

African Heritage From the Lenses of African-American Theatre and Film

I. Peter Ukpokodu

Introduction: What's in a name?

As Richard Pryor told it years ago, he was sitting in a hotel lobby on a trip to Africa when he heard a voice within. "What do you see?" it asked. "Look around."

"I looked around and I saw people of all colors and shapes. And the voice said, 'Do you see any niggers?' I said, 'No.' It said, 'Do you know why? There aren't any.'"

Pryor told an audience that he started crying then. The comedian, whose speech had always been peppered with that ugly word, abruptly realized that it had not passed his lips in the three weeks he'd spent among the blacks of Africa. Pryor subsequently renounced the word altogether. The most profane man in America decided that there was a term too profane even for him.

—Leonard Pitts

Africa has always been a source of spiritual self-renewal, creativity, and psychological therapy for most African-American performing artists. The first African-American places of theatrical entertainment bore the important adjective African—the African Grove, the African Theatre—and the first African-American theatre company was called the African Company.² The principal actors of the African Company, James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge, whether performing at home (New York) or touring US and foreign countries, always referred to themselves as the "black Roscius," the "African Roscius," or the "Tragedian of colour, from the African Theatre, New York."³ As in the manner of Mohammed Ali, some African-American artistic and cultural leaders have shed their western names to rechristen themselves with indigenous African names such as (Imamu) Amiri Baraka, Maulana

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Ron Karenga, Aisha Rahman, Nubia Lai Leslie Lee, and Ntozake Shange. Perhaps the most radical has been that of the versatile entertainer and autobiographer, Joseph Howard Lee, who changed his name to Bata Kindai Amgoza ibn LoBagola. The seventeenth child of African-American parents Joseph and Lucy Lee, he was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but maintained that he was born in Dahomey (Republic of Benin) in West Africa. To maintain his persistent claim of a false African origin he took out US naturalization papers. It was only when he was convicted of a crime and faced deportation hearings as an undesirable expatriate that he reluctantly revealed his American citizenship.⁴ David Killingray and Willie Henderson give a sympathetic explanation of LoBagola's behavior:

Joseph Howard Lee, an African American born in very disadvantaged circumstances, with little schooling, was clearly in many ways a remarkable, if deeply disturbed, man. His life might have been spent in the poorer districts of his home city of Baltimore or abroad freighters plying the transatlantic routes, but he escaped from both urban drear and maritime employ. This and his subsequent career reveal a considerable measure of intelligence and a determination or willingness to seize chances as they came his way. Some of these were dead ends that led nowhere; others opened up a range of opportunities. His success, when it came, depended upon his ability to tell and sustain a lively tale and upon his great capacity as an entertainer. By adopting an African identity, LoBagola was able to exploit his blackness in a way that opened doors that would otherwise have been closed to an African American[. . .] Undoubtedly he was exploited, but he also exploited others by his talent for imitation and presentation. As such he entertained at a high standard before large, appreciative, and sometimes critical audiences.⁵

The practice of adopting African names or imitating Africans is not limited to African Americans. As Ernest Marke and Sidney White have shown in their studies, such a practice also existed in the African diaspora in general. Ras Prince Monolulu was the African name assumed by Peter McKay from Guyana as he performed shows in the streets, racetracks, and railway stations of London, Britain.⁶ Recently, a London drinking establishment was named after him.⁷ Black Dougie from Jamaica entertained British racecourses as an African while Edgar B. Knight wore long and flowing "African" costumes as he played the role of a "quack" doctor and herbalist; he said he was from Abyssinia.⁸

While not underestimating the importance of these people and places in the general history of the black performing arts, the focus must now shift to a critical

interpretation of African-American theatrical and filmic representation and understanding of African history, spirituality, and culture. Haile Gerima, August Wilson, and Amiri Baraka seem to consciously explore the spiritual and cultural connection between Africa and its diaspora, especially the United States. An examination of representative creative works of these artists will reveal their understanding and attitude towards their ancestral continent.

***Sankofa* and the Diasporic Lucidity of the Possessed**

The history of slavery and the slave trade is one that is uncomfortable for the descendants of the slavers and the slaves. For the descendants of slaves, it is an unhappy history that should permanently be entombed in the human subconscious. It is also one in which, as in *Gerima's Sankofa*, the African American would rather be distanced from Africa, as in Mona's cry of being American, not even African American that she is, and certainly not African! Surrounded and approached by African slaves in the dungeons of the slave castle on whose external grounds she had earlier performed seductive modelling postures before a white male photographer, Mona breaks away but the doors slam shut on her and she is unable to escape. Mona is soon made to confront the history she is running from by living the experience of millions of slaves from whom she descended.⁹ By the time she goes through this humbling experience, the historical and cultural ties between Africa and the African diaspora are established, and a more mature, pensive, knowledgeable Mona replaces the erstwhile flighty, fashionable, materialistic, class-conscious girl of vanity. Haile Gerima employs the technique of possession to effect this change in perception.

Possession, in the African context, is a state in which a higher force (a spirit, a god, or an ancestor) occupies the body of a person and makes that individual to exhibit the essential traits of the higher power. Though possession could be dangerous, malevolent and may lead to malady when prolonged, it is often benign, benevolent, and of short duration. Possession may occur in a person at the will of the higher power but it could also be induced through incantation, "special dancing and drumming."¹⁰ The spirit may speak through the possessed thus making that person to play "the role of a medium."¹¹ John S. Mbiti points out that at the climax of possession, "the individual in effect loses his own personality and acts in the context of the 'personality' of the spirit possessing him."¹²

In *Sankofa*, the possession of Mona is induced by drumming and incantation in which the spirits of the dead are invoked to rise up and possess the living. Mona becomes the person to undergo possession through her encounter with the self-proclaimed guardian of the sanctified grounds of the slave castle. In a culture that has established the spiritual potency of words, the command word *sankofa*¹³ addressed pointedly at Mona is immediately efficacious. The word not only leads

Mona into the dungeons of the slave castle but the word becomes flesh when Mona is transfigured to Shola. The spirit and personality of Shola take over Mona. When the possession is complete Mona's strident cry of her American origin is silenced when her clothes are torn off her and she is branded with a hot iron¹⁴ that transforms her to Shola, the African slave. Her nakedness also marks the change in personality. The presence of the "bird of passage" (the buzzard) becomes Gerima's technique of traversing the vast Atlantic Ocean (the Middle Passage) from Africa to the Americas. It is the use of this bird (already established prominently with its head turned backwards as if looking back to the past) that accounts for Shola's presence at a Lafayette sugarcane plantation in the United States.

Gerima makes the possessed transfiguration of Mona to Shola the moment of historical knowledge and the beginning of wisdom on diasporic cultural relationships. The historical and cultural epistemology is principally directed at both the African and the African American, although ample provision is made for white American male audiences to scrutinize the role played by slave merchants and owners in the internal, publicly unobtrusive, dynamics of slavery as an institution of harrowing experience to both the slave owner and the slave. To the slave owner moments of the pleasures of the flesh and of the joys of life experienced through the raping of slave women are suddenly balanced and checked by an awakening to the sense of human mortality and rebelliousness. The juxtaposition of scenes of satisfying accomplishment that could evoke the *nunc dimittis* (as in Father Raphael's apparent success in making "Bible" Joe a fanatical Christian with utmost disdain towards his heathen mother) with those of conflagration and human annihilation reminiscent of the *dies irae, dies illa* (as in Joe's murder of Father Raphael and the setting of the church on fire) is a humble lesson that life and death are held on the same fragile thread.¹⁵ Humanity at most vital and vivacious is humanity most vulnerable and mortal, and its application is non-racial in *Sankofa*: Nunu the black, Joe the mulatto, and Fr. Raphael the white all experience what life has to offer and make their final exit in a burning church. To the Catholic mind of Father Raphael, it is the arrival of the eschatos without the parousia. His world has dissolved in the promised burning flames of the last days but he will have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ when the trumpets will summon the dead and the living for final judgement elaborated in the *Dies irae, dies illa*:

The trumpet's wondrous call will sound in tombs the world over and urge everybody forward to the throne. Death and nature will stand amazed when creation rises again to give answer to its Judge. Then will be brought out the book in which is written the complete record that will decide each man's fate. And when the Judge is seated, all secret sin will be made known, and no sin will go without its due punishment.¹⁶

It seems accurate to identify Father Raphael as one of the strongest and most influential characters in *Sankofa* even though he mostly stays in the background. His deft manipulation of Joe accounts for the stifling of Joe's love for Lucy. Lucy's frustration over the unrequited love drives her into seeking some love potion from the irrepressible Shango to make Joe love her. Applied to Joe's food the love potion has a deadly burning effect on his throat that drives him to the waters of a stream. As Joe exhibits the pangs of death, Nunu vicariously suffers the same pains as her son, and rushes to the stream. She is able to revive her son by calling on the succor of her African ancestors and spiritual forces. In this process she sees the medal of the Virgin Mary that Joe wears on a chain around his neck. When she pulls it from his neck and throws it into the stream, Joe goes berserk and purposely drowns her. We must revisit this incident later to examine its far reaching implication within an African theological framework. It suffices to observe for now that Father Raphael is so important to the film that a seemingly ordinary innocuous act of winning a convert to Christianity has a cascading effect that precipitates terrible events of serious mortal repercussions.

The maturity of Gerima's artistic vision is clearly visible in his use of Father Raphael, seemingly at the periphery of the Africanist vision of the film, to assume a central role unobtrusively. The vision of a center controlled by the periphery or by the marginalized bespeaks an oxymoron. By placing a white priest at the margins of a black center and giving him manipulative control of the center, Gerima widens the scope of the film's intellectual horizon. Thus *Sankofa* which is about Africa and the African diaspora is also about the religious and intellectual leaders of that part of the world where Africans have been dispersed through slavery. The Church is a cornerstone of that western milieu, and Father Raphael represents its moral and intellectual foundation. It is within this frame of reference that Joe goes to Father Raphael to seek an answer to his most troubling question, "Who is my father?"

Father Raphael's answer is general, not specific. He theologially refers to the divine paternity of humans, who by his analysis are "Christians" and not the despicable "heathens." He posits God as "our father," thus introducing sophistry that allows him to evade the issue of an earthly father Joe is desperately searching for to give completion to his life and to explain his color difference from both blacks and whites. Joe has no intellectual rigor to press the issue further—if God the Father is the father I am looking for, did he make Nunu, my mother, pregnant in a manner similar to the divine impregnation of the Virgin Mary? Do I have divine genes in me, and would a DNA analysis prove that? Because of Father Raphael's evasive answer that places Joe in a situation of never knowing his earthly father, an intellectual awakening is created by apocalyptic events. The events are a vision of "the last days" expressed in the *dies irae*. Joe's question will be answered when the "Judge is seated, [and] all secret sin [. . .] made known."¹⁷ An intellectual

perspective outside the African world view is thus established to give a final answer to the inquiry about an incident that seemingly was brought about by that outsider's forcible penetration into the interior of the African.

The death of Nunu at the hands of her son, Joe, allows Gerima to explain a key point in African culture to those born outside of it and who have lost their knowledge of it. Nunu is the African; Joe is the African American, born and bred in the diaspora and has lost his cultural affinity to the African culture. This reality is driven home by the name he is popularly called—Bible Joe. A devotee of the Virgin and her child whose medal he wears around his neck, his life outside the field where he is a head slave revolves around the Church and Father Raphael. Private moments are used in holy adoration and admiration of, and meditation about, the Madonna and the infant Jesus. In a rare moment of carnal knowledge of Lucy, his act is frozen before completion because of his sudden awareness of the picture of the Madonna and child to which he redirects his gaze. He throws Lucy out of his room in a fit of anger, a "holy" anger at Lucy the devil who almost ruined his Christian attitude of *de contemptu mundi*, especially that of the mortification of the flesh. One may only imagine the acts of contrition and self-flagellation that Bible Joe would resort to in an affirmation of his Christianity. It is this same fanatical, pious attitude to the Christian culture that leads him to murder his mother when the latter intentionally cuts and throws into the stream the chain that holds the medal of the Virgin.

It is evident from the actions that follow immediately that Gerima sees matricide as a most serious offense that must be examined from the perspective of the African culture. Matricide viewed from that cultural angle is unnatural in the most basic sense of going against nature, not merely human nature. Gerima captures this cultural understanding in the thick black clouds that immediately cover the skies above the stream, and in the winds, and the fierce thunder and lightning that are the ingredients of an approaching storm. The rain that follows pelts Joe mercilessly to indicate that it is not the usual rain generally regarded in that culture as a blessing. The "normal" rain, as the spittle of the Supreme Being¹⁸ or as the water spilled by the divinities when fetching some for the Supreme Being,¹⁹ is a cause for joy and is cherished as divine benevolence and benignity. The storm and the heavy rain that follow matricide are a condemnation by nature of an unnatural occurrence.

On another level, human nature condemns Joe from a long standing cultural practice that parents do not kill their children nor children their parents. Nunu has adhered to this code of conduct. When Joe was little, "hardly bigger than a mouse, it was [his] mother who wiped the mucus from his nose, her breasts [he] sucked and pulled at anyhow, even biting them, and it was on her clothes [he] defecated and pissed upon."²⁰ The point of emphasis here is that when Joe was little, weak, and helpless, Nunu could have killed him if she had so desired. She believed in the

traditional code of conduct, of a mother's protection for her child, and she upheld it. Even as an adult Joe still received this protection from Nunu as evident in rendering help to him to survive Lucy's poison. Just at the moment that she revives him, Joe murders her after verbally condemning her as a heathen.

Joe does not keep his part of the ethical demand of the cultural relationship between a mother and a child. His uncontrollable anger makes him violate the expected relationship the moment he raises his hand against his mother. The code is clear that Joe has earned a mortal curse for his mortal sin:

If your parents rebuke you, stay silent, show that their censure grieves you; never talk back when they censure you thus. There are certain children who never let their parents speak without interruption[. . .] And children who are even so bold that they raise their hands against their mother! Ah, how merciful is God, for were I the Creator, I would command the arm of such a child to stay up and never come down again! [. . .] I beg of you, do not earn the curse of your father, nor cause your mother to execrate your name; the curse of parents when the child is guilty never fails to hunt down the child.²¹

Joe is guilty before nature and before humans; Joe's death is inevitable.

Gerima seems to suggest that Joe's nihilist attitude towards his mother and the African culture from which he inheres is the cumulative result of Father Raphael's indoctrination. Before Joe dies, he is made to confront the priest who had educated him to hate his culture and his mother. Shola is instrumental in making Joe come to a true knowledge of the sufferings his mother had gone through in the hands of her people who sold her to slavery, of the slave merchant who raped her to give birth to Joe, of Father Raphael who labelled her a heathen, and of Joe himself who despised and murdered her. Joe becomes enlightened about Nunu as the true *mater dolorosa*, and as he bears her dead body to be laid at the sanctuary of Father Raphael's church—the pelting rain has changed to ordinary showers as if in sympathy with his contrite enlightenment—one could sense the Catholic mind of Joe applying verses of the *Sabat Mater Dolorosa* to Nunu:

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Quis est homo qui non fleret, | Who is there who would not weep |
| Matrem Christi si videret | Were he to see Christ's mother |
| In tanto supplicio? | In such great suffering? |
| Quis non posset contristari, | Or who could help feeling |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Christi matrem contemplari | Sympathy with the mother, were |
| Dolentem cum Filio? ²² | He to think of her sorrowing with her son? |

Joe receives a modicum of honor when he lays Nunu's body on the altar and declares her a saint. His canonization of his mother is not enough to totally purify him from the mortal sin of matricide. When his argument with Father Raphael leads to the priest's death, Joe is irredeemably doomed. Is Father Raphael the father he does not know? There are vague allusions that suggest so—the reference to a heavenly father when Joe inquires about his earthly father, his close bond with Joe, and his reference to Joe as special. If Father Raphael is his father, Joe has added patricide to his list of sins. In another sense, Father Raphael's death is still patricide because he is a priest, a spiritual father. Joe has killed the Lord's anointed! The church is set ablaze, burning the bodies of Joe and Father Raphael. Nunu's body—the only innocent one among the three—is not found. A legend about it states that a big bird, a buzzard, had swooped down from the skies and carried her back to Africa.

One of the compelling aspects of *Sankofa* is the religious battle on the field of slavery between Christianity, the religion of the slave owners, and African traditional religion, the belief system of the slaves, except Joe. Shola becomes the playground of these antagonistic forces. In a very vivid scene, Shola is brought in by her owner before Father Raphael to receive flagellation and spiritual renewal for attending a "heathen" ceremony. Rendered completely naked before the probing eyes of Father Raphael (who holds a cross across her breasts) and her master, James, working away with a whip at her rear (the same rear he had forcibly entered Shola on numerous occasions and for which he would die), Shola seems to evoke a conflicting metaphor of concupiscence and crucifixion. With her hands tied above her head and her body lifted by a hook to the knot of her uplifted hands, irresistibly receives corporal punishment and verbal abuse and indoctrination. Her helpless posture seems to resemble and mock the cross that Father Raphael places against her breasts as her master violates her body from the rear with a whip. After the physical punishment, the hook is loosened and she drops to her feet. Gerima's christological irony is evident: Shola, the "heathen," undergoes the agonies of Christ under Father Raphael and James, the Christians. She suffers some form of crucifixion by the Christians. The new Christ is a black woman! When she "resurrects" mentally, she is a changed, strong woman helping to lead the slave rebellion and to seek freedom. As Christianity is diminished by the cruelty of Father Raphael and James, African traditional religion is uplifted by Shola and Shango.²³ Shola accepts the sankofa bird medal from Shango and wears it. She has finally accepted the traditional religion.

However, the film has a greater purpose for putting Christianity vis-a-vis African traditional religion. It strives to awaken a people's memory to the often unspoken, perhaps unknown, history of the role of Christianity in slavery. As John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. have pointed out:

[Spain and Portugal] carried Africans to Europe and made servants of them, feeling justified in doing so because Africans would thereby have the opportunity to cast off their heathenism and embrace the Christian religion[. . . .] Finally, this was the period [second half of the 15th century] in which Europeans developed a rationalization for their deeds based on Christianity [. . . .] If they were chaining Negroes together for the purpose of consigning them to a lifetime of enforced servitude, it was a "holy cause" in which they had the blessings of both their king and their church.²⁴

In 1517, Bishop Bartolomeo de Las Casas encouraged Spanish importation of African slaves to the Americas to relieve Native Americans of the burden of slavery. Charles II gave approval.²⁵ Christianity thus gave benediction to slavery at both the church and state levels. The theology of slavery supported the commercialization and enslavement of humans in an unusual alliance of spiritualism and secularism.

Sankofa also attempts to capture the historic brutality of slavery. Because of the horrifying conditions under which they labored, some slaves tried to escape. The punishment for those caught was most severe. In the film, Kuta is apprehended when she tries to escape to give birth in freedom. With her hands tied above her head to a wood bar she is whipped to death. The most humiliating aspect of this is that a black male slave (Noble Ali) is made to flog a black female slave (Kuta) while a black male slave (Joe) does the counting and the white master (James) watches. Nunu performs a Caesarian operation on her to save the baby. Nunu brings up the baby as her own, with the cooperation of enslaved mothers in lactation who breast-feed the baby.

The slaves are not altogether passive to the systematic inhumanity of slavery. Not only do we see Shango unsuccessfully encouraging Shola, a house slave, to poison the slave owners, we are made to observe a brutal slave rebellion in which angry slaves destroy a sugar cane plantation and Shola uses her machete to murder her white rapist. We do not see the end of the rebellion but historical accounts point out that such revolts were quelled with gruesome ferocity whether on sea or land. In his 1737 diaries, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil and the West Indies*, John Atkins describes how Captain Harding dealt with slave uprising:

Why, Captain Harding weighing the Stoutness and Worth [of the ringleaders] did, as in other countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three other Abettors, but not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman [who had helped in the revolt] he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp'd, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves, till she died.²⁶

It must be remembered that a slave owner could beat a slave to death without any legal repercussion. In a particular case, after the backbones, thighs and limbs of slaves had been broken as part of their capital punishment for planning an insurrection, the slaves were chained to a wheel facing the sun. They were to stay in this position for as long as it pleased "God to preserve them alive" after which they were decapitated and their heads impaled on tall poles for all to see, according to the judge's order.²⁷

Sankofa comes full cycle when Shola is seen at the slave castle at Elmina, Ghana. Her state of possession over, Mona emerges, tearful, naked, and changed. A woman wraps a sheet of cloth around her to cover her exposed breasts and buttocks. She seems to realize the sanctity of the ground she stands on, and ignores the persistent inquiry by her modeling photographer. Now in full knowledge of the history and culture from which she descends, she humbly and voluntarily joins the people from Africa and its diaspora who are seated with full attention to the man beating the drum and chanting. Mona has gone to the past and has returned; she now sees her oneness and connection with the people around her. Her earlier distinction between the African and the American (she did not even identify herself as African American at the moment before possession) has lost its meaning as the common culture from which both inhere becomes overpowering. Mona and Shola—what's in a name?—have become one.

Remembering the Sources of Spiritual Power

"Joe Turner split us up," says Herald Loomis. "Joe Turner turned the world upside."²⁸ For a people enslaved by the white bounty hunter Joe Turner, here a prolonged metaphor for slave owners and slavery in general, the world is a changed place where it is difficult to find one's bearings. Part of that dislocation relates to identifying the spiritual sources of one's being. August Wilson identifies two sources. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson shows the struggle of newly liberated slaves to remember "the names of the gods"²⁹ and the powers associated with them. In *The Piano Lesson* the second location of spiritual power is identified as the ancestors. Wilson locates both sources in the African heritage of powerful gods and ancestors. These gods and ancestors from the past make the present

meaningful and bearable and give hope to the future. Whether it is Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* or Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*, the knowledge that those who have placed their hope in the gods and the ancestors will not be put to shame is a strong one. It must be pointed out that placing one's hope in the divine is not exclusively African. The Christian *Te Deum Laudamus* for example ends with *In te, Domine, speravi; non confundar in aeternum* ("O Lord, in Thee have I hoped; let me not be confounded forever").³⁰ The difference between Wilson's choice and the Christian tradition is one of polytheism and monotheism, ancestors and saints.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson evokes the trope of memory to reconnect the present to the past. This is necessary to recover the mysteries and spiritual foundations that make the life of a disconnected people livable. As "foreigners in a strange land" the newly liberated African slaves have been separated and dispersed for such a long time that their principal preoccupation is the "search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy" (n. pag.). The phrase, "foreigners in a strange land," is perhaps intended to have a double meaning. Not only are the freed slaves strangers in America since they are Africans but strangers in North America where they have moved from the South. The double meaning increases the degree of physical separation and mental disconnectedness from Africa. In a Platonic sense as in the allegory of the cave, the Africans are three "steps" (the ocean, the South, and now the North) removed from the African truth.

Wilson matches the anguish of physical separation with the despair of spiritual loss. The freed African slaves are "isolated, cut off from memory." They have "forgotten the names of the gods" and can only guess at their faces (n. pag.). Just as the degree of their physical separation from Africa is marked by the ocean, North, and South America, the sense of their loss of African spirituality is deepened by the "Bibles and guitars" they bring with them as they wander in the cities. The monotheistic bible of a dictatorial, other-worldly God occludes the polytheistic *opele* (divining tray) through which they could hear the humanistic, world-loving gods and spiritual forces talk to them. Because the bible excludes other gods, it is only logical that attention to the bible drives the ex-slaves further from remembering the names of the gods and from seeing their faces clearly. The gods with whom they regularly communicated in Africa for spiritual and material prosperity have shrivelled to a guess work. The guitars that have replaced their drums have cut them off from making holy music that induces possession. The gods whose names they have forgotten and whose faces they can only guess cannot come to occupy their physical body temporally through possession. The ex-slaves are therefore a group of "dazed and stunned" wanderers in a diasporic space of stunted spiritual growth and impaired vision.

In what seems to be an autochthonous African polytheistic theology—that

the gods do not desert or punish humans who have not willfully abjured them—Wilson shows the presence of the gods and spiritual powers among the people. Some of the people are doing the work associated with some divinities, thereby becoming disciples of the divinities without knowing it. The gods are with the people but because the latter can only guess the faces of the gods and have forgotten their divine names, the deities remain invisible to them. Yet the people in Pittsburgh of August 1911 who are working with iron ore at the steel mill and are building roads and bridges are doing god's work without knowing it:

It is August in Pittsburg, 1911 [. . .] The fires of the steel mill rage with a combined sense of industry and progress. Barges loaded with coal and iron ore trudge up the river to the mill towns that dot the Monongahela and return with fresh, hard, gleaming steel. The city flexes its muscles. Men throw countless bridges across rivers, lay roads and carve tunnels through the hills sprouting with houses.³¹

The people are immersed in the creative labor of Ogun, the Yoruba warrior god of iron, steel and metal. Anyone who makes or uses any tool fashioned from these elements directly or indirectly patronizes Ogun. The iron chains that physically bound the slaves from Africa to the Americas also bound them to Ogun spiritually. Ogun, therefore, never left the African slaves; it is the African slaves who lost sight of this divine presence among them when they carried the “bibles and guitars.” As the god of war, the leaders of the various slave revolts that took place felt his power, and were spiritually closer to him. The field slaves, rather than the house slaves, would have been closer to Ogun since they used the machete for field work, and the machete or knife is a principal symbol of the deity.³² No wonder then that the slave riots and rebellions were usually started by the field slaves!

As Wilson creates the scene of men building bridges, roads and tunnels, the presence of Ogun is felt. In his theory of the origin of Yoruba tragedy, Wole Soyinka credits Ogun for building the bridge of transition across the “chthonic realm.” It was not only the god's task but “his very nature” and being to “fashion a bridge across” the gulf of transition by subjugating “chthonic chaos.” This creative act opened a passage way across untamed territory for the gods to be reunited with and to bond with humanity. His ability to organize the mystic and technical forces of nature made it possible for him to “forge a bridge for his contemporaries to follow.” Ogun is thus the “primordial voice of created man [and . . .] the forerunner and ancestor of paleotechnic man.”³³ Ogun's bridge is intended to have a double meaning: univocally, it is the structure over an obstacle or a depression; equivocally, it could stand as any constructed passageway, road or tunnel linking two places. It is in the latter sense that Ogun the god of metal is also the god of the roads. In a car

accident, metal and road come together as one in the divinity's sphere of influence. Ogun is, therefore, the patron divinity of drivers and travellers who seek spiritual insurance against transportation accidents.

Most of the characters in the play reveal an aspect of Ogun or of African spirituality. Seth, "a skilled craftsman" who makes pots and pans for Selig to peddle from door to door exemplifies Ogun's creativity even as he condemns Bynum's sacrifice of pigeons and the rituals he performs as "old mumbo jumbo nonsense" (p. 1). Through the dialogue between Seth and his wife, Bertha, the reader is invited to witness Bynum's rituals:

SETH: [. . .] Now he got that cut. He done killed that pigeon and now he's putting its blood in that little cup. I believe he drink that blood [. . .]

BERTHA: [. . .] You know Bynum don't be drinking no pigeon blood [. . .] Well, watch him, then. He's gonna dig a little hole and bury that pigeon. Then he's gonna pray over that blood . . . pour it on top . . . mark out his circle and come on into the house. (p. 3)

Seth has described earlier how Bynum performs a dance around a big circle drawn on the ground with a stick.

The reality is that Seth, Selig, and Bynum are Ogun's disciples without knowing it, and are serving him in various ways without recognizing his face. Selig, the "People Finder," who "carries squares of sheet metal under his arm" and peddles pots and pans is an Ogun follower by trading in the god's wares. Seth, as the maker of metal sheets into pots and pans, is engaged in the divinity's creative design. He cooperates with Selig to further Ogun's will and extend his territorial sphere of influence. Because of the vast territory he covers selling Ogun's craftware, Selig is able to link missing people or to connect people separated by vast distances. In this manner, he is like Ogun who connected the divinities with the humans by bridging the gulf of separation. Both the god and the man thus bring satisfaction and fulfillment to those connected.

It seems to me that Wilson is performing the job of Ogun by linking the African Americans to their spiritual heritage in Africa so that the "anguish of severance would not attain [. . .] tragic proportions."³⁴ He is, like Selig, a "People Finder," but more than Selig, a "God Finder" as he helps to name the African gods and fix their faces. Bynum performs Ogun's rituals through sacrifices. As the god of ferrous materials, he is the first of the divinities to taste any sacrifice. The knife that Bynum uses to slaughter the pigeons for sacrifice is Ogun's instrument. Bynum's power of binding people is similar to Ogun's essential, connecting power; in the hands of the god creativity becomes a "binding force between disparate bodies and

properties.”³⁵

Bynum’s activities are in the manner of a traditional priest, a devotee, and a medicine person. Devoutly spiritual, he does not take his vocation lightly: “It cost me a piece of myself every time I do it [binding people]. I’m a Binder of What Clings” (p. 10). He does not profess to possess all the powers of the god; he recognizes the limits of finite humanity. Only Ogun can bind disparate bodies. Bynum knows the spiritual and medicinal essences of plants, herbs, and roots which he uses to resolve human problems. He is also aware of the power of dance to unleash spiritual forces on humans, hence he performs dance rituals:

BYNUM: Alright. Let’s Juba down! (The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance. BYNUM sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost. In the middle of the dance HERALD LOOMIS enters) (p. 52)

By inserting the Holy Ghost in the heart of a dance that should be as African as possible, Wilson is strengthening his thematic preoccupation of an African-American populace whose vision of the African spiritual heritage has been impaired by the bible. The closest equivalent to an African state of spirit possession is that of the Holy Ghost, and the reader is not surprised that Loomis who comes in at the frenzied moment to denounce the Holy Ghost is possessed. As a sign of possession he “starts to unzip his pants” and “begins to speak in tongues and dance around the kitchen” (p. 52). Then as he begins to “walk out the front door [he] is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision” (p. 53).

From his vision while possessed, one may safely conclude that Loomis is possessed not by the Holy Ghost but by the African spirits who have been aroused by Bynum’s drumming and the call-and-response dance. Loomis, entering at the same time as the spirits, provides his body as a temporary vehicle for the spirits. His vision of human skeletons that walk on the ocean without sinking, and of their immersion into the ocean only to be washed ashore as living Africans—“black. Just like you and me. Ain’t no difference”—is reminiscent of some of his African ancestors, the slaves who perished in the terrifying waters of the middle passage. These resurrected spirits are “walking around here now. Mens. [sic] Just like you and me” (p. 56). The presence of the spirits and the terror of the vision are so overpowering that they render Loomis’ body numb. He tries to stand but his “legs won’t stand up!” and he “collapses on the floor” (p. 56). Even Bynum cannot help him. Possession is an affair between the possessed and the possessing spirit. All

other people are merely outsiders, spectators who can only see and hear the possessed and not the occupying force, though they may feel the presence.

It is important to note that Loomis reveals the African spiritual power in him when through personal blood-letting (he “slashes himself across the chest [and] rubs the blood over his face” p. 93) in opposition to Martha’s obsession with the blood of Jesus, he becomes “shining [. . .] like new money!” (p. 94). The simile, “like new money,” is a powerful one because Ogun as the god of metallic substances is attributively lustrous, like newly mint coins. Loomis is the “shiny man” that Bynum has been searching for to give completion to his spiritual calling as a binding man and a medicine person. Because the shiny man is the “One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way” (p. 10), he is a personification of Ogun, the god who went before the other gods and showed them the way across the gulf of transition that hitherto had been a barrier to uniting spiritual and human essences. The shiny man first reveals himself to Bynum “on the road” (p. 8) and shows him “how to get back to the road” (p. 10). Ogun has propriety over roads, and getting back to the road becomes a metaphor for going back to the ways of African spiritual heritage, the ways of his father who had preceded him as a healer through songs. It is after seeing his father through the agency of the shiny man that Bynum discovers his song—the spiritual power of his song to bind people, and he has “been binding people ever since” (p. 10). Once Loomis reveals himself as the shiny man and is recognized thus by Bynum, the play ends. Ogun has shown his presence among his people; the countenance of a true god has been rendered visible to the bible-carrying, guitar-playing “sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves” who, having been “isolated, cut off from memory” have “forgotten the names of the gods” and could only guess at their faces (n. pag).

In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson focuses on another aspect of the African spiritual heritage of African Americans, the belief in the powers of the ancestors. A seemingly ordinary American story of a ghost and a piano is transformed into an African ancestral response to a property that has become a totem. Ancestral powers confront Sutter’s Ghost just as the spiritual, ancestral images carved on the piano confront the material, ordinariness of the piano. Wilson describes this pairing of opposites, this oppositional utilitarianism (the spiritual and the material are useful and usable), this conflict between the inherited American materialism and the equally inherited African traditional spirituality as “a rustle of wind blowing across two continents”³⁶—the African and the American continents. “Two continents” is also a metaphor for two different worlds, the spirit world of the living-dead or ancestors and the secular world. The continent of the living-dead is inhabited by Sutter, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Esther and Mama Ola while the secular one is represented by Berniece, Boy Willie and their relatives.

All is not well in both metaphysical continents. The piano that is the center of conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece in the secular world also draws Sutter

and Berniece's ancestors into conflict in the spiritual world. The intra-world antagonisms would blossom into an inter-world conflict as a spiritual agent (Sutter) takes on the secular opponent (Boy Willie) in a "life-and-death struggle" in which "Boy Willie is thrown down the stairs" by Sutter's Ghost and the former "picks himself up and dashes back upstairs" to continue the fight (p. 106). A fight between the mortal and the immortal is an unequal one because of the super-human powers of the latter. Boy Willie's ancestors cannot stand by to see their son destroyed; the protection of their earthly lineage is the reason for their existence as ancestors. Just as the ancestors keep their earthly lineage alive by protecting their descendants from spiritual and physical harm, the descendants keep their ancestors alive by offering them libation, prayers and proper rites, and by remembering them by name. An ancestor ceases to be when the earthly lineage is dead. It is the realization of this mutual dependence and that Boy Willie can never be a true match to Sutter's Ghost which motivates Berniece to call on her ancestors for help:

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

Wilson describes Berniece's realization of what she must do as emanating "from somewhere old" and that her action is "both a commandment and a plea" (p. 106) to her ancestors. By that act she brings in all her ancestors—Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola—to "battle" with, and expel, the belligerent Sutter's Ghost. Berniece makes the battle an unequal one by bringing in four spiritual agents to battle against one. The battle between the spiritual powers is as unfair as the battle between a spiritual force (Sutter's Ghost) and a mortal (Boy Willie). The invitation of an overwhelming force against Sutter's Ghost assures Berniece of victory, and she expresses gratitude to them as she chants: "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you" (p. 107).

The ancestors come to Berniece's aid because both of them are united by a similar purpose not to sell the piano because of its family value that links the living to the dead. Sutter had bought the piano with "one and a half niggers" from Nolander, and those "niggers" traded for the piano were Berniece's father when he was a nine-year-old boy and her grandmother (pp. 42-43). The piano took on more family meaning when Berniece's grandfather carved on it pictures of family members

and family rites of passage such as marriage, childbirth, funeral, and “all kinds of things what happened with [their] family” (p. 44). Berniece’s father, Boy Charles, died when the train he travelled in was set on fire by Sutter and his men who were angry that Boy Charles stole the piano and hid it from them (p. 45). For seventeen years, Mama Ola, the bereaved wife of Boy Charles, “polished the piano with her tears[. . .] For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in . . . mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it” (p. 52). When the piano played, Berniece thought that the pictures carved on it came alive at night and walked through the house and she could hear her mother talking to them (p. 70). The ancestors then are alive and well, and have affinity to the piano.

Wilson is treading gently between two important traditions in approaching the resolution of a spiritual force let loose by the conflict over the piano. Avery comes in the Christian tradition of the candle, the bible, and the holy water to “cast out the spirit of one James Sutter.” He lights a candle for Berniece to hold while he begins to pray:

(He throws water at the piano at each commandment.)

Get thee behind me, Satan! Get thee behind the face of Righteousness as we Glorify His Holy Name! Get thee behind the Hammer of Truth that breaketh down the Wall of Falsehood! Father. Father. Praise. Praise. We ask in Jesus’ name and call forth the power of the Holy Spirit as it is written. . . .

(He opens the Bible and reads from it.)

I will sprinkle clean water upon thee and ye shall be clean (pp. 104-105).

Avery’s approach fails, and he capitulates when he says, “Berniece, I can’t do it” (p. 106).

Avery’s failure awakens in Berniece, “from somewhere old,” the African traditional belief system of ancestral invocation. The ancestors—Mama Berniece, mama Esther, Papa Boy Charles, Mama Ola—are called in because, according to the belief system, they are the closest links between our world and the spirit world. The ancestors still belong to the human family where people continue to have individual memories of them. Says John S. Mbiti:

[The ancestors] return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in the family [. . .]; they enquire about family affairs, and may even warn of impending

danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their special instructions. They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity, act as the invisible police of the families and communities. Because they are still ‘people,’ [they] are therefore the best group of intermediaries between [human beings] and God: they know the needs of [people], they have ‘recently’ been here with [people], and at the same time they have full access to the channels of communicating with God directly or [. . .] indirectly.³⁷

Berniece goes into this deep understanding of the roles and powers of the ancestors to their earthly family to seek their help. She is suddenly aware of those powers because, when she had played the piano in the past, the dead and living could carry on a conversation, and family pictures could take on life and walk in the house (p. 70). She remembers those powers, and they come to help the family when she calls on them. It is this display of ancestral powers that convinces Boy Willie that the piano has sacred, ancestral, spiritual values that outweigh material and pecuniary considerations. Berniece’s gratitude to the ancestors at the end of the play is Wilson’s reminder to African Americans that they do not give enough thanks to these African slaves, their ancestors, who gave them rich values even in the face of material poverty and death-affirming situations, and who have not stopped watching over them. In both *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson seems to point out in strong images that the African heritage provides stability and equanimity in a world of flux. It is not the African gods and ancestors who have abandoned the African American; it is the African American who has lost sight of the presence of the original gods and ancestors and who has created new ones.

Baraka’s Argument from Culture

In his extremely short but powerful play, *Bloodrites*, Amiri Baraka argues that African Americans who “want life[. . .] want to live” must first perform a unifying expiatory sacrifice (“Brother comes out, gets a chicken, cuts head off, scatters blood into audience”) and embrace blackness (“Black Black Black Black Black”) that is deeply rooted in African culture (p. 25).³⁸ In the struggle by “brothers and sisters” against “devil woman and man” who try to frustrate the efforts of the former to “build a nation,” an African cultural identity provides the shield to blunt the devils’³⁹ attack:

LOUDSPEAKER: "A culture provides Identity, Purpose, and Direction. If you know who you are, you will know who your enemy is. You will also know what to do. What is your purpose? A culture provides Identity, Purpose, and Direction. If you know who you are, you will know who your enemy is, and also what you must do. What is your purpose??" (p. 27)

Baraka's panacea to survival is love, and a collective, committed, and functional "Black Art" (p. 28) that must be based on the "Nguzo Saba" (p. 30). Nguzo Saba is the KiSwahili for the "Seven Principles" of the African-American non-religious cultural holiday called Kwanzaa ("first fruits"), reminiscent of the harvest season in a traditional African setting. By using KiSwahili words and African ideas to build an African-American culture, Baraka seems to suggest that the way to survival for the African American is a committed, collective return to the African indigenous cultural sources to borrow a cultural model. This is central to *Bloodrites*, and it is around the Nguzo Saba that all conflicts and their resolutions seem to make sense.

In the 1960's, Maulana Ron Karenga created Kwanzaa to bring a sense of cultural affinity between Africa and its diaspora, and to give African Americans an avenue for celebrating the fruits of their labor. At the core of Kwanzaa is the Nguzo Saba, which Baraka lists in the play: "UMOJA (Alternating.) Unity KIJICHAGULIA Self-Determination UJIMA Collective UJAMAA Cooperative NIA Purpose KUUMBA Creativity IMANI Faith (Alternating speaker + in English)" (p. 29).

All these are KiSwahili words which are at first spoken, and later chanted without the English equivalent (p. 30) as the African Americans move tirelessly, even at a seemingly break-neck speed, to build their world. Finding their cultural origins has given them an unimaginable creative energy and speed that cannot be stopped because "the devils [are] gettin' slower" (p. 29). The chanting of each principle imbues it with a spiritual power that renders opposition ineffectual.

Umoja is a cultural affirmation of unity at various levels—race, nation, community, and family. It also espouses mental and physical unity in a person. Kujichagulia encourages self-determination and self-will, including what name to be called. Perhaps this principle is best exemplified in the life of the playwright in his change of names from LeRoi Jones to Imamu Amiri Baraka to Amiri Baraka.⁴⁰ On the national scene Americans of African descent have collectively gone through many name changes—Negro, Black, Colored, and African American. The Ujima principle is a call for collective work and responsibility. It puts Kujichagulia in perspective by pointing out that the spirit of self-determination and self-assertion does not run at cross-purposes with communal responsibility. Ujima permits communal maintenance and cohesiveness, and encourages charity towards others.

It is the closest to the African expression of the relationship between the “I “ and the “We”: “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” The individual African is also the corporate and social African. Mbiti explains this concept most philosophically:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of its own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife ‘belong’ to him alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father’s name. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.⁴¹

Ujamaa is the principle of cooperative economics, and by extension political economy. It is an understanding of the relationship between politics, economics and freedom. Economic subjugation lessens political freedom. Ujamaa encourages the building of businesses and profiting from them. Nia, purpose, is given the most voice in *Bloodrites*:

VOICE: “Identity . . . Purpose . . . and Direction . . . our purpose must be the building and maintaining of our own communities, and restoring our people to their traditional greatness.
[. . .] What is the purpose of your life, what is the purpose, what is the purpose, what is the purpose purpose?” (p. 28)

Kuumba celebrates creativity, and the general creative spirit of a people that allows them to bequeath, from one generation to another, a community more beautiful, more vibrant, and more beneficial. The play’s reference to “Brothers and sisters (poets) all around” (p. 26) and the “Black Art [that] must be Collective, Committed, and Functional” (p. 28) is perhaps indicative of Baraka’s own contribution to creativity as a poet and playwright, and his formation of the revolutionary Black Arts Movement. From this movement grew the playwright’s Black Arts Theatre (also called Black Arts Repertory Theatre) in Harlem in 1965. Its purpose was to make the productivity of African-American performing artists available to African-American audiences. Such a theatre was to reflect street and life realities while functioning to restore the greatness of spirit of African Americans. The theatre was used to raise the aesthetic, moral, social and political consciousness

of African-Americans. When the theatre closed its door for lack of funds, Baraka continued to express the concept of the Black Arts Theatre in his plays such as *Junkies are Full of (Shhh . . .)* (1971) and *Bloodrites* (1971).

Imani, the principle of faith, advocates faith in and loyalty to parents, teachers and leaders. It also calls for a belief in the people and in the African-American spirit of righteousness and of victory in the human struggle.

At the end of the play, Baraka brings the seven principles together to show their power. Chanted in KiSwahili, they give the people unusual energy to come together, subdue the “Devil” through the “**RAYS OF OUR HOT SAVAGE GODS [. . .] AND THE RAYS OF GOD,**” and successfully build “a city dancing against the sun, gold towers [that] beat our eyes with sensuous natural harmonies” (p. 30). It is Baraka’s way of saying that the survival of the African American lies heavily on setting its foundation on the African cultural heritage. To him the distinction between “us” (the African American) and “they” (the African) has been displaced by the all-inclusive “our” which he uses in describing the awesome savagery of the gods in protecting their heritage—“our hot savage gods.” The phrase is both endearing and awe-inspiring. The culture championed by Baraka is one in which supreme opposites are ultimately reconciled and understood, as in the coexistence of monotheistic (“**RAYS OF GOD**”) and polytheistic (“**RAYS OF [. . .] GODS**”) beliefs.

Conclusion: A Kindred Spirit

LoBagola, Gerima, Wilson, and Baraka have used various approaches from the performing arts to respond to the call of the African heritage as understood by them. It is this call that manifests a kindred spirit in them. Africa seems to give them a sense of unity and of being that renders complex experiences and relationships meaningful and livable—at least in artistic terms. Even as each artist struggles with a particular preoccupation (name, history, spirituality, and culture), there is a unifying undercurrent of economic politics. LoBagola creates his own shtick by which he finds an entry into the economic and societal standards that have excluded him. In his art and reality (economic survival) become one. Painting the history of African slaves as gods,⁴² Gerima examines the economic foundations of slavery and slave trade as sanctioned by religion and politics. The economic interests that placed slaves and slave-owners in a contiguous space also distanced their humanity; the reification of the slave also made the slave-owner less human. Iniquitous, capitalist economic dictates gradually pushed humans from civilization towards savagery. In Wilson, one observes economic forces that occlude traditional spiritual values. Just as in one play a god manifests himself as the author of money so that spiritual and pecuniary pursuits need not be antithetical but accommodating; a ghost is introduced in another to reconcile a family feud over the economic and spiritual worth of a heirloom. For Baraka, the economy has to be approached from

an African cultural perspective for African Americans to survive and to be productive. Immersing oneself in African socio-economic principles as in the Nguzo Saba not only creates a cultural fullness of being and economic prosperity but produces a living and surviving space, a space where one can speak and be heard and is not denied agency. In drawing attention to the African heritage, all four artists raise important issues not only about the past and the present but how the past is viewed by the present.

Notes

1. Leonard Pitts, "Blacks' use of n-word is a sign of self-loathing," *Journal World* (Lawrence, Kansas), March 26, 1998, 6B.
2. George A. Thompson, *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 1999), is very informative.
3. Thompson, 46, 153, and 211.
4. David Killingray and Willie Henderson, "Bata Kindai Amgoza ibn Lobagola and the making of *An African Savage's Own Story*," in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, Bernth Lindfors, ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999) 250-251.
5. Killingray and Henderson 254-256.
6. Sidney H. White, *I Gotta Horse: The Autobiography of Ras Prince Monolulu* (London and New York: Hurst and Blackett, 1950).
7. Killingray and Henderson 259.
8. Ernest Marke, *Old Man Trouble* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975) 102-104.
9. While historians have not agreed on the exact number of African slaves imported to the Americas, there is a consensus that the "aggregate approaches staggering proportions." The figure varies from 13,887,500 (by Edward E. Dunbar), 14,650,000 (R. R. Kuczynski), to 9,566,100 (Philip D. Curtin). See John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 40th edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) 37-39. Basil Davidson points out that "[s]o far as the Atlantic slave trade is concerned, it appears reasonable to suggest that in one way or another, before and after embarkation, it cost Africa at least fifty million souls. This estimate may be about one fourth of Black Africa's approximate population today [1961], and is certainly on the low side." Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1961) 80-81.
10. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London and Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann, 1988) 82.
11. 82.
12. 82.
13. Sankofa means return to your source, your origin; go back to the past.
14. John Barbot's, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea; and of Ethiopia Interior, Vulgarly called Angola*, 1746, gives an eye-witness account of the branding of slaves before being shipped from Africa. "[. . .]each of the others, which have passed as good, is marked on the

breast with a red-hot iron, imprinting the mark of the French, English or Dutch companies, that so each nation may distinguish their own, and to prevent their being chang'd by the natives for worse, as they are apt enough to do. In this particular case, care is taken that the women, as tenderest, be not burnt too hard." See Basil Davidson 92.

15. The *Nunc dimittis, Domine, in pace* (Now, O Lord, you may dismiss in peace [your servant] or the *Te Deum Laudamus* (We praise you, O God) would be appropriate songs of joy of deep satisfaction. The 13th-century Catholic hymn for a requiem mass sets an interesting contrast:

Dies irae, dies illa
Solvat saeculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sibylla.

A day of wrath, that dreadful day
 When the world is reduced to glowing embers
 As David and Sibyl have foretold.

Since Father Raphael is a Catholic priest and his world (the church) was consumed by the same fire that burned his body, this requiem song with its eschatological overtones of the world thrown into terror as the "Judge" (Christ) steps out to examine all deeds in strict justice is appropriate. For the full song of nineteen verses written in trochaic dimeter, see Dom Matthew Britt, ed. *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1955) 327-329.

16. Joseph Connelly, *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957) 252-254. I have only quoted the English translation, of the Latin original.

17. Joseph Connelly 254.

18. Mbiti 41.

19. 78.

20. D. O. Fagunwa, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, translated by Wole Soyinka as *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (New York: Random House, 1982) 104.

21. 105-106.

22. I have given here the free translation available in Joseph Connelly's *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy* 186. A more traditional, close translation is:

Is there one who would not weep,
 Whelmed in miseries so deep
 Christ's dear Mother to behold?
 Can the human heart refrain
 From partaking in her pain,
 In that Mother's pain untold?

See Don Matthew Britt's *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* 276.

23. Shango is the Yoruba divinity of thunder and lightning. Perhaps this accounts for the impetuosity of Shango, the man, in the film.

24. *From Slavery to Freedom* 29.

25. 32-33.

26. Quoted in Basil Davidson 94-96. Africans themselves who held the title of grand caboceroe (principal trader) were cruel to one another in the battles they waged on the African coastlines to secure

slaves for European buyers. An example is given of Thomas Osiat from Cape Coast (Ghana) who "took a great many prisoners, among whom were nine of the petty caboceroes of Elmina, whose heads Tom Osiat (tho' a Christian) caus'd to be cut off, and sent them next day in a bag" to those who had opposed his authority.

27. Franklin and Moss, Jr. 44.

28. August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (New York: Penguin, 1988) 76.

29. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, n. pag.

30. Dom Matthew Britt 16.

31. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, n. pag; see "The Play."

32. "Opa Ogun" (Ogun's staff)--"a long willowy pole [. . .] topped by a frond-bound lump of ore"--is more symbolic of his transitional labor. See Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* (New York: Pantheon, 1993) 37.

33. 27-38.

34. 30.

35. 33.

36. August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Penguin, 1990) 106.

37. John S. Mbiti 83.

38. All page references to the play are from Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Bloodrites in Black Drama Anthology*, ed. Woodie King and Ron Milner (New York: Penguin, 1986).

39. As the play introduces Jack Armstrong, John Wayne, FDR, MacArthur, and Zeus as male devils, and Eleanor Roosevelt, Mollie Goldberg, and Jackie Kennedy as women devils (27-28), it becomes obvious that the devils who are preventing the "brothers and sisters" (African Americans) from unity and self-actualization are the powerful whites who hold political, economic, and cultural leadership.

40. Imamu means "spiritual leader"; Amiri is "blessed one" while Baraka stands for "prince." The full meaning of the name is grasped when understood as the prince who is the blessed spiritual leader. When he repudiated Black Nationalism in the 1970s for a Marxist and individual expression of reality, he dropped Imamu from his name.

41. 108.

42. I have heard that a version of *Sankofa* has been staged in Ghana, but has not been published. I have used here the film version that was produced in 1993 and directed by Gerima. The relationship between theatre and film continues to be interesting to me not only because theatre and film form one department in many institutions but also because many influential professional bodies such as the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the African Literature Association (ALA), and the National Association of African-American Studies (NAAAS) recognize that relationship in conferences and publications. A recent article in *Theatre Research International* is illuminating:

The cinema's developments in lighting, sound and image technology have helped the theatre, and have also allowed its aesthetics to become lighter (Strehler) as well as more complex (Langhoff). Films have originated in plays (not least Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street*, which has been accused of wiping away all traces of the theatre, when, in fact, this eradication was part of the staged work

itself); and films have passed into plays (for example, *Miracle in Milan* staged by Zadek in 1993 after De Sica's film). The distinction between text and image, which defined the theatre/cinema split, is far less useful than distinctions between different types of images[. . .]

See Beatrice Picon-Vallin, "Passages, Interferences, Hybridations: *Le Film de theatre*," *Theatre Research International*, vol. 26 (no. 2), July 2001, 190-198.

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ANNOUNCING SPECIAL ISSUE

Feminism and Time

Volume 21, Number 1 (Spring 2002)

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