Southern Spiritual Memory Evoked by Conjure Characters in August Wilson’s Dramas

August Wilson’s cycle dramas capture the twentieth-century African American experience on stage. His “black expression” functions as a distinctive dramatic art and a historical guide for the African American community and the American public at large. Wilson often portrays conjure characters as central to the African American experience. Conjuring is literally connected to the performance of magic in the Christian world, such as conjuring up ghosts and/or the souls of the dead. Many Christian societies associate conjuring with magic for the purpose of entertainment or for doing evil and assume that conjurers invoke or serve demons or other evil spirits to cause harm to people or things. Another understanding of conjuring, however, emphasizes its traditional link to the task of repelling negative spirits and protecting an individual space or a collective one. This spiritual spectrum occupies a considerable place in African culture, and it is both an important and an integral part of African American spirituality. The African American conjurer in August Wilson’s plays, this article shows, displays this latter definition. August Wilson elevates this theme to historical and cultural dimensions by connecting the past and present of African American community. Conjure characters, according to Kim Pereira, seek “spiritual unification with the mythological aspects of their greater cultural identity as Africans” (3). Wilson’s focus on the spiritual dimension of his conjure characters is to explain the African American struggle to find empowerment, self-affirmation, and unification in American society with their distinctive cultural heritage.

Spirituality evoked by conjurers is neither new in African American culture nor in literature. The ways and approaches to this unique subject, however, differ in terms of its treatment of the authors in literary works. Charles Chesnutt’s The Conjure Women, for instance, was published as early as in 1899 and consists of a series of stories alluding to the personal experiences of the author. The book is

1Parts of this article are drawn from a paper delivered in “Facing the Past Facing the Future: History, Memory, Literature,” International Conference held in Bahçeşehir University, İstanbul, May 7-8-9, 2009.

2For further information on the various definitions of conjuring see Georg Luck, Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Collection of Ancient Texts (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).
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an excellent example of reflecting repressive Southern (slave) narratives. Joyce Ann Joyce’s *Warriors, Conjurers, and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* is also a significant book that formulates the theoretical framework of Afrocentric literary criticism in which Joyce maintains a link between black art, aesthetic criticism, and politics. Her work evaluates “conjuror,” however, as an author and a critic/conjuror (Joyce selects particular writers in her book including Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sonia Sanches) rather than a fictional character, focusing on the alienation of black intellectuals from the black masses. She asserts: “[the] conjuring critic mystically merges his or her identity with that of other Black people” (39-40). Joyce points to the “diversity of the African American literary canon” (31), and she stresses negotiation between diversity and unity that August Wilson (as a conjurer author) well establishes in his dramatic literature by means of his conjurer characters.

As several scholars have noted, Wilson often invokes the otherworldly voices of mystics and ghosts in his plays, sometimes implicitly and off-stage, and sometimes actually on stage. Kim Pereira shows that conjurers’ spirituality, which allows ghosts, divine revelations, and spirits to interact with the world of common experience, is universal in Wilson’s work (3-4). Wilson displays his characters’ spiritual dimension in order to convey the ancestral memory of African Americans and to explore the historical dimensions of his work. On historical mystery surrounding the conjurer characters in Wilson’s plays, Trudier Harris comments, “the fact that conjurers come from an area [psychologically] apart from the community into the realm of the belief in their power gives them a grander, more psychologically effective appearance; the spatial distance also serves to prepare recipients mentally for the power to be exerted in their behalf” (51). Harry Elam argues that conjure men may appear to be marginal figures, but repeatedly the marginal refuges the center (The Past 58). Elam goes on to note that “madness enables these characters to mediate both figuratively and literally against discord, for harmony and for communal and cultural change” (August Wilson 611-12). The conjurers’ apparent madness, Elam emphasizes, is connected to what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double-consciousness” (215)—the African side and American side of African Americans.

W.E.B. Du Bois, in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folks*, describes the term “double consciousness” as the dual condition (awareness of living a double life) of the African American self. Du Bois explains double consciousness in the following manner: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps
it from being torn asunder" (215). Through the intention of double consciousness, it is no doubt that Du Bois encompasses a broader view, and the widespread use of Du Bois’s term since the turn of the twentieth century has social, historical, and psychological dimensions that are beyond the limits of the thesis of this article. Related to our subject, however, in Du Bois’s remarks in The Souls of Black Folk are the conjurer characters, as with many other performers throughout the twentieth century, who struggle “to merge the double self into a better and truer self to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows” (215). August Wilson has made his contribution to such awareness of black consciousness by bringing the sophistication of African culture through his conjure characters. Thus, conjure characters give Wilson a possibility of revealing African cultural heritage and instructing African Americans as well as the wider audience about the scope of the double consciousness affecting the African American community. Wilson’s purpose is to find possible ways for cross-cultural acceptance and understanding through his art by remaining on the side of the particular needs and concerns of African Americans. Wilson is both functional and political in his messages; thus, he both entertains white society with his art, while exposing the souls of black folks through his conjure characters.

This article is intended to observe conjure characters in Wilson’s plays3 and display how these characters establish unification and community consciousness by evoking past and collective memory through spiritual references. Bynum Walker in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1988), Archangel Gabriel in Fences (1987), Aunt Ester, who appears in several of Wilson’s plays, and Stoolpigeon in King Hedley II (1999) are prominent conjurers who practice rituals in ways that invoke racial memory in the history of the African American experience. In each of these plays the characters display an immense offstage force, which reminds the audiences of the distinctive African American spirituality, history, culture, and traditions. Such characters as Bynum, Gabriel, Aunt Ester, and Stool Pigeon, who, as Elam describes them, “appear mentally impaired, besieged by madness, unable to grasp the reality of the world around them, represent a connection to a powerful, transgressive spirituality, to a lost African consciousness, and to a legacy of black social activism” (August Wilson 611). Thus, these exemplary characters call to mind the spiritual memories of African Americans throughout their history in the United States Bynum Walker, one of the leading characters in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, fits the role of a conjurer in terms of his spiritual codes and connections. Kim Pereira describes Bynum as “a conjurer with a special connection to nature. His strength derives from a tradition that stretches directly back through slavery to his African roots” (64).

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3 For more on August Wilson and his plays, see my book, on which I relied heavily when writing this article: Monologue in Contemporary U.S. Drama: Exposing American Voices, Ataturk University Publications No: 961, Erzurum, 2007.
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Bynum evokes spiritual issues that enable other characters in the play to maintain ties with their cultural past.

*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* opens in a boarding house run by Seth and Bertha Holly in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1911. The most interesting of all the boarders is Harold Loomis. After seven years of imprisonment by a legendary gang of Joe Turner, a white slave owner, Loomis finds his daughter Zonia in his mother-in-law’s house and then begins to search for his wife, Martha Pentecost, now settled in Pittsburgh. Upon the reunion of the family near the end of the play, Martha reclaims Zonia, but rejects Harold Loomis. The legacy of centuries of slavery in America is clear in the play; every character is in search of a new identity and a new way of life in the decades after the end of slavery. On the surface the play is about separation, a bitter legacy of slavery. At the core of the play, however, lies the struggle of quest for identity in order to continue life.

The theme of loss and renewal is symbolized by the character Bynum’s presentation of a “life song” that signifies a person’s identity. Bynum tries to find his “song” in life and also helps people find their own songs through rituals. As Trudier Harris writes, “Singing and song in the play... have historical, folkloristic, religious/spiritual/metaphysical connotations” (58). Bynum learns to find his song through his encounter with a spiritual “shiny man,” whose character, Harris notes, “begin[s] Wilson’s transformation of traditional supernatural and religious phenomena into African American folkloristic phenomena” (50). Wilson describes the shiny man in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as a nameless special fellow who shines, and “that shine could pass on to anybody. He could be anybody shining” (211). Bynum’s long story about his encounter with the shiny man in the play carries ritualistic references:

He had this light coming out of him. I had to cover up my eyes to keep from being blinded. ... He shined until all the light seemed like it seeped out of him and then he was gone and I was by myself in this strange place where everything was bigger than life. ... I came out to where everything was its own size and I had my song. I had the Binding Song. I chose that song because that’s what I seen most when I was traveling...people walking away and leaving one another. So I takes the power of my song and binds them together. Been binding ever since. That’s why they call me Bynum. Just like glue I sticks people together (*Joe Turner*, 212-13).

Trudier Harris notes: “The shiny man is an extra natural guide/seer who leads Bynum to discovery of the song that defines his being, his purpose in life, and his relationships with others” (50).

If the shiny man is a saver of souls, a saint, Joe Turner’s case in point (chain gang) is the representation of a stealer of souls, a devil, as stated by Bynum:
That ain’t hard to figure out. What he [Joe Turner] wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he’s looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he’s got you bound up to where you can’t sing your own song. Couldn’t sing it them seven years cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it (Joe Turner, 270).

The character of Harold Loomis’s unjust imprisonment and forced labor is the cause of his loss of identity, according to Bynum. Bynum’s song about Joe Turner, explains Patricia Gantt, is “a reminder of the past and its dominance by the white oppressor, to provoke Loomis into remembering his own song” (74). Joe Turner, in this context, is a symbol of racism rather than simply a figure in the play. Wilson’s dramaturgy specifically focuses on the cultural history of his community offering a counter-text to traditional American history in order to contextualize black cultural experiences. Wilson does not make Joe Turner’s chain gang actually appear in the play because he uses the story of Joe Turner’s farm as an embodiment of destructive history and challenges white cultural hegemony. As Trudier Harris writes, “By making Joe Turner a living white, legendary villain, Wilson gives flesh to the force that has historically separated black men from black women, that is, the white man—whether he did so through the sharecropping system or lynching black men or locking them away in jails with little possibility of escape” (60). After seven years of imprisonment in Joe Turner’s chain gang and repeatedly being told that he is worthless, Harold Loomis seeks to define himself in a world that contains his image.

It is Bynum who guides Loomis to find and sing his song during the course of the play. When Bynum reveals to Loomis how he learned his own song from the shiny man, he helps Loomis to understand and locate his spiritual identity, thus provoking him into self-reliance and healing himself. As Patrick Tyndall has observed, “Bynum’s story instructs Loomis as to how he can accept who he is, while Loomis’s interior monologue will give the character an opportunity to express his pain” (165). Loomis and Bynum then engage in a dialogue in which each character completes the other’s thoughts, suggesting the “call-response” pattern of African American ritual. The dialogue, moreover, centers on Loomis’s description of “the bones rising out of the Atlantic Ocean,” an allusion to those Africans who died in their crossing the Atlantic “Middle Passage” as slaves:

Bynum: Wasn’t nothing but bones and they walking on top of the water.
Loomis: Walking without sinking down. Walking on top of the water.
Bynum: Just marching in a line.

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4 For further information on the subject see Randy Gener, “Salvation in the City of Bones,” American Theater 20 (May 2003), pp 20-21.
Loomis: A whole heap of them. They come up out the water and started marching.
Bynum: The bones sunk into the water. They all sunk down.
Loomis: When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up…
Loomis: It washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only…only…
Bynum: Only they ain’t bones no more.
Loomis: They black. Just like you and me. Ain’t no difference.
Bynum: You just laying there. What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?
Loomis: I’m waiting on the breath to get into my body.
Bynum: They walking around here now. Mens. Just like you and me. Come right up out the water.
Loomis: I got to stand up. Get up on the road.

By interacting with him, Bynum helps Loomis to remember his African spirituality and consequently recognize his African American identity.

Bynum’s spirituality is connected to Africa in his role as an African healer. At first, he appears to be a threatening or evil man in his practice of voodoo and Juba dance in the play. Yet, he develops as an African healer who leads Loomis to find his song through an exorcism of his vision associated with the African religious tradition. His performance of a Juba dance is meaningful because it involves all the characters for the first time in the play and establishes community consciousness around African American values. Through the Juba dance, Sandra Richards argues, “African spirits, masked in the discourse of Christianity, force a crisis of consciousness in Loomis,” (97) and thus heal him. Furthermore, Bynum’s pigeon sacrifices and his planting seeds in a vegetable garden at the backyard of Seth’s boardinghouse also strongly suggest African spiritual healings. Bynum’s spiritual power is made clear on many occasions, including the talk between the two children, Reuben and Zonia:

Reuben: Something spooky going on around here. Last night Mr. Bynum was out in the yard singing and talking to the wind…and the wind it just be talking back to him. Did you hear it?
Zonia: I heard it. I was scared to get up and look. I thought it was a storm.
Reuben: That wasn’t no storm. That was Mr. Bynum. First he say something…and the wind it say back to him (Joe Turner, 275).

Wilson stresses the spiritual side of African Americans through Bynum’s representation of mystical depth, and thus refers to the presence of the African past in the African American present. Similarly, Gabriel in Fences is another conjurer whose main function in the play is to evoke belief in a spiritual world. As Sandra Shannon writes, “The importance of Gabriel to Fences lies chiefly in his role as
a visible link to the past or as a personification of an African retention that stirs up the blood memories of contemporary African Americans who have severed ties with the past” (102).

Set in a northern industrial city (Pittsburgh) in 1957, *Fences* is about Troy Maxson and his family, who live in a lower middle-class neighborhood. Troy, a dominant figure and the central character, has been married to Rose for seventeen years. Dramatic conflict occurs between Troy and Rose when Troy’s affair with another woman (Alberta), who dies while giving birth to their child, is made public. The story revolves around the Maxson family members, Troy’s older son Lyons, his brother Gabriel, and his illegitimate child Raynell, all of whom come together at the funeral when Troy suddenly dies. The play ends with Gabriel blowing the trumpet for Saint Peter to open the gates of heaven and to let Troy enter. At the end of *Fences*, it is Gabriel who, as Harry Elam writes, “links the past to the African American present in a moment of ritual and spiritual possession. Gabriel summons his special faith to open Heaven’s gates on the day of his brother Troy’s funeral” (*August Wilson* 628). By doing so, not only does he revive the African inheritance and invoke memory, but also brings past African theology into the present.

Gabriel evokes the darker side of America, with his war injury, a severe head wound in the Korean War. Although he has experienced the horror of war as an American serviceman, Gabriel has to face discrimination as well. Yet, according to Elam, “paradoxically, Gabe’s [Gabriel’s] mental condition locates him in a space of alternative consciousness where he has a special spiritual mission to fulfill” (*August Wilson*, 616). He chases hellhounds throughout the play. “Gabriel fantasizes that it is his responsibility to chase away hellhound” (33), observes Sandra Shannon, and Gabriel firmly believes that it is his duty to remind St. Peter to open Heaven’s gates. Gabriel with his function in the play moves from merely a brain-damaged war veteran and Troy’s brother to a conjure character who reveals hidden truths, and strives to live in accordance with his spiritual codes.

Gabriel’s duty in *Fences* becomes obvious at the end of the play. While he entertains the audience with his apparently naïve and even, at times, absurd gestures, his hidden spirituality refers to the circle of the African American community. Sandra Shannon observes that Gabriel’s “silent gestures may very well be silent only to the onlooker. Indeed, his attempts at speech and his trance-like dance movements belie a closed communication between him and the spiritual world” (103). As a personification of the African ancestral spirits that occupy a considerable place in African American culture, Gabriel, his atavistic dance, his blowing the horn to alert St. Peter to open the Gates for him, and his demand that Rose join him in his spiritual world at the end of the play, all pave the way for forgiveness for Troy, who might enter the Heaven through the gates opened for him by his brother:
Hey, Rose. It's time. It's time to tell St. Peter to open the Gates. Troy, you ready? You ready Troy. I'm gonna tell St. Peter to open the gates. You get ready now. (...It is a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand. HE begins to dance. A slow, strange dance, eerie and life-giving. A dance of atavistic signature and ritual. ...HE begins to howl in what is an attempt at song, or perhaps a song turning back into itself in an attempt at speech. HE finishes his dance and the gates of heaven stand open as wide as God's closet.) That's the way that go!

By opening Heaven's gates for his brother, Gabriel not only revives African inheritance and invokes memory, but also brings past theology based on African tradition into the present. Archangel Gabriel, like Bynum Walker, practices unique spiritual powers that evoke spiritual memory. These characters can be taken as the embodiment of the African presence in the present, and represent collective memories of their community in America. Randy Gener notes: “Belief in mysticism and the power of rituals... are strongest in the early decades of Wilson’s cycle, but by the 1960’s, the very idea of African heritage, which Aunt Ester represents, is receding into the collective unconscious” (34).

The character Aunt Ester embodies the historical memory as a conjure figure as old as the African presence in America, thus keeping connections with the African roots alive. Aunt Ester is Wilson’s most important conjurer. She appears first, off-stage, in Two Trains Running (1992), as the distant voice of Africa. Although Aunt symbolizes the earlier generation of African slaves with her age of 322 years—thus signifying the period of time since the American slavery commenced—her sacred teachings and advice reflect her search for reconciliation rather than rejection of the circumstances. According to Pamela Monaco, “Aunt Ester’s answers to ‘Who am I’ connect her visitors to ‘Who we are’: the personal and the communal become fully integrated” (100). Aunt Ester resembles the invisible ghost-like characters of ancient Greek tragedies, though she is a visible and literal entity. “Aunt Ester is far from a static site of remembrance, but rather a living force, actively mediating for spiritual and cultural change” (Editorial, x), as Harry Elam describes Aunt Ester, “the Ancestor,” the aunt of her people, connecting African Americans with their past personally, collectively, materially, and metaphysically.

Aunt Ester appears on-stage in Gem of the Ocean (2003), set in 1904, when she is reported to be 285 years old. Much like Bynum, who leads Harold Loomis to the answer in his search of identity, the conjure woman Aunt Ester leads Citizen Barlow, in search of salvation, to find out his duty in order to be redeemed in Gem of the Ocean. Citizen Barlow has committed a mortal crime before meeting Aunt Ester. He needs Aunt Ester’s guidance to get his soul cleansed and Aunt Ester takes him on a spiritual journey in her home. Citizen joins Aunt Ester on a paper boat called Gem of the Ocean made from Aunt Ester’s bill of sale as a slave.
This “magic boat” symbolically turns out to be a slave ship, and the course of a ship is the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the City of Bones as Aunt Ester describes the place:

It’s only a half mile by a half mile but that’s a city. It’s made of bones. Pearly white bones. All the buildings and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I been there, Mr. Citizen. My mother live there. … You want to go there, Mr. Citizen? I can take you there if you want to go. That’s the center of the world. In time it will all come to light (Gem of the Ocean, 52).

Aunt Ester guides Citizen to the Gate of the City of Bones where he faces his guilt and confesses the truth: “It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails,” (69) and the gate is wide open for him. Aunt Ester not only helps Citizen to get his soul purified, but she also teaches him to live in order to fulfill his duty in life.

In Gem of the Ocean, Aunt Ester establishes a spiritual linkage (the link to ancestral roots) between Africa and America. As a mythic figure, “an African-descended conjurer who inherits the mantle of power from her great grandmother—she is the Great Mother of Wilson’s flock” (Gener 34). Wilson himself describes Aunt Ester, in his preface to King Hedley II, as “the most significant persona of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children” (x). She shares her vast knowledge with her community and evokes community consciousness, and “her embodiment makes the metaphysical an element of the everyday” (Elam, Editorial x). She influences many of Wilson’s characters on the stage with her metaphysical presence.

Aunt Ester appears off-stage in King Hedley II (1999), and has a central role, though she has passed away. Stool Pigeon’s announcement and his comments on Aunt Ester’s death throughout King Hedley II reflect her significance to the community: “Lock your doors! Close your windows! Turn your lamp down low! We in trouble now. Aunt Ester died! She died! She died! She died!” (19). Then he explains the type of trouble he fears: “She’s gone. She ain’t here no more. Aunt Ester knew all the secrets of life but that’s all gone now. She took all that with her. I don’t know what we gonna do. We in trouble” (20). In fact, Stool Pigeon’s fear is that of losing the past, the ancestral memory, the hidden truths and spiritual codes with the death of Aunt Ester. Stool Pigeon does not accept her death: “She died too soon. She wasn’t supposed to die at all. She wasn’t but three hundred and sixty-six years old” (80) and he tries to bring her back to life. Stool Pigeon performs rituals over Aunt Ester’s black cat that he has buried in the backyard: “All you need now is some blood. Blood is life. You sprinkle some blood on there and if she ain’t used up her nine lives Aunt Ester’s coming back” (69). He calls to God, and receives a reply in a stage direction, (“the sound of a cat meow is heard”), at the end of the play.
when the lights go off. As Harry Elam puts it, “God has heard Stool Pigeon’s plea, and the past renews the present” (August Wilson, 630).

Wilson also establishes a bridge between past and present through Stool Pigeon in King Hedley II. As Stool Pigeon says, “See I know what went on. I ain’t saying what goes on...what went on. You got to know that. How you gonna get on the other side of the valley if you don’t know that?” (27). His insistence on what happened in the past is, in fact, Wilson’s insistence of evoking the ancestral spiritual memory in the present. Moreover, as a guiding and revealing character, and as a conjurer, it is Stool Pigeon who guides his people to “get on the other side of the valley.”

Although Wilson in King Hedley II, as in other plays, emphasizes reconciliation and renegotiation rather than search for social change, King Hedley II reflects the increasing violence and corruption in urban slums (a barren lot in Pittsburgh’s Hill District) by the time of the play’s 1985 setting. Wilson’s message is clear, that black people and white people alike should keep in mind the struggle of African Americans for survival in America despite terror, racism, etc. In King Hedley II, one feels terror and pain of slavery in the presence of Stool Pigeon’s position of marginality. Yet, as Harry Elam writes, even the marginal characters such as Gabriel and Stool Pigeon, are “outside behavioral norms and on the periphery of their plays’ central conflicts, fiercely particularized, idiosyncratic, and iconoclastic, they exemplify subjectivity and interiority run amok” (August Wilson 615).

Stool Pigeon, like his predecessor conjurers Bynum and Gabriel, prophecies the power of judgment in which God is supreme. All of these characters also question the role of the Christian God in their lives and in the lives of their community. Bynum, for instance, in the words of James Keller, “does not bind people exclusively; he also unifies [Western and non-Western] cultures” (471). While Bynum guides people through his rituals such as juba, a rhythmic dance, pigeon sacrifices (as a means of salvation), and visionary trances, defined by belief in ancestors and evocative of racial memory, he also blends African and Christian motifs by discussing the Christian Holy Ghost in a juba dance. Gabriel’s function of connecting the African tradition of spirituality in Fences with that of the African American experience of Christianity (Gabriel’s reference to St. Peter to open the Gates of Heaven) can also be observed at the end of King Hedley II, in Stool Pigeon’s solitary speech with God: “Thy will! Not man’s will! Thy will! You a bad motherfucker!” (62, 103). His repeated use of the same exclamation might also be the connection of the African cosmology with Christianity, if not a critique of Christianity, as noted by Elam: “Stool Pigeon is calling out to a God who looks like him, who understands the history of black struggle and survival, and who can and will respond to black needs” (August Wilson, 626).5

5For further commentaries on the role of Christianity in August Wilson’s plays, see Amanda M. Rudolph, “Images of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in Joe Turner’s Come and
Africa plays an important role in Wilson’s dramas as a source for spiritual phenomena. The memory of Africa flows through the literal/conjurer characters of Bynum and Harold Loomis in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Archangel Gabriel in *Fences*, Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean*, and Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II*. Wilson creates these characters to evoke spiritual memory through their conjuring and ritualistic expression in order to establish community cohesion. The conjurers such as Bynum, Gabriel, Aunt Ester and Stool Pigeon are all references to an African spiritual world, and they represent African American spiritual cosmology in the United States. The conjurer characters revive the cultural past and invoke racial memory of the African American community to bring the significance of their history and express their collective memory in Wilson’s plays. Each of the conjurer characters embodies the spiritual memory and brings forth the past experiences in order to reveal the present. Thus, one of the prominent messages that comes out of Wilson’s work and his development of conjure characters is that the African American community is destined to live in an identity crisis if they do not seek to become aware of their African roots while living in a white world. Consequently, Wilson utterly defies estrangement of African American people from their own mythical traditions. He tries to create a bridge between past and present of the community through the recurring motif of conjurers in his plays. Wilson, in fact, becomes a conjurer author himself. He incessantly reminds his audiences, white and black, of the power of African spirituality in twentieth-century American culture. He also appeals to African Americans to, in the words of the drowned slaves in *Gem of the Ocean*, “Remember me. Remember me” (65-66). It is in this very remembrance of the past that they find themselves. By evoking spiritual memory, the conjurer characters enable the African American community, in essence, to reclaim their cultural history. August Wilson stresses the idea that the African American community should turn to its history and re-examine the past for strength and guidance in the present and for determination of the proceeding steps in the future.

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Works Cited


