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La Revue Particip'Action reçoit les projets de publication par voie électronique. Ceci permet de réduire les coûts d'opération et d'accélérer le processus de réception, de traitement et de mise en ligne de la revue. Les articles doivent être soumis à l'adresse suivante (ou conjointement) : [Participation1@gmail.com](mailto:Participation1@gmail.com)

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Un titre qui indique clairement le sujet de l'article, n'excédant pas 25 mots.

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Une courte présentation en note de bas de page des auteurs (es) ne devant pas dépasser 100 mots par auteur. On doit y retrouver obligatoirement le nom de l'auteur, le nom de l'institution d'origine, le statut professionnel et l'organisation dont il relève, et enfin, les adresses de courrier électronique du ou des auteurs. L'auteur peut aussi énumérer ses principaux champs de recherche et ses principales publications. La revue ne s'engage toutefois pas à diffuser tous ces éléments.

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Un résumé de l'article ne doit pas dépasser 160 mots. Le résumé doit être à la fois en français et en anglais (police Times new roman, taille 12, interligne 1,15).

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Une liste de cinq mots clés maximum décrivant l'objet de l'article.

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-La structure d'un article, doit être conforme aux règles de rédaction scientifique, selon que l'article est une contribution théorique ou résulte d'une recherche de terrain.

-La structure d'un article scientifique en lettres et sciences humaines se présente comme suit: **- Pour un article qui est une contribution théorique et fondamentale :**

Introduction (justification du sujet, problématique, hypothèses/objectifs scientifiques, approche), Développement articulé, Conclusion, Bibliographie.

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Titre,

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Résumé en français. Mots-clés, Abstract, Keywords,

Introduction, Méthodologie, Résultats et Discussion, Conclusion, Bibliographie.

Par exemple : Les articles conformes aux normes de présentation, doivent contenir les rubriques suivantes : introduction, problématique de l'étude, méthodologie adoptée, résultats de la recherche, perspectives pour recherche, conclusions, références bibliographiques.

**Tout l'article ne doit dépasser 17 pages,**

**Police Times new roman, taille 12 et interligne 1,5 (maximum 30 000 mots).** La revue Particip'Action permet l'usage de notes de bas de page pour ajouter des précisions au texte. Mais afin de ne pas alourdir la lecture et d'aller à l'essentiel, il est recommandé de **faire le moins possible usage des notes (10 notes de bas de page au maximum par article).**

- A l'exception de l'introduction, de la conclusion, de la bibliographie, les articulations d'un article doivent être titrées, et numérotées par des chiffres (**exemples : 1. ; 1.1.; 1.2; 2. ; 2.2. ; 2.2.1 ; 2.2.2. ; 3. ; etc.**).

Les passages cités sont présentés en romain et entre guillemets. Lorsque la phrase citant et la citation dépassent trois lignes, il faut aller à la ligne, pour présenter la citation (interligne 1) en romain et en retrait, en diminuant la taille de police d'un point. Insérer la pagination et ne pas insérer d'information autre que le numéro de page dans l'en-tête et éviter les pieds de page.

Les figures et les tableaux doivent être intégrés au texte et présentés avec des marges d'au moins six centimètres à droite et à gauche. Les caractères dans ces figures et tableaux doivent aussi être en Times 12. Figures et tableaux doivent avoir chacun(e) un titre.

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Les références de citations sont intégrées au texte citant, selon les cas, de la façon suivante :

- (Initiale (s) du Prénom ou des Prénoms de l'auteur. Nom de l'Auteur, année de publication, pages citées) ; - Initiale (s) du Prénom ou des Prénoms de l'auteur. Nom de l'Auteur (année de publication, pages citées). Exemples :

- En effet, le but poursuivi par **M. Ascher (1998, p. 223)**, est « d'élargir l'histoire des mathématiques de telle sorte qu'elle acquière une perspective multiculturelle et globale (...), d'accroître le domaine des mathématiques : alors qu'elle s'est pour l'essentiel occupée du groupe professionnel occidental que l'on appelle les mathématiciens (...) ».

- Pour dire plus amplement ce qu'est cette capacité de la société civile, qui dans son déploiement effectif, atteste qu'elle peut porter le développement et l'histoire, S. B. Diagne (1991, p. 2) écrit :

Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas : de toute manière, les populations ont toujours su opposer à la philosophie de l'encadrement et à son volontarisme leurs propres stratégies de contournements. Celles-là, par exemple, sont lisibles dans le dynamisme, ou à tout le moins, dans la créativité dont sait preuve ce que l'on désigne sous le nom de secteur informel et à qui il faudra donner l'appellation positive d'économie populaire.

- Le philosophe ivoirien a raison, dans une certaine mesure, de lire, dans ce choc déstabilisateur, le processus du sous-développement. Ainsi qu'il le dit :

le processus du sous-développement résultant de ce choc est vécu concrètement par les populations concernées comme une crise globale : crise socio-économique (exploitation brutale, chômage permanent, exode accéléré et douloureux), mais aussi crise socio-culturelle et de civilisation traduisant une impréparation sociohistorique et une inadaptation des cultures et des comportements humains aux formes de vie imposées par les technologies étrangères. (S. Diakitè, 1985, p. 105).

Pour les articles de deux ou trois auteurs, noter les initiales des prénoms, les noms et suivis de l'année (J. Batee et D. Maate, 2004 ou K. Moote, A. Pooul et E. Polim, 2000). Pour les articles ou ouvrages collectifs de plus de trois auteurs noter les initiales des prénoms, le nom du premier auteur et la mention "et al" (F. Loom et al, 2003). Lorsque plusieurs références sont utilisées pour la même information, celles-ci doivent être mises en ordre chronologique (R. Gool, 1998 et M. Goti, 2006).

**Les sources historiques, les références** d'informations orales et les notes explicatives sont numérotées en série continue et présentées en bas de page.

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Dans la zone titre, le titre d'un article est présenté en romain et entre guillemets, celui d'un ouvrage, d'un mémoire ou d'une thèse, d'un rapport, d'une revue ou d'un journal est présenté en italique. Dans la zone Editeur, on indique la Maison d'édition (pour un ouvrage), le Nom et le numéro/volume de la revue (pour un article). Au cas où un ouvrage est une traduction et/ou une réédition, il faut préciser après le titre le nom du traducteur et/ou l'édition (ex : 2<sup>de</sup> éd.).

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AMIN Samir, 1996, Les défis de la mondialisation, Paris, Le Harmattan.

AUDARD Cathérine, 2009, Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme ? Ethique, politique, société, Paris, Gallimard.

BERGER Gaston, 1967, L'homme moderne et son éducation, Paris, PUF.

DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir, 2003, « Islam et philosophie. Leçons d'une rencontre », Diogène, 202, p. 145-151.

DIAKITE Sidiki, 1985, Violence technologique et développement. La question africaine du développement, Paris, L'Harmattan.

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NB2 : La quête philosophique centrale de la revue **Particip'Action** reste: **Fluidité identitaire et construction du changement: approches pluri-et/ou transdisciplinaires.**

Les auteurs qui souhaitent se faire publier dans nos colonnes sont priés d'avoir cette philosophie comme fil directeur de leur réflexion.

La Rédaction

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## WEAPONIZING THE VOICE IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT: A READING OF AUGUST WILSON'S *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

Kodzo Kuma AHONDO\*

### Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the Black characters of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* have used their voices as a weapon to tame the hostile environment they live in. In this perspective, the Marxist and the Afrocentric critical approaches are used as the theoretical frameworks against which this study is conducted. This paper has found the African Americans' voices can be used as consciousness awareness raiser and a weapon to confront the hostility of their environment.

**Keywords:** Blues, environment, hostility, voice, weapon

### Résumé

Cet article explore les façons dont les personnages noirs de la pièce *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* d'August Wilson ont utilisé leur voix comme une arme pour apprivoiser l'environnement hostile dans lequel ils vivent. Dans cette perspective, les approches critiques marxiste et afrocentrique sont utilisées comme cadre théorique contre pour mener cette étude. Cet article a découvert que les voix des Afro-Américains peuvent être utilisées comme un outil de sensibilisation et une arme pour faire face à l'hostilité de leur environnement.

**Mots-clés :** arme, Blues, environnement, hostilité, voix

### Introduction

Literature and Civilization are relatives as the former derives from the latter. Many of the material Literature uses are taken from civilization. This way of doing makes literature more realistic. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a play by August Wilson (1982) is evidence of the realistic aspect of literature. The play evolves around Ma Rainey, who existed in real life. "Playwright August Wilson wrote *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1982, a

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play based on her career in Chicago in the 1920s” (Abbott, 2008, p. 333). The 1920s was the beginning of a phenomenon known as Race Records whereby Black singers and musicians recorded their music for a Black and more urban audience. Unfortunately for them, like in other industries, Blacks had no ownership in the music and recording industry. They were shamelessly and outrageously exploited by white owners and managers in the industry.

For the analysis of this play, it is interesting to have a look at the culture of the author that characterizes it as it may reveal information that impacts the play. August Wilson was a victim of American racism right from his teenage. “When August was a young teenager, the family moved to a mostly white suburb of Pittsburgh. At school August frequently found notes on his desk that read “Nigger Go Home”” (The JBHE Foundation, 1998, p. 61). The racism he was a victim of, the same that fueled the Race Records. Wilson’s play “pays tribute to the impact of Rainey’s early professional success as a black woman and the power of the music that she brought to the American mainstream” (Abbott, 2008, p. 334). He tries to keep the black culture alive in this play. “Mythology, history, social organizations, economics—all of these things are part of the culture. I make sure that each element is in some way represented—some elements more so than others” (Shannon, 1993, p. 539). The backbone of this culture has always been the exploitation of Blacks.

Patricia M. Gantt (2009, p. 7) notes that “Tied to a slavery and sharecropping past they can still remember, caught in the conflicts between their rural past and urban present, *Ma Rainey's* black characters are searching for an identity of their own; presumably, they can find it in the music.” This identity the characters are developing is a tool, a weapon that helps them confront the challenges of the hostile American culture. According to Frank Rich (1984, p. 6), “Like his real-life heroine, the legendary singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, Mr. Wilson articulates a legacy of

unspeakable agony and rage in a spellbinding voice.” In the context of this study, “the spellbinding voice” that crystalizes “the unspeakable agony and rage” of Blacks is viewed as the superweapon.

Relying on the Marxist and the Afrocentric literary criticisms as theoretical framework, this paper seeks to analyze how black characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* weaponize their “voice” to square up the hostile environment they live in. Because the play mainly deals with ownership, jobs, and power, Marxist theory is relevant to this analysis. According to Catharine A. MacKinnon. (1982, p. 515), “Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do make things needed to survive humanly.” Yet, the capitalist society fails to meet this goal as only very few people enjoy life, the upper class. To capitalism, “Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue” (p.515). Marxist criticism helps to better examine the class, the production (work), the capital (ownership) and the control (power) aspect of the play.

As for Afrocentricity, Molefi Kete Asante, its initiator, expounds that it “is a paradigm containing requirements for agency and subject placement for African people within the confines of African historical narratives; thus, moving Africans from the margins to the center in African discourse” (Smith, 2020, p. 212). This is the reader sees as the play under study focuses mostly on black characters instead of the usual periphery they used to be. Afrocentricity champions the African perspective on the text. Asante argues that “It is central to almost any technical, educational, economic, or cultural advance toward a genuine African Renaissance” (p. 212). Music (the Blues) being a technical discipline, Afrocentricity is also central to it.

This study focuses only on the script of the play. In this vein, it does not highlight the performing or scenic aspect of the play. And it is structured around five sections the first of which elaborates on the impact of

the oppression on Black characters. Section two deals with the value of Blues whereas section three explores the character of Toledo. The two last sections focus on Ma Rainey and Levee.

### **1. The Hostile Environment**

Drama imitates people's life experience in terms of their history, beliefs, customs and traditions, and their culture. It can be educative, informative, entertaining, or therapeutic. American drama is no exception. August Wilson, one of its prominent figures, has imitated the American culture that he puts on stage. In his *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, he does not only represent the hostile exploitative environment in which Blacks live, but also highlights how Blacks use their voice as a weapon to quench the hostility of that environment.

In the context of Race Records, Çiğdem Üsekes (2003, p. 116) observes that "Wilson first began to inspect the nature and source of Euro-Americans' economic power in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* ... Set in Chicago in 1927, the play exposes the exploitation of blues musicians by the white moguls of the recording industry." Things were so because "white culture has access to all the mechanisms to promote its own agenda, whereas black culture has not had the same benefits. That's why he presses this agenda" (Downing, 2005, as cited in Gantt, 2009, p. 2).

The white man has huge historic advantage over the black man. Çiğdem Üsekes (2003, p. 123) notes that "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 remains one of abuse and bondage for African Americans." Since then, Blacks have not been able to break that yoke yet. "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” (p. 123). In the same perspective, Molefi Kete Asante observes that “Centuries of predatory brutishness have dislocated African people from histories, languages, and institutions” (Smith, 2020, p. 212).

The system that dislocated the Africans from humanity has always been capitalism. In this regard, Çiğdem Üsekes (2003, p. 123) explains that she believes “Wilson's target is instead the American capitalist system, which allows the strong to be stronger and the weak to be exploited. No one can deny, though, that this system was established by Whites who have reaped its benefits.” Sandra G. Shannon (1993) also notes that the system is set not only to exploit Blacks but to destroy the resistance tool the Blues constitutes. “I don't think that it was without purpose, in the sense that the blues and music have always been at the forefront in the development of the character and consciousness of black America, and people have senselessly destroyed that or stopped that” (p. 540). Üsekes (2003, p. 116) further expounds that Wilson's emphasis on how “property or capital 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, often disrupt and destroy those lives for their own economic survival.” That is the reason why Blacks keep working for the white man. “Work is the social process shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are” (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 515). This work has alienated and dehumanized the black man ever since.

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in Chicago. “Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries” (Wilson, 1982, p. xv). Right from the beginning of the play, the reader is exposed to the fact that the characters evolve in a hostile environment where of millionaires and derelicts,

gangsters and roughhouse dandies are the stockholders. And the presence of Irish grandmothers praying with their rosaries contrasts with the corruption of this hostile contest. Irish people are traditionally catholic. And knowing the tremendous role that the Roman Catholic Church played in the enslavement of Blacks and seeing the Irish old women fingering (torturing) “black” rosaries (foreshowing the treatment of black characters), one is prepared to meet the hardships awaiting Blacks. Again, the reader could wonder if the presence of religion makes this American environment so hostile to Blacks, what if there were no religion at all.

The reader is also introduced to Sturdyvant, the studio owner, who represents the white exploiter of Black musicians. “*STURDYVANT is visible in the control booth. Preoccupied with money, he is insensitive to Black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm’s length* (sic)” (Wilson, p. 17).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1997, p. 55) notes that “. . . one of Wilson's accomplishments is to register the ambiguous presence of white folks in a segregated black world—the way you see them nowhere and feel them everywhere.” This implies that though living in a segregated area, Blacks’ lives are strongly influenced by the white despite his absence. This also highlights the hostility of the environment. So, to say, the presence or the absence of the white man does not matter as long as the system he has set controls Blacks’ lives. “Wilson's fictive black world, however, is peopled with many Whites; if they do not appear on stage, they materialize in the lives, stories, and conversations of his black characters” (Üsekes, 2003, p. 115). By doing this, Wilson brings Blacks in the center. “Wilson's white characters have appeared time and again in Wilson scholarship; however, they have been treated as peripheral, rather than central, to his plays” (p. 115). Even on that periphery, the White still controls Black lives.

By shifting the white man from the center to the periphery while centering Black in his play, “Wilson's dramatic work, whose emotional

center lies with his African American characters, also consistently draws attention to the pervasive and negative impact of Euro-Americans in the black community” (Üsekes, 2003, p. 115). This is to say that whether in the center (presence) or at the periphery (absence), the environment the white man has created is hostile to the black man. The white man’s system (capitalism) comes from the Western paradigm of Eurocentrism or Eurocentricity. “It must be emphasized that Afrocentricity is not a black version of Eurocentricity. Eurocentricity is based on white supremacist notions whose purposes are to protect white privilege and advantage in education, economics, politics, and so forth” (Asante, 1991, pp. 171-172). This is where the hostility against Blacks comes from.

In the play, the name of the oppression against Blacks is capitalism coupled with racism. Throughout the play, and mainly off-stage, white characters who are part of the oppression deny ownership to Blacks. For instance, when Ma Rainey tells the policeman who follows her in the studio that the car is hers, the officer says: “That’s what you say, lady ... We still gotta check” (Wilson, 1982, p. 50). For the white policeman, a black person, and again a black woman, owning a car that perhaps he can never afford is unconceivable. When Ma Rainey realizes she is going to be late, she wants to take a cab, but the white driver refuses. Ma explains, “Said he wasn’t gonna haul no colored folks ... if you want to know the truth of it” (p. 51). In the same perspective, seeing a black man with a check is weird in a capitalist and racist society. That is what Cutler fears when he says: “See a nigger with a check, the first thing they think is he done stole it someplace” (p. 106). All these white attitudes towards Blacks constitute subtle hostility.

## **2. The Values of Blues in the Black Community**

Drama brings awareness to people. By imitating culture, drama also shows the asset of people. This is the case in Wilson’s play Ma Rainey’s

Black Bottom, where Blues is viewed as a weapon of resistance to cope with the harsh realities of American recording industry.

The Blues is the symbol of hundreds of years of suffering of Africans in America. Though it has become an American cultural heritage, it does not carry the same value for Blacks and whites. The Blues represent the African American voice per excellence. As *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* portrays it, the Blues has only financial values to Sturdyvant, the studio owner, and Irvin, Ma's manager. But the Blues represent much more for Blacks. Sandra G. Shannon (1993, p. 540) notices that "I think that the music contains a cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in." The Blues is indeed the cultural response to oppression and suffering. The Blues (the voice) is their resistance tool.

To Blacks, the Blues is sacred. It is the blood of their ancestors that has created the music. According to Alice Mills (1995, p. 35), "The importance of the relationship between African American music and the sacred does not go unnoticed by Wilson...; Ma Rainey is afraid of entrusting her voice to the radio." This reluctance from Ma Rainey reveals her awareness of the desecrating nature of the white about African art. Since the Blues means so much to the playwright, Wilson cherishes, preserves, and promotes it through his plays as resistance tool for Blacks.

In a broader sense, each African American carries the Blues in his veins, since it is part of the tools that helped his ancestors to go through slavery. The life of slaves was sung in the Blues, and the Blues tells their life stories. So, the black characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* also have the same experience. The Blues they are singing, playing on the trumpet, the guitar, the drum, and other musical instruments is about their own suffering. The Blues tells their story. Each character has a story sung in the Blues. Alice Mills (1995, p. 35) explains this better when she states, "Even though all of the characters in Wilson's drama are not blessed with Maretha's musical gifts or Ma Rainey's talent, each carries within in him a song; a

song which is simultaneously collective and individual.” Though they all have a song, they need a voice to sing that song. Three black characters stem out of the group in the context of this paper, Toledo, Ma Rainey, and Levee.

### **3. Toledo: The Ananse of the Play**

In a broader view, August Wilson’s play sheds light on the evils of American society, and is meant to influence the thinking of people, so they straighten their wrong deeds. Wilson’s play is a mirror of the American society, which is expected to change its sociopolitical and economic foundations to demonstrate the land of freedom and opportunity it claims to be.

Among the black characters of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the study focuses only on three of them for the tremendous role and impact that they have in the play. These are Toledo, Levee, and Ma Rainey. This section examines Toledo’s contribution to the story. Of these characters, Toledo is viewed as philosopher, the wise guy, the observer. Patricia M. Gantt (2009, p. 9) asserts, “Again Wilson dramatizes his core belief that we cannot know who we are as individuals or as a people unless we know our traditions.” Through this quote the reader may sense that Toledo is like the spokesman who voices Wilson’s vision of the world. Çiğdem Üsekes (2003, p. 117) also observes that:

Toledo's rather long monologue, one of the most vital passages in *Ma Rainey*, articulates Wilson's concise version of African American history, a long history of abuse, impotence, passivity, and muteness. Furthermore, it introduces "the white man" as an off-stage character whose influence is severely felt among blacks. It is this generic off-stage presence that Wilson will consistently summon in his later work.

Toledo represents the Black consciousness, the one that really understands the gist of the white man’s system. He tells the other band members, “See, now ... I’ll tell you something. As long as the colored man looks to white folks to put the crown on what he say ... as long as he look to

white folks for approval,” to let them see where the problem lies. “... then he ain’t never gonna find out who he is and what he is about. He’s just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That’s one sure thing” (Wilson, 1982, p.37).

In this hostile environment, Toledo’s voice attempts to connect the Black man to his tradition as fighting strategy. Toledo, from an Afrocentric perspective, can be considered Ananse, the West African spider. In the West African tradition “the spider can be tricky, but it can also be well meaning. Its name is Ananse, and he is hybrid. As a spider, he is suspended between heaven and earth. As a human, he lives on the edge of society” (Mills, 1995, p. 31). It is being on the edge of society that helps Ananse to become a keen observer of society. “Ananse-Elegbara-Esu is presented as Toledo in *Ma Rainey*,” (p. 31). Ananse is spider in the Akan language (Ghana), Elegbara in the Yoruba language (Nigeria) and Esu in the Fon language (Benin). “In his role as spiritual guide, Ananse is selflessly devoted to the service of others” (p. 32). This is the role Toledo incarnates in the play. He symbolizes the light for the other black. When Levee, the stupid Negro, laughs at Toledo, he is simply highlighting his own ignorance.

The crucial issue Toledo raises in his monologues is the identity of the Black man. Wilson, commenting on this matter in an interview declares that

The question we've been wrestling with since the Emancipation Proclamation is, “Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values?” (Shannon, 1993, p. 546).

Now, one may assimilate into something genuinely positive. When the black man sees the kidnapping of human beings from Africa to the Americas and the way the white man treats his fellow human Black, the assimilation pill becomes too big to swallow. August Wilson declares that

“On the surface, it seems as though we have adopted the idea that we should assimilate, because one has received more publicity than the other” (Shannon, 1993, p. 546). Yet, appearance is deceitful. With a close look, “you’ll find that the majority of black Americans have rejected the idea of giving up who they are—in essence becoming someone else—in order to advance in American society, which may be why we haven’t moved anywhere” (p. 546). The majority of the Blacks rejects the white man’s predatory world view. In the same vein, Wilson states that “I see the majority of the people saying, “Naw, I don’t want to do that. I’m me.” These are the people in the ghetto; these are the people who suffer” (p. 546). It is this rejection of assimilation that the voice of Toledo represents in the play: Bringing awareness to his people.

This refusal of adopting a system whereby human beings only have economic value to be shamelessly exploited is a way of acknowledging the suffering of their ancestors and proudly accepting their cultural heritage. Wilson explains that “The culture of black America is still very much alive. Black Americans still practice the values that their grandparents had—with some exceptions, of course. For instance, black people . . . we decorate our houses differently” (1993, p. 546). This quote implies that black people are different from white people in terms of world view. The white for centuries keeps saying he is the best and tries to school everyone else. Wilson declares that “It’s white America that says, “Our way is better than your way. You’re not acting right. You’re not doing this right. You’re not supposed to act like that”” (p. 546). That arrogance is unbearable to most Blacks

#### **4. Ma Rainey: The Black Female Warrior’s Voice**

Of the three black characters this study focuses on, Ma Rainey is the most punchy and incisive one. Ma is the one who has fully weaponized her voice (the Blues) to force the oppressor do what she wants and deserves. Ma

Rainey is the warrior in the forefront against white exploitation in the play. Ma has two assets at her disposal: self-awareness and dignity. Sandra G. Shannon (1991, p. 6) argues that “Fully aware that she is a crucial element for a successful recording session, she [Ma Rainey] enjoys her temporary as the anxiously awaited prima donna.” When the white policeman comes in the studio with Ma Rainey, she tells Irvin, “Irvin ... you better tell this man who I am! You better get him straight!” (Wilson, 1982, p. 48). Ma knows her identity. She knows her capacity as well. “Acknowledged as the “Mother of the Blues,” Ma Rainey brought rural blues to American musical life” (Abbott, 2008, p. 332). Ma is aware she is the mastodon of the Blues to the dismay of the oppressor. “And maybe most importantly, Ma Rainey recognizes that her record offers a lucrative business deal for Sturdyvant. In the end, the triumph is hers” (Üsekes, 2003, p. 117). All her presence in the studio demonstrates an attitude of defiance to the white producers because she knows the hostile environment Blacks are living in.

As far as her dignity is concerned, “Ma Rainey struggles to maintain her dignity in the face of apparent ruthless plundering of her talent by white promotor Sturdyvant and Irvin and to exercise as much control as is possible over the right to her music” (Shannon, 1991, p. 6). Ma’s dignity constitutes her shield in this fight against the white producers.

On top of her self-awareness and dignity, Ma Rainey clearly understands the rules of the white man’s game. “Ma Rainey's triumph can best be understood in terms of her familiarity with the rules of the game, which enables her to remain in control and to negotiate with the men on her own terms” (Üsekes, 2003, p. 117). Knowing the rule of the game also implies the recognition of one’s limits. Ma Rainey acknowledges her limits and fights accordingly. In this perspective, Shannon (1991, p. 8) notes,

Although she knows that her authority is limited once her songs have been committed to recording, she gets some degree of satisfaction by disrupting the white men’s scheduled recording session: she is noticeably late; she complains about a chilly studio;

she stalls to get a Coca-Cola; and she insisted that her stuttering nephew be allowed to introduce the recording.

This is the embarrassing, uncomfortable and power unbalanced situation the white hates to be confronted with. This situation also reveals why the white man is so subtle but crude in the matter of keeping Blacks as the cheapest labors force in the Marxist understanding of the concept. Sturdyvant and Irvin's eagerness to record the Blues and make money is tale telling. Here, Ma stands for the black working class. Ma fully enjoys this status until she goes out of the studio. Üsekes, (2003, p. 117) observes that "even when most of her wishes are fulfilled, she leaves the studio without signing the release forms, the last site of her power over Sturdyvant."

Before Ma's arrival, the room where Blacks are performing is cold but none of them say anything. They know this environment is not good for them. Yet, Ma's power is clearly demonstrated from her arrival in the studio. She calls Irvin to heat up the room for her comfort. What gives her that power is her voice, and being aware that without her voice, the white men would not even look at her. Moreover, "When Ma finally makes her appearance on stage, she refuses to go along with Sturdyvant's selection for the record" (Üsekes, 2003, p. 116). At times, Ma uses the same weapon as her oppressor, hostility. "Her hostility toward 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, although the record becomes the site of their conflict" (p. 116). Ma Rainey is very powerful in this fight because she has some alternative.

In this regard, Ma "can rely on her Southern fans for her financial survival, Ma Rainey can defy Sturdyvant, and the power she derives from having an alternative provides her with the unwavering tenacity she needs in her dealings with Sturdyvant and Irvin" (Üsekes, 2003, p. 117). Frances Abbott (2008, p. 333) confirms that Ma Rainey's "ability to capture the

essence of southern black life endeared her to a wide southern black audience.” What makes Ma challenge the white producers in every contradicting step they take toward her is only her voice. And this is the center of her power, her weapon.

### **5. Levee: Misusing the Voice**

If Toledo is the philosopher, Ma Rainey the warrior, Levee is surely the stupid Negro whose utopia leads him to think he can outsmart the white oppressor. Though Levee is the only character that can write the Blues and play it on his trumpet (his voice), his immaturity takes over him, preventing him to grasp the reality of the hostile environment. All his reactions and speech throughout the play has underscored his stupidity. All his world revolves around money. When Toledo challenges him to spell the word “music”, here is what Levee says: “What you talking about? I can spell music. I got a dollar say I can spell it! Put your dollar up. Where you dollar?” (Wilson, 1982, p. 28). Alice Mills (1995, p. 32) also notes that “*In Ma Rainey*, Levee is divided between his need, on the one hand, to play trumpet with other African Americans and his equally pressing need, on the other, to surpass them by excelling in the eyes of a white audience.” That type of Negro is very dangerous for his fellows.

Levee’s immaturity prevents him from taking life in America as a black person as living in a hostile environment. He is always into something, messing around. And when Toledo, the wise and altruist Ananse, wants to bring him light, he vehemently rejects it. He thinks he is better than everyone else. “I ain’t like you, Cutler. I got talent!” (Wilson, 1982, p. 26). Levee wants to impress a girl with a pair of new shoes he bought. Cutler wonders “What the hell she gonna do with his shoes? She can’t do nothing with the nigger’s shoes” (Wilson, 1982, p. 23). The strange thing is that the girl is Mae, Ma Rainey’s girlfriend. Ma Rainey is Levee’s boss. He is always putting himself into trouble and thinks that is okay.

Levee also claims that “everybody can’t play like I do. Everybody can’t have their own band” (Wilson, p. 26). He keeps saying he wants to start his own band, which is a good thing. Yet, he totally ignores the rules of the game. He thinks it just very easy to have talent to change social classes, from the working class to the middle class. Levee says, “I’m gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave ... and Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and beg her to stay! That’s the way I’m gonna be!” (p. 94). He wants the white man to respect him. In this vein, he writes the songs (his voice) the white producer Sturdyvant asked him. But unlike Ma Rainey, Levee has no self-awareness and dignity as assets.

Unfortunately, Sturdyvant declines his proposal and proposes to pay five dollars for each song Levee writes (Wilson, p. 109). Çiğdem Üsekes (2003, p. 116) argues that “To his disappointment, however, Levee will, by the end of the play, discover his role to be merely that of a pawn in the game determined by whites” (p. 116). Prior to that, Levee was fired from the band by Ma Rainey due to his everlasting stupidity (p. 102). Realizing that he has just ruined his own life, he turns his anger on Toledo, who accidentally steps on his shoes. Though Toledo apologizes, Levee is not satisfied. “Enraged by this turn of events, Levee takes out his anger on Toledo, stabbing to death his fellow musician who, ironically, had earlier warned him about what to expect from white folks like Sturdyvant” (Üsekes, 2003, p. 117). Though “Levee has stabbed and killed the man, an act not of personal hatred, but of societal despair” (Gantt, 2009, p. 8), his stupid action confirms his rejection of the African Ananse’s wisdom and philosophy.

Levee’s actions and reactions are conditioned by the oppressor. He is without knowing it alienated to the white man’s world vision, money. Levee is dislocated. According to Molefi Kete Asante “our problem was that we had been dislocated by the European imagination. Europe had, in a

sense, taken us out of our own position and away from our own subject place, which is our own center” (Turner & Asante, 2002, pp. 117-118). To overcome this dislocation in Blacks takes a lot of energy that explains why they have not yet totally recovered from this evil.

The dislocation of the black man has created disunity among them. Both the dislocation and the disunity among Blacks are the manifestations of the hostility they have been living in. Patricia M. Gantt (2009, p. 7) observes that “Nor is there black unity in *Ma Rainey*; the squabbles among the musicians offer a natural way for Wilson to explore both intra- and interracial conflict” (Gantt, 2009, p. 7). Yet, white oppressors mostly work as a wolf pack. To carry out their evil, they work in team. An instance is when Cutler tells the story of Rev. Gates who was humiliated by a gang of white Southerners to dance for them as they circled around him (Wilson, 1982, p. 97). Another example of unity of the oppressors is the white gang who raped Levee’s mother (Wilson, 1982, pp. 69-70). Now, the point is if white can cooperate in evil doings, why can Black not come together for something positive?

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to analyze how Black characters in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* weaponize their “voice” to square up the hostile environment they live in. Among them Toledo, who is considered the wise guy and philosopher has used his voice to raise the awareness of his fellow Blacks on the hostile system they are living in. Ma Rainey, also referred to as “Mother of Blues” is the one who really weaponizes her voice to confront the white oppressors. She is the warrior in the play. Levee, the white man’s pawn has bitterly realized what Toledo is trying to explain him. This study has relied on the Marxist and the Afrocentric criticisms as theoretical framework.

Marxism has helped the reader to see Blacks as working class where white producers are the upper class, the owners who shamelessly exploit the black working class to make as much profit as possible. As for the Afrocentric criticism, which celebrates the role African people play now and have played in human history and reorients their thinking from the white man's culture to their own world view.

This paper has found out that the white has a predatory nature that he applies to every domain of his life. This nature leads him to dehumanize his fellow human in slavery and now in economic exploitation in the play under study. In the play, his appearance is rare, both his presence on-stage and his absence off-stage have strong impacts on black characters who are in the center of the story. This paper has also noted that the Blues is used as resistance tool by Blacks in America. Likewise, the voice of a person can be used as a weapon to confront one's oppressors like Ma Rainey does. White oppression has dislocated Blacks, and the only way out is to reconstruct their African identity, and the Blues is just one of the many ways.

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