company where Ma Rainey and her band are preparing to record a new album, and as Sandra Adell states, he “finds it particularly irritating to have to put up with one who comports herself as if she were a queen,” that is, Ma Rainey (58). Sturdyvant has a firm grip on the band, if not Ma Rainey, because of his economic privilege. Whereas the musicians obey him almost sheepishly, Ma combats his control over her, but her resistance results in a more adamant power struggle between the two.

**STURDYVANT:** I’m not putting up with any shenanigans. You hear, Irv? . . . She’s your responsibility. I’m not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit!

**IRVIN:** Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.
STURDYVANT: I don’t care what she calls herself. I’m not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here . . . record those songs on that list . . . and get her out. Just like clockwork, huh? (18)

Presumably having been crossed in the past by Ma Rainey, Sturdyvant passes the responsibility of “handling” her to Irvin, Ma Rainey’s manager, who is entrusted with the role of negotiator. Irvin, Wilson says, “prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them” (17). Thus, while Sturdyvant remains aloof from the black musicians, Irvin, the go-between, carries out his orders. But the power struggle in the studio, even in the absence of the Mother of the Blues, takes its toll on the musicians, who soon find themselves in a disagreement of their own as they debate which songs to practice for the recording session.

CUTLER: Levee, the sooner you understand it ain’t what you say, or what Mr. Irvin say . . . it’s what Ma say that counts.

SLOW DRAG: Don’t nobody say when it come to Ma. She’s gonna do what she wants to do. Ma says what happens with her.

LEVEE: Hell, the man’s the one putting out the record! He’s gonna put out what he wanna put out!

SLOW DRAG: He’s gonna put out what Ma want him to put out. (37)

While Ma Rainey remains off-stage, this controversy among her band members discloses the imbalance of power in the music industry and Ma Rainey’s struggle not to surrender to Sturdyvant. Ma’s trumpet player, Levee, unlike the other musicians, chooses to side with the white man who has economic power and who exercises that power over blacks...
like Levee. By identifying himself with Sturdyvant’s power, Levee presumes he himself is associated with it. However, to his disappointment, he will discover his role to be merely that of a pawn in the game determined by whites.

When Ma finally makes her appearance in the play, she refuses to go along with Sturdyvant’s song choices. Her hostility towards the white men she works with has more to do with her reaction to her disempowerment as a black woman artist than with the songs per se:

You decided, huh? I’m just a bump on the log. I’m gonna go which ever way the river drift. Is that it? You and Sturdyvant decided... I’m gonna tell you something, Irvin... and you go on up there an' tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don’t count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That’s what counts with Ma... Now, if that don’t set right with you and Sturdyvant... then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I don’t like it up here no ways. (63)

Ma Rainey’s outspoken resentment against Sturdyvant’s poor treatment of her and her defiance of him can be ascribed to her Southern fans on whom she can rely for her prosperity. She has the economic power to stand up to Sturdyvant’s dicta if she so wishes. She also recognizes that her record offers a lucrative business deal for Sturdyvant, so that he will not fire her despite his threats. Sandra Shannon addresses a crucial issues when she says, “Although this powerful presence may suggest that Ma Rainey is in control of her career, she knows full well that whites... ultimately
determine her longevity in the business. Thus any sense of victory Ma may enjoy is usually tempered by an awareness of how very expendable she is” (“The Ground” 152). In other words, Ma feels and resents her disempowerment by the white music industry, but she also knows there are other opportunities available to her were she to cease making records. Ma has a choice, and the power derived from having an alternative provides her with the unwavering tenacity she needs in her dealings with Sturdyvant and Irvin.

Shannon admits not reluctantly Ma Rainey’s triumph in the play: “Despite her acknowledged degradation, Ma’s victory seems to be in maintaining her dignity in the face of the apparent ‘prostitution’ of her talents and in exercising as much control as possible over the rights to her music” (“The Ground” 152). Nonetheless, the playwright himself entertains another reading of Ma’s situation.

... she can record her own songs if she wants, but still the distribution and the choice to put out, and to pay her lie with the whites. She ultimately has no real power in relation to her products, only to the extent that Irvin and Sturdyvant can use her when she has something that they want. Other than that, they don’t need her; therefore, she has no power. (Personal interview, Appendix 204-05)

Wilson’s insistence on the control whites exercise over black musicians negates the freedom (limited as it is) which Ma appears to enjoy in relation to the white men she confronts. Ma is thick-skinned, and her familiarity with the rules of the game enables her to remain in control and to negotiate with them on her own terms.
They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of god. But they can’t do nothing else. They ain’t got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain’t got no use for me then. I know what I’m talking about. You watch. Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don’t care nothing about me either. He’s been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends. (79)

Ma Rainey has mastered the rules of the game so well that even when all her wishes are fulfilled, such as having her nephew paid for his part in the recording, she leaves the studio without signing the release forms, the last site of her power over Sturdyvant. Once the recording is finished and the forms are signed, Sturdyvant, Ma Rainey knows, will not hesitate to subject her to humiliation and disrespect.

Sturdyvant’s economic exploitation extends far beyond Ma Rainey to her musicians, especially Levee. Having commissioned Levee to write songs for him, Sturdyvant later turns them down and offers a mere five dollars as compensation for Levee’s time. Levee is so enraged by this turn of events that he takes out his anger on Toledo—a fellow musician, Ma’s piano player and the only literate member of her band—and stabs and kills him for the senseless reason of stepping on his shoes. Being
helplessly pushed to their limits by the economic exploitation they suffer from, Wilson’s
black men take their revenge on each other, thus worsening their own situation.
Ironically, Toledo’s explication of the American social system is authenticated by the
end.

See, we’s the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what’s the
colored man gonna do with himself? That’s what we waiting to find out.
But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now, who knows that? You
find me a nigger that knows that and I’ll turn any whichway you want me
to. I’ll bend over for you. You ain’t gonna find that. And that’s what the
problem is. The problem ain’t with the white man. The white man knows
you just a leftover. ’Cause he the one who done the eating and he know
what he done ate. But we don’t know that we been took and made history
out of. Done went and filled the white man’s belly and now he’s full and
tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself. . . you
just ask Mr. Irvin what he had for supper yesterday. And if he’s an honest
white man . . . which is asking for a whole heap of a lot . . . he’ll tell you
he done ate your black ass and if you please I’m full up with you . . . so go
on and get off the plate and let me eat something else. (57-58)

Toledo’s monologue, one of the most important passages in *Ma Rainey*, introduces “the
white man” as an off-stage character whose influence is severely felt among blacks. It is
to this generic off-stage presence that Wilson will return consistently in his later work.
Toledo’s rather long monologue also articulates Wilson’s concise version of African-American history, a long history of abuse, impotence, passivity, and muteness:

The rules of the game are often made up without your participation, and often without your cares and concerns and needs taken into consideration. I think that’s a large part of the problem. That we don’t participate in the society and that we don’t participate in the making of the society . . .

(Personal interview, Appendix 203)

Toledo, who serves in part as the dramatist’s mouthpiece in this play, signifies the best alternative for black America and its financial abuse by white America. Unlike the other blacks, Toledo can read, a point Wilson has underlined in his interview with Bill Moyers:

To be able to read means you can unlock information. . . . You cannot liberate yourself by learning the oppressor’s language because all the things that oppress you are built into the linguistic environment—and they recognized that. Blacks in America don’t have the political sophistication yet to understand the value of language, for instance, or, for that matter, the value of reading. (170)

Toledo then is for all practical purposes decolonized as he can decode the white man’s language. Levee, on the other hand, represents the other path black Americans tread on, which those like Wilson censure. Sandra Adell comments that “unlike Ma Rainey, who knows that it was black people and not white people who made her a star, Levee relies on Irvin and Sturdyvant to give him his break” (56). Levee is the only African-American on
stage who, for some inexplicable reason, trusts that he will receive a chance and is completely distraught when he finally realizes that he is of no worth to Sturdyvant. Levee has not grasped Toledo's lesson of American history and reacts to the messenger, and not to his true enemy, the white man. According to Sandra Adell, Levee has not understood his father's teachings either. As a child, Levee watched his mother being gang-raped by white men, after which incident his father took justice in his hands by killing as many of them as possible by a sly strategy:

What Levee forgets is that his daddy did not smile and yessir the white man in order to get something from him. He did it in order to do something to him, and he carried his plan out to the bitter end. A true warrior, Memphis Green learned how to do what his son cannot. . . . Levee lets his personal ambition dictate how to do battle with his oppressors. In so doing, he reverses his father's smile-and-sell strategy and substitutes compliance for subversiveness. (Adell 60)

The on-stage personifications of whiteness in *Ma Rainey* remain stereotypical, a fact the dramatist himself admits:

The [white] characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are not as well drawn as the black characters, you see, because the emotional center of the play is not those characters; it's with the four guys in the bandroom. So Sturdyvant and Irvin are almost cardboard characters; they are certainly not three dimensional. (Personal interview, Appendix 200)
August Wilson, however, expanded his white portraiture after the one-dimensional, almost demonic Irvin and Sturdyvant of *Ma Rainey* with a better-developed white character in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986). This play examines the lives of African-Americans in the 1910s in a Pittsburgh boarding house. The black owners of the establishment, its residents, and the travelers frequenting it while on their personal quests, frame the dramatic interest in *Joe Turner*. Mary Bogumil provides an informative account of the historical setting for the play:

As a result of the Reconstruction period in the South—and after the 1896 Supreme Court Decision Plessy vs. Ferguson, which declared the “separate but equal” doctrine—the Southern states vehemently began to impose segregation and to enforce Jim Crow laws by rewriting each state’s constitution, legislating an exclusionist policy toward African Americans. By 1907 many African Americans had moved to Northern industrial cities to escape the impact of this constitutional discrimination and to find work other than that of itinerant sharecroppers and docile servants. With the massive migration came feelings of displacement for many of those who were former slaves and for the sons and daughters of those slaves. These feelings were symptomatic reactions to their new social climate. While the African Americans were now free men and women in the North, their freedom unfortunately often took the form of a self-imposed isolation, perhaps a vestige of their marginalization as a culture in the antebellum South. It is this sense of displacement, particularly but not exclusively of
black males, which is dramatized in several ways in Wilson’s play . . .

(464).

Among these displaced black characters dwells one white man, Rutherford Selig. A peddler, he provides Seth, also the owner of the boarding house, with raw materials and then sells the end products to other blacks in the community. Although Selig does not exploit Seth quite the same way as Sturdyvant exploits the black musicians in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Selig’s relationship with Seth is still mainly one in which the white man symbolizes the capital, and the black man the labor, thus substantiating Aimé Césaire’s characterization of interracial relations.

SELIG: I need some dustpans. Everybody asking me about dustpans.

SETH: Gonna cost you fifteen cents apiece. And ten cents to put a handle on them.

SELIG: I’ll give you twenty cents apiece with the handles.

SETH: Alright. But I ain’t gonna give you but fifteen cents for the sheet metal.

SELIG: It’s twenty-five cents apiece for the metal. That’s what we agreed on.

SETH: This low-grade sheet metal. They ain’t worth but a dime. I’m doing you a favor giving you fifteen cents. You know this metal ain’t worth no twenty-five cents. Don’t come talking that twenty-five cent stuff to me over no low-grade sheet metal.
Selig: Alright, fifteen cents apiece. Just make me some dustpans out of them. (7)

At the crux of their bargain lies the fact that Selig is the employer, and Seth the employee: “Selig can’t make no pots and pans. He can sell them but he can’t make them” (43-44).

The rudimentary distinction between the white man and the black man is that the former has access to property whereas the latter can only labor for the white man. Alan Nadel observes in his essay “Boundaries, Logistics, Identity” this racially-charged aspect of Selig and Seth’s business relationship by stating that the former “controls the economy in which Holly’s [Seth’s] labor is traded” (99).

Selig’s main difference from the other white characters of Wilson is that he is not despicable. He is, for example, clearly welcome in the black boarding house, where Seth’s wife Bertha hopes to make him feel at home: “Sit on down there, Selig. Get you a cup of coffee and a biscuit” (7), and “You know you welcome anytime, Selig” (11). The white characters in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom are indispensable to the economic survival of blacks since they are the property-owners, hence the decision-makers, but they are not welcome forces in the lives of African-Americans. What distinguishes Selig from all other white characters Wilson has created is his likeability and his sense of belonging in the black community.

However, even a more positive emblem of whiteness like Selig is not without his defects either. Known as the People Finder among blacks, according to one perspective in the play, he keeps records of his customers in order to locate them in the future for
others. Yet Selig, because of African-American history, inhabits a problematic role as the People Finder:

I can’t promise anything but we been finders in my family for a long time. Bringers and finders. My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships. That wasn’t no easy job either. Sometimes the winds would blow so hard you’d think the hand of God was set against the sails . . . . You’re in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy have found plenty Nigras. My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. He was the best there was at it. Jonas B. Selig. Had him a reputation stretched clean across the country. After Abraham Lincoln gave you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking over for each other . . . we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don’t pay as much. But the People Finding business ain’t so bad. (41)

Rutherford Selig comes from a long tradition of “People Finders,” a euphemism in this case for those in the slave-trading business or in the hunting down and capture of runaway slaves. Selig does not conceal the fact that his family has been the arch-enemies of Africans and later African-Americans, although he appears to overlook the hostility which has historically existed between his ancestors and the ancestors of the blacks in the community where he works. Selig now employs his skills in a legitimate and clean trade, yet it still is a business and his source of livelihood. Its history is far from being untainted, stretching back in time to slavery. As people with African origins were objects for material gain for Selig’s ancestors, his black customers are objects to be located for
money for Selig. In this regard, his business carries a strong resonance of his family's past encounter with blacks.

The second perspective, voiced by Beitha on Selig's role as the People Finder, contradicts the first one and bears more negative undertones:

You can call him a People Finder if you want to. I know Rutherford Selig carries people away too. He done carried a whole bunch of them away from here. Folks plan on leaving by Selig's timing. They wait till he get ready to go, then they hitch a ride on his wagon. Then he charge folks a dollar to tell them where he took them. Now, that's the truth of Rutherford Selig. This old People Finding business is for the birds. He ain't never found nobody he ain't took away. (42)

Like Bertha, who remains skeptical of Selig's business and its ethics, critic Kim Pereira, too, refuses to interpret Selig's role and its history as benevolent:

The disruption of black communities that began with forced migrations from Africa and the selling of slaves piecemeal from plantation to plantation thus continues in a new cycle as sharecropping drives them from their homes in search of a better environment. This, ironically, maintains the profitability of trading in blacks, and Rutherford Selig has found an innovative way to continue the family tradition by finding black people separated as a consequence of slavery and sharecropping. (59)

Nonetheless, August Wilson himself contends that Selig is more or less a positive portrait of whiteness:
I like Selig. I like the idea that he's a People Finder. I think one point I like, given his history which was the history of basically whites with blacks—his grandfather used to hunt down runaway slaves—is that Selig voices this without apology, as a fact of life. This is the way things were, and he very ironically then tells Loomis, “You’re in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy caught a lot of runaway slaves.” I like Selig; I like his honesty; I like his straightforwardness. I like the fact that he presents himself without apology. He’s also welcome into the house. “Sit down, Selig, have a biscuit. Where you going? Oh, here, I’ve got some cabbage and tomatoes,” etc. So there’s no animosity; there’s no nothing coming from the black characters toward him or the fact that his grandfather used to catch runaway slaves. There’s none of that. Everyone can accept people on their own terms; he is a very nice man. (Personal interview, Appendix 199-200)

Whether or not Selig is to be welcomed with open arms or approached with caution, his history overlaps those of his black customers and workers, and it is in this history, in the absent off-stage white characters whom Selig himself names, his father and grandfather, that we find the missing pieces of the puzzle of white-black interaction in America.

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* advances the dramatist’s agenda on whiteness via other off-stage white characters, such as the white man Jeremy, a boarding house resident, confronts. The absent white figure extorts fifty cents a week from black workers at Jeremy’s workplace by threatening them that they will otherwise lose their job. Jeremy
refuses to comply: “It didn’t make no sense to me. I don’t make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him fifty cents of it? He go around to all the colored and he got ten dollars extra. That’s more than I make for a whole week” (64). The injustice of the situation is clear to Jeremy, but his courage in standing up to the white man costs him his job, thereby disclosing the vulnerability of black Americans in the business world.

Another significance of this narrative is this very fact, that it is a narrative. While the dramatic genre more than likely demands that at least some events take place off-stage, thus requiring the related information to be distributed by some other means, Wilson’s plays rely extensively on storytelling. His black men communicate their experiences and the lessons therein through oral narratives. Storytelling is central to Wilson’s work, as it is to African-American literature in general. Black oral narratives, traceable to Africa and later to slave communities in America, function as “communal strategies—community creating and community enhancing”: they instill social values and a unique world view (Stepto 125). Most of the narratives about whiteness in Wilson’s dramatic world enforce a dualistic perspective by dissociating the white from the black and underscoring the negative impact of the white men in the black world. Furthermore, while information is circulated with the help of stories, the whites, who are crucial to the plays themselves, are relegated to an off-stage presence in order to reserve the limelight for the black characters.

One of the central characters of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is the off-stage eponymous white character who looms over the black characters in the play, thus exemplifying once more the significance of such characters in Wilson’s work. The title
of the play comes from a blues song about the historical Joe Turner, who kidnapped black men to work on his plantation as slaves for seven years. Turner was the brother of the Governor of Tennessee and installed a slavery system in the South long after the Emancipation. Because of his privileged status, Joe Turner could secure free labor for himself without having to suffer any consequences. In an interview, August Wilson relates in more detail the historical background for his character: “Joe Turner would press Blacks into peonage. He would send out decoys who would lure Blacks into crap games and then he would sweep down and grab them. He had a chain with forty links to it, and he would take Blacks off to his plantation and work them” (qtd. in Bogumil 468). The play’s protagonist Herald Loomis is one of these unfortunate African-American men.

Had a whole mess of men he caught. Just go out hunting regular like you go out hunting possum. He catch you and go home to his wife and family. Ain’t thought about you going home to yours... .Joe Turner catched me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight. Kept everybody seven years. He’d go out hunting and bring back forty men at a time. And keep them seven years. (72)

A deacon, Herald Loomis has been estranged from his wife and his family as well as his sense of self because of these lost years he has spent in bondage. When he arrives at Seth’s boarding house with his daughter, he is, on the surface, searching for his long-lost wife; Yet the ultimate object of his quest is his identity. Trudier Harris explains Loomis’s dilemma and how the absent white character becomes a compelling symbolic presence on stage thanks to his black victim:
Turner looms over Loomis’s past, his present, and his future. As an archetypal symbol of racism and repression, he is not simply a man, but a force. He represents the evil that takes away all the potential identified with black men, whether that evil historically took the form of slavery, sharecropping, or convict labor as a result of being jailed without any semblance of due process. He represents the collective failure of American democracy for all black people, the dismissal of the race from the American dream. It is not necessary for Turner to appear as a character in the play for the destructive history of his collective representation to be felt. As long as Herald Loomis lives, so will Joe Turner. (56)

The destructive history Joe Turner epitomizes in this play is the haunting history white America has imprinted on black Americans. Sandra Shannon declares Turner to be “both Loomis’s captor and the personification of all the antagonistic forces facing newly freed slaves of this era” (“Conversing with the Past” 35). He is the most prominent symbol of the economic exploitation and abuse African-Americans have experienced in the hands of whites. The playwright has noted in an interview with Kim Powers that the seven years Herald Loomis has spent in peonage “can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery, of being taken out of Africa and brought to America” (54).

Trudier Harris comments further on the role of Turner in this play named after him:

Turner could rightfully be viewed as the devil, or even worse than that, for if he merely took people’s souls, that would be an end to their misery. By
stealing their lives and their potential—without killing them—he consigns them to the fate of zombies. Men like Loomis become automatons, destined to live out the fate that others have prescribed for them, existing because they lack the imagination or the will to take their own lives . . . by blaming the white man for everything, he[Loomis] has made him into a god. Long after Loomis has been granted freedom several years ago—on Joe Turner’s birthday—he still belongs to that man’s definition of black male human beings. (55)

As Trudier Harris observes, Turner is such an integral component of Loomis’s journey in life that he carries Turner with him wherever he goes, thus extending the influence of the white man among blacks almost infinitely.

In his 1987 play, The Piano Lesson, the playwright situates the events in 1936 but deliberately looks back once again at the historical and personal significance of slavery. The dramatic conflict at the heart of The Piano Lesson revolves around the two options available to Boy Willie and his sister Berniece regarding their family heirloom piano. Whereas Berniece wants to hold onto this symbol of her heritage, Boy Willie claims it would be put to better use if they sell it and with the money buy the land on which their ancestors have toiled as slaves. Another pivotal actor in this family drama is the ghost of a white man, James Sutter, whose ancestors have claimed proprietorship over both the black family and the piano. In fact, The Piano Lesson stresses for the most part the consequence of ownership as its central characters, Boy Willie, Berniece, and James Sutter, lay claim to the piano. By thus interweaving the family histories of both racial
groups, Wilson demonstrates how the history of the black race and the white race in the United States has always been intertwined.

In *The Piano Lesson*, whiteness is embodied in the on-stage character of the ghost (who without any doubt is a palpable force both for the black characters and the audience) and in the numerous off-stage characters playing crucial roles in African-American narratives. For instance, one of these absent white characters is Robert Sutter, the grandfather of James Sutter, who had bartered two of his slaves for a piano for his wife, Miss Ophelia. But when the mistress began to miss her former slaves, Sutter had Boy Willie, the great-grandfather of Boy Willie and Berniece, carve on the piano images of his wife and their son, the two Sutter slaves who had been sold. Doaker (the uncle of Berniece and Boy Willie) informs his audience with another narrative:

See that right there? That's my grandmother, Berniece. She looked just like that. And he put a picture of my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy the way he remembered him. He made them up out of his memory. Only thing . . . he didn't stop there. He carved all this. He got a picture of his mama . . . Mama Esther . . . and his daddy, Boy Charles . . . . Then he put on the side here all kinds of things. See that? That's when him and Mama Berniece got married. They called it jumping the broom. That's how you got married in them days. Then he got here when my daddy was born . . . and here he got Mama Esther’s funeral . . . and down here he got Mr. Nolander taking Mama Berniece and my daddy away down to his place in Georgia. He got all kinds of things what
happened with our family. 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. When Miss Ophelia seen it ... she
got excited. Now she had her piano and her niggers too. . . . (44)

The piano serves specifically as a reminder of the black family's history of bondage, but
its significance also encompasses the African-American cultural history. These carvings
transform the piano into more than a musical instrument; it becomes a catalyst in the
interactions of the black and the white family. Until now, the piano has belonged to the
Sutter family. However, Boy Willie, by carving his family history on it, has also claimed
it as his property. The new value the piano assumes—it has been bought, in the first
place, at the price of Boy Willie's family, and it artistically tells their story—results in
friction between the two families and their future generations. Boy Willie's grandson
Boy Charles associates the piano with his own family: according to him, whoever owns
the piano also owns the black family. Therefore, it has to be removed from the Sutter
household: "He be talking about taking it out of Sutter's house. Say it was the story of
our whole family and as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we was still in slavery"
(45). These black narratives unveil the past that has shaped the present, in which the
ghost of James Sutter "refuses to relinquish his claim on the piano as well as an unspoken
related claim on these descendants of slaves once owned by the Sutter clan" (Shannon,
Dramatic Vision 160). The late Sutter haunts the black family and claims the piano as his
with his unrelenting presence on stage.
Ownership is of utmost importance among the present day members of the black family, too. Whereas Berniece insists on keeping the piano (thus, her family history and the ghosts from her past) in her possession, Boy Willie wants to buy land with it because he believes, as does August Wilson, that whites are privileged because of their property. According to Boy Willie’s reasoning, African-Americans with land will enjoy equal rights as Euro-Americans.

Many is the time I looked at my daddy and seen him staring off at his hands. I got a little older I know what he was thinking. He sitting there saying, “I got these big old hands but what I’m gonna do with them? Best I can do is make a fifty-acre crop for Mr. Stovall. Got these big old hands capable of doing anything. I can take and build something with these hands. But where’s the tools? All I got is these hands. Unless I go out here and kill me somebody and take what they got... it’s a long row to hoe for me to get something of my own... 

See now... if he had his own land he wouldn’t have felt that way. If he had something under his feet that belonged to him he could stand up taller... If you got a piece of land you’ll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton... the weather, and anything else you want to talk about. (91-92)

Boy Willie sees the main source of the white man’s power over the black man as his property: the land. African-Americans in the past lacked prestige because they could only
serve as laborers on the white man’s land, first as slaves, later as sharecroppers. Once these roles are upset, Boy Willie believes the white man’s authority will be terminated.

Nevertheless, Berniece refuses to acquiesce to Boy Willie’s plan, and the siblings remain at odds with each other until the very end when the ghost of Sutter poses a more dangerous threat to the black family, and they need to unite forces to defeat him. Anne Fleche maintains therefore that the dramatic conflict shifts in the course of the play from that between the brother and the sister to that between “their family and Sutter” (10). The ghost with whom Boy Willie wrestles in the end in “a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror” can only be exorcised by Berniece who summons help from the spirits of her ancestors by playing the piano for the first time in years (106). Having witnessed a practical and vital use for the piano, Boy Willie finally allows Berniece to keep it: “Hey Berniece . . . if you and Maretha [Berniece’s daughter] don’t keep playing on that piano . . . ain’t no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back” (108). Both siblings finally agree that the piano can serve them better as a well of spiritual strength rather than as a piece of property.

August Wilson’s next play Two Trains Running (1990) also highlights the economic power of whiteness and the white man’s economic exploitation of African-Americans. The play takes place in 1969 in a Pittsburgh restaurant where its characters are working hard to ensure their economic survival in a white-dominated world. One of its central off-stage white characters, Lutz, owns the meat market across the street from the restaurant. Many years ago, Lutz hired Hambone, a black man, to paint the fence around his store in return for a chicken. If the job was done well, Lutz promised
Hambone he would receive a ham. When Hambone finishes his painting job, he expects a ham, believing he has done a satisfactory job, but since it is up to Lutz to determine the merit of the black man's labor, Hambone feels cheated out of his ham. Memphis, the owner of the restaurant, however, excuses the inequity: "He[Hambone] think he did a good job and Lutz didn't. That's where he went wrong—letting Lutz decide what to pay him for his work. If you leave it like that, quite naturally he gonna say it ain't worth the higher price" (23). Most of the black characters in the play regard Lutz with hostility as he has in their opinion taken advantage of a black worker. Hambone, on the other hand, has protested this injustice by standing outside Lutz's store every day for nine years and demanding his ham in the few phrases he can now utter: "I want my ham. He gonna give me my ham."

MEMPHIS: Lutz ain't gonna give him no ham . . . cause he don't feel he owe him. I wouldn't give him one either.

WOLF: After all this time, it don't make no difference. He ought to go on and give him a ham. What difference do it make? It ain't like he ain't got none. Got a whole store full of hams. (28)

It is curious why Lutz refuses Hambone a ham after so many years. The audience is not offered any insights into his motivation, and maybe that is beside the point. What August Wilson underlines instead is how black workers are exploited by white Americans who employ them. Sterling, a newcomer at Memphis's restaurant, comments more extensively on the injustice of the bargain: "That fence run all up the side and all the way around the back there. He ought to give him two hams. I wouldn't paint that fence for no
ham. He'd have to give me a case of chickens or one of them half-cows he got hanging over there” (49-50). Although Lutz remains a negative off-stage white character, he attends Hambone’s funeral at the end of *Two Trains Running*, and his behavior indicates that Hambone’s protests have at least earned Lutz’s respect. Hambone is a symbol in the play (as is Lutz), a man who would not just take anything but what he thinks he deserves. Holloway, who is introduced as “a man who all his life has voiced his outrage at injustice with little effect” (5) supports and admires Hambone’s position: “he ain’t willing to accept whatever the white man throw at him” (30).

When I inquired about his white characters, and more specifically, Lutz, August Wilson replied:

I was careful not to make them villainous. There is a tendency; it’s too easy to make white characters villainous. Lutz didn’t give Hambone his ham. Lutz says he wouldn’t give it to him either because he didn’t owe Hambone. Under those circumstances, you know Lutz is an honorable man. He did not owe the guy his ham because Hambone did not do a good job on the fence according to Lutz. The fault is in letting someone else put the value on your labor, you see; it’s always been about labor with black Americans. That’s why we’re here, as part of a labor system. So the fault was in allowing Lutz to put the value on labor. If I say, “I will charge you this amount, a ham, to paint the fence,” then it won’t be up to your judgment whether I get a ham or a chicken. So Lutz isn’t a villainous character. He could have given Hambone the ham, but he didn’t owe him;
it's as simple as that. What is important to me is the fact that Lutz
confronts Hambone every day, or Hambone confronts Lutz every day, to
put it more properly, and says, "I want my ham," and Lutz says, "Take a
chicken," and he turns his back and opens up his store. It is at this very
point that the character says, "Lutz turn his back. He open up the store."
He feels comfortable enough that he can just turn his back on the man. I
think that at least Lutz, if he opens up a store, should be looking, but he
doesn't have to. You see, he can turn his back and open up the store. So
little things like that, those things, for me, are really important. (Appendix
202-03)

While in these "little" details Wilson stresses the social superiority of white men
and their fearlessness in exploiting others, Two Trains Running ends with a somewhat
promising outlook on African-American economic future. Memphis finally receives the
sum from the government he has been demanding from them for buying out his
restaurant. Yet the underlying message remains hopeless: the blacks' money ends up in
the pockets of the dominant group:

The money go from you to me to you and then—bingo, it's gone. You
give it to the white man. Pay your rent, pay your telephone, buy your
groceries, see the doctor—bingo, it's gone. Just circulate it around till it
find that hole, then—bingo. Like trying to haul sand in a bucket with a
hole in it. (34)
Because the economic system is in the hands of the majority, African-Americans cannot retain the money they earn, and they have to rely on illegal operations like playing numbers, which is once again controlled by whites. Holloway ineffectively criticizes the economic injustice:

I don't know why I play the numbers. The Alberts want all the advantages. They got six hundred-to-one odds, but that ain't enough for them. If thirty or forty niggers get lucky enough to hit the numbers the same day, they don't even want them to enjoy their luck. They want to take that away from them. They don't say nothing about cutting the numbers when six thousand niggers guess wrong. (84)

When Sterling hits the numbers and discovers his share has been cut by the Alberts, crucial off-stage white characters, he protests furiously. He visits Old Man Albert to settle the score with him: "... I told him to give me back my two dollars. Said I was calling off the bet. He gave me the two dollars and asked me for his six hundred back. I told him no. Told him I was gonna keep that. That way I have something that belong to him for a change" (97). The black Americans in August Wilson's dramatic world are fed up with the abusive system but can only make feeble attempts at retaliation.

In *Two Trains Running*, as in other Wilson plays, whites own and therefore govern the world. The lack of economic equilibrium is illustrated in the off-stage character Mellon, a rich white man, who makes the calls and has a great influence on the political scene. When Prophet Samuel, an African-American, is arrested and prophesies a sign from God, and the stock market loses value, Mellon, the owner of companies like
Gulf Oil, tells the mayor "to drop the charges" against Prophet Samuel (26). However, although a white man seems to have heeded the warnings of a black man in this specific instance, it is still whites who decide the fate of the powerless group.

Norine Dworkin in her article "Blood on the Tracks" presents the historical context for *Two Trains Running*:

In 1968, the relationship of blacks to white Americans was not that much different than the relationship of slaves to their masters. It was like a day off on the plantation. Nobody was working. There were no jobs. There were all these people with families but no means of support, because society didn't have any use for them. (8)

The play itself bears out Dworkin's thesis as Holloway argues in his rather long monologue:

Niggers is the most hard-working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. . . .Now all of a sudden niggers is lazy. . . .All of a sudden when they got to pay niggers, ain't no work for him to do. If it wasn't for you the white man would be poor. Every little bit he got he got standing on top of you. . . .He give you three dollars a day for six months and he got him a railroad for the next hundred years. . . .If the white man could figure out a way to make some money by putting niggers to work . . . we'd all be working. He ain't building no more railroads. He got them. He ain't building no more highways. Somebody done already stuck the telephone poles in the ground. . . .The white man ain't stacking no more
niggers. You know what I’m talking about, stacking niggers, don’t you? If you ain’t got nothing... you can go out here and get you a nigger.

Then you got something, see. You got one nigger. If that one nigger get out there and plant something... get something out the ground... even if ain’t nothing but a bushel of potatoes... then you got one nigger and one bushel of potatoes. Then you take that bushel of potatoes and go get you another nigger. Then you got two niggers. Put them to work and you got two niggers and two bushels of potatoes. See, now you can buy two more niggers. That’s how you stack a nigger on top of a nigger. White folks got to stacking... and I’m talking about they stacked up some niggers!

stacked up close to fifty million niggers. (34-35)

One of the points Wilson revisits in his work is how the socioeconomic system in America has from the outset lain on the shoulders of its black citizens, crippling them with its immense weight. The economic exploitation of African-Americans has not ended with slavery; it has only assumed a slightly different form. Without black workers both during and after slavery, America would not be the America that it is today, a fact white Americans are unwilling to acknowledge, at least publicly. The white men, the main source of evil in Wilson’s fictive world, have used blacks to attain their goals and to build an optimal society for themselves, but having already accomplished their objectives, they have no further use for blacks, who in the end are discarded by those who have exploited them and their labor to the fullest extent. Moreover, Euro-Americans, signified in Holloway’s monologue by the generic “white man,” have managed to take credit for
the products of black labor and do not hesitate to disparage these workers now for their "laziness," a handy excuse to explain away their unemployment in the sixties.

Wilson's latest play *Seven Guitars* (1995) explores a similar world to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Both plays, although set in different eras, the former in the 1940s and the latter in the 1920s, explore how record companies owned by whites take advantage of black musicians. Floyd Barton, the protagonist of *Seven Guitars* and a blues singer whose record has become a recent hit, like Ma Rainey, has to work with the white moguls on unequal terms. Savoy Records and his manager Mr. T. L. Hall, another one of Wilson's numerous off-stage whites, offer Floyd some respect after his success. Only at that moment does Mr. T. L. Hall invest in Floyd and the record company invite him to Chicago for another recording session. While *Seven Guitars* can also be regarded a murder mystery culminating in Floyd's murder, it exposes in greater depth the unjust economic setup in America. Though now famous, Floyd and his musician friends are as poor as ever. The whites are only interested in making a profit off of Floyd's music, and not his or his band's financial welfare.

**CANEWELL:** I walked out cause the man didn't want to pay me what he said he was going to pay me. He didn't want to pay the agreed-upon price. He wanna be halfway in the liquor business. Twenty-five dollars and a bottle of whiskey do not make thirty-five dollars...

**RED CARTER:** It ain't gonna work like that with me either. We may as well get it straight now. If he tell me thirty-five dollars, that's what he gonna pay me.
CANEWELL: You see what I’m saying? I asked him say, “Is there any other kind of way we can do this?” He just looked at me. I asked him again. I wanted to be polite like my mama taught me. He told me “Leave.” Just like that, “Leave.” Just like you tell a dog “Sit.” I told him “Bye!”

FLOYD: This time it’s gonna be different. We gonna get the money up front.

CANEWELL: It wasn’t all about the money. He treat me like he didn’t care nothing about me.

FLOYD: He don’t have to care nothing about you. You all doing business. He ain’t got to like you. Tell him, Red, you got to take advantage of the opportunity. It don’t matter if he like you or not. You got to take the opportunity while it’s there.

CANEWELL: Just because I was there on an opportunity don’t mean he got to treat me bad. He on an opportunity too. You creating an opportunity for him. (47)

The black musicians in the recording business have no value as human beings for the white businessmen. Thus, Seven Guitars emphasizes that blues musicians like Ma Rainey have not made much, if any, progress in the two decades between the twenties and the forties. Artists like Floyd are as expendable as they were twenty years ago, and American society and businesses are not likely to be transformed in favor of their black workers. It is also this point Wilson took issue with during our interview:
Floyd doesn’t need Mr. T. L. Hall; he is quite capable of making a record by himself. . . . So nothing is stopping Floyd from getting up to Chicago and presenting himself to record his record. Ideally, he should get in a position where he has his own recording studio, and he can record what he wants, you see, because the decision about what records to record and what records to be put out are still being made by someone else. Those decisions are being filtered through the sensibilities of someone else, so that’s the whole point. “I don’t know if they even are gonna put it out or not, but I told you that if they put it out, it was gonna be a hit. I knew, it would be a hit record if they put it out.” You see, because it’s always left, in 1948 and 1998, in the hands of someone else to do that. So the struggle is to gain access to the power to control and to disseminate your own cultural products. (Appendix 204)

Although *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars* both critique the unfairness of the music industry in the first half of the twentieth century, the dramatist thinks not much has changed at the end of the century to ameliorate the working conditions of African-American artists.

*Seven Guitars* ends with a twist when Mr. T. L. Hall is revealed to be another kind of exploiter, one who sells fake insurance in the poor black neighborhoods. This dramatic incident could reflect on the playwright’s personal experiences with white Americans. As a child growing up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Wilson was acquainted with the white economic force in this black community. He tells Dinah
Livingston that “There was literally an army of whites who would come through that
ever you saw 'em in the community, they were takin' money out of the community” (29). However, Canewell in *Seven Guitars* perceives Mr. T. L. Hall’s thievery through another lens: “There’s lots of poor people. Mr. T. L. Hall say he didn’t want to be one. Selling that fake insurance might have been his only chance not to be poor” (85).

Considered from this angle, the exploitation of blacks by whites is no longer synonymous with malevolence as it merely illustrates Nature’s principle of the survival of the fittest. Only in his latest play does Wilson admit the inevitability of black Americans’ exploitation if Euro-Americans are to succeed and thus complicates his so far homogeneous depiction of whiteness.

Whiteness, as I will discuss in the following chapters, has many evil attributes in Wilson’s drama, but its predominant quality for the playwright is that of economic power derived from proprietorship and its aftereffect, economic exploitation. Whites, since their initial contact with blacks, have approached them as free or cheap labor and have capitalized on their labor. Thus, even after the Emancipation, the American history of the twentieth century—which Wilson has been rewriting in his cycle of plays—remains one of abuse and bondage for African-Americans. Black Americans, now free, can still not enjoy sovereignty, economic independence, or cultural equality and are unfortunately still within the tight grasp of the white majority. In the following chapters, I will investigate why black Americans cannot shatter these metaphoric chains.
CHAPTER III
WHITENESS AS SOCIAL PRIVILEGE

The privilege of whiteness in Wilson’s dramatic universe extends far beyond the reach of property and capital. The Caucasians in Wilson’s plays also enjoy social privilege, which derives purely from their skin color. American society, while it welcomes whites with open arms, offering them a fair chance at the American dream, denies African-Americans opportunities simply because of their race. August Wilson has consistently criticized this social inequality, which he claims has its roots in Christianity, in many of his plays, namely *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *Two Trains Running*.

The first of these plays, *Ma Rainey*, mainly delves into the economic exploitation of blues musicians during the 1920s. Yet the playwright also directs the audience’s attention to how white America operates in more insidious ways to humiliate and subdue its black subjects, as in the case of Ma Rainey, who is denied service by a white cab driver. Once she arrives on stage, the dramatic conflict between her and the police officer, one of Wilson’s few on-stage white characters, heightens with their incompatible accounts of the same incident. Despite such disparity, one can easily surmise that Ma Rainey, being a black woman, has been refused a ride by the cab driver, a white man whose absence on stage does not lessen his impact on the black character. “Said he wasn’t gonna haul no colored folks . . . if you want to know the truth of it” (51). The
driver, apparently, serves only white folks, and his excuse to turn down black customers is that “he was waiting on a fare . . .” (50). Ma Rainey’s confrontations with the white world, represented in the play by Sturdyvant, Irvin, and the policeman, reveal her demands for respect and recognition both as a human being and as a talented blues singer.

However, in this society run by whites, she is disesteemed because of her race. As Cutler, her guitar and trombone player, later acknowledges, “She can’t even get a cab up here in the North” (95). Yet it is not only Ma Rainey who faces such degradation. The black men in her band, too, have to endure similar experiences in the North where they can’t even cash a check; therefore, they make numerous requests to Irvin to be paid in cash. Although August Wilson focuses on the lives of African-Americans in his plays, his black portraits disclose a lot about whiteness as well. Whiteness is what blackness is not. Therefore, the privileges not enjoyed by black Americans are those enjoyed instead by white Americans.

The white man’s hegemony has its origins mainly in his religious authority. Kim Pereira reminds us that “Many atrocities during slavery were committed in the name of Christianity by owners who believed that their Christian upbringing endowed them with the moral authority to enslave African ‘savages’” (79). Africans were first enslaved in the name of Christianity: “through the ages the church had sanctioned slavery as a means of converting the heathen to Christian civilization” (Franklin and Moss 190). Later, worried that Christianized blacks would consider themselves on a par with their masters and pursue liberty, white Americans passed laws, for example, the following one in Virginia
in 1667, which stated “the conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the
person as to his bondage or freedome” (qtd. in Franklin and Moss 57).

Once planters were convinced that conversion did not have the effect of
emancipating their slaves, they sought to use the church as an agency for
maintaining the institution of slavery. Ministers were encouraged to
instruct slaves along the lines of obedience and subserviency. Bishops and
other high church officials were not above owning slaves and fostering the
continuation of slavery. . . . In the last three decades before the Civil War
the church became one of the strongest allies of the proslavery element.

(Franklin and Moss 135-36)

African-Americans’ awareness of how Christian ideology was modified to advocate
slavery comes across in slave narratives like Frederick Douglass’s. Douglass points out
in his narrative the dichotomy between the two images of Christ blacks discovered in the
white man’s religion: one who enslaves them and one who promises them deliverance at
the end of their suffering and punishment to their oppressors. Slavemasters committing
the most heinous crimes appear to have found a proponent in the former image and in the
Scripture: “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many
stripes” (Douglass 288). Nonetheless, slaves did not fail to note and believe in a Christ
who “was neither remote nor abstract, but as intimate, personal, and immediate as the
gods of Africa had been” (Levine 35). Lawrence Levine’s analysis of spirituals in his
book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) highlights refrains in spirituals
which depict Christ as the champion of slaves’ rights: “‘O when I talk I talk wid God,’
'Mass Jesus is my bosom friend,’ ‘I’m goin’ to walk with [talk with, live with, see] King Jesus by myself, by myself’” (35). Abolitionists, too, endorsed the teachings of a gentler Christ: “they insisted that it[slavery] was contrary to the teachings of Christianity, since Jesus taught the doctrine of universal brotherhood and one of the cardinal principles of Christianity was that all men were created in the image of God” (Franklin and Moss 173).

However, the association of Christianity with slavery is entrenched in the minds of some of Wilson’s black male characters, who, therefore, consider Jesus Christ “a white man’s God,” as Levee in *Ma Rainey* describes him: “God ain’t never listened to no nigger’s prayers. God take a nigger’s prayers and throw them in the garbage. God don’t pay niggers no mind. In fact . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don’t love you, nigger! Jesus hate your black ass!” (98). Levee’s rage at God stems from both social and personal reasons. He resents the fact, as do other blacks, that Christianity has condoned slavery and the inhumane treatment of black Americans. Moreover, Levee’s fury originates, in part, from God’s seeming unresponsiveness to his mother’s prayers while she was being raped by white men. Having lived under the shadow of that incident all his life, Levee expresses his ire by stabbing “upward in the air, trying to reach God” (100). Sandra Shannon maintains, “Levee has concluded that God and the white man are one and the same. Motivated by this simple equation, he simultaneously rails against the white man for a history of abuse and against a now-alien God for allowing it to persist” (“The Long Wait” 143). This “equation” of God and whiteness is not peculiar to Levee. In fact, Wilson himself as well as some of his other black male characters share the same perspective.
Despite the religious tone of *Ma Rainey*, *Fences* is a more secular Wilson play in which a white Christ figure does not preside over the fates of blacks. Instead, Wilson in *Fences* investigates the social privilege of whiteness within the context of the American dream, a dream that was inaccessible to African-Americans. *Fences* depicts not only the fences that eventually surround Troy’s family but also the fences within which black America is imprisoned. The prologue to the play highlights the imbalance of social privilege by comparing the advantages available to European immigrants and former slaves at the turn of the century:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. . . . The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. . . . The city rejected them. . . . They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole and lived in pursuit of their own dream: That they could breathe free, finally, and to stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (523-24)\(^6\)

\(^6\) The reference here is to a different version of *Fences* in *New Worlds of Literature*. Elsewhere, I cite from the 1986 edition.
Wilson critiques here how the American dream was readily obtainable by those of European descent but was denied for no good reason to those with darker skins. While Anglo-Americans could easily realize their American dream, African-Americans were only allowed to contribute to the prosperity of their racial Other with their menial labor. The American dream was out of their reach. Consequently, Troy’s primary resentment against life emanates from his social failures which he could not circumvent because of his race. Troy knows that he couldn’t even have owned a house if it hadn’t been for Gabriel’s injury in World War II: “If my brother didn’t have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I’m fifty-three years old. Now see if you can understand that!” (31). A hard-working man like Troy hasn’t been granted an opportunity to transcend his social status and is, therefore, left with a feeling of discontent with himself, as well as with the social rules that have brought about his social immobility.

Although *Fences* is primarily a family drama, it also addresses the social discrimination against blacks. Troy has dedicated his life to overcome racial barriers. The play begins in media res with Troy’s protests against the policies of the trash collection company where he is employed.

I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, “Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?” Told him, “what’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white men fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain’t no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How
come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?” He told me “take it to the union.” (9)

The company discriminates against black workers by assigning them to haul garbage while white workers have the cleaner job of driving trucks. This policy reveals how American society, because it is run by Anglo-Americans, privileges and protects its white citizens while marginalizing and exploiting the black ones. Troy’s life is marked by his reactions and struggles against such an unjust social setup. His fight for equality finally yields results, and he is promoted to driving trucks. Yet Dinah Livingston remarks that “In Wilson’s plays, black people are only as successful as white people allow them to be.” For instance, “When Troy Maxson . . . is promoted from garbage collector to garbage-truck driver, it is clear that he has gone as far as he can go” (25). The white world circumscribing Troy’s life finds its symbol in Mr. Rand, the manager of the company Troy works for, who remains off-stage but vividly comes to life in black characters’ stories.

A more focal conflict in Troy’s life is his having being denied a chance at major league baseball because of his race. He has played successfully in the Negro Leagues, but professional baseball was segregated until it was too late for Troy to participate in the majors. Although Rose and Bono attempt to convince him that “Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. . . .They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football” (14), Troy remains unconvinced and resentful: “if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don’t care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play . . . then they ought to have let you play”
Troy, as a result of his own disappointing experiences in the past, is apprehensive about Cory’s future and refuses to let him play football because

The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can’t nobody take away from you.

Blacks in sports are at the mercy of Caucasians who make the determinations about the fate of black athletes. In order to succeed in this dog-eat-dog world according to Troy, “The colored guy got to be twice as good before he can get on the team” (36). It is thus not coincidental that white baseball players of Troy’s time who are the same caliber or less notable than their black counterparts receive more advantages: “I saw Josh Gibson’s daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk’s daughter ain’t walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that!”

As August Wilson points out in his prologue to *Fences*, the white man is “limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work,” whereas the black man is restricted in every possible way and spends his entire life struggling against and failing to overcome the obstacles artificially erected in his way (103).

In *Fences*, it is not only the white world that extends benefits to whiteness; some blacks also further this social imbalance and thus become Troy’s target. For instance,

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7 Josh Gibson was the homerun king of the Negro leagues, whereas Selkirk was merely an average white baseball player.
Pope, who buys himself a restaurant after hitting the numbers, favors white customers over blacks: “A Negro go in there and can’t get no kind of service,” complains Troy. “I seen a white fellow come in there and order a bowl of stew. Pope picked all the meat out the pot for him. Man ain’t had nothing but a bowl of meat! Negro come behind him and ain’t got nothing but the potatoes and carrots” (26). The fate of African-Americans becomes more dismal, Wilson suggests, when blacks themselves contribute to their own misery.

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, too, Wilson reminds his audience once again how all the privileges in American society have gone to the white men. Seth, the owner of the boarding-house, warns the others of the fate of the newly-freed blacks who “drop everything and head North looking for freedom”: “They don’t know the white fellows looking too. White fellows coming from all over the world. White fellow come over and in six months got more than what I got” (6). The American dream is thus not earned on merit, but on race. People’s skills and hard work have little to do with the benefits they reap; their social success in America is purely determined by the color of their skin. In fact, this social commentary emerging in 1911, the historical background for the play, was still true in 1957, the year in which *Fences* is set.

*Joe Turner* carries on some of the other Wilson themes from earlier plays. Like *Ma Rainey*, it espouses the view that Christianity is the white man’s religion. Its protagonist Herald Loomis, who has served as a deacon before he was captured by the infamous Joe Turner, now ironically compares Jesus Christ with an overseer:
Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting. He tallying up the cotton. “Well, Jeremiah . . . what’s the matter, you ain’t picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations.” And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is ‘cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here. Something don’t fit right! (92-93)

Having experienced slavery firsthand, Loomis understands how Christianity has served and furthered the interests of his oppressors, as critic Kim Pereira observes:

... in Loomis’s mind, it is the church, not he, that has sinned. Christianity is at the root of many of his problems and the problems of his people. White Christian men sold black Africans into slavery and the white God, Jesus Christ, in whose name and under whose protective banner plantation owners exploited their cotton-picking slaves, blessed his white disciples for their efforts. (78)

During an interview, August Wilson expressed to Bill Moyers similar views about Christ and Christianity:

Amiri Baraka has said that when you look in the mirror, you should see your God. If you don’t, you have somebody else’s God. So, in fact, what you do is worship an image of God which is white, which is the image of the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on the
slave ships, who have beaten you, and who have forced you to work. (qtd. in Shannon, *Dramatic Vision* 137)

Worshipping the image of your oppressor puts you in a double-bind. Consequently, Herald Loomis, after he is reunited with his wife Martha, has to achieve self-sufficiency, like other Wilson characters, and has to learn not to seek help from symbols of whiteness. Therefore, Loomis “slashes himself across the chest” and bleeds (for) himself rather than empower “the white man’s God” for having suffered, bled, and died for the sake of humanity (93). If Loomis can become his own deity, he will have no further use for Christianity. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* can thus be interpreted as espousing the same self-sufficiency to its black audiences by showing them how to end the social privilege of whiteness sanctioned by the church. Sandra Shannon, too, argues that the Shiny Man whom Bynum is searching for in the play “is the African alternative to what August Wilson calls ‘the white man’s God’” (*Dramatic Vision* 137). To abolish the white man’s privileged status in society, black Americans need to replace one of the main symbols of his power with their own God.

In yet another play, *Two Trains Running*, Wilson calls attention to how the Christian God is associated with whiteness in the black imagination. Holloway, for example, tells the story of how his grandfather, clearly an Uncle Tom figure whom Holloway detests, has conjured up God: “If you let him tell it, God was a white man who had a big plantation in the sky and sat around drinking mint juleps and smoking Havana cigars. He couldn’t wait to die to get up in heaven to pick cotton” (77). It is this portrait
of God that August Wilson and most of his black characters distrust and resist, a conception that benefits Caucasians and condones their crimes.

As seen in these four plays, black Americans perceive whiteness to be heavily laden with social privilege even in the absence of economic power. According to Wilson, American society is structured so that citizens with fair skins have insurmountable advantages over those with darker skins who are unrelentingly marginalized, exploited, and abused by the system. Race, because it is often a distinct indicator, has for a long time been used to privilege one group over another. From the beginning, Anglo-Americans have implanted this order by manipulating the teachings of Christianity to suit their own interests. For this reason, Wilson favors substituting an African God for the “white man’s God”—a crucial off-stage character who, nonetheless, looms over Levee and Loomis’s past and present. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the privilege of whiteness stretches to more than just religious or social authority, and merely replacing the white image of Christ with an African deity will not once and for all eradicate Caucasians’ heightened status in America.
CHAPTER IV
WHITENESS AS LAW

In his delineation of whiteness, August Wilson often underscores the legal power Euro-Americans exercise over black Americans. The white sheriffs, police officers, and judges persecute and prosecute the African-American characters mostly wrongfully. The clash between these authority figures and the numerous black characters who have been victimized by the legal system points to how law has a white and ugly face in the black imagination. In his plays, Wilson thus emphasizes the fine but essential distinction between law and justice, between legality and legitimacy. What is considered lawful by the power structure is indeed unjust and erodes the black characters' faith in the system.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the white policeman, the representative of law, encounters a conflict with the black world, more specifically, with Ma Rainey. The tension between the two characters, which has begun off-stage, only accelerates once they appear on stage. On her way to her recording session, Ma has had an accident with her car, and her subsequent attempt to get a cab fails. The white cab driver who refuses to drive Ma and her company is knocked down. The policeman handling this incident explains that the driver "claims she knocked him down. We got her charged with assault and battery" (50). Ma adamantly denies the charge. For her, the problem lies instead in the officer's disrespect for her and his disbelief in her declared identity. Her insistent order to Irvin, her manager, "Tell the man who I am!" reflects on her hurt pride
occasioned by the policeman’s refusal to take her seriously (48). The policeman thus
represents the social order—enforced by the dominant group—according to which black
Americans are denied presence, identity, and any validity. For instance, the policeman
declines to accept that Ma’s nephew Sylvester was driving her car.

POLICEMAN: Lady, we don’t know whose car he was driving.

MA RAINEY: That’s my car!

DUSSIE MAE and SYLVESTER: That’s Ma’s car!

MA RAINEY: What you mean you don’t know whose car it is? I bought
and paid for that car.

POLICEMAN: That’s what you say, lady... We still gotta check. (49-50)

The dialogue consists of a series of statements by Ma Rainey, Sylvester, and Dussie Mae,
all black characters, questioned by the white officer of the law. The policeman not only
refuses to believe that an African-American woman could own a car, but he also sides
with the cab driver: “she tries to get in this cab. The cabbie’s waiting on a fare. She
starts creating a disturbance. The cabbie gets out to try and explain the situation to her
... and she knocks him down” (50). By disregarding Ma Rainey's narrative and
endorsing the cab driver’s instead, the policeman is instrumental in furthering the
discrimination the cab driver reveals in his reluctance to serve black customers.

August Wilson portrays the forces of law and order in a negative light by
emphasizing their corruption as well. Like most other white officers whom Wilson has
created, the policeman is easily bribed and agrees to ignore the charge brought against Ma
Rainey.
IRVIN: (Slides a bill from his pocket.) . . . (He shakes the POLICEMAN’s hands and passes him the bill.) As soon as we’re finished with the recording session, I’ll personally stop by the precinct house and straighten up this misunderstanding.

POLICEMAN: Well . . . I guess that’s all right. As long as someone is responsible for them.

(He pockets the bill and winks at IRVIN.)

No need to come down . . . I’ll take care of it myself. Of course, we wouldn’t want nothing like this to happen again.

IRVIN: Don’t worry, Officer . . . I’ll take care of everything. Thanks for your help. (52)

The so-called justice decreed by whites becomes something that can be bought and sold for the highest price in Wilson’s plays. Consequently, the already privileged members of the white race enjoy power by their command of the law, and black Americans are left to fend for themselves by having to pay for “justice,” as in the case of Ma Rainey.

_The Fences_ offers a similarly unflattering portrait of whiteness and its legal authority, and Troy’s brother Gabriel is a veteran of World War II. Troy lays the blame for Gabriel’s injury on the American government which had recruited black men like Gabriel to fight against the Japanese: “Man go over there and fight the war . . . messing around with them Japs, get half his head blown off . . . and they give him a lousy three thousand dollars. And I had to swoop down on that” (31). According to Troy, the white government is guilty not only of playing both ends against the middle but also of
undercompensating one of its soldiers for his trauma. As if Gabriel has not suffered
enough in the hands of the white-run legal system, this non-threatening, pious man is
arrested by the police for disturbing the peace, and Troy has to persuade the judge not to
recommit his mentally-challenged brother: “Told him I’d look after him. It didn’t make
no sense to recommit the man. He stuck out his big greasy palm and told me to give him
fifty dollars and take him on home” (62). Troy condemns the way in which the judicial
system (embodied in off-stage white characters like the policemen and the judge) exploits
blacks, the pawns of American society.

In all six of August Wilson’s plays, Troy Maxson is one of the few African-
American men to be punished justly for a crime he has committed; he has served a
fifteen-year sentence for manslaughter. However, most other black men in these plays
claim to be unreasonably persecuted and prosecuted. A temporary resident at Seth’s
boarding house, Jeremy in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is one of these men who run into
trouble with the law for no good reason:

I ain’t done nothing, Mr. Seth. I stopped by the Workmen’s Club and got
me a bottle. Me and Roper Lee from Alabama. Had us half a pint. We
was fixing to cut that half in two when they[Mr. Piney’s boys] came up on
us. Asked us if we was working. We told them we was putting in the road
over yonder and that it was our payday. They snatched hold of us to get
that two dollars. Me and Roper Lee ain’t even had a chance to take a drink
when they grabbed us. (13)
Jeremy has been arrested by "Mr. Piney's boys" (off-stage characters) and fined two dollars for loitering around in the streets. The strict Seth decides that Jeremy must have deserved the punishment whereas his wife Bertha accepts Jeremy's explanation and comments, "You know the police do that. Figure there's too many people out on the street they take some of them off" (13). What Bertha does not state, though, is that the only people the police remove from the streets in Wilson's world are black men.

*The Piano Lesson* also suggests that white America governs black America. One of the many stories in the play informs the audience of how Boy Willie, his friend Lymon, and Berniece's husband Crawley got caught in the very act of stealing wood, as a result of which Crawley was killed, and Lymon was shot in the stomach. The two surviving men are later placed in a penitentiary, Parchman Farm, where they labor under difficult conditions for three years. When Lymon does not fulfill his duties to the satisfaction of those in authority, the judge fines him a hundred dollars. Lymon narrates, "Mr. Stovall come and paid my hundred dollars and the judge say I got to work for him to pay him back his hundred dollars. I told them I'd rather take my thirty days but they wouldn't let me do that" (37). The judge rules in favor of the white Stovall, who by his act is entitled to use Lymon for cheap labor. Lymon, however, does not submit to the mandate and runs away. To escape from the sheriff in search of him, Lymon accompanies Boy Willie on his mission up North to sell the family heirloom piano.

*The Piano Lesson* consistently illustrates the white Americans' control and exploitation of the body of law. For instance, according to yet another narrative, when Lymon's father was imprisoned, his wife had bribed the sheriff with a hundred dollars:
“The sheriff looked at that hundred dollars and turned his nose up. Told her, say, ‘That ain’t gonna do him no good. You got to put another hundred on top of that’” (63).

Unless the sheriff had received the full sum, Lymon’s father would have been sent to work at Parchman Farm for a minimum of three years. Lymon, who has done time there, describes the penitentiary: “They work you too hard down there. All that weeding and hoeing and chopping down trees” (39). The white men not only manipulate the law to punish black Americans but also to make a financial gain off of their jurisdiction by asking for and accepting bribes from blacks.

Boy Willie’s uncle Wining Boy is as wary of the white man’s corpus juris as are Lymon and Boy Willie. He believes that the American legal code does not extend equal rights to blacks and whites.

Now Mr. So and So, he sell the land to you. And he come to you and say, “John, you own the land. It’s all yours now. But them is my berries. And come time to pick them I’m gonna send my boys over. You got the land . . . but them berries, I’m gonna keep them. They mine.” And he go and fix it with the law that them is his berries. Now that’s the difference between the colored man and the white man. The colored man can’t fix nothing with the law. (38)

White Americans enjoy more power in society and can protect their rights better than black Americans because of the loopholes in the law. Moreover, they have officers (judges, sheriffs, policemen) who ensure that the interests of the white race are secured while no one safeguards the rights of the underdogs of the system.
For example, some of the black male characters claim to have been imprisoned without any wrongdoing:

STERLING: You don’t have to do nothing to go to jail.
WOLF: You right about that. I know. I can walk down there ... just walk down the street and ask people ... every nigger you see done been to jail one time or another. The white man don’t feel right unless he got a record on these niggers. Walk on down there ... I’ll give you a dollar for every nigger you find that ain’t been to jail. Ain’t that right, Sterling. I been to jail. Stayed down there three months. Tried to make bond and couldn’t do it. They kept me down there in the county jail for three months. Ain’t done nothing but walk down the street. I was walking down Centre Avenue ... police was chasing somebody and wasn’t looking where he was going, and I wasn’t looking where I was going either ... he ran into me so hard it knocked us both down. I started to get up and there was two, three policemen with their guns pointed at my head. Told me not to move. They arrested me for obstructing justice. Kept me down there for three months before the judge had a chance to throw it out. But I learned a lot from that. I learned to watch where I was going at all times. Cause you always under attack. (53-54, my emphasis)

The pointlessness of these arrests reveals how Euro-Americans usurp the power they have access to through the laws they have implemented in their own favor. In an interview
with Bill Moyers, August Wilson remarked that “the most valuable blacks were the ones in prison.” The warrior spirit they possess has landed them in jail because “Refusing to lie down and die, these men of destiny fought for what was denied them” (qtd. in Pereira 33). Memphis, the owner of the restaurant, has to undertake a similar battle with the power structure when he finds out that the City declines his request for a certain sum for his restaurant because of a clause in the deed. Memphis has experienced the unfairness of the law, its white bias, in the past, too. He has bought some land from Jim Stovall, a white man (another off-stage character), with the condition that if any water was found on the land, “the sale was null and void” (72). When Memphis discovers a source of water after months of backbreaking work, Stovall demands his land back. Memphis attempts to straighten things out in court, but the judge rules in favor of Stovall. Stovall has secured his interests with the help of the white-biased law, which thus renders African-Americans powerless.

The police, as an agent of the white race, also like to keep a close eye on the “suspicious” activities of the black minority. Sterling reports that during the Malcolm X rally the police took pictures of those who attended the rally. Wolf responds sarcastically, “They don’t go out there where the white folks at and take their pictures” (104). The police officers are thus depicted as collaborators of the dominant group in a racial conspiracy to oppress the subordinate and innocent minority.

Two Trains Running also questions the power African-Americans possess as participants within the judicial system. In his legal battle against the City, Memphis’s black lawyer Chauncey Ward III fails to reach a satisfactory deal for his client.
Thereupon, Memphis substitutes a white lawyer in his place who eventually wins the case so that Memphis obtains an even higher amount for his restaurant than what he had been bargaining for. The playwright thus discloses how black Americans lack significant power even in the role they might play as agents of law. Wilson also hints that these blacks have to blindly obey and uphold the (white) system to be able to participate in it. For instance, Chauncey Ward’s father, “The first black judge they had down there,” was “death on niggers. Give one fellow five hundred years” (58). Black Americans who work for the establishment have to pay a price for their personal success. They are so alienated from their racial identity that they become faithful servants of the dominant group and ill-treat their fellow men much more so than the whites do. This incident may also signal how the power structure only permits such puppets to practice law in order that the status quo can be maintained.

Wilson continues his criticism of the illegitimacy of the white law and its discrimination against black citizens in his most recent play, *Seven Guitars*. Floyd Barton, the protagonist, has been imprisoned more than once. At one time, he has been incarcerated for “worthlessness.” The judge “give me ninety days for worthlessness. Say Rockefeller wortha million dollars and you ain’t worth two cents. Ninety days in the workhouse” (9). During his second brush with the law, he claims he “ain’t done nothing but walk down the street. Come home from the cemetery after burying my mama, was walking down the street—and they arrested me” (22).

FLOYD: I asked the police say, “I done nothing. What you arresting me for?” He say, “I’m arresting you in advance. You gonna do something.”
just look at him and told him, “Well, boss, you right, cause if I had my
druthers I’d cut you every which way but loose.” He just laughed, cause
he know a black man ain’t never had his druthers. They took me down
there and beat me with them rubber hoses till I said uncle. (41-42)

Wilson’s black male characters insist on having been victimized by the system because of
their race. The demarcation between blacks and whites, those who are at the mercy of the
law and those who exercise its power, albeit unjustly, is all but too apparent. Canewell,
one of Floyd’s band members, tells a similar story of wrongful arrest:

Nothing. I ain’t done nothing. Ask Floyd. Singing. That’s all I did. I
was right down there on Maxwell Street waiting on Floyd. I started
fiddling with my harmonica. I said, “If I’m gonna stand there and play I
may as well throw my hat down . . . somebody might put something in it.”
The police said I was disturbing the peace. Soliciting without a license.
Loitering. Resisting arrest and disrespecting the law. They rolled all that
together and charged me with laziness and give me thirty days. (23)

Red Carter, another black man and a musician, complains about his similar experiences
with the law:

RED CARTER: One time they arrested me for having too much money. I
had more money than the law allowed. Must have . . . cause the police
arrested me, put me in jail. Told me if I had that much money I must have
stole it somewhere.
Wilson’s black men interpret their position as one of entrapment. They are held in metaphorical chains, and all of their actions are subject to investigation by law enforcement. Any excuse can be and is used to keep them under scrutiny. The police officers with an inkling of suspicion about a black man would rather arrest him than allow for the possibility, no matter how remote, that he might commit a wrongful deed in the future. Therefore, the golden principle of the American legal system, that one is presumed innocent until proven guilty, clearly does not apply to black citizens. African-Americans are instead presumed guilty by the system until they can prove their innocence.

The distrust, if not the open hostility, of the officers of the law against African-American men is met with an equal distrust of the black men for the system. The oppressive white power alienates its black citizens further by tightening its control over them by more unjust means. The plight of black Americans thus includes unlawful victimization as well as a constant vigilance over the probable threat of law enforcers. As Wolf in *Two Trains Running* reminds his audience, “you always under attack.” The dramatist underlines the distrust of blacks for police officers numerous times in *Seven Guitars*. The discrepancy between the white and the black versions of “truth” is manifest when Wilson contrasts the media’s representation of the police involvement in a robbery...
with his black characters’ interpretation of it. While Canewell reads from the newspaper an account of a robbery, he also offers a completely different interpretation of it:

“Policeman Foils Robbery.” The policeman was standing there getting his shoes shined. He was loafing on the job and ended up being a hero. The mayor liable to give him a medal. . . .

“Police are searching for two other men believed to be accomplices, who police say escaped with an undisclosed amount of cash.”

See, that’s another thing. I know how the police do. They shoot the man in the back. Take the money out his hand and put it in their pocket and say, “Oh, the other ones got away with the money. We still looking for them.” (96-97)

African-Americans have become so cynical of the system that they have no trust left for the law and its officers as well as the other groups (like the media) who promote the governing faction’s political stance.

August Wilson’s perspective on the American legal system is fiercely negative. His plays are peopled with many off-stage agents of law: judges, sheriffs, and police officers, all of them white and male (with the exception of one black judge who acts “white”), none of them portrayed in a favorable light. They are representatives of a corrupt system which exploits and undermines the weak. In order to drive this point home, Wilson follows a distinctive pattern: just as he shows the establishment to uphold the white characters’ contentions in courts and elsewhere, August Wilson upholds his black characters’ interpretation of events, almost the only version of “truth” the audience
receive in these plays. Therefore, although one might reasonably assume that the law would apply equally to both blacks and whites, that never appears to be the case in Wilson's plays. The playwright insists many times in his work that African-Americans have never been dealt with fairly and squarely by the white world. African-Americans cannot receive justice unless they can pay the right price. Law is thus revealed to be another instrument of the establishment to protect the interests of the white race and to overbear its adversaries. In August Wilson's imaginative world, law is white, but it is very much blemished.
CHAPTER V

WHITENESS AS TERROR

August Wilson’s white portraiture does not merely accentuate the economic, social, and judicial dominance of Caucasians in America. The dramatist also depicts whiteness as a terrorizing physical force whereby he confirms bell hooks’s claims in her essay “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination”: “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness” (175). According to hooks, black Americans associate their racial Other with “the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing” (170). Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, The Piano Lesson, and Two Trains Running corroborate bell hooks’s assertions by portraying the white man as the formidable foe of blacks who furthers his control over them with the threat and use of violence.

Ma Rainey’s trumpet player Levee is pivotal to Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom as one of its most intriguing black characters. Levee, who is in contention with the rest of the band members because of his “flamboyance” and his “rakish and bright” temper, is distinguished from his colleagues by his impatience and non-conformity along with his desire to please Sturdyvant (23). When they ridicule him for being an Uncle Tom figure, Levee defends his disposition thus:

I can say “yessir” to whoever I please. What you got to do with it? I know how to handle white folks. I been handling them for thirty-two years, and
now you gonna tell me how to do it. Just 'cause I say “yessir” don’t mean I’m spooked up with him. I know what I’m doing. Let me handle him my way. (68)

While Levee rationalizes his way of “handling white folks,” his audience is offered an insight into a haunting incident from his childhood when his family life was disrupted by the terrorizing force of whiteness:

My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want.

(Pauses.)

There was my mama with a gang of white mens. She tried to fight them off, but I could see where it wasn’t gonna do her any good, I didn’t know what they were doing to her . . . but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it.

I’m gonna show you how spooked up I was by the white man. I tried my damndest to cut one of them’s throat! I hit him on the shoulder with it. He reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it.

(LEVEE raises his shirt to show a long ugly scar.)
That’s what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death.

... (69-70)

Levee’s oral narrative serves more than one purpose: it not only offers his audience a new insight into who he is, but it also goes to show how the off-stage whites, the generic “white man” or “white folks” regulate the lives of African-Americans. Levee has received his principal lesson on “how to handle white folks” from his father who, upon finding out about the rape, kills four of the men before they “Caught up with him and hung him and set him afire” (70). The father’s strategy for revenge has to depend on guile since he lacks any power in the social system controlled by whites. Therefore, he smiles and lies to his wife’s rapists while he takes justice into his own hands. Levee’s narrative is a striking one because it reveals the physical violence of Euro-Americans against the whole black population, including women and children. In this poignant story, the images of the knife and the fire, of raping and lynching operate together to instill in the audience the terror white America signifies to black America. Such fear is entrenched in the minds of blacks who, for centuries, have been at the mercy of those who owned them. Unfortunately, African-Americans have not been strangers to raping, beating, and lynching.

In fact, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* insists on the equation of whiteness with terror by another instance of the white assault against the black. Cutler, the guitar and trombone player, shares with the other band members the story of Reverend Gates (another oral narrative), who, having missed the train when he was looking for an outhouse at a station, is left alone in a small town. Soon a group of white men close in on him:
Now, he's standing there, you understand... got his cross around his neck like them preachers wear. Had his little Bible with him what he carry all the time. So they crowd on around him and one of them ask who he is. He told them he was Reverend Gates and that he was going to see his sister who was sick and the train left without him. And they said, "Yeah, nigger... but can you dance?" He looked at them and commenced to dancing. One of them reached up and tore his cross off his neck. Said he was committing a heresy by dancing with a cross and Bible. Took his Bible and tore it up and had him dancing till they got tired of watching him...

That's the only way he got out of there alive... was to dance. Ain't even had no respect for a man of God! Wanna make him into a clown.

(97)

Reverend Gates has had to dance for his life at gunpoint, afraid to show any signs of hesitation. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is thus as much governed by the negative portrayal of Irvin, Sturdyvant, and the policeman as by the terrifying and horrible images of whiteness which haunt the black characters. August Wilson has set up his play so that the economic exploiters of African-Americans appear on stage whereas the perpetrators of violence leave their indelible impression on the audience indirectly, through the stories passed on about them in the black community.

*The Piano Lesson* relies, for the most part, on the same dramatic technique of narration to delineate a comparable image of whiteness. However, this play differs from
Ma Rainey in that a frightening white presence looms on stage: the invisible yet palpable ghost of James Sutter who is an unseen “on-stage” character. Sutter does not completely terrorize the black family, but his presence is sufficient to evoke fear. Having seen the ghost, Berniece exclaims: “Sutter . . . Sutter’s standing at the top of the steps” (13). “I told him to go away and he just stood there looking at me . . . calling Boy Willie’s name” (14). Doaker admits later to Wining Boy, his brother, that he has already seen the ghost before anyone else but has kept the incident to himself.

I ain’t heard him say nothing. He was just sitting there when I seen him . . . Sutter here cause of that piano. I hear him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don’t play that kind of music. I come out here and ain’t seen nobody, but them piano keys was moving a mile a minute. (57)

Even to Boy Willie, who remains skeptical of the ghost’s reality until the very end—“That’s all in her[Berniece’s] head. There ain’t no ghost up there” (16)—Sutter represents an unwelcome force to be reckoned with. He is only convinced of the ghost’s actuality by the end of the play when he is forced to “wrestle with” him.

The ghost’s presence serves another, more significant purpose in The Piano Lesson; it provides the link to the black family’s violent past. As I discussed earlier, Robert Sutter barters two of his slaves, Boy Willie’s great-grandmother and her son, for Mr. Nolander’s piano. Later, Boy Willie’s great-grandfather, also named Boy Willie, is commissioned by his master to carve the images of his wife and son on the piano for his mistress who misses her former slaves. However, Boy Willie doesn’t stop until he carves
his family history on the piano which, thus, becomes a symbol to the black family and their future generations of their slavery to the Sutters. In the end, Boy Charles, the father of Berniece and Boy Willie, steals the piano from the Sutter household:

Now, I don’t know what happened when Sutter came home and found that piano gone. But somebody went up to Boy Charles’s house and set it on fire. But he wasn’t in there. He must have seen them coming cause he went down and caught the 3:57 Yellow Dog. He didn’t know they was gonna come down and stop the train. Stopped the train and found Boy Charles in the boxcar with four of them hobos. Must have got mad when they couldn’t find the piano cause they set the boxcar afire and killed everybody. (45)

The punishment for Boy Charles’s transgression is to be burnt alive, another instance of the white man terrorizing the black man. Violence eventually accelerates as the ghosts of the victims, the so-called Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, castigate the white men by pushing them down their wells according to a folktale. Wilson’s plays, as I will examine in more detail, offer an antidote to white terror: black terror.

The savagery of the white against the black is underscored also in Two Trains Running. Before relocating to Pittsburgh where he now owns a restaurant, Memphis has bought some land from Jim Stovall, who warns him that he would declare the transaction null if Memphis finds any water on the land. Memphis strains for six months to find a water supply on his farm, but when he finally does, Stovall demands the farm back.
Went down to the court to straighten it out and come to find he[Stovall] had a bunch of these fellows get together to pick on me. He try to act like he ain’t had nothing to do with it. They took and cut my mule’s belly out while it standing there. Just took a knife and sliced it open. I stood there and watched them. They was laughing about it. . . .He kinda reared back, took a few steps, and fell over. One of them reached down, grabbed hold of his dick, and cut that off. I stood there looking at them. I say, “Okay. I know the rules now. If you do that to something that ain’t never done nothing to you . . . then I know what you would do to me. So I tell you what. You go on and get your laugh now. Cause if I get out of this alive I know how to play as good as anyone.” . . .

. . . Got home and they had set fire to my crop. To get to my house I’d have to walk through fire. I wasn’t ready to do that. I turned around and walked up the hill to Natchez. Called it a draw. (73)

Memphis loses his farm, his crop, and his mule and is displaced by the white man whose greed results in the most abhorrent forms of violence.

The depiction of whiteness in these three plays is such that Euro-Americans exercise violence to get what they want, to threaten African-Americans, to demonstrate to them the extent of their power and cruelty in case their wishes are disregarded by black Americans. Whites assume, according to August Wilson, that they have a right to everything they might desire, and that their wishes are not to be opposed. When they are, blacks are punished in the most horrible ways, not just by death, but by brutal death:
hanging and burning. Consequently, Wilson represents whiteness in these plays as a repulsive and terrible force that can keep black Americans in check. The images of the destruction whites embody are knives and guns with which they rape, kill, or threaten to kill African-Americans.

Violence, of course, breeds violence, and at times, Anglo-Americans fall victim to it when their monstrous deeds backfire. For example, Levee in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* attempts to stop the white men raping his mother by attacking one of them with a knife, and when he fails, his father wreaks destruction on them by killing as many of them as he can. Likewise, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog in *The Piano Lesson* embrace an intimidating identity similar to that of whiteness. Boy Willie, too, becomes acquainted with the “power of death” upon killing his cat:

&*ne, 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. That’s what I learned when I killed that cat. I got the power of death too. I can command him. I can call him up. The white man don’t like to see that. He don’t like for you to stand up and look him square in the eye and say, “I got it too.”

Then he got to deal with you square up. (88)

Thinking in similar terms, Memphis in *Two Trains Running* criticizes the supporters of the Black Power movement for their naïveté.

I don’t know how these niggers think sometimes. Talking about black power with their hands and their pockets empty. You can’t do nothing without a gun. Not in this day and time. That’s the only kind of power the
white man understand. They think they gonna talk their way up on it. In
order to talk your way you got to have something under the table. (42)

Black Americans need guns to protect themselves and their rights. But as Holloway
points out, the power of the armed black is alarming to Anglo-Americans:

A nigger with a gun is bad news. You can’t even use the word “nigger”
and “gun” in the same sentence. You say the word “gun” in the same
sentence with the word “nigger” and you in trouble. The white man panic.
Unless you say, “The policeman shot the nigger with his gun” . . . then that
be alright. Other than that he panic. He ain’t had nothing but guns for the
last five hundred years . . . got the atomic bomb and everything. But you
say the word “nigger” and “gun” in the same sentence and they’ll try and
arrest you. Accuse you of sabotage, disturbing the peace, inciting a riot,
plotting to overthrow the government and anything else they can think of.
(85-86)

Through these multiple instances of blacks resorting to violence, August Wilson contends
in his plays that unless blacks can discover a means to assert their own physical power,
they will continue to be terrorized by their white compatriots.

The African-American playwright takes his generally negative portrayal of
whiteness a step further by associating it with terror. Wilson’s Euro-American characters
do not merely run the social system and exploit blacks economically. Also rapists and
murderers, they emerge as disruptive and destructive forces in the black world, the
impetus behind their violence being a desire to protect the status quo and their privileges.
Clearly not pacifists, some of August Wilson's characters advocate retribution for these brutal acts. The sole alternative left to blacks is to become like the transgressor, and not turn the other cheek, and maybe only then can white supremacy be terminated. However, that end is, unfortunately, still not in sight as late as 1969, the most recent decade Wilson has probed into (in *Two Trains Running*) in his unfinished twentieth century cycle.
August Wilson’s twentieth century cycle concentrates for the most part on the lives and experiences of his black characters; nonetheless, because their lives are inseparable from those of white Americans, Wilson’s work also consistently examines whiteness through a black perspective. The dramatist’s fictive black world is peopled with many whites; if they do not appear on stage, then they materialize in the lives, stories, and conversations of his black characters. They appear everywhere and enjoy pervasive control. They are almost always evil and almost always male. Moreover, the white characters in his earlier plays (Joe Turner set in the 1910s, for example) do not differ significantly from those in the later plays (for instance, Two Trains Running set in the late 1960s). In other words, the playwright sustains a homogeneous position on whiteness; he accentuates in his plays the economic, social, and judicial dominance of Caucasians in America. Most importantly, whiteness for Wilson equals economic power and its twin brother economic exploitation. Although proprietorship bestows on Anglo-Americans this power, they are privileged even in the absence of property. For instance, the innumerable white sheriffs, judges, and policemen in Wilson’s plays symbolize the Caucasians’ control over the corrupt legal system that favors them. In the end, blacks are revealed to be the social and the physical victims of whites who terrorize them with brutality.
Although the basis of Wilson’s white portraiture is historically accurate (After all, whites did and still do have economic power in American society; they have exploited blacks for centuries; they do have social privilege and dominate the government as well as the judicial system; and they have terrorized African-Americans), it is curious why he refuses to admit any positive traits in white Americans. The closest Wilson gets to inventing a non-stereotypical white character is Selig who, nonetheless, has his own direct connections to slavery and thus inhabits an ambivalent social identity in the black community of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.

Such labeling of whiteness unmistakably positions the black against the white and hypothesizes that the (black) Self is what the (white) Other is not. One is the victim; the other the aggressor. One is vulnerable; the other is in charge. One is good; the other is evil. One racial group is thus defined and understood through its radical difference from another racial group. Of course, these stereotypes inevitably raise questions about their reliability. If black writers and scholars have been decrying Anglo-American authors like Eugene O’Neill for their ignorant and stereotypical portraits of blacks, then one cannot help but wonder how successful and thorough a representation of whiteness can be when it is presented in predictable terms from one work to the next.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Wilson assured Dinah Livingston during an interview that “I don’t write from a wellspring of bitterness. I write from a very positive viewpoint of black life and black experience” (31). African-American critics, too, maintain similar interpretations of Wilson’s work. For instance, Sandra Shannon declares that Wilson does not “focus upon blaming white America for the conditions under which
blacks live but instead . . . the underlying emotional scars blacks bear” (*Dramatic Vision* 6-7). Likewise, Regina Taylor argues Wilson “does not place the blame on society’s racism and claim that African Americans are victims—he states the facts and lets the indictments fall where they may” (23). It is plain, nevertheless, where Wilson’s indictments fall.

James Weldon Johnson’s 1928 essay “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” sheds some light, I think, on the interpretive differences we encounter (generally speaking, between black and white interpretive communities) when reading African-American texts: “The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter, he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America?” (477). African-American writers from the outset have found themselves writing both for their own racial group and the white community (e.g. Phyllis Wheatley or the authors of slave narratives as well as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance), unlike white artists who decidedly wrote only for a primarily white audience.

The presence of this double audience problematizes the act of writing (“How should I write what I write?”) and the act of perception (“How will my various readers interpret what I write?”); it is presumably the latter which has resulted in the misinterpretation of Wilson’s work in white dramatic circles: that he is apolitical. Wilson, who cannot avoid comparison with other major American writers, like O’Neill and Baraka, has been “used” by scholars to disparage Baraka and his art. White critics prefer to read Wilson’s work as being different from (read: better than) Baraka’s. Their
determination that Wilson does not write agitprop theatre, unlike Amiri Baraka, makes Wilson “safe” for white audiences. Nonetheless, such scholars refuse to acknowledge the definitely political nature of Wilson’s art even when he himself contends that “All art is political. It serves a purpose. All of my plays are political but I try not to make them didactic or polemical. Theatre doesn’t have to be agitprop” (qtd. in Gordon 18). On the other hand, Mark William Rocha insists that Wilson, who openly acknowledges Amiri Baraka’s influence on his work, “continues and deepens the motif of facing the white man which Baraka developed so fully” (“The Four B’s” 7). Rocha explains further:

It is no exaggeration to say that Baraka’s plays are about little else but this black-white confrontation. . . . One might then say that Baraka taught Wilson how to do the facing of the white man, a lesson Wilson applies to every one of his five major plays that currently constitute his historical cycle . . . (7)

The misconception in white literary circles that August Wilson is a non-threatening black artist for white theater-goers is not only naïve but also perilous in that it reveals a certain, maybe even deliberate, misreading. Compared to black playwrights of the 1960s who produced “bitter, vituperative dramas” and “literally drove the white audiences out of the theatre” (Shafer, “New Approach” 17-18), Wilson, who claims to have come out of this tradition “chooses a toned-down version of their more sensational attempts at didacticism” (Shannon, Dramatic Vision 6). Although Wilson might not be as overt in his criticism of white society as Amiri Baraka is, that criticism is still an essential ingredient of Wilson art. When read carefully and closely, Wilson’s plays undeniably
reveal a negative approach to white America. It is peculiar how white audiences can find Wilson’s art safe when they are being constantly vilified by the characters on stage. Or, as the critic Mark William Rocha puts it, “white folks just don’t get it” (“American History” 117).

Maybe there is a rationale for this willful denial. One of the highlights of Rocha’s essay “American History as ‘Loud Talking’ in Two Trains Running” is his discussion of how Wilson “loud-talks” his white audience to make a political statement. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines the term thus:

One successfully loud-talks by speaking to a second person remarks in fact directed to a third person, at a level just audible to the third person. A sign of the success of this practice is an indignant “What?” from the third person, to which the speaker replies, “I wasn’t talking to you.” Of course, the speaker was, yet simultaneously was not (qtd. in Rocha 117)

August Wilson’s safety net could easily come from this dramatic device; when confronted, he or his black characters might defend themselves by claiming, “I wasn’t talking to you” even when they were. Of course, this stratagem serves equally well the needs of Wilson’s white audience, some of whom might prefer to ignore the derogatory remarks about themselves. Unlike other black playwrights who still haven’t “made it,” August Wilson’s success on Broadway and in dramatic circles may be due in part to this non-confrontational writing style. Another component of white audiences’ blissful reading of Wilson may be the humor Wilson so amply employs in his plays. The humor, which may not come across as strongly on the page as it does on stage, also helps explain
why audiences may be willing to ignore the bitterness hiding behind the mask of comedy Wilson’s black characters adopt in order to better deal with their difficult lives.
CHAPTER TWO

CONCLUSION

Race has functioned as a powerful demarcator in the interplay of various communities in the United States, and for this reason, more and more scholarly attention has been devoted to it in the second half of the twentieth century. While the concept of blackness has undergone serious scrutiny by African-American thinkers because of the ongoing objectification of blacks in America, the same is not true of whiteness.

Among the earliest Anglo-American dramatists to address the concerns of black Americans in his work, Eugene O’Neill still holds immense interest and value for scholars of race. O’Neill, notwithstanding his limited exposure to his subject material, remained true to his social objectives as he explored the fate and psyche of his Racial Other in play after play. While some of his earliest efforts (for instance, *Thirst*, *The Moon of the Caribbees*, and *The Dreamy Kid*) are not the best of their kind and merely reinforce racial stereotypes common in contemporary literature (such as black primitivism), his later work benefits from an enhanced cognition of blackness. *The Emperor Jones, All God’s Chillun Got Wings, and The Iceman Cometh* illustrate O’Neill at his best with their complex inquiry into racial relations in America.

Beginning with *The Dreamy Kid*, O’Neill has studied the ordeal of black Americans in a predominantly white society which denies them their humanity and full participation in it. O’Neill’s African-American protagonists have basically two options
available to them: racial isolation (as in the case of Abe Saunders) and assimilation (as in the case of Brutus Jones, Jim Harris, and Joe Mott). Given the sheer number of his black characters wearing white masks, one can safely determine that O’Neill was more interested in the second alternative, assimilation. Whether or not Jones, Harris, and Mott embrace “whiteness” and adopt white masks (as they have done), they cannot truly “pass,” fit in, or succeed. O’Neill agrees with other anti-colonial thinkers that assimilation is never the answer, and any success these men may enjoy is bound to be ephemeral; hence, the tragic element.

I do not share African-American critics’ indignation over Eugene O’Neill’s black characters. Interestingly enough, the dramatist’s racial perception parallels that of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, who have both contributed intriguing analyses of the psychological effects of colonization on the colonized (and to a certain extent the colonizer). *Emperor Jones, All God’s Chillun, and The Iceman Cometh* testify to the alienating power of colonialism on the subordinate group, as Fanon and Memmi have discovered: “Because no other solution is left it, the racialized social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialize itself. The ‘inferior race’ denies itself as a different race” (Fanon, *African Revolution* 38). Arriving at the same conclusion as postcolonial theorists, and much earlier than them, O’Neill substantiates the futility of Manichean thinking in the colonial/racial context, a point with which Fanon would agree. According to this Martinican revolutionary, categorizing people as “the colonizer” and “the colonized” can only reinforce a simplistic view of reality. There undeniably are members of the colonized group who would much rather be (like) the colonizer, as there
are members of the colonizer group who are determined to fight colonialism to the end:

"The settler is not simply the man who must be killed. Many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation" (Fanon, *Wretched* 146). Vron Ware emphasizes, likewise, the crucial distinction between whiteness as a skin color (biological construct) and whiteness as a certain way of thinking one willingly and consciously adopts (social construct). Being marked as "white" does not necessitate that one think and behave "white."

O'Neill, although he was privileged by virtue of his skin color, strove to dissociate himself (artistically and intellectually) from the white perspective; his socially-motivated work does not hesitate to denounce whites (Ella Harris in *All God’s Chillun* and Smithers in *The Emperor Jones*, for instance) and to bring to the foreground the tragedy of those who suffer under the yoke of Caucasians.

In spite of the extent to which blackness has been scrutinized, the concept of whiteness has only recently come under critical eyes, or so the whites would like to think. Even Noel Ignatiev, the co-editor of *Race Traitor*, a journal dedicated to abolishing whiteness, has argued in an interview with Cornel West that "No one has yet answered the question of what a positive white identity is," (West 180) and insisted, "Whiteness does not mean anything as a category" (181). Black thinkers and artists, however, have long been weighing whiteness. August Wilson, for example, has already answered Ignatiev’s implicit question ("What is a positive white identity after all?") with a direct and candid answer: "whiteness = economic power, economic exploitation, social privilege, law, and terror." Since we lack any in-depth studies of white portraiture in
black letters, I propose Wilson's categorization as a useful framework through which to reconsider black writers' racial depictions.

Wilson adheres to the principle of polarities in the racial context unlike O'Neill who managed to or at least tried to transcend such thinking. Wilson's characterization of black and white Americans in binary opposition (The white man is the transgressor, and the black man his victim) replicates the Manichean thinking Fanon decries, which perceives of the colonizer and the colonized in stark conflict with each other, existing in an unbridgeable chasm. Albert Memmi was aware of the triggering mechanism underlying such a racial outlook. His book *The Colonizer and the Colonized* provides clues as to why colonized peoples like August Wilson might be drawn to negative conclusions about those who have maintained control over them:

Being considered and treated apart by colonialist racism, the colonized ends up accepting this Manichean division of the colony and, by extension, of the whole world. Being definitely excluded from half the world, why should he not suspect it of confirming his condemnation? Why should he not judge it and condemn it in his turn? The racism of the colonized is then neither biological nor metaphysical, but social and historical. It is not based on a belief in the inferiority of the detested group but on the conviction, and in large measure on the observation, that this group is truly an aggressor and dangerous. (131)

While Memmi's particular background in psychology may especially imply the stance he describes above to be largely a psychological one, I think his argument and his
conclusions should be approached more as indicating the political will and determination of oppressed subjects in response to legitimate circumstances. Frantz Fanon, too, interpreted reverse racism as an inevitable part of the decolonization process. The first stage of colonization—“alienation”—during which the colonized realize they can never attain equality to those in power, is followed by the former’s quest for self-validation; hence, “nationalism,” the second stage. “The culture put into capsules, which has vegetated since the foreign domination, is revalorized. It is not reconceived, grasped anew, dynamized from within. It is shouted” (Fanon, *African Revolution* 44). Wilson’s work echoes these sentiments of Fanon’s nationalistic phase when members of the subordinate group cease to idolize their oppressors and instead invest their energies on rebuilding and advancing their racial community.

Writing in the early part of this century, Eugene O’Neill, with a unique foresight as a white American dramatist, delved into the psychology of alienated colonial subjects in America, who in their “hopeless hope” to belong, isolate themselves from their racial group and look for the sanction of their enemies. Despite his germinal examination of the decolonization process through Hattie in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* and Joe Mott in *The Iceman Cometh*, his main concern was the first stage of colonization Fanon would come to identify years later and its impact on the black psyche. A member of the racial group O’Neill could only investigate from a distance, August Wilson focuses instead on the second phase of colonization, pinpointed once again by Fanon, by disclosing what happens when the disesteemed see through the (neo)colonial stratagems of their oppressors. However, Wilson’s specific political agenda, namely his focus on the
community he self-identifies with and his critique of white America, compromises his art, resulting in one-sided, superficial representations of the "reality" of white Americans. Another factor contributing to Wilson’s unsatisfactory white portraiture could be his artistic agenda itself. Whereas O’Neill endeavored to understand his Racial Other by consistently writing about African-Americans, Wilson is more intent on exploring the lives of his black characters rather than ensuring that his white Other is accurately delineated.

Nonetheless, I fear that polarized racial thinking, which Wilson’s work promotes, can lead to a "reverse ethnocentrism which simply reproduces existing categories, performing an identical function and producing the same effects as the system it contests," as the postcolonial critic Benita Parry warns us, and as Frantz Fanon himself knew (91). In The Wretched of the Earth, more specifically in the essay appropriately entitled “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” Fanon looked toward a time in history when there would no longer be “the Self” and its “Racial Other,” when all would coexist in unison. America is, unfortunately, not there yet. Consequently, August Wilson’s stereotypical white characters reflect the nationalistic phase black America has not outgrown.

I hope that in this study I have succeeded in unveiling the often overlooked, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, racial dynamic in American theatre. Most immediately, “Racial Encounters in the American Theatre” has addressed the encounter between the artists and their subject matter, the racial otherness that comes into play as Anglo-Americans like O’Neill and African-Americans like Wilson reflect on their Racial
Other, an Other who is of tremendous importance in their own lives, who nonetheless remains an Other, not quite captureable or knowable, because of the racial taboos at work in American society.

In this study, I have also attempted to investigate another form of racial encounter in American theatre. In accord with Harold Bloom’s theory of “the anxiety of influence,” black playwrights still find themselves speaking back to their mostly white predecessors. No wonder August Wilson resists comparisons with Eugene O’Neill when critics (namely, Clive Barnes) have gone so far as to rechristen him “O’Neill in blackface.” In spite of his understandable discomfort with these critical comparisons, Wilson should deny neither their reality nor his inevitable encounter with O’Neill, given the latter’s racial identity, the scope and nature of his work, his immense dramatic legacy, and his importance merely by virtue of his chronological positioning.

And finally, because our topic has been drama, for which a physical audience is very much present, more so than the other literary genres, there exists an encounter between the playwrights and their audience, critics and lay viewers. This last encounter has been implicitly embedded in this discussion all along. The black critical voice raised against O’Neill and in support of Wilson as well as the decidedly naïve responses of Wilson’s white audience have also significantly participated in and contributed to these racial debates.

I only hope that this study with its inherent dialogism is a step in the right direction and will encourage further literary investigations of racial concepts and racial representations. The multi-faceted truth about racial thinking in the United States lies not
only in poetry or prose but also in drama, and modern American drama, a neglected field by and large, has a treasure of racial material waiting to be dug up, to be brought to daylight.
ÇÜ: Mr. Wilson, in many interviews you have discussed your black characters at length. However, I'm also interested in your white characters, whether on- or off-stage. Maybe we can begin by addressing the more visible on-stage characters, such as Irvin and Sturdyvant in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Selig the People Finder in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. How do you approach these characters? How essential is their whiteness in character portrayal?

AW: Well, I like Selig. I like the idea that he's a People Finder. I think one point I like, given his history which was the history of basically whites with blacks—his grandfather used to hunt down runaway slaves—is that Selig voices this without apology, as a fact of life. This is the way things were, and he very ironically then tells Loomis, "You're in good hands, mister. Me and my daddy caught a lot of runaway slaves." I like Selig; I like his honesty; I like his straightforwardness. I like the fact that he presents himself without apology. He's also welcome into the house. "Sit down, Selig, have a biscuit. Where you going? Oh, here, I've got some cabbage and tomatoes," etc. So there's no animosity; there's no nothing coming from the black characters toward him or the fact that his grandfather used to catch runaway slaves. There's none of that. Everyone can accept
people on their own terms; he is a very nice man. The characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are not as well drawn as the black characters, you see, because the emotional center of the play is not those characters; it's with the four guys in the bandroom. So Sturdyvant and Irvin are almost cardboard characters; they are certainly not three dimensional. I don't think that there's any point in the play where they espouse any philosophical ideas, for example. We never learn anything about their ideas and their attitudes towards life. They function in the play in order to get the records made by Ma. There's not very much there because of the emotional center, and I would suspect that that would be true of O'Neill, too. I don't know O'Neill's works, but I suspect that would be true of his black characters as well, that the emotional center is elsewhere in the play.

ÇÜ: In some of them.

AW: Okay.

ÇÜ: Are you familiar with *The Emperor Jones*, for example, where he ...

AW: Yes, that's not a very good play.

ÇÜ: Okay.

AW: I'm familiar with *The Emperor Jones*, and I better not comment on that actually.

ÇÜ: Do you think O'Neill was working with racial myths?

AW: Of course, everyone is. Sure. O'Neill was a white man writing in the 1930s, in the 1940s. Of course, he did. Everyone is.

ÇÜ: Are you?
AW: What I meant by that remark is I would suspect O’Neill was working with some misconceptions and misunderstandings of black Americans. Whites, particularly at that time, and that’s all whites, even the most liberal whites, didn’t fully understand or respect black American culture, and they did not recognize it as having any value. They still don’t today in 1998. They say, “You are OK, you’ve got that music thing, and you do this,” but really when you come down to it, there is still Bach and Beethoven and what not. The society builds palaces to Bach and Beethoven. In almost every city, you have this big culture symphony hall where they all go in celebration of European classical music. There’s no real respect for or value to black American life, to black American culture. It was especially more so in the early part of the century. People are more educated now. There’s technology, communication. It’s a global world, and we understand that there are different cultures, and all this intellectually we understand.

ČÜ: How about your own understanding of white Americans?

AW: I don’t think I have any misconceptions of white American culture. I know it better than the white Americans know black culture. I have been a victim of it in the sense that I’m here in America in 1998, and my mother was born in Spear, North Carolina in 1920. There’s a reason how she got to be in Spear, North Carolina. So I have a very intimate relationship with that culture and that society, so I don’t operate under any myths. I certainly don’t buy the myth of white racial superiority.

ČÜ: I also find your off-stage white characters very interesting. Euro-Americans play an important role in all of your plays although they may never appear on stage. I am
particularly thinking of Lutz in *Two Trains Running* and Joe Turner in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

AW: The off-stage white characters in all of the plays should ideally make you feel this presence of white America in the play and how it affects the lives of black Americans. In *Seven Guitars*, you feel that outside world constricting, forcing its way in on these people, and I think it was after *Joe Turner*, I decided, hey, I don't need white characters on stage. Once I put black Americans on stage in their cultural milieu of the particular decade, I had white America. I don't need to have any white characters because I have a representation, because the characters are continually struggling. They're struggling for dignity; they're struggling to feed their families; they're struggling to live a clean, hard, useful life. There are all of these things that are forcing their way in on them. So I didn't need the white characters, and that's why they are all off-stage characters. I was careful not to make them villainous. There is a tendency; it's too easy to make white characters villainous. Lutz didn't give Hambone his ham. Lutz says he wouldn't give it to him either because he didn't owe Hambone. Under those circumstances, you know Lutz is an honorable man. He did not owe the guy his ham because Hambone did not do a good job on the fence according to Lutz. The fault is in letting someone else put the value on your labor, you see; it's always been about labor with black Americans. That's why we're here, as part of a labor system. So the fault was in allowing Lutz to put the value on labor. If I say, "I will charge you this amount, a ham, to paint the fence," then it won't be up to your judgment whether I get a ham or a chicken. So Lutz isn't a villainous character. He could have given Hambone the ham, but he didn't owe him; it's as simple
as that. What is important to me is the fact that Lutz confronts Hambone every day, or Hambone confronts Lutz every day, to put it more properly, and says, “I want my ham,” and Lutz says, “Take a chicken,” and he turns his back and opens up his store. It is at this very point that the character says, “Lutz turn his back. He open up the store.” He feels comfortable enough that he can just turn his back on the man. I think that at least Lutz, if he opens up a store, should be looking, but he doesn’t have to. You see, he can turn his back and open up the store. So little things like that, those things, for me, are really important.

JM: As a black dramatist, do you think it’s possible to write a play where the off-stage white culture is not a main character, where the off-stage white is not important?

AW: Yeah, sure, I mean, depending on the characters in the play. All white people aren’t important, but I think the white society is representative of white society. But, yeah, it’s important for you to set down a play inside that and still operate under the rules that are made up. The rules of the game are often made up without your participation, and often without your cares and concerns and needs to be taken into consideration. I think that’s a large part of the problem. That we don’t participate in the society and that we don’t participate in the making of the society, so that not only the cultural, but also these decisions to build all these palaces to European art are made by Europeans, and we don’t, can’t make the decisions to build a palace to black art. We don’t have a jazz hall. So, you see, it’s a matter of who controls the cultural war.
ÇÜ: Some of your black characters need the white characters to get ahead, to make their dreams come true, don’t they? For example, Floyd Barton in *Seven Guitars* has a white manager, Mr. T. L. Hall.

AW: You know, this is 1948; you have to place things where they are. Floyd doesn’t need Mr. T. L. Hall; he is quite capable of making a record by himself. All my characters arrive at that moment when they find out they are self-sufficient and that there is nothing outside of themselves that they need. Loomis arrives at that, Boy Willie, everybody arrives at that conclusion. So nothing is stopping Floyd from getting up to Chicago and presenting himself to record his record. Ideally, he should get in a position where he has his own recording studio, and he can record what he wants, you see, because the decision about what records to record and what records to be put out are still being made by someone else. Those decisions are being filtered through the sensibilities of someone else, so that’s the whole point. “I don’t know if they even are gonna put it out or not, but I told you that if they put it out, it was gonna be a hit. I knew, it would be a hit record if they put it out.” You see, because it’s always left, in 1948 and 1998, in the hands of someone else to do that. So the struggle is to gain access to the power to control and to disseminate your own cultural products.

ÇÜ: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* deals with the same socio-economic issues. But unlike Floyd, Ma Rainey has more power. She insists, against the wishes of Sturdyvant, on recording her own songs.

AW: Well, she can record her own songs if she wants, but still the distribution and the choice to put out, and to pay her lie with the whites. She ultimately has no real power in
relation to her products, only to the extent that Irvin and Sturdyvant can use her when she has something that they want. Other than that, they don’t need her; therefore, she has no power.

ČÜ: Some of your plays, specifically *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson* present the blacks’ antagonism towards the God of Christianity. I am wondering if you visualize God as a white character.

AW: Well, I don’t think he is a white character. The image of God, Jesus Christ, this image that we have, this white man is the same image that oppresses you. When you look in the mirror, you should see your God. If you don’t, you have somebody else’s God; it’s just as simple as that. So it’s not that deep. The Western image we have here of the white man of Jesus Christ is rightfully so because this is the Western people who came out of that; we weren’t expecting them to come up with the Buddha. Everybody has their own image of God, but everybody still has the one called God, whether you call him “Allah,” “Jehovah,” “God,” “Jesus Christ,” “Buddha,” whoever. The larger question beyond this Western image is, “Why God got to be so big, and why he gotta be bigger than me?” And this is the question, I think, the original question man asks when he realizes that he is not God, that there is something larger and more powerful than himself, and he asks himself “but why?” The other question is, “Why, if God is good, then why does he permit so much suffering? Why didn’t God stop the Holocaust, how can he just let six million of his chosen people be murdered, I mean, why didn’t God do...” People ask this question when an eight-year-old kid dies—I mean, “Why?” Floyd answers this question, at least to his satisfaction, when he says, “God don’t know—he don’t know all
this is going on. If he did, he'd do something about it, obviously. Why would God permit that? So he must not know. You know, because he's up there in his heaven, and things are going on. There's a lot of stuff he don't know about.” So that satisfies him, you know. And then he brings up, “God is in his heaven and he staying there.” He says, “I don't want to talk about it.” In other words, leave him up there, too, you know, because he don't know what's going on. So I'll just deal with this down here.
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